Spes Ultracombinatoria
Neo-Human Spirituality and Digital Games

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As cultural products and peculiar kind of texts, digital games can be considered as **in some way** situated chronologically and culturally inside a given time and a space. They speak about possible pasts, presents, and futures, in a language that players understand and can process –and critically approach, if they want to. This is generally more evident in so-called 'indie games', with them having in most cases more creative leeway to pursue authorial goals and ideas. Still, some glimpse of the artistic power and fertility of this medium is evident in high-budget productions. Sometimes, big publishers release a title where the authorial direction is strong enough to convey not mere clear messages, but a refined voice to communicate that message or the breeding ground for further inquiry and analysis by players and scholars. The digital game industry reached a maturity with which it meets the issues, challenges, and possibilities of another sector of the entertainment industry: cinema. Like movies, digital games are a medium for both artistic pursuits and financial gains; like them, they are experienced by many people and have the chance to impact their worldview. However, in the case of digital games, these issues, challenges, and successes are multiplied exponentially. This is not only because of the amount of money involved, but also due to the **pervasiveness** of the digital game medium.

To experience a movie, back in the golden age of the medium, a person would have needed to physically go to a place where movies were being projected: theatres, communal halls, drive-ins were places that created a sense of separation from daily life and offered a leisurely escape into a story, albeit a passive one. The diffusion of television meant that these venues were diluted into more intimate situations, like one's living room, which means these experiences have remained personal and passive. Even the possibility to view a movie on our phones and tablets are often occasions to close ourselves off during a commute or even social gatherings, thus highlighting the possibility for pas-

siveness of the medium. On the other hand, a particularly good or enticing movie can be a communal experience that goes beyond the mere discussion of technical merits and flows of a film projection. Particularly interesting is the case of *cineforums*, a confessional version of *ciné-clubs*, founded in the Italian Jesuit education system, where the discussion after a film show about the movie's merits is often filled with references to cultural, ethical, and social elements. However, there is still a certain degree of separation between the media and the public. It is a separation that still underlines how, on one side, those who make the movie can be seen, and on the other, those who watch it and can best discuss it. There is no way for the public to interact directly with a movie.

This is not the case for digital games, or at least not completely. During the act of playing, a person is not only watching a story or situation unfold but is experiencing it in a way that allow them to be part of it in a very specific way. In some sense, even for those games where the storyline and characters are not the focus of the production, a player can be seen as existentially involved with the game through the act of playing. This is true in case of any kind of play and game: it is not by chance that the act of play has been analysed by many scholars, from Huizinga to Moltmann, from a spiritual perspective. Additionally, as stated in the first sentence, we can consider digital games as situated (chronologically and topologically) only **in some way**. This is due to the peculiar nature of the digital medium from which they are created and into which they operate. Such '**some way**' has the potential to let a player further analyse what their existential involvement in the act of play can be, as immersion (the moment where a player is fully experiencing the game as if they were inside the game world) pushes the boundaries of game involvement that may encompass all aspects of one's life.

This is the reason for which the relation between the act of playing modern generation digital games and spirituality is such an interesting topic, philosophically speaking. The idea of digital agency, of avatar, of immersion (all topics deeply examined by numerous authors) can open the ground on how spirituality can be seen as evolving in the contemporary world. It also helps in understanding what the advancement of technology means for this fundamental element of Human nature, so strictly tied to how we think and how we approach the world (Newberg et al. 2001). Discussions on trans-humanism, post-humanism, and how to define Human nature and evolution are nothing new, but one must not forget that we cannot tie this discussion to technology only. The very word 'trans-human' is historically and culturally tied with spirituality. One of its first occurrences is one of the most pious operas of Human literature:

> Trasumanar significar *per verba*
> non si poria; però l'essemplo basti
> a cui esperienza grazia serba.

In these three verses of his *Divina Commedia* (Paradiso, Canto I, verses 70–72), the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri create a new word to express how, in his view, Human nature can transcend itself in order to embrace a higher, divine state. It is something that cannot be expressed by words and needs to be accepted by divine grace. On the one hand, it is true that Dante's *transumanar* it is a completely different, almost specular view of how the Human can express its full potentiality from the contemporary idea of transhumanism as

an evolution of humanity through technical and technological means. Additionally, this concept needs to be contextualized in the time and place when it was written by Dante. On the other hand, it shows the deep relation that is established between the Human and Reality: when words fail, experience can build a deep understanding of a possible future. In experience lies the potentiality of a philosophical inquiry about the relation between digital games and the future of our species, an inquiry that can leverage the peculiarities of acting in a non-physical world.

To properly express this argument, this paper has been divided in two main parts. The first part will present the ontological foundation, underlying the hybrid nature of digital games, through the ideas presented by the work of Luciano di Letizia and Joo Han Kim. Even if their work can be considered outdated, given the quick evolution of digital technology in the current day and age, I will try to show how their approach can still provide a suitable starting point. It will also present the Multimedia Interactive Opera, a concept proposed by Marco Accordi Rickards (2021) and that can be a suitable foundation to analyse a digital game as a work of art according to its peculiar nature. Next, the paper will move on to establish a spiritual approach on conscious gaming, through a case study of *Planescape Torment* (Black Isles Studio 1999), *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), and *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015). The second part will use these tools to analyse transhumanism and posthumanism in *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Project Red 2020) and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal 2011) to see how these themes are presented in the titles themselves. Additionally, it will try to show how a philosophical approach can be conducted on them, problematizing the issues of Human nature from the peculiar perspective of **techgnosis**, a peculiar spiritual approach to technology. The conclusion will offer a different way to harmonize technology and spirituality with a keen eye on the Human nature, with a brief look at how these themes have been presented in *Sid Meier's Beyond Earth* (Firaxis Games 2014).

One methodological point needs to be expressed before starting, though. Generally, there are two main ways through which philosophy can approach digital games. The first one tries to see them as subjects of philosophical inquiry, analysing them with concepts and arguments varying from phenomenology to ontology to logic. This approach favours the more theoretical perspectives, as it expresses in sound terms the nature of digital games from various perspectives, be it the idea of acting in a digital world, the ontological status of the digital world, or how the tools of logical analysis can be applied to digital games. The second way views digital games like any other cultural artifact, such as movies or books: an analysis of their themes, how they represent them, what impact they may have, and so on. The point here is that our discipline has its full toolbox available to act on digital games and is able to reach great results while doing so – as the literature on the subject shows. I am fully convinced, however, that there is a third approach: as I will try to argue by speaking about 'conscious gaming', we can do philosophy **with** digital games. That is, their peculiar hybrid nature and the element of immersion give them the potential to become another tool in the 'philosopher's toolbox', and one that is very useful to approach the contemporary world. I am aware of the risks that this approach can have, especially because digital games are part of a proper industry, and as such need to be analysed with that in mind. However, these kinds of connections have not deterred scholars from analysing movies and TV series; therefore, I believe that a critical approach

to digital games can work despite their relations to the market and all that entails. It will surely make arguments more difficult; but this can be quite the exciting challenge for a critical mind.

The Ontological Status of Digital Games: Multimedia Interactive Operas

If we want to over-summarize what a digital game is, we can consider it as a kind of program that can be executed from any kind of computerized platform elaborate enough to run it: personal computers, game consoles, mobile phones, and even fridges in some cases. In this program, a placer can interact with digital worlds, stories, and ludic experiences through a graphical interface. From the 'simple' platformers or flight simulators to authorial narrative experiences, all digital games develop a very peculiar kind of interaction between the game world and the player. This interaction, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, can be considered as the proper peculiarity of this kind of contemporary cultural production. For this reason, especially when looking at agency in videogames and how its influence can stretch beyond the game world, videogames become a compelling artifact from a theoretical point of view.

When we act, we usually modify our surroundings through our body. We are physically inside a physical world: to move a rock, we extend our hand, pick it up, and carry it to another place. Every act that an agent in the world do is tied to this basic physical interaction between a body and another body, between a thing and a thing. Even in the case of immaterial things one could say that there is some kind of physicality involved. While we take part of a discussion, 'hard sciences' show us that there are several changes in the physical structure of our surroundings and ourselves that allow this discussion to take place: neurons flashes to give orders to lungs, tongues, and mouths that emit small movements that generate frequencies that are carried by the movement of air particles to hit a specific bone in our ears. Through this very material and physical series of phenomena, a great exchange of non-physical things is built and create new things. This cannot be said about what we experience in a digital world; but these worlds can still have a very much physical effect in those who partake in it. For this reason, it is important to clarify what the ontological status of digital games is; that is, the justification for speaking in a proper ontological way about digital games and not only about the objects in them. The peculiar hybrid nature of a digital game can make it be considered as an artistic piece, as has been claimed before (Quaranta 2013), but with a specific difference that requires further theoretical speculation.

Di Letizia's phenomenological approach on games ontology starts from a basilar question: "do the objects of digital games exist?" In order to find an answer to this, he employs the tools of process philosophy (Whitehead 1979; Manzotti 2006): the idea that a being is not something that is given, but something subject to a constant process of becoming, a continuous change. According to this speculation, existence is a quality pertaining to the relationships established between subject and object. When a subject observes a phenomenon, its physical representation is not the mere vehicle of perception but the phenomenon itself that cannot be separated by it. For example, di Letizia says (2015: 111), a rainbow exists in the moment when solar rays cause specific neural

events. By looking at the physical colourful arch in the sky, an effect is produced in the observer; that is, a process (a causal chain of events) happens that was not there before. The interaction between observer and observed thus creates a 'difference in reality', something new that did not exist before. Such difference is ingrained in the dimension of experience: digital games might not be 'there' in a physical sense, but both the physical representation and the subject are. Their object exists in a hybrid sense: the torch in *Alan Wake* (Remedy Entertainment 2020), for example, is at the same time a string of code, a block of pixels and a torch to be manipulated, both to light up the surrounding and to be used as a weapon against the Dark Presence.

But what differences and hybrid sense of existence say about the ontological nature of digital games? Di Letizia (2015) proposes the definition of digital games as **recursive formal systems**, that the phenomenological approach turns into the experience of immersion in the game by the player and then the tele-presence of the self in the avatar. With this word we refer to the extension of the player in the game world, where it experiences as part of itself the avatar's sense of ownership and sense of agency (Ibid; Gallagher 2000). The definition of digital games as formal system, ingrained in game design studies, is useful from an operative point of view. By looking at a digital game as a set system of rules, language, and symbols, a game designer can manipulate the code, art, and narrative composing it; a player can play it; a critic can examine it; a philosopher can speculate on it. Example of such approach is how a gaming journalist expresses his review on a digital game: they examine the artworks, the gameplay, the controls, and every element that builds up to the final product. All this stems from the decision made by the team behind a digital game. For example, *Life is Strange* developer's goal was to tell a story influenced by player's choices. Every part of the game was thought-out and studied to transmit a meaning to the player: even the setting, northwest Oregon, was chosen in order to give the players a 'sense of looking inside ourselves'. This title is a classic example of a digital game where the creative director's impact is noticeably felt on the final product. As happens in a movie, where photography, story and acting concurs to the final product, digital games are born from a harmonic relation between artworks, gameplay, narrative, and player freedom, or interaction. If we accept the interaction through gameplay as the first and foremost way for the player to enter in a relation with the digital game, it can be said that this is the quality marking digital games as art (McManus 2011). These elements are then 'embodied' in a computer program, which can be pointed out to be their substrate and formal cause of existence.

This harmonic relation situated in a computer program, that is, the informational nature of a digital game, seems to point to another way of thinking about the hybrid nature of digital games. The focal point lies in the fact that digital games are mainly digital products, and thus can be fully part of the speculation of philosophy of information. If we focus on the element of data in digital games, every element can be seen as a 'piece of information' according to Bateson's definition (Bateson 2000): a difference that makes the difference. Evolving from this point, Luciano Floridi (2012) speaks of *dedomena*, signals, and symbols, to show how this difference is structured. *Dedomena* describes a lack of uniformity in the real world, signals are lack of uniformity between two physical states of a system and the lack of uniformity between symbols is, for example, the difference between P and B as letters. Again, there is a focus on differences: digital games find their

meaning in the act of being played, where the difference is underlined and exalted as fruitful in the player's **immersion** in the game (Björk/Holopainen 2005) or its **incorporation** (Calleja 2011): the first refers to the experience of playing a game generically from a psychological point of view, while the second looks at it from a bodily point of view. Another approach to the existence of objects in digital games follows the idea that digital beings can be considered a thing because of the phenomenological characteristics we can find in them (Kim 2001). A digital being has unity of circumstances, the selfsameness of the perceived persisting of the 'thing-totality' and exceed Heidegger's three types of representation: a torch in *Alan Wake* is not simply a sign for a torch, nor is the perception of a picture of a torch. We can have the rendering of a torch, but the rendering is not sign of the torch, or the graphic tablet the artist used to draw it, or the PC where the game runs. In pointing a torch toward the Dark Presence, *Alan Wake* players do not manipulate a sign of the torch, but the torch itself through instruments; they are not bodily-there to themselves, nor they are an 'empty intending'. The relation that the player experiences in playing a digital game build from the difference between his perceivedness and the presence of his actions in the game. Digital beings are

> a paradoxical entity – it has a certain "bodily presence" (perceivedness) without "being bodily-there". We may call it quasi-bodily presence (…) what we actually use is not a computer but a digital-thing. (Kim 2001: 94–95)

that is, a digisein. In the experience made by the players this paradoxical digital entity, delocalized, synchronized, and correlated (Floridi 2012: 22) acquires an ontological status that is both objective and subjective. There is no substantial difference between the torch used by a player and the torch used by another player, since they are the same line of code and created by the same creative team. And yet, they are two different torches because the game copies, the machines on which they run, and the players are different. We have, again, the hybrid sense of existence of a digital game, only that this time the peculiar way of considering the digital game as a digital being can bring it even closer to an artwork, where the aporetical relation between art piece, artist and bystander is crucial in determining its qualities. Moreover, as the possibility to compare choices made in the story implemented in *Life is Strange* shows, even in games focused on narrating a story instead of the competitive gameplay the relations between players adds to the qualities. This gives often birth to a rich dialogue between players: digital games and forums burst with 'theorycrafting' about games with deep narratives, encouraging debates about story elements and 'what ifs' that make the game grow beyond its intended boundaries. Thus, it is not only a formal system but includes certain qualities that pertain to the Infosphere dimension (Floridi 2014) with a focus on experience, bringing it closer to a continuous digital art performance than a mere work of art.

The relational dimension of a digital game can then help its ontological inquiry. More than difference, a term that might be useful to describe information in digital games might be *différance* (Derrida 1997): the constant productions of differences in an active movement of interrelations of meaning in language that can't be verbally expressed in its entirety. Its history is the **grammatisation**, which is the retention of information on different *hypomnemata* (supports for memory, texts), physical, cultural and social (Stiegler

1998). Bertrand Stiegler expands this in the digital dimension by saying that internet is a collective hypomnema, or in other words a group of

> milieux of human geographies technically associated, made of practitioners instead of users, amateurs instead of consumers, contributors instead of clients and providers. (Stiegler 2015: 102)

This milieu that is internet expresses itself 'multimedially': texts, images, sounds and the like interact between themselves in a constantly creative dimension in order to convey their meaning. This multimediality resides also in the devices used by this onlife humanity (Floridi 2015). Mobile phones, PCs, tablets, laptops; all concur to the *milieux* and are connected in an ever-evolving interrelation, where *différance* extends beyond mere verbal language and grows in every *hypomnemata* available. Digital games are particularly impacted by this growth, especially those that bring forth a self-consciousness of their nature as a new artistic media due to the involvement of creative directors. Consider FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* (2011): a game renowned for its difficulty that produced the new 'Souls-like' sub-genre of digital games thanks to its innovative gameplay. During the years it birthed a strong community devoted to the creation of different ways to play it, fan-art, fan-fiction, modders, and 'lorethrough' (playthrough where the community member play the game to show and explain the world and story of a game, rather than its gameplay). The original game has been re-imagined by the players up to the point where it cannot be played without considering every element that the player culture keeps adding. It has become a **symbol** according to what Raimon Panikkar means with this term: a pure relation between meaning, vehicle, and subject, impossible to be discerned in its parts without its destruction, fertile in the ontological determination of a *τόδε τι*, of thing-that-is which is no longer an individual substance with its autonomy but a constant dynamic movement of interrelations (Panikkar 2008b: 239–74). The relation between the players and the game can change both; not from an aesthetic point of view but an ontological one. By looking at a digital game in this way, then, the difference between information as symbols becomes *différance*. Its elements of information are not lost, but with this kind of vitality a digital game sees its nature of **inforg** (the term Floridi uses for digital organisms from the perspective of his ethics of information) confirmed and reinforced thanks to the *hypomnemata* involved in it becoming a milieu of lacking, meaning, and desires of players, and a game's meaning greatly exceeds that originally thought by designers. Moreover, a digital game is subjected to the ethics of information (Floridi 2014: 146–57), since the ever-growing quality and quantity of information can prevent entropy to devour it or can even 'resurrect' it, as the players' community is able to give new meanings to old games. In this sense, a digital game can be seen as a proper example of **inforg**: it is born by information and grows with the accumulated information that both player communities and further iteration and episodes can give; it can be genre-defining thus spawning similar titles; it can expand over the limits of 'games culture' and become part of the public discourse, in all the possible good and bad ways. It has a proper **memetic** nature – both in the original sense expressed by Dawkins (1976) and in the common sense of something part of the internet culture.

Summarizing, the ontology of digital games may be described in three different hybrid ways: 1) a recursive formal system of harmonic data expressed by a PC and distributed in digital form, experienced by the player thanks to the immersion in its world, where it being hybrid lies in the different statuses acquired by the elements part of the system; 2) an artistic digisein, a digital being for which the experience of its thing-totality is cardinal in structuring the relation with the players and between them; 3) an **inforg** or milieu of information, created by game designers, enriched by players, guided by the ethics of information. These three ways are equally apt at defining a digital game, according to the standpoint from which a player can approach it: a product of computer technologies, a product of contemporary culture, a denizen of the Infosphere. Common to these ways are the categories of difference (between game and physical world) and relation (between game, players and designers): two dynamic characteristics, that can change according to where and when a digital game is experienced. Moreover, the elements involved in the creation of digital games, from setting to arts to music to narrative, are each a single form of art; but none is enough to pinpoint the element of artistic creativity in digital game design. It is the presence of the ontological category of relation as a mutual fertile interrelation that brings the aesthetic speculation on digital games on the theoretical level.

As operative definition for digital games when considered ontologically, it can be then proposed the expression Multimedia Interactive Opera (henceforth, MIO), created by Marco Accordi Rickards (2021) to underline a game's artistic value that this paper proposes to reformulate. As MIOs, digital games can be seen as the art products peculiar of the Infosphere, where all the media that concurs to them represent the intrinsic virtue and are tied to gameplay: the interactivity between players and game and the players themselves, its relational quality. Not merely a form of interactive fiction (Tavinor 2005), but considered in relation with other works of art, MIOs accepts the three hybrid ways of considering a digital game. Formal systems, digital expressions, milieux of information all concur to the definition of a particular art piece thanks to the peculiar quality of the relation expressed both in interaction through gameplay and interaction between players. The harmony of the elements that compose an MIO is expressed by the word 'Opera'. In Italian language, '*opera*' means 'workpiece', 'artefact'; but it is also that art form made by singers performing a dramatic work of mixed narrative and sound score in a theatrical setting. This play-on-words wants to underline the hybrid nature of the digital game as a work of art, while the 'Interactive' is a strengthening of the quality of relation. This affirmed ontological status expands the original definition of MIO, integrating what both phenomenology and philosophy of information can express about digital games. This definition, while lacking the objectification of the previous three due to its focus on relation does not aspire to encompass every game ever made. It is more a proposal for the evaluation of some past digital games, made to urge game designers alike to become conscious of what a digital game can be in the panorama of the anthropocene's Fourth Revolution: a proper form of artistic production. Authorial control over production can take advantage from this concept in order to keep its prominence. A digital game can be a work of art that, even in its reproducibility as an **inforg**, possess the possibilities to recover the 'aura of artistic production' that contemporary art lost (Benjamin 1966) – and this is the spiritual approach to conscious gaming.

Two Clarifications on the Spiritual Approach and on Conscious Gaming

Before delving into the theme at hand, two important clarifications must be made here. The first is the fact that by **spiritual approach** I do not mean something that pertains only to religion per se, nor only a kind of techno-gnosticism (Davis 2015) applied to digital games as we will see in the second part. By 'spiritual' I mean an integral approach to the totality of Human's life (Panikkar 2011). There is a Christian spirituality as well a Buddhist, Marxist, and liberal spirituality: a term that tries to convey a quality of action, of thought, not tied to some kind of immaterial doctrine but pertaining life in all its aspects. It means to hear the Rhythm of Being (Panikkar 2012), embodying Human's *sacra quaternitas perfecta* of body, self, being and spirit. Translating Panikkar's heavily symbolic language: spirituality is nothing more than a self-conscious approach to daily life ingrained in the knowledge that what we are and what we do cannot be compartmentalized and separated from every other part of our being, but rather is in a constant relation with everything else, even if we are not aware of that. His expression of the Human as a 'cosmotheandric mystery' wants to point it out as *πάντα πως*, *quodammodo omnia*, a metaphor in a constant tension toward totality not in a transcendental way but in a dynamic state of being (Panikkar 2010: 135–41). Not only subject nor only object, the Human finds its focal point in a relation between itself, the world, and that Silence from which meaning proceeds (Panikkar 1980). Faith, here, might be a misleading word for our approach to Reality: but neither worldview would be a good term, for its focus on *noematic* content without *pisteuma*. A concept created by Raimon Panikkar in dialogue with Husserl's phenomenology (Panikkar 2001: 54–55), *pisteuma* points to the content of a 'faith' not as a system of belief but as the interpretative framework that allows each Human to experience the world. It is the qualitative dimension that makes a statement to be true or false in any given worldview and that is able to change the ontological qualities of a being before any further analysis and rationalization, because it cannot be explained without its reduction to a quantitative value. Thus, spirituality is an approach to life that does not rejects rationality but accepts it along with what is believed and unspoken, its **mythos**, which is that 'something' that

> we believe up to the point where we are no longer aware that we believe in it. (Panikkar 2008a: 92)

This speculation has found a great use in practical philosophy (Tarca 2013) because it points to a mystical approach in everydayness that combines an opening to Reality and a necessity for intellectual inquiry in every movement. *Pisteuma* is not a negation of *noema* but its 'other side'; what builds between them is not a contradiction nor an opposition, but a mutual fecundation.

The second clarification relates to 'conscious gaming'. It was used for the first time by Accordi Rickards (2002) to express an approach to gaming equidistant from 'casual player' and 'hard-core player' and is currently kept alive in the Italian gaming community by the YouTube videos made by Michele Poggi. By being a thoughtful consumer while buying games and supporting creators (as opposed to the casual player) and not transform his passion in an elitist and self-referring culture (as opposed to the hard-

core player), the conscious player plays in full knowledge of the digital game as an artistic expression capable to convey meaning, ideas, and emotions. This approach, useful for gaming critics and reviewers, also have something to say in philosophy of games as considered in this paper, if joined by the deeper philosophical question about being Human. Without this joining it will remain only a useful guideline for game designers, consumers, and critique – it might even be a good expression of what a phenomenological approach can say about gameplay and narrative. But conscious gaming formulation can include the ideas of practical philosophy of intellectual inquiry and pisteumic openness to what a digital game can say about Reality. It thus becomes not simply awareness of meaning, ideas, and emotions, but a philosophical way to play those digital games that have enough authorial directions, artistic depth, and interactivity to be able to create a relation with the player and between players. In other words, a philosophical way that recognizes those ontological and existential aspects of digital games expressed earlier. It must be stressed that this proposal is not some kind of saying 'how we must play', or a supposed 'correct' way of playing. Without a full knowledge of the mechanisms that spring into action during gameplay's experience and without the consciousness of risks and problems that digital game addiction might bring, such an approach cannot be presented. Rather, conscious gaming in the sense just expressed is **an exercise of practical philosophy**, much like how roleplaying can be described (Marcato 2015). As I will explain, it is also crucial for a digital game to be suitable to such analysis. Although I am not talking about an elitist approach to games, so that only certain 'artsy' games can be useful for practical philosophy (as this would be against the idea at the core of this argument), but rather that a title must have some elements, be it gameplay or story or setting, that allow for such an approach.

The Peculiarity of the Question: Ravel Puzzlewell's Riddle

Having established the peculiar quality of digital games as MIOs in the relation that grows between the player and the game and between players, and having clarified the concept of both conscious gaming and spiritual approach, the next step lies in understanding how this relation is structured and what it means for the player as a human being: 'what can change the nature of a Player?'

This question is a quotation from one of the most successful digital game RPGs: Black Isles' *Planescape: Torment* (1999). In this acclaimed title, the protagonist is called Nameless One. In an undefined past time, due to an unspecified crime that would have condemned him to an eternity of suffering, the Nameless One sought immortality at the hand of the night hag Ravel Puzzlewell. As payment for Ravel's ritual, the Nameless One gave the only true answer to her most difficult question: 'what can change the nature of Man?' The answer the player can give will be part of the conclusion, but the riddle's context must be explained. The creation of a protagonist whose focal point was immortality and loss of memory at each 'death' can be seen as a choice made by game designers to combine a) player freedom in the choices of character creation and development and b) the narration of a set story. It is unknown how many 'lives' the Nameless One lived; nor if his final death, the goal of the game, is the definitive; nor there is a canon answer the Nameless

One gave to Ravel Puzzlewell; but it is implied that his answer was the only true one because he himself believed it. There is no correct answer, because everything can change the nature of Men: in an existence determined by a constant change of self-perceivedness, self-determination, and capacities, where a subject is open to the world and thanks to the experiences it is well beyond its biological, cultural and historical Self (Sartre 1936), the Human is a constant dynamic event whose nature is *dynamis*.

A quick note on this must be expressed, especially due to contemporary very important topics about identity that needs to be acknowledged. Here, I propose a definition of dynamic Human according to Raimon Panikkar's idea of mankind as **cosmotheandric mystery**. To summarize the argument, I use the term 'Human', capitalised, in order to reject:

- Every form of sexism that might derive from the use of a male or female term to designate our species (as 'mankind').
- Every form of absolute that might derive from the use of a collective noun for a specie that annihilate the irreducible interrelational unicity of every member of that specie (as 'humankind').
- Every form of limitation to the biological dimension that might derive from the use of a classificatory term that separates the Human from its biological settings and closes its doors to the strength and fertility of a Mystery of which the physical dimension is richness but not excluding (as 'human race', 'human being').

Positively speaking, the term 'Human' wants to propose a notion of our being where 1) its *dynamis* is the only way to ontologically speak about it and 2) *τέχνη* can return to be integral and positive part of our being, without any risk of 'dehumanization', if driven by a spiritual *τέλος*.

To return to the topic at hand, in a more analytical way, this question can be translated as follows: what can a philosophical approach to digital games say about our being Human? This question is different to those normally intended by philosophy. In the conclusion of his work, Di Letizia (2014: 309–22), in order to dissolve the objection that a digital game 'is just a game', reaffirms phenomenology, information philosophy, and process ontology as able to give the answers to five key aspects of philosophical speculation: 1) mind 2) ethics 3) reality 4) brain 5) society and culture. By showing how a game's "magic circle" (Huizinga 1967: 114–5) grows into the real world over the boundaries of make-believe, his phenomenological approach appears effective in analysing the digital game experience. His most important contribution lies in arguing how the Self of the player is in the game as well as outside it (Di Letizia 2014: 298–300), enriching a debate philosophically that pertains mainly to cognitive sciences and psychology (Argenton et al. 2014) and game studies (Bittanti 2004). Being part of a phenomenological speculation, his approach interrogates digital games thanks to the concept of noema and intentionality. It is here that lies the difference: Ravel Puzzlewell's riddle, as translated above, does not have only a *noematic* content, strictly rational and born from knowledge, but moves from the *pisteuma*, from what we can believe be true, and only after that it is analysed and challenged and/or validated by *ratio*. The torch in *Alan Wake*, in a player's worldview, is a torch before any other speculation and nothing more than a torch until any other question is asked.

This is the reason for which the Nameless One gave the only possible correct answer to the hag's riddle: it is a *pisteumic* answer that become *noematic* only once challenged. And by asking what digital games can say about our being Human, the path marked by phenomenology crosses the bridge towards the spiritual. A player's emotional involvement in the game is fundamental in determining the question status: it has already been shown how digital game impact emotions (Frome 2007), but the element of *pisteuma* seems to point to another direction.

The Sea of Doors and the "Human Without Destiny": Spiritual Approach in Conscious Gaming

A spiritual approach in conscious gaming, starts from accepting that a game is not 'just a game', but an integral part of our being Human; the neurological, cultural, and experiential point of view are beginning and complement of how this might be expressed. It is a philosophical question that challenges the assumptions of a Player's nature and points to Human's nature; moreover, it can help showing how an MIO can have the 'sacral aura' of works of art in the contemporary, digitalized, and informational western culture. Not every game can have the right conditions to be experienced using this approach, obviously, in the same way as not every movie carries deep philosophical meaning, or how not every book bears the same literary value. This is a crucial part of this proposal: by accepting the relational nature of games intended as MIOs, as argued earlier, a player should be able to identify which digital game is appropriate to be played as a practical philosophy exercise. The two philosophical exercises in conscious gaming that follow recognize the games presented as MIOs thanks to both their intrinsic virtues (artistic direction, powerful soundtrack, apt gameplay) and relational quality (being *différance* of relation with the player and between players). The following quick case studies can be seen as an example of how this approach can leverage a deeply authorial title, and how these kinds of digital games can be used as a tool for practical philosophy.

In the development of Irrational Games' *Bioshock Infinite*, its game designers gave an unintended answer to the philosophical question that we advanced in this argument. After having her multidimensional powers fully restored, once again being able to open rifts (called 'tears' in-game) between different realities and universes, the character Elizabeth transports Booker DeWitt (the player) to a peculiar place called the 'Sea of Doors': an endless expanse of lighthouses over the sea. In the game's setting, this represents the quantic variables and constants of different realities in the many-worlds interpretation as presented by quantum physicist Bryce Seligman DeWitt, namesake of the character. In this vast expanse of possibilities, the main antagonist, Zachary Comstock, searched and found all the elements that allowed him to transform the utopic (dystopic?) fling city of Columbia into a powerhouse capable of challenging the nations of the world – and even to conquer them, in an alternate reality. One of the cardinal characters of the story, the Songbird, is created by looking at one of the alternate realities nearest to Comstock's Columbia: the Big Daddy from the first *Bioshock* chapter (2K Boston 2007). In the Sea of Doors, the player sees different version of his character and Elizabeth walk towards other lighthouses in a mimicry of their movements, but always with a slightly varied de-

tail. "There is always a lighthouse, there is always a man, there is always a city"(Irrational Games 2013) says Elizabeth, in reference to all *Bioshock* games (since 2007): lighthouses, cities, and a man fighting against a destiny that ties him since the beginning of the story are a common thread in all episodes of this series. It can be argued that these varied details, if expanded in an infinite setting, are able to cover every movement's variation made by a player in multiple playthroughs and by different players in different playthroughs. There, in the Sea of Doors, the player is offered a glimpse of their own nature: a dynamic constant in a sea of variables, not only for different playthroughs, but different games too. In a sense, Kevin Levine (the lead designer of the series) and his team are suggesting us to look at their games as 'tears' not only on other stories, but also on other aspects of ourselves. "Every lighthouse is a door" (ibid.); the closest ones open to other playthroughs of the same title but is easy to imagine that the farthest are to other games. Lighthouses turns into towers, then into castles, or skyscrapers, each one a door to another game, another experience. An experience of conscious gaming kept on the noematic level is aware of the story's meaning and the connection with quantum theory and can appreciate the setting's artistic level. The spiritual approach adds something more, without risking to 'read too much' into a game. A spiritual approach to *Bioshock Infinite* makes the player aware of the *pisteuma* behind the experience of gaming and what it means to be a player, having the chance to cross games, settings, narratives, gameplays. It makes the player aware of the potential to keep all the experiences made while immersed in a digital game and to transport them in their everydayness. Much as different aspects of the same character can be a force of good and a force of evil according to what we experience, different aspects of the Human can be raised and developed according to what inside the stories we live and what we believe can resonate with us. Player and characters of every game played 'live' two different experiences, where the former is aware of the latter (but not the other way around) thanks to the phenomenological mechanisms of immersion. This philosophical acknowledgement is felt in the whole player: mind, body, personal relations, but also cultural, anthropological, and professional speculations; all are impacted by the meaning that arises from such dynamism of the relation between player and characters. In the end, the *différance* is such that, like Booker DeWitt, at the very end of *Bioshock Infinite* gains the consciousness of being both himself and Zachary Comstock, a player can affirm in a certain, hybrid way to be both themself and any character ever played.

In being aware of this relation with his characters, the player can be in a certain state of freedom between different choices and narrations; state of freedom situated more in emotions than in rational reasoning, as suggested by an interpretation of Dontnod Entertainment's *Life is Strange* guided by this approach. This game, like *Bioshock Infinite* involved with quantum theory in its themes and narrative, was designed (as said in the first part) in order to 'give a sense of looking inside ourselves'. The choices that Max Caulfield, the player's character, is guided through thanks to her capacity to rewind time, from a noematic perspective make the player reflect on free will, action and consequences, and friendship value. But the emotional involvement generated by the game seems to indicate something more, something that is tied to the nature of Max as character. The relation between Max and her childhood friend Chloe Price is drawn and narrated in such a way that the player is involved way more than other games, both in the narration and in the characters. Not considering the occasions when the player rewinds time in order to

progress the story, we can identify three principal different timelines: 1) the main timeline, 2) the timeline where Chloe's father survives an accident and Chloe is reduced to a paralyzed condition, and 3) the timeline where Max wins the photographic contest and flies to San Francisco. These timelines are connected by definite turning points: 1) the day Chloe's father dies and 2) the day Max saves Chloe from being shot and, thanks to this emotional struggle, discovers her powers. In the game the character keeps memory of everything the player experiences, for gameplay purposes. Thus, the player can progress in the story using notions, dialogue options, objects, and the like. In one of the 'timeline jumps' during Episode 5, Max clearly states this loss of memory to Chloe: "in a few minutes I won't know any of this happened… nothing. (…) You'll have to tell me exactly what I did and said just now" (Dontnod Entertainment 2015). Due to this, it can be said that Max does not remember anything if she returns to a timeline before and after producing a change, because it was not experienced by the player. During the game, the various choices and story lines are designed to open to the player to the inner turmoil of a contemporary teenager between memories of childhood, present school and romantic struggles, and perspectives for the future of their career. The complex net of characters and feelings involved are designed to generate attachment in the player that build up until the very end of the story. The final choice (made under a lighthouse, by the way) forces the player to a hard decision: to sacrifice Chloe to save the town, or the other way round. This is enough to justify an internal struggle in the player before choosing. Max, as a character, surely 'suffers' through the same or an even stronger emotional struggle. It is possible that, at some point in one of two Max's futures, she experiences another emotional struggle due to remorse that sends her back in time to the moment the game began – and there, she does not remember anything. Under this light, each playthrough is another iteration of the same narration; the character cannot remember, but the player does. Be it for exploring different paths, for trying different choices, or for experiencing the same story, the player turns Max in the 'Human without destiny', a wandering Human (Marcel 1980) purely dynamic and entangled in a relation of mutual experiences of events not yet lived. This characteristic, if applied to MIOs with a strong narrative component, can make the emotional involvement of the player in a game, from a spiritual approach to conscious gaming, akin to that peculiar nostalgic feeling for events that never happened. It is clearly an aporetical expression: How can someone have nostalgic feelings for something that was never experienced? Here, again, lies the *différance* between player and character: the memories of a game, which justify the game itself by being phenomenologically experienced, if looked through a spiritual approach to conscious gaming, are in a certain 'hybrid' state and concurs to the nature of the *pisteuma* the MIO can help to build in the Human.

Digital Sublime and *Cyberpunk*: Ultra-Material as Door to the Transcendent

Given the hybrid nature of the digital medium and the hints of transcendence that it can contain, it is no surprise that the idea of some kind of 'digital sublime' (Mosco 2004) was pushed forward when technological advancement in the field showed what potential it might bring to Human's everyday life outside of imagined science fiction stories. The idea

of a digital sublime suggests that when we are faced with a new, advanced technology, we have the same experience of the sublime that Romanticism started to theorize upon both in philosophy and in art. To summarize Mosco's theory, the digital sublime is the intense experience of marvel at the ideas, concepts, and consequences of a technological advancement that up until that moment was not present, or if present, not yet fully shared to the public. At the time of writing, the positive reactions towards the perfectioning of generative AI like ChatGPT can be described as a kind of digital sublime. The idea that algorithms have advanced so much that an AI can now delve into the domains traditionally thought as only accessible by Humans to produce art and literature is awe-inspiring to some, as they may understand it as a promise of comfort and ease of existence. There is, however, those who extend stern critique of the concept of the digital sublime and the positive attitude towards technology that it brings, as it does not allow for a critical analysis of the risks that new technologies might advance (Numerico 2022). Those who oppose it, again by taking the example of how much AI has advanced in recent years, say that it risks giving a too optimistic opinion on these kinds of technologies, thus clouding judgement. Critics' perspective is quite radical: new technologies are instruments and as such need to be considered, with full knowledge of the fact that they share the same potential of those technologies that have brought forth ages of conflict past and world-level tensions during the Cold War. It is not a new debate, as time and time again voices are raised in warning against a technological advancement unbound by critical thinking. This is the reason for which every discussion about new technologies must be rooted in a critical approach towards *τέχνη* that can recognize potentiality and risks at the same time; and any discussion on digital games and their potential as philosophical tool must share this approach. It is easy, in fact, to get carried away by the well-crafted worlds and game experience that the industry presents to the players and users. A spiritual approach to the experience of a digital game in the 'conscious gaming' sense can mitigate these scenarios we presented –and at the same time help in understanding the relationship between the Human and the ever-growing digital. It might also be considered as a way through which contemporary sensibilities can experience the age-old concept of **transcendence**.

Let's consider CD Project Red's *Cyberpunk 2077*. While riddled with flaws in the gameplay, it presents themes strictly tied to the idea of transcendence through the Machine. It can be seen as one of the finest examples of the cyberpunk movement and aesthetics, being as it is the digital game transposition of the Tabletop Roleplaying Game *Cyberpunk 2020* (Mike Pondsmith 1988) and its subsequent incarnations. In this title, a player follows the story of V, a mercenary operating in Night City, who during the classic 'heist-gone-wrong' trope of crime stories ends up inserting the digitalized consciousness of one of the most acclaimed rockers into his augmented brain. The rocker is a cross between mercenary and rockstar: Johnny Silverhand. From here, the story throws its co-protagonists into a long struggle to understand how this ghost in the machine-brain can be extracted without killing both host and digitized consciousness, and what this means for the bigger picture of constant war between the megacorps. The themes of immortality and Human nature are strictly tied to the gameplay. The game developers and writers did an impressive job of presenting a vast spectrum of how a hyper-technologized Human can react to an ever-advancing *τέχνη*. In Night City, there are people that completely reject any kind

of augmentations, and others that try to 'chrome themselves up' as much as possible, up to the point of falling to the ever-present threat of cyberpsychosis. This is an interesting gaming mechanic, present in the tabletop games as well, that could really be a starting point of a whole different paper. But suffice it to say that it shows how far the addition of technology into one's very own being, both physically and mentally, can bring a person far from their Humanity (Pondsmith 2022). All of this is set in a huge, sprawling open-world style map that the player can explore up to its most remote areas. When exploring further and further and reaching spaces far from the urbanized centre of Night City, the environment becomes progressively emptier and more deserted, but also more realistic and meaningful.

Cyberpunk 2077 can thus provide a huge number of examples and elements that can be helpful in the approach I have tried to formulate. Aside for the main plot struggle of a digitized consciousness to understand what it is (Just a simulation or can it be considered a real, living entity?) the world CD Project Red and Pondsmith present to the player is breath-taking. They can meet Buddhist monks that tear all technological augmentation from their bodies and live in poverty, subject to the violence of bands of thug that forcefully augment them just out of spite. They can meet netrunners that completely rejected their humanity and upload their consciousness in the Net. They can even meet what seems to be entities born directly from the collective upload of huge amount of data, like a naturally emerging artificial intelligence (and this would be another very interesting starting point for another paper). But most importantly, they can see dozens and dozens of everyday people, progressing through their normal lives that integrate technological enhancements and advancements in their existences, oblivious to the high-level theorizing that the player do with the two co-protagonists, V and Johnny Silverhand. In this sense, *Cyberpunk 2077* presents a world where the technological element of a dystopian cyberpunk society is on one side heavily material, a proper *res* and *substantia* that grounds the lives of its inhabitants, but that can also open the doors to something that transcend that very same technology, be it by embracing or rejecting it. Especially interesting is how the impermanence of the digital in the net can be seen as the experience of some kind of non-physical experience akin to religious mystic experience in the sense the Voodoo Boys express. This is, in the game, a gang of very expert hackers and thugs that build up a faith system by crossing Haitian voodooism faith in loas and spirits with the (in-game world) reality of the already mentioned emerging artificial intelligences.

All these elements, when met during the game, on one side enrich the story the designers tried to tell, but on the other, are elements that give further elements on the understanding of the relation between Human and technology. Once again, the idea of a defined nature of the Human is challenged; quite the contrary, it is presented as a constant dynamic between the physical and mental dimension and how the implementation of technology can bring to this discussion. It is, of course, an approach that goes to the direction of transhumanism in the contemporary sense of the word (and not according to Dante's *transumanar*, unfortunately). However, rather than wanting to give a clear answer to these questions and a direction towards which pushing the player, *Cyberpunk 2077* can be interpreted as a problematization of these themes. Being a role-playing game, *Cyberpunk 2077* present all of this in its narrative, thus providing a rich ground for further analyses.

Neo-Humanism in *Beyond Earth*

Sid Meier took a different path: *Beyond Earth* does not have much in terms of narration as a strategic game, but it presents a world. The only narration predates the game events: with great hubris, Humans almost destroyed the planet with pollution, wars, and by exhausting its resources. States and private companies have built colony spaceships according to their own traditions, thus presenting the player a choice of sponsors that range from American Reclamation Company's specialization in spies and undercover operation to Franco-Iberian culture advancement. The introduction movie shows these characterizations in a moving way, with the corporative building of ARC's spaceship or the blessing of Slavic Federation's seeding vessels by an orthodox priest before take-off. Here, the indirect narration expressed through building, units, and technologies descriptions tells of the Great Mistake, the Seeding, the quest of the Human for a new place to live, where to atone for its past sins –or to repeat them.

The term 'lore' used by the community of players to describe this peculiar kind of silent narration is particularly appropriate here. It can trace its origin from Old English *lār*, 'to learn', to the Old German **laistjan*, 'to follow a track', and up to the Indo-European root *leis-*, 'track, furrow'; it is also connected to Latin *delirium*, 'madness'. To follow this story means to search for the footprints in every corner, to follow the tracks and the ditches in the environment, looking for every little detail that might give a hint to the bigger picture. It means for the player to have an attention to details and to be in a very particular mind-set in order to find meaning.

Players can decide to just follow the game mechanics and build cities, create states, and relate to other factions via diplomacy or war; but sometimes the game shows its world thanks to environmental storytelling, and here players can make a conscious act to follow these hints toward a better understanding of the game's world. There is no big story as in *Cyberpunk 2077*; there is no huge and defying struggle against megacorporation to save the life of a simple mercenary. Here, descriptions and quotes are what accompany the player in their chosen civilization's evolution.

The player is presented with three branches of possible Human advancement, each one tied to a different victory scenario. **Supremacy** sees the Human become more and more tied with digital technologies, ultimately merging with them in a synthetic life form where Human flaws have been corrected by computing power and immortality is achieved uploading one's consciousness. **Harmony** rejects the environmental sins of Humanity's predecessors and welcomes alien life, trying to integrate them in the Human genome to live in harmony and reach the whole Planet's awakening. **Purity**, on the other hand, tried to correct the errors of the past by keeping the human genome intact and establishing control over technology, without dominance of neither and embracing the idea of the Human as a peculiar and dynamic being. Discovering new technologies connected to these ideologies brings a civilization closer to its ideals – or, with the Rising Tide expansion, allows a player to adopt hybrid play styles. Every technology discovery or erecting of a Wonder (unique buildings that give an edge in different areas of a civilization's development and play style) is accompanied by a quotation of one of the sponsors' leaders that shed light on a possible outcome of its ideology.

This is an important point: there is no narration but a quotation that helps immersion by the player in the game. Everything else is built by the player during the experience of the game; it is left to the player's imagination to create the story of the Human during the Seeding of a new Planet every new playthrough. *Beyond Earth* lets the player build their knowledge of Humanity's past, of the various scenarios and the possibilities of the future, piece by piece. It is a slow process that requires players to be patient and listen to the quotes, open the in-game encyclopaedia, and read the stories of buildings and units and to suspend the game and discuss it with other players in forums and social networks. If experienced with an open mind that welcomes stimuli for reflections and considerations, playing the game presents various elements that can stimulate to think about the future of the Human. What will be the relation with our environment when we finally accept that anthropocentrism has to be abandoned and rejected? Is integration with technology a road to embark upon or we will have to keep ourselves in an interrelation with it? The slow pace of a turn-based strategic game allows a player to reflect during the gameplay, much like reading an essay or a paper.

Conclusion

In playing *Planescape: Torment*, the player is able to follow the steps of the Nameless One's story and give another answer to Ravel Puzzlewell's riddle. No matter what the player chooses as an answer, the hag always accepts it, for the same reason: it is true for the Nameless One. A player can answer according to the story their character lived or according to their personal choices. In the very conclusion of the game, when the protagonist is confronted with his own mortality and has to fight it in order to gain the right to finally die, he summarizes this effectively:

> If there is anything I have learned in my travels across the Planes, it is that many things may change the nature of a man. Whether regret, or love, or revenge or fear –whatever you believe can change the nature of a man, can. I've seen belief move cities, make men stave off death, and turn an evil hag's heart half-circle. This entire Fortress has been constructed from belief. Belief damned a woman, whose heart clung to the hope that another loved her when he did not. Once, it made a man seek immortality and achieve it. And it has made a posturing spirit think it is something more than a part of me. (Black Isle Studios 1999)

Humans, if we accept the idea that they can be understood as *dynamis*, can be seen as the embodiment of this concept. We are constantly changing and evolving around a relational core, and while technology is one of the elements that change and evolve (at a **staggering** rate), it is also at the hearth of what means to be Human. However, without consciousness of how this evolution and this *dynamis* happen, being overwhelmed by the sirens of an untamed digital sublime is no longer just a risk, but a reality of our everyday life.

Digital games can be a tool for practical philosophy to analyse these issues and search for solutions, if looked at in a certain way. Hence, I tried to build on Marco

Accordi Rickard's concept of Multimedia Interactive Opera to identify which can be the characteristics of a digital game in order to be used in practical philosophy. I have then suggested the idea of **a spiritual approach of conscious gaming** as methodology of this peculiar practical philosophy proposal, and tried to argue with case studies of *Bioshock Infinite* and *Life is Strange* what this approach can say about the nature of the Human. In the second part, I have further expanded this approach on two other case studies, *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Sid Meier's Beyond Earth*, to argue that a spiritual approach to the themes of transhumanism and posthumanism, once cleared of the interesting but dangerous impressions of an unbridled digital sublime or an acritical techgnosticism, can help in understanding what the relation between Human and technology can be.

Of course, I am fully conscious that such an approach is open to criticism. This is the reason for which the proposal presented in this paper is a workflow, an approach, rather than a definite argument. While I am convinced that it truly possesses the potentiality to enrich all philosophical approaches to digital games, it not only requires more refinement, but it also needs to be continuously tested in order to keep the pace of the, once again, staggering rate of technological advancements.

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