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What erotic *Tetris* has to teach serious games about being serious? Design implications of

an experiential ontology of game content

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Abstract

Building on phenomenological insights on the constitution of experienced significance within computer game play, derived from the author's earlier research on *Tetris* variations with explicit content, this paper presents a comparative close-playing analysis of a number of casual games about climate change. In this analysis, differences emerge between the means by which the games make their contents appear as significant to the players. These differences may have implications to the design of serious games: aligning the actual gameplay and the intended message can assist in safeguarding against players' transgressive interpretations.

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What are often approximated as "serious games" are distinguishable from the bulk of interactive entertainment by their attempts to convey a particular kind of significant experience to their players. These games attempt to be not just fun to play but also *about* something specific. However, these attempts are complicated by the facts that there is more in computer game play than the designed game artefact and that the players bring in a diversity of motivations and intentions – some of them much less conformist than others – affecting their in-game choices and interpretations of the game's content. Based on applying insights on the phenomenology of computer game play from the author's previous work (Leino, 2007, 2009) to comparative close-playings of contemporary serious games, this paper suggests that we can describe differences in the ways in which the games make their contents appear as significant from the player's perspective. This may have implications to the design of serious games: it seems possible for game design to mitigate the potentiality of players' transgressive interpretations of the game's content by aligning the actual gameplay with the game's intended message.

The paper assumes a perspective informed by computer game studies (Frasca, 2003; Juul, 2005; Aarseth, 2007) on one hand and by phenomenological insights on human experience (Solomon, 1993, 2007; Sartre, 2003) and technology (Ihde, 1995; Verbeek, 2008) on the other. The games analysed, including *LogiCity* (2008), *Planet Green Game* (2007) and *V GAS* (2007), are selected because while they all assumedly attempt to embed a similar message in gameplay their strategies for doing so vary. To understand the differences between the ways in which these games make their contents significant, the games are subjected to close-playing analysis. This analysis builds on the author's previous research on how several variations of *Tetris* introduce explicit content into

gameplay, which resulted in an ontology of game content as experienced. (Leino, 2007).

The ontology is originally intended to facilitate close-playings of existing games, separating the idiosyncratically contingent and subjective interpretation (deniable) from the inter-subjectively valid material (undeniable).

The methodological premise for this kind of analysis is that a close-playing of a computer game can achieve inter-subjective relevance by occupying a vantage point at the position of the "implied player" delineated by the "set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to 'exercise its effect'." (Aarseth, 2007, 130-1) However, this premise does not automatically allow us to consider winning the game or attaing its goals as end points in a teleology in relation which we could distinguish the significant from the insignificant. What we can safely assume about the player, without needing to back up the assumption with empirical-scientific evidence, is that she is, *qua* player, engaged in the gameplay activity (at least) for the sake of sustaining the activity itself. (Leino, 2009, 10-12) This prevents close-playing from turning into introspection, and allows us to consider the game as a kind of a "technological artefact" (Ihde, 1995): it not only mediates human experience about the world (Verbeek, 2008) and extends its user's capabilities like all technological artefacts do, but is also *playable*, meaning it that resists the player's attempt to remain a player, thus making her responsible for the freedom it gives her. (Leino, 2009, 12) In this light, games which manage to be *about* something specific are those which manage to slip significance and values into the game/player relationship so that their acknowledgement is a necessary condition for being able to sustain the activity of gameplay.

If we consider the game's resistance toward the player's attempt to remain a player as a baseline, we can arrive at an ontology which is able to account for the experienced significance of game content. The key to this ontology is the fairly simple distinction: as players we are free to reappropriate or ignore some of the game's features at will, whereas

other features we cannot reappropriate or deny without risking our existence as players. Hence, the experiential ontology distinguishes between deniable and undeniable game content. (Leino, 2007). By applying the ontology in close-playing analysis, the paper draws attention to how the analysed games represent individual issues related to climate change as either deniable or undeniable, and explores whether best practices can be derived from these observations. Finally, the paper discusses how the ontology and the questions it implies concerning the relationship between the game artefact and the experience of play could be connected with empirical-scientific research on games and players.

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