

I Play, Therefore I Think: Procedural Philosophy in Remedy Entertainment's *Alan Wake 2* (2023)

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Abstract

Regarding video games as *loci* of philosophical thinking, not simply illustrations of pre-existing philosophical concepts and positions, is far too rare in gamic thought studies. Yet due to the conceptually complex nature of the critically acclaimed *Alan Wake 2* (Remedy Entertainment, 2023) such a perspective becomes necessary in order to fully understand the philosophical, gamic, and aesthetic complexity of the game. Subsequently, this article argues that the game performs what is termed “procedural philosophy” as it involves adapting a position of radical skepticism and questioning the essential ontological categories of both the gamic and the nongamic reality. As the analysis shows, *Alan Wake 2* develops a philosophical conceptualization of reality which results in the formation of “obscure ideas,” related to a gamic flattening of ontology.

Keywords

Game philosophy, flat ontology, *Alan Wake 2*, gamic ideation, gamic concept formation, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, procedural philosophy

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Finnish video game developer Remedy Entertainment has always challenged gamic, narrative, and textual boundaries ever since the initial success of *Max Payne* (2001) where the character “breaks out of the diegetic space of the game to view himself as a sort of marionette within the world of gameplay” (Galloway, 2006, p. 35). *Alan Wake 2* (2023), Remedy’s newest highly critically acclaimed release, builds on the story of the first *Alan Wake* (2010) as well as establishes a connected universe with *Control* (2019) and *Quantum Break* (2016). Unsurprisingly, most of scholarly research done on *Alan Wake* focuses on the game’s (inter)textuality since it is both a structural and a thematic focus of the game—a writer haunted by his own horror story just as the character in the second game remarks in the game’s opening: “trapped by the genre, we are all ripped to pieces along the way. This is not the story I hoped it to be. This is not the ending I wanted. This story will eat us alive. This story is a monster. And monsters wear many faces.” Michael Fuchs, for instance, due to its self-conscious incorporation of other texts, sees the first game as a monstrous, uncanny example of “haunted media” and states “that *Alan Wake*’s monotonous gameplay supports the game text’s meaning, as it is merely one element in the video game’s self-reflexive engagement with its role in the Gothic tradition and its meta-reflections on the medium of the video game in view of other media” (2016, p. 39). Similarly, Nieves Rosendo highlights how the game employs intermediality and remediation to uniquely treat the genre of the fantastic (2015, p. 73). Dawn Catherine Stobart focuses on a specific example of intertextuality by addressing how the game incorporates international folklore (2016) and Joseph Campbell’s Jungian view of mythology while Andry Garcia, on a related note, investigates how the game treats Jungian archetypes in its storytelling and gameplay (2022). While the aspects investigated in *Alan Wake* are the most salient elements, I suggest that in *Alan Wake 2* these are utilized to serve a more overarching, philosophical logic, which I shall explore in the following analysis. Due to *Alan Wake 2*’s complex treatment of (non-)gamic elements, even such analytical meta-perspectives as Jungian psychoanalysis and intermediality/intertextuality are subsumed under the game’s flat(ening) ontology—the gamic expands to incorporate the real.

Procedural Philosophy and Gamic Thinking

Seen as the medium of (inter)action *par excellence*, video games are still too rarely considered as *loci* of philosophical thinking as opposed to strategic and sensory-motor action. Even though there are admirable pioneering studies thinking about video games by connecting them to established philosophical problems, such as Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox’s *Philosophy through Video Games* (2008), they tend to see games as examples of philosophical enquiry, not as interlocutors of philosophical logic. Closest to initially conceptualizing games in terms of how gamic action, especially via game mechanics, can be persuasive irrespective of the representational qualities themselves—convincing one of certain ideas via action—is Ian Bogost (2007) by

defining procedural rhetoric as integral to how games involve the player in ideation. How the gamic rules are set up and how the game mechanics guide the player's decision-making process is seen as contributing to strengthening certain ideological beliefs: "One use of procedural rhetoric is to expose and explain the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political, or cultural behavior" (Bogost, 2008, p. 128) and one should therefore "understand video games as procedural representations that make arguments about systems in the world" (p. 136). However, most of what one could term "gamic thought studies" focus on the game theoretical understanding thereof, that is, seeing gamic thinking as primarily strategic thinking or "meaningful actions" (see Murray, 1997, p. 324; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 670). As Barry Atkins explains: "The focus, always, is not on what is before us or the 'what happens next' of traditionally unfolding narrative but on the 'what happens next if I'" (2006, p. 137). Even more recent studies discussing the application of "philosophical games" in education subscribe to the same concept of gamic thought by treating the gamic as the vessel for philosophical content, not as itself capable of producing that content. For instance, Maria Anagnostou et al. propose a teaching scenario that "aims at cultivating hypothetic—deductive and critical thought/moreover, enhances the linguistic ability in the vocabulary of ancient Greek philosophy as well" by using "digital games such as quizzes and crossword puzzles, student generated comic stories, and a digital guide [...] [and] physical activities involving movement and dialogue using fishbowl techniques and Socratic circles" (2022, p. 567). While not without merit, these intersections of philosophy, rhetoric, and video game study should be extended to encompass seeing games as capable of conceptualizing phenomena.

I aim to map out how a specific game—*Alan Wake 2*—can go beyond the representational philosophical content or the ideological thinking facilitated by procedural rhetoric by engaging the player in *active concept formation* through the gamic encounter (narrative and nonnarrative elements, mechanics, etc.). One could argue that such an analytical procedure is simply an extension of Bogost's procedural rhetoric, but I would suggest separating procedural rhetoric from what I name "procedural philosophy" as the two enquiries are slightly distinct—and the video game examples discussed by Bogost do fall into the category of how I will now define rhetorical thought. While rhetoric is concerned with making persuasive arguments about the world without systematically, rigorously questioning any fundamental assumptions about reality, philosophy conceptualizes (reshapes) that reality via a philosophical thought procedure. Even though the separation between rhetoric and philosophy is highly contested ever since its inception and the Sophists, according to Gerard A. Hauser, they are often understood in terms of the opposition between effectiveness/speech-as-action and epistemology/speech-as-truth, which is illustrated by the ancient disagreement between Plato and Gorgias: "While Gorgias celebrated the enormous psychagogic powers of language, Plato lamented the consequences of an abandoned quest for the Truth. His concerns are captured in his signature objection to rhetoric: philosophers pursue the Eternally True through reasoned arguments, while

Sophists and rhetors seek the probable through sensory engagement structured by *phantasia* and *mimesis*” (Hauser, 1995, p. iv). That is, procedural rhetoric implies a (preexisting) philosophical stance, while procedural philosophy explicitly labors to arrive at a stance. In my analysis, I explain how *Alan Wake 2* is not simply persuasive of certain ideas in a rhetorical sense but how it performs procedural philosophy.

Alan Wake 2 develops an idea, akin to a philosophical concept, arrived at through gamic action enveloped and modified by duration/temporality. It blurs the boundary between reality and fiction—a typical gesture for the speculative and new weird fiction tradition (see Noys & Murphy, 2016, p. 127) from which it draws its narrative and conceptual inspiration—in a uniquely gamic manner. By doing so, it eventually incorporates the nongamic player’s reality into its own logic of ever-expanding fictionalization or “gamification” of the real—abolishing the boundary between the gamic and the nongamic. Such a “flattening” of ontology is key for speculative realism (represented by such thinkers as Steven Shaviro, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux who challenge the anthropocentric correlation of thought and being) and object-oriented ontology (a subset of speculative realism originated by Harman). It involves questioning the primacy of the human subject and the categorical boundaries on which it relies (subject/object, culture/nature, human/animal), including the distinction between fictional and real phenomena (see Bryant, 2011; Harman, 2005, 2017; Morton, 2010). Such a perspective is not without its critics. Stephen Mulhall objects to OOO by stating that “Harman implies that the fact we humans must acquire knowledge of the real world, and so must employ a variety of physical, mental and cultural means or media in so doing, engenders a kind of metaphysical incarceration. OOO treats the (embodied, rational, social) reality of human animals as if it were a mode of exile from reality” (2018). Harman responds by explaining how the idea that reality is not reducible to what is perceivable to human intellect and senses or that nonhuman objects have real relations vis-à-vis each other independent of what is humanly conceivable does not lead to relativism, does not imply an “anything goes” attitude to science: “The sensual lemon is not something ‘emitted’ by the real lemon [...], but instead is produced by the mediated interaction between the real lemon and the real me with my specific neurological constitution. But all this means is that I am one of the ingredients (along with the real lemon) that produces the sensual lemon” (2022, p. 459). Saying that the real lemon and the sensual lemon perceived by someone are distinct, equally real objects does not imply that Truth is meaningless or reinterprets “relations between objects as primitive versions of the kind of relations subjects have with objects” (Mulhall, 2018).

There remains a question of how much of this discussion is pertinent for *Alan Wake 2*’s “philosophical” thought. Since my claim is that the game initiates a certain philosophical thought procedure which results in taking a stance akin to OOO, one may object to my previous claim that the game “does” philosophy as it may be seen as simply, rhetorically illustrating a preexisting stance. Yet any knowledge of or familiarity with OOO and related philosophical ideas is not necessary, neither is *Alan Wake 2* reducible to a few, albeit key, propositions by Harman. Methodologically, I shall

therefore closely describe a number of game examples and explicate how the cognitive and sensory–motor encounter initiates certain thought procedures that conceptualize gamic and nongamic reality in a philosophically specific way. Even if one rejects OOO’s concept of reality nongamically, gamically—while thinking through/with *Alan Wake 2*—they remain true. That is, one can reject *Alan Wake 2*’s philosophical thought postgamically, but even then, the sensuous idea (experience as evidence) could not be contested, only the propositional content. This situation is reminiscent of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of Paul Cézanne in “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945/1993) where he argues that Cézanne’s paintings *are* phenomenology, that is, they invite one to see/reconceptualize reality with them—they perform what Merleau-Ponty wishes to achieve in his philosophical texts, the difference is that they do so while “staging” this thought in a sensual manner. By gamifying or “awakening” reality—turning the nongamic reality into itself—*Alan Wake 2* may be even said to subsume these philosophical stances, which are echoed in the stances of the two main detectives (truth seekers) of the game; Saga Anderson’s position vis-à-vis fictional/real is akin to Mulhall’s and Alex Casey’s to that of Harman. From within the gamic, even Mulhall’s and Harman’s texts function as interactable items similar to Federal Bureau of Control’s reports found throughout the game. Subsequently, the aim of this article is also to show how *Alan Wake 2* performs its thought in conjunction with the player by problematizing the (post)gamic.

Alan Wake 2’s resulting concept is what I refer to as the obscure idea, a reflection of the philosophical doubt and skepticism that this gamic encounter facilitates and a contrast to the Cartesian clear and distinct ideas—the philosophical tradition with which the game’s logic has deep resonances. René Descartes postulates such ideas as the basis for determining what is true in *Principles of Philosophy* (1644): “I term that clear which is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye they operate upon it with sufficient strength. But the distinct is that which is so precise and different from other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear” (1911/1973, p. 237). Since such clear perception is for Descartes dependent upon God’s existence and God’s existence is proven via the logical thought procedure of arriving at clear and distinct ideas, one ends up with a circular reasoning where the basis of logical certainty is belief. Descartes is most famous for his dualistic ontology—the split between *res cogitans*/thinking substance and *res extensa*/extended substance which separates the thinking human being from nonhuman animals, inanimate beings, and the human body itself—the distinction speculative realism and OOO are at odds with. As such, the game might be said to systematically and rigorously attack the Cartesian epistemological procedure that results in this ontological distinction. Continuing the plot of the first *Alan Wake* game, the premise of a writer writing a story (*res cogitans*) which transforms reality (*res extensa*) via the immaterial—dark emotions, especially as expressed through artistic means—is made more philosophically challenging than in the game’s previous incarnation. Much like the game’s symbols of the two intersecting triangles that appear throughout the game and have

different meanings that eventually only point to their common origin, the game's premises, conclusions, and judgments about what is factual/real are twisted, signify contradictory meanings without resolving the contradiction as the game teaches a specific form of ideation. *Alan Wake 2* appears to be built on a multitude of cultural references the order of which (what is the original and what is the copy) is made unclear as the game flattens out its ontological phenomena—the reality of imaginary and real phenomena becomes equally real and equally fictional. Aiming for Cartesian certainty (the game's "announced" task for the player) only exposes one to objects that lose their clarity while being regarded and are not distinct in their boundaries and categories.

Gamic Being: Doubting Identity

A glaring plethora of references to such cultural phenomena as Nordic noir crime series, Norse and Finnish mythology, the famous *Twin Peaks* television series by David Lynch, Broadway musicals, Aki Kaurismäki's filmmaking style, fan fiction writing, among others, turn them into reflections of each other, questioning any kind of cultural and ontological hierarchy—one's reality is posited as potentially fictional without being less real. Such logic is most evidently established via the basic narrative choice and corresponding game mechanics of the two playable characters—Saga Anderson and Alan Wake. One is initially thrust into the dark visual and narrative world to be chased by a group of people while occupying a naked body of a middle-aged man running through the woods. Soon enough, one is caught by the pursuers in dark cloaks and deer masks and one's heart is cut out in a form of ritual sacrifice as a strange stream of consciousness is heard: "the Cult of the Word ... Hemingway..." countered by the other voices: "We are the Cult of the Tree. We watch in the night!" Only much later, one learns that the man was Robert Nightingale—a familiar character to the players acquainted with the first game. Although not apparent at this moment, the jumping between realities/bodies will become procedurally pivotal in philosophically questioning ontological boundaries between entities—a philosophical gesture resonant with OOO. After this opening, one is sutured to a more conventional character—Saga Anderson, an FBI agent—who, together with her fellow agent Alex Casey, arrives at the small town of Cauldron Lake to investigate Nightingale's murder. Throughout the game, Saga is presented as a strong, independent, yet complex individual with her own personal and professional struggles, akin to the famous Nordic noir heroines of *The Bridge*—Saga Norén—and *The Killing*—Sara Lund; even the sweater she wears is visually reminiscent of Lund's. In a later scene, the player's attention is drawn to the garment's cultural significance as another character, Ilmo Koskela, based on its "Nordic" look, guesses that she might have Finnish immigrant roots, which is countered by Saga's statement that she is Swedish on her mother's side. Such a seemingly mundane interaction is revelatory of the game's deep-seated logic of blurring the boundaries between different

phenomena and highlights the necessity of thinking an object's independent significance and in relation to a subject.

Only after a certain portion of the narrative is explored, does one switch to the second playable character—Alan Wake, the protagonist of the first game—and gains the ability to shift realities, implying that the stories, although inevitably meant to intersect and finally merge, can be experienced in a nonlinear manner. Such a game mechanic does not only affect the narrative “emplotment” but contributes to the obscuring of temporality and thus hides one of the main twists of the story, the relationship between Alan and the story's villain Mr Scratch. Alan is trapped in the Dark Place—another reality dimension—where he struggles to free himself from his inner demons and prohibit his antagonist Mr Scratch (Wake's double) from editing his books *Initiation* and *Return*, which would turn the reality Saga presently inhabits into an eternal horror story. Since irrespective of the order in which one plays the characters, they mostly interact and collaborate via threshold places, one assumes that these intersectional temporalities do not necessarily match, and such a choice obscures the identity of the Alan that escapes the Dark Place. Is he truly Alan, Scratch, or Alan with the Dark Presence inside him? But the game's obfuscation of Alan's identity runs deeper as the mysterious janitor Ahti refers to Alan as Thomas Zane, an artist from the 70s who may be Alan's own creator. Such an uncertainty about Alan's ontological status (real, fictional, or partially fictionalized) is mirrored by Alan's ability to affect the narrative trajectories of Saga and Casey. In the beginning of the game, one hears Saga talk to her teenage daughter on the phone. As Wake's/Scratch's story begins to transform reality or, in the game's terminology, a World Altering Event (an AWE) starts to take place, she learns that her daughter is dead, and her marriage has been broken for a while due to this tragedy. One is thus made uncertain not only about the identities, their roles (villains or heroes—since it is implied that Scratch is Alan at a different narrative stage, the distinction being temporal, not ontic), but also about the degree of fictionalization—one cannot be certain to which degree Saga's and Casey's memories are altered by the story. One can only choose to believe that Saga's *believed* version—where she is happily married and her daughter is still alive—is the “unedited” original. Since Saga holds to this belief until the end, her position is linked to Mulhall's rejection of flat ontology—the fictional and the real are held separate.

What is more, the obscurity of the idea of who one (the player) is becomes even more salient due to the game mixing up the playable realities at a key point; in Saga's reality, one is suddenly forced to play as Alan when he and Casey come under attack by the Cult of the Tree. This is a moment of high significance easy to overlook due to the necessity for immediate player action—to fight multiple enemies or escape them. As there is no clearly motivated reason to shift from Saga to Alan at this point, this diminishing of control over playable character choice (forced character switch during a cut scene) cues one to the fact that one's control over narrative action is questionable and suggests that the idea of individual, monadic identity is unstable; much like Meillassoux's concept of hyperchaos according to which reality is not

strictly bound by laws and provisional laws may be subject to a sudden change, generating new worlds (2008, p. 64)—a similar concept to *Alan Wake 2*'s AWEs, the player controlling the game shifts to the game controlling the player. At the same time, the game forces the player to rethink the propositional distinction between author/authored and player/played, illustrated when Alan (in the Dark Place) sees a vision of Alex Casey (a character from his crime thriller, based on the actual Casey) as the latter narrates the story of a crime investigation that involves his own creator—Alan Wake. One's merging and nonmerging with the playable characters is thus questioned. Is one Saga/Alan? Or is one the Dark Presence in their minds? One's identity is posited as a "withdrawn" (from human perception) object, which results in multiple sensual objects. Via raising such questions, the game's procedural philosophy investigates individual identity. Consequently, the ontological separation of the player's nongamic reality from the gamic actionable space is flattened out as well as the player's situatedness in the "real" world is similarly fictionalized and gamified—is subject to the game's flat ontology. As one's reality comes in contact with the constantly merging and separating realities of the Dark Place and Cauldron Lake, the game's/Wake's fiction affects the player or, to use OOO's terminology, creates a new sensual object—the player affected by the game.

Gamic Encounter: Doubting Phenomena

Along with the uncertainty about oneself as a character-player and the boundary between the gamic and the nongamic time-space, encountering phenomena also obscures perception—the objects and other entities are constantly perceptually oscillating. Starting with the non-playable characters, one experiences an uncertainty about their existential status and one's relation to them. Besides the basic premise that all characters are affecting/affected by the story, some identities are particularly interstitial and allow to think of them as "withdrawn" (from one's perception) objects (see Harman, 2017, p. 12). Ahti, the mysterious janitor (already familiar to the players of *Control*), is one such key entity. Ahti's identity or even existential status (possibly an astral entity) are not entirely clear, and his characterization combines suspicious specificity and abstract generality. The janitor is marked with a familiar Finnish identity—often uses Finnish phrases, direct translations of Finnish words of wisdom, references to Finnish culture such as his love of tango—and a strange ability to escape definition, to transcend spatiotemporal boundaries. Ahti appears in Saga's and Alan's segments, can access the Dark Place and the actual Cauldron Lake, including nearby towns, and is the one to facilitate reality shifts for the player as one switches realities in safe spaces where there is a pool of water on the ground next to a janitor's bucket. Ahti was likewise the only character to enter my own dreams while playing and researching the game, which reinforces the game's logic and characterization. The very name—Ahti—alludes to a Finnish water god and thus strengthens the uncertainty about the character's identity. In fact, this referential and etymological ambiguity permeates most interactable and noninteractable objects. Ahti's pool of Finnish inserts

often includes a prominent Finnish curse word *perkele*, which can be translated as “damn”; the word itself stems from Perkūnas, an ancient god from Baltic mythology; this everyday phrase thus unites the opposites (god/devil), echoed in one of the game’s songs “Champion of Light/Herald of Darkness”—subject to a temporal, not ontic distinction. Moreover, *perkele* is reminiscent of the word “percolator,” referenced in the game’s amusement park Coffee World and establishes a further link to *Twin Peaks* and its famous first episode that alludes to the mysterious fish in the percolator. Thus, such insignificant phrases are infused with a potential deep meaning the final interpretation of which is made obscure—everything connects but it is never clear how.

Much like the playable characters, the nonplayable characters blur the gamic/non-gamic boundary. As the story progresses, Saga gradually becomes incorporated in the town’s world and her story changes—she has now been previously a resident of the town and it is here that her daughter drowned. One witnesses several incidents of characters talking to Saga as if they know her from before. Informed by Alan that it is the story’s fault, she accepts this fact only to eventually start to doubt the boundary between reality and fiction. She meets Tor and Odin Anderson, the two old rockers from the band Old Gods of Asgard, who present themselves as her close relatives and decides to play along, commenting: “As if they remember a different reality.” But later, after reconsidering her own mother’s words and some photographic evidence, she comes to believe that these may be her actual relatives. Saga is therefore not only a detective from the Nordic noir television series but a Norse mythological entity “on her mother’s side.” Such a shift reflects the player’s evolving relationship to the story—as a new object created in this interaction. The chapter title “Local Girl” which contains the meeting with the two brothers, cements this movement from a stranger to a resident in the fictional town and *Alan Wake 2*. Tor and Odin are not only doubled as Norse gods or the aging residents of the Valhalla Nursing Home, but as the actual, nongamic Finnish rockers Poets of the Fall. This logic is echoed by others too, most notably Casey, a real/fictional detective, who is also the game’s creator Sam Lake (Sami Antero Järvi)—the character’s model for motion-capture. In the Dark Place, when Alan is present at an interview about his book’s film adaptation, he is seated next to Casey’s actor, introduced as Sam Lake, looking, of course, identical to the character, only his Finnish accent indicates the “real” Lake since otherwise the character’s voice is provided by James McCaffrey. Such scenes are moments of philosophically “actionable” space as they investigate the concept of the self, another example being when the town’s sheriff Tim Breaker (“the time breaker”) intimates to Alan that he dreams being other individuals in other places, a hint at his other selves as an actor and a character. The player is too primed to question their separation from the story and its phenomena. My own identity, due to my name, much like Saga’s, Tor’s, Odin’s, or Ahti’s, is affected by this logic.

Unsurprisingly, the collectible items empowering the player-character such as manuscript fragments that allow one to upgrade one’s weapons are tied to the storytelling and its world-(re)shaping abilities. Upon upgrading, a cut scene of Alan’s writer’s room is shown and Alan’s voice-over “re-writing” the story and making the chosen

weapon more powerful is heard. Such fragments are found spread around the terrain, placed inside Alex Casey movie lunch boxes, and their locations are decorated with small stones wrapped inside bright-colored knitting—curious specificity hinting at obscure significance; the boxes contain words of encouragement for the “hero” and sometimes pieces of Alan’s book-inspired fan fiction. Saga learns that these boxes belong to a huge fan of Alan—the waitress and nursing home worker Rose who believes that the writer is sending her secret messages. All these details procedurally—via encountering them and establishing their gamic significance—point to the phenomenon of intentional/accidental meaning. Alan’s books inspire Rose’s fan fiction and her belief that she is chosen by Alan to help the hero; Alan denies sending such messages, but it serves his purposes irrespective of his intentions. Another collectible item that singularly strongly reinforced this world-(re)writing logic is related to touching the stuffed deer heads in the different locations one visits. Eventually, this collectible unlocks a room inside the lodge Saga stays at (to get more items), but it also emphasizes the indeterminacy of deer symbolism, its “withdrawn” object status. From my experience, indicative of an overarching gamic tendency to bleed into the nongamic, the deer heads contributed to the flattening of my ontological reality. My position in front of my computer—my doorway to the game—closely echoes Saga’s positioning inside her Mind Place due to an embroidered deer head hanging on a wall behind me. When Saga contemplates the information related to the case in her Mind Place, Saga’s head covers the deer head on her wall, Saga “becoming” the deer with horns which are significantly doubled by a pair of shadow horns—*mise-en-scène* this way hinting at the idea of doubles, the self as the hero and the villain. Accidentally turning to *mise-en-scène*, the decor of my room is (un)intentionally absorbed by the game, making me see my commonsense reality as gamic reality and myself as a gamic entity encountered by Saga, Alan, and Ahti.

One thus can use the game’s own term to describe such a phenomenon—paraliterature, that is, paranormal literature that has reality-altering effects (functions as a hyper-chaotic attractor). *Alan Wake 2* has another collectible item which illustrates this concept—the nursery rhyme puzzles that appear in many different locations and the purpose of which becomes clear only when Saga solves them all. One finds several dolls depicting archetypal figures—the child, the mother, the bear, the trickster, the monster, among others—and crayon drawings with accompanying rhymes, reminiscent of children’s fairy tales. Saga/the player must place the correct dolls on the drawings to make the picture correspond to the rhyme. Each time one succeeds, one gets a charm to slightly improve the character’s abilities. But, more importantly, this activity ontologically flattens the distinction between the aesthetic, the ludic, and the real, explained by one of the interactable items—in the “Beauty and the Beast” report detailing the purpose of such experiments: “I am certain that setting the stage in a sufficiently convincing manner will make the Fiction come into existence. I am now going to use propping in the way a set designer of a feature film would—making the cabin seem like the actual house of the characters depicted in the rhyme with small personal touches and realistic items in addition to the few key items

(such as the drawings, dolls, and personal letters) used so far.” As a sidenote, this scene provides a clear hint that Jungian archetypes are red herrings, a means to an (obscure) end, not the hermeneutic key. Upon finishing all puzzles, Saga/the player is contacted by the scientist responsible for the experiment. Fittingly for the game’s blurring of the boundaries between opposing notions, as the scientist expects Saga to be sucked into another dimension (the Dark Place), one hears him suffering the fate he expected the subject of the experiment to face. As the “echo” (a vision/memory observed by Alan) of the fictional Casey in the Dark Place explains, itself an allusion to the Cartesian demon, investigating entails being “a demon to sort out the clues based on [one’s] interpretation, to change that which [one observes]”—Saga’s/player’s interaction/perception affects the experiment; the observer/player inevitably changes the nature of the observed/the game through their investigative/hermeneutic activity.

Gamic Experience: Doubting Categorical Perception

When first chancing upon a nursery rhyme puzzle, Saga asks “A poem or a riddle?” which perfectly encapsulates the game’s procedure of questioning categorical distinctions; the aesthetic is posited as the ludic. Inside the Dark Place, Alan encounters Alice’s—his wife’s—photography exhibition, his own fictional characters as well as Zane’s mysterious lost film *Nightless Night* (*Yötön Yö*). One can watch the film in its entirety, visually, plot- and dialogue-wise reminiscent of Lynch’s and Kaurismäki’s style—the actual spectatorial experience is internal to the gamic. Challenging the categorical distinction between the aesthetic, the philosophic, and the real is linked to OOO’s treatment of aesthetics as first philosophy (Harman, 2007), which, for Harman, is not reducible to human experience and “what is important even in human aesthetic experience is not our awareness of the object–quality gap, but our productive role as an ingredient of it” (2022, p. 461). Such a slippery nature of the aesthetic/the ludic, doubling each object as art/(sub)game in an obscure relation to the real is evident in many other examples: Rose’s fan fiction, Old Gods’ of Asgard music, Ahti’s tango performance, the nursery rhymes, even the humorous ads by the Koskelas or Alice’s documentary videos describing the artist’s attempts to deal with the monstrous by photographically capturing it. *Alan Wake 2* abolishes the distinction between art forms and individual texts, implying that they all are related to the same core idea which, however, remains obscure—the game procedurally primes the player to philosophically think their relationality and categoriality. Of course, most of these pieces of art comment on the game’s plot, are premonitions or meta-reflections, which further complexifies the game’s concept of relationality. For instance, in one of the final recordings, Alice explains that she can no longer be the observer, the detached artist, and must now become the subject; she then sets up and times her camera; several haunting photographs of her walking to the edge of a cliff and jumping down follow—either to her own death or to the Dark Place. Alice’s exhibition illustrates how obscure ideas are spread in the gamic and the non-gamic reality alike—by one being emotionally affected in ways one is not fully

consciously aware of, a phenomenon referred to in *Control* as “resonance.” That is, a resonant object, by the virtue of being close to another object or person, may make it resonate in the same frequency, just how art affects its beholder; aesthetics is reconceptualized as game physics.

Such “resonance” and its gamification of the real also affects the player’s presumably nongamic reality via chapter end/transition screen songs, which may be said to propose a similar idea to Harman’s statement “that aesthetics must traffic in some way with the real and not just the sensual” (2022, p. 452). What seems to be short “lulls” between various moments of gamic action are likewise commenting on the action and the significance of various gamic experiences; they interpolate the player, without the guise of the playable character, inviting him/her to emotionally resonate with the obscure gamic ideas—a sensual object modifies a real object. Using transition screen or chapter end songs as parts of the gamic is not uncommon, but *Alan Wake 2* employs them philosophically. To take an obvious example, Poe’s “This Road” reoccurs in Alan’s parts and tends to lyrically change to correspond to the advancing story, reconceptualizing the character’s journey only eventually to sonically fall apart when Alan’s realization of being Scratch comes. Or ROOS + BERG’s “No One Left to Love” describes Saga’s resolve to fight “the story” and save her family, but it does so through abstraction and by occupying the liminal time-space of the transition screen—a “threshold” between game and reality. When one hears the penultimate chorus “When there is no one left to love/And there’s no light left to guide us home/Still keep you with me through the darkest night/And I won’t let go,” it is followed by the altered version of “Yeah there’s always you to love/There’s a spark of light to guide us home/I keep you with me through the darkest night/And I won’t let go”; this resolution is accompanied by the percussive gun shots. Gamifying the real via aesthetics, this segment invokes the constant experience and sonic gamic memory of Saga shooting enemies while fighting to not let go of her story—not to let the aesthetic distort her real. Saga’s—human subject’s—absorption by the aesthetic alludes to the speculative realist dream to think the aesthetic in nonanthropocentric terms. But the song via lyrical abstraction and inherent semantic polyvalence of music describes the player’s possible experiences too. Much like Ahti’s characterization, the songs tend toward specificity and abstraction at the same time.

Similarly, Paleface’s “Dark, Twisted, and Cruel” is heard when Scratch takes over and the song for the first and only time gives access to Scratch’s interiority. The fact that this happens only during the liminal moment of encountering a transition screen intensifies the relationship between the gamic and the player’s reality. Described is the idea of a constant creative process filled with doubt and second-guessing—of editing the manuscript: “You have no light in sight/Just endless darkness to fight/The horror story comes true/I’m dark, twisted, and cruel/You locked your house, but I’m inside/I count to ten and let you hide/I’m the knife cutting your blouse/The wicked whisper in your ear/It’s my story to write/Ripping pages in the night/When the writer is in doubt/I just scratch, scratch out.” Although contributing to Scratch’s characterization, the song echoes other moments of the game since the emphasis on

owning the story is, for instance, mentioned in “No One Left to Love” as well and implies that the distinction between Saga and Scratch/Alan is again temporal, not categorical. Scratch’s song “illuminates” another connection, mostly implicit thus far, that of God’s word and the suggestion that God and the devil are likewise such “perspectival” opposites: “Raoul, Duke, and Buk, they are my crowd/Fit together like the shotgun fits in Hemingway’s mouth/I carve down my plot, I write with your blood/I created this world, but first came the word.” Writing the word that (re)shapes reality is exactly what the biblical God achieved in his wor(l)ding “game” and what Scratch, Alan, Saga, and the player aim to do. Correspondingly to “No One Left to Love,” the musical, not only the lyrical, aspects are key as “Dark, Twisted, and Cruel” is the game’s only rap song and rap’s musical texture tends to highlight the words/lyrics, imbuing them with power and intensity, turning the musical into the linguistic which is emotionally- and agentially inflected—word rendered as action motivated by feeling. Put differently, rap music reduces the musical to the prosodic whereas many other genres tend to do the opposite, to transform the voice/speech into the melodic/instrumental. When Scratch takes over, “the word” literary becomes, to use the game’s own terminology, an object of power.

Gamic Action: Doubting Agency

To developing the gamic, philosophical concept contributes not only what one is or encounters but what one does as well—the game primes the player to prioritize philosophical activity. *Alan Wake 2* reverses the characteristic function of gamic action. Although the game does contain the typical third-person shooter actions such as fighting enemies, going on quests, getting achievements, or collecting items, and proceeding through the story by accomplishing certain actions, that is not the main action of *Alan Wake 2*. The actual activity is mental—attempting to understand connections and what is happening and eventually forming the concept of what the gamic reality is, reaching epistemological certainty regarding the bare ontological fundamentals such as to what extent one is real or someone’s written character and whether the categorical distinction between these states is even of any significance. Such an activity is highlighted in multiple ways such as deemphasizing interactivity as one usually simply echoes the character’s thoughts/actions. While as Saga one can explore the terrain and search for items and clues, one is mostly only able to find the evidence that Saga discovers and then one “helps” the detective put the evidence on her case board, initiating profiling; one delivers pieces of dialogue or otherwise vocalizes and visualizes what one—as sutured to her perspective—observes if one plays attentively. While at times one is given the option of several dialogue prompts and may decide which topic one is more interested in, this does not influence the overall narrative trajectory. As such, the real gamic action resides in one’s mental, ideational activity of finding relations between (non-)gamic elements to establish an ontological hierarchy which always turns upon itself due to the obscurity of the gamic ideas. And the moments of battle that involve physical, motoric player actions such as clicking the mouse or console buttons function

as brief rests from that straining mental activity, as moments of forgetting the main “quest.” *Alan Wake 2* thus performs an inversion of gamic action as the episodes of the most intense physical action (diegetic and player) are reprieves from the game’s actual activity—philosophically establishing what is real/true when that truth keeps “looping,” manifesting circular logic.

As it were, the main activity is ideational and there is a certain reversibility of the concept of the mental/physical inscribed in the game, best illustrated by the two key locations in Saga’s and Alan’s parts. Saga’s Mind Place is a mental space, visually represented as a room containing a case board, various mementos from her life as well as her case files. By echoing the actual room in the lodge where Saga stays at, the Mind Place blurs the link between the physical and the mental game space; the Mind Place mirrors the player’s search for epistemological connections and ontological ground. Alan’s Writer’s Room is an equivalent mental place where the player can see the pieces of the story unfold on the storyboard and explore the game meta-reflectively—to see the game’s design. As such, these game design and mechanical choices prioritize the Cartesian cogito (the mental) as the locus for Truth. Only near the end of the game does one find out that the sanctum echoes the writer’s room located inside the Valhalla Nursing Home. Notably, in the mental writer’s room, one can change the scene, that is, use a game mechanic that allows one to “rewrite” the plot by changing specific scenes/locations and opening areas that are inaccessible while using a different scene title. Such a mechanic emphasizes the idea that the physical reality is entirely subject to “the scene of writing” (Derrida & Mehlman, 1972, p. 116) as the game’s mechanic (re)writes the physical via fiction—is the scene of writing that flattens ontology. And the Dark Place itself where Alan is trapped for almost entirety of the game and where Saga is captured near the game’s end as the Dark Place creates its shadow version of Saga’s Mind Place where she is forced to fight the piling “evidence” against herself—fight the idea of being a failed detective, mother, colleague, and friend—is quite clearly a physical manifestation of a mental space, shaped by thought, that is, the mind as affected by the dark resonance of the Dark Presence. The latter is to be fought and momentarily defeated with the help of the Bright Presence; one fends off the encroaching shadows by shining a light (of cogito, reason) on them—mentally and physically.

Arguably the most instructive example of game/life reversibility and indistinguishability achieved due to such an obscuring logic—privileging cogito/reason and exposing the inability thereof to establish any clear ontology—is how *Twin Peaks* is incorporated into *Alan Wake 2*. Of course, there are several clear references to the series spread out throughout the game such as Saga’s room inside the lodge mirroring agent Dale Cooper’s room or the iconic coffee and cherry pie combination being served at the Oh Deer Diner. Yet the most significant connection is the symbolism of the “peaks,” of the intersecting triangles. If one is familiar with *Control*, one knows that the triangles refer to the Board, a powerful entity from the Astral Plane, but the symbolism is obscure and the different ways the triangles intersect suggests a multiplicity of meaning generated by one obscure/abstract idea. For instance, the Cult of the Tree—a group of vigilantes led by the Koskela brothers who aim to

protect the town from monsters—find the symbols on the files left by the FBC and misinterpret it as a “tree”; yet this “wrong” interpretation may be “true” since in *Control* one finds references to Yggdrasil. Such a roundabout, looping process of interpretative thought is exposed as obscuring the distinction between right and wrong interpretation, the distinction being again temporal—the opposites are opposites only at a certain point in this interpretative process. And the triangles likewise refer to *Twin Peaks*’s name as well as the famous town sign seen in the opening credits of the series. Even the Dark Place may be seen as *Twin Peaks*’s Black Lodge (or the reverse) as *Alan Wake 2*’s figuration transforms the series into another manifestation of its own workings—it gamifies and integrates *Twin Peaks* into its reality. *Twin Peaks* is part of *Alan Wake 2* and its intertextuality is “edited out” of existence since the game subjects the notion of the textual to its flat ontology—any textual distinctions are obscured; one can no longer establish any text/reality distinction. In doing so, the game inevitably involves applying its own epistemological procedure to nongamic phenomena and the player’s “outside” reality; the action extends to philosophically conceptualizing the nongamic from within the gamic.

Conclusions

Alan Wake 2 facilitates a highly complex philosophical process of concept formation through procedurally experiencing its story and action. Everything in the game is made to emanate a sense of concentrated, purposeful, and interrelated meaning, yet that meaning is eventually uncovered as inherently obscure—the game invites one to establish an onto-epistemological basis and makes it impossible to do so. One goes from the most abstract—the triangles—to the most specific such as Rose’s fan fiction, tracing only their general correspondence, but the “factual” or the Truth never emerges, ultimately remaining a result of Belief rather than Reason. As such, the game’s process of conceptualization is a reinvestigation of the Cartesian circular reasoning regarding the formation of clear and distinct ideas. *Alan Wake 2*’s ideational activity consists of deciding what is real by constantly flipping the meanings (intersecting the triangles); the reality investigated is subject to radical doubt as one is exposed as performing tasks without understanding their true nature. But even though the game awakens critical thinking, it allows one only to form obscure ideas or, as Casey’s echo proclaims, the game/reality offers “clues heavy with obscure meanings that [lead] nowhere.” In the beginning, Alan likewise warns Saga and the player: “Don’t wake up the dreamer if your life is a dream.” By “seeping” into the player’s nongamic existence, as examined in this article, *Alan Wake 2* encourages the player to philosophically investigate their own “dreaming,” to question fundamental ideas about reality’s and one’s own ontological nature, offering a more radical philosophical skepticism than the method of Cartesian doubt since the game makes it impossible to establish any first principles (undoubtable truths such as *cogito ergo sum*). Even I, the author of this article, was made to vacillate between being a researcher (observer), a player (a

specific playthrough's "author," the game's actualizer), and a character (observed/authored).

One may conclude that there is a commonality between speculative realism's, especially OOO's, critique of Kantian and Cartesian reliance on anthropocentric thought, the cogito, and *Alan Wake 2*'s procedural philosophy. And yet the game's position cannot be seen as a mere illustration thereof not simply because it is a unique instantiation (real and sensual object) of the thought it facilitates but because its position is not reducible to any preexisting instance of speculative realism. While for Descartes it is the soul/the mind that constitutes the basis for the real and for Harman it is the (real and sensual) objects (independent of the cogito), for *Alan Wake 2* such a basis is constantly oscillating between being posited and doubted. In contrast to Harman, the game doubts whether there are real (or withdrawn) objects behind the sensual ones—it critiques the conceptual basis for OOO. Furthermore, the philosophical critique proper becomes only possible once the player is situated in the nongamic or the postgamic reality since experiencing the gamic reality instantiates the thought it posits, which proves problematic for a number of reasons. From within the gamic, speculative realism and OOO are nothing but additional clues that may lead nowhere, on the same (flat) ontological basis as Alan's writing or other in-game phenomena. As the boundary between the gamic and the nongamic is unstable, the same can be said about the postgamic since when the game "ends" for the player-turned-character is uncertain. I can attest to the fact that long after the game I was prone to subject my own reality to *Alan Wake 2*'s ideation, even questioning myself as to why I am still "inside" the game. Put differently, once the game seeps into the nongamic, the postgamic is unstable or hyperchaotic. If the game's radical skepticism and flat ontology can be rejected only postgamically and when/whether that state is reached is "metastable," then the distinction between propositional content and sensuous idea/object cannot be established. As such, *Alan Wake 2* should therefore be considered as possibly another subset of speculative realism rather than a specific illustration of a preexisting philosophical position.

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