

WHAT PASSAGE REVEALS ABOUT GAME DESIGN AND PHILOSOPHY?

PASSAGE OYUNU, OYUN TASARIMI VE FELSEFEYE DAİR NE SÖYLÜYOR?

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Abstract

This article examines Jason Rohrer's *Passage* (2007) to explore how digital games can function as a medium for existential inquiry. Adopting a qualitative approach that combines procedural rhetoric with philosophical hermeneutics, the study addresses how abstract concepts such as Martin Heidegger's "Being-Toward-Death," "thrownness," and "anxiety" are procedurally encoded within the game's mechanics. Focusing on vision, score, and irreversible death, the analysis shows how *Passage* disrupts the success-failure binary and shifts the player from winning toward reflective experience, demonstrating the philosophical potential of minimalist game design. The findings contribute to the broader field of game studies by illustrating the potential of "existential play" as a valid form of philosophical discourse.

Öz

Makalede dijital oyunların nasıl varoluşsal bir sorgulama aracı olarak işlev görebileceğini araştırmak amacıyla Jason Rohrer'in *Passage* (2007) oyunu incelenmiştir. Prosedürel retorik ve felsefi hermeneutik yöntemlerini birleştiren nitel bir yaklaşım benimseyen çalışma, Martin Heidegger'in "Ölüme-Doğru-Varlık", "fırlatılmışlık" ve "kaygı" gibi soyut kavramlarının oyunun mekanikleri içine prosedürel olarak nasıl kodlandığını ele almaktadır. Analiz, görüş alanı, skor ve geri döndürülemez ölüm üzerinden *Passage*'ın başarı-başarısızlık ikiliğini nasıl bozduğunu ve oyuncuyu kazanmaktan düşünsel bir deneyime yönlendirdiğini gösterir; minimalist oyun tasarımının felsefi gücüne işaret eder. Bulgular, "varoluşsal oyun" kavramının geçerli bir felsefi söylem biçimi olma potansiyelini ortaya koyarak oyun çalışmaları alanına katkı sağlamaktadır.

Key Words: Game Design, Philosophy, Digital Games, Heidegger, Philosophical Games.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Oyun Tasarımı, Felsefe, Dijital Oyunlar, Heidegger, Felsefi Oyunlar.

INTRODUCTION

Jason Rohrer's *Passage* (2007) is frequently cited as a significant example of the "artgame" genre, noted for its minimalist design and memento mori themes. While the game has garnered considerable attention for its aesthetic qualities and its role in the debate regarding games as art, less scholarly attention has been paid to the specific structural correspondence between its procedural mechanics and existential phenomenology. This article critically examines *Passage* not merely as a design object, but as an interactive investigation of human finitude. Drawing on the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger, specifically his concept of "Being-Toward-Death" (*Sein zum Tode*), this research investigates how the game's basic mechanics, such as the fixed timeline and the non-respawning death, function to proceduralize abstract philosophical principles. The central premise is that *Passage* translates Heideggerian concepts like "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*) and "anxiety" (*Angst*) into a concrete, sensory reality for the player.

Digital Games as Interactive Philosophical Inquiry

Since they were first categorised as merely entertainment, digital games have seen a substantial metamorphosis, developing into intricate interactive tales that may inspire deep creative and philosophical reflection. Academic interest in games as a valid cultural form has grown as a result of this development, leading to critical engagement in a number of fields, such as media theory, digital humanities, and philosophy (Willumsen, 2016). While some expressive styles from other media are still relevant, new forms of expression exclusive to video games are constantly emerging, and the multidisciplinary discipline of game studies is becoming more and more focused on examining how games express and transmit meaning (Arjoranta, 2018). The growing scholarly interest in games, especially their potential for philosophical expression, reflects a larger societal change in the way people view interactive media. The cultural legitimization of games is supported by the application of sophisticated scholarly methods.

The cultural legitimization of games is supported by the application of sophisticated scholarly methods such as code-level analysis and hermeneutics. Their involvement integrates games into broader cultural debates, regarding them as legitimate sources of insight about human experience. *Passage*, a minimalist "artgame" created by Jason Rohrer in 2007, exemplifies this shift. Its incorporation into MoMA's permanent collection in 2012 underscores the recognition of digital games as vehicles for complex expression. Crucially, the institutional framing of *Passage* as a "design object" rather than traditional fine art highlights the significance of its functional ingenuity. This classification

supports the central argument of this article: that *Passage*'s artistic and philosophical value is derived not merely from its visuals, but specifically from how its interactive mechanics procedurally simulate existential themes.

This mixed response suggests that although *Passage* is praised for its avant-garde aesthetic and cultural influence, established art organisations are still debating whether video games should be considered "fine art" in a more general sense. Martin Heidegger's "Being-Toward-Death" (*Sein zum Tode*), a fundamental component of his existential phenomenology, is used in this research to shed light on the deep philosophical meanings of *Passage*. The game's mechanics and player experience may be powerfully interpreted via Heidegger's paradigm, which views death as an innate possibility that shapes human existence (*Dasein*) rather than an external occurrence. By employing a procedural-hermeneutic framework, this article analyzes how *Passage* translates Heidegger's abstract theory of 'Being-Toward-Death' into a concrete, experiential reality. Rather than treating the game solely as a text, the study examines how specific procedural variables, such as the fixed timeline and non-respawning death, function as interactive definitions of existential concepts. By compelling players to confront their own finitude and make existentially charged choices within a constrained temporal and spatial framework, *Passage* not only fosters profound personal reflection but also significantly contributes to the academic discourse on digital games as a unique medium for philosophical inquiry.

To systematically explore this intersection between minimalist design and existential philosophy, this article addresses three central research questions:

RQ1: How do the specific procedural mechanics of *Passage* (such as the aging avatar and non-respawning death) function as metaphors for Heideggerian concepts like *Thrownness* and *Being-Toward-Death*?

RQ2: In what ways does the game's rejection of traditional victory conditions facilitate a shift from a goal-oriented player experience to an existential mode of 'being'?

RQ3: What are the implications of *Passage*'s design for the broader field of game studies regarding the potential of 'existential play' as a form of philosophical inquiry? By answering these questions, the study aims to demonstrate how game mechanics can serve as a valid language for philosophical discourse.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design combining procedural rhetoric and philosophical hermeneutics is employed to analyze *Passage*. First, Ian Bogost's framework of procedural rhetoric is utilized to conduct a close reading of the game's mechanics. This involves an examination of how the game's rules, specifically its constraints on time, movement, and scoring, function to persuade players to adopt a specific worldview regarding mortality and finitude.

Second, a hermeneutic lens is applied, drawing on Heidegger's own phenomenological method and recent game studies scholarship on 'real-time hermeneutics.' Within this approach, the gameplay experience is treated as an interpretive text where meaning is constructed through the player's interaction with the game's 'un-ready-to-hand' mechanics (such as the inevitable death). By mapping specific game elements directly to Heideggerian concepts (as detailed in Table 1), the gap between abstract philosophical theory and concrete game design elements is bridged.

Jason Rohrer's *Passage*: A Minimalist Meditation on Mortality

Core Mechanics and Design Philosophy

The design of *Passage* is "painstakingly simple" and minimalist, a purposeful aesthetic decision that greatly deepens its symbolic meaning. The minimalist design of *Passage* is not merely an aesthetic choice but a procedural necessity derived from the constraints of the Gamma 256 event. The fixed five-minute runtime and the restrictive 100x16 pixel resolution are utilized to frame the player's experience within a strictly finite boundary, effectively mirroring the limitations of a human lifespan. Rather than prioritizing graphical fidelity, the purposefully low-resolution and "blurry" visual style is employed to symbolize the inherent ambiguities and uncertainties of existence (Martinez, 2017). The purposefully low-resolution and 'blurry' visual style of *Passage* can be further understood through what Gürkan (2022) describes as a shift toward a haptic look in contemporary media. Rather than providing a clear, distant representation, the game's aesthetic forces a sensory closeness to the screen's surface, where the player is invited to feel the 'grain' of the experience, the pixelated decay of the avatar and the shrinking world, rather than merely observing it from a distance. These structural limitations establish the foundation for the game's procedural rhetoric; mechanics such as the narrowing field of vision and the aging avatar are not designed as mere visual effects, but are strategically implemented to simulate the phenomenological experience of temporality and finitude.

Additionally, players come across a treasure gathering and companion selection mechanism. The game introduces a female character early on. Touching her begins a friendship that lasts till her unavoidable demise. However, there is a substantial trade-off associated with this decision: moving through the maze-like landscape becomes more challenging as the companion limits movement, making some treasure boxes inaccessible. The maze is filled with treasure chests that grant points. According to Rohrer's creator statement, "most of them are empty, not every pursuit leads to a reward." A small error in the chest puzzle's solution that affected score maximisation was also discovered through code-level analysis, making it more difficult to understand the game's reward system and its commentary on material pursuits (Alvarez et al., 2015). The game features a non-respawning death mechanic. Passage is devoid of traditional victory conditions, and death is an unavoidable culmination for both the companion and the player character after the fixed five-minute duration. The companion transforms into a tombstone, and the player character eventually follows suit, with the world fading to black and white (Oliu, 2014). This non-respawning death is presented not as a failure state, but as a fundamental, inescapable end to the play experience (Pratt, 2008). The game's philosophical effect is greatly aided by its minimalist design, especially its low resolution and abstract graphics. Passage enables players to project their own experiences and ideas onto the abstract figures and landscapes by avoiding representations that are overly explicit or precise. A worldwide resonance is facilitated by this deliberate vagueness. Because of its abstract nature, the game might serve as a "metaphorical life game" that cuts across identities, making the experience more widely applicable than specifically. While Passage employs a fixed, pre-determined aging process to symbolize inevitable fate, recent scholarships suggest that modern technologies could offer different approaches to character evolution. For instance, Dervişoğlu (2025) notes that AI-supported character creation allows for dynamic evolution based on player behavior, turning the character into a 'living' entity rather than a static representation. However, Rohrer's rejection of such dynamic adaptation is precisely what reinforces the game's Heideggerian theme of thrownness, the player cannot alter the aging process, only experience it.

Artistic Legitimacy and Critical Reception

With Rohrer himself a strong advocate for the creative integrity of video games, Passage has become a pivotal point in the current discussion over the medium as an art form. Its "elegant ludic metaphor" and intrinsic "openness to interpretation," which have been extensively lauded by critics, have helped establish it as a classic in the field of game studies. Within this context, animation serves as a significant medium for encoding and transmitting cultural

values and symbols within creative industries (Balaban, 2019). In *Passage*, this ‘encoding’ process transcends specific cultural boundaries by utilizing procedural mechanics to represent the universal human ‘value’ of confronting finitude and mortality. By framing death as the ‘fundamental culmination’ of play rather than a failure state, the game purposefully rejects the conventional binary of winning and losing, shifting the emphasis from an industrial or goal-oriented output to an existential performance.

MoMA’s acquisition criteria for games placed a strong emphasis on “interaction design,” which includes aspects like the beauty of the coding and the design of player behavior in addition to visual excellence and aesthetic pleasure (Antonelli & Galloway, 2022). While some critics have questioned whether *Passage* qualifies as a ‘game’ due to its lack of traditional victory conditions, this deviation is central to its philosophical argument. By framing death as the ‘fundamental culmination’ of play rather than a failure state, the game purposefully rejects the conventional binary of winning and losing. This design choice serves a specific hermeneutic function: it forces the player to abandon the teleological ‘outcome of doing’ in favor of the ‘process of being.’ In doing so, *Passage* procedurally aligns with Heidegger’s concept of *Sein zum Tode* (Being-Toward-Death), where death is understood not as an external accident to be avoided or a ‘game over’ screen to be retried, but as the intrinsic possibility that gives shape and urgency to existence (Pratt, 2008). Players are forced to reconsider their long-held beliefs about success and purpose in both games and life as a result of *Passage*’s purposeful rhetorical manipulation of conventional game mechanics, such as death being an ending rather than a failure and the score being conventionally meaningless. Death usually denotes a defeat or the need to restart, and traditional games are usually based on explicit objectives, prizes, and punishments. These norms frequently reflect cultural ideals that place a premium on measurable success and conquering challenges. However, it purposefully goes against these assumptions: death is inevitable, riches may be “empty,” and the score is “meaningless.” This “contrary game design” subverts the player’s “instinctual response[s]” by treating “mechanics and gameplay scenarios as clichés.” Players are forced to consider their actions and motivations by the game’s removal of the external affirmation of victory. This forces individuals to look for significance in the “process of being” rather than in a result. This purposeful subversion of standard game logic acts as a potent meta-commentary, inspiring players to consider the meaning and worth of life, in which dying is not a failure but rather an inevitable, intrinsic aspect of being alive.

Heidegger's "Being-Toward-Death": An Existential Framework

Procedural Rhetoric and the Simulation of Meaning

Heidegger characterizes human existence (Dasein) through the concept of "thrownness" (Geworfenheit), signifying that one is cast into a world of predetermined possibilities and inherent finitude without choosing to be there (Arjoranta, 2022). In *Passage*, this ontological state is not merely described but procedurally enforced; the player is "thrown" into a restrictive 100x16 pixel world with no instructions, mirroring the existential condition of finding oneself in a life already underway. Within this framework, Heidegger defines death not as an external event but as Dasein's "Being-Toward-Death" (Sein zum Tode), an intrinsic, "non-relational" possibility that limits and restricts all other possibilities, revealing their temporary nature ("Heidegger on Death in Being and Time," n.d.). Rohrer's design operationalizes this concept through the non-respawning death mechanic. Unlike traditional games where death is a temporary setback shared by a community of players, the permanent death in *Passage* forces the player to confront mortality as their "ownmost" and singular possibility, strictly aligning the gameplay loop with Heidegger's definition of authentic finitude. The statements "No one can take the other's dying away from him" and "Every Dasein must itself actually take dying upon itself" are clear statements from Heidegger. Death is considered "non-relational," which means it "does not either depend on or require any other Dasein or any other relation" ("Heidegger on Death in Being and Time," n.d.). Consequently, the experience of dying remains radically singular and untransferable. This contrasts with the ways in which civilisations tend to communalise death through rituals or by seeing it as an occurrence that primarily impacts other people. The companion's death serves as a procedural analogy for this non-relationality. While this event can certainly be read as a representation of mourning or shared finitude, the subsequent gameplay, where the player must navigate the final moments alone, echoes Heidegger's insight. Rather than fully capturing the ontological complexity of 'Being-Toward-Death,' this design choice metaphorically compels the player to face the non-transferable nature of their own end, reinforcing that dying is ultimately a solitary burden. In *Passage*, this concept of thrownness is visually and mechanically represented by the narrowing field of vision, which forces the player to focus increasingly on the accumulating past rather than the shrinking future possibilities.

Authenticity, Inauthenticity, and Anticipatory Resoluteness

Heidegger draws a critical distinction between authentic (Eigentlichkeit) and inauthentic (Uneigentlichkeit) modes of existence. Authentic existence

involves transparently and explicitly confronting one's own death, thereby understanding one's finite nature as a "thrown project towards death". This confrontation allows Dasein to grasp its own unique possibilities (Shaw, 2012). Conversely, inauthentic existence is characterized by an absorption in everyday dealings, a "constant flight from death," where death is treated as a distant event that happens only to others. This "falling" into the "they" (das Man), the anonymous and dominant ways of everyday existence, leads to "averageness" and a "disburdening" of individual choice, effectively preventing Dasein from living its own death and realizing its unique potential ("Heidegger on Death in Being and Time," n.d.). "Anticipatory resoluteness" (vorlaufende Entschlossenheit) is presented as the crucial pathway to authentic Dasein. It highlights a recognition that embracing one's finitude enables Dasein to assert control over its life by acting with intentionality and independence. This is not merely an expectation of death but a courageous "seizing" of one's possibilities in light of one's finitude. A fundamental tension within Heidegger's framework is revealed by Shaw's critique of the paradox of authenticity (Shaw, 2012), in which facing the "impossibility of existence" (i.e., projecting into no particular abilities) is equated with anticipating "individuality" (i.e., projecting into particular abilities). This conflict, which *Passage* procedurally portrays, highlights the enormous psychological difficulty of accepting finitude while still claiming personal agency and meaning-making. This fundamental paradox in Heidegger's idea of authenticity is highlighted in Beau Shaw's critique: it requires one to simultaneously anticipate one's "individuality" and "particular abilities" while also expecting "projecting into no particular abilities" (death). The gameplay of *Passage* clearly reflects this inherent philosophical paradox. The player is given options that stand in for "particular abilities" or life pathways, such as friendship or the search for riches. But in the end, all unique skills and accomplishments are rendered useless in the face of Dasein's "absolute impossibility" since these decisions are made inside a rigid framework of set time and unavoidable death. In keeping with the intellectual discussion around Heidegger's idea of authenticity, the game therefore compels the player to consider this very paradox: how to exercise agency and make meaningful decisions when the final result is predestined and out of their control.

Angst and the Revelation of Finitude

Dasein's "being-in-the-world as a whole" is revealed through the basic mood of angst (anxiety). Angst is objectless in contrast to dread, which has a clear object or threat; it emerges when Dasein is exposed to its own options and the radical freedom of self-choice, so exposing the "uncanniness" of life. Worldly creatures emerge in "barren mercilessness" while one is experiencing Angst, and the world loses its customary relevance. Dasein is forced to face its

“ownmost potentiality-for-being,” or its own possibility of impossibility, death, in this situation. This intense conflict deprives Dasein of its immersion in the impersonal “they” and individualises it (“Heidegger on Death in Being and Time,” n.d.). While Angst is often considered a rare phenomenon, Heidegger suggests it is merely “sleeping” due to the myriad of everyday distractions and pastimes. Passage’s design, by stripping away traditional game goals and imposing an unavoidable end, intentionally creates an environment conducive to inducing this Heideggerian Angst, thereby forcing players out of their “asleep” state of inauthenticity and into a direct confrontation with their own finitude. Heidegger posits that “Anxiety is there. It is only sleeping”, often obscured by “everyday pastimes” and distractions such as “TV, computer games, Facebook” (Möring, 2014). By eliminating common entertainment components like obvious enemies, power-ups, and winning criteria, passage purposefully undermines conventional diversions. In a manner reminiscent of Heidegger’s notion of Angst, where Dasein is confronted with a world that fades into meaninglessness and offers no anchor for self-comprehension, the game employs vague objectives, an arbitrary score, and the inevitability of death to generate an unsettling atmosphere of existential anxiety. By eliminating the fake escapes of daily life, this deliberate design decision actively “awakens” the latent Angst and forces players to face their finitude in a genuine way. Rohrer’s design evokes this specific Heideggerian Angst by stripping away clear objectives and instructions, leaving the player in an ambiguous state where the only certainty is the eventual cessation of play.

Proceduralizing Existentialism: Passage as Experiential Philosophy

Dasein’s Finitude and Thrownness

Ian Bogost introduces the concept of “procedural rhetoric” to explain how digital games convey meaning and influence players’ understanding of the world not merely by using written or spoken language, nor simply through visual imagery, but by engaging users in systems of rules and processes. According to Bogost, the persuasive power of games lies in their ability to simulate particular worldviews or ideological structures through the very mechanics that define how interaction unfolds. These interactions, governed by programmed rules, encourage players to think and act within specific constraints, thereby presenting arguments or critiques about real-world systems. He refers to procedural rhetoric as a unique expression in which a player is persuaded through the creation of interactive models based on principles that are abstract and can be practically explored or played out experientially.

Arguing from this perspective, Bogost claims that games have a unique ability

to make arguments and persuade participants to the extent of disrupting and changing pre-existing sociocultural stances by embodying processes and relying on players to perform them (Bogost, 2007). The game's rules and interactions, through their computational properties, derive meaning and thus transpose abstract ideas into experienced reality (Willumsen, 2016). While procedural rhetoric focuses on how games wield rules to persuade, *Passage* goes further by demonstrating how games can simulate philosophical notions, allowing players to perform an argument instead of merely accepting it. Such an experience requires an embrace deeper than intellectual grasp, an embodiment that is visceral, active, and oriented toward movement, shaping reasoning and thought. The paradigm of procedural rhetoric by Ian Bogost is centered on how games rigorously follow procedures in their claiming and reasoning about the external reality. But by allowing the player to confront the philosophical argument of finitude, *Passage* invites the player invite the player not only to active encounter through, not mere claim. The game's mechanics, such as the fixed five-minute duration and the visibly aging avatar, are not simply abstract representations of time; they are lived by the player as their avatar visibly declines and their movement slows.

Embodiment of Heideggerian Concepts through Gameplay

The *Passage* provides users with a direct engagement with abstract philosophical concepts through an interface that encapsulates core Heideggerian principles by implementing fiction-based systems. The parameters of the game include a fixed five-minute playtime and an avatar that ages over time. In game time is viewed as existence, and the continuous flow of time, expressed through fixed duration and aging, functions as an elegiac form of narration. Completing the game dutifully amplifies "memento mori" elements, enforcing a sharpened encounter with death. Time is marked for everyone as avatar speed is set to slow down over the course of the game, showcasing the deterioration of form associated with old age. The most striking example of procedural representation of death is the non-respawnable death. This serves as the apex of the play experience and facilitates a deeply existential journey where *Dasein* is confronted with its ultimate and inescapable actuality: death. Encountering death in this fashion, where it is posed as an unavoidably conclusive stopping point instead of something that can be transcended, stands in sharp contrast to the absence of *Dasein* total impossibility, and "absolute impossibility of *Dasein*".

The avatar's field of vision narrows as it moves to the right side of the screen, showing more of the past (left) and less of the future (right), symbolising the accumulating past and the dwindling future. This provides a moving portrayal

of the ageing and introspection process that people go through. The idea of irreversible time is further reinforced by the blurring and distortion of the area behind the figure, which highlights how hazy recollection is. Players are forced to look for or construct meaning in the process of playing the game rather than in traditional success or outside validation because of its “meaningless score” and inevitable conclusion. This design intentionally induces a form of Heideggerian Angst, as the player is confronted with an objectless state of unease and the “uncanniness” of existence, revealing their inherent finitude. The game thereby transforms into a “crucible for profound existential reflection.” By proceduralizing these notions, *Passage* offers a distinct kind of “experiential hermeneutics” in which players engage with the game’s mechanisms to live out abstract concepts rather than merely analyse them. The elements of the game essentially serve as the “text” that players decipher in real time, influencing how they see existential issues. As a philosophy of interpretation, hermeneutics holds that “understanding a game at its most primordial means knowing how to hammer” and that comprehending a book entails a cyclical movement between particular pieces and the total (Arjoranta, 2022).

The mechanics of *Passage* incorporate philosophical reasoning. The player encounters procedural laws that directly affect the gameplay experience, such as the companion’s death, the ageing avatar, the decreasing mobility, the set five-minute length, and their own final conclusion. This turns abstract philosophical ideas into a tangible, lived experience by forcing the user to understand these procedural occurrences in light of their own life and mortality. Specifically, the non-respawning death serves as a “un-ready-to-hand” event. A tool or game mechanic becomes “un-ready-to-hand,” losing its phenomenological transparency and necessitating closer examination, when it does not accomplish its intended purpose (for example, death in *Passage* is an absolute end rather than a failure to be overcome). This forces the player to reevaluate and reinterpret the “rules” of existence. Through play, philosophical ideas are “lived out” in a “experiential hermeneutics” made possible by this process. To further illustrate the intricate connections between *Passage*’s design and Heidegger’s philosophy, Table I offers a heuristic overview of how key game mechanics may be interpreted through Heideggerian concepts. While acknowledging the complexity of these philosophical ideas, this schema highlights the structural parallels between the game’s procedural rules and existential themes. The analysis moves beyond metaphorical interpretation to demonstrate a direct structural correspondence between Heidegger’s phenomenology and Rohrer’s code. Each philosophical concept is not merely referenced but is enacted through specific algorithmic constraints.

Passage Element	Mechanic/Design	Corresponding Heideggerian Concept	Procedural Embodiment/Experiential Impact
Fixed 5-minute duration		Finitude/Temporality	Player's life is procedurally limited, forcing an accelerated confrontation with the finite nature of existence and the relentless march of time.
Visibly Aging Avatar		Being-Toward-Death	Physical decline and slowing movement embody the process of "dying" as an inherent aspect of Dasein's being, making mortality tangible.
Narrowing Field of Vision		Thrownness/Temporality	Less future visibility and more past visibility metaphorically represent the diminishing possibilities and accumulating history of a finite life, emphasizing Dasein's thrownness into time.
Non-respawning Death		Absolute Impossibility/Angst	Death is the unavoidable, ultimate culmination, not a failure. This forces players to confront Dasein's "absolute impossibility" and induces objectless anxiety about finitude.
Companion Choice & Impact		Care (<i>Sorge</i>)/Relationality	Player choices regarding companionship become existentially charged, highlighting the compromises and responsibilities of "being-with-others" under the shadow of finitude.
Treasure Collection/Score		Authenticity/Inauthenticity	The "meaningless score" and often "empty" treasures challenge the pursuit of external validation, pushing players to seek or create meaning in the process of living rather than material accumulation.
Minimalist Aesthetics		Revelation of Being/Projection	Abstract visuals encourage players to project their own experiences onto the game, facilitating universal identification and deep personal reflection on existential themes.

Figure 1. A Heuristic Mapping of Passage Mechanics to Heideggerian Concepts

This table presents a heuristic framework to illustrate potential intersections between game mechanics and philosophical concepts. It is not intended to imply a reductive one-to-one correspondence, as Heideggerian phenomenology is non-binary and open to interpretative variance. The mappings above should be viewed as interpretative lenses rather than definitive equivalencies.

Subverting Traditional Game Design Paradigms

By transforming death into the “fundamental culmination of the play experience” as opposed to a punishing failure condition, passage radically alters traditional game design. This is in stark contrast to most games where dying means you’ve lost progress, had to start over, or are punished. Because the game noticeably lacks conventional win conditions, players are forced to reconsider what success or meaning means in its context. Passage forces players into an experiential, existential style of interaction, reorienting their emphasis from the “outcome of doing” to the “process of being,” rather than encouraging a goal-oriented attitude centred on “winning” or “achieving.” Furthermore, the game reinterprets familiar objectives common in video games: the maze-like environment becomes a metaphor for life’s confounding choices, treasure chests symbolize material riches that may not be worth the arduous pursuit, and companionship represents an “irrationally desired” yet potentially restrictive relationship (Pratt, 2008). Passage’s subversion of well-known game “clichés” not only challenges traditional game design but also subtly challenges larger social norms that frequently place a higher importance on measurable success and accomplishment than on the qualitative experience of life. Because of this creative decision, the game becomes a meta-commentary on lived experience and ludic. Players in traditional games “know exactly how they work and exactly what they need to do in order to be successful” since they are based on “typical mechanics and scenarios.” These frequently reflect social ideals of success, wealth, and conquering challenges. The passage purposefully defies these assumptions by stating that death is inevitable, the score is “meaningless,” and riches may be “empty” (Finley, 2016). By making death an inevitable culmination rather than a failure, the game challenges the ingrained notion that life is a game to be “won,” thereby prompting a deeper, critical reflection on the “rules” that govern our pursuit of meaning and success in existence.

Player Experience and Hermeneutic Engagement with Passage

Fostering Personal Reflection and Empathy

Through its unique design, Passage positions players in a direct procedural confrontation with finitude and mortality, mirroring Heidegger’s insight into the inescapable nature of human existence. Theoretically, this engagement offers a framework for reflection on life choices, the impact of relationships, and the inevitability of one’s own end. The game can be analyzed as an ‘empathy game,’ a genre designed to foster emotional resonance with a subject matter. While some empathy games face criticism for potentially reducing complex issues to ‘pity tourism,’ Passage’s abstractness and direct procedural

embodiment of universal themes avoid didactic storytelling. Instead, the game suggests a structural possibility for a profound and less prescriptive empathetic response, inviting players to project their own meanings onto the minimalist mechanics (Johnson, 2019).

Empathy is stirred not by a specific narrative or typical character relatability, but by an algorithmically generated interpretation of uniquely human experiences like aging, friendship, and loss. This suggests that abstract, procedural design may achieve greater empathy through storytelling about existentialism and impose deep, personal self-reflection. Unlike other empathy games that disguise weak understanding of life circumstances such as depression or trans identity, *Passage* is more abstract, featuring pixelated figures and no clear plot. Regardless, critics describe it as “sufficiently affecting,” claiming it inspires “deep emotions” and intense introspection. This indicates the game allows the user to project their experiences, emotions, and thoughts onto an abstract depiction which serves as a universal procedural metaphor for aging, friendship, and death by age. A designer’s ability to foster abstract empathy enables profound understanding of the human condition. Instead of focusing on an individual’s suffering, one can approach universal suffering.

Real-Time Hermeneutics: The Shock of the Un-Ready-to-Hand

As a philosophy of interpretation, hermeneutics is extremely pertinent to comprehending the intricate ways in which meaning is created and interpreted in games. According to Heidegger, comprehending a game essentially entails “knowing how to play it,” a process that develops when we are “thrown into the world and must cope with it” Espen Aarseth’s “real-time hermeneutics” theory postulates that playing a game and comprehending its generated material happen at the same time (Arjoranta, 2022). However, this view has been subject to critique, with arguments suggesting that understanding often emerges reflexively through “intermittent trials and errors,” and that “misunderstanding is constitutive for understanding” in hermeneutic processes (Salin, 2018). The non-respawning death in *Passage* serves as a classic “un-ready-to-hand” event. According to Heidegger’s philosophy, a tool or item (or, consequently, a game mechanism) becomes “un-ready-to-hand” when it is unable to accomplish its intended purpose. For example, death in *Passage* is not a failure that must be overcome but rather an ultimate and inevitable end. The player is forced to think carefully and reinterpret the basic “rules” of existence because it is no longer phenomenologically apparent and requires closer scrutiny. Since the player’s direct interpretation of mechanics significantly influences their comprehension of existential issues, this method, known as “experiential hermeneutics,” enables philosophical ideas to be “lived out” through play.

The intentional disruption of player identity and control in the game, such as the avatar's uncontrollably ageing appearance and its fixed screen position that changes without the user's movement, acts as a procedural "hermeneutic shock." Players are forced by this shock to shift from a simply "ready-to-hand" interaction with the game, in which mechanics are clear-cut tools employed for immediate objectives, to a "present-at-hand" mode of reflection, in which the game's systems themselves are the subject of philosophical thought. Heidegger makes a distinction between "ready-to-hand" tools, those that are used openly, such as a hammer for hammering, and "un-ready-to-hand" tools, those that break down and compel one to consider their nature. At first, players interact with *Passage* in a "ready-to-hand" way, adopting the character's persona and utilising controls to walk right and gather treasures in a transparent manner. However, the game's deliberate design choices, such as the character's uncontrollable aging and the fixed screen position that shifts independently of player movement, disrupt this transparency. The ultimate "un-ready-to-hand" moment is the inevitable, non-respawning death, which cannot be "won" against. This forces the player to stop perceiving the game merely as a tool for achievement and instead to reflect on its underlying "rules" of existence, thereby shifting from an uncritical "ready-to-hand" engagement to a reflective "present-at-hand" contemplation of the game's deeper existential meaning. This procedural disruption acts as a "hermeneutic shock," compelling a deeper, philosophical interpretation.

Heideggerian Care (Sorge) and Existential Choice

Heidegger defines *Dasein's* very being as "care" (*Sorge*), which constitutes its ontological essence, signifying that the human being is fundamentally what it is able to be. Three fundamental components make up the structurally differentiated unity of care: the "possible self," an individual's "skills," and the "facilitating world," which all pertain to an individual's capacities and interactions with their life (Shaw, 2012). Under the constant threat of death, player decisions in *Passage*, such as whether to look for a partner or seek gold, take on an existential significance. *Dasein's* "thrown project" and its innate capacity to mould itself, even in the face of limitations, are reflected in these decisions, which were made within the game's constrained parameters. Despite its pragmatic limitations in games, the "irrational desire" for friendship can be seen as a deep expression of concern for another *Dasein*, underscoring the necessity of human connection in the face of adversity.

The game's design quietly highlights that value in life is found in how one "cares" for one's possibilities and relationships within that finitude, rather than in escaping it, by making player decisions meaningful despite death's ultimate

inevitability. This draws attention to *Passage*'s ethical significance in addition to its existential concerns. Dasein's essential mode of being, its capacity to be what it can be, including its relationships and possibilities, is included in Heidegger's concept of "care" (*Sorge*). Players are given a set lifespan and the knowledge that they will die in *Passage*. They are nevertheless granted the ability to make decisions, such as whether to seek friendship or wealth, in spite of this final restriction. Even if the ending (death) is set, the game's rules make sure these decisions impact inside the constrained framework. This implies that meaning doesn't stem from the illusion of avoiding death, but rather from the act of making deliberate choices and genuinely engaging with one's journey and connections. In this way, the game subtly conveys that to live authentically is to navigate one's finite resources and surroundings with intention and responsibility, an idea that closely aligns with Heidegger's notion of "care."

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF EXISTENTIAL PLAY AND PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

As a pioneering example of existential game design, *Passage* literally implements Martin Heidegger's notion of "Being-Toward-Death." Its minimalist aesthetic and core mechanics allow players to grapple with themes of meaning and mortality in a rich, multi-faceted manner through their actions and experiences. The game's classification as an "artgame" and its subsequent purchase by MoMA further entrench digital games within the discourse of serious art, capable of nuanced philosophical argument. The enduring influence of *Passage* illustrates the idea that the minimalist approach in game design can achieve maximalist meaning. By removing distractions and conventional game elements, it refines the experience to an interactive, existential one that demands players evaluate life and death devoid of distractions. This Heideggerian framework unveils the astonishing potential of games as "interactive thought experiments," where intricate philosophical ideas can be engaged and not just considered. This promotes minimalistic discourse by showing how deeply essayed arguments in game design can embody, making them felt rather than abstracted. The philosophy underlying *Passage* demonstrates a fundamental shift in how philosophy can be engaged with and disseminated, the success of *Passage* suggests that complex philosophical arguments can be proceduralized. Games, with their unprecedented manipulative qualities, can serve not only as a pedagogical tool, but also give a new experiential dimension to abstract concepts aimed at a wider audience by transforming philosophy into practice. Traditional philosophical inquiry, as with most philosophy, involves a great deal of reasoning and text, which is not easily accessible to everyone.

Games, with their procedural nature, can make claims about how society functions and mount arguments in the form of rules and interaction. *Passage* enables players to “live out” concepts like finitude and Being-Toward-Death, which is an additional layer of complexity. This experiential dimension, where learners are “absorbed in immersive worlds of play”, offers a novel and potentially more effective way to engage with philosophy. It suggests that games can serve as a “tool for encouraging employees to explore Heideggerian themes” or as “interactive, virtual-reality, narrative game[s] that simulate various coping strategies”, indicating a strong potential for philosophical education and personal growth through embodied play, thereby broadening the reach and impact of philosophical inquiry. Creating such existentially charged experiences carries a responsibility to consider their potential psychological impact on players. The ethical implications extend beyond individual player well-being to the broader societal impact of games. If games can “disrupt and change social and cultural positions” and influence players’ understanding of life and death, designers bear a significant ethical responsibility for the “claims about the world” their games make. Ian Bogost’s procedural rhetoric highlights that games are not neutral; they “make strong claims about how the world works” and can “disrupt and change these positions themselves”.

When a game, for example, *Passage*, aims at evoking deep existential thoughts and confronting players with their own mortality, it transcends entertainment to culturally impactful content with remarkable persuasive capabilities. That persuasive impact suggests that designers include particular ideologies or viewpoints into their systems. Hence, if games can affect how a player understands core concepts of existence, it means game designers, like in cases of traditional art, literature, and educational media, need to deeply ethically consider the values, messages, and embedded psychological effects within their procedural designs. The ethics of game development are no different to those in other artistic forms. Other possible directions in this transdisciplinary domain of research could focus on the existential impact of “existential play” on the player’s well-being, philosophical frameworks, behavioral results, and overall attitude over time. *Passage*’s comparative studies with other minimalist or philosophical games may offer new perspectives on how different design strategies achieve or fail at communicating complex existential ideas.

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