

Senior Thesis

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Play is Serious

“Play is necessary,” says Kevin Karol. This is the title of a Ted Talk he gave describing how play is a transformative force throughout his life. Play may be scoffed at by an old man who believes you should be pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. We have all heard the phrase, “No horsing around!” yelled at us at one time or another. But the fact remains, “Play is necessary.” Throughout this paper we will explore the many forms and functions of play within the individual and society. We will confront the dichotomy of play versus seriousness and attempt to bring them into the same sphere. We must realize that whether or not we perceive play as a waste of time, play an activity which animals and humans engage in regularly to perform its function. Play has been an inspiring force in my life and has helped me to overcome obstacles. The game sEVEN that I designed is a playful metaphor describing my own philosophies for reaching self actualization and overcoming personal negativity in one’s life.

Most often when someone talks about play we think of horsing around, goofing off, wasting time etc. But, on the contrary, play should be understood seriously. According to Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens*, “Play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of a purely biological activity. It is a *significant* Function.” As individuals we need play to live a healthy, happy lifestyle. As a society we need play in order to evolve and flourish. So, let's break it down; what is play?

Google will offer the definition, “Engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.” However, that definition doesn’t quite give play the credit it really deserves. Bogost in the preface of his book, *Play Anything*, says, “That’s what it means to play. To take something, anything, on its own terms, to treat it as if its existence were reasonable.” Play allows us to enjoy the limitations of our reality instead of being stuck in annoyance. Bogost’s take on play aligns well with Plato and Kirkegard’s philosophies of play. According to Ardley in his essay called, *The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato*, on page 226 “without play, our intellectual exertions lead but to fatuous solemnities. In Kierkegaard's phrase, humour is the incognito of life; it enables us to pass through the world without succumbing to the prevailing mood of alternating agitation and hopelessness. " Therefore, let’s define play as the tool used to overcome the mundane. Play enables us to be interested and engaged.

There seem to be multiple categories of play which must be understood as we move forward. Play can be a game like soccer or basketball. Play can also be a computer game or chess. But play can also be fantasy and imagination. Play can be a theater production: let’s go to the play tonight. And play can also be an attitude: a way of being that is light hearted and bright. There are many forms of play: Huizinga in his book, *Homo Ludens* describes play with various characteristics. The first of these is found on page 8, “Here then we have the first characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not ordinary, or real life. It is rather stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own.” You might ask, Well if play isn't “real”, then why should we take it seriously?

We take play seriously all the time. Think of the olympics and how seriously athletes train, or football games, the list can go on and on. Aside from the traditional understandings of play as sports these two characteristics of play also lend themselves to incorporate anything that has a space separate from the ordinary. So a theater production can be play, a movie can be play. In those spheres people engage in a fantasy that is not real. But, this only pretend quality does not divorce play from seriousness. Huizinga says on page 8, “Nevertheless, as we have already pointed out, the consciousness of play being only pretend does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome “only” feeling.”

Play is not only serious, it is also necessary. Kevin Karol titled his talk on play, *Play is Necessary*. So often as we get older we start to scoff at play, forgetting that it has been an integral part of our development and wellbeing. Huizinga agrees with Karol saying on page 9 of *Homo Ludens*, “It (referring to play) adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual as a life function and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a cultural function.” Furthermore be careful not to get too wrapped up in a finite definition of play. While play is limited to a particular sphere in most cases like the confines of a soccer game, or the structure of a chess board, the meaning of the concept of play is expanded throughout this essay.

Bogost in his book, *Play Anything* makes this clear on page 12, saying that the limitations of games can help us appreciate everything that has limited structures. This is the window through which Bogost suggests a playful way of being. In the preface of *Play Anything* Bogost writes, “Play bores through boredom in order to reach the deep inner truth of ordinary

things.” We can see evidence of this throughout history and the development of the human species when we look back to ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.

Both of these philosophers understood the importance of play for society and the individual. Gavin Ardley writes in his essay *The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato* on page 227, “The philosophers who have been touched with the spirit of playful seriousness stand out from the multitude who were too serious to be really serious. There are not many in number. Plato was the first. Aristotle comes co-equa.” This dichotomy in our society of our understanding of seriousness and play is a topic which Plato and Aristotle both seek to be rid of. On page 232 Ardley mentions how Plato saw this dichotomy as one of the tragedies of human existence.

This is because both Plato and Aristotle philosophize that humans reach their potential when they are doing something for the sake of it: The satisfaction of the thing being an end in itself. This is the case with play as stated by both Ardley on page 233 and Huizinga on page 9. Ardley writes, “A game at its best is something played for love, for its own sake.” And Huizinga says, “It is Played-out in certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning.” For Huizinga, play expands far beyond that of a chess game and this is important to keep in mind as we progress. On page 10 of *Homo Ludens* Huizinga lists spheres of play. Included in this list are temples, the courtroom, the stage and the screen.

Through the engagement of play we develop and progress as a culture and as a species. Huizinga in his book, *Homo Ludens*, on page 16 writes, “Forbenius draws even more far reaching conclusions from this, “playing at nature”. He deems it the starting point of all social order and social institutions too. Through this ritual play savage society acquires its rude forms of government.” You may be thinking to yourself, Well, how does kicking around a soccer ball have anything to do with the government? How does playing basketball in the alley have

anything to do with ritual? Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* on page 18 can help us. He writes, “All play, both of children and of grown-ups can be performed in the most perfect seriousness.” When a professional athlete is sprinting down the soccer field during the world cup he is not laughing, goofing off or horsing around. He is intensely immersed in the seriousness of play. Government is made up of rules and regulations just like soccer. We play within these limitations and this is what builds society.

Part of the role of play in society is how it produces culture. Play propagates culture. Think about sports culture, computer games, board games and the role that play has in the history of Greek and Roman culture. Community flourishes where people play together and active play grants us a sense of belonging. This feeling of belonging and the ability that play has to produce social structure is because, as Huizinga writes on page 10 of *Homo Ludens*, “Inside the playground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we consider another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order.”

Humanity seems to have a common struggle. We struggle for purpose, for pleasure, we get annoyed and we get bored, we hate certain aspects of ourselves and we run from our shadows. We don't want to look at what we don't like or enjoy. For the most part we spend our time avoiding our problems and engaging in short spells of superficial satisfaction. Play can help us overcome our shadows. In other words those negative parts of ourselves that we have a hard time accepting or those self sabotaging voices that can bring us down. Real happiness is not gained through superficial, short term engagements. Happiness is a byproduct of solving a real issue. The reason playing is fun is because there are limitations. We solve problems and feel joy when the tension of the game concludes and we have done it. Bogost wrote a book called *Play*

Anything. Even though play helps society to create cultures and order, we don't tend to incorporate an attitude of play into our daily lives.

If you are anything like me, then often you find yourself chasing after happiness. Unable to accept and appreciate how things are you think, if I do x then I'll feel better or if I do x then y and then z then I will feel happy, and then I can rest. But this state of being is persistent and most times we never get to the end of the road because we never just stop. Bogost on page 14 of *Play Anything* writes, "The limitations of play can enable us to treat things as they are instead of as we wish they were." This gives us the opportunity to take a second and start to play at our problems. On page 12 Bogost says, "By refusing to ask what could be different, and instead allowing what is present to guide us, we create a new space." Treating life like a game isn't the point here. The point is to understand that play creates order, it gives purpose, and it brings people together. Approaching one's problems and limitations with an attitude of play can open up the space for appreciation, instead of feeling frustrated by what we can't do or don't have.

This is a suggestion for how play can function in the individual. And it has been proven by research that when we don't engage in creative activities, like play, we get sad and angry. Berne Brown is a researcher and appears on Oprah. She says, "We need to cultivate play rest and creativity." Otherwise our unused creativity will, "metastasize." Basically, by not playing, our problems get worse. Berne Brown says, "We feel like we always need to prove that we are a hard worker." We tend to disregard play as fruitless. But, incorporating a playful attitude on a daily basis will help us face our shadows and overcome our problems.

Unfortunately, as we get older we stop playing as much. Societal stigma builds up and we lose our sense of open mindedness and playful curiosity. Why does this happen? What is the result? We get so caught up in our goals that we lose sight of the moment. Stuart Brown says in

his Ted Talk that, “If the purpose is more important than the act of doing it then it's probably not play.” If we live our lives for something that is always beyond us, how can we ever feel content? Kevin Carol explains his life as play. Going so far as to attribute all of his success to play! He says that. “Play is necessary timeless and ingenue.” Albert Einstein even agrees, and Carol quotes him, “Play is the highest form of research.”

The funny thing is that since play becomes marginalized as we get older these ideas may sound a bit radical. But play has been praised and set in high regard since Plato and probably before Plato! The reason play has been important for all of humanity's existence is because as Stuart Brown puts it, “Play is practical and is born by curiosity and exploration.” Carol talks about how play is a transformative force. It changed his life for the better, bringing him joy and professional success. He started in the ghetto and is now giving Ted Talks. A lack of play can have just as drastic effects inversely.

Stuart Brown talks about the Texas Tower Murder. Brown says that the perpetrator, Charles Whitman, of the mass murder, through deep study was found to have severe play deprivation. Scientists involved in the study felt that the absence of play throughout his development led him to be more vulnerable to the tragedy he perpetrated. This is an example of how play is necessary for our mental development. Stuart Brown says, try to imagine a life without playing, adult or otherwise. That would mean, no movies, no music, no flirtation, no jokes, no fantasy and so on. Holy moly, that would not be fun, right? We would be severely depressed and alienated! Brown reminds us that work is not the opposite of play. This is a good reminder since most of us would think so. We can have a playful approach to our work. But, depression is the opposite of play.

Bogost gives us many suggestions for how to incorporate a playful mindset into our daily life. One perspective he suggests is on page 4 of *Play Anything*, “Play isn't doing what we want, but doing what we can with the materials we find along the way. And fun isn't the experience of pleasure but the outcome of tinkering with a small piece of the world in a surprising way.”

Bogost is saying that when we appreciate the limitations of our reality they become rich with meaning and the potential of joy. On page 12 he says when we accept reality the way it is we are in a, “Playground in which the limitations of the things we encounter, of anything we encounter, can produce meaningful experiences.” Bogost uses games to help us understand this, saying that games are fun because they have a structure. Games have limitations, and those limitations are why we enjoy them.

This same lens can be applied to our everyday existence. Bogost writes on page 12, “Games aren't magic, and the most special thing about them isn't unique to them anyway, their artificial, deliberately limited structures teach us how to appreciate everything else that has a specific, limited structure. Which is to say anything whatsoever. Play isn't our goal, but a tool to discover and appreciate structures of all the malls and fishbowls we encounter.” To Bogost this means that the playground can be anywhere. The playground can be your workplace, it can be your backyard, the hiking trail, anything you want. It is all about how you relate to the world around you that determines whether or not it is rich with enjoyable meaning.

Now that we know what it could mean to have an attitude of play in our present, lets jump back to the past. An attitude of play has been suggested a long, long time ago. As mentioned earlier, Plato is a philosopher who wrote in a complimentary way about the spirit of play. And Plato isn't the only ancient philosopher to be a supporter of play. Aristotle also commends play saying, “the man of eutrapelos is the man of autarkeia, of inner serenity and

self-sufficiency of disposition, who can strike the right note of mingled seriousness and gaiety, who brings a lightness and gracefulness of touch to every situation,” from *The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato* page 229. According to the author Gavin Ardley, utrapelos literally means ‘happy turning’. Aristotle describes this as a virtue to be attained.

Plato didn't like sophists. He believed that they were the enemy of humankind. “It is the sophist who is the primordial evil genius,” *The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato* page 229. This is because they have lost their humility. They believe themselves to be above humanity and have therefore fallen below it and are trying to drag others down with them. In my own interpretation, they have lost sight of appreciating the nature of being just as it is in its natural form, and have become too serious, skeptical and fallacious to partake in the spirit of play. But, as stated earlier, seriousness and play may go hand in hand.

Work and play are not opposites, and do not have to be separate. “The man of scholē, of eutrapelia, recognises no such divorce. From his inner citadel of mastery and leisure he takes his work as a kind of play,” *The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato* page 231. The man of eutrapelia is the man who has attained the play virtue. This means that since ancient times philosophers have been aware of the importance of play within society. Not only does play benefit the wellbeing of the individual but in so doing, it also helps cultures to form and society to develop. Stuart Brown in his Ted Talk about play starts off his introduction by showing a depiction of a courtyard in Europe in the 15th century that shows people of all ages engaging in forms of play throughout the courtyard. Brown says, “I



think we may have lost something in our culture.”

Before conducting this research on play I was an advocate for a playful attitude and spirit. After conducting this research I have only been more vehemently inspired to play. In particular I want to break down this barrier our society constructs between play and seriousness. Every form of play serves a purpose: an organized game of chess, a soccer game, a theater production, a movie, sexual play, an attitude of play, throwing rocks into the pond for the enjoyment of it. And they all share something in common. Play is done for its own sake.

What I would like you to take away from all this information is the idea that if you are able to embrace an attitude of play throughout your day to day life, you will be happier. Why? Because you will be appreciating the limitations of your existence with curiosity and acting for the sake of the action itself. When all of our actions come from a place of striving for something beyond this moment we are not really here to enjoy it. As Ardley writes in *The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato*, “Man is most alive, and most like unto God, when he possesses and deploys this overflowing activity (playful spirit). He is then the grave-merry man. He moves in the world, simultaneously as a man who loves the world as his home, and as a man of no illusions about the finality of worldly things.”

The game sEVEN was inspired by my own playful spirit. My goal is to take a serious metaphor and translate it through a game. The game depicts a boy who has lost pieces of his soul and needs to recover them while being pursued by his own shadow. Once the boy has recovered all seven pieces of his soul he is able to face and accept his shadow.



This is a metaphor to describe my own life experience and how I can overcome the negativity that is always at my back trying to drag me down.

I believe that everyone has an internal struggle and that there is something everybody is running from. Maybe they are running from their problems, maybe they are running from pain, or fear, maybe they are running from the truth, the list could go on. The point is, that thing that we are running from, that is our shadow. And it is not going to go away until we can address it. All it takes to dispel my shadow or negativity is a playful spirit. We don't need to take our shadows so seriously. It is okay to relax.

However it is hard to relax if I feel incomplete. If I feel like I am missing something. There are events that I have been through in my lifetime that have left me feeling lost and broken. This is represented in SEVEN by the seven soul shards that must be recovered before the boy can face his shadow. When I heal the pieces of my soul that have been hurt I am able to relax. I am able to feel like everything is okay. I am able to see that I would not be a complete being without my shadow. That by rejecting my shadow and running from it, I am rejecting an essential piece of what it means to be whole. I chose the number seven because as an angel number, the number seven represents completeness or perfection.

Now that I have described the overall philosophy of the game let's get into the process. Spirituality has always been an important aspect of my character and my existence. I have spent a lot of time meditating, going to therapy and doing my best to overcome my own shadows. That is where this began. At the beginning of last year I was talking to my brother and I said, "I don't know what to do for my senior project, what do you think?" His response was, "Why don't you make a 2D game?" So that's what I did.

I chose the editor called Unity because I had taken a class in Unity last year so I was already familiar with the software, though I had never made a 2D game before. Youtube became my best friend and closest companion throughout this process. Before I began building the game I already had the concept mapped out. I knew it would be about a boy running from his shadows. But, I didn't yet know how it would all come together. I went down many tangents before refining the game to the product it is now.

Brackey's YouTube channel and the Unity assets store was a big help. Brackey's channel had a complete guide to building your first 2D game in Unity. The Assets store supplied me with a lot of pre-made characters and structures to use in the game. These are referred to as sprites. Starting with Brackey's videos I downloaded some sprites from the Asset's store and was able to get a character who could jump standing on a platform pretty quickly. Now I just had to figure out how to incorporate the shadow and if there would be other enemies besides the shadow. Another problem would be to determine how the player would lose or die. This is where I began to go off on some tangents that made the whole process take longer than it really needed to. If someone told me to make the game today I could make it in half the time it took me initially. But, I guess that is a good thing. I learned a lot!

Before I designed the shadow you see in the final project I used a filler character. And started the arduous task of learning how to write a script in c# that would tell the shadow to follow the player. Eventually I found an algorithm through Brackey's called A* (A star) which is actually the algorithm google maps uses to determine the shortest path between two points. I incorporated this algorithm into my project, editing it slightly to serve its purpose in my own game. Now I had a character who had a shadow chasing him! Brilliant! Except the shadow

looked like a weird skelton that couldn't move and turned upside down when it chased after the player.

Through this process I had to overcome a lot of my own mental shadows. There came a point where I thought I had set out to tackle a project too big for me to handle. The negativity at the back of my mind was gaining on me just like the boy's shadow in the game. Fortunately, I was able to recover a piece of my soul and change my perspective to rearrange the project into a more manageable and effective form. See, initially I thought I would be creating a game with multiple levels. But, the first level took me so long to complete that multiple levels became an unrealistic goal.

At first this disturbed me and made me feel like I was behind and I was going to fail. But then I realized that all I needed to do was play with the limitation of my reality. I needed to take on the perspective from Bogost's book *Play Anything*. I realized I didn't really want my game to be a run of the mill platformer with multiple levels and enemies you had to fight. I wanted it to be more like an art piece while still incorporating aspects of computer games to make it interactive and playful. This set me free of my shadow that was telling me I would fail since it wasn't like a traditional 2D game.

I began to think about it as a cyclical journey, which is how I see my own life journey. There are no enemies in my life, so there are no enemies in the game. Even the shadow isn't really an enemy. This is depicted when the player finishes the game and sees themselves transforming into their own shadow and then back to themselves over and over again. Sometimes we become our shadows. Sometimes we get totally consumed by them and live in that place of negativity for a while. But, as long as we are willing to start over again and recover the pieces of our lost soul we can make it to a place of peace and understanding.

I made it to this place of peace when I realized having multiple levels wasn't really going to serve the message of my game anyway. I also went on this tangent of making a health controller script and designing multiple enemies the player had to defeat along the way. However, like the levels, I realized this also was not serving the overall message of the game. I got rid of them and decided that for the message to be the most clear all I needed was a way for the players to interact more with the shadow rather than only running away. This is when the soul shards came in.

Whenever the player picks up a soul shard they get a short speed boost that decays over time, allowing them to gain some distance between them and their shadow. Simultaneously, the voice of the shadow becomes less audible the further away from it you get. Therefore, the more soul shards you are able to consecutively pick up quickly you may get far enough away from your shadow that you can't hear it at all. The shadow pursues the player at a consistent speed but the player's speed changes. Therefore, if the player fails to get to the next soul shard in time the shadow will catch up, since the player's speed is decaying.

The relationship between player speed, soul shard speed boosts and outrunning the shadow's audio, gives the player more interaction with the shadow. The shadow is constantly belittling the player. It is a projection of that negative voice inside my head telling me I am not good enough, that no one will ever love me, that I can't do it. In order to finish the game the player has to overcome this shadow, this negative voice. In order to be at peace with myself I must do the same. This voice coming from the shadow has an audio filter on it connected to the distance between it and the players. In order to do that I had to delve into YouTube once again. Everything in this game I credit to YouTube, and to my professor Joe McKay who taught me Unity and helped me along the way.

Crediting the success of this game to YouTube I believe is also a product of being on Zoom this year. The process of making this game at home alone, instead of at school, was very different. When I was at school creating games in Unity for my Unity class I had a whole community of peers attempting similar problems around me. There was a computer lab I could go work in with computers that supported Unity and peers to bounce ideas off of and get advice from. At home alone, all I had was the PC I built the summer before senior year in order to be able to use Unity effectively at home and the internet to help me solve all my problems. At times this was very lonely and the lack of community definitely made it more difficult for me to maintain my inspiration.

In order to make the best of the circumstance it was imperative that I embrace a playful attitude. Play can save us from our shadow. When we don't take our shadows seriously, when we are able to realize ourselves as complete beings we don't have to drag ourselves down. We don't have to run from our problems anymore. We can turn around and face our shadow, just like in the game sEVEN.

In order to win the player must stop running. They have to realize that since they have recovered their soul they can just stop and face their shadow. When their shadow collides with them, at that point it no longer consumes them. They are able to let it go and move into the next scene: A scene of peace and understanding. However, the game is pretty hard.

The game is hard because I wanted the player to be caught by their shadow over and over again. In my life I feel as though I have been caught by my shadow over and over again. I have gotten so frustrated thinking that I will never be able to stop running from my problems. I have felt hopeless, like my shadow will always be right behind me. The negative voice inside my head

is a constant pain. But this feeling of frustration and hopelessness for me has given way to surrender and acceptance.

I wanted the player to have to dwell in that experience. I wanted them to really feel their shadow. I wanted them to feel like they couldn't beat the game and that they really weren't good enough. Then when they are able to push through their frustration and finally win, that makes it all the better. To me a game that is easily completed is no game at all. An easy life, to me, isn't really worth it, or as Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." When something is hard and difficult I get to learn things. I get to exercise. I wanted this game to have that feeling of being a mental exercise, a spiritual exercise. And I wanted the player to have to spend enough time with it that they would begin to understand the metaphor it translates and apply it to their everyday life.

After all, philosophers like Aristotle and Kirkegard say Play is a literally divine virtue. Playing this game can be a spiritual experience that can leave us with a significant take away: That I don't have to listen to my shadow. That I can accept my shadow and it doesn't have to destroy me. That there are positive and negative qualities in all of us and that this balance between them is what makes us whole. That even if you feel pain, or are lost you can recover your soul and embrace the wholeness of your being shadow and all. And most of all that you don't need to take your shadow seriously. It is really just a game, so have fun playing!

So often I try to run from reality. Because sometimes it really seems like reality stinks, right? But that is just my shadow talking. If I am able to embrace a playful attitude and have fun with the limitations of my reality without taking them so seriously then I will recover pieces of my soul and accept my shadow without taking it seriously. Because I can do this, you can too!

Making this game was a great process for me. It was hard and frustrating. Hours of YouTube videos and giving up in frustration because even though I was doing exactly the same thing that they were doing in the YouTube video, it wasn't working. But sticking with it and finishing it felt so good! I could easily make a 2D game now. I could easily help somebody else make a 2D game in unity. There were even bigger shadows I had to overcome while making this game that weren't even a part of the game as well.

I moved to NY from WI while making this game, stayed there for a month, realized I didn't have the money to live there while I was in school and moved back home to WI. There were so many negative voices in my head saying I had failed somehow, or that there was just too much going on for me to be able to finish this game. But, luckily I didn't take my shadow seriously. I was able to acknowledge those negative voices and let them go, recovering a piece of my soul in the process and getting a speed boost. Not really because it was real life, but you get the idea.

If I were to be consumed by my shadow I would have gotten too overwhelmed and quit. In the game when the player gets consumed by their shadow if they click play again they really have not lost. But if they give in to that shadow and quit the game, then they have lost. At least that's how I like to see it.

Bogost in his book *Play Anything*, mentioned earlier in the paper, says that games are a limited structure. It is their confines that make them fun. If you could do anything in a game then it wouldn't provide any satisfying challenge. It is the limits of games that make them fun. That is why this game became successful when it was refined to one level with one enemy, the shadow, chasing the player. Appreciating the limits of games and their function can also be applied to everyday life. When this application is made I find that I am much more appreciative of the

everyday. Instead of seeing limits as problems, I can transform my vision of the everyday into a series of opportunities and the limits become limitless.

To apply this to the metaphor of sEVEN, the shadow represents that negative mindset. If I am consumed by a negative mindset, then my reality is negative and my limits become my problems. But, if I am able to accept the limits, metaphorically speaking, my shadow, then my limits can become opportunities. The darkness becomes brighter and I need to be bright to see things this way.

That is why the soul shards are glowing lights. They are literally a glowing path to a bright destination. I was imagining that each time the player picks up one of these glowing pieces they become brighter. That is why they need all seven before facing the shadow. When they have all seven then they are bright enough not to be overcome by the darkness of the shadow.



While I am really happy with the concept of this game and the form it took in it's final product I have some qualms about the duality it poses. In most games there is a duality of win or lose. In the game sEVEN there is both a duality of win and lose, light and dark, good and evil and I tried to think of a way to get around this duality. Because I don't see duality as reality. For instance the Yin Yang symbol does a great job of depicting the nonexistence of duality while acknowledging its form. In every light thing there is dark, in every win there is loss. And the two

sides of the coin depend on each other in order to be whole. Even though I couldn't think of an entirely effective way to make sEVEN non-dual I reference totality in a couple different ways.

The player and the shadow are the same person. They were both built from the same original character sprite and the shadow is just wearing a purple cloak. Also, at the end of the game there is an animation that cycles between the shadow and the player implying that they are continuously transforming into one another: That in fact, they are two sides of the same coin.

However, I feel I was unable to truly get away from a win/lose duality in this project and I want to make a game one day that truly absolves itself from the duality of win or lose. sEVEN attempts to get away from this dichotomy by implying a cyclical nature of becoming and unbecoming. However, the player still feels a sense that they lost when the shadow catches them and a win when they finally move onto the next level.

I do like that you win by colliding with your shadow and you lose by colliding with your shadow. Even though sEVEN is still stuck in the dichotomy of win or lose, both winning and losing happen in the same fashion. This at least brings the dichotomy closer together. In pursuing freedom from the win/lose duality I also created a secret level.

When the player "wins," they aren't actually at the end of the game. If they jump off the platform on the "winning," level they will go onto a level that I like to think about as outside the game: As beyond the duality of winning and losing, and shadows and not shadows. Here a voice speaks to them that is undefined and left up to the player to define where it is coming from. The voice acknowledges that they have accepted their shadow and asks them what they are going to do next. Then it follows up by suggesting to just sit and enjoy the music.

I really enjoyed implementing this scene because meditation has been a valuable part of my life. This scene in the game is a meditation that the viewer is invited to take part in. It

provides a space to really take in and enjoy the whole experience. The phrase ‘listening to the music’ is a metaphor. In a sense it is literal because there is music playing. But, for me it means, listen to everything. Listen to the universe, the totality of existence, and just be here and relax into it.

This scene does not display a ‘play again’ button. The end scene does and the scene of being consumed by your shadow also does. In Buddhism they describe a cycle of *samsara*. The cycle of *samsara* is one of worldly suffering and through meditation we may leave the cycle of *samsara* and enter nirvana. When the player clicks ‘play again’ in either the scene of being consumed by the shadow or the ending scene of the game, they are choosing to reenter the cycle of *samsara*. But, if they make it to the secret level they can choose not to play again. In other words, they can choose to leave the cycle of worldly suffering.

In Buddhism this is what happens through meditation. Those who reach this choice may choose to become bodhisattvas: One who has seen nirvana, but has chosen to stay in this world in order to help others reach a state of enlightenment. Buddhism has been a part of my life since I was very young, since it is a part of my family and how I grew up. Therefore, it is a part of my thought process in general and played a part in shaping the game sEVEN.

sEVEN represents my own spiritual philosophy through a playful method. This allows the player to engage in a profound metaphor playfully and without the seriousness of a philosophy book or religious text. sEVEN is a complete conglomeration of all my experience and philosophy into a single, refined, sizable bite. It is open to vast interpretation or can be taken only as a game. It allows for the possibility to be realized that nobody has to take their shadow seriously and that anyone can overcome those negative voices in your head. For those who wish

to truly engage with it, sEVEN offers a deep level of spiritual philosophy to contemplate and apply to everyday life.

The real ending of sEVEN, the secret level past the winning level also implies that limits are surpassable. That even if you think you are limited there might just be something you haven't seen yet. For those who find this secret level, they must have had a playful attitude. They must have gotten to the end and curiously jumped around just for fun until they fell off into the secret level. This demonstrates the necessity of play in order to go beyond the limits of the mundane. As I finished up this paper, this poem came to me. It is by Rumi and demonstrates a profound acceptance of the "shadow self." Please, take it with you as you go out from here.

The Guest House, by Jalaluddin Rumi

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

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