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An Unfinished Perfection: *The Unfinished Swan* Examined Phenomenologically

Soham Ganguly,
Independent Scholar, Kolkata

Abstract

This paper critically examines *The Unfinished Swan*, a videogame released for the Play Station 3 platform by Giant Sparrow Entertainment, as an existentialist narrative. With this aim in mind, the various devices used in the game for the purpose of narration and virtually representing the imaginary world in which the story takes place, i.e, within the fairytale world of an unfinished painting, are studied. Their cumulative effect is considered through the lenses of existentialism as laid down by Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Whether a virtual representation of an existential quest for meaning is possible is at first examined, after which, the focus is shifted to how far this is realized in the game.

Right from its outset, in terms of its title as well as its back-story, *The Unfinished Swan* harps incessantly on the fundamental problem that carries the narrative of the game forward, that in it, there is something dominant that remains unfinished, namely the world of the painting that the protagonist enters, and the player plays in. As part of its back-story, we find that the protagonist, Monroe is left with one of many paintings that his mother created, all of them left unfinished. The one left to Monroe is that of a swan, unfinished as well. The game begins with Monroe following the footprints of the aforementioned swan through a magical door in the wall.

The property of the painting of the swan being unfinished gives the protagonist the reason to proceed to do so. We may define this as a fundamental lack at the heart of Monroe's being and hence, fuelling his eternal striving towards the goal of solving the enigma latent in the narrative-

We must further understand that the intentions aim at appearances which are never to be given at one time. It is an impossibility on principle for the terms of an infinite series to exist all at the same time before consciousness, along with the real absence of all these terms except for the one which is the foundation of objectivity. If present these impressions even in infinite number-would dissolve in the subjective; it is their absence which gives them objective being. Thus the being of the object is pure non-being. It is defined as a lack. It is that which escapes, that which by definition will never be given, that which offers itself only in fleeting and successive profiles (Sartre, 1966, p.28).

Indeed a phenomenological study of *The Unfinished Swan* demands that the portrait be unfinished in order to provide the protagonist the reason to set out into the

world of the painting. The game is replete with existential symbols, apart from being, in the ludological sense, full of possibilities and paths of action.

The goal of the boy is to follow the trail of the swan. The swan embodies a primary existential symbol in the course of the game. Having its origin as a creation of the boy's mother, the swan stands for the past, and in the life that the boy lived prior to setting out in the game's central quest of the swan hunt, it formed his present, and as he seeks to find the swan it becomes his future possibilities all put together.

A fresh, white slate of a world is given to the player, which forms the "ground of experience" (Sartre, 1966, p.73), and the matter of *Dasein* or "being in the world," as conceptually laid down by Martin Heidegger and examined by Sartre, immediately comes into play (Heidegger, 1962).

To start with, hence, we need take a look at Being, and how it stands in this context- "Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is.' Being includes both Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself, but the latter is the nihilation of the former. As contrasted with Existence, Being is all-embracing and objective rather than individual and subjective" (Sartre, 1966, p. 592).

The white world which greets Monroe upon first starting the game, or even at the beginning of each chapter or level, may be likened to a state of pure being, because it is, and no more may be said about it. Though there might be scruples of it not entirely being Being because it can stand by its chromatic, visual properties as being not-black on not any other colour, one may reason that since it is a visual approximation of the principle of Being-in-Itself, this is pretty much the nearest the game designers could get to it.

This, however, brings us to an anxiety of the digital plane being able to incorporate the entirety of human experience, and Ian Bogost considers various ideas which address the question-

"Lacan's domain-specific use of unit operations influences Badiou's extension of mathematization to all domains. Given his application of mathematics to philosophy, it is not surprising that Alain Badiou finds great utility in Lacan's use of the *matheme*, extending the latter's use of mathematical transmission for key relationships between the symbolic and the real to the entirety of possible relationships in general. When dealing with such universally translatable systems, Kittler's tone is ambiguous. He focuses on transfer of human knowledge and experience into binary data for electronic storage. Dogmatic sociologist Neil Postman makes his opinion on such matters plainer: 'People now commonly speak of 'programming' or 'deprogramming' themselves. They speak of their brains as a piece of 'hard wiring,' capable of 'retrieving data,' and it has become common to think about thinking as a mere matter of processing and decoding.' Postman steadfastly opposes technology for technology's sake, going so far as to say that the computer 'subordinates the claims of our nature, our biology, our emotions, our spirituality. The computer claims sovereignty over the whole range of human experience, and supports its claim by showing that it 'thinks' better than we can.' Again we see an ontology that implicates humanity in technology's wake" (Bogost, 2006).

This leads to the inevitable inference that- “We are all elements in an informational ecology that creates the useful illusion we call reality” (Rheingold, 1991, p.63).

Before delving further into our consideration of the game both in terms of its mechanics and thematic currents, we must eliminate the idea that its attempt to craft an ontological plane is to be dismissed on any oneiric grounds. For this, we may turn to what Ian Dallas, one of the developers of *The Unfinished Swan*, expresses earnestly yet tersely- “It is a world, and not a dream” (Takahashi, 2012).

And therefore, it ought to be a world where “the consciousness of man *in action* is non-reflective consciousness. It is consciousness of something, and the transcendent which discloses itself to this consciousness is of a particular nature; it is a structure of exigency in the world, and the world correlatively discloses in it complex relations of instrumentality. In the act of tracing the letters which I am writing, the whole sentence, still unachieved, is revealed as a passive exigency to be written. It is the very meaning of the letters which I form, and its appeal is not put into question, precisely because I can not write the words without transcending them toward the sentence and because I discover it as the necessary condition for the meaning of the words which I am writing. At the same time in the very framework of the act an indicative complex of instruments reveals itself and organizes itself (pen-ink-paper-lines-margin, etc.), a complex which cannot be apprehended for itself but which rises in the heart of the transcendence which discloses to me as a passive exigency the sentence to be written” (Sartre, 1966, p.173).

Therefore, the world lends itself to such instrumentalization. In order to interact with this world, Monroe must be able to perceive it, and otherwise instrumentalize in the world, such as by touching things in it, or moving about. For Monroe to affect the world, impinge upon it in any way at all, he must, in this first person painting game, throw a colour blob, which starts out with merely a black blob.

This black blob of paint, in turn, acts upon that canvas world of white to mark or indicate in the area covered by its dark splatter a three-dimensional landscape. Bombarding the canvas repeatedly until the whole landscape may be traced out as standing out in black on white, the fairytale world emerges.

The landscape of the level titled ‘Chapter One,’ may serve as a worthy example. It appears to be that of a park or a lakeside, with the water and the sky remaining white. Blobs aimed at the water float about until they sink or are consumed by a leaping fish from beneath the otherwise tranquil waters.

Monroe, by virtue of his existence in the world of the painting he has entered, brings Nothingness into the world, which may be explained as- “Nothingness does not itself have Being, yet it is supported by Being. It comes into the world by the For-itself and is the recoil from fullness of self-contained Being which allows consciousness to exist as such” (Sartre, 1966, p.581).

Therefore, the condition in which Monroe is, must, by deduction, be Being-for-Itself, further spurred on by a desire to transcend by the game mechanic of having to search for the Swan. The Swan becomes a symbol of the For-Itself, it becomes the primary force that pushes Monroe forth as he keeps searching for it- “The nihilation of Being-in-itself; consciousness conceived as a lack of Being, a desire for Being, a relation to

Being. By bringing Nothingness into the world the For-itself can stand out from Being and judge other beings by knowing what it is not. Each For-itself is the nihilation of a particular being” (Sartre, 1962, p.581).

Thus we see the meticulous detailing with which the world exists. Monroe here is the agent who brings nothingness into the world, the sense of things which are not white, not nothing and not him, Monroe.

This lends the world the existential principle of quality, which the designing of the game expresses amply-

“A quality does not objectivate itself if it is subjective. Supposing that we had projected the unity of an object-pole beyond qualities, at most each one of them would be given directly as the subjective effect of the action of things upon us. But the yellow of the lemon is not a subjective mode of apprehending the lemon; it is the lemon. And it is not true either that the object X appears as the empty form which holds together disparate qualities. In fact the lemon is extended throughout its qualities, and each of its qualities is extended throughout each of the others. It is the sourness of the lemon which is yellow, it is the yellow of the lemon which is sour. We eat the color of a cake, and the taste of this cake is the instrument which reveals its shape and its color to what we may call the alimentary intuition. Conversely if I poke my finger into a jar of jam, the sticky coldness of that jam is the revelation to my fingers of its sugary taste. The fluidity, the tepidity, the bluish color, the undulating restlessness of the water in a pool are given at one stroke, each quality through the others; and it is this total interpenetration which we call the this. This fact has been clearly shown by the experiences of painters, especially of Cezanne. Husserl is wrong in believing that a synthetic necessity unconditionally unites color and form; it is the form which is color and light. If the painter wants to vary anyone of these factors, the others change as well, not because they are linked by some sort of law but because at bottom they are one and the same being.

In this sense every quality of being is all of being; the quality is the presence of the absolute contingency of being, its indifferent irreducibility” (Sartre, 1966, p.329).

Every image that is thus revealed to Monroe when he tosses blobs of paint upon the world is one which is glutted with ontological quality. In totality, this leads us to reason that the world of *The Unfinished Swan*, albeit virtual, is a possible ontological space worthy of phenomenological consideration.

As for the narrative of the game, it has been noted that –

“*The Unfinished Swan* draws upon a rich history of children’s literature—the illustrative style of Shel Silverstein and stories like *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. Those familiar with Harold’s story will recall that the book describes the adventures of a boy who uses his crayon to create a world in an otherwise empty space [. . .] because as his drawing progresses, Harold is shown to be utterly alone. Attempting to create a companion, Harold draws a policeman who only stands as a fixed image, without life” (Stowe, 2012).

However, this is thankfully not the case for Monroe, as he finds other lifeforms in the world of the painting, encountering them with genial frequency. As for the central storyline-

“Players take on the role of Monroe, a young boy who has recently lost his mother, a painter with a penchant for leaving her works unfinished. Upon her death, Monroe is told that he may only keep one of his mother’s works—he chooses (not surprisingly) the unfinished swan. But one evening the swan escapes from its canvas, and Monroe sets out to find it. The swan’s bright orange footprints lead him on, serving as a constant reminder of its presence. Similarly, scattered throughout the game are textual tableaus that continue the story, artfully read by a soothing narrator. As the story unfolds, we find that Monroe has ventured into a kingdom whose absent ruler also struggles with an inability to finish anything satisfactorily. Whereas the creation account in Genesis has God approving of each aspect of his creative work, the King in *The Unfinished Swan* constantly finds that his work is not good enough” (Stowe, 2012).

Seen from the perspective of a fabricated experience at the behest of the powers ruling that world, perhaps the king, though it is unclear, the world naturally fulfils the noetic criteria involved in the production of a virtual reality, interspersed with ideas of lucid dreaming. But either way, the experience of Monroe does comprise a concrete consciousness with a fully functional logic of its own. One may argue for the inherent uncertainty of being, which *is*, and whatever surfaces is only through the entrance of nothingness and its properties into the world, but it only bears out the formation of consciousness as it applies to that imaginary, magical or dream realm, devoid of colour with extremely few exceptions such as the Swan’s footprints. As in any existent, Monroe has to engage and interact with the world just as he finds it, and only to the extent that it allows. He has something to be conscious of, and is conscious by directing his sphere of consciousness towards being, in order to be in the world. This is the game’s mechanic of replicating “the For-itself’s necessary connection with the In-itself, hence with the world and its own past. It is what allows us to say that the For-itself *is* or exists” (Sartre, 1966, p.579). This is what is known as the “facticity” of an individual, in this case Monroe’s.

Therefore, it is Monroe’s quest, though it is not known to him, to find the King, who happens to be his father, and who created his mother who in turn escaped to the real world and gave birth to Monroe. Neither the father nor the son know each other, and yet the whole meaning of Monroe’s existence lies in the Other, in all save his own Being, his own essential condition, and his Other has been woven in the realm of the painting by the King himself, who even created his mother, and thus punctuates every bit of what meaning Monroe’s life may have. This is because-

“The Other's existence reveals to me the being which I am without my being able either to appropriate that being or even to conceive it, this existence will motivate two opposed attitudes : First-The Other *looks* at me and as such he holds the secret of my being, he knows what I am. Thus the profound meaning of my being is outside of me, imprisoned in an absence. The Other has the advantage over me. Therefore in so far as I am fleeing the in-itself which I am without founding it, I can attempt to deny that being which is conferred on me from outside; that is, I can turn back upon the Other so as to make an object out of him in turn since the

Other's object-ness destroys my object-ness for him. But on the other hand, in so far as the Other as freedom is the foundation of my being-in-itself, I can seek to recover that freedom and to possess it without removing from it its character as freedom. In fact if I could identify myself with that freedom which is the foundation of my being-in-itself, I should be to myself my Own foundation” (Sartre, 1966, p.413).

It is toward this goal that the protagonist is driven, though it is incorporated in the game as the only natural and logical possibility, the only way for him, as well as for the player, to find meaning as a result of Monroe’s efforts as controlled by the player. What this is successfully able to instill in both the protagonist and the player is a sincerity which can be likened to the existential idea of *sincerity*-

“A quick examination of the idea of sincerity, the antithesis of bad faith, will be very instructive in this connection. Actually sincerity presents itself as a demand and consequently is not a state. Now what is the ideal to be attained in this case? It is necessary that a man be for *himself* only what he *is*. But is this not precisely the definition of the in-itself-or if you prefer-the principle of identity? To posit as an ideal the being of things, is this not to assert by the same stroke that this being does not belong to human reality and that the principle of identity, far from being a universal axiom universally applied, is only a synthetic principle enjoying a merely regional universality?” (Sartre, 1966, p.226)

The “regional universality” has its virtual equivalent in the ludological aesthetic way of representation by providing the player an ontic area larger than mere optical and aural perception-

“You can move your character around [. . .] As you do this, the terrain that you’re standing on moves off the screen and new terrain appears as if from off screen. You are in a virtual space that is larger than the screen. This shouldn’t be at all surprising. It seems that every 3D game, from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and *Super Mario 64* to *Tomb Raider*, offers virtual spaces that are larger than the screen. *Quake* and other first-person shooters have them as well, as do 2D games” (Bogost, 2006).

Thus, this is how the sense of regional universality is conveyed, and the trail of the swan and the textual tableaux that must be followed by the player in the guise of Monroe enforce the existential notion of sincerity directed towards the ideal of finding the Swan, being led to the King, and thus finding out who he is, and being at one with who he is.

In the end, when he does meet the King, he is told of how he, being an artist, was unable to finish the great works of art that he had begun. It was then that he dreamt of Monroe, the possibility of his artistic hopes being projected towards a future. The swan, whom Monroe has chased throughout the course of the game’s narrative, takes the icon of creativity, the paintbrush, from the hand of the King as he offers it to Monroe. Thus, Monroe is forced to chase the swan once again, and it is on this note of eternal pursuit towards a creative endeavour, towards artistic perfection, that the game ends, eliciting viewpoints such as-

“We all carry a sense of unattainable perfection; and our creative output will continually struggle with a dissatisfaction, with a frustration that we didn’t get it quite right. Too often this sense can lead to unnecessary and incessant revision, and *The Unfinished Swan* offers itself as an appropriate corrective to this compulsion. Resting in the unfinished shouldn’t mean that we don’t make the fullest effort, it simply means that we find contentment in the beauty of making. This then is the kind of presence in absence that *The Unfinished Swan* reveals—the discovery of present beauty in the absence of complete perfection” (Stowe, 2012).

It is certainly reminiscent of the existential quest of Antoine Roquentin, who, at the end of *Nausea*, hears a jazz record just prior to leaving the town of Bouville, and says—“It is. I want to be” (Sartre, 1949, p.251).

We may thus infer, that *The Unfinished Swan* is just as much a story of the protagonist’s search for an answer to his existence, and consequently, for authenticity.

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Soham Ganguly, M.A in English, Presidency University
