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Existential Meaning-Making in Hollow Knight:A Hermeneutic-Ludological Case Study of Metroidvania Space, Repetition, and Agency

Hollow Knight'ta Varoluşsal Anlam Kurma: Metroidvania Mekânı, Tekrar ve Eyleycilik Üzerine Hermenötik-Ludolojik Bir Vaka Çalışması

Abstract

This article examines how several ludic structures in Hollow Knight (Team Cherry, 2017) can be interpreted through distinct existential concepts. The analysis focuses on the relationship between mechanics, space, represented events, and their consequences rather than on empirically reported player experience. Four principal correspondences guide the discussion: the game's opening disorientation is considered alongside Heideggerian thrownness; ability-gated revisitation alongside Kierkegaardian repetition; the death-and-recovery loop alongside Camusian persistence; and consequential quest outcomes alongside Sartrean choice and responsibility. Franklin's account of meaning is used more selectively in the discussion of the Nailsmith's redirected purpose. Drawing on philosophical hermeneutics and game analysis, the study compares mechanics, spaces, narrative fragments, and audiovisual motifs while also considering conventional genre explanations. Hollow Knight offers a productive single case in which incomplete knowledge, revisitation, accumulated competence, and constrained agency shape the process of making meaning.

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Öz

Bu makale, Hollow Knight'taki (Team Cherry, 2017) bazı ludik yapıların farklı varoluşçu kavramlarla nasıl yorumlanabileceğini incelemektedir. Çözümleme, ampirik oyuncu deneyiminden çok mekanikler, mekân, temsil edilen olaylar ve bunların sonuçları arasındaki ilişkiye odaklanmaktadır. Tartışmaya dört temel eşleştirme yön vermektedir: oyunun başlangıcındaki yönsüzlük Heideggerci fırlatılmışlıkla; yeteneklere bağlı geri dönüşler Kierkegaardcı tekrar kavramıyla; ölüm ve geri kazanım döngüsü Camusün ısrar düşüncesiyle; sonuç doğuran görevler ise Sartreci seçim ve sorumluluk anlayışıyla birlikte ele alınmaktadır. Franklin anlam yaklaşımından daha sınırlı biçimde, Nailsmith'in değişen amacı tartışılırken yararlanılmıştır. Felsefi hermenötik ile oyun çözümlemesini bir araya getiren çalışma; mekanikleri, mekânları, anlatı parçalarını ve görsel-işitsel motifleri geleneksel tür açıklamalarını da dikkate alarak karşılaştırmaktadır. Hollow Knight, eksik bilgi, geri dönüş, biriken yeterli ve sınırlandırılmış eyleyciliğin anlam kurma sürecini biçimlendirdiği verimli bir tekil vaka sunmaktadır.

Keywords

Hollow Knight; Metroidvania; existential philosophy; game studies; hermeneutics; agency

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“One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

-Albert Camus

Introduction

Digital games communicate not only through represented stories but also through rules, spatial arrangements, and the actions they require (Bogost, 2007; Sicart, 2009; Tavinor, 2009). *Hollow Knight* is a particularly useful case because its ruined kingdom becomes intelligible through traversal. The player proceeds with incomplete knowledge, encounters restricted access, fails repeatedly, and gradually develops both competence and spatial understanding. Against this background, the article asks how selected ludic structures in *Hollow Knight* support readings informed by specific existential concepts.

Calling *Hollow Knight* an ‘existentialist game’ would obscure important differences among the thinkers discussed here. Heidegger’s account of being-in-the-world, Kierkegaard’s repetition, Camus’s absurd, Sartre’s situated freedom, and Frankl’s approach to meaning belong to distinct philosophical projects. The analysis therefore brings each concept into the discussion only where a particular feature of the game provides a plausible formal connection.

The argument centres on the spatial and temporal organisation of this Metroidvania: areas are only partly accessible, new abilities make return productive, cartographic and narrative knowledge accumulates unevenly, and progression combines designer-imposed limits with player-directed exploration. *Hollow Knight* provides goals and rewards, but their wider significance often remains unclear until much later. The resulting experience is better described as incomplete orientation than as the absence of purpose.

This distinction also defines the scope of the claims that follow. Choosing one corridor over another is ordinarily a matter of navigation, whereas a decision such as sparing the Nailsmith carries a narratively framed consequence. The article is concerned with such designed possibilities and their interpretive force. It does not attempt to establish a common psychological response among players, and conclusions about the Metroidvania genre are left for comparative research.

Differentiated Conceptual Framework

Games as Configured Possibility

Debates between ludology and narratology showed the limits of reducing games either to stories or to rule systems (Aarseth, 2001; Perron & Wolf, 2009). Fernández-Vara (2015) instead approaches mechanics, spatial organisation, fiction, and play context as related dimensions of analysis. Bogost’s (2007) procedural rhetoric draws attention to the expressive work of rule-gov-

erned processes, while Nguyen (2020) treats games as an art of agency in which temporary goals and practical abilities may themselves acquire aesthetic significance. Together, these approaches make it possible to examine what a game asks the player to do without assuming that all players respond in the same way.

Games share with literature and cinema the interpretive activities of inference, memory, anticipation, and disagreement. Their additional feature is intervention within a designed field of possibilities, where actions may produce system-dependent consequences. The important distinction here is between interpretive activity and ludic agency, rather than between supposedly passive and active media.

Four Primary Concepts and One Secondary Lens

Heidegger's thrownness (Geworfenheit) describes the condition of finding oneself already situated in circumstances one did not choose, while being-in-the-world concerns practical involvement in those circumstances (Heidegger, 2010). *Hollow Knight's* opening becomes relevant to this account when its lack of orientation is considered together with the practical work through which the world gradually becomes navigable.

For Kierkegaard, repetition is more than recurrence: what returns is encountered through a changed relation (Kierkegaard, 1843/1983). Ability-gated revisitation gives this distinction a concrete ludic form, since a familiar location offers different possibilities after the player acquires new capacities. Camus's absurd concerns another relation, the tension between a desire for intelligibility and a world that does not fully answer it (Camus, 1942/1991). The death-and-recovery loop is discussed in this light because effort resumes after failure without assurance of success.

Sartrean freedom is exercised within facticity rather than outside all limits; commitments made under given conditions contribute to the project a person becomes (Sartre, 1943/2018). This perspective is most useful for the game's narratively consequential acts, including the Nailsmith's decision and the pursuit of Dream No More. Frankl's account of meaning (Frankl, 1946/2006) has a more modest role in the article, providing language for the Nailsmith's crisis

Game structure	Primary concept	Analytical boundary
Initial descent, missing map, practical orientation	Heidegger: thrownness / being-in-the-world	Not every tutorial omission counts; the sequence must organise situated orientation.
Ability-gated return to a known region	Kierkegaard: repetition	Return must transform possibilities, not merely repeat traversal.
Death, Shade recovery, renewed attempt	Camus: persistence amid the absurd	No claim that players feel absurdity; the loop stages persistence.
Consequential quest or ending commitment	Sartre: situated choice and responsibility	Routine routing and optimisation are excluded.
Character crisis and redirected purpose	Frankl: meaning orientation (secondary)	Textual interpretation only; no clinical diagnosis.

and subsequent redirection of purpose.

Method

Case Design and Corpus

The study adopts a qualitative single-case design informed by philosophical hermeneutics and game analysis (Gadamer, 1960/2013; Fernández-Vara, 2015). *Hollow Knight* was selected because its interconnected world, ability-gated progression, environmental narrative, and multiple endings place space, action, and interpretation in unusually close relation. The unit of analysis is the configured relationship among a rule, a location, a represented event, the action required of the player, and the consequence that follows.

The corpus comprises the sequences used directly in the analysis: King's Pass, Dirtmouth, and the Forgotten Crossroads; map acquisition and navigation; the Mothwing Cloak and Mantid Claw gates; death, Shade, Geo, and recovery rules; the City of Tears; the Dream No More route; and the arcs of Quirrel, the Nailsmith and Sheo, Myla, Tiso, and Zote. Dream No More is considered as one possible ending rather than the sole authoritative conclusion. Areas, quests, bosses, and endings that do not contribute to the argument fall outside the corpus.

The evidence consists of author-captured screenshots and named sequences that can be inspected in the game. A session-level play log was not kept, so platform, build number, total duration, session count, and a complete record of endings are unavailable. This prevents exact replication of the original play sessions, but the claims made here can still be checked against identifiable rules, locations, events, and consequences. *Hollow Knight* remains the primary text; the interview with Team Cherry (Nintendo Australia, 2021) supplies contextual information about design intentions where relevant.

Interpretive Procedure

The surviving research record does not include contemporaneous formal coding, and the study consequently presents its procedure as interpretive comparison rather than retrospective thematic coding. The analytical categories were derived from the differentiated conceptual framework and then applied to the selected gameplay material. An analytical matrix makes the comparison visible by relating five conceptual categories - thrownness and orientation, transformative repetition, absurd persistence, situated choice and responsibility, and meaning orientation - to concrete features such as incomplete mapping, ability gates, revisitation, recovery after failure, optional consequences, fragmented lore, and crises of purpose. The matrix records the examples and limits used in the analysis.

Each example was approached in four stages. First, the relevant event or rule was described in ordinary game terms: what information was available, what action was possible or required, and what changed afterward. The second stage considered the relationship among

mechanic, space, fiction, and consequence. The third compared that relationship with the philosophical concepts defined above. Finally, the interpretation was set beside a conventional design account. Backtracking, for example, controls pacing and distributes rewards; Shade recovery manages risk and resources; route choice often remains simple navigation. The philosophical reading is retained where it explains a further relation without displacing these functions.

Four considerations guided the comparison: the presence of a named textual or ludic anchor; a connection grounded in form rather than atmosphere alone; consistency with the relevant philosophical concept; and a claim proportionate to the available evidence. Statements about emotion, identification, or player attitude were avoided because the study includes no interviews, surveys, telemetry, or experiments.

Scope and Limitations

Hermeneutic interpretation cannot offer statistical reproducibility. Here, transparency depends on a delimited corpus, clearly defined concepts, named textual anchors, and attention to alternative readings. The study neither reconstructs designer intention beyond the cited interview nor generalises from one game to all players or all Metroidvanias. Its value lies instead in analytic transferability: the proposed relationships can be compared with other games and challenged through further research.

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Analysis

Incomplete Orientation and Thrownness

After the descent through King's Pass, the Knight reaches Dirtmouth and the Forgotten Crossroads without a complete map or a full account of Hallowenest's crisis (Team Cherry, 2017). The game nevertheless provides local objectives, enemies, resources, signs, and routes. The condition is therefore not goal-absence but situated incompleteness. Cornifer's audible humming, purchasable maps, benches, and the player's own annotations gradually convert an initially opaque environment into a practicable world.

The sequence is open to a Heideggerian reading because disorientation is inseparable from practical involvement. King's Pass introduces movement, attack, risk, healing, and spatial attention through action, and this learning becomes the means by which the player gains a foothold in unfamiliar conditions. Hallowenest is not first presented as an object to be understood from a distance; it takes shape through movement, failure, mapping, exchange, rest, and return. Nitsche's (2008) account of game space is useful here because it likewise treats traversal as a source of spatial knowledge. At the same time, minimal guidance is a familiar convention of exploration games. Thrownness names a formal analogy within the sequence, not a complete identification between the Knight's situation and Heidegger's Dasein.

Figure 1

Thownness and Practical Orientation at King's Pass



Note. The opening descent places the Knight within an unchosen situation before Hallownest has become cartographically or narratively intelligible. The image is treated as one element of a larger rule-space sequence, not as self-sufficient proof of Heideggerian philosophy. Screenshot captured by the author from Hollow Knight (Team Cherry, 2017).

Ability-Gated Revisitation as Transformative Repetition

Metroidvania progression repeatedly sends the player back to recognisable spaces with altered capacities. The Mothwing Cloak changes horizontal reach; the Mantis Claw turns previously decorative or obstructive walls into routes; shortcuts and Stag Stations reconfigure travel time (Team Cherry, 2017; Bycer, 2017). The same location persists, but its field of possible action changes. Revisitation also changes the player's knowledge: hazards become legible, routes shorten, and narrative fragments acquire context.

Kierkegaard's repetition helps describe this return because it directs attention to the difference created within something familiar. A region does not simply recur: accumulated competence changes what can be done there, and later knowledge may also change what the place signifies. Ability gates still perform familiar design work by pacing content, rewarding mastery, and coordinating progression. The philosophical connection becomes useful at the point where return also reorganises the player's understanding of an earlier encounter.

Routine traversal therefore differs from transformative repetition. Passing through a corridor again because it is efficient changes little. Revisiting it with a new ability may disclose another route, while revisiting it with new knowledge of Hallownest may alter its narrative

significance. The analysis reserves transformative repetition for these changes in practical or interpretive possibility.

Failure, Shade Recovery, and Absurd Persistence

Death in *Hollow Knight* leaves a Shade at or near the site of failure. Until it is defeated, the player's Geo remains at risk and the Soul meter is constrained (Team Cherry, 2017). The mechanic therefore links renewed progress to a return toward the trace of the previous failure. It is simultaneously a resource-recovery system, a pacing device, and a fictionalised confrontation with the Knight's divided self.

Camus becomes relevant when renewed effort continues without any guarantee that the next attempt will succeed. Death is not simply equated with Sisyphus. Instead, the return to the site of failure gives practical form to a recurring decision: attempt recovery, take another route, or abandon the effort. The mechanic can thus articulate persistence while continuing to operate as a risk-and-resource system.

Figure 2

Quirrel at the Blue Lake: Contemplation after a Completed Journey



Note. Quirrel sits beside the Blue Lake after completing his role in Monomon's release. His stillness and the subdued setting support a character-level reading of completion, finitude, and contemplation. The scene is not treated as evidence of a psychological condition or a universal player response. Screenshot captured by the author from *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017).

Figure 3

Shade Recovery: Failure Materialised as a Return



Note. After death, recovery requires the player to revisit the site of failure and confront the Shade. The sequence affords an interpretation of persistence and self-confrontation while retaining its ordinary function as a risk-and-resource mechanic. Screenshot captured by the author from *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017).

Melancholy, Hollowness, and Loss of Meaning

Hollow Knight disperses its history across memorials, tablets, dreams, objects, architecture, and fragmentary speech. Jenkins's (2004) concept of embedded narrative is useful because Hallownest's past must be reconstructed from spatially distributed traces. The City of Tears is a concentrated example: persistent rain, blue-grey monumental architecture, empty interiors, and the Hollow Knight memorial present a civilisation through the remains of its grandeur. The effect is an environment marked by melancholy and historical loss.

Within the fiction, 'hollow' refers directly to the Pale King's attempt to create vessels without will or feeling that could contain the Radiance, an attempt that ultimately fails (Team Cherry, 2017). Beyond this narrative function, hollowness may suggest emptiness, fractured subjectivity, or a loss of meaning (Möring, 2013). The Infection itself is better understood on the game's own terms as mental domination and bodily transformation than as a metaphorical diagnosis of collective depression. Melancholy, despair, psychic disintegration, and loss of purpose remain closer to the states represented in the game.

The character arcs give these motifs different forms. Myla begins by singing as she mines in Crystal Peak; as the Infection advances, her speech fragments and the once-familiar encounter turns hostile. Tiso imagines the Colosseum of Fools as the setting in which he will prove himself, only for the later appearance of his body to expose the distance between that project and the world's indifference. Zote offers another variation through his heroic self-description, fifty-seven Precepts, and the idealised Grey Prince created in Bretta's fantasy. His performance can be compared, cautiously, with Sartrean bad faith: not because he merely lies, but because he repeatedly turns a contingent heroic role into a fixed essence despite conditions visible to the player. The comparison illuminates a specific tension in his portrayal without exhausting Sartre's account of bad faith.

Consequential Choice and Situated Responsibility

Most choices of route or equipment carry little narrative or ethical weight. The Nailsmith sequence is different. After completing the Pure Nail, the Nailsmith asks the player to kill him. Refusal makes possible a later encounter with Sheo, where craft has given way to art and companionship (Team Cherry, 2017). Because the choice is optional, consequential, and intelligible in retrospect, it offers a strong example of Sartrean situated choice. Frankl's vocabulary of meaning adds a secondary perspective: the Nailsmith discovers purpose through another practice and relationship rather than through an abstract solution.

Dream No More extends the question of commitment across a longer sequence. Reaching it requires the player to gather dispersed knowledge, obtain the Void Heart, and enter a confrontation that is unnecessary for the simpler ending. The possibilities remain tightly designed, yet the decision to pursue these conditions alters the outcome available within them. Freedom appears here as a commitment made inside constraints rather than as the absence of constraint.

Figure 4

Official Concept Illustration of the Knight in the City of Tears



Note. This official *Hollow Knight* concept illustration depicts the Knight inside a glass structure in the rain-soaked City of Tears, with Hornet and Cornifer visible in the background. It is not an in-game screenshot. Image reproduced from official *Hollow Knight* concept artwork (Team Cherry, 2017).

Discussion

This article has argued that *Hollow Knight*'s most productive philosophical feature is the conjunction of spatial incompleteness and temporal return. Inaccessible routes leave practical questions open; new abilities revise the available answers; later visits recast earlier spaces; failure interrupts action but leaves a recoverable trace; and a small number of decisions reshape projects and outcomes. Meaning develops neither as a fully given message nor as an unconstrained invention, but through situated action across time.

The philosophical concepts clarify different aspects of this process. Heidegger draws attention to practical orientation in an already-given world. Kierkegaard helps explain a return changed by capacity and understanding. Camus brings persistence without assurance into view, while Sartre sharpens the relation between commitment, consequence, and constraint. Frankl contributes more locally to the Nailsmith's redirection of purpose. Their relevance to the same game should not erase the differences among them.

This case also illustrates what games add to forms of interpretation shared with literature and cinema. A player may read the City of Tears as one reads a fictional ruin, but must also negotiate its elevators, enemies, locked routes, and benches. Interpretation is therefore coupled with traversal, risk, competence, and system response. Ludic agency does not replace interpretive activity; it gives that activity another material organisation.

Broad labels such as 'interactive existentialist novel' contribute little to this account, as do canonical comparisons with Kafka or Beckett when they rest only on mood or theme. More precise comparisons may still illuminate alienation, repetition, or fractured meaning. The stronger claim is that *Hollow Knight* organises philosophical interpretation through the interaction of mechanics and space.

One case cannot establish an existential grammar for the Metroidvania genre. It can, however, generate questions for comparison: Do partially accessible worlds regularly encourage retrospective reinterpretation? How does ability-gated return differ from repetition in other genres? Does player-directed progression alter the relationship between narrative uncertainty and agency? Studies of other Metroidvanias could show which of these relationships belong to the genre and which are distinctive to *Hollow Knight*.

Conclusion

Hollow Knight supports existential interpretation most strongly where a philosophical concept corresponds to a particular formal relationship. The opening combines incomplete orientation with practical engagement; ability-gated revisitation transforms familiar spaces; the death-and-Shade loop gives persistence a recurring structure; and selected quests and ending conditions connect commitment with consequence. The vessel narrative and the game's melancholy environments further develop themes of loss, emptiness, and fractured purpose.

The argument concerns designed structures and their interpretation. Questions about how different players experience melancholy, achievement, identification, or existential uncertainty require interviews, surveys, observation, or experimental research. Claims about the Metroidvania genre likewise depend on comparison with other games.

Even within these limits, *Hollow Knight* shows why the Metroidvania form is philosophically suggestive. Movement makes the world intelligible, return makes its past more legible, and acquired competence changes what the player can perceive and do. Meaning-making arises from the interplay of incomplete knowledge, constrained agency, revisitation, and consequence rather than from themes imposed on mechanics from outside.

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