

# <∞ min to Oasis of Happiness: Promises of Freedom and Play in Pocket Planes\*

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## Abstract

This paper draws upon existentialism, play theory, and game studies and makes use of firstperson insights on *Pocket Planes* (2014) in order to address questions pertaining to the nature of freedom in single-player computer game play. On one hand, this paper could be read as a critique of *Pocket Planes*. On the other, it focuses on *Pocket Planes* as a case through which to examine the usefulness of the idea of ‘free play’ for the description of the interactions we have with single-player computer game artifacts. First, I shall briefly introduce *Pocket Planes* to give the reader a context, and then proceed to cross-expose concepts from Fromm’s dualistic notion of freedom with ideas of play from Hendricks and Fink. I shall then analyse how the experience of playing *Pocket Planes* matches with this constellation, and proceed to discuss what the analysis could possibly tell us about freedom and play on a more general level.

## Introduction

Several ‘romantic’ theories of play (e.g. Huizinga, Caillois, Fink, Suits) paint a picture of play as free: free from constraints of productivity and everyday life, voluntary, and often full of frivolous, creative and unpredictable qualities. In his article “Play as the Oasis of Happiness”, Fink (1968: 20), for example, suggests that we live under constant anticipation of future, and “experience the present as a preparation, a way-station, a transitional state” on our way to some ultimate goal in life. In Fink’s view, human existence is characterized by being oriented towards a goal in the future. Fink suggests that play offers a temporary respite from this orientation: as its purpose is not subordinated to an “ultimate purpose served by all other human activity”, play “contrasts conspicuously with the futuristic mode of being”. The discussion that follows in this paper was prompted by my somewhat non-playful, or perhaps more accurately not-yet-playful, experience that has not yet lived quite up to the standard of what could be assumed based on the ‘romantic’ theories of play. I can interact with a software that looks like a game, but somehow, something feels off.

The game that sparked these considerations is *Pocket Planes* (2014), an airline tycoon game for Android and iOS platforms, featuring in-app purchases, achievement badges, and social network integration. To give the reader a context, I shall below briefly describe the series of experiences, which prompted me to have a closer look at the kind of interaction this game affords.

After seeing an advertisement of *Pocket Planes* with colourful graphics evocative of the 8-bit era of my childhood, I was keen to download the game to give it a try. Having a liking for tycoon games, I was hoping to encounter simple but clever gameplay in a pocket-sized form, something to offer a temporary respite from concerns of life and work and fill in the occasional moments of boredom. However, what I found was a host of features related to customization of appearances on one hand, and activity characterized by perpetual waiting on the other: waiting to carry out, at too-frequent intervals, trivial tasks that are masked as interesting and challenging. The interface of *Pocket Planes* is like that of computer games, with menus and submenus, but given the nature of choices available, it appears unnecessarily user-unfriendly. Given the features described above, what is the mechanism, by which *Pocket Planes* holds me in its grip?

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I soon learned that it is not the micro-level of interacting with the interface where the game's attraction lies. Instead, the game makes a promise that one day my patience will be rewarded: that if I grind long enough, the game will afford making choices that are not only non-trivial, but also can be motivated purely by my subjective preference. The game promises that eventually I will be able to do a variety of things that are relevant to me as *'fun'* in the world of *Pocket Planes*: transporting all my cargo by a spaceship, making trans-continental flights with no stopovers, breaking records, and participating in the "Flight Crew" community events in which multiple players contribute together to a larger effort. In other words, if I continue to take the mindless grind for a while more, or, purchase "bux" with real currency, I will be free to play.

After several months of experience with *Pocket Planes*, the planes and profits have gotten bigger and the distances longer, but I am still waiting for the game's promises of freedom and play to be fulfilled. While I am free to do a variety of different things in *Pocket Planes*, interacting with the software feels like being locked into a boring and repetitive job and completely without the freedom often associated with play. *Pocket Planes* seems to be warranting an existential/ludological analysis. What does it mean if I say I *'play'* *Pocket Planes*? What is the nature of my freedom like in *Pocket Planes*? By answering these questions, I believe, we could possibly be able to learn something about the relationship between freedom and play not only in *Pocket Planes*, but in single-player computer games, in general.

### Play and the two aspects of freedom

To conceptualise freedom for the purposes of this article, I turn to Fromm (1941). Knights & Willmot (1982: 206) describe Fromm (1941) as distinguishing between "negative" and "positive" freedom, respectively, as follows:

- (a) man's capacity to free himself from external constraints. This form of freedom Fromm describes as *'freedom from'*; and (b) man's capacity to realise his intellectual, emotional, and sensuous potentialities. This form of freedom Fromm terms *'freedom to'*.

Can we assume that it would be productive to expect that play would manifest both kinds of freedom described by Fromm? I turn to the play theorist T.S. Hendricks, since his understanding of play as "self-realization" (2014) seems initially compatible with Fromm. Let us look at his definition of play, in order to attempt to see whether the activity it prescribes can be expected manifest qualities of both positive and negative freedom.

The part of Hendricks' (2006: 193) project that I will make use of here, focuses on differentiating between play and three other forms of expressive human behavior. On the one hand, Hendricks distinguishes between the subject's "transformative" and "conformative" stances "toward object world". On the other, he distinguishes between "instrumental" and "consummatory" rationales for the subject's behavior. This allows Hendricks to differentiate from each other the following "forms of expressive behavior": work (transformative stance + instrumental rationale), play (transformative stance + consummatory rationale), ritual (conformative stance + instrumental rationale), and *communitas* (consummatory stance + conformative rationale). Hendricks' twodimensional account appears to describe play activity that manifests both positive and negative aspects of freedom.

In Hendricks' model, play follows the "consummatory" rationale, within which "psychological and behavioural states become the guiding ends of action" while on the other, players take a "transformative stance", following which "they take particular elements of the world and turn them into something different from what they were before." By unpacking Hendricks' model, and describing play not only as what it is, but also in relation to what it is not, we can shed light on how Hendricks' idea of play interfaces with both positive and negative aspects of freedom.

The negative aspect of freedom in play becomes evident when we compare how, in Hendricks' model, play is different from "communitas" (a concept Hendricks uses for activities such as social gatherings), another consummatory form of behavior. In contrast to those engaged in social gatherings, who assume the conformitive stance and "submit themselves to the forms and powers of the world", players assume the transformative stance instead and "manipulate the world" in order to "find its strong and weak points, the places where they can assert themselves most effectively." In other words, instead of having to adjust themselves according to the world, players have the capacity to adjust the world according to themselves. Play, like described here as consummatory and non-conformitive, appears to manifest qualities of negative freedom as described by Fromm. How about positive freedom, the freedom *to*?

The positive aspect of freedom in play becomes evident when we compare how play is different from work. Hendricks (2014: 208) notes that workers, who are driven by the instrumental rationale, "commit [...] acts of transformation for instrumental purposes; typically, they must be motivated by external or extrinsic rewards" while play, driven by the consummatory rationale, "is a commitment to the act of transformation and to the forms of self-awareness that arise during this process." In other words, instead of adjusting the world to achieve external ends, players adjust the world in order to realize themselves. Play, like described here as transformative and non-instrumental, appears to manifest qualities of positive freedom as described by Fromm.

It seems that we can safely assume that when looking at play, we should be able to find both positive and negative aspects of freedom. Let us see if and how positive and negative aspects of freedom are present in the activity of playing *Pocket Planes*.

### **The promise of positive freedom in *Pocket Planes***

*Pocket Planes* is characterized by perpetual waiting. Not only do I have to wait for the planes to land so I can assign them new cargoes, passengers, and routes, but also for new passengers and cargoes bound for new destinations, and for new items to appear for purchase in the market. The game, running on a smartphone, gives a sound signal, not unlike that of a message having arrived, every time there is an event warranting my attention. The events are too far and few between to amuse oneself with them all the time, but frequent enough to prevent concentrating on anything that needs an attention span longer than that of a sparrow. We may observe that when I interact with *Pocket Planes*, concerns of the 'real world' are not my concerns: the software's effectively bar any concerns regarding behavior and productivity. Effectively, when I focus on *Pocket Planes*, I cannot focus on anything else. Thus, it seems that my interactions with *Pocket Planes* are negatively free.

How to approach the positive freedom in *Pocket Planes*? For example, using Crawford's (2012) approach of describing in-game actions using "action verbs", we can list the things I can do in *Pocket Planes*. The available verbs in *Pocket Planes* include, but are not limited to loading and unloading, assigning and deassigning, buying, selling, and gifting. (In addition to these, there are other actions related to character customizing and other such things, to which I will return in a bit). Thus, it is correct also that I have freedom to do things, but do these combine to allow me to authentically realize my intellectual, emotional, and sensuous potentialities? To facilitate the analysis, let us consider the possibility for a choice expressing one's subjective preference, as a minimal form of realizing one's intellectual, emotional, and sensuous possibilities.

I can open a new airport in Nagasaki instead of for example in Tokyo, thinking that it is one such authentic choice. However, it is pre-determined in the materiality of *Pocket Planes* that those starting in Japan will open Nagasaki before Tokyo, as they progress. (Tokyo, having 10 million people, is significantly more expensive to open an airport in, than Nagasaki and thus out of reach for individuals who have not purchased in-game currency with real money.) Due to the constraints hardcoded in the software, if I refuse to conform, I cannot continue interacting. (It would be pointless trying to open an

airport in Tokyo with not enough coins in my virtual pocket.) Perhaps there are choices that are conforming enough but allow an authentic realization of my potentialities?

Consider this: I would prefer to transport cargo rather than people. However, to keep my airline afloat I have to transport also people. I can deduce from the software's logic that perhaps, if I am persistent enough, I will eventually be able to choose my customers. Given the limited slots for individual planes, this will require me to scrap all my passenger airplanes and purchase new passenger airplanes. There are two kinds of in-game currency, and planes can be purchased only with bux, which is much more rare than coins. However, if I can continue distracting myself with the microinteractions" (Saffer 2013) the game constantly demands, it will be weeks, perhaps months, or even years, before I can possibly switch to a cargo-only operation and in doing so, make an authentic choice that expresses my subjective preference. This is the promise of positive freedom in *Pocket Planes*, but its fulfillment is far away.

### **Automaton conformism in *Pocket Planes***

I mentioned before that in addition to loading and unloading things, assigning and de-assigning waypoints, and buying and selling plane parts, there are also other actions available. I can also customize the colour scheme of my planes. I can choose three colours for each plane. In addition to changing colours, I can change the planes' names or numbers. I can also choose the outfits of the planes' pilots. There is a vast range of outfits, being combinations of a limited number of individual components such as headgear, sunglasses, eyeglasses, shirts and pants. The components cannot be changed individually. If I paid real money, I could also buy special outfits, such as furry animal or robot suits, for the pilots. *Pocket Planes* also contains an achievement system, and there seems to be enough achievements in all progress brackets. The software keeps also track of a range of different kinds of statistics, including the profitability of my airline and the total number of flights, the economic performance of individual aircrafts, etc. These statistics can be viewed through a particular interface feature. Furthermore, the virtual passengers of my airline write status updates to a virtual in-game social networking page, Bitbook". Some of their updates make references to choices I have made as the user, for example, to the destinations of particular planes, to shipments of cargo carried by particular planes, to opening and closing of individual airports, to introduction of new planes into the fleet, etc. I can read these updates and be amused by the references, and am also given the opportunity to share these updates on my preferred social networks in the real world. Perhaps interacting with these features would take me closer to realizing my potentials?

Regardless of how unique the combination of my pilots' outfits might indeed be, my choices bear no consequences to my survival in the game. Reading the passengers' BitBook updates gives me no information that is relevant my survival in the game. The choices as to what the pilots should wear, while clearly expressing my preferences, affect mere decoration only. What to make of these choices? Previously, making use of insights from Sartre (1962) and Gadamer (2001), I have proposed the notion of gameplay condition" (Leino 2009), as follows:

Not unlike a human in the world, the player is also bound to choose, and in her choices she carries a responsibility for this freedom of choice. Some choices for example may open up new possibilities for choosing [...] while other choices can lead to the freedom of choice being taken away altogether (i.e. game over).

Gameplay condition gives the necessary baseline that allows us to consider player's negative and positive freedom as a subset of her freedom as a subject existing in the world, in general. Using this idea, it is possible to distinguish between two kinds of game content: deniable" and undeniable". With deniable game content, I refer to that which can be ignored without implications to the continuing of the project of playing. Correspondingly, undeniable" game content is that, which cannot be ignored without risking a death, game-over, getting stuck, or similar. (Leino 2007) The choices as to what the pilots should wear are deniable" (Leino 2007); I can ignore the features related



to pilots' outfits without decreasing my long-term possibilities to act in the game: they bear no significance to the 'core gameplay' of *Pocket Planes*, i.e. are irrelevant to my chances of survival as an airline tycoon in *Pocket Planes*. These features are irrelevant to my "endangered freedom" (Gadamer 2001, 106) as a player of *Pocket Planes*. The appeal of these choices seems to be elsewhere. Allow me to try to describe their appeal by turning to Fromm (1942: 90), who, when describing "automaton conformism" as a strategy by which individuals escape the burden of negative freedom, suggests that:

[the automaton] desperately clings to the notion of individuality; he wants to be "different", and he has no greater recommendation of anything than that "it is different". We are informed of the individual name of the railroad clerk we buy our tickets from; handbags, playing cards, and portable radios are "personalized", by having the initials of the owner put on them. All this indicates the hunger for 'difference' [.]

The choices regarding whether to dress the pilots for example in animal ears or in sunglasses, do not take me closer to an authentic realization of "intellectual, emotional, and sensuous potentialities", but instead offer me the illusion that my experience of interacting with *Pocket Planes* would be different from that of other users. These are not affordances for positive freedom, but for automaton conformism, which, by appealing to my 'hunger for difference', allows me to forget that the promise for positive freedom, at present, remains unfulfilled.

I mentioned before my concerns regarding the usability of *Pocket Planes*' interface. *Pocket Planes*, by way of the design of its interface and gameplay features, seems to make things unnecessarily complicated. Consider the following example of the 'layover' mechanic. *Pocket Planes* pays 25% bonus if a plane is filled with cargo or packages going all to the same destination. To maximally benefit from this, players use the layover feature to consolidate passengers and shipments, so that optimally, each flight would yield the 25% bonus. One would reasonably expect a transport strategy game to have a feature showing an overview of all airports and their layovers. However, as this is lacking in *Pocket Planes*, hunting for the 25% bonus is requires some trivial but tedious effort. I need to flick through the interface – from map screen to airport screen, further on to jobs/layovers screen and from there to cargo/passenger view, repeated for each city under consideration – or try to develop mnemonics, or even take notes and draw maps on a piece of paper to remember which plane should go where to maximize the profit.

It is nothing new to players that games are unnecessarily difficult. Suits (2001: 187–8), for example, defines game-playing as the voluntary overcoming of unnecessary obstacles. However, there is something to be said about the triviality of the difficulty in *Pocket Planes*, for example in the case of the layover mechanic. Let us try to approach this triviality with the help of Suits. Suits mentions "constitutive rules", which define what players of a game are allowed and not allowed to do. Constitutive rules are not exhaustive: they allow more and less efficient means to strive for the goal of the game. Hence, there is room also for "skill rules", which describe what a successful player might do. To break the constitutive rule means to not play the game, but 'breaking' a skill rule means only to not play the game well. Games with lot of 'skill rules' have a lot of strategic potential. In terms of the layover mechanic in *Pocket Planes*, the constitutive rules, which we consider to include also what is implied in the interface, do not allow more and less efficient means. There are few 'skill rules' pertaining to the layover mechanic, and thus, 'acing' the layovers, requires little skill but instead tedious and repetitive work. It is fair to say that the core gameplay of *Pocket Planes* consists of trivial choices, where triviality refers to the previously described inapplicability of skill rules to describe the situation, at frequent intervals.

Many tycoon, simulation, and strategy games like *Cities in Motion* (?), *SimCity* (?), afford the speed of the game being changed to avoid the unnecessary waiting for things to happen, but this is not possible in *Pocket Planes*. Hence, it seems fitting, that in addition to the core gameplay features, there is a host of distractions to fill in the waiting time. Using the "airpedia" feature, might read about properties of planes which I cannot access yet (further adding to my futureoriented anticipation), or

customize the outfits of my pilots as previously mentioned. One more feature warrants our attention here. When my planes are mid-air, the game invites me to look at them flying. Not only the passengers make funny faces by sticking their tongues out every now and then, but there is an in-game economic incentive as well: sometimes coins and ‘bux’ fly past, and I can acquire them by clicking. This incentive is, however, very trivial, since the amounts that can be gained this way are minuscule. Given the finitude of my human life, regardless of how long I stared at the screen collecting coins and ‘bux’, this would not make a significant difference to my survival in the game. (Only in unusual circumstances, such as desperately missing only one unit of ‘bux’ from the purchase price of a new plane, staring at the planes flying might be useful). Here is relevant to mention how Fromm (1942: 218) describes that under automaton conformism,

intense activity is often mistaken for evidence of self-determined action, although we know that it may well be no more spontaneous than the behaviour of an actor or a person hypnotized.

We can observe that perhaps in the hopes of making choices appear as interesting and challenging, in *Pocket Planes*, makes trivial and simple actions are made complicated and timeconsuming through the unnecessarily user-unfriendly interface, which lacks features equivalent to those in other, relatively similar games. Intensity, frequency, and repetition, rather than skill, challenge and creativity, are the appropriate terms with which to describe my interactions with *Pocket Planes*. The activity of interacting with *Pocket Planes* is made up mostly of trivial (*i.e.* not affording strategic thinking) choices – most of the time there does not seem to be a significant difference, in terms of what kind of effort is required on my behalf, between clicking to make a decision as to which plane goes where, clicking to read what the virtual passengers have written on their “Bitbook” pages, and clicking to close off a pop-up notification window – which can be described as automaton conformism: appealing to ‘hunger for difference’ and by ‘masking intensity as self-determination’, attempt to hide the fact that (at least) at present, positively free play, *i.e.* pertaining to realization of my intellectual, emotional, and sensuous potentialities, is not possible.

### **The nature of ‘play’ in *Pocket Planes***

In the beginning, I posed three questions about *Pocket Planes*. What is the mechanism, by which *Pocket Planes* holds me in its grip? What does it mean if I say I ‘play’ *Pocket Planes*? What is the nature of my freedom like in *Pocket Planes*? We are now in a position to try to answer these questions.

In the article “Oasis of Happiness”, Fink (1968: 20—1) suggests that we live under constant anticipation of future, and “experience the present as a preparation, a way-station, a transitional state” on our way to some ultimate goal in life. In Fink’s view, human existence is characterized by being oriented towards a goal in the future. Fink suggests that play offers a temporary respite from this orientation: as its purpose is not subordinated to an “ultimate purpose served by all other human activity”, play “contrasts conspicuously with the futuristic mode of being”. In respect to the future-orientedness toward positive freedom, my project of playing *Pocket Planes* could potentially be described as similar to that of an aspiring pianist struggling with finger placement when trying to reach the level of virtuosity needed to perform with personality and emotion. It true that I interact with *Pocket Planes* voluntarily and without external pressures, perhaps unlike the aspiring pianist, whose is forced to practice by a tiger parent. Hence, it that we can reaffirm that my activity is free, in the negative sense. However, striving for the fulfillment of the promise of positive freedom becomes a burdening constraint in itself – a goaloriented project in the “futuristic mode of being” (Fink 1968: 20—1) of non-playing, something which I could seek to myself from - questioning the usefulness of describing *Pocket Planes* as affording negative freedom in the first place. Thus, describing my interactions with *Pocket Planes*, as it is now, as positively free play is possible only if we, benevolently, put positive freedom in a future tense: something which I am promised I will have in the future.

Regardless of whether the promise will ever be fulfilled – whether positive freedom will ever materialize – the future-oriented project lends significance to affordances of automaton conformism available at present time, and elevates their playful yet deniable nature into a more ‘judic’ status than what is really justifiable. This, I believe, is the mechanism, by which *Pocket Planes* holds me in its grip.

What can we learn about the relationship between freedom and single-player computer game play from these observations? Theories of play often stress play’s disconnectedness from the concerns of everyday life as an explanation for why we derive enjoyment from them. Earlier, we were reminded of Fink’s description of play as offering a temporary respite from the purposefulness of human activity. The future-oriented nature of the activity of interacting with *Pocket Planes* seems to run against the current of Fink’s ideas. Let us examine this further. For Hendricks, we observed earlier, play is not instrumental, *i.e.* carried out for the sake of external ends, but instead consummatory: carried out for the sake of experience it gives. Here Fink and Hendricks are in unison. However, consummation, alone, is not enough to describe play: there needs to be also the transformative – *i.e.* non-conformitive – stance toward the world, the readiness ~~to~~ take on the world, to take it apart, and frequently build it anew” (Hendricks 2006: 185).

We observed that the negative aspect of freedom in play appears when we compare how, in Hendricks’ model, play is different from ~~“communitas”~~. Whereas those engaged in social gatherings submit themselves to the norms of the activity, players, supposedly are able to manipulate the world in order to find ways of asserting themselves. Let us examine the kinds of interactivity afforded by *Pocket Planes*. We observed before that positive aspects of freedom in play, as described by Hendricks’ typology, arise when we compare play to work, and find that play is carried out for the sake of experiences that it gives rise to, not for external rewards; *i.e.* that it is ‘consummatory’, rather than ‘instrumental’. Together, we observed earlier, these describe a play activity, which can manifest both negative and positive aspects of freedom: play that is carried out free *from* constraints of socio-cultural norms and concerns of productivity, play through which we are free *to* realize our potentials.

In *Pocket Planes*, I fly people from Guangzhou to Chicago via Karachi, Istanbul, London, and Boston, in order to acquire enough “coins” and “bux” to allow me to upgrade my planes so that they could carry more passengers and would need to make less stopovers on the way, all in order to be able to acquire even more “coins” and “bux” to, realize my subjective preference by scrapping all passenger-carrying planes and replace them with cargo planes. The present state of my grind in *Pocket Planes* is indeed only ~~“preparation, a way-station, a transitional state”~~ (Fink 1968, 20) toward my desired goal, and the trivial and repetitive actions are justified only as the necessary build-up for something more desirable. Indeed, I seem to be in a ~~“futuristic mode of being”~~ (Fink 1968, 20—1). One might think that from this would follow that I would be driven by what Hendricks (2006, 193) refers to as the ~~“instrumentalist rationale.”~~ However, my rationale does not extend beyond *Pocket Planes*: my future-orientedness ~~“is contained or restricted within the activity itself”~~ (Hendricks 2006, 191). Thus, while my project of interacting with *Pocket Planes* is indeed future-oriented, it is nevertheless outside the ~~“purposefulness of human activity”~~, and can be described as offering a ~~“temporary respite”~~ from it.

*Pocket Planes* gives its voluntary, player a promise of positive freedom, of future possibilities to realize their potentials in a transformative fashion, but actually affords only conformitive, if nevertheless consummatory, activities. Saying that I ‘play’ *Pocket Planes* would not only misrepresent a largely conformist project as negatively free, but also obfuscate the peculiar fashion in which the ‘in potentia’ nature of positive freedom imbues the *panem et circenses* affordances of automaton conformism with anticipation and meaning.

### Freedom and play in ‘free-to-play games’

Up to this point I have not addressed the nature of *Pocket Planes* as what is known as a ~~“free-to-play”~~ (F2P) game, meaning, according to Alha et al. (2014) that it ~~“can be acquired and played free of~~

charge while players are encouraged to buy virtual goods during game play”. In *Pocket Planes*, units of *‘bux’* can be bought using real money. This perhaps explains its shortcomings which appear in comparison to computer games. Purchasing *‘bux’* with real money, I could skip the repetitive grind, go straight to doing what I prefer to do. In other words, the promise of positive freedom and play could be redeemed with cash. Previously, I suggested, following Suits, that constitutive rules in *Pocket Planes* are more exhaustive as they are in computer games, i.e. they leave little room for skill rules, i.e. those which describe what a successful player might do. Considering the nature of *Pocket Planes* as a free-to-play game, a skill rule appears – a successful player buy *‘bux’* using real money – moving the activity of interacting with *Pocket Planes* even further away from the ideas of play as secluded from the everyday reality, such as those in Fink (1968).

Aarseth (2007: 130) suggests that “Games are facilitators that structure player behavior, and whose main purpose is enjoyment.” This echoes Adamo-Villani & Wright (2007) who, when discussing serious games, make reference to computer games as “tools for fun”. Earlier, I observed that the interface and gameplay logic of *Pocket Planes* is intentionally inefficient and user-unfriendly – consider for example the implementation of layover mechanic without overview of all layovers, the impossibility to adjust the speed of the game, and, the lack of strategic affordances. The future-oriented nature of the project of interacting is not unique to *Pocket Planes* – for example players of *Civilization* may recognize the “one more turn attitude” (Holopainen 2011, 64). Games in the *Civilization* offer indeed a productive comparison to *Pocket Planes*. Their author, Sid Meier, once said that a “game is a series of interesting choices” (Rollings & Morris 2000: 38).

*Civilization* games offer a lot of strategic potential: already in the very beginning of a game of *Civilization V*, for example, there are a lot of skill rules in place, and the game allows the players to, following Hendricks (2006: 193) “find its strong and weak points, the places where they can assert themselves most effectively” and thus work toward transforming the world just to enjoy the process of doing so. In this respect, *Pocket Planes* is decisively different. Nolan Bushnell, the founder of Atari, suggested, according to Malone (1981, 63) that “a good game should be easy to learn, but difficult to master.” *Pocket Planes* introduces a peculiar twist to this principle, by being indeed easy to learn but not difficult and instead either time-consuming or expensive to master. While *Pocket Planes* structures my behavior, its design, with the described obvious shortcomings, is clearly not optimized for the “purpose of not enjoyment” (Aarseth 2007: 130) but for some other purpose. As a tool for fun it would be broken, and perhaps it should not be considered as such.

Alha et al. (2014: 1) suggest that the “F2P model has also raised controversy and criticism” due to the fact that some of the ways in which game designers seek to make the players pay have “resulted in exploitative game design”. The *in potentia* nature of play in *Pocket Planes*, the holding-back of affordances of positive freedom, makes perfect sense in relation to the “free-to-play” principle: *Pocket Planes* is a well-choreographed dance of frustration, anticipation, and satisfaction, poised to break even those individuals who are determined to hold their purse strings tightened. This observation suggests highlights the nature of *Pocket Planes* as a “persuasive technology” (Verbeek 2006) with a particular kind of “material morality” (Verbeek 2008: 93), and suggests that the existential-ludological analysis in this paper should be followed by a moral assessment of *Pocket Planes* and other similar free-to-play games, which seems to be long overdue.

While moral assessment would be beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible to initially observe that especially the “methods of persuasion used” (Verbeek 2006: 10) seem questionable: while *Pocket Planes* seems to, for example, respect my privacy and is free from social biases, it can perhaps be described as violating my autonomy by initially disguising itself as a computer game but affording positive freedom only to those who are willing to pay, i.e. its use of covert persuasion may be morally questionable. Moral assessment seems more warranted in terms of some aspects of the “free-to-play” model than others. Paying real money for “deniable” (Leino 2007) features like a special set of animal ears for the pilot makes perfect sense against the gameplay condition of *Pocket Planes* as a virtual form of excess, luxury, or “indulgence” (Leino 2010, 271). This is, however, significantly different from being asked to pay in order for the promises of play and positive freedom, the *raison d’être* of



this genre of software artifacts, to be fulfilled. *Pocket Planes* is not “free-to-play”, but only “free-to-interact”, where interactivity is playful and disguised as computer game-playing.

## Conclusions

In this paper I have suggested, following a conceptual analysis of ideas of freedom and play in Fromm (1941) and Hendricks (2006, 2014), respectively, that we can assume that play can embody qualities of both positive and negative freedom. I have analysed *Pocket Planes*, and found out that game initially affords negative freedom and makes a promise of positive freedom and play. This promise, however, becomes a burden to the player, questioning the usefulness of describing *Pocket Planes* as affording being played. Looking at the activities that are possible in *Pocket Planes*, I found similarity to what Fromm (1941: x) describes as “automaton conformism”: in particular, that *Pocket Planes* appeals to my “hunger for difference” and masks “intensity as self-determination.” These findings led me to suggest that it would be misleading to call the activity of interacting with *Pocket Planes* ‘play’. Finally, taking into account the nature of *Pocket Planes* as a “free-to-play game”, I questioned its nature as a computer game and highlighted its nature as a “persuasive technology” (Verbeek 2006) with a particular kind of “material morality” (Verbeek 2008: 93) and suggested that a moral assessment of the covert ways in which attempts to persuade its users to pay to realize the promise of play would be warranted. Aarseth (2004, 51) suggested that players are “employed by the game”. This is a very apt description of the kind of relationship I have with *Pocket Planes*. I am waiting, perhaps forever in vain, to ‘downshift’ and do what I enjoy. Not having arrived at the oasis of happiness yet, please excuse me, PL026 has landed in Guangzhou and brought rare paintings which are not only worth of whopping 8 bux but also the last unit required for a full Fighbuster-C bound to Tokyo.

## Games

*CITIES IN MOTION*. Colossal Order/Paradox, PC, 2011  
*CIVILIZATION (SERIES)*. Meier, S./Various publishers, various platforms, 1989-  
*CIVILIZATION V*. Firaxis Games/2K Games, PC, 2010  
*POCKET PLANES*. Nimblebit/Mobage, Android, 2012  
*SIMCITY (SERIES)*. Wright, W./Various publishers, various platforms, 1981-

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