

Tetris

A Game of the Absurd

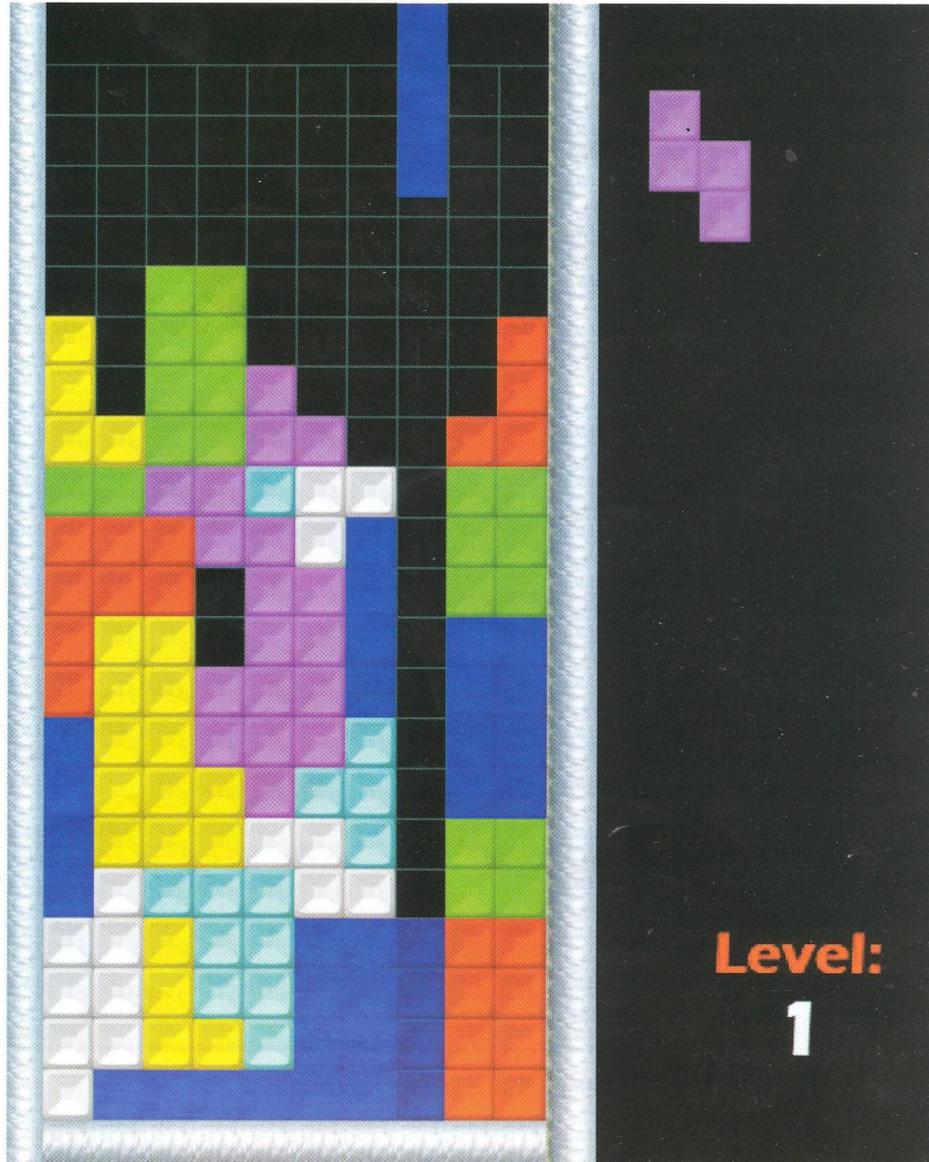
Robert Harries says that playing this game is a Sisyphian task, and represents the human spirit up against a meaningless fate.

In 1984 in the former Soviet Union, a computer engineer by the name of Alexey Pajitnov created the mega-selling computer game, Tetris. Its format, known to everyone who has ever played a games consol, is a simple game of logic and reaction where you place randomly-shaped falling Tetriminoes (connected sets of four blocks) in a shaft with the objective of completing single or multiple horizontal lines. The lines disappear and as the game goes on, usually the speed in which the pieces fall increases, making it harder to place the pieces accurately, cutting down on vital time for strategic decision-making on where to place the next piece. The replay value is the obsession to beat your previous best. There is no authority stating that this is the objective of the game – however, a high scores board is the only indication of its purpose. Millions upon millions of people have played Tetris, ranging across a spectrum that includes playing casually to pass the time on a laborious journey, playing for pleasure, or an obsessive competitive complex to out-score friends or merely beat your own best.

Tetris is just a game: it wasn't invented to provide logic training to elite soldiers, or a philosophical comment on life. However by its very nature Tetris has become the 21st century representation of the myth of Sisyphus, a grand statement of the absurd.

Many writers have attempted to deal with the absurd. In a nutshell it is the realization that the human need for meaning or purpose in life is impossible to fulfil in a universe that is devoid of meaning, where there's no authority on morality, and there is no final victory or purpose. Any professed meaning is an illusion bought into being by the individual to appease personal needs. In the famous opening line of his seminal work on the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus concluded that under the realization of the absurdity of existence "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."

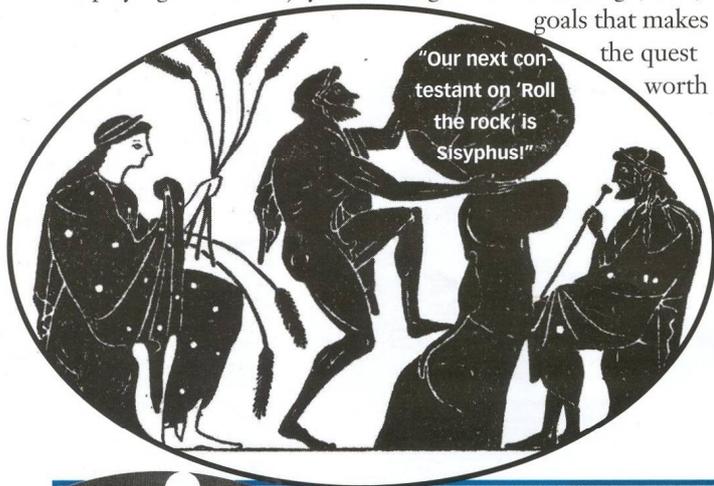
Camus stated that the answer to the problem of suicide must be a resounding no. His response is to embrace the absurd and live life to the full, to rebel and hate death even though it draws nearer as each day passes. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* he draws on various examples of the absurd hero who, knowing his fate is meaningless, continues to live and embrace the futility of his



endeavours. The most potent example he sets out is Sisyphus himself, who cheated the gods and death, and as punishment was forced to spend eternity repeatedly pushing a boulder up a mountain only to see it roll back down when he reached the top, whereupon he had to start the task again. The sheer futility of this situation is a reflection of life, which is also a meaningless task with no purpose or beckoning achievement, just a constant struggle. Camus believes Sisyphus to be the ultimate absurd hero as he accepts his fate. By embracing his task and coming to terms with it, Sisyphus reflects the tenacity and resilience of life in the face of nihilism and death. As Sisyphus continues to live his fate for eternity “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” as Camus says, since that is all we can expect of him and of our lives, which are marred by futility too.

The parallels to Tetris are very real, since Tetris is also a marker of the absurd. Tetris is a game with no hope of an end, no final victory, since even if you beat your friend’s score or your own personal best, you can always score one more point. It is devoid of meaning. As you play Tetris, the pieces stack up quicker and quicker: you will inevitably fail and the game will end. You are doomed and you will die, every time.

Yet with Tetris, as with life, the point is not about a perceived success or a destination. It is the experience, the living, the playing and the enjoyment one gets out of chasing (futile) goals that makes the quest worth



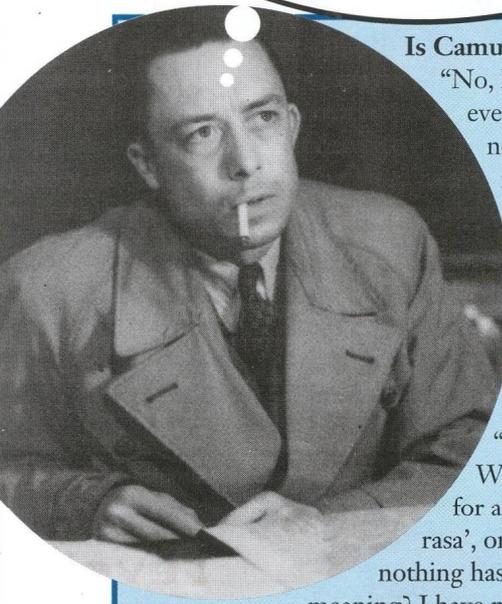
pursuing. The only solid reason to play Tetris, or live, is to do so for its own sake and be content with the result (or lack of one). Much like Sisyphus’ task, Tetris presents a height which keeps on increasing. The sight of an endpoint becomes more and more distant the further you progress up the game. Yet the resolve to keep playing and searching for one becomes even greater. The battles of Sisyphus between life and failure are the same as the battle of Tetris between playing and failing. The resolve of people who rebel against death and the absurd by living is exactly the resolve of the Tetris fans who continually play and play, both in the knowledge of their fates.

That is to say, Tetris has the same futility as the task bestowed on Sisyphus, but it’s an even greater representation of the absurd than his. Sisyphus was *forced* into his futile task – it was one which he had no choice in doing, but only a choice in embracing. On the contrary, millions of people, with an eagerness for Tetris, and possibly life, go out of their way to *choose* the absurd task of playing Tetris, and to embrace it with levels of passion not expressed by Sisyphus. In being played with optimism but no hope of an end, it more accurately represents the human spirit and its struggle in the face of a meaningless and futile fate.

Tetris may be played by people who have never realized or even heard of the absurd; but nevertheless they embrace the absurd in Tetris form. They know they will fail more often than succeed; they know that there is no ultimate peak to reach; they know that ultimately it is the pleasure of playing not the attainment of anything that makes Tetris worth playing. As Camus believed it is the quantity of life lived that marks out the absurd man, so with the Tetris player it is the quantity of playing that defines one as a Tetris player. All we can hope for in life and Tetris, is a lot of playing the game, so that on our deathbeds, in acknowledgement to the absurd, we can say no truer statement than: “I did the best I could. My highest score was 55231. Long live Tetris! Long live Life!”

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Is Camus an existentialist?

“No, I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names linked. We have even thought of publishing a short statement in which the undersigned declare that they have nothing in common with each other and refuse to be held responsible for the debts they might respectively incur. It’s a joke actually. Sartre and I published our books without exception before we had ever met. When we did get to know each other, it was to realise how much we differed. Sartre is an existentialist, and the only book of ideas that I have published, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was directed against the so-called existentialist philosophers.” From an interview with Jeanine Delpuch in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (1945). Cited in *Albert Camus: Lyrical and Critical Essays*, Vintage (1970).

Is he an absurdist?

“This word ‘Absurd’ has had an unhappy history and I confess that now it rather annoys me. When I analyzed the feeling of the Absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I was looking was looking for a method and not a doctrine. I was practicing methodical doubt. I was trying to make a ‘tabula rasa’, on the basis of which it would then be possible to construct something. If we assume that nothing has any meaning, then we must conclude that the world is absurd. But does nothing have any meaning? I have never believed we could remain at this point.” From an interview with Gabriel d’Aubarède in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (1951). Cited in *Albert Camus: Lyrical and Critical Essays*, Vintage (1970).