

## Gamers and the Good Life

### 1. Introduction

Computer games are a rapidly evolving and growing aspect of contemporary culture. In 2005, U.S. retail sales of videogames<sup>1</sup> topped \$10.5 billion, a new industry record and a six percent increase over the previous year. This upward trend is due in part to growth in online gaming and the portable game market, indicating how pervasively games are becoming woven into the fabric of daily life. Playing computer games is a major activity for youth (e.g., Hayward et al. 2002).<sup>2</sup> Yet many players are now adults, and the market continues to broaden to include once under-represented groups. Indeed, games are becoming far more culturally acceptable—changing from “geek to chic” (King and Borland 2003). As such major cultural forces, computer games deserve careful ethical scrutiny.

The paper answers four questions: (a) What are computer games? (b) What makes computer games ethical phenomena? (c) What general kinds of ethical issues are raised by computer games? (d) How are computer games related to the good life for individuals and cultural quality more broadly?

I employ a classic game model, modified in part to demonstrate that computer games are primarily ethical phenomena because of the consequences that travel across the borders of the “magic circle” supposedly separating the gameworld from real life. I then argue that computer games present two broad categories of ethical issues stemming from different kinds of border-traffic. The first concerns matters of the right, especially justice and privacy, or other issues of autonomy. Yet computer games more often raise questions about the good life. This second category of ethics is more overtly ontological, paying attention to impacts on the human condition, or our way of being in and perceiving the world.

One way to see the connection between computer games and the good is through the concepts of *character* and *valuation*, as developed below. This approach has much in common with “lifeworld” philosophers such as José Ortega y Gasset and Martin Heidegger who emphasize the ways in which technology engenders transformations of consciousness or human being. Computers and the networks they form are especially suitable loci for this kind of approach. As Michael Heim notes, computers are entering “the inmost recesses of human existence, transforming the way we know and think and will” (1993, p. 61). Computers have gone beyond the original relations with humans as cognitive extensions for information processing. Humans increasingly form ontological relations with computers, as they become “portals to worlds that we inhabit” (Brey 2005, p. 383). Computers increasingly serve as “digital habitats” in which we live, structuring the way we are (Stefik 1996).

As more time is spent playing computer games and as they take on greater influence in society, questions about how this impacts our aspirations, cultural values, and moral commitments become increasingly important. This paper does not provide an in-depth ethical analysis of computer games and the gaming cultures with which they co-evolve. Rather, it develops some general ethical categories and moral language that will be of use for clarifying normative evaluations. Different types and aspects of games have different consequences in terms of living well. On one hand, many aspects of gaming culture and technologies foster distraction,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, I will use computer games and videogames synonymously to designate computer-based gaming systems using video displays. For 2005 figures see: [http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press\\_060117.html](http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_060117.html). Worldwide, sales are over \$30 billion.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.becta.org.uk/page\\_documents/research/full\\_report.pdf](http://www.becta.org.uk/page_documents/research/full_report.pdf).

loneliness, and a withering of vital engagement with the world. On the other hand, some aspects may foster greater happiness, either through the activity itself or the skills that activity provides for greater success in the non-gameworld.

## 2. Conceptualizing Computer Games

I use the “classic game model” as presented by Jesper Juul (2005) to conceptualize computer games. The model consists of six features that work on three different levels: the game itself as a set of rules, the player’s relation to the game, and the relation between the activity of playing the game and the rest of the world. According to this model a game is:

1. a rule-based formal system;
2. with variable and quantifiable outcomes;
3. where different outcomes are assigned different values;
4. where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome;
5. the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome;
6. and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable (Juul 2005, pp. 6-7).

The model pictures games as *transmedial*. Juul further emphasizes the notion that games are composed of *rules*, *fiction*, and their interaction. Rules specify limitations and affordances, as they both limit player action and “set up potential actions” that are meaningful inside of the game (p. 58). Games, then, are different from free-form play. The rules construct a “state machine” that responds to player action as a branching “game tree” of possibilities. Interaction between rules and the player’s efforts constitutes “gameplay” that allows for choice of strategies, develops a repertoire of skills, and presents what Sid Meier (in Rollings and Morris 2000, p. 38) calls “interesting choices” that partially explain the enjoyment of playing games.

All games have rules, and in addition most computer games project a “fictional world” through graphics, sound, text, etc. and is the location of a character controlled by the player. As Thomas Pavel (1986) noted, fictional worlds are incomplete because it is not possible to specify all the details about any world. Players use their imagination to fill in the gaps of fictional worlds, often following what Marie-Laure Ryan (1992) called the “principle of minimal departure” that states when a piece of information is missing about the fictional world players tend to fill in the blank using their understanding about the actual world.

The form of a game is closely related to its rules and can be thought of as the activity of engaging in game-play, regardless of what the game is “about.” The content of games pertains to the kinds of fantasy worlds presented as well as the specific activities engaged in and goals pursued. Different kinds of games raise different ethical considerations. For example, different games involve different levels of social interaction. Some games emphasize acts of violence while others emphasize sharing, puzzle solving, or even dialogue. Such differences are sometimes attributable to the basic hardware being used (e.g., online games vs. offline game platforms). At other times the software of the game design or other technical as well as non-technical factors account for the differences.

Since “games are not tied to a specific set of material devices, but to the processing of rules,” they obviously are well suited to computers (Juul 200, p. 53). Computer games largely adhere to the classic game model, but they also challenge it in certain respects. For example, though they are still rule-based, the computer upholds the rules, giving them much greater flexibility and complexity. Open-ended simulation games such as *The Sims* do not specify which outcomes are better than others. Online games with shared, persistent worlds blur the borders of

the “magic circle” separating the game from the world. As T.L. Taylor (2006) notes concerning the MMOG *EverQuest*, “People create identities for themselves, have a variety of social networks, take on roles and obligations, build histories and communities” (p. 28).

Though the tagline of *EverQuest* is “You’re in our world now,” there are important senses in which the world of this or any game bleeds into the non-game world. It is this condition that gives rise to the significant ethical issues associated with computer games.

### 3. Through the Magic Circle

My focus is on the third level of Juul’s taxonomy: the relation between the activity of playing the game and the rest of the world. In an early analysis of games, Johan Huizinga (1950) described them as existing outside of normal life—closed off by a “magic circle,” the borders of which defined a separate time and space (see Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Fiction projects another world and rules carve out an area where they apply. Huizinga described games as separate and unproductive. A game is an activity that has “no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it” (1950, p. 13). This obviously misses gambling, so Roger Callois (1961) modified the basic thesis that games are separate by noting that “Property is exchanged, but no goods are produced” (p. 5).<sup>3</sup> Yet, the disputes surrounding the sale of *EverQuest* characters for real money signify that the magic circle has even more porous borders than Callois admits.

Indeed, games pervade our personal lives, culture, and economy. There is a rich two-way traffic across the borders of the magic circle as game contents and technologies are products of wider social dynamics, which in turn are influenced by the games themselves. Computer games are part of the new media technologies that both convey and transform culture. Henry Jenkins (2003), for example, pictures videogames as a storytelling that inhabits a wider cultural ecology of beliefs, institutions, and signs. Eugene Provenzo (1991) similarly casts computer games as cultural objects that configure societal values. Juul points out that, on the level of fantasy, game and world intersect within conventions of film, game, and interpretation. More broadly, game and world intersect wherever there are consequences that cross from one side of the border to the other.

If the magic circle were airtight, then games would be utterly consequence-free. Characters might fail or succeed, die or advance in levels, but all only within the game itself. Yet even if this were the case, there would still be the opportunity cost of time spent within this supposedly consequence-free world that could have been spent otherwise.

Juul (200) argues that “A game is characterized by the fact that it can *optionally* be assigned real-life consequences” (p. 41). Betting is the prime example, in which consequences are *pre-negotiated*. Such optionality does some work in distinguishing games from real-world activities. We cannot make the consequences of international trade or politics optional. We could model politics and use it as a basis for a game. But politics itself is not a game, because it has *non-negotiable* consequences. The stakes, in other words, are real.

More fundamentally, Hans Jonas (1966) argued that metabolism as the “defining property of life” opens us to consequences. Organisms sustain themselves through the exchange of energy and materials with their environment. As such, we are “entities whose being is their own doing.” For life, “Being has become a task rather than a given state.” As such, we are characterized by need, and “the peril of cessation is with the organism from the beginning,” because the need for nourishment requires “the compliance of an environment that can either be granted or denied.”

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<sup>3</sup> Callois called play “make-believe” “accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life” (p. 10).

Ultimately, life “carries death within itself.” Life is the realm of consequences and ethics, because it is the ontological condition in which something can “have a stake.” Avatars or any in-game character are not alive, thus, they have no stake and are not what Kenneth Goodpaster (1978) called “morally considerable” in themselves.

“Entities” in the computer game are not like living natural entities, which are self-experiencing subjects with interests. Although actions and situations can occur in in-game worlds that appear morally charged, they only have moral significance insofar as they impact humans (or some other morally considerable creature) and insofar as they are caused by a moral agent who is capable of being morally responsible. The ethics of computer games is anchored in this world where there are real stakes.

Not all the consequences of games are optional or consciously pre-negotiated. One example is “after effects,” or the way in which the elation of winning or the depression of losing continues after the game is done. Friendships have ended over arguments about a game. Callois (1961) argued that games are voluntary, because we opt into them. Yet as Juul notes, there are social pressures either consciously felt or unconsciously encoded that call into question what we mean when we consider the act of playing games itself as “optional.” Furthermore, as the case of the famous Lambda-MOO “rape” indicates, we can come to identify with virtual characters and situations with greater strength than we may consciously desire or admit to.

The “after effects” of games point to one of the most important kinds of border-traffic across the magic circle. In contemporary culture, sports athletes are often heralded as heroes. But this valuation is not just about their performance in the gameworld (the field, track, arena, etc.). In fact, for two reasons it has at least as much to do with their character as human beings. First, athletes are often judged by how well they “handle themselves.” They are esteemed for demonstrating grace after a loss (e.g., shaking hands with the winning team or providing interviews with the media and maintaining composure) and for showing humility after a win (e.g., pointing out the contributions of teammates or coaches). This is not part of the official game rules, but such demonstrations of noble character are essential aspects of excellence.

Second, doping scandals and other instances of cheating similarly ignite social passion for reasons that transcend the gameworld itself. We judge excellence in sports not just by the outcome of games, but also by how the outcome was reached. A cyclist who uses blood doping agents will be valorized for winning, but as soon as the public learns of the way in which she or he achieved victory, valor turns into villainy. We care about the character of the athlete, for example, his or her discipline to avoid the temptation of doping and to train everyday. And we care not just because we think it is important to maintain the game rules, but because sports symbolizes the opportunity to cultivate and demonstrate excellence as a whole human being. Achievement in the arena is necessarily connected to one’s entire character. Indeed, this is why so many parents encourage their children, perhaps to an extreme, to play sports. They “learn life lessons,” in other words, the sport is a cauldron in which to test and mold a better person.

Juul claims that computer games retain a stronger border between gamespace and real world than physical games in which the ball can literally fly “out of play.” Yet due to the powerful allure of computers as well as their pervasive presence in our lives, it is not clear that Juul’s argument holds. The computer screen is not a separate reality, but one in which we pour our creative energies, receive signals from our culture, and shape our (alternative) identities.<sup>4</sup> Computers are integral components of our lives that impact how we live, work, and play.

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<sup>4</sup> This border traffic discussed here is different from the “invisible walls” that mark the ends of the fictional world within the game.

#### 4. Types of Ethical Issues

I take a pragmatic approach to the relationship between normative theory and practice inspired by John Rawls' "reflective equilibrium" and Stephen Toulmin's "practical reason." My approach is set against the notion that theory is to be "applied" to practice in a way that will deliver the one right answer. The world is too complex and pluralistic to form a one-to-one correspondence with our theories. Ethics is not a deductive logic. This is not to submit, however, to conceptual chaos or ethical relativism. Rather, theories provide both the evaluative language with which to highlight relevant values and the normative standards or ideals by which to judge actions and situations.

As we go about our lives we occasionally come across a situation that forces us to pause. We find ourselves perplexed, delighted, angered—in other words, caring. We are driven to search for language and standards to describe and evaluate the situation. So, we turn to normative theories. If they do their job well, theories sharpen our moral vocabulary by indicating reasons why we found ourselves caring. They help us develop a clearer, more critical understanding of an issue. Different theories may highlight different aspects of complex issues. They may develop different standards, which lead to opposed normative conclusions. Therefore, it is most important that theories employ language conducive to reasonable discussions. Certain virtues, especially civility and open-mindedness, are important in the common adjudication of issues that may contain irreducible ambiguities and tradeoffs.

When individuals are compelled by some issue associated with computer games to consult normative theory, what kinds of language and ideals will they find? There are two broad classes of ethical theory. The first class I call "horizontal ethics." It is horizontal either in being concerned primarily with right or just relations between people or in being concerned with aggregating pleasures without differentiating various qualities of those pleasures.<sup>5</sup> The second class I call "vertical ethics." Its focus is on quality, either the good life for the individual or standards of cultural quality. Questions of the good treat the vertical dimension of humanity by calling attention both to the higher aspirations and the deeper roots of being human. They thus tend to be more explicitly anthropological and teleological.

My focus will be on the second class for two reasons. First, issues of justice and right are more commonly used in computer ethics and such moral language and standards are more readily understood in modern societies. Second, many of the most important ethical implications of computer games are best thought of in terms of their bearing on the good life.

##### *Horizontal Ethics: The Just and the Right*

Liberal democratic and capitalist societies tend to traffic in the moral language of justice and autonomy. These stem from the moral theories of deontology and some types of utilitarianism, which both are concerned with the performance of acts and their conformity with rules or principles. Immanuel Kant stated the first theory in the categorical imperative that one should, "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."<sup>6</sup> This theory stresses rights and correlative duties. Jeremy

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<sup>5</sup> As we see with Bentham's theory, these two senses of the term "horizontal" amount nearly to the same thing. His utilitarianism is only normative when it comes to prescribing the behavior of legislators, who ought to seek to create the greatest good for the greatest number. Thus, his primary normative concern is with justice (the right), not pleasure (the good). He takes the pursuit of pleasure as a natural or given fact motivating humans.

<sup>6</sup> *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Lewis White Beck (MacMillan, New York, 1987), *Akademie*, p. 429.

Bentham voiced the “principle of utility,” which “approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.”<sup>7</sup> This theory takes such forms as contracts and cost-benefit analyses that seek to ensure the “greatest good for the greatest number.”

Some ethical issues raised by computer games are best suited to such theories.<sup>8</sup> Intellectual property right (IPR) disputes are a case in point. For example, Taylor (2006) notes vexing issues associated with ownership when it comes to fan fiction and user generated content, including avatar identities. Players contribute to games through their “labor,” and it is not clear what the proper division of ownership is between them and gaming corporations, especially since the intellectual and material culture of computer games is so malleable and open to multiple interpretations. Some corporations are resisting player claims to IPRs, while others are partnering with players and gaming cultures to improve their products, leading to the emergence of gaming “prosumers”<sup>9</sup> (see Kline et al. 2003). Economics is one of the major forms of border-traffic across the magic circle, perhaps even including the use of virtual worlds with real money economies for money laundering purposes (Foley 2006). Yet the major economic implications stem from virtual worlds, not necessarily computer games.

Privacy and safety are other ethical topics suited to theories of the right, because they relate to the autonomy of individuals to control who has access to them. Yet for all its importance to new media technologies in general, privacy and safety are not big issues with computer games. Deontological ethics can admonish us to be good sports by respecting others as persons or ends in themselves, but this is hardly a major ethical issue raised by computer games.

It may seem that utilitarianism is the best ethical theory to address the issue of violence in computer games such as *Grand Theft Auto* or the more general ethics of engaging in simulated immoral acts (rape, snuff films<sup>10</sup>, homicide, etc.). That is, we may suppose that the salient ethical point here is that engaging in such activities predisposes the player to be more likely to commit such acts in real life. Thus, these games are “risk increasing” activities that make immoral consequences more likely.

Yet Matt McCormick (2001) argues that utilitarian (and deontological) theories do not answer our intuitions about what is morally objectionable in these cases.<sup>11</sup> As qualified by others (e.g., Waddington 2006), McCormick’s thesis is that the ethical problem has very little to do with the impact on people other than the player. What is most wrong is not that someone may go on to commit such acts in real life or violate some duty later on. Rather, “the harm that may occur is best construed as harm to one’s character” (p. 278). By engaging in simulated immoral acts, we are cultivating the wrong sort of character. This is both damaging in itself and in a consequentialist sense if such distortion of character leads one to devalue the distinction between

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<sup>7</sup> *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*. (Prometheus, Amherst, NY, 1988), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> I include the intrinsic enjoyment of playing computer games under horizontal ethics insofar as this pleasure is taken as a given (merely calculated as one pleasure among many in the style of Bentham). If, however, we wish to inquire about the quality of this pleasure, which I think motivates much societal interest in computer games, we must abandon the economic calculus of satisfying “utils” and engage in the concepts and language of vertical ethics.

<sup>9</sup> This can be read as both producer-user or programmer-user.

<sup>10</sup> As in the game *Manhunt*.

<sup>11</sup> See also Ren Reynolds 2002: [http://www.igda.org/articles/rreynolds\\_ethics.php](http://www.igda.org/articles/rreynolds_ethics.php). His argument, however, is not very well developed. My emphasis on character and valuation is a way to strengthen this line of argument.

immoral and moral acts, leading to immoral acts in real life. In either case, the root of the ethical issue lies in one's character and in how this relates to ethical valuation.<sup>12</sup>

Computer games raise many issues that are not adequately treated by horizontal ethics. This is partially due to the kinds of values the language of horizontal ethics brings to light and the kinds of consequences that transfer across the borders of the magic circle. McCormick noted, "No video game player ever broke her neck playing Quake III, fractured a leg when Laura Croft jumped off a large building, or ended up in a wheel chair after a virtual high speed car wreck" (2001, p. 281). Direct harm to person or property does not often transfer from the gameworld to this world. But this is the kind of inter-personal consequence best captured by horizontal ethics.

### *Vertical Ethics: The Good*

Horizontal ethics is deduced from principles or rules of conduct, whereas vertical ethics is rooted in what it means to be human and to perfect human nature. Vertical ethics is concerned with quality, or leading a rich and meaningful life. Aristotle understood a person's character to be more important than a set of universal rules in this regard, in part because such character informs how one negotiates the inevitable ambiguities of ethical existence. I do not consider quantitative utilitarianism or preference satisfactionism to be vertical theories if they do not distinguish different qualities of preferences or desires. Vertical theories must have some standards for distinguishing higher from lower pleasures. The existence of such standards often earns a theory the label "objective," which is unnecessarily misleading, because they are rooted in insights about the nature of the human being or "subject." Examples include Aristotle's virtue ethics and John Stuart Mill's qualitative utilitarianism.

I cannot here develop or defend a full theory of vertical ethics. In line with my pragmatic notion of theories, I instead develop the notions of "character" and "valuation" as two aspects of vertical ethics that can be of use in characterizing some important issues raised by computer games. These should be seen as heuristics for further ethical analysis rather than discreet categories. This is because valuation is an aspect of character and the two interact in a reciprocal fashion. An individual's character conditions the valuations he or she makes, which in turn inform character formation through the production and dissemination of culture.<sup>13</sup>

*Character* derives from a Greek word denoting a tool to engrave and derivatively the mark impressed on coins or seals. The term was used as early as the fifth century B.C.E. metaphorically to denote the mark impressed on persons. Throughout the twentieth century, discussion of character mostly took place in the social science literature.<sup>14</sup> Aristotle argued that, more than any other type of entity, humans have a nature that is open to and even requires further determinations through behaviors that actualize inherent potencies. At the social level, these additional determinations are called political regimes; at the individual level they are called character (see Mitcham, forthcoming). Character is an integration of human nature and cultural

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<sup>12</sup> Such changes in valuation can also be aesthetic and perhaps even epistemological, insofar as computer games raise axiological issues of beauty and truth, not just the good.

<sup>13</sup> This circularity is often seen as a weakness of vertical ethics (e.g., Pellegrino 1995). It is, however, more true to life than abstract, universal "systems." Others argue vertical ethics is totalitarian, relying as it does on the authority of teachers to shape character, rather than rational first principles to guide conduct. I can only here point to the valuable insights developed by Susan K. Allard-Nelson in this regard (2004).

<sup>14</sup> In *The Psychology of Character* (1928), A.A. Roback defined it as "an enduring psychophysical disposition to inhibit instinctive tendencies in accordance with regulative principles" (p. 450).

form. Human nature is “oriented toward, in need of, in potency to, character” (Mitcham 2000, p. 131). Mill also focused on character:

It really is of importance, not only what men do, but that manner of men they are that do it. Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself (1859, III).

Following Miguel Sicart (2006)<sup>15</sup> and Sherry Turkle (1995), game players are best seen as active moral agents rather than passive moral zombies. Thus, the use of character should be qualified to steer away from the image of the player as a passive tabula rasa receiving the game’s impress. Sicart (2006) argues that the “computer game is a moral object that creates an ethical experience.” That experience is an active process of interpretation.

Character is a disposition that provides orientation—on how to live and what to value. A central expression of someone’s character, then, is his or her values, or the *valuations* that he or she makes. On an ethical level, character pertains to what someone finds valuable, noble, or worthy of pursuit and sacrifice. It also pertains to what someone deems to be wrong or base. On an aesthetic level, valuation denotes the judgments one makes about beauty and what is considered high art as opposed to less worthy creations. Though valuations stem from character, it is a mistake to consider them “subjective” or mere opinions. Ethical relativism involves well-known contradictions. Furthermore, the language of valuation does much to help articulate many intuitions about the ethical implications of videogames.

Character formation happens imperceptibly and slowly. Aristotle notes that the seed will only sprout well in well-prepared soil (*Nic. X, 9; 1179b23-25*). Computer games are part of our technological culture, the soil in which we live. As Albert Borgmann notes, modern technology is the major influence on character formation: “if we increasingly surround [human beings] with shallow things, [they] will become shallow also” (1973, p. 35). Next, I build from the concepts of character and valuation to indicate how they might inform ethical evaluations of computer games.

### **Computer Games and the Good Life**

In what follows I suggest four ways in which computer games—as simultaneously technologies and cultures—impact quality of life. The emphasis here is not on a phenomenology of the gaming experience, but rather on ways in which culture and character come together in computer games. This often occurs through valuations, so I first explore that concept further.

#### *Devaluation*

In Plato’s *Republic*, Adeimantus challenges Socrates to prove that virtue is a good to be sought for itself, rather than for its reputational effects. Those who merely fake or simulate virtue can get all the rewards of being deemed a virtuous person without actually being virtuous. The difficulty is one of telling the difference between real and simulated virtue. If we cannot tell the difference, then the very notion of virtue becomes devalued. Similarly, if we could not tell the difference between gold and dirt, then gold would be devalued—it would be as worthless as dirt. In the case of computer games, devaluation speaks in part to the connection between the ontological status of virtual or simulated objects or actions and their intrinsic value.

David Waddington (2006) applies devaluation to the case of simulated acts of immorality. The danger is that as videogames increase in verisimilitude, it will become increasingly difficult to differentiate between real transgressions and simulated transgressions. The very idea of wrongness, then, would become devalued. He notes this devaluation—like character formation—

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<sup>15</sup> Unpublished dissertation available at: <http://www.itu.dk/people/miguel/CGPEgold.pdf>.



would happen slowly and imperceptibly. Devaluation obviously marks a change in our valuations, and it does so in the specific sense of losing sight of qualities that serve as differences, differentiating one thing from another. It is closely related to desensitization, or the notion that repeated exposure to simulations of X inures one or lessens one's tendencies to react strongly to actual instances of X.

Virtual pets, such as *Tamagotchi*, provide another telling case in how computer games can lead to devaluation. As Philip Brey (1997) indicates, some people obsess over the "health" of their virtual pets, as denoted, say, by digital bars on the screen like those commonly used to signify a virtual character's "strength" or "energy." Some children even nearly abandon their actual living pets due to the amount of time spent "caring for" their virtual pets. Yet there is nothing there—no self-experiencing organism—to care for. Here the difference between real, experiencing subjects and simulated appearances of such subjects has been lost. Could this loss of differentiation between simulation (where there are no consequences) and life (where the stakes are real), may slowly lead to widespread devaluation of life?

This case also shows how devaluation is related to re-valuation. In the context of computer games, for example, many have voiced concerns about the tendency for gameworlds to portray female characters in stereotypical ways (e.g., young, buxom, and scantily clad). One concern is that repeated exposure to such simulated female forms may lead to a re-valuation of the natural, given female form. People may begin to prefer the artificial figures to the natural. But this could be part of a larger cultural devaluation of the given bodily form as enhancements and cosmetic surgeries are increasingly used, suggesting a de-differentiation: all bodies are seen like virtual bodies, instantly malleable to suite our preferences. Another related issue is glamorization or glorification. For example, the glamorization of warfare depicted by many videogames may contribute to a devaluation of actual war, possibly contributing to the devaluation of life. Indeed, the conduct of actual war already resembles computer games as actions are often reduced to pushing buttons in a remote location while watching the consequences unfold on a screen.<sup>16</sup>

I now consider some ways in which character, devaluation, and computer games interact and their implications for the good life.

### 1. Cognitive Skills

Since the rise of the "information" or "post-industrial" society, one of the main ways character is discussed is through the rhetoric of cognitive skills. There is widespread valuation of the kind of education that develops the mental skills necessary to compete successfully for jobs in the globalizing high-tech economy, as is most strongly indicated by the popularity of Thomas Friedmann's *The World is Flat* (2005). Unlike the craft economy, in which "skills" refers to the mastery of a particular manual labor, the *skills* demanded by a dynamic economy are more nebulous. Both current and future workers must be equipped with a general ability to creatively adapt, process, and apply new knowledge. For training or cognitive exercise, then, content matters less than form.

Computer games are commonly held to distract from the serious business of acquiring such skills. They are part of the "entertainment industry," thus inevitably sapping the intellectual resources of gamers who are "supine before the false pleasures" of consumption (Strinati 1995, p.

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<sup>16</sup> I suggest that the concept of devaluation may be of further use in analyzing new media culture more broadly. For example, it would be illuminating to apply the concept to the rise of "citizen journalism" and blogging. Might this represent the loss of a distinction between news and journaling? On a broader scale, the Internet seems to be blurring the distinction between the public and private spheres, perhaps devaluing both in the process.

12). But several recent authors attempt to refute this common wisdom, often arguing that it inappropriately transfers cognitive models from the consumption of passive old media to the interactive, nonlinear cognition involved with new media. For example, Juul (2005) notes that “Playing a game is an activity of improving skills in order to overcome...challenges, and playing a game is therefore fundamentally a learning experience” (p. 5). Furthermore, David Shaffer, in *How Computer Games Help Children Learn* (2006), draws from psychological and pedagogical research to argue that computer games may hold the key to transforming educational systems to meet the demands of a high-tech economy. Though he includes several forms of learning, Shaffer focuses on the highly-valued character traits of creativity, design, and innovation.

Steven Johnson makes similar claims in his defense of mass culture, *Everything Bad is Good for You* (2005).<sup>17</sup> Speaking strictly in terms of form (not content), he argues that videogames often enhance cognitive faculties. Thus, he argues against the widespread assumption that media can only be good if their content is morally redeeming. Johnson argues that nonliterary media like computer games are increasingly providing the same cognitive benefits as literary media, while honing different mental skills as well. He points out how frustratingly difficult and complex new computer games are, and draws from neuroscience to suggest that games are nonetheless so captivating because they “tap into the brain’s natural reward circuitry” (p. 34). Johnson develops the terms “probing” and “telescoping” to describe the kinds of mental skills computer games hone, especially problem solving.

Such analyses are important correctives to the dire common wisdom. Yet skeptics can counter by questioning the overall value of cognitive skills. Perhaps computer games will help students and workers perform better in the global economy, but is this not just training better hamsters for the hamster wheel? Is human character here not portrayed too narrowly as an information processor? Computer games may help “impress” us into the mould of techno-global capitalism, but how valuable is that goal to begin with? Skeptics may claim that there is an implicit devaluation behind the cognitive skills arguments. In assuming the goal of economic competition, we may lose sight of the difference between this narrow aspect of life and the full flourishing of a human person. Advocates for the redeeming values of computer games, then, would have to broaden their perspective on the meaning of a good life and how computer games enhance well-being in a wider sense.

## 2. Interpersonal Skills and Civic Engagement

In other words, character pertains to far more than job skills. It also pertains to how we interact with one another on the interpersonal level and in the public sphere. If Friedmann’s book called attention to the importance of economic character, we can point to two other works symbolizing resurgence in the importance of social character. First, Robert Putman’s *Bowling Alone* (2000) traced the worrisome trend of individuals in the new media age becoming disconnected from family, friends, community, and democratic forms of participation. Second, Michael Sandel’s *Public Philosophy* (2005) made a subtle case that strong civic order relies on strong individual character. Indeed, the globalizing techo-economy increasingly demands civic virtue and substantive public dialogue as it brings cultures into conflict and challenges traditions.

Again, common wisdom has computer games fairing poorly on such wider notions of character. If the widespread negative image above was of the dumbed-down dropout, the image

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson includes a telling quote from McLuhan: “The student of media soon comes to expect the new media of any period whatever to be classed as pseudo by those who acquired the patterns of earlier media, whatever they may happen to be” (in Johnson 2005, p. 15)

here is of the apathetic, infantilized, isolated, socially inept nerd. He may be saving damsels in distress in virtual worlds but unable even to approach an actual woman. He may be saving some cyber-world but he couldn't begin to tell you how his government works or what is in the news. We can adopt here Neil Postman's critiques of television (1985) and argue that computer games, as a medium, inherently shape dialogue. Jonathan Rauch (2006) noted the meager, pre-programmed dialogue of most games, arguing, "State-of-the-art games render action and environment with eerie realism and genuine aesthetic distinction. But their characters are dolls, not people" (p. 80). Many games offer a "stunted environment in which blasting someone's head off is easy but talking to him is impossible" (p. 78).

However, this paints computer games with too broad of a brush. Many online games, for example, foster communities that must co-operate to achieve common goals. Some games even feature chatting as a central element. Taylor (2006) notes that some people take on leadership roles in *EverQuest*, often to the point of becoming overly-socialized, as they manage people with divergent desires and conflicting ideas. Such online communities even overlap with the offline world in gaming conventions. Some psychological research suggests that mediated relationships like those between players in games can become "hyper-personal," as the increased anonymity provides a safe environment to divulge secrets and form closer emotional bonds (e.g., Walther 1996).

Turkle (1995) further points out that virtual environments like gameworlds can be fruitful places to try out alternative identities, thus potentially increasing one's empathetic capacities, and to practice honing one's ideal identity, which could transfer to improved character in the actual world. Furthermore, some emerging computer games such as *The Party* utilize artificial intelligence software to create dramatic dialogues (see Rauch 2006). This suggests a kind of remediation in which the old media of performing art and play writing blend new media qualities such as interactivity in a way that may both improve interpersonal skills and foster new creative expressions. Finally, Sicart (2006) sees computer games as increasingly social experiences. Players' development of moral character occurs through interaction with gaming communities, which often confront morally ambiguous actions and situations together.

Yet skeptics may still contend that another type of devaluation is going on here, one in which the differences between simulated friendships or community and actual relationships are eroded. For example, online communities, especially the issue-specific variety formed in gameworlds, may not foster the same level of commitment and meaning as offline versions. Dean Cocking and Steve Matthews (2000) further argue that mediated friendships, due to the greater level of control involved, cannot form the kind of relational identities essential to strong friendships. In short, even those computer games that foster interaction may be offering substitutes of inferior quality.

### 3. *Excellence and Artificial Arête*

Another way in which character is valued is in terms of excellent achievements that command honor and respect. Indeed, as mentioned above, games have long served as artificial worlds in which fair rules create ideal conditions for displays of greatness. The Greek term *arête* is often translated as virtue, but means something closer to "achieving your highest human potential." For all of its democratic tendencies, the modern world still highly esteems the nobility of soul and physical determination that excellent achievements require. We admire athletes who endure great hardships under intense pressure to perform. Similarly, we admire great artists who suffer immense torture as they give themselves to the exacting demands of the muses.

In what sense is successful play of computer games a demonstration of excellence? I am reminded of a *South Park* television episode that parodied computer games. In the show, we first see a master warrior deftly and effortlessly vanquishing other players through his superior talents. In the next scene, we see that the person controlling this “character” is, in the actual world, not such an admirable character. He is morbidly overweight and “has no life,” that is, he plays the game every waking minute. This is a powerful contrast of achieving excellence in the gameworld at the expense of wasting one’s life in the actual world. The player was not *really* a warrior. He did not possess any physical skills outside of some digital dexterity to manipulate his keyboard. He did not engage in any physical or mental exercises. His was an artificial *arête*. The same can be said of the enormously popular sports computer games such as *Madden NFL* or *NBA Live*. Gamers win the super bowl every day without every putting on the pads or making a play. This is not actual *arête*. Though virtual experiences, such as flight simulation, may help in training, they are not the “real thing.”

What is artificial about the excellence achieved in computer games? Norman Mooradian (2006) argues that virtual objects and activities can “fail to have the properties that ground the value attributions made to them” (p. 674). He takes the case of virtual simulated karate as an example. Because the art of karate is rooted in movements of the body that take years to perfect, it can be said to have an essence or at least a proper characterization. This is in contrast, say, to sex, which Mooradian argues has no such essence, because there is no equivalent training involved to master any specific movements.<sup>18</sup> The notion of essence is the basis of the distinction between appearance and reality, which bears on the intrinsic value of an experience. The virtual body movements bear no relation to the physical bodily movements required for superior performances. Yet, as there are certain “objective” actions that must be carried out in order to achieve excellence in karate, the value it has is necessarily grounded in the body and its physical action. Those partaking in simulated karate games may be disappointed to learn that they are very far from practicing the real thing. If this is the case, then ontological facts about the simulated experience undermine its value. They may nonetheless still enjoy the activity, but this enjoyment would be a “kind of spectator activity...with interactivity and immersion thrown in” (p. 683).

Mooradian argues sex is different from karate in part because the criterion of success in the former is based entirely in feeling, or perceptual experience, whereas in the latter there are more objective standards of excellence.<sup>19</sup> In other words, we cannot understand artificial *arête* if we only have recourse to a hedonist account of value as equivalent to perceptions, sensations, or feelings. *Arête* signifies that value stems from the physical and mental capabilities of practitioners of an art: “development to a standard of excellence is the basis of value and the source of satisfaction and enjoyment” (Mooradian 2006, p. 688). Devaluation in this instance would entail losing sight of the difference between the standards set by feeling and those set by perfection. Computer games may democratize excellence—with a few hours of practice anyone can hone a wicked serve in a tennis videogame—but in so doing they may also cheapen its very meaning.<sup>20</sup> *Arête* entails *continentia*, self-control, and *ascesis*, exercise or self-discipline. Its

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<sup>18</sup> Poker, however, can be simulated without losing value, at least in this radical sense, because it is not rooted in the execution of certain physical movements.

<sup>19</sup> I would still argue, however, that simulated sex is inferior to the real thing, but for reasons based on intimacy rather than skill.

<sup>20</sup> Art presents a more difficult case, because of the ontological question of whether beauty is in the eye of the beholder (hedonism) or not (perfectionism). Computer software programs now make the creation of seemingly professional works of art within anyone’s reach. Intuitively, it does not make sense to think that we are suddenly

devaluation would stem from *incontinence*, weakness of the will, in the face of the temptation of easy but ultimately shallow achievements.

#### 4. *The Given and the Created*

The “cognitive skills” section noted the importance of character as critical thinking, problem solving, and innovation. This is closely related to another perceived benefit of computer games, namely the increased chances they offer for exploration, imagination, self-expression, and fantasy-rich experience. But these qualities are also intrinsically valuable aspects of being human. Computer games in particular offer powerful new ways to create “our own worlds.” Some have suggested they may even engender new art forms and artistic expressions, thereby co-creating “this world.” Ian Bogost (2006) explores the ways in which computer games may shift from entertainment (passing the time) to art (transforming our times). Similarly, Heim (1993) sees in computer game players the emerging talent to become powerful new artists, or “virtual world makers,” ready to birth the world transforming potential of virtual reality. Here the border traffic across the magic circle blurs the lines between play and cultural production. One example is the Newsgaming series (e.g., *September 12*) developed by Gonzalo Frasca. These Web-based games make social and political statements.

Yet the centrality of creativity in computer games may also have downsides. Importantly, an emphasis on creation and manipulation of artificial (and real) worlds can clash with another important aspect of character: respect for others. As Emmanuel Levinas (1969) notes, the ethical imperative of respecting others is rooted in the concept of otherness itself. Otherness is that which one does not create or appropriate. Rather, it is received as *given*—a limit on one’s willfulness. A well-rounded character entails knowing one’s boundaries and thus when to adopt a beholding rather than a molding posture toward others and the world. Respect for the given not only fosters humility and patience, but most importantly is an abiding source of meaning, as we are oriented by an exterior guidepost. Computer games may be problematic, then, in fostering an overly manipulative character or attitude, especially toward the givens of our own bodies and the natural world.

Jeremy Rifkin (1983) made this argument in regard to biotechnology, suggesting that children will grow up in a world populated with their own artificial creations, which will distort or even erase their relationship to nature. Computer games are directly linked to such concerns about respect for nature, as noted by Richard Louv (2005) in his book about “nature deficit disorder.” As children increasingly spend time indoors, jacked into computer games, they are not exposed to the ennobling qualities of close engagement with nature. More indirectly, environmental problems, such as global climate change, are instructing us in the wisdom of respecting nature. Yet, in *SimCity*, a power-plant can be constructed in two minutes. In *Age of Empires II*, villagers can be created with the click of a button. Computer games often provide experiences in which we are everywhere surrounded by ourselves—our own creations that are controllable, instantly disposable, and re-creatable.

But to leave it at this would be an unwarranted generalization. We must pay attention to the details of each game, as some emphasize control and creativity more than others. Computer games are essentially about following rules—they are not free-form play. Perhaps gamers do hone respect for otherness as they repeatedly confront the limits established in the gameworld. Juul further notes that “if we actually play *SimCity*, the experience is one of *not* being able to

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great artists because of technological advances. Yet, if this is so, then it contradicts other intuitions about excellence in art being a matter of subjective opinion, or feeling, rather than perfection.

control a city” (2005, p. 191). Indeed games are increasingly able to model emergent complexity that may foster humility in the face of forces beyond one’s control.

Nonetheless, it is worth considering further the ways in which computer games might be contributing to the devaluation of nature. This particular devaluation would result from the loss of the distinction between artificiality (human or self created) and reality (natural or given). Its apotheosis would take the form of Jean Baudrillard’s “precession of simulacra” in which the copy replaces the original (1976). The world itself peels away, leaving only the unbearable lightness of simulacra, which conceal, not the truth, but the fact that there is no truth. As we continue to immerse ourselves in computer games and other virtual worlds, do we risk losing our anchorage in this world? If so, can we find enduring meaning in those other worlds? If we cannot, can we find the moral language to explain the importance of nature and its unbidden alterity?

## 6. Conclusion

The condition for the possibility of computer games as ethical phenomena is the border-traffic across the magic circle. It is this traffic that impacts us in ethically relevant ways. This “impact” can take the form of more immediate threats to person or property, in which case the standards and language of horizontal ethics are most appropriate. Impacts most often, however, take the form of more diffuse influences on our way of perceiving, valuing, and being in the world. In these cases, the standards and language of vertical ethics are most appropriate. Being more indirect, these impacts are more difficult to conceptualize and measure. I argued that the concepts of character and valuation can be of use in conceptualizing the connections between computer games, the good life, and cultural quality. The point was not to specify the details of how character and valuations are impacted by computer games. Rather, the goal was to use this framework as a way to develop some standards and moral language that could be of use in illuminating our moral intuitions about computer games, thereby promoting further ethical evaluation and improved public discussions about the moral responsibilities involved in the design, use, and regulation of computer games.

The brief application of the concepts of character and valuation in this paper suggests that computer games present a mixed picture in terms of ethics. This is to be expected given the wide diversity of computer games. Positive evaluations might focus on the potential of games to not only provide intrinsically enjoyable experiences, but also their instrumental value in developing cognitive and interpersonal skills as well as imagination and creativity. Negative evaluations might focus on the potential of computer games to devalue personal relationships, excellence, and nature.

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