Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes:
Spaces of Moral and Narrative Possibilities in Computer Games

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Thesis

If artworks are artistically valuable insofar as they get us to adopt what’s fictionally an immoral attitude,
then this holds for computer games that are like *BioShock* in the relevant sense *all the more* – insofar as they get us to freely develop what’s fictionally an immoral attitude.
Two Steps

First, I will specify how computer games that are like *BioShock* in the relevant sense are to be characterised.

Second, I will argue that *if* artworks are artistically valuable insofar as they get us to adopt what’s fictionally an immoral attitude, *then, a fortiori*, computer games as specified in step 1 are artistically valuable insofar as they get us to freely develop what’s fictionally an immoral attitude.
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

CHOOSE whether to RESCUE the Little Sister or HARVEST her.

If you harvest her, you get MAXIMUM ADAM to spend on plasmids, but she will NOT SURVIVE the process.

If you rescue her, you get LESS ADAM, but Tenenbaum has promised to make it WORTH YOUR WHILE.
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

Definition

A game is a *computer game* if and only if

1. it’s interactive,
2. it’s run on a computer and
3. it’s interactive because it’s run on a computer.

(Lopes 2010: 26)
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

- a work’s display: “the structured entity that results from the artist’s creativity and that we tune into when we appreciate the work” (Lopes 2010: 4).
- computer games: interactive in the sense that they prescribe their players to have a direct impact on their displays.
- computer game: the work that’s appreciated while the player appreciates her generated display as one among many possible displays of that computer game.

(cf. Lopes 2010: 59)
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

- computer game’s display: moving images on a screen, acoustic elements, haptic elements
- can represent situations with an imagined existence only

(cf. Tavinor 2009: 38)
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

Definition
A computer game is an Interactive Fiction Machine (IFM) if and only if its displays are fictions.
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

- IFMs prescribe players to imagine that something is the case
- IFMs prescribe players to generate fictions themselves
  - generating fiction that represents Little Sisters as being killed?
  - generating fiction that represents Little Sisters as being saved?

→ is that all that’s going on?
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

- what player does is essential for the generated fiction
- tight player-display connection

(cf. Tavinor 2009: 40ff.)
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

**display world:** fictional world of an IFM’s display

- Every Little Sister was harvested
  → true in my display world

**make-believe world:** fictional world of the game of make-believe that one plays with an IFM

- I felt so-and-so while initiating the killing of the Little Sister
  → true in my make-believe world

(cf. Walton 1990: 58)
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

- normally: make-believe world *supplements* fiction
- computer games: make-believe world *influences* fiction

(cf. Walton 1990: 59; also Tavinor 2009: 57)
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

- part of make-believe world: *imaginings from the inside*
- imagining to experience what one makes player-controlled character experience in a fiction oneself
  - can influence generated fiction substantially
  - sometimes: experiences of fiction-directed emotions?
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines
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• belief that oneself is actually in danger is a necessary condition for fear for oneself
• but: true in my display world that Big Daddies threaten player-controlled character
• and: true in my make-believe world that I myself am threatened by Big Daddy
  \[\rightarrow\] fear-like sensations (quasi-fear)
  \[\rightarrow\] truth in my make-believe world that I myself fear Big Daddy

(Walton 1978)
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

- such experiences enrich fictions with a sense of meaning and significance
- narratives involve transmission of how someone felt in a certain situation (Fludernik 2010: 122)

→ A computer game is an Interactive Narrative Machine (INM) if its displays are narratives in this experience-transmitting sense.
Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

- decision based on experiences (quasi-emotions) that are real emotions within the fiction
- quasi-emotions occur automatically
- quasi-emotions are *real experiences*
  - one is responsible for them
  - one can learn something from them
  - fictions which prescribe these can satisfy one’s desire for diverse experiences
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes
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- artwork can be *artistically valuable* insofar as it prescribes such a psychologically intelligible and self-illuminating imaginative experience
- in particular, if this experience leads to the adoption of what’s fictionally an *immoral* attitude

(cf. Kieran 2003: 57)
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

(1) Imaginative experiences are valuable insofar as they enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways.

(2) Artworks are artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe valuable imaginative experiences.

Hence, (3) artworks are artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe imaginative experiences that enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways.

(Kieran 2003: 63)
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

(3) Artworks are artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe imaginative experiences that enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways.

(4) Imaginative experiences that get us to take up fictionally immoral attitudes can enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways.

Hence, (C) artworks can be artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe imaginative experiences that get us to take up fictionally immoral attitudes.

(Kieran 2003: 63)
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

- understanding: grasping why and how something is as it is
- full understanding: requires comparative cases
  - includes relevantly contrasting kinds
  - for morally good experiences: morally bad experiences (two kinds)

(Kieran 2003: 63ff.)
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

• imaginatively taking up immoral attitude: epistemically valuable substitute for actually taking up attitude
• must be presented so that one is psychologically able and willing to entertain it
  ○ imaginatively experiencing immoral attitude from within (as being in a certain situation)
    → actual experiences, which are fictionally emotions
    → make it fictional that I myself experience attitude immorally

(cf. Kieran 2003: 63ff.)
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

(4+) If imaginative experiences that get us to take up fictionally immoral attitudes can enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways, then imaginative experiences that get us to develop fictionally immoral attitudes can enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways all the more.
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

(C+) If artworks can be artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe imaginative experiences that get us to take up fictionally immoral attitudes, then they can be artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe imaginative experiences that get us to develop fictionally immoral attitudes all the more.
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

- certain INMs: works that prescribe player to develop fictionally immoral attitude
- serve as evidence for the truth of the preceding *a fortiori* conditionals
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

- non-interactive artworks: one learns what it feels like to be in a state of mind that results in immoral actions
- INMs: one learns, additionally, what it feels like
  + ... to develop such a state of mind
  + ... to act in accordance with it
  + ... to be responsible for being in and acting in accordance with it

→ knowledge that isn’t otherwise to be had
Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

• given (C), insofar as a work succeeds in getting one to imaginatively *adopt* an immoral attitude, renders it intelligible, and provides epistemic rewards for having engaged in this imaginative experience, the work is *artistically valuable* (Kieran 03: 70f.)

  → given (C+), insofar as an INM succeeds in getting one to imaginatively *develop* an immoral attitude, renders it *more* intelligible and provides *richer* epistemic rewards than any non-interactive work could, the INM is artistically *more* valuable than any non-interactive work could be
Conclusion

• “morality systems”? 

• artistic evaluation: matters to what extent prescribed imaginative experience is psychologically intelligible and epistemically rewarding
  
  → experiencing what are non-deliberately occurring emotions in imagination fulfils condition to high degree
  
  → imaginatively *developing* immoral attitude might deepen understanding of

  • why certain immoral actions are pursued
  • how it feels like to freely act immorally
  • how it feels like to be responsible for such actions
Conclusion

- INMs allow for the development of such attitudes in imagination
  - particularly and distinctively well-suited to provide imaginative acquaintances of how one would feel if one *fully* engaged in immoral attitude
  - epistemically and, thus, artistically valuable
References


**BioShock Screenshots:**