

# The Ethical Relevance of Interactivity in Computer Games (Draft)

Sebastian Ostritsch

University of Stuttgart

## 1) Introduction

Is there an ethical difference between watching someone being murdered in a movie, e.g., in *The Godfather*, and enacting virtual murder in a video game, e.g., an installment of the *Mafia* game series? A common intuition, especially among non-gamers, is that there is indeed such an ethical difference. People either seem to believe that the enactment of fictional murder is somehow “worse” than its mere reception, or, in a stronger version, that *only* the enactment of fictional murder can be morally wrong but not its mere visual reception. If one asks for the reason for such a difference in moral culpability, the interactive nature of video games seems to be a rather obvious candidate: While the reception of the more traditional representational arts, including watching movies, seems passive, playing video games is active. Instead of just watching a fictional murder, one is *committing* it. And given that something at all is unethical about fictional crimes, then, just as with real crimes, committing them is worse than witnessing them; actually, being merely a witness to a crime is not a crime at all, unless, of course, one is violating some Good Samaritan duties in its aftermath. Thus, it seems that interactivity provides a moral difference between gaming and the reception of more traditional representational arts. For the purpose of having a short and handy term, let me call this view about the moral difference between perceiving and committing fictional crimes *the naive view*.

The aim of this paper is twofold. *First*, I want to criticize the naive view from two perspectives. On the one hand, gaming is not as morally problematic as the naive view suggests, and on the other hand, the reception of the more traditional representational arts is not as innocent as the naive view makes it sound. *Second*, I want to argue that there is a kernel of truth to the above sketched intuition that playing video games is justifiably subjected to a more severe form of moral scrutiny than, e.g., watching movies. In other words: My second point is that the special *interactive* nature of video games leads, at least in the context of certain games, to a moral reasonability that is somewhat unique to the activity of gaming.

## 2) Against the Naive View

There seem to be at least two separate reasons why the naive view is misguided. The first one is that labeling games as active and the more traditional representational arts as passive is not convincing. Watching a movie or reading a book are not merely passive. On the contrary, they are *activities* with an ontological contribution to the artwork in question. As Kendall Walton has argued in his seminal work *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990), the representational arts can be understood as props providing the basis for the make-believe activity of the recipient.

Thus, the recipient, or rather his interaction with the artwork is co-constitutive of that very artwork. Therefore, gazing at a painting, watching a movie, reading a novel is not like being an innocent witness after all. Rather, receiving the representational arts is *interactive* in the sense that one is complicit in co-creating whatever representations one is perceiving.

Sometimes, as in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997), artworks even reflect this very complicity of the recipient. In the case of "Funny Games", the killers address the viewers' complicity by, e.g., looking directly into the camera and winking.

Therefore, if one were to take the position that, depending on the content that is being represented, particular representations within artworks or entire artworks as sets of representations can be morally problematic, then games and the more traditional representational arts would have to be treated on par. For in both cases, there is an interactive element which makes the recipient a co-creator of the represented content.

A possible answer to this argument may be that even if there is (inter)activity involved in establishing the representations of an artwork, i.e. the fictional world of an artwork, one is still more active in gaming because one also acts *within* that world one has helped to establish. Thus, even if the recipient of the more traditional representational arts is not an innocent witness, it is still only the gamer who can commit a crime within the fictional game world. However, this possible counter-argument has to be rejected, if one concedes what can be called *weak amoralism* about gaming. As I have argued elsewhere (Ostritsch 2017), virtual actions as such are never in themselves rightly subject to moral evaluation. If, e.g., one is carrying out torture as the sociopath Trevor in *GTA V*, one is *not really* torturing anyone. Those acts are only fictional. Morality, however, is "made" for reality. Therefore, committing a fictional crime cannot have, at least not in itself, the moral significance the naive views claims it has.

It is important to point out that weak amoralism about virtual acts as such does not equal *strong amoralism*, according to which nothing about the practice of gaming is rightly

subject to moral evaluation. One can be an amoralist in the weak sense and still believe that, sometimes, playing certain games can be indicative (or expressive) of a certain *real* motives, emotions or passions, which we rightly judge to be immoral (see Patridge 2011 and Young 2017). One can also be a weak amoralist and agree with the *hypothetical* consequentialist argument, that *if* there were severely harmful real life consequences of gaming, the practice of gaming as such should be regulated on moral grounds. Yet, even such a moralist concession does not contradict the main claim of weak amoralism, according to which there is nothing *intrinsically* morally (right or) wrong with carrying out virtual acts. *As virtual*, they are beyond good and evil, right and wrong. The central point for our question is that both an expressivist and a consequentialist moralist critique of gaming is indifferent to questions of activity or passivity and therefore applies equally to the more traditional representational arts.

### 3) Strong Interactivity and Gaming

The interactivity we have been discussing so far is *minimal* in the sense that it applies to all artworks alike, i.e., to games as well as to the traditional representational arts. There are, however, other, more robust ways of conceiving of interactivity. Dominic McIver Lopes (2001) has introduced two further conceptions of interactivity. On the one hand, weak (but more than minimal!) interactivity allows for the alteration of the sequence of the represented content. Strong interactivity on the other hand allows for the alteration or modification of that content itself. Or as Lopes has put it:

Whereas in weakly interactive media the user's input determines which structure is accessed or the sequence in which it is accessed, in strongly interactive media we may say that the structure itself is shaped in part by the interactor's choices. Thus[,] strongly interactive artworks are those whose structural properties are partly determined by the interactor's actions. By a work's "structural properties" or (more briefly) "structure" I mean whatever intrinsic or representational properties it has the apprehension of which are necessary for aesthetic engagement with it – sound sequences in the case of music and narrative content in the case of stories. It should be kept in mind that what is in question here is not the structure of a work as its user *experiences* it, for that is "interactive" in some broad sense for all works of art, but the structure of the work itself. (Lopes 2001: 68)

This account of interactivity has been criticized by Jonathan Frome (2009) for mainly two reasons. First, it seems confused to claim that the structural properties of an artwork can be individuated without any reference to the experience of a recipient. E.g., according to Frome, we only know that "apprehending time is necessary for film and not for comic books in reference to the audience's experience of the artwork" (Frome 2009: 3). This is true. However, there is a difference between subjective experience being constitutive of the fact that only certain kinds of properties are structural properties of an artwork (= minimal

interactivity), and the audience's experience being constitutive of particular structural properties (= strong interactivity).

Frome's second objection to Lopes' account is that, since the order in which the elements of an artwork are arranged (i.e., its sequencing) is itself a relevant structural property of that artwork, weak and strong interactivity coincide. This is a more viable point of criticism, one which rightly leads Frome to modify Lopes' account of interactivity to the extent that, for an artwork to be *strongly* interactive, one has to include the fact that an artwork is *intended* to be modified by the recipient's input (see Frome 2009: 4).

If we accept Lopes' account of strong interactivity (with Frome's aforementioned modification), the paradigmatic examples for strongly interactive artworks are video games. However, they are not the only strongly interactive media that exist. E.g., one of Chicago's landmarks, "Cloud Gate" aka "The Bean" by Anish Kapoor is a strongly interactive artwork, even though there is no computer technology involved in it. Yet, generally (but not universally) speaking, the traditional representational arts are not strongly interactive.

#### **4) Why Strong Interactivity Matters Ethically**

If we want to understand how strong interactivity matters ethically, we have to take a look at how strongly interactive artworks are structured ontologically. Lopes argues that strongly interactive artworks do *not* split into multiple, disconnected works, each one created by a separate interaction. Instead, they are to be understood as types, whose tokens are created through interaction in the strong sense. The main reason to prefer the latter, dual type-token ontology to one of multiple, disconnected tokens is that only the former is in alignment with our aesthetic and ludic practices. With respect to video games, we tend to see two playthroughs of, e.g., *Fallout 3*, as just that: two – potentially very different – tokens of one and the same game. And we will credit the game (as a type) for this very ludic property of allowing for different playthroughs.

What keeps the different tokens of a game together as tokens of the same type is a very complicated question (see Lopes 2011: 75f. and Ostritsch / Steinbrenner 2018). Luckily, it does not have to concern us here. For our purposes, it is only important that there is a very interesting interdependence between the game as a type and the interactively created game tokens. On the one hand, the game as a type allows only for certain tokens to be created, thus the game as a type seems to at least partially determine the game tokens. On the other hand, it is those very tokens that – as co-created by the player – actually make up the game as a type. Thus, the relation of determination also seems to run in the other direction, from token to

type, and thus from player to game. This heightened ontological influence, i.e., the determination of structural properties of the game by the player, seems to be the reason for our intuition that committing a virtual crime in a video game is – *from a moral point of view* – something else than just witnessing the same crime as part of the fictional world of an artwork that belongs to the more traditional representational arts.

However, the question arises why weak amoralism, as sketched above, does not also apply to artworks that are strongly interactive. The answer has to be that strongly interactive actions are *not* the virtual actions within a fictional game world but the *real-life* actions of gaming as such. In other words: strong interactivity is not about what one does within a game, e.g., as the nameless psychopath in the mass-murder game *Hatred*, but that one – in reality – plays such a character in a video game. But the question remains: Why should playing such a game as *Hatred*, i.e., playing as its main protagonist be morally wrong? If we hold on to weak amoralism, the answer can't have anything to do with the representations of fictional mass murder. After all, what is represented is fictional and not real. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Ostritsch 2017), games do not only represent evil deeds and characters, but sometimes they also endorse them. This means that games (just as more traditional representational arts) can endorse an immoral worldview as something for the recipient to apply to the real world. A game like *Hatred*, e.g., does not only represent a “genocidal crusade” (as stated in the game's introductory cut-scene), but it also glorifies such actions. Because games are strongly interactive media, playing a game such as *Hatred* means bringing it *and its real-life endorsement of immorality* into existence. And: bringing something into existence that *actually* endorses immorality, is clearly immoral.

But why, one might continue asking, is this ethically more problematic than, e.g., bringing a movie into existence through *minimal* interaction, i.e., willfully engaging in the activity of make-believe? The ethical difference becomes clearer if we place the player's strong interactivity on a spectrum of activity that is ontologically constitutive of an artwork. In contrast to merely perceiving an artwork, an activity which is minimally interactive, strong interactivity does, through creating the tokens of an artwork, determine the structure of the work itself. Yet, strong interactivity involves less intentional control of the outcome and therefore is less “free” than, e.g., a performance of a play (see Lopes 2001: 79f.). However, compared to directing a play – or even more extreme, the creation of the play itself, i.e., its script –, a performance of a play is itself limited in its freedom to determine the structural properties of an artwork. The spectrum just described runs from less to more substantial interactive contributions to the ontological constitution of an artwork. For someone to watch a

play, a play has to be performed, for someone to perform a play, it has to be directed and for it to be directed, it has to be written. The weight regarding the ontological constitution is, as I want to claim, also ethically relevant. It is relevant in analogy to our views about the moral responsibilities for a crime: The criminal masterminds behind a crime are those who deserve most of the blame, second come those who merely execute it, and third in line are those who have not carried out the crimes themselves but who have aided and abetted the main criminals. Correspondingly, we judge Veit Harlan, the director of *Jew Süß* (1940) more severely than the actors that took part in that anti-Semitic propaganda movie. And we judge the actors more harshly than the moviegoers. The same is true for games: The creators of the Japanese rape game *RapeLay* are more culpable than the players, and the players deserve more blame than those who watch a let's play video of *RapeLay* on YouTube.

Of course, and this is very important final caveat: It is very well possible to have good, i.e., ethically exculpating reasons for playing *any* game, e.g., the need to do scientific research. In contrast, there seem to be no good reasons for creating a game like *RapeLay*.

Summing up, we have good reasons to suspect that the spectrum of increasing ontological contribution to a game's existence and content through the player's activity is also a spectrum of increasing ethical responsibility. Further research will have to shed more light on the correlation between these two spectra.

## References

- Frome, Jonathan (2009): "The Ontology of Interactivity", in: *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference*, Oslo.
- Lopes, Dominic McIver (2001): "The Ontology of Interactive Art", in: *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35 (4), pp. 65-81
- Ostritsch, Sebastian (2017): "The Amoralist Challenge and the Gamer's Moral Obligation", in: *Ethics and Information Technology*, 19 (2), pp. 117-128.
- Ostritsch, Sebastian / Steinbrenner, Jakob (2018): "Ontologie des Computerspiels", to appear in: Feige, Daniel M. / Ostritsch, Sebastian / Rautzenberg, Markus (eds.): *Philosophie des Computerspiels*, Stuttgart: Metzler.
- Patridge, Stephanie (2011): "The incorrigible social meaning of video game imagery", in: *Ethics and Information Technology*, 13 (4), pp. 303-312.
- Walton, Kendall (1990): *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Young, Garry (2017): “Objections to Ostritsch’s argument in ‘The amoralist challenge to gaming and the gamer’s moral obligation’”, in: *Ethics and Information Technology*, 19 (3), pp. 209-219.

### **Films**

Coppola, Francis Ford (1972): *The Godfather*. Paramount Pictures.

Haneke, Michael (1997): *Funny Games*. Castle Rock Entertainment et al.

Harlan, Veit (1940). *Jud Süß*. Terra Film.

### **Games**

*Fallout 3*. Bethesda. Bethesda. PS3 et al. 2008.

*Grand Theft Auto V*. Rockstar North. Rockstar Games. PS3 et al. 2013-2015.

*Hatred*. Destructive Creations. Destructive Creations. PC. 2015.

*Mafia*. Illusion Softworks. Gathering of Developers. PC et al. 2002-2004.

*RapeLay*. Illusion. Illusion. PC. 2006.