

# COMPUTER GAMES AS PHILOSOPHICAL MEDIUM

By

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Suppose a doctoral student approached you with the following proposal for her dissertation in philosophy: that, in lieu of the customary volume of written text, she would develop, design, and submit a computer game dealing with a philosophical topic. (You can easily 'mod' this scenario to that of a book acquisitions editor and potential author or even, perhaps, an online journal editor and possible contributor.) For sake of argument, let's assume that the proposer possesses sufficient skills to accomplish this in an acceptable amount of time and that the topic seems at least plausible for such a presentation (not all will likely be so). How would you respond? I think that most of us (at this conference, at least!) would initially be intrigued by the idea but also, upon a bit of further reflection, would be somewhat skeptical about whether such a project could ultimately be regarded as fulfilling the sort of criteria and expectations normally governing what counts as a dissertation in philosophy. (At least where I come from, I pretty sure that the Dean of Graduate Studies would take a very dim view of such a thing.) The following presentation seeks to explore some of the issues involved in such a proposal and ultimately offers a 'guardedly affirmative' response to our student's novel request.

## I. Philosophy's Various Relations to Computer Games

At the outset, it will be helpful to distinguish several different ways in which philosophy can be connected with computer games in order to clarify what exactly is being proposed and considered here.

The first sort of relation I will call '**philosophy in computer games.**' Here, it is assumed that there are certain problems or issues already recognized within the philosophical tradition and that computer games (or certain aspects or segments of them) are employed as examples or illustrations of these already recognized themes. Examples would be Cartesian solipsism as illustrated in the 'Tranquility Lane' episode of *Fallout III* or 'ethical dilemmas' as presented in the *Bioshock* series. The second can be called '**philosophy and computer games,**' indicating a range of new issues arising from the encounter between contemporary philosophical thought and certain features of interactive digital media. Questions such as the 'artificial intelligence' of NPCs and the implications of avatars for theories of personal identity would fall under this heading. The third we can call '**philosophy as computer game.**' Let's assume that it is this sense, and not just either of the first two, that is at stake in our imagined proposer's request. The real question at hand, that is, is whether, or to what degree, it is possible that a computer game *can itself serve as a medium* for conducting philosophical inquiry or expressing a philosophical position or philosophical claims. (I take it that the first two types of relation between

philosophy and computer games are relatively non-controversial; it is this third and most radical version that will be the focus of this presentation.)

## II. Philosophy as Computer Game: Initial Questions

Let's begin by leaving aside the practical and (likely) political issues that such a proposal might raise and focus, instead, upon the conceptual problems presented by such a proposal. I suggest that there are (at least) four important lines of response to the proposal at hand worth considering. (1) Are there *prima facie* reasons having to do with the nature of computer games for a negative response to the proposal that computer games can serve as a medium for philosophical inquiry or expression? (2) Are there *prima facie* reasons concerning the nature of philosophy that would render such a proposal implausible? (3) More affirmatively, to what degree do arguments that support accepting computer games as 'art works' provide a basis for regarding them, as well, as a medium for philosophical inquiry? (The case of film will, perhaps, be most instructive on this point.) (4) Are there aspects of the medium of computer games that render them (at least arguably) *more* suitable for serving as a medium of philosophical thought or expression than the prevailing model of essay or monograph employing a 'natural language' (together, perhaps, with, at certain points, its 'formalization')? I will consider these in turn and conclude by suggesting some potential constraints upon my otherwise affirmative response to the proposal with which I began.

### III. *Prima Facie* Objections Based on The Nature of Computer Games

The fact is that we do not yet know all the capabilities of the medium of computer games. After all, it is, compared to more traditional media, including film, a relatively new medium that was invented and has rapidly and intensively developed within most of our own lifetimes. Most of us who began playing *Pong*, *Space Invaders*, or *Pacman* could scarcely have foreseen that, within only a scant few decades, we would be engaging with a medium that could challenge our basic assumptions about what is 'real' and what not, confront us with difficult moral choices, lead us to reflect upon how secure our assumptions about what it means to be a 'self' are, or put us in the position of acting within a context where the basic 'laws' governing the 'actual world' are dramatically altered. The development of computer games themselves (as well as much scholarly study and reflection about them) have discredited most of the shibboleths, usually based on earlier states of their development, that are occasionally still employed to characterize them.

Among such stereotypes are: that computer games, as games, are unsuitable for the 'serious' concerns of philosophy; that they are primarily perceptual-motor activities possessing 'intellectual features' only contingently or accidentally; and that the 'open-ended' nature of interactive gameplay, generating widely differing 'gamepaths,' prevents computer games from expressing any single or stable 'philosophical perspective.' The complexity and nuance of many of the best recent

computer games, together with our own ignorance of what is yet to come, are probably the best witnesses against any *prima facie* claim that computer games are unsuitable as a medium in which to engage in 'serious' philosophical inquiry or expression, and appear, for most of us, products of earlier states of development of computer games themselves.

#### **IV. *Prima Facie* Objections Based on The Nature of Philosophy**

Admittedly, such objections are, by far, the most difficult to counter with respect to the proposal under consideration. Partly, this is due to the fact that, in the current climate, serious and fundamental disagreements prevail both among and within several major 'camps' (for example, the 'analytic' and 'Continental' approaches) as to what the actual nature of philosophy itself is and how it should be pursued. Those differences being what they may, we might still hazard a description of a potential 'common ground' of agreement among at least some of their advocates (and likely many other 'non-aligned' philosophers) with respect to the issue at hand. It can be stated as four basic 'theses' about the nature of philosophy. (1) The fundamental and necessary medium of philosophy is 'natural language' (and, in some cases, its formalization). (2) The basic 'content' of philosophy is the 'proposition' expressed in 'natural language.' (3) The basic 'activity' of philosophy is the production and linking of 'propositions' in logically coherent wholes that constitute 'arguments.' (4)

Arguments eventuate in (propositional) 'conclusions' which constitute 'philosophical theses' or, taken together, a 'philosophical position.'

The *prima facie* objections to computer games serving as a medium for philosophy would then be that (1) the medium of computer games does not essentially (though it may contingently or accidentally) involve 'natural language'; (2) it cannot, therefore, express 'propositions' in the requisite philosophical sense; and (3) lacking *bona fide* 'propositions,' it cannot succeed in organizing them in any way capable of producing 'conclusions' capable of constituting 'philosophical theses' or 'positions.'

First (though I won't pursue this much contested and sometimes highly technical topic here in any detail), it's worth noting that, for some time, serious questions have been raised about some of these basic assumptions about the nature of philosophy. Both Heidegger, in his critique in *Being and Time* of the logical proposition as the primary bearer of 'truth,' and Wittgenstein, in his key distinction between 'saying' and 'showing' and his later accounts of the functioning of 'ordinary language,' commenced lines of philosophical discussion that have rendered these assumptions about the nature of philosophy much less self-evident than they might have once appeared. Such more recent developments as post-structuralism, the more recent thought of Gilles Deleuze, 'post-analytic philosophy,' developments in formal logic, and research in cognitive science and psycholinguistics all continue to raise serious questions about the 'propositional' nature of thought, the

fundamentality of the logical structures long taken to govern it, and hence about the basic nature of philosophy itself. Given such doubts and attendant controversies, it is fair to conclude, at the least, that such assumptions as those I have mentioned can no longer now constitute any *prima facie* case against the proposal at hand, whatever the eventual outcome of these discussions may be.

Another way to approach these *prima facie* objections to computer games serving as vehicles for philosophical thought and expression might run something like this. Suppose we imagine a continuum of possible computer games ranging from games made up solely of interactive texts on a digital display, to purely visual games (perhaps enhanced by various non-linguistic sounds) involving no text or explicit discourse at all. Further, suppose we regard these two extremes as ‘limit cases’ between which most modern computer games fall. On such a scenario, with respect to the expression of distinctively philosophical theses or views, the first extreme would represent little more than ordinary printed philosophical texts, simply transposed to a digital medium, together with the usual opportunities to interact with it that we ordinarily have as we read any printed work of philosophy. Few, I think, would raise any objection to the possibility that certain ‘games’ of this sort might fully qualify as philosophical undertakings. As to the second ‘extreme,’ I suspect that most of us would also agree that such a purely imagistic ‘play of representations’ would likely be unable to express any determinate philosophical theses or viewpoint (at least without importing a good deal of other considerations).

Of course, the area bounded by these ‘extremes’ would be quite extensive, but there would be no *prima facie* reason why at least some of these ‘mixed media’ games would not be able to qualify as fully philosophical enterprises, unless one insisted (as Hegel sometimes did) that the presence of *any* ‘representational element’ in the medium of purely conceptual discourse vitiates that discourse’s philosophical integrity. As we will soon see, such a view would also discount much of the generally accepted ‘philosophical canon’ itself.

I make no pretense that the considerations I have presented serve to settle this difficult issue one way or the other. Rather, my aim has been to oppose any view that takes such objections as somehow *prima facie* or self-evident. That is, there are no persuasive and widely-accepted philosophical grounds upon which to reject our student’s novel proposal out of hand and the burden of proof would be upon the thesis advisor to make a cogent case to the contrary (something at least unlikely given the current state of philosophical controversy about such fundamental matters).

## **V. Computer Games as ‘Art’ and as ‘Philosophy’**

Having concluded that there seem to be no cogent *prima facie* objections to our student’s proposal, we can now turn to considerations that might underwrite a



more positive response. One that readily comes to mind is based upon a good deal of recent work that argues the case for computer games qualifying as genuine 'works of art.' (See, for example, Grant Tavinor's *The Art of Videogames* and Graeme Kirkpatrick's *Aesthetic Theory and The Video Game*.) We might then add to this some version of the view, developed, for example, in connection with film by Stephen Mulhall in *On Film (Thinking in Action)*, that works of art like film can, in certain cases, involve "thinking seriously and systematically about [views and arguments properly developed by philosophers] in just the ways that philosophers do. Such films are not philosophy's raw material, nor a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – film as philosophizing." Joined with the idea that computer games should be counted as genuine 'works of art,' the conclusion would be that the medium of computer games, as well, is capable of serving as a medium of genuine philosophical activity.

I by no means take such lines of reflection as providing the knock-down argument that it might appear to be on its face. Granted, there are many good reasons to regard at least some computer games as qualifying as *bona fide* works of art, reinforced by such recent developments as exhibitions and collections of computer games by established art museums like the Smithsonian Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art. The problem, however, lies in the second claim that films (or computer games) are capable of "thinking seriously and systematically...in just the ways that philosophers do." On the face of it, such a claim seems to harbor a

sort of 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness.' That is, one might well question whether works of art, including films and computer games, of themselves, "think" at all. Rather, one would be more inclined to say that certain artworks can, at their best, express certain 'philosophical thought processes' on the part of their creators and that they can provoke some similar or related processes in their readers, viewers, or players. Of course, how an artwork mediates between creator and audience is a much-disputed question in aesthetics and literary theory. But, on the side of the audience, many things that are not artworks can provoke a seemingly similar 'philosophical' response: my daughter's wedding, a diagnosis of cancer, or even a lovely sunset. Given this shift I am suggesting, the question then becomes whether there are any particular and specifiable feature(s) of artworks (say, film and computer games) that serve to initiate such activities and, in some way, continue to sustain them. (I leave the question of the much-contested role of the 'intentionality' of the producer of the artwork for other discussions.)

The first thing we might observe is that the most likely candidates for works of art capable of initiating and sustaining philosophical reflection determinate enough to produce philosophical 'theses' or count as philosophical 'positions' are exactly those that utilize, as part of their respective media, 'natural languages.' This would include novels, poetry, most films, and many computer games. Also, all such artistic media, as opposed, perhaps, to works of sculpture or painting, share in common the fact that they themselves unfold as temporal processes. While a painting, for

example, may very well provoke one or even multiple lines of ‘philosophical reflection’ in the viewer, it fails to continue to provide any determinate specificity or direction to the processes of reflection that it may otherwise provoke. That is, it may initiate processes of reflection but does not accompany and direct them in ways that at least some artworks that unfold in time can. Further, film and computer games typically employ what we might call ‘multiple signification systems’ (sound, natural language, images, and montage, among others) that, when skillfully deployed, serve, at once, to reinforce one another, comment on one another, or even contrast with or oppose one another. My point, then, is that one need not accept such extravagant claims as that of Marcel Duchamp that *every* artwork is somehow ‘concrete philosophy’; still, we *can* view certain artistic media and works deploying them as more likely than others to provoke and sustain determinate and focused philosophical reflection. With regard to the ‘artwork-therefore-philosophical-work’ argument I mentioned above, I agree with only a limited form of it: while I deny that it is logically sound as it stands, I take it as suggestive and worth consideration to the extent that, in the cases of certain media and works within them, their status as artworks possesses some important connections with their capacity for initiating and sustaining philosophical reflection. Further, while I agree with Mulhall’s argument (under the emendation that I made above) that film is one likely candidate for this, I want now to point to certain aspects of computer games (some admittedly shared with film, others not) that make them especially suitable for serving as vehicles for philosophical activity and expression.

## **VI. Aspects of Computer Games as Philosophical Vehicles**

My general approach in this section will be to call attention to several expository or argumentational devices for which well-known examples can readily be found within the philosophical tradition as well as in some more recent philosophical discussions. My claim will be not only that such devices have clear counterparts in the medium of computer games but also that, in most cases, their deployment within computer games may have significant advantages over their presentation solely in the form of (usually written) discourse in some 'natural language.' My point, that is, is that computer games might well prove to *enhance* the presentation of philosophical theses, arguments, or positions otherwise presented in written texts.

### **1. Examples and Counterexamples**

As we know, examples and counterexamples were already extensively employed as important, sometimes even essential, elements of philosophical argumentation by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and have remained in constant use throughout philosophy's history. However, as many, perhaps especially Wittgenstein, have pointed out, such 'ostensive' devices often prove to create their own further difficulties since they depend upon it being 'intuitively clear' exactly what they are intended to exemplify or how appropriate they are as examples of the point in

question. (One thinks, for instance, of the extensive criticism that Kant's 'examples' of moral and immoral actions in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* has provoked.) As creatures of verbal discourse, examples often leave considerable leeway to the imagination of the auditor or reader, producing areas of indeterminacy of detail that may render them more or less appropriate to the point at hand. By contrast, in computer games, it is possible (using Wittgenstein's famous distinction) to 'show' what cannot be 'said' (or 'said' only at a lesser degree of determinacy or detail).

## **2. Thought Experiments**

Another well-known and often utilized device (which, at least in some cases, might be regarded as an 'extended example') is that of the 'thought experiment.' As they typically function, thought experiments invite the reader to consider, often in a hypothetical or counterfactual mode, what would be the likely outcome or conclusion if certain conditions obtained or if one were to accept a certain narrative description as true. Examples of such thought experiments range from Plato's image of the Cave, through Descartes' *Meditations* and the 'state of nature' widely employed in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century political philosophy, to Schrödinger's 'Cat,' Searle's 'Chinese Room,' and Putnam's 'Brain-in-a-vat.' Again, the deployment of such argumentational devices often leave one with the feeling that either they were not actual 'experiments,' since they have only one result (*per* the argument at hand)

or that other possible results that should have been considered have somehow been omitted. I suggest that at least some ‘thought experiments’ could be more convincingly presented as actual ‘experiments,’ in more nuanced and engaging forms and with more concrete surveys of alternative outcomes, in the medium of computer games. (Some already have; I would also mention *The Stanley Parable* as a recent example of such a ‘thought experiment.’)

### **3. Moral Scenarios and Ethical Dilemmas**

The use of alternative scenarios, often posing moral dilemmas, has been an important element of moral philosophy from Plato’s ‘Ring of Gyges,’ through Enlightenment reflection upon the ‘state of nature’ and Kant’s various ‘moral scenarios’ (especially the his *Lectures on Ethics*), to Rawl’s invitation to consider what choices we might make given a (hypothetical) ‘original position’ and more recent scenarios associated with ‘decision theory.’ Again, the usual procedure is to describe such a (usually fairly abstract) scenario and invite the reader to consider how she would choose or act within its given conditions. Typically, as this device functions within some overall argument, there is some single ‘preferred response.’ However, I would suggest that there is a significant difference between merely considering a scenario or moral dilemma and actually being engaged in it in all its details (where ‘the devil’ is usually found). Especially in playing through a game such as the original *Bioshock* (by now a relatively simple example) multiple times,

many of us have likely discovered that the issues as framed discursively by moral philosophy turn out to be considerably more complex and nuanced than we might have expected or could have predicted beforehand. As Wittgenstein might have told us, there is a good deal more to practical ethical reflection that can only be 'shown' than can be captured solely in the discursive theories of philosophical ethics.

#### **4. 'Reader-engaged' Forms of Presentation**

In a somewhat broader sense, there are certain philosophical styles or modes of presentation that deliberately require and presuppose the reader's active engagement with and participation in the text itself – works that, by their very design, cannot be 'passively' read but that demand the reader's participation for their completion or success. I have in mind such works as the Platonic dialogues, Descartes' *Meditations*, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, most phenomenological and existentialist texts, and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. These are not only some of the most important philosophical works of the tradition but highlight the fact that philosophy is not merely a set of 'theses' or 'logical arguments' but, as well, an *activity* performed in cooperation with the active engagement of the reader. It is on this count, perhaps among others, that the medium of computer games exceeds that of film as a potential medium for philosophy. For, as we know, like the philosophical texts that I have mentioned, computer games, considered apart from gameplay, are only 'virtual frameworks'

consisting of digital programs that only become actualized through the engaged gameplay of individual players. As I mentioned earlier, many of the philosophical innovations and advantages of such devices as the dialogue form, the 'meditation,' the 'self-development' through time inherent in some 'dialectical' forms, and the analyses of phenomenology are inherent possibilities of the temporal and also necessarily participatory medium of computer games, even more so than that of film.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

So how should I respond to my intrepid graduate student's request to be allowed to submit a computer game as a dissertation? What would be my concerns and reservations?

1. I would first encourage her by indicating that I see no reason in principle why such a project would not be acceptable as a dissertation and that I admired her rare combination of technical skills and philosophical passion. (By the way, I would not expect, at least at this point in time, that I would see very many such proposals; I don't think we have to worry about being inundated with such requests!)



2. I would then point out that there is likely to be serious differences among members of her committee about the nature of philosophy itself that will affect the whole matter. Some will tend to identify philosophy with the 'results' that it produces – propositions, arguments relating them, and conclusions following from them – and they will tend to regard the 'activity' of philosophizing as variable, contingent, and maybe even 'subjective' sets of processes producing them. Others will tend to view philosophy as an engaged activity for which determinate propositions and their logical relations are only transit points embedded in a broader process of philosophical thought. I would then suggest to her that, in carrying through her project, she must take care to strike a precarious balance. If too discursive and didactic, her game will prove boring and maybe even redundant in relation to the alternative of producing a written text. If too engaged with processes involving the sensory and experiential aspects of the medium, it will fail to express any determinate claims that might count as philosophical theses or positions.

3. I, at least, am 'conservative' enough to suggest that there are (at least) two ways in which such a balance might be struck. On the one hand, she might (like some of the MFA visual arts students that I have supervised) submit, along with her game, a written discussion of the issues that her game raises – a sort of philosophical and interpretive commentary upon her game. Or, she might embed within the game itself some discursive 'game objects' that the player can discover and read in the

process of playing the game, a device like the 'hidden scrolls' in so many RPGs that provide a discursive commentary on the game though contained in the game itself. The more radical alternative would be that the game 'stand alone,' as it were, and allow such philosophical reflections to occur within subsequent discussions of those who have played it. None of these are ideal solutions and each has its advantages and drawbacks.

The upshot is that, as a philosophical (or maybe metaphilosophical matter), the project must walk a fine line between two views of philosophy – that which primarily identifies philosophy with its 'propositional' and 'argumentative' results, and that which emphasizes the activities out of which these are generated. I personally believe that such a middle ground is possible (and has been accomplished by some of the greatest works of the tradition). I also believe that computer games are capable of accomplishing this.

So, yes, I will say, proceed with your project. At the least, it will provoke some productive discussion about the nature of philosophy itself and, likely, the more specific issue with which you are concerned. At best, it will prove that there is a new medium for the expression of philosophical ideas and views and we philosophers will now have to accommodate this in our future philosophical thought, activities, and institutions. Either way, it will significantly contribute to the enterprise of philosophy, and that's, in the end, what we expect successful

dissertations in philosophy to do. So go ahead, design and produce your game and let's see what happens!