

Morality in Computer Games: A Phenomenological Approach

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Introduction

One of the main attractions of computer games is that they allow us to do things we normally cannot do: they extend our possibilities. *TopSpin 3*, for example, makes it possible for us to play the finale of the *US Open*, although we absolutely lack the qualities even to make it to the first round in real-life. What is perhaps even more interesting though, is that computer games not only enable us to do things we *cannot* do, but also things we *should not* do in the real world. One should not, for example, shoot innocent pedestrians: this is ethically wrong. But in the notorious *Grand Theft Auto*-series, this is exactly what the player can do. And recently, a Japanese computer game caused commotion, since it encouraged players to rape virtual women. In the light of these phenomena, philosophical reflection on the moral status of actions realized in computer games becomes inevitable. This paper will provide the groundwork for such a reflection by asking the following question: *Can we apply the predicates of 'right' and 'wrong' to actions realized in computer games? Or do games rather constitute a domain beyond good and evil in which there are no impermissible deeds?* This question will be answered in three sections:

1. The first section deals with the necessary condition for the application of the predicates of 'right' and 'wrong' to actions realized in computer games: *freedom*.
2. In the second section, it will be made clear that the fulfillment of this necessary condition is not sufficient when it comes to the application of the predicates of 'right' and 'wrong' to in-game actions.
3. The last section will try to explain why we can still be uncomfortable with certain types of in-game behavior, for example virtual rape, even though we cannot label it 'right' or 'wrong' in the strong sense.

1. In-game freedom

Just like in the real world, agents in games should be *free* for their actions to be labeled right or wrong. Of course, a certain degree of freedom is implied in every game: the player is not

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passively watching events unfold, but *acts*. Still, not all actions realized in games appear to be suitable for moral evaluation. What type of freedom is required to judge them morally? To answer this question, two kinds of practical rationality will be distinguished.

Many computer games only call for the kind of practical rationality that is usually labeled 'instrumental rationality'. They set out a well-defined goal for the player to accomplish and the player acts rationally when she finds the most efficient means to reach it. Think, for example, of *SimCity 2000*, where the player has to successfully build and run a city. She has to find the best way to accomplish this task, but there seem to be no moral decisions involved in this process.

There is, however, a second type of practical rationality, that is increasingly being implemented in games. The player is given free choice in matters that do not merely appeal to our capacity to deploy instrumental reasoning. In *Call of Duty 5*, for example, the player, who incarnates a Russian soldier fighting its way through Berlin in 1945, is confronted with a group of German soldiers who want to surrender. She is, however, ordered by the commander of her unit to shoot them. If she does not do so, the commander will order some of her fellow soldiers to burn them alive with Molotov-cocktails. The designers of *Call of Duty 5* quite obviously use this scene to provoke some kind of ethical deliberation on the side of the player. What is the best thing to do? Shooting soldiers that are trying to surrender or causing them to be burned alive? The game gives the player the space to make a decision that cannot be made on the basis of instrumental rationality alone. And in *Grand Theft Auto 4*, the player roams a virtual city, where she can, for example, kill innocent pedestrians by running them over. But she does not have to do this: it is up to the player to decide for it.

More and more computer games allow the player to act freely, thereby fulfilling the necessary condition for labeling actions 'right' or 'wrong'. Why not simply apply our daily, non-virtual ethical paradigms to in-game actions without further ado? Why would the *necessary* condition to morally judge in-game actions, i.e. freedom, not be *sufficient*?

2. The problematic moral status of in-game actions

To show what remains problematic with regard to the application of the predicates 'right' and 'wrong' to in-game actions, a small detour must be made.

From a phenomenological perspective we can describe our being-in-a-virtual-world as a form of image-consciousness. We are dealing with objects *through* a mediating object: the image (Husserl 2005: 27). It is only because of the screen that the world of, for example *Call of Duty*, can be disclosed. Image-consciousness is characterized by *neutrality*, or the '*as-if*'-modification (Husserl 2005: 617). When I look, for example, at a photograph of my late grandfather, I do not really perceive him: it is only 'as if' I do. Objects intended in image-consciousness are 'beings-as-if'; not actually present, but only virtually there. Moreover, in image-consciousness, not only the objective correlates of my acts are neutralized, the mental acts themselves are too. Not only my grandfather has the 'as-if'-modality, also my seeing of him is neutralized and unreal. Immersed in the game environment nothing really happens, since the totality of conscious life - acts and correlates - is neutralized.

Let us return to the problem of morality in computer games. We discussed the effect of the ‘as-if’-modification on acts of virtual *perception* using the example of the photograph. But how does it affect *actions* realized in a game environment? We will argue that the ‘as-if’-modification challenges both consequentialism and deontology as paradigms to validate virtual actions.

Consequentialism judges particular acts by their consequences; by what they bring about. In computer games, however, everything brought about by an action is brought about ‘as if’. When I kill a character in *Grand Theft Auto*, I do not actually kill someone. In the strict sense, nothing is actually brought about in the game world, which explains why one cannot be convicted for something like virtual murder. May be we should resort to an ethical framework that focuses not so much on the outcome of actions - in virtuality, there are no true outcomes - , but on the *intentions* grounding action. But, as we have seen, the ‘as-if’-modification not only encompasses the correlates of acts, but also acts themselves. When I ‘kill’ someone in *Grand Theft Auto*, there is no intention to actually kill someone, it is only as-if I am going to kill a virtual life form. Actually, I am not pulling a trigger to fire a bullet when I play a game: I am only touching the mouse.

This leads us into another problem with regard to morality in computer games. Immersion in the game environment renders the question concerning the identity of an agent, and thereby the one concerning *responsibility*, problematic. At first sight, it seems clear who is the subject corresponding to the ‘as-if’-intentions: me. Things are, however, a bit more complicated. Immersed in an image-world, I do not only lose track of the actual world surrounding me, but also of my actual ego. Husserl makes a helpful distinction between the actual I and a so-called image-world-I (Husserl 2005: 556). In *Call of Duty 2*, also situated in World War II, the player incarnates the character of corporal Taylor. While playing, I become in a way corporal Taylor; I respond to artificial teammates shouting “Taylor, get your ass over here”, by coming their way. Whereas the actual I sits in front of the computer using the controller, the image-world-I (corporal Taylor) is in France around 1944, firing at German soldiers. The actual I and the image-world-I are separated by an abyss.

Thus, the neutralization implied in every form of image-consciousness modifies everything: intentions, consequences, and even the subject responsible for all these things. In the virtual image-world nothing really counts: every action seems to escape the grasp of ethical verdicts. Does this imply that game environments constitute not so much an unethical, but rather an ‘a-ethical’ domain of action? But why then are we disturbed by excessive violence or perverted sexual acts in computer games? Why are we not at ease with people engaging in, for example, virtual rape, even if we know very well that, *actually*, they are not doing anything wrong?

3. Discomfort and relief

In this last paragraph, a possible ground for our discomfort with certain kinds of in-game actions will be put forward. Hopefully, this will lead to a nuanced account of the problem of morality in computer games that does not overlook the relative harmlessness of virtual action, but still explains why we are not at ease with certain types of in-game behaviour.

In order to do this, we will leave the high-tech world of computer games behind us for a moment, to consider a more traditional example of neutralized action: the theatre. Everything that happens on stage, happens in the ‘as-if’-modification. The actor is never really acting, i.e. not realizing actual practical intentions, but rather *depicts* actions. In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, the actor playing the part of Marcus Brutus is, of course, not actually murdering the actor playing Caesar; the murder is only depicted. There is a clear distinction here between the actor as an actual person (depicting Marcus Brutus) and his image-world-I (Marcus Brutus). When one does not know that one is looking at a play, the revelation of this distinction can come as a relief. In the British comedy series *Blackadder III*, situated in the late eighteenth century, the Prince Regent – who is said to have ‘a peanut for a brain’ – attends Shakespeare’s *Caesar*. The moment Brutus stands behind Caesar with a knife, he shouts: “Look behind you, mister Caesar!”, and after Brutus has murdered Caesar the prince calls in the guards to arrest the actor playing Brutus. When, however, he is told by his butler that it was just a play, and that the actor playing Caesar is standing upright on the stage awaiting applause, he is utterly relieved. The relief the prince feels is, however, different from the relief one would feel when an *actual* attempt to murder someone has been made but failed. In the context of the theatre namely, the murder itself *it still there*, but it appears in a different light, in a new modus of presentation: the ‘as-if’-modification.

This example seems to support the idea that ‘actions-as-if’, like in-game actions, can never be labelled ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Although something ethically condemnable seems to happen on the stage, our discomfort fades away to make place for relief once we are aware of the fact that is ‘only’ a play. We should, however, dwell a little longer on the example of the theatre, for we have left a possibility unexplored: a movement not from discomfort to relief, but the other way around, from relief to uneasiness. The exploration of this other possibility might help us understand why we are so uncomfortable with excessive violence or sexual perversity in computer games.

In an essay on pictures, Robert Sokolowski argues that an actor needs an audience to act (Sokolowski 1992: 17). He gives the example of an actor playing Richard III without an audience. A possible effect of this could be that the actor starts losing himself in the role. No longer does he merely depict Richard III, he rather starts to act and feel like him. According to Sokolowski, the actor now *imagines* to be Richard III, and imagining is a far more serious activity than depicting. Whereas in depiction the emphasis is on difference (I am depicting *someone else*), in imagination it is on identity (I coincide with the person I depict). The example of Shakespeare’s *Caesar* started with a feeling of relative uneasiness (‘Someone is being murdered!’) and ended with relief (‘It was only a play’). Here it is the other way around: what seems to be ‘just acting’ starts to swallow the actor. Whereas she is normally in a position best described as ‘disengaged’ - she does not coincide with what and whom she is depicting -, this disengagement seems totally lost here. The actor is no longer depicting Richard III, but rather coincides with him. This strikes us as worrying and we might interfere to re-establish the distinction between the image-world-I and the actual person. Doing so, we aim to re-neutralize the de-neutralized situation.

Let us now return to our theme proper: the moral status of in-game actions. Although we have argued that it is hard to label these acts ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, some of them seem not right at all. We have appealed to the somewhat vague concept of ‘discomfort’ to indicate this. Our discussion of this concept in the context of theatre and play has hopefully contributed to its

clarity. We feel discomfort when there is no clear distinction between the actual person and the ('immoral') image-world-I. The hypothesis I would like to put forward, is that something similar bothers us about, for example, people who are engaging in virtual rape.

Our problem with the virtual rapist, is that we suspect her of not being in a disengaged state. We suspect her, in other words, of not merely *depicting* a rapist in a game, but of *imagining* to be one while performing acts of virtual rape. The virtual rapist is probably not only aroused 'as if' by her actions; she is *actually* aroused. This causes the difference between her actual personality and her image-world-I to *collapse*. In a way, these two distinct personalities start to coincide, which makes the in-game action more than just virtual. The knowledge that someone engages in virtual rape makes us feel uncomfortable not because it actually harms someone - it does not - but because we think that someone doing this is actually aroused by it. This makes it very hard to say that this person is just depicting a rapist in the world of the computer game. It is more likely that she imagines *to be one*, and this is, as made clear by the examples about the theatre, a far more serious and far less playful activity.

Implicit in our argument is that in-game acts are not in themselves discomforting. It is not the case that virtual rape is intrinsically more disturbing than, for instance, virtual murder, as some have tried to argue (Luck 2009). We have developed an argument referring to the subjective disposition of the person performing the in-game act. Not only in the case of virtual rape but also in the one of virtual murder can we be disturbed when an agent is swallowed by the game to a degree that it becomes impossible to distinguish the actual person from the image-world-I. There is something discomforting about someone who imagines himself to be a killer, in stead of 'merely' depicting one in the context of the theatre or the computer game. Most players of violent computer games seem aware of this distinction. They do not think of themselves as killers: there is still a wide enough gap between themselves as actual persons and their virtual incarnations in the computer generated world. They are immersed in the game, but still conscious of this immersion and of the abyss separating the virtual and the actual. They may be depicting immoral acts, but they are not imagining to be really engaged in them. In this last case, virtual actions start to contaminate the actual person. What happens in the image-world starts to affect her own personality. It becomes clear, namely, that she not only takes pleasure in depicting murder or rape but is interested in these activities themselves, using the game as a substitute for what she actually wants to do.

Our phenomenological approach has now reached its outer limits. The best it could do is provide us with an explanation of the discomfort we feel when someone realizes acts in computer games that, if they were to be realized in the actual world, would be condemned as immoral. What it cannot do, however, is to provide us with a final normative verdict on the moral status of particular virtual acts like in-game rape or violent murder. It cannot do this because phenomenology is essentially *descriptive* and crosses its own limits when *prescribing* something. The development of concrete policy regarding virtual behaviour requires, on top of philosophical analysis, a normative reflection and, of course, careful political deliberation, taking into account philosophical insight as well as empirical reality.

Games

CALL OF DUTY 2, Activision, PC, 2005

CALL OF DUTY 5, Treyarch, PC, 2008
FLIGHT SIMULATOR, Microsoft, PC 2006
GRAND THEFT AUTO 4, Rockstar Games, PC, 2008
SECOND LIFE, Linden Lab, PC, 2003
SIMCITY 2000, Maxis, PC, 1993
TOPSPIN 3, PAM Development, Wii, 2008

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