

FREEDOM AS 'MEANINGFUL CHOICE':  
PHILOSOPHICAL LESSONS FROM COMPUTER GAMEPLAY

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**Introduction**

Typically, when philosophers consider computer games, they tend to assume that they already know what the interesting or important problems are and scour games for illustrations of their own preconceived issues and views about them. We're already familiar with this tactic from many 'philosophical' approaches to literature and other art forms. Much less common are approaches that are open to the possibility that certain features of computer games may be instructive about how philosophers formulate their own central questions and even suggest fresh lines of approach to them. I will adopt this less typical perspective in the present essay. The particular 'philosophical space' I want to explore is that rarely visited area between aesthetics and metaphysics, where evaluative terms often used to characterize artworks meet metaphysical issues, in this case, the question of free will.

Game designers, commentators, bloggers, and critics often employ such terms as 'engaging,' 'deep,' or 'speaking to the human condition'<sup>1</sup> as positive and desirable features of (aesthetically) 'good' or 'praiseworthy' computer games. While I have not found any very concerted attempts to clarify or unpack such terms or phrases,<sup>2</sup> we might begin with another phrase that is sometimes mentioned in connection with them: the notion of 'meaningful choice' as a feature of some of the 'best' computer games. The intuitive idea here is that one feature of 'deep,' 'engaging,' or

'meaningful' games is that their gameplay involves choices on the part of the player that significantly influence the subsequent course and experience of gameplay and that these choices appear to be, in some sense, free or at least 'uncoerced.' We might put this latter point in more precise counterfactual terms by saying that, had a player chosen differently, his or her subsequent experience of the game would be significantly different.

Painting in admittedly very broad strokes, the two currently dominant philosophical approaches, the analytical and Continental (or perhaps, more accurately for the latter, phenomenological or hermeneutic), generally tend to highlight two very different aspects of this idea of 'meaningful choice.' On the one hand, more phenomenological or hermeneutic approaches tend to focus upon the nature of 'meaning' in relation to the overall 'lived-experience' of human beings (or what Heidegger, for example, calls "*Dasein*" or Sartre refers to as "Being-for-itself"). They tend to maintain, as a fundamental assumption, that the '(radically) free production of meaning' is the defining feature of what it means to be human. For this approach, choice is, at most, only one among a complex ensemble of ways in which the 'meaning of human being' is created or disclosed to us. On the other hand, analytically oriented philosophers have tended to focus upon the question of whether the concept of 'free choice' is logically coherent or, alternatively, consistent with empirical evidence or current scientific theorizing. When the question of 'meaning' comes up, it is usually in the context of logical or linguistic considerations. The point is that the idea of 'meaningful choice,' as an important aesthetic element of computer gameplay, seems to occupy that region of dead space created by the familiar disconnect between the two currently dominant philosophical approaches. It is exactly because it occupies such a position that we might anticipate that exploring this concept, as it appears in the aesthetic discourse of computer gaming, may shed some light on the limitations of current philosophical approaches and serve as an example of ways in which a consideration of computer games might contribute to the broader discourse of contemporary philosophy.

## **I. A Philosophical Dilemma and the Parameters of Computer Games**

We can put the preceding broad sketch in terms of a dilemma with respect to the concept of 'meaningful choice.'

**Either:** Computer gameplay (like many other things) can be meaningful, apart from the question of whether free choice (at least in a practical or deliberative sense) is involved or not;

**Or:** Computer gameplay can be regarded as meaningful (in some relevant sense) only if it can be shown that the concept of free choice is both logically coherent and its exercise actually possible.

Now the very ontological parameters of computer games and gameplay impose certain constraints on how this dilemma might be addressed. First, the program-assemblage that provides the material/software foundations for any gameplay at all is, in several familiar senses, deterministic. With respect to gameplay, this is especially so in that the program-assemblage constituting any computer game dictates that there is only a finite and determinate set of choices presented within gameplay as well as a similar (finite) set of endings or final states to the game (sometimes only one) at which any series of such choices eventually arrives. On the other hand, the series of choices made by any individual player seems, in the process of gameplay itself, 'free' in that, at certain points, the player is confronted by alternatives that could have equally well (that is, 'freely,' at least on some interpretations of this term) been chosen. This point is supported by the fact that the same player can replay the game making different choices at various junctures, in some cases arriving at one among several different endings, in others terminating at a single finish point.<sup>3</sup>

## **II. A Framework for Confronting the Dilemma**

In order to begin to address this dilemma from the point of view of computer gameplay, we need first to distinguish three aspects of gameplay:

- (1) a **micro-level**, consisting of *choices* presented in the game and typically responded to through input on a game-controller;
- (2) a **median-level** of series of such responses to choices presented that constitute a set of possible *paths* through the game; and
- (3) a **macro-level**, formed by the *final state or states* of the game at which at least some paths eventually arrive when one has 'completed the game.'

Employing these distinctions, I'll begin by suggesting that any account of 'meaningful choice' in computer gameplay should start with the median-level and ask, "Given the limitations imposed by the range of discrete choices, on the one hand, and determinate end-states, on the other, to what degree does gameplay permit the construction of different paths through the game?" I propose starting with the median-level of possible game paths for two main reasons. First, it is the game paths produced in the course of gameplay that serve to connect the discrete choices presented in the game with the ultimate consequences of any given series of choices. Without the series of possible game paths, the discrete choices presented in the game would be entirely disconnected from and independent of the consequences of those choices and ultimately the end states possible within the game. Playing the game would be like taking an online quiz that is randomly graded. Second, it is the actual game path produced by a given series of choices that most constitutes what we might call the 'experience' of the game. Most of the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition (not to mention their ancestor, Kant) has emphasized that 'experience' involves a good deal more than just the registering of discrete sensory impressions – that it also involves some sort of coherent ordering and connection of those sensory impressions in space, through time, and according to some concept of causality. In the context we are considering, it is the series of choices and their

consequences for gameplay, that is, the game paths, which most correspond to this richer sense of 'experience.' And, in general, this seems to be the heart of what any gamer means when he or she refers to the 'experience' of any computer game.

The idea, then, is that choices in gameplay are 'meaningful' only if they fulfill three basic conditions. First, the choices presented must be connected with one another in such a way that series of them constitute particular game paths, each of which yields a distinctive experience of the game. Second, for such series of choices to be meaningful, the alternative game paths that they constitute must be 'strongly differential' among themselves. While I admit that the phrase 'strongly differential' begs for some further clarification of its own, it's sufficient for the present discussion to say that alternative choices must serve to constitute alternative game paths that result in discernably different experiences of the game. We might say that the game paths must be sufficiently different to 'make a difference' to the player (and, perhaps in most cases, the more different, the better). Incidentally, this seems exactly what many gamers, commentators, and critics have in mind when they speak of the 'replay value' of a game. Finally, for choices to be meaningful, at least some significant number of the game paths that they produce must converge, in some experientially coherent way, upon the final state or states dictated by the game's program-assemblage. That is, any final state arrived at within a game must be capable of being regarded by the player as a consequence of choices made in the game forming a game path with some final state as its terminus. Note that the fact that there is only one final state of the game does not defeat this condition, since, on this view, the experience of game play is much more a function of alternative differential game paths than of the final state or states at which they arrive. By the same token, 'degrees of freedom' at the level of discrete choices is not a determining issue, since differential alternative game paths can just as well be constituted by a series of simple binary choices as they can by choices involving a wider range of options.

To return now to our original dilemma, the approach I've suggested on the basis of an analysis of the concept of 'meaningful choice' in computer games has several important implications. First, it suggests, in response to the first horn of the dilemma, that choices are much more intimately connected with the concept of meaning than most Continental approaches have assumed. The key is to see that, while their approach may have some validity as a critique of other perspectives that treat 'choice' as an isolated and discrete action (such as the way in which Kant typically presented his moral theory, for example), it is the game paths formed by connected *series of choices* that define whether or not gameplay is experienced as meaningful. An analysis of computer games, then, brings us to see that choice is not just one among other elements of meaning but is, in some important ways, the primary one. Second, with respect to the second horn of the dilemma, there seems no reason to assume that the question of whether 'free choice' is possible in some metaphysical sense or not has much (or any) bearing on the question of whether the game paths arising from alternative series of choices can be experienced as meaningful in the sense outlined above. In fact, the program-assemblage underlying all computer games is (in a particular sense) a deterministic framework and, in principle at least, all possible game paths available within the game's program could be finitely enumerated and described. Even so, that in no way undermines the player's experience of any given game path as meaningful. While the old adage, "There are no replays in life," may harbor some fundamental metaphysical truth, leading some thinkers to reject the ideas of 'freedom' and 'free choice' as incoherent, replays in computer games *are* always possible as are the different meaningful experiences associated with them. Neither metaphysical nor digital determinism, then, has much to do with the sort of meaningful choice involved in computer games and it is arguably the case that digital determinism is one of the primary conditions on the basis of which the choices involved in computer gameplay can be experienced as meaningful.

### III. 'Meaningful Choice' Deployed as an Aesthetic Concept: Evaluating Some Recent Computer Games

I will now employ the concept of meaningful choice, and the framework proposed above providing a partial analysis of it, to consider the aesthetic merits of three recent computer games.

The first game I want to consider is *The Last of Us*.<sup>4</sup> *The Last of Us* has been widely praised as one of the 'best' – most 'engaging,' 'deepest,' and 'relevant to human experience' – games of its generation, if not of all time. *Metacritic* calculated a score of 95/100 based on 98 reviews.<sup>5</sup> This almost universal acclaim is frequently based upon, among other things such as its compelling graphics, the fact that it confronts the player with frequent meaningful choices and that, closely associated with this, it possesses a high degree of replay value. A typical review is that of Colin Moriarty.<sup>6</sup> Speaking of the multiple and mutually exclusive choices required for 'crafting' in the game, he writes, "How you choose to navigate these forks in the road have considerable effects on how you approach future enemy encounters, adding a special dynamic to *The Last of Us* not found in very many games."

However, Moriarty, like most other reviewers, also notes that the real heart of the game is the development of the "dysfunctional father/daughter" relationship between the game's two main characters, Joel and Ellie. Joel loses his own daughter early in the game and is later 'hired' to take Ellie, through a huge and dangerous territory, to a medical research facility in hopes that her physical condition, which somehow made her immune to the plague decimating the population, may hold the key to its cure. Throughout their odyssey, both characters (whose identity the player alternately assumes) are faced with choices that produce markedly different game paths. For example, fairly early on, and continuing through much of the game, Joel is confronted with the difficult choice of whether to allow Ellie to be armed. On

the one hand, he recognizes the value of having a companion who can protect herself and assist when multiple enemies are encountered; on the other, he has serious qualms about making her an accomplice, with its attendant loss of innocence and experience of guilt, in the inevitably violent and mortal confrontations that frequently beset them. Deciding to allow Ellie to be armed or not both alters the course of the game as well as the ongoing development of their relationship.

Still, on the face of it, one might argue that this game does not serve as a particularly convincing example of the point I have been making. First, there is only a single ending upon which all game paths seem to converge. Second, the design of the game is such that the choices that construct alternative game paths do not occur at any single, obvious, or easily identifiable points in the game. The game design, that is, does not (like the original *Bioshock* or *Spec Ops: The Line*) present identifiable and clearly presented 'decision points' that will determine or contribute to one among other possible endings. Finally, the game is strongly narratological or diegetic, in the sense that the game itself has a 'story to tell' and a major part of the experience of the game is participating in and living through a preconceived overall story-line. From this perspective, a critic of my views might well argue that, if this game deserves the aesthetic praise that it has received, and granting the points I've just made, then 'meaningful choice' cannot be such a central concept for the aesthetics of computer gaming as I've suggested it is.

I want to respond that a more nuanced interpretation of this game proves otherwise and does so in a way very instructive about some of the philosophical assumptions we might make about what is involved in the idea of "meaningful choice." The key to my response, as well as to the 'depth' of this game so often noted by reviewers, lies in the fact that the game concerns, more than anything else, the developing emotional relationship between Joel, a father who has recently lost a daughter of his own, and Ellie, a girl about the age of his daughter who has lost her parents. The



'differential' operative in the alternative experiences of this game is primarily emotional and is defined by the different choices of each of the main characters in response to the alternative choices of the other. In a way virtually unique among most current computer games, diegetic alternatives are almost always associated with and emerge from the ongoing development of Joel and Ellie's emotionally complex relationship. Given this, it makes little difference that all of the alternative game paths converge, diegetically speaking, upon a single ending. The much discussed ending is itself emotionally and morally complex and problematic, and how a given player interprets its significance is a direct function of how he or she has experienced a given game path, consisting of the series of the many choices made by the player on behalf of each character that define the development of their relationship.

Within the framework that I have developed, then, we can say that the many and often subtle micro-level choices presented in the game play of *The Last of Us* are meaningful not because they lead to different endings, but because they form median-level game paths that are strongly differential with respect to the player's experience of the unfolding emotional relationship between the two main characters. The convergence of these alternative (so to speak, 'emotional') game paths at a single macro-level ending succeeds so well because the emotionally and morally complex ending itself reflects the complexities of any and all of the alternative experiences of Joel and Ellie's relationship.

The second game I want to consider is *Beyond: Two Souls*,<sup>7</sup> a game frequently compared with *The Last of Us* for, among other reasons, the fact that its main character, Jodie, 'acted' through motion capture by Ellen Page, not only was about the same age as Ellie but bore a striking resemblance to her (which led to some legal controversies between the two companies that produced the games). The reception of *Beyond: Two Souls* was decidedly mixed, as indicated by a *Metacritic* score of

70/100.<sup>8</sup> Most of the positive responses to the game focused upon the voice acting of the main characters and the innovative use of motion capture technology, without which, one suspects, the *Metacritic* score would have been considerably lower. Typical of the reviews is that of Jim Sterling,<sup>9</sup> who concludes his critical assessment with:

“Like a sociopath, *Beyond: Two Souls* knows how to act like it has a heart, while providing nothing of the emotional depth required to connect with an audience. Its characters can smile, and cry, and tell us they're feeling all of these feelings, but their paper-thin presentation and the frequent narrative dead ends prevent any of their pantomime from becoming too convincing.”

While Sterling, like most other reviewers, identify a number of problems with this game – lack of character development, a disjointed storyline aggravated by a complicated flashback mode of presentation, and unconvincing game mechanics, among others – I would suggest that many of these can be traced back to a single problem with the game: lack of meaningful choice. True, there are numerous choices presented throughout the game, but they tend to involve things that make no difference at all to the overall experience of gameplay. Such choices involve, for example, choosing the color of blouse or other articles of clothing that Jodie will wear, deciding whom to dance with at a party, or what to select from her refrigerator for dinner. One could certainly replay the game making some or even completely different choices and it would have no effect whatever in defining alternative game paths.

In fact, the game is structured in terms of Jodie recovering segments of her past in a non-linear way, a process that is represented between episodes on screen as a time-line in which the pre-titled ‘blanks,’ with little connection other than chronological order among them, are progressively filled in. At most, the player gains a broader understanding of how Jodie has come to be as she is when we first meet her, but

there is little actual character development or alternative game paths to this discovery. And, within such a construct, we already know from the beginning what the ending will be (since the rest is all in flashback mode), so there is no question of alternative endings – we simply finish the game when all ‘blanks’ have been filled in.

In the terms that I’ve proposed, *Beyond: Two Souls* presents a clear case of a game in which no meaningful choice occurs because the choices that are presented play no role in creating differential game paths, a complete disconnect of what I’ve called the micro- and median-levels. It is for this reason, I suggest, that reviewers like Sterling invoke perhaps the most aesthetically damning term with which a game can be characterized: that it is boring.<sup>10</sup>

The final game that I want to consider is *Grand Theft Auto IV*.<sup>11</sup> *GTA IV* (as it’s usually referred to in reviews) received a *Metacritic* rating of 98/100, one of the highest ever achieved by a computer game.<sup>12</sup> It was almost universally praised by computer game critics for its pioneering ‘open world’ format; its ‘realistic’ setting; its ‘improved’ game mechanics; and the character development of its main protagonist, Niko Bellic. Perhaps the most common praise accorded it, however, concerned the ‘freedom’ granted to the player in gameplay. Typical of such reviews was that of Andrew Reiner<sup>13</sup> :

“If you thought that the previous Grand Theft Auto titles offered an amazing level of freedom, you haven’t seen anything yet. In *Grand Theft Auto IV*, you really feel like you have ownership over the entire experience. You build relationships, approach missions the way you want to, and even dictate the flow of the story. In true GTA style, you do the dictating with your gun.”

There is no doubt that many critics were right: *GTA IV* did, in fact, represent a groundbreaking moment in the development of the ‘open world’ or ‘sandbox’ format

and, in some sense of 'freedom,' it did offer players an extremely wide range of 'free choices.' However, the question, which I would also put to the entire genre of 'open world' games, concerns whether the sort of freedom offered the player amounts to a series of meaningful choices that define strongly differential game paths and experiences of the game. Although there is an overall storyline (for the single-player game), the player is presented with so many choices – of cars to steal, 'enemies' to dispatch, locations to visit, activities to pursue, characters to meet, even clothes to wear – that the storyline is continually lost sight of and subordinated to the sheer number of choices offered. The player is, in effect, overwhelmed by the sheer number of choices, very few of them sufficiently meaningful to constitute any experientially coherent game path, let alone alternative game paths that are strongly differential among themselves.

We might characterize this problem as a tension between freedom, understood as measured by the sheer quantity of choices available (reminiscent of Hobbes's view of freedom as 'absence of external constraint'), and meaningful choice, determined more qualitatively as decisions that 'make a difference,' forming alternative and recognizably differential paths through and experiences of the game (a view perhaps more in line with such critics of Hobbes as Rousseau and Kant). Despite all the possible choices that one might make in game play (and in replay), there remains something monotonous about *GTA IV*, a sense that, however differently one might have chosen, the overall experience of the game remains much the same. [I might even note that, after playing the game for more hours (and stealing more cars and dispatching more victims) than I'd like to admit, I wasn't even aware that there was some overall diegetic element until I began reading some of the online reviews and walkthroughs of the game.] Such an overall experience of the game seems to indicate that the 'freedom' that such open world games offer tends to conflict with and work against the 'meaningful choice' that is often cited as a central feature of the most aesthetically compelling games.

This tension becomes especially evident when we consider the connection between the many choices available within the game with the game's 'ending.' Viewed in terms of the game's storyline, there is, in fact, a single ending of the game, which involves Niko killing a notorious mobster named Pegorino. However, viewed from the point of view of the overall experience of the game, the whole idea of an 'ending' to the game becomes ambiguous. The game offers several options on this score. First, one could play the game simply as an exploration of the many options it offers, perhaps exploring Liberty City and its 'delights,' thereby creating a unique, though ultimately random, game path without arriving at any 'ending' other than the arbitrary point at which one decides to stop playing. Alternatively, one might engage in a sort of 'mixed play mode' (and I suspect this is what most players actually do) that combines more or less random exploration with occasional returns to the main storyline. In this case, only persistence will determine whether the storyline's 'ending' is finally reached or not; a player may well decide, after a while, that any point along the storyline constitutes the 'ending,' perhaps without even realizing that there is more to come. Finally, one might make a concerted effort to concentrate on following the already plotted storyline to its 'official ending,' hewing close to the sequence of overt 'missions' that are presented as the game progresses. Doing so, however, will tend to significantly diminish exactly those aesthetic features that many commentators find most compelling about the game.

In the framework that I've presented, the problem involved in the ambiguity of 'ending' mainly concerns the disconnect between the median-level of game paths and the macro-level of any 'ending' (in whatever sense) that is reached. True, there may be some meaningful choices along the way, but they are intermingled with and often submerged in a mass of other choices that make no real difference to either the player or the diegetic development of the game. As such, they fail to produce strongly differential game paths that connect with later consequences, further

choices, and ultimately to any aesthetically satisfying 'ending.' While *GTA IV* offers a massive degree of 'freedom' at the micro-level, within which a much more limited number of meaningful choices may be included, and while some of these may (sometimes seemingly by accident) coalesce into a much more restricted number of differential game paths and experiences of the game, even these, given the background noise of the 'free' but irrelevant choices, fail to coherently connect with any 'ending,' the very idea of which (as I noted above) remains ambiguous. Note that this is not a case of the sort of ambiguous ending that I mentioned in connection with *The Last of Us*, where the ambiguity of the ending reflects the complexities of the emotional relationship of the main characters. Rather, it involves an ambiguity in the very sense of what might serve as an 'ending' at all for any or all of the massive number of game paths that the game permits through the even greater number of choices that it presents. (I might add that my own replays of the game felt more like a disconnected series of *déjà vu* moments rather than genuinely different and alternative experiences of the game.)

#### **IV. Some Philosophical Lessons from Computer Gameplay**

I began this essay by suggesting that we approach computer games employing a perspective different than that typical of many current philosophical engagements with them: that we consider the possibility that certain features of computer games might instruct philosophers on how they formulate their basic questions and attempt to provide responses to them. I'll conclude by illustrating this with several lessons that philosophers might learn from a consideration of computer games like the one I've developed here.

When philosophers discuss the issue of 'freedom' or, more precisely, 'free will,' they tend to formulate the debate in terms of four major alternatives: determinism,

libertarianism, compatibilism, and incompatibilism.<sup>14</sup> We can eliminate incompatibilism as an alternative relevant for our discussion, since it typically functions either as a refutation of compatibilism (leaving the choice between determinism and libertarianism undecided) or as an extended way to argue in favor of determinism. We can, then, assume for the present that the first three are the major alternatives to be considered. If we now ask which of the three alternatives seems best supported by our discussion of meaningful choice in computer games, I would propose that compatibilism (under a specific interpretation) is the preferred alternative. First, as I indicated earlier, the digital program-assemblage that forms the basis for all computer games is a deterministic system, in that it dictates a predetermined set of choices, game paths, and endings available within a given game. On the other hand, within this deterministic framework, an individual player is free to choose between (or among) the alternatives presented at any point, thus creating differing game paths and experiences of the game. It is in this specific sense that I would suggest that a compatibilist view is most consistent with the actual mechanics of computer games.

Still, for philosophical purposes, it's equally important to note both the advantages and limitations that such a claim has for broader philosophical discussions. First, the sort of 'freedom' or 'free choice' involved here assumes a type of counterfactual interpretation of such concepts that holds that a choice is 'free' if and only if one could have chosen otherwise. Within the context of computer games, this condition is clearly satisfied by the fact that such choices are uncoerced by the program and that replays involving different choices are always possible. However, it by no means decisively answers the broader 'metaphysical' question, often at the heart of philosophical discussions of this issue, of whether, in fact, the player is 'free' (or exercises some special capacity of 'free will') in any of his or her individual choices, even if he or she chooses differently on replay. Nor does it address the issue, sometimes raised by some libertarians, that being free to choose among specific,

limited alternatives is not a sufficiently robust idea of what is involved in an adequate concept of 'free choice.' On this score, it is likely that neither most convinced determinists nor libertarians will be persuaded that the sort of compatibilism that I have sketched in the context of computer games goes very far in clarifying or resolving the real issues with which they (respectively) are concerned. For causal determinists, in particular, the idea of 'free choice' within a framework that is itself deterministic is too weak an idea on which to base any cogent compatibilist theory. And for libertarians, especially of the more phenomenological or existential type, the sort of 'free choice' that such a framework permits falls far short of the sort of 'radical freedom' that they sometimes advocate.

Still, there is a way of interpreting the sort of compatibilism I've sketched that is worth further philosophical consideration.<sup>15</sup> Suppose that, along with numerous contemporary scientists, we regard the natural order (or 'reality') as operating according to digital principles (a view variously supported by such ideas as DNA ordering and replication, quantum theory, and neuroscience, among others). Suppose, further, that this constitutes a digital (and hence deterministic) framework of determinate alternatives, the realization of any one of which is equally possible (even if some may be more probable than others). Finally, suppose that human intervention (i.e. 'choice') is at least one of the factors involved in determining which of certain alternatives are realized (and others not). With such a set of assumptions, derived from a consideration of computer games but consistent with other scientific and philosophical convictions, we might begin to sketch a plausible compatibilist view. Though it will likely not satisfy more extreme determinists and libertarians, it may at least provide a fresh and suggestive approach to some longstanding philosophical controversies.

To extend this line of reflection a bit further, I would suggest that the threefold



distinction of 'levels' I developed in considering computer games might also have some broader applications beyond this more restricted discussion. To capture what is involved in free will and human action, many thinkers from otherwise quite different orientations (among them Aristotle, Kant, Gadamer, Ricoeur, MacIntyre, and Habermas) have suggested that focusing solely upon single isolated cases of choice or decision will always prove philosophically insufficient. Rather, discrete choices are meaningful or significant (especially in an ethical sense) only when they are connected with other, both earlier and later, choices in series constituting something like a 'life-path' or what Aristotle and MacIntyre refer to as 'virtues.' And these, in turn, can be meaningful only if they can be seen, by an agent, as having some intelligible and (relatively) predictable connection with an outcome (such as 'happiness,' or 'the human good,' or a 'meaningful life'). Again, I'm not presuming that this framework, drawn from a consideration of computer games, will settle all or even any such philosophical disputes, but it can, perhaps, serve as one productive way of formulating them that avoids some of the limitations of many current discussions of such issues.

Finally, to return to the beginning, I do think that there is one salient lesson we *can* learn from a consideration of the aesthetics (and, in a way, also metaphysics) of computer games. It is that the dilemma I stated earlier, produced by the differing and opposed approaches of the analytic and Continental traditions, serves only to reveal the present inadequacies of both. If 'meaningful choice' represents an important feature of the computer games we typically judge to be aesthetically valuable or engaging, and if these philosophical approaches undermine this basic concept by isolating 'meaning' and 'choice' from one another, then I think we have to take this as evidence of their own inadequacies as general philosophical perspectives. Rather, a consideration of 'meaningful choice' in computer games should teach us the lesson (adapting an adage of Kant) that "choice without meaning is blind, and meaning without choice is empty."

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Jonathon Blow, "Video Games and the Human Condition," lecture at Rice University, Sept. 27, 2010, available on You-Tube.

<sup>2</sup> But see Grant Tavinor, *The Art of Video Games* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) and Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and The Video Game* (Manchester U. Press, 2011). Both works offer ideas relevant in various ways for considering such terms, but they are more concerned with the broader status of computer games as 'aesthetic objects' rather than with the more specific meanings of aesthetic terms employed in 'practical criticism.'

<sup>3</sup> *The Stanley Parable* (Steam, PC/Mac, 2013) is a recent game that quite self-consciously explores exactly this issue.

<sup>4</sup> Naughty Dog, PS3, 2013

<sup>5</sup> *Metacritic*, CBS Interactive, July 2013

<sup>6</sup> "'The Last of Us' Review," IGN, June 5, 2013

<sup>7</sup> Quantic Dream, PS3, 2013

<sup>8</sup> *Metacritic*, CBS Interactive, October 2013

<sup>9</sup> "Review: Beyond: Two Souls," *Destructoid*, October 8, 2013

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*, Harvard U. Press, 2007, p. 151 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Rockstar Games, PS3, 2008

<sup>12</sup> *Metacritic*, CBS Interactive, September 2014, archived

<sup>13</sup> "Perfection," *Game Informer*, GameStop, April 2008

<sup>14</sup> For the current state of this debate in philosophy, see the Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (Oxford U. Press, 2005) and *Four Views on Free Will*, Fischer, Kane, Pereboom, and Vargas (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007.)

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Dennett, a self-confessed compatibilist, has explored something like this in such works as *Brainstorms* (MIT Press, 1981) and *Elbow Room* (Bradford, 1984).