

Narrative video game aesthetics and egocentric ethics

A Deweyan perspective

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Abstract

This article argues that video gaming allows for player-focused (egocentric) moral experience that can be distinguished from the other-focused (allocentric) moral experience that characterizes literature and film. Specifically, a Deweyan perspective reveals that video games afford first-personal rehearsals of moral scenarios that parallel how, in real life, individuals mentally rehearse the different courses of moral action available to them. This functional equivalence is made possible because the aesthetics of video games bear unique affinities to the human moral imagination. However, whereas the moral imagination may be limited in terms of the complexity and vividness of its analog imaginings, the ethically notable video game may draw on the medium's digital capacities in order to stage elaborate and emotionally compelling ethical rehearsals. The article concludes by applying this perspective to the ethically notable video game Undertale.

Keywords

Video games, ethics, morality, simulation, John Dewey

Introduction

Literature and film are frequently lauded for their *allocentric* nature. The fictions carried by these media are not centrally about the media user—the reader or the viewer—but about other people, whose circumstances may be very different from the media user's own circumstances. Therefore, literature and film are thought to offer an escape from the limiting perspective of the self. For example, philosopher Martha Nussbaum proclaims the novel's capacity to “wrest from our frequently obtuse and blunted imaginations an acknowledgment of those who are other than ourselves, both in concrete circumstances and even in thought and emotion” (2017, p. 400). Likewise, psychologists Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley argue that “engaging in the simulative experiences of fiction literature can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference” (2008, p. 173).

By contrast to the allocentricity of literature and film, video games may be said to offer principally *egocentric* experience: experience that is of and about the self. Players manifest their selves in game worlds through controllable character stand-ins, often termed “player characters.” The game worlds inhabited by these player characters revolve around the player's agency, such that most meaningful events in these worlds are prompted by the player's progression in completing difficult tasks or defeating powerful foes. Commonly evaluating the player's skill are score counters and in-game reward systems, which constitute feedback to the player about their accomplishments. In these ways at least, video gaming's gratifications are about players themselves: their stories and their accolades. The medium centers the user's own, egocentric experience to the point that it has been equated with “an experience of the self” by one prominent video game scholar (Perron, 2016, p. 200). In line with this perspective, the philosophers Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin (2016) have recently argued that video games present self-involving interactive fictions (SIIFs) that, as digital props, allow players to imagine *themselves* involved in varied scenarios.¹

This article argues that the ethics of video gameplay is notable for being as egocentric as other aspects of video gameplay, and that this should be seen as an experience-defining strength of the medium rather than as a weakness. The true ethical potential of video gaming may lie in challenging and educating the player's moral self directly rather than in transcending the self in the inner life of another. I begin the article by summarizing and extending Robson and Meskin's (2016) argument that video games are SIIFs. Then, through the lens of John Dewey's integrated moral and aesthetic philosophy, I explore how video games can involve the player's moral self. I propose that self-involving moral deliberation finds important parallels in the structure of self-involving video gameplay. These parallels allow video games to scaffold the player's moral imagination, animating it with a sense of arresting immediacy and meaningful consequence. I conclude the article by applying this perspective to the ethically ambitious role-playing video game *Undertale* (developed by Toby Fox, released 2015).

Video games as self-involving interactive fictions

Robson and Meskin's (2016) argument that video games are SIFs is primarily premised on players' discourses about their in-game actions. Rather than employ a third-person vocabulary appropriate to the allocentricity of traditional narrative media ("James Bond killed the bad guy, and he made it out alive"), players typically employ a first-person vocabulary appropriate to describing their own fictional efforts and accomplishments ("I killed the bad guy, and I made it out alive"). Non-player observers of gameplay commonly mark the same conviction in their second-person address to players. For example, they may ask whether "you," the player, chose selflessly to save or selfishly to sacrifice the Little Sisters in the first-person shooter *Bioshock* (developed by 2K Boston/2K Australia, released 2007). It seems very unlikely that such self-involving fictional discourse, intuitive and commonplace as it is, should be shorthand for extrafictional claims (e.g., "Did you make it the case that the player character in the *Bioshock* fiction saved the Little Sisters?"). Robson and Meskin delimit this argument to games that contain a substantial amount of fictional content with which the player can interact. My own discussion in what follows will target the ethics and aesthetics of narrative single-player games, but may also prove applicable to ethically notable multiplayer games.

Common emotional experiences afforded by video games likewise indicate that game fictions centrally involve the player's self. As game designer and novelist Naomi Alderman (2013) has pointed out, "while all art forms can elicit powerful emotions, only games can make their audience feel the emotion of agency. A novel can make you feel sad, but only a game can make you feel guilty for your actions." Guilt is a self-conscious emotion paradigmatically appropriate to a dyadic transaction whereby *I*, a feeling moral agent, have wronged *you*, a moral patient. Video games can stage such dyadic transactions and induce the guilt appropriate to the moral agent. For example, a player might feel guilty for having selfishly sacrificed a Little Sister character in *Bioshock* in order to gain new abilities. By contrast, guilt is not appropriate to a situation in which *I* learn about an injustice perpetrated by someone other than myself, unless *I* consider myself to be sharing in the offender's moral identity, as may be defined by ethnicity, family, history, class, vocation, etc. Thus, even a young contemporary German citizen might experience guilt in response to a film depicting Nazi war crimes because they consider their personal history to be intimately tied up with their nation's history. Traditional narrative media may elicit guilt in this and other special cases (e.g., Plantinga, 2009, pp. 68-75), but self-conscious emotion comes easy to a medium that is centrally concerned with its user's own choices and actions (Frome, 2006; Lazzaro, 2004; Perron, 2016).

Of course, the player's choices and actions could only produce guilt under a representational description. One does not feel bad about pressing buttons on a controller, or even about pressing some buttons more frequently or forcefully than other buttons. Rather, the guilt felt by the player is indexed to the player's self-initiated *fictional* misdeed; it is intelligible only as a player's response to his or her own agency within the game's

fictional world. Other paradigmatic emotional experiences afforded by video gameplay, sometimes termed *gameplay emotions* (Perron, 2016), are similarly self-conscious: pride in one's (fictional) accomplishments, for example, or disappointment in one's (fictional) failures. Video gaming's potential to elicit self-conscious emotion is another line of evidence that prototypical video games are self-involving interactive fictions.

Video gaming, then, fictionalizes experiences of choosing and acting, and of experiencing first-hand the consequences of one's choices and actions (Robson & Meskin, 2016). Among the kinds of experience open to such fictionalization are social experiences of doing right or wrong by fictional characters. Such interactions can provoke self-conscious moral emotions, including guilt, and they can make normative descriptors, such as "good," "affable," "selfish," and "murderer," fictionally true of a player. In short, such interactions can be of and about the player's own moral agency. Of course, this high-level characterization of the ethical potential of video gameplay leaves many questions unanswered. How does one get from pixels on a computer or television screen to specifically moral forms of imaginative experience, and how could such experience be said to involve the exploration and education of the player's moral self? The next two sections seek to answer these questions in showing that the aesthetics of video gameplay can *mediate* natural processes of self-involving moral deliberation through phenomenal and structural isomorphisms between these two domains. By "video gameplay," I refer to the activity of engaging with the rules of a video game, and via that engagement to partake in the fictional world of that video game. I take this notion to be intuitive enough. By "moral deliberation," I refer to the process of reasoning through and about alternative courses of morally relevant action. This latter notion is the topic of the next section.

A Deweyan perspective on moral deliberation

The nature of moral deliberation has been influentially rendered by the 19th- and 20th-century American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. Dewey centrally observes that moral difficulty presents to the experiencer as a felt psychic tension between various competing personal and social ends.² One may feel tense about whether to break a promise in order to help someone in need, or one may feel torn about whether to stay with or leave a romantic partner at a time of mounting crisis. In order to resolve the moral and emotional tension, the deliberator may mentally simulate the various courses of action open to them in order to find the course that best satisfies the various concerns involved. Crucially, this experience is not cool and abstract, but alive, affective, dynamic, and imaginatively dramatized; it is "played out" in the mind's eye. Dewey, with collaborator James H. Tuft, writes:

Deliberation is actually an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct. We give way, in our mind, to some impulses; we try, in our mind, some plan. Following its career through

various steps, we find ourselves in imagination in the presence of the consequences that would follow; and as we then like and approve, or dislike and disapprove, these consequences, we find the original impulse or plan good or bad. (1932, p. 303)

This process of imaginative deliberation, which Dewey elsewhere labels “dramatic rehearsal” (1922, p. 190), seeks in its moral application to encompass the full moral significance of the various competing courses of action open to the deliberator. “What do I desire?” “Who might help or hinder me, and how?” “Which valued principles might I violate?” “What consequences would, or could, my actions bring about?” Such deliberations may subjunctivize a dizzying array of concerns, desires, ends, conflicts, and conditionals. Finding one’s way may therefore require many imaginative “test runs.” Fesmire summarizes Dewey’s thoughts on the object of such deliberation:

Dealing comprehensively with conflicting tendencies is demanded of all deliberative processes. In moral deliberation, an experience is “complete” or “consummated” when we deal fruitfully with the whole system of desires pressing for recognition and resolution in a problematic situation, such as conflicts of long-range ends and short-range ends-in-view, along with pressing needs, desires, and ends of our own and of others, as well as contingent events, etc. (1995, p. 570)

To deliberate morally, then, is to deliberate imaginatively and comprehensively. It is to apprehend the morally relevant elements in a situation, and then integrate them in a unifying commitment to forward-looking action. This concretist moral epistemology is an essential corrective to abstractive and absolutist alternatives. Moral deliberation seldom if ever reduces to the application of an abstract rule to a concrete case; in truth, human sociality is far too complex, too riddled with nuance and contradiction, for such an approach to describe its practice (Johnson, 2014). As argued by Dewey, “the surrender of [the abstractive approach] would lead men to attend more fully to the concrete elements entering into the situations in which they have to act” (1984, p. 288). However, Dewey is also not blind to the fact that imaginative moral deliberation is not the only game in town. We deliberate not when we can, but when we feel that we must, that is, when sedimented social habit does not seem to provide a satisfactory fit with the pressing moral demands of a situation (Dewey, 1922, pp. 196-197). In this way, imaginative deliberation diffracts blind impulse into discernible lines of intentional action. It thereby affords the deliberator moral *foresight*.

A Deweyan conception of self-involving deliberation is at the very core of modern psychological studies of self-involving mental simulation, whether moral or otherwise. At the global level, enactive and embodied approaches to cognition, such as proposed by Barsalou (2008), stress the simulative character of human mental life. Johnson (1993, 2014) has analyzed the simulative nature of specifically moral cognition. His approach takes explicit inspiration from Dewey in describing the “moral imagination” as a form of dramatic rehearsal of competing courses of moral agency. This perspective, in turn, is

supported by recent studies of the mind's capacity to entertain self-involving counterfactuals in order to inform decision-making (Icard et al., 2018). These studies posit a Deweyan deliberative procedure in suggesting that moral deliberators evaluate candidate actions from an internal simulation of their context-dependent outcomes. Dewey's position further informs these and other studies in its insistence that the moral imagination operates over an experienced qualitative totality that involves the self.

For Dewey, the synthesizing and actuating imagination poises over the whole of human experience—including, pertinently, artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation. It is what enables the artist to achieve a unifying balance between the various formal and representational elements that may constitute a work of art. Prior to the achievement of such a balance, the artist's appraisal of the unfinished artwork results, as with moral deliberation, in a halting psychic tension. The work presents as disharmonious or incomplete: "an inclusive qualitative whole not yet articulated" (Dewey, 1980, p. 191). When the disordered elements are aesthetically harmonized, whether in actuality or preliminarily as "exercised in imagination" (ibid., p. 51), the psychological tension resolves in consummated experience and aesthetic emotion. A similar process of tensional resistance and sought-for resolution characterizes aesthetic perception, which aims finally to discern a "pervading qualitative unity" in the perceived work of art (ibid., p. 192).

Frequently stressing such fundamental convergences between aesthetic and moral imagining, Dewey rejects as facultative ideology the common compartmentalization of moral and aesthetic modes of experience. He notes that a sense of the vital importance of balanced resolution is common to both the aesthetic and moral domains: "justice [...] has a strong ally in the sense of symmetry and proportion" (Dewey & Tuft, 1932, p. 298). Common discourses on moral "beauty," "ugliness," and "balance" lend these claims plausibility, as do results from moral psychology indicating primitive conceptual mappings between moral and aesthetic domains. Thus, aesthetically pleasing or displeasing aspects of acts, persons, and situations exert correlative influences on the moral judgments predicated of them (Tsukiura & Cabeza, 2011). But there are deeper affinities still. In summarizing Dewey's integrative view, Johnson notes that "the aesthetic is that which makes it possible for us to have relatively unified, coherent, meaningful, and consummated experiences. Therefore, the aesthetic is present and intermingles in what we think of as the 'scientific,' the 'theoretical,' and the 'moral'" (1993, p. 208). The point of this "intermingling," in the case of the moral imagination, comes from the Humean observation that moral meaning and motivation do not ultimately originate in arithmetic reckonings or abstract principles, but instead in emotionally charged appreciations of persons and situations as we represent them. As a simple demonstration of this fact, observe your emotional response to a novel that engages your moral emotions—say, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). By contrast, observe your response to any concise summary of that same novel. If you are like most people, the novel will engage your moral thoughts and emotions whereas the summary will not. The reason for this disparity is that the novel

presents its themes to the moral imagination through its sustained aesthetic treatment: its rich characterization, evocatively elliptical dialogue, and poignant plot developments. In the same way, video games may be able to scaffold the player's moral imagination by infusing emotionally charged concepts into abstract moral considerations. Rather than consider detachedly whether it would be defensible to sacrifice one person in order to save five, or whether it is permissible to steal drugs to help a sick family member, players make subjectively meaningful decisions and take subjectively consequential actions. This "execution element" (Schulzke, 2014, p. 252; see also Zagal, 2009) comes to matter morally because it is aesthetically realized as imaginative experience.

Video game aesthetics and egocentric ethics

The Deweyan moral imagination simulates the workings of social reality and thereby mediates a connection between the deliberator's past and future social conduct. Video games, too, simulate various facets of reality, such as population dynamics, as in *SimCity* (developed by Maxis et al., released 1989), or automotive mechanics, as in *Gran Turismo* (developed by Polys Entertainment/Cyberhead, released 1997). Video games may also simulate facets of sociomoral reality (Shaffer et al., 2005). Just as the mind can render lively and dynamic representations of moral import to the mind's eye, so the video game can support experiences of moral conduct through its representations, that is, its graphical assets and models, prerecorded sounds, artificial intelligence, etc. For example, the characters that populate the virtual world of the adventure game *Life Is Strange* (developed by Dontnod Entertainment, released 2015) are ostensibly socially human. They are represented as having hopes, fears, beliefs, desires, regrets, heartbreaks, and other experiences and subjective states that we recognize in ourselves and in others. Moreover, these psychologically realized characters interact. They meet and clash in virtual settings, and often with grave social ramifications. Such representations of thinking, feeling, and interrelating social agents constitute props for the player's moral imagination.³ These props immerse the player in digitally vivified, traversable social environments (Tavinor, 2009, ch. 3).

The imaginative support of game worlds is in many ways similar to the imaginative support provided by films to their audiences. Both of these media provide iconic modal representations that capture and hold the attention of media users, who are invited to entertain the set of fictional truths thus depicted. As Currie notes, such works "give us, through the talents of their makers, access to imaginings more complex, inventive and colourful than we could often hope to construct for ourselves" (1997, p. 53). Films, however, cannot normally represent the media user's own choices and actions. Filmic representations instead focalize the experience of other persons—characters—many of which are fictional. We imaginatively engage these characters in order to understand the psychological forces that define and compel them. This process may educate us about the characters' social existence, though we cannot ourselves reach into and probe that

existence. In video gameplay, by contrast, the dynamic representations are keyed to a state machine—the underlying, representation-shuffling game engine—whose interactivity allows the player to partake in the game’s fiction (Juul, 2005, ch. 4). For example, in *Life Is Strange* we play as Max Caulfield, a young American woman whose high school experience involves her in matters of love, betrayal, violence, infidelity, and suicidism. It is a quintessentially moral experience, one of apprehending social convolution and subtlety before committing to action. At one point, Max must decide whether to report a fellow student for brandishing a loaded gun at another fellow student. That choice might seem easy, but the offending student has familial ties to the school management, and Max cannot prove what she saw. Moreover, the offending student, who has shown himself extremely prone to violent outburst, might come after Max if he were to find out that she had reported him. These and other considerations are likely to influence the player’s decision about whether to report the offender. By staging interactive fictions such as that of Max’s high school experience, video games may support imaginative “playings out” of different courses of intentional action with respect to the same initial conditions. And by supporting such moral experimentation, video gaming’s inherent egocentricity aligns the medium with the enactive moral imagination. It positions the player as a deliberative moral actor rather than as a contemplative observer.

However, whereas Deweyan imaginative rehearsal relies on unguided, analog imagining, the player’s projective rehearsal is supported, directed, and enlivened by the game’s digital representations. The medium of the moral imagination becomes itself supportively mediated. In being so mediated, it is not necessarily constrained by such finite mental resources as working memory and the stock of representations internally available to the deliberator. The game can provide novel representations and hold massive quantities of representations in the hardware platform’s virtual “memory.” It can simulate thinking and feeling agents, who will be meaningfully impacted by the player’s choices and actions, and it can represent such agents as being embroiled in harrowing social dilemmas. Finally, it can render such moral concepts to the player through audiovisual interfacing that rivals or surpasses the fidelity of purely mental imagery. Indeed, *Life Is Strange* does all these things. The game’s representations enable it to make moral agency come alive to immediate sensation, and, through sensation, to the moral imagination. This vital union of envioning aesthetics with deliberative ethics is peculiarly Deweyan. Through its aesthetic realization, the ethical gameplay experience is focused, intensified, and made personally meaningful.

An egocentric, deliberational perspective on the ethics of video games is in various ways anticipated by previous work in game studies and game design. I have already related it to work that conceives of video games as experiences of the self. Another illustrative parallel is to James Gee’s influential notion of *projective identity*, which denotes a primary way for a player to relate to a player character. Gee explains that the term plays

on two senses of the word “project” meaning both “to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character” [...] and “seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become” [...] I will represent this identity as “James Paul Gee as [the fictional character of] Bead Bead.” (2003, pp. 55-56)

This imaginative process parallels the Deweyan deliberator’s rehearsals as described above. The player’s own values and agency are projected onto a fictional player-character, and, through that manifested self, into the hypothetical game world. Another Deweyan theme, thus far unmentioned, is that projective engagement represents not just a process of moral discovery and determination, but of moral *self*-discovery and *self*-determination:

In my projective identity I worry about what sort of “person” I want her to be, what type of history I want her to have had by the time I am done playing the game. I want this person and history to reflect my values, though I have to think reflectively and critically about them. (ibid., p. 56)

So, too, for the Deweyan deliberator: “Superficially, the deliberation which terminates in choice is concerned with weighing the values of particular ends. Below the surface, it is a process of discovering what sort of being a person most wants to become” (Dewey & Tuft, 1932, p. 317). In both cases, the moral imagination does not simply proceed from the existing moral self, but reveals and revises the moral self through its reflexive rehearsals (see Consalvo et al., 2019). This perspective evokes the philosophy of Richard Kearney, who stresses that the moral imagination is not just allocentric—not just “responsive to the demands of the other”—but also “bids man to tell and retell the story of himself,” that is, to reflect on and revise the moral self in response to the other (1988, p. 395).

Consider the standard gameplay mechanic of saving and loading your game. It is not uncommon for players to load a previous save state in a game when they believe their actions to have caused otherwise irreversible social harm. Understandably, such players wish to “walk back” their moral failings and proceed on a different moral course. This operation can be procedurally mapped as movement on a branching decision tree. The player annuls a moral lapse by reverting to a previous node in the decision tree, and from there may reprise the game’s self-involving fiction with greater moral awareness. *Life Is Strange* brings this approach to a head by encompassing the mechanic in the game’s fiction: For reasons that are never made fully explicit, Max has the ability to reverse time and undo previous choices and actions. Players may probingly follow one course of action, experiencing in the process its dramatized career as well as their own emotional response to it, and then decide to accept the outcome or to “rewind” and try for a different outcome. This approach to gameplay is one of imaginatively and emotionally forecasting available moral courses, and in the process integrating new information *that would have informed the player’s original choice*, had it been known at the outset. The procedure parallels the workings of mental simulation in moral cognition. As Icard, Cushman, and

Knobe observe, “if the function of simulation is to improve future action then, broadly speaking, it must work by correcting errors in people’s current assumption about the values of various actions” (2018, p. 517).

Of course, players may also wish not to be able to glibly revert their moral decisions, as this can be felt to sap the decisions’ meaningfulness at a more global level (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008, p. 348). Therefore, rather than committing only to a single ethically meaningful action or decision before potentially reverting it, players may wish to commit to a complete ethical *playthrough*. Games like *Life Is Strange* are sometimes played in this way. I think the right way to analyze this approach is as imaginative simulation of a different order than is supported by the save-load approach. Whereas the save-load approach allows the player to rehearse and revert particular moral choices and actions, an uninterrupted *playthrough* allows the player to rehearse a full moral course, which may then be reverted in a subsequent *playthrough*, typically with a view to obtaining a morally preferable outcome. That morally preferable outcome is commonly taken to supersede the morally inferior outcome that preceded it, even though both outcomes were actualized by the player’s actions. In other words, the morally superior outcome, once achieved, is *what actually happened*, whereas the morally inferior outcome is negated, or overwritten; it was merely a test-run. A similar perspective is betokened by players’ synonymous use of “true” and “good” to designate an especially desirable ending in video games that can end on different notes, such as *Undertale* and *Nier: Automata* (developed by PlatinumGames, released 2017) (e.g., TV Tropes, 2019). The “true ending” of an ethically notable video game is typically the ending that satisfies the player’s moral aspirations in a meritorious dénouement, thereby rewarding sustained moral investment. It is also the ending that the player would normally want and might replay the game to get. This teleological language echoes Dewey’s integration of aesthetic with moral modes of experience in its insistence that the aesthetic aim of unified experience is contingent on some sort of moral closure.

All of this is not to say that players will always aim for the most moral outcome possible. They may also wish to explore *vice* in a virtual setting. This is no objection to the account that I am proposing, as it need not assume players to be paragons of virtual virtue since, quite uncontroversially, most people are not paragons of real-life virtue. Rather, we might expect players to at least sometimes be enticed to wrongdoing—even if only for purposes of moral experimentation (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008). Still, empirical evidence suggests that players of video games tend to act from considerations derived from their own moral values (Consalvo et al., 2019; Weaver & Lewis, 2012). They tend to do the right thing as they see it, as presumably they tend to do in real life.

Another potential concern with the present account might be how it would accommodate the distinction between projecting one’s own identity onto a player character versus adopting the fictionally pregiven characteristics of a player character, including that character’s moral outlook (e.g., Banks, 2015). Some players may favor one or the other approach, and some games may be seen implicitly to prescribe a “correct” approach, such

as by relating the character's backstory in enough detail to establish certain core values and personality traits. However, both approaches imply that players adopt a first-personal perspective on the game world, and both approaches allow players to experiment, in an involved and reflective way, with moral choice and social consequence. In my view, the fact that players are sometimes able to adopt a different identity only expands the scope of video gaming to provide egocentric moral experiences.

The egocentric ethics of *Undertale*

To further illustrate how my approach can shed light on ethical gameplay, I will now apply it to the popular role-playing adventure game *Undertale* (independently developed and published by Toby Fox), which is widely recognized to be an ethically accomplished and challenging game. In *Undertale*, the player starts by naming the player character, a child whose personality has not been intimated and whose physical features are vague and androgynously ambiguous. The nondescript, "empty" nature of the player character suggests that it is a mere vessel for the player's projective engagement in *Undertale's* fictional world. That world is initially presented as the world of a typical action-adventure video game, complete with a simple story of good, in the guise of humans, fighting evil, in the guise of monsters. Following a war with humanity, the monster king, Asgore, has been banished to the Underworld along with his minions. He plots to escape the Underworld and overthrow the humans. Players find themselves in the Underworld by mere happenstance and must survive monster attacks and hazardous environments in order to defeat Asgore and return home.

As the story world opens up, however, it becomes clear that things are not so simple. The frequently hostile inhabitants of the Underworld are not crazed killers, but thinking and feeling creatures with dreams and fears and whimsical personalities. Trained by genre convention, the player may well choose to kill and loot the monsters. However, the monsters may also be spared, which typically requires interacting with them in order to appease them, such as by probing their grievances and comforting them. As the inquisitive player will soon discover, the monsters feel extremely threatened by the human player because of their historical oppression and banishment by the human species. They have *reasons* to be hostile, and to assume hostility on part of the player character. In accordance with genre convention, players who choose to kill the monsters are rewarded with valuable experience points (EXP), which increase their level (LV) and thereby their power, as well as with currency that enables them to acquire helpful items and perks from non-hostile monsters. Players' choices about how to deal with the game world's inhabitants will eventually lead to one of three main endings, which the player community has come to label Pacifist, Neutral, and Genocide, respectively. Each label conveys the moral and emotional tone of its corresponding ending.



Figure 1: The backstory of *Undertale*, related in the game's opening cutscene, suggests a morally clear-cut conflict between righteous humans and evil monsters.

Source: author's screenshot.

Undertale presents a whole story world of characters and character relationships, and of moral choice and moral consequence. However, *Undertale* initially hides this richness behind its crude graphical presentation. The game's simple yet expressive sprite-based aesthetic and isometric perspective harken back to the 8- and 16-bit role-playing games of the 1980s and 1990s, such as those in the *Dragon Quest* (1986–) and *Final Fantasy* (1987–) series. These games, which almost all revolved around powering up the player character in order to vanquish some evil menace, contained no serious moral difficulties. They had good characters to help and bad characters to kill. In channeling this tradition, *Undertale* plays on a conditioned expectation that a lack of graphical texture betrays a lack of moral content. But as already mentioned, the “monsters” of the Underworld are endearing social creatures that live, love, and squabble, much like their human oppressors. Some are genuinely nasty, just as some people are nasty. Many are endearing and funny. If the player kills a monster, others may be seriously and lastingly impacted, and witnessing these consequences may cause players to reconsider their approach.

For example, if the player kills the motherly cow-monster Toriel, a dear friend of Toriel will unwittingly comment that he has been unable to contact her near the end of the game. Unbeknownst to him, of course, he is never going to see her again. The player's realization of this fact is likely to make them feel guilty—so guilty that they might choose to revert to a previous save state in order to spare Toriel's life. Players who do reload after killing Toriel are soon after greeted with knowing derision by the game's true antagonist, Flowey, who seems fully aware that there is someone on the other side of the screen: “I

know what you did. You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it. Ha ha ha ha...” In recognizing the player’s final accountability in this way, *Undertale* might be seen to discount or ridicule the save-reload mentality described above. However, in also recognizing the player’s guilt as precisely the sort of moral motive that would induce the player to “[go] back,” *Undertale* affirms that mentality as descriptively true of players. In other words, Flowey’s metafictional remarks presuppose the player’s deliberative engagement with the game’s fictional world.

If, throughout *Undertale*, the player kills many monsters, a whole monster town may be deserted by the time the player arrives there, likely because the town’s former inhabitants feared becoming the hostile intruder’s next target. Such consequences of the player’s actions are morally significant in their being about the player’s social imprint on the game’s fictional world. Players come to discover these consequences, as well as such personal consequentiality as will be reported by attendant emotion, and to integrate them in a broader view of the game’s ethical import. Consider the testimony of one player, as recorded in his popular YouTube video “Good Game Design – *Undertale*: Real Morality”:

The first time I played [...] I just killed everything I came across [...] I did this because that’s just how I’ve always played RPGs [role-playing games]. You have to kill the bosses and enemies you face, right? I mean, sure, the game told me that you can talk to them or do different actions, but I basically stuck to what I knew, because it was the comfortable solution. But what I noticed almost immediately is how much this game makes you feel bad for killing things: from Toriel’s heart shattering into a million pieces, to Muffet’s little baby spider laying a flower on her grave, to Undyne melting away as she tries to cling to life. It made me rethink every action I was doing and if it was really the right decision at all. (Snoman Gaming, 2015)

My own initial playthrough of *Undertale* led to a similar shift in perspective. I subsequently came to adopt a more morally responsive, “Pacifist” playstyle, which revealed the true extent of the monsters’ grim predicament. Crucially, this revelation was brought about by my own exploratory efforts, which, in turn, were prompted by my sensing that *Undertale* had more to offer than I had previously assumed. This epistemic function marks another parallel between the Deweyan moral imagination and video gameplay: Both are testingly inquisitive in nature. Just as one may mentally rehearse a moral scenario in order to appreciate its scope and complexity, so the player explores, maps, and probes the worlds of games like *Undertale*. To the extent that such games are ethically ambitious, they will challenge the player to perceive and engage the game world’s ethical affordances and thus attain a fuller picture of the meaning of the game.



Figure 2: Harkening back to earlier generations of role-playing games, the graphics of *Undertale* are simple but expressive.

Source: author's screenshot.

Throughout *Undertale*, the player occasionally interacts with an enigmatic and playful skeleton monster named Sans (the same character that may comment on Toriel's disappearance). Though he appears as a fictional character, Sans, like Flowey, frequently intimates an awareness of the actual player of the game. After cracking a joke, he may turn toward the virtual camera and wink directly at the player, and, if the game's software code has been tampered with, he may address who could only be the player as a "dirty hacker." (Curiously, Sans's switch from addressing the player character to directly addressing the player goes unmarked in *Undertale*. There is no functional equivalent of the "Dear reader" trope. I take it that the direct address is sanctioned by the game fiction's self-involving nature.)

Toward the end of *Undertale*, right before the player's final confrontation with King Asgore, Sans appears in front of the player character to "judge" them for their actions throughout the game. During this judgment, Sans reveals that the EXP and LV that the player has attained, which assumedly stood for Experience Points and Level, as in countless other games, are actually short for Execution Points and Level of Violence. In commenting on these extradiegetic interface elements, Sans quite clearly means to suggest something about the player rather than about the fictional player character. Sans further observes that the player's LV at this point in the game is a direct measure of the amount of suffering they have caused in the game world. Depending on how much hardship the monsters have endured at the player's hands, Sans may go as far as to accuse the player of being a "murderer" and telling them that they "should be burning in hell" before attacking

them without warning and with immense power. It is difficult to convey the impact of this sequence in plain text without making it seem somewhat on the nose. In the context of a structurally traditional roleplaying game, however, it is anything but. The player's moral shock is a product of understandable but limiting assumptions about the kinds of themes and inspirations a game like *Undertale* may contain. *Undertale's* interactive fiction challenges the player to discard such limiting assumptions, and to reckon with their own deliberative involvement in the game's virtual world.

The observations just made about *Undertale* were intended to surface themes and experiences found in other ethically notable video games as well. Such games challenge players to appreciate their personal involvement in sociomoral complexity before committing, however testingly, to a morally responsive course of action. For example, in the provocative indie-release *Papers, Please* (developed by Lucas Pope and 3909 LLC, released 2013), players take on the role of an immigration officer in the fictitious, Eastern Bloc-inspired nation of Arstotzka. The rules of the game are simple: Over the course of 31 in-game days, players must review the papers of hundreds of would-be immigrants and deny anyone who presents exclusionary, insufficient, invalid, or false information. However, moral complexity is introduced as players are forced to decide whether to break the rules for some moral purpose, such as to admit refugees whose lives may be threatened or to prevent the splitting up of nuclear families. It can sometimes be difficult to determine if the applicants are lying about their plight and engaged in dangerous schemes of their own, such as human trafficking. Moreover, players must constantly contend with a social double bind: If they fail to observe the immigration rules, they may be fined heavily and could therefore end up unable to provide food and medicine for their own impoverished families.

All of this adds up to a game in which agonizing moral compromise is inevitable. At first, the player is likely to approach the game in an unreflective and mechanistic way. Documents are checked, information cross-referenced, and a decision is made. But blind rule-following fails to capture what is most interesting about *Papers, Please*, and the inquisitive player will soon find the game's true challenge to be decidedly unmechanistic. That challenge is one of appreciating the expansive moral scope of one's role as an immigration officer, and, subsequently, of making very hard choices. Moreover, the game's menu, which lists a separate, playable timeline for each of the player's prior game sessions, allows the player to resume any of these sessions at will. The player even decides on which date to resume the session, and is thus free to entertain and compare multiple moral trajectories. To repeat, this schema recalls processes of unmediated moral deliberation, which also proceeds through different possible courses of action from the recognition of goals beset by moral difficulty.

Conclusion

Anticipating the conclusions of this article, Henry Jenkins has observed that

the computer game constitutes an incredible resource for self-reflection and personal exploration, one with rich potentials for moral and ethical education. No other current art form allows such an intense focus on choices and their consequences; no other art form allows us this same degree of agency to make our own decisions and then live through their outcomes. (2010, p.xvi)

I have argued that video games may so furnish the moral imagination by scaffolding the player's first-person imaginative rehearsal in an aesthetically realized virtual setting. In this final section, I briefly relate this perspective to existing work on the ethics of video games.

Of the different ethical frameworks that have been applied to video games, virtue ethics has arguably been the most productive (e.g., McCormick, 2001; Sicart, 2009). In a sentence, a virtue ethics of video gaming sees the player's moral agency in the game world as originating from, and redounding to, the moral character of that player. Games may therefore be ethically evaluated on the extent to which they foster gameplay experiences that may be thought negatively or positively to influence the moral character of the player. Numerous considerations recommend this perspective (McCormick, 2001). Most obviously, the virtue ethical perspective locates the ultimate source of video gaming's moral significance in the player rather than in the fictional consequences of the player's agency. This is a reasonable starting point given that players exist as thinking and feeling beings whereas fictional video game characters do not. However, a virtue ethics of video gaming is in an important (if only descriptive) sense derivative. It is derivative because video games could only probe and affect moral character by way of supporting morally relevant forms of *experience*. The medium can accomplish this by allowing players deliberately to simulate moral choice and action.

I believe that this move—to conceive of ethical video gameplay in the terms of actual, albeit imaginative and fictional, experience—is an important one. It suggests a rather close structural fit between the ethics of video gaming and the ethics of unmediated experience. On this view, if we wish to understand the kinds of moral experience open to video games, we should look to the kinds of moral experience found in real life. This is a departure from the more formalized account of Sicart, who argues that there are “two fundamental elements to [video games]: systems and worlds. These two elements have to be coherent, creating entertaining gameplay while crafting a game world. The ethics of games as designed objects can be found in the relations between these two elements” (2009, pp. 21-22). Sicart is surely right that video games comprise these two distinct elements, or bases, but their mutual interaction may not be the proper level of analysis of the player's ethical experience. As Grodal (2000, p. 203) points out, the player typically engages video games first and foremost as an *experiential sequence*—as a series of unfold-

ing events in which they imaginatively participate—rather than as an abstract system. Therefore, the proper level of analysis of the player’s first-personal moral experience may typically be that of making choices and taking action in a social environment. One way to substantiate this argument would be to document similarities in how players discuss their real and virtual ethical agency. If, in both cases, players talk intuitively of being a social agent in a world of other social agents—of having to choose between different moral and nonmoral ends, and of anticipating or failing to anticipate the consequences of such choices—then that would be evidence that players’ mediated ethical experience is structurally similar to their unmediated ethical experience, and that it ought to be analyzed as such (see Mosca, 2017, for discussion). For what it is worth, my own experience has been that players do talk in this way.

Another point of contact with real-world morality comes from the suggestion that the playing of ethically notable video games constitutes a form of imaginative rehearsal (see also Zagal, 2009). If so, might we not expect this rehearsal to cultivate socially responsive action in the real world? Existing research on the possible moral benefits of video gameplay has focused on games with an explicitly prosocial message. Such games have been found to cause positive but quite limited effects on player attitudes and behaviors (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014). From a Deweyan perspective, however, it might be more productive to study how players respond to morally challenging gameplay—gameplay that challenges them to question easy assumptions and make hard choices.

As a final thought, I believe that an appreciation of the egocentric ethics of video games may contribute to the medium’s artistic enfranchisement. To use Janet Murray’s (2016) terminology, the modern video game is more than just an “additive” medium—more than *video plus game* (ch. 3). It is a medium that, unlike literature and film, involves the media user centrally in its elaborate fictional worlds. From an ethical perspective, this pervasive egocentricity is what makes the medium special, and, to my mind, tremendously exciting. It may be what allows us to conclude that video games are an ethically significant art form.

Notes

- 1 But see Patridge (2017) for partial dissent.
- 2 Dewey (1984) distinguishes “three independent factors in morals,” corresponding to individual ends, ends of communal life, and approbatory ends to do with attaining status and an agreeable reputation.
- 3 I use the word “prop” in a Waltonian (Walton, 1990) sense, according to which props prescribe imaginings in games of make-believe. The modal props of a video game convey the game’s fictional content.

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