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5 CAN ETHICS BE LEARNED? VIDEO GAMES AS AN ETHICAL SANDBOX

Fanny Verrax

Learning Ethics: The Self and Others

Whether ethics can be taught and learned is a sensitive and thoroughly discussed question. Most of the literature usually focuses on academic or vocational training in ethics to assess its practical benefits (Geary and Sims 1994; Ritter 2006; Langlois and Lapointe 2010). This chapter chooses to take a slightly different perspective: the amount of ethical learning enabled by video games, and more specifically, single-player video games—that is, video games in which there are no direct interactions between players. Hence while aiming at answering the question “can ethics be learned?,” which is central in moral philosophy, the chapter will also address a question more specific to philosophers of technology: How necessary are human interactions in order to facilitate the learning of a typical human skill, and what is the role of things that relate to us in this learning process ?

The discussion is still vivid in ethics on what should be the very object of ethics: one’s relationships to other humans only—the position known as minimal ethics—or one’s relationship to the self also—the position known as maximalist (Ogien 2007), while non-anthropocentric views emphasize duties to nonhuman others. This chapter does not intend to enter this debate but rather to suggest the idea that nonvirtually others are not necessarily needed in order to foster an ethical learning, which can also benefit relationships with humans.

When video games are praised in game studies and related fields, it is usually for one of two reasons. First, their ability to promote development of cognitive skills, such as memory and attention, is acknowledged—sometimes to the point that it is said to outgrow that of reading. Steven Johnson, notably relying on the work by James Paul Gee, suggests for instance that the typical activity involved in most video games (probing, forming a hypothesis, reprobating, rethinking) is very similar to the scientific method and can be seen as a great way to learn it (Johnson

2006). Second, when it comes to analyzing interactions, the focus is on the communication with nonvirtual others, through the video game as a medium: “a fundamental part of the process of developing our moral understanding of games is belonging to a game community, experiencing the presence of and interacting with other ethical beings who play computer games” (Sicart 2011, 9). This kind of analysis is particularly developed for MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), whose most famous examples are games such as *World of Warcraft* or *Dofus*.

But this is not our focus. I would like to argue here that single-player video games (video games in which the player interacts solely with an artificial intelligence) offer a unique experience of virtual alterity and ethical learning. This experience is of a different kind entirely, but as, if not more, interesting in terms of ethical learning than MMORPG and other video games relying on the multiplicity of nonvirtual players. More specifically, I would like to focus on two features of single-player video games that make them a worthy ethical experience: they expand moral imagination, and they provide a safe learning environment.

Characterizing Video Games

Games and Video Games

Before being characterized by their digital environment, video games are games. Dutch historian and anthropologist Johan Huizinga identifies five fundamental features of games that are, consequently, also present in video games:

- 1) Freedom: Games are free in the sense that at any time, a game can be delayed or canceled. The need for playing exists insofar as there is a need for pleasure, but it never stems from a physical urge or a moral duty.
- 2) Culture: Games have a cultural function; they create spiritual and social bonds.
- 3) Isolation: Games exist in a separate time and space framework. This isolation allows for another essential feature: repetition.
- 4) Order: Games are structured by rules. “As soon as rules are violated, the game universe collapses” (Huizinga 29).
- 5) Tension: This means not only that there can be an element of uncertainty or luck but also that “something must succeed at the cost of a certain effort” (Huizinga 28).

Video games, just as traditional games, are therefore characterized by these five features: freedom, culture, isolation, order, and tension. Let me now be more specific about what makes video games specific, compared to non-video games.

NB. Given the extreme diversity of both video games and IRL games, these differences are to be understood not as radical differences but rather as a continuum.

How to Characterize Video Games

Premise n.1: Video Games Are Ergodic Activities

The seminal work of one of the founders of humanistic informatics, Norwegian Espen Aarseth, allows us to think of video games as an *ergodic* (from *ergon*, work, and *hodos*, path) activity, in the sense that the sequence of signs changes according to the player's decisions. This is what Aarseth calls a "non-trivial reading" that is core to cybertext and video games (Aarseth 1997). I argue this is a specific feature of video games in the sense that in traditional games, such as chess or checkers, and board games, such as *Risk*, *Monopoly*, *Settlers*, *Alhambra*, obviously players' decisions impact the economy of the game and how it looks, but the global sequence of signs remains the same. Even in more evolved non-video games, such as *Dominions*, it is true that the sequence of signs (here cards) changes from one time to another, but this happens *before* the actual game starts. This ergodic feature reaches its paroxysm in procedurally generated video games, such as *Minecraft* or many survival games.

Premise n.2: Video Games Foster Emotional Involvement

Beyond the *work* that is necessary to make sense in video games, it is the emotional involvement that characterizes computer games: "It makes a difference if we have to arrange blocks in an optimal position or if we have to save the princess from the jaws of a monkey" (Pohl 2008, 101).

Premise n.3: Video Games Allow for Moral Emotions

The issue of moral emotions is a hot one in ethics. It is not the point here to enter the debate on ethical intuitionism (Roeser 2010; Steinbock 2014) but rather to establish as a starting point for discussion that:

- a) Moral emotions (or higher-order emotions), such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride, exist and are experienced regularly in ordinary life.
- b) Moral emotions can arise in video games as well, thanks to their fictional content: "without fictional context, the player actions cannot be interpreted morally" (Švelch 2010, 56).

Premise n.4: Avatars Are Not Indispensable to Emotional and Moral Involvement

Švelch (2010) focuses on avatar-based single-player video games for he believes the avatar is the seat of the player's agency, thus fostering moral engagement. Very simply put, the scheme that Švelch endorses is the following:

avatar → agency → moral engagement.

Although I do agree that avatars can provide a unique experience of virtual moral agency, I do not believe they are absolutely necessary for moral engagement.

Thus most of the examples in the chapter will be taken from non-avatar-based single-player video games, mostly simulation and strategy games, a realm underexplored by the literature.

The Ethics of Video Games: Experience Comes First

Little explored, the ethics of video games usually point to the problems they provoke rather than the solutions they can offer. In his chapter “Philosophy and ethics of game,” Lafrance suggests for instance five ethical features that are all negative: futility, agonistic character (competition), illusion, propagation of sexist stereotypes, violence (Lafrance 2006). Some games score particularly high on these scales—one can think of the delusional, highly violent, and sexist game *Grand Theft Auto* as a paradigmatic example.

But independently of what a game’s particular content is about, one shall not forget that a game is never just a set of rules or a code, but foremost an experience, which is why it is important to distinguish between “games *in potentia*” and “games *in actio*” following the Aristotelian dichotomy.

When reading the criticism some games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* has received for its violent content, media and game critics seem to focus only on the analysis of the ethical affordances of the game as a possibility. Ultimately, a game is not the object we describe when we write about the rules and the fictional universe, but the experience constructed by the interaction of a user with that world. In a sense, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, only exists as a moral experience when played, while it certainly is a moral object of incomplete nature when only described. Games from their design are moral objects, but we need to consider how they are experienced by players in order to fully understand the ethics of computer game. (Sicart 2005, 15)

In the video games that will be discussed throughout this chapter, we will try to see what is needed in order for the player to experience her own “game in potentia,” which is a requirement to foster a proper ethical experience.

Video Games Expand Moral Imagination

Moral skills usually break down to two broad categories: judgment, including argumentation and deliberation, and imagination. Moral imagination is paramount to *perceiving* what moral issues are at stake in a given situation. This is why some philosophers refer to it as “imaginative moral perception.” Canadian philosopher Martin Gibert identifies three modes of imaginative moral perceptions:

Perspective shift: The ability to change perspective, for example, by imagining somebody else’s perspective on a given situation.

Reframing: Imagining a particular element of a situation as different from what it actually is.

Comparison: Imagining a whole situation as different from what it actually is (Gibert 2015).

I argue video games expand imaginative moral perceptions through these three modes. The next section will, however, particularly focus on the first mode, perspective shift. I will show that by providing the player with an experience of power, weakness, and overall diversity and multiple identities, video games allow for a wide range of perspective shifts.

Experiencing Power

The designers and fans of world-builder games are not exaggerating unreasonably or (at least in any simple sense) exhibiting impiety when they refer to world-builder games as “god games”. The avatar’s power over the world of the game is superhuman. And astute players and programmers of these types of games have wrestled with the moral quandaries that such power raises. How should someone with this kind of power rule? (Cogburn and Silcox 2008, 73)

Citizens’ lack of involvement in public life is often interpreted as a logical consequence of the very real lack of power to change anything for most citizens: the typical “why would I bother if I can’t change anything?”

In the video games realm, world-builder games (*Civilization*, *Tropico*), city-management games (*Simcity*, *Cities skylines*), and political simulations games (*Democracy 3*) make it worth it to ask real-life political questions like the following:

—Should I create neighborhoods with different infrastructures and possibly regulations (such as curfew) based on income level? (*Cities Skylines*)

—Should I legalize gambling and give a permit to build a casino to generate extra cash, while knowing it will in all likelihood increase criminality in the neighborhood and may foster protests? (*SimCity*)

—Should I attack my neighbor before they attack me, or try to sign a pact of nonaggression? (*Civilization*)

—Should I raise the oil tax, knowing that commuters and car owners will be angry, but environmentalists will be happy, and that I have an asthma epidemic to deal with, plus I could really use the extra cash? (*Democracy 3*)

Issues that are addressed are not just present-based but span throughout history, up to sci-fi scenarios:

—Should I adopt slavery as a social policy, making it possible to finish buildings faster by sacrificing a part of my population? (*Civilization*)

—Should I try and live in harmony with aliens I do not quite understand yet, or destroy them preventively? (*Civilization Beyond Earth*)

Furthermore, the player can question the question itself: Why is it that building a casino in my city is going to increase the criminality rate? Is that even true? Why do I not have other options? This is where *mods* enter the game: from players who are not entirely satisfied with the game as it is and want to have more options. Mods are the way in which video games take their ergodic characteristic a step further: not only is the sequence of signs modified but the actual code is also modified.

Example: mods in *Democracy 3* include not only new countries but new social policies and new interactions between them. For instance, a mod adds “freedom of speech” and relates it to youth’s satisfaction.

If some players are willing to spend hundreds of hours developing new mods to expand the horizons of their favorite video games, it is not entirely unlikely that this dedication could, someday, be transferred to nonvirtual issues and modes of actions (signing a petition, going to vote, changing their consumption habits, etc.) even though, obviously, empirical data would be needed to confirm this possibility.

Another way in which video games offer a unique decision-making experience is by presenting the player with specific professional contexts. Typical examples here include being a prison manager (*Prison Architect*), running a pharmaceuticals company (*Big Pharma*), or working as a customs officer in a totalitarian state (*Papers please!*). Here the moral dilemmas are quite explicit and clearly intended in the game design.

Some games also have the unique feature of offering the players both roles: the decision-maker and the one the decision is made for. In *Prison Architect*, for instance, the player can build and manage a prison as a warden and then enter “Escape Mode” and choose to be a prisoner. Certainly the focus of the game is on security: making sure as a warden the prisoners cannot escape, and as a prisoner finding the loophole that will allow for escape (if one plans it ahead as a warden, of course it is no fun). But there is something else to it: the player has to live the life of the prisoner, including the regime that has been decided for her: when she can eat, sleep, phone her family, and so on. Obviously I am not suggesting that this experience is similar to the one of actually being detained in jail, but I do believe it can still offer a valuable basis to escape a purely theoretical debate on these issues.

Experiencing Weakness

Indeed perhaps even more importantly than experiencing almighty power, some video games provide the player with an experience of **ethical weaknesses**, be it embedded in the game (*Papers please*) or be it derived from an experience of power abuse, when I, as a player, have the experience of being weak to the call of power (all world-builder games—called “God games” for a reason—can trigger that feeling to some extent).

I suggest there are two ways in which a human player can experience ethical weakness while playing video games. The first one has to do with failing to master a set of skills or failing to do it in time—this is mostly true in real-time games (as

opposed to turn-based). For instance, in the Microsoft series' *Age of Empires*, a player can add for oneself a special ethical challenge and decide before starting a game that whatever happens, they will not kill the enemies' civilians (workers and priests). But as the game runs, the player can fail to achieve this goal, as the virtual army she commands has some autonomy, and will for instance attack a priest who is trying to convert them. This failure has to do with a lack of rapidity or dexterity ("I knew what I wanted to do but I didn't manage"), oblivion or negligence ("I forgot my army was there"), sometimes excess of pride ("I didn't think I needed to pause the game and I thought I could figure it out while running, but it turns out I couldn't").

Now, consider the constraints imposed upon the player of turn-based world-builder games, such as the impossibility of reacting immediately to the enemy's movements, or the constraints imposed by real-time interfaces, such as the difficulty of simultaneously managing the movements of hundreds of soldiers through the game-world. Might it be possible to obtain some insight into the nature of potential conflicts by reflecting upon how these limits forced on the player influence the coherence, realism, or even the entertainment value of god games?

If this example is based upon an extra challenge that perhaps few players actually deal with (although setting one's goals independently of the game's explicit missions is an essential feature of simulation games), some real-time games are designed to challenge the player's technical skills (memory, dexterity, visual recognition, etc.) while presenting her with explicit moral stakes. The game *Papers, please!* is an independent simulation game in which the player embodies a customs officer from a fictional soviet republic. While the set of rules to respect grows every day, the player also has to make calls: Shall she let pass this poor woman who seems harmless although she does not have correct identification? The woman may be a terrorist after all. And even if she's not, letting her through means the player has used up her mistake allowance quota. Next time, she may bring less money home and not be able to feed her family. The ethical aspect of the game therefore lies in its very gameplay, as put by one reviewer:

But the moral quandaries are so real, so relatable that your conscience speaks to you more than it does in most other games. The decisions feel like they matter. Even if you're the kind of person to always take the "lawful good" route, to always take the high road in games, you're forced to commit acts for which you might hate yourself. If you don't, you and your family will not survive the winter. The fact that a few sentences of text accompanied by retro-style graphics can make you feel as bad as you do is impressive.

(Britton Peele, Gamespot, August 13, 2013: <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/papers-please-review/1900-6412914/retrieved March 12, 2018>)

In any case, the player can feel not only disappointment but also actual shame or guilt, including for mistakes that are purely technical, like not going fast enough,

which is no different from real-life experience: if a driver hits a walker because they failed to turn the wheel fast enough, the fact that it was a technical shortcoming, and not a moral one, does not necessarily prevent the guilt.

The second way in which a player can experience ethical failure is by being weak to the call of power. This provides a particularly unique experience when the game is set in a historical context that the player knows at least a little about. It is the case for instance with the scenario “Scramble for Africa” included with the Brave New World extension pack of *Civilization V*. The player can choose to play a European power (France, Belgium, England, etc.) or an African country (Egypt, Morocco, Ethiopia, etc.), all starting in 1880. The victory conditions are different for European powers and African countries. If the player chooses to play a European power, she will be astonished at how easy it is to defraud commercially or conquer militarily the African territories, based on intercultural differences. Rights of way through another player’s territory, for instance, are usually a quite expensive favor to obtain in the standard game. One must very often give significant amounts of resources or money in order to gain a right of way. But what is implied in *Scramble for Africa* is that African people do not hold the same conception of a “national territory” and therefore do not care, granting right of way without realizing its strategic value. The player is therefore facing the following question: Why offer a fair deal when the other player doesn’t even realize she is being ripped off?

Another example is the so-called “dystopian business-simulator” *The Founder*. Created by Francis Tseng to mock the start-up world, the player is confronted with start-up founders’ choices. One of them is choosing the kind of things she can say to potential employees in order to negotiate their salary as low as possible. Possibilities include sentences like: “We’re building products that will change the world” or “You’ll have a huge impact on people’s lives here,” although this does not affect the company’s actual choices. Here the player is facing the question: If my employees agree to make less money as long as I sell them a harmless yet untrue narrative about their jobs, why shall I not enjoy it and make more profit?

Experiencing Multiple Identities

Finally, through all these various contexts, the player is invited to embody different identities. I argue that the type of moral engagement depends upon the kind of identity that is experienced.

In *Prison Architect*, for instance, one indicator that players can choose to attend to is the repeat offender rate. This rate is calculated from other indicators, such as prisoner’s health, punishment intensity, and reform programs. Concretely, having the prisoner locked in her cell many hours a day and having armed guards patrolling often in front of the prisoner’s cell will increase the punishment intensity, while offering general education classes and the possibility to work in the prison (laundry, kitchen, etc.) will increase the reform grade. So the dilemma

is, for every player, whether to increase punishment at the cost of reform, or vice-versa, knowing that, according to the game's algorithm, the repeat offender rate will not be satisfactory if both are not taken into account. This is when the player's own values and beliefs often enter the game.

Švelch (2010) quotes two radically opposed views on the matter, that also emphasize the uttermost importance of the type of game considered:

“When I play a BioWare role-playing game, my characters tend to not only lean toward the nicer side but almost immediately start twinkling with the magical pixie dust of purity. It's embarrassing, but I just make the decisions I believe I'd really make, and end up that way” (John Walker, Eurogamer. Com; Walker 2009).

“I laugh out loud when I run pedestrians over in Grand Theft Auto and get a kick out of unleashing Godzilla on my Sim City. In fact, I can't name a video-game that did evoke any sadness or true ethical dilemma in me until BioShock” (Osama, TowardsMecca.com; Osama 2008).

In this perspective, I suggest the following typology of identities in video games:

Phenomenological identity: The appearance of the avatar the player embraces. The player can choose to make it resemblant to her actual looks, or not. Many games do not represent any avatar (such as *Democracy 3*: all the player can see is the back of a leader who is probably male); some have but one option per character choice (typically in *Civilization* the avatar depends on the chosen civilization and depicts an historical leader. Interestingly enough, the player hardly ever sees her own avatar, as its main function is to appear in the dialogue box when communicating with other civs); some offer a very limited set of choices that make it virtually impossible to choose a resembling avatar; some offer various choices, but none of which is based on human looks (in this category we will find mostly fantasy games or humorous games, such as *Girls and Robots*); and some finally offer millions of possibilities through a character design process that is a big part of the game (the most typical example is *The Sims* and all its extensions).

Ontological identity: The self-claimed personality characteristics of the avatar. The player usually must choose between a set of options that can be wide (*The Sims* is here again the most prominent illustration, with dozens of personality traits that can be combined. In the *Sims 3*, sixty-three personality traits can be combined to form hundreds of millions of possibilities. Examples of traits include “ambitious,” “loves outdoors,” “slob,” etc.) or quite restrictive (as in *Prison Architect*, there is mostly one personality trait associated with each warden, such as “calm” or “lobbyist”).

The ontological identity is close to what Kjevler calls the “playable character,” which is the fictional character with her personality and background, to distinguish it from the avatar, understood here as the mechanism of fictional agency (Kjevler 2008).

Existential identity: The identity that the player builds for herself through decisions and actions in the game. It is partly derived from the ontological identity,

as the latter designs different behavior patterns and possible actions in at least three different ways, that will be illustrated with different examples taken from *The Sims*, considered by many as the ultimate life simulation game, and *Prison Architect*, a goal-oriented simulation game.

The first way in which ontological identity influences existential identity in video games is simply by allowing a specific action. Typically “frugal” sims have the ability to clip coupons from the newspapers, while nonfrugal sims don’t even have that possibility.

The second way in which ontological identity influences existential identity is by giving more incentives to perform a certain type of action. Still in the *Sims*, sims who love the outdoors will get “happy mood” points for spending time outdoors, which will make it easier and more rewarding to have them perform outdoorsy activities, such as gardening or fishing.

The third way in which ontological identity influences existential identity is by changing the horizon of possibilities, sometimes the entire course of the game. Embodying “the pacifier” in *Prison Architect*, which “reduces the overall temperature of your prison, making your inmates less likely to cause trouble,” means that the player most likely will have to face extremely violent riot much less often, thus changing radically her game experience. If choosing a warden is an explicit decision to make that does not involve any rush, sometimes a trivial decision made in a hurry impacts massively the following of the game, such as in the action role-playing game *The Witcher*.

The Bogeyman identity: I argue that video games offer a fourth type of identity, the bogeyman identity, that is, embodying, in a constrained time-space, consequence-free framework, the identity of the person one does not want to be, but perhaps is attracted to. Rather than just fantasizing about being that care-free, or slob, or evil-spirited, or profit-driven person, the player can act like one in the separated time-space that video games offer.

In most games, the player then has to deal with the consequences of their actions and sometimes will have to start a new game altogether if the interactions with the nonvirtual others have become too aggressive or out-of-hand.

The one noteworthy exception is obviously *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA), in which there is no consequence for murder, rape, or any usually morally reprehensible action. GTA offers a space of total freedom, that is not so much immoral as amoral. The bogeyman identity is to video games such as GTA what *catharsis* is to classical theater.

“Even in the case of those who treat a game purely as an ethical ‘sandbox’ to try out a variety of styles, the player still wants a sense of the consequences and the results because that’s part of the pleasure and the appeals of these dilemmas” (Schreiber, Cash, and Link 2010, 76).

Not all games allow players to embrace all these types of identities. While existential identity is a common feature of most video games (since having

to make decisions is at the core of video games), phenomenological identity is only relevant in video games that do display an avatar. As for ontological identity, I would like to suggest that the player can choose an ontological identity even in the absence of any avatar or explicit personality trait: somehow a hidden *intentional existential identity* that will influence her decisions in the game, but is not a design part of the game play and perhaps will not show on any indicator.

For instance, a player can start a game of *Civilization* having as a personal objective to be nonviolent, that is to never declare war, and in the case of other civilizations declaring war to her, try to cease all conflict as soon as possible. The player can even choose to embody a leader with advanced military traits and not use it as an advantage. This shows a possible dichotomy between the explicit, *game-designed existential identity* and the self-claimed, somehow secret *intentional existential identity*. Some scholars, adopting a psychoanalytic perspective, have argued that what happens in *Civilization* is an “intellectualisation” of brutal violence, “a transfiguration of primary sadism into strategic management” (Garandel 2012, 156). Beyond sublimation, what makes video games like *Civilization* a unique experience, though, is the “technical conversion of violence,” in the sense that the epistemic value of the quest is subordinated to its pragmatic value: to win a game (Garandel 2012, 158).

This dichotomy between existential and intentional identity can only exist, however, if the player frees herself from the indicators’ logics. Indeed, and as duly noted by French philosopher Mathieu Triclot, in video games such as *The Sims*, “the individual exists... under the pure form of a set of indicators. *The Sims* do in small what computing does at a larger scale: reduce a situation to its symbolic coordinates and handle it from a distance by acting on available information” (Triclot 2011, 216, *my translation*). If indeed the existential identity can mostly be reduced to a set of indicators, the intentional existential identity, by freeing oneself from the constraint of winning (and thus filling the indicators), can explore new combinations, combinations that perhaps will be valuable learning experiences. For instance, in *The Sims*, a player can choose to combine personality traits that will not help at all to achieve her avatar’s lifetime wish, such as aiming to be a “heartbreaker” (have many romantic relationships), while having no sense of humor, being a workaholic and a snob (that trait usually keeps other sims away as the snob sim mostly talks about self). No doubt that this particular sim will be quite conflicted, and the player may have a hard time keeping it happy—that is, monitoring its indicators in a satisfactory way. Still, it may be an enjoyable game experience for the player, which reinforces her sense of self and her *existential identity* and *ontological identity* beyond built-in game options.

In any case, I would like to suggest that these multiple identities are, in themselves, a valuable ethical experience. The well-known economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has developed the idea that the self-awareness of

belonging to multiple communities is a powerful step against violence (Sen 2007). Or said otherwise that the illusion of unique identity (being only or mostly an African American, a Hindu, a soldier, a gay person, a Palestinian, etc.) is one of the main causes of violence. To the heated debate about whether video games make players violent, I would like therefore to suggest that they can do the absolute opposite and foster a climate of nonviolence by making players aware of their multiple identities, actual and imaginary, as well as by allowing them to differentiate between their phenomenological, ontological, and existential identity.

Video Games as a Safe Learning Environment

In the second part of this chapter, I would like to argue that this opportunity for multiple identities is enhanced by the indefinitely iterative feature of video games that makes them a safe learning environment, desacralizing mistakes and providing a learning curve. The analysis of different backup systems will also provide a basis for discussion of Bernard Williams's concept of moral luck. Finally, the role of video games in controlling one's emotions will be considered.

An Iterative Learning Environment

The vast majority of video games offer the possibility to save a game through checkpoints, autosavings, or mindful backups (when the player chooses when to save). Autosavings are automatic and occur either on a time-scale (for instance, every fifteen minutes) or in case of turn-based video games, every n turns. Checkpoints on the other side are chosen by the game's developers as significant points to stop, typically after a specific challenge: if you have managed to pass it once, you do not want to try again. Checkpoints are therefore essential in a wide array of games (especially arcade games), and their relevance is paramount: "Bad checkpoints kill any and all interest I have in games, and replaying large sections of a level due to the developer's inability to use them well is infuriating" (Ben Kuchera, Polygon.com, February 25, 2014).

Finally, and usually compatible with either checkpoints or autosavings, the player has the possibility to perform mindful backups. Let alone specific technical issues (*I know the game usually crashes at this point so I always save my game right before*), mindful backups are a great way to enhance one's humility. Indeed, the possibility of mindful backup forces the player to anticipate *what could go wrong* at any time, and one's possible mistakes or shortcomings. Let's consider the following fictional monologue of a *Civilization* player:

I am considering declaring war on my expansionist neighbor. I have checked his military (he's weaker) and my finances (I'm wealthier), I have the diplomatic

support of at least two other major nations, and I am technologically more advanced: what could go wrong? Oh well, let's save the game before I do declare war, you never know ...

The possibility of autosaving, that is, the possibility to go back to this exact point in the game, before I declare war, in case my planning was wrong (*oops, he was researching Nuclear Power and I wasn't aware!*) invites the player to always consider the possibility of her failure. And if one's ego or hubris is too strong to practice mindful backups in this way, a hundred repeated failures in this safe learning environment usually do the trick. Regular gamers confess sometimes having the "mindful backup" automatism when interacting in real life: "*I was about to tell her my way of thinking; then I realized I couldn't do 'Ctrl + S' in case it would go wrong, and who am I to decide it couldn't go wrong?*" The infinite possibility of mindful backups in the universe of video games reinforces the perception that decisions and social interactions' consequences are irreversible in real life. This specific kind of humility learning is therefore transposable.

Consequently, video games in which mindful backups are possible allow for a type of mastery in reaching "the golden mean": if courage is somewhere halfway between cowardice and recklessness, as the Aristotelian view puts it, the iterative aspect and the backup system of video games allow gamers to actually gain courage by shying away from both extremes.

Video Games and Moral Luck

There is also another aspect made possible by the iterative aspect of video games: the great number of decisions and acts, condensed in few hours of gameplay, allow players to embrace the notion of moral luck as developed by Bernard Williams, without trivializing morality. Bernard Williams argues that although the very conceptual basis of our morality is meant to be immune to luck (according to Kant and followers, moral judgments ought not to depend on luck), there is in fact a significant part of luck in the way we perceive and assess the morality of actions (Williams 1981). A typical example is that of a person driving while being slightly drunk. If nothing special happens on the road, we may judge this person mildly irresponsible, but the condemnation will fade off pretty quickly. However, if she has an accident and kills someone (external circumstances), she becomes a reckless murderer. Another example used by Williams is that of an artist who isolates herself from other peoples' lives and needs in order to live her passion. If the artist becomes successful (external factor), she may become entitled in this radical choice. If she does not, she may be perceived as not only selfish and worthless but having taken a decision for which the scope of moral justifications (create something worth being prioritized) no longer exists. Williams' thesis has profound consequences on the very definition of morality, since it stops belonging to a transcendent category and instead becomes contingent.

Based on William's thesis on moral luck, Nagel's work later identifies four types of moral luck:

Resultant Luck: The luck involved “in the way one's actions and projects turn out.”

Circumstantial Luck: The luck involved in “the kind of problems and situations one faces”

Causal Luck: The luck involved “in how one is determined by antecedent circumstances.”

Constitutive Luck: The luck involved in one's having the “inclinations, capacities and temperament” that one does (Statman 1993, 60).

I argue that the infinitely iterative nature of video games may help players grasp the concept of moral luck in these various types, without narrowing morality to a trivial throw of dice. Indeed, luck is a characteristic paramount in the gameplay of many games. Sometimes, some level of information is available; sometimes, the player can directly impact luck by using some kinds of buffs (food, equipment, etc.). As an illustration, here are the messages a player can receive every morning while turning on the TV before starting her day in the simulation game *Stardew Valley* (a disciple, if not a spin-off, of *Harvest Moon*), with their luck coefficient.

The luck here is both circumstantial and resultant, if using Nagel's terminology: the luck affects both the type of situations the player faces, circumstantial luck (for instance chance of getting coal from rocks), and the luck involved in how to deal with this situation, resultant luck (for instance, the chance of discovering ladders while mining). So on an unlucky day, if a fellow villager asks for a mission in the mines (“Help wanted” missions), and if the player has chosen to embody a character with a helpful personality who always tries to complete this kind of quest, the player knows it is unlikely her character may fulfill the mission, independently of her previous experience in the mines (causal luck) or even the player's experience and will (constitutive luck).

Message	Luck coefficient
The spirits are very happy today! They will do their best to shower everyone with good fortune	+0.07 to +0.1
The spirits are in good humor today. I think you'll have a little extra luck.	+0.02 to +0.07
The spirits feel neutral today. The day is in your hands.	-0.02 to +0.02
This is rare. The spirits feel absolutely neutral today.	0
The spirits are somewhat annoyed/mildly perturbed today. Luck will not be on your side.	0.07 to -0.0
The spirits are very displeased today. They will do their best to make your life difficult.	-0.07 to -0.1

Through the backup system previously analyzed, video games offer this unique opportunity to live twice the same day, just with different luck coefficients, hence making empirically tangible the impact of various types of luck on the outcomes of a character's decisions. This diversity of experiences builds an understanding of ethics as a complex realm in which individual decisions are always to be measured against the messiness of life, hence allowing for a nonbinary understanding of ethical situations, in which moral luck is not an excuse for wrongdoing but rather a well-understood part to take into account in decision making.

Emotional Learning and Fostering a Climate of Benevolence

When a player experiences aggressive thoughts toward a virtual other, she knows that the artificial intelligence behind the game has not actually intended to hurt her or offend her. Video games can then be said to embody the popular wisdom known as “Toltec Lessons,” one of the “agreements” reading: never forget that even when someone tries to kill you, it is never about you and always about him.

Therefore, video games offer the unique and valuable experience of having an actual emotion, with all its phenomenological characteristics (annoyance, anger, or frustration that can be translated into rising heartbeat, sweating, or extra focusing abilities) but without it being directed toward another living person. In other words: there is no one to blame, no one to direct one's anger to, no one from whom to assume evil intentions. Controlling one's emotions in this context is not an act of surrendering or a sign of cowardice, but of wisdom.

Finally, I want to suggest that single-player video games can foster both a demanding culture of self-control and a benevolent climate for other's ethical weaknesses.

Indeed, harshness in relation to others' weaknesses often arises from the strength of the conviction that “one would have done differently,” that “one would have been capable of controlling oneself,” and so on. By being confronted by many different contexts, by having to make a lot of decisions in unfamiliar environments, by being pushed to embody various identities, I believe single-player video games will develop virtues of not only leniency but benevolence toward others' weaknesses and ethical failures, because they will be more willing to imagine that this could have been them.

This is not to say that such a video games culture would be unable of having strong moral standards and of enforcing them, but rather that players experiencing Arendt's thesis of the banality of evil on a regular basis on their computer screens would be perhaps less prone to put away wrongdoers in the monsters box. Perhaps, having played in this ethical sandbox and recognizing a possible self in a virtual world, they would be more willing to engage in a highly necessary dialogue.

Transfer of ethical skills gained in video games into the “real world” is no easy claim. However, this is what many players' feedbacks suggest about some

particularly engaging games. Among these, *This War of Mine* stands out. It is a war survival video game that was launched in 2014 and is very peculiar compared to most war-themed video games in that it focuses on the civilian experience of surviving through a siege, rather than frontline combat. The developers of 11-bit studios have shared that the game was inspired by the Bosnian War that they have experienced personally, and more specifically the Siege of Sarajevo. The gameplay looks like a tragic and stressful sims: the player controls characters who are most of the time tired, hungry, wounded, sick, and/or depressed, and who die regularly, without any hope of having them back. Indeed, *This War of Mine* (TWOM) does not allow for mindful backups: if your character is killed, there is no way to go back and try again—just like in real life. This is actually a feature quite common in survival games, and even to some extent in simulation games, that forces the player to experience a different kind of humility than the one described for games allowing for mindful backups. How is humility at play in a game like TWOM? At night one survivor scavenges in places that are more or less dangerous and tries to bring back food, meds, or construction materials. If an army guard sees him, or even another civilian, he might get killed. But if he doesn't bring back any food or meds, they might all die the next day anyway. There is no strategy here. One can never quite hoard nor plan. There are dilemmas, fueled by uncertainty. A second of recklessness, and the scavenger dies. But too much circumspection and it may be the entire shelter who vanishes, from lack of resources. Again, the golden mean is the way here, and the player learns it the brutal way.

But can these lessons really be passed on into real-life instances? Let us hear some players' comments on the topic (highlights by the author):

Once again, this game shows you how war isn't anything like the first person/third person shooters we play. It's literally hell on Earth. **It really teaches you how to be humble** and appreciate what you have IRL. **And to think people like Syrians and the Rohingya are going through this in real life.** (Review posted on November 14th, 2017, on the Steam page "This War of Mine: Stories—Season Pass" by user KMZ 809—retrieved February 26, 2018)

I felt shame when I went to the ruined villa and stole things that didn't belong to me, shame that deepened when I got back home to my own shelter and found that my mates had been wounded in another raid. The bandages and medicine I'd hoped to snatch from the other location? I never even found them... There was the time that the military came to my house looking for persons of interest in my neighborhood who'd taken food from an air drop. They said that the food was property of the state and they offered me cigarettes, canned food and fresh water in exchange for any info. Faced with three people who were either in "hungry" or "very hungry" states, I ratted out the neighbor. Despicable? Certainly, but war does that to a person... **I was aghast at how quickly my empathy eroded in a video game, which made me more cognizant of its fragility in real life. It's the kind of game that could potentially change**

the way you watch the news, treat others or cast a vote in an election. (Review posted on the Kotaku website, on November 18th, 2014, by Evan Narcisse: <https://kotaku.com/this-war-of-mine-the-kotaku-review-1660267338>—retrieved February 26, 2018)

Humility, shame, empathy—these reviews confirm, if needed, that dealing with nonhuman virtual others is not in any way preventing the players from developing feelings and emotions, as the case of Amazon’s Alexa (Michelfelder 2020) also shows. Even more, the wide range of human emotions at stake seems not only to be unavoidable within the video game experience but to transfer to real-life thinking quite easily. If video games offer a safe learning space in which emotions can thrive and virtues develop, these are by no means confined behind a screen.

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