



## I GAME, THEREFORE I AM”: AN EXPLORATION OF VIDEO GAME EPISTEMOLOGY AND ITS ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

**Tuan ANH CHAU, Tristan WHITE,**

Angelo State University

USA

Email: Tchau086@gmail.com, twhite36@angelo.edu

### ABSTRACT

*The discussion regarding ethical implications of entertainment and arts has been an age-old story in the world of philosophy, dating as far as Plato and Aristotle. Ancient Rome’s citizens during the third century BCE and the fourth century BCE got treated to the format of gladiatorial combat in which prisoners of war and slaves duked it out with deadly weapons to become the ultimate survivors, as a popular form of entertainment. The spectators of the civilized Rome were indirectly exposed to the gory altercations of violence and endless slaughter. In the modern world, spectacles like gladiatorial combat scenes or fight scenes have been meticulously replicated and rendered realistically in various forms of graphic portrayals and photorealism – specifically in video games; and of course, the themes for video games span beyond historical depictions, taking inspirations from different slices of life. Nonetheless, instead of having indirect exposition to the events depicted, the user – or player – of video games actively acts out their part in the happenings of the designated story. The simulated quasi-realism of the game world allows the players, while not being intoxicated directly by the consequences of their actions (by following the story line), to directly experience and influence the actions of the in-game avatars and the environment of the game world. This research firstly addresses how a human’s epistemological engagement – the process of meaning-making – in video games is not entirely different from real-world interactions; more specifically, applying the theory of the extended and embodied mind, the video games’ simulations extend the human’s mind into the game, thus allowing phenomenological interactions. Secondly, this research aims to elaborate on how video games bring up ethical implications by making the player an ethical agent for in-game scenarios.*

**Keywords:** video games, embodied mind, extended mind, ethical agency, art, phenomenology, epistemology, choice.

### INTRODUCTION

“All systems are formal structures with rules that govern their behaviors and operations. This holds for belief systems like Judaism or Christianity, social and economic systems like communism or capitalism, systems of thought like Platonism or Hegelianism, and gaming systems like the puzzle game *Myst*, the first-person shooter game *Doom*, or the MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) *World of Warcraft*. As rule-based structures, all of these could be classified as and legitimately called “games.” And as with any game, users first need to learn the rules and then conduct themselves in such a way



as to follow or break these stipulations, reaping the benefits from the former, or suffering the consequences of the latter” (Gunkel 1)

The conceptualization of narrative operations has always been catering to the interpretations and expectations of the human mind. To be more specific, a narrative helps – or creatively hinders and messes around with – its audience’s process of meaning-making of the content. Hence, it can be said that narratives, in different rhetorical platforms under which they are implemented, are inherently conceptualized for the sake of informing and directing their audience to certain designated agendas. Video games, as digital interactive narratives, reinforce the loop of interaction between the game system’s mechanical principles and the player’s expectations by constantly molding their experiences and beliefs as the storyline of the game progresses. Ian Bogost in *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* cites criteria established by Clark C. Abt for determining the “usefulness” of a video game in terms of its expressive, or persuasive power: “active involvement and stimulation of all players; sufficient realism to convey the essential truths of the simulation; clarity of consequences and their causes both in rules and gameplay; repeatability and reliability of the entire process” (qtd. in Bogost 321).

Essentially speaking, the player becomes engrossed and constantly challenged by the predesigned motifs set up by game designers while simultaneously having their cognitive awareness assimilated by the worldview and conventions of the in-game environment, which explains how different genres of video games seek to convey or contain different ideologies. Therefore, it is inappropriate to classify our epistemological engagement with video games as being in some form fundamentally different from these real-world “games.” Through a technological apparatus that engages our motion and perception, video games extend our mind into the game, allowing us to experience it as we would the outside world. In light of this, one must consider the player’s ethical role in a game. The player’s intimate interaction with the formal structures of the game makes their role as an ethical agent apparent.

## 1. VIDEOGAMES AND THE EMBODIMENT OF THE MIND

If video game studies only focus on in-game actions and representations depicted intentionally for purpose-specific narratives on-screen, the field would eventually limit itself to the same experiences offered by screened entertainment such as watching movies, reading poetry, or listening to music; on the other hand, as Sheila C. Murphy argues, “interactivity” and “modes of input for interactivity” are the engine that empowers video gaming (19).

Although the self-involving nature of a video game is an important aspect of this, the particular technological means by which this involvement is enacted is crucial. Other forms of interactive art may involve a representation or some kind of understanding of the audience’s involvement within the art form, whether this be a piece on a game board in *Dungeons and Dragons* or a reader’s conceptual understanding of themselves while reading a *Choose-Your-Own Adventure Book*, but users have an especially intimate relationship with the representation of themselves in a video game. Enzo D’Armenio writes that video games are a mixture of two important elements: “the visual syntax, which has already been studied in semiotics and visual studies, and which pertains to the qualities of still images, and a syntax never addressed before, that is, a kinetic syntax which articulates the qualities of the movement itself” (122). As the players interact with a game, they make movements based on the interface, but it is necessary for the game’s technology to come into play in order to “translate the abstract movement upon the interface into a system of figurative and thematic movements (running, jumping, shooting, climbing, etc.)” (125).



This close relationship between our own movements and the content of a video game is necessary to understand the way in which a video game affects our experience.

This relationship is best understood within the framework provided by the embodied mind. Andreas Gregersen and Torben Grodal describe a specific condition in which the player becomes immersed into “an embodied awareness in the moment of action” – that is, “a body image in action” or dual responsibility of “agency and ownership of virtual entities” (Murphy 20). The movements of a player’s character within a game are very closely tied to the movements of the player themselves, and even though the player’s character is not a part of their biological body, the character can be understood to be an extension of the player’s body, a part of their phenomenological experience if not their biological one. Since the character is controlled so closely by the player, this character exists as a kind of tool not unlike “the blind man’s stick” discussed by Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, which eventually ceases to be understood as tool and instead discloses an “experiential field” (157), thus becoming an extension of the lived body.

The player’s movements, such as walking and turning, reveal new visual aspects of the game. The player’s character is “a zero-point set by the perceiving body. Out of it a perspectival spatiality opens up” (Gallagher and Zahavi 160), this spatiality being the environment of the video game world. With the character being a part of the player’s lived body, the player understands the character as being a part of themselves. The body is a reference point for observation: “I do not perceive it; I am it” (Gallagher and Zahavi 162). Because of the close kinetic connection between the player and the on-screen body they inhabit, their epistemic understanding of the game world is similar to that of the outside world. The player is inside of and a part of the game in the realest sense. Furthermore, the player exhibits intentional action, exerting control over their actions within the game. Gallagher and Zahavi argue that a phenomenological understanding of action can be established through “ownership” and “agency” (180). In video games, we have ownership: a particular character whose actions we manipulate. There are various environmental factors, as well as other characters, whom we have no control over, and therefore no ownership over. We also have a sense of agency. The actions of the character are those that correspond to our movements, giving us control over the character.

As C. Thi Nguyen points out, however, our agency within a game is limited. The structured design of the game acts as a “prescriptive frame” (121). It is important to take into account the relationship between the play – the player’s involvements – and the systematically created rules of the game world. Regarding rules, they are “fixed,” “rigid,” “closed” and are, in nature, “mathematical” (Zimmerman 26). The player represents the polar opposite of the rules set up by game designers – that is, improvisation, spontaneity, and uncertainty in terms of their courses of actions and affordances (Zimmerman 26).

The player’s “play” is far more intrinsic and intuitive, for it is subjectively adjustable by the player’s interactions with the controllers or keyboards. Essentially, the phenomenological experience is created by the interwoven interaction between pre-established game mechanics and the dynamic influences of the player element; in other words, for a game to create meaning, the player has to play it; while, for a player to be able to interpret a game aesthetically, he or she needs to work around the rules of the game designers. Ian Schreiber, co-author of *Game Balance*, theorizes in his blog that the rules or structural restrictions of the game world represent the Mechanics while the Dynamics stems from the play experience; as a result, it is through the dynamic and intimate immersion into the mechanics of the game world that the subjective interpretations of the beauty of the



system and its in-game worldviews arise, “[t]he game designer only creates the Mechanics directly. The Dynamics emerge from the Mechanics, and the Aesthetics arise out of the Dynamics” (qtd. in Guay 240).

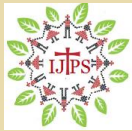
The specific foundations behind the player’s motivations to play and interact with elements of the games depend on the challenges, conflicts, learning curves, and formal objectives created by game designers (Guay 245). Players are not wholly free to determine their actions but must also consider them within the context of the game’s structure, narrative, and aesthetics. This environment shapes the gamer’s actions in a way that is similar to how our environment shapes us in real life — “the environment directly and indirectly regulates the body, so that the body is in some sense the expression or reflection of the environment. The environment calls forth a specific body style so that the body works with the environment and is included in it” (Gallagher and Zahavi 156).

Anyone playing a game must react to environmental elements that exist beyond their control. It is what gives many games their challenge that is at the heart of the playing experience. As Nguyen writes, “the game designer shapes our activities, and often does so in order to enable, encourage, and even construct aesthetic experiences of agency” (121). Since the mind of the player is extended into the game world, the player finds themselves interacting directly with the pre-determined elements crafted by the game designers. The player thus experiences the situations of the game directly, and from a first-person perspective. Even if the player has no control over a particular scene from a narrative standpoint, they experience an intimate involvement in it. Near the beginning of *The Last of Us*, Joel, the player’s character, must carry his dying daughter. Although the player can in no way cause or prevent this from happening, the fact that they are still experiencing agency of movement during the scene builds an important emotional connection. Because the player experiences events so directly, it is important to consider how designers can create ethical games.

## 2. VIDEOGAMES AND ETHICS

Vocal opposition against the rising cultural status and transformation of video games from its former label of “just entertainment” is trivially expected. Be that as it may, certainly game designers, in their construction projects of several contemporary game titles of the twenty-first century, attempted or at least are attempting to bring video games to cater to a wider variety of functions (Jagoda 211). What are video games? The Oxford English Dictionary defines video games as games “played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a monitor or other display.” Nonetheless, the definition by The Oxford English Dictionary lacks mentioning video games as a medium, which is supposed to be determined by the audience and purpose – like movies, paintings, or photographs. Like photography or cinematography, video games involve the projection of content via audiovisual and visual information; despite the conceivable similarities in terms of form, video games focus on first-person perspective of the user in order to make meaning of the general narrative – said disposition is dubbed by Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin the genre’s “self-involving interactive nature” (167). To elaborate more, Eric Hayot argues that games are “about simulating activities” (178). In digital interactive narrative games (or interactive participatory simulations), the worldview is constructed with a higher emphasis on spatial design, meaning that the player is allowed to interact with, to react, and to listen to the fictions while having expansive influences over the “structural properties” and plot development of the storyline (Robson and Meskin 167).





The process of meaning-making, through interactivity, in video games is articulated through the “confrontation” between the video game’s set of principles and limitations and the player’s subjectivization of the gameplay. In addition, the concept of gaming revolves around the need for the player’s “doing” (Squire 22). In other words, video games embrace essentially the attempt at libertarian decision-making (Hayot 187) – advocating for a sense of autonomy in fictional worlds representational of real-life objects. On the other hand, in discussing subjectivization, the player’s subjective view (understandings) is said to be forged through “cycles of performance within the gameworlds” (Squire 19), and the player develops their own new identities through “game play and through gaming communities in which these identities are enacted” (19).

The process of meaning-making depends on the sense of agency, which refers to the degree to which a user is allowed to influence the narrative and development of a game. If what separates video games from other mainstream forms of art lies in the medium’s emphasis on interactivity between the ideal or digital environment (or gameplay) and its audience, it is essential to reckon that the player agency plays a significant role in the creation of meaningful experiences and character identities. As such, game designers construct the “parameters for players’ experiences” (Squire 21) while the player agency contributes to interactivity by developing an adaptive and innovative vision to work around pre-determined gaming mechanisms.

Taking into account the versatility of video games as a medium for reflective judgment, Miguel Sicart defines the player as “an ethical agent”; to be more specific, the player is supposed to be “morally aware and capable of reflecting upon” the consequences and merits of their act in the game world and how their ethical decisions in the gameplay reflect their nature as an ethical agent (62). While movies, novels, or television shows could undoubtedly provide their audience with a “variety of moral perspectives” or interpreted modern takes on different social or political agendas, video games intuitively enhance meaning-making by allowing their players to interact with said perspectives or topics (Sicart 61), both intellectually and emotionally. The player actively shapes the continuity of a game for a player is “the keeper of its existence” (Sicart 68); as a matter of fact, the absence of players technically spells the absence of a game’s progress. The game - the product of virtual world-making - contains the context and sets of principles that govern the physics of its artificial world. Nevertheless, for its principles to be upheld and followed, they must be embedded in the player’s epistemic process or, in other words, such rules must be perceived and taken for granted. Gaming scenarios, in popular mainstream creations such as Red Dead Redemption or The Walking Dead, present the players with the option of becoming virtually a legitimate moral being – one that could make a moral stance (based on their own choices and preferences). In particular, Telltale’s marketing director Richard Iggo claims that players act out based on their moral dispositions rather than on logical inferences:

the majority of people will try to do the ‘right’ thing if they can, even if there’s really no ‘right’ decision to be made. It’s fascinating because even when we offer players a decision where the apparently darker option might make sense from a purely logical point of view, they’ll often try to choose the ‘higher’ ground at personal cost even if that means being put in danger or having a relationship with another character suffer because of it. (qtd. in Stang)

Sicart explains that a player, in accordance with the in-game mechanics, gradually comes up with “a set of ethical values inspired” by the game itself and the community; be that as it may, said player’s in-game ethical values are not inherently excluded from their presupposed ethical beliefs (Sicart 76). Taking into account Iggo’s statement about the



potential dependence of in-game ethical decision-making on the player's natural orientation towards correct moral choices, it is not hard to point out that games are capable of fostering the sense that players have a responsibility for what transpires in-game and of fostering a form of cognitive empathy.

Games such as *Red Dead Redemption 2* create an ethical framework by providing phenomenal feedback to players. In this game, nearly every action the player makes in the world will cause them to either accumulate or lose honor points. If the player has positive honor points, they receive advantages such as store discounts, while a negative honor score can increase the player's earnings from robberies. The player's honor score also affects certain details of the narrative. A gain or loss in honor points is made immediately clear to the player via the game's heads-up display (HUD), allowing the player to readily interpret morally acceptable actions as earning honor, whereas unacceptable ones cause a loss. Through this immediate feedback, the player can have an intimate perceptual understanding of ethics built along a particular framework. The player begins to perceive an immoral action not just as the action itself, but also understands it to be closely associated with a loss in honor. This frames the player's interaction with the game systems inside of an ethical framework created by the designers. The player's role as a free ethical agent is made immediately clear, giving the player an insight into this framework and an understanding of their own ethical agency.

## CONCLUSION

Vocal opposition against the rising cultural status and transformation of video games from their former label of entertainment is trivially expected. Be that as it may, certainly game designers, in their construction projects of several contemporary game titles of the Twenty-First century, attempted or at least are attempting to bring video games to cater to a wider variety of functions (Jagoda 211). The video game is unique in that it cannot be separated from the experience of the audience, and in fact games intimately involve the player. Video games often portray acts of violence and morally gray situations, and because of the player's epistemic participation it is paramount that these games develop an ethical system in which to frame these situations, one that accounts for player agency.



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