gamevironments

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religion gamer analysis representation healing lore religio-scape soul diablo class tradition experience twitch rebirth genesis clan gamer
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Review of *Ethik des Computerspielens: Eine Grundlegung* (Ethics of Video Gaming: A Groundwork)

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Abstract
A book review of *Ethik des Computerspielens: Eine Grundlegung* (Ethics of Video Gaming: A Groundwork).

The question of the moral implications of playing video games has been contested in academia since the emergence of the medium itself. They reach from psychological evaluations about the harms and advantages of gaming to mental health (e.g., Aarseth et al. 2017) to cultural studies empirical assessment of the cultural innovative drive (e.g., Crogan 2018) as well as the discriminatory tropes and biases in certain titles (e.g., Mukherjee 2017). Philosophers too participate in these endeavors. In the German-speaking context, Ostritsch (2018) was one of the first to outline the morality of games and their respective content from a philosopher's perspective. Now, Samuel Ulbricht (2020) provides us with a systematization of philosophical thought on video gaming as practice. His focus lies on video gaming as human actions and the question of their moral assessability through different ethical accesses. For this, he categorizes individual gameplay actions around types of underlying intentions and puts them in dialog with three schools of ethics (Utilitarianism, Aristotle's virtue

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ethics, and Kant's deontological moral) to assess the moral wrongness or rightness of each type through exemplary cases. In doing this, he provides a complex yet distinct path to evaluate video game actions normatively.

Outline

Ulbricht asks how video game actions can be morally assessed. He first defines video games, demarcates them from other forms of play, and justifies his focus on video game actions instead of video games themselves (Ulbricht 2020, 1-11). Based on Anscombe (1957) and Davidson (2001), he defines actions as "practices we do intentionally" (Ulbricht 2020, 9, translated by the author) and demarcates video game actions from common actions by their fictional rather than real actualization. Then he poses the question if such actions actually qualify as morally assessable due to this fictional component. He argues that not all but some video game actions qualify for moral assessment. To shed light on the question what kind of video game action belongs to the former and what kind to the later, Ulbricht differentiates between different types of actions (Ulbricht 2020, 11-23). The first type (1) includes video game actions that are executed towards a goal in reality. The second (2) describes players' actions that target goals within the game world. And the third type (3) contains actions by entities within the game outside the players' involvement. Each type can be applied to the same practice (e.g., pushing buttons, resulting in a defeated foe). They only differ in the player's main intention behind their execution (e.g., I do this to pass time (1), I do this to get a sword (2), Link is doing this (3) [Ulbricht 2020, 21-25]). The first type (1) qualifies for moral assessment but does not demand special consideration compared to other (meaning actual) types of actions. The last type (3) disqualifies as actual action because of the lack of a human agent. Ulbricht therefore mainly focuses on the second type (2). He considers it to be especially challenging for

common ethics which were not designed to evaluate actions with a fictitious goal in mind (Ulbricht 2020, 51-54). To grasp the nature of this type of action, he argues with Huizinga that they are expressions of the pure form of play and can be considered quasi-actions. This means that the fictitious character of the content is never entirely forgotten by the player. He extends this quasi-operator on the moral-layer, saying that we can apply quasi-moral to actions that players conduct in fictional realms that would be immoral if conducted in reality (Ulbricht 2020, 31-41).

After describing his object of investigation in this way, Ulbricht subjects it to utilitarianism. For this school of ethics, both virtual (1) and fictional (2) actions can be morally assessed by their impact. Ulbricht especially highlights the impact of video game actions on the player themself (for example, when they fall into addiction) against the so-called amoralist perspective that disregards video gaming per se as morally intangible (Ulbricht 2020, 56-64). Next, Ulbricht applies the same amoralist-perspective to Aristotle's ethics school that focuses on the virtue of the executor for its assessment. The distinction here lies between expressive (a) and consequential (b) valuations. The first (a) judges the player's virtue by their choice to play (questionable) games. Here, the judgment involves the player's character and is unrelated to specific video game action and therefore disregarded for this evaluation. The consequential valuations (b) investigate, if the practice of gaming itself is harmful or beneficial for players' virtues. Here, Ulbricht argues that vices and virtues enacted in games cannot be habitualized to their counterparts in reality and therefore he dismisses this approach, too (Ulbricht 2020, 76). While virtue ethics fall short to grasp the fictional aspects of video game actions appropriately, Ulbricht highlights the merits of Kant's deontological moral for this aspect. To make his point, he provides a digression into literature studies' theory on fiction. Based on Walton (1990), he shows that fictions are characteristically incomplete, and that their gaps must be filled by the

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recipient's imagination (Ulbricht 2020, 82-98). Ulbricht uses these findings to further differentiate fictional actions (2) into subtypes: the fiction-accepting (i) and the fiction-transforming (ii) type. In the first (i), the player stays aware of the fictitious character of their actions. In the fiction-transforming type (ii), however, the player makes themself believe (even though they stay aware of the fiction-actuality-distinction) that their action is real. Here, Kant's moral provides the chance to condemn such quasi-immoral actions even though they lack actualization in the real world. This is based on the notion that quasi-immoral actions with a fiction-transforming intention by the player violate the categorical imperative (Ulbricht 2020, 98-107).

In the end, Ulbricht shows the limits and merits of his approach and stresses the benefit of all three schools of ethics in grasping the moral implications of video game actions appropriately. He concludes that most of the time video game actions lie beyond moral assessability (amoralist perspective) but at times when they are morally assessable, established schools of ethics can provide helpful normative guidelines. However, they can be wrongly applied if the fictional component of such actions is not properly considered. For this, he stresses the importance of the initial action-typology for a differentiated gaze on the phenomenon for future ethical evaluations on video games (Ulbricht 2020, 109-113).

Criticism and Benefits

Ulbricht provides us with the first categorization of video game action for normative evaluation. He relies mainly on his philosophical predecessors in the field and on literature studies. While he mentioned game studies and cultural studies briefly, a deeper engagement with their empirical groundwork might have provided this

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endeavor with more tangibility; his examples are imagined and not based on an empirical basis. While this is a valid philosophical procedure for a theoretical outline and groundwork on ethics, it becomes clear, nonetheless, that the examples provided are derived from the author's own experience as a player. A stronger link to existing empirical research might have provided his categories more credibility to be applicable outside of the provided set of examples. Especially his typology and strong fiction-actuality distinction appear to be vulnerable when confronted with less ideally created examples. For example, DeVane and Squire (2008) investigated players' motivations for playing *Grand Theft Auto* (a title often referred to by Ulbricht). Their emphasis on players' shifting gameplay-interests based on social setting and gaming literacy challenges the singular understanding of intention and the guiding distinction between fiction and actuality in his action-typology. Additionally, while Ulbricht does provide a deeper look into fiction theory, what he considers actuality in contrast to fiction is sometimes under-defined and shifting. Especially comparisons between *fictional* games (video games) and their *actual* counterparts (e.g., soccer and card games) led me to suspect that the division punctually changes into virtuality vs. materiality. In fact, some arguments might even have profited more from this distinction than from the former (for example his quasi-operationalization). Ulbricht's examples and types often beg the question of their quantitative relevance (or even existence) for actual players. He points this problem out himself with the fiction-transforming-type (ii) of fictional actions (2). Here, the strong dichotomy between fiction and actuality shows its limits and is artificially upheld by this questionable type. But because his typology relies so strongly on the *true* intentions of players, empirical validation of the existence of such a type seems impossible to prove or falsify.

How can cultural studies, which are seldom interested in normative evaluations, benefit from a moral assessment on video game action? I believe that Ulbricht's systematization of possible moral justifications behind video game actions might serve as an exemplary deductive category system for fieldwork: can we find utilitarian arguments when players justify their actions? Can we identify narratives of virtues when players discuss the benefits of playing certain games? And do players consider the fictional component of their actions when they show remorse for gameplay decisions? For this, Ulbricht's Ethics of Video Gaming: A Groundwork provides ample examples for possible reasoning patterns we might encounter when researching actual players.

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