The Ethics of Choice in Single-Player Video Games
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A. Introduction

Video games have become ubiquitous in today's society, ranging from simple apps on a smart phone to immersive computer or console games that require eighty or a hundred hours to complete. Furthermore, they are no longer the purview of a small fraction of the populace; they are a form of media that children grow up with and adults continue to engage with throughout their lives. As such, it is natural to wonder about the impact of games upon us: what kinds of effects are they having?

While much discussion in the popular press has been concerned with the effects of video games on children, we should not ignore their effects on adult players. While adults may be more morally developed and less easily influenced by the messages in media, they are certainly not immune from them. I will argue that prominent accounts of ethics in video games, such as Miguel Sicart's (2009, 2013) ignore this fact by focusing too much on ideal players and not enough on actual players.

The increased focus on video games over the last decade dovetails with the attention many academics are devoting to extending principles of moral harm or benefit to virtual worlds. With the advent of online environments such as *Second Life* (Linden Research Inc. 2003), serious moral questions have been raised concerning the status of our actions in those realms. Can one cause harm via an avatar? Do our actions in a virtual world have moral status? There have been a variety of answers, but they all display a concern for the notion of causing harm within virtual worlds. Video games are a specific kind of virtual world which many engage with on a daily basis; as such, we cannot ignore the values they embody.

I will argue that it is possible to cause moral harm or benefit within a video game, specifically by drawing attention to the nature of the choices both players and designers make. For the purposes of this paper, I will set aside multiplayer games and concentrate on single player games. In such cases, we can separate the ethical consequences within the game from the consequences to the player. We can thus consider the ethical ramifications of actions from inside the game world and the relationship a player has to those actions; we can also consider the effects of the actions on the player herself. I discuss ways in which games attempt to represent morality, arguing that while flawed, even games with seemingly superficial devices such as morality meters can attempt to promote moral reflection. Contrary to Sicart, however, I believe that players are not always reflective about the moral choices they face. Ultimately, I argue that the moral status of the actions depends on the effects of those actions on the player herself; if those actions make us less ethical then the actions are wrong. Unfortunately, it is not clear to me that players are always in a position to tell whether this is the case.

B. Morality and Choices

Before diving into the details of how video games handle choices, one might wonder whether ethics is even relevant to this topic. I have argued elsewhere that moral standing is tied to having

interests. (Neely 2013) These can range from very simple interests such as being free of physical pain to more complex interests such as those involved in our legal understanding of property ownership, however, if a thing, such as a rock, lacks interests, it is difficult to understand how one could either harm or benefit it. Within the realm of a single-player video game, one interacts with virtual characters; there are no other players, but there are other characters programmed into the game world. In one sense, those characters do not have interests, since they are not real – they are much like characters in dreams or fantasies. As such, it would appear at first glance that one could treat them however one wished: lacking interests, they also lack the ability to be harmed or benefitted, thus they seem to stand outside of morality; one's actions towards them are neither morally praiseworthy nor morally blameworthy. Thus it may seem that there is not much to be said on this topic.

This is slightly hasty, however. Following Johnny Søraker (2012) we can distinguish intravirtual (inside the game world) and extravirtual (outside the game world) consequences of actions. From an extravirtual standpoint, video game characters, indeed, are fictional and thus cannot be harmed or benefitted extravirtually; any argument about morality must take another approach.[1] While we will consider this broader picture in a moment, let us first examine the former standpoint, i.e., the characters within their own context, as members of a particular virtual world.[2]

The ability to choose different actions has become an important part of many modern video games, and players expect the game world to reflect those actions. Games such as *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* (Troika Games 2001), *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009), and *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) have offered players a multitude of possible actions, with different in-game consequences for each choice. In these games, actions towards the denizens of the game may have moral import because one's decisions have impact *within the game*. If the characters seem to be harmed (or benefitted) within the game world by your actions, then it is easier to attach moral standing to those actions. For instance, in *Arcanum*, the main character can choose to blow up a bridge leading to a particular town. At the end of the game, you discover that doing so causes the town to wither from lack of trade. It would appear, therefore, that your character has taken a morally wrong action – or at least one which has negative moral ramifications. On the other hand, if your character aided a person without any thought of gain, then you have likely done something virtuous.

In order to track the intravirtual moral consequences of our actions, many games have introduced systems that track the players' choices. I will now consider some of the ways in which intravirtual morality is handled, beginning with a fairly crude explicit system before turning to more complex instantiations of the system. While all of these systems have limitations, I will

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[1] Of course, as Søraker notes, video games are particular states instantiated on physical devices and thus have an extravirtual component simply in terms of the bits on the machine; all of the characters, objects, and actions within the game thus have an extravirtual component in this sense. This is rarely the sort of extravirtual consequence we are concerned with from an ethical perspective, however.

[2] This is, presumably, the same sort of distinction we make for other art forms such as novels or films; on the one hand, it is false to say that Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty are enemies, since neither exist. However, in general when someone is making such a statement, they are actually talking about what is true within the fiction and, in this context, Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty are enemies. This distinction is discussed at length by Kendall Walton (1990) and is applied specifically to videogames by Grant Tavinor (2009).

argue that they all permit an important type of moral exploration on the part of the player; there is thus a connection between the intravirtual moral consequences of the character's actions and the extravirtual moral exploration of the player.

C. Choices and Morality Meters

The idea that actions can have moral import within a game context is presumably the genesis of morality meters in video games. This is a fairly crude system for measuring morality. While there are variations, in general one extreme represents pure evil and the other pure virtue; the main character's morality is measured using this meter. Various actions will cause the meter to move incrementally in one direction or the other, depending on the scope of the action. A minor misdeed will make you only slightly less virtuous, while major scheming may cause the meter to drop significantly. We may call this a single-stream morality meter.

A serious issue with single-stream meters is that they display a single score to represent the player's morality – each action either is deemed morally good (adding points to the score), morally neutral (leaving the score unaffected), or morally wrong (subtracting points from the score.) This implies that enough morally good actions can cancel out a morally wrong action. Hence a player who performed an extremely evil action and then many extremely good actions to counter it would be viewed as no different than a character who has performed no evil actions and only a few small good actions. Yet one might well argue that the latter should be deemed morally superior to the former; at the very least, it seems there is a relevant difference between the two which is not captured by the game mechanics.

To address this concern, some games have separate scores to measure morally good and morally bad actions; we may call this a dual-stream morality meter. *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) and its sequels divided actions into two categories; a character could amass paragon points (if she performed a compassionate or heroic action) or renegade points (if she performed an apathetic or ruthless action.) For instance, when faced with the last surviving member of an alien species, choosing to set it free will earn paragon points while choosing to kill it will earn renegade points. In this way the designers ensured that one's actions never truly disappear; a character's new virtuous actions may outweigh his previous unethical actions, but they do not negate those actions. This is surely a more accurate representation of real world morality, since one's previous actions do not cease to exist simply because one has atoned: you may no longer steal, you may have repaid the person you stole from, but the fact remains that you once stole, and that cannot be undone.

There are large assumptions bound up in these meters, even if viewed only as intravirtual measures of morality. One critical problem is that they rarely take intent or context into account – all instances of X will drop or raise your morality by Y. Hence an accidental act is not distinguished from an intentional act, nor is there room for nuance; a poor character stealing bread because they are starving to death would be no different than a rich one stealing out of avarice.[3]

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[3] As Heron and Belford (2014) note, this flaw generally rules out using Kantian ethics to measure morality in the game world, as there is no seamless way to determine the intent behind the actions.

Another issue is that one may question the moral system underlying the meter. For instance, *Arcanum* contains a quest in which a farmer asks the player to kill some wild animals that are damaging his crops. If the player does so, her character's morality decreases and any good-aligned characters in her party will object. This supposes that killing these animals is an immoral act, which betrays an unfamiliarity or lack of care displayed for the amount of damage that vermin can do to crops. If the designers presented killing the animals as simply one of several ways of completing the quest, then perhaps this would be a plausible representation of morality; it could be the least virtuous way to achieve the goal. Since they did not, however, the moral message appears to be that allowing wild animals to ruin crops (and this farmer's livelihood) is more virtuous than removing those animals; this seems a rather questionable moral conclusion.

Morality meters, therefore, represent a particular view of morality within the game, and one with which the players may disagree. This is not in itself necessarily problematic. Grant Tavinor (2009) discusses the fact that players of a game are engaged in a kind of "make believe," in which we do not so much suspend our disbelief as agree to a set of fictions for the purposes of play. Thus when we play a game, one thing we do is engage with the game's world, which can include a particular moral stance.[4] Yet players will not always simply accept this stance uncritically, particularly if it does not seem well-supported by the rest of the game's fiction. In *Arcanum*, there is nothing to indicate that killing the animals should be seen as immoral, nor are there any other relevant experiences that would reinforce this message; this is a single instance of the moral situation, and it thus seems poorly motivated.[5] The morality meter seems, if not incorrect, at least debatable in its judgment of this instance.

Moreover, there is a very utilitarian feel about this assessment of morality. Single-stream morality meters, which simply adjust one way or the other due to your good and bad actions, represent an extremely simple hedonic calculus: if the amount of utility (positive morality points) outweighs the amount of disutility (negative morality points) then a character is good.[6] While dual-stream morality meters are somewhat more complex, they still seem largely consequentialist in character; awarding points based on each specific action, for instance, would not sit well with a virtue ethicist's idea that character is displayed through habituation, not single acts. A virtue ethicist approach simply does not fit well with an explicit morality meter, even though such meters are often presented as attempting to represent the character's moral character.[7]

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[4] Sicart (2013) refers to this as being morally complicit with the game and its world.

[5] Sicart (2009) also discusses conflict between the rules of the game and the fictions of the game world, particularly when he discusses how the game *XIII* (Ubisoft 2003) portrays the character as a ruthless killer but the game will not allow her to kill police officers or innocents.

[6] Indeed, the entire scheme of awarding points is reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham (1823/1996), since actions which are more harmful or greater in scope do seem to award more negative points than those which have smaller consequences. It is not a perfect representation of his hedonic calculus, but it is in the same vein.

[7] Of course, this is not a truly utilitarian account of morality either, since it is relativized to the game world; in some sense, neither utility nor disutility is generated by an action, since the actions are fictional. However, since such meters generally reflect what are considered good or bad consequences *within the game*, they are roughly utilitarian if one is engaged in the make-believe fiction of the world.

A more fundamental objection to the idea behind morality meters is presented by Sicart (2009) when he argues that morality meters may have little to do with the player's ethical engagement, since they become just another mechanic to strategize over and manipulate. If a player knows that the game world will respond to him in certain ways if he takes certain actions, or if he crosses a certain threshold on the meter, then he may pay attention to the morality of his actions not for its own sake, but because he desires certain results in the game. This issue arises on multiple plays of a game, since one has an idea of what results will occur for certain actions based on past experience. However, many games have the ability to restore to a previous point via saving and reloading; this would enable a player to take an action, see what the effect is on her score, and redo it if she did not like that result.[8] While Sicart argues that such actions are purely strategic and devoid of moral reflection on the part of the player, I disagree. This, too, displays a kind of consequentialism: a player has her character take an action, evaluates the consequences, and then decides whether those are good consequences for the game *as the player wishes it to progress*. Admittedly, this represents a form of meta-gaming: the player is not necessarily concerned with the moral consequences as evaluated by the game. However, it enables the player to develop particular kinds of characters easily and see what happens to them within the game universe. This will not necessarily result in moral reflection on the part of the player, but it does not seem to prevent it either; the reflection simply will be over the character's actions/game as a whole, rather than over the consequences of a single action.

One way that games attempt to prevent this kind of meta-gaming is to attempt implementing more complex systems of morality. For instance, many games lack explicit morality meters but will alter the game world and people's reactions to you in response to what you do. This can be relatively simplistic; for instance, in *Arcanum* (Troika Games 2001), if a character is seen stealing, the town's guards will attack him. Alternately, the game can involve complex adaptations which are sensitive to dialogue and plot choices; in *Dragon Age: Origin* (BioWare 2009) there are many conversational paths with party members, and the dialogue choices a player makes will affect their attitudes toward her character. This is an attempt to display game-world consequences of one's actions in a less arbitrary fashion than through an explicit meter.

Such attempts can still be subject to Sicart's objection if they are too simplistic. For instance, if a particular dialogue seems to go poorly, a player may restore and try again. While I do not find his objection totally persuasive, as argued above, his concern is further mitigated in some games by making the long-term effects of choices unclear.[9] One of the most interesting recent examples is in the game *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015), which has a mechanic wherein the lead character can rewind time for short bursts, allowing her to try different options and see the results.

Three things make this mechanic particularly fascinating. First, the character is intensely self-reflective; in many situations, no matter what choice a player picks, the character wonders aloud whether she should choose the other. Unlike games with clear black and white paths, this

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[8] Assuming that there is much of an effect on the gameworld; Heron and Belford (2014) criticize many implementations of morality meters because they are fairly shallow – the choices have few real consequences. This is an objection to how a system of morality is implemented in practice, however, rather than a fundamental objection to the idea of morality meters which Sicart appears to have.

[9] Sicart (2013) looks at this in greater detail, particularly praising *Fallout 3* as an example of a game which does this well.

leaves the player doubting and reflecting on his actions as well. Second, the rewind mechanic only works for a short period of time and does not continue indefinitely; once you have left one area and entered another, you cannot rewind past that point. Thus at some point one's choices are static – the player ultimately will have to make a decision and stick to it, unless she wishes to replay a large portion of the game.[10] Since many of the choices have long-term consequences, the player can pick what *seems* best, but he may be wrong about whether that choice actually *is* best. Third, partway through the game the character starts losing the ability to rewind time in some situations. This lends an unexpected urgency to dialogue and action choices in those cases – when the character is faced with trying to talk someone out of committing suicide, knowing that you cannot rewind makes the player's choices feel more significant. The fact that the game explicitly built in the players' ability to try different options and then took it away lends a weightiness to the consequences beyond what typically seems to be present in video games.[11] These factors combine to make the game world's adaptation to a player's choices extremely compelling and promotes a greater thoughtfulness with regard to moral decisions than most games.[12]

One of the interesting aspects of *Life is Strange* is how wildly unrealistic its implementation of moral choice is; in real life we cannot try out different options and rewind to see what would happen if we tried another path. In general, while morality meters are fairly crude devices, they are attempting a fairly realistic representation of morality: just as we judge people by their actions in the real world, the designers attempt to do so in the game world as well. These systems have limitations – most of us view morality as slightly more complex than simply reducing a person to a number or pair of numbers, and we cannot generally engage in the sort of meta-gaming that the ability to save and reload allows. Yet despite these limitations they still can promote moral thinking. Moreover, *Life is Strange,* which explicitly embraces some of the artificialities of typical play by incorporating it into the story line, demonstrates that even a wildly artificial system does not preclude such deliberation.

Having said that, the way in which the moral thinking occurs will likely differ depending on how obvious or artificial the system is. Attempts to modify the player's experiences based on his actions in the game clearly is a reflection of what happens in the real world. Our actions have consequences; the world (and people in it) respond to what we do. There is a need for some system of in-game morality if the game world wishes to seem realistic; in general, a world in which observed stealing has no consequences is not convincing.[13] Similarly, it is easier to be

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[10] Unlike many games which allow a player to save whenever he wishes, *Life is Strange* only allows saves at particular checkpoints; to change options after the rewind window closes, a player would have to reload to the previous checkpoint and play the game through to that dialogue or action choice again.

[11] Once again, this is reinforced by the fact that saving and reloading the game is somewhat constrained and thus adds a price to deciding to change one's choices.

[12] This is in part because *Life is Strange* has a stronger narrative than many games due to its linear nature and way of handling player choices. While I agree with Tavinor (2009) that frequently games have difficulty with narrative due to gameplay constraints, *Life is Strange* uses moral choices to reinforce different narrative possibilities in an extremely effective manner.

[13] Presumably even if a game is set in a lawless dystopia, people will be annoyed if you take their belongings.

immersed by a world where not all actions are presented as having the same moral ramifications. The morality meter or adaptation reinforces the fiction of the world.[14]

The attempt to make a convincing game world has interesting consequences, as our identification with our characters affects what we are willing to do with them. Michael Nagenborg and Christian Hoffstadt (2009) noted that the more a player sees her avatar as a reflection of herself, the more her own ethical code comes into play.[15] If she strongly identifies with a particular character in a game, she will be less willing to have that character commit actions she views as morally wrong; if she does not strongly identify with that character, then she is more likely to pay attention to the fictional nature of the game and thus feel that any action is morally acceptable (since, after all, the action is not truly occurring.)[16] A sufficiently immersive game world, then, has the potential for prompting moral deliberation. A player may not see his avatar as a perfect reflection of himself, retaining his own moral code. However, if he sees his character as embodying particular traits, then he may react as he believes such a person would react. In this case, he is not seeing all actions as permissible; he is instead approaching the scenario from a particular moral standpoint, albeit not the same one as he likely has in the real world.[17]

It is not clear to me that this kind of immersion is always required, however. As my response to Sicart on morality meters indicates, I believe that players will sometimes engage in meta-gaming to aim for a particular kind of game experience. Similarly, games such as *Life is Strange* use the artificial nature of the game to allow for a greater freedom to explore options than real life allows. I do not necessarily regard this as ethically inferior to a game in which a player is more directly immersed (or where the moral system is less obvious). Rather, I believe they promote different kinds of potential ethical experiences. A game in which a player strongly identifies with a character will engage her ethically at each decision point; she may agonize over what to do in various situations because her avatar is an extension of herself and thus the choice seems more real. However, when a player is engaged in meta-gaming, there is still the potential for moral evaluation. That evaluation, however, is more likely to be of the ultimate experience of the game as a whole: if I pick choices X, Y, and Z, did the game react in a convincing or satisfying way? The player's character is thus much closer to a character in a book or a movie, but one which the player directs – the player makes choices, but there is little identification with those choices. It is thus about the particular experience of the game as a whole.

D. Extravirtual Harm

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[14] Note that by "immersed" I simply mean that a player is deeply mentally engaged with the game, much in the same way that one can be drawn in by the fiction of a book or movie. Many games attempt to create worlds that promote this by trying to be relatively realistic (insofar as their setting allows). **[more?***]**

[15] Although I would note that some research (Lange 2014) suggests that the majority of players engage with moral choice systems using their own moral code regardless of how much they identify with a character.

[16] Note, with Gorrindo and Groves (2010), that what we do with our avatars is not literally what we are willing to do in real life; the fact that you are willing to murder someone in a game does not imply you would murder in real life. Your avatar's actions may are not a literal map of your actions – they at best provide insight into your personality.

[17] It will be interesting to see how this evolves as we have more immersive virtual worlds – will players be less willing to choose the "evil" path in a game? Will there be a point at which it simply becomes too realistic to maintain a separation between their own morality and the game's morality? Or will we become gaming chameleons, wherein we can successfully inhabit a range of moralities, depending on the character we are playing?

This distinction between evaluating one's actions in the game and evaluating the game experience as a whole brings up larger questions of morality. It seems clear that, within a game world, one can take ethical or unethical actions; there are ways of harming or benefitting characters inside the game context. However, this leaves open the larger question of whether you are causing moral harm or benefit outside of the game world; are there extravirtual consequences of your actions?

This issue is frequently framed in terms of whether it is morally problematic to play violent video games. As Matt McCormick (2001) notes, it has become common for the media to connect video game playing to events such as mass murders and school shootings; it is almost stereotypical at this point to reveal that such perpetrators loved playing first-person shooting games. Even without that connection, some games are extremely brutal or gruesome, and many wonder whether there is something unethical about engaging with them. We can thus raise questions on both a micro and macro level: is it wrong to commit actions in a game if we would deem those actions wrong in the real world? Is it wrong to play a game which encourages such actions? Or, should we argue with Sicart (2009, 2013) that players are sufficiently capable of moral reflection and thus are not susceptible to being morally harmed by games? The truth, I will argue, lies somewhere between media hysteria and Sicart's blithe assurances of moral reflection – while gamers are capable of moral deliberation, it is not clear to me that they always engage in it.

Let us consider a somewhat fanciful example. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) contains a quest in which you are instructed to take a sharp stick and poke baby monkeys to cause them distress.[18] Within the game context this action is essentially seen as a necessary evil – the fact that you are asked to do this by a particular faction is motivation to later repudiate that faction. However, since generally we frown on torturing animals in the real world, one might wonder whether this quest is wrong to undertake in some larger sense.

In order for our actions to cause moral harm, someone's interests must be harmed. From an extravirtual perspective, clearly we cannot claim that the monkeys are actually harmed since they do not exist. The only existing entity directly involved in the scenario is the player; as such, it appears that the only being who could be harmed is that player. The question then becomes whether a player is somehow causing harm to herself by engaging in the action. This is a virtue ethics approach which addresses the effect on a player's moral character; if by performing the game action, the player is apt to become less ethical in real life, then the action is wrong to take within the game.[19] In essence, the player is rendering herself less virtuous by taking that action, and thus indirectly could be promoting future harms to others. For instance, if repeatedly engaging in violent activities in a game is rendering the player less sensitive to the effects of violence on others, then she should refrain from those activities. Members of society have an interest in adhering to the ethical standards of that society; a choice which makes one less likely to have empathy for others in the social group is impeding one's social interests.

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[18] While *World of Warcraft* is a multi-player game, this particular example does not involve any multiplayer elements and thus is akin to a quest in a single player game.

[19] I am far from the only person to suggest this approach. For instance, McCormick (2001) raises this as a possibility and Mark Coeckelbergh (2007) develops it further.

However, it is not clear whether these actions will translate into future harms. McCormick (2001) and Coeckelbergh (2007) each reject utilitarianism and deontological ethics in this regard because there is not enough evidence to connect video game playing to bad future actions.[20] Yet it is not clear that they establish that harm to one's character actually occurs in playing these games. Coeckelbergh claims that

> The more precise conditions for a game to be morally problematic are not only (1) that there is violent content, but also (2) that there are particular structural similarities between the virtual and the real world in place, and (3) that they un-train – or, at least, do not allow or inhibit development and training of – empathy.[21] (p. 227)

Clearly, not all seemingly unethical game actions will translate into real world harms. Some actions may be neutral in their effect on the player. For instance, consider a player who steals in a video game. Since frequently games will allow rogues or thieves as characters, this player may see these behaviors as tacitly endorsed within the game. As such, he may see his behavior as divorced from the real world: he can simultaneously see stealing as wrong in this world while believing it permissible in the game world. Assuming he is able to distinguish the two worlds, these actions are not apt to make him less ethical. In this case, even if there are some structural similarities between the virtual and real world, they are sufficiently different to allow for ethical distinctions.

Similarly, some games deliberately encourage thinking about ethical dilemmas and wrestling with what actions to take. As mentioned before, *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015), delays the appearance of many consequences in a way that lends significance to player choices and encourages players to try different paths and see what happens. When thoughtfully done, this kind of experimentation can be morally beneficial to the player – not only may it fail to make her more unethical, it may instead aid her moral development by increasing her sensitivity to ethical choices and their ramifications. So actions, even unethical actions, could increase empathy.[22]

Thus, with respect to the aforementioned *World of Warcraft* quest, poking baby monkeys with a stick in the game is not necessarily wrong, assuming the player is not thereby more likely to commit harm in real life. If, say, she takes the quest and experiences moral revulsion while performing it, the quest may instead be morally beneficial; she has learned something about her reactions to torture or animal cruelty. This is a kind of philosophical thought-experiment in video game form; while the trappings may be fantastic, the moral dilemmas faced in games can reflect larger ethical questions about the treatment of animals, the lengths one should go to in order to appease authority figures (such as quest givers) and so forth.

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[20] Indeed, the empirical studies are decidedly mixed in their results, and I tend to agree with Coeckelbergh's assertion that "philosophers are tempted to pick out the one or few [empirical studies] that suit their arguments best." (Coeckelbergh, 2007, p. 220)

[21] This could be somewhat too restrictive if, in fact, there are non-violent actions which also negatively affect moral character. Such actions were beyond the scope of Coeckelbergh's argument, but a broader use of his definition may require an expansion of this clause.

[22] This is presumably part of what Sicart (2009, 2013) finds promising about the creation of ethical video games.

Much of Coeckelbergh's attempt to lay out conditions seems quite convincing, therefore. Yet the problem remains that it is fairly abstract – he has argued that actions are wrong to take if they make one less ethical by inhibiting empathy, but he has not said how to determine whether this is so. Perhaps in the monkey example it seems likely that the player is not harming her moral character, since she experiences an appropriate reaction. But what about an instance to the contrary? What if the player believes himself capable of divorcing the video game from reality but, in fact, is being influenced by it and is acting less ethical in the real world? How can one tell that the action is wrong to take?

There are two things to note in response to this objection. First, this raises interesting questions about distinguishing the game from reality, and I believe that the game context itself is relevant to this; I thus believe that Coeckelbergh's second criterion is useful here. Games which mimic reality are relevantly different from games which take place in vastly different worlds. If a game is set within a fantasy world wherein a player is a wizard casting spells and slaying dragons, there is probably a sufficient disconnect between that world and this one to render it easy to distinguish the two; no matter how tempting it may be to fling a fireball into the middle of a boring faculty meeting, one is aware that this is not possible. On the other hand, a game such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008) involves situations which occur in the real-life. The chances are thus higher that such games will cause moral repercussions for the player due to the direct parallels between the actions in that game and actions in the real world.[23]

Second, there is an important distinction between the wrongness of an action and our being able to determine that wrongness. The former, more theoretical question, is the one which Coeckelbergh and I have been addressing; the latter is the pragmatic question of how to act upon that theoretical result. While fairly convinced by Coeckelbergh's proposed answer to the former question, I find the latter more troubling. It is true we can study general effects of video games upon individuals to see whether there are trends in what kinds of games and actions have good or bad effects upon the players and their future actions.[24] However, there are currently contradictory studies (as noted above), and I do not know whether this situation will improve. If it does not, then we have little way of telling what the effects on a player's character are.

This is particularly troubling given the tendency among some writers, Sicart (2009, 2013) in particular, to overstate the moral reflection among gamers. This is likely in response to the popular portrayal of gamers as being almost passive puppets in the hands of violent video games, shaped into hateful, violent beings through playing first-person shooting games. That is clearly a caricature of gamers and their responses to games. Yet, Sicart risks swinging too far the other way when he notes that "When I write about players, I am referring to an implied, model player…who has experience playing games and has the ethical maturity to understand them as an expressive medium." (Sicart 2013, p. 25)

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[23] Note that this also increases the possibility of moral benefit, not simply moral harm.
[24] This is already being done by researchers such as Saleem, Anderson, and Gentile (2012).

I agree that, in general, a "player is a moral user capable of reflecting ethically about her presence in the game, and aware of how that experience configures her values."[25] (Sicart 2009, p. 17) However, I am not certain that adults are as immune to influence as Sicart believes. While adults do usually have more experience with moral thinking than children, I do not agree that our morality is fully-formed and unchanging; indeed, if games can promote virtue and moral thinking, as many argue, then they can do the reverse as well. One cannot be susceptible to virtue unless one is also susceptible to vice. Furthermore, while players are clearly *capable* of moral reflection, this does not imply that they always *engage* in moral reflection. As such, there continues to be a risk to actual players, even if there is no risk to the theoretical player.

In particular, while a single action seems unlikely to change the moral character of a gamer, it is less clear that a pattern of actions will have no effect. It may well be that completing one morally dubious action in a video game or even playing one morally dubious video game will not significantly affect one's character. This does not imply, however, that repeating the actions has no effect. Exposure to one idealized body image is unlikely to cause an eating disorder, yet cumulative exposure has a much greater chance. (Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein 1994) A similar effect may be true for video games. Perhaps it may not matter if one takes violent actions in a single game, but it may matter if it is part of a greater trend. Similarly, playing a single first-person shooting game where the hero is white and the targets are all non-white may not affect one's character, but perhaps playing many such games does.[26]

Thus, despite being sympathetic to Sicart's emphasis on the reflective potential of gamers, I am less optimistic about its practical value. The fact that we are capable of reflecting on our choices does not prevent us from making harmful choices, even if we are not aware of it. Thus choices within a game may lead to extravirtual harm, not necessarily in an overt fashion, but by subtly influencing us.

E. Conclusion

With the increasingly pervasive reach of video games, it is important to consider their moral ramifications. I have argued for an emphasis on choice as a way of understanding various ethical issues that arise in this arena. In single-player games we must distinguish between the intravirtual effects on the game world and extravirtual effects on the player of the game. A desire to adapt the game world to player choices has, in part, led to the advent of morality meters and other systems of morality tracking within the game. Unfortunately, these have certain limitations. In particular, their inability to consider the nuances of a particular action is problematic, as is the question of what system of morality is in play. Breaking with Sicart (2009, 2013), however, I am less concerned with the idea that players could strategize to obtain particular results; this strikes me as simply another venue for potential ethical reflection. Thus I

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[25] Note that we are setting aside the question of child players here – both Sicart (2009, 2013) and Tavinor (2009) explicitly distinguish players who are not adults and thus not morally-formed in order to argue for age-restrictions on games. Adults seem to be viewed as having a stronger moral center and as being more capable of reflection.

[26] Ultimately I think these kinds of concerns bind game designers as much as players, since building a world that encourages certain kinds of actions may make players less inclined to deliberate on the worth of those actions and thus less inclined to see how their choices are affecting their values.

believe that even explicit or obvious systems of morality in video games may be useful for ethical reflection.

The idea that good actions could cancel out bad actions has caused many to seek alternate ways of portraying morality within video games, whether through separate meters tracking good and bad actions, or simply through adapting the game world without any explicit measure of morality. Once players have real choices within the game world that world must reflect those choices or else it lacks realism. Interestingly, that realism has consequences for a player's actions within the game; the more she identifies with a character in a game, the less she is willing to use that character to violate her own sense of morality. Immersion is not required for ethical reflection, however, as the act of experimentation within a game world can also lead to reflection on the part of the player. This is true even when the moral system is implemented in an extremely artificial way, such as in *Life is Strange*. (Dontnod Entertainment 2015)

Outside of the game world, we must consider the effect of video game actions on a player; in particular, we must ask whether the actions can cause moral harm to that player by rendering him less ethical. Unethical actions in a game do not necessarily have this result, as the player may be able to separate actions in the game from actions in the real world. Furthermore, many games with sophisticated conceptions of morality specifically encourage the player to deliberate among the possible choices; this deliberation may aid our moral development. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether we will always be able to tell if a game is harming us; while ideally players will engage in self-reflection, actual players do not always do so and may not be as capable of moral deliberation as the ideal player.

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