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## Introduction: The Ethics of E-Games

### Abstract:

E-games are a dramatically expanding dimension of contemporary exploitations of computing and computer network technologies - one that, thus far, has evoked much more heat (often, in the form of "moral panics") among parents and politicians than light in the form of serious scholarly and philosophical analysis. We argue that e-games deserve such analysis in part because of their intrinsic philosophical interest as they raise primary philosophical questions of ontology, epistemology, human nature, the character of gameplay," - and most especially, of ethics. We further suggest that such analyses - exemplified by the articles collected here - may also contribute to resolving the larger social and political debates evoked by e-games.

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Across the world, e-games – which we understand to mean primarily games that require computer processing for their play, in either standalone or network-based environments – have long evoked fierce debate in many circles, raising sentiments across the board. As is often the case as new technologies appear and diffuse in societies, these sentiments, responses, and issues range from discomfort, anger, and pleasure, to parental concerns and serious addiction problems. Within these parameters, the ethical debate surrounding e-games is certainly growing. But this debate threatens to become paralyzed on the one hand by simple-minded and, in some cases at least, unwarranted characterizations of e-games and their impacts, and, on the other hand, by overly simple ethical analyses that would force us to choose between Manichean polarities of absolute evil vs. absolute good. Moreover, while numerous articles on the ethical dimensions of e-games have appeared over the past two decades – within the philosophical literature, e-games have received remarkably scant attention. However, as a sign of the growing scholarly interest in and importance of gaming, two journals, *Game Studies*<sup>1</sup>, which began in 2001, and *Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media*<sup>2</sup>, premiering January 2006, are dedicated to an intellectual and critical examination of gaming.

In our view, however, e-games – as a rapidly growing social, economic, and perhaps political phenomenon – deserve serious ethical reflection first of all as an important component of the larger fields of Computer and Information Ethics that seek to bring the tools and insights of philosophical analyses to bear on computing technologies and their multiple interactions with our ethical and political existence. In fact, as we shall see by way of conclusion here, the articles collected in this special issue – as one of the very few (if any) such issues in the philosophical literature – contribute to several of the central discussions in Computer and Information Ethics. Moreover, if we as individuals, families, communities, and scholars are to debate effectively and fruitfully regarding e-games, including their potential impacts on our children, families, and societies; and if we, in the light of those debates, are to develop and implement ethically-justified resolutions to

demonstrably significant (i.e., empirically-grounded and ethically important) problems – then these debates and discussions require precisely the substantive philosophical reflection that e-games deserve in any case. In presenting what we take to be significant contributions to such analysis, we hope that this special issue will encourage further philosophical reflection of the highest order. In doing so, we further seek to take contemporary ethical discussion of e-games beyond such Manichean dichotomies between “moral panics,” on the one hand, and self-interested defenses, on the other hand, and thereby contribute some of the approaches and insights needed to fruitfully resolve these important debates.

Before turning to the articles collected here, it may be helpful to briefly consider the contemporary ethical and political landscape regarding e-games. In the United States, industry labeling of video games began in 1994. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) uses five different rating symbols and over 25 different content labels that refer to violence, sex, language, substance abuse, gambling, humor and other potentially sensitive subject matter. It is not surprising that e-games are contributing to current political discussions. Recent legislation has been introduced to protect minors from “inappropriate” games; Senators Clinton and Lieberman proposed the Family Entertainment Protection Act, noting that “There is a growing body of evidence that points to a link between violent videos and aggressive behaviour in children. We are not interested in censoring videos meant for adult entertainment but we do want to ensure that these videos are not purchased by minors. Our bill will help accomplish this by imposing fines on those retailers that sell M-rated games to minors,” Senator Lieberman said (Clinton 2005).

Across Europe, e-games are also hot-button political issues. In Germany, for example, the new coalition of the SPD (Social-Democratic Party) and CDU (Christian-Democrat Union) has urged legislation that would forbid so-called *Killerspiele* – “killer games” such as first-person shooters (FPSs) that, some studies have suggested, increase tendencies towards violence among their users (see especially Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic and Thomas Larsson, this volume, for a review of the relevant literature). Critics counter, it is worth noting, that such studies may be flawed in important ways – and that, for example, only 3% of computer games in Germany are for “adults only”, in contrast with the vast majority of games designed especially for educational use among young people (Networld 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.gamestudies.org/>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://gac.sagepub.com/>

This issue includes eight articles, each of which contributes to the growing scholarly discussion of e-games. We begin with three articles that take up the ethical dimensions of e-games from more general and theoretical perspectives. These articles (Mia Consalvo, Miguel Sicart, and Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic and Thomas Larsson) serve to introduce us to the large theoretical frameworks and issues central to philosophical reflection on e-games, including primary questions of ontology, epistemology, human nature, and the character of “game-play” – the experience of playing that, precisely as the human agent engages with the game as a formal system of rules, both actualizes the potentials of the player and the game, and thereby constitutes the peculiar “reality” of the game as a *construction* “between” the player and the game (so Sicart). Within these larger philosophical frameworks, these articles then introduce us to the various ethical dimensions of e-games, as well as provide a helpful overview of the relevant literatures, including current research on the positive and negative psychological and sociological impacts of e-games and gaming. These articles are followed by ones that address more specific ethical and legal questions – namely, questions of race in games (Dean Chan); what it means to cheat online (Kai Kimppa and Andrew Bissett); the legal dimensions of cheating (Dan Burk); and the ethical dimensions of Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) (Dorothy Warner and Mike Raiter, Jengchung Chen and Yangil Park).

We begin, then, with Mia Consalvo’s “Rule Sets, Cheating, and Magic Circles: Studying Games and Ethics.” This article offers potential frameworks for studying e-games; in particular, it asks “what is game ethics or what would it look like?” This article moves us towards a critical stance, much beyond the simple-minded, “is this a good game or a bad game” mentality that often permeates social and political sound bites surrounding e-games. By asking questions of an ethical nature at various levels and of various stakeholders in the gaming process, for instance, the gamers themselves, the game industry itself, and the game developers, significant and interesting questions arise — questions that contribute productively to our understanding of gaming. Consalvo’s questions move us into the sometimes unique and complex issues in the ethics of e-games, issues which will be addressed in greater detail in subsequent articles.

Miguel Sicart continues our initial focus on the larger philosophical questions of frameworks by demonstrating first of all how and why computer games

pose ethical problems. Sicart reiterates Consalvo’s point that the ethical dimensions of e-games are multi-layered, first of all as they implicate both designers and players: indeed, players bear a particular set of ethical responsibilities as they are central agents in the overall construction of the *meaning(s)* of computer games. Sicart then takes up Aristotle’s virtue ethics to examine the particular nature of computer games and to develop a specific framework for undertaking ethical analyses and constructing ethical approaches to e-games. In this way, Sicart helpfully ties ethical analysis and reflection on e-games to a central philosophical framework in the Western tradition – one that has enjoyed a renaissance, moreover, in contemporary ethics. Sicart’s approach is thus especially useful for furthering robust analyses of e-games that seek to draw on the full range of available philosophical resources, and thereby contribute to the nascent development of e-game ethics as a component of Computer and Information Ethics.

Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic and Thomas Larsson’s reiterate and amplify Sicart’s understanding of the *ontology* and *epistemology* of e-games: “a game is always embedded in reality and interpreted both inside and outside its conceptual space.” An ethical analysis must then take into account both the ontological and epistemological functions of games. Further reiterating Consalvo’s multi-layered analytical approach, Dodig-Crnkovi and Larsson likewise call attention to the multifaceted social position games assume. Their analysis emphasizes a central point made by Consalvo and Sicart as well: only when all invested parties assume an integral role in the ethical discussion will we see the development of an ethically sound game culture.

These initial analyses of the ethical dimensions of e-games, as intertwined with their ontological and epistemological dimensions, make clear that the nature of e-games is complex, and both reflects and is reflexive of reality. Given this duality, e-games are an important focal place in which we can fruitfully examine complex social issues.

To begin with, if we accept that e-games are always informing and are informed by social space, the issue of race is of paramount importance. Dean Chan’s “Playing with Race: The Ethics of Racialized Representation in E-Games” describes the racial overtones and representations in war, sports, and action adventure games and urges more critical reflection and engagement with such racialized representations. Through a reflexive engagement and by advocating for greater diversity of represen-

tation, Chan believes that gaming design and development can continue in a more ethically grounded way.

Next, Kimppa and Bissett take issue with cheating in online gaming communities. The authors assert that for a variety of reasons, cheating in e-games has not been considered as serious as cheating on other game venues, noting that it is a significant offence when considered in specific ethical parameters. They offer us a taxonomy of cheating and countermeasures intended to help us understand the potential array of offences. The authors argue for serious consideration of cheating as a way to ensure a fair and moral playing field for all in e-games.

The types of cheating raised in Kimppa and Bissett's, "The Ethical Significance of Cheating in Online Games," do not typically fall into legal discussions, though one could envision such debate. Dan Burk takes the legal issues head-on, as he examines the disparate interests of game players, publishers, and legality. Using an American copyright framework, Burk's "Electronic Gaming and the Ethics of Information Ownership" critiques current copyright law and addresses its shortcomings as a model for allowing and enabling player expression and creativity. By questioning existing intellectual property models vis-à-vis e-gaming, Burk moves the discussion forward in a meaningful and significant way.

We conclude with two articles that delve into the unique ethical dimensions of an emerging type of e-gaming, namely, Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), in Dorothy Warner and Mike Raiter's, "Social context in Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs): Ethical Questions in Shared Space," and MUDs and MMOGs in Jengchung Chen and Yangil Park's "The Differences of Addiction Causes between Massive Multiplayer Online Game and Multi-User Domain." Warner and Raiter describe unique ethical issues raised by the cross-cultural and transitory nature of MMOGs, and the authors rightly recognize that the consequent level of diversity of perspectives, circumstances, and expectations in MMOGs results in a particularly complex social context where ethical boundaries are stretched and tested.

Beyond these boundaries, Chen and Park examine another level of social concern surrounding e-games: addiction. How addictive are MMOGs and MUDs, and why? What social consequence does such addiction hold? Chen and Park illustrate significant differences in the causes of addiction between MMOGs and MUDs. This article explores two theo-

retical bases for addiction, Use and Gratification Theory, and Flow Theory to explore the ever-increasing discussion of addiction and gaming.

Taken together, then, these articles provide first of all a primer on the basic philosophical dimensions of e-games – their ontology and epistemologies, as well as their ethical dimensions – and in ways that, as Aristotle would require, reflect the real-world *praxis* of our ethical behaviors, both online and offline, as well as contemporary psychological and sociological research that helps provide empirical foundations for both the positive and negative claims regarding the impacts of e-games. In this way, these articles help carry forward the basic philosophical work of developing and applying coherent frameworks for ethical analysis – frameworks that, we trust, will prove fruitful for serious reflection and debate on e-games that seek to move beyond simple "good/bad" polarities and divisions. By the same token, the various analyses of specific ethical and legal questions of e-games help flesh out the more general and theoretical reflections with substantive contributions to reflection and debate concerning particular legal and ethical issues.

In these ways, this special issue brings together a distinctive collection of philosophically and empirically robust articles that significantly contribute to the still nascent literature on e-games. While we trust that the articles collected here will helpfully contribute, both individually and collectively, to this nascent literature – clearly, the coherent, empirically-informed, and philosophically robust analysis and reflection that this special issue represents are only in their earliest stages. In particular, while these articles help articulate and define important frameworks and issues for such analysis – they by no means raise all the significant questions, nor exhaust all possible philosophical approaches: indeed, these articles are further significant for the ways they open up still more possible routes of important philosophical exploration. For example, while Aristotle's virtue ethics, as a major component of ancient and contemporary Western ethics, figures prominently here – e-games deserve and require analyses based on the widest possible range of ethical frameworks, including those that draw from consequentialist and deontological traditions, as well as from contemporary feminist ethics, ecological ethics, etc. Moreover, the discussions here of the sometimes unique and distinctive character of gaming and gameplay thus highlight e-games as a significant example in *praxis* of one of the most important meta-theoretical debates in Computer and Information Ethics – namely, whether computers

introduce genuinely novel ethical problems, and/or whether the ethical issues they evoke can be resolved simply through the application of already established ethical frameworks (cf. Tavani 2004). In addition, the multi-layered approaches developed here by Consalvo, Sicart, and Dodig-Crnkovic and Larsson suggest that an adequate ethics of e-games must move beyond prevailing (modern-Western) emphases on atomistic *individuals* as the primary locus of moral responsibility to conceptions of moral responsibility as shared among a community of ethical agents – conceptions that are brought forward in contemporary ecological and feminist ethics, for example, as well as in pre-modern Western ethics (such as Aristotle), and, most importantly for e-games as a *global* phenomenon, Eastern ethical traditions (such as Confucian thought).

By the same token, the debate regarding the nature of the gaming experience, e.g., as in between our ordinary, real-world experiences and a virtual reality that may have no connection with and impact on our real-world lives, likewise serves as a fine-grained example of similar discussions that have emerged in recent decades under the rubric of “the computational turn” (Cavalier 2005). That is, computers and computer networks create new environments that, in their contrast with our prior notions and experiences of ontology, epistemology, and ethics, thus help sharpen our understanding of these earlier experiences and notions, and offer new electronic venues for testing both traditional and novel philosophical views in the *praxis* of online social experiences.

Finally, while the articles collected here represent a wide range of national traditions and perspectives; and while Warren and Raiter especially emphasize how MMOGs entail a range of cross-cultural encounters – our authors by no means exhaust the possible perspectives on e-games as a *global* phenomenon, one that engages both designers and players from a wide range of cultures and thereby a wide range of ethical traditions. As with e-games themselves, the extant philosophical analyses of what Rafael Capurro has helpfully called “intercultural information ethics” – as the larger field for what we might call by extension an intercultural e-games ethics – is only at its beginning stages (Capurro 2005; Ess 2005). The emergence of e-games ethics, as calling for approaches, norms, and practices that would claim moral relevance and legitimacy across the global range of diverse cultures and ethical traditions, may thus serve as an important and suggestive focal example in the larger project of intercultural information ethics.

Especially as e-games continue their phenomenal growth and impact on our lives, both individually and collectively, we very much hope that this special issue will both contribute to and inspire further, much-needed philosophical reflection and debate on the ethics of e-games – both in light of the frameworks and issues brought forward by our contributors, and in light of the questions, issues, and frameworks still left to be explored.

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