

5-26-2011

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Videogames, Experiential Reality, Ethics, and Gamers

by

Sean Naubert

A thesis submitted to the  
Department of Philosophy, Linfield College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
May 26, 2011

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## Introduction

**Guy:** “Dude! Did you just see me totally axe that ogre in the head?”

**Dude:** “I didn’t see you do squat, all you did was press that red button about five million times and run around in circles.”

**Guy:** “No way man, I totally just owned him for real.”

**Dude:** “You didn’t own anything “for real” ‘cause it’s a game you fool.”

**Guy:** “Whatever, let’s play a game and I’ll show you how I can REALLY kick your butt!”

**Dude:** “Fine! In the mean time get over and help me write this dang paper...”

Poor Guy, he’s just trying to have a little fun playing a game but Dude is being a total buzz kill. Oddly enough though they strike upon an important topic during their squabble, what is it that makes something real? Is something real because we have experienced it in some particular way or must it exist in some physical external fashion for it to be real. Guy truly believes he has done something of real value, but Dude believes Guy is just messing around avoiding the real work that needs to be done.

I propose that there is one singular external reality that we are foundationally connected to, but our personally accessible realities are determined by the participation and experience of the individuals within them, and that from that individualistic reality we as individuals determine what is true for us. I will explore the presence and validity of personally accessible reality as determined through perceptions in the modern world where videogames and the internet compose so called “virtual realities.” I will endeavor to show that reality is no singular realm that we are constantly accessing. We do share a foundational reality, but our access and views of it

are greatly individualistic; although not completely relative by virtue of the fact we are rooted to one foundational reality. I discuss these ideas within the context of the increasing involvement within the internet and gaming. In addition, I will bring in positions and challenges from philosophies and philosophers such as Existentialism, Pragmatism, Immanuel Kant, René Descartes, Nelson Goodman, and Ferdinand Schiller for the purpose of refining an understanding of what one may consider to be reality. Finally, I will show that games can become very real and very valuable to the individual who participates in them, that videogames may also serve as forums for the engagement of moral and ethical issues, and that videogames can also provide a significant venue for play and creativity.

Before we jump into all that, I am going to tell you why this is an important topic deserving of critical analysis. First of all, I am not trying to undermine the ontology of the common “shared” reality that we all experience on a daily basis with our physically embodied existence. Rather, I am arguing that the shared foundational reality is not so clearly distinguishable as being the only reality that we can access. Whether or not it is the primary reality or how important it is, is determined by the individual; our personal point of view does not simply “receive” the external foundational reality. In fact, I will show that although we are rooted in a common reality, that does not exclude videogames or virtual realities from becoming and being quite real for the individual engaged in them. Within the internet and games, a person can develop their character to be anything or anyone, and they can become who they would like to be. The character who has been created is essentially a new image of the gamer’s self, and can allow the individual gamer to fulfill him or herself in ways that would be almost impossible in the “common” reality. This virtual self can develop a great deal of value to that individual.

Technology has moved so fast that how we use, or how we think, with it has fallen far behind. The incredible speed with which technology has developed leaves humanity astonished with the progress but not very cognizant of the ramifications; this is quite clear in regard to the field of medicine. Where once people were either dead or alive, we now have technology that has the ability to sustain a human body even when brain function has ceased. Because of this, the clarity between being alive and being dead has been muddied. The notion of death is seemingly very clear to humans from a young age, but due to the advances in technology we now have to determine the exact criteria for death and being dead. Ethical questions enter when a person is comatose with no higher brain function; do we declare that person dead or not? And that is only one facet of the problem. The overarching moral, ethical, and philosophical consequences are vast and extremely contentious. This issue extends beyond medicine and into many facets of modern life, and in the case of this work, to video games.

Although this is only an example, it is one of the clearest distinctions that can be drawn to illustrate how far technological progress has taken us, and yet how far we need to go for our thinking to catch up with technology. The technologies present in gaming have become so advanced that it is no longer a passive experience. One can have meaningful relationships within the realms of videogames, and one can also have a significant impact on these accessible realities. One of the key features of the shared foundational reality is that things interact and react to actions that are taken by us as individuals. Videogames have grown and continue to evolve to where the worlds one sees are much more organic and carry many of the same characteristics as our common reality. By organic, I do not mean grown without pesticides or anything like that, but organic in that they take on their own unique set of properties and nature. In addition, they are organic in the ways in which these worlds exist evoke a sense of impact on

both the person experiencing it and the world itself. This relates to what I said earlier about reaction. Reaction and interaction are a necessary part of existence, even if they must occur within the mind. If there is no action, there must not be anything present to be acting. If a person is experiencing a situation where they can have an impact and be impacted upon, then they are within a reality. If a game provides a world for this to occur, then that game becomes a working part of the common reality for the individual and cannot be dismissed.

### The State of Game-ion

Before one can begin to talk coherently about videogames, one must first setup and define the position and technology of videogames today. To bring things into focus I will now discuss the rapid evolution and status of videogames, both technologically and socially. When videogames were first released they were incredibly simple, 2D block-like images that moved with very simple controls. The stigma of social isolation and awkwardness based on the fact that games serve only to drive the people who play them into seclusion and thus deprive them of a “real” life still lingers today. However, this is an outdated and naïve notion. While the fan base and accessibility of games has grown to include a massive variety of people, the stigma does still exist. But videogames have come a long way since the days of *Pong*<sup>1</sup> and *Pacman*<sup>2</sup>.

The addition of the internet to gaming has furthered this expansion exponentially. Today, up to millions of people across the globe can play the same game together over the internet. As the popularity of videogames has grown, so too has their complexity. Games today like *World of*

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<sup>1</sup> *Pong*. Sunnyvale: Atari Inc. 1972

<sup>2</sup> *Pacman*. Tokyo: Namco - Midway. 1980



*Warcraft*<sup>3</sup> (here after referred to as WoW) allow players to mold their character in any way they see fit. They have access to perhaps the most complete virtual world ever created, and there are over twelve million subscriber accounts today. (A subscriber account is where you create a profile and pay a monthly fee in order to play the game) The most modern of developments in videogames is actually one of reaction and the creation of worlds that react to you. *Mass Effect*<sup>4</sup> is one of my favorite games. Like WoW, it is a role playing game where you develop your character not just in skill, but personality as well. Whether you chose to treat people harshly or fairly expands or limits your interaction with other characters. In a particular episode, my character and a good friend were locked in a standoff and it seemed the only way to end it would be to kill him, until an icon appeared. It indicated that because of previous decisions I had made in the game, I had developed traits that gave me the skill to talk him down and thereby spare myself from killing a great friend. I am saying this to show that videogames are not “set-piece” affairs anymore. The individual makes decisions that have significant outcomes on how the game proceeds, much like the lives we lead in the shared foundational reality.

*World of Warcraft* is so immersive that it allows people to buy and sell virtual things on a market. One can take up a profession and even get married; all online. As technology has grown so has the demand for realism. Increasingly, videogame characters become more accurately modeled to look as human as possible; one can even photograph their own face and import it onto a videogame character. The point of this is that the old criticism that videogames isolate people has become flawed and not always correct. Videogames have advanced to allow people to

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<sup>3</sup> *World of Warcraft*. Irvine: Activision-Blizzard. 2001

<sup>4</sup> *Mass Effect*. Montreal: Electronic Arts-Bioware. 2008.

do almost everything they do in the common foundational reality, in a virtual format, thereby making that virtual world into the real world for those people dedicated to it.

People are drawn to these “virtual” experiences for a number of reasons. For some, it may be escapism because they dislike school or their job and dream of being a racecar driver or a knight. For others it could hold the same attraction as a good book, being able to lose one’s self and be encapsulated in a completely new and foreign place. Games can also provide arenas for fulfillment and personal exploration that are vastly more accessible to millions of people. These individuals may find something that is comforting or memorable and that makes such a place special. But regardless of the reason for a person participating in these new parts of reality, the point is that games cannot and should not be simply discounted as being merely imaginary or false aspects of our shared reality just because they are virtual.

## **SECTION 1**

### **Games Gettin’ Real**

#### **Reality, Yeah Right**

In order to have a coherent discussion about what constitutes a reality and what implications these parameters have, there must first be a definition of reality to work from. All things that can be said to be real obviously exist within a reality, but what exactly does that mean? To exist within a certain plane of reality means that you exist with barriers. While we may have an expansive amount of freedom there are simply things that we cannot do. For instance, I

cannot simply sprout wings and fly to the Bahamas. There are actual physical barriers that prevent such things from happening. It is in these ways that the foundational reality imposes upon us. Just the same there are barriers that limit our abilities within “virtual” realities and video games.

Reality has many implications and many important functions, but they is useful to us only insofar as they relate to us. Reality for humanity is quite simply the ability to act and have the world around us react to that action. There is no reality if there is nothing that can be done because that would be pure stagnation. Here is where I would begin to formulate my definition of a reality. I find it is helpful to think of reality as a pie chart, within which the whole of possibility and actuality are contained. Each person has a section of the pie which represents his or her own life experiences and perceptions. These slices can cross and intersect but they can never be identical. Because of this we can all have intimate knowledge of the same things, and we can share that knowledge, but we can never know that thing completely because we have not lived as that thing. The only thing we can know in itself is ourselves. We develop that knowledge of ourselves and the reality we find ourselves in through experience and interacting with that reality, this is why I propose that reality is eventful. I do not mean that reality is exciting, although it certainly is, but more that reality is an event. This event occurs when things, primarily people, interact with and are acted upon. It is from this event in which one participates, that I introduce the notion of “primacy of reality.” Primacy of reality means that reality is created through the event of interaction and participation, but it is chosen as the most important by the individual. If shared foundational reality for humans is necessarily active, then any realm in which a person can be active must also be a part of the shared reality. It is under these terms that

I assert that the internet and videogames where people can be active must now be considered part of reality.

For the great majority of the human race, one can say that our shared reality is the primary one because that is where our greatest interactions and fulfillments come from. But there is a growing population of people who find their greatest fulfillments online. For some, this may manifest in having thousands of friends on Facebook.com, for others, it can be the adventuring and camaraderie they find whilst questing around the world of Azeroth within *World of Warcraft*. Any reality is ultimately a place, a vast, infinite, and potentiality filled place, and what makes things within the common reality so real is their ability to be acted upon and thereby experienced. When something that is experienced moves the individual in such a way that it makes them keenly aware of the actions they have taken or the actions they will take, and how that action will impact the reality, then the substantiality and value of this part of reality has been iterated. Alfred Schuetz discussed this same sense of co-effect between reality and self, stating that “World, in a sense, is something that we have to modify by our actions or that modifies our actions.”<sup>5</sup> If a videogame or any type of interaction over the internet can absorb an individual’s attention to the point that the person becomes deeply involved within that realm, then that space becomes a part of the individual’s reality. Alfred Schuetz states this very fact in the introduction to his article *On Multiple Realities*, he says that “the origin of all reality is subjective, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real.”<sup>6</sup> This reinforces the notion that if an experience online

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Schuetz. "On Multiple Realities." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. 5.4 (1945): 534.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Schuetz. "On Multiple Realities (1945): 533.

or within a videogame is more stimulating or fulfilling than shared common reality, then that shared reality can be effectively displaced from primacy by one that helps the individual to most effectively achieve actualization.

### Why Do You Need More than One?

The argument could be raised that what I am in fact stating is a misunderstanding and that there are not multiple realities but there is simply one dynamic reality and the “different” realities are actually just facets of the one. This has been a long standing debate within philosophy going back to antiquity; the argument over plurality vs. monism. Monism supports that reality is a continuity of one realm with everything composed within it, while pluralism suggests that reality is made up of many separate yet cooperative realms. I take a more Aristotelian view. Aristotle posited that there was an underlying principle of the universe that allowed for the being of things. This was his concept of the unmoved mover, and it contained all actualities and potentialities of the world<sup>7</sup>. This means that all things that are and all things that ever could be, are present within god although they may not now, or ever, be actualized in the reality of humans. I believe that while there is a monistic nature to what allows for the being of things; including reality, that this does not determine one’s accessible reality. What I mean is, while all things, ideas, etc., are all part of one foundational reality, the only way we understand the world is through our own limited views and that is our makes up our individual reality. Reality is perceptual, and it is shaped by one’s own mind and judgments on what is and is not valuable so as to achieve the greatest actualization of the self.

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<sup>7</sup> Borchert, Donald M. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 1. Detroit: Thomson Gale/Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. Pp. 263-282.

Some may argue that this view of “subjective personal reality” is not ultimate reality nor ultimate truth because these things would still be contained within the limits of the infinite potentiality and actuality that supports them. I argue that this is actually a useless notion even if it is accepted because ultimate reality does nothing to aid the day to day lives of people. The idea of absolute reality is barely able to be conceptualized let alone utilized in any meaningful way. The stance that “your reality is what is actual and what may be actualized” does nothing to inform our existence or serve any purpose towards the natural human quest for happiness. Our accessible realities are determined by our mind, and it is only in that way that any notion of reality is useful to us, a position called “Perspectivism.” It must be fundamentally focused on the self in order for flourishing as a human being to become possible. In short, there is a foundational reality that we are all anchored into, but it is so great that we cannot perceive it in any totally knowable way. The only way we know things is how we see them through our own perceptions. It is in this way that reality is accessed by the individual. Even though we may encounter the same thing as part of reality, because we encounter it as different people our sense of the world is unique to us. We could only ever know it in that way because the only things we can ever be is ourselves and we are therefore incapable of knowing things from any other point of view.<sup>8</sup> Nelson Goodman and Immanuel Kant are integral in discussing the ethical and metaphysical problem of reconciling the perspective of the individual and the presence of an external foundational reality

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<sup>8</sup> I realize that this may raise issues with regard to people with psychosis, but I feel that to fully address this issue would be too tangential to this conversation although it is obviously worth discussing and must be covered at a separate time.

Nelson Goodman & Kant... Unite!

Nelson Goodman provides a stance similar to my own. He does not argue that there are multiple realities, but that there are multiple right versions of the same reality. This is a more refined stance similar in nature to mine where there is an underlying reality, but in-so-far as it is accessible by man, reality is inherently subjective and relative. Goodman provides a definition that all subsequent right worlds are still dependant on or responsible to the one reality, “We might... take the real world to be that of some one of the alternative right versions and regard all others as versions of that same world differing from the standard version in accountable ways.”<sup>9</sup> He is asserting here that the one world appears differently to us all, but it still has roots tracing back to the one essential foundational reality. This is similar to my theory of primary reality, there is one essential and fundamental reality that allows for the existence of all other things and all possible primary realms for an individual are inherently tied to that fundamental one. Although there is an essential reality that holds up the accessible realities of individuals, the foundational reality in itself is inaccessible to us. Accessible reality only has meaning as it is perceived to the unique mind. As individuals we can interact and have common experience because of the foundational reality but that does not make all accessible reality the same for everyone. Instead, it allows for basic resemblances that allow us to grasp or comprehend objects and people external to us.

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<sup>9</sup> Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1978, 20.

Kant's ideas of idealism, noumena, and phenomena<sup>10</sup> now must be introduced into this discussion. There is a rightness and concreteness to the world; this is Kant's noumena.

He [Kant] distinguished between phenomenal reality, or the world as we experience it, and noumenal reality, which is purely intelligible, or nonsensual, reality. When we experience a thing, we inevitably perceive it through the "lenses" of our a priori categories of thought....We can obviously never have an experience of a nonsensuous perception. All objects we know are sensed objects. Still, we know that the existence of our world of experience is not produced by the mind.<sup>11</sup>

There are very real things within the foundational reality, but these things are not knowable in their entirety because we as humans are finite beings capable of only our own perceptions. That does not stop us from establishing certain patterns and systems that give us reasonable evidence to believe in the common existence of things, but we cannot prove these things beyond all doubt. Like reality, there is evidence of objective truth but we do not have first-hand knowledge of it, the evidence that we take to support the being of these things is what Kant claims as phenomena. "Objective" means that there is a definition and nature of truth and reality that is unknowable in its totality. "Idealism" describes how we shape things in the world, things seem external to us

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<sup>10</sup> Borchert, Donald M. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 5. Detroit: Thomson Gale/Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. Pp. 8-35.

<sup>11</sup> Stumpf, Samuel Enoch. *Socrates to Sartre: a History of Philosophy*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993, 309.



and we take them as such because that is how our minds process and categorize information. But what one eventually comes to find is that the self is not empirically knowable so we cannot really say with certainty what is external or internal.

The notion of the self does however allow for the possibility of our experience; it is the condition for that experience. The self is a construct of morals, beliefs, and value judgments that allows us to organize our experience and order the world in a coherent manner. Without some notion of the self we would be incapable of experiencing anything because it would all simply become noise and sensory overload, there would be no way to make sense of it. This notion of the self, and the system of categorizing things in a way that seems external to us, begins to form an explanation for common experience and our ability to encounter the same types of things and have similar experiences with them despite the fact that all we have is our own narrow perceptions. That is because the experiences are based off of phenomenological real data that is coming in. This means that things are not entirely relative, either for truth or reality. The content of our experiences is objectively external but we place our own values and judgments on it after we have internalized it. We can know this because of the inconsistencies in our knowledge. Take the artists color wheel for example, the wheel contains every shade of color and transitions from one to the next seamlessly. But if you pick a point between blue and green, what is that color? One person might call it turquoise, another might call it sea-foam green, and others still might call it either blue or green. People see and experience things differently, although we can see the similarity between our thought processes, neither of what we say is actually the thing itself. This is part of what makes us unique as human beings, although we are rooted in physical existence and that is where our experiences begin, that is most certainly not where they end. Although things are external to us physically, we can still experience them and develop reasonable theories

for their existence because they are based off of real data, even if we don't get that data in its purest form. While this does account for common experience, it also allows for discrepancies in experience as well. For some people games can be more real than the "shared" experience, and in that game realm they can function, find greater meaning, and flourish as an individual. So while the experience within a game is quite real, it is valued and processed differently by the mind of the individual. This leads back around to a discussion on relativity and morality which Goodman explores adeptly.

Goodman further refines the foundation for morality in the face of relativity. He establishes that although there can be many different versions of worlds and realities, that does not mean that the judgment of right or wrong becomes irrelevant.

Our passion for one world is satisfied, at different times and for different purposes, in many different ways. Not only Motion, derivation, weighting, order, but even reality is relative. That right versions and actual worlds are many does not obliterate the distinction between right and wrong versions, does not recognize merely possible worlds answering to wrong versions, and does not imply that all right alternative are equally good for everyone or indeed every purpose.<sup>12</sup>

It is important that I clarify at this juncture that it does not seem that Goodman is saying that certain worlds are simply better than others, as a generalization. But there does exist a certain inequality for each world's or accessible reality's effectiveness to attain a certain goal. For

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<sup>12</sup> Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1978, 20.

instance, one may, as I have previously argued, be more completely fulfilled through their involvement or the character they adopt within a videogame. If that is indeed the case, then that aspect of reality would be better suited for that purpose. But, say one wishes to get into shape, well that would be better realized in a more physically determined part of reality. No matter how much one makes their character run around in the game they are playing, the player will not get any more in shape, although the character in game may take on a more fit physique. Unless the character is controlled from a Wii-like interface that mimics the movements of the player and translates those movements to the character, physical reality would be a more appropriate tool for developing one's physique. The ideas discussed in this section can be seen as relative arguments which can be scary for many people if what is meant by "relative" is not addressed.

### That Whole Hitler Problem

I feel that it is important to address as an integral facet of my argument what is meant by relativism, and the consequences involved in how I am using the term. Relativism is defined as being, "the doctrine that no absolutes exist... the doctrine holds that all truth is relative."<sup>13</sup> The most common argument and almost fear of the term and ideas of relativism, is that it basically legitimizes the views and actions taken by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime during the holocaust in World War II. While reality and truth seem to have a fundamental tie to the individual, this does not give that individual the wholesale right to act on their beliefs. I believe that my stance on this has become a fusion of relativist notions of truth and Kantian ethics of self governance

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<sup>13</sup> Reese, William L. *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Humanities Press, 1996, 646.

and moral duty. The ethical stance to which I am referring holds that one may live and govern themselves in any way that they see fit so long as it does not negatively impose upon other individuals. This idea is akin to that of sovereignty within the realm of international politics, where what one does within their own borders is up to them so long as it does not harm, impede, or negatively affect others. I do firmly believe that the individual's notion of reality and truth are fundamentally intertwined and that these views of reality and truths are informed by one's own experience and that makes our realities inherently individual. Perhaps this is the flag waving American within me who believes that you have the right to believe as you see fit and I have no right to refuse you those beliefs. I may disagree with them but you are still entitled to them. However, the right to enjoy one's own truth within their own scope of reality does not come with the uninhibited right to act on those theories. Much like with the right to free speech, one not only has the right to determine what they perceive as being real but that right should be protected from a moral stand point. If a person finds themselves most fully actualized in a part of reality that may be different from our own then they should not be shunned or impeded from enjoying the value they receive from participation in that realm. But to reiterate, this right to determine one's own perspective and even if it is protected. Since one cannot say that one person's view is entirely any more right than another's, that does not mean that one can impede, harm, or negatively affect any other individual. This not only has to do with physical affect but also mental affect which brings in the discussion of dualism with mind and body, and who better to engage than Rene Descartes. Now that we have addressed the issue of what is meant by "relative" we can move forward to discuss how one can judge the feasibility of a given individual reality.

## Descartes & Bouwsma

Descartes' philosophy is focused around doubt and what can or cannot be doubted. Out of this comes his idea of dualism. Dualism means that the mind and body are separate in so far as you cannot doubt your own mind, but you can doubt your body. Descartes asserts that all things outside of the mind can be doubted and subsequently one can never be sure that these things actually exist. From this, I propose that if you cannot be sure that the immediate external world is real, then you also cannot be sure that a seemingly "virtual" world that you are experiencing is *not* real. Descartes philosophical ideas are used heavily in the film *The Matrix*<sup>14</sup> in which a world that appears to be real in every way turns out to be just an interactive projection put in front of us. It is not a great stretch to see the analogies that can be drawn between a "Matrix" situation and video gaming. If it is accepted that the only certainty that we have is our mind, and that the external world is just a flurry of ideas that are held within that mind, then it follows that our mind is what shapes our individual reality and thereby making it possible and perfectly reasonable that one might accept a videogame as being a real and inherently valuable part of reality. Although this is not the position that Descartes takes because he uses his doubt methodologically, if we apply the method of doubt then the logic proceeds to this end.

Naturally not everyone is ready to accept the possibility that ideas are only held in the mind and have no externality of their own. For this I will turn to another philosopher, O.K. Bouwsma. Bouwsma pushes Descartes' methodological use of universal doubt to its ultimate conclusion. Bouwsma uses a story of a man named Tom in a discussion with the evil genius;

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<sup>14</sup> "The Matrix (1999) - IMDb." *The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*. Web. 19 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/>>.

whose goal is to deceive man into believing what he sees is real. It is important to note that the evil genius has a special sort of sixth sense that allows him the creation and recognition of the illusions without being deceived by them. In the upcoming passage they are discussing the issue by looking at some flowers and the difference between flowers and the illusion of flowers.

“Tom” he [the evil genius] says, “notice. The flowers in the mirror look like flowers, but they only look like flowers. We agree about that. The flowers before the mirror also look like flowers. But they, you say, are flowers because they also smell like flowers and they feel like flowers...Imagine a mirror such that it reflected not only the looks of flowers, but also their fragrance and their petal surfaces, and then you smelled and touched, and the flowers before the mirror would be just like the flowers in the mirror. Then you could see immediately that the flowers before the mirror are illusions just as those in the mirror are illusions. As it is now, it is clear that the flowers in the mirror are thin illusions, and the flowers before the mirror are thick. Thick illusions are best for deception. And they may be as thick as you like. From them you may gather pollen, send them to Milly, [Tom’s lady friend] and foolish bees may sleep in them.”<sup>15</sup>

The argument that is being made here is that even if certain things seem a certain way, even if you get multiple types of sensory stimulation, that does not mean that the thing you think you are experiencing is any more real than something that only appears to be a thing. Ultimately, there are no things to seem one way or another, you cannot misunderstand one thing as being another

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<sup>15</sup> Bouwsma, O.K. “Descartes’ Evil Genius” *The Philosophical Review*. Vol. 58.2 (1949), 149.

because they are all misunderstandings, as Bouwsma puts it, “they must be made of the stuff that dreams are made of.”<sup>16</sup> This leads to one eventual end, and that is if nothing can be said to exist except illusions, and then ultimately nothing can be said to be “real,” and there can be no line in the sand as to what is deemed real and what is not. All that can be said is that we have perceptions and the way in which things seem to be real to us as individuals. It makes no difference whether a thing seems real in a more or less dynamic way than some other thing, both are equal in their reality by virtue of our perceptions of them. This goes back to my theory that we all have a piece of the reality pie, our perceptions and experiences are quite real because they are all that we have and all we can know, to suggest that there is truth beyond that is nice, but it does not useful in discounting our reality. The entirety of this argument is made from the perspective of the “evil genius,” but Bouwsma goes on to argue a more conciliatory point for man’s limitations.

In fact, Bouwsma takes the line that the “illusions” or deceptions that the evil genius places humans in are no longer illusions. For man the reality that they are placed in is quite real and if that reality; be it made of paper, snow, or jell-o, is the only reality that one can be aware of. These realities are illusions for the evil genius because he possesses the sense to create and detect such illusions but man does not. So as much as we might be told that one world is real and one is fake, we as humans can never make the distinction because all that we encounter is what is phenomenally available to us. If we are present to the reality that we participate it in, then that is the accessible reality that we accept as real because such a reality is all that can be understood by us so to call it into question is a non-issue because we can’t see the illusory, as opposed to

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<sup>16</sup> Bouwsma, O.K. “Descartes’ Evil Genius” *The Philosophical Review*. Vol. 58.2 (1949), 145.

choosing not to see it. As to why one's slice of reality and notion of self is based on what one deems to be valuable, I will now turn to theories on existentialism.

### Existentialist This

Many of the topics and arguments I have invoked share many aspects with the existentialist movement and its ideas. Existentialism<sup>17</sup> has a long list of big name philosophers behind it, including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. The basic premise of existentialist philosophy is that subjectivity is the most central and integral part of human experience. Soren Kierkegaard<sup>18</sup> is one of the foundational philosophers of existentialism and set many of the core aspects of the philosophy due to the fact that, "he contributed an emphasis on the individual, the importance of subjectivity, and Angst or anguish as the central emotion of human life."<sup>19</sup> What existentialism is about is placing control over the scope of one's life in the hands of the individual and therefore that individual *must* determine their own values and have the freedom to pursue or discover their values. At its core existentialism has an attitude of "live life to the fullest." This does not mean to voraciously consume all that gives pleasure to you, but to pursue that which you find most fulfills you as a person and allows you to live your life in the most

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<sup>17</sup> Borchert, Donald M. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 3. Detroit: Thomson Gale/Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. Pp. 500-510.

<sup>18</sup> Borchert, Donald M. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 5. Detroit: Thomson Gale/Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. Pp. 61-68.

<sup>19</sup> Reese, William L. *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Humanities Press, 1996, 219.



meaningful way that you can. This is one of the largest aesthetic or possibly ethical goals for my discussion; having a videogame as an important facet of your individual reality can be very valuable and should not be foolishly tossed aside as being fake or imaginary. If videogames are where one feels most effectively fulfilled, then they should not be looked down upon. Whether one chooses sports, books, movies, games, cars, work, volunteering, or any other possible activity, all of these constitute a part of the foundational reality and a venue for individual flourishing and because of that they are all valuable. In fact, it is perfectly reasonable that a person is able to move from different parts of reality and the importance placed upon them, into the next; much like growing in and out of clothes. One may choose to involve oneself fully in one specific area of reality or one might choose to set their individual reality as a buffet of many areas within the foundational reality. What I am trying to indicate is that there is a transitory or fluid nature to how we participate in the changing and dynamic nature of reality and moving from one facet to the next is a personal choice. Actually, even if one is forced to participate in multiple areas, like working a job in order to eat, the individual still chooses how much they wish to become involved in that aspect of reality. This makes the primary realm not one that is forced but one that is chosen, but this does not decrease the necessity of being involved in that part of reality. This is not meant to promote a kind of self isolationism, simply because one chooses a certain area within reality based on values the individual deems important does not mean there is no interactivity with other people, or areas of foundational reality that coincide and overlap within the scope of that person's life.

## My Glasses!

The idea of reality being discussed as experiential is nothing new, but when it is talked about it often involves notions of perceptions. Perceptions are quite simply the way in which one comes to know and see the external world around them. It's kind of like putting on a different set of glasses. We all have lenses through which we view "reality," and different motivations for why we see things the way we do, so there is no universal reason to rule out the lens that is a TV or computer screen.

There are some arguments to be made that these "glasses" are simply another cop-out from reality and no events in a game physically affect the person in reality. This statement is greatly flawed because it automatically gives credence to what that individual has experienced and does not respect the experiences of others. It assumes a "fake-ness" of things that fall outside of "physical" governance. But one is in fact physically affected by one's perceptions; there are millions of electrical firings and physical actions taking place within the brain that allow one to decipher the flurry of information being accessed through the sensory organs. This brings up a point of contention. Does our physicality determine our reality and, to include the point above, at what point are things considered to be a physical determinant? If a player has sculpted his or her character over many hours of game play and that character dies, certainly the player does not, but the pain of loss of that character may be an affliction of a magnitude similar to losing a loved one.

I feel it is important to keep in mind that in this particular example I am not dealing with gamers who play as a pastime or hobby, but people who dedicate themselves and delve deeply into the worlds that they come upon. But back to my point, it seems foolish to assume that in

order for something to really be real it must manifest itself physically. For instance, does God ever manifest him/her/it-self physically? God's existence or reality is quite well accepted in some form by the vast majority of the Earth's population. The norms and habits of a culture change over time and often this leaves some members of the population disenfranchised. Often we regard this as a generational issue, but it is a similar effect felt by certain members of the gaming community. The way in which we move from different personal realities that may differ from the foundational reality by virtue of our individual lenses is apparent in what might be called "generational differences."

### My Generation

Here I will be continuing my argument against the seemingly undeniable concreteness of the "physical reality." I believe physical reality is what many people mean when referring to a grounded or common reality and furthering the position of perspective determined reality. For this section, I will introduce generational conflict as my example which offers a unique look at reality as valued by the individual, but that may also be a shared view with others of similar age. Everyone belongs, more or less, to one generation, being a part of a population born during the same socio-economic conditions within a certain time frame. With each new generation that is produced, the previous tends to become more and more distanced from the center of cultural importance, what one might call "what's hip." For these people their reality is not determined by what surrounds them within the immediate social spheres or culture. What is most often the case is that they are actually displeased by or ill equipped to understand, the contemporary cultural climate because they find no value in what that culture is made of or is producing. That aspect of reality is not a place where they are happy because they are incapable of flourishing and feel cast

out. This is why some long to return to a time of greater familiarity because that is the area of reality with which they best identify. So it would seem that where one might be physically is not very important for determining one's priorities within reality, but it can in fact be detrimental to the individual. However, these things are not entirely arbitrary, as I have stated before with regard to Kant; these things are working with the external world and based off of real phenomenological data coming in, although the interpretation of that data is subjective to the individual.

To further my claim that placing value on "embodied" existence or the physical necessity for reality is naïve, I will introduce some biological information. Over a period of about 7 years, your body completely replaces or alters every single cell in the human body, so to say that we are who we were born as is ludicrous due to the vast amount of change that occurs both externally and internally. To someone who would raise the argument of physical unity, I would posit the question of what exactly allows us as individuals to persist if our body is constantly changing itself? One possible reply that one could make is the self or our sense of identity, which is inherently a part of what is considered to be the mind. Therefore, the mind is what determines who we actually are, not our bodies, despite the fact that we are rooted in our bodies, and if our mind can shape our notions of self then it most certainly can shape our reality. We are shaped by what we experience and what we come to know and the value that we place on that knowledge and experience. This is the same argument I have used in how I have described the process by which we determine our individual slices of reality. Our realities are defined and evolve with our mind. This is because our theories of self and reality are fundamentally interdependent. What determines our reality is where we are most fully realized in accordance with our idea of ourselves, and the self that we are is based off of the same value judgments that define the areas

of reality in which we choose to participate. I think that the latest über-blockbuster *Avatar*<sup>20</sup> provides an excellent example for talking about value judgments and the choices we make about the areas of reality in which we decide to participate.

### Avatar: A Case Study

Now to avoid the pitfalls and accusations that I am simply a gamer looking to rationalize my own obsessions, I will discuss the transitory or multiplicative basis of our experience. I will do so by references the movie *Avatar*. The latest movie by director James Cameron, *Avatar*, is a striking example of this conflict of reality and whether it is determined by mind or body, and how an individual moves between the two realms. Jake Sulley finds himself torn between the shared reality with his fellow humans, and the alternative realm that exists within that same reality amongst the natives of the planet Pandora. It is in the latter reality that one can see that Jake finds himself more fully realized. This is a special example because both realms exist upon the same plain of existence but the mind of the individual has differentiated the two worlds and ultimately adopted one as more valuable than the other. This is an interesting case study because the character is keenly aware of two realms at the same time; the one in his “actual” human form where his mind is held, and the body he adopts to which his mind is transported. When he is in one of the bodies he is still keenly aware of the state of the other, and both are considered to be him. This can be paralleled to the planes of reality that are the commonly shared reality and those that an individual participates in online; both are you because both have been generated by you but you are aware of yourself as existing between these two realms of reality. One being who

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<sup>20</sup> *Avatar*. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Sam Worthington. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. 2009.

you are: meaning those who encounter you physically regard you as *that* you. The other being who you are actualized as; meaning, who you are where you feel you are most accurately able to present your true self image. I mean that the person you see yourself as where you are more fully actualized may be an entirely different person than what other people see. In essence, I am talking about two different senses of self or two identities that are held within one mind and noticeably differentiated. The next author I will engage with discusses these same issues of self, experience, and reality, through the frameworks of dreams

### Dream On

Antti Revonsuo discusses the existence and reality in regard to dreaming and experiential necessity for establishing something as being real. Revonsuo says of dreams that “to say that the dream-world is not “real” is not to say that it does not really exist: dreaming, like consciousness in general, is an experiential reality.<sup>21</sup>” Here he is saying that when dreaming, one does experience in a similar way as when one is conscious. However, the way in which one comes to those experiences is changed. Essentially, the vehicle is different but the ride and destination are the same. I believe that this can be extended to virtual realities because although what is experienced is not done physically, it is still done with full intent and presence of mind to the experience. In fact it can be argued that experiences that occur beyond physiology are more significant because they require a sense of self and presence that is held entirely within the mind. One does not receive the same sensory inputs that would occur on a physical plane and thereby requires an individual to bring the self fully to the action. In order for someone to be able to do

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<sup>21</sup> Revonsuo, A. "Consciousness, Dreams and Virtual Realities." *Philosophical Psychology*. 8.1 (1995): 35, 4.

that, they must be able to find some way in which things “work” for them. This is the basis of pragmatism, a philosophy or world view is only useful in so far as it is satisfactory for the individual.

### OMG FCSSP- F.C.S. Schiller and Pragmatism

Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller was a philosopher working from the late stages of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Schiller is generally argued to be a pragmatist due to the nature of his philosophy. Pragmatism<sup>22</sup> is understood as a philosophy that is mainly concerned with clarifying hypotheses through the analysis of their consequences. This is not to be confused with utilitarianism, which is an ethics based off of the idea that the moral worth of an action is determined by its outcome. Schiller took his ideas to the most radical end of pragmatism by developing a fairly relativistic approach to how ideas shape individual existence and reveal truth. In this endeavor he found himself aligned with the likes of William James; both supported the view that in at least some capacity “reality and truth are; at least in part, human constructions.”<sup>23</sup> The healthy human mind is a fascinating construct in that it is constantly undergoing self-evolution. I say healthy because a mind that has become stagnant with regards to its ways of thinking has become obsolete and will be irrelevant. What I mean by self-evolution is that the mind is continuously receiving new information, processing and valuing consequences, assessing the meaning of that information, and then realigning its theories on a given subject or perhaps

<sup>22</sup> Borchert, Donald M. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 7. Detroit: Thomson Gale/Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. Pp. 741-750.

<sup>23</sup> A, By. "Schiller « Research Pragmatism Cybrary." *Pragmatism Cybrary*. Web. 13 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.pragmatism.org/research/schiller.htm#bio>>.

even its entire world view to accommodate for this new perspective. It is in this way that new knowledge of an individual's accessed reality can be created because there has been a fundamental change where previously unconsidered factors must be accounted for and thus shift the nature of reality as it appears to us. This is where Schiller makes the jumps to more relativistic or subjective theories of truth and reality:

Both James and Schiller followed the primary philosophical implication: all thought must service the organism's survival efforts in a plastic and malleable world. Schiller promptly expanded upon James's will-to-believe doctrine, declaring truth to be what proves to be valuable, and formulated a subjectivist version of James's stream of consciousness theory, declaring that reality must only be as it is knowable by an individual mind. Schiller asserted the ontological ultimacy of the creative personal mind because it is the most real thing knowable, and held that personal values must always be the final judge of all knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

The view that Schiller is purporting is that what ultimately determines an individual's reality is that person's beliefs and value judgments about what is and is not important. In an ever changing world, where information is continually circulating in and out of relevancy, the only determinant factor is what the individual decides as valuable towards their survival, and I would argue, that allows the greatest degree of individual flourishing and eudaimonia; the ability for the individual to most fully actualize the person that they feel they are. From here the radical pragmatist view solidifies its position by not just supporting the ultimacy of personal views but by discrediting

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<sup>24</sup> A, By. "Schiller « Research Pragmatism Cybrary." *Pragmatism Cybrary*. Web. 13 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.pragmatism.org/research/schiller.htm#bio>>.



any type of overarching metaphysical or universal notion of truth. “No metaphysical truth can be attributed to any laws; whether reality is such that we should conceive it according to one or another mental law depends on the results of a posteriori experimental science.<sup>25</sup>” What is being said here is that the only time that one might be able to evoke any kind of law or descriptive pattern comes only *after* such a thing has been experienced ( a posteriori literally means “after experience”). Only after a thing has been experienced can a law be made about it and then there remain things that have not been experienced which go unaccounted for. Therefore, the individual cannot provide mental laws or values about those things because they are not a part of their scope of accessible reality yet. Reality is individualistic and ultimately it does adopt certain notions of truth that have a relativistic bent, but they are not to be understood as whole-sale arbitrary.

### Reality in a nutshell...or is reality the nutshell?

What I have been discussing up until this point has been the metaphysical nature of reality as it pertains to human experience and knowledge. I have outlined an argument that although an external objective truth and reality are present, similar to Kant’s theory of noumena, the only access we have to the knowledge of those things are through our own subjective interaction with them. So while the data coming in is objective, the mechanism by which it is processed inherently changed that data to be subjective to the individual. Therefore, our reality is not determined solely by the seemingly physical externalities of the world, but also by our internal interpretations and manipulations of that information. We may be rooted by this

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<sup>25</sup> A, By. "Schiller « Research Pragmatism Cybrary." *Pragmatism Cybrary*. Web. 13 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.pragmatism.org/research/schiller.htm#bio>>.

relationship but we are not defined by it. I have discussed through existentialist, pragmatist, and Kantian views, how our individual reality is only knowable via our personal perceptions and by virtue of subjective interpretation we shape the importance of our reality based on individual value judgments. Therefore, videogames can constitute an important realm within reality. People may have very valuable and real experiences in videogames because the individual has judged the game to be an essential tool for expression of their sense of identity. Thus, videogames may become perhaps the most valuable facet of reality in which they participate. Now is an appropriate time to transition to another topic that grows out of this metaphysical discussion. These are the ethical consequences to which such metaphysical conclusions lead. In this next section, I will discuss the idea of ethical behavior within games, the external ethical treatment and value of those involved in gaming, and the ways and whys one becomes immersed in a videogame.

## **SECTION 2**

### **Games , Ethics, and Social networking for realz.**

As I have mentioned before, gaming faces several challenges from both an internal and external society. There are those that are not a part of the videogame culture who see games as a waste of time and a hindrance to leading a full and happy life. I will engage this position with a discussion on the philosophy of sport and how the lines between sport and gaming are not clear enough to warrant the apparent discrepancy in the treatment of the two activities. There is also a conflict that has arisen within the gaming community that has become increasingly important as the advent of massive online multiplayer games has grown to involve larger and larger portions

of populations. The conflict comes from the fact that different people bring different values to the same game and are interacting in the same realm. Because of how each person comes to the game they may interfere with another's enjoyment and sense of value of that game. I then discuss how these conflicts arise and if it is at all possible to set down an ethical code for online gaming.

### Come on, Let's Play

One of the classic objections against video gaming is that kids should just go outside and play a sport or something along those same lines. This position assumes that sports and games are completely different activities, which I propose is a misunderstanding. In fact, gaming is quite similar to other sports both in reality and participation. I feel it is important here to bring in the discussions of what constitutes play and games that have come out of the philosophies on sport. Play is extremely difficult to define but several key characteristics make it easier to frame what we are trying to engage. Play is usually an activity that is freely engaged, done for enjoyment, provides both focus on the activity being done but also evasion from other types of activity, and also involves uncertainty where the outcome is not predetermined. While differentiating between play and sport is very difficult, it is very clear to see that play is part of sport. Play is a foundational setup that creates games and upon further refinement, the game becomes sport. From here I will compare the nature and value of sport to that of videogames.

Like reality, sport has no clear definition that draws perfect distinctions between itself, games, and play. An integral part of how Johan Huizinga<sup>26</sup> defines games has to do with the

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<sup>26</sup> Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*. London: Routledge, 2000.

presence of an extraordinary realm and a separate yet definite time and space for that realm. In order for play to take place, there has to be an agreed upon reality in which individuals *must* participate. If there is one person who does not buy into this realm then it destroys the reality and the playing ceases. While some might argue that this is just a contractual agreement to the rules, they have not considered the metaphysics of sports. Rules are a transitory aspect of the alternate facets of reality in which sports occur. In an Aristotelian view, the rules would be the predication of the substance (i.e. reality), they are not the thing itself only a part of it. As such, the rules can change but the thing itself does not. Sure, agreeing to the rules is an entry into a more extraordinary area of reality, but the rules are more ceremonial or symbolic. What one is agreeing to is the entrance into a place where the efficiency or quite possibly even the logic of the world outside that place is not necessarily applicable. When entering into play, games, or sports, your superficial responsibility is to abide by the rules, but it is your ethical responsibility to uphold the real-ness of the game through bringing yourself fully to the activity. Extending far beyond following the rules, your duty is to preserve the reality of the game through your actions for your fellow participants.

Sports are the precipice of this necessity of mutual participation. Athletes or anyone who takes part in sports or a gaming activity agrees that they now exist within a very specific realm with its own set of rules and goals. For those who participate in the activity but decide not to abide by the rules, they will face disapproval and ridicule from their peers because they have corrupted and destroyed the game of which they agreed to be a part. It is through this disapproval for “cheaters” or those who do not play properly that one can see the ultimate *value* that we place

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on these realms. Here is where I will draw out the similarities between sports and videogames, and the discrepancies in how we treat them. As I have mentioned before, there are rules and limitations that exist within the shared physical reality and, similarly, there are limitations within videogames. These limitations exist as rules, the way in which a game is programmed are thereby an integral part of the game because the structure of the game determines how one is supposed to achieve a goal or the task set before them. This is synonymous between sports and games because the rules that determine how we play are a fundamental part of how the nature of the game is determined. Like in sports, gamers greatly dislike the few players who seek to break these rules and give themselves an unfair advantage, ultimately destroying the fun and the value that is gained by playing videogames. Rules are important for establishing a framework for play when multiple participants are involved but when the experience is specifically individual, the rules take a back seat. Videogames become valuable when the participant is able to bring themselves fully to the universe and become creative within that universe. Rules do determine how we play in that there has to be a framework for the goal to be achieved within, but it is not the singular determining factor. The possibility for creativity and expression must be present for a reality to be formed and for actual play to take place. Now I will be moving on to discuss the moral and ethical benefit that games allows us when we give them the proper credence.

### Playground Gaming

One of the benefits I see from the participation in videogames is the moral and ethical blooming of an individual. Games allow a person to encounter and negotiate a litany of ethical problems. That person must regard those moments with gravity because the path the individual decides to take in some games ends up affecting the rest of the narrative in some capacity. For

instance, the game *Mass Effect* is a story structured as a trilogy and decisions that the player makes not only influences the current section of the story they are playing, but also the games and narratives that follow. In my playing of the game, I was involved in a pivotal battle, in which I had to decide whether to direct reinforcements to save “the council” (a political entity that governs the universe) or to destroy the enemy. I chose to destroy the enemy and consequently the council perished. As a result, a new council had to be chosen and was subsequently in power at the beginning of the next game in the trilogy. In making my one decision I ended up reshaping the political environment of the game. Not only can games help shape how one might approach critical decision making, games can actually help determine our individual moral core.

By being put in varying ethical and moral dilemmas we can explore but also express our moral compass. I will use another game experience to make my point. *Fable*<sup>27</sup> is another series of games that focus on character development through decision making. Character development comes down to whether you make decisions to be good or evil, these decisions will positively or negatively affect how other characters respond and interact with you. Most games place you as the hero, and even the role of an “anti-hero” becomes the hero if that is your character. However, the chance to explore a role as a villain is a greatly valuable position. In my own experience, I was borderline unable to make repeatedly evil decisions (stealing, murdering, etc.), and when I was able to do those kinds of things I experienced much less enjoyment of the game. This shows that making those kinds of decisions was not harmonizing with the person I am or perceive myself to be. I was able to discover that at my core I am unable to deliberately make or take

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<sup>27</sup> *Fable*. Guildford: Lionhead Studios – Big Blue Box. 2004.

cruel actions. Whether those actions are inflicted on in-game characters or the people around me, it would seem that such things would go against my nature. From these examples, one can see that games can be useful for expressing and revealing one's moral disposition.

Now, certainly not all gamers approach the same games in this way. While I may have not enjoyed a game as much when forced to make evil decisions, another person may have found some type of enjoyment or novelty in the opportunity to act evil. The enjoyment that one might experience, or at least amusement, does not necessitate that the individual be evil by nature. This is simply because not all gamers approach the same games with same degree of gravity. This is evident in the *World of Warcraft*, which is a massive multiplayer online game that has a certain narrative, but is impacted by millions of individuals simultaneously. In one case there was a group of people playing who took the time to mourn the death of one of their friends by holding a funeral within the game. However, there was another group of players passing by that saw this as an opportunity for gain or fun, and attacked the funeral proceedings and slaughtered all the characters in attendance. This situation exemplifies the fact that some players are playing the game seeking some kind of valuable community experience while other players see the game as a forum for entertainment which they can pursue in any way they see fit. The problem arises when these two types of players come together and reside within the same world. The question that reveals itself in this instance is whether or not players have a moral obligation or responsibility to other people (in the case of online multiplayer games) or even to characters (single player games) that share the game space together?

Are we playing the same game?

The answer to the question posed above is not altogether clear. In both cases you are dealing with issues of the game being what the player makes of it (as far as value is concerned) but there is a distinction to be made when playing games solely with computer controlled characters (NPC's) and games that are multiplayer. The problem lies in the fact that both groups involved in the "funeral slaying" are placing different values on the game itself. The victims are approaching the game as almost an end in itself. For these players the value comes from playing it, while the attackers are treating the game simply as a means to enjoyment thereby making them less responsible for their actions. Monica Evans articulates this dichotomy in her article "*You Can Kill Your Friends But You Can't Save Gnomeregan.*" Evans states that,

The issue is one of perception: that ethical or morally-correct behavior in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game is directly related to each player's understanding of the game world, rules, and culture. To the funeral attendees, World of Warcraft is an extension of real life, and in-game events can be just as real, important, and meaningful as real life events. To the "Serenity Now" members [the attacking party], World of Warcraft is a game first and foremost, one that encourages competition and rewards players for the domination of other players through skill, tactics, or surprise.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cuddy, Luke, and John Nordlinger. *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*. Chicago: Open Court, 2009, 4.



The problem then compounds itself because of how the actual “world” of *World of Warcraft* is constructed.

The offended party can argue that the others are not playing the game it is meant to be played but in fact there are very few rules about how one must conduct one’s self within Azeroth. Basically, any sort of ethical or moral law that one might perceive as being in effect is actually a misunderstanding, or being imposed by that individual. This is difficult because while one player is negatively affecting another, they are still operating well within the rules of the game and there is no law to say that their offense is actually an offense. That being said, there is a notable discrepancy between what the law is, and what is ethical, so hiding behind the rules of the game is a fairly weak defense. As I stated previously, when discussing the nature of sports, it is not simply the rules that dictate how players interact with one another; that is simply a gateway entry to the realm of play. What actually matters is how the players play the game; do they buy into the spirit of play out of respect for the other players? I would conclude that there does exist some basic moral or ethical responsibility between and amongst players who participate in massively multiplayer games because the majority of characters within those realms are backed by a person and there does exist a moral responsibility between people. But in so far as games may be a testing ground for morals, it is hard to say definitely what that moral or ethical code might be. That being said, if a player recognizes another person’s character as being representative of that person, and still persistently acts immorally, then the concern becomes that of the player’s specific moral disposition as a person.

Dealing with games populated by NPC’s (non-player controlled characters) changes the matter somewhat. I would propose that massively multiplayer games involve more expression of

moral disposition and single player games are more exploratory. Both are so by virtue of degree and have no clear distinction in themselves. In so far that single player games lend themselves to exploring one's morality, there is less moral responsibility to the NPCs. Ultimately non-player controlled characters are just that. There is no other human controlling that character, it is more of a doll as opposed to a person's virtual representation of self. It is in that way that a player may chose to regard the characters within the game as tools for probing and fleshing out the player's moral compass. However, this is only true for the state and technology of games today. I say this because right now any level of "intelligence" given to NPC's is basically that of a computer (yet it is still referred to in the industry as "artificial intelligence"). As technology advances into the future, A.I.'s will become increasingly complex and if they should ever become self aware, the moral obligations to them would change. (However, that constitutes its own very complex topic that would be better left for future discussion.) Ultimately, given the state of game characters today, the player has no moral or ethical responsibility to the non-player controlled characters beyond those that the player him/herself imposes on the game. From here I will move onto the moral and ethical responsibilities that exist between people who play games and those who are outside that community.

### Get a Social Life

The question then arises; is having a videogame as one's primary area of reality a good thing? Does becoming enraptured within a videogame's reality cause harm to the self or even others? This is question that can be traced back to ideas of existentialism, to classical eastern philosophy, to the emphasis on the idea that we are not purely individual, and that we do not end at our skin, and to the fact that we are in fact defined by our relationships with other people.

Under such circumstances, making claim to those kinds of theories would in fact make the occupation of primary reality by videogames a transgression against the self. This position also plays off of the stigma that videogames serve to isolate an individual. In addition, this claim also assumes that the common reality is the one of greatest value. I would argue that if one's participation in the common reality is viewed as a matter of necessity rather than a desire for self fulfillment then that individual could actually be harmed by being forcibly removed from gaming. A person in this type of situation would not be categorized as the recreational gamer. This person may be someone who is devoted to gaming and has had very few meaningful interactions via the shared reality. The individual may glean much greater value from the experiences within a game. Indeed this would be an extreme case. If over the scope of one's life they have found little value in the same common world that we participate in, and have found that values lacking in the shared realm are fulfilled somewhere else, then to try and remove them or attempt to "correct" their perspective could be quite damaging and would be a transgression against that person. This begs the question, does one become lost in videogames, or does one find one's self?

The former is valid concern, there is a point at which games can become an addiction rather than alternate reality. In such cases, I would posit that the individual has become lost. But if that individual consciously understands what they are doing and how they are participating (or not) in a certain realm of reality, then you cannot necessarily say that the individual is lost. Rather, they have "found themselves," as it were. As I have argued before, the deepest level of involvement within a game does not mean that person is necessarily isolated from all other people. Again, there is a distinction here between online multiplayer games and single player games, but in games like *World of Warcraft*, one can be completely enveloped and involved

within a very real world. Because that world is made up of other people, the individual ends up replacing one community for another. Because they may value the experiences that they have in the game more than outside of it, it would follow that they place a good deal of value in the interactions they have with the other people participating in that online community. They have shifted their web of connections that determines who they are from people within the common reality to people that partake in the same community online. Paul Brown expresses a much deeper sentiment, likening involvement in a game to religious experience, in discussing Kierkegaard.

...such a higher plane of existence can be achieved by playing *Warcraft II*.

[Another game in the *Warcraft* canon] The game presents an entirely subjective and particularly intense experience that can't be understood through the established institutions of gamedom...it is understood, *felt*, by the player himself when he becomes "contemporary" with the game. From this comes, if not eternal, then at the very least substantial happiness.<sup>29</sup>

If it is therefore possible for a player, or any person, to achieve the precipice of happiness and actualization, to discount or attempt to remove the means by which that happiness is experienced for that individual, would be transgression against them.

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<sup>29</sup> Cuddy, Luke, and John Nordlinger. *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*. Chicago: Open Court, 2009, 80.

### Hey look, I'm on Halo!

One of the most important questions for this topic that must be directly addressed is, “what makes a game worth playing?” The most obvious response for a gamer would be that a game is worth playing because the game is good, or because it is fun. Channeling my inner Socrates this leads me to ask what is it that makes a game fun? The most fundamental aspect of a game is that it provides entertainment, but also intrigue to the player. To begin this discussion, we will take a look at the former of the two; entertainment. It is important to distinguish between entertainment and amusement because while amusement can be a big part of why something is entertaining, it is certainly not the sole reason for it. The point I am making here is that entertainment and amusement are not the same although they may be interrelated or at least simultaneously present in the activity being experienced. Entertainment is more than just being amused because there is the possibility for a deeper evocation from entertainment that is not present in amusement. This means that there is some aspect of the game that is being played that resonates with the player in a way that draws their attention to it and drives their will to participate in the game. An integral part of creating this desire to participate is the presence of intrigue within the content of game being played.

Intrigue in gaming is about capturing the attention of the individual but also evoking an interest in the uncertainty of what lay ahead. Intrigue is a drive to explore and discover within the game because one *does not* know the outcome. Intrigue is essentially a seduction into participation with the game and enticing the player to play. Intrigue is an integral part of a game because it feeds into the game's entertainment ability. The type of entertainment that games provide is unique because of the level of participation that it requires of the player. There is an

aspect of participation in any form of entertainment, but the difference between games and a book or a movie, for example, is that it takes the person's point of view and shifts it from more of a top-down perspective down to one at more of an eye level. In addition, the level of actual control over the character that the player is being exposed to is also extremely different. This type of point of view facilitates the player's emotional investment and sense of identification with the character they are playing with. In many ways this facilitates the dissolving of barriers between the player and the character because the level at which the player experiences the world they are playing is very close to the perspective with which the character is seeing the same world.

From this leveling of perspectives, we can begin to circle back around to the original question of what makes a game worth playing. Part of what makes a good game, as I have said before, is the ability to involve the player in the world, to make them feel that their actions carry weight and affect the world in which they are involved and make it "real" for them. This is the development of the player's sense of agency in what are basically imaginary worlds. Note that although the worlds may be imaginary that does not lead to the conclusion that the experiences had within those worlds are fake. The player occupies a role as a do-er in a world with specific ontological parameters and possibilities. You become an actor in a world with specific limitations and ways in which you can participate with that world, and yet, you become unaware of many of those limitations. In a sense, one forgets the limitation imposed upon them by being absorbed into the world in which they are playing. Dennis Hemphill notes this immersion and merging of player and character when stating that, "The distinction between the game player and the game character seems to disappear, or at least merge, in the lived experience. In phenomenological terms, the game controller, as an extension of the body, recedes into the

background, so to speak, as the player becomes immersed in the action.<sup>30</sup> By becoming immersed in these worlds the player not only forgets that they are playing a game but in fact merges the characters identity with their own. In essence, the controller and the game console are no longer external to the player but become part of him/her through this immersion. This is why when one watches someone playing a game that person identifies the character in the first person, they become “I,” as in “Oh damn, I died,” or “Hey look, I just drove at 100 mph through that intersection,” instead of saying that their character died they identify themselves as that character.

To review this discussion, we see that immersion leads to intrigue, which hold hands with entertainment, and it all becomes a bundle that makes us want to play games. These are the factor that make players buy into a game world and allows them to have very real experiences and gain real knowledge. Because, the fact is, their experience is occurring on a very real plane of reality. Players break down these barriers of distinction and the game and player become unified in a single real interaction that further substantiates games as capable of providing real valuable experiences.

#### No dessert until you've finished playing your games

From talking about what's real, why it's real, what isn't real...

**Dude:** ‘Don’t call my stuff not real.’

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<sup>30</sup> Hemphill, Dennis. "Cybersport." *Journal of Philosophy of Sport* 32 (2005) Human Kinetics Inc, 203.

**Guy:** “Oh I’m calling it unreal.”

**Dude:** “Well let’s play a game and find out how much you stink at my “unreal” stuff...”

...Sorry, Dude and Guy are getting carried away again. On this journey I’ve shown that there is a real external reality to the individual, but we are incapable of having intimate complete knowledge of what is really real. By virtue of how our minds work, our knowledge is inherently subjective. As Kant indicated, we can establish patterns and develop reasonable evidence to support that things are true and that things exist, but we can never have intimate full knowledge of those things such as they are. Since it is our own minds that receive the data and shape and mold the world based on the value judgments we make, then it is perfectly valid to accept a videogame as an integral part of one’s reality and it may indeed be the most valuable aspect of reality over the scope of one’s life.

I have proposed that entertainment, intrigue, and immersion are what bring us to buy into these worlds and allows us to have real experiences that are capable of impacting who we are at our core. Games have provided an invaluable forum for an individual to explore ethical issues and exercise their moral disposition as they see fit. In addition, the issues that have risen out of that position with the advent of online multiplayer gaming exemplifies and has reignited an age old debate over ethical responsibility to other people.

Due to the metaphysical and ethical arguments I have made and the weight of such positions, it becomes impossible to continue the same derogatory societal viewpoint on gaming. Even if I have failed to convince you that games are very real, I hope to have at least cast enough doubt to spark a conversation that may lead us deeper into the dungeons of inquiry. Perhaps



down in one of the dark damp corners of this discussion we may find a chest containing a rare item of knowledge. Armed with a mind as my sword and reason as my torch, I will press on.

Will you join me?

► Press **A** to accept this quest ◀

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