

The Ethics of Computer Games

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1 Introduction

I am not quite sure how it happened, but I felt guilty. No, no, I was guilty.

It started like so many other times: my weapons of choice, banal words, and action—*good* action. I was formidable, unstoppable, the master of my surroundings, a lethal instrument with one goal, vaguely heard while I was enjoying my newly acquired arsenal.

And then it all stopped.

That character, cannon fodder if only I had any bullets left, changed the meaning of my actions.

What if I am wrong? What if they lied to me? What if the goal is a lie?

*Deus Ex*¹ is a critically acclaimed first-person shooter/role-playing computer game in which players explore a dystopian world as a cybernetic supersoldier. The player's character, JC Denton, is presented as the ultimate combat tool of the United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition. At the beginning of the game, the mission presented to the player sounds simple: a shipment of a vaccine for a lethal plague is in the hands of the National Secessionists Forces (NSF), a terrorist group the United Nations is combating. The goal is to recover the shipment and gather information about the NSF. The player is given a choice of weaponry, from missile launchers to crossbows, and the game starts.

When I first played *Deus Ex*, I acted as a reckless assassin, eliminating all targets with a brutal use of force. Those terrorists I was fighting seemed ill-prepared, poorly armed, and not really confrontational, cannon fodder for a supersoldier. And then I ran out of ammunition. This meant I had to carefully navigate the environment to maximize my resources. This meant I could eavesdrop on some conversations. And what the terrorists

were talking about contradicted the information I was given by my superiors. Who was right? What type of armed forces is the United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition? What does it mean to be a terrorist? What does it mean *to be called* a terrorist?

Deus Ex is a fascinating dystopian ethical game because from the first mission, the player doubts the goals and purposes of her assignment. Eavesdropping on NSF members' conversations reveals that not everything in this game should be understood as good versus evil. Ultimately, the player discovers that the United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition is a power-thirsty organization that contributes to the spread of the plague. The terrorists the player has been combating throughout the first half of the game may not be evil. As a matter of fact, the player's actions, commanded by the initial United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition, were in fact "evil." The plot twists, and a different understanding of the game narrative forces the player to reflect on her previous actions.

In many combat-based games, following the orders given to players means "doing the right thing." *Deus Ex* breaks that expectation, and forces players to reflect on the meaning of their actions. In *Deus Ex*, ethical thinking is as powerful a weapon as a handgun, and ethical responsibility the most adequate gameplay strategy.

The ideas behind this book arose while I was playing *Deus Ex*. I started thinking about this topic because, for the first time, a game made me consider the nature of my actions by means of game mechanics and game world design. *Deus Ex* starts as a rather generic science-fiction first-person-shooter, only to evolve into a strong narrative that gives players moral purpose. Furthermore, the goals and winning conditions were ethically questioned almost from the beginning, forcing players to think morally about the missions and their meaning. When playing *Deus Ex* I felt that a computer game was challenging me as a moral being, showing me new ways of understanding games as well as my presence and actions as a player.

Ever since, I have tried to understand what the ethics of computer games are, and how I could explain my experience of *Deus Ex*. My intention was to reveal what the conditions were for such an ethical game experience to take place, and how to understand them. This book is an academic exploration of ethical gameplay, ethical game design, and the presence of computer games in our moral universe. Most of it uses complex philosophical

theory, and it requires from the reader a certain degree of openness to the rhetoric of ethics. But I have tried to write a text that can also be read by the non-philosophically oriented. There are chapters, especially in the first half of the book, which can be challenging. But there are also case studies, discussions of well-known ethical issues, and even game design reflections that should be of interest to those readers curious about the application of ethical theory to computer games.

With this book I have tried to explain an ethical experience. To do so, I had to understand computer games as a form of art and entertainment. I hope that by the end of this book, I communicate my understanding of the ethics of computer games and set up a fruitful dialogue between players, developers, and academics.

1.1 The Bull's-eye of Morality

Computer games have been a mass media target for a good part of the last two decades. Accusations that games are training devices for teenage serial killers with serious social issues made them a usual suspect in terms of creating moral panic. One common media argument claims that games lead to violent behavior and desensitization in the face of violence. This has even led certain groups to actively seek legislative restrictions on the distribution of violent computer games. Computer games are now what cinema and rock and roll once were: the bull's-eye of morality.

This moral panic is a symptom of a larger cultural issue. In our postindustrial societies we understand and promote computer games as a valuable medium for entertainment, creation, and socialization. Developed and developing societies, from China to the United States, are witnessing the economic and cultural benefits of computer games as a dominant cultural industry. Academia too now focuses on these games as objects of research, validating their importance in the configuration of our cultural landscape. Despite all this interest, we know little or nothing about the ethics of computer games. When considering such ethics, there are a number of important questions that arise: is it the ethics of the game, or the ethics of playing the game? Is there such a difference? Do game designers have moral responsibilities? If so, how and why? All these questions point to a broader field of the ethics of games, a field that has scarcely been explored.

This book is an exploration of the ethics of computer games. Ethics can be defined as a system or set of moral values, and the tools for analyzing these values. Morals can be defined as the right or wrong of actions or objects. The application of ethics is the rational, philosophical approach to the questions of good, evil, harm, duties, and values. This book is then an exploration of the moral nature of computer games and computer game players.

In this book I claim that computer games are ethical objects, that computer game players are ethical agents, and that the ethics of computer games should be seen as a complex network of responsibilities and moral duties. I explain why rules can have moral values that affect the ethical behavior of players. I also describe how players use ethical thinking to play computer games, and why incorporating these ethical players into the game design is crucial for the expressive use of computer games.

This book gives arguments for considering players creative, engaged, ethical agents. Players no longer are passive moral creatures, exposed to unethical content: computer game players reflect, relate, and create with an ethical mind. And the games they play are ethical systems. I will argue that *Manhunt*,² a game banned in several countries, is a rich ethical experience if played by mature players. On the other hand, a game like *Knights of the Old Republic*,³ which allegedly allows players to take moral choices and play by them, is an example of unethical game design.

Computer games are complex cultural objects: they have rules guiding behavior, they create game worlds with values at play, and they relate to players who like to explore morals and actions forbidden in society. The ethics of computer games have to take into consideration all these variables. I will present a comprehensive perspective on why computer games can be ethical, and how players use their ethical values to critically engage with these games. Ultimately, this is a book about how players are ethical agents, and how we morally relate to computer games.

In this book, I propose a framework for understanding the ethics of computer games, a framework that will define these games both as designed objects and as player experiences. I am providing a theoretical approach from the fields of philosophy and game studies, a framework based on the formal understanding of computer games as moral objects and players as

ethical subjects. The experience of a computer game is the experience of a moral object by an ethical subject. Thus the gaming experience is not only ethically relevant, but should also be analyzed by philosophy and game research. This framework also provides a tool for addressing relevant ethical issues that take place in the cultural context of computer games, from unethical content in computer games to the responsibility of game designers for the ethical issues raised by a game.

From an academic point of view, my research belongs to an emerging discipline that can be called computer game studies.⁴ It also represents a philosophical inquiry into the moral nature of playing computer games. This book is a synergy between moral philosophy and computer game studies. It appeals to game scholars who want to use philosophy as a method for understanding computer games. This book also addresses philosophers, who can be interested in the challenges digital games pose to ethics and metaphysics. Finally, game developers can see in this text not only a cultural validation of their work, but also a serious approach to the ethical issues that games raise, and how to address them. Furthermore, parts of this book can be read as challenges for all of them: the challenge of using philosophy in games or games in philosophy, or the challenge of creating compelling ethical computer games.

Nevertheless, some clarification on this synergy is needed before I proceed. Philosophers who read this book may not be very happy with what they might see as a superficial approach to ethics and some ontological issues, such as the nature of games as objects or players as subjects. Game researchers, on the other hand, might find this book too philosophical, and perhaps too light on illustrative examples or deep discussions on notions like narrative and fiction. Finally, game designers, developers, and producers might think that the text is just academic gibberish, neither solving nor tackling the specific ethical problems they face when developing a game.

To all these possible critics I can only say they might be right. This is not a philosophy book, though I think there are some interesting issues that computer games raise, issues I will put in the language and perspective of ethical philosophy. I use philosophical methods that may seem formalistic and devoid of empirical value for some game researchers. Yet the philosophical method provides an alternative way of thinking about what players are, and about how games can be designed with ethical affordances

and constraints. Philosophy does not close any doors, or try to impose its rhetoric: it attempts to widen our perspectives and broaden our capacities for discussion. As for reviews of some of the classic notions of game studies, I intentionally leave some discussions out of this book. The focus of this book is not to discuss the specifics of game ontology, but rather to apply what has been debated in game research to the development of a general theory for the understanding of the ethics of computer games. It is, then, an instrumental approach to terminology and its importance.

Finally, to game developers I would say that this is not a twelve-step program for solving ethical dilemmas when creating a game, and it is certainly not a do-it-yourself ethical course on computer games. But game designers, developers, and producers might be interested in understanding the complexity behind the products they develop. They should not just be told that they are morally accountable, but also understand why and how they are morally accountable. Confronting this responsibility is not an easy process, but it is one that, if undertaken, might provide new insights and creative challenges, thereby stimulating innovation that could erase stigmas and open perspectives.

This book has moral responsibility: it presents a foundation for the understanding of the ethics of computer games. Most of the theory comprising the first three chapters responds to that moral duty—the arguments have to be solid, and based on a theory that is explained so it can be discussed. This may make the first half of this book too dependent on the theoretical discourse. Yet that dependence is a requirement for the sound consolidation of a framework for the analysis of computer game ethics.

By the end of this book, the reader will have understood why we are ethical players, but also how we behave as we do in the virtual worlds of computer games. This book is a voyage to the ethics of rules, strategies, and game design. It is also a reflection on who we are when we play games. In the following chapters I will introduce the purpose and objectives of this book, as well as the methods that will inform each chapter and the overall reflection on the ethics of computer games. The choice of method, and especially the stress on ethical theory, makes necessary a chapter on the position of this research in the overall picture of the computer ethics field.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

This book has one purpose: to understand the ethics of computer games. I will focus on giving an appropriate answer to this issue, providing a framework for the research, analysis, and application of ethics in computer games. Most of the research work informing my arguments consists of reflection on my experience of computer games from my knowledge of and interest in ethics. Therefore, whenever the first person is used, the reader has to take into account that I am a southern European, raised and educated in a Catholic environment, yet not religious. This book has been written in a Scandinavian country, which I believe has had an effect on the importance I place on communities and the individual responsibility of computer game users. I am also a long-time computer and role-playing game enthusiast. I started playing computer games with 8-bit machines and tapes, and I remember fondly the days when I made my games by copying code from magazines. This is the “I” in this book.

Given that my main purpose is to understand the ethics of computer games, I will need to define what kind of ethical discourses we find in these games, in which ways or where we find those discourses, and which theories can be applied. This means that a number of more focused analytical steps need to be declared. To understand the ethics of computer games, the first objective is to define what computer games mean for ethical theory and, related to this, what games are as moral objects. Without legitimizing the ontological relevance of games for ethics, my research would be meaningless. I also need to define the players' ethics, and how they relate to the ethics of computer games, describing which types of ethical theories can be applied to agency in ludic digital systems. Since my ambition is to open the field of ethics and computer games and apply the results of this research, I will suggest applications of the theory for analyzing ethical issues related to computer game culture, theory, and development.

Of course, like any other academic research, this book inserts itself in a tradition within which the success of the ideas can be measured. And this tradition is also a theoretical one: in the next pages I will present the work of other theorists of the ethics of computer games, and how my own research relates to them. This book should be read in the tradition of these precedents.

1.3 Precedents

No research is totally original. As academics, we are part of a tradition, and it is our duty to acknowledge that tradition and contribute to it. Even though research on the ethics of computer games from a philosophical perspective does not have many precedents, I would like to introduce here what I consider to be part of the tradition to which my work belongs, as well as some other texts having an affinity with my own approach.

This book takes a cross-disciplinary approach. Even though there is an analytical prevalence of philosophy, and the results of the research have to be understood as a work of applied computer ethics, there are a number of precedents from other disciplines that have to be taken into consideration. The works I present (and briefly review) have a certain affinity with my own arguments, yet there are significant theoretical and conceptual disagreements.

The first relevant precedent for the central claims of this book is Eugene F. Provenzo's *Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo*.⁵ In this work, Provenzo describes the then-dominant Nintendo-produced computer games and their effects as cultural devices, focusing on issues related to simulated violence and the portrayal of gender in the Nintendo culture. Provenzo's work takes computer games seriously, granting them the status of objects that have an effect on the configuration of values and discourses in contemporary societies, specifically in the United States.

Video Kids is focused on children as game console users and how this use may affect their cultural and moral development. Provenzo always analyzes games with respect, yet with moral caution. He played the games he writes about, and his comments are often accompanied by samples from interviews with children. He presents a number of questions of extreme interest: what are computer games as cultural objects? What happens when we play computer games? How do video games affect our moral universe? Provenzo's framework for answering these questions is quite varied, ranging from psychology to cultural studies and Don Ihde's postphenomenology,⁶ giving a solid foundation for his conclusions.

There are some aspects of Provenzo's work that differentiate it from my own, though. The author focuses on one exclusive company, justifying it by citing Nintendo's market dominance in the late 1980s and early 1990s video game. This research choice gives a partial perspective on the culture

of computer games. It could be argued that *Video Kids* is a criticism of Nintendo and the culture that it created via its sponsored media. But computer games' culture is defined by a number of companies, institutions, and stakeholders. It is neither possible nor correct to make large assumptions about computer games and their presence in contemporary culture based on the exclusive analysis of one company.

Provenzo has an implicit discourse of child players as beings with creative capacities that also include their moral universe, and he presents the same caveats against computer games as I will present in this book: computer games can be ethically questionable when they do not allow players to create their own ethical game values, which should be also taken into consideration in the game experience.⁷ This is an insightful perspective, analogous to some of the criticisms of computer games for which I will argue.

Nevertheless, Provenzo's work lacks some nuances: he seems to be a technological determinist, arguing that games do not give players the possibility of control and modification, therefore players subordinate to those instructions and obey mindlessly. That is a perspective on players, even on child players, that deprives them of their moral capacities. Perhaps games do not let players directly modify the conditions of play, but players, in their phenomenological experience of the game, have the capacity not to subordinate to the game, not to be totally determined by its rules. Players tend to be creative and reflective, even with games that do not afford them control over the rules.

Provenzo describes computer game players as uncritical creatures who give away their human capacity for reasoning and for moral thinking just because the game itself presents a limited amount of choices. I will counterargue that we become players not only by learning to play games, but also by developing a sense of computer game ethics and values that gives us the tools to ethically experience games. Even in the case of children, there is a presence of moral reasoning when playing games—a presence that has to be cultivated and encouraged by computer game culture. Provenzo sees players as isolated beings, whereas I will argue that a fundamental part of the process of developing our moral understanding of games is belonging to a gaming community, experiencing the presence of and interacting with other ethical beings who play computer games.

Provenzo's work, with his stress on the importance of game rules and the relevance of designers and developers in the final ethical configuration of computer games, is a valid precedent, but my understanding of players and their ethical being is radically different, and that justifies the divergent conclusions of his work and this book.

Another reference work within the field of ethics and computer games is Sherry Turkle's *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*.⁸ Here Turkle explores the presence of computers as a part of our social and psychological lives, paying attention to the influence of computer games in the constitution of that "second self" that comes into being when in contact with digital technologies.

Turkle's work is essentially psychological research on the impact of computing in the rhetoric of the self. Therefore, her findings are definitively dissimilar to mine: the methodological divergence between philosophy and psychology is, in this case, too big. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental reason why Turkle's work can be considered as a precedent: the very notion of a second self. In chapter 3, "Players as Moral Beings," I will argue that the player is a sub-subject, a relatively autonomous self who comes into being when experiencing a computer game. Turkle argues that the contact and interaction with machines creates a similar second self in which our way of thinking and relating to the world is different than in a nonmachine culture.

In her chapter specifically dedicated to computer games, Turkle argues for an approach to the culture of rules and simulation, of which computer games are an excellent example. Computer games are largely liberated from mechanical constraints, and thus their expressive capacities are unparalleled. But, in an argumentative line similar to Provenzo's, Turkle points out that all those capacities do is limit players (children again—not adult players) in their own self-building and expressive capacities.⁹ What computer games do, according to Turkle, is re-center our self,¹⁰ but that is a second self in contact with the game experience. She also points out the presence of empowered users,¹¹ which means that players are not mindless zombies who just follow and obey rules.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between Turkle's take on the second self and my own philosophical definition of players. While I agree that the presence of computer games creates a second subject, my take on that subjectivity is more complex. In this book I argue that the

player-as-subject is an ethical being capable of morally reasoning about the ludic experience she is immersed in, because the player is herself an ethical subject. In Turkle's work there is, I believe, a certain confusion between the second self and the process of focusing on the act of playing, which undermines the possible ethical implications of considering the being of a second self.

The core of this divergence can be found in the phrasing of "second self." "Second" implies subordination, precedence, a "first." In Turkle's work the presence of that first is somewhat unclear, yet it does undermine the second self's ethical autonomy. I will argue that being a player means creating a subject with ethical capacities who establishes phenomenological and hermeneutical relations with the subject outside the game, with the game experience, and with the culture of players and games. It is not a self parallel to the out-of-the-game self, but a mode of being that takes place in the game.

These two precedents are not directly related to the topic of ethics and computer games. As I have stated previously, there is not much work done on this topic, and most of the examples are short academic papers or articles oriented to larger audiences outside academia. Nevertheless, they have to be taken into account, and put in the perspective of my own arguments. The following is a sample of the most interesting, complete papers related to the topic of this book. There is more work on the ethics of games, but it often is focused either on specific games or on the application of ethical theories to games, disregarding the particular ontological properties of computer games that are crucial for my own theoretical framework.

Perhaps the most quoted article on the ethics of computer games is Ren Reynolds's "Playing a 'Good' Game: A Philosophical Approach to Understanding the Morality of Games,"¹² in which the author applies three different ethical theories, consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics, to the analysis of *Grand Theft Auto III* (DMA Design/RockStar North 2001). Reynolds's article suggests a method for understanding if a game is good or evil, concluding that virtue ethics is the appropriate framework for the understanding of the morality of games: "I believe virtue theory is the most relevant theory for an analysis of 21st century computer games".¹³

While there are some similarities between this book and Reynolds's approach—for instance, when it comes to considering that the content of the games does not exclusively determine the morality of games, or arguing

that virtue ethics can provide interesting approaches to this topic—there are strong dissimilarities. Essentially, Reynolds's article, which was intended for a nonacademic audience, does not define what a game is, nor who the player is or why players have virtues. Using *Grand Theft Auto III* as an example limits the perspective of the article: with that focus, it is only possible to determine the ethics of *Grand Theft Auto III* for the player Ren Reynolds—a necessary and interesting task, but limited in scope.

Reynolds's work was a primer, intended to call the attention of game developers. Yet it shows some limitations that need to be taken into account. First of all, in this type of research the game as a system with rules needs to be considered as a simulation of a world where players engage in activities while guided and rewarded by that same system; we also have to think about players as ethical agents who reflect upon their own values and the values they want to develop in their experience of a game, as the philosophy of sport tradition¹⁴ has already argued for. Only within this perspective is it possible to say if a game is good or bad, and even that statement has to be nuanced: what does "bad" mean? Is it the game played or its design that is "bad"? To whom is the game harmful? All these questions are absent from Reynolds's approach, and as such his results, while valuable and insightful, have to be regarded as an introductory approach to the question of ethics in computer games.

There are other precedents that show a different value. Matt McCormick's "Is It Wrong to Play Violent Video Games?"¹⁵ presents the issue of the moral concern that violent computer games raise, applying to that issue utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics, and concluding that virtue ethics is the theory that gives deeper insights to the understanding of moral problems raised by computer games.

McCormick does not write about any specific game, but more in general about video games. This can be considered a problem, for not all computer games are alike, and the divergence between genres and types can have ethical implications. Furthermore, by not focusing on games but on the players, McCormick does not give any importance to the fact that games are designed to guide modes of interaction, rewarding some of them. As I will demonstrate in chapter 2, when defining the ethics of video games it is crucial to take into account that games are designed objects.

Nevertheless, McCormick's account is a nuanced and thorough analysis of the possible ethical implications of playing violent computer games. His

article starts by applying utilitarianism to the act of playing these games, trying to answer the title's question. To his surprise, the results are not conclusive,¹⁶ which leads him to the application of Kant's deontology to the same question. And again, the fact that "playing a game, whether on the computer or on the rugby field, is not the same as real life"¹⁷ discards the possible Kantian criticism to playing computer games, because "if we are too sensitive about the detrimental effects of games on a person's inclination to do her duty, we will be forced to condemn a wide range of activities along with violent video games."¹⁸

Finally, McCormick finds in virtue ethics the ethical theory that can prove why playing violent computer games is wrong. Of course, at this moment in the article it seems clear that McCormick wants to consider playing violent games unethical, and his argumentation may be flawed by his determination. It is true that computer games raise moral awareness, but that does not necessarily mean that the moral concerns are right. That is the fundamental flaw in McCormick's argumentation.

Virtue ethics, the author argues, would define playing computer games as an unethical activity because "by participating in simulations of excessive, indulgent and wrongful acts, we are cultivating the wrong sort of character."¹⁹ It is a strong virtue ethics argument, and Aristotelians make a clear point here. But it leaves out the possibility of considering the player a moral agent who has specific, game-related virtues attached to a ludic subject. In chapter 3 I will counterargue this position by presenting an alternative conception of players in which the users of games see their ethical autonomy increased by also increasing their ethical responsibility. Players have specific game virtues, and a specific, game-related character, within which, for instance, sportsmanship and other virtues have their meaning.

McCormick's account is well argued and nuanced. He does take into consideration the fact that what we do in computer games as players are simulated actions, and includes a closing remark connecting the ethical issues that computer games raise with the larger computer ethics perspective. His article is a valuable precedent for this book, even though the conclusions I will reach partially contradict McCormick's insights.

The December 2005 issue of the *International Review of Information Ethics*²⁰ was dedicated to the ethics of "e-games." In that issue two articles

present the relations between games and ethics in a productive way: Mia Consalvo's "Rule Sets, Cheating, and Magic Circles: Studying Games and Ethics," and Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic and Thomas Larsson's "Game Ethics—Homo Ludens as a Computer Game Designer and Consumer."

While Consalvo's article presents a layered understanding of the ethics of computer games,²¹ rather similar to some of my conclusions in chapter 5, it is Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic and Thomas Larsson's work my research is closer to. These authors acknowledge that "the ways we play vary with civilizations . . . they are influenced by our cultural environment,"²² which is similar to the argument I build around the idea of players being part of cultures in and out of the game, cultures that play a role in the ethical configuration of the play experience. Furthermore, these authors also realize that we need to define the ontology of games before we can consider their ethics, a claim I will echo in my analysis of what computer games are.

Dodig-Crnkovic and Larsson's article focuses on the ethical responsibilities of game designers, and how they "often rely on free-speech legislation to defend their right not to take into account ethical considerations."²³ It is a strong and brave criticism, and the authors succeed in building a strong case from a philosophical perspective, but not also easily applicable by game developers and educators, a step that should have been taken, the absence of which nevertheless does not harm an insightful article on the ethics of computer games.

These articles show what I believe will be a trend in computer ethics: the interest in computer games and how philosophers and game researchers can define their ethical relevance. This book is a part of that larger trend that answers not only to the field of game studies, but also to the research area of computer ethics. It is necessary then to put my own work in the perspective of computer ethics theory.

1.4 The Computer Ethics Paradigm

For some readers it may be surprising that I write about the ethics of computer games, instead of the ethics of games. It might be seen as an arbitrary delimitation of the field of study, and it could raise the question of the extent of this research: are the ethics of computer games the same as the ethics of games? Or, in other words, using the framework I am proposing

here, is it possible to understand the ethics of professional sports, children's games, or card games?

The answer is both yes and no. In this book I am focusing on the ethics of computer games and, even though there are some parallels between the ethics of digital and nondigital games, there are some specific ontological properties of computer games that raise unique ethical challenges. As may be obvious, the most important difference is the presence of computing power and the ways in which that power affects the game design and its experience by the players. There are strong analogies between digital and nondigital games, so it could be possible, though outside this book's scope, to apply some of the conceptualizations of this work to professional sports or nondigital games.

But given these similarities and possible areas of connection, I believe it is necessary to explain what the fundamental differences between computer games and nondigital games are, as relevant to the study of computer game ethics. This difference can be summarized by one fact: computer games are games played "using computer power, involving a video display."²⁴ Computer power brings forth new possibilities and demands that are significant for the ethical construction of the experience of the game.

Computer games are designed experiences in virtual environments with rules and properties that, in general, cannot be adapted or corrected by their users. When playing a casual game of basketball with friends, some of us change the rules to make the game more or less physically demanding, or to become what we believe is an offense-oriented, beautiful game. For instance, we could decide that the team that scores a basket keeps the ball, instead of the turnaround that we find in basketball's official rules.

When I play a casual game of basketball on my console, with my friends, we cannot do that. The computer system upholds the scoring and turnaround rules, so it is not possible for us to change them and make it a more pleasant, casual game. We can, obviously, change our play styles, because players determine how games are played, but the game world and its hardwired systems of rules are impossible to modify. Much like professional, refereed sports, computer games do not allow for players to change the rules while playing.²⁵

The other element differentiating computer games from nondigital games is their simulation capacities. The game world of a video game is

usually dependent on the simulation of other systems, be these the laws of physics, like the ball dynamics in *Pro Evolution Soccer 4*,²⁶ the colossi of *Shadow of the Colossus*,²⁷ or the musical instruments of *Daigassou! Band Brothers*.²⁸ Game worlds in computer games are simulated environments, with some fictional elements.²⁹ In classic, nondigital games, there tends to be no simulation (though there are nondigital games that are simulations, like *Monopoly*). Computer games, conversely, almost always present simulated environments (though again, there are digital games that are not simulations, like poker games).

To understand the ethics of computer games, we have to take into account that computer games present simulated environments designed to be interacted with in specific ways by players who agree to those constraints and who, in most cases, cannot do anything to change the rules or the possible interactions with the system. Both the simulation and the rules are upheld by the computer and affect the player's interactions, behaviors, and subjectivity. Therefore, the presence and importance of computer power and simulation capacities are relevant for understanding the ethics of digital games, and thus it seems obvious to relate this research to the field of computer ethics.

Computer ethics is the field studying the ethical implications that the use of Internet communication technologies and computational technologies create, determining if those ethical issues are new problems or just reiterations of old problems. As in any nascent field of research, the discussions between these two positions are long and detailed. It is not my intention, though, to argue for or against either of these. The vision of computer ethics that I am going to present here is related to the specific needs of this book.

The first issue for us to consider is the nature of the ethical issues that arise with computer games: should we consider those issues as new or as old ethical dilemmas? Is there a radical novelty in the ethical questions posed by computer games? To define what kind of ethical questions computer games pose I will use Deborah Johnson's threefold distinction: "The ethical issues can be organized in at least three different ways: according to the type of technology; according to the sector in which technology is used; and according to ethical concepts of themes."³⁰

For computer games, this means that the ethical issues are related to the use of computer technology to create a virtual world and enforce a set of

rules; to the fact that not all users of these games are mature enough to be exposed to certain content; and to the issues that computer games raise in the perspective of, for instance, virtue ethics: does the act of playing games reinforce moral desensitization? Only those problems related to the technology are unique to computer games. All the other questions have been present in history, in other forms of expression. Computer games pose old and new questions.

In terms of the general epistemological field of computer ethics, my theoretical framework is very close to the paradigm proposed by Philip Brey's³¹ disclosive computer ethics: "Mainstream computer ethics focuses on the morality of practices, particularly on the use of computer technology. What is often marginalized in the discussion . . . is the moral role of the technology that is being used. That is, the design features of computer systems and software. . . . Technological artifacts may themselves become the object of moral scrutiny, independently from, and prior to, particular ways of using them."³² Similarly, it is in the game as designed simulation system where the ethics of computer games can be partially tracked. The way games are designed, and how that design encourages players to make certain choices, is relevant for the understanding of the ethics of computer games.

But the main argument of this book, the one that I believe marks a turn from the conventional discourse relating to computer games and ethics, is my dedication to putting the player in the center. As designed objects, computer games create practices that could be considered unethical. Yet these practices are voluntarily undertaken by a moral agent who not only has the capacity, but also the duty to develop herself as an ethical being by means of practicing her own player-centric ethical thinking while preserving the pleasures and balances of the game experience. The player is a moral user capable of reflecting ethically about her presence in the game, and aware of how that experience configures her values both inside the game world and in relation to the world outside the game.

My arguments placing computer game players as the central element of any analysis of computer game ethics justify my choice of virtue ethics and information ethics as the philosophical theories informing my analytical framework. Both virtue and information ethics take into consideration both what constitutes an ethical situation, and what is an ethical agent. While deontology or utilitarianism provide a picture of the subject as ethical agent, virtue and information ethics, both constructivist theories,

allow for an integration of the subject in an ongoing process of ethical reflection. In other words, these ethical theories allow the analysis of players and their relations with game systems. I will explain in detail the application of these two theories in chapter 4.

This is a book on computer ethics, since it uses some of the most relevant findings of this field and applies them to digital games. I have tried to write a text that, while applying a number of different disciplines to the explanation of the ethics of computer games, could be understood as a part of computer ethics—more specifically, as a part of the trends in computer ethics that designate users of designed environments as responsible moral agents who are capable and ought to protect and enhance the well-being of the environments where their interactions take place. This is, in summary, this book's contribution and allegiance to the field of computer ethics.

1.5 Structure of the Book

I have divided the book into eight chapters, but there is a conceptual division that should be noted. Chapters 2 to 4 are the core theoretical parts: there are examples, but mostly presented as short illustrations of conceptual problems and their solutions. In these chapters I present the theory behind this book's understanding of the ethics of computer games. Since there is much at stake with this topic, I wanted to provide a detailed framework justifying each one of my arguments. It is in those chapters that the theory on the ethics of computer games is explained, argued for, and presented.

Chapter 2 focuses on the ontology of games as designed objects, using design theory and game research as the main theoretical backgrounds. In that chapter I explore the relations between game rules and fictional worlds. I will argue that the ethics of computer games as objects have to be localized in the game system, and that the fictional world—the audiovisual element—while important, is secondary to the ethics of a computer game.

Chapter 3 explains the player as a moral being. In this chapter I will argue that players understand the ethical constraints and affordances of the game design and the game fiction, but they are ultimately empowered ethical beings who reflect morally about their actions in the game. The core idea in this chapter is that players are not moral zombies, but productive agents who understand the values of a game.

Chapter 4 presents the framework for the analysis of computer game ethics. This framework applies two different and consolidated ethical frameworks, information ethics and virtue ethics, to the findings of the two previous chapters. The central questions are: how do we play these ethical systems, and how do we tackle the ethical issues they raise? Chapter 4 concludes with a general theory for the understanding of computer game ethics.

In chapters 5 to 7, I apply the theory to different issues: I present three case studies, illustrating not only how to apply the theory, but also what its influence is in the analysis of single-player, multiplayer, and massively multiplayer online games. Chapter 6 focuses on more general questions, such as the issues raised by unethical content in computer games, and such content's possible effects on players. Chapter 7 applies the general theory computer game ethics to the craft of designing games, coming up with a synthesis of design theory and ethics that could be used both as an analytical tool and potentially as a source for reflection and inspiration in the creation of ethical gameplay.

This book may have, by nature, very different readers. The fact that it is an academic book, and that it reasons using the arguments of methods of philosophy, can make it seem difficult to read on occasion. It probably is. Nevertheless, different audiences will find different chapters interesting: those readers who are philosophically inclined will find the first half of the book relevant, while those who want a more concrete application of theory may find the second half more appealing. The ethics of computer games is a large, complicated topic, and I have tried to make it understandable and entertaining without sacrificing the rigor required to provide a complete answer to a critical question.

This book has the goal of providing a comprehensive overview of the ethics of computer games, a field scarcely researched but deserving of more attention due to the increasing ethical questions that computer games, as an emergent cultural form of expression and entertainment, pose to developed societies. It is, by no means, a complete work—there are areas that require more discussion, and games, in their unstoppable evolution, will likely render parts of the text old. Nevertheless, I intend this text as a first step, as the starting point of a dialogue in which designers, academics, and players share positions and discuss the moral importance of games in our culture.

