Scholarly Discourse on the Visuality of Ethics in Gaming: An Opening Conversation

Visual Ethics

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Abstract

This article offers perspectives into some of the key intersections between ethics in representation and game design by showcasing an extended ten-minute version of the presenters' original video about the provocation of visual ethics in gaming, first shown at the summit 'Re/Sponse-able Visual Ethics.' This version particularly divulges further detail into the ludic and congruent real-world dynamics that come into play in coding and facilitating both the game's system of rules and mechanics as well as the player's immersion in its game world. Topics principally addressed included the relationship and function of violence in procedural-based game activity, and game developer intentions or responses to their chosen subjects and themes embedded into their game. While the video and its topics primarily aligned to the presenters' respective disciplines, it is still a valuable platform to instigate new or expand existing avenues of research into the relationship of ethics and gaming.

Keywords

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FEATURE   This article comprises two videos, which can be viewed here.

– This article is part of the special topic 'Visual Ethics', edited by Jayne White, Dean Sutherland and Marek Tesar.

1   Introduction

Ethics within video game studies comprises of and contributes valuable work to a wide range of research interests. A popular subject of focus is the continued discussion around the relationship of violence to video games, and concurrently evaluating games' capacity to invoke violent behavior among its players due to containing in-game content considered as unethical or immoral by societal standards (Happ and Malzer, 2014; Schott, 2016; Maughan, Igarzábal, and Debus, 2019). This subject often intersects with other discourses, such as assessing players' inability to distinguish their own reality from the one experienced in the game from frequent and prolonged activity, and determining the long-term risks of gaming addiction to a player's mental, emotional, and physical health (Ferguson, 2018; Weßel, Tillmann, Groen, and Kiel, 2020; Hendrickson, 2021). Some works have explored certain games' capacity to encourage players to engage in ethical reflection, and subsequently compare their own values to those encoded in the game system through actions and events they chose to initiate over others (Brown, 2008; Murphy & Zagal, 2011; Sicart, 2013). In this framework, these games (though not all) can be "engineered to reinforce real-world ethical ideals ... [and] also present the player[s] with moral dilemmas"

(Murphy and Zagal, 2011, p. 69). Digital game scholars Miguel Sicart's *The Ethics of Computer Games* and Samuel Ulbricht's *Ethics of Computer Gaming: A Groundwork* constitute another major sphere of game ethics study by dissecting and demonstrating the different levels or paradigms of ethics taking place within the interactions between the game in question and the player(s) (Sicart, 2009, 2013; Ulbricht, 2022). Notable areas of this study include assessment of players as moral and / or immoral beings, understanding video games as designed ethical systems, and the applicability of ethics during a game's pre-planned and development stages. Finally, studies have emerged in recent years regarding the uses and limits of video games as texts for research into and / or teaching ethics within social studies education (Schrier, 2021; Johnson, Colby, and Colby, 2021).

The variety of these studies highlight the impossibility of a standardized account for how ethics operate in gaming, especially when establishing methods of understanding both the ethical and unethical implications or values that accompany the different types and effects of a game's visuality. Nonetheless, to explore further the intersections of ethics between its real-world and procedural or ludic modes, our video discussion (followed by a separate and short closure video at the end of this article) contributed to ethics in gaming through the lens of visuality. Prominently, unveiling insights into the extent of responsibility game developer studios have to the content and themes they incorporate into their game by answering several key questions and using particular video games as illustrated case studies representing settings or contexts related to the presenters' major research backgrounds. Namely, screen and media studies (Schott) and history and historical game studies (Redder). Using game illustrations thematic to the presenters' disciplines was vital to approaching discussion on the ethical standards present in game design, authorship, and the visuality of content pertaining to the game's represented world, as prominently addressed in the following recorded video. Afterwards, a final section summarizes the key findings unveiled in the video while providing some new supporting commentary to further elucidate on its points discussed.

Before watching these videos, two disclaimers. Firstly, due to the criteria outlined on the type of video submission for the summit 'Re/Sponse-able Visual Ethics' organized by the Association for Visual Pedagogies, this video and its contributive discussions are formatted as an opening provocation on the subject in order to provide a facilitative platform to assist students, academics, teachers, and other experts working in or incorporating digital game studies and game design. Therefore, it is impossible to address every single facet on the role of ethics taking place throughout the research, game design, and

gameplay stages. Nonetheless, both authors recommend studies on persuasive gaming and the differentiation between entertainment and 'applied' or 'serious games' (Bogost, 2010; Siriaraya, Visch, Vermeeren, and Bas, 2018) as other integrals readings involving gaming ethics as a component in their research. Second, it is important to provide several (but by no means exhaustive) definitions of game terms or concepts, in order to provide readers a contextual guide to understanding digital game terminology and discourse expressed in both the video discussion and the subsequent written section, especially those not familiar with video games and the primary field of research digital game studies.

Game developer / designer: A developer who works as part of a wider comprehensive team to create a video game by working in a range of roles, including design of characters, constructing puzzles or obstacles, using e-computer programming, and designing game environments in each level.

Gameplay: Typically defined as how you play, interact, and progress through the game from start to finish. However, gameplay, in truth, encompasses the entirety of the animative game experience, including in simultaneity its ludic and procedural elements, visual, performative, narrative, verbal, socio-cultural, aural, and many other communicative modes.

Ludic / proceduralism: The fundamental game mechanics and conventions of a video game system such as in-game rules and objectives, player agency, obstacles and challenges, character class systems, level design, and dialogue options, which are all tied to and manifest through gameplay.

Player: The primary participant or agent who both activates and interacts with the game text by performing the actions in concert with those from other human and / or AI (Artificial Intelligence) players, mastering the game rules, and the completion or failure of the game's goals or objectives and storyline missions, all of which comprise player agency.

Representation: A multimodal form of communication, which is the simultaneous integration and interaction between its multiple literacies and modes of communication and their meaning-making processes.

2   Gaming and Ethics through Visuality – an Opening Provocation

VIDEO 1   Gaming and ethics through visuality – an opening provocation. (See here.)

2.1   *Summary – Key Findings*

This video tackled several major discourses prevalent in the study of ethics within gaming through visuality with sound responses, by situating them in the context of the presenters' respective fields and concurrently the topic questions. These questions for re-iteration were:

–   How do you go about researching players' engagement with violence?
–   What are the ethical considerations when writing about games as history, and am I in danger of giving to much validity to accounts of the past that work in a ludic framework?

Consequently, an outcome from this discussion was that the particularity of representations in games on a visual level are increasingly congruent to and combining representational and procedural functions and codes or meanings in signifying and communicating a game's content, rule system, and immersive experiential play. Subsequently, each of the presenters' adoption of a ludic and representational frame respectively in their dialogue showed the potential for real-world ethics to comprise or be reproduced in the representational codes and functions of the game mediated by its ludic elements.

In discussing current approaches to how research conducts player engagement to violence, particular focus was given by the first presenter to how video games reproduce different types or activities of violence from their real-world occurrences and its outcome ramifications into entirely different modes and

codes of meaning and value when re-appropriated under a ludic framework. In referring to the first presenter's example of killing innocent pedestrians by driving, this act of reckless high-speed driving in the real-world is a disdainful and immoral act with severe life-threatening consequences, which can be motivated by malicious or nefarious intent on the part of the driver to cause harm or death. In games like *Grand Theft Auto IV* (*GTAIV*) by contrast, the design of their ludic codes and rules, as well as the vast physics of the game's world and inhabitants, replace typical road-code and safe-driving practices with different affordances. Examples include higher rates of vehicle crashes from collision due to vehicles in-game designed with faster speeds, and opportunities to drive on the other side of the road as well as footpaths and public areas. While these affordances would intensify the frequency of players hitting oncoming pedestrians, they are primarily a means of providing a range of ludic or strategic advantages to the player, including faster shortcuts to reach a target destination while avoiding traffic, and to keep tail on a chasing vehicle trying to escape from the player.

Therefore, the visual display of these violent acts by the player's driving skills invokes different emotive responses and stimulations not congruent to our real-world, one being comedic entertainment such as a player's inability to control a car and parodying high-speed car chases and stunts depicted in action films. However, I would like to further add that not all elements congruent to real-world dynamics are absolved in games. Using the driving example in *GTAIV* again, injuring or killing bystanders or pedestrians (whether accidently or not) alerts any nearby police officers to apprehend, kill, or give chase to the player if they refuse to comply. Additionally, the increasing number of law enforcement and tactical resources involved by the game's system is defined by the severity of the player committing further crimes, such as killing pursuing police officers. These situations then demonstrate how certain real-world ethics can still be implemented in game design not only to enhance a player's immersion of its game world but also provide additional game mechanics that simulate some of the real-life consequences to ethical dilemmas caused by the player's actions, while limiting players taking excessive advantage of these ludic affordances.

This emphasis on distinguishing the ludic qualities and functions of player exposure or engagement to violence by using methods that measure participants as actual players having direct involvement in violent engagements within the game is imperative to better understanding and separating the ethics surrounding the visuality of violence within game representation from its real-world implications. Using participants as passive viewers of recorded snippets of game footage without any extensive context or background about

the game given to participants only creates a superficial detached picture of the visuality of violence expressed in games. This is because it usually results in participants exclusively relying on and reinforcing their own real-world ethics and moral values when examining player violence as a distant audience viewer rather than as an interactive, immersive player. Therefore, the presence of a ludic dimension nuances or differentiates player violence and its visuality in games from its real-world context. Principally, by providing temporary suspension of ethical values and moral conduct players routinely follow in their real everyday life for full immersion and thrill in the ludic and narrative concerns of the game and its system of rules, including activities and storylines that contain or engage players in violent activity. However, as the first presenter emphasized, the amount and level of visual exposure to mature themes and violence in games by both players and general viewers is still moderated by the input of age censorship certification and consumer policies that restricts younger age groups from directly accessing and experiencing game content and themes suitable for only older teenagers or young adults.

Contrastly, discussion into the ethical paradigms of representing and studying (historical) games as history, and subsequently games' extent of validity in expressing past accounts within a ludic framework, highlighted the potentiality of real-world dynamics infused into the player's visual and ludic immersions of the game's respective historical setting. Dynamics that is re-constructive of or emblematic to that particular past. The second presenter highlighted the neccessity for game developers to inform players if there are, and what, approaches or methods they use to engage in researching and representing their history, and the intentions or reasons to choose history as a prime setting for their game besides its value as a form of entertainment. With respect to historical gaming, these are important aspects when examining the visual nature of historical game design and gameplay. The type of methods and level of commitment to research undertaken by game developers in designing historical representations, as well as the primary modality of historical expression and its conventions chosen, help both scholars and educators to distinguish more clearly choices by game developers to integrate or omit ethical and / or unethical content and experiences as imperative for historical immersion and education if they allude or correspond to and contextualize past real-world occurences or phenomena pertaining to the game's respective history.

For most historical game releases until recent years, developers approaching history primarily as a form of entertainment for players to enter a world aesthetically, spatially, and materially distinct positions their game's respective historical representations as visually authentic to, but by no means serious documentations or commentaries on, the society, events, traditions, and

other minutiae of their real-world counterparts. Thus, the ethicality of these games' visual representations within player immersion expressing sensitive themes like violence mainly attune to ludic concerns. However, the emergence of recent historical games like *Kingdom Come: Delievrance* (*KCD*) discussed by the second presenter illustrate a different model, wherein ethical sensitivities that emerged in player's interactions with the game's historical world through their gameplay activity closely correspond to a number of real-world ethics, dilemnas, and beliefs of that past.

In the case of *KCD*, these elements were specifically those pertaining to its developer Warhorse Studios' serious attention to researching and documenting its localized Medieval Czech history. Principally, conveying past historical experiences and events relating to either the Rattay-Sasau region and society during the Bohemian Civil War of 1402–1403 between the brothers King Wenceslas IV (c. 1361–1419) and King Sigismund (c. 1368–1437), or phenomena, trends, and activities prevalent in late Medieval Bohemia (modern-day Czech Republic) before and during the civil war. By the studio's extensive combined use of mutiple methods in scholarly historical research and representation similary used by historians and historical experts, as well as developing distinct methods of research for gaming via game design practices, the player's encounters with and involment in ethical dilemmas, sensitive topics, and violent conflicts engaged in and convey the visuality of this late Medieval history re-constructed in *KCD*. Notable examples include: the real historical siege and massacre of Silver Skalitz (Czech – Stříbrná Skalice) and its subsequnt socio-political impacts on the region such as the Skalitz refugee crisis; partaking in late Medieval combat in the German tradition; and clerical impropriety and abuses during late Medieval Bohemia remediated in a storyline quest called 'Mysterious Ways'.

This video discussion and its findings only touches the surface of exploring and employing ethics in gaming, and indeed more substantial work is vital to expanding this network of research. Nonetheless, these presenters' dialogues have demonstrated an exciting opportunity to establish more collaborative cross-disciplinary discourses and approaches to researching, analyzing, and disseminating the various intricacies of ethics in the visuality of gaming and their intersecting modes of ludic, rule-based, and representational expression. With respect to its applications in pedagogy or education, there is potential development for designing curriculum programmes or courses specific to teaching students, as future academics and / or game designers, in certain areas. Including ethics as a distinct tool or mode of developing game systems and content, the ability to identify and distinguish game content as ethical or unethical, and learning about policies and procedures of avoiding potential ethical dilemmas when obtaining consent to and consulting with experts on

the access, integration, and display of content, aretefacts, and art derived from cultural, indigenous, and / or religious backgrounds. These potential avenues of expanding future research into ethics within the wider game development practices are also summarized in the following closing video, which serves as a conclusion to both the main video and this article.

3 Gaming and Ethics through Visuality – a Closure Statement
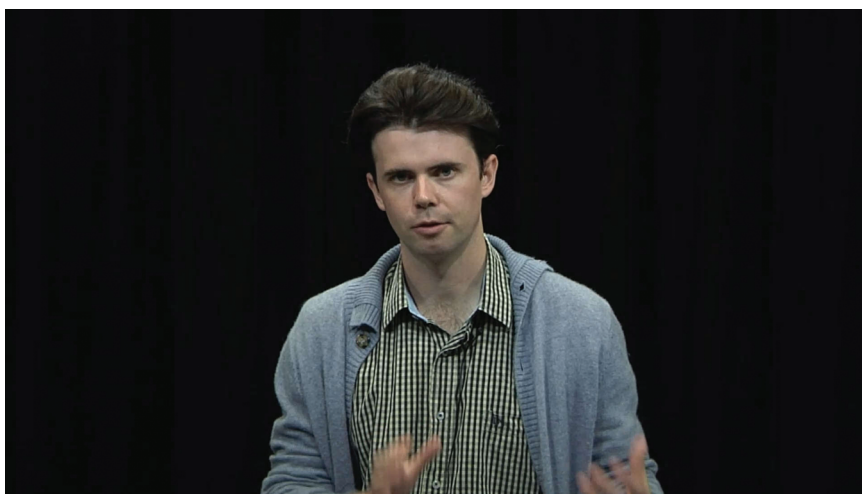
VIDEO 2   Gaming and ethics through visuality – a closure statement. (See here.)

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