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Though academics have long sought to connect ethics and popular culture, few authors have taken as broad and detailed an approach to connecting ethics with the medium of the computer game as Miguel Sicart in his recent *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009). With research firmly grounded in the ontological identity theories of Badiou and Becker, the phenomenological theories of Heidegger and Gadamer, the virtue ethics of Aristotle, and the informational ethical theories of Floridi and Sanders, Sicart seeks to form an extensive framework for the critical examination of games as inherently ethical artifacts that implore – either successfully or unsuccessfully – the player to craft a unique subjectivity that is inextricably intertwined with the rules of gameplay, the pervasive community, and one’s real-life moral position in society. Both the inscribed ethics of game design and the player’s potential reflection thereupon result in what Sicart calls “the ethics of the game as a system of rules that creates a game world, which is experienced by a moral agent with creative and participatory capacities, and who develops through time the capacity to apply a set of player virtues” (p.226).

Although it is described as a “synergy between moral philosophy and computer game studies,” Sicart’s investigative text is obviously designed with students of the latter in mind (p.5). A basic familiarity with game genres and terminology is assumed, and Sicart’s analyses of games such as *Manhunt* and *World of Warcraft* are highly approachable regardless of one’s previous exposure to complex philosophical theories. Sicart engages in a certain amount of rigid moral prescription, but only to better describe how ethical games may represent and even affect the moral conscience of designers, game communities, and the individual player, who is hardly a blank slate. Indeed, Sicart takes care to remind the reader early on that no person exists in a moral vacuum: “a fundamental part of the process of developing our moral understanding of games is belonging to a game community, experiencing the presence of and interacting with other ethical beings who play computer games” (p.9).

The structure of the book is largely dissertational; specific case studies of ethics applied to games are foregrounded in both a literature review and discussion of philosophical methodology. Sicart’s literature review places his text among other works of ontological and ethical game research, referring to seminal books in the discipline of game studies as well as other texts written by famed game designers. However, Sicart moves deftly to a more intricate discussion of the ethical theories underlying his subsequent game analyses. He employs two primary methods for exploring the ethics of computer games: the aforementioned theories of virtue ethics and information ethics. Sicart uses virtue ethics to describe a “ludic hermeneutic circle” by which the player-subject is first conditioned by the gameplay rules, is then given the opportunity to reflect his/her moral relationship to these rules (e.g., their

affordances and limitations), and then employs his/her or the game community's "ludic phronesis," a kind of ethical good sense, to construct experiential meaning from the game object (p.116-127). With regard to information ethics, Sicart fashions an interrelated network, or "infosphere," in which informational agents act upon each other to shape the ethical experience of a game system or "informational environment" (p.131-134). In this infosphere, players play the part of plugged-in informational being, a being responsive to other players, and "*homo-poeticus*," or a co-creator of values and ethical behavior (p.134).

Sicart does not go so far as to suggest that playing games on the whole is a "good" or "bad" enterprise, but rather that specific games can enrich or undermine the moral experience of a player and/or game community by the very nature of their design and implementation, and that this is in and of itself an ethical act. Perhaps one of the few limitations of his book is that Sicart does not go into great depth as to how such ethics may or may not be manifest with regard to specific player and designer characteristics (and this is reasonable given the brevity and aim of the text). He does, however, allude to a few: "...ideally, all these virtues should be present in the ethically good player: sense of achievement, explorative curiosity, a socializing nature, and balanced aggression" (p.97). For Sicart, the "virtuous" player seems to be one who is both willingly bound by the rules of the game and actively (or even socially) reflective upon the limitations or implications of those rules.

Much of the onus, then, rests upon the game design to which the virtuous player is responsive, and Sicart takes a handful of games to task for how certain aspects of their gameplay can be deemed "unethical." For example, Sicart faults *Bioshock* for offering an ethically flimsy choice between saving or destroying the game's Little Sisters when both choices result in similar gameplay results. He goes on to decry *World of Warcraft's* honor system, a much-abused gameplay update that resulted in morally appropriate community backlash but little recourse for the community to act morally within the game itself.

Sicart suggests two possible ways for game designers to appropriately address ethics in their games beyond shallow moral gimmickry: "open" and "closed" ethical systems. Open ethical games are those that afford the player ethically creative choices and react accordingly (p.214). Closed systems, which provide the player with preset moral values, come in "subtracting" and "mirroring" varieties: Subtracting ethics allows players to "create their values according to what the game suggests" while subsequently not addressing those values directly, whereas mirroring ethics, such as those found in the game *Manhunt*, creates an explicitly self-aware value system that forces players to reflect on the differences between the ethical charge of the gameplay and one's own values (p.215-217).

While it is often labored with intentional repetition – uncharacteristic of a brief, mostly theoretical text – *The Ethics of Computer Games* is an illuminating thought-experiment that challenges its readers to consider how game designer, player, and game community work together to create distinctly ethical objects and experiences. More importantly, it is a work that challenges the next generation of game designers to think critically about the ethical values conveyed by certain designs. Sicart's concepts of open and closed ethical systems in particular are useful terms for

thinking about the often untapped rhetorical power of video games to channel and reflect the ethical interests and virtues of the culture in which they exist.

References

Sicart, M. (2009) *The Ethics of Computer Games*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.