



**THE ETHICS OF
COMPUTER
GAMES**

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3 Players as Moral Beings

Heraclitus wrote “*ethos anthropoi daimon*”—character is fate, or the design philosophy behind *Grand Theft Auto IV*.¹

Niko Bellic just wants to begin anew, to leave behind the memories of war, the crimes, the ghosts of his past. Liberty City promises the American dream, a path to comfort and success, a clean slate from where the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses can prosper and fulfill their dreams. Niko Bellic arrives in Liberty City desiring nothing more than peace and prosperity, and the promised land with no past.

The reality, though, is quite different. Niko will soon be involved with shady characters, criminals at the brutal base of the mafia ranks. There are no jobs for Niko beyond those where who he was and what he did are significant assets. Niko is driven back to his past, to violence and crime as the only way—not to prosper, but to survive. In the world of *Grand Theft Auto*, there is no redemption, and character is fate.

Grand Theft Auto IV is an extremely compelling ethical game experience. Players control Niko Bellic, a Serbian war veteran in search of the American dream in Liberty City. Niko is presented as an affable, sarcastic, tough-but-tender man whose dreams are often in confrontation with reality. Players hear him complain about his past and about the dark side of violence and crime, and dream about how he would like to leave all that behind and move on. Niko just wants to be a better man.

Yet the game in which we play him is a gritty take on urban criminality, comparable with *Goodfellas* or *Mean Streets*: contemporary tales of violent men trapped in their own fates. Niko claims he wants to rebel against his past, but his character, as the game evolves, drives his fate: *Grand Theft Auto IV* is a violent, merciless dystopian tale about the American dream.

There are many aspects of *Grand Theft Auto IV* that are interesting from an ethical perspective, but I will single out one that reveals the importance of players in the ethical experience of a computer game. When playing *Grand Theft Auto IV*, we are presented with noninteractive dialogues in which the character expresses his dislike for the violent downward spiral of crimes he is trapped in since his arrival in Liberty City.

Grand Theft Auto IV is ethically relevant because of its sense of player responsibility. From the outset, we know that Niko despises the man he was and wants to begin anew. But as players, we are given the task of completing these criminal missions and fulfilling the fate of Niko Bellic. *Grand Theft Auto IV* is built around the fundamental tension between a character who does not want more violence, and a player who is commanded to play this violence. This is a tension that takes place between the fiction of the game and the actions afforded to players, its gameplay. There are other ways to play *Grand Theft Auto IV*, though. There are non-violent, noncriminal missions that still allow for the enjoyment of the game world. But if we want to really play *Grand Theft Auto IV*, we need to become criminals. It is our responsibility to make that choice. Like any tragic hero, Niko Bellic is controlled by forces more powerful than himself: fate, gods, or players.

Grand Theft Auto IV is, among other things, a contemporary classical tragedy, a game experience built around ethos and daimon, values and destiny. *Grand Theft Auto IV* is a game about urban and cultural exploration but, more fundamentally, is an exploration of the meaning of being a player: what are the consequences of our actions? What are our values, as players and as human beings? All these questions will be answered in this chapter, in which I define the player as an ethical agent.

This is a key concept in the general argument of this book. I am advocating for a player that is morally aware and capable of reflecting upon the nature of her acts within the game world. This reflective capacity goes beyond the focus on goals and objectives, and effectively acts as a moral reasoning tool. As players we are moral beings, and our actions within a game are evaluated precisely from our nature as moral players. I will present in some detail the philosophical arguments behind these ideas, since it is a crucial cornerstone for the understanding of the ethics of computer games.

subjectivization

I have already reasoned that **games are processes**. In this same line, it is possible to understand **the act of playing a computer game as an act of subjectivization**, a process that creates a subject connected to the rules of the game.² Nevertheless, this player-subject is not confined to the borders of the game. The player is a reflective subjectivity who comes into the game with her own cultural history as player, together with her cultural and embodied presence. Becoming a player is the act of creating balance between fidelity to the game situation and the fact that the player as subject is only a subset of a cultural and moral being who voluntarily plays, bringing to the game a presence of culture and values that also affect the experience.

In this chapter I will explore this process of becoming a player. To this end I will again take up the concept of game as object, framing it within Michel Foucault's theories about power.³ These structures create a being, a subjectivity that can be explained using the theory of Alain Badiou,⁴ which has a certain tradition in the field of computer game research.⁵ Barbara Becker's theories on the body-subject will lead a methodological turn toward a phenomenological and hermeneutical understanding of the player. This turn will set the player as subject into perspective, providing an approach for understanding the player as a moral being.⁶ This will be the conclusion of this chapter: because the player is a subject that exists in a game situation, and because this subject operates by interpreting this situation both within the ethics and culture of her experience as player and as a human being, the player as subject can legitimately be considered a moral being. A computer game is then a moral object that is actualized by a moral agent.

If there is an argument I believe is crucial for the understanding of the ethics of computer games, it is the consideration of players as ethical beings. **As players we reflect critically on what we do in a game world during a game experience, and it is this capacity that can turn the ethical concerns traditionally raised by computer games into interesting, meaningful tools for creative expression, a new means for cultural richness.**



3.1 Becoming a Player

I turn on my PlayStation 2 console. I insert a game disc: *Rez*.⁷ The game starts. I am immersed in a world of lights, colors, and sounds. I don't have

instructions on what to do, or about this world. I start playing, hitting the buttons of the controller, and quickly I find out the rules and mechanics: *Rez* plays essentially like *Space Invaders*, only the experience is very different, based on the beats and rhythms I am creating by shooting down enemies and how those beats affect the evolving background music and the display of colors on-screen. I also know what I cannot do: there is a world surrounding my avatar that I cannot explore, and I cannot just stay immobile, staring. For me to enjoy this experience, I have to play according to those rules I have deduced, because then and only then does *Rez* give away its secrets, the pleasure of its ludic experience.

The situation I have just described happens in any linear computer game.⁸ Playing a computer game is an act composed of multiple actions, some physical, some psychological, some cultural, some ethical, and some aesthetic. In the act of playing a game there are a series of operators that condition the kind of process or experience we are facing as players: it is not the same to play a massively multiplayer online role-playing game like *Everquest*⁹ as it is to play a simulated massively multiplayer online role-playing game like the *.hack* series.¹⁰

If we want to understand the complexity of computer game ethics, we need to understand players as moral agents and how they relate their ethics to those of the game as object. **To understand the ethics of video games, we need to consider the game as object, the game as experience, and the process linking both.**

Let's return to both the material and the experiential aspects of the act of playing *Rez*: it begins with a physical manipulation of an object, the game disk. Once the game as object is initiated, it becomes an experience: by hitting the buttons I am actualizing *Rez* as the computer game it is, beyond its nature as object. I do so by discovering the rules—as a cultural being that has been playing games since a very early age, I have developed a repertoire that allows me to identify patterns of rules and apply them. Once I figured out the rules, I understood what my actions in the game were supposed to be and acted upon that knowledge. I did so because playing a game is acknowledging and obeying the rules. If I don't follow the rules, or if I never understood them, the game would not take place as a successful experience. Furthermore, the game is coded to punish me by not letting me play if I am not subdued by

its rules. If I want to be a player, I have to understand the rules and play by them.¹¹

In sports there are penalties against those who do not follow the rules, and in online computer games there are often bans for those who use software or hardware designed to obtain unfair advantages. Games are designed with tools to enforce the following of the rules, tools that are not only hardwired, but also to some extent lent to the players so that they can enforce their own set of values. An example of the tools for enforcing rule obedience would be the fact that if a player enters cheat codes in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, she is warned that perhaps the save files will be corrupted, and her progress will not be recorded. On the other hand, a game like *A Tale in the Desert*¹² actually enforces the community policing that is commonplace in MMORPGs, creating a society in which players can be elected to rule over the world, enforcing policies and punishments. While these two examples represent extremes, they show the importance of the game design as an enforcer of rules, and also the importance of players when enforcing the codes of practice and behavior within a game, according to their previous gaming experience.

I am here referring to the set of knowledge that players have acquired by playing games, be they digital or not. This knowledge helps players build patterns when facing a new game, deciphering the rules and the modes of interaction and allowing us to learn to play new games with relative ease.¹³ The repertoire also works on an ethical level: the more computer games we have played, the more we can identify, and in case of their absence, demand, those ethical constraints the design may pose.

The example of my personal experience with *Rez* is that of a successful game played by a player with a rather extensive repertoire. On the other hand, a player with less experience with computer games, when first playing a game like *Burnout 3*, will most likely hesitate to ram and smash other cars, even though that is the sanctioned-by-design way of achieving the goals. This happens because the *Burnout* series plays with the convention of car/racing games, in which crashing and destroying your avatar/car is generally punished. Because the conventions that we use to form our repertoire are reversed, the first experience of *Burnout* is rather surprising.

The repertoire shows that players are beings who come to a game experience with the cultural baggage of previous game experience. This implies that players with a certain experience will have a different subject

configuration than newbies, which leads me to formulate the following hypothesis: players build their ethical subjectivity—their capacity to ethically interpret the content and experience of a game—only by being players, by virtue of experience. Playing, then, develops players' ethics through the development of their player repertoires and their virtues,¹⁴ alone and as a part of a player community.

I have argued previously that **games can be defined ontologically as ergodic systems of rules.** A game is ergodic because it has built-in rewards and punishments for successfully experiencing it. These procedures are those game rules that can be applied to evaluating the players' experience. For example, the completion percentages in games like *Grand Theft Auto IV* or *Burnout 3*, which mark how much of the game the player has completed, are used to measure success in overcoming the games' challenges. Even the high scores in arcade games operate in a similar fashion: they are only given after the players have lost or completed the game, and serve as a numeric evaluation of how successful the game experience has been.

Within this perspective, it is plausible to say that when a player is immersed in this system, her behavior is shaped by the game system, its rules and mechanics. A player will act within the rules that govern the game world, which determine what is possible, impossible, and relevant or not within game experience. This is not to say that players always subordinate to or play by the rules: a cheater, for example, does not play by the rules, but can only be a cheater if she acknowledges the rules and explores their boundaries, as Suits has already pointed out.¹⁵ Any kind of courtesy or sportsmanship that might lead to gameplay that lets the weakest players win (such as when playing games with small children) is seen as not strictly obeying the rules, but those rules are still necessary for the behavior to exist. Rules create behaviors.

These rules have to be freely accepted and agreed upon by the players.¹⁶ It is only when these rules are accepted and acted upon by the player that the actuality of the game takes place. This transition operates by means of a power structure in the Foucaultian sense. There are three reasons why Foucault provides an interesting framework to describe the relations between players and the game: first, power and power structures in Foucault are devoid of any negative or positive conditioning, they merely exist. There is not any kind of value statement attached to

the ontological being of games as power structures. Second, power structures are prerequisites for the subject. Likewise, I will argue that the game as an object is a prerequisite for the being of the player. Finally, the later works of Foucault on ethics are strongly influenced by classical Greek ethics, and thus it correlates with my predominantly Aristotelian approach.¹⁷

Foucault invokes power in ways that distance him from most philosophers and political scientists. For him, there is power in the societies we live in, but it is not possible to consider it in isolation. Power has ceased to exist in an absolute way: it only exists in relations, operations, or structures between agents: "there is no such entity as power, with or without capital letter; global, massive or diffused; concentrated or distributed. Power exists only as exercised on other, only when it is put into action, even though, of course, it is inscribed in a field of sparse available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures."¹⁸ Power is manifested in the relations established among agents, but how does it manifest itself?

Power is a force of creation; it has generative attributes. Knowledge is created when agents are inserted in a power structure.¹⁹ What power does when establishing the relations between agents is to produce something that was not there before, and it does so by delimiting, plotting, and relating the possibilities and the actions of these agents. Thus power need not be a negative element or a source of subjective or collective stress, as many conflict theorists might have argued.²⁰ Power in this decentralized way is the cause of the creation of certain knowledge between the agents involved in a specific power structure: "what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered a productive network which runs through the whole social body."²¹ Furthermore, to exist as a networked structure between agents, power has to be freely accepted, acknowledged, and recognized by those agents: "Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides."²²

The productive being of power is twofold: power produces knowledge, and it also produces the subjects that make that power relation exist. By acknowledging the existence of a certain power relation between them,

agents are constituted as subjects related to the knowledge they are creating: “the individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces . . . the individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation.”²³ Power is a productive form of creating subjectivity. Those individuals who are freely involved in a power structure experience the productive nature of power by becoming subjects.

Given these premises, I will henceforth argue that **computer games are power structures. Power creates subjects, and so games create players. The process of experiencing a game and becoming a player needs to take into account how the nature of the game contributes to the creation of that subjectivity.** The game’s ontological nature initially defines the ontological position of its subjects, the players. That is, the game as ethical object establishes the starting point for the process of subjectivization that takes place in the act of playing a game. A player is then at least partially affected in her moral being by the game she is experiencing.

If a computer game is a power structure, then the players are subjects of that structure. When I played *Rez*, I deduced the rules using my experience as a player of other games, and then I became a player of that game. If I tried not to follow the rules of the game and refused to, for example, shoot at the nonplayer characters, then the game would “punish” me with a “game over” screen. But if I follow the instructions, I enjoy the designed ludic pleasures of *Rez*. Only because I acknowledge that there is a game with clear rules, and only because I voluntarily accept to play by those rules, the game *Rez* comes into being and so do I as a player.

Games create subjectivities because they operate as power structures. **Their ontology as objects starts a subjectivization process on their users that makes them become players of that game. This process, like any power structure, creates knowledge and values: the rules become knowledge, the player’s repertoire. In this sense, the game provides a context and a set of principles that, when accepted by the player, create a subjectivity.** The player is also aware of her state of being as a player. In order for the player to remain engaged in the game, successfully enjoying the freely accepted power relations, those relations need to be preserved,

and for them to be preserved, the player needs to make the game situation prevail. The player is not only created by being attached to the game, she is also the keeper of its existence, since the absence of players means the absence of game. Thus it is possible to argue that players are responsible for the game's well-being. For instance, it is up to players of online worlds to create and enhance the social rules that govern the games. It is players who, to the extent the developers allow them, create behavior policies and control other players' behavior, leaving the developers the role of refereeing.²⁴ **Active behavior by the player-subject is relevant because players are cultural beings that share a game culture in a game community.**

There is another element that needs to be taken into consideration: for a power structure to exist, it has to be not only accepted, but also needs to be perceived as such. In the later works of Michel Foucault, his ethical theory took a drastic turn toward a more classical Greek approach, returning to a kind of communitarian ethics.²⁵ Acknowledging the importance of the community in the constitution of the game as a power structure implies extending the ethical responsibility for the game's well-being to that player community. Furthermore, it also implies that the player-subject should be ethically conscious of the nature of the power structure in which she is immersed. But what does it mean to be a player, or to become a player? To answer this question, I will use the works of French philosopher Alain Badiou, especially his work *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*,²⁶ where he links his theory of the becoming of the subject to ethics.²⁷

But before delving into philosophy again, let's briefly return to computer games. *Sim City*²⁸ provides the user with a simulation of a city that the player has to create, expand, and develop over time. To do so, the player is presented with a set of simulation tools ranging from construction sets to policy makers, comprising the core of *Sim City's* gameplay. Playing this simulation implies accepting the tools that we are given as system users. If we want to build a city that evolves successfully, given the parameters for success and failure built into the system, we need to accept those policies and apply them. ***Sim City* is a North American computer game: its modeled economic systems and policies are those closer to the liberal market economy of the United States.**²⁹ The example I will use is taxes: for the city to have inhabitants, taxes have to be rather low, below that of

countries in Europe with different economic and cultural perceptions of the public good.

As a citizen, and as a cultural being, I am European, and I believe in a model of society that values the community in terms of its economic policies. Nevertheless, when playing *Sim City*, I do not hesitate to use policies with which in principle I do not agree. I do so because otherwise the game would be harder, perhaps impossible to play. When I engage in the act of playing *Sim City*, some of the cultural and political elements of my subjectivity are modified in order to achieve a successful experience of the game. Even some of the elements that are tied deeply to the values that I hold as a cultural being are set aside in seeking the ludic experience that *Sim City* promises.

But let's move beyond political ideas and serious games. The computer game *Vib-Ribbon*³⁰ uses its software to create challenges from the output of the game's music. When playing that game I am presented with a set of tasks, challenges, and rules regarding how I can play that music: *Vib-Ribbon* is a bizarre platform game where the levels and their challenges are generated based on the input of music loaded from a CD. As a player of *Vib-Ribbon*, I listen to the music in a rather different way: instead of understanding its formal beauty, I perceive it as a set of challenges that I need to fulfill in order to enjoy the ludic experience. The boundaries of the ludic experience are expanded, showing that the player is actually an embodied subjectivity beyond the graphical representation of the game world because, much like when playing a real instrument, players *play* the music, both in

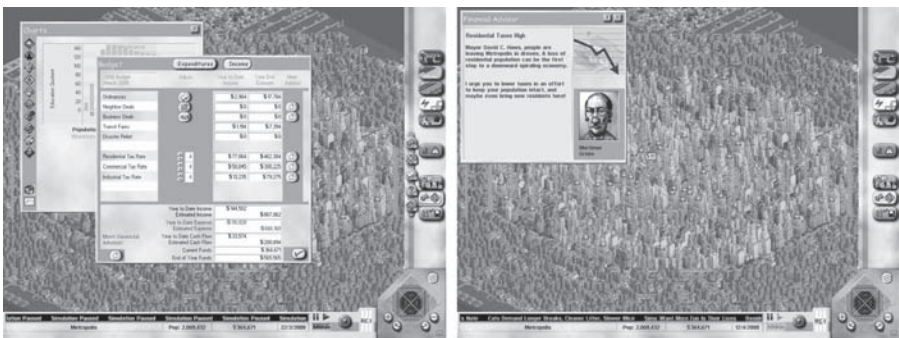


Figure 3.1
Sim City: No Welfare State, Thanks!

the productive sense and in the ludic meaning of the word. *Vib-Ribbon* is an abstract game, almost a conceptual piece of art. To play it we need to consider only our rhythmical sense, which is a highly embodied sense: we play this game with our full body. Because we are embodied, we can understand that the rhythm of the music becomes a physical challenge in which we need to prevail if we want to succeed in the game; the music becomes rewarded actions that make sense and take place in our experience of the game. The game thus creates a subjectivity that embodies the values given to rhythmical mastery.

In this context, I argue that a player becomes a player-subject upon entering the game experience, when actualizing the potentiality of the game into a concrete experience. A player can then be defined as the subject that comes into being when playing a game. It is the mutual existence of the game and the player that makes the game's potentiality become actuality. The player is the subject/agent that, when experiencing a given game, comes into being; and similarly, it is only when there is an agent experiencing the game that we can consider it a process and not an object.

What are the conditions and characteristics of the player as a subject? In Badiou's philosophy, the subject comes into being when exposed to a process of truth, to an *événement*, (henceforth an "event").³¹ An event is an act of absolute truth that shatters the established knowledge, a situation that calls for a compromise: "the event is nothing—just a sort of illumination—but the consequences of an event within a situation are always very different and it is true that there are major consequences, long sequences of truth, or brief sequences."³² An event is also an experience of delimited boundaries with a series of imperatives that have to be assumed in order to become a subject. A game will be here considered operationally similar to an event: a delimited system with prerequisites that qualify their users to become subjects.

A game operates as an event that creates a subject, a subject that needs to be faithful to the event's constitution to come into being.³³ The constitution of the game as event is its ontology: the rules of the game and its game world. Faithful to those principles, the player as subject is created. Not being faithful to the rules implies not being faithful to the event, and therefore losing the ontological status of subject. When playing *Rez*, I have to be faithful to the game as experience if I want to enjoy the ludic process

in which I am immersed. The subject created by *Rez* is a subject faithful to the harmonic interactive rhythms and colors triggered in the ludic act: it is in the fidelity to the game as an event where *Rez* becomes a successful synesthetic experience. Likewise, it is in the fidelity to the universe, economy, and highly competitive and associational society we are presented in *Eve Online*³⁴ where the player finds the pleasure of the ludic experience, where the player and the game come into full, actual being. *Eve Online* is a game for dedicated players: breaking that convention—not showing up or being less interested in all the trading or piracy rules and possibilities that the game offers—means a breakdown of the category of subject that arises from playing the game, which means the effective end of the player's subjectivity.

Games as events require commitment. We have all met players that did not take a game seriously and, by doing so, enraged other players. And cheaters are considered, in computer games, sports, and casual games, the worst kind of individuals one can meet.³⁵ This is because they do not commit to the rules of the game and the game experience. Being a player is an act of commitment to the rules, to the social community, and to the game experience.

A subject is, in Badiou, "the bearer . . . of a fidelity," a subject "in no way pre-exists the process . . . he is absolutely nonexistent in the situation 'before' the event."³⁶ The player does not exist before playing a game; that is, the player of *Vib-Ribbon* does not exist before playing *Vib-Ribbon* for the first time. But she certainly does during and after—carrying through the truth or knowledge from one process of subjectivization to the next, thus establishing the cultural tradition and the repertoire allowing players to deduce rules when exposed to a game for the first time. Nevertheless, this subjectivity presents a series of conditions and characteristics that are specific and critical for the understanding of the ethics of computer games. For example: even if we are not playing a game, we can participate in the player community as *players*, like in a fan convention or an online forum. Furthermore, our mood and our ideas can be altered by a game experience. We can be angry because we have lost in *Counter-Strike* and we are punished by having to witness the game in spectator mode—we are not *actively* playing, but we are still players.

The subject created in the act of playing becomes a part of the multisubjectivity of the agent that experienced the game. Thus, it is possible to

relate to the game community without playing a game. Because a process of subjectivization is a strong ontological procedure, as long as there is a hint of the event that created that subject, the subject will come forth. For example: when I started playing *World of Warcraft* I created the subject that plays this game, faithful to the experience it provides. That subject plays *World of Warcraft* within the parameters that make the game an event that creates a subjectivity, but I also reflect upon my gameplay and interact with the community, thinking about the situation according to the game. The fidelity to the game extends to all those situations that can be thought of and/or acted in by the subject of the game. When participating in the community discussions I am also a subject true to the event of the game, even though I am not immersed in actual gameplay.

The player-subject is not limited to the game experience once it is created: it operates as a relevant subjectivity in every situation in which the subject can be successfully faithful to the game. The game as actuality—the experience of the game—is larger than the mere gameplay sessions: the game is every situation in which the subject that is created is operational. What this implies is that there is a connection between the player-subject and the other subjectivities present in our daily life. Being a player is just a subset of our being as multiple subjects, and what I am describing here are the necessary conditions for this specific subjectivity, the player, to arise. In this sense, the player-subject is not an isolated moral agent but an agent in constant dialogue, evaluation, and interpretation within the experience of the game situated in a world and in a culture.

Summarizing, the player as subject exists when it is operational, when the event it is faithful to is true. And that need not happen exclusively in the phenomenological experience of the game; it can happen outside the game as well, when the subject sports claims that are true for the game, but not true for any other world. For instance, if I talk about the importance of urban representation in *Half-Life 2*, I am speaking as a player-subject, because the statements and the frame of mind I am using are true for the game *Half-Life 2*. This extends the influence of games, and of their ethics, beyond the act of playing and into the realm of cultural behavior.

What are the ethical foundations of this subject? They are the ethics of truth, the ethics of aspiring to good, which Badiou identifies as the ethics

of keeping faithful to the event. What is interesting about Badiou's ethics is that they presuppose that the subject that comes into being in the event is an ethical being, a being committed to doing good, where good is the fidelity to the event. The subject that comes into being is a moral agent, and is entitled to moral judgment within the event, and to apply the principles of the event.

This does not mean that players are mechanical beings that mindlessly follow instructions. In *Quake*³⁷, players found that if they took the rocket launcher, aimed it down, jumped, and then shot, they could jump higher, thus obtaining certain tactical advantages. Some could argue that these players were not being faithful to the game because their bending of the rules seems to contradict obedience to these rules. Nevertheless, the "rocket jump" is a part of playing *Quake*, another strategy. I will say, then, that the fidelity of the player is present as long as her actions are coherent with the game rules and the game world, and do not contradict a rule.³⁸ Rocket jumping in *Quake*, then, is an action that is both coherent in the game world and according to the rules of the game, and it does not contradict any rule. As such it is faithful to the game as event.

On the other hand, the reaction to cheaters shows the ethical nature of players as subjects. Player communities and game designers tend to see this type of player as a source of discomfort, and they stress that cheating has to be avoided and punished. Cheaters are perceived as such because they are subjects unfaithful to the event. A player of *Counter-Strike* who uses a software cheat to be able to see through walls, granting her the maximum benefit when playing against other players, is not being faithful to the event that created that subjectivity. A cheater perceives the conditions of the game not as an event, not as a ludic experience, but as something that can be modified with or without considering the possible harm caused to other players—they do not think about the situation according to the event. They break the game experience by refusing to become a subject and, instead, pervert those conditions by which all the other members of the community are constituted as subjects.

Summarizing, a player is the subjectivity that is created from the conditions of a game experience, and who is a part of a larger culture and community of players who are also subjects. The player-subject exists in fidelity to the game, to its rules and the experience that it creates, a fidelity that is related to the in-game coherence of her actions and choices and the

noncontradiction of any game rule. This implies that the player will act in ways that preserve the fidelity of this event, thus becoming a moral being, capable of reasoning about the ethics of the process that created it as a subject.

I have used Foucault's concept of power structures to establish the ontology of the game as moral object and the player as subjectivity, stating that the actuality of computer games operates as a productive network of power that generates a subjectivization process. I analyzed that process of subjectivization with Alain Badiou's philosophy of the subject, which led me to conclude that players as beings are subjects created by and related to the game as a productive event; subjects need to be faithful to the game in order to become players. Badiou's approach also allowed the introduction of the player as an ethical subject, as the subject ought to have the inclination to preserve her subjectivity within the event.

Nevertheless, there are some objections to these theories that need to be fleshed out before constructing a comprehensive approach to the ethics of computer games. The main objection to Foucault is that his theory of power does not allow for any kind of ethical research that does not fall into relativism. Foucault advocates the end of the modern conception of the subject as a unified entity. Instead, the subject is a multiplicity of subjects who occur when inserted into different power relations. Thus it is not possible to state any ethical approach that might contribute to the understanding of the relevant ethical questions in a general way.

In this book I am not advocating such a relativist perspective. From the very outset, I have stated that computer games have ethics that can be analyzed and determined. Furthermore, I argue that computer game players are ethical beings who use a series of ethical tools in their experience of games. I argue for the consideration of the ethics of computer games as a set of beliefs, values, and practices that can be understood in a rather general, while not totally universal, way. The ethical analysis I am presenting here will be flexible enough to approach ethical dilemmas in computer games across cultures, and thus Foucault's moral relativism is discarded.

Alain Badiou's work, on the other hand, operates as a very functional explanation of the process of becoming a player within the set of rules and practices of the game. Nevertheless, when it comes to ethics, Badiou's work

has to be handled carefully since in the original work the subject that takes place in the event is a moral subject, a subject to and for ethics, but whatever is outside the event is “the human animal”;³⁹ that is, beyond the categories of good and evil. For Badiou, ethics only exist in the act of the event, while without an event there are no moral dimensions to be discussed.

This radical approach to ethics poses a series of problems when applied to computer games. Essentially, it would be odd to justify an ethical approach that only considers the subject ethically accountable and responsible when it takes place in an event. Players are subjects, but they are not detached from the larger set of subjectivities that constitute who we are. That is, outside the game as event we are also moral beings. Just this caveat would not be enough to justify these lines shaping my use of Badiou’s philosophy. But it also seems to be out of order to understand the subjectivity of the player as totally detached from the moral subject we are as cultural and embodied beings. The fact that we play when immersed in a ludic experience does not mean that the created subject is impermeable to the ethical presence of the larger ethical being of which we are a part.

For example, when playing the first-person shooter *Perfect Dark*⁴⁰ for the Nintendo 64, I discovered that I could shoot the guards I knocked out, thus preventing them from waking up and catching me by surprise. On one occasion I used a scoped handgun to kill the lying soldier. Once I shot him “dead,” the digital body crudely simulated the muscular spasms of a body when killed in this way, as popularized by cinema. That simulation disgusted me to the extent that I quit the game, and I never repeated such acts again when playing *Perfect Dark*. If the player is subject to the ethics that take place within the event of playing, why did I react like this? Why is a game like *Custer’s Revenge*⁴¹ considered an aberration? Why do some users of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*⁴² react so violently in the discussion forums against this game?⁴³

When playing a game, the player creates a set of ethical values inspired by the game, derived from the game culture and community, and strictly applicable within the game situation, including participation in the different layers of involvement of the game community. But the player is also limited by the fact that she is a culturally embodied being, and her own ethical values and practices cannot be easily suspended. In more Aristotelian words, we cannot avoid being moral animals.

Therefore, to understand the possibilities that reflecting about the player as subject gives to the ethical research of computer games, I will now argue for an expansion of the notion of player as subject. To do so, I will use Barbara Becker's theories on embodiment to provide a first step for the analysis of the player as a moral subject.

3.2 The Player as Ethical Skin

The player is a subjectivity that arises when faithful to the event of a game. But as I have mentioned, this approach does not take into consideration the ethical subject *outside* the event. The player-subject would be detached from her culture and her embodied presence, and as such the ethical risks of playing games would be obvious. The player-subject is only a subset of the larger cultural beings we are—we cannot avoid bringing into the game experience as much as we take away from the game experience. I will now propose a way of understanding the relations between the player-subject, its process of generation, and the larger cultural and embodied set of subjects that we all are. To do so, I will draw on the work of philosopher Barbara Becker,⁴⁴ especially her phenomenological understanding of the body-subject as a relevant experiential/phenomenological being.

My central argument is that the agent of the ludic experience, the player, is not an animal beyond morality. Players are subjects that take place when ethical beings play a game; when there is a moral being who voluntarily and freely engages in the experience of the game. We must take this into consideration when analyzing the ethics of the player; otherwise, we are giving absolute moral agency to a subject that takes place only within the boundaries of a game experience. We need to clarify how the player-subject comes into being within the experience of a game by a moral being, and how these subjectivities correlate.

For Becker, the issue of the body in cyberspace has to be taken into consideration from a phenomenological perspective, which yields an interesting result: "we find the concept of the double existence of the body. It is simultaneously an external being that can be experienced and an internal being that experiences other, and thus it is ambiguous, somewhere between a material object and a pure consciousness, an intermediate phenomenon between nature and culture."⁴⁵ This body with double existence

is what Becker calls the “body-subject.” The body-subject, at the same time perceived and perceiving, experiencing and experienced, is not self-generated, but created both intrinsically and extrinsically by the experience of the world: “the body-subject therefore does not only depend on individual self-creation and self-determination, but is also governed by the strange and unavailable laws of the world.”⁴⁶

The body-subject takes place in the world of experiences, both passively and actively, by means of the act of touching, “simultaneously giving and perceiving meaning.”⁴⁷ To touch is to instantiate this body-subject, to give it a conscious place in the experience from which it comes: “touch is never the product solely of a controlling intentional subject. It can only be understood at the point of its emergence.”⁴⁸ By touching, we constitute ourselves as body-subjects in the world we experience, but doing so is not to be free of those affordances of the experienced world, affordances that can be in human agents or in objects: “touch is an act of responsivity, a resonance, because we are always answering to the atmosphere and the affordances given by the objects or persons with which we are in touch.”⁴⁹ Becker’s phenomenology returns the physical body to a place in philosophical discourse through the poetic use of the concept of skin and touch.

Similarly, I argue that the player as subject is a body-subject; it does not have a full body, real or simulated, but it does present some qualities of embodiment. The complex and highly detailed process of avatar creation in games like *City of Heroes*⁵⁰ is a symptom of this fact. In *City of Heroes*, the player is encouraged to create her avatar in grand detail, using multiple options for customization. For some players, the way their avatar looks is extremely relevant. And this high level of detail in customization is present in many contemporary computer games, from *EverQuest* ⁵¹ to *The Sims 2*⁵² to *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*,⁵³ where the customization options are so many that creating the avatar could possibly take hours. In the light of these examples, I would argue that the detail that computer games provide to the player when it comes to customizing the virtual body’s physical appearance is related to the necessity of creating a skin that is both “oneself” and “other,” because it has a component of strangeness that puts the player in contact with the virtual world, the “other” world.⁵⁴

This is not to say that there is a correlation between the player as body-subject, the player as skin, and the avatar's virtual appearance. The fact that we can modify our avatar's looks is a symptom of the larger process of subjectivization into the body-subject that plays. The player as body-subject has to be understood as the subidentity created during the play experience. The subjectivity of the player is our skin when interacting with a computer game: it marks the boundaries of the subject, but also determines how much we can interact with the digital world. Playing is putting on the player-skin and experiencing the world and the game world within it.

When playing, we are a body-subject that becomes the significant element in our relation with the game world in the broadest sense, including the game community and the other players. Understanding the player-subject as a skin is a useful metaphor because it connects the internal, individual subjectivity of the player with the larger communitarian, cultural, and historical subjectivities of the contemporary self. This player-skin includes both our subjectivity as a player and how it relates to the larger being that is affected by this process of subjectivization, separating our being from the experience of the game. This subjectivity, which keeps the culturally embodied being both together with and separate from the player-subject, is related to, but distinct from the cultural being in which it originated. It keeps us close to the fact that players do have a body, both real and virtual, and that the body matters, be that the body of the avatar or the real body, as they are constituents of the player-subject's skin. But it also indicates a fundamental tension between our values and our values as player-subjects; a tension that is at the heart of the ethical issues that computer games raise.

When I play *Fahrenheit*, I relate to that fictional world by the subject that follows the rules and experiences the game world. In that context, my player-subject is created, and I interact with *Fahrenheit*. But the situations and some of the choices this game puts me through affect my player-subjectivity: the game is designed so that players grow attached to some characters. *Fahrenheit* is designed to provide elements that make us use that subjectivity in a rational and emotional way. The fact that the game uses quick-time events as a means of interaction (a polemical design decision) could be interpreted as a tool for strengthening the physical relation with



Figure 3.2
Fahrenheit: A Matter of Moral Choices

the player, trying to embody the act of playing by means of interface design. In action scenes the player has to follow some on-screen indications as to what controller input needs to be given in order to pass the level, what is popularly known as a “quick-time event.” That input consists of pressing the buttons, manipulating the joystick, and combinations of both, following a certain sequence. It seems like such an odd choice for controlling the action sequences of an adventure game, which has its origin in the intention of “embodying” the player to a greater degree via the use of the console controller.⁵⁵

When experiencing a game, the player-subject is created as a skin with a set of functions: it both separates and connects the cultural embodied being from which the player is generated from the player-subject; it also creates the game experience as it is created by it; and, finally, it operates as a sensitive organ that is affected and affects the experience of the game. It is possible to speak of a game situation even when it comes to Internet forums or other social environments in which we wear our player-skin and thus remain in touch with a player experience.⁵⁶

The player-subject, in touch with the larger cultural and embodied set of subjectivities that forms her self, can relate to the affordances of the object by which it is created and which it phenomenologically

experiences. In this sense, the player's body-subject is created to fit and mold, as a flexible organ, to those affordances and constraints in the behavior that the game as object presents. A player is a body-subject created in and by the experience of a game. Phenomenologically, the player-subject as skin acts as a being that creates the game and is created by the game, in a process of dialogue in which the player uses moral reasoning in her relation with the game world and with other players. Ethical judgment is necessary to preserve the integrity of the body-subject and the fidelity to the game event, and to contribute to the flourishing of a player community where the player's body-subject can achieve excellence without being broken or harmed. To understand that use of moral reasoning, it is necessary to delve deeper into the phenomenological layer of the game as experience.

3.3 The Phenomenology of Playing

If the player is a subject that comes into being when playing a game, then the ethical nature of the player must be placed in the context of that experience. The phenomenology of playing informs the ethical being of the player and how these processes of mutual creation and experiencing work are related to ethics. In particular, Gadamerian phenomenology provides a framework for the analysis of the player as ethical being and for the understanding of the ethics of computer games. The essential questions about these two processes will be approached in three different and consecutive stages: I will first draw on phenomenology to explain playing as a process; then I will focus both on the hermeneutics of becoming a player and on the hermeneutics of games; finally, I will make the transition to the ethical discourse by using the Aristotelian concepts of *praxis* and *phronesis*.

Let's start with defining play as a phenomenological process. I read about the experimental independent game *Passage*.⁵⁷ I access its website, read the author statement, and understand that the software I am about to download and play intends to create the experience of a *memento mori*, a work of art that intends to make me experience the fragility and futility of life. I start the game and am presented with a narrow, elongated game world where I control a little avatar that can move around in four directions. I explore: I find treasures, and eventually a partner, a computer-controlled

character who will follow me. As the game proceeds, I can see progressively more of the map I am leaving behind, and less of what I have ahead. After five minutes of play, and after the death of my partner, I die and the game is over.

Passage creates a moral and philosophical game experience—playing the game is realizing the perception of time and how it relates to potentiality, to the loss of possible lives that happens when we grow old. And it does so not through the artist statement, but through the game as such—the evolving perspective of the game, where we progressively see less and less of the future until we die, and by the ultimate acknowledgment that the score system is futile. There is a tradition of memento mori in art history, but *Passage* is unique because it is, to my knowledge, the first time this experience of the fragility of life and its times takes place in the phenomenological experience of game. In other words, is it only as a game that *Passage* is meaningful art, or is it only because it is a game that *Passage* is experienced as art?

Computer games are about becoming the player that the game allows, directs, and suggests that we become. A more prosaic example comes from *Guitar Hero*,⁵⁸ which wants the player to feel like a guitar player of



Figure 3.3

Passage: Death and the Game

rock-star magnitude, and as such the game is bundled with a guitar as its physical interface. Like in other rhythm games like *Donkey Konga*,⁵⁹ the player can actually manipulate the game with a standard controller, but the game is only understood in its full actuality when played with the guitar, when the player lives through the whole body and machine experience.

Stated more precisely, games are the experience of being a player—without this experience, the game is *just* an object designed to provide the means for a subjectivization process; a process that will result in a ludic experience that actualizes the game. The game as object is just the condition by which the player comes into being, and with her the game. The game, then, has to be understood as an experience and not an object when the player is taken into consideration, as Gadamer had already hinted at: “the mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward play as if toward an object.”⁶⁰

To understand the player and the game from this experiential perspective we will use the concepts and method of phenomenology, within the tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer. Phenomenology is a fundamental ontology that interprets an experience, relating it to the context in order to understand its mode of being.⁶¹

Phenomenologically, the player is the subject that experiences a ludic situation originated by, but not limited to, the game as object. For the ludic activity to exist, the player has to come into being within the limits and extensions of the ontology of the game.⁶² Phenomenologically, the player has to be considered as a subject within an experience, a player-and-game involved in a procedural operation of being,⁶³ a subjectivization process by which the player comes into being as a body-subject.

A music player in a band, for instance, is both a part of the music group and only one instrument. For the music to be played correctly, the musician has to be a subject in the experience—that is, both an individual producing a set of sounds with her instrument, and a part of the larger experience of the music as performance. For a spectator, the musician need not be *a subject*, but a part of the process of creating or interpreting the music; for the musician, there is a duality in her mode of being within the performance experience. The spectator may see an orchestra; the player experiences her own performance *and* her performance as a part of the orchestra.

Playing a single-player computer game like *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* presents the same mode of being: as a player, I am experiencing the game not as an object, but as a process that regards, rewards, and punishes my interaction with it. What I experience is my subjectivity as a player with the ergodic agency of the computer game. In *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* I have to control Eric and Dylan, the troubled young sociopaths who perpetrated the Columbine massacre, on the day of the events. Moreover, I have to play those events through the conventions of classic role-playing games. As a player, I have to enter the high school, plant bombs, and massacre students and teachers with a crude turn-based combat system. The game as experience creates me as a player who becomes “forced” to gather tokens and resources in the game while eliminating opponents, but those tokens and resources and opponents, despite the retro-aesthetics of the game, are teachers, students, and other victims of the massacre. The ludic experience of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* takes place for that subject who is forced to perform these actions that, at the same time, are rewarded by the system with new possibilities and expansions of my capacities as player within the game world.

Of course, most players will probably evaluate this tension as uncomfortable. Even though the game is not different from other classic



Figure 3.4
Super Columbine Massacre RPG!: Playing the Unthinkable

role-playing games, it *feels* different. There is a strong tension between the player-subject and the subject external to the act of play, a tension generated by the contradiction between the fidelity to the game experience and the cultural meaning of the actions, which we give from a perspective external to the player-subject. This tension is crucial for understanding the potential of computer games as ethical experiences, and can be analyzed by applying hermeneutics in the Gadamerian sense, which will help in singling out the being of the player in the experience of the game—explaining how the player operates as a reflective, moral being.

I will return to *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* in later stages of this book. For now, I will focus on a less controversial example: the computer game *Daigasso! Band Brothers* is a simulation of a musical orchestra in which the single-player version tries to simulate the process of playing a tune, while the multiplayer version puts every player in charge of an instrument. *Daigasso!* provides a very interesting insight into the process of playing a game, becoming a player, and experiencing the game in a phenomenological sense. Using some of the most interesting hardware capacities of the Nintendo DS, *Daigasso!* is a game built around an orchestra simulator. The player is faced with a certain number of training tutorials that, simulating the progress of a musician in the development of skills, allow her to play more and more complicated songs. The gameplay is exquisite for its simplicity: the player is faced with abstracted sheet music in which, instead of notes, there are keys that have to be pushed following the rhythm. In single-player mode, the player interprets a different number of instruments in each song, much like in any other rhythm game.

The multiplayer version of *Daigasso!*, on the other hand, presents other interesting aspects. The DS is equipped with Wi-Fi capability, which theoretically allows a number of consoles to connect wirelessly in order to share information, chat, or play. More interestingly, with many DS games it is only necessary to have one physical copy of the game to start a multiplayer session. That is the case with *Daigasso!*—with just one copy of the game it is possible to create a small network of players. And the multiplayer version of the game is rather remarkable, for players can actually join in and play one of the songs, and each player individually interprets one instrument. It is, then, a collaborative simulation of a music

band in which all participants have to take part in order to recreate the song and achieve individual points. In this sense, it is possible to say that all players are at the same time a unity, for they all play the same game united in the desire to achieve the same goals, and they are individual players because they will be evaluated for their actions. From a phenomenological perspective, *Daigasso!* multiplayer mode is the experience of individual play and of individual player-subjectivity, as well as collective cooperative play, in which it could be argued that there is a “player of players,” a larger play subject that is composed of a number of players experiencing the same game at the same time, with different procedures of play simultaneously.

What hermeneutics actually explains is precisely the operational properties of the player as subject within the game experience; that is, those ontological capacities that make the player as subject come into being within a game. The act of experiencing a game—making a game object actual—is an act of interpretation of what that situation demands for creating a subject. Playing is interpreting our ontological situation as players within the borders established and agreed upon by the game as object; but playing is also a process of self-reflection and interpretation of our own being as players, within those parameters of the community or group of players, our culture, and those values and ideas that inform our real-life existence.

Gadamer and Heidegger provided an ontological turn to hermeneutics within the limits of phenomenology by stating that what we understand from an object or experience is already somehow in the object or experience; or, rather, understanding is partially derived from what is understood. In the case of computer games, the player repertoire (the fact that we can infer the rules of most unknown games by using our past experience as players) seems to suggest the same conclusion: playing is giving to the game object an interpretation derived at least partially from our own cultural and game-cultural background, inferring the being of the game from our own interpretational capabilities applied to the game rules. In that circular process the game and player come into being within a ludic experience.

This mutual (re)creational process, in which the player constitutes and is constituted by the interpretational process of playing a game,⁶⁴ calls for the use of the hermeneutic circle, which explains the process of

understanding a part of the text and how that affects the understanding of the whole. Within Gadamer's theory, though, the circle becomes more than an interpretational tool: "The circle, then, is not formal in nature. It is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter . . . thus the circle of understanding is not a 'methodological' circle, but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding."⁶⁵ The ontological turn implies that for Gadamer the circle operates as a way of acquiring knowledge about the modes of being of understanding, and, by extension, of the modes of being of the subject who understands.

Returning to *Daigasso!*, when starting to play the game, the player-subject comes into being, and so does the game as experience. Then the player uses her culture and tradition as a player to find ways of experiencing this particular game. Knowledge of the genre, reviews read in magazines or online, or personal interaction with other players provide the initial interpretational tools. Once the player figures out the key elements, it is possible for the game to become a fulfilled actuality through and with the player. In the case of *Daigassou!*'s multiplayer mode, we have to take into account the player community that is created—how the player is integrated in that community, and what role(s) she has. Finally, the act of playing is evaluated and understood via the culture, values, and traditions of the player outside the game, because that is the way in which we acknowledge the particular seriousness of games, their specific ontological being separated from and distinct to other types of experiences.⁶⁶

The process of experiencing a game as a player-subject takes place in interpretational layers that provide different yet complementary ontological feedback to the process of becoming a player. It begins with an ontological move voluntarily made by the player: accepting the game as object and its conditions for success. Then the player interprets those conditions, actualizes them, and becomes player-subject within the game experience. This subject is then interpreted by the player culture as player; that is, by the tradition in which she has been a player. In the case of several players within the ludic experience, the player also takes into account the created community. Finally, the acts and experiences of the game are evaluated by the real-life self, her culture and subjectivity, in a circular process that

returns to the player-as-being, the initial constituent of this situation. It is in this hermeneutical process where the ethical being of the player-subject takes place and finds meaning.

Gadamer's reinterpretation of hermeneutics is heavily grounded in Aristotle, and, more specifically, in the concept of *phronesis* or practical wisdom.⁶⁷ For Gadamer, hermeneutics is not only a mode of understanding, but also a mode for self-understanding, developing what Aristotle considered a key value for the ethical development of the individual as a moral being. Aristotle believed that humans are moral beings, roughly because we have a rational mind that guides us in pursuit of happiness.

The hermeneutical process operates as a way of self-understanding within the parameters of *phronesis*. Considering that, for the player-subject, playing games is a hermeneutical process, I argue that in those situations the player informs her interpretational process of the becoming from a moral perspective. The player can be, then, a moral subject who rationalizes the game experience with the tools and parameters of her ethical wisdom, which is (as I will show later on) both a cultural and an individual property. But before stepping into those layers of the player-subject, I will focus on the ethical turn of the hermeneutics of becoming a player.

Aristotle considered ethics a practical science—beyond a theory or a set of empty discourses, ethics had to be practiced by those who wanted to achieve the virtuous state in which life was balanced at the moral level. These practices had much to do with the specifically human capacity for moral reasoning, which was anchored in moral wisdom as a practice, or *phronesis*. What *phronesis* gives to this approach to the player-subject is the connection of the ethics of the game as object with the ethical nature of being a player, the two main elements for the configuration of the ethics of computer games.

Let's consider the act of playing *Black & White*.⁶⁸ This game puts the player in the role of a god who is in charge of a civilization, with which the god communicates both through direct actions in the environment and through a gigantic creature that the player trains. The way the player treats this creature will determine its behavior: an evil god, for example, will create a scared and enraged creature, while a benevolent god creates

a more pleasant creature. Playing this game is the act of interpreting the game rules by means of the knowledge amassed by the player of previous games within the game genre—in this case everything from the classics *Populous*⁶⁹ and *Civilization*⁷⁰ to the software toy Tamatgotchi. But it is also the act of interpreting that tradition within the new elements of this game; namely, the fact that the player *is* a god that will be evaluated according to the choices she makes. And it is also the act of interpreting that the player-subject has to adopt the logic of a god in the game, and how that might relate to real-life values, ideas, and cultural settings.

To play a computer game is a cultural process in which we grow up and mature as players. A *Manhunt* player who is not familiarized with computer games will not only have a hard time navigating the environment, but she might feel shocked by the gruesome acts she is compelled to play. A more experienced player, I argue, will understand that the game is actually designed to make the player enact an unethical experience, showing that there is no fun in committing these acts, but rather mirroring the lack of morals and the desperate situation of the main character in the fictional game world. The player of *Manhunt* will go through an ethical experience, unless her own ethical values, her cultural embodied being, despises the game so much that the subjectivization process breaks down. Experienced players have a better chance of understanding *Manhunt's* ethical conundrums because the more we play, the more literate we are in the rhetoric and play styles of computer games. We better understand the design decisions, and we are able to penetrate the game as object in different, more complex ways during the process of subjectivization.

Playing computer games should be considered as a praxis, an act of choices and decisions, a voluntary self-evaluation and creation of a subject. It is my argument that a game has to be understood as an object experienced as a praxis of moral wisdom, in a process of interpretation and self-interpretation. The player is the subject that culminates the transition of computer games from object (potentiality) to praxis (actuality). And, by introducing it in the realm of practices, players become subject to self-scrutiny, the evaluation of and reflection on the very same processes of being and becoming players. In the praxis of playing computer games, players become ethical subjects.

3.4 Players as Moral Beings

It is time now to close this phenomenological turn and introduce the perspective of virtue ethics applied to the subject of the player. To do so, I will start by putting players in context, showing the similarities and differences in playing alone and playing together. I will then introduce the perspective on the player as moral being that I believe defines the player as ethical being: the virtue ethics perspective, in an Aristotelian fashion. I will define a number of virtues for the player, and illustrate them with references both to literature on players and to actual games. Finally, I will define what the nature of a player is from an ethical perspective, and how this affects the overall consideration of the ethics of computer games.

But first, an example. The settings of *Counter-Strike: Source* allow for a detailed search of what kind of server the player wants to join. One of the filters for the search engine is the availability of anticheat software: if a player wants to make sure that there will be no use of any kind of cheats or exploits during gameplay, she will certainly choose to play on a server in which this anticheat system is present. Furthermore, once a protected server is chosen and while the connection between client and server is established, the player will read on her screen a rather harsh warning: "Players who cheat will suffer an immediate and permanent ban." And such is the case not only with *Counter-Strike: Source*, but also with many other online first-person shooters. Similarly, players who exploit the rules of other online games, by cheating the economic systems or "farming" resources, have seen their accounts banned, and the community reacts quite aggressively against these kinds of acts.

Stepping a bit away from digital games, if we reflect on the practice of collective or multiplayer games, patterns emerge. When playing soccer or basketball in a social context, certain kinds of behaviors are regarded poorly by the community of players, or directly rejected. In soccer, for instance, nobody likes an individualist striker who does not help in defense, and in basketball noncooperative players who just want to score all the points are often regarded as spoilsports. And like these two examples, most team-based sports and games tend to have implicit codes of conduct that are enforced by the players in order to preserve the well-being of the game in progress.

When we play with other people, we want to experience the game, and we demand that nobody spoils that enjoyment. Therefore, we care about those behaviors that threaten the experience. Playing is not only experiencing a game, but also preserving the ludic flow of that experience. And playing with others is also a matter of demands: we demand behavior from other players that ensures the game will not be spoiled by those who do not want to follow the rules, or those who believe that winning is the only desirable outcome of a ludic experience. Playing is also learning those codes of conduct that tell us what we can expect from other players, and how we should behave if we aspire to contribute to the well-being of the player community.

Becoming a player is the act of learning the practices that the historical community considers desirable and undesirable. Playing is learning to be a good player, to care about how to participate in the game. This is not to say that players believe that goals are more important than means, or that there are no practices of playing that consider cheating a desirable behavior,⁷¹ but in general cheating and other spoilsport behaviors are seen as practices that should be avoided.

These phenomena are not limited to playing with other players. Playing a single-player computer game is also an act of moral relevance. A player introducing cheat codes, for instance, affects the game balance and the carefully crafted game experience, thus shattering the game experience as it was intended and optimized. Playing, for instance, *Half-Life 2* in “god” mode, where your avatar cannot suffer any kind of harm, is somehow amusing, but also slightly boring, unless of course it is done with the sole intent of finishing the story of the game. In an example I have already suggested, I pointed out that *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* warns players who save a game in which they have cheated that this action may compromise the stability of that save-file, risking the loss of all the data of the game progress up to that moment. Besides, at the moment, those games that actually pretend to simulate the importance of morality in gameplay, like *Fable*⁷² or *Knights of the Old Republic*, are single-player games.

Playing a computer game is still the act of enjoying a ludic experience, and being a player, even in a single-player game, is taking the responsibility for playing the game in enjoyable, sanctioned ways. This does not mean blindly following the rules. After all, some of the most creative computer

games in history, from *Elite*⁷³ to *Grand Theft Auto IV*, are sandbox environments where the player exerts her creative capacities in her interactions with the world. But this creativity comes with a responsibility, both for players and designers: ensuring that the game is a pleasurable and balanced experience. The player should not be considered a passive element of gameplay, a mere trigger of situations placed there by the designers. Players of computer games also have the stewardship over the game system, the software, and its informational integrity.

The process of becoming a player is also the process of creating, accepting, and developing that stewardship. Being a player also implies becoming, or aspiring to become, a good player from a moral perspective. To define what a good player is from an ethical perspective, I will use Aristotelian virtue ethics, since it provides a well-defined theoretical framework wherein it is possible to give a clear picture of what it means to be a good player.

Being a good player is being a virtuous player. A virtuous player is the one who engages in a game and enjoys its ludic experience, but it is also she who, in the face of a moral challenge, uses the practical wisdom acquired by playing that game, and all those games that form her repertoire, in order to make the most ethically informed choice. These moral challenges can be either experienced by the player-subject or by the out-of-game subject. For instance, in a situation where two players of different skill levels are playing *Pro Evolution Soccer 4*, the challenge for the most skilled player is to choose a different difficulty level than her opponent. In doing so, it will be more difficult for the skilled player to defend. If both players do so, there is a larger chance that the simulated football match will become an enjoyable ludic experience. As a matter of fact, the act of tweaking the gameplay in a casual setting, such that it is possible for players of different skill sets to enjoy a common ludic experience, is rather common when we play games, and is a symbol of how as ethical players we behave toward others in the pursuit of a successful gameplay session.

What is, then, a virtuous player? To define more clearly what I mean by virtuous player, it is necessary to define virtue. For Aristotle, "Virtue then is: a state apt to exercise deliberate choice, being the relative mean, determined by reason, and as the man of practical wisdom would determine."⁷⁴ I define virtue applied to computer games as the capacity for a

player-subject to make a gameplay choice informed by her practical wisdom and understanding, taking into account her membership in a player community and her self outside the game. A virtuous player uses ethical reflection based on her virtues when playing a computer game.

This is too much of an abstract definition, and requires a more precise approach to what virtues players should have. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle expands on a list of virtues⁷⁵ that, in his mind, define the virtuous citizen. Additionally, those virtues are explained under the Doctrine of the Mean.⁷⁶ A virtue is a mean state between the absence and the excess of virtue, the classic example being how the courageous person is the optimal virtuous being between the coward, who is dominated by fear, and one who foolishly puts his life in danger. The virtues spelled out by Aristotle need to be complemented with what the virtues of the player-subject in a game experience should be.

I will elaborate on these virtues, taking as a premise the player types categories suggested by Richard Bartle.⁷⁷ These player types broadly define play styles any player can adopt in a multiuser dungeon (MUD). This account of how players behave, what their motivations are, and what defines them can cast some light on an initial set of virtues that are present in game players. Given the assumption that virtues are, roughly said, the ethical modalities of gameplay sported by players, it is of interest to understand what kind of play types are present in virtual worlds, and from them deduce the related virtues.

There are, though, two caveats that need to be mentioned: first, Bartle's work was originally derived from the study of MUDs, and only later extended to other online worlds like *Ultima Online*,⁷⁸ or to social spaces like *Second Life*.⁷⁹ Even though there are differences between virtual worlds and single-player games, and between these and multiplayer local-area network games such as *Daigasso!*, I will advocate for a more integrated view, arguing with illustrative examples that Bartle's player types are relevant for the description of the player's virtues.

The second caveat has to do with my definition of player. I have defined the player-subject as a subset of the self that comes into being when experiencing a game. And I have argued that this player-subject is a body-subject, related to the cultural, embodied, and temporal self outside the game. Nevertheless, I am here presenting specific game virtues, which can have a different meaning when playing games. Being courageous

in an online match of *Halo 3*,⁸⁰ for instance, is not different from being courageous outside of the game, for acting too cowardly will not allow the player to score points, and rushing into action will probably kill you, losing online status in both cases and forcing some undesired waiting time.

There is then a connection between the virtues external to the game and the virtues that are appreciated in a game. But there are some virtues that are only relevant within the game experience. For example, players who do not try to communicate at all in a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* will have a hard time experiencing the game, because it is a game in which communication is essential for achieving certain goals. Likewise, a player who just enjoys the linear achievement of goals will most likely not fully enjoy the expansive, almost living world of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, because in that environment the gameplay—the linear action—ends up being quite dull. Finally, the classic example is cheaters: most players do not like cheaters in multiplayer games. Conversely, most players do like players who behave in ways that are perceived as positive, sharing knowledge of behaving with sportsmanship.

Bartle's player types, as interpreted in light of virtue ethics, provide an understanding of how players interact with the game and with others within a virtual world. Bartle distinguishes initially between four types of players: achievers, who "regard points-gathering and rising in levels as their main goal, and all is ultimately subservient to this;" explorers, who "delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them;" socializers, who "are interested in people, and what they have to say;" and killers, who "get their kicks from imposing themselves on others."⁸¹ These four types refer to dominant play styles that determine the type of players that a virtual world presents and the dynamics of the interaction between them.⁸²

What player types show is different ways of engaging in gameplay, ways that are specific to games and that can be interpreted within the perspective of virtue ethics. I will now proceed to deduce a basic set of virtues for players, relating them with player types. I am considering player types as extremes from which virtues can be deduced.

Achievers demonstrate that we can consider legally attempting to achieve the goals of the game a virtue. For instance, it is virtuous to try to win a race in *Project Gotham Racing 2*⁸³ using the given cars, unmodified,

and depending only on one's skill at the wheel or, in this case, with the gamepad. This wish to complete the game and face the challenges can also be considered a virtue. In excess, this trait would create a player who does not respect any social rule or protocol in order to achieve the goals (in the case of *Project Gotham Racing 2*, this player would try to crash other players), while a player who lacks this trait would probably choose the slowest cars, impeding other players' ability to enjoy the competition in equality.

The first virtue would then be achieving, which is present in those players who compete fairly against the challenges of the game and against other players, respecting the social norms and rules, and for whom victory is a desirable state in the game but not the most desirable—for that would be enjoying the game, alone or with others.

Players like exploring the boundaries of game systems, realizing at once their belonging to that experience, their being as players, and the relatively safe nature of these environments. Players of *The Sims* have actually tried different ways of killing their avatars.⁸⁴ Similarly, some players used the open and modifiable universe of *Deus Ex* until they discovered that by using adhesive mines they could climb some walls and avoid conflict, a classic example of emergent gameplay.

Exploring the game system and the possibilities of interaction is a player virtue. In excess it can make players forget about the goals of the game, ignoring the designed gameplay process. In *The Sims*, for instance, a player who just explores the many ways of building a house and how complex it can be is setting aside a crucial gameplay element: the house is just the container where the game action takes place, and the possible ways of creating houses are determined by the gameplay.⁸⁵ On the defect end, a player that only sees *The Sims* as a game, and does not explore the building possibilities, will most likely find the simulation boring because it is indeed repetitive if we don't consider the multiple possibilities of customization that the game offers.

The socializers seem to be the backbone of contemporary role-playing online worlds, but they are not limited to these environments. Socializers create and move communities by caring about the players within the game as much as for the players outside the game, and they do so by using means of communication, from fanzines to the Internet, to make communities cohere. Socializers care about other players and about the game, and they

express their care by, for instance, attending game forums where they actively participate. In the case of *Shadow of the Colossus*, many players have cared enough to complete the game's voluntarily incomplete fiction, since there are many questions about the game's characters that are never answered. These players provide fan fictions that contribute to a vibrant game community surrounding this single-player game.⁸⁶

In excess, the virtue of socialization can encourage players who act despotically within the community, players who may believe that the game is just secondary to their participation in a community that, needless to say, makes sense only within the shared experience of the game. But by default, a player can ignore these communities, which in itself is problematic. For instance, players in multiplayer games who do not take into account the presence of a strong and coherent community may participate in unethical actions (as determined by social rules) and they would do so because they ignore, or do not give importance, to the fact that players do have a culture of their own, surrounding specific games and beyond that. The socialization virtue defines those players who participate in a player community, contributing to their culture as players, but who acknowledge that this community is a part of a game experience, and that it is the game, or the shared event of being a player, that makes the community exist.⁸⁷

At first glance, it may seem that killers do not sport any virtue—how could a killer be virtuous? Nevertheless, it is possible to consider killers as somehow virtuous players. Killers only exist in multiplayer environments, and they are only present in those games, from persistent worlds to online multiplayer match games like *Counter-Strike*, in which player-versus-player gameplay is a sanctioned practice. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, a killer would inhabit a server where she could engage in combat with other players. But, as I will show in my analysis of that game in chapter 5, *World of Warcraft* changed its design by implementing an “honor system” that added a set of ethical affordances to the game. This system did actually disrupt the gameplay very much, and even now, after a number of developer-originated solutions, the forums related to player-versus-player gameplay are full of complaints about the honor system, the “battle-grounds,” and how killing other players is rewarded.

To kill other players has a “balanced aggression” virtue. By it, players may have the right to attack and kill other players, but that gameplay

should be balanced, regulated, properly rewarded, and be interesting from a gameplay perspective. In the case of *Counter-Strike*, for instance, when joining a server it is possible to allow the computer to balance the teams automatically, so the matches have an even number of “terrorists” and “counterterrorists.” This adjustment is made so that it is possible to enjoy balanced gameplay with the right number of players. The defective presence of this virtue explains why some *World of Warcraft* players who joined a player-versus-player server complain about being attacked while doing quests: they do not understand that an implicit part of playing in such a game mode is to be targeted as hostile by the opposite faction, and thus possibly get killed. And the excess of this virtue would lead to grieving;⁸⁸ that is, to players that use the player-versus-player enabled environment to harass other players without considering the rewards or the logic of allowing player-killing.

Bartle’s player types are abstract categorizations of different play styles, and thus they show generalizations of how players actually play. I have used them here as a source for describing the virtues of the players, deduced from these player types. I by no means try to make a correlation between player types and player virtues—in my interpretation, Bartle’s player types show which is the dominant virtue of a player in a given situation or world. But ideally, all these virtues should be present in the ethically good player: sense of achievement, explorative curiosity, a socializing nature, and balanced aggression. Yet these are not enough, and there surely must be more of them.

The notion of game balance is closely related but independent of the player virtues. The Doctrine of the Mean can be translated, in the realm of digital ludic environments, to the act of seeking balance in gameplay, or, better stated, to the need to preserve game balance. Game balance is what Rollings and Adams define as a game where it is only the skill of the player that determines the success factor.⁸⁹ In a virtuous sense, players ought to preserve the game balance, thereby making it a fair game for all the parties involved. In a more phenomenological fashion, I would argue that the virtue of preserving game balance has to do with the preservation of a successful game experience for all players and agents involved in the game.

In the case of *Project Gotham Racing 2*, a more skilled player is not obliged to choose a worse vehicle if she is playing against less-skilled players, be

those computer agents or humans, but she would definitely be a better player from a virtuous perspective if she did so in order to create and preserve a successful ludic experience. By choosing a less desirable vehicle, she would have to use all her skills and her mastery in order to win the game, and the less-skilled opponents would stand a chance in the competition.

Game balance in this sense has to be understood as the balance perceived by players, and not necessarily, like Rollings and Adams suggest, the formal property of the game system. As I will explain in my analysis of *Bioshock*⁹⁰ in chapter 5, a game can be unbalanced, yet still both playable and ethically relevant. A brief example can be taken from *Passage*: the choice of having a partner prevents players from exploring the world, while not giving any specific systemic reward. This imbalance is actually appealing to the ethical player, who will understand its meaning beyond the actual design of the game. In those cases where the game is voluntarily and creatively imbalanced, the virtue is then to preserve the game balance both in terms of the system, and in terms of the experience of the system.

Finally, I will briefly consider the issue of sportsmanship as a player virtue. Most of the work on the ethics of sport⁹¹ has clear roots in the virtue ethics paradigm, defining what is to be a good sport, or, more specifically, how and why sportsmanship is a virtue for players in sports. These authors start from an implicit, yet pervasive point, the golden rule of sports:⁹² “Always conduct yourself in such a manner that you will increase rather than detract from the pleasure to be found in the activity, both your own and that of your fellow participants.”⁹³

A good sportsman is one who is capable of following this golden rule. Sportsmanship is a specific virtue that has more to do with the ontological status of the player-subject and the relations it establishes with the game experience than with the fact that the player is immersed in a ludic experience that creates the player-subject. The virtue of sportsmanship, then, “is a mean between an excessive seriousness, which misunderstands the importance of the spirit of play, and an excessive sense of playfulness, which may be called frivolity and which misunderstands the importance of victory and achievement when play is competitive.”⁹⁴

Sportsmanship is a virtue related to the subjectivization process of being a player, and therefore it is different from and complimentary to respecting, protecting, and enhancing the game balance. I have argued that becoming a player is a process of subjectivization deeply related to the acceptance of a set of rules. An agent that fails in this subjectivization process but engages in the act of playing regardless fails to follow the virtue of sportsmanship.

This may seem a conceptual contradiction with the classic concept of sportsmanship, which intuitively refers to the capacity for making the right moral choices within gameplay. Let's observe a situation in which we would need to use the concept of sportsmanship: when playing *Diablo II*⁹⁵ online, I was approached by another player who had obviously used a hack to enhance her powers. This player invited me to join her guild, offering me access to the aforementioned hack, and also wealth and good weapons. A good sport would decline the invitation, we would say, because cheating is wrong. It was the realization that such a promise of wealth and power could only mean that suddenly the game would become more boring, and more focused on harassing those who did not want or have these powers, that led me to turn down the offer. And of course, to be grieved for a while by that other player.

Similarly, when playing a game like *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, a player can face the dilemma of using emergent strategies to solve missions. For instance, one of the game's missions consists of taking a motorbike and jumping from roof to roof in order to get some tokens. But as the game is an open environment, it is also possible to complete that mission using a small helicopter available for the player at another location. If the player has completed the mission in this way, she did not take the challenges of the game seriously, therefore she has been a player, albeit not a virtuous one.⁹⁶

Sportsmanship is, then, the virtue that determines the degree of success in the subjectivization process that takes place when playing a game. A player can still be considered a player-subject if she is not a good sport, but she would be a worse player-subject, due to her detachment from the game rules, and certainly not a virtuous player.

Returning to Aristotle's definition of virtue, there is an element that needs to be considered in order to define the player as a moral being, and

that is practical wisdom. Aristotle defined virtues as related to what “the man of practical wisdom would determine.”⁹⁷ This practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, is one of the key concepts in Aristotelian ethics, and also one of the most discussed concepts in the history of philosophy. It is not my intention here to perform an exegesis of the word, but to define it appropriately for the player of computer games.

Phronesis is the central concept of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this chapter, practical wisdom is defined as “a state conjoined with reason, true, having human good for its object, and apt to do.”⁹⁸ There are several elements in this definition that need to be addressed in more detail. *Phronesis* is a capacity of the reason: that is, it does not concern feelings and it is not irrational or subconscious. Practical wisdom is an attribute of a reasoning mind. This reasoning mind aspires to be “good,” good being the state in which all virtues are present, the state of maximum human flourishing.⁹⁹ Finally, practical wisdom is related to actions, to *praxis*. I have already mentioned that, for Aristotle, ethics is a practical science, and practical wisdom is the tool for the use of the agent’s virtues in a practical situation.¹⁰⁰

When a long-time player of *Counter-Strike* starts playing another first-person shooter, say *Battlefield 1942*,¹⁰¹ she will most likely act much like she did when playing *Counter-Strike*—avoiding camping, enhancing teamwork, and all the other elements that her repertoire indicates are appropriate. But let’s imagine that she faces a situation in which she doubts—it is not clearly a part of her cultural experience as a player, and she does not know how to react. Her actions will then be dictated, if she is a virtuous player, by her moral wisdom—she will try to make a decision informed by her experience as a member of a given human community as well as one or more gamer communities; a decision that maximizes her enjoyment of the game without hurting the experience of any other players. She is using her ludic practical wisdom.

In the case of a game like *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, players are forced to use their ethical practical wisdom in a different way. In this game, ethical reasoning, the practical wisdom of players, is of foremost importance. Practical wisdom is used to interact with a game as a player-subject, reflecting on what the game suggests that we do, what we can actually do in our interaction with the game world, and how that affects the moral integrity of both the player-subject and the self outside the game

experience. In the case of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, the game is consciously designed to provoke moral reflection by using the conventions of computer role-playing games to make ethical comments about the act of playing a game, being a player, and their influences on real events. In this game, players have to incarnate Eric and Dylan and follow step by step the process that ended in the Columbine massacre. By forcing the player to commit these acts, the game designer forced players to reflect on the meaning of actions: as a player, you want to win, but as a human being, you have to think about what winning means, and what the actions that are being simulated meant. As I have already mentioned, it is in this tension where thinking about the ethics of computer games is productive, and shows the potential of computer games for creating rich moral experiences.

It is games like *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, *Manhunt*, or *September 12th* that draw on the fact that players present moral reasoning, a capacity for applying ethical thinking to their actions within a game, not only to take the most appropriate action within the game in order to preserve the game experience, but also to reflect on what kind of actions and choices she is presented with, and how her player-subject relates to them.

In this chapter I have argued that players are moral beings whose ethics when playing a game can be understood using virtue ethics in a classic Aristotelian framework. I have identified a number of virtues that players should have:

- sense of achievement
- explorative curiosity
- socializing nature
- balanced aggression
- care for game balance
- sportsmanship.

All these virtues are put into practice when playing a game, forming players' practical wisdom, their *phronesis*, defined as the gameplay choices taken by players following the virtues in order to become good game players from an ethical perspective. I have also argued for a hermeneutic understanding of the phenomena of playing, in which a player interprets the game situation and her role in that situation using those values that

are a part of her gamer culture, of her gaming community, and of her real-life presence.¹⁰² I have argued that **the player-subject is a skin subject in contact with the world outside the game, which in return does have influence over how a player experiences a certain game.**

What these reflections on the ethics of the computer game player show is that **the act of playing any computer game is a moral act.** A player who comes into being within a game experience wants to preserve that phenomenological experience, and to do so she will engage in certain actions and avoid other practices that, even though they are possible, work against the balance of the game experience. Players decide which values, practices, and discourses are morally desirable, making the act of playing against other player agents, be those artificial or human, a constructivist act: a process of creating the desirable behaviors and practices within the game experience.

Games as objects can condition what the ethical practices and values of the players will be through their affordances and constraints. For example, physical aggression in soccer is strictly forbidden, and those players who engage in violent actions are seen as spoilsports. On the other hand, Australian football is rather permissive with some aggressive behavior, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not in sports. This shows that it depends on how the game as object is designed; the experienced game will encourage certain player behaviors, as well as making others unethical or undesirable for the players and the player community because they disrupt the phenomenological experience of the game and its being.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, the game object, as I have hinted before, is not exclusively responsible for what players believe is ethical or unethical. Players interpret the game experience from their game cultural background, making ethical choices that affect the way the game is experienced. The player as ethical being is constructed first, individually, by her interpretation of the game object as projected into her experience; then that ethical being is modified by the player's interpretation of the game experience from her viewpoint as a subject immersed in a player culture. Finally, players take into consideration, when creating their ethical values in a game, what other players do and consider correct; a player is a part of a moral community.

Players are body-subjects, cultural and embodied beings that take place when playing a game. Our cultural values also play a role in the

construction of the ethical subject of the player. The Atari 2600 game *Custer's Revenge* sported hideous gameplay based on avoiding arrows so the player avatar could reach a tied-up female avatar and rape her. Beyond almost any game that has been publicly criticized for its content, *Custer's Revenge* broke all taboos, turning itself into one of the most shameful examples of game design ever made. It is not the player-subject who makes this game's ethical evaluation: the degree of moral perversion in this game makes many players immediately suspend the player-subjectivity and evaluate this with their own personal and cultural values.

Players use phronesis as a practical ability for the configuration of their being in the game. This moral wisdom is applied both to the experience of the game and to the other agents that are immersed in it. Other players' well-being has to prevail in order to enjoy a successful game experience; also, the game experience's well-being has to be respected for the experience of the game to take place. Winning is not always the most rational choice. This might be derived from the fact that players are moral beings who care for other players, acting with moral judgment when creating the game experience.

But are players *always* ethical beings? From the virtue ethics perspective, the answer is partially negative. For Aristotle, ethics and virtue are not something we have, but rather a practice—one in which we can improve.¹⁰⁴ Our goal as beings trying to flourish as moral beings is to first cultivate the virtues and then develop the practical wisdom that will allow us to make virtuous choices in different situations. Similarly, playing games is a matter of maturing our capacities to create the player-subject and its moral reasoning.

A game like *Fahrenheit*, in which some of the choices the player has to make concern personal relationships (of love, of brotherhood), is addressing a player who can reflect upon the ethics of these choices and how they may affect the branching structure of the game. *Fahrenheit* targets its gameplay to a player population that understands that game choices have as much to do with ethics as with the optimal strategies for proceeding in a game.

Players need to play games in order to develop their own culture, but also to develop their virtues and their capacity for reacting with practical wisdom to any situation within a game. This is a process that takes time, much like the learning process that any other art requires.

It is possible to imagine the following counterargument: because players are subjects that take place in the experience of a game, they are exempt from ethical consideration, for their existence as such only takes place within the game. I have argued against this point of view by using the concept of body-subject: players are not encapsulated in the game experience, they are immersed in a culture and they do have a bodily presence that can affect their ethical judgment and configurations. **Players are not exempt from ethical scrutiny just because they are subjects that take place in the game. Precisely because games can be moral experiences, players have to be taken into account as agents who use ethical thinking not exclusive to the game experience, but related to their being in the world.**

Let's return to Liberty City to understand, in detail, who we are when we play *Grand Theft Auto IV*, and how this game is designed for an ethical player. I have pointed out the essential tension between Niko Bellic's wish to begin anew (the noninteractive fiction of the game) and the players' interest in interacting with the game and making the story progress (the gameplay). The Niko we see in the noninteractive scenes regrets the past and the violence; the Niko we play to complete the story is a violent, merciless criminal. Niko is a tragic hero, and, as Heraclitus put it, his character is his destiny. But what is his character?

We, as players, decide Niko's destiny. We, as players, have the choice of not engaging in violence. We can work as a driver, we can flag taxis instead of carjacking, we can forget about the story and just dwell in Liberty City. But that is not playing *Grand Theft Auto IV*. As players, we have to engage in the values of the game, in the ethos of *Grand Theft Auto*. As players, we have to make Niko a criminal again so our experience of the game is complete. If we want to become players, and ethical players, we have to play this game. Our virtues, as players, are a part of the experience of the game. When engaged with *Grand Theft Auto IV*, not playing is unethical.

As players, we have the ethical capacities to interpret the game and the decisions we make in it as a part of the process of creating our subjectivity. This means that we will understand the game as a simulation, as a process in which our values relate to the values encouraged by the game. That means that the ethical player of *Grand Theft Auto IV* will build values based on the values of the game: values that imply, ultimately, that Niko has to

be a criminal. Of course, this could be interpreted as an argument for considering *Grand Theft Auto IV* a reasonably unethical game: our values as players are created by a game that simulates the life of poor criminals in a big American urban environment.

But that's where *Grand Theft Auto IV* becomes a true ethical masterpiece. As players, as ethical agents, our ludic phronesis acts as the evaluation method of the appropriateness of our actions and values. We think, and play, as ethical agents beyond being players, but also as cultural beings. We play as body-subjects. That's why playing *Grand Theft Auto IV* becomes an exploration of meaning and purpose, of values and actions. Previous iterations of the *Grand Theft Auto* series used humor to distance the player, to allow her a moment of reflection to interpret the game as subversive satire. *Grand Theft Auto IV* does not use humor, but tragedy: we empathize with Niko, yet we are forced to drive him to crime. Do we really want to do that? Further, will we also be criminals when we can play in free-form, when we don't have to complete the missions in the game? What does this power say about who we are as ethical beings?

Playing *Grand Theft Auto IV* is, among other things, exploring the relation between the values we have as players and how they relate to who we are outside the game. The *Grand Theft Auto* series is only suitable for mature audiences, not only because of its violent content, but also, and more importantly, because it is appealing to who we are as consumers of computer games: our values, our behaviors, our conscience. *Grand Theft Auto IV* is a game designed for the ethical player, since it is a story about ethos and destiny—about *our* ethos, and *our* destiny.

The act of playing is concerned with the well-being of the players and the success of the game experience. Players create codes of behavior that grant that their actions, as well as the actions of the other players, will respect and enhance the game experience. Players act with moral wisdom and can be considered moral beings who take place when experiencing a moral object. It is in that phenomenological process where the normative approach to the ethics of computer games will find its meaning, as it is there that the ethics of computer games take place.