Playing a "Good" Game: A Philosophical Approach to Understanding the Morality of Games

by Ren Reynolds
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Introduction

What do we mean when we say that a game is good or bad?

Generally speaking good games are those that have strong gameplay, impressive graphics or simply are just plain fun; whereas bad games are ones that have poor graphics, are too simple or are just not enjoyable.

However when a politician or pressure group says a game is bad they mean something very different. In this context they are charging a game with being corrupting, immoral or even evil.

But can a mere game be bad in a moral sense?

I believe that they can. And I believe that there is a solid philosophical argument to back this view. However I think that the current debate over games is hopelessly confused and owes more to rhetoric than logic.

So, in this piece I want to sketch out the ways that we would determine whether a particular game is or is not unethical. To illustrate my points I will examine Grand Theft Auto III (GTA3) from Rock Star Games / Take-2 Interactive.

I've picked GTA3 as it has attracted a massive amount of attention. Game players and the game industry alike are crazy about it. GTA3 is ground breaking in its use of the PlayStation 2 platform and has pushed back the boundaries of interactivity. What's more, just about everyone in the games world agrees that it's a great game.

On the other hand for the mass media and a number of pressure groups, GTA3 represents all that is wrong with computer games, games culture generally and possibly the whole of modern society.

According to these groups GTA3 is sexist, corrupting, violent, offensive and immoral.

In short GTA3 represents what is supposedly the best and worst in current computer games and sits at the centre of the debate over the morality of games and game play.

GTA3 101

GTA3 begins by establishing a back-story. You're a small time crook betrayed by your girlfriend and 'partner-in-crime'. On the way to jail you escape as a bi-product of a gang freeing one of its members who was being transported to the lock up with you. At this point you're given control of the game, though your only option is to steal a car and drive into Liberty City (the setting for GTA3) with a fellow escapee called 8-Ball. From here on in the ostensive point of the game is to complete missions for various gangland bosses. These missions include driving a prostitute around town, beating people up, killing people, delivering a 'stiff', setting bombs, bribing police and other day-to-day activities of organized crime. Successful completion of missions provides you with money and enables you to climb the gang hierarchy.

Yet this rather dry explanation misses just about everything that people love and indeed hate about the game. Liberty City is aptly named because the freedom of interaction that a player enjoys is like no other previous game. During the game the player can interact with just about any character, vehicle or weapon that they come across, players drive pretty much where they want and can even take a train across town. The simple PS2 controls are context sensitive giving the whole game a natural feel of space and engagement.

The Case Against

The mass media has been fairly uniform in its response to GTA3. While headline's have been strident - "Game glorifies a life of crime" USA Today, publications have tended to report outrage created by the game rather than take a direct stand against it.

Of course there have been exceptions. In "Connecting with your inner thug" J Weiss of the Boston Globe says "This is what technology has given us: a way to shrink the distance between the part of us that wants to break rules and the good sense that keeps us in line". Similarly A Curtiss of the LA Times writes, "GTA III is a game so suffused with sadism that its considerable technical attributes are lost in a nihilistic realm that thumbs its nose at any sense of propriety or responsibility". While M Richtel of the New York Times kicks off a piece titled "Mayhem, and Far From the Nicest Kind" with "A few words about head-bashing, carjacking, looting, drug-dealing, drive-by shooting and running over innocent bystanders with a taxi: these activities have crossed the line into bad taste".

Most of the direct criticism of GTA3 has come from pressure groups, most notably the US - National Organization of Women (N.O.W.). In NOW's Action Alert 25\01\02 it sates that GTA3 "encourages violence toward and the degradation of women … glorifies violence and degrades women". The group

adds "it has been widely reported that younger kids are getting their hands on it" and "even if violent games like GTA3 don't have a direct effect on our behavior, if the games are just an escape, what does that say about how we escape? Is this our definition of 'fun' now? Is this how we 'play'?".

In summary, GTA3 is charged with being: sadistic; in bad taste; having a tendency to reduce the players sense of responsibility, respect for property or respect for rules of any kind; degrading to women; encouraging of violence and lastly - not the sort of game that a member of a civilised society would play.

Philosophical Approach

Much of the criticisms of GTA3 are based in fact. The game is highly violent and is based in a world of organised crime where you have to steal and kill to progress. While some people might not like any of these facts. This doesn't make the game immoral.

So what do I mean by 'immoral'? In a sense we all have our own ethical codes. That is, what we believe is good or bad. Philosophers have argued for centuries about how to think about these questions and come up with universal solutions rather than mere personal opinion. Yet even after all this time there are still extremes of opinion. On the one hand some philosophers deny that there is any such thing as good or bad, or they deny there is any objective way of finding out whether an action has a particular moral status. If one tends with these schools of philosophy there is little point in debating whether GTA3 is immoral, as the question has no meaning.

Another school of philosophy called normative ethics suggests that something is considered immoral or un-ethical if it falls outside the boundaries set by a particular set of rules or codes (i.e., a norm, derived from a given ethical theory). In general the societies we live in and the way we conduct our every-day lives are based on notions of normative ethics, even though we may not be aware of the underlying theories. To most people is it simple common sense to believe that some things are wrong, some things are right, and that there is some logical way to make the distinction.

In philosophy what each of the various normative theories do is suggest a particular way or arriving at these judgements. Hence a normative theory of ethics will not simply say 'stealing is bad'. Rather the theory will say: these are the assumptions we should use and types of argument we should apply to determine whether stealing is bad.

As normative theories state ways of arriving at ethical judgements, they are in a sense, in competition with each other. This is because if one theory purports to be the rational way of thinking about ethics, the others must be irrational (by implication) or at the very least based on fallacious argument, even if they end up with the same results. Where this is important, of course, is where the competing theories come up with different results.

In the rest of this piece I want to apply a set of normative ethical theories to GTA3 and see what the results are. The theories I will use are the three most popular western ethical theories:

Consequentialism
Deontology
Virtue Ethics

Despite their rather technical names these theories represent three contrasting ways that we make every day judgements about right and wrong. This can be illuminated by applying them to GTA3, in this way we can summarize the theories in three simple questions:

Does the game, on balance, have a negative impact on an individual, or society as a whole (i.e., does the game produce more harm than benefits)?
Does the game contravene any rights or responsibilities?
Does playing the game make you a bad person?

Now, according to a normative ethicist, if GTA3 fails any of these tests then there is at least a prima facie case for viewing it as immoral. If this is the case then there is probably a good argument to applying some social sanctions to it...

Consequences - Benefits vs Harms

Playing computer games has many consequences. Some are easy to determine - if you're playing a computer game then, as a direct consequence, you are not doing something else. However the moral status of even simple consequences is difficult to determine. Take the above example, it could be the case that playing a computer game means that an individual is not reading an 'improving' book, something that many (though not all) would deem to be morally superior. On the other hand, playing a game may replace engaging in petty crime.

It has either been directly stated or heavily implied that GTA3 may have the following effects on those that play it:

Increased violence
Increased tendency to participate in crime in general
Increased probability of consorting with prostitutes
Reduced respect for women in general

I am not going to rehearse any of these arguments here as they rely on sets of theories and empirical evidence that are both convoluted and contentious. What I do wish to comment on is the structure of the arguments employed.

Consequentialist ethics is more complex than it at first seems. Specifically in most cases it is not sufficient to demonstrate that something causes harm to label it un-ethical. A medical operation, for example, causes great physical harm to the body but operations are generally intended to produce some other good hence are seen as ethical. Similarly, automobiles cause the death of countless people each year but few call for their abolition. On the other hand, we certainly do not always grant that ends justify

means.

The way society tends to unravel these knots is though a kind of neo-utilitarianism. That is, we seek, in general terms, to weigh harms against benefits. In the case of computer games some of the benefits that are proposed are as follows:

    Increased problem solving skills
    Increased dexterity
    Comfort with technology
    Pleasure

When it comes to computer games the last of these benefits (i.e., pleasure) is the most immediately apparent. It's also the most politically charged. This is because some people do not view pleasure as having any worth in and of itself. For others pleasure is seen as a moral good but they maintain that computer games create an 'empty-pleasure', a feeling that is more like stasis hence not really a pleasure at all.

Dropping GTA3 into my personal set of utilitarian scales I believe that the game is not morally exceptional. There seems nothing in the game, nor any element of interactivity, that seems likely to have negative consequences any more severe than any other game or within its general genre. That is, it seems to me that the argument about whether current games tend to make us more violent is one that is still the subject of much controversy hence I do not see it as a strong consequentialist argument as, if the negative consequences were profound it would seem that they would be easier to detect. The fact that games are offensive and even degrading to many groups including women is unarguable. However against these I would weigh the hours of entertainment that these games provide, and one must remember consequentialist argument is largely a matter of measuring rather than applying the sort of principled judgements we might want to make.

To some this argument might just seem wrong. How can I dream of weighing offence to women and game elements such as prostitution against the pleasure of a, largely male, game playing population? If this is your position then it is likely that you think that the negative consequences of these games simply do outweigh the pleasure they create, in which case you would be against a large number of video games and much of popular media. Though I believe that this is a difficult argument to sustain on consequentialist grounds given the millions of people and probably billions of hours of pleasure that games generate, and noting that surveys tend to suggest that amongst games players, game playing is often the most enjoyable leisure pursuit they undertake.

Alternatively you might think that the argument is deeply wrong - in which case one probably does not believe that consequentialism is a valid form of argument. This is a highly defensible moral position, however if one believes generally in normative ethics but rejects consequentialist then one needs to seek an alternative justification for ones views of right and wrong - deontology for instance.

Deontology - My Rights Your Wrong

While offence to women and game elements such as the role of prostitutes in GTA3 are arguably not that significant from a consiquentalist point of view, they certainly have significance for a deontologist.

A deontological argument is one based on duties and rights (at least for purposes of clarity these are the parts of deontology I wish to concentrate on here). While deontology does deal with the consequences of actions it does so in a very different way from consequentialism and is not primarily interested in notions such as magnitude of consequence or the weighing of consequences that utilitarian approaches take. In comparison, deontology is a highly principled ethic which does not concern itself directly with consequences.

Looking at GTA3 from a rights and duties perspective there are rights that would suggest that the production, sale and use of GTA3 is moral and should be protected by society, there are also rights that would suggest that it is immoral and should be controlled.

On the pro-side we have:

> Right of free speech
> Right to access a range of expression

On the opposing side there are:

> Right not to be offended
> Right not to be harmed

Allied to these rights are responsibilities such as the duty of care that adults have over children's use of video games. There is also a potential duty of care that developers' have over the users of their products.

Many of these rights are related to the very same consequences dealt with above. However deontology treats such matters very differently. While consequentialist ethics often balances benefits and harms, a deontologist need not do so. Thus in the case of harm to a game player, one might argue that harm to a single player breaks their right not to be harmed or an organization or guardians duty of care to that individual and that this is sufficient to censure an act irrespective of the pleasure it brings to others.

But deontology also has its complexities. It is generally based not on a single right but a hierarchy of rights. So if we take the view that GTA3 is certainly offensive to some people and thus contravenes their right not to be offended we must also take into account the rights such as free speech.

Games are generally assumed to be a form of speech. Under US and EU practice free speech is generally taken as a primary right. Therefore games tend to be in a very strong legal/ethical position. Because in the case of speech and an opposing right such as right not to be offended, society generally

protects speech acts irrespective of how many people might be offended by these acts. Indeed, the principled argument often stated is the case of a single voice saying something that might be disliked by many is exactly the case that needs the strongest protection, In other words completely the opposite position the utilitarian/consequentialist arguments we examined above.

There a number of practical issues with the implementation of these arguments in any given society. First, as we have seen in two recent US court cases, there is no single definition of what constitutes speech. Ruling in a US district court in favour of an action taken by St. Louis County, Judge Stephen Limbaugh upheld St. Louis's assertion that games are not speech hence do not enjoy the strong First Amendment protections afforded to speech. Whereas a judge in the U.S. District Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit examining a separate but similar case ruled that games are speech.

A second issue with the application of deontology is that even if people agree with what constitutes the definition and scope of individual rights and duties, they do not necessarily agree the prioritisation of those rights. For instance, some groups within western democracies do not assume the primacy of speech as they may, for instance, believe in the primacy of a duty to god's will.

This type of conflict at a fundamental level tends to be dealt with through compromise and accommodation. For example, the UK and other countries have laws that restrict speech that is considered blasphemous. Then there are the civil laws of slander and liable that provide a pragmatic framework of control.

In the case of computer games, many opt to limit the right to hear rather than the right to speak. That is, many western jurisdictions are establishing systems of computer game categorization along the lines that are already applied to cinema. In this way virtually any content can be expressed in a game however the audience for that game may be restricted to adults - a compromise that is generally recognized as fair.

Yet there are some statutory and pragmatic variations on this theme. Some territories have insisted that the content of games are modified (e.g., changing human characters to 'zombies)'. Similarly games companies have opted to pro-actively modify content to ensure that a game is acceptable in a particular territory. This can be seen as bottom up censorship and indeed has created conflict when players have bought a game on the strength of an internet review only to find that their local edition has been modified.

So, what does all this mean for GTA3?

In my view the content of GTA3 is, from a rights perspective, un-exceptional. Women certainly are treated in a stereotypical and arguably offensive way, however this is well within the bounds of offence that contemporary society deems to be allowable when taking the right of free speech into account. If it is the case that the position of games-as-speech is widely modified then the legal position of GTA3 would shift, potentially indicating a deeper change in society's deontological prioritisation.

Furthermore there are practical issue to take into account. We all know that mature rated games are

played my minors. This raises the wider question of whether the creators, publishers, and/or retailers of games have a duty of care to the un-intended audience for the game.

Certainly these parties have a duty not to target minors in advertising, but are we justified in taking the next logical step (i.e. protection of minors). I would suggest that games developers do not have such a duty and that of publishers and retailers is already broadly defined in law. That is, the responsibility of games developers cannot stretch on indefinitely. As a parallel one can look at gun laws. The maker of a gun is not held responsible for all those who may at some point come to control that gun, whereas a retailer generally bears some responsibility in respect of who they sell guns to (e.g., that they are not sold to minors).

One last relationship worth noting is that between the games industry, minors and their guardians. It certainly is the case that guardians have a duty of care to minors, which includes the minors' access to media content, including games, which has been deemed unsuitable for them. I do not want to comment here on the full extent of this duty, however I will note that for the duty to be carried out the system of game content rating and the content of individual games needs to be communicated more effectively to guardians. Guardians need to take computer games seriously because, as the industry and gaming advocates are keen to point out, the modern crop of mature video games are far from being 'simply games'; they have content and emotional depth appropriate to, and exclusively for a mature audience.

To summarise - in virtue of the primacy of free speech and the non-extensibility of a duty of care for minors I do not see GTA3 as immoral. However if the status of games-as-speech changes, or if offence to women is given high moral authority then GTA3 would possibly be in a different legal and moral position, yet it would be far from alone. Similarly if GTA3 contained religious or racial imagery we would probably give it a different ethical status.

If you remain unconvinced by this form of argument but still believe in the merits of normative ethics then one is left in the arms of virtue ethics.

Virtue Ethics and the Good Player

Virtue theory is one of the oldest areas of philosophy and moral thought. It dates back to the ancient Greeks especially Aristotle who wrote his account of ethics in around 350BC. Paradoxically I believe virtue theory is the most relevant theory for an analysis of 21st century computer games.

Virtue theory is based on a very simple idea - the point of being human is to be virtuous. Applying this theory to video games we can put aside questions about whether they cause harm or offend against people tastes and simply ask: is playing a given computer game a morally good thing to do? To put it another way, would the virtuous person, say Socrates (often taken as the ideal of virtue), play GTA3?

What's fascinating about this approach is that it gets straight to the heart of computer games' unique nature - their interactivity. The fact that a video game is necessarily interactive means that if we play a

game we must make choices. Sure we make a choice to see a film or read a book and each of these are moral choices that say something about us. The difference with a game is that we make choices within the game itself - these choices are the game.

So when we choose to kill something in a game, we have in a very real sense made a moral choice to kill. But context plays a large role in the moral status of this choice. Blasting a Space Invader is hardly transgressive, but I would argue as games become more realistic and the choices we have in these games become wider then the moral force of our choices increases.

To illustrate my point I want to jump-cut to the film Westworld. In this movie the protagonists were placed in a world of androids that looked and sounded just like humans. Like a computer game, Westworld provided a context where killing these androids was seen, by the humans playing the game, as morally acceptable. However I would argue that in this case there was a moral reality to what the humans did, their feelings and emotions, the individual choices they made to kill what looked and felt like other humans makes their acts and intentions morally questionable.

With GTA3, both its context as a game and the context within the game (i.e., the gangland plot), give us adequate licence to play and enjoy freely. However there are still moral problems. For a game that seems so free we have a very restricted set of options. We can interact with just about any other character in the game, but this interaction is ostensibly violent. There is also the issue of what is known as the Hooker Cheat. To gain extra health one picks up a hooker, finds an isolated place and has sex with her. This costs money, so as soon as the hooker gets out of the car the player jumps out, kills the hooker, and takes the money back.

Within the context of the game this is a valid thing to do. A game of this nature about organized crime without hookers would be unbelievable. The problem is that the game seems to have an underlying positive bias towards using the Hooker Cheat as it can be done as many times as needed and is a logical tactic if one wants to win the game.

In my own view, and to step perilously into the area of game design, I would suggest that to even out the balance of choices that a player can make in the game, a consequence could be attached to the Hooker Cheat. For example, there could be a probability of drastically reducing ones health possibly irreversibly by having sex with a prostitute - the real world parallels for this are obvious. This would remove the underlying bias and make this one of many choices which include attendant risks and rewards.

Finally, to return to one of NOW's argument, they state: "if the games are just an escape, what does that say about how we escape? Is this our definition of "fun" now? Is this how we "play"?" - here I think they have a point. In the current crop of games the fictionalising effects context and form outweigh the intention stances and actions we take within the game, however if games become significantly more realistic then we as developers should re-assess whether they are still 'fun'.

I think that GTA3 is certainly getting near the border line. Personally I am happy to play GTA3 as I

believe that the fictional nature of the game contextualises my actions within the game space to such a degree that I do not consider my intentions to be un-ethical. However, I think that a classically virtuous person in the mould of Socrates would think that playing GTA was immoral, the fact that one plans to and then does have sex with a virtual prostitute and then makes the decision to kill her, would be a step too far.

This of course leaves GTA3 in a philosophical nether-world. Just like asking whether a tree makes a sound if it falls in the woods where no one can hear it, we are left with the question of whether a game is immoral if no one plays it. I do not propose to tackle this conundrum here, but would conclude that any game that forces a player to make choices or carry out virtual actions that they consider to be beyond the bounds of virtue is indeed, from a classical virtue ethics point of view unethical.

Conclusion

The philosophical problem with the popular debate about video games is that each side of the debate mix their modes of argument. For example the practical view that games harm children is counted with the right of free speech. But one of these arguments is consequentialist the other deontological and as you will recall the origin of these normative theories is that they aim to be rational and self consistent, except that each theory largely rules out the legitimacy of the others. Hence if one recognizes the power of a consequentialist argument then one either has to argue against it with another application of consiquentalism or discount this as a valid mode of argument and choose another battlefield.

This may seem an overly academic point. But it has real effects. While an effects vs rights argument seems valid in the heat of debate. Such an argument has no hope of being resolved. Because if the protagonists argue long enough they will simply find that the are arguing from different theoretical stances and that each argument has little or no bearing on the other.

In this analysis I have concentrated on a single game GTA3. An analysis of another game would follow similar lines but utilize different arguments based on the unique content that game, for instance the educational or relaxing qualities of games may weigh heavily in a consequentialist argument, or as noted above the rights or religious groups may enter into the deontological debate.

In the cast of GTA3 I have concluded that from a consequentialist position the game is not immoral as the weight of pleasure the game provides outweighs its potential harm, at least from the evidence we have at hand. From a Deontological point of view, free speech trumps other rights and duties issues meaning that again the game, at least from a quasi-legal interpretation, could not be considered immoral. But that this is open to a wider societal debate about games and freedom of speech which may result in a shifting of the law placing GTA3 and other games into a less clear cut position. Finally from a virtue ethics point of view I concluded that personally I would judge playing GTA3 in its present form as within my code of ethics, but the paradigm of virtue Socrates would probably opt not play the game as he would consider actions within the game as immoral.

Now you may not agree with any of these conclusions, but I hope that at least you can see their theoretical origins, the logic that informs them, the evidence that would prove or disprove them and the structure of institutionalised rights that do or don't support them. In other words using this philosophically based structure we could have rational arguments about the morality of GTA3, or any other computer game.

Hence, I suggest that developers, players and policy makers reflect on the structure of the arguments that they and others make. Further I would propose that everyone involved in the games debate examine the consequences, rights and virtues of gaming; that developers take potential harm seriously and welcome balanced studies, that policy makers take the benefits of gaming seriously, and that we look at rights and responsibilities not only from a legalistic point of view but from a view of real and changing social norms.

Lastly as one who favours a virtue based approach to ethics I would argue that its easy for each of us to make a personal judgement about the moral status of a game - just think about the choices you have to take to win, and consider what they say about you.

Author Bio

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Ren spends his time researching and writing about the implications of technology. This ranges from strategic market plans for global companies such as Cable and Wireless and white papers for companies such as IBM, to academic papers and philosophy based articles. His primary academic interest is the ethics of technology and he now specializes in the study of computer games and virtual environments. Ren is presenting a paper on Emerging Intellectual Property Rights in MMORPGs at ETHICOMP 2002 later this year.

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