

Ethical Reflection and Emotional Involvement in Computer Games

This paper focuses on the way computer games refer to the context of their formation and ask how they might stimulate the user's understanding of the world around him. The central question is: Do computer games have the potential to inspire our reflection about moral and ethical issues? And if so, by which means do they achieve this? Drawing on concepts of the ethical criticism in literary studies as proposed by Wayne C. Booth and Martha Nussbaum, I will argue in favor of an ethical criticism for computer games. Two aspects will be brought into focus: the ethical reflection in the artifact as a whole, and the recipient's emotional involvement. The paper aims at evaluating the interaction of game content and game structure in order to give an adequate insight into the way computer games function and affect us.

According to the cultural historicist Johan Huizinga (1955), playing games allows the player to transcend reality's boundaries and enter a fictional game world where the rules of "real life" are not effective and where he may act as someone else without fearing the consequences of "real life". Games take place in what Huizinga calls the "magic circle", a space characterized by the "as if" quality of the player's actions. Although this determination of games applies as well to computer games; they are more than just games, more than mere distractions from "real life." Computer games are cultural artifacts that are embedded in their specific cultural context and they comment on this context in a way other than literature and films do.

Ethical Criticism as a Means to Approach Computer Games

In the beginning of her book “Love’s Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature”, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum explains why she has for so long been interested in the mutual influence of ethics and literature. She sees the reason lying in her childhood when she spent many hours reading and declared novels as her best friends. Not only was she concerned about the protagonist’s fate, but the books she read also inspired her to think about highly philosophical issues concerning, for example, truth, and life, and love. Books became her friends, her “spheres of reflection” (Nussbaum 1990:11), as she calls them.

Today, many children and adolescents probably spend equal amounts of time playing computer and video games. Like books, these fictional worlds on the screen may offer alternative modes of being and living we are keen to explore. And like the literary characters in the books we read, the avatars introduced in these games may become somewhat like friends to us, and we may feel responsible for their well being. So, when Martha Nussbaum illustrates how the books she read made her the person she is today, can the same be said of today’s computer games as well? Can they have a similar impact on our lives and the ways we see the world?

Most of the people who play computer games would probably immediately answer: Of course they can! Computer game heroes can serve as role models or idols just as literary or filmic characters do. But above that, how do computer games influence the way we think, especially if we take playing as an epistemological model for gaining insight and knowledge of the world?

The ethical criticism proposed by Wayne C. Booth in the 1960s and later resumed by Martha Nussbaum from a philosophical perspective in the 1990s draws on the assumption that novels and other

narrative texts can have a strong ethical influence on their readers by engaging them in moral conflicts and therefore exercise their practical moral sense. Narratives achieve this through rhetorical devices such as “point of view” or “reliability of the narrator.” The reader witnesses the emotional perturbations of the protagonists and involuntarily forms an opinion about what he is told and how he is told. One problem with this approach is obviously that literature can easily be misunderstood and exploited as an instrument for moral guidance. It is certain that literature does not simply convey ideas, but makes proposals that the reader may agree to deal with according to his own moral predispositions, or may not. Literature expresses a particular sense of life to which the reader involuntarily and automatically takes a stance. Additionally, it can be noticed that literature sometimes uses rhetorical strategies to imply the reader emotionally and morally; literature counts consciously for a certain mental predisposition of its readers. Ghost stories or lurid tales, for example, are written with a certain reader in mind and they only function as they should if the reader reacts as the anticipated ideal or implied reader inscribed in the story.

In her introduction “Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature”, Martha Nussbaum explicitly draws attention to the necessity for an equal consideration of content and form when reading literature from an ethical perspective. (The equal consideration of “form” appears to be one way to meet the accusations of subjectivity when it comes to an ethical criticism of aesthetic phenomena.) It is not only *what* the author chooses to narrate, but also *how* he tells his story that illustrates a certain point of view or outlook on the world. The form or style of literary texts, Nussbaum argues, “itself expresses choices and selections, and sets up, in the reader, certain activities and transactions rather than others” (Nussbaum 1990:5). By combining form and content adequately, literature can make contributions to the reader’s moral imagination. Nussbaum goes even further by

claiming that literature is not only capable of ethical theorizing as well as philosophy, but even does so more vividly. While philosophy appeals to the intellect at an abstract level, she argues in “Reading for Life”, literature also involves the reader emotionally and as an individual person (although many philosophers would probably dissent and argue that philosophy, too, is a highly emotional field):

For philosophy, too, has its seductive power, its power to lure the reader away from the richly textured world of particulars to the lofty heights of abstraction. [...] On the other hand, the seductions of literature can frequently return us to a richer and more complex world; and the very enchantments of the novel can lead the reader past her tendencies to deny complexity, to evade the messiness of feeling (Nussbaum 1990:238).

The aspect of authorial agency as the power to select among a variety of possibilities to tell a story becomes even more relevant regarding the gaming structure in computer and video games. By offering the player a set of options (for example to kill people in the game world) and denying others (for example to kill kids in the game world) the designer of a game also makes a moral statement. The options the designers of a game provide are first of all only relevant on the level of the source code. Every player movement has to be programmed in order to be considered as valuable input. But as soon as these decisions obtain a semantic denotation, they become part of the narrative universe of the game. Semantized allocations and restrictions of options on the level of the narrative can then refer to the implied ethics of the game (Sicart 2005).

The division of the game into a **ludic** and a **narrative level** corresponds to the distinction between form and content in traditional linear narratives. I understand the ludic level as the basic conflict structure of the game as it is written in the source code. The narrative level is placed upon this basis. It is on the one hand intertwined

with it, while on the other hand it is on this narrative level that the ludic structure becomes visible. The ludic level cannot strictly be separated from the narrative level. One only gets an idea of the ludic level through the narrative level (unless he is able to read the source code.) The analytical tools of the literary *Possible Worlds Theory* (PWT) as drafted by Marie-Laure Ryan turn out to be very suitable when analyzing the correlation of conflict structure and narrative layer of computer games and to get an idea of the moral system that underlies the game world (Ryan 1991).

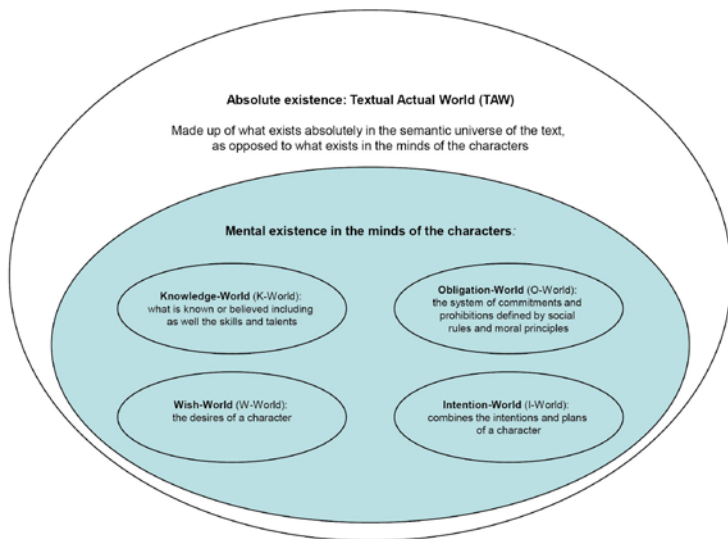


Fig. 1: Analytical Categories of the Possible Worlds Theory (based on Ryan 1991)

First of all, a text establishes a narrative universe that constitutes a reference world called the *Textual Actual World* (TAW). Opposed to this reference world, there are several possible worlds that only exist in the minds of the characters such as *Knowledge-World*, *Intention-World*, *Obligation-World*, or *Wish-World*. These different worlds are

not always compatible, in fact if they were, the narrative would be missing a conflict and probably bore its readers. Accordingly, “the relations among the worlds of the narrative system are not static, but change from state to state. The plot is the trace left by the movement of these worlds within the textual universe” (Ryan 1991:119). A conflict between two or more of the character’s worlds or one of the character’s worlds and the TAW can cause movement: “For a move to occur and a plot to be started, there must be some sort of conflict in the textual universe. Plots originate in knots – and knots are created when the lines circumscribing the worlds of the narrative universe, instead of coinciding, intersect each other. In order to disentangle the lines in their domain, characters resort to plotting, with almost inevitable effect of creating new knots in some other domain” (Ryan 1991:120). This understanding of plot and movement in a narrative can be applied to certain computer games in order to analyze their conflict structure. The game is initiated with some sort of conflict the player has to solve, with ever new conflicts coming along the way. In the following, the game FAHRENHEIT (2005) will be analyzed by means of the categories of the *Possible Worlds Theory* in order to demonstrate the correlation of ludic and narrative level and give an impression of the playing process.

The game’s story in FAHRENHEIT is elaborated from two different perspectives. First, there is the perspective of the protagonist of the game, Lucas Kane. At the beginning of the game he finds himself waking up in the restroom of a little restaurant where apparently he has just murdered a man. Lucas does not know the man and does not know what happened; he committed the murder in a state of trance or unconsciousness. The first conflict or quest therefore is to leave the restaurant unattended, the general quest of the game is to find out about the reasons for this murder and prove Luca’s innocence.

The second perspective that is offered to the player is the one of the two investigating police officers, Carla Valenti and Tyler Miles.

These two perspectives alternate and the player can act as either one of these three; he can choose between either being Lucas or switching between Carla and Tyler. FAHRENHEIT mixes classic adventure game quests with quests that require more action game-like skills, such as speed and precision in the pressing of buttons. The dialogue scenes also combine these two principles by offering up to four possible topics among which the player has to choose, one in a given time frame (about 5 to 7 seconds) in order to communicate with another character in the game.

The *Textual Actual World* equals at first sight our own perception of reality. The game is set in New York City in the month of January in today's time. Yet, some clues hint at supernatural forces agitating in that world, which the avatar, Lucas Kane, does not understand himself. When considering the different worlds we have to make the distinction between the world from the perspective of the avatar and the world from the perspective of the player. In the beginning of the game, the avatar's *Knowledge-World* is more or less congruent with the player's *Knowledge-World*. Lucas finds himself having committed a murder without having any memory of the act itself and therefore without knowing what actually happened and why. The same holds true for the player – only that his attention has already been drawn to a crow sitting in the restroom's window, a figure that in fiction often serves as a symbol for supernatural and ominous forces. The player can therefore already assume that something supernatural has taken place and will cross the game's storyline again. Additionally, the player starts to broaden his own *Knowledge-World* by gaining control over the navigation and the menu. What is also still unknown to him is the knowledge of his abilities as player of the avatar.

Also the player's and the avatar's *Obligation-Worlds* are more or less equally assignable. Murder is labeled a crime and hence morally not justifiable. The police are introduced as the legal institution that prosecutes these crimes. Although the player assumes this, he has

to verify if his own moral system is applicable to the game by trying out various options. The option to flee the place, for example, is not provided. Neither is the possibility to confess the crime to the police officer who is sitting at the bar of the restaurant. An appalled and paralyzed reaction to the murder or the waiting for things to happen is condemned as well. The time frame for reacting to the murder and leaving the restaurant is limited. When it is over, the police officer finds Lucas in the restroom and arrests him, the game ends. One might conclude from these restrictions that cowards are dismissed right at the beginning of the game and only the brave and curious should continue. Not allowing these alternative options probably has structural rather than moral reasons. It is remarkable though that while the game does not continue these alternative threads on the ludic level, they are considered and realized on the narrative level in cut-scenes and therefore characterize the avatar indirectly and give the player a hint of the implied ethics.

The *Wish-World* of all three avatars (Lucas, Carla, and Tyler) is partly symbolized through an energy bar that shows the avatar's state of affections and that can be filled in the first chapter by actions that make Lukas feel comfortable and more safe such as "eat", "drink", "play jukebox", "remove dead body", or "hide knife"; and is lowered by actions that attract attention or arouse suspicion for example the following: "talk to waitress", "talk to cop", or "leave without paying." The more points the player makes in this chapter, the better he is prepared for what is coming.

Intentions and wishes go hand in hand in the first chapter: Lucas wishes to erase his tracks as well as possible and escape the restaurant before the police finds out about the murder. His intention is to look for the best way to do so without drawing too much attention towards himself. The player adopts these concerns by trying to fill the energy bar. Obviously, the intentions of Tyler and Carla in the second chapter are directly opposed to Lucas' in the first chapter. Whereas

he wants to cover his traces, the investigators want to detect them. The player has to adopt both perspectives and all concerns to an equal extent in order to progress. The possibility to even deliberate whether he wants to give one party a priority over the other is not intended in the game and this is what establishes kind of a moral conflict in the player.

This close analysis of FAHRENHEIT demonstrates how the player gains insight of the ludic structure of the game through the narrative structure. Restrictions on the level of the source code are expressed and made reasonable on the narrative level. In the case of FAHRENHEIT this is realized consequently throughout the game and I believe the correlation of both levels and not the independent functioning of each might be one criterion for a good game. In the case of FAHRENHEIT, the player is denied elemental decisions, for example to choose which side he wants to be on. At the same time, he is offered less far-reaching options to solve the game's conflict and it is still up to him if everything goes well in the end. From the perspective of an ethical criticism, both levels, the ludic, as well as the narrative as correspondents to the levels of form and content in literature, should therefore be considered in order to grasp the idea of a game; the outlook of the world implied in and transported through the game.

Forms of Emotional Involvement in Computer Games

Earlier I mentioned Nussbaum's claim for the heuristic value or ethical potential of literature since it not only appeals to the intellect, but also involves the reader emotionally. Above all, it is the emotional involvement that characterizes computer games. However, we have to differentiate between two different ways of emotional involvement. One is instantaneous and spontaneous: We play a game, because we want to win a game. This is the first focus of our interest and if the game is good we hold up this commitment throughout the game. But some games also involve the player on a second level emotionally,

which is comparable to the emotional involvement in literature and depends first of all on the narrative level. It makes a difference if we have to arrange blocks in an optimal position or if we have to save the princess from the jaws of a monkey. In games with a narrative framing, we are concerned about the avatar's fate, not only because the avatar is our representative in the fictional world and the instrument we need in order to actually play and win the game, but because we feel for him, we identify with his concerns and want to know how the story turns out for him and for us. The narrative framing of a gaming context can affect the gaming motivations.

In literature it is through the narrator and/or the protagonist that we are drawn emotionally into the fictional universe of the text. During the reading process we establish a kind of emotional relationship to the protagonist characterized above all by the emotion of empathy, which is amongst other things influenced by the narrator's point of view (Schneider 2002). In computer games there is no narrator to tell the story. We experience the story directly as it happens or at least this is suggested. What is of similar importance for the emotional involvement in digital games, though, is the relationship between avatar and player. (It would be interesting to analyze if players preference for certain games depends partly on their sympathy for the avatar.)

Before demonstrating some forms of emotional involvement in computer games with three examples, I would like to focus first on the communicative situation in games since there is one highly relevant aspect that has to be kept in mind when bringing together literary concepts with computer games. This is the fact that we have to play for the text, it is the ergodicity of these texts, as Espen Aarseth stated in his book *Cybertext*, that influences the relationship of player and avatar to great extent. He describes the communicative situation in Adventure Games as an "intrigue structure" (Aarseth 1997:111-114).

[Extratextual]	[Intratextual]		[Extratextual]
	Implied Author	Implied User	
Real Author	Intrigant	↔ Intriguee	Real Reader
		Avatar	

Fig. 2: *Intrigue Structure in Cybertexts* (based on Aarseth 1997)

Unlike narrator and implied author, the *intrigant*, rather than guiding through the story and the game, complicates it. He can be seen as the player's adversary. The *intriguee* on the other side holds the positions of the implied reader and the narratee. The *intrigant* wants to prevent the *intriguee* from solving the problems too easily; the *intriguee*'s aim is to overcome all the obstacles installed by the *intrigant* in order to win the game. This situation varies in different game genres, but the formula of *intrigant* – *intrigue* – *intriguee* generally applies to most of the game genres.

On the side of the *intrigue*, player and avatar work hand in hand. It is first of all on the ludic level that this relation is determined. The player is given certain options to act on other non-playable characters or objects in the game world (e.g. fight, talk, pick up objects, etc.) and forbidden others (e.g. to go where he likes and to ask what he likes).

The game SYBERIA (2002) serves as a good example for how the relationship between avatar and player can also be influenced on the narrative level. Kate Walker, the avatar in SYBERIA, is given strong psychological traits; she is compared to others an exceedingly de-

fined and personalized avatar. This implies that the player's way to interpret the game world is to great extent left out. He is forced to adopt Kate's perspective. It is often argued that avatars need to be flat characters that leave room for the player to come in. Yet it seems, depending on the game genre, that also games with round, i.e. autonomous characters are attractive for players, because they offer new schemata of thinking and acting that can be; other than in literature, tested. This relationship between avatar and player can be considered a form of emotional involvement. In the case of SYBERIA, it is possible that the player rather than thinking about what he himself would do, might get to a point where the answer to the question, "What would my avatar do in this situation?" is more relevant to him. Judging from what he already knows about his avatar already, he might then find the solution to the given problem. What I just sketched out can best be realized in adventure games because they have a determined game structure that leaves only little room for deliberation and negotiation on behalf of the player.

A different form of emotional involvement is realized in FAHRENHEIT, a game I already mentioned. Like SYBERIA, FAHRENHEIT introduces an avatar that is predefined as an autonomous character that reacts emotionally and in a very personal way to the things that happened to him. Lucas Kane, the avatar of FAHRENHEIT is no hero in the classical sense; he actually was not looking for this challenge. He is an anti-hero or a tragic hero and FAHRENHEIT is the extraordinary story of an ordinary man, as he says himself in the introductory sequence. Here the player is inspired to ask not so much what the avatar would do, but what he himself would do if he were in such a situation. A feature that supports this impression is the design of the dialogue scenes. As in other games, the player can choose between several possible questions or answers, but here he is only given a short time frame to select between these options. The player therefore has not much time to think about possible consequences for the progression of the game, but has to decide spontaneously and emotionally.

A third form of emotional involvement in games can be discovered in *GTA SAN ANDREAS* (2005). What is of importance here is first of all the introductory sequence. The *Textual Actual World* of the game is introduced, and especially the categories of “good” and “bad” executed in the game world. Carl Johnson, the protagonist of the game is the good, misunderstood boy who is stigmatized by the bad cops. They want to foist a murder on him which he did not commit. This introductory sequence therefore functions as the reference foil to which everything in the gaming process has to be set into relation. It sets up a framework that evaluates illegitimate actions as acts in self-defense and provides new moral schemata. Therefore, the introductory sequence is of great importance here, it provides the player with the psychological and moral reasoning of the occurrences in the course of the game and commits the player to the game’s ethics.

All three forms of emotional involvement sketched here have in common that they combine the player’s perspective from outside the game with the player’s perspective inside the game through the eyes of an avatar. This is something that cannot be realized to equal extent in literature, since literature does not involve the reader in the unfolding of the story. The forms of emotional involvement in computer games are various, they go far beyond empathy or compassion and these three examples can only be first approaches in describing the aesthetic and emotional experience of computer games. But they already indicate that computer games are contextualized artifacts that might distract the player from “real life” and from himself, but that always find multitudinous forms of referring back to the player and his mental and emotional predisposition. Additionally to literature and film, computer games can be regarded as media that stretch our moral senses. A computer game can serve as a playing ground for the other in us. But at the same time, a computer game is also a playing ground for the self in us.

References

Aarseth, Espen (1997): *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: Hopkins UP.

Attridge, Derek (1999): "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other", in: *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 114/1, 20-31.

Booth, Wayne C. (1988): *The Company We Keep. An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley: California UP.

— (2001): *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: Chicago UP.

Buell, Lawrence (1999): "In Pursuit of Ethics", in: *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 114/1, 7-19.

Davis, Todd F./Womack, Kenneth (Eds.) (2001): *Mapping the Ethical Turn. A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, Charlottesville: Virginia UP.

Hoffmann, Gerhard/Hornung, Alfred (Eds.) (1996): *Ethics and Aesthetics. The Moral Turn of Postmodernism*, Heidelberg: Winter.

Huizinga, Johan (1955): *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, Boston: Beacon [1938].

Manovich, Lev (2001): *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge/London: MIT.

Nünning, Ansgar (2001): "On the Perspective Structure of Narrative Texts. Steps toward a Constructivist Narratology", in: *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, ed. by W. van Peer and S. Chatman, Albany: SUNY, 207-223.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven (1992): *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York: Oxford UP.

- Parker, David** (1993): "The Turn to the Ethics in the 1990s", in: *The Critical Review* 33, 3-14.
- Perron, Bernard** (2005): "A Cognitive Psychological Approach to Gameplay Emotions", *Changing Views – Worlds in Play. Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference*, <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.58345.pdf>.
- Phelan, James** (1996): *Narrative as Rhetoric. Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*, Columbus: Ohio UP.
- Rabinowitz, Peter J./Phelan, James** (1998): *Before Reading. Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*, Columbus: Ohio UP.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure** (1991): *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- (Ed.) (2004): *Narrative across Media. The Languages of Storytelling*, Lincoln: Nebraska UP.
- Schneider, Ralf** (2002): "Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction", in: *Style* 35/4, 607-640.
- (2005): "Hypertext Narrative and the Reader: A View from Cognitive Theory", in: *The Cognitive Turn: Papers in Cognitive Literary Studies*, ed. by M. Toolan and J.J. Weber, Basingstoke: Taylor & Francis, 197-208.
- Sicart, Miguel** (2005): "Game, Player, Ethics: A Virtue Approach to Computer Games", *International Review of Information Ethics* 4, <http://www.i-r-i-e.net/inhalt/004/Sicart.pdf>.
- (2005): "The Ethics of Computer Game Design", *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference*, <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.55524.pdf>.
- Wolf, Mark J.P./Perron, Bernard** (Eds.) (2003): *The Video Game Theory Reader*, New York/London: Routledge.

— (2003): *Virtual Morality. Morals, Ethics, and New Media*,
New York et al.: Lang.

FAHRENHEIT (2005), Atari, Playstation 2.

GTA SAN ANDREAS (2005), Rockstar Games, Playstation 2.

SYBERIA (2002), Vivendi Universal, PC.

Biography



Kirsten Pohl, MA

PhD Student at the International Graduate Centre
for the Study of Culture at the University of Giessen.

Research:

Ethics and Aesthetics in Computer Games, Computer Games
as an Expressive Medium, Mechanisms and Strategies of
Involvement in Computer Games.

kirsten.pohl@gcsc.uni-giessen.de