

Review: *Ethics of Computer Gaming: A Groundwork*, by Samuel Ulbricht. 2022. Palgrave Macmillan. xvii + 111 pp.

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Samuel Ulbricht's 2022 book *Ethics of Computer Gaming: A Groundwork* is a translation of the original German *Ethik des Computerspielens*, published in 2020 by Springer-Verlag GmbH. It classifies playing computer games as either amoral or immoral through the three approaches to normative ethics: utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and deontology. Ulbricht asks if it is even possible to act immorally when playing a computer game and, using Kendall L. Walton's (1978) theory of fiction and both Elizabeth Anscombe (1957) and Donald Davidson's (1963) theories of action, lays the groundwork for answering said question.

Ulbricht acknowledges that before an action can be deemed ethical or not, it must first be declared an action. Digital actions—or quasi-actions, as he describes them—are in the tricky liminal space between real actions and imaginary ones. Here is where Walton's (1978) theory of fiction finds its place in *Ethics of Computer Gaming*. Walton made a distinction between ordinary emotions and emotions related to fiction by calling the latter "quasi-emotions." For example, a person could be grief-stricken over the death of a fictional character even though a real person has not died. The realness of the emotion is not in question, even though the realness of the event is. It is the same with in-game actions, Ulbricht asserts. A person may cut down all the trees on an island in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, but no real trees were cut. The quasi-actions and quasi-emotions have a level of realness to the player that gives them moral weight, even if the action/event has not taken place in the real world.

Through its four chapters, *Ethics of Computer Gaming* examines the different kinds of actions a person can take and how those actions, within the context of computer games, can be evaluated ethically.

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Chapter 1 outlines what makes a computer game and spends significant time discussing the difference between gaming and games, which is specifically relevant in its native German where “game” (the objects) and “to game” (the verb) are the same word: “Spiel.” Ulbricht is not addressing computer games as objects here, but instead as digital places to play. He argues it is more relevant to study what a player does in a game than the game object itself, since ethics deals with the rightness or wrongness of an activity. This is in direct contrast to Miguel Sicart’s (2011) work, where Sicart defines games as physical, moral objects and asserts that engaging with games inherently exercises moral thinking. Ulbricht believes these are independent questions: what a game is versus what one does with or in a game.

In Chapter 2, Ulbricht breaks actions down into their practical syllogisms and uncovers that it is not only the act itself but the intention and the outcome that determines its ethical value. He asserts the need for precise separation of real and fictional aspects of videogame actions, as well as a robust terminology of the fictional or physical actions (p. 22). For example, a player pushing buttons or moving a joystick has moral relevance in the same way the in-game fictitious depiction does. Ulbricht describes these actions as virtual, fictional, and fictive: virtual actions are ordinary actions that aim to achieve real purposes; fictional actions are performed by the player with their purpose in the game world; and, lastly, fictive actions are the quasi-actions noted earlier where the fictive character does something within the game, which is not necessarily caused by the player’s will. In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD, 2020), for instance, a virtual action would be pressing the A button, a fictional action would be the player’s intent to use their axe to chop down a tree, and a fictive action would be the avatar swinging the axe at the tree.

Ulbricht moves to evaluate these actions through utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics in the second half of the book. Chapter 3 argues that the intention of a player is another aspect of in-game acting that determines its morality. This intentionality is borrowed from Davidson’s (1963) work, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” and Anscombe’s (1957) work, *Intention*, where they both argue that the major premise of practical reasoning—or why one does what they do—is their “intention in action.”

For example, if a player wants to play a game which requires killing other player characters because they like competing with their friends, there is a different moral evaluation than if they want to play that same game because they want to make their friends suffer. The actions may be the same, but the intention and motivation are very different. As Ulbricht writes: “a successive answer to the question of ‘why’ forms a chain of reasons that fully explains a person’s action” (pp. 18–19).

Having determined that the why of an action matters as much as the “how,” the second half of Chapter 3 moves towards ethics evaluation. Ulbricht defines the three major approaches to ethics (virtue ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism) before diving into each. Again, Ulbricht’s motives are not to make judgments on the effects of playing or on games themselves. Instead, “the question is whether there are *genuine* moral differences between computer game actions and ordinary actions” (p. 51, emphasis in the original). This is why he uses utilitarianism; the major difference between in-game actions and real-life actions is arguably the “realness” of them and the “realness” of the consequences. If this is the case, evaluating consequences is a natural space to answer the major questions of this book.

In the final section of the book, Ulbricht argues against the amoralist theories of gaming: that games are fiction and therefore cannot be moral/immoral. He concludes in Chapter 4 that games can be amoral—in fact, it is reasonable to assume that playing games is generally unproblematic—but they can also be morally wrong when they produce more suffering than pleasure. Ulbricht notes as well that if a player were to delight in a particularly egregious act in-game, it is less the act that is immoral and more the player that is immoral. Again, the intention or the derived pleasure matters more than the fictive action itself. In an example drawn from *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), Ulbricht notes that even acting in explicitly immoral ways (such as torturing another person) may not be considered immoral because the player is not meant to want to carry out the action; instead, they must do so in order to continue with the game.

This book approaches ethics in videogames in a unique way. Unlike Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum (2016) in their work *Values at Play in Digital Games*, Ulbricht removes the intention of the game developer from the equation. In this level of analysis, the creator’s intention is irrelevant. Also unlike Sicart (2011), Ulbricht does not differentiate games, genres, or physical representations of games. As he states: “I am not concerned with an evaluation of computer games . . . but rather with an evaluation of computer gaming” (p. 48). Where other game studies ethicists might draw on virtue ethics to state that practicing immoral or moral decision making in-game has moral relevance, Ulbricht concludes using the same ethical framework that the action is nearly immaterial compared to the intent. The entire focus of the book is about intention becoming fictive action. In this way, this book contributes to the collective canon of ethical game studies.

A major strength of *Ethics of Computer Gaming* is in the holistic nature of Ulbricht’s analysis, which examines the actions of players from intention to execution and their moral implications. Ulbricht argues that intention is a driving factor of both action and its moral value. Understanding the moral implications of an action requires identifying the player’s judgment of that action. The motivation, intention, and

effective desire of the player, based on the game's requirements, are the foundation of what makes a fictive action moral, amoral, or immoral.

There are valid critiques of *Ethics of Computer Gaming*. For example, Ulbricht both dismisses and assumes developer intentions. If a player is not meant to want to carry out an immoral action, that means the developers' intention has relevance. The book also focuses specifically on the smallest description of an action (flexing a finger to push a button) but does not address the larger picture of computer gaming as cultural practice.

As Ulbricht himself notes, this work is meant to be foundational to further study. In the conclusion, he states "the detailed action-theoretical analysis lays the foundation for being able to carry out moral-theoretical investigations of computer gaming" (p. 101). This book will prove an interesting addition to researchers interested in the ethical implications of videogames, as its conclusions are not necessarily congruent with other theorists.

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