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Constructivism in Video Games

Konstruktivism u
video-igrama

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Abstract

This paper proposes a way to implement a constructivist ethical approach in the regards to video games. The view of constructivism shall be taken as an agent-based view for act based theoretical approaches did not have much success in tackling the morality of a player. Constructivism that is being taken into the account is a procedure of moral reasoning derived from the theories of John Rawls and Thomas Scanlon. The strategy of this argument will be to expand on the paper written by Eric Sheng in which he stresses his concerns on the immoral playthrough of the player. This expansion of Sheng's argument will shed light on the different ways in which we play video games and that the same acts do not have to have the same moral problems. Therefore, the constructivist procedure will be used as a way to determine an answer to the question of the individual motivation behind a virtual act and show the moral implications of it. At the end of the paper, the weaknesses and the benefits of this approach shall be stressed.

Keywords: moral constructivism, video games, act theory, player, agent-based theory

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad predlaže način za implementaciju konstruktivističkog etičkog pristupa na fenomen video igara. Pogled na konstruktivizam će se uzeti kao gledište fokusirano na agensu, uzevši u obzir da teorijski pristupi zasnovani na činovima nisu imali mnogo uspeha u elaboraciji morala igrača. Konstruktivizam koji se uzima u obzir je postupak moralnog rezonovanja izveden iz teorija Džona Rolsa i Tomasa Skenlona. Strategija ovog argumenta svodi se na ekspanziju rada koji je napisao Erik Šeng, u kojem naglašava svoju zabrinutost zbog nemoralnog načina igranja igara od strane igrača. Ekspanzija Šengovog argumenta će razjasniti različite načine na koje igramo video igre, te da ista dela ne moraju da imaju iste moralne probleme. Stoga će se konstruktivistički postupak koristiti kao način da se odredi odgovor na pitanje motivacije pojedinca iza virtuelnog čina i pokaže moralne implikacije istog. Na kraju rada biće naglašene slabosti i prednosti ovog pristupa.

Ključne reči: moralni konstruktivizam, video igre, teorija čina, igrač, teorija agensa

Introduction

Video games have been a growing concern for philosophers concerned with ontology, ethics and epistemology. In many regards, it is easy to see why; they open a new world for us to participate in, a world which is an, as Miguel Sicart would argue, an aggregate of systems and worlds (Sicart, 2009: 21). Like with any new form of art, questions are raised in the general public, as well as in the field of humanistic research. In this paper, the question of ethics shall be up on the spotlight. The most important question would be – can we even have an ethics of video games? Could we use the already established ethical traditions to give an account of the video game ethics? Since video games themselves are a relatively new phenomenon in comparison with the history of philosophy, the debate on these questions is currently a “hot topic”. On the other hand, surely these questions require a whole book or two dedicated to answering them. Therefore, my ambitions shall be lowered, and the purpose of this paper is the continuation of the debate opened by Eric Shang in the paper “Why Is Virtual Wrongdoing Morally Disquieting, Insofar as It Is?” (Sheng, 2020), which has won an Oxford uehiro prize in practical ethics. Shang’s argument shall be presented in the following chapters. This challenge would open a door for this paper to present one way of ethical deliberation about video games which is found within the tradition of moral constructivism. In this way, constructivism shall be shown as a moral theory which could provide necessary tools for us to give explanation of certain events which might occur on the relation between the player and the game. However, there are certain drawbacks with this approach. They will be mentioned after presenting the approach itself.

Problem of Ethics in Video Games

When talking about ethics, we usually talk about three traditions which are in the basis of every variation that we currently have – deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics. We shall briefly describe these moral theories. Deontology is a view which takes roots from Kantian thought. As Onora O’Neil rightfully notices, Kant’s true purpose was to derive moral norms from the process of deriving them from reason itself (O’Neil, 1993: 176). These norms, or, as Kant would call them, duties (Kant, 1998). In the contemporary deontology, these duties would be constraints or prohibitions of moral actions. For example, we have a duty not to do X, we

have a duty not to kill, lie, steal etc. The obligations and duties arise from the need to respect the autonomy of the other. Therefore, every *person* who is a person in the sense that he/she is a rational agent has autonomy which should be respected regardless of the circumstances (Davis, 1993: 206). In this regard, deontological theory does not ask the question of “what consequence will my act produce”, but its focus is the motive behind the action and the respect for the autonomy of the rational person. On the other hand, utilitarianism can be considered as a fusion of consequentialism and welfarism¹. Consequentialism is at the heart of utilitarianism, and it assumes a forward-looking morality. That is to say, something is morally justified if and only if it maximizes the overall good which is elaborated within the concept of welfare. In short, utilitarianism provides us with rules that ensure functionality (Kymlicka, 2002: 12). At the end, we have virtue ethics which is based on the theories of the Hellenistic philosophers, most notably, Aristotle. Contemporary virtue ethics is not focused on the act theory, but on the agent of those acts (Hursthouse, 2003: 21). Virtue ethics asks the question – what would a moral agent be like? Virtues, in this regard, are character traits that are constituting the just moral agent. Virtues have their opposition – the vices. The topic of virtue ethics is very much characterized by this dichotomy.

Having described three major ethical traditions in a very brief note, let us turn towards one very influential text which was published by Matt McCormick – *“Is it Wrong to Play Violent Video Games?”*. McCormick argues that neither deontology, nor utilitarianism can provide us an adequate account of video game ethics (McCormick, 2001: 284). If both of these theories are act based theories, the act of playing video games itself is not problematic. According to McCormick, *we have seen that the utilitarian cannot provide much support for the belief that we may have that there is something wrong about the games. And the Kantian response seems to reduce to the recommendation that we should all be good sports when we play games by treating each other with respect and dignity.* (McCormick, 2001: 284)

This is, I would argue, completely true. Deontology is only concerned with the deliberate, rational agents and the actions originating from them. We have no obligations nor moral codex to show us what we owe to NPC’s. On the other hand, deontology is very much in effect when talking about the relation between a player X and a player Y. It tends to elaborate what do we owe to another player during the process of playing a game.

1 Welfarism in the sense of a utility that needs to be maximized. During the history of utilitarianism, the most preferable form of welfarism was hedonism. However, during the contemporary debate, we have various views of utilitarianism, most noticeable is the preference utilitarianism which centers around preferences rather than hedonistic values.

On the other hand, utilitarianism can be very fluid, however, it still tells us nothing about the importance of the video game morality. For example, utilitarianism can justify the most monstrous acts within one virtual system if this promotes the maximization of welfare of the player. One can also consider our need for escapism and psychological venting. The virtual world provides both an escape and a way in which we can vent. Utilitarianism would say – if that is the case, and if one would get benefit from playing video games, then one should do whatever one wants within that realm as long as it does not harm anyone. NPC's, of course, cannot be harmed. If we, for example, play one monstrous game in which we torture an NPC in the most grotesque ways, utilitarianism would say – go for it. Deontology, on the other hand, would not have anything to say about it.

If that is the case, then act theories cannot show us anything important when it comes to video games. The same can be said about the various forms of art as well, however, video games are very specific in the regard in which the consumer of a medium is also an agent of action. Having said that, agent-based theory should be necessary to answer to the needs of video game ethics. McCormick's answer lies in the theory of Aristotelian virtue ethics which is, as mentioned, agent based (McCormick, 2001: 285). In this regard, the question shifts from "is it moral to play video-games?" to "what do the acts performed within a video game say about the player?". McCormick, sadly, does not expand much on this issue apart from providing this theory as a potential solution. It seems rather obvious that virtue ethics offers a good intuition on how to think about the ethical question of playing video games, however, it also comes with a lot of theoretical baggage necessary to provide a valid explanation (such as that of naturalism, teleology and flourishing (Rasmussen, 1991: 32). This baggage is also misleading as it would shift our discussion from the relation that matters (player-context-game) towards the player himself. Another issue that I find with this view is that it tends to provide a general outlook on the practice of playing video games; an outlook which simplifies the situational and contextual complexity. Video games are, as stated, something very individually perceived, and we play video games for various reasons. For this reason, agent-based theory is necessary, however, one agent-based theory cannot provide us with general answers. So, in this regard, we would need a contextual agent-based theory.

In this paper, it will be argued that we do need an agent-based theory to explain particular actions within video games. However, this account does have various limitations and it is very context based. That is to say, this theory cannot be universalized in the sense in which it can give explanation to every case of wrongful acts within video games, but it can show what act is not right in a certain context. By not right, I mean an ac-

tion which we consider morally concerning when relating it to the agent, or, in this context, a player. The theory that is under consideration is the ethical theory of constructivism. By saying that it is a contextual theory, I would like to provide its procedure on the case which was opened by Eric Sheng. Following from this, the method is quite clear – first step is offering the theory of constructivism, while the second step is answering to Sheng's moral problem of video games.

Moral Constructivism – An Outlook

Constructivism is a relatively new and a broad field of ethical thought. By saying that we are going to be concerned with constructivism, we must point out which constructivism we have in mind. On the one hand, constructivism has been used to describe a method of moral deliberation. We shall call this constructivism of procedural deliberation. The second way to think about constructivism arises from the first method, it is thinking about constructivism as a metaethical theory. Now, which of these constructivist views shall be taken as a representative view for this paper? First of all, metaethics is not a valid method of explaining this phenomenon. When talking about metaethics, we are concerned with moral ontology, moral psychology and, above all, moral linguistics (Miller, 2003: 3-4). This is not a normative, nor an applied theory, but a descriptive one. Having said that, this method is incompatible with the line of investigation proposed in this paper. Therefore, we are going to focus on the constructivism of procedural deliberation.

One of the first coherent views of constructivism was proposed by John Rawls in his reading of Kantian moral theory. This view shall be taken as a basis for the rest of this paper. Rawls, being one of the most (if not, the most) prominent political thinkers of contemporary age, writes this text in order to provide substance to the theory of the original position, a position through which we acquire the principles of justice, he has presented in his *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1999: 102). Therefore, Rawls's reading of Kant is for the purpose of giving more credibility to his political theory. However, a process of moral deliberation can be derived from it, something that Thomas Scanlon has introduced in his theory of moral contractualism. Many concepts were mentioned without giving any elaboration on them; therefore, we should carry on with the deconstruction of these concepts and an elaboration of the moral constructivism based on procedural deliberation.

First, let us start with Rawls. A good starting point could be seen in one citation which can provide an overall framework. On constructivism, Rawls states:

The constructionist view accepts from the start that a moral conception can establish but a loose framework for deliberation which must rely very considerably on our powers of reflection and judgment (Rawls, 1980: 560).

Let us provide a few comments on this quotation. Constructivism provides formal principles which are acquired by the moral deliberation based on reflection. Agents of construction perform the process of constructing moral and (for Rawls) political principles under a procedure. This procedure is the key for understanding constructivism. The procedure encompasses a relational connection between the agent of construction and the principles which this agent acquires. For Rawls, this procedure is seen in the notion of the reflective equilibrium (Rawls, 1999: 42-43). Rawls urges us to imagine a hypothetical procedure in which we are rational agents who are constructing a perfect society. At the start of the procedure, the agent of construction has his/her intuitions on what is moral and what is not, what is justified and what is not as well as egoistic tendencies. However, this procedure restricts the agent in one very specific way – the agent is also subjected to those principles that he/she chooses. So, you have an agent with starting intuitions, those intuitions go through a test of universality. If those intuitions cannot pass the test of universality, they go backwards in the process of the constructing procedure, and the agent changes them in a way in which they can do so (Ibid., 43). This test of universality is Kantian in nature, it is a variation of his first formulation of categorical imperative: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant, 1998: 31). In Rawls’s theory, we can think of this universal law to be a just society. So, changing the imperative a bit, we have the following – *choose the principles of justice under which at the same time you would want to govern a society in which you live as well.* For example, if a racist were to construct a just society based on his/her intuitions, the procedure would lead him/her to a position in which the society coerces people of color. The agent would not know if he/she would end up being a person of color in that society and, therefore, it would be unreasonable to hold these views. Rawls, however, does not wish to make constructivism a comprehensive moral theory insofar as it does not suit his goals (Rawls, 1996: 90).

What is the relation between political constructivism and moral constructivism and how can we distinguish these two? In this regard, we shall turn to Thomas Scanlon’s version of constructivism which has a Rawlsian basis. Rawls has even stated in one of the footnotes that (during the time of his writing) only two authors understand constructivism as he does – Brian Barry and Thomas Scanlon (Ibid., 91). Now, back to the relation

between moral and political constructivism, a good way to go about this issue is to consider what Scanlon states about the relation between political theory and ethics. According to Scanlon, ethics and moral theory deals with individual morality, while political theory is dealing with the morality of institutions (Scanlon, 2016: 3). In this regard, the constructivist procedure could be shifted from the institutional level towards the individual. When it comes to moral constructivism, we should note three important notions: the notions of reason, right and wrong. These concepts are intertwined, as Scanlon puts it:

The view I will defend takes judgments of right and wrong to be claims about reasons—more specifically about the adequacy of reasons for accepting or rejecting principles under certain conditions (Scanlon, 1998: 3).

Scanlon's version of constructivism is in many regards similar with Rawls's. It escapes the question of the reality of moral values and turns from the question of metaphysical to the question of the practical. Thus, for Scanlon, as well as with Rawls, we need practical objectivity. This objectivity, according to Scanlon, is achieved through giving reasons under the hypothetical procedure, a constructivist procedure. Following from this, Scanlon's account of an individual morality is also a constructivist one (Scanlon, 2012: 235). In short, wrongness of an act is determined through reason-giving for its prohibition in one constructivist procedure. For one act to be wrong, it would need to have reasons and prohibitions against the act itself (Scanlon, 1998: 153). What is right, according to Scanlon, is an action that is not wrong. Through reasons conducted through a hypothetical procedure, the notions of the right and the wrong will have judgment independence and choice independence (Scanlon, 2012: 236). They are completely formal moral principles.

One might notice that this might look like an act theory yet again. Constructivism is, in its core based on the Kantian model of ethics. Constructivism, on the other hand, does not only entail an act theory, but an act of construction as well. The act of construction is agent dependent, and it includes a whole line of argumentation of what it means to be a moral person. Putting that aside, we shall be concerned with the notion of the reflective equilibrium, mentioned earlier. This procedure, when applied, offers an agent of construction a corrugation of the intuitions and beliefs. We shall not be concerned by what is right and what is wrong, nor by what is just or unjust. These are the question which follow afterwards. The main issue that this procedure deals with, in this paper, is about the following – are my intuitions and my beliefs which I am exhibiting within video games reasonable? Having said that, let us commence with the proposal of Sheng's argument.

Something morally disquieting about wrongdoing in video games

Sheng wants to investigate a gaming example that “triggers” our moral intuitions (Sheng, 2020). Recently, a user of the YouTube platform posted a video on his profile playing the game *Red Dead Redemption 2*. But, first, briefly about the game itself. The player in this game takes on the role of Arthur Morgan who is a member of the gang. The world of this game is set in the Wild West in 1899. Although the story revolves around Arthur and his gang, the player is free to explore the world and interact with the characters in it. The game shows very well the status positions of minority groups, genders, races, etc. within that social context. A YouTube user playing this game decided to approach a woman who demanded the right to vote, beat her, tied her up and then threw her to an alligator. This user’s YouTube profile also contains various problematic clips of this game - for example, deporting Mexican citizens from America, kidnapping dark-skinned citizens with the aim of bringing them to a gathering of the Kyu-Klux-Klan, etc. If we look at the comments section, I believe that we will not be wrong if we place this player and his/her followers in the sphere of variation of traditionalist ideology that is present in America. Sheng asks the following question - what exactly bothers us with this? What is it that “triggers” our moral intuitions? (Sheng, 2020) Is it an act of cold-blooded and brutal murder? It could be the case IF this player did it in the real world. The problem of moral evaluation of an act within a video game becomes, as we have seen, very problematic. Deontology and utilitarianism cannot provide any insight on where the player has made a moral error. Sheng also provides an interesting example in comparison. Imagine a racist that is inside his/her room and then he/she shouts racist slurs (Sheng, 2020). The act itself hurts absolutely no one. However, what we might find morally disquieting there is the actor him/herself and the moral intuitions/beliefs he/she has. Following from this, as it was mentioned during the second part of this paper, we need an agent-based theory, not an act-based one. In this instance, I would consider one more example and then use constructivism as a possible explanation.

One of the interesting examples is offered by Jaroslav Švelch which highlights the role of an observer while the player is playing the game. During one psychological experiment, multiple people were subjected to undergo an interview about their experiences of video games (Švelch, 2010: 65). One of the people who gave the interview, Jerek, stated that he did not know what to answer to his child when he was asked why he was stealing cars in the game *Grand Theft Auto*. After that question, Jerek realized that he should not do that while playing this game. The next person who gave the interview stated that he plays games quite differently when his girlfriend watches him and makes “more moral” choices (Ibid.,

65). Švelch also connects this with the role of emotions and with the theory of moral act (Ibid., 66), however, I would like to point out another dimension of this example. We remember how a YouTube user posted clips on his channel doing extremely problematic works in the game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018). Eric Sheng's conclusion is that what he does in video games speaks about him, not about the problematic nature of the act. Also, that YouTube user is completely anonymous. However, what if you were not anonymous? What would happen if you had observers around you while doing those acts in the game? We have reason to believe that emotions such as shame and guilt would overcome any ideological apparatus that this player has precisely because, as Švelch points out, of more personal interaction. After all, the only case in which a player would do the same is if he would irrationally adhere to his/her unreasonable doctrines. And here is the key. Let us consider constructivism and what it can bring to the table when talking about video games.

Consider the following: we have two players and both of them are doing the same thing within a video game. To be coherent with an example, both of them are killing a feminist activist and throwing her to the alligator. However, the reasons for this act are completely different. The player X tends to throw a feminist activist to the alligator because he/she feels frustrated about the current state of affairs and deems them as ideological opponents. This is followed from the moral intuition that feminism is something completely wrong and this intuition induces emotions of hatred, resentment and bitterness. Player X feels like he/she has done something to satisfy his/her need for violence against a specific category. On the other hand, consider player Y. He/she does not hold anything against feminist activist; but he/she roleplays Arthur as a psychopathic murderer. Player Y does not have any negative emotions directed towards the feminist activist, nor does he/she have any moral intuitions to find feminism morally unjust. The action is the same, however, the motive which was induced by the set of beliefs is not. On this matter, our moral intuitions tell us that player X has committed something much more morally disquieting than player Y. Why is that the case? As stated earlier, the act itself means nothing if it does not produce any harm or if it does not endanger the autonomy of any person. What we find morally disquieting is what this action says about the person. When this question is opened, another question follows – what does this action say about the person? Opening this question invokes reason giving procedure. And the reasons for an action inside the video game world become a thing that can be problematized. As we have seen earlier, we do not deem that the act of the player X and the player Y was of the same moral value because of the reason underlining the act itself.

Now, constructivism comes into the picture, and I would like to portray it with an addition of Švelch's example. For constructivism to be achievable, we would need a procedure, something which is a like with the reflective equilibrium. Playing video games with an observer can produce a similar effect. And let us say that this observer is someone who is very meaningful to the player and, at the same time, a reasonable person who can be considered as being morally arbitrary. In many regards, this observer can be connected with an ideal observer theory which is proposed by both David Hume and Francis Hutcheson.² In this procedure, the players will be the agents of construction, they have starting moral intuitions, their actions in the video game will be a test of their intuitions and the ideal observer would be someone who is judging their intuitions through their actions. By taking these things in this regard, we have a reconstructed reflective equilibrium. Let us again consider the example from players X and Y. Would they still do the same act? Would they play the game in the same way? Both of them will have specific intuitions at the beginning of playing the game, and, in this regard, the veil of ignorance will be replaced by the ideal observer. Now, both X and Y are to commit an act that was used in the earlier example. After this action, both of them would have to justify this act in the regards of reason-giving. Let us start with the easier example, with player Y. Player Y can say: "I know that my action is wrong, however, I was just roleplaying. I have no reasons for being anti-feminist, on the contrary, I even tend to agree with the position.". Would that morally justify player Y? It is to my belief that, if the act did not harm anyone and that, if the intuitions that a player Y holds are pure, roleplaying (or any other activity in the single player games which allow for the free choice) cannot be considered morally disquieting. One might ask – why does this person have the need to roleplay in such a way? The reasons for this are plural as well, however, this question does not address the issue that is being considered. Psychological domain is, while being closely correlated with morality, another area of investigation. What is important in constructivism are the principles which are based on reasonable agreement. Roleplaying without endangering anyone and not being subjected to unreasonable doctrines passes the test of the constructivist procedure. The time has come to consider player X, and, in accordance with the subject of this paper, this becomes the central example. First question would be – would the player X play the game in the same way as he/she did by knowing that the ideal observer was watching him/her. The fact that the player X would hesitate to play the game in the same way would

2 This ideal observer theory is taken from the third person perspective. It is used as a governing principle of action. Some action can be determined moral/immoral whether it would be approved by the ideal observer who is observing an action from the third-person perspective. Of course, there are variations of this theory in the regards of both cognitive and emotional perception, but that would require much unneeded elaboration. For more, see (Hume, 1902), (Hutcheson, 1964)

lead us to believe that he/she is doubting the moral purity of the beliefs and moral intuitions that he/she is having. Would a racist shout a racist slur if there was an ideal observer watching him? One would say, only an unreasonable person would do that and, by saying so, we can come towards the position in which only an unreasonable person would hold racist views. In addition to this example, it would be quite unreasonable for the player X to do the same thing and boast about his/her motives behind it. But let us assume that a player X indeed believes that he/she holds a morally justified position. He/she would need to give reasons for holding this position to be true and that would be the start of another constructivist procedure. If we consider player X to be reasonable, he/she will corrugate his/her beliefs and intuitions. Also, noting that I am taking constructivism as purely descriptive in this sense and not normative, it would not matter if the player changed his/her intuitions or beliefs. What does matter is showing why those beliefs are wrong in the first place and offering a mechanism of describing the wrongness of holding them while playing a video game.

Having said that, we need to mention the attraction and the downside of using constructivism when it comes to video games. The attraction of constructivism is that it offers a lot of explanatory power when it comes to the particular cases of players acting within video games. It provides a universal procedure which can prove to be the means of testing the reasons and intuitions of the player or, as Matej Cibik puts it, it is a procedure of value grounding (Cibik, 2014: 1). In short, it is a theory which can offer a lot of answers when we ask, "what is the motive behind how the player plays the game?". On the other hand, constructivism is rather subjective and context-based in many regards. It cannot provide an answer on the questions such as "is it moral to play a game X?", nor can it give a definite answer to the questions which are not context-based. Be it as it may, I would deem constructivism to be one of the best solutions to the question of morality when it comes to playing video games and the reasons for that are given in this paper.

Conclusion and finishing remarks

At the end, we should sum up everything that has been done during the course of this paper. Firstly, we have provided a call; a call for an ethical theory capable of giving explanations on morality in video games. After considering three major ethical theories, we have decided that constructivism should be taken into consideration. Having that in mind, the need came for constructivism to be explained and the versions of this theory were taken from the theoretical systems of John Rawls and Thomas Scanlon. Having constructivism on the table, we have presented a prob-

lem offered by Eric Sheng, a morally disquieting acts that players do in video games. This problem was deconstructed in the notions which are important to the theory of constructivism, after which we have provided an explanatory method, showing the moral importance of intuitions, beliefs and reasonableness when it comes to playing video games.

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