

# EDUCATIONAL GAMES

Design, Learning and Applications

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Editors



*Education in a Competitive  
and Globalizing World*

NOVA

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*Chapter 13*

## COMPUTER GAMES, EDUCATION, AND THE GOOD LIFE

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### Abstract

Given the popularity of computer gaming and the educational and ethical problems they raise, we need a way of evaluating games. We should be concerned with particular games but also with games as a medium. We need normative criteria that allow us to judge to what extent the medium and the messages meet educational and ethical standards. This can inform the design, regulation, and practice of computer gaming.

This chapter contributes to this task by articulating the epistemic, moral, and ethical aims of education and by applying these criteria to computer games. It is assumed that education aims at the development and flourishing of individuals as human beings who have the potential to grow in wisdom and moral beauty and who cannot reach those goals without others. From this perspective, this chapter identifies the goals of education in terms of knowledge and experience, moral development, and the good life and explores how computer games can contribute to these goals. It is concluded that to the extent that we want games to be educational, we are justified to demand that they promote the wisdom, virtue, independence of thinking, care, pleasure, and – generally and ultimately – the good life of ourselves and of others. Understanding this intimate connection with the good life reveals education as something that is central to what being human is all about.

### Introduction

Given the popularity of computer gaming and the educational and ethical problems it raises, we need a way of evaluating games. Although many gamers are adults, there are worries about children and young people playing games that appear to promote violence. There is no doubt that many games have a violent content. Consider games such as *Manhunt*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *MadWorld*. But is playing these games bad for educational and ethical reasons? And what should education aim at anyway?

Whether or not games have immediate influence on behaviour remains controversial. It is hard to establish a causal link between game violence and real-world violence. Correlations have been found (see for example Kutner and Olson 2008; Ferguson et al 2008; Anderson and Dill 2000) but correlations do not allow one to make a causal claim: there are many factors that can lead to violent behaviour. For instance, Ferguson and others report that they found 'no evidence in either study to support a direct link between video game exposure and aggressive or violent behaviour' (Ferguson et al. 2008, p. 330). In the absence of evidence for a strong, direct link we should be cautious with our ethical judgment concerning the direct, immediate impact of computer games on behaviour.

Here I am more concerned with the long-term, indirect societal and cultural effects of computer games. We should not only evaluate the message or content of particular games; we should also evaluate the broader ethical-cultural influence of games as a medium. As McLuhan argued and contemporary philosophy of technology teaches, the medium itself influences our lives and our society (McLuhan 1964) and this influence goes beyond the immediate impact or intended function of the technology. McLuhan gives the example of the railway, which created new cities and new kinds of labour and leisure time (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8). For instance, it is well-known that the railway contributed to the establishment of 'central' and 'standard' times. New media and the information and communication infrastructures in which they are embedded are the railroads of our time: they change the way we organize and perceive space and time, they change the way we work, play, and live. Computer games, therefore, must be evaluated not only in terms of the ethical aspects of their content and their direct impact on behaviour; they must be studied and evaluated as a medium as well.

In this chapter, I do not offer a comprehensive study and evaluation of computer games as a medium, but I hope to assist this task by developing part of the normative framework needed for such an evaluation. In order to judge to what extent the medium and the messages meet educational and ethical standards, we must develop criteria that can inform the design, regulation, and practice of computer gaming. This chapter contributes to that task by articulating the epistemic, moral, and ethical aims of education and by applying these criteria to computer games.

My view of education is mainly, but not exclusively, influenced by a neo-Aristotelian perspective and in particular by Martha Nussbaum's work (see for example Nussbaum 2006), pragmatism (especially Dewey), and care ethics. I assume that education aims at the development and flourishing of individuals as human beings who have the potential to grow in wisdom and moral beauty and who cannot reach those goals without others. From this perspective, I discuss the relation between computer gaming and education.

## Goals of Education

Although the precise aims of education must differ according to the development of an individual<sup>1</sup>, let me distinguish the following general goals (or end-goals) of education and discuss computer gaming in the light of these goals.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, following the work of Piaget and Kohlberg (Piaget 1932; Kohlberg 1969) it is generally accepted that there are stages of moral development and that moral education should be adapted to these stages. However, there is much less agreement about the definition of these stages and about the precise kind of educational measures that should complement them. Below I further discuss moral development as a goal of education.



## Knowledge and Experience

Education should expand our knowledge and experience. Following the distinction in Greek philosophy between *theoria* (insight, vision of the truth) and practical wisdom, we can distinguish between two kinds of knowledge: theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. Often formal education in schools and higher education institutes still mainly aims at theoretical knowledge (knowing that). But education should also aim at practical knowledge (knowing how) and foster knowledge that is embedded in concrete practices and experiences. These practices include gaming and other practices related to electronic media. For example, education should help us to deal with information offered by electronic media and use that information to live better lives and to improve the lives of others. Games can contribute to this task. However, some games may mainly lead to knowledge that is either irrelevant to life or makes life worse by providing misleading perspectives on the world. While this does not necessarily render playing these games morally wrong as such, they cannot be called educational and are sometimes at least morally problematic. For instance, some fantasy games project a Manicheistic, dualistic image of the moral world as a battle between good and evil and suggest that these qualities are fixed to individuals (one cannot change one's character) rather than to deeds or habits. By projecting such a view of the moral life, they do not directly promote violence, but they may influence the moral outlook of young people in such a way that does not help them with living in the offline world where moral problems and moral characters are usually more complex and dynamic.

Note that this concern has nothing to do with a demand for truth as correspondence (with reality). In the case of fantasy games, film or literature such a demand would be absurd. There is nothing wrong per se with creating worlds that differ from our own. Luckily some of us are very good in using their imagination to do precisely that. What matters, morally speaking, is that habitual fantasy gaming may influence one's general moral outlook in (real) life.

Furthermore, it might be the case that gaming takes up so much time that one has no access to other experiences that are valuable. But there are also less extreme influences. As I suggested in my introduction, technologies tend to change the way we organise our time and our lives. While gaming does not *necessarily* lead to abandoning other forms of spending (leisure) time and can involve on-line social interaction, it usually does not encourage face-to-face contacts with other people and physical and outdoor activities, which seem to be essential to our development as bodily, situated, and relational beings. Computer technologies often (but not necessarily) alienate us from our bodies and our physical environments and it is at least questionable if this contributes to our well-being<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, gaming may change the perception of people in such a way that it restricts the range of options they imagine to have to spend their (leisure) time.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course this concern applies not only to gaming or other computer-mediated leisure activities but also to the way we (adults) work.



## Moral Development

This brings me to moral development as a general aim of education. This is a widely shared concern in relation to computer games; but what is moral development? It includes at least the following elements:

1. *Virtue*. As I mentioned in my introduction, many people worry that particular games are morally bad because they (are supposed to) promote violence. I have argued, however, that arguments relying on a causal link between gaming and wrongdoing are hard to sustain. Instead, I have proposed to follow McCormick's suggestion to evaluate such games by using a virtue ethics approach (McCormick 2001). While it is too hasty to suggest that people who play violence-rich games at one moment are likely to go out on the street and shoot people the next moment, it is more plausible that habitual playing of this kind of games nurtures the habit of virtual violence and is therefore not conducive to moral excellence understood as having a virtuous character. Playing such games may not directly lead to violence but it harms your character (Coeckelbergh 2007). Therefore, whatever other value they may have, they do not contribute to one of the goals of education: moral development.
2. *Autonomy*. Autonomy is usually seen as the highest stage of moral development (Piaget 1932; Kohlberg 1969). However, this requirement must not be understood as meaning independence from others, as Gilligan and other feminists assumed when they criticized Kohlberg (Gilligan 1982), but should be interpreted in accordance with the Kantian, Enlightenment line of argument that we should achieve independence of (moral) thinking (Kant 1784). Rather than relying on tradition and convention, we should use our reason to think for ourselves. For educational games, this implies that we should ask if they stimulate independent thinking, critical reflection. And in most cases it seems to me that the answer is negative. Although there might be exceptions, games as a medium do not nurture (this kind of) reflection. Literature and discussions with others are better means to reach this goal provided the right kind of guidance is available. This does not imply that one should not game, but rather that one should make sure that gaming does not come at the expense of this kind of moral development. That said, there is always the possibility to discuss a game with others in a critical way – in the same way as one might discuss a book – and to discuss gaming in general.
3. *Dependence on others and care*. As I suggested above, promoting the autonomy criterion is not opposed to recognizing that for our moral development we are highly dependent upon others and to endorsing the demand that we engage in caring relationships with others. Some games clearly do not promote this recognition or the growth of these kinds of relationships. For instance, many violence-rich games promote the idea that others are standing in my way and prevent me to reach my goals. Moreover, on-line games may allow for, or even require co-operation and interaction. However, there is a difference between, on the one hand, short-term instrumental co-operation and interaction and, on the other hand, the development of bonds between humans that enrich the lives of the people involved and promote their moral growth and human flourishing. Perhaps such bonds may develop over time, as they do in the case of off-line sport games; but in those cases there is plenty of offline interaction between embodied, vulnerable people in real contexts connected



to many narratives. It is a world where actions and words matter to people's lives, in other words: a world rich in joy, suffering, and meaning, a world in which there is much at stake, in which our losses and gains really count, a world in which we can give birth, die, and be really afraid to die. Games, surely, are one way of coping with this predicament and are not devoid of meaning, but as far as moral development is concerned, they are not doing a great job.

## The Good Life

My discussion of moral development has chosen a route towards a broader understanding of morality than 'doing the right thing'. This perspective can be named 'ethics of the good' as opposed to 'morality of the right'. More precisely, it can be called ethics of the 'good life'. In this view, the goal of education is not only to give people possibilities to gain knowledge and to teach them what is right and what is wrong, but ultimately to allow them to attain the (practical) wisdom of how to live well and to reach that 'good life'. Of course there is plenty of disagreement of what 'good life' consists in. Let me discuss two interpretations of the 'good life' in relation to computer games.

1. *Pleasure*. According to the hedonistic interpretation of the good life, we should aim at pleasure. Now let me grant that it is at least one goal of education to entertain people and to give them pleasure. Raising children and engaging in formal education without giving and having any pleasure at any time is a nightmare view of education. However, this position should not be confused with the view that therefore educational practices should always try to maximize pleasure and that pleasure should be the main goal of education. Some people think that education should always be 'fun'. But this misses the insight that knowledge and wisdom requires sustained effort and, sometimes, suffering. Computer games are good in providing pleasure and entertainment, but I suspect that they are less good, for instance, in teaching us how to experience, and cope with real disappointment and suffering, that is, how to cope with things that happen to us that (1) really matter to us and to our lives and (2) influence our lives in an adversarial way. Thus, the problem I identify here is not so much that computer games are virtual as opposed to real, but that what happens in these games is not vitally connected to personal learning processes that depend on a degree of vulnerability and dependency computer games cannot influence. On the contrary, as some other electronic mediums, they attempt to set up a space of immunity from the joys and tragedies of real life.
2. *(Other) objective goods*. Of course one may take pleasure in knowledge, in virtuous living, in caring for others, etcetera. And pleasure may be a good by itself. But this does not show that pleasure should be our main goal. There are many other goods and therefore many other goals of education. My own way to articulate this pluralistic and objectivist approach to the good life and to education draws on Nussbaum's capabilities approach, in particular her presentation of the capabilities list in *Frontiers of Justice* (2006). I interpret the 'central human capabilities' listed by Nussbaum as human goods that should also be considered as goals of education. The list includes elements such as health, senses, imagination, thought, emotion, affiliation with others, and play (Nussbaum 2006, p. 76-78). Computer games can contribute to the development and maximizing of these capabilities, which I



understand as constitutive elements of the good life and (therefore) as goals of education. For instance, computer games allow us to play and to enjoy recreation. However, games and the practice of gaming may also endanger some of these goods and inhibit developments towards these goals. For example, if gaming takes up so much time that it damages one's health and prevents one to have meaningful affiliations with others, then it no longer makes a contribution to the good life of that person and to the lives of the persons that have a stake in that person's life. And if certain games inhibit the development and exercise of empathy by training people to see others as non-subjects (e.g. as monsters or zombies), then these games prevent the personal development and human flourishing of the gamers and the people that suffer from their lack in education and moral development.

## Conclusion

Having articulated these goals of education, we have the basic elements of a framework to evaluate computer games – both the content of particular games and games as a medium – with regard to their educational value. To the extent that we want games to be *educational* and if we understand its goals as outline above, then with regard to the design, regulation, and practice of gaming we are justified to demand that games and gaming promote the wisdom, virtue, independence of thinking, care, pleasure, and – generally and ultimately – the good life of ourselves and of others.

However, we should avoid focusing our moral and educational attention on new media alone. Usually they attract a lot of public interest since they are new. But the criteria articulated above are not only applicable to games. If we worry about what computer games do to people, we should also care about what other media, technologies, and educational environments do. For instance, we may ask what the traditional school system does to our children. What kind of knowledge is promoted in schools? Is it embedded in experience? Is independent thinking sufficiently encouraged? Do our children learn to care for others? How healthy is the way we currently organize formal education? Is there room for emotional development? Perhaps we demand a lot from schools already. But regardless of how high we set our standards, we should not measure by two standards (one for new media and one for old media) and thus avoid a one-sided focus on new media and new technologies.

Finally, education is not only a matter of developing children or young people. If we understand education in the broad sense argued for above, then education only stops when life ends. And if the goals of education are indeed intimately connected with the good life, then education is not one of the compartments of modern society but is central to what being human is all about.

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