

Chapter 10

How Games Can Touch You: Ethics of the Videogame Controller

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ABSTRACT

Novel kinesthetic and mimetic video game interfaces, such as the Wii Remote, PlayStation Move, and Microsoft Kinect, are seeing widespread mainstream appeal. However, with games ranging from the family-friendly Rock Band series, to the banned Manhunt 2, this chapter discusses the ethical implications of interfaces that seek to increase the verisimilitude of our game experiences, and offers a position from which to further consider the controller as an integral part of the overall game design.

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the British Board of Film Classification (responsible for regulating films and videogames in the UK) issued a statement banning Rockstar's *Manhunt 2* ("BBFC Rejects Video Game *Manhunt 2*," 2007); this was the first game since 1997 to be thusly rejected. The statement claimed that the game "constantly encourages visceral killing with exceptionally little alleviation or distancing." Additionally, four United States Senators at that time also wrote a letter to the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) to suggest it reconsider its ratings system in light of *Manhunt 2*. Notably,

their concerns specifically addressed the fact that the game was available for the Nintendo Wii. The senators wrote (Tapper, 2007):

[The Wii] system permits children to act out each of the many graphic torture scenes and murders in Manhunt 2 rather than simply manipulating a game pad. This led one clinical psychologist to state that the realistic motions used with the Wii mean that 'You're basically teaching a child the behavioral sequencing of killing'. ...we do believe that the ESRB should take the Wii Remote controller, and future advances in game controllers, which create more realistic gaming environments, into consideration.

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These assertions are exemplary of the “moral panic” demonstrated by the “common media argument,” as observed by Sicart, “that games lead to violent behavior and desensitization in the face of violence” (2009). Of course, in the case of *Manhunt 2* as above, it is seemingly the kinesthetic mimicry of the motion-sensing Wii Remote controller that raises ethical questions about the game. That is, the way in which the violent actions occurring onscreen must be physically *acted out* by the player, using the Wii Remote. The game provides a close mapping between the player’s real-world action, and the in-game action. We can therefore question whether the game would garner the same kind of controversy had it been developed solely for a classic, non-motion based controller, in which the player’s actions (pressing buttons) are abstracted from the character’s actions on-screen.

Of course, such “moral panic” regarding new technology is not new; Janet Murray, in her seminal text *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), describes the cultural history of such adverse reactions and the “fear with which we have greeted every new powerful representational technology.” (1997, p. 21) For example, Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) described a dystopian vision of the future, triggered by the advent of cinema, in which audiences could enjoy ‘feelies’: movies which pervade our bodily senses, and feature realistic, somatic representations of “arresting helicopter views, lots of sex, and characters who are constantly bursting into song.” (Murray, 1997, p. 20) Murray states that “for Huxley and Bradbury, the more persuasive the medium, the more dangerous it is... as soon as we open ourselves to these illusory environments, we surrender our reason and join with the undifferentiated masses, slavishly wiring ourselves into the stimulation machine at the cost of our very humanity.” (1997, p. 21)

This chapter will explore the ethics of video-game controllers, the physical hardware interfaces by which a player may interact with a videogame system. I will explore how interfaces which in-

creasingly map a player’s real-life-body to the game system may increase the verisimilitude of “illusory environments.” If this does indeed create experiences which are more “persuasive,” I will explore the potential ethical implications of this, how much ethical responsibility lies with the player, and the designer respectively. An interdisciplinary approach, combining philosophy and interaction design, will inform this analysis. Where possible, empirical evidence will be referenced in this discussion; otherwise it will be made explicit that the statement is a hypothesis motivated by theory and/or experience as opposed to rigorous empirical observation.

The central thesis of this chapter is that as this verisimilitude of experiences within games increases with innovations in controller technology, from a virtue ethics perspective, there may be potential for misuse by a non-virtuous player. Furthermore, it is proposed that abstract games and simulations lay on opposite ends along a spectrum. As controller technology evolves to more accurately accommodate our bodily inputs, the player’s game experience moves away from abstraction and toward simulation instead. It is argued that whilst in certain circumstances (such as training applications) this may be desirable, the sense of aesthetic distance required to critically evaluate one’s actions within the game may be lost. Therefore, in terms of games designed for entertainment, any games which do not conform to what we would consider “ethical” in the real world, may have ethical implications if a non-virtuous person were to play them.

In this chapter, I will first define establish terms. I will look at what is meant by the ‘controller’, and, importantly what is meant in this context by “ethics” and “ethical implications” in this context. I will also discuss the ethical framework to be used throughout this analysis.

Next, I will examine the notion of aesthetic distance, a concept central to this thesis; the way in which a degree of separation is required for a player to be able to appreciate a game as ‘art.’

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