

Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes: Spaces of Moral and Narrative Possibilities in Computer Games

Daniel Alexander Milne

Introduction

I once killed a little girl. I killed her because I had developed an attitude of disgust towards humanity. I had been shown how one's base human nature leads to individual self-destruction, how acting on collective human desires leads to the self-destruction of whole societies and that there is no altruism, empathy or moral responsibility in anyone.

I might add that I had developed such an attitude, and, as a result, killed the little girl, only in my imagination, proffered by the computer game *BioShock*. *BioShock* forcefully teaches its appreciative players how it's like to come to feel this way, to act in accordance with this attitude and to be responsible for such actions. It thus serves as evidence for the truth of the following conditional, which I'm going to defend in this paper: *If artworks are artistically valuable insofar as they get us to adopt what's fictionally an immoral attitude, then this holds for computer games that are like BioShock in the relevant sense all the more – insofar as they get us to freely develop what's fictionally an immoral attitude.*

I will proceed in two steps: First, I will specify how computer games that are like *BioShock* in the relevant sense are to be characterised. Second, I will argue for the above *a fortiori* claim.¹

Step 1: From Computer Games to Interactive Narrative Machines

First, I must provide a definition of the concept *computer game* that I can narrow down. Dominic Lopes' definition (Lopes 2010: 26) serves my purposes nicely. According to Lopes, a game is a *computer game* if and only if (i) it's interactive, (ii) it's run on a computer and (iii) it's interactive because it's run on a computer.

If I play a computer game, I first appreciate my playthrough, and the display that's thereby generated. Every artwork has a display, which is “the structured entity that results from the

¹ For a more detailed version of the following argumentation, including an analysis of *BioShock*, see Milne 2012.

artist's creativity and that we tune into when we appreciate the work" (Lopes 2010: 4). Computer games are *interactive* in the sense that they *prescribe* their players to have a direct impact on their displays. A *computer game* isn't the sum of its generated displays, though, but the work that's appreciated while the player appreciates *her* generated display *as one among many possible displays of that computer game* (cf. Lopes 2010: 59). Appreciative players thus ask themselves: What (other) possibilities does the computer game provide?

A computer game's display consists, at least in part, of moving images on a screen, as well as acoustic and sometimes haptic elements. In explaining computer games, Grant Tavinor illustratively employs the term "fiction machine" (Tavinor 2009b: 53). Elaborating on this idea, I call a computer game an "*Interactive Fiction Machine*" (IFM) if and only if its displays are *fictions*, depicting "situations with an imagined existence only" (Tavinor 2009b: 38). IFMs both prescribe their players to *imagine* that something is the case as well as to *generate* fictions themselves.

If, in a *BioShock* fiction, a so-called "Little Sister" is encountered, the player must decide which fiction to generate: one that represents the Little Sister as being killed or saved. This, by itself, doesn't reflect the way in which the fiction was generated, though, as what the *player* does is, somehow, an essential part of the generated fiction. In order to explain this tight player-display connection, Kendall Walton's distinction between two kinds of fictional worlds (Walton 1990: 58; see also Tavinor 2009b: 40ff.) proves useful: We can distinguish the *display world*, i.e. the fictional world of an IFM's display, and the *make-believe world*, i.e. the fictional world of the game of make-believe that one plays with an IFM.

That every Little Sister was killed is true in my display world, for example. It's not true in my display world, however, that *I* felt so-and-so while playing a game of make-believe with *BioShock*. That's true in my make-believe world. In contrast to playing a game of make-believe with a movie, while playing an IFM, my state of mind not only supplements the display world (cf. Walton 1990: 59; see also Tavinor 2009b: 57), but also influences it. This results partly from my imagining something from the inside, about myself as "doing or experiencing something (or being a certain way)" (Walton 1990: 29ff.). One can thus imagine to go through what one makes the player-controlled character go through in a fiction oneself.

In some cases, this might lead to experiences of fiction-directed emotions. In *BioShock*'s fictions, each Little Sister is accompanied by a monstrous creature called "Big Daddy". The player must decide whether he'll reduce his fear of the Big Daddies or allow his pity for the Little Sisters to determine his actions. Hence, not only do the Little Sisters "use our own emotions to defend themselves" (Tavinor 2009a: 98), but the Big Daddies, too, are designed to elicit our emotions of fear in order to provide similarly powerful gameplay obstacles – or so it seems. For does the player really *fear* the Big Daddies?

Since the belief that oneself is *actually* in danger is a necessary condition for someone to be in a *genuine* state of fear for oneself, one would, within a Waltonian framework, claim that the player isn't really fearful, but only *quasi-fearful*, which is to be in a psychological state that's *very* similar to that of genuine fear (Walton 1978: 6ff.). Clearly, it's true in a display world that the Big Daddies threaten the player-controlled character. But since I, as a player, can imagine that I myself am part of the fiction, I can imagine me myself being threatened by a Big Daddy. This imagined state of affairs only obtains in my make-believe world, though. Yet this knowledge results in my fear-like sensations (Walton 1978: 14), which, in turn, make it true *in the same make-believe world* that I myself fear the Big Daddy.

As a final piece of conceptual build-up, I claim that experiences that are emotions within the fiction enrich displays with a sense of meaning and significance that is essential to genuine *narratives*. Conceptually, we can regard narratives as essentially involving the transmission of how someone *felt* in a certain situation (Fludernik 2010: 122). I call an IFM an "*Interactive Narrative Machine*" (INM) if its displays are narratives in this *experience*-transmitting sense.

Let me conclude step 1 by explaining what's *fictionally* going on when *BioShock* asks the player to deal with the first Little Sister by, *technically*, pressing one of two buttons. As I've argued, appreciative players *decide* what to do, based on their experiences that are emotions within the fiction. This doesn't amount to deliberately imagining an emotion (Walton 1978: 10), but can happen automatically. That, fictionally, such quasi-emotions are real emotions neither diminishes one's responsibility for them, nor one's disposition to learn something from them. Since quasi-emotions *are* experiences, fictions which elicit these can satisfy one's desire for diverse experiences in a *very* direct, and thus psychologically intelligible and self-illuminating way.

Step 2: Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes

According to Matthew Kieran, an artwork can be *artistically valuable* insofar as it prescribes such a psychologically intelligible and self-illuminating imaginative experience – in particular, if this experience leads to the adoption of what's fictionally an *immoral* attitude (cf. Kieran 2003: 57). Kieran develops an argument for this claim (cf. Kieran 2003: 63), which I'll reconstruct step by step:

(1) Imaginative experiences are valuable insofar as they enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways.

(2) Artworks are artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe valuable imaginative experiences.

Hence, **(3)** artworks are artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe imaginative experiences that enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways.

(4) Imaginative experiences that get us to take up fictionally immoral attitudes can enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways.

Hence, (C) artworks can be artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe imaginative experiences that get us to take up fictionally immoral attitudes.

Although the sub-argument that leads to premise 3 is itself controversial (cf. Gaut 2007, ch. 7), I will, in what follows, focus only on how Kieran establishes premise 4 (Kieran 03: 63ff.):

Understanding, for Kieran, includes grasping why, but also how, something is as it is, including the nature of higher order cognitive-mental attitudes. Full understanding of certain experiences requires the experience of comparative cases, which are tokens of both the experiences in question, as well as of other, but relevantly contrasting, kinds. In order to fully understand morally good experiences, immoral experiences are required: While one can experience being the *object* of others' immoral attitudes, I'm more likely to fully *understand* the how and why of a certain immoral attitude if I experience this attitude in a way that's *itself immoral*, though, as this constitutes a comparative experience that's otherwise unavailable and distinctively provides the experiencer with discriminatory capacities that are required for a full understanding of the contrasting morally proper attitudes.

According to Kieran, *imaginatively* taking up immoral attitudes can serve as epistemically valuable substitutes for *actually* taking up such attitudes. In order to engage in such an imaginative experience, it must be presented so that I'm psychologically able and willing to entertain it. In Walton's terms, this amounts to imaginatively experiencing an immoral attitude *from within*: I can imagine that I myself am in a certain situation. This can lead to actual experiences, which are fictionally certain emotions. These, in turn, can make it fictional that I myself experience an attitude immorally, which can be epistemically valuable.

Accepting the preceding argument, I claim that Kieran's established premise 4 gives rise to the following pair of *a fortiori* propositions:

(4+) *If* imaginative experiences that get us to *take up* fictionally immoral attitudes can enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways, *then* imaginative experiences that get us to *develop* fictionally immoral attitudes can enhance our understanding of something in otherwise unavailable ways *all the more*.

(C+) *If* artworks can be artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe imaginative experiences that get us to *take up* fictionally immoral attitudes, *then* they can be artistically valuable insofar as they prescribe imaginative experiences that get us to *develop* fictionally immoral attitudes *all the more*.

Next, I claim that certain INMs are precisely such works that prescribe the player to develop fictionally immoral attitudes and serve as evidence for the truth of the preceding *a fortiori*

conditionals. My *BioShock* narrative, for example, not only manifested an immoral attitude, which I have *taken up* in imagination. By interacting with the INM, I had *chosen* to manifest such an attitude, as I had freely fictionally acted on experiences that were fictionally certain emotions and in virtue of which I had *developed* an immoral attitude imaginatively.

While doing so, I had not merely learnt what it feels like to *be* in a state of mind that results in such actions, however, but what it feels like to *develop* such a state of mind and what it feels like to act *in accordance with it*. Finally, and most importantly, because I had actively developed an immoral attitude in imagination, and fictionally acted in accordance with it, I had learnt what it feels like to be *responsible* for being in and acting out of such a state of mind. Hence, developing what are fictionally immoral attitudes by playing certain INMs can lead to knowledge that isn't otherwise to be had – neither actually, nor by engaging in imaginative experiences prescribed by traditional (i.e. non-interactive) artworks.

Finally, given (C), insofar as a work succeeds in getting one to imaginatively *adopt* an immoral attitude, renders it intelligible, and provides epistemic rewards for having engaged in this imaginative experience, the work is artistically valuable (Kieran 03: 70f.). Hence, given (C+), insofar as an INM succeeds in getting one to imaginatively *develop* an immoral attitude, renders it *more* intelligible and provides *richer* epistemic rewards than any non-interactive work could, the INM is artistically *more* valuable than any non-interactive work could be.

Conclusion

Many computer games possess what's called a "morality system", which usually amounts to the players' being able to decide, *for no apparent reason*, whether to be fictionally good or evil. If we want to evaluate a work *artistically*, however, it matters to what extent its prescribed imaginative experience is *psychologically intelligible and epistemically rewarding*. Experiencing what are non-deliberately occurring emotions in imagination fulfils the condition of psychological intelligibility to a high degree. Further, given that imaginatively *adopting* an immoral attitude might deepen our understanding of why certain immoral actions are pursued, imaginatively *developing* an immoral attitude out of which we ourselves fictionally act might, additionally, deepen our understanding of how it feels to freely act thus and to acknowledge one's responsibility for such actions.

Given that certain *INMs* allow for the *development* of such attitudes in imagination, they are *particularly* and *distinctively* well-suited to provide imaginative experiences of how one would feel if one engaged in certain immoral attitudes, which is epistemically and, thus, artistically highly valuable.²

² I thank the reviewer for bringing to my attention the question of when, if ever, the development of what's *fictionally* an immoral attitude crosses the boundary of becoming a *genuine* immoral attitude. Unfortunately, while this question certainly merits further investigation, discussing it lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, given the result of this paper, I suspect at least this much: *If the adoption* of what's fictionally an immoral attitude can cross this boundary, *then the development* of what's fictionally an immoral attitude can do so all the more.

Game

BIOSHOCK. 2K Games, PC/Mac/PS3/Xbox 360, 2007.

References

- Fludernik, M. (2010). *Erzähltheorie: Eine Einführung - 3. Auflage*. Darmstadt: WBG.
- Gaut, B. (2007). *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kieran, M. (2003). "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism", in J. Bermúdez & Gardner, S. (eds.), *Art and Morality*. London: Routledge.
- Kieran, M. (2004). *Revealing Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lopes, D. (2010). *A Philosophy of Computer Art*. London: Routledge.
- Milne, D. (2012). "Developing Fictionally Immoral Attitudes: How Interactive Narrative Machines with a Moral Twist Refute Ethicism", URL: <http://bit.ly/14Dkzpj>
- Tavinor, G. (2009a). "Bioshock and the Art of Rapture", *Philosophy and Literature* 33, 91–106.
- Tavinor, G. (2009b). *The Art of Videogames*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Walton, K. (1978). "Fearing Fictions", *Journal of Philosophy* 75, 5–27.
- Walton, K. (1990). *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.