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This special issue's topic—*The Philosophy of Computer Games*—might seem in vogue and out of date at the same time. Out of date on the one hand, because the first wave of philosophical approaches to computer games peaked about ten years ago. The *Game Philosophy Network*[1] initiative was launched as early as 2005, the network's *International Conference on the Philosophy of Computer Games* reaching already its 13th iteration with its last pre-Covid-19 conference on 'The Aesthetics of Computer Games' in St. Petersburg in October 2019. The highly influential volume on the philosophy of computer games edited by John Richard Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim and Tarjei Mandt Larsen (2012) was published almost ten years ago—with many of its contributions remaining essential points of reference for philosophical approaches to computer games to this date. On the other hand, the aforementioned renewed turn to computer game aesthetics (scholars like Rune Klevjer have been addressing this aspect for quite a while; see Klevjer 2001) and especially the turn towards a phenomenology of computer games that has gained some new momentum recently (Keogh 2018; Gualeni and Vella 2020; also see McDivitt; Oulette and Conway; Bakels, all in this issue) seem to have brought new attention to what philosophy has to offer to game studies (and vice versa), raising new questions and putting new emphases on old ones: What is a computer game exactly? How do we experience computer games? How do computer games experience us? What are a computer game's aesthetics if we apply the term to perception and its dynamics rather than styles of representation? And what analytical frameworks may arise from questions like these?

On a closer look, these questions—as well as 'renewed' interests and familiar lines of discourse 'gaining new momentum'—raise the superior question whether the recent wave of philosophical approaches to computer games has to be seen as merely old wine in new bottles. The answer to this question—as always when it is raised with regard to philosophical reasoning—is yes and no at the same time. Yes, because—as we have seen above—most of the philosophical issues and lines of discourse with regard to computer games addressed within the recent years (and within this issue) have been tackled in one way or another before. Yet the arguments for rejecting the old-wine-reproach add up to more than just the commonplace phrase that philosophy's questions remain to be discussed for eternity.

For example, the aforementioned renewed interest in the phenomenology of computer games makes for more than just an update. Pioneering scholars in this field have highlighted and evaluated how phenomenology's core concepts—experience and subjectivity—can offer new perspectives with regard to well-established areas and subject matters within game studies like imagery (Crick 2011), the player–avatar relation (Klevjer 2012), empirical research on what makes people play computer games (Čulig et al. 2014), the quest for less human-centrism in academia in general and game studies in particular (Bogost 2008a), or the temporality of computer gaming (see Brown as well as Illger in this issue). While still

following the paths these pioneers have opened up, recent contributions to a phenomenology of computer games have evolved to book-length holistic approaches, grasping for an encompassing concept of experience that allows for a phenomenological 'reading' of potentially any computer game (Keogh 2018).

By elevating subjective experience—and the aesthetics grounding experience—from a 'side effect' of narration, rule-based strategy, or mediated action to a game studies subject matter of its own, these holistic approaches also enable game studies to relate to concepts and perspectives on subjectivity, experience and identity that have emerged within the larger field of cultural, political, and gender studies, in turn expanding the discourse on ethics and politics within game studies—as can be witnessed with regard to the concept of queer phenomenology (see McDivitt in this issue). At the same time, phenomenological perspectives on computer games have even given rise to a new digital existentialism (Gualeni and Vella 2020) that takes computer games as a paradigmatic subject matter in order to understand the human condition in the digital age—linking game studies and philosophical approaches to digital cultures and media (Hansen 2004 and 2014; Hui 2016) more explicitly than ever before.

Against this backdrop, the field of phenomenological approaches to computer games can provide a first lead with regard to the question of why philosophy and game studies have been—and will likely remain—in an ongoing close exchange over the last one and a half decades (and why I—in all modesty—consider this issue most fruitful):

On the one hand, game studies as a field of study—to avoid the discussion on its potential status as an academic discipline in its own right as well as the conflicting positions whether this status is a desirable aim after all—is ever evolving, still in search even for common concepts, paradigms, and objects of study (see Oullette and Conway in this issue). Philosophy—or more specifically the characteristic combination of openness and a clear epistemological focus that drives philosophical thinking—can be of significant help in the process of sketching out focal points as well as the necessary boundaries of what game studies are, should be or potentially could be concerned with.

On the other hand, philosophy's status as a meta-discipline—and this status' persistence—is rooted in the fact that the human condition keeps on changing over time, with philosophy providing the questions that have proven fruitful in order to constantly reflect on this ever-changing condition as well as the means of making sense of it while, in turn, historico-cultural developments constantly propel philosophical thinking. With the intentional distinction of the computer as a means of work and a means of play rendered more and more obsolete in the so-called digital age—characterized by the computer becoming a means of living (Hui 2016) as well as by a renegotiation of what is to be considered virtual and what to be real (Juul 2005; Coppock 2012)—it is in this regard, that game studies can in turn contribute insights into the evolving digital condition gathered over two and a half decades to the larger fields of cultural studies, (new) media studies, and philosophy. Against this backdrop, Sageng, Fossheim, and Larsen's reasoning in 2012 remains valid to this day:

There are two main reasons why a philosophy of computer games is called for. First, given the emergence of academic research on computer games, there is a need for critical examination and clarification on which this research typically draws—notions such as rules, simulation, virtuality, immersion, play and gameness. […] With its history of conceptual analysis and clarification, philosophy has a lot to offer in this regard. [...] Second, computer games present a context in which many of the questions from traditional philosophy maybe pursued in novel ways, with the prospect of providing new and interesting answers to them. Philosophy as an academic discipline is not, or not simply, directed at perennial intellectual questions, but is fundamentally shaped by cultural and historical circumstances (2012, pp. 2–3).

In this regard, computer games themselves can serve as "cultural and historical circumstances" "shap[ing]" philosophy—especially if we consider the paradigmatic status of computer games with regard to digital environments and cultures. Sure, the internet is not a game, a self-ordering refrigerator is not a device for playing, and a fitness tracker or a digital workplace monitoring framework may not draw on the same kind of motivation as playing *The Last of Us II* (Naughty Dog 2020) does. Nevertheless, formative phenomena within the larger context of what is discussed under the term 'digitalization'—like the second order cybernetics characterizing digital information networks (Glanville 2002), the experiential qualities of smart technology (Darby 2018), or the principles shaping a concept like gamification (Blohm and Leimeister 2013; Sailer et al. 2014)—overlap with issues addressed within game studies to an extent that renders some of game studies' core areas—and the questions they have generated—paradigmatic when it comes to understanding life in the digital age. To put it briefly: At this point in history, philosophy, cultural studies, and game studies seem to be almost predestined to maintain a relation of coevolution.

Of course, phenomenological approaches to experience—that served as a point of departure for the thoughts laid out above—only make for one little field of discourse among many that have emerged at the intersection of game studies and philosophy. Any attempt to list even these fields of discourse thoroughly seems doomed to fail. Nevertheless, I will try to briefly sketch out a few of the philosophy of computer games' core areas.

One of these core areas revolves around the *ethics* of computer games resp. computer gaming. "Figures", some readers will exhale eye-rollingly at this point, given how dominant the debates about violence in computer games have been for quite a while (and to some extent still are) with regard to the public perception of computer gaming—as with any and every new media and its respective cultures, practices, and poetics one might add (Barker and Petley 2002; Kirsh 2011). As one could expect, the philosophical discourse on the ethics of computer gaming is more or less directly linked to the aforementioned discussion of whether, to what extent, and in what ways computer games are to be considered real—in this case (as with debates about violence in literature, poetry, or film in past decades and centuries) the respective discussions are less concerned with the 'realness' of virtual (or fictional) worlds, but rather focus on actions performed or represented within computer games (Spence 2012; Reynolds 2012). Given the specific importance of action for gaming practice and theory (Galloway 2006), it should not surprise that the ethical aspects of

mediated violence are discussed even more fiercely when it comes to computer games—marking ethics as a go-to field in philosophy for game studies in turn:

> [T]wo dimensions of computer games in particular stand out when it comes to investigating their status vis-à-vis more traditional applications of ethical thought: agency and identity. The two are tightly interlinked. Identity concerns what it takes to be a person, and how far various features or aspects should be seen as parts of that person. And this question normally becomes important in the context of an act being performed, either on the part of the person, or on the part of someone else who through their act affected him or her. [...] The issue of personhood and agency in this context is normally about one's status as a morally responsible agent or as a patient [...] with moral worth. Correspondingly, the field of ethics is especially interesting to computer games (Fossheim 2012, p. 95).

At the same time, the issue of violent actions in computer games raises the question of how these (virtual) actions done by somebody to somebody relate to a specific rhetoric of computer games that enables us to consider more than just representation, identity, and agency.

If we come back to the aforementioned *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020)—to take a more tangible example for the ethics of violence, agency, and rhetoric with regard to computer gaming—we find that the game more or less forces us to make our avatar perform violent actions to an extent that has led to various accounts (Sims 2020) of how the joy of gaming is gradually replaced by repulsion of one's own actions. Though referring to different poetics and experiential qualities and coming to far more ambiguous verdicts, these accounts are somewhat evocative of the critical acclaim aimed at *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team ICO 2005) after its first release for Sony's PlayStation 2—teaching us to be fond of and sad for the giants we slay. Looking at these examples, the insights the philosophy of ethics has generated with regard to the ethics of computer gaming seem to directly highlight the need for an encompassing theory on the rhetoric of computer games (Bogost 2008b) building on complex approaches to interactive 'authorship', subjectivity, and experience. Hence, looking at the ethics of computer gaming, the essential potential of philosophical approaches to computer games might be leading ways and raising questions rather than generating certainties.

Another essential area within the philosophy of computer games—too manifold to boil down to some kind of quintessence, but too important not to be at least briefly addressed within this introduction—is concerned with the *politics* of computer gaming. This—of course—includes philosophic and anthropologic approaches to what computer games represent how and how these modes of representation relate to concepts like race or gender (Murray 2017), the utopist potential of computer games and gaming (Henthorne 2003), or reflections on how computer games shape the way we relate to—past, present, and future—reality (Hong 2015). Finally, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate in which diverse ways philosophy can offer starting points to reflect on the politics of computer gaming—may it be with regard to the biopolitics of computer gaming (see Piero in this issue), phenomenal experiences of queerness computer games are able to generate (see McDivitt in this issue), or the inherent medial logics of computer games in particular and digital media in general (see Stark as well as Denson in this issue).

Most importantly with regard to main lines of discourse within the philosophy of computer games, the concept of *play* itself is a subject matter of philosophical reasoning. Philosophy has been—literally—concerned with the concepts of 'play' and 'playfulness' since ancient times; Plato already went as far as pointing out how philosophical reasoning itself should be seen as play (Ardley 1967). The works on play and games of (cultural historian and philosophical anthropologist) Johan Huizinga (1955) and (sociologist and philosopher) Roger Callois (2001) have shaped early as well as current game studies discourse to an extent that I will refrain from repeating their lines of argument (again) at this point. Nevertheless—more than 60 years after Callois' critique on Huizinga and about three decades into game studies— an agreed upon definition of gameplay remains one of game studies' unfulfilled promises—and probably does so for a good reason:

> If we want to sustain computer game studies as an endeavour that acknowledges the unique aspects of computer games while seeking to shed light not only on computer games as designed artifacts but also on the ways in which they become intertwined with human experience and practice at the time of playing, it is necessary to arrive at an understanding of this amalgamation of subjectivity, process, and technology which is constituted when the computer game is played and which we have might approximate as "gameplay". [...] I assume that the difficulty in defining "gameplay" and the vagueness that it results are indications of the ontological hybridity of the phenomenon the term attempts to refer to. This I intend as meaning that gameplay incorporates elements that belong to mental and physical domains—qualities of experience, activity, and materiality, to be more specific (Leino 2012, pp. 58-59).

If we play the devil's advocate for a minute, Leino's thoughtful reflections on the difficulties arising as soon as we try to define gameplay could be summed up as follows: philosophy may not help us when it comes to the aim of actually succeeding in defining gameplay—but it offers a great deal with regard to explaining why we cannot do so. Then again, this summary would blatantly miss the point Leino is making: the focal point of approaching gameplay as a concept should not so much be a handy definition, but rather the ongoing discursive practice of identifying, reflecting upon, and relating ideas, phenomena, and concepts that (philosophically speaking) differ in origin but all partake in what we call 'trying to define gameplay'. Game studies' key concept rather a demand for continuous reasoning than an epistemological 'tool'? What more beautiful way could there be to point out the enduring relevance of a philosophy of computer games.

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Notes

[1] For more information see https://gamephilosophy.org.