dynamics and provides a deeper look into online projects, contrary to those who state that the network form of organization is a liberating social arrangement per se.

Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. 264 pp. ISBN 9–7802–6201–2652, $35.00 (cloth)

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Miguel Sicart undertakes an ambitious, two-fold agenda in this volume. At a first level, he seeks to develop a theoretical framework that goes beyond previous work in game ethics, for example, whether taking a philosophical approach that begins with a pre-defined ethical theory such as deontology or utilitarianism or taking a more psychological approach as exemplified in so-called effects studies. To do so, Sicart draws upon an exceptional range of theoretical resources from the likes of Aristotle as well as more contemporary figures in phenomenology, hermeneutics and information ethics. At the same time, and as Aristotle would insist (i.e. theory must be grounded in and constantly tested against *praxis*), this philosophical task is fully informed both by Sicart's solid mastery of the relevant research and literatures of game studies *and* his own extensive firsthand experience as a player of these games. So far as I can gather, he draws the balance between these three large domains (philosophy, game studies and player experience) more or less perfectly as he develops his theoretical framework. The upshot is nothing less than a novel, substantive and impressively fruitful framework for analyzing the ethical dimensions of computer games.

It is *novel* and *substantive*, first of all, as it pushes these fields forwards in taking up *virtue ethics* (alongside the more familiar theories of utilitarianism and deontology), thereby incorporating Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, a kind of practical wisdom that requires both extensive (and embodied) experience alongside rational reflection. This move is not only essential, in my view, for a robust ethical theory in general. It is further central to one of the key contributions of this volume, as I see it; namely, a robust and positive account of the game player as an ethical being in contrast with the sometimes prevailing stereotypes of gamers as 'moral zombies', in Sicart's phrase (p. 18). Second, his framework further incorporates, and with unusual effectiveness, the considerable philosophical resources offered by both more contemporary philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Alain Badiou, Barbara Becker, Luciano Floridi and Philip Brey, as well as by such classic figures in phenomenology and hermeneutics as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. This conjunction allows Sicart to build a theoretical framework that not only does justice to the game player as an ethical being, but also to the *experience* of gameplay itself (i.e. as described phenomenologically and with attention to the role of hermeneutics or interpretation in such play). Moreover, Sicart is impressively aware of the *cultural* dimensions of ethics, design and play. In this direction, one of the chief virtues of his theory is that it functions effectively not only at a first or normative level (i.e. as offering direction for ethical judgments about what counts as a good game, good play, etc.), but, further, his framework is robust at a second, metaethical level, insofar as Sicart can defend his theory as *pluralist* (one that takes on board fundamental cultural

differences), but not *relativist* (one that would give up on making ethical judgments beyond the confines of a specific culture or group).

But the most critical index of a theory is its applicability to central problems. Sicart's theory, in fact, is highly fruitful on both theoretical and practical levels. For example, in addition to his strikingly rich account of the game player as an ethical being (found in Ch. 3), Sicart's theory further issues in a specific list of 'player virtues' (p. 98), which provide a concrete and detailed account of what a *good* player (in the Aristotelian sense – one that, as Sicart shows, closely resonates with the more contemporary senses of this term) would look like, thereby providing us with a crucial focus and touchstone for game ethics. Similarly, drawing on Foucault and Aristotle allows Sicart to introduce a strong communitarian component in his ethics, one that is immediately useful as a way of making theoretical sense of the empirical realities of player communities. While many other examples of such philosophical richness could be listed here, one of the most important features of Sicart's framework, from my perspective, is its use of Barbara Becker's phenomenological account of how our skin serves as both a boundary and a means of communicating with the world beyond our body. Sicart builds on Becker's account, as complemented by his own experience as a gamer, so as to make excellent sense of the otherwise complicated tangle of the differences and connections between a player's embodied, real-world sense of identity and ethics and his/her ethical sensibilities and identities as a player in the virtual worlds of computer games. In this way, finally, Sicart provides an account of how our online and offline identities (and, thereby, our ethical sensibilities) are closely interwoven with one another. This both coheres with and contributes to similar findings in contemporary internet research in a wide range of fields (see Consalvo and Ess, forthcoming).

None of this is to say, of course, that Sicart's framework is complete, final or beyond criticism. While I am generally persuaded by Sicart's argumentation, in more than one place I questioned a specific claim or conclusion. But this is, of course, one of the most important ways in which Sicart's theory is highly fruitful; just as readers will take issue with one or more of Sicart's theoretical components, such critique will only help to further expand and enrich the theoretical and empirical groundwork that Sicart lays here.

More immediately, Sicart further demonstrates the fruitfulness of his theory (developed primarily in Chs 3 and 4), as he goes on to show us (in Ch. 5) how to apply this theory to three specific games: *Bioshock*, *DEFCON* and *World of Warcraft*. Readers will find that Sicart's analysis of these games provides both salutary and sometimes surprising insights, especially as they take us well beyond simple ethical either/ors that would either condemn such games outright for their ostensible risk of inciting aggression or defend such games without qualification (e.g. in the name of freedom of expression).

In Ch. 6, Sicart's theory then grounds a careful analysis of 'the ethical implications of unethical game content' and (primarily psychological) studies of 'the (moral) effects of computer games on their users' (p. 189). Finally, Ch. 7 seeks to show how his framework can be used by designers 'to think about ethical gameplay …' (p. 207) in both cases (again, the results are fine grained and nuanced analyses that thereby demonstrate the utility and richness of the theory).

Simply put, Sicart's book accomplishes what it sets out to do, at least on its first level (i.e. with regard to developing a rich and applicable theory of the ethics of computer games).

This is manifestly no small accomplishment. While Sicart can point to predecessors in game theory, there is no precedent for what he has done; namely, to inaugurate the field by providing the first fully fledged theoretical framework for taking up game ethics as a distinct field within information ethics. The book thereby functions both as an introduction as well as a handbook for this new field of information ethics – an ethics that, in light of the increasing cultural significance of computer games, should concern more than just philosophers.

There is also reason to hope that Sicart's book will succeed on a second level. Sicart's ambitions here include providing a groundwork for needed dialogue between academics, gamers and designers, '… a dialogue in which designers, academics, and players share positions and discuss the moral importance of games in our culture' (p. 19). As my comments here should make clear, as a philosopher and scholar of computer-mediated communication, I certainly find more than sufficient conceptual substance here to begin to come to grips with the important ethical issues evoked by computer games. While I cannot speak for gamers and designers, I am impressed, and certainly edified, by Sicart's extensive and consistent incorporation of games research, his own experiences as a gamer and his familiarity with the issues and processes of game design. This inspires hope that Sicart's colleagues in the player and design communities will likewise recognize here an equally gratifying breadth and depth of offerings that will similarly catalyze their engagement with this book and, ideally, fund an extension of the dialogue between these three communities that Sicart's book itself exemplifies and seeks to ground.

Reference

Consalvo M, Ess C, eds (forthcoming) *The Blackwell Handbook of Internet Studies*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.