

# Are you (relevantly) experienced?

## A moral argument for video games

Amanda Cawston and Nathan Wildman

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**Abstract:** Many have offered moral objections to video games, with various critics contending that they depict and promote morally dubious attitudes and behaviour. However, few have offered moral arguments in favour of video games. In this chapter, we develop one such positive moral argument. Specifically, we argue that video games offer one of the only morally acceptable methods for acquiring some ethical knowledge. Consequently, we have (defeasible) moral reasons for creating, distributing, and playing certain morally educating video games.

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## Introduction

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A number of critics have offered various moral objections to video games, primarily contending that they depict and promote morally dubious attitudes and behaviour.<sup>1</sup> However, few have offered moral arguments in favour of video games.<sup>2</sup> Here, we attempt to fill this lacuna by developing one such positive moral argument.

In particular, after spelling out some background assumptions, we begin by discussing an insight from standpoint epistemology, according to which being suitably experienced is a necessary condition for grasping certain knowledge. Using this insight, we go on to show that there is a body of broadly moral knowledge the possession of which requires agential experiences. Notably, that these experiences are agential means that they cannot be adequately conveyed via testimony—they can be depicted or described, but, to undergo the experience, one

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, [McCormick \(2011\)](#) and Wonderly (2008).

<sup>2</sup> The exceptions are [Coeckelbergh \(2007\)](#) and [Schulzke \(2014\)](#), who argue that, given a virtue ethics approach, playing video games could have a positive effect on one's character.

needs to *do*, rather than merely *see*, something. Hence, there are major epistemic problems facing anyone who would try to grasp the relevant moral knowledge via testimony.

Of course, there is one way to get to the knowledge: actually undergo the relevant experiences! However, many of these experiences are ethically problematic, or pragmatically impossible. So, there is some ethical knowledge that is epistemically inaccessible to the unexperienced, and there are either ethical or epistemic problems with the most obvious routes we might use to acquire it.

It is at this point that video games, as a kind of *interactive fiction*, enter the picture. For via engaging with some particular video games, it is possible for players to *fictionally* undergo the relevant experiences. Having fictionally taken up the relevant standpoint, players may be enabled to grasp the relevant ethical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> In this way, video games can offer a morally acceptable method for acquiring certain moral knowledge that may otherwise be beyond reach. Consequently, video games can be a valuable resource for those interested in moral education. Further, for at least some kinds of moral knowledge, there may be (defeasible) moral duties for creating, distributing, and playing certain video games.

Before turning to our argument, it is helpful to note two underlying assumptions. First, we assume that it is possible to learn from fictions. This is relatively uncontroversial, though some—for example, Currie (2020)—disagree.

The second assumption is more substantive, and best approached by example. *Spec-Ops: The Line*, a 2012 third-person shooter video game, is a harrowing depiction of the depths and horrors of war. Like many video games, *Spec-Ops* is plausibly classified as a work of fiction. *Spec-Ops* is also importantly *interactive*: throughout the course of the game, players are asked to make various choices, which play an essential role in shaping the content of the game's fiction. For example, in *Spec-Ops*' finale, the player is asked to choose whether to shoot or spare the main antagonist. Players who shoot the villain *make it fictional* that he is shot, while those who spare him *make it fictional* that he is spared. Put otherwise, *Spec-Ops* leaves certain aspects of the story *open*, and it is up to the player to decide which path is taken, and hence what is fictionalised. In contrast, Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, while also a harrowing depiction of the

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<sup>3</sup> This is close to, but distinct from, Nguyen (2021), who argues that playing games allows us to try on different forms of agency. The primary difference is that we believe it is the interactive fictional aspect of video games that is important for taking on a new standpoint, while Nguyen thinks this is a product of gameplay. For more on this difference, see Wildman (MS).

depths and horrors of war, lacks this interactivity. No matter what the viewer does, they cannot make it fictional that, for example, Willard does not take up the mission, Chief survives the trip up the Nùng river, or Kurtz wears clown make-up. The fiction, as presented to the viewer, is in some sense *closed*—the events are pre-determined, and the viewer is just along to see what happens, which is simply not up to them.

Such differences motivate a distinction between *traditional* fictions, which includes most novels, films, poetry, and dance, and *interactive* fictions, which include most video games, choose-your-own-adventure books, virtual and augmented reality, table-top and live-action role-playing games, and theatre (as an actor).<sup>4</sup> The contents of the former, like with *Apocalypse Now*, come to the viewer (in some sense) pre-packed, while the contents of the latter, like with *Spec-Ops*, are at least partially created by users' choices when they engage with the fiction.

Exactly how to demarcate traditional and interactive fictions is a difficult and contentious point. But it is clear that the distinction can be made. So, we will here assume that there is such a distinction.

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## Standpoint epistemology and the experience gap

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Generally speaking, *standpoint epistemology* starts from the idea that having a particular, socially situated perspective provides an epistemic privilege or authority within a relevant realm.<sup>5</sup> One plausible way of understanding this idea is to say that those who are experienced know a proposition *in the right way*. Thus, for example, coming to know the oppression women face in patriarchal societies requires undergoing certain oppressive experiences; without the relevant experiences, there will be certain things you will never understand, certain ways of knowing a fact that remain beyond your epistemic ken.

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<sup>4</sup> In treating (most) video games as interactive fictions, we follow [Lopez \(2001, 2009\)](#), [Lavinia \(2003, 2008, 2009\)](#), [Robson and Maskin \(2011, 2015\)](#), [Maskin and Robson \(2011, 2012\)](#), and [Wildman and Woodward \(2013\)](#). The qualifier is necessary because some video games—for example, *Tetris*, *Chessmaster*, and *Puzzle Bobble*—are not fictions in the ordinary sense of the term. This usage of ‘interactive fiction’, though relatively standard within philosophy, is broader than the other standard usage of the same term, designating the specific genre of game or electronic literature exemplified by *Colossal Cave Adventure*. Notably, all instances of the latter are also examples of the former, but not vice versa.

<sup>5</sup> For more on standpoint epistemology, see for example, [Anderson \(1995\)](#) and [Hartsock \(1987\)](#).

Notably, this standpoint insight does not mean these experiences are *sufficient* for the relevant knowledge—one can undergo the relevant experiences but still fail to come to know whatever is at stake. But it does entail that being suitably experienced is a *necessary* condition for grasping some facts in the right sort of way. Thus, the core thought of standpoint epistemology is the question, ‘are you (relevantly) experienced?’ (hereafter referred to as the Experience Test).<sup>6</sup> If not, then there are some things you aren’t able to know.

A good amount of knowledge seems to require being so experienced. One example is most (and possibly all) *de se* knowledge. Here, one must undergo certain experiences in order to grasp the relevant knowledge simply because the experience partially generates what it is we come to know. For example, I can only come to know that I am the one spilling the sugar in the grocery store aisle provided that I am undergoing the experience of doing so—if I wasn’t, then I wouldn’t be spilling the sugar, so the relevant proposition wouldn’t be true (and hence not something I could know).<sup>7</sup> The same goes for much *phenomenal* knowledge: the relevant experience at least partially constitutes the relevant proposition, so undergoing it is a necessary condition for the proposition’s truth (and hence ‘knowability’). For example, consider the scenario famously proposed by Frank Jackson (1982): imagine a neuroscientist, Mary, who has lived her life without exposure to the colour red. As a neuroscientist, assume Mary has full knowledge of the mechanisms of colour perception. However, Jackson argues, without having experienced seeing the colour red herself, Mary does not know *what it is like* to see red.<sup>8</sup> As L.A. Paul writes, ‘[w]hat we learn from the case of Mary is that stories, testimony, and theories aren’t enough to teach you what it is like to have truly new types of experiences—you learn what it is like by actually having an experience of that type’ (2014: 13). Knowledge of this qualitative experience (or quale) is inaccessible without undergoing the relevant experience. This point extends beyond colour perception to other phenomenal knowledge, for example, I can only know what being depressed *feels like* after I have experienced it.

One might object that the cases offered so far, of *de se* and phenomenal knowledge, represent trivial instances of experience-dependent knowledge. That is, they pick out cases where the relevant proposition’s *truth* depends on the experience. We might then wonder, is there any

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<sup>6</sup> With apologies to Jimi Hendrix.

<sup>7</sup> For more on *de se* knowledge, see, for example, Lewis (1973) and Perry (1973).

<sup>8</sup> See Jackson (1982) and the absolute explosion of literature discussing this case.

propositional knowledge whose *truth* does not depend upon the undergoing of certain experiences, but knowledge of which still requires passing the Experience Test?

For one, as mentioned earlier, much of the core literature on standpoint epistemology has advanced the idea that there are certain facts about, for example, oppression that are only graspable once you have been oppressed in the relevant way. But, this certainly isn't the sole area where passing the Experience Test looks vital.

Another concerns aesthetic testimony. Pessimists about aesthetic testimony hold that we cannot arrive at much aesthetic knowledge on the basis of testimony.<sup>9</sup> The truth or falsity of pessimism is a highly debateable matter, and one that we will not enter into here—all we are interested in is the following conditional: *if* pessimism is true, then much aesthetic knowledge requires passing the Experience Test.<sup>10</sup> For the truth of pessimism entails that there is some propositional knowledge—for example, that Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is lively, vibrant, and beautiful—that I cannot acquire indirectly, via testimony. Rather, I have to engage with the work. Only then, after having undergone the relevant experience, will I be in a position to know. So, pending the truth of pessimism, much aesthetic knowledge will also require passing the Test.

A third is what Paul (2014) calls *epistemically* and *personally transformative experiences*. These are, respectively, experiences that teach us something we could not have learned without having that kind of experience, and experiences that change us in some deep and personally fundamental way (e.g. by altering our core preferences or desires). By definition, both are straightforward grist to the Experience Test mill: they feature certain propositional knowledge that is simply inaccessible to us prior to undergoing the transformative experience. Many of these experiences will be essentially agential, involving our taking on some specific agential role.

Finally, a natural, though unexplored, application of the standpoint epistemology framework concerns moral knowledge. One domain where this is contested is the ethics of war,

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<sup>9</sup> Exactly why pessimists are pessimistic varies, though one motivation is because they accept something like Wollheim's (1980: 233) *Acquaintance Principle*, according to which 'judgements of aesthetic value . . . must be based on first-hand experience of their object'. However, many pessimists, including Wollheim (1980) and Hooker (2000, 2007, 2011) allow for exceptions, though some—for example Scruton (1977)—adopt an unqualified version of the position.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the general debate about aesthetic testimony, see Robson (2012), and for discussion of pessimism in particular, see for example Meakin (2004), Whiting (2015), and Nguyen (2017).

where some argue that ‘experience, sheer, vulgar experience’ (Fussell, 1988: 14) provides the basis for a certain kind of epistemic privilege that allows one to grasp certain facts about the moral nature of war that are epistemically inaccessible to the suitably inexperienced. This is a point frequently and persuasively made in a large body of literature produced by combat veterans. For example, Sledge, writing about his experience in World War II, says he and his marine comrades, ‘existed in an environment totally incomprehensible to men behind the lines’ (1981, 121), and that, ‘unless they have seen it with their own eyes, it is too preposterous to think that men could actually live and fight for days and nights on end under such terrible conditions and not be driven insane (1981, 260). Sledge sums this up by commenting that, ‘Often people just behind our rifle companies couldn’t understand what we knew’ (quoted in Fussell 1988, 30-1).

Similarly, Fussell says that ‘what’s at stake in an infantry assault is so entirely unthinkable to those without the experience of one, or several, or many, even if they possess very wide-ranging imaginations and warm sympathies’ (1988: 19). We take it that the same goes for the myriad other forms war can take: the combat-experienced standpoint provides unique epistemic privileges, which can then be leveraged into insights into the ethics and nature of war. In other words, when it comes to knowing war, and what is morally at stake, *experience matters*.

The *type* of experience is also relevant here. From what combat-experienced soldiers have said in interviews and memoirs, it is not that of being under mortal threat, or even of confronting gruesome scenes. Rather, the point that comes up again and again is that what matters is what they have *done* (or, in some cases, failed to do) in a combat context. Marlantes, for example, stresses facing ‘the death of those *I killed*’ (2011: 16, our emphasis), while Wold (quoted in Sites, 2014) focuses on ‘the things [he] did’ while stationed in Fallujah. Similarly, AIC Bryant, a US Airforce drone pilot from 2007 to 2011, talks about ‘watching someone bleed out, because of something [he] did’ (quoted in Power, 2013), while those interviewed in Ouma, Chappelle and Salinas’s (2010) extensive analysis of burnout/PTSD amongst drone operators heavily emphasised facing the consequences of their actions.

In short, then, the relevant experience is that of *being an agent in a combat context*, thereby bringing about certain moral, and possibly mortal, outcomes. Having undergone this essentially agential experience, individuals are then placed in a position to grasp certain insights unavailable to the unexperienced.

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One immediate upshot of this experience being essentially agential is that merely watching someone undergo it will not suffice: the relevant experience isn't *seeing* someone participate in war, it's *doing* so. You *yourself* have to be in one of these moral moments, then *act*, and, having done so, face the consequences. You have to undergo what Fussell describes in the following:

When the young soldier with the wild eyes comes at you, firing, do *you* shoot him in the foot, hoping he'll be hurt badly enough to drop or miss-aim the gun with which he's going to kill you, or do *you* shoot him in the chest (or, if you're a prime shot, in the head) and make certain that you and not he will be the survivor of that mortal moment?

(Fussell, 1988: 34–35, emphasis added)

So understood, to take up the soldier's standpoint, one must have the experience of *acting* in a 'mortal moment'. Those who lack this experience—who have not been agents in combat contexts—fail the Experience Test for knowing the various propositions about the nature and ethics of war that Fussell and his fellows have access to. That is, because they fail to satisfy one of the necessary conditions, there are certain facts about war that are epistemically inaccessible to the inexperienced.

Perhaps the clearest instance of this is the exchange between Fussell and Walzer on the use of the atomic bomb. Walzer argues—rather persuasively, it should be said—that the use of the bomb on Hiroshima was a political and not a military act, and hence an act of terrorism; it was a 'violation' of a 'code' that should not be broken (1988: 14). Fussell's response is that the bombing was both 'political and military, sadistic and humanitarian, horrible and welcome', a point he suggests it is only possible to see once you adopt the soldier's view. He ends his response by saying:

I was arguing the importance of combat experience, alas, in influencing one's views on the ethics of the bomb. I observed that those who deplore the dropping of the bomb absolutely turn out to be largely too young to have been killed if it hadn't been used. I don't want to be needlessly offensive . . . But I note

that in 1945 Michael Walzer, for all the emotional warmth of his current argument, was ten years old.

(Walzer and Fussell, 1981: 14)

Importantly, we do not suggest that all actors in war will come to have the moral knowledge or ethical views on war that Fussell refers to. There are a number of factors that can influence the outcome or what effect experiences can have on an agent, and the often complex and traumatic experience of war can have varying effects on what individuals come to know. Moreover, what exactly these soldiers come to know is contested, that is how to characterise this knowledge, how it translates to normative judgements regarding war, or how it should guide actions or decision-making. These issues, however, point only to the complex nature of the knowledge in question and the underexplored state of the field, rather than motivate broad scepticism about such knowledge.

In summary, we assert that there is some propositional moral knowledge that requires passing the Experience Test. In addition, a subset of this knowledge requires undergoing certain essentially agential or participatory experiences.

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## **Agential experience and learning from fiction**

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As noted in the introduction, we assume that it is possible to learn from fictions. Moreover, we accept that fictions are capable of imparting a wealth of knowledge, including some moral knowledge. However, we argue that traditional fictions are limited in their capacity to impart certain moral knowledge, namely that which requires agential experience. This is because traditional fictions are, in some sense, *closed*—novel readers and film viewers are unable to participate in the depicted events/actions in any way. They are removed from the action (though they might be ‘immersed’ in a relevant sense if the depiction is of sufficiently high quality). This removal means that traditional fictions are structurally unable to deliver any kind of participatory or agential experience. To take up the example above, no matter how rich a description traditional fictions deliver, they cannot put us in the soldier’s standpoint—they can’t give us the experience of being an agent within a mortal moment. They can, of course, *depict* or *describe* the



relevant experience. They can invite readers to adopt the standpoint of a character who is grappling with mortal moments and their consequences. However, while the reader can reflect on what choice they might make in similar circumstances, they cannot act. The choices always remain in the character/author's hands. Readers can learn about the soldier's standpoint, but they cannot, strictly speaking, take it up.

So, traditional fictions cannot put us in the soldier's standpoint. Since being in the soldier's standpoint is a necessary condition for knowing certain facts about the nature and ethics of war, it follows that traditional fiction cannot teach us these facts.

More generally, since such fictions are closed, in the sense that they do not allow readers to participate in the depicted or described events, traditional fictions cannot put us in a position to satisfy the relevant necessary conditions. Consequently, traditional fiction faces an experience knowledge gap: they are incapable of teaching us any knowledge for which passing the Experience Test with agential experiences is a necessary condition.

However, *interactive* fictions can support fictional agency—they allow their players to shape the relevant work's contents by taking-up the role of active agents within the world of the fiction. This fictional agency can be used to help fill the experience gap.

Interactive fictions are able to support fictional agency because they feature *affordances*.<sup>11</sup> Roughly, affordances are quasi-causal real world to fictional-world functions, with their inputs being various actions of the player and the output being some corresponding change in the world of the fiction. Exactly what form these affordances take depends upon what form of medium the interactive fiction is. For example, a standard affordance for video game interactive fictions is that the player can manipulate a thumb-stick and, in so doing, move the player-character—a fictional entity that serves as the player's proxy in the game-world—around in the game-world. Meanwhile, affordances of choose-your-own-adventure books like *Project UFO* and *Hyperspace* typically involve the reader flipping to a certain page depending upon what actions/events they want to occur within the fiction. Finally, table-top and live-action role-playing-games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Vampire: The Masquerade* often feature affordances that involve verbal or written communication describing what the players would like to have happen (e.g. 'I cast magic missile!'), accompanied by some form of chance mechanism (frequently dice or rock paper scissors) to determine the action's success or failure.

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<sup>11</sup> For more on affordances, see for example [Holl \(2005\)](#) and [Cosburn and Silcox \(2009\)](#).

Of course, traditional fictions (and, arguably, all artworks), feature something that looks a lot like, but is in fact distinct from, affordances. For traditional fictions allow appreciators to control the sequence or means in which they access the traditional fiction's content. You can, for example, choose to read a book in reverse order, or view a film played at 2× playback speed. But, as Lopes notes, changing the order or manner in which a fiction's content is accessed isn't to change the content itself—as he puts it, ‘whatever *Ulysses* is about is not altered by my reading it in order, say, of chapter length’ (2001: 68). In this way, though traditional fictions are *weakly interactive*, in that they only allow readers to alter how the work is displayed, but not alter its contents, interactive fictions are *strongly interactive*, in that readers' inputs do not merely cue up various previously encoded fictional events, but instead actively shape the work's very contents. What happens in the world of the interactive fiction depends upon the reader's input, such that the world is only generated after the inputs are supplied. It is the interactive fiction's affordances that translate the player's inputs into the relevant fictional content.

The nature and number of a fiction's affordances delineate what can and cannot be changed (and hence how interactive the interactive fiction is). For example, *Dark Souls* allows players to determine, by pushing a button, whether they link the flame and prolong the Age of Fire, or walk away and usher in the Age of Dark, but there is no means for players to make it such that the story takes place somewhere other than in Lordran. Still, many interactive fictions feature a significant range of affordances, allowing players to have direct control over a large amount of the fiction's content—control that, with traditional fictions, is only in the hands of the writer/director.

In this way, affordances are a defining feature of interactive fictions. They are the mechanisms by which players are able to fix the content of the interactive fiction, the things that make interactive fictions genuinely *interactive*. For the same reason, affordances are absent in traditional fictions: if a work includes affordances, then it is interactive.

These affordances mean that interactive fictions allow players to *fictionally participate* in the world of the fiction: by providing inputs, readers have a kind of agency within the fiction, shaping and (partially) determining what occurs. This also allows for certain unique emotional reactions. For example, as (Fowler 2005: 37–39, 2010: 631) notes, a player of an interactive fiction might feel guilty for *what they (fictionally) did*. Such a response seems inappropriate in the context of traditional fictions, since the relevant emotional attitude presupposes an active

role. Or, to put the point another way, you can't feel guilty about what *Apocalypse Now*'s Cpt. Willard does—that's out of your hands—but you can (and probably should) feel guilty about what *Spec-Ops: the Line*'s Cpt. Walker does, because it's your hand that made him do it.<sup>12</sup>

So, interactive fictions, via their affordances, support a kind of fictional agency. In turn, this means interactive fictions can help bridge the experience gap.

The process has three steps. First, we, who lack the relevant real-life experiences, can, via interactive fictions, generate *fictional experiences*—that is, experiences within the fiction that are analogous to the relevant real-life ones. In this way, it can be said to pass the Experience Test within the fiction by taking up the requisite standpoint. Then, staying within the fiction, we can acquire the desired knowledge. Finally, to the extent that the fictional experiences and standpoints correspond to those that are relevant in the actual world, the knowledge gained from them can be extended to the real world.

For example, we can engage with an interactive fiction that allows us to serve as agents in a fictional combat situation. This will generate a body of agential experiences, many of which will, if the interactive fiction is well done, correspond to the real-world experiences that Fussell and the like contend are necessary for knowing war. So, *within the fiction*, we would then satisfy the necessary condition for knowledge—we have fictionally taken up the soldier's standpoint. Staying within the fiction, we can then perform whatever necessary cognitive operations—the requisite bit of thinking—to acquire the knowledge we are seeking. Finally, using the same mechanisms we standardly employ, we can export this genuine knowledge from the fiction to the real world.

Of course, this process might be limited, or even fail, in numerous ways. For example, the interactive fiction might not be very well made, or otherwise not fully capture key aspects of the experience, and hence fail to deliver fictional experiences that are analogous to the relevant real-life ones. In that case, players would fail to fictionally take up the relevant standpoint, and hence not be in a position to pass the Experience Test.

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine (Confessions, Book 10, chapter XXX) argues that our actions in dreams are not morally appraisable and thus we should not feel guilty for doing X *in a dream* where X, if actually done, would warrant appropriate guilt. This argument naturally extends to some X done *in the fiction*, raising a potential problem for this point. However, we will leave the issue for now, since discussing it would take us too far afield. Thanks to Adam Carter for raising this.

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Alternatively, the interactive fiction might deliver the right fictional experiences and thus allow us to take up the relevant standpoint, but we might fail to grasp the desired knowledge. This might happen because a player is not engaging with the interactive fiction with the appropriate attitude—for example, just playing for entertainment, or to look at the amazing visuals/listen to the in-game music. Additionally, the player’s awareness that they are engaging with a fiction, that is that it is ‘not real’, may impede their ability to connect that experience to the intended knowledge. Finally, we might be able to get the right experience and derive the appropriate knowledge, but, for whatever reason, fail to properly extrapolate it. Such cases will most likely occur when players mistakenly believe that their fictional experiences are not genuinely analogous to relevant real-life ones.

For these reasons, it would be foolhardy to claim that interactive fictions *always* fill the experience gap and deliver the relevant knowledge. In reality, it is likely that there will be issues at one or more of the above points. However, these failings or impediments can occur in degrees—that is interactive fictions can do better or worse at teaching us various lessons, rather than simply passing or failing. In this way, interactive fictions can remain educative even if they are not perfect. Notably, these problems are not unique to learning from interactive fictions but are familiar obstacles to learning from traditional fictions or even non-fictions. Our claim is that knowledge gained from appropriately engaging with well-constructed interactive fictions can get us *closer to* that which requires real experience. On this point, the above shows that interactive fictions *can* deliver a range of fictional participatory experience and, if the process goes smoothly, provide some knowledge traditional fictions are structurally incapable of delivering.

Moreover, there is good reason to think that interactive fictions not only can but do, in certain cases, provide such knowledge. Perhaps the strongest evidence for this is that those who are most interested in producing capable soldiers think so. From 2000 to 2010, the U.S. military spent roughly \$6 billion annually on designing, producing, and distributing video games.<sup>13</sup> These range from *America’s Army*, a ‘tactical multiplayer first-person shooter’, to *Gator Six*, a game that simulates, through the use of edited real-life combat video, the judgement calls an officer has to make in modern war. Their motivation for spending so much on such games, besides being cost-effective alternatives to real exercises (and an extremely effective recruitment tool) is ‘to make virtual vets’ (Col.(R) Matthew Caffrey, Professor of War Gaming and Planning

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<sup>13</sup> Figures from Singer (2010).

at the Air Command and Staff College, quoted in Singer (2009)).<sup>14</sup> This ‘virtual vets’ claim makes no sense unless the experience players get from engaging with these video games is sufficiently similar to war.

But there are other, more widely available interactive fictions that can be understood as supporting (fictional) combat experiences. For example, *Spec Ops* first places the player in a variety of carefully crafted ‘fictional mortal moments’ and second, the game does not shy away from showing the player the consequence of their actions, displaying the brutal effects on those they are done to and by. In the finale, the game asks: *why did you do it?* This question isn’t

directed at the player-character, but at the *player*.<sup>15</sup> Challenging players in this way, the game forces them to confront the violence that they have committed and admit they’ve blood on their hands, thereby avoiding the possible pitfalls of having the player not think about their experience, and of failing to engage with the fiction in the appropriate manner. But most importantly, many players have confessed that they feel *Spec Ops* changed their conception of

war.<sup>16</sup> For these reasons, it is not a bridge too far to say that *Spec Ops* is an interactive fiction that supplies us with something like fictional combat experience—the kind of fictional combat experience that can be used to help fill the experience gap. Of course, even if this last point fails and there are in fact no current *actual* instances, the larger point remains: interactive fictions *can* teach us some propositional knowledge traditional fictions cannot.

More generally, we acknowledge that video games as a genre have focused primarily on entertainment rather than education and thus most existing games are ill-suited to convey valuable moral knowledge. However, there is growing interest in the development of ‘serious games’ that focus on education or other serious outcomes.<sup>17</sup> These games show the possibility of harnessing interactivity to promote educational aims, including moral awareness. These

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<sup>14</sup> Edery and Mollick note that ‘30 percent of all Americans age 16 to 24 had a more positive impression of the Army because of [playing *America’s Army*] and, even more amazingly, the game had more impact on recruits than all other forms of Army advertising combined’ (2008: 141).

<sup>15</sup> This is made explicit by how the final confrontation is framed, with the main antagonist pointing his gun/directing his questions at the camera, and hence at the player. Thus the game isn’t asking Walker, ‘Do you feel like a hero yet?’, it’s asking *you*, the player, the one in control.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, <https://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3723999>, but cf. <https://forums.2k.com/showthread.php?260331-A-Disabled-Combat-Veterans-Perspective>. [Accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>17</sup> For example, *A Force More Powerful* (2006), *Darfur is Dying* (2006), and *Amnesty the Game* (2011).

existing developments suggest that future projects aimed at moral education, including on topics such as the ethics of war, are possible.

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## The Nancy Sherman problem

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Before concluding, we would like to briefly discuss a challenge, as doing so will help refine our discussion. The philosopher Nancy Sherman is an expert on the ethics and trauma of war. Her expertise is founded on a vast array of interviews with veterans, intended to help us better understand their ‘inner wars’ (2011: 48). However, Sherman has never personally experienced war. So, given our argument above, one might wonder: are we committed to saying that, in principle, Sherman’s years of work have not taught her *anything* like the moral knowledge that Fussell claims to have?

A direct response to this objection is to simply bite the bullet and say that Sherman lacks the moral knowledge; that is, while she might be very knowledgeable about many aspects of the ethics of war, there are some things that she just doesn’t—and, given her experiences, can’t—know. Of course, this does not fit well with the claim that Sherman is an *expert*, who likely does possess something like the relevant moral knowledge.

With an eye towards addressing this tension, let us, paraphrasing Cath (2019: 113–114), distinguish between three ‘grades’ of moral knowledge:<sup>18</sup>

**Gold Standard** A person  $p$  knows some relevant moral knowledge due to directly undergoing a particular agential experience  $e$ —for example, their knowledge originates in first-hand experience of war-relevant agential activities.

**Silver Standard** A person  $p$  knows some relevant moral knowledge due to directly undergoing an agential experience  $e^*$  that is distinct from, but relevantly similar to, experience  $e$ —for example, their knowledge originates in first-hand experience of being a paramedic.

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<sup>18</sup> Note that Cath focuses on what-it-is-like-knowledge.

## A moral argument for video games

**Bronze Standard** A person *p* knows some relevant moral knowledge not due to any agential experience, but from some other source—for example, testimonial evidence.

Armed with these, we can say that Sherman's extensive body of interviews ensures that, with regard to most moral knowledge about war, she satisfies the Bronze standard. In that sense, she's much more knowledgeable than many others. In this way, she is definitely an expert. However, there is a sense in which those who satisfy the Silver or Gold standards are epistemically privileged or have epistemic authority with respect to the relevant knowledge. For they know—or at least *can* know—more of the relevant knowledge. This does not entail that engaging with certain video games makes one more knowledgeable in total, than Sherman. Nor does it imply that any engagement, however minimal, with a relevant video game is more authoritative than Sherman's body of knowledge. However, if it is true that some knowledge of the moral nature of war requires agential experience, then Sherman's knowledge of the ethics of war will be incomplete if it derives only from testimonial evidence.

This allows us to maintain our flat-footed response—there is something that Sherman just cannot grasp—while also accommodating the (true) idea that she is an expert. However, it also allows us to reiterate the point that fictional agential experience meets only the Silver Standard and thus gives only incomplete or imperfect access to the moral knowledge we are after. Someone who is a 'virtual vet' is never going to have all the moral knowledge that someone like Fussell has. No matter how well designed and researched, how immersive or transportive a game is, it will never get you to the Gold Standard. It will always leave *something* out. Of course, a natural question is 'what exactly is missing?' At this we have to confess that we simply do not know, as neither of us has been to war. Moreover, given our starting assumptions regarding standpoint epistemology, it will not be possible to fully convey what is missing via testimony.

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## Conclusion

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Susan Sontag ends her [2002](#) essay, 'Looking at War: Photography's view of devastation and death', with a discussion of Jeff Wall's 1992 photograph entitled 'Dead Troops Talk (A vision

after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)'. She considers what these dead troops would have to say:

What would they have to say to us? 'We'—this 'we' is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is—and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine. That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right.

(Sontag, 2002).

We have argued in support of Sontag's conclusion, namely that some knowledge requires undergoing certain experiences. In the case of war at least, experience matters. In particular, we have argued that some important kinds of moral knowledge seem to require undergoing certain *agential* experiences. This requirement for agential experience means that traditional fictions are structurally unable to convey such knowledge. Interactive fictions however, such as video games, could help teach us this knowledge by allowing us to fictionally undergo the relevant agential experiences. While the resulting knowledge remains incomplete or partial, the potential to gain further moral understanding through video games is significant.

We will end with consideration of some possible implications for educational practice. First, if an educational programme aims at moral education, it will be important to consider how to incorporate experiential elements, including agential experience, into its program. While we have focused our discussion on moral knowledge related to war, we believe there are many moral issues for which agential experience matters for gaining moral knowledge. These can include issues in medical or bioethics, ethics of policing and incarceration, migration ethics, and reproductive rights. Comprehensive moral education on these topics ought to consider how to incorporate agential experience.

Second, where it is not possible or permissible to provide the relevant direct experience, such programmes may look to interactive fictions, including video games, as an alternative. In the case of the soldier standpoint, it is clear that it is morally impermissible to subject individuals



to the experience of fighting in war merely for educational purposes. But it also seems important that policy makers, academics, and the public at large have as complete an understanding as possible of the moral realities of war. In this case, there may even be a moral obligation to develop and engage with appropriately designed games in order to teach the important subject of war.

This is particularly important when one group makes decisions that have direct impact on others, but where members of that group likely lack the relevant experience. For example, academics working on the ethics of war, politicians in charge of defence decisions, and those engaged in the arms trade ought to gain insight into the ethical reality of war given the impact their decisions make on others. Broader moral obligations for individuals outside of particular formal roles to engage with such games will depend on one's views about duties to provide moral education, however, it is again possible to imagine games that aid understanding of general (rather than role-related) moral knowledge.

Importantly, we argue only that interactive fictions, such as video games, may be an important route to moral knowledge, not that they are the *only* route. Rather, they may be most valuable in combination with other, also-partial, media including traditional fictions. Moreover, there is cause for caution in attempting to recreate or design certain experiences which may be traumatic or become desensitising.

Third, while there is great potential in our view, for learning from interactive fictions, we noted that successful uptake requires the player to engage with the work with the appropriate attitude. Thus, we suggest that incorporating interactive fictions as educational tools must be paired with instruction and guidance on how to appropriately engage with and reflect on the work. To our knowledge, there is little formal work on this subject and so marks an important topic for further research.

To conclude, there is reason to encourage development and distribution of well-constructed games, and to play them! In so doing, we can teach ourselves new, important moral lessons—lessons that we'll only learn by picking up the controller. **19**

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