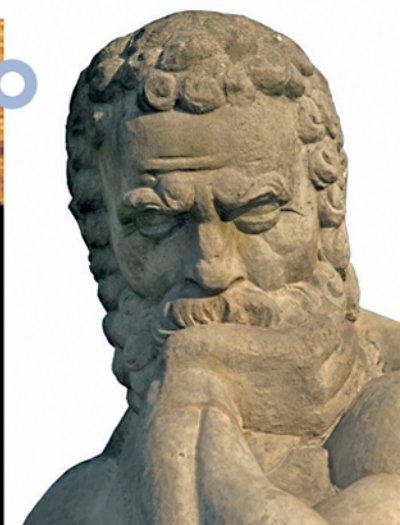




PHIL **THROUGH VIDEO GAMES** SOPHY



**JON COGBURN
AND
MARK SILCOX**



Philosophy Through Video Games

How can *Wii Sports* teach us about metaphysics? Can playing *World of Warcraft* lead to greater self-consciousness? How can we learn about aesthetics, ethics, and divine attributes from *Zork*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *Civilization*? A variety of increasingly sophisticated video games are rapidly overtaking books, films, and television as America's most popular form of media entertainment. It is estimated that by 2011 over 30 percent of US households will own a Wii console—about the same percentage that owned a television in 1953.

In *Philosophy Through Video Games*, Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox—philosophers with game industry experience—investigate the aesthetic appeal of video games, their effect on our morals, the insights they give us into our understanding of perceptual knowledge, personal identity, artificial intelligence, and the very meaning of life itself, arguing that video games are popular precisely because they engage with longstanding philosophical problems. Topics covered include:

- The Problem of the External World
- Dualism and Personal Identity
- Artificial and Human Intelligence in the Philosophy of Mind
- The Idea of Interactive Art
- The Moral Effects of Video Games
- Games and God's Goodness

Games discussed include: *Madden Football*, *Wii Sports*, *Guitar Hero*, *World of Warcraft*, *Sims Online*, *Second Life*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Knights of the Old Republic*, *Elder Scrolls*, *Zork*, *EverQuest*, *Doom*, *Halo 2*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Civilization*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Rome: Total War*, *Black and White*, *Aidyn Chronicles*.

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Philosophy Through Video Games

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Preface

The most famous philosophers of the Western tradition have traditionally been depicted in art, literature, and popular culture as spacey dreamers with their heads in the clouds, lost in silent contemplation of massive tomes or falling down well shafts while staring at the stars. To anyone who takes this image of the philosophical life seriously, it must be hard to imagine how the revelatory insights that philosophy is supposed to provide could be achieved while playing a video game. Gazing up at the heavens and pondering life's deepest conundrums might provide its own distinctive set of rewards, but it certainly won't get you very far in *Doom*. Most such games require the sort of focused concentration on private, short-term goals that has traditionally been viewed as strictly incompatible with the types of gratification that are distinctive of philosophy.

So why suppose that one *can* achieve philosophical wisdom through the medium of video games? If we're right in thinking that people do, then the path must begin at some point a little *after* one has fought off the demons, won the virtual golf tournament, or at the very least, pressed the "pause" button. The work of a philosopher begins when the mind takes hold of whatever residual thoughts remain, once one has succeeded (or failed) at the highly specific tasks set by the game. Fortunately, in our experience at least, there is almost always at least some such residuum. Whether she is taking a break from something as simpleminded as *Pac-Man* or from a work of art as deep and involving as *BioShock*, the habitual gamer always eventually finds herself pondering some vivid piece of imagery, some quirk of gameplay, or some anomalous feature of the diegetic world that she has just been inhabiting. What would it be like to *be* Pac-Man? To live on Myst island? To rule one's very own world? These thoughts can flicker out of existence as quickly as they arrive. But for the philosophically inclined, they might also lead to deep confusion, sleep loss, a change of career, or an experience of conversion.

Although few gamers realize it, when they engage in these sort of reflections they are taking part in an ancient practice that runs through the whole history of Western culture. The systematic, self-conscious practice of philosophy in fact grew out of earlier historical pursuits that were far closer

to game-play than they were to abstract reasoning. As Johan Huizinga points out in his magnificent book about “the play element in culture,” *Homo Ludens*,¹ philosophical argumentation was first carried out by the sophists of ancient Greece through the medium of the *epidexis*, a form of public rhetorical performance. These displays of verbal acuity, to which certain of the Greek sophists such as Gorgias and Prodicus would sometimes charge an attendance fee, often centered around the examination of riddle-questions like “What is the same everywhere and nowhere?” or “All Cretans are liars; I am a Cretan. Am I lying now?”² Huizinga proposes that the origins of philosophy in gameplay are evident in many of its most distinctive values and practices: “May it not be that in all logic,” he wonders, “and particularly in the syllogism, there is always a tacit understanding to take the terms and concepts for granted as one does the pieces on a chess-board” (*Ludens* 152–153)?

Given these historical facts, it is perhaps surprising that the great Western philosophers have had so little to say about the practice of game-playing. Of course, the idea that philosophy itself is a game—a frivolous distraction from the serious occupations of making money, saying one’s prayers, or protecting Our People from the Bad Guys Over the Hill—is as old as philosophy itself.³ More subtle and provocative analogies between philosophy and game-play have been suggested by Thomas Hobbes, who seemed to think that the rational decision to leave the state of nature and cast in one’s lot with a civilized culture is a decision that closely resembles the strategic projections of game-play, and by Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose famous analogy between games and human languages has excited some contemporary philosophers while leaving others perplexed.⁴

But perhaps the most famous modern philosophical argument about games is John Stuart Mill’s criticism of the view that “push-pin is as good as poetry.” Mill was a hedonist—he thought, that is, that the only thing in the world with any intrinsic value is pleasure. But Mill was horrified by the thesis endorsed by other hedonistically inclined philosophers (especially his forerunner Jeremy Bentham) that the difference in value between simple-minded games such as push-pin⁵ and great works of art can only be established by determining which provides the largest number of people with the greatest amount of pleasure in the real world. If more people have gotten their kicks from playing *Joust* than from looking at paintings by Manet, then according to Bentham’s standard, this makes *Joust* more objectively valuable. Against this, Mill argued that a distinction needs to be drawn between what he called “lower” and “higher” pleasures. The latter species of pleasures, he thought, might have more genuine value even if a lot fewer people are in a position to enjoy them, because they would be chosen by what he called “competent judges,”—highly experienced people with access to a broad basis for comparison.⁶

Contemporary ethical theorists have tended to take rather a high-minded and dismissive attitude toward this dispute. Many of them have wondered

(in a broadly Kantian vein) why any serious moralist (as opposed to, say, a French chef or a rock musician) would bother to concern herself with such grubby matters as trying to discern the “higher pleasures,” when she could instead be composing rhapsodies about the importance of social justice, self-sacrifice, or eternal salvation. But there has been something of an upsurge of Millian sentiment in the philosophy of the past twenty years or so. Books with names like *Philosophy Goes to the Movies*, *Philosophy of Wine*, *The Philosophy of Erotic Love*, and even *The Philosophy of Horror*⁷ have been hitting the bookshelves in large numbers, and drawing a surprisingly enthusiastic readership. Not all of the authors of these works have been committed to the truth of philosophical hedonism. But all of them do seem to believe that it is the business of philosophy to understand how we have fun, and to provide substantive reasons why, for example, most old French Burgundies are better than most young Australian Shirazes, or why *Curse of the Demon* is more worth watching than *Friday the 13th*.

The philosophically informed love of video games that we developed in our youth, and that continues to enrich our lives today, leads us to hope that we can perform something like the same service for some of the greatest works of art within this massively popular but still under-analyzed new medium. Both of us witnessed the development of video games as a form of entertainment and (eventually) of art at about the same pace that we developed our consuming interest in philosophy. We remember *PONG* hitting our local convenience stores around the time that we first began to experience rudimentary curiosity about where the universe might have come from. The PC revolution, and all of the wonderful text and graphical adventure games (*Zork*, *King's Quest*, *Ultima*) that came in its wake, arrived when we began to have doubts about the central tenets of our religious upbringing. The Nintendo 64 hit the stores while we were both slaving away at our doctoral dissertations, and the glorious, revelatory beauty of even the earliest three-dimensional games for this console cheered us both up through what are normally some of the bleakest days in the life of any career academic.

Of course, there is plenty in video games to interest the philosopher, independently of whether he or she thinks that any of them are truly valuable works of art. Their mere novelty as an entertainment medium, and the enormous amount of logical and psychological effort that goes into the production of even the simplest (and ugliest) of games, are phenomena that are by themselves certainly worthy of serious philosophical attention. Nonetheless, in addition to hoping that the reader will be persuaded by the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic arguments herein, we also hope to show that the appeal of many video games is closer to that of great poetry than it is to the transparent and forgettable charms of push-pin.

In each of the following seven chapters, we begin by describing a puzzle that arises from reflection on some particular genre or species of video game.

Why do players identify so closely with the protagonists of multi-player Role Playing Games? Is it rational for them to do so? How should the surprising success of the Wii be expected to influence the future of game design, and why was it so unanticipated? What (if anything) might be morally wrong with playing violent video games? How close does the expert at world-building games like *Black and White*, *Rome: Total War*, and *Civilization* really come to “playing God?” What does the phenomenon of interactivity tell us more generally about the aesthetic experiences that are part of shared humanity and the good life? Why is the “artificial intelligence” in video games so bad? Any serious attempt to answer these apparently straightforward questions must end up drawing heavily upon the resources of Western Philosophy. In addition, we try to show how plausible solutions to at least some of these puzzles support legitimate and creative contributions to this ancient and justifiably venerated tradition.

Our approach to the philosophical discussion of video games reflects the type of training that both of us received in the North American philosophy departments where we were educated, and where we have both found professional homes. In most English speaking universities, so-called “analytic” philosophy has been the dominant school of thought for over a century. Analytic philosophers tend to take the view that the problems of philosophy are best discussed separately and on their own terms, rather than from the perspective of some overarching worldview, metaphysical theory, or ideology. The specifically philosophical issues that we have elected to focus upon here—the problem of the external world, the puzzle of personal identity, the nature of intelligence, and the questions of whether the depiction of violence is immoral, whether morality can be based on religious belief, and what makes an artwork what it is—are those that have seemed to us to arise most naturally from reflection on the most popular contemporary genres of video games. Thus, while this book may profitably be read from beginning to end, any chapter can also be read out of order by the reader who is specifically interested in its central topic. All of this being said, we ourselves have some reservations about the lack of a broader perspective in much contemporary philosophy. In our last chapter we will try to adopt such a perspective by considering in some detail what video games might have to teach us about the overall meaning of human life itself.

We hope that these discussions will strike a chord or two with fans of video games who have at some point or other been provoked to abstract speculation by the casting of a spell, the killing of a monster, or the exploration of a virtual world. Philosophical wisdom arises from the strangest, most unpredictable wellsprings. Writing this book has only served to strengthen our conviction that video games represent a rich and hitherto largely untapped philosophical resource.

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Note on Book's Webpage

We strongly encourage readers of this book to avail themselves of the web resources posted at <http://www.projectbraintrust.com/ptvg/>. For each chapter we have included a list of key words, arguments, links mentioned in the text, and discussion questions. We also include links to a moderated discussion board, web resources for writing philosophy papers, a glossary, and download sites for freeware games related to each chapter's discussion. The content of the site is not static, and will be expanded and improved based on discussion board consensus. We hope that these resources will prove helpful to teachers who want to use the book in courses on philosophy and game design as well as to readers who are tackling it by themselves.

1 I, Player: The Puzzle of Personal Identity (MMORPGs and Virtual Communities)

1.1 The Problem

Chris and Alayne Edwards owned adjacent plots of land. Alayne liked to work in her garden; Chris performed science experiments in the main room of his house. They got into the habit of paying visits back and forth to admire each others' handiwork, and had discussions about their hobbies and enthusiasms that lasted well into the night. During these conversations, something clicked, and friendship turned into courtship. They passed a memorable weekend together at a nearby resort owned by friends, spending the daylight hours exploring the luxurious grounds and the nighttime enjoying candlelit dinners in the open air.

Then, Chris made the bold move of catching a plane across the Atlantic to meet Alayne face to face for the very first time. To their genuine surprise, they had a great time, and soon decided to get married.¹

Does this story hang together? Perhaps it will appear less paradoxical if we point out that the events described in the first paragraph all took place within the virtual community *Second Life*, while the flight across the Atlantic and subsequent marriage happened in what people like to think of as the "real" world.

Video game players tell less dramatic, but equally paradoxical stories to one another all the time. When recounting one's progress the previous night through the newest chapter of *Halo* or an unexplored stretch of Azeroth in *World of Warcraft*, one will often say things like "I killed a dozen members of the Covenant" or "I had a planning meeting with the other members of the Jewelcrafter's Guild." But does the personal pronoun in these sentences really refer to you, the person who sat in her basement eating pizza and clicking a PC mouse until dawn? On the one hand, it's hard to see how it could; after all, *you* certainly didn't kill anyone, and you probably haven't ever manufactured a piece of jewelry in your life. On the other hand, when Chris and Alayne told their friends "I have fallen in love with my next-door neighbor!" it certainly seems as though they were saying something true.

This is the newest version of an old philosophical puzzle. It turns out to be extraordinarily unclear exactly what is going on when a person says "I

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remember growing up,” for example, or “I lost half my body weight,” or “I’ll get a good grade if I force myself to study.” Our ability to use these sorts of expressions meaningfully seems to presuppose knowledge of a clear *criterion of identity*, a reliable way, that is, of telling: (1) when something still counts as the same object or person after having undergone changes over a period of time, and (2) what makes two different things or people different from one another.

People are especially tricky, since we all go through both psychological and physical changes throughout our entire lives. For example, a relative of one of this book’s authors used to countenance voting for George Bush in 2000 by saying, “George Bush is not the same person he was before finding Jesus in his forties. He’s grown up.” Then, four years later, as a prelude to telling you why he might vote for Bush in 2004, the relative would say, “George Bush is not the same person he was before September 11. He’s grown up.”

Whatever their merit in the case of the 43rd President of the United States, such observations about someone’s becoming a “different person” often do have a certain plausibility, especially when we assess whether people are morally responsible for past actions. However, these ways of speaking also contradict other well-entrenched linguistic practices. The 43rd President still talks on the phone with his father and calls him “Dad.” If a completely different person was instantiated in his region of space-time, would it be at all rational for him (the new person) to continue this sort of a relationship with the elder Bush?

Note also that the locution “he’s not himself” can correctly describe many states of consciousness, from mild grumpiness to full blown dementia. But how can one not be oneself? Doesn’t logic itself dictate that everything is what it is, and not what it is not?

The strange use of the word “I” by participants in role-playing games, from tabletop *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D & D*) all the way to Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) like *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*, not only adds a new level of complexity to the whole discussion, but also ends up providing support for some fascinating philosophical theses concerning the nature of the self. In this chapter, we will first examine (and dismiss) the view that the contested class of statements in the first person are all simply false. Then we will delve more deeply into the nature of the self to solve our original puzzle about the relationship between the “I” of the player and the “I” of the player’s avatar. We will arrive at the metaphysically surprising conclusion that the temporal and spatial boundaries of the self are fundamentally *vague*.

1.2 A Fictional Self?

We begin by examining more closely the relevant kinds of self-ascriptions that Role Playing Game (RPG) players are likely to make. A puzzling fact

about these games is that the rules often allow the player's avatar (the entity that represents the player, usually by carrying out actions dictated by the player's manipulation of the game controllers) to do things that the player herself clearly *can't* do. In these circumstances, it seems as though the character/avatar's identity is partially constructed by the game master or computer or programming team. If the character does something the player is incapable of, it is extremely misleading for the player to ascribe the character's actions to herself. It is the apparent intractability of this problem that might tempt some philosophers to throw up their hands and just say that all such self-ascriptions are false.

1.2.1 Role-Playing

There is a sense in which role-playing games are as old as the impulse that we've all felt as children to say to one another "Let's pretend . . ." But the idea that such games are more fun with explicit, mathematized rules, and that they can be played just as effectively through conversation and die-rolling as they can through schoolyard play-acting, is a much more recent innovation.

Commercial RPGs first became popular during the mid-1970s, via the craze for tabletop games such as *Traveler*, *Paranoia*, *Top Secret*, and, most famously, *D & D*. One thing that distinguished these games from close cousins like *Clue*, *Monopoly*, and *Axis and Allies* was the unusual way that the player was represented within the game. Instead of being signified by a little plastic counter, a metal car, or fifty cardboard hexagons with tanks printed on them, the tabletop RPG player makes a long series of die rolls to "create a character." The result of each roll is taken to represent one of a group of basic character traits such as physical strength, intelligence, charm, dexterity, and so on. Further rolls and calculations are made to determine each character's more specialized skills, e.g., programming computers, making public speeches, climbing mountains, or taming animals. Each character's attributes get recorded on a sheet of paper at the outset of the game, and are referenced at later points to determine things like the outcomes of fights or negotiations with non-player characters. For example, a character's Dexterity score will determine how likely she is to successfully hit an unarmed person with her bare fist, should she decide to do so (the score determines how high the player's die roll has to be for a successful hit). Her Strength will determine how much damage her fist can do. Each character has a finite number of Hit Points, which are lost when the character is wounded and regained upon healing.

Such mechanisms of "character creation" are still present in most contemporary MMORPGs like *Everquest*, *Anarchy Online*, and *World of Warcraft*. When a player joins any of these games for the first time, she is expected to "customize" an in-game character in a variety of ways similar to those just described, as well as others that range from choosing a suitable

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name to picking a polygonal 3-D avatar's height, gender, skin color, and facial configuration.

But sophisticated players of tabletop role-playing games are able to go a step further. They can actually “play” their characters, in the sense that their success in the game can depend upon how good they are at pretending to be the people represented by the statistics that they have recorded on their “character sheets.” Among especially serious players of *D & D* and other tabletop RPGs, it is often forbidden to speak in one's own voice during a game, rather than the voice of the character that the player is supposed to be. And even when this convention isn't strictly observed, a competent GM (i.e., “game master”—or “Dungeon Master,” or “Administrator,” or whatever the person is called who controls events in the game-world) will reward players for performing their parts plausibly, and penalize them for acting “out of character.”

There is simply no parallel to this phenomenon in computer RPGs. It is practically impossible to imagine how one could even begin to program a computer to pass spontaneous judgment upon how well some human player imitates a dwarf, a wizard, a paladin, or whatever. Real, theatrical role-playing still does take place in contemporary MMORPGs though. In fact, the universe of *World of Warcraft* contains some designated “role-playing realms” in which players are encouraged to act “in character” through the game's instant messaging system. But there are no palpable in-game rewards like the finding of treasure or the earning of experience points made available to the player for being good at this. To achieve these goals, all the player can do is to have her character attempt the various tasks that the game actually puts before her, such as crawling through a cave or fighting off trolls, and then wait while the computer crunches numbers to find out if she succeeds or fails. This can often be a lot of fun, but it is also something quite different from actually pretending to be another person.

There is a powerful sense, then, in which pen-and-paper tabletop RPGs are more liberating works of interactive art than MMORPGs. But there is another sense in which they are far more constraining. A *D & D* player of average intelligence who tries to step into the role of a character who is a total genius will need constant hints and cues from the GM about how she should use her talents most effectively in the game-world. The same problem applies to many of the other primary or secondary character traits that are usually represented in these games with a simple quantitative score, such as Wisdom, Courage, and (perhaps most dramatically) Charisma.² In order to achieve any kind of realism, the GM must be imaginative and quick-witted enough to keep the players honest about how their characters would behave, and to make compensatory adjustments whenever there is an inconsistency between what can reasonably be expected of the player and what one would expect of her character. Sometimes these adjustments will come in the form of mere suggestions to do things differently. Sometimes they are enforced by having non-player characters (also known as NPCs, the human

and non-human agents controlled by the game master) respond to the player's actions in various ways. And sometimes the GM must prohibit certain sorts of behavior outright. When a wealthy Paladin who is supposed to be in the 98th percentile for charm goes around the *D & D* game-world spitting on the ground and cursing at shopkeepers, something has clearly gone wrong in a way that it never could in a video game. For, assuming that a game like *World of Warcraft* allowed spitting as a possible action, all the Paladins could simply be *programmed* not to do it.

RPGs present us with plenty of contexts in which players say “*I do X*” even though the action they describe is utterly beyond their capacities. Of course, when the claim in question is something like, “*I charm the dragon*,” this is so for the uninteresting reason that the player herself lives in a world that does not contain any dragons. But when the claim is something more like “*I charm the shopkeeper*,” a problem of interpretation arises just because the person speaking may not be especially gifted with bargaining savvy. In these cases, the GM and programmer must help the character manifest a virtue that some human beings in the real world have, but that the player herself systematically lacks. But then there is a sense in which the player can't even really *play* the character at all. The character's rational behavior is mostly a function of the game master or computer that is playing the character *for* her. Under these specific circumstances, it seems especially misleading for the player to say, “*I charmed the shopkeeper*.”

We cannot stress strongly enough the omnipresence of this disconnect between character and player in RPGs. Smart players play dumb characters and vice versa. Charismatic players play charmless characters and vice versa. Lawful good players play chaotic evil characters and vice versa.

Indeed, the problem is so prevalent that one of the primary skills of a decent GM is seamlessly and non-intrusively guiding and shaping all of the players' behavior to help craft an entertaining yet believable narrative.³ Given the all-pervasive role of the game master (or the programming team) here, must it not be false for the player to think that she is speaking about *herself* in any coherent sense whatsoever, when she describes the actions of her character?

1.2.2 Naïve Fictionalism

The simplest solution to this problem would be to adopt a position of naïve fictionalism toward the claims that are made by participants in RPGs when they are speaking “in character.” This approach amounts to saying that the claims in question are simply *false*.⁴ When a *D & D* player tells the GM “*I search the dungeon for treasure*,” or when a participant in *Second Life* says “*Last night I redecorated my house*,” their assertions fall into the same semantic category as more straightforwardly implausible remarks like “*Ben Franklin was President of the United States*” or “*My sister is a pumpkin*.”

An unsophisticated fictionalist interpretation of the gamer's use of “*I*” has

considerable intuitive appeal. There are two major problems with it, though. The first is relatively obvious: when gamers make these sorts of claims, informed, rational people don't normally *treat* them as though they were false. It would be weird, after all, for the GM of a tabletop game to respond to a player's assertion that she's searching the dungeon by saying "No, you're not—you're here in the dining room of my apartment!"

The second, trickier problem arises when a player says something in character that clearly would be true even if it were said in a more everyday context. Take, for example, the following assertion: "I noticed for the first time yesterday that it's difficult for a person to tip over a cow,"⁵ and imagine it being made by a player of *Asheron's Call*, a popular early MMORPG from the 1990s in which it was possible (though tricky) for player characters to tip over virtual cows in the diegetic realm (i.e., the fictitious video game world that is typically represented on a 2-D monitor). Even if it were clear from the context that the person was talking about an event in the game, she also in this case happens to be saying something that is *clearly* true, both about her own epistemic state and about a property of real-life cows. To say (as the naïve fictionalist must) that the claim is false merely because of the slightly peculiar context in which the word "I" is being used would be explanatory overkill.

Clearly, then, we must look for a better approach to solving our original puzzle about the RPG player's use of "I" than that of the naïve fictionalist. Our problem would be solved if we could avail ourselves of a less naïve philosophical understanding of the nature of fiction itself,⁶ which is surely necessary in any case. Whatever else might set apart fictional narratives from other forms of art and human communication, the view that it is simply their *falsehood* is catastrophically simple-minded.

However, rather than trying to work out such a theory we will focus here upon issues about the metaphysical status of the self that arise specifically in the context of video games. We will show that certain philosophical concerns strongly motivate a philosophy of the self that allows us to differentiate true first-person avowals ("I met Alayne last night" being true in the real world even if only their avatars had met) from ambiguous ones ("I have an eighteen Charisma" being true in the game world and false in reality), while leaving a vague area in between ("I am brave" used to refer to uncharacteristic honesty exhibited on a person's own MySpace page).

1.3 The Temporally Vague Self

Here we examine the attempts of some major philosophers in the Western tradition to construct a general, metaphysically plausible criterion of identity for objects and persons over time. We will look at René Descartes' views on these topics, since his contributions to the subject in the seventeenth century have been by far the most influential in the history of Western

philosophy. Then, we'll examine some reasons offered by the skeptical eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume for doubting that there could be any criterion of identity whatsoever for the human self. Our main conclusion will be that the self is temporally vague. In Section 2.4, we will go on to examine Andy Clark's "extended mind hypothesis" in order to argue that the self is also spatially vague. We will show how this vagueness renders coherent and plausible some of the ways players of video games use the word "I."

1.3.1 Our Cartesian Heritage: Criteria for Identity

Questions about the nature of human selfhood have usually been discussed by philosophers as instances of a more basic and abstract issue in metaphysics: the problem of persistence through change. How can we make sense of the superficially paradoxical fact that an object can undergo changes over a period of time while remaining (in some metaphysically significant way) exactly the "same thing?" All human beings change as they grow into adulthood, casting off old molecules, beliefs, commitments, and projects as they continuously take on new ones. At the same time, most of us keep the same proper names, and are easily re-identifiable by other human beings who know us as "the same person" each time they meet us throughout all of these processes of transformation. Furthermore, it is pretty clear that if we couldn't rely on both of these things taking place, we wouldn't be able to understand the conventions for using words like "I" and "you" in RPGs at all, let alone anywhere else.

1.3.1.1 The Parmenidean Challenge

The earliest philosophers of the ancient world found the phenomenon of persistence through change quite puzzling. Surely, they reasoned, it is simply a *contradiction* to say about anything that it is "the same, yet different" today from how it was yesterday. The Greek thinker Parmenides proposed a radical solution to this puzzle; in a strange metaphysical poem written in the sixth century BCE, he argued that all change that takes place over time is an illusion. The universe, for Parmenides, is really just a single undifferentiated thing, "like the bulk of a well-rounded ball,"⁷ and our attempts to think of any part of it as undergoing change are uniformly paradoxical. His argument for this startling conclusion is rather obscure. There are two "roads" that human thought can take, he argues:

one, that "it is and cannot be"
is the path of persuasion (for truth accompanies it):
another, that "it is not and must not be"—
this I say to you is a trail devoid of all knowledge.

(*"Way"* 132)