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Why So Serious? Toward Online Game Ethics

: Wittgenstein's "Norm" and Levinas's "Il y a" as Illumination

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I. Rationale

Why is the issue of online games so 'serious' that it is an issue worthy of philosophical treatment? By 'serious' the author means 'ethical responsibility.' Ethics is meta-morality, so it concerns not the binary judgment of right/wrong in a static structure, but the dynamic relationship with others and the ensuing responsibility. Games are not just for fun, but also directly involve the other players as subjects. In other words, we have to treat gaming as a serious ethical issue.

Traditional metaphysics extracts and lifts the specific to the level of a concept, and that concept can then even be uplifted to an archetype: the Ideal. In the long run, the concept precedes the concrete, and the form determines the content. This is dangerous since archetype as the sole form of identity is subject to stereotype, which is vulnerable to hierarchy; the bane of so many tragedies as we can see from history. This train of thought is the rudimental problem of metaphysics that needs to be overcome. After the thriving of postmodern discourses, traditional metaphysics has continuously been the target of varied petite narratives. Many dimensions, like language, history, and desire, have been explored to emancipate philosophy from the metaphysical shackles of identity.

However, all of these efforts may not go very far because of their destined limits. Language, determined by grammar and semantics, is the indispensable mediation through which we can discuss metaphysics. With this precondition, how can language justify its position of criticism and really escape from the inextricability of metaphysics? Likewise, in terms of history, it is a dilemma to narrate history without forming a viewpoint or framework. With a frame as a premise, the concept has been decided, and the deadlock of metaphysics cannot be broken. Even the most fluid desire faces its fated predicament—what

about the desire of philosophy itself? Won't it be another kind of metaphysics to say that philosophy is to raise questions or to create new concepts? All of the ways out seem to encounter an impasse because the concept precedes the content. In view of this, gaming may be an alternative to the issue.

Games may be one of the potential candidates for getting rid of the fetters of metaphysics. This is the key reason for philosophizing the concept of 'game.' All the serious terms mentioned above cannot do better than a game does in deconstructing metaphysics because the term 'game' composes itself in the process of playing. Even Giorgio Agamben's implication of a game as a time-accelerator suggests its power to deconstruct the metaphysical identity of time: "The immediate result of this invasion of life by play is a change and acceleration of time. ... The calendar, whose essence is rhythm, alternation and repetition, is now stopped short" (Agamben 76). In everyday life, we are subject to clock time, but when we are playing a game, time flies. The specific time is redeemed from the abstract numerical one.

This paper does not use an abstract definition of 'game' as the touchstone against which each specific case is tested. It is rules, not definitions, that enact a game. Furthermore, rules concerning games are highly flexible and can be changed anytime, as long as the people involved enter into negotiations and agree on certain platforms or issues. In this sense, a game runs counter to metaphysical registration. The point is that concrete practices should not be subordinate to abstract concepts. Certainly there are all kinds of practices, but the practices of games are by far the most unbridled due to their particular flexibility of rules.

II. Literary Review

Even with such potential, the discourses of games are usually still bound to metaphysics. Hans-Georg Gadamer's discourse of 'game,' for example, in the first place seems to render 'game' its own position, "[t]he real subject of the game is not the player but instead the game itself" (Gadamer 106), but actually he grafts 'game' onto art, or, to be precise, onto works of art: "Human play comes to its true consummation in being arts" (Ibid. 110). Gadamer's aim, after all, is to probe into the universality of understanding works of art, and, truth, finally. "Openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play" (Ibid. 109), he declares. It is obvious that the discourse of 'game'

here is still inclined to metaphysics. Subordination of the game to art, universality of understanding, and the structure of closedness all account for this inclination. Furthermore, he also provides some definitions for the term game. For instance, a game is the “to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end” (Ibid. 103). This definition-dropping suggests concept-first. Johan Huizinga’s thesis would be another case in point. Huizinga is one of the heavyweight figures dealing with the discourse of ‘game.’ He tries to legitimize games in a more direct way and even begins his *Homo Ludens* with the announcement that it is “older than culture” (1). He defines a game as the following statement:

We might call it a *free* activity standing quite consciously *outside* “ordinary” life as being “*not serious*,” but at the same time *absorbing the player* intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and *no profit* can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper *boundaries of time and space* according to *fixed rules* and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of *social groupings* which tend to surround themselves with *secrecy* and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (Huizinga 13, emphasis added)

Summarizing and modifying Huizinga’s notion, another seminal figure in the discourse of ‘game,’ Roger Caillois, defines a game as ‘free,’ ‘separate,’ ‘uncertain,’ ‘unproductive,’ ‘governed by rules,’ and ‘make-believe’ (Caillois 9-10). Contemporary ludologists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman also appropriate Huizinga’s notion to underscore the separation of time, space, and rules in a game from those of ordinary life. The definition of a game seems to reach its self-enveloped consummation under these critics’ comprehensive abstracts. However, doubts should be cast on the static and enveloped concept of ‘game.’ All of the key critics’ point of departure is to justify the position of ‘game.’ Nevertheless, their approaches seem to waste the potentiality of the game, only making it subordinate to metaphysics.

III. Wittgenstein’s “Family Resemblance” / Blurred Definition of MMORPG

In light of this, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s insightful view of ‘game’ as ‘family

resemblance' may point a luminous way out. He indicates that we have a "craving for generality":

We are inclined to think that there must be something in common to all games, say, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term "game" to the various games; whereas games form a *family* the members of which have family likenesses. Some of them have the same nose, others the same eyebrows and others again the same way of walking; and these likenesses overlap. (Wittgenstein 1965, 17, emphasis original)

He even directly points out that this tendency "is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness" (Wittgenstein 1965, 18). There is, according to Wittgenstein, nothing common to all games, but just similarities among games. "For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that" (Wittgenstein 1953, 31e). For example, if game One has the features of A, B, C, D, E, and F, then game Two could be featured as B, C, D, E, F, and G (**A out G in**), and game Three would be featured as C, D, E, F, G, and A (**B out A in** compared to game Two, or **B out G in** compared to game One), and so forth. In other words, there is only the relationship of resemblance in the family of games. No universal definition can dominate all games. Huizinga's announcement that games are prior to culture should even be questioned, for it would fall into another trap of metaphysics. This paper holds that a game transforms within culture and keeps pace with the time, which, according to Wittgenstein, "is an observance" or at least "pre-supposes an observance" (Wittgenstein 1984, 83e). Heterogeneous elements are always rung in and rung out by discursive power time after time.

Wittgenstein's 'family resemblance' of games is the down-to-earth practice, and the Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) has been chosen as the intermediary through which Wittgenstein's insight can be elucidated since MMORPG is a product of the postmodern age, and hence contrasts sharply with traditional games. As a result, heterogeneous elements rung in can be foregrounded and Wittgenstein's 'family resemblance' can be manifested. Ethics in MMORPG will be analyzed further on in the paper.

It is fair to say that MMORPGs can be undeniably conceived as games. Nonetheless, the reason that MMORPGs are regarded as games is seldom rethought of in terms of how MMORPG is a game. If we put Huizinga's

sweeping definition into consideration, it may be readily observed that most of the characteristics of the MMORPG seem to be filtered through Huizinga's definition, but we also find that something goes ambivalent here.

At first glance, MMORPGs seem to be properly dovetailed into this comprehensive definition. Nonetheless, doubt on the legitimacy of this kind of adaptation needs to be raised. At best, the adaptation is 'almost compatible, but not quite.' For instance, selling virtual coins for real cash is heard of quite often. Here, the boundary of the ordinary/virtual world claimed by Huizinga is ambiguously blurred. When a MMORPG player goes out trading virtual coins real cash, s/he, in a sense, is still at play (Even after the computer is shut down, the chosen character is still standing by, and the game world is in fact still at work.). Consequently, the definition of 'outside ordinary life' is put into an awkward and problematic position. It is a 'both ... A and ... B' as well as a 'neither ... A nor ... B' situation. What makes the situation more complex is that the selling activity is not necessary. Some players sell their virtual coins, whereas others do not, which makes it more difficult to define the boundary between the ordinary and the virtual worlds. Meanwhile, insofar as the selling behavior could be involved, the definition of 'no profit' hence goes suspended. In other words, it depends on the context. That is, under what kind of social context or discursive mechanism could a MMORPG player trade the virtual coins for real cash?

As for the fixed rules, the rules in a MMORPG turn ambiguous, too. In fact, the situation is not so much rules as conditions. As long as the player is in a better condition, s/he can almost re-define the rule. For example, it is quite often reported that some players use certain extra self-designed programs or plug-ins to support their performance in the game. That is, something beyond the game-designer's intention and outside the rule is added to the game world. The boundary of game rules begins to flow, and anticipatively will never be settled down. Under what kind of discursive power is the quasi-cheating behavior formed and accepted? What kind of scientific condition strengthens the circulation of plug-ins? What kind of legal discourse would be involved? These possibilities to transgress the rule without being kicked out of the game are other discursive issues worthy of treatment.

As for 'make-believe,' this characteristic is not so absolute, either. In some traditional games, the players play certain roles because they identify with the characters. When they do so, they, to some degree, make believe that they are the characters. However, in the MMORPG, there is little room for

identification. Ostensibly speaking, the players choose certain characters because they identify with those characters. As a matter of fact, they choose those characters not because they want to make believe they are the characters, but because those characters possess certain particular abilities. For example, a female character may be chosen by a male player just because she can jump higher, move faster, or exert magic in the game to his specific purpose. In his analysis of video games, James Newman also gives us another example, “‘Rayman’ is defined not by his appearance or any traits of individuality or autonomy but by his ability (to allow the player) to run, jump, swim ... In essence, by the flatness of the character” (Newman 133). Due to the ‘flatness,’ the effect of identification is reduced to the minimum, so we may say there is little room for ‘make-believe.’ Besides, a player of MMORPG can own different characters in different accounts. The sense of identification decreases as a result. All in all, the boundary of ‘make-believe’ is blurred and gradually de-territorialized.

In these above mentioned examples, the MMORPG almost blurs Huizinga’s definition of ‘game,’ making it ambiguous. Is Huizinga wrong? Not quite. Isn’t the MMORPG a game? Of course it is. So, what’s going wrong? The problem lies in the fact that a game cannot be defined. At most we can say that there is a family of ‘game,’ but we cannot generalize games. Certain new characteristics should be included in the game family in the postmodern age. In this author’s view, ethics, which will be discussed later, holds the key.

MMORPG is a fertile soil where many critics have plowed. For example, Dean Chan takes up the racial issue represented in e-games; Jengchung Chen and Yangil Park cope with the addiction problem in e-games; Kimppa and Bissett deal with cheating in e-gaming communities; taking Kimppa and Bissett’s issue a step further, Dan Burk links the issue of cheating in e-games with legal problems. Kristal Curry in her 2010 journal article analyzes how warcraft in *World of Warcraft (WOW)* can be used to teach civic education. Another recent book, *World of Warcraft and Philosophy: Wrath of the Philosopher King*, examines how the activities in *WOW* are associated with the real world. What interests me the most is Dorothy Warner and Mike Raiter’s radiance on the ethical issues raised by MMORPGs. For instance, griefing, the intentional harassment in e-games, could evoke the iterative retaliation on a large scale. Besides, “Games such as *WOW* allow players to form guilds within the game, in order to facilitate community

building and mutual cooperation” (Warner and Raiter 47). Moreover, text messages, which also comprise a part of the narrative inter-text virtual world, could be sent by players as inter-subjects within the game. All of these new ethical issues other than the traditional characteristics provide us with a good opportunity to reexamine how a game could be.

IV. Ethics in Online Games

Ethics is meta-morality and involves not so much either/or judgment as the relationship in practice with others, which can be best exemplified by MMORPGs. *WOW* will be employed as a case in point to illustrate the increasing ethical responsibility in the age of the Internet. Wittgenstein and Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy may serve as the beacon. Although it seems misleading to take out certain quotations out of the context of the two philosophers, it is, however, one of the ways to disrupt the traditional metaphysics which this paper opposes. A healthy philosophical discourse, in Deleuzian vein, is not so much an enveloped system of totality close to a fascist grand narrative as a machine which allows dismantlement, supplement, and combination. The thesis of a philosophical discourse should be grasped, but to deliberately misread a certain part of a philosophy might be an effective strategy when treating an issue concerning games which calls any concept into question.

Although Wittgenstein’s arcane writings set an obstacle to the public, his philosophy, ironically, is in fact quite engaged and oriented to the world, which can be shown in the maturity of the later Wittgenstein. And *Philosophical Investigations* can be regarded as a shift “from a pictorial to a descriptive view of language,” and “from logical atomism to linguistic pluralism” (Kolak 531). Wittgenstein himself also admits that his early thinking is immature. The mistake of pictorial view of language lies in the fact that it attributes all modes of language to the only mode: the logical picture. “We must do away with all explanations, and description alone must take its place” (Wittgenstein 1953, 47e), declares Wittgenstein. For him, “Philosophy really *is* ‘purely descriptive’” (Wittgenstein 1965, 18, emphasis original). We may say that it is not a one-on-one metaphysical representation of the object, but a network of relations revealed in ordinary language that matters. In short, Wittgenstein emphasizes engaged practices. His term,

‘language-game,’ should be understood as language and action interwoven and put into practice according to rules.

“Wittgenstein argues that most philosophical problems arise from a misunderstanding about language ... predicated on the word-object illusion. Instead he proposes that we cease thinking of words as having meanings in and of themselves and begin to conceive of them as having *functions* in various *real-life situations*, which he likes to call ‘*games*.’ The meaning of a word is therefore determined by its *use* in a given situation, say, a sentence” (Boswell 25, emphasis added). In Wittgenstein’s usage, practice according to rules can be viewed as the norm. In addition, language-games as language and action interwoven and put into practice according to rules hence involves a norm. The norm is absolutely not equivalent to an ideal. In reality, they take opposite sides. The norm is a flexible and living communal agreement. Neither the subject nor the object, but the relation, predominates. Furthermore, the relationship of networks among people reshuffles immediately as soon as there is imbalance. If we associate Wittgenstein’s emphasis on practices with one of the famous MMORPGs, *WOW*, some aspects of ethics may be illuminated.

According to the recent book *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft® Reader* (2008), in comparison with traditional video games, the MMORPG like *WOW* “has no clear ending,” and is “constantly being expanded” (Corneliusen 8). In a traditional video game, the program is designed once for all and the player just advances all the way down to meet the last boss, whereas the MMORPG is open-ended because new tasks, creatures, and items can be added all the time. In the past, the game designer structures a closed world of grand narrative, and the player follows. By contrast, now the designer proposes, but the player chooses to dispose of what s/he wants to. This difference is significant since it suggests that the traditional metaphysics of totality is not applicable to the new type of game environment. Furthermore, the MMORPG is concerned with narration, the literal representation of action. Like a movie, it can be seen as a text set in motion. Actually, it is more than that. It is language and action interwoven and put into practice according to rules. Here, action does not necessarily speak louder than words. The fact is that action usually accompanies words, that is, a performative statement. Furthermore, other functions of language like descriptive and prescriptive statements also take place. In *WOW*, narration is enacted and developed by words interwoven with actions by all the players

and the NPC (Non-Player Character) as well as the GM (Game Manager). In the beginning, the player has different factions, occupations, and attire to choose. Faction determines the player's attribute and point of departure in the world, and occupation decides the player's ability, weapon, and accessories, which will play a key part in the unfurling of the storyline. Different attire that is freely chosen helps to customize each individual player. In order to digest millions of players, there are various servers to log on to. According to the immediate demand, the amount of the server can be added. The ordinary usage of language which functions in this game world first will be analyzed.

After the player collects certain equipment and then wants to use it, sometimes, due to the limitation of level or attributes, there will be a voice from nowhere: "You cannot use it now." It is a performative statement that announces the infeasibility of the equipment as the referent. 'For the sake of our horde' is another famous slogan heard ubiquitously when the player contacts a NPC (Non-Player Character controlled by the computer) without even asking a question. It is not a response or answer, but a performative statement whose "effect upon the referent coincides with its enunciation" (Lyotard 9). This statement sets the basic tone of the game, and the game is set in motion because it is 'for the sake of our horde.' The player does not necessarily act for the horde, but the player's being in the world is for the sake of the horde. This statement wields a magical spell on the tacit referent, the game, just like what a priest says to a newlywed, "Now I announce you bride and groom."

When the player enters the world for the first time, s/he has to go to the NPC (with a question mark overhead) nearby to take up some tasks in order to advance his/her level. Once the player contacts the NPC, the NPC will narrate the content of the task, usually nothing more than a favor that will help the faction of that NPC, e.g. collecting five pieces of leather of a unique species, looking for a prophet over the mountain, or killing 13 foes (the faction of another NPC, not of other players). An order is disguised as a help or suggestion. When the NPC announces the task, the statement actually is a prescriptive one, which has already endowed the player with responsibility.

The performative and prescriptive function of language reminds us of Jean-François Lyotard's insightful distinction of the different language game (inspired by Wittgenstein) in terms of a logical statement. Lyotard discusses the issue throughout his major work, like *Just Gaming*, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, and even "Logic of Levinas." Unlike a

performative statement, the “pragmatics of prescription entail concomitant changes in the posts of addressee and referent” (Lyotard 10). For Lyotard, and, of course, for Wittgenstein, the effects belong to “different modes of discourse” (Ibid.). When we take ‘If P, then Q’ as R, which is a performative statement, then ‘If R, then S’ does not make sense if S is a prescriptive statement. Lyotard argues that there is an unbridgeable gap and incompatible relationship between two language games. For him, the only way to dissolve the incompatibility is through the maximum of opinions, which is always in the process of negotiating and thus corresponds to Wittgenstein’s norm, or, communal agreement. In *WOW*, the basic tone throughout the game is ‘For the sake of our horde,’ which is a performative statement. However, the basic way to set the narration in motion in the game is to contact the NPC and ask for tasks, which are prescriptive statements. With the illumination of Wittgenstein and Lyotard, we know that the two statements are incompatible and thus make no logical sense. However, the main momentum of the game is driven by this contradiction. Is there no way out? In fact, “there is,” in Levinas’ “Il y a” (Levinas 1978, 57).

V. Levinas’ Ethics

I would like to appropriate Levinas’ notion of “Il y a” to recount the brand-new ethical relationship of the game in the postmodern age. “Il y a” is a state of ineluctable “presence of absence,” an impersonal and anonymous “there is” (Ibid.), which echoes the feature of anonymity in a MMORPG. Levinas illustrates that the experience of “Il y a” can be exemplified by our experience of darkness and insomnia. In darkness, the contour of everything is gone, and we feel something without a subject out there. The darkness is not so much nothingness as uncertainty. Likewise, when we suffer from insomnia, we are clutched awake by the impersonal and unnamed presence of absence, which is reminiscent of the sleepless night owls that log on to online games to face unknown players. We begin to know: something uncertain and unnamed is out there, ubiquitously. In a MMORPG, when a player takes a break, logging out and shutting down the computer, the chosen character is still there. The game is still on. The player seems absent but in fact present, entering a state of ‘presence of absence,’ owing debt to the other players as inter-subjects. It is in this sense that the ethical respon-

sibility is involved. Also, through the others' "Il y a," the self is questioned and examined. The other players are not the incarnation of God, but through 'the face of the Other' you hear the call of God. Upon hearing the interpellation, each player replies, "I'm here," constructing a net of intersubjectivity, shouldering the ethical responsibility simultaneously.

In fact, Levinas's thought echoes Wittgenstein's in some ways. In his "Essence et Désintéressement," Levinas proposes 'immanence' as a dynamic harmony where no one is transcendental, but lives within the world altogether. It is a state of extreme synchronicity of all creatures. This immanent state can be linked up to his usage of 'détermination' as regulation formulated by encounter and conflict, during which one has to readjust her/himself so as to be adapted to the environment. That is, détermination is always being built up and collapsing at the same time. In a word, dynamic détermination can be conceived as constituting the harmonious immanence. The relation between détermination and immanence is to Levinas what the relation between norm and family resemblance is to Wittgenstein.

After justifying the appropriation of Levinas to online games and his correspondence to Wittgenstein, this paper will turn to the problem left in the previous passage. That is, is there any way out insofar as the logic of the game itself is problematical? As advanced as it may be, the online game still succeeds in the traditional video game in that it has its logic within. This internal logic is usually dominated by the designer and grafted onto the NPC in the game. Nevertheless, as mentioned, the statements that support the logic are incompatible. Maximized opinions negotiated to form communal agreement is the way out, but necessitates considering "Il y a." But how? The answer sounds easy but worth rethinking: to substitute players' interactions all the more for the built-in logic. Why? In many servers of *WOW*, one intrinsic logic is that player-versus-player mode is allowed—the player can kill another player of the opposite faction in the name of their horde. In the face of our enemy, we cannot help but remember Levinasean "Thou shalt not kill," which, like the tasks given by the NPC, both belong to prescriptive statements. In this sense, the encounter with other players can thus coincide with the internal logic of the game itself. In a traditional video game, when you encounter the enemy, you have no alternative but to kill them all the way; otherwise, you will be killed, definitely, and the game cannot be advanced.

However, even with flaws, online games provide us with a chance to rethink

what a game is. We are rendered the 'real' freedom to decide whether to kill or not. If goodwill is shown, the original logic of the game is canceled out, and the game can still go on. 'Real' freedom contrasts with what Levinas terms as the freedom of modernity illusion. Speaking of fatigue, Levinas argues that modernity gives us an illusive equation of work=future=freedom. As Howard Caygill rephrases Levinas, "This fundamentally questions the equation of work and freedom central to modernity in its liberal, fascist and socialist variants: all assume work to be directed towards the future and that this future is destined to realise the promise of freedom" (Caygill 60). Freedom does not reside in work, but in the fact that you can choose not to kill just out of goodwill, not out of power. Even situated in a game oriented to violence like *WOW*, as its name suggests, we can still find an alternative way of playing: just interchanging greetings through text messages, exchanging treasure, selling by auction, mailing, or, sheer giving, which can be exemplified by the behavior of spell-casting. In *WOW*, each species is gifted with certain magic, some of which can be used to recover or strengthen other players whom you encounter and did not even know before. An unwritten rule in *WOW* is: "Heal, don't fight, if you are a healer" (Corneliusen 9). As Japanese tech entrepreneur, Joi Ito, expresses in an interview by the journalist, in *WOW*, no one cares about him because of his hierarchical position in the real world, but respects him owing to his goodwill. "I'm begging people to let me join their group and casting nice spells on people, trying to earn their friendship" (Pinckard 109). In real life, we may have an illusion that other people esteem us because of our individuality, but the fact is sometimes the opposite. We are treated because of something external to ourselves, like position, power, fame, or interest. Paradoxically, it is likely that we may see clearly our essence in a virtual world thanks to its anonymity. As Levinas teaches us, questioning ourselves through the 'Other' is the quintessence of ethics. Level-uplifting through violence is not the only way in an online game. As mentioned, there are many alternatives. Theoretically speaking, a player can explore the online game world without level-uplifting as long as there is no player aggressing. Or, even if s/he encounters NPC's attack, s/he can also survive safe and sound provided that s/he is accompanied by other players of higher level. Care is the core. "Taking care of a guild, administering to members' needs, looking after newbies, pleasing the veteran is a delicate balancing act," says Joi Ito. The internal logic of the game will be deconstructed while we interrupt the set flow, create our own gestures and substitute ethics for one-way ideology.

Some other cases to help us rethink the ethical issues in an online game need to be proposed. In *WOW*, as the review of *PC Magazine* points out:

When a player attacks an NPC of the opposing faction and for a short time becomes “PvP-flagged”—meaning open to any enemy attack—the entire opposing faction is also notified of the transgression. This approach to PvP works exceptionally well and avoids many of the problems that plague other games, such as higher-level players killing beginners for no good reason. (Levinas 1999, 121)

If you attack a Non-Player Character controlled by the program of an opposing faction, you will become the target of that faction, including other NPCs and real players as a whole. Likewise, if you attack another player of an opposing faction, you will also be attacked by those NPCs and other players of that faction. This design makes the game more complicated and not so clear-cut violent within its internal logic. It will urge the player to reflect upon the ethics, although it involves strategy in an artificial way.

In one of the previous passages, it was mentioned that the player cannot alienate himself/herself from the online game even if s/he logs out, so the player bears the ethical responsibility for other players. But in what way? For example, while you join the guild in the game, you occupy a vacancy. If you log out for quite a long time, another player may not be able to join the same guild due to your debt (though this is not the case in *WOW*, but in other online games). Or, when you take some equipment or domesticate a pet, you are occupying the resources even if you are logged out. Or, if you promise to trade with someone at a place, but forget to log in, that player’s range of activity will be limited while waiting for you. Levinas tells us:

The face looks at me, calls out to me. It claims me. What does it ask for? *Not to leave it alone*. An answer: *Here I am*. My presence, of no avail perhaps, but a gratuitous movement of presence and responsibility for the other. To answer, Here I am, is already the encounter with the face. (Levinas 1999, 163)

In view of this, online games can offer us a thought-provoking chance to reexamine ethics. Playing games is more than something self-absorbing or immersive. In short, we play the game not for our own sake anymore, but have to take others into consideration. “Il y a” is an invisible contract that binds all players together as inter-subjects. In addition, for Levinas, real time

exists only in synchronic intersubjectivity, which can emancipate the subject from self-identity through diachronic time in traditional games. The immediacy of online games welcomes and allows any player to join in at any time, whereas the traditional games refuse the impromptu joining due to the limit of artificial time such as a round, a set, or an inning. Furthermore it is also this immediacy of online games that makes the instant modification of rules possible. Diachronicity to some degree suggests accumulation and presupposes hierarchy, whilst synchronicity embodies equality and democratization in the examples given above. Maybe it is in this vein that the question raised in the beginning can be answered. Why so serious? Because the game is not just for fun and it bears philosophical investigations, we have to treat it seriously and ethically.

VI. Coda

The position taken in this paper seems not to be completely free from the boundary of metaphysics, since metaphysics here is attacked from within, which has already been a gesture of deconstruction. In “Levinas’ Logic,” Lyotard criticizes Levinas for his confusing mixture of different language games. However, as shown in the previous passage, if we displace Levinas’ thought from its original context to an online game, the paradox can be partly dissolved, both for Levinas and for the game. Levinas is in fact an engaged philosopher, and his philosophy should be embodied through concrete practices. So is Wittgenstein. “For Wittgenstein, language does not displace us from the world but rather takes place ‘in’ the world. ... Far from alienating us from others, language can only exist as a product of communal agreement between others” (Boswell 31). This is also the appropriate footnote to Wittgenstein’s view of game. With the two thinking giants’ illumination, maybe we are stepping toward an online game world of ethics, hopefully.

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Abstract

This paper first tries to spell out the literary review of the game discourses by seminal figures like Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Then, by introducing Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of 'norm' and 'family resemblance,' it is argued that the ethics of games today holds the key to the metaphysical prison of the traditional game. Next, the Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *WOW* (*World of Warcraft*) is chosen in particular, as the text set in motion to exemplify the operation of game ethics in a postmodern age. Furthermore, Emmanuel Levinas' concept of "Il y a" will be appropriated to beacon the way out of the intrinsic contradiction in this kind of postmodern MMORPG. "Il y a" is a state of ineluctable 'presence of absence,' an impersonal and anonymous 'there is,' which echoes the feature of anonymity in a MMORPG, where the game is still on, and the chosen character is still there even when a player takes a break, logging out and shutting down the computer. The player seems absent but in fact present, entering a state of 'presence of absence,' owing debt to the other players as inter-subjects. It is in this sense that the ethical responsibility is involved. For Levinas, real time exists only in synchronic intersubjectivity, which can emancipate the subject from self-identity through diachronic time in traditional games (readily reminiscent of Agamben's implication of game as a time-accelerator). The immediacy of online games welcomes and allows any player to join in at any time, whereas the traditional games refuse the impromptu joining due to the limit of artificial time such as a round, a set, or an inning. Also, it is also this immediacy of online games that makes the instant negotiation and modification of rules possible, paralleling Wittgenstein's 'norm' again.

Keywords: online game, MMORPG, ethics, Wittgenstein, Levinas

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