CYBERPUNKED IN 2077: A MORAL APPROACH TO DIGITAL CHOICE

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Abstract: *In this article, I am detailing an application of White's perspective about the 'conjunction' between: (a) logical sentences, (b) moral sentences and (c) descriptive sentences. I examine several options from the main storyline of the role-playing video game Cyberpunk 2077. I am approaching the video game's content from the standpoint of Morton White's holistic pragmatism (i.e. 'corporatism'). I assert that a 'narrow' interpretation is necessary, to admit a moral objection.*

Key words: *conjunction, corporatism, holistic pragmatism.*

1. Introduction

In the various missions from the single player role-playing video game Cyberpunk 2077 the statement „This is immoral" entails several questions: what is „this" actually denoting and connoting? What could be considered immoral within a specific context from the open world of Night City? Trying to answer these questions is essential if one wants to elucidate the debate surrounding Cyberpunk 2077's various missions' content. This entails approaching a more specific set of questions: (a) what are the behaviours and the examples of decisions meant to be morally objectionable or conversely, to be desirable? (b) what would such an objection mean? (c) how would an objection be justifiable from a moral standpoint? (d) what is the extent to which an objection is justifiable in an open world role-playing video game such as Cyberpunk 2077.

In this article, I am focusing on the morality of several choices in terms of their potentiality and consequences in one of the largest open world single player role-playing games up to date, from the perspective of adults. Therefore, I will not discuss any issues pertaining to the legislation, namely the exposure of minors to content in which various forms of immoral actions are being portrayed.

I begin by expounding the relevance of Morton White's holistic pragmatism for my excursus. Afterwards, I briefly present Cyberpunk 2077's synopsis and emphasize the in-game choices that can be examined using White's theses. In the last chapter of this article I apply White's doctrine and method on several options available in the last part of Cyberpunk 2077's main storyline.

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2. Morton White's Holistic Pragmatism Re-examined

In my excursus, I am drawing upon Morton White's holistic pragmatism. Particularly, I am using White's thesis that "a conjunction containing a normative ethical principle and a descriptive statement may be viewed in a holistic fashion and tested empirically *[sic!]*" (White, 2005, p. 157). This is actually the main point of divergence between him and Willard Van Orman Quine. Superficially, one may consider that White's holistic approach of such a 'conjunction' is based upon accepting "a reductionist form of utilitarianism according to which all ethical statements are deemed synonymous with statements of descriptive behavioural science" (White, 2005, p. 157). However, his method is quite different. He avoids the perspective that ethical sentences are the same with sociological or psychological sentences. Instead, White develops a nonreductive version of holism, meant to bridge the gap between the moral and the descriptive, in a manner which is similar to the bridge between logic and physics, which was previously established by Alfred Tarski and Quine.

Analogous to Quine's approach, when he discusses moral belief, White distinguishes: "(a') the moral thinker; (b') the conjunction of logical, descriptive, and moral beliefs he uses as a tool for organizing the flux of sensory; and (c') those sensory experiences and feelings themselves" (White, 2005, pp. 157–158). Furthermore, in order to expand both the moral thinker's 'kit' of instruments and her or his pool of experiences, White uses William James' perspective, where he speaks of "the flux of our sensations and emotions as they pass" (James, 1907, p. 93).

In the philosophy of morals, as well as in anthropology and semiotics, there is a multitude of articles about the various ways in which in-game choices are enacted in open world single player role-playing games (e.g. Collier et al., 2008; Copenhaver 2015; Nauroth et al. 2014; Young, 2015). However, I have yet to find an article which approaches the morality of choices from the perspective of holistic pragmatism. I assert that a holistic interpretation of Cyberpunk 2077's content allows me a more thorough examination of the in-game choices. I consider White assertion that "the moral obligatoriness of an act *[sic!]*" cannot by judged only by "our moral principles themselves, since such a position lends support to the view that our ethical principles are self-evident guarantors of singular moral judgments that have no anchor in our feelings" (White, 2005, pp. 168–169). His argument is based on predicating a 'conjunction' of (a) logical statements, (b) moral statements and (c) descriptive statements. When a conflict arises between such a 'conjunction' and an observation sentence there are three possible outcomes: (i) the 'conjunction' can be rejected; (ii) the 'conjunction' can be revised; (iii) the observation sentence can be repudiated.

This is undoubtably a form of monism, from an epistemological, methodological and an ontological point of view (White, 1951, pp. 373–380). Basically, White includes moral beliefs among testable 'conjunctions' of beliefs. Furthermore, he labels his perspective 'corporatism' (White, 1993, p. 9). This is, for all intents and purposes, a 'narrower' form of holistic pragmatism than Quine's perspective. After examining White's perspective, in the following chapter, I present several aspects from *Cyberpunk 2077*'s storyline.

3. *Cyberpunk 2077's* Synopsis

Cyberpunk 2077 is an open-world role-playing video game which was developed and launched by *CD Project Red* on December 10th 2020. It is based on the world imagined in the 1980's by Michael Alyn Pondsmith. Most of the game's missions are set in Night City, a giant free city situated in North California. While the police department (i.e. NCPD) is present in most of the city, the corporations and several gangs are the real forces that are actively vying for the city's control. One constant throughout the city is the heavy reliance on robotics and bioengineering for daily life. From an architectural point of view, Night City entails several superimposed layers which are functionally and relationally like Foucault's heterotopias (Foucault, 1967/2008, pp. 13–22). These layers are visually derived from four styles: (1) Entropism; (2) Kitsch; (3) Neo-Militarism and (4) Neo-Kitsch. In this ensemble of environments, cybernetic modifications are pervasive and consequently, are a direct cause of cosmetic addiction and violence. Gunfights are common throughout most of the city and therefore the city's inhabitants are allowed to openly carry various types of guns.

The main storyline of the game starts by selecting the avatar's appearance, gender and one of the three paths available: Corpo, Nomad or Streetkid. All the three paths entail V (i.e. the player's character) starting a new life in Night City. For the first part of the main storyline, V is accompanied by his friend Jackie Welles. Regardless of the path chosen at the beginning, the story reaches a crucial moment when Jackie Welles mediates a "job" in which both he and V are hired by Dexter DeShawn to steal the Relic, a unique biochip developed by the Arasaka Corporation. Their plan of obtaining the chip is dramatically changed when both V and Welles become the unwilling witnesses of Saburo Arasaka's murder at the hands of his son, Yorinobu Arasaka. The murder is subsequently covered as a poisoning. V and Welles narrowly escape, the latter is mortally wounded and T-Bug, their hacker friend (i.e. netrunner) is killed. During the firefight, the Relic's case is irreversibly damaged. V is forced to insert the biochip into one of his cyberware ports and connect it directly to his brain (CD Projekt Red, 2020).

After the death of Jackie Welles, Dexter DeShawn shoots V in the head and leaves him for dead. The bullet triggers resurrection nanotech from the biochip and V is awakened. Almost immediately after his revival, V is haunted by the digital ghost of Johnny Silverhand, a rock star and war veteran. Silverhand had been considered dead since 2023. His death was associated with an attempted nuclear attack on *Arasaka Tower*. Later in the main storyline, Viktor Vector, a 'ripperdoc' (i.e. a cyberware transplant specialist) tells V that his memories will inevitably be overwritten by Silverhand's memories. The chip cannot be removed: V must find a way to erase Silverhand's personality and memories in order to survive (CD Projekt Red, 2020).

Interestingly, V is able to relieve Johnny Silverhand's memories. As a result of that, V learns that Silverhand's girlfriend, Alt Cunningham, had created *Soulkiller*, an artificial intelligence capable to copy netrunners' minds through their neural links, while destroying their brains. The Arasaka Corporation kidnapped in 2023 Cunningham in order to develop a proprietary version of *Soulkiller*, which would be able to store the minds of its victims into *Mikoshi*, a digital fortress specifically developed by Arasaka. In

2023, Silverhand had attempted to rescue Cunningham, but ultimately failed, and Arasaka used their version of *Soulkiller* on her. Furthermore, Silverhand's nuclear attack was a cover to free Cunningham's consciousness from Arasaka network. However, the Arasaka Corporation's assault squads manage to capture Silverhand. He is also subjected to *Soulkiller*. Notably, the gameplay switches from 2077 to 2023 and vice versa.

One of the consequences of creating *Soulkiller* is the Arasaka's 2077 "Secure Your Soul" program. Initially, it was developed as a secret research application that entailed writing a digital copy of a mind into a living human brain. The Relic was a direct result of that research. From the perspective of White's holistic pragmatism, it is interesting to examine the choices that each player has to make from V's standpoint: she or he can attack *Arasaka Tower*, to access *Mikoshi* and use *Soulkiller* to purge Silverhand's personality and memories from V's brain. The various actions chosen by the player during the game have a direct impact on the options of attack: (1) V can commit suicide; (2) allow Silverhand to plan the attack with his former team: (3) V can mount the attack with the allies she/he has gained during the game; (4) V can attack alone. However, after using *Soulkiller*, it turns out that no matter the option, V's body is irrevocably damaged. Again, the game developers have inserted another set of choices for the player at the end of the game: (I) V remains in her/ his body and is confronted with an uncertain life expectancy; (II) Silverhand takes over permanently and leaves *Night City* (CD Projekt Red, 2020). While discussing each of these choices and the secondary missions' multiple options far exceeds the purpose of this article, I examine several options from the main storyline in the following chapter.

4. Cyberpunk 2077: What the representation of having free will is like?

When one talks about the representation of free will in single-player video games, I agree with Garry Young's assertion that there isn't sufficient consensus, both "in terms of interpretation and attitude to establish a social norm" regarding what can be considered moral or immoral (Young, 2015, p. 319). However, in this article I intend to provide neither grounds, nor reasons why consensus is lacking. I am more interested in examining how action role-playing video games, such as *Cyberpunk 2077*, can be used as veritable sandboxes for applications in moral thinking. I draw upon White's demonstration regarding "What Having Free Will is *[sic!]*" (White, 1993, p. 7). I assert that players are often free to perform various actions that are represented via the various in-game options (White, 1993, p. 8). This can be exemplified as several 'conjunctions' of sentences which are derived from the main storyline:
(1) In the final part of the main storyline, if the player chooses to allow Silverhand to plan the attack with his former team, then Silverhand will appear to perform it;
(2) The player *can* choose to allow Silverhand to plan the attack with his former team;
(3) If the player chooses *not* to allow Silverhand to plan the attack with his former team, then Silverhand will appear not to perform it.
(4) The player *can* choose *not* to allow Silverhand to plan the attack with his former team.
Obviously, the 'conjunction' between (1) and (2) entails that the action performed by

the player can have a pivotal consequence represented in the game. The 'conjunction' of (3) and (4) implies that the player can avoid to perform an action with a pivotal consequence represented in the game. The 'conjunction' of (1), (2), (3) and (4) infers that the player is free to perform an action with a pivotal consequence, without being restricted in any form or shape by the game designers. Also, to state that the player is free to perform an action that has a pivotal consequence represented in the game is the equivalent of the conjunction of (2) and (4).

White's doctrine outlines a method that can be used to justify the belief that a player has free will represented by the various storyline options. His doctrine is actually a 'narrower' form of holistic pragmatism than the ones espoused by Pierre Duhem and the aforementioned Quine. White's corporatism differs from the view of other holists because he claims "that moral beliefs may be included in a tested body of beliefs that also includes nonmoral beliefs" (White, 1993, p. 9). His "Cicero is free to kill Caesar" demonstration can be adapted for the options in the final part of the game (White, 1993, pp. 8–10). Let us consider the following statements:

(a) V *is free* to purge Silverhand's personality and memories.

(b) V *ought* to purge Silverhand's personality and memories.

(c) If V chooses to purge Silverhand's personality and memories, he will purge him.

(d) Supplemental statement: V can choose to purge Silverhand's personality and memories.

According to White's doctrine, (a) cannot be immediately presumed from (b). However, if a player starts to think about what is in-game free will with premises (i.e. logical, descriptive and moral) that causes her or him to formulate a moral statement like (b), then she or he may conjecture the statement (a) from (b) and the moral principle that "all obligatory acts are free" (White, 1993, p. 10).

Nevertheless, the player may very well part company with White's doctrine and assert that she or he can deduce from (a) that V's not choosing to purge Silverhand is not causally necessitated by anything. Obviously, reasoning in this way the player accepts a conjunction of statements that is both descriptive and moral.

From this point forward, if I continue to use White's doctrine, then the player's conjunction should be abandoned (White, 1993, pp. 10–12). Instead, a new conjunction should be developed. In this new conjunction, the statement (d) is replaced by the denial of:

(e) Certain actions and items chosen by the player in-game causally necessitate V not choosing to purge Silverhand.

This statement is somewhat imprecise so I consider it necessary to 'refine' it with a more specific sentence:

(e') The denial of the statement: V's not choosing to purge Silverhand is causally necessitated by the player choosing a dialogue which is choice-preventing for V.

Using White's doctrine, one can clarify and contribute to the solution of some of the most important issues regarding free will. Furthermore, his theses regarding free will are useful for identifying alternative solutions in various in-game contexts and bring into focus considerations relevant for any player and/ or philosopher that studies open-world games.

5. Conclusions

The doctrine of holistic pragmatism entails a method of elucidating various problems regarding free will. I readily accept that when it comes to single-player role-playing video games such as *Cyberpunk 2077*, there is still insufficient consensus, particularly in terms of interpretation. The applications of White's doctrine of 'corporatism' have the potential of illustrating new alternative solutions both in game design and in gameplay, solutions that are open not only for philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists: they are also open for game developers, game consultants and players.

Widely held perspectives regarding the nature of the connection between (i) a moral statement and (ii) a statement of freedom neither entail obvious truths, nor are they predicated on obvious truths. However, if in various applications, one chooses to adopt a moral version of White's principle that 'Ought' implies 'Free', and a correlated view of the variable meaning of a statement like "V can choose to purge Silverhand", which is an equivalent of "Cicero can choose to kill Caesar", one may better navigate the difficulties entailed by topics like the one approached in this article.

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