Playing with Integrity: Videogame Involvement and Moral Identity

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INTRODUCTION
Videogame players face the ongoing task of integrating their involvement with meaningful videogame play into their sense of self. This includes the reconciliation of private gameplay – and its ethically inflected features – with their personal values, beliefs, commitments, and broader moral identity. Approaches to the ethics of videogame play have been diverse but have mostly moved on from the moral panics and staunch absolutisms of early videogame discourse. One promising development in the literature has been the intersection of videogame studies with virtue ethics, de-emphasising the formal structures and representational elements of videogames, and instead focusing on the moral capacity and habits of individual players (McCormick, 2001; Reynolds, 2002; Sicart, 2009 & Bartel, 2020). This focus encourages examination of the complex relationship between the player as a co-facilitator of gameplay and as a person outside of immediate gameplay contexts. It also allows a normative framework to emerge which can prescribe ways of developing key moral skills and sensitivity necessary to be a responsible player, one able to maintain a balanced moral self across a wide variety of videogame experiences and fictions. If the more ambitious program of virtue ethics fails, it may at least prescribe ways to avoid fumbling the task entirely.

Applications of virtue ethics to videogame play have established initial accounts of virtuous play and of vicious play. Sicart (2009) notes that virtuous players – through their accumulation of experiences and ongoing interpretation of videogame play – develop ludic phronesis (a type of game-focused practical wisdom). These experience-based insights allow players to consciously recognise the ethically relevant aspects of gameplay, to relate such gameplay to their own ethical and cultural values, and to act accordingly based on that process. On the other hand, Bartel (2020) suggests that some videogame play can also facilitate the expression and development of immoral fantasies and vicious character. These two applications illustrate extremes: an exemplary player and a degenerate player. Virtue ethical accounts of videogame play are still emerging and there is much left to consider.

The application of virtue ethics to videogame play is now at a point at which it is highly valuable to develop detailed accounts of specific virtues and their role for videogame players. One such virtue that appears to be necessary for a player to successfully balance videogame play with their personal identity and moral standards is integrity. A promising conception of integrity is that it is a master virtue that encompasses a cluster of skills and excellences that contribute to the successful management of one's fluctuating values, beliefs, projects and commitments. By this

account, to be a person of integrity is to successfully take one's life seriously by (in part) avoiding various excesses and deficiencies (Cox, La Caze, & Levine, 2003). In terms of videogame play, a player can fail to play with integrity in a number of ways. Integrity is undermined by habitual deficiencies that constitute superficiality such as wantonness, triviality, disintegration, and indifference. On the other hand, it can also fail via excesses that constitute inflexibility. These include conformity, arrogance, dogmatism, monomonia, preciousness, and rigidity. Such obsessive inflexibility can interfere with the pursuit of the goods of gameplay. Living with integrity requires thoughtful reflection and examination of one's life, so self-deception, self-ignorance, mendacity, or hypocrisy can also undermine it. Integrity can also fall under threat when the various spheres of one's life conflict or undermine each other (e.g., types of sustained gameplay undermining core commitments or relationships and vice versa). Playing with integrity necessitates a responsible and reasonable custodianship of one's own moral identity throughout a life in flux. It also includes an appreciation of the various goods and moral freedoms of videogame play, be they mundane, profound, transformative, or simply beautiful.

This research project is the culmination of a Ph.D. thesis on videogame player ethics which uses conceptual analyses, aretaic normative theory, and case studies to interrogate the virtue of integrity and its role in meaningful videogame play. It outlines many ways in which integrity can be undermined. It also argues that successfully playing with integrity is compatible with taking moral holidays through the adoption of agential perspectives quite different from that of the player. While this project is primarily focused on the ethics of player involvement and aims to give players of any background something to consider, it has implications for broader aspects of videogame ethics. For example, Cox and I (2023) have argued elsewhere that involvement with some gameplay is fitting grounds for feelings of self-repugnance. If to play with integrity necessitates the avoidance of gameplay that excessively compromises one's conscience, and some gameplay fittingly generates those conditions, then this has important implications for community norms, design practice, and regulation.

BIO

I work in the core curriculum at Bond University on the Gold Coast, QLD, as the deputy convenor of *Responsibility, Integrity and Civic Discourse*. My research is currently focused on videogame player ethics, but I am also interested in broader aspects of applied ethics and aesthetics.

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