Integrity and the Gamer's Dilemma: Self-Directed Moral Emotions in Gameplay

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INTRODUCTION

The Gamer's Dilemma, first articulated by Luck (2009), contrasts moral intuitions surrounding virtual murder with those regarding virtual acts of violation (Luck's original example being paedophilia). This dilemma challenges us to explain why virtual murder is often deemed morally permissible in single-player video games, while virtual acts that include extreme violation are almost universally condemned. Addressing this puzzle has led to various responses in the literature, including attempts to draw moral distinctions between in-game actions, dissolve the dilemma by examining contextual factors, or argue that the intuitions underlying the dilemma are flawed (e.g., Bartel, 2020; Patridge, 2013; Ramirez, 2020). Recent responses to the dilemma have turned their focus to self-directed moral emotions and the fitting conditions for their generation (Coghlan & Cox, 2023) However, the debate surrounding the dilemma has not yet addressed the role of integrity in relation to self-directed moral emotions, an element which is crucial for understanding the ethical tensions that arise in private videogame play.

In this paper, I propose an applied virtue ethics approach to the Gamer's Dilemma, focusing on the virtue of integrity and the role of self-repugnance in ethically inflected gameplay. Integrity, generally understood to mark the integration of the various aspects of a moral agent's life and personality into an action-guiding and coherent self-conceptualisation, is particularly vulnerable in such gameplay contexts. However, integrity is not merely about coherence between actions and commitments; it must also account for the moral worth of those commitments (McFall, 1987 & Cox, La Caze, and Levine, 2003). For example, imagine a player that privately enjoys gameplay that includes virtual acts of bullying and mockery that is hatefully (and ignorantly) targeted at a minority group. Even if this behaviour fully aligns with their values, it seems misguided to label this person an exemplar of virtuous integrity just because they fully identify with their gameplay. This is crucial for understanding how integrity can be both compromised and preserved in virtual environments where moral commitments are tested.

I argue for what I term an "expansive-commitments" view of integrity, where the virtue involves balancing core commitments with the dynamic, often fragmented, nature of life and its complex moral demands. Unlike narrower conceptions that emphasise rigid self-integration or identity-maintenance, this view recognises the complexity of navigating multiple roles and values. Integrity involves ongoing self-reflection and an appreciation of moral ambiguity, especially in situations where personal values and ethical commitments conflict with temporary, in-game roles. As

Sicart (2009) notes, gameplay often involves a tension between fidelity to the game experience and fidelity to real-world commitments. This tension is particularly relevant in private gameplay, where players must constantly negotiate their in-game actions with their broader moral identity.

Additionally, I argue that thick aretaic language (in reference to excellences of character), which captures the richness of virtues like integrity and self-directed emotions such as self-repugnance, is better suited to addressing the ethical issues of private gameplay than thin ethical language like 'permissible' or 'impermissible'. Videogame play, with its shifting agential roles (Nguyen, 2020) and complex emotional engagements (Isbister, 2016 & Anable, 2018) requires a moral vocabulary that can capture these nuances. Thin ethical terms fail to fully account for the affective complexity involved in the player's involvement with gameplay. The emotional aspects of such engagement are not reducible to the design of game features and material interfaces but also reflect the personal values and moral commitments that players bring into the game world.

For example, a teacher who is deeply committed to education may experience significant moral tension when playing a game like *Scourge of Students* (a hypothetical example), where the player is encouraged to act with disdain and negligence toward students in a simulated classroom. In such a scenario, the game may be designed to evoke a sense of rebellion or humour, but the player's core commitment to student welfare could lead to feelings of self-repugnance. This emotional conflict does not arise purely from the game's content but from the betrayal of the player's core values and professional commitments, making integrity a central concern in the ethical evaluation of their gameplay.

Ultimately, I argue that an interrogation of integrity, in conjunction with an understanding of self-directed emotions like self-repugnance, provides a more comprehensive framing for evaluating the ethical risks of private videogame play. This approach moves beyond surface-level moral intuitions often associated with virtual acts of murder and violation, helping to explain the deeper moral discomfort players may feel when their in-game actions conflict with their core values. It also recognises that participation in gameplay which depicts immoral actions and values does not necessarily undermine a player's integrity. By focusing on when and why certain forms of gameplay generates fittingness conditions for feelings of self-repugnance and threaten a player's moral identity, this framing offers normative guidance for understanding the ethical stakes of solitary videogame play.

BIO
I am currently a teaching fellow in the Transformation CoLab at Bond University on the Gold Coast, where I am the deputy coordinator of the core curriculum subject *Responsibility, Integrity and Civic Discourse*. My research is currently focused on virtue ethics and moral emotions, but I am also interested in broader aspects of applied ethics and aesthetics.

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