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

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Keywords

Integrity, Self-repugnance, Virtue Ethics, Gamer's Dilemma

INTRODUCTION

The Gamer's Dilemma, first articulated by Luck (2009), contrasts moral intuitions surrounding in-game murder with those regarding in-game acts of violation (Luck's original example being paedophilia). This dilemma challenges us to explain why in-game murder is often deemed morally permissible in single-player video games, while in-game acts that include extreme violation are often condemned. Addressing this puzzle has led to various responses in the literature, including attempts to draw moral distinctions between types of in-game depictions and resultant harms, 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 personal integrity in relation to self-directed moral emotions, an element which is crucial for understanding the ethical tensions that arise in private videogame play. I propose an applied virtue ethics approach to moral questions such as those emerging from the Gamer's Dilemma, focusing on the virtue of integrity.

Integrity is generally understood to mark successful integration of the various aspects of a moral agent's life and personality into an action-guiding and coherent self-conceptualisation. As Sicart (2009) notes, ethically meaningful gameplay often encourages tensions between the player's fidelity to the game experience and fidelity to their real-world values. It appears that personal integrity is the virtue that enables responsible players to adequately manage these tensions. However, integrity is not merely about coherence between actions and commitments; it must also account for the moral worth of those commitments and the specific parts of life that they relate to (McFall, 1987 & Cox, La Caze, and Levine, 2003).

I argue for what I term a *responsive commitments* view of integrity, which involves balancing core commitments and self-identity with the dynamic, often fragmented, nature of life and its complex moral demands across a variety of different contexts and in pursuit of a variety of different goods (ludic, aesthetic, moral etc.). Unlike narrower conceptions of integrity that equate it with rigid self-integration or identity-maintenance, this view recognises the complexity of personal values across context-dependent circumstances. Playing with integrity involves ongoing self-reflection, especially in situations where personal values and ethical commitments conflict with temporary, in-game roles.

Additionally, I argue that thick aretaic language (in reference to excellences of character), which captures the richness of virtues like integrity, is better suited to addressing ethical issues of private gameplay than thin ethical language often employed in response to the gamer's dilemma, like 'permissible' or 'impermissible'. Thin ethical terms fail to fully account for the affective complexity of a player's involvement with gameplay. 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. The affective aspects of such engagement are sensitive to the design of game features, in-game depictions, and material interfaces, but also reflect the personal values and commitments that players bring into their gameplay (and take from it).

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 during play. This emotional conflict does not arise purely from the game's content but from the felt betrayal of the player's core values and professional commitments, making integrity a central concern in the ethical evaluation of their gameplay. The committed teacher might be deeply uncomfortable with the gameplay, whereas someone in a different profession may not feel that their sense of self is affronted in the same way.

Ultimately, I argue that an interrogation of integrity, in conjunction with an understanding of self-directed emotions like self-repugnance, provides a useful framework 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. My research is focused on virtue ethics and moral emotions in relation to videogame play, but I am also interested in broader aspects of applied ethics and aesthetics.

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