
"In short, the gamer's always to blame": on real and virtual wrongdoings

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Résumé

Virtual actions raise a moral problem: are our moral principles to apply in virtual situations without modifications? Luck (2009)'s "gamer's dilemma" suggests a negative answer, because of two widespread moral intuitions about virtual actions, i.e. that virtual murder is morally permissible whereas virtual paedophilia is not. The problem consists in explaining the origin of this double ethical standard and how it can be justified. The literature has largely focused on (sexually) violent video games as a case study, but the dilemma is an instance of the aforementioned general ethical problem. Thus Patridge (2011) discusses the dilemma in the context of the "amoralist challenge": it seems that non-serious action is immune to blame, however horrendous the action, because the agent can always respond "it's only a game" or "no victim no crime". More recently, Luck (2022) presents the "paradox of treating wrongdoing lightly": he distinguishes between *grave* wrongdoings which are wrongdoings in reality and in virtuality alike (Luck's examples: child molestation, rape, homophobic abuse...) and *light* wrongdoings which are wrongdoings in reality but become permissible when done virtually (Luck's examples: murder, false imprisonment, egregious theft...).

I propose to look at this general problem within the philosophy of games, building on Nguyen (2020)'s recent proposal to construe games as the "art of agency". Nguyen argues that when one plays a game, one is invited to endorse a temporary agency that is shaped by the game design(ers). I then explore the unwillingness and/or inability to endorse a temporary agency, based on moral considerations. From this vantage point, the intention to explore and endorse morally deviant forms of agency is a feature of the game design: if it is not nuanced by other aspects of the game, it can be the locus of moral criticism. The natural tendency to blame the *gamer* should thus be resisted, just like the art of blaming Fortune that La Fontaine writes about. Rather, the moral problem comes from bad design, which is also an aesthetic flaw.

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Mots-Clés: Virtual action, gamer's dilemma, agency, games, video games