COMMENTARY

Can E-Sport Gamers Permissibly Engage with Off-Limits Virtual Wrongdoings?

Thomas Montefiore[1] [ORCID] **· Paul Formosa[1]**

David Ekdahl (2023), in a constructive and thoughtful commentary, outlines both points of agreement with and suggestions for further research arising from our paper 'Crossing the Fictional Line: Moral Graveness, the Gamer's Dilemma, and the Paradox of Fictionally Going Too Far' (Montefiore & Formosa, 2023).

Ekdahl endorses two central elements of our approach. First, he endorses our reframing of the Gamer's Dilemma, following Luck (2022), as a specific instance of a more general paradox of *fictionally going too far* that is applicable across a range of media, such as film and literature. This broader paradox challenges us to account for our differing intuitions about the moral permissibility of fictional wrongdoings, whereby some fictional wrongdoings (the canonical example being murder) are considered morally 'fair-game' and others, *ceteris paribus*, go *too far*, and are morally 'off-limits' (the canonical example being sexual assault). Second, he endorses our rejecting the assumption that we *must* look for a *moral* property or feature to explain our differing intuitions when this paradox arises (see Montefiore & Formosa, 2022). These two elements free us up to both consider a broader range of instances of the paradox, and to consider a broader range of non-moral considerations that could help to explain it. Of course, while this does not mean that morality can have no place in such an explanation, it broadens our perspective beyond a sole focus on the moral features of fictional wrongdoings.

Our work, as Ekdahl notes, opens two avenues for further research. First, empirical research that explores how the intuitive moral permissibility of 'off-limits' fictional wrongdoings differ across a range of media (we are developing a study at present which is exploring this issue). Second, research exploring *non-moral* contextual factors that could help to explain this difference within specific media, such as video games, as well as across media generally. We also argue, as does Ekdahl (2023), that empirical work, such as Formosa et al. (2023), can help to illuminate both these lines of research.

✉ Thomas Montefiore
    Thomas.montefiore@mq.edu.au

[1] Department of Philosophy, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Ekdahl focuses on the second line of research through a helpful discussion of e-sports. E-Sports is an interesting case to focus on as it gives us an example of high degrees of immersion and skill acquisition – a "serious" approach to gaming – which provides a useful lens for thinking about some of the non-moral aspects that might impact our assessment of engagement with fictional violence. This is because it highlights how "immersion" can bifurcate – we can be immersed in the *systems* or ludic elements of a game and we can be immersed in the *content* or semantic elements of a game (see Sicart, 2013; Aarseth, 1997; Klevjer, 2002). The former includes a focus on mastering and being immersed in a game's systems so as to play a game optimally. This kind of gameplay is likely to be the central, or even exclusive, mode of engagement of e-sport practitioners. This approach may lessen some of the ethical meaning of one's virtual acts that arise exclusively from the representational content of a game, since e-sport gamers will tend to be immersed in a way that sidelines the semantic layer of the virtual action. This is Sicart's (2010) 'reactive' player who doesn't reflect on what her actions *mean* beyond them being strategically optimal (see Formosa et al., 2016). For such players, including many e-sports practitioners, all virtual wrongdoings might be glossed over and genuinely *experienced* as amoral. Whether this actually renders the virtual wrongdoings in question amoral, and whether this deeply immersive yet morally insensitive mode of engagement with (often extremely violent) virtual wrongdoings is cause by itself for moral concern are both questions worth exploring further.

By contrast, deep immersion in the narrative elements of a game is a double-edged sword in that, on the one hand, this is precisely the sort of approach that might be important for proper moral engagement (Ryan et al., 2016), while on the other hand it raises distinct ethical questions when that deeply immersive engagement is directed towards morally troubling content, such as sexual violence. This is partly what motivates our response to Luck (2022), when we argue that we also need to include *serious* engagements with virtual wrongdoings in an analysis of the Gamer's Dilemma, rather than narrowing its focus to virtual wrongdoings that are treated lightly.

We can speculate that players are, through extensive experience, more adept at immersing themselves in systems when it comes to physical violence such as murder, given the extremely common use of physical violence as a game mechanic, and this explains and may even justify such virtual actions being intuited as morally permissible. In other words, players may not be registering virtual murder semantically, but rather in terms of how it can be optimised within a game's systems. Whereas this kind of *ludic resistance* may not, we suggest, occur (at least as easily) for 'off-limits' virtual actions, such as virtual sexual violence, since gamers (typically) can't fail to pay attention to the semantic layer of what such virtual actions represent. This may be, in part, because of the rarity of virtual sexual violence in video game contexts, and the resulting limited experience players have with the mechanics of engaging with such virtual wrongdoings, or it could be due to a range of other non-moral or moral features that are intrinsic to those virtual wrongdoings (see Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020). However, this remains merely speculative at present, and in unison with Ekdahl (2023) we reiterate the need for interdisciplinary collaborations to explore such questions both theoretically and empirically.

Declarations

Ethical Approval N/A

Consent to Participate PF and TM have both consented to the production of this paper.

Consent to Publish PF and TM have both consented to the publication of this paper.

Competing Interests None.

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