

Good Violence, Bad Violence: The Ethics of Competition in Multiplayer Games

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ABSTRACT

Most game studies research on ethics and games examines the ways games encode, express, and encourage ethical reflection and ideas through their systems, mechanics, and representational elements. However, not much attention has been paid to the ethical aspects of games as/when they are played by more than one player. In this article we use literature from the philosophy of sports to discuss how competition can be framed as an ethical activity and how doing so allows us to examine commonly used value-laden terms such as ganking, spawn camping, and trash talking. We propose the idea of the ideal moral competitive game: a game in which the best moves or plays are coincidentally those that result in the best possible degree and type of challenge for my opponent. From this baseline we then articulate a preliminary ethics of play, centered on competition that can be productive for examining and understanding the ethics of inter-player interactions.

KEYWORDS

ethics, videogames, competition, violence, ganking, spawn camping, trash talking, design

INTRODUCTION

Earlier work has argued that games can be useful for encouraging ethical reflection in their players (e.g. Sicart 2009; Schrier and Gibson 2010; Zagal 2011). Flanagan (2009) also discusses how games can represent states of affairs as good or bad. Similarly, Bogost's work in procedural rhetoric argues that games can make moral claims when game-systems represent real-world systems; a favored example is the McDonald's Game, where players must maximize profits and take care of the environment but discover, eventually, that it's impossible (Bogost 2007). Sicart, argues that computer games are ethically interesting when they represent ethical situations, such as killing, in a morally interesting or provocative way - such as Grand Theft Auto, where killing is an efficient path to money, but not the only path (Sicart 2009).

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While most work has emphasized the role that their systemic and representational elements play, not much work in game studies has explored the ethics underlying the ways that players interact with each other. While scholars have examined how players interact with each other in ways that are presupposed to be unethical (e.g. grief play), not much work has examined why these interactions should be considered unethical. For example, the game EVE Online is notorious for its “grief play” – where players often scam and betray each other. This style of play has been described as “unbounded” in that “player attitudes towards acceptable and unacceptable play are markedly more ‘loose’ than what is found in other MMOGs” (Carter and Gibbs 2013). The game’s developer recommends that players should not trust each other since scams and theft are commonplace. In contrast, other online games rely on strict enforcement of rules forbidding unacceptable speech and play behavior. This seems to suggest that the ethics of player action are set explicitly by the game developers.

On the other hand, Myers’ (2010) experience of purposefully playing a character in an online game who followed the ethics and norms of the fictional universe but (willfully) ignored the social norms established by player communities shows that moral guidelines for online play are often arbitrary, loosely determined, and complicated by corporate policies (e.g. the game operators’ “terms of service”). Myers (2010) found that despite never being punished for his actions by the game’s operators, the player community clearly felt he had acted wrongly. This seems to suggest that game ethics emerge from norms derived from the player community.

There also exist accounts describing how players deal with online situations that feel (or are described as) clearly unethical, yet are simultaneously complicated due to the virtual nature of the events. Dibbell’s early account “A Rape in Cyberspace” (1998) is perhaps one of the most famous. Dibbell describes the moral quandary faced by players of an online multi-user environment when they witness a beloved character lose control to another player who then forced her character to have sex and brutalize her own (virtual) body. This and other accounts are often rooted in three issues: (1) a clear sense that something wrong has happened and (2) the dilemma of articulating the nature of the wrong while (3) recognizing that virtual actions are not quite the same as those that are not. Understanding these issues is perplexing to players who attempt to reconcile the ethics of how we relate to each other with what that means when we do it through online personas, characters, and avatars who are often representations entirely unlike those of their players. Simply by examining the emergent lexicon used in online games, we can see how much of it is value-laden and rich in implied moral valence (e.g. twinkling, ganking, griefing, trolling, ninjalooting, spawn camping, etc.) (see also Achterbosch, Miller, and Vamplew 2013). This suggests that certain kinds of in-game actions are always wrong across all sorts of games, and game communities.

So, are in-game betrayals of trust inherently unethical? Are the ethical boundaries set by the game developer, by individual intention, or by community consensus? Or are they inherent in the nature of the in-game actions themselves? In this paper we take a first step towards discussing the ethics of player interactions in a way that is neither relativistic nor independent of earlier work in moral philosophy. The terrain is complicated and vast. We have decided to narrow our focus on the ethics of competition. When is a competitive act morally good, and when is it problematic? We feel that understanding the ethical status of competitive acts can be fruitful in setting up a baseline from which other kinds of interactions can be framed. We are in no sense claiming that all games or all play is competitive, nor do we think the conclusions of this analysis extend to all sorts of games,

nor do we take this account to exhaust the moral or social value of gaming or competition. We will focus solely on understanding the immediate ethical status of player actions in multiplayer competitive games, and narrowly on their immediate ethical status as attempts to interfere with the immediate, in-game goals and desires of other players.

So how do we distinguish between healthy and unhealthy competition? We will argue that competition is a form of violence and that violence is unethical. However, games can transform certain kinds of violence offering a context in which the moral negative valence of violence is not only neutralized, but inverted. Games create the possibility of good violence. However, this transformation is not automatic; it emerges from a complex set of features including a game's design, player consent, and psychological fit.

Our view might be contrasted with the 'magic circle' view where game play is separated off in a special and impermeable way from normal life (as summarized by Stenros 2014). In particular, the magic circle is sometimes presented as providing a moral pass in which in-game actions have no moral consequences or status outside of the magic circle. Our view is the reverse. We think that game-play is knit into moral life. Successfully transformed violence is a positive good; untransformed violence is morally bad, and to the extent that developers, players, and gaming community members can effect that transformation, they have moral obligations to encourage it. Games are not immune from moral criticism; they are a part of moral life, and viable avenues for moral success and failure.

COMPETITION

In traditional game theory, competitive games are those that require players to form strategies that directly oppose those of other players in the game: in order to win, all others must lose. The two main forms of competition are direct and indirect. In the former, obtaining a resource may require taking it from an opponent (e.g. I block your shot, denying you a goal), while in the latter obtaining a resource may not imply it is being denied or removed from an opponent (e.g. my score in Golf is independent of everyone else's performance). Caillois (2006) famously argued that competition, or *agon*, was one of the fundamental categories of games. He also noted that these were occasions where "adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions" and that competition was a way to settle, within prescribed limits and "without outside assistance" who is best at certain things (Caillois 2006). Caillois also suggests that equality (as in, equal chances at winning) is an essential component in competition, thus the common use of handicaps or randomization in starting conditions of games and sports. With that in mind, what is the moral valence of "competition"? Is it right or wrong?

First, we should consider a few options regarding different kinds of wrongs. Barbara Herman suggested that, for a Kantian, there are two distinct wrongs: the wrong of coercion and the wrong of violence. The wrong of coercion is the attempt to control the will, where the wrong of violence lies in the attempt to obstruct the will (Herman 1989). Similarly, Allan Back says an act is violent if it is a forceful action, done by an agent, of a type that intends to reduce the freedom or genetic fitness of its recipient, and if the actor is morally responsible for the effort to cause harm (Back 2004). Much depends on how we define harm. There are looser definitions of harm, like Seana Shiffrin's, in which harm is any condition that generates a significant chasm between one's will and one's experience, or Feinberg's, in which harm is any situation in which one's state is worse off than it could have been (Shiffrin 1999). There are more demanding ones, like Matthew

Hanser's, in which one is harmed if one loses a basic good - a general resource for supporting all sorts of action - like one's eyesight, or hands, or income (Hanser 2008).

Now, if we conceive of harm such that it requires grievous bodily injury or the loss of a basic good, then most games do not involve violence or harm. But if we conceive of violence and harm such that any attempt to frustrate the will and intent of another, or to introduce a gap between their will and their experience, counts as violence, then oppositional games clearly do involve inflicting harm. This means that competition is wrong. In fact, we should perhaps refer to "competition" as it is usually called in non-game related contexts: violence.

However, let us distinguish between different kinds of violence. We will call "significant violence" that which attacks the basic human resources for forming and executing plans and actions, including the body. Significant violence does not occur in most games (though it may occur in high stakes poker or combat sports). As Herman notes, the paradigmatic form of violence, violence against the body, is an attack on autonomy, since the body is the primary resource for bringing willings into reality (Herman 1989, 424). Violence is significant when it has effects that go beyond the immediate plan or action that is being prevented: shooting someone might prevent them from hurting you, but it also prevents them from doing anything else.

We will call "mere violence" all forms of violence that are not significant. Mere violence occurs in all oppositional games: I am always acting to truncate the other players' plans and frustrate their intentions. To be clear, we are not referring to the representations of violence within a game (these are often representations of significant violence). So, in chess I slowly deprive my opponent of their pieces, which are the in-game basic resource for action (mere violence) while the pieces getting "eaten" is a representation of significant violence. Similarly in competitive *Starcraft*, my units may destroy enemy units (a representation of significant violence) while I engage in mere violence: denying my opponent access to her resources. When my opponent defeats me in a game of chess, she truncates my plans to win, but truncates no other plans - and thus we call it mere violence instead of significant violence. We do not act to truncate their game-irrelevant plans - e.g. we do not act to truncate their marriage or their publishing goals. We also do not act to truncate their plan to be playing a game. We act to truncate their in-game plans by the means permitted by the game's rules. In chess and *Starcraft*, most of my efforts are spent predicting and frustrating all the particular actions of my opponent. What we're doing in these oppositional games is very clearly an abstracted form of violence. In fact, it is the capacity of games to offer something that is recognizable as violence - though in an abstracted way - that makes it possible for games to tease apart certain of our darker impulses from the actual doing of significant harm.

So consider this simple argument: all competition is wrong, because all competition involves some sort of violence. In direct competition, like chess and *Starcraft* we are attempting to truncate all sorts of plans from other people. But even when the competition doesn't involve direct opposition - even when it is something like a sprint trial - by trying to win, I am trying to deny my opponents the win. I am trying to beat them. So, goes the argument, playing competitive games is inherently bad. Kretchmar (2012) has summarized a variety of such arguments.

There are further arguments to support competition as morally wrong. While most work on violence and videogames has focused on their content (see Ferguson 2010 for an

overview), researchers have also started to study the role that competition may have in influencing aggressive behavior in players. It seems that competition may be the aspect of videogames with the most influence on aggressive behavior (Adachi and Willoughby 2011). This is because competition can act against a player's feelings of competence thus "leading to higher levels of aggressive feelings, easier access to aggressive thoughts, and a greater likelihood of enacting aggressive behavior" (Przybylski et al. 2014). If oppositional play (i.e. competition) can lead to these negative effects, is it not also the case then that competition is wrong?

Our thesis is that games can transform certain kinds of competition from bad to good. In short, we argue that games *can* be an engine for taking violent tendencies and actions, and turn them into experiences that are positive for the objects of our violence. Put simply, in games I can beat up on someone and, if things go right, give them a good experience. Discussion of game ethics has focused on the ethics of what games represent (e.g. McCormick 2001; Sicart 2009; Tavinor 2009). This has de-emphasized the other moral capacity for games: their ability to act as designed contexts in which the moral valence of violent acts can be transformed. But, this transformation is not inevitable. So, when can games effect this transformation of violence and competition, and when do they fail? When is a competitive act ethical and when is it not?

EXPLAINING ETHICAL COMPETITION

Some forms of competition seem clearly ethical. When I am playing a tournament, and try as hard as I can to beat my opponent, is that not ethical? They would be disappointed if, for example, their spouse had bribed me to go easy on them. If I drug my opponent's coffee at lunch before our tournament round, this is obviously unethical. Of course, there are more complicated scenarios, is it ethical to win by an embarrassingly huge margin?, shout hostility at my opponent?, or pretend to be a new player in order to defeat novices?

How are we to distinguish between the ethical and unethical competition? We need an account of how this transformation happens. We would like to offer two. First, from the philosophy of sport, there is the standard view: games transform the violence of competition through consent and agreement. This has been recently well-elucidated by Steven Weimer (2012): in a boxing match, we both agree, ahead of time, to strike one another. This is for our own benefit: we would each separately like the chance to exercise our skills and abilities at boxing. Then, when I'm striking you, my act does not count as a truncation of your plans (mere violence). Instead, I am aiding your plans by fulfilling my obligatory duties to you. What we are doing is, in a sense, a trade: we each want the experience of fighting, and we each agree to be the opponent for the other.

Though this view is compelling, we claim it is incomplete. A complete picture of the transformation of violence can only happen when we look at the structure of reasoning and motivation in game-play (Nguyen 2015). For this, we can turn to Bernard Suits' account of playing games (Suits 2005). Suits says that to play a game is to voluntarily take up obstacles for the sake of the experience of overcoming them. In game-life, says Suits, the normal relationship of means and ends is reversed. In practical life, we take up a means for the sake of the ends. In game-life, we take up an arbitrary end for the sake of the means it forces us through. I don't care about being at the location that the marathon finish line is in, but I adopt that goal temporarily, for the sake of the experience of struggling for it. This in-game goal – which Suits calls the "lusory goal" – is deeply arbitrary, and disconnected from the rest of my ends (Suits 2005, 51). If I genuinely wanted to get a ball through a basket as many times as possible, I would get rid of all

those constraints about dribbling and opponents, and maybe show up to an empty court with a step-ladder. But fascinatingly, the best game experiences come when I genuinely care about the lusory goal. Thus, caring about lusory goals is instrumental to the truly desired thing - the experience of struggling. And, so long as our darker impulses can be satisfied by blocking an opponent's attempt to achieve a goal about which they genuinely care, then crushing an attempt to achieve a lusory goal will serve to satisfy that impulse.

It is the strange instrumental nature of game ends that makes the moral transformation of competition in games possible. If I genuinely care about winning for the sake of the experience of striving, then it's possible for another to contribute to my experience of striving by trying to frustrate my attempts to win. Furthermore, it is that strange, fluid, and disposable nature of lusory goals that takes the sting out of the truncation of ends. In the moment of play, I take up an end that is not connected up to the rest of my life in the usual way. Thus, when another truncates my attempt to achieve that end, the usual consequences don't apply, since nothing hangs on actually achieving that end. The lusory goal is adopted only because in caring about it and trying to achieve it, I get the right sort of struggle. So when another tries to truncate my attempt to achieve my lusory goal, they are actually helping me achieve my real goal, which is the experience of the struggle.

We think the Suitsian picture is necessary to understand the complete nature of the transformation of violence in games. In Weimer's picture, the good I do another is invariant between games - so long as I fulfill my duty to play well and sincerely, then I am doing all the good that can be done, game-wise. In the Suitsian picture, the degree of moral transformation depends on particularities of a game's design, and its fit with a particular person's psychological state. Imagine, for instance, consenting to the following game: we are going to have an insult contest, until one of us cries. For Weimer, the good that arises from that is the same as the good of a game of chess; the badness has been neutralized by consent, and we are both fulfilling our duties. But in the Suitsian picture, you will need something more than consent: a well-designed game that makes my insults into interesting obstacles for you. In the Suitsian picture, consenting to a badly designed game, or at least one that is a bad fit for our psychologies, will not yield the moral transformation from negative to positive. Consent has a role - it helps us sort ourselves into psychological categories, and finding other people who can receive exactly the kind of abuse we desire to give. But the primary engine of transformation is the way a game's design aligns my mere violence to your desire for struggle.

But games do not always do this perfectly, and this is where we think the advantages of our view over the consent view are clearest. The Suitsian view captures the many ways in which games can go wrong, even with consent, and makes it clearer what's happening when they go right. Take, for example, the possibility of steamrolling another person. For most people, chess is only fun and interesting if played against somebody of similar skill level. It is, in particular, not at all fun to be destroyed by somebody vastly better than you. Under Weimer's view, once we have consented to the game, the goods are the same, no matter what the relative skill levels. You consented to the game, and I am contractually obligated to destroy you. But under the Suitsian view, the positive moral transformation only happens when we're the right fit for the game, and for each other. In other words, if I'm good at chess, and I go out looking for newbies to stomp for my pleasure, the Suitsian view says that's bad. Weimer's view says that I'm doing just as much good for the other person. For Weimer, the only failure an overskilled player is making is to himself, for failing to find a context in which to appropriately develop and display his excellences. Under our view, I'm doing something bad to the other person - I'm seeking

out a case in which I know that my violent acts aren't causing any good to the other person. I should seek an appropriate opponent to effect the transformation. So, for example, this makes matchmaking systems, which ideally set me up with an appropriate opponent, an integral part of the interpersonal moral valence of games.

To summarize, we have proposed two mechanisms by which games transform violence.

1. Games transform violence through consent and the mechanism of social contract.
2. Games transform violence by aligning the merely violent actions of one player with another player's desirable experience of struggling.

The former transformation works as Weimer has suggested, the latter transformation works via the Suitsian mechanism we have described. We claim that an ethical competitor attempts to avail themselves of both mechanisms of transformation. Players who avoid one or both of these mechanisms are ethically flawed players.

These two mechanisms together provide a complete explanation of what's going wrong in certain situations. Consider a simple case: I pose as a chess novice online by dishonestly lowering my ranking. I then go on-line and proceed to easily and overwhelmingly defeat new chess players. In our account, I am playing badly in both ways. First, I am undermining the mechanism of consent, through deceit. A player in on-line chess is consenting to play somebody ranked at about their level; I am undermining that consent. Second, I am not giving players their desirable experience of struggle. Most players do not enjoy, and do not want, to be crushed by a vastly superior opponent.

Note that these mechanisms are independent of each other. For a first example: imagine that I do not artificially manipulate my rankings, but search out new games from low-ranked players who have, in the on-line system, started games that are open to any opponent, and instead of attempting to give them a teaching game or an interesting game, I simply crush them. Here, I have not undermined consent, but I have consciously selected games where my violent actions are misaligned with other's desirable experiences of struggling. Alternatively, imagine that my wife enjoys a challenging game of *Magic: The Gathering*, though I can't always provide one because I'm not as good as she is. She's a little down, so I sabotage her deck by removing a few good cards. I have not obtained her consent, but I do provide her with an enjoyable experience of struggling.

What we are arguing here is that the moral transformation of violence can happen in a consensual Suitsian game, because of the motivational structure of Suitsian games, but it isn't an automatic feature of any and all consensual Suitsian games. Moral transformation requires a coincidence of skills and interests that, though it may occasionally happen fortuitously, usually requires an extra effort from the players. Imagine I enjoy squashing noobs at chess, and my nephew desperately wants the experience of brilliantly outplaying me. He has no chance, and will be humiliated by how badly I will beat him, but isn't actually good enough at chess to realize how little chance he has. Suppose I know this, and take extra relish in playing him, for I enjoy humiliating such uppity noobs. Notice, that if I play my nephew in order to enjoy humiliating him, that what we are doing is consensual on both sides, and is, in fact, Suitsian play: both of us are playing for the sake of a particular desired experience of striving. But there is no moral transformation of my violence here, because I have not chosen an opponent who is sufficiently well-matched

that my game-violence will result in their pleasure. Rather, I am specifically selecting somebody where my game-violence will result in their suffering. A Suitsian game provides the possibility of the moral transformation of violence, but is not, by itself, sufficient to guarantee that transformation. A further effort of coordination is required.

The Ethical Competitor

We can now see how it is possible to have ethical competition. It depends, first, on consent and second, on the motivational set-up of the players. If players are playing to win, then playing a game is, in fact, a zero-sum exchange. When I do something to make myself win, somebody else thereby loses, and so fails to achieve their ultimate goals. But a Suitsian player is not playing to win. She is temporarily caring about the win, in order to have the experience of striving. When the experience of striving is the point, then a game isn't zero-sum – we can come together, oppose each other, and both come out the better for it, no matter who wins. In this sense, we can see that an ethical competitive game is a marvelously bit of social technology: it is an activity that is competitive in its individual moments, but collaborative as a whole.

Contrast the way an ethical competitive game works with a nearby neighbor: the teaching game. In a teaching game, the teacher attempts to set up puzzles for the learning player, either to teach the game, or to teach strategy. The teacher is trying to give the player a valuable experience of some sort, and they have to do it intentionally and consciously. But in a well-designed ethical competitive game, the player does not have to consciously intend to give their opponent a good experience; they simply have to attempt to beat their opponent, and the design of the game (and the proper psychological fit of the players to the game) converts that into a desirable experience. Games are desire plumbing.

Davidson (2009) argues that “well played” can be used to describe someone who does something in a game with skill (e.g. a well played hand of poker). We argue that this view is insufficient since it does not take into account the relationship between the players and the role that the game's design plays in helping create these situations. Similarly, Juul (2010) argues that when we play any multiplayer game, we must take into account three different considerations: the goal of the game (e.g. desire to win), the game experience (e.g. desire for an interesting game), and the social context (e.g. how the outcome may affect the social group you're playing with). So, when deciding to capture a piece in chess (advancing in the goal to win) we might also create a less-interesting game (your lead over your opponent is too great) and affect the social situation (your opponent feels humiliated and is angry at you). In the context of Juul's framing, we suggest that an ethical competition is one in which all three perspectives align with each other: so, a move towards the game's objective creates a more interesting game that also results in a positive social situation. This view aligns with Upton's argument that “[s]uccessful multiplayer games are structured so as to channel actions performed out of self-interest into interesting choices for the other player” (Upton 2015, 86). In other words, successful games can transform the selfish interest that lies at the heart of competition into something positive – here a more interesting game play experience for the other players. Similarly, the new games movement of the 1970s was driven by the notion that while competition is important (and fun), winning and losing wasn't. The transformational power of competition from mere violence into something positive was expressed by their three guiding rules for new games: play hard, play fair, and nobody hurt (Fluegelman 1976). We agree with the views of Upton and the new games movement, and take ourselves to have elucidated the philosophical reasons how such channeling is possible.

THE UNETHICAL COMPETITOR

Now let's examine different value-laden phenomena related to competition. For each, we will examine how we can view them as either unethical or not in the context of the mechanisms (consent and alignment of violence and struggle) we previously discussed.

Ganking

Reynolds (2007) has argued that ganking – or “the killing of a lower player by a higher one where there is no question of a contest” is problematic because some players feel it is one of the most negative aspects in online MMOs while others feel that, in the context of player vs player competition (PVP), it makes the game more exciting. From our perspective, ganking is unethical as a competitive practice.

We can assume that the first requirement, consent, is met by players who have agreed to participate in the game (and, presumably on a PVP-enabled server or in-game area). However, the 2nd requirement – aligning mere violence with a players' experience of struggle is clearly not met. The central struggle faced by a player in a competitive MMO context depends on how different player's strategic choices (regarding, say, character abilities, equipment, etc.) and how to best use these against an opponent. A player who “ganks” an opponent is effectively denying them the opportunity to test those choices because, as defined, they have no chance. As such, the player on the losing side is not struggling with the challenge of making productive strategic choices because there simply are not any to be had. In other words, in order for the opposition presented by a competitor to create a valid struggle, it must be such that the player has the possibility of overcoming that struggle. Similarly, the ganker is never at risk of losing and thus is not being provided with any form of meaningful struggle.

Ganking is an interesting example because it highlights the importance of ensuring that players in a competitive game provide each other with a degree of struggle that is appropriate to their desires. Ganking also makes clearer that the consent theory of moral transformation is insufficient.

Spawn-Camping

Spawn-camping, usually reviled by players in most competitive first-person shooters, is the practice of staying in a location that provides a strategic advantage over the location where enemy players spawn, or appear, in a game. The strategic advantage usually comes from the fact that the newly appearing enemies do not have time to react or respond before they are eliminated. It is a miserable experience to be spawn-camped, and, though it is usually allowed, strictly, within the rules of the game, most communities of game-players look unkindly on it and enforce a social norm of avoiding spawn-camping. From our mechanisms above, the 1st requirement is met: all players have agreed to be attacked by their opponents and to participate in a competitive online game. However, the 2nd requirement isn't met. In first-person shooters, the core struggle is a test of reflexes, hand-eye coordination, and spatial navigation. In the case of spawn-camping, the attacker is denying the struggle of navigating the virtual environment while the defender is denied the opportunity to test their reflexes and hand-eye coordination against their opponents. Thus, spawn camping, as a competitive practice, is unethical.

Spawn-camping is interesting, because it's a case where a players compete within the rules of the game, but fail to provide their opponents an enjoyable experience. This forces a refinement on our earlier claim. It is not the case that I can always, in any game, attempt to beat my opponent by any means allowed within the rules, and trust to the game to

convert it into a quality experience. Perhaps some games that are perfectly designed converters might permit such single-mindedness. But most games are not – they are, at least as moral converters, imperfect. Therefore the ethical competition must distinguish between the forms of competition that can be converted into desirable experiences, and the kind that cannot. In some cases, this is obvious – it seems very unlikely that there are any players who enjoy being spawn-camped. In other cases, there are grey areas, where some forms of competition are enjoyed by some competitors, but not by others. For that, we will turn to another issue: trash talk.

Trash Talk

Let's consider the act of verbally insulting other competitors in an online game. Trash talk is a phenomenon common to both sports as well as videogames (Conmy 2008). Sometimes insults are motivating and part of the pleasure, other times they're supposed to hinder an opponent. Also, they can be miserable, toxic, and exhausting. Where, then, is the line? It's easy to think that a certain kind of comment would count as grieving in any context. But this, we think, misunderstands the structure and activity of game-play. Just as a punch to the face would be wrong in a game of chess, and a rightful activity of a boxing match, whether an insult is joyful or toxic varies from one context to another.

Weimer's consent-based account would say: it depends on the rules of the game that we've consented to. The consent-based account can deal with the difference between insults in, say, an insult contest, and insults in a chess match. Insults in an insult contest are specified as permitted moves in the rules of the game. But basketball presents a more difficult example – the kinds of insults that would be part of the fun at the neighborhood basketball courts might be problematic at a university basketball finals.

The consent-based account would say: these are different games, with different rules. There are different implicit rules in university basketball and street basketball, and we consent to different rule sets. But this account doesn't match how people actually play. Pick-up basketball occurs in many moods – some are full of trash-talk, some aren't. When I show up to the court, I'm not told that this will be an insults-allowed game, to which I consent. The only things that we have arguably consented to, in most situations, are the rules of basketball. For this reason, the consent-based account is insufficient.

There are two accounts we might use in this case. First, the Suitsian account. In the Suitsian account, what seems to be doing the work of conversion is proper psychological matches. Some people like trash-talk filled basketball matches, and some don't. A good reason to disallow it in university basketball is that everybody who plays wants to have a good physical contest, but not everybody wants to have their heritage insulted. But pick-up street basketball permits free motion and self-selection – you can choose to avoid playing with a particular crew if you don't want to.

Second, there is Robert Simon's account from the philosophy of sport. Simon argues that we can use some legal theory to sort out what's allowed and not allowed outside of the rules. Says Simon, game rules can be interpreted as we interpret laws. When we need to interpret a set of laws, we look not simply at the wording of the individual laws, but the implied purpose of the whole. That implied purpose can be used to fix laws, supply missing laws, or interpret ambiguous phrases in laws. Similarly, says Simon, one can look to the rules of a game and infer their underlying purpose. Take, says Simon, the case of Josie, a professional golfer who shows up to the game having lost her clubs in her travels. Ought her competitor, Tom, lend her his spare pair of clubs? The rules of golf are

silent on this matter. But, says Simon, we can infer from the rules of golf that the purpose of golf – what he calls the *ethos of the game* – is to create a context in which we face tests of skill and worthy competition. This ethos guides us: it tells us that yes, Tom should lend his clubs to Josie. This, says Simon, is the source of our norms of good sportsmanship, when they go beyond the explicit rules (Simon 2009).

Note how different these accounts are. Simon will say of basketball that we infer, from the explicit rules, the purpose. That purpose will be the same for all instances of basketball that follow those rules. The ethos of basketball is surely in the realm of physical competition, and insults interfere with this. We see this because all the rules of basketball have to do with regulating the physical interaction, and none have to do with insults. Therefore all the street basketball players are guilty of bad sportsmanship, and violating the ethos of the game. For Simon, the ethos is inferred from the explicit rules, so the ethos is the same between all instances of people playing those explicit rules. Summers, on the other hand, offered the opposite conclusion from the same approach: that trash-talking of certain types is part of the test of sporting competition – this time, testing mental focus (Summers 2007). Even though the conclusions are opposite, the ethos-based approach makes both Simon and Summers present their conclusions universally: for a given rule-set, it is either always right or always wrong to trash-talk.

There is no such universal standard under our account: what matters is consent, psychological fit and desirable experiences. It is plausible that some people desire pure physical struggle without the mental strain of dealing with insults, while other people desire the simultaneous physical and emotional contest of trash-talk filled basketball.

For Simon, there is a singular notion of proper sportsmanship, derivable from a set of rules. For us, there is simply the incidence of good and bad matches. A healthy competition happens when there is consent and a good psychological fit between the competitors. People who desire an insult-contest need to find like-minded people, and not force themselves on not like-minded people.

These views should apply to, say, insults on online first person shooter (FPS) games. By Simon's account, the ethos of an FPS has to do with skilled reactions and tactics – that's what the game design is all about. Insults are not part of the ethos, are not encouraged or sculpted by the rules, and so insofar as they interfere with tests of skilled reactions, they are bad sportsmanship. By our view, some people enjoy that sort of thing, and so long as the insulters agree to play on one server, and the non-insulters on another, we're good. We put a heavy ethical load for quality competition on the means of helping people sort themselves into matches.

THE ETHICAL COMPETITIVE GAME

We have argued so far that games can transform the violence of oppositional games into an ethical form of competition. However, we have not been explicit in the role that design features can play in this transformation. To effect the transformation we have described, it must be that:

1. Players' awareness of the game experience aligns with the game's experience (consent)

2. The games' design is such that a move towards the game's objective always creates a more interesting game for my opponent (alignment of struggle between players)

We propose this definition as a way of presenting a transformational ideal that, while it may never be achieved, can serve as an aesthetic goal to be pursued. Also, to be fair, achieving this goal will always depend on the player's genuine pursuit of the lusory goal that Suits describes.

Now, where could we start in pursuing the aesthetic goal of the perfect ethical competitive game? Or, to be more specific, how we can identify those games that seem to facilitate ethical competition. If ethical competition depends on (1) player consent to the experience and (2) the alignment of player's violent actions with their opponents' desirable experience of struggling, what general features and characteristics would the ideal ethical competitive game have?

In order to obtain a player's informed consent, the player needs to have appropriate information regarding a game. This can come from various channels, but only a few of those are controlled (or designed) directly by a game's developer. The key question when it comes to consent is whether or not the player has a reasonable understanding of what the game experience is supposed to be like. So, does a player know what they are getting themselves into when they decide to start playing *EVE Online*, *World of Warcraft*, or *League of Legends*? If we examine the game as a self-contained experience (ignoring, for example, media campaigns, game reviews, word of mouth, etc.), studying how games structure and present their tutorial and introductory sections could be productive. The focus here would be on understanding if (and how) players learn what the experience of playing the game is like such that we could argue they have provided informed consent when they start playing in earnest. This is an open question and while such an analysis is beyond the scope of this article, Paul provides an interesting perspective on how *EVE Online*'s purposefully incomplete tutorials serve as a tool for socializing its players into (or away from) "what makes EVE what it is" (Paul 2011).

For the second aspect, what sorts of design features or systems do game designers currently use to encourage optimal struggle? First, let us consider the *degree* of difficulty. As we have argued above, even when we have obtained consent, an inappropriate match of skills will block the morally transformative process. The two most salient design features for degree of difficulty are matchmaking systems and dynamic difficulty adjustment systems. The ideal matchmaking system pairs players with opponents as equal as possible in terms of skill (Graepel and Herbrich 2006). While a good system can contribute to a game's commercial success, we argue that it is also significant to a competitive game's moral success. As alluded earlier, from a design perspective, matchmaking systems can be critical in encouraging a moral competitive experience.

Dynamic difficulty adjustment systems are loosely understood to be systems that allow a game, while it is being played, to make changes in order to provide players with an ideal challenge (Hunicke 2005). This is usually in the context of computer-controlled opponents where, for example, computer-controlled opponents in a racing game may receive a speed boost to catch up to the player if she has too much of a lead. However, these ideas could be envisioned applied to players rather than AI opponents in order to achieve more interesting games (in terms of struggle). For example, the powerup distribution system in most *Mario Kart* games provides racers in the last places with

better items than those in the lead. The most famous item, the “blue shell”, only targets the racer in first place, thus functioning as a sort of dynamic adjustment setting. We could also conceive of games that use dynamic difficulty systems as a way to implement handicapping mechanisms that automatically provide buffs between matches in order to identify an optimal level of struggle. This is another open area for investigation – determining exactly what kinds of features (or how they are implemented) can result in ethical competition (rather than, say, negative perceptions of unfairness or imbalance). As an example of early work in this area we point to LeBlanc’s argument for the importance of dramatic tension in games as a way to provide game experiences that are climactic struggles (LeBlanc 2006). He identifies a collection of game dynamical tools (e.g. cybernetic feedback, escalation, fog of war, and more) that can help produce dramatic uncertainty (i.e. lack of clarity on who will win) that, when combined with inevitability or “the sense that the end of the game is imminent”, can lead to satisfying dramatic tension (LeBlanc 2006). We feel LeBlanc’s articulation of this tension is aligned with our notion of the ideal struggle – one that advances my position in the game while providing my opponent with an interesting challenge.

Next, let’s consider the *kind* of struggle. As noted earlier for basketball, formal rule systems are open to wildly different styles of play. This is obviously true of multiplayer online games. As we’ve argued, psychological fit between particular players is crucial for moral transformation. In face-to-face games, this can often be accomplished through individual acts of expression and negotiation. While this kind of negotiation may not currently be available in more automated and anonymous communities, such as for MMO’s and multiplayer online shooters, we think it could provide interesting potential for future designs to consider. Some have attributed the famously toxic atmosphere of *League of Legends* to flaws with the player-match-up system (Myślak and Deja 2014). Under our view, achieving good psychological fit is not simply a bonus (or, to be fair, a hard research and design question) – it is an essential feature for supporting morally good competition.

Going back to our trash-talk example, is insulting another player morally right or morally wrong? We can see now that there is no singular answer to this question. Rather, it depends on whether the players consent to the game, and whether they fit with the game and the community. The answer is, not relative, but contextual. But it is a contextual matter that game designers and game players can do something about. Game players can attempt to perform the negotiation and self-sorting to ensure that they are appropriately fitted to their opponents. And game designers, especially for online games, can, in the mechanisms of match-making, difficulty adjustment, and communication, ensure that players are sorted well. This goes beyond merely skill rankings. A mechanism where first-person shooter players either self-selected, or were automatically selected, to match other players with approximately equal levels of emotional viciousness in messaging could be a tremendously good thing.

CONCLUSIONS

What we’ve found out is that an in-game action cannot, in isolation, be seen as good or bad. Rather, the moral quality of competitive acts depends on larger, contextual features that are normally thought of as outside the game itself – finding the right opponents, matchmaking systems, community sorting. Viciously aggressive play isn’t always bad. A player who seeks out lost newbies to destroy, to render their game-experience unpleasant – is doing something morally wrong. A player who first makes sure that his opponents

want and enjoy that level of viciousness, and only then which unleashes his aggression and vitriol, is doing something morally good, and morally transformative.

Similarly a game designer cannot simply declare that game violence is fine, because it is fictional and consensual. The game designer should do what she can to make sure that extra-game community systems are in place to make good psychological fits more likely.

More broadly though, we feel this framework for analyzing the morality of competition, can also be applied to other activities associated to competitiveness more generally as well as specific game design elements. Rather than focusing on game design patterns to avoid (Zagal, Björk, and Lewis 2013), what patterns could we discover, refine, or develop to pursue ethical games? For example, we might examine the ethics of unforgivingly difficult games, difficulty curves, tutorials, and more. Similarly, we think that we can also envision a form of game design practice that prioritizes the moral valence of the actions it tries to encourage and foster in its players. In particular, a practice that focuses on the transformative potential for the mere violence that players inflict on each other while they compete. This could lead not only to improvements in game design (e.g. better matchmaking systems) but deeper insights into how players perceive and understand challenge and the effects that their actions can have on their opponents. After all, why should we not pursue the idea of the perfect competitive game, a game in which the best moves or plays I might take are coincidentally those that result in the best possible degree and type of challenge for my opponent?

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