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Ludic Ethics: The ethical negotiations of players in online multiplayer games

Abstract

This paper introduces the ludic ethics approach for understanding the moral deliberations of players of online multiplayer games. Informed by a constructivist paradigm that places players' everyday ethical negotiations at the forefront of the analysis, this study utilises a novel set of game-related moral vignettes in a series of 20 in-depth interviews with players. Reflexive thematic analysis of these interviews produced four key themes by which participants considered the ethics of in-game actions: 1) Game Boundaries; 2) Consequences for Play; 3) Player Sensibilities; and 4) Virtuality. These results support the conceptualisation of games as complex ethical sites in which players negotiate in-game ethics by referring extensively—though not exclusively—to a framework of 'ludomorality' that draws from the interpreted meanings associated with the ludic digital context.

Keywords

multiplayer games, ethics, morality, players, qualitative methods

1. Introduction

The disruptive behaviour of players in online multiplayer games takes many forms: players scam, hack, cheat, betray, insult, deceive, harass and otherwise bother one another in ever-evolving ways. These kinds of behaviours are interwoven with the commonly-recognised act of griefing, which involves intentionally disrupting gameplay often for one's own enjoyment (Beale et al., 2016; see also Rubin & Camm, 2013) and can include acts ranging from verbal harassment to killing new players and exploiting loopholes (Achterbosch et al., 2013).

Scholars have drawn from a range of ethical theories to argue that such actions in multiplayer games require more ethical scrutiny, particularly given that they can cause harm to

other human players (Danaher, 2018; Huff et al., 2003; Luck, 2009; Powers, 2003; Wolfendale, 2007). More researchers still highlight the 'toxic' and damaging qualities of such acts (Adinolf & Turkay, 2018; Coyne et al., 2009; Kwak et al., 2015), which can drive away new players (Shores et al., 2014, p. 1363), negatively impact team performance (Neto et al., 2017), and cause anger and frustration (Chesney et al., 2009). Some scholars take a different approach and explore the subversive value of disruptive play (Bakioğlu, 2019; Beale et al., 2016), while others adopt more contextual understandings of multiplayer ethics (Dunn, 2012) and examine how acts like killing other players (Ryland, 2019) and trash talk (Nguyen & Zagal, 2016) can be acceptable when they are fully consented to.

But how do players themselves understand, permit or condemn these behaviours? Research paints a complex picture. A dominant paradigm by which to understand players has typically been through the lens of moral disengagement (Carter & Allison, 2018, p. 7): it has been said that "players often regard video games as moral vacuums" (Ryan et al., 2019, p. 300), drawing a "morally discontinuous magic circle" (Heron & Belford, 2014, p. 48) around their gameplay. Empirical studies have suggested that players adopt an 'amoral' approach to gameplay by morally disengaging from their in-game actions and content (Croft, 2011; Flores & James, 2012; Klimmt et al., 2006; Malazita & Jenkins, 2017). It has also been argued that many players tend to make in-game decisions based less on ethics and more on strategy or a desire to "[test] the limits of the game system" (Evans, 2010, p. 82).

At the same time, some studies have examined the positive ethical experiences that players derive from this apparently amoral play, exploring the "transgressive potential" of in-game 'teabagging' (Myers, 2017, p. 15), the paradoxical guilt and enjoyment of killing other players in *DayZ,* (Carter & Allison, 2018), the invigoration inherent in treacherous play in *EVE Online* (Carter, 2015)*,* the freedom and experimentation associated with cheating (Consalvo,

2005, 2007), and the productivity of illegal and disruptive game modifications in *Call of Duty* (Meades, 2013).

Furthermore, there is an increasing awareness of the longstanding debates and ongoing 'boundary-work' among players about what counts as acceptable behaviour in multiplayer games (Carter et al., 2015; Gibbs et al., 2013), which have been described as "moral economies" in which players value different kinds of play (Carter, 2020). Players can display a wide range of 'cultural norms' among different groups of players, even within a single game (Strimling & Frey, 2018).

Amidst these varied perspectives, the observed amoral attitude among players alongside a growing recognition of the potential for causing other players real harm has further inspired calls for more ethical play (see Sicart, 2009a). However, given the multiple values at play in online multiplayer games, this task is not as straightforward as it seems. If we are to design games that promote ethical interactions among players, we need to understand what such interactions might actually look like in different play contexts.

However, there are a few notable gaps in the literature here. Firstly, discussions of ethics in digital games often focus on single-player games rather than multiplayer games (Nguyen, 2017, p. 14; see also Sicart, 2009a, p. 174). Secondly, more empirical work is needed that acknowledges the importance of players' voices and experiences (Consalvo, 2007, p. 84). Finally, based on our review of the literature, few studies have attempted to approach a clear framework of ethical considerations among players that span across acts, game contexts, and platforms. This has left room for a grounded, holistic understanding of multiplayer ethics from the players' perspective.

The present study is thus designed to address these gaps by formulating a broad framework of multiplayer ethics through empirical means. With the goal of understanding

players' ethical views and shedding light on what ethical multiplayer game design might look like given these views, we ask the following research question: What key considerations do players draw on when evaluating the ethics of actions in online multiplayer games? To explore this question, this study introduces and adopts a 'ludic ethics approach' that utilises a constructivist research design to examine players' moral deliberations on their own terms 'from the ground up'. The ludic ethics approach specifically refers to this grounded study of player deliberations through an ethical lens, which focuses on players' existing ethical values rather than the values that they lack or 'morally disengage' from. It places both ethics and players' perspectives at the forefront of the analysis while simultaneously avoiding the imposition of a particular existing ethical or theoretical framework. Through this approach, we then elaborate on four key themes that participants were identified as drawing from when ethically evaluating acts in multiplayer games, which together make up a framework of 'ludomorality'.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Recruitment of participants began after ethics approval for the study was obtained from the Human Ethics Advisory Group (Engineering) at the University of Melbourne (ethics ID: 1853304.2) and took place between May–July, 2019. Invitations to participate were posted and shared through the first author's social network on Facebook, the university's online noticeboard, and physical posters placed around campus. The only strict inclusion criteria for the study were that participants must have had experience playing multiplayer games and be able to attend an in-person interview.

As there are no "magical formulas" for determining sample size in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019, p. 851), we set our intended sample size at 20 participants. This number is within the usual sample size range for reaching data saturation, but more importantly

it was chosen to balance the acquisition of meaningful, in-depth data with the limitations of this study's scope and funding (see discussion in Braun et al., 2019, pp. 850–852). We received over 70 responses to our calls for participants, and we purposively selected participants to interview until the intended sample size was reached.

Maximum variation sampling was used to select the final 20 participants in order to recruit a range of players of different backgrounds to support a broader framework of multiplayer ethics. This sampling method also has the added benefits of yielding results with "high-quality, detailed descriptions" (Patton, 1990, p. 172) and avoid the issue of overrepresentation of certain groups in game studies (Khazaal et al., 2014). The sampling process involved first identifying a range of characteristics relevant to the study, including demographic factors such as age and gender as well as factors related to gameplay habits (these factors are represented in Table 1). Potential participants were then asked to fill out a screening questionnaire that asked for this information (e.g. "How many hours per week on average do you spend playing multiplayer digital games?; "What genre of multiplayer game do you play the most?"). The responses to these questions were then used to purposively identify and select a range of participants based on those factors. As it became evident during recruitment that there were few players over the age of 30 in our sample, we also sent out a call for participation on www.theoldergamers.com, a gaming forum aimed at adults over 25.

2.2 Procedure

Individual, semi-structured interviews with each of the 20 participants were conducted face-to-face, lasted one hour, and were audio-recorded upon consent. All interviews were conducted in person, which allowed for the use of physically-printed vignettes that served as tangible 'anchors' for shared discussion, and facilitated the management of subsequent in-person focus groups. Prior to the interviews, all participants were provided with a plain language statement

detailing the study, and were given a consent form which they signed before the interviews commenced.

During the interviews, participants were asked questions related to their experiences of ethics in games (e.g. “Have you ever felt that someone did something wrong to you in a digital game?”) and were then asked to reflect on a set of four moral vignettes, each of which told a story of an act in an online game that has generated controversy among players (e.g. “Do you think there is something ethically problematic with what Player X did? Why or why not?”). Participants were also prompted to imagine each case in different ways to encourage further ethical reflection (e.g. “What if real-life money was lost in this case, rather than just in-game currency?”). Following Abidin (2013), the goal of prompting the participants in these ways was “not to ‘call them out’ or accuse them of contradictions” (p. 9), or to prompt ‘moral dumbfounding’ (Haidt et al., 2000), but to more deeply explore how their ethical considerations can change in different circumstances. The interview structure was largely the same for all participants, though some flexibility was permitted in order to follow up and explore individual participants’ key concerns.

Three follow-up focus groups were conducted with participants who were able to attend (*n*=10), which allowed participants to discuss and expound on their opinions further, and gave the researchers the opportunity to clarify participants’ views to enhance the validity of the qualitative data (Waller et al., 2016, p. 26). All participants in both the individual interviews and focus groups received an AU$20 gift card as compensation.

2.3 Moral Vignettes

Drawing from Kandemir and Budd (2018), vignettes were chosen as a method of exploring player ethics because of their ability to elicit rich responses on sensitive and complex topics. Vignettes and dilemmas are often utilised to elicit moral judgments or discussions in

participants (Clifford et al., 2015; Haidt et al., 2000; Mah et al., 2014), and have been used in studies of ethics in online environments (Talwar et al., 2014) and multiplayer games (Croft, 2011).

The four moral vignettes in this study were designed by drawing from Barter & Renold's (1999) recommendations for using vignettes in qualitative research. The vignette story themes were selected through intensity sampling of real-world cases (Patton 1990, p. 171) and then written up as short stories. The four vignettes thus cover four in-game scenarios respectively: 1) in-game scamming; 2) griefing; 3) unwanted sexual interactions; and 4) lack of team play (for more detail, see Table 2). The vignettes were piloted on two participants that were not included in the final participation count, which helped hone the vignettes to make them clearer to players from different backgrounds. This piloting process, along with the fact that the vignettes were created based on previous research, player discussion and actual case studies, helped to establish their internal validity (see Hughes & Huby, 2004, pp. 37–38).

2.4 Analysis

The recorded interview data were transcribed through the transcription service *Rev*. The transcriptions were then verified and corrected by the first author and entered into the data analysis software *NVivo 12* (QSR International). The data were then analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) following the six key stages outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes the researcher first familiarising themselves with the data and generating initial codes, then searching for, reviewing and defining themes, and finally producing a written report. This method has a strong theoretical foundation in the constructivist research paradigm underlying the ludic ethics approach in this study, valuing "researcher subjectivity, organic and recursive coding processes, and the importance of deep reflection on, and engagement with, the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593).

3. Ludic Ethics[1]

In this section we present the results of the reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data, structured according to four main themes: 1) Game Boundaries; 2) Consequences for Play; 3) Player Sensibilities; and 4) Virtuality (see Figure 1). Together, the four themes constitute a framework of ludomorality, a term applied to these player-driven themes to highlight the fact that they are primarily game or play (i.e. 'ludic') focused, and are negotiated extensively by players when evaluating the ethics of in-game acts (i.e. 'moral'). Ludomorality thus describes the ethical framework by which players negotiate the ethics of in-game actions in online multiplayer games, as investigated through the ludic ethics approach.

The participants in this study held diverse values and sometimes had widely varying perspectives on the ethics of the acts under discussion. As such, the themes presented here do not simply reflect participants' values or preferences, but rather vectors around which players negotiate their values and evaluate the ethics of in-game acts. To clarify, we can refer to other ethical systems: For instance, utilitarian ethical frameworks are concerned with the concepts of 'harm' and 'consequences', and the meanings and adequateness of these concepts can be debated when evaluating the ethics of an action. Similarly, ludomorality is concerned with four themes (game boundaries, consequences for play, player sensibilities, and virtuality), and players can debate the meanings and adequateness of these concepts in evaluating the ethics of an in-game action. We begin reporting the results with the most prominent theme, game boundaries.

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[1] The present study builds on a preliminary work-in-progress paper that discusses parts of the interview data (Sparrow et al., 2019). In the present paper, we report on the completed analysis of the data and examine a broader research question.

3.1 Game Boundaries

Participants engaged in extensive discussions about whether various in-game acts are truly 'part of the game', which often had implications for whether these acts were acceptable. For many participants, an act that is 'part of the game' is rarely so because it is a part of the written rules or the terms and conditions. Rather, an act's permissibility can be determined by referring to the game's 1) mechanics; 2) objectives or premise; and 3) player culture.

3.1.1 Mechanics

If an act is made possible through the basic functioning of the game, is it ethically acceptable? For some participants, the answer to this question was "yes". Tom (28, M) perhaps most succinctly summarised this view when he said, "In a game you can do everything the game allows you . . . anything can happen, just accept [it]". Anna (23, F) similarly felt that the game's mechanics play a role in making the act of griefing in the second vignette acceptable:

> If [the griefers] were just a random rival community and just saw a bunch of people and just attacked them, like that's part of the game mechanic . . . it's kind of like, 'Well, you can do that'.

This view was particularly present in regard to the fourth vignette, which described a teammate who refused to switch characters to help their team. Most participants agreed that this was acceptable, distinctly because the ability to choose any character you want is built into the game's functioning. As Eloise (20, F) said,

> It's still their right to choose the character that they want to, it's the nature of the game. . . . The game allows them to change the character, and choose, select their own characters.

However, some participants noted that merely because something *can* occur in a game does not mean it is acceptable. Karen (25, F) felt that the act of griefing in the vignette was wrong, and the mechanics should be changed to reflect that: “It should not be possible for another community or another member or player to cause an issue like [this]”.

3.1.2 Objectives

Some participants noted that a troubling in-game act can become expected and acceptable if it is part of the “objective”, “point” or “premise” of the game, particularly competitive games. Jimmy (40, M) made this clear in response to the griefing vignette:

> You're going in an arena where conflict does happen. You can't rule out the fact that there's going to be conflict. . . . So, you've got to expect it, you can't be stupid enough to think that the enemy team is just going to sit and watch by while you're all off guard.

Karen (25, M) made a similar point in reference to the first vignette on in-game scamming, describing the act as “not something that is really severe, ethically severe. . . . Because he's playing [an] in-game goal, it looks like a fair transaction if anything”. Michelle (18, F) concurred, suggesting that a game featuring economic transactions necessarily permits loss, even through scamming:

> You lose coins or you lose gold, and you gain some. . . . Whether . . . you were tricked into it, or you just lost it by . . . losing a battle in a game, I guess it's part of the experience.

However, participants disagreed on what actually counts as part of a game’s objectives. Zoe (37, F) drew a contrast between in-game scamming in an MMORPG [massively multiplayer online roleplaying game] and the social deduction game *Secret Hitler*, which has deception clearly written into the rules*:*

> . . . The point [of *Secret Hitler*] is that you're deceiving people and that's okay. It's all fun, you know that's what you're meant to do. [In an MMORPG] you can do a range of activities, and I think without any kind of established conflict in this relationship . . . there's no reason [to do it]. It's just plain nasty.

Some acts are clearly outside of the scope of the game's objectives. The third vignette, which describes the groping of a teammate in a VR game, was more prominently noted to be wrong, partly for this reason. For instance, Tom (28, M) said,

> [If] the game allows you kill other players, then you can compete with other gamers. . . . That's the point of the game . . . This [act of groping] is different, this is kind of insulting.

3.1.3 Community Etiquette

Some participants suggested that what counts as 'part of the game' can also be determined by the social or cultural etiquette that has arisen in a particular game community. These norms may arise within the game itself, but also in paratextual sites such as gaming forums and online video content. Felicity (28, F) acknowledged community norms as a reason why scamming in an MMORPG could be considered acceptable: "Maybe . . . it's expected that people tried to trick each other. I don't know what the background is." Zoe (37, F) also notes that community expectations can alter how the ethics of an act can be perceived: "If that's part of the culture of the game, I don't know if it means it's okay, but it will change perception of that experience because you'd kind of almost be expecting it." Anna (23, F) points out that the culture surrounding gaming takes the ethical 'edge' off many "common" troublesome in-game acts; teabagging, for instance, is just "irritating" and is largely performed "in good jest".

At the same time, some noted that community etiquette can just as likely make a seemingly acceptable action unacceptable if it breaks the community's values. For instance,

Owen (24, M) suggested that killing the attendees at an in-game wedding, while normally permissible in a competitive play environment, could become unethical if the victims were "quite invested in the game and . . . have their friendship community built up there", as the wider community should recognise that the game is taken more seriously by its players.

3.2 Consequences for Play

Participants largely understood games as spaces in which play can—and should—occur. As such, participants also considered the ethics of in-game acts from the perspective of whether or not such acts impeded play as a valuable activity in itself. These considerations are broken down into two subthemes, including the consequences for play for 1) the individual players involved; and 2) the wider game and player community.

3.2.1 Individual Players

In-game acts that impeded play for the harmed player were sometimes recognised as more ethically problematic. In reference to the vignette on groping in a VR game, Bella (50, F) said of the player who was groped, "She didn't go there to be assaulted. She went there to just relax and have a good time", and highlighted how such an act can severely disrupt the playing experience. On the issue of abusive chat, Vera (21, F) felt it becomes especially problematic when it interrupts the game:

> When I get [abusive chat] in text, it doesn't really impede on the gameplay, but when you're hearing it . . . it sort of disrupts the flow of everything, like everyone else is just trying to cooperate and then there's this one person who's just screaming abusive stuff into the voice chat. And it's like, 'Oh, I can't hear anything, what are you people saying?'

More prominently, however, participants tended to draw on the value of and consequences for play when defending a player's disruptive or harmful actions. For some participants, it is

important for players to be able to exercise a certain "freedom" to play however they like, to explore taboos and roleplay as scammers, troublemakers, and so on. Anna (23, F) framed this in terms of a player's "rights": for her, the player refusing to switch characters for their teammates was not in the wrong because "they have every right to play as the character that they're comfortable with. And I think that they have every right to make a decision based on their own gameplay".

In this sense, for some participants, an in-game act that harms another player is not quite so unethical if the player performing it is exercising their right to play freely. In turn, a player who objects to this style of play can actually be more in the wrong—as Owen (24, M) said, "You can't expect that the whole game stops just because of you".

3.2.2 The wider game and player community

Participants also turned to whether an act ultimately benefits or stifles play for the game as a whole and the wider player community. As mentioned in the previous section, some participants regarded problematic in-game acts to be an integral part of the play experience as a whole. For Peter (25, M), disruptions bring many games to life, making them "more believable, more engaging", and even encourage players to "want to spend more time in the game". For Greg (46, M), such activities can produce "amazing player stories" that can be shared with others—at the same time, "outwitting the game design" by finding loopholes in the mechanics, even if it disadvantages other players, can add a lot of fun to the game as a whole. Vera (21, F) sees "two sides" to the act of griefing presented in the second vignette, suggesting that crashing someone's in-game wedding could be "pretty fun" and even deepen the bonds between the rival communities.

Certainly, many participants considered most of the acts described in the vignettes to be fairly amusing—many laughed after reading them or described them as "funny", even if

they subsequently said that the act was wrong. For some participants, an act's subjective ability to contribute 'fun' to the game (and elicit laughter among wider player audiences) had a role in offsetting some of the potential harm it may have done to the players involved.

Furthermore, regarding disruptive acts as unethical was potentially worrying for some players, as it raised concerns that game developers would restrict play in ways that ultimately damage the game and the wider player community. Neil (31, M) argued that games should not change to reduce disruptive behaviours—rather, people should be educated how to behave better in games "because when you change the game, everyone gets affected". Zoe (37, F) also questioned whether changes made in response to problematic in-game behaviours would "restrict other aspects of play that are enjoyable for people".

At the same time, acts that themselves serve to impede gameplay for the wider community were also seen as problematic. Peter (25, M) felt that cheating was particularly unethical because it disturbs "the wider ecosystem of the game". Greg (46, M) suggested that griefing can become especially problematic if it leads to lag that makes the game unplayable for other players, which is a problem because it affects "the entire world as it is". Taking a slightly different approach, Caleb (37, M) expressed concern than an act like scamming "could really sour [the player who got scammed] on the game and the greater community in general", which could lead them to "be more likely to treat others in such a way as well" and cause a kind of toxic snowballing in the community.

3.3 Player Sensibilities

In the third main theme, participants' negotiations around in-game ethics took into account whether players express appropriately playful sensibilities. This included discussions of 1) the player's intentions in performing an act; and 2) the role of sensitivity and adaptability as 'virtuous' player qualities.

3.3.1 Player intentions

For some participants, ethical consideration of an act rested partly on whether the player performing it intended the act to be harmful, or intended it to be promoting the fun, funny, or playful elements of the game. Eloise (20, F) felt that this distinction can make a difference when evaluating aggressive chat:

> As long as you know that your intention is that it's just friendly bantering in the game, I feel that's still okay. But if you just have the intention to . . . hurt someone with your words, then that's definitely not okay.

Anna (23, F) acknowledged that it can be difficult to determine someone's intentions in a faceless online environment, but referred to the amount of "effort that's gone into [the act]" as a kind of proxy. Addressing teabagging and related sexual gestures in games, she said, "If they're putting a lot of effort into it, it's not okay. But if it was just a quick up and down kind of thing, it's just a norm in games that I don't think it would feel as malicious". Here, there is a sense that acts often regarded as problematic outside of games are tolerable in games in small doses, and that these (un)ethical ebbs and flows are part of the play experience and rarely reflect anything further about a player's character or intentions. Zoe (37, F) also mentioned that the level of planning involved in the vignette on griefing marks it as more ethically dubious: "There must have been some planning involved in getting the rival team to all come at once and do this thing. So there's intent there. The scale of intent is greater".

3.3.2 Player qualities

Many participants recognised that players hold a wide variety of values and motivations in digital games. For instance, while some are heavily invested in winning or outperforming other players, others prefer to play more casually, and this can result in variances (and conflicts) in game-related values. Because of this, some participants expressed that part of being a 'good'

player involves being adaptable and sensitive to this apparent lack of moral objectivity, both when one is performing a disruptive act and when they are on the receiving end of it.

For Bella (50, F), finding out the personal boundaries of another player and establishing consent in a game is crucial to interacting with them respectfully. This is particularly important when it comes to acts like the virtual groping depicted in the third vignette:

> Every person is different. And when you initiate that sort of behaviour, the odds are you have spent absolutely no time or effort finding out whether that behaviour is going to distress the person you're doing it to.

Jimmy (40, M) highlights that finding the line between 'funny' and 'bullying' can be difficult, and not everyone has the skill or sensitivity to do so. In regard to trolling other players, he said:

> There's moments when it really works and it's funny, and the person getting trolled isn't too badly affected. But there is a line that you can cross where it becomes too much, it's not cool, it's not funny anymore. . . . A lot of people don't know where the line is. They don't know the right time to do it, and the person to do it to, right?

For Owen (24, M), finding this line requires a player to pay attention to the other player's reactions: "You have to be able to differentiate between somebody who thinks [an act] is funny" and one who does not. Getting to know other players, and playing among friends rather than strangers, can help one to learn another player's "sense of humour" and boundaries. Eloise (20, F) also felt that there is a "general game etiquette" among players that requires players to be "mindful of your actions as a whole", regardless of who you are playing with.

The requirement to be adaptable and sensitive to others in order to be a 'good' player was sometimes extended to players who feel harmed by an in-game action, as well. According to Scott (20, M), for instance, it is important to adapt to a game's community norms and learn to navigate the game environment, even if it happens to be toxic: "What makes a multiplayer

game good is that there's a community. That means that community has its own set of rules ... It's all there. It's on you to read it".

3.4 Virtuality

Finally, the 'virtuality' or digital nature of video games was an important talking point, particularly for the role it plays in potentially offsetting the consequences of harmful in-game acts. Within this theme, participants discussed two interrelated virtual qualities: ephemerality and avatar representation.

3.4.1 Ephemerality

Participants often noted that objects and events in video games are highly transitory in nature. In-game losses or harms can be considered passing and less consequential—for instance, stolen items can be gained back, and players can 'move on' quickly from an unpleasant experience. In reference to the first vignette on scamming, Greg (46, M) notes, "With in-game gold, you know, you can always earn it back . . . It's an hour of time maybe." Vera (21, F) concurs: "It's not something that you really dwell on, like, 'Ah I got tricked, but oh well, life goes on'". For Wren (37, NB) the fact that in-game items potentially are much more easily replaced than physical-world objects can make in-game disruptions brought about by griefing less impactful: "If everything can be restored, then it's annoying and it's frustrating and it's whatever. . . but if everything can kind of be reset and nothing's actually lost . . . then it's less bad." Greg further points out that most competitive games move on quickly, so bad teammates can be easily avoided.

For Lisa (31, F), this ephemerality can be problematic, as it makes it difficult to bring about appropriate punishments in response to bad behaviours. On the other hand, for some participants, this ephemerality also puts some power into the 'wronged' player's hands and allows for more control over in-game harms. For Felicity (28, M), a wronged player "always

[has] the option to leave, which you don't necessarily always have in real life." Wren (37, NB) echoes this sentiment:

> . . . It's very easy to flag [the offending] player as someone who you don't want to ever be matched with again . . . Whereas in real life, that's harder. You can't just block a username and never see them again.

3.4.2 Avatar Representation

Participants also discussed how the connection (or lack of it) between the player and their avatar, character or account, can change the impact of an in-game harm. For Scott (20, M), there is a distance between players and their virtual selves, and this lessens the harm of in-game acts: "Player models are different to your physical self… it's kind of like you're controlling your character versus 'I am the character'". Peter (25, M) held a similar view when discussing the vignette on scamming, but also recognised that one can still be 'attached' to a character via a sense of ownership: "Well actually it's not you being scammed. It's the character. It's like an extension of you, so at the same time you have a sense of ownership of the character." For Bella (50, F), however, there is no distinction between one's 'virtual self' and 'real self' in any video game: "It is the real world for so many people . . . we need to start treating it as a real interaction with real consequences".

The connection between the player and their avatar became a particularly notable talking point in response to the third vignette on groping in a VR game. Participants often struggled with understanding the act as morally wrong while acknowledging that no physical contact occurred: for instance, Caleb (37, M) said, "I know it's wrong but I just view it [with] that kind of disconnect. Like, the avatars are computer generated beings with no real being."

However, many participants felt that the lack of physicality did not lessen the harm of the act, particularly since it occurred in a highly embodied environment. For both Lisa (31, F)

and Tom (28, M) this vignette was “different”—namely, more serious than the other cases. For Vera (21, F), “the creepiness and the intent of the act is still there. It can be emotionally scarring, I feel, even though you don't have the physical effects of it.” Many participants considered this case to be clearly constitutive of sexual harassment. Karen (25, F) said,

> I've seen people that have sexually harassed other people via texts, like chat messages. So that's already something that is reportable, you really know it is wrong, and this person needs to be removed from the game. . . . And this [case] is already at the point of action, where it’s virtual reality. It’s like someone doing it to you. So that’s really on a very, very severe scale.

4. Discussion

Despite having a wide diversity of gaming backgrounds, the participants’ discussions tended to cohere around a set of four ludic themes when discussing the ethics of in-game acts. From negotiating what counts as part of the game, the consequences for play, appropriate player sensibilities and the digital environment in which these acts take place, it is clear that the interpretation of the boundaries and meanings surrounding games and play is a significant element of the way players consider the ethics of in-game acts. Importantly, these themes—which make up the framework of ludomorality—went far beyond “ludostrategic” thinking, in which in-game acts that promote advantageous gameplay are considered more prominently than moral or ethical ones (Bosman, 2019; Sicart, 2013). Rather, participants’ ethical evaluations were interwoven with a vast array of meanings attached to digital games and play, including understandings of fun, freedom, boundedness and adaptability.

In some ways, some participants adopted what is sometimes understood to be a broadly ‘postmodern’ approach to their ethical evaluations of in-game actions, characterised by “self—celebratory and scruple-free individualism” over adherence to strict moral codes (see

discussion in Bauman, 1993, p. 3). This valuing of the self-expressive, 'protean' (Yee, 2014) potential of digital games is in keeping with a broadly-understood existentialist ethic that has a history of being associated with online digital environments (Turkle, 1995, Frissen et al., 2015). Certainly, some participants did emphasise the importance of moral subjectivity, freedom and playful experimentation in gaming. But a postmodern framework is perhaps not robust enough to capture players' key ethical norms and values either. Participants did not move entirely beyond the notions of 'good' and 'evil'—a player could indeed perform rightly or wrongly, but what determined this rightness or wrongness tended to be distinctly related to the ludic context.

These findings offer empirical support to a number of emerging perspectives in games studies. Most notably, this study intersects with Carter's (2020) theoretical conceptualisation of multiplayer games as "moral economies . . . where different types of play are given different values by players" (p. 435). Carter argues that how we come to value these different forms of play is influenced by a number of factors, including the game's rules, mechanics, fictional context, paratexts surrounding the game, the game's "social and cultural context", and players' personal ethics (pp. 444–446). For Carter, this process is also "a universal process, integral to the function of all multiplayer games" (p. 444). The themes of ludomorality presented in the present study lend tentative support to this claim of universality: while they are structured to represent key considerations that players take into account when making ethical evaluations of in-game acts rather than when valuing types of play as such, they nevertheless point toward many of the factors mentioned by Carter, and identify them as occurring across different kinds of online multiplayer games.

At the same time, this study offers a small but significant shift in perspective by which to understand the process of valuing play among players. The ludic ethics approach has two key components: 1) it promotes the grounded, constructivist exploration of in-game ethics

through the perspectives of the players themselves, and 2) it puts the focus on ethical deliberation in this exploration. To expand on this second point, rather than taking play as a starting point and exploring how 'real-world' ethics inform (or fail to inform) the valuing of play, the present study positions ethical and moral evaluation as a foundational human process that is inevitably integrated into the valuing of acts, playful or otherwise. As the results of this study show, when it comes to acts in multiplayer games, these evaluations take on a distinctly ludic focus (a ludomorality). This alternative starting point for analysis of player ethics sets up ludomorality to be considered an ethical framework unto itself, one that can be meaningfully negotiated, critiqued and engaged with both academically and among game designers and players. In this way, the ludic ethics approach fully integrates the understanding that 'real-world' ethics and gameplay are thoroughly intertwined at a fundamental level.

In turn, this study's approach and findings stand in contrast to those that suggest players morally disengage from in-game content (Carter & Allison, 2018; Croft, 2011; Flores & James, 2012; Klimmt et al., 2006; Malazita & Jenkins, 2017). In keeping with the ludic ethics approach, we frame participants' apparent amorality rather as a ludomorality that was rarely unreflective. Echoing Consalvo et al.'s (2019) findings, although the phrase "it's just a game" was uttered on a number of occasions, participants engaged more often in "feelings of discomfort or disgust" (p. 234). Relatedly, this study further lends support to arguments that acknowledge the ethics of gameplay as "contingent and contextual" (Consalvo et al., 2019, p. 234). For instance, Nguyen and Zagal (2016) argue that even seemingly "viciously aggressive play" (p. 13) can be permissible or even morally good in competitive games if it is consented to and fosters the right kind of challenge. The results of the present study support this view among players, as exploring multiple considerations surrounding the vignettes revealed that participants were not simply broadly permissive or impermissive of in-game acts but rather persistently turned to game-related contextual considerations in their ethical evaluations.

It must be emphasised that presenting a framework of ludomorality should not suggest that players agree on the ethical weight of the four themes presented, or the values within them. Rather, they encompass a vast array of values and perspectives, a “variation in lusory attitudes” (Woods, 2007, p. 17) that reflects the ongoing “boundary-work” (Carter et al., 2015; Gibbs et al., 2013) taking place within ludic digital spaces. The framework of ludomorality does, however, help us identify where disagreements might arise. For instance, even if two players agree that an act should be ‘part of the game’ in order to be permissible, they may disagree on whether an act like scamming another player out of in-game gold really is part of the game. Furthermore, while one player may think that game boundaries are important for determining the ethical standing of an in-game act, another may think game boundaries are not important at all—and the latter’s engagement with this theme may mainly take the form of arguing against its significance.

Certainly, the emerging framework of ludomorality itself was sometimes contested by participants who felt that more ‘extra-ludic’ ethics (i.e. ethics not chiefly concerned with the game and play) should be applied to multiplayer games. Participants negotiated the ethics of these spaces intensely; in particular, they highlighted abusive chat and cheating as particularly notable ethical issues, and many female participants shared their experiences of gendered verbal harassment and threats. Most notably, responses to the vignette describing an act of groping in a VR game point to a growing recognition of some acts as being impermissible regardless of gaming context. In line with feminist theories of sexual assault and harassment, which do not rely so much on physical harm but on “emotional and psychological or societal harm” (Strikwerda, 2015, p. 500), a number of participants considered the act of groping in VR to be clearly indicative of sexual harassment. The fourth theme, virtuality, thus took on particular importance for participants in navigating the ethics of in-game unwanted sexual acts, which lack in physicality but nevertheless remain harmful. At the same time, participants

grappled with responding to a "misogynistic gamer culture" that serves to undermine, demean, and suppress the voices of female players speaking out about harassment in games (Consalvo, 2012, n.p.).

This suggests that while context is important in gaming ethics, designers may increasingly face calls for a clearer responses to cases like these across contexts, particularly in VR. Sicart (2009b) argued that a multiplayer game like *EVE Online* was "perhaps the most ethical virtual world" at the time, because it allowed players to "exercise their ethical values without limits" (p. 200). However, the responses in this study show that a game without *any* limits on what players can do may be one that fails to adequately take into account the importance of both ludomorality and the extra-ludic ethics that are embedded in the game and the communities at play.

How, then, does the framework of ludomorality shed light on what an 'ethical' multiplayer game might look like? Firstly, as player ethics are strongly ludic-focused, efforts by game developers and educators to encourage players to behave more ethically and communicate a game's ethics may see more impact if they engage not only with extra-ludic concerns but with ludomoral ones as well. Secondly, players' ludomoral values vary widely. Acknowledging the complexity of the ethical considerations and values in online multiplayer games, scholars have begun to recognise the importance of cohesive values among players for a game to function successfully (Carter, 2020), and the potential for game design to give players options to select the sorts of multiplayer gameplay experience they want to have (Nguyen & Zagal, 2016). In the present study, participants often struggled with navigating what is (un)acceptable in the company of players who may hold different values. Our findings thus lend further support to these calls to empower players to actualise their differing values in multiplayer game design—not through an 'anything goes' approach, but rather by acknowledging the various voices of players within a given community while at the same time

drawing a clear 'bottom line' regarding which behaviours are *always* unacceptable. This highlights, for instance, the importance of providing separate spaces for different kinds of ludomoral play within a game, making the ludomoral expectations of these spaces clear to players (e.g. what *is* and *is not* part of the game and why), and further exploring mechanics that allow players to have agency in determining their play interactions and experiences. Further work is needed to examine the robustness of the framework of ludomorality in different contexts and through other methods (such as quantitative surveys). Nevertheless, the themes of ludomorality presented in this study may be a useful means for researchers and designers to start clarifying the different considerations that matter to players, and to design and manage gameplay experiences and communities with those considerations in mind.

5. Conclusion

This paper introduces and implements the ludic ethics approach to explore the ethics of in-game acts in online multiplayer games. This approach promotes the grounded analysis of player ethics and values from the perspectives of the players themselves, and positions ethical deliberation as a foundational element of player negotiations of acceptable play. Through this approach, we identified a framework of ludomorality by which participants negotiated the ethics of in-game actions, consisting of four key themes: game boundaries, consequences for play, player sensibilities, and virtuality.

Participants adopted a distinctly contextual, ludic perspective when evaluating ethics in multiplayer games. Participants did not simply engage in moral distancing; rather, they reflected heavily on the (un)acceptability of in-game acts. At the same time, meanings and constructs related to digital games and play were strongly interwoven in their evaluations, providing evidence for the understanding of multiplayer games as sites of ethical and moral negotiation that emphasise the ludic context. Considerations surrounding how to play a game—

and play it 'right'—have taken on their own importance as arbiters of ethics for players, though the framework of ludomorality and the values it encompasses remain contested.

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Figures and Tables

Table 1. Summary of participants' demographics and play habits (*n*=20)

Age		**Platforms Used***	
Mean (SD)	29.7 (9)	PC/Mac	17
Min-Max	18–50	Smartphone	10
Gender		Home Console	10
Female	9	Portable Console	5
Male	10	Tablet	2
Non-Binary	1	**Preferred Genres***	
Nationality		Action	1
Australia	7	Battle Royale	7
Australia/China	1	Educational	1
Australia/Japan	1	First-Person Shooter	7
China	3	MOBA	5
Germany	1	MMORPG	9
Indonesia	2	Racing	3
Malaysia	2	Social/Party	5
New Zealand	1	Sport	3
Sri Lanka	1	Strategy	10
Switzerland	1	Survival	3
Hours played per week		**Identifies as Gamer****	
Mean (SD)	13.5 (11.5)	Yes	14
Min-Max	1–40	No	1
Years playing games		Not Sure	5
Mean (SD)	13 (7.8)		
Min-Max	3–32		

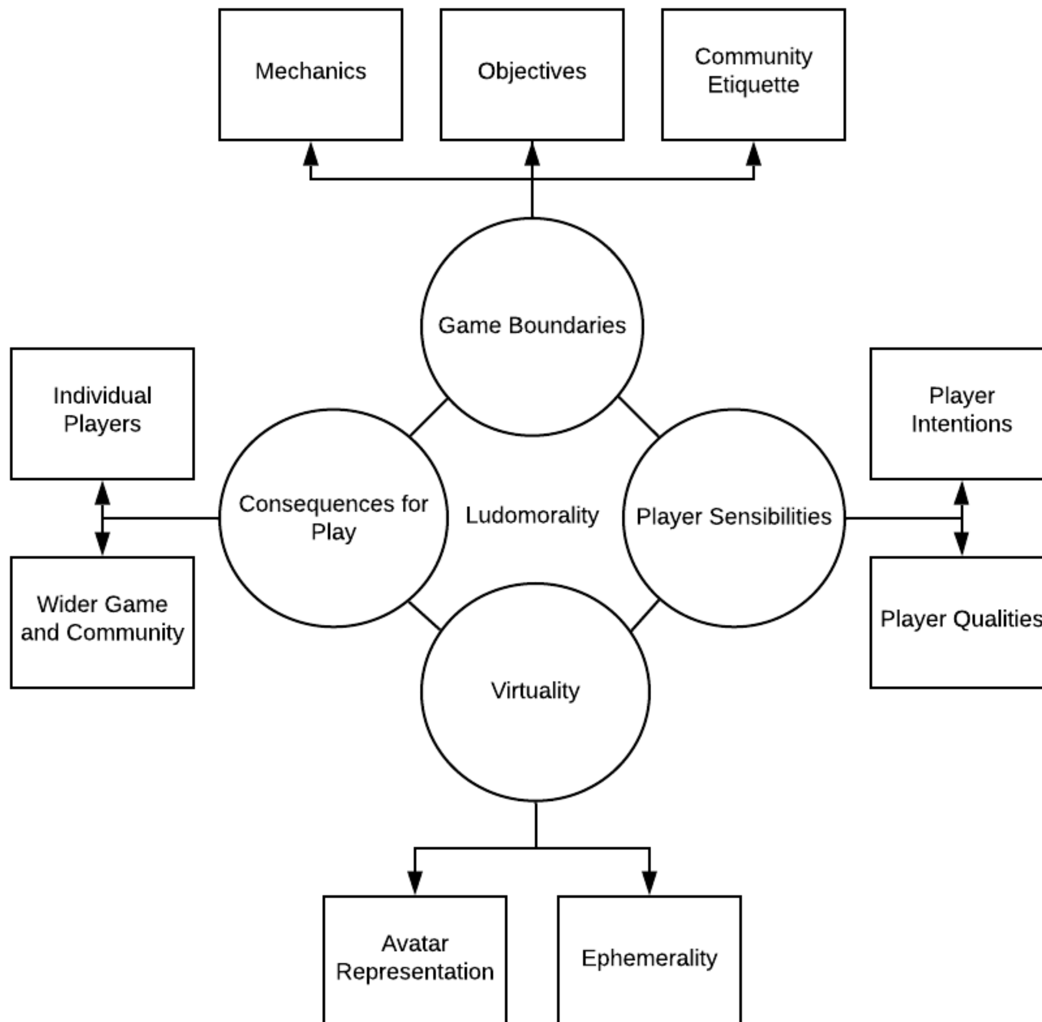
* A number of participants reported multiple preferred genres and used more than one platform to play multiplayer games.

** Although all participants played multiplayer games, not all of them identified with the 'gamer' label (see Shaw, 2011).

Table 2. Summary of moral vignettes

No.	Theme	Action	Excerpt	References
1	Scamming	Cheating someone out of in-game gold in an MMORPG	"... Player 2 tells Player 1 that this item is very valuable, and will also give whoever activates it some rare, special skills that will help them level up very quickly. ..."	Croft (2011), Meyer (2011), Strikwerda (2012), Messner (2017)
2	Griefing	Crashing an in-game wedding held in a social virtual platform	"… Suddenly, just as the couple are saying their vows, a group of participants from a rival community appear and release a virtual item called Devastating Goo. …"	Bakioğlu (2019), Luck (2009), Gibbs et al. (2013)
3	Unwanted sexual interaction	Virtually groping another player in a VR game	"… Blue Player goes up to Green Player and starts to make grabbing and rubbing sexual motions at the area on Green Player's avatar where their genitals would be. ..."	Belamire (2016), Wong (2016), Carter & Egliston (2020), Sparrow et al. (2020)
4	Lack of team play	Refusing to switch characters in a team-based FPS	"… Player X, who picks last, chooses a character that is not suitable for the team lineup. The other players on Team 2 ask Player X to switch to another character, but Player X refuses to do so…"	Hernandez (2017), Hodges & Buckley (2018), D'Anastasio (2019)

Figure 1. The four themes of ludomorality and their associated subthemes



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