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Playing with Ethics

In the closing chapter of *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga famously claims that play is “in itself neither good nor bad”, that it is “outside morals” (Huizinga, 1992), an argument that highlights the complicated relations between play and ethics. In these days of gamification and videogames, in which digital playful experiences are ubiquitous, the question of the relation between play and ethics is more urgent than ever.

In this short piece I want to continue my own work on ethics and videogames (Sicart, 2009; 2013), yet I want to go beyond the potential moral dangers that aspects of computer games culture in order to question how play is valuable for our well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2008). I want to argue here that play is a moral activity that can contribute to our flourishing as human beings. In Virtue Ethics terms, play is a central element of a good life. The objects we play with, from games to toys, are part of a constellation of technologies that ought to be analyzed as part of the way we develop our moral being by playing.

There has been some studies reading the impact of ethical game design in players (Zagal, 2011). These studies apply a conventional questionnaire-based qualitative methodology. These studies contribute with important insights on the role that ethics play in gameplay experiences, and the possible impact that ethical gameplay design has in our ethical discourses. However, to understand the role that playful technologies have in our moral engagement with the world, it is necessary to combine these classic qualitative methods with research approaches that allow us to understand the ethics of play in context.

Since play is a consensual activity that takes place in a specific context, separated from conventional rules by the very activity of play, researchers will highly benefit from methodologies that include context and user in the same analysis. A valid methodology would be contextual inquiry (Wixon, Flanders, Beabes, 1996), a phenomenological research method that observes specific actions and then asks users to explain these actions in context.

A more experimental methodology, like cultural probes (Gaver, Dunne, Pacenti, 1999), can be useful to research on the attitudes that players have towards the ethics of the games they play, and the way in which they relate to playing morality in their daily lives.

In general, any methodology for the study of the relation between ethics and play needs to have access to the reflective work that players do when engaging with moral challenges. That is, the study

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of ethics in games needs to be qualitative and contextual, engaging users directly in the production of and reflection upon the research data.

Play is not a morally neutral, or even a morally positive activity. There are ethical risks when we play, in excessive play (Caillois, 2001), in addiction (Schüll, 2012), in deep play (Geertz, 1972). However, play is important for the moral fabric of society not only despite its potential risks, but also *because* of these risks. Playing is learning to navigate, playfully and deeply seriously, our own being in the world. Because play is dangerous (Schechner, 1988), and because it is also a creative, human form of expression, it has value for us, it makes us better human beings. To play, as an expressive, appropriative form of being in the world, is to assert ourselves in the world creatively, to explore it under rules we have accepted as valid, we have agreed to submit to or we have ourselves created.

In philosophical terms, I am taking a constructivist ethics approach (Bymun, 2006). Ethics is a practical science that helps us develop as human beings by practicing virtues. To be a morally sound human being we must develop our potential, we must exercise, practice, test and expand our virtues, from empathy to love, to courage. We are ethical beings because we can develop those virtues through time and practice. That practice takes place in all instances of life: when we work, we love, when we are idle and when we exhaust ourselves (Burke, 1971). A way of understanding this active, constructivist approach to ethics is to think about morality as another way of being in the world, including how we conduct research, one that determines how we engage with others and how we take decisions. It is therefore that it is crucial for the study of play that we involve users qualitatively, so they are allowed to engage with and reflect upon their own morality when playing.

Play is a way of being in the world that appropriates, and is sometimes mediated, by objects, things and circumstances. In this sense, the importance of playthings in our betterment is obvious: things and devices can help us play a good life (Waterman et al, 2008). But here we find too the problem that the Huizingian theory of play poses: if play is considered to be outside the domain of ethics and morality, even though we acknowledge that it does foster some virtues, its very unseriousness and lack of productivity condemn it as an empty leisurely act. If play is outside morals, the acts of play are also devoid of moral and scientific weight, detached from our moral being.

I claim that we need to leave behind the idea of play as something that happens separate to the world; as something that has its own seriousness that is not affected and does not affect the contexts and objects through which it is manifested. Play is valuable *because* it is appropriative, expressive, and disruptive - the values of play reside in the way play allows us to explore, train, explore, investigate, study and develop our best potential as human beings. Given that ethics is a way of being in the

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world that underlies all of our actions, activities and ideas, its relation with play should be obvious. The ethics of play should be then seen as *the value* of play, the way in which, through play, we live a good life.

This is not to say that all play is good, that there are no moral risks with play. Play can seduce us; through playthings we can forget that play is just a mode of being in the world, and we can lose the relative distance between the action and the context that we need for play to be ethically and culturally valuable (Henricks, 2006). Play can become an addiction, the only mode of being in the world, not allowing us to develop relations that are not through play.

We need play because we need occasional freedom and distance from our conventional understanding of the moral fabric of society. Play is important because we need to see values and practice them and challenge them so they become more than mindless habits. Games, toys, playgrounds (Seitninger, 2006), they are all instruments that allow us to explore, enact, and develop our own different understandings of morality, not because they are separate from the real world, but because they are things we play with.

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When play is *about* ethics, it is so because it appropriates and explores values. But play should not be reduced to being ethically significant when it *explicitly* addresses morality. Like any other way of experiencing and expressing the world, play is *always* moral. Play is the expression of a moral being in a world.

So how do we study the ethics of playable things? Play is an appropriative act that helps us explore our values. The experience of play is mediated by technologies and social contexts, all of which influence how the activity of play configures our moral being. In order to understand the ethics of playable things, we need to look at the ways they open up for, or constrain, the appropriative capacities of players, their occasional freedom (Danzico, 2011). In order to develop our moral being, in order to flourish and live a good life, playable things should be open to appropriative play.

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The two main vectors that we can inquire to understand the ethics of play as mediated by objects are those of submission and of resistance. Most games are playable things that want their users to submit to the world of rules and systems and mechanics that create a particular social encounter. Our understanding of the ethics of games, then, will have to do with the way that submission allows for the players' ethical being to reflect and develop towards its full potential. Games like *This War of Mine* or *Papers, Please*, show how morally sound playthings can contribute to our moral development by giving us worlds in which our act of play requires moral reflection.

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On the other hand, the play of resistance can be a form of expression, an appropriation of the world through play that allows for practicing values. For example, the playful appropriation of tracking technologies for mocking their properties, from drawing penises with Nike+ to cheating fitness trackers, highlight the questionable ethics of everyday surveillance by making fun of them, in a carnivalesque reversal of the meaning of objects by means of a playful attitude. Playing with the world to reveal, and rebel against its power structures is a form of asserting the moral power of play. This is precisely the kind of attitudes that methodologies like cultural probes can help reveal and understand.

Play is important for our moral life because it can turn our own assumptions and ethical principles into props for play. Play gives us distance to, but also engagement with, our own moral fabric. To live a balanced life, to explore and become who we can become and flourish as ethical human beings, we need to understand our values and principles. And play, because of its appreciative nature, allows us to do precisely that: appropriate, strange us from our own moral being, and allow us to explore what our values are.

We *need* to play in order to be better human beings. There is much talk and importance given to games and other playthings as *important* because they can address serious topics. But that is an unnecessary argument: play in itself is already important, necessary for living a good life. The values of play reside on how play can appropriate all of the former, and let us explore their meaning. Play is necessary to be human not only because as humans we play, but also because through play we better express what it means to be a moral human being.

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Commented [LC7]: Nice examples but could be extended by giving examples in relation to methodology?

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