Toward an Ethics of *Homo Ludens*

Miguel Sicart

Introduction

There is a long history of accusing videogames of societal ills. From violence to addiction, videogames have been in the crosshairs of legislators, psychologists, and moralists of all kinds. Often, there is no proof of the evil deeds of games, and probably these moral panics are fueled more by a contempt about the idea of play as escapism, than triggered by evidence of social decay caused by games.

However, these moral panics have had a large effect in the way we study games and ethics. It seems that the very idea of questioning the ethics of games needs to revolve around how the content of games, or the activity of playing games, affect our capacity as players to distinguish between the real and the virtual. This single-minded, simplistic approach

M. Sicart (✉)
University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark
e-mail: miguel@itu.dk

has left many questions and many approaches to the ethics of games underdeveloped.

In this chapter, I will present a theoretical argument to overcome the limitations of those "sensationalist" approaches to game ethics, and will use it to illustrate what new ethical issues may arise if we transcend the theoretical and cultural parameters in which we have situated play, games, and all ludic forms, when it comes to their morality.

My theoretical argument is simple: I propose that Huizinga's *homo ludens* is an instantiation of a broader conceptual category of ethical agency proposed by Floridi[1]: the *homo poieticus*. The *homo poieticus*[2] is a creative, moral agent who inhabits the infosphere, an environment "constituted by the totality of information entities, including all agents – processes, their properties and mutual relations."[3]

If we consider the *homo ludens* as a category or variation of *homo poieticus*, we can then pose new questions and analyze new ethical challenges from a perspective that is both based on solid philosophy, and on classic play theory. This chapter applies a constructivist ethics approach to look for trouble, to seek those ethical challenges that might define a generation of players and several generations of game designs, but that so far has been camouflaged under old concerns about the morality of play.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: I will start with a brief presentation of the concept of *homo ludens* as *homo poeiticus*, introducing both classic play theory, Philosophy of Information, and how these two perspectives can be combined in an original perspective on play. After that, in the second part of the chapter, I will present two different ethical questions that this perspective allows us to identify, and to propose answers to. This chapter outlines a research program on the ethics of computer games that calls for an extension of the breadth and depth of our ethical analysis of games and playable media, so we can better understand their role in culture and society.

---

[1] Floridi, *The ethics of information* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[2] Ibid., 161–179.

[3] Floridi, Information ethics: On the philosophical foundation of computer ethics, *Ethics and Information Technology* (1999), 1(1), 37–56.

From *Homo Ludens* to *Homo Poieticus*

Tinkering with one of the key concepts in play theory is always a risky maneuver. If it doesn't work, the proposed ideas will not catch on, and the research program will fail. If it works, and a valid alternative is adopted by different communities, there will still be years of formal debates around the validity of the new terminology. It is not my intention to perform such exhaustive and exhausting work. Therefore, I do not want to argue that we should start using *homo poieticus* instead of *homo ludens*. The goal is simpler: to argue that *homo ludens* is a type of *homo poeiticus*, a subclass of a more general category or concept of human that is not defined by playing, but that uses playing to express, to construct their own relations to others and the world. Let's start, then, with the classic concept from play theory.

Understanding *Homo Ludens*

To make things easy, let's start with the concept of play. Since play is inherently ambiguous and resists definitions,[4] I will limit myself to providing an instrumental definition of play that allows me to engage with the ethics of *homo ludens*. This instrumental definition is phenomenological in nature, as I am mostly interested in *homo ludens* as a mode of explaining how humans interact and relate with the world.

Play is a way of organizing our experience of the world: "Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other

---

[4]Sutton-Smith, *The ambiguity of play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

means."[5] In my own[6] theory of play, I propose that that play is a mode of being in the world that structures both reality and agency: "To play is to be in the world. Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human."[7] Play's structuring of reality and agency creates worlds that have their own purpose and seriousness.[8] These are the encapsulated worlds of dollhouses and *The Sims*, of the beauty of a ball bouncing off a wall, of the pleasure of skateboarding downhill, of making Amazon's voice controller Artificial Intelligence (AI henceforth) assistant Alexa tell a joke. The worlds created by play are not worlds of productivity, defined by their end goals and results. The worlds of play have meaning on and of their own. Play is ultimately a free activity we voluntarily engage with,[9] an activity that is separate from the world, but that is also deeply engaged with creating a world, a possible network of connections and relations based on the imposition of order through rules, the creation of behaviors through mechanics, and pleasure as a driving principle for action.

In Philosophy of Information terms, this concept of play as world-building and establishing new relations between agents can be described as re-ontologization. To play is to re-ontologize the world so we can give it a different meaning than the conventional one. This new world is open for expression, pleasure, and interrogation: "(…) play is a rebellion against the forms and forces of the world. Players confront and challenge 'claims' coming from their own bodies, the environment, the social world, and culture. In those confrontations, they try to manage behavior their way."[10] Playing is re-ontologizing the world with the purpose of appropriating it for expressive, personal reasons.

---

[5]Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992[1938]), 13.

[6]Sicart, Playing the good life: Gamification and ethics, in *The gameful world: Approaches, issues, applications* (2014a), 225–244.

[7]Ibid., 1.

[8]Henricks, *Play and the human condition* (University of Illinois Press, 2016).

[9]Caillois, *Man, play and games* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001[1958]); Bogost, *Play anything: The pleasure of limits, the uses of boredom, and the secret of games* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

[10]Henricks, *Play and the human condition*, 1451–1453.

Play and the Ethics of Information

Let's look at this process of world creation from the perspective of Information Ethics and the Philosophy of Information. More specifically, let's lay the groundwork for understanding how the concept of re-ontologization can be used for the ethical inquiry on games and play. Floridi argues that one of the unique capabilities of information technologies is their capacity to re-ontologize: "re-ontologizing […] refer[s] to a very radical form of re-engineering, one that not only designs, constructs, or structures a system (…) anew, but one that also fundamentally transforms its intrinsic nature, that is, its ontology or essence."[11] That process of representation[12] is similar to a process of creating a world: "computational model-building proceeds through the application of a repertoire of schemata, each of which joins a metaphor to a bit of mathematics that can be realized on a computer."[13]

Since the world created by this process of re-ontologization is inhabited by agents, both human and nonhuman, that relate and interact with each other,[14] any ethical approach requires to consider what happens when a world is re-ontologized. Most of the work in Philosophy of Information refers specifically to those instances in which a computer is creating a re-ontologized environment (a world). This chapter focuses mostly on the ethics of videogames, so that should not be problematic, though I admit that the applicability of these ideas to board games and other forms of non-digital play might be more complicated to argue for.

In any case, since play consists of a process of creation, of re-ontologization, it is fitting to take a constructivist approach to the

---

[11] Floridi, *The ethics of Information,* 6.

[12] Cantwell Smith, *On the origin of objects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

[13] Agre, *Computation and human experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 38.

[14] Bynum, Flourishing ethics, *Ethics and Information Technology* (2006), *8*(4), 157–173. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-006-9107-1; Volkman, Why information ethics must begin with virtue ethics. *Metaphilosophy* (2010), *41*(3), 380-401; Volkman, Being a good computer professional: The advantages of virtue ethics in computing, *Professionalism in the Information and Communication Technology Industry* (2013), *3*, 109.

ethics of play. Information Ethics (IE henceforth) provides a method[15] to address some complexities of ethical constructives. Even though it implies an inflation of terminology, Information Ethics allows us to deploy a very specific framework to explain what happens when re-ontologization takes command: agents in the infosphere, be those human or artificial, like the non-playing-characters in videogames, should proactively contribute to maintaining the balance of the infosphere: "By placing value in the infosphere and in the informational nature of entities, regarded ontologically as the primary, fundamental, and constituent element of our new element and its artificial agents, it is possible to elaborate a constructionist strategy that supports an ecopoietic approach."[16] The infosphere requires constructivist ethics because it needs to be developed by all the informational agents that inhabit it: "[…] IE is an ethics addressed not just to 'users' of the world, but also to producers or demiurges, who are 'divinely' responsible for its creation and well-being."[17]

According to Floridi, humans in the infosphere should be considered *homo poieticus*, stewards of an environment in which they should act so they can thrive: "*Homo poieticus* concentrates not merely on the final result, but on the dynamic, on-going process through which the result is achieved. *Homo poieticus* is a demiurge, who takes care of reality, today conceptualized as the infosphere, to protect it and make it flourish."[18]

What do we have so far? Play is a form of creating worlds so we can establish new relations and appropriate existing world structures. This process can be defined as re-ontologization, leading us to the possibility of using Philosophy of Information to analyze what happens during these processes of re-ontologization. *Homo poieticus*, therefore, becomes a model to understand the creative stewardship of humans in these environments, be those infospheres, or game worlds. It is time to look at the ethics of *homo ludens*, so we can draw the comparison between *homo poieticus* and *homo ludens*.

---

[15]Floridi, The method of levels of abstraction, *Minds and Machines* (2008), *18*(3), 303–329. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-008-9113-7.

[16]Floridi, *The ethics of information*, 178–179.

[17]Ibid., 168.

[18]Ibid., 175.

Homo Ludens as Ethical Agent

The analysis of the ethics of *homo ludens* has been largely influenced by Huizinga's insistence on situating play outside the domain of morality: "Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil."[19] For Huizinga, it is important to keep the integrity of the experience of play as a separated activity, even if that means creating an uneasy contradiction with the broader argument that play creates culture.

If play is outside morality, is *homo ludens* (the player) a moral agent? And if play is outside ethics, what is the moral value and status of the culture it produces? Huizinga created these problems by insisting that play is a disinterested activity, that play produces nothing quantifiable, and that play is separate from real life. The core of the problem, then, is the issue of the *separateness* of play. And therefore, we must try to overcome this limitation by thinking within the framework proposed by Huizinga, but also in a different way. We need to redefine the separateness of play not as a formal property of play, but as the description of a process. Let's start by reassessing the very concept of play as separate from other activities.

Huizinga was adamant in his considering of play to be ontologically separated from real life due to his reading of Schiller's interpretation of Kant. In Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*,[20] he writes: "(…) in every condition of humanity it is precisely play, and play alone, that makes man complete."[21] Schiller's argument is a reading of Kantian aesthetics.[22] This Kantian "play" is a detached activity outside of the domain of productivity.

---

[19] Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*, 6.

[20] Schiller, *Dover Books on Western Philosophy: On the aesthetic education of man* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1794 [2012]).

[21] Ibid., 79.

[22] Kant, *The Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant: Critique of judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1790 [2001]); see also Laxton, From judgement to process: The modern ludic field, in D. J. Getsy (Ed.), *Refiguring modernism: From diversion to subversion, games, play, and twentieth-century art* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 3–24.

For Huizinga, play creates culture as a function of its disinterested-ness, as a result of its (Kantian) aesthetic engagement with the world. This argument complicates the moral position of the concept of *homo ludens*, since any attempt to do so would break the disinterested, separate, aesthetic engagement with the world that constitutes the very essence of play. Play is paradoxical, but it should not be to the extent that we cannot think about its role in shaping the ethical behavior of those who play, or the moral impact of their actions. If we accept play's separateness as an unnegotiable ontological quality, then we are accepting a paradox-ical position: play creates culture, but if we accept that play is outside morality, then the culture it creates is also outside the scope of moral scrutiny.

Creating an order in the world by applying a play lens to it is what makes *homo ludens* a creator of culture. Play can create worlds, and these worlds reflect the values of *homo ludens*. That is why we need to inquire on the moral foundation of *homo ludens*: to understand the ethical chal-lenges of a playful computational culture, and the ways in which we can intervene to analyze problems and effect change.

Play is a moral action because it re-ontologizes the world for the purpose of playing. Play creates encapsulated worlds through the use of rules, social norms, and mutually agreed goals, in order to achieve a (shared) pleasurable experience.[23] This process of appropriation is not morally neutral: games and other play technologies have embedded values[24] that affect the way the world is re-ontologized. At the same time, players have values they bring to the activity of play.[25] The worlds created at play are assemblages[26] of technologies and agencies, human and artificial.

Any ethical discourse about *homo ludens* needs to reflect both the informational nature of being, the infosphere as the space in which infor-mational agents live and thrive, and the creative, appropriative capacities

---

[23]Goffman, *Encounters, two studies in the sociology of interaction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961); Henricks, *Play and the human condition.*

[24]Sicart, *The ethics of computer games.*

[25]Ibid.

[26]De Landa, *A new philosophy of society: Assemblage theory and social complexity* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006); Taylor, The assemblage of play, *Games and Culture* (2009), *4*(4), 331–339.

of *homo ludens*. An ethical understanding of *homo ludens* needs to be flexible enough to allow for understanding how play is both separate from the conventional structuring of reality and reflecting the social structures in which it takes place.

Homo Ludens as *Homo Poeiticus*

To play is to create worlds. *Homo ludens* is a creator of worlds in which rules and actions are giving purposes and consistency to the very existence of that world. To play by the rules, and to change those rules so all players are welcome and they can enjoy the pleasures of play, is to act *poietically* in the world of play. Playing is *poiesis*: the creation of infospheres to inhabit, within this world, for ourselves and others to enjoy. Playing is a carefully balanced activity that proposes a world, gives it a consistency through rules and props, and gives agents the responsibility of keeping that world alive.

  Both *homo poieticus* and *homo ludens* are concepts that describe agency in the infosphere. They are both models of constructivist beings, creators, and preservers of worlds. Because of their central role in creating and preserving these worlds, both *homo ludens* and *homo poieticus* as agents who should have moral responsibility toward the world they inhabit and the agents they interact with. *Homo poieticus* is a steward of the values and informational integrity of the environment in which they inhabit. Similarly, *homo ludens* is responsible for the values that define the encapsulated infosphere created when playing. As Goffman observed, many of the activities that we engage with when we play have to do with collectively negotiating the purpose of our actions while maintaining the integrity of the separated world in which we play: "Speaking more strictly, we can think of inhibitory rules that tell participants what they must not attend to and of facilitating rules that tell them what they may recognize."[27] To play is to create and sustain an encapsulated infosphere. *Homo ludens* has creative stewardship in the infospheres of play.

---

[27] Goffman, *Encounters, two studies in the sociology of interaction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), 31.

Playing is a way of manifesting the ethical nature of *homo poieticus*. This encapsulated play infosphere is separate but not unrelated to the world. Playing is constructing worlds. Most research on the ethics of games has focused on the gameworld as a finished manifestation. In this chapter I encourage a shift of perspective toward the analysis of the processes that lead to the creation of gameworlds, from rules and social norms to the broader ecologies of media and culture in which games can be found. Games are encapsulated infospheres, and we should analyze the relations between the encapsulated gameworld, and the world at large.

An ethical *homo ludens* is in creative charge of the values that structure the re-ontologization process that creates the encapsulated infosphere. *Homo ludens* is also in charge of upholding those values and contributing to the experience of the ludic in a creative way. If we are to understand how *homo ludens* can act ethically in the Information Age, we need to address its *poietic* actions, and develop the kind of constructivist ethics that will allow us to better engage with these play worlds and the ways they have an effect in computational culture.

I propose then that the ethical analysis of *homo ludens* focuses on how to create worlds through play by specifying the values of those worlds, the values of the actions that can take place in that world, and how they relate to the infosphere. It is the moral duty of *homo ludens* to make these values public, to share them, to reflect upon them, and to ensure that they contribute to the well-being of every agent in the playworld. By public here I refer to a double position: public within the gameworld, so communities of play can be created around those values; and public from the gameworld toward the world outside of the game, so it is possible to understand, analyze, and critique the values of the game within the broader cultural discourses in which they are situated.

To play is to create worlds within this world, creating culture and human forms of expression. In our era of ubiquitous computer machines, questioning the ethics of *homo ludens* is fundamental to understand some of the ethical challenges posed by videogames. But most interestingly, which new ethical challenges does this perspective, of *homo ludens* as *homo poieticus*, allow us to analyze?

Changing Topics: New Horizons for Ethical Inquiries in Videogames

The purpose of this chapter is to move on from the classic, tried and tired topics that have dominated the discourse on the philosophy and ethics of games.[28] Considering that the ethical responsibility of *homo ludens* is to practice creative stewardship of the playworld that is created when playing, I propose to look at two different new ethical challenges that, if we focused exclusively on analyzing the game as object, and not the capacity of players to act and enact values, would be invisible for ethical analysis.

Videogames Are Culture

To put this approach to the ethics of videogames to test, let me return to the question of violent videogames, and let's explore them as ethical challenges. First of all, it is imperative to start by acknowledging that violent videogames are extraordinarily popular, both in terms of their commercial impact and of their cultural relevance. Even in the age of the independent videogames as a form of exploration of a medium, the popular discourse around videogames often pays extraordinary attention to games in which violence is a key element of gameplay.

One way of explaining the popularity of these games could be through the application of Huizinga's ideas, who argued that play was a formal structuring of conflict within accepted boundaries and separate from the real world. But that does not answer the actual ethical question these violent games raise: why does Western culture embrace violent and militaristic metaphors as the dominant rhetoric to embody the artificial conflict of play?

---

[28]McCormick, Is it wrong to play violent video games? *Ethics and Information Technology* (2001), *3*, 277–287; Coeckelbergh, Violent computer games, empathy, and cosmopolitanism, *Ethics and Information Technology* (2007), *9*, 219–231; Waddington, Locating the wrongness in ultra-violent video games, *Ethics and Information Technology* (2007), *9*, 121–128; Wonderly, A Humean approach to assessing the moral significance of ultra-violent video games, *Ethics and Information Technology* (2008), *10*, 1–10.

Videogames cannot be isolated from the culture that creates them, and trying to answer this ethical issue by looking exclusively at what the player does in one of these games will only give us a partial, limited, narrow-scoped answer. So let me try to approach this question from a different angle: the problem of violent videogames is not the problem of violent videogames. Violent videogames are a symptom of a culture obsessed with violence. And their negative effects are not so much training players to kill, which they don't, but forcing the creative stewardship of homo ludens to the limited spectrum of relating to others through the metaphors of dominance, violence, death, and conquer. Violent videogames are an act of violence on our ethical standing as moral *homo ludens*.

The argument that we, understood as the wealthy west, live in a culture of violence should surprise nobody. From *Game of Thrones* to *Westworld*, violence dominates the discourse in fiction. And, of course, in real life, where conflicts are escalated, where the news is a parade of threats, where the violence we inflict on those in the margins is ever-present, without remorse. This ambient violence, this permanent thrill and allure of blood and the dead, they are the cornerstone of cultural expression in our days.

Violence in videogames is problematic, yes. But not because of what it makes us do—or not just because of that, but because it reflects and contributes to broader cultural conversations, using the power of play and the rhetorics of technological prowess to promote, like propaganda, a glorification of violence as the only mode of engaging with conflict, and resolving it. The actual ethical question should not be what do violent videogames do to us, but what do violent videogames say about us, as individuals and as culture.

From the perspective of *homo ludens* as *homo poeiticus*, we can phrase this dilemma as follows: the worlds created by play are reflections of the world outside of them. The act of creating these worlds, of maintaining them by playing, of giving them meaning, is an act of reproducing the violent actions and harming inequalities of the world. Violent videogames exploit the stewardship of *homo ludens* to colonize games as a form of expression with a rhetoric of violence.

I am aware that violence has always been connected to videogames, and that there are of course arguments that consider violence to be just a metaphor for conflict. I believe this argument does not break my premises: videogames have always used violence because they partially reflect the culture of violence from which they come from. The worlds we are stewards of when playing are worlds of violence, and that is the ethical issue that needs addressing.

What are the alternatives, then? Are all games, or all mainstream games, violent or reflecting this culture of violence? Fortunately, we have historical examples of mainstream games that are more popular than their violent counterparts, and that do not make us stewards of a world of conflict. From *The Sims* to the *Animal Crossing* series, or *Stardew Valley*, there is a large number of examples of games that use other metaphors to provide players with challenges that are pleasurable, and with worlds that, while they still reflect capitalist and wealth-extractive ideologies that are questionable, are not founded on discourses of conquer and domination. Other worlds are possible in games, other worlds should be given to us in games, so the act of playing as stewardship is not the act of taking care of a cult-of-death-like aesthetic, but a practice of virtues and an opening for the imagination of social, political, and human alternatives.

Videogames in the Digital Stream

I want to extend this review of the ethical challenges of videogames from the perspective of culture to highlight other ethical issues that are not central to game studies at the moment, but that is relevant when trying to make sense of the ethics of computer games. For example, we should start questioning the position and role of videogames in the digital stream, that is, in the multimedia environment of images and services that are now shaping the specific culture of videogames, from *Twitch* to *YouTube*.

Let me start with a popular example from the game *Red Dead Redemption 2*, an open-world Western that allows players to explore the myth of the Far West and to interact with a richly crafted cast of non-player characters that create a multitude of stories in that virtual world. The player and the story she triggers in the game is the common element in the

simulated lives of all these non-player characters. *Red Dead Redemption 2* has been designed to have fairly coherent AI-controlled characters, that not only react to players' actions, but also keep a schedule outside of the players' influence. For example, the farmer will spend most of the virtual day farming, and the village drunk will be drunk or waiting eagerly for the saloon to open. These complex systems create a coherent sense of place, that help players engage with the world beyond the narrative lines they have to perform. These are cues that encourage exploration, and in that exploration, I find my example.

In order to give coherence to this virtual world, the developers decided to include the character of a suffragette. This character is interactive. It has lines of dialogue that explain the critical role of these women in extending the right to vote to women in the United States. This suffragette is also the main character in a series of *YouTube* videos in which players try out different cruel ways of killing this suffragette. The videos are horrible, and the comments tend to reveal the worst of human nature.

This example shows the complexity of analyzing the ethics of a computer game, if we insist on looking exclusively at their content, or even at what an abstract, ideal player could do. We could argue that the mere presence of this possibility in the game is ethically questionable and should be prevented. After all, in *Red Dead Redemption 2* there are characters who are children, and it is impossible, by design, to kill them. Rockstar, the developers of the game, could have done the same with a character that should have been obvious was going to be targeted by the sad, angry mobs of *GamerGate* and similar misogynistic communities gathered in and around games. On the other hand, one could also argue that what Rockstar gives is a possibility for players to *not* do those horrible actions. It's a cynical argument, but a possible one: nobody is forcing players to do any act of violence with that character, and the game cannot be responsible for those whose morals are not developed enough.

This argument displaces responsibility from the game to the player. Players are then responsible for creating the discourses around the game, they are the creative stewards of the world they have been given, and they

should act ethically. This is the key argument in a creative stewardship understanding of games.

And yet, there is also something about the value of games as places in which we can freely explore consequences and choices, in which we can safely fantasize about *what if*. There is a pleasure in these explorations of imagination, and while they may be questionable, they are also a part of practicing the stewardship of the world we are given. However, these explorations need limits: they cannot harm others, and they shouldn't promote or contribute to discourses of hate. The tension here is between the act of playing unethical actions *privately* and the act of doing so *publicly*. A lot of "immoral" play happens in private. Why is then something like the suffragette death videos in *Red Dead Redemption* ethically questionable?

The answer is cultural. Videogames are not individual, isolated consumer products. They are cultural objects that are played and enjoyed in public, that are an integral part of the ecosystem of discourses in the digital stream. Videogames shape and are shaped by *YouTube*, *Twitch*, *reddit*. Publishing these videos in these digital streams means having an effect in the culture of games, and in the cultural role given to games.

The ethical dilemma here is not so much whether we should or not act unethically in a game, but how will that action become a part of a digital stream that creates cultural interpretations and understandings of games. We need to study not what the game allows us to do, but when are we doing what the game allow us to do, and for whom are we doing it. If the action is private, the conversation is different. The act of playing these games in isolation, or as a practice of few individuals bound together by friendship or other strong social bonds, might call for a different perspective on the ethics of games. But few games are played in private. Videogames are a public performance of play in the digital stream. Our stewardship does not end in the game—it extends toward this stream; it considers the whole set of discourses around play and games. By playing, we are becoming stewards of a world presented to us but interconnected and related to all the other players and their worlds out there, a part of the global discourse around games, a part of the global culture of games.

Videogames and Data Transactions

Understanding *homo ludens* as *homo poieticus* is a productive perspective shift if we want to look at games within a broader ecology of media and entertainment. Some of the dilemmas about the content of videogames, about the actions they represent, and they force players to make, are part of an ecosystem of digital communication and data transactions that need to be taken into account when analyzing the ethics of videogames. When videogames become a part of the attention economy of *YouTube*, when the actions taken by players are rewarded by comments, likes, and also by economic rewards to that attention; when videogames become funded by the data markets that fuel the attention economy, the question of the ethics of content and the ethics of game design needs to be extended beyond what *a* player does, but how a player is given agency and stewardship over a game, and in exchange of what data that stewardship is assigned.

Videogames are part of what Srnicek[29] described as platform capitalism: the economic context in which technological platforms, from Apple to Amazon and Google, use their system to extract data from users, so it can be sold to advertisers who in turn try to get the attention of users to sell them products, from port-a-potties to presidents. The complexity of platform capitalism is too great to be addressed in this chapter, but I still want to mention it as one of the areas in which ethical inquiry on *homo ludens* as *homo poieticus* needs to be carried out.

For example, what are the ethics of the economic model of *free to play*, in which players are given free access to a game, while offering them the possibility of purchasing small game elements to improve gameplay, or the aesthetics of the game. *Free to play* is an economic model that, in the context of the current economics of capitalism, is encouraged to create engaging experiences that are abruptly cut so that players spend some money so they can keep on playing. *Free to play* commodifies the act of play. From this perspective, it might be the case that this economic model monetizes stewardship itself, breaking the possibility of creating a

---

[29]Srincek, *Platform capitalism* (London: Wiley, 2016).

healthy and constructive relation with and through the activity of play, since it will be interrupted by economic requirements.

And there's another element to the *free to play* economy. As the saying goes, if you don't have to pay for it, you are the product. So these games are also often used to syphon user data and sell it to data brokers. In fact, these games have the ability to capture data of extreme value: attention span, interest in certain topics, willingness to spend money, the time dedicated to play, … Videogames are used in platform capitalism as pleasurable instruments that break privacy through play so data can become a part of an economic transaction. And we accept it, as players, because we like free things, but also because we are hesitant to look at videogames from the same perspective, we apply to question Facebook and other algorithmic machines of data extraction. Understanding the ethics of videogames is also understanding videogames as a platform in the economy of data extraction. This requires extending our perspective, looking at videogames as data systems that monitor users and try to extract data for selling it. The challenge is preserving the positive elements of creative play, of the creative stewardship of virtual worlds, while managing to protect the privacy and autonomy of players. Only when both are met, can we truly speak about ethical approaches to videogame playing and design.

(Temporary) Conclusions

I started this chapter by challenging our understanding of the ethical nature of *homo ludens*. By adopting a philosophy of information perspective on the activity of playing games, and specifically of playing videogames, I wanted to change the focus of the ethical inquiries on players. This chapter proposes a perspective that allows us to move beyond the analysis of the actions of players in gameworlds. The focus of ethical inquiry is not what players do according to the rules of the game in these gameworlds, but more their role as being critically engaged with the very act of creating meaning and enacting values in those games. Players do not perform actions: they are the stewards of gameworlds that

require their effort to exist, and that should be open to the values that emerge from the creative appropriation of that world.

I followed this move from locating the ethics of players in actions to locating them in their relations to gamewolds to a similar change of perspective with regards to games and their position in culture. *Homo ludens* was described by Huizinga as a creator of culture, and therefore games were also origins of culture. However, games were also considered to be separate from the world, as if they were reflections of a world from which they were isolated. My move from the separateness of *homo ludens* to the relationality of *homo poieticus* should be followed by a relational approach to games as culture. The stewardship implied in the playing of games requires us to see them in the larger contexts of culture in which they are inserted, understanding how games are connected and related to the world outside them, how they have an effect in larger forms of culture. This article proposed two different domains in which an approach to the ethics of games from a perspective of informational stewardship allows us to formulate novel questions and see new moral dilemmas: videogames as part of a broader digital ecology in which broadcasting play in platforms of surveillance capitalism is affected by the logics of attention-seeking algorithms; and videogames as part of an economy of data extraction in which players' privacy becomes commercial interest, in a free-to-play market.

The perspective on *homo ludens* I have sketched in this chapter requires us to apply ethical thinking about videogames in the context of the societies, economics, and cultures in which these games are developed and consumed. The ethics of games cannot be reduced to the ethics of their content, isolated in individual moments of play. All play is public, all play is social, all play is part of a culture and an economy. The true challenges of the ethics of play are not the analysis of what happens on one screen at a time. For us to truly engage with the ethical challenges of games, we need to see them not as worlds separate from this one, but as cultural forces that are inserted in the same ebbs and flows of data, money, and attention than other digital media. Let's keep Huizinga's intuition that play is at the heart of culture, that *homo ludens* creates

culture; but let's question the ethics of this player as a *homo poieticus*, a creator of worlds in the crossroads of many worlds.

References

Aarseth, E. (2001). Computer game studies, year one. *Game Studies*, *1*(1). Retrieved from http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html.

Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M. (2010). *The dialectic of enlightenment*. London and New York: Verso (Original work published 1944).

Albrechtslund, A., & Dubbeld, L. (2006). The plays and arts of surveillance: Studying surveillance as entertainment. *Surveillance and Society*, *3*(2–3), 216–221.

Agre, P. (1997). *Computation and human experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arafat, O., & Riehle, D. (2009). *The commenting practice of open source* (pp. 857–864). Presented at the Proceedings of the 24th ACM SIGPLAN Conference Companion on Object Oriented Programming Systems Languages and Applications, New York, NY, USA: ACM. http://doi.org/10.1145/1639950.1640047.

Arnoldi, J. (2016). Computer algorithms, market manipulation and the institutionalization of high frequency trading. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *33*(1), 29–52. http://doi.org/10.1177/0263276414566642.

Avedon, E. M. (1971). *The structural elements of games*. New York: Wiley.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bardzell, J., & Bardzell, S. (2011). *Pleasure is your birthright: Digitally enabled designer sex toys as a case of third-wave HCI*. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 257–266). Retrieved from Google Scholar.

Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Berkowitz, D., & Schwartz, D. A. (2016). Miley, CNN and the onion. *Journalism Practice*, *10*(1), 1–17.

Bishop, R., Gansing, K., Parikka, J., & Wilk, E. (Eds.). (2017). *Across and beyond: Post-digital practices, concepts, and institutions*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

Bogost, I. A. (2014). Why gamification is bullshit. In S. Deterding & S. Walz (Eds.), *The gameful world approaches, issues, applications* (pp. 65–80). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bogost, I. A. (2016). *Play anything: The pleasure of limits, the uses of boredom, and the secret of games.* New York: Basic Books.

Bynum, T. W. (2006). Flourishing ethics. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *8*(4), 157–173. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-006-9107-1.

Caillois, R. (2001). *Man, play and games.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press (Original work published 1958).

Cantwell Smith, B. (1996). *On the origin of objects*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Chess, S., & Shaw, A. (2015). A conspiracy of fishes, or, how we learned to stop worrying about #gamergate and embrace hegemonic masculinity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *59*(1), 208–220. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917.

Coeckelbergh, M. (2007). Violent computer games, empathy, and cosmopolitanism. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *9*, 219–231.

Consalvo, M. (2007). *Cheating: Gaining advantage in videogames.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Consalvo, M. (2009). There is no magic circle. *Games and Culture*, *4*(4), 408–417.

Corneliussen, H. G., & Rettberg, J. W. (2008). *Digital culture, play, and identity: A world of Warcraft® reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

D'Angour, A. (2013). Plato and play: Taking education seriously in ancient Greece. *American Journal of Play*, *5*(3), 1–15.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Hedonia, eudaimonia, and well-being: An introduction. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *9*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9018-1.

DeLanda, M. (2006). *A new philosophy of society: Assemblage theory and social complexity.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Demir, H. (2010). The fourth revolution: Philosophical foundations and technological implications. *Knowledge, Technology & Policy*, *23*(1–2), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12130-010-9095-7.

Deterding, S., & Walz, S. P. (Eds.). (2015). The gameful world. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Deterding, S., Sicart, M., Nacke, L., O'Hara, K., & Dixon, D. (2011). *Gamification: Using game-design elements in non-gaming contexts*. In *PART 2*—Proceedings of the 2011 Annual Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 2425–2428).

Dodig-Crnkovic, G., & Larsson, T. (2005). Game ethics-homo ludens as a computer game designer and consumer. *International Review of Information Ethics*, *4*(12), 19–23.

Farwell, J. P., & Rohozinski, R. (2011). Stuxnet and the future of cyber war. *Survival*, *53*(1), 23–40. http://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2011.555586.

Feezell, R. (2006). *Sport, play, and ethical reflection.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Ferrara, J. (2012). *Playful design.* New York: Rosenfeld Media.

Floridi, L. (1999). Information ethics: On the philosophical foundation of computer ethics. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *1*(1), 37–56.

Floridi, L. (2002). On the intrinsic value of information objects and the infosphere. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *4*(4), 287–304.

Floridi, L. (2008). The method of levels of abstraction. *Minds and Machines*, *18*(3), 303–329. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-008-9113-7.

Floridi, L. (2013). *The ethics of information.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Floridi, L. (2014). *The 4th revolution : How the infosphere is reshaping human reality.* Oxford: Oxford University Press (Kindle edition).

Floridi, L., & Sanders, J. W. (2005). Internet ethics: The constructionist values of homo poieticus. In R. J. Cavalier (Ed.), *The impact of the internet on our moral lives* (pp. 195–213). Albany: SUNY.

Frissen, V., Lammes, S., de Lange, M., de Mul, J., & Raessens, J. (2015). *Playful identities: The ludification of digital media cultures.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Galloway, A. R. (2006). *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture* (Vol. 18). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Galloway, A. R. (2012). *The interface effect.* New York: Polity.

Gaver, W. (2009). Designing for homo ludens, still. In T. Binder, J. Löwgren, & L. Malmborg (Eds.), *(Re)searching the digital Bauhaus* (pp. 163–178). London: Springer. Retrieved from http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/46gaver-ludens-still.pdf.

Geertz, C. (1972). Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Getsy, D. (2011). *From diversion to subversion. Games, play, and twentieth-century art.* Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press.

Giddings, S. (2007). A 'pataphysics engine: Technology, play, and realities. *Games and Culture*, *2*(4), 392–404. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412007309534.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Encounters. Two studies in the sociology of interaction.* Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Golumbia, D. (2009). Games without play. *New Literary History*, *40*(1), 179–204.

Henricks, T. (2008). The nature of play: An overview. *American Journal of Play*, *1*(2), 157–180.

Henricks, T. S. (2009). Orderly and disorderly play: A comparison. *American Journal of Play*, *2*, 12–40.

Henricks, T. S. (2016). *Play and the human condition.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Huizinga, J. (1992). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture.* Boston: Beacon Press (Original work published 1938).

Johnson, S. (2016). *Wonderland: How play made the modern world.* New York: Riverhead Books.

Juul, J. (2005). *Half-real: Videogames between real rules and fictional worlds.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kant, I. (2001). *The Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant: Critique of judgement.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Original work published 1790).

Khaldarova, I., & Pantti, M. (2016). Fake news. *Journalism Practice*, *10*(7), 891–901. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1163237.

Knight, T., & Vardouli, T. (2015). Computational making. *Design Studies*, *41*, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2015.09.003.

Laxton, S. (2011). From judgement to process: The modern ludic field. In D. J. Getsy (Ed.), *Refiguring Modernism: From diversion to subversion: Games, play, and twentieth-century art* (pp. 3–24). Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Lehdonvirta, V., & Castronova, E. (2014). *Virtual economies: Design and analysis.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 0262027259.

Lieberoth, A. (2014). Shallow gamification: Testing psychological effects of framing an activity as a game. *Games and Culture.* https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014559978.

Mallaband, P. (2002). Understanding Kant's distinction between free and dependent beauty. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *52*(206), 66–81. Retrieved from Google Scholar.

Marenko, B., & van Allen, P. (2016). Animistic design: How to reimagine digital interaction between the human and the nonhuman. *Digital Creativity*, *27*(1), 52–70. http://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2016.1145127.

Massanari, A. (2015). #Gamergate and the fappening: How reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media & Society.* https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815608807.

May, H. (2010). *Continuum series in ancient philosophy: Aristotle's ethics: Moral development and human nature.* New York: Continuum.

McCormick, M. (2001). Is it wrong to play violent video games? *Ethics and Information Technology, 3*, 277–287.

McNamee, M. (2007). Sport, ethics and philosophy; Context, history, prospects. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, 1*(1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/17511320601173329.

Montola, M., Stenros, J., & Waern, A. (2009). *Pervasive games: Theory and design.* London: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers.

Nijholt, A. (2016). *Playable cities.* London: Springer.

Norman, D. A. (2004). *Emotional design: Why we love (or hate) everyday things* (Vol. 2004, pp. 1–1). New York, NY: Basic Books. http://doi.org/10.1145/966012.966013.

Phillips, W., & Milner, R.N. (2017). *The ambivalent internet: Mischief, oddity, and antagonism online.* New York: Polity.

Phillips, W. (2015). *This is why we can't have nice things: Mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Piaget, J. (1997). *The moral judgement of the child.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Postman, N. (2005). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business* (20th ed.). London: Penguin Books.

Ratto, M. (2011). Critical making: Conceptual and material studies in technology and social life. *The Information Society, 27*(4), 252–260. http://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2011.583819.

Raessens, J. (2006). Playful identities, or the ludification of culture. *Games and Culture, 1*(1), 52. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281779.

Rodriguez, H. (2006). The playful and the serious: An approximation to Huizinga's homo ludens. *Game Studies, 6*(1), 1604.

Schechner, R. (1988). Playing. *Play & Culture, 1*, 3–19.

Schiller, F. (2012). *Dover books on western philosophy: On the aesthetic education of man.* Mineola, New York: Dover Publications (Original work published 1794).

Seo, Y., & Jung, S.-U. (2014). Beyond solitary play in computer games: The social practices of eSports. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 16*(3), 635–655. http://doi.org/10.1177/1469540514553711.

Seward, G. (1944). Play as art. *The Journal of Philosophy, 41*(7), 178. https://doi.org/10.2307/2020303.

Sherrick, B., & Hoewe, J. (2017). The effect of explicit online comment moderation on three spiral of silence outcomes. *New Media & Society*, *25*(1), 146144481666247. http://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816662477.

Shields, R. (2015). Ludic ontology: Play's relationship to language, cultural forms, and transformative politics. *American Journal of Play*, *7*(3), 298–321.

Sicart, M. (2009). *The ethics of computer games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Sicart, M. (2014a). Playing the good life: Gamification and ethics. In *The gameful world: Approaches, issues, applications* (pp. 225–244).

Sicart, M. (2014b). *Playful thinking: Play matters.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Srincek, N. (2016). *Platform capitalism.* London: Wiley.

Suits. (2005). *The grasshopper: Games, life and Utopia.* Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2009). The assemblage of play. *Games and Culture*, *4*(4), 331–339.

Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Raising the stakes: E-Sports and the professionalization of computer gaming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Vallor, S. (2016). *Technology and the virtues: A philosophical guide to a future worth wanting*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Verbeek, P. P (2006). *What things do: Philosophical reflections on technology, agency, and design.* Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Volkman, R. (2010). Why information ethics must begin with virtue ethics. *Metaphilosophy*, *41*(3), 380–401.

Volkman, R. (2013). 7. Being a good computer professional: The advantages of virtue ethics in computing. *Professionalism in the Information and Communication Technology Industry*, *3*, 109.

Waddington, D. I. (2007). Locating the wrongness in ultra-violent video games. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *9*, 121–128.

Walz, S. P., & Deterding, S. (2014). *The gameful world : Approaches, issues, applications.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Whitson, J. (2014). Foucault's fitbit: Governance and gamification. In S. Deterding & S. Walz (Eds.), *The gameful world approaches, issues, applications* (pp 339–359). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wonderly, M. A. (2008). Humean approach to assessing the moral significance of ultra-violent video games. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *10*, 1–10.

Zimmerman, E. (2013). Manifesto for a ludic century. In S. Deterding & S. Walz (Eds.), *The gameful world approaches, issues, applications* (pp 19–23). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.