

# Becoming an Emotionally Better Player: Virtue Ethics and Guilt in *Spec Ops: The Line*

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## Introduction

One commonly identified problem in game studies regards what we could call moral engagement: how can video games encourage players to perceive, interpret, and negotiate the moral significance of a game situation in which they take part? Stephanie Patridge (2011: 303-4) and Gary Young (2013: 16-8) note that, as players, it is indeed too easy to find excuses to justify our actions as being “amoral,” especially in single-player games. We can always point out, for example, that our behaviour only affects pixels on the screen and not real living beings. Instances of amorality have existed in discussions on the nature of game. Johan Huizinga’s conception of game as a “magic circle” is characterized by a form of exceptionalism, according to which “activity of play lies outside morals, in itself is neither good nor bad” (1992: 213). Raph Koster (2005: 80-5) has downplayed moral content in games such as *Death Race* (Exidy, 1976) in favour of the abstract interactivity and mathematical system that supposedly constitute the essence of the game. The idea that the game domain shares no connexion to the moral domain ties up with the autonomist position in art history, from which stems the famous expression “art for art’s sake.” Yet, understanding narrative art requires moral knowledge (Carroll 1998: 141), not to mention that institutions funding culture and educational programs legitimate themselves through the edifying power of art (Gaut 2007: 4). Why would that be different for the 10th art?

Recognizing the problem of amorality and the need for moral engagement, game scholars have deliberated on what an “ethically relevant game” (Sicart 2009:48–59) or “ethically notable game” (Zagal 2009: 1) is, and on how a game may “engage and challenge the player’s moral self.” (Ryan *et al.* 2016: 3). One frequently suggested solution is the refinement of game design by integrating open moral problems or dilemmas, thus impelling the players to exercise their moral capacities instead of instrumentalizing morality to unlock game features, such as new powers or items in *Fable* (Lionhead, 2004) or *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare, 2003). But design strategies to achieve this end are still a source of disagreement.<sup>1</sup>

One thing that is still missing from the discussion is the potential contribution of players’ emotions to moral engagement. Video games trying to elicit emotional responses, such as guilt

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, while Schreiber *et al.* (2009: under the section “Is the dilemma a ‘juicy’ decision?”) recommend informing players of the morality of the actions at their disposal and their potential effects to hold them responsible for what might happen, Ryan *et al.* (2016: 7) defend that games should demonstrate subtlety by letting players decide by themselves what moral significance a fictional situation may embody. Jamey Stevenson (2011: 45-6) also notes the lack of consensus on whether a game should provide moral lessons or moral autonomy to players.

or pride in reaction of one's own performance, and compassion, gratitude, or indignation towards characters, should be considered as morally interesting as games presenting moral dilemmas. It has been argued in philosophy that emotion "shares in reason" (Kristjánsson 2018:19–20), "is a necessary condition for human happiness" (Roberts 2013: 34), reveals values (de Sousa 2004: 123-4), and undermines "weakness of will" (Greenspan 2010: 554). These particularities, some of them we will address later in this paper, make emotion a concept as much morally relevant as choice and action, which received far more attention in the moral engagement debate. In truth, emotion has been neglected in game studies in general. But this omission is even more surprising considering the numerous adaptations of virtue ethics to the case of video games,<sup>2</sup> despite that Aristotle, one of the precursors of this theory, clearly states in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999) that being virtuous is a matter of developing our emotional dispositions.

In what follows, we will shed light on the nature of emotion and its relation to virtue ethics. In what sense emotions can be virtuous? Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, contemporary interpretations of virtue ethics, and contemporary cognitive theories of emotion will help us in this endeavour. Following the idea that players and games share a responsibility in moral meaning-making, which has already been emphasized by many scholars including Miguel Sicart in *The Ethics of Computer Game* (2009:21–106), we will have to examine how moral engagement depends on, firstly, the emotional attunement between the player and the external world, and secondly, on the capacity of a game to prescribe virtuous emotions. We will finally demonstrate how *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) prepares the experience of a morally interesting emotion, guilt, that may be virtuous or not depending on how the player feels it. We will thus distinguish cases of virtuous guilt from morally non-optimal guilt, demonstrating how an exemplary moral engagement may be fulfilled despite being demanding.

### **From Cognitive to Virtuous Emotions**

It is necessary to investigate the nature of emotion in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of its implications on morals. Here, we will advocate for a cognitive interpretation of emotion, according to which emotions are apt to represent the world in an objective way, just as other cognitive categories can, such as belief and judgment. According to Ronald de Sousa (2001: 120; 2004: 123), emotions are akin to axiological perception: they are perceptions of values (or evaluative properties) rather than beliefs about facts (or reality status). The value or values an emotion reveals about the external world is also what characterizes the said emotion in terms of formal object. To borrow from de Sousa's example (2004: 127-8), if fear's formal object is dangerousness, meaning it is constituted by the value of danger, being afraid of a dog relies on the cognitive move of attributing dangerousness to the animal's behaviour.<sup>3</sup> If the person

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, McCormick (2001), Sicart (2009), Schulzke (2009), Björk (2010), Coeckelbergh (2011), Nay and Zagal (2017) use Aristotle's works on virtue ethics without mentioning his valuable contribution to the question of emotion.

<sup>3</sup> Non-cognitive theories of emotion, such as Charles Darwin's (2009) or William James' (1884), instead claim that emotions spring from specific physiological activities rather than cognitive processes. Therefore, fear would not be the perception of danger in the external world, but the consciousness of internal combination of shuddering muscles, alerted senses, accelerated heart rate, perspiration, and more (e.g. Darwin 2009: 305-12).

encountering the dog does not represent it as being dangerous, no fear will arise. Since emotions are cognitions, they are also prone to error and may misrepresent the external world. A person might perceive the dog as dangerous despite its docile or friendly behaviour, showing inconsistency between the perceived value (dangerousness) and the objective value (trustworthiness). Therefore, by being irrational, some instances of emotion are not suitable in a given situation. This is one reason why emotions have to be cultivated during the lifetime of an individual: to successfully connect with the reality of the external world.

If emotions were extra-rational phenomena, they could not be objects of moral evaluation, as de Sousa makes clear (2001: 122):

Such perceptions should not, of course, be thought of as isolated from reason. To judge of the validity of ordinary sense-perception, we bring to bear background knowledge, reason, logic, and corroborating or conflicting perceptions. We do the same in coming to judge of the validity of any particular emotion.

In other words, emotions do not have the last word on values, especially moral ones. It is because they are able to respond to reason that Aristotle thought of emotions as morally relevant and educable (1999: 17 [I.13, 1102b14-35]). More specifically, Aristotle is best understood as a “soft rationalist” (Kristjánsson 2018: 34-7), according to which there is harmony between reason and emotion: the former might set the end, but it is the latter that moves us towards it. Thus, emotions play an important role in virtue ethics. They are an essential ingredient in the development of a virtuous person, namely, a person with an excellent moral character, who expresses virtues such as courage, generosity, honesty, and others in a reliable way.

Virtues are comparable to the practical skills of an athlete or musician in the “need to learn” and “drive to aspire” they demand (Annas 2011:16–20). It is not sufficient to possess virtues, in the same way we might possess knowledge in forms of moral rules or principles. We have to exercise them willfully in order to improve ourselves. As Aristotle claims: “we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions” (1999: 19 [II.1, 1103a32-1103b2]). This is a crucial point in Sicart’s (2009: 92) adaptation of virtue ethics : by playing well—and often we could add—we are better able to rely on our experience and know how to (re)act in games, thus developing into a virtuous player. This does not mean that acquiring virtues is a passive or unconscious conditioning process, in which virtues are sheer mechanical reflexes of habit. Cultivating virtues is oriented towards a deliberate aim, our individual flourishing, and requires “the giving of reasons” about how to act and feel (Annas 2011: 19). When expressing virtues (or vices), we are not accomplishing actions automatically and dissociating ourselves from our emotions. “A virtuous person [...] does not perform virtuous actions impassively and with lack of concern,” as underlines Julia Annas (66).

Robert C. Roberts argues for emotions themselves having a “skill-like aspect,” meaning they are “subject to considerable development and sophistication” (2013: 54). But we are more responsible for our emotional dispositions than our emotional occurrences, since we do not directly control the latter (see Kristjánsson 2018: 21; Bégorre-Bret 2009: 49). Aristotle indeed states that: “we are neither praised nor blamed insofar as we have feelings; [...] [we] do not blame the person who is simply angry, but only the person who is angry in a particular way” (1999: 23 [II.5 1105b30—1106a2]). It is the character revealed by the emotion that should be the object of moral evaluation, or the tendency to have certain emotions in certain circumstances, and not the emotion per se.

That being said, we have to explain on what basis emotional dispositions are subject to moral evaluation. Kristjánsson (2018: 20) cites Aristotle when pointing out that emotional dispositions have to satisfy five criteria to be in line with virtue: “having [...] feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue” (1999: 24 [II.6, 1106b20-11]). In this work, we will only discuss two criteria to simplify our demonstration. We already mentioned having emotions about the right things under the notion of objective value. The other criterion, the right end (or motive), means that emotions have to express virtue *for itself*, and not for conforming to social norms or for being instrumentally beneficial, for instance (Kristjánsson 2018: 24; 42). As we have suggested, being virtuous is not simply mimicking what good role models do and how they feel, but knowing why they act and are moved that way. We will have the opportunity to deepen these two criteria later during our game analysis.

Taking into account this overview of virtue ethics, the practice of playing video games should not be an exception to the exercise of emotions. This puts responsibility on players and discourages the consideration of them as “passive victims” (Sicart 2009: 112). But if we were to conceive an overly autonomous player, who is always able to reflect on the games’ meanings in a detached way, the morality of games as such would not matter in our ethical theory. Video games are also responsible for the flourishing of players. Without having to necessarily refer ourselves to a list of virtues,<sup>4</sup> we should be able to criticize games for being morally praiseworthy or flawed because of the emotional experience they offer, thus strongly rejecting the amoralist view. To develop this idea, we will turn to Berys Gaut’s aesthetic philosophy (2007).

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<sup>4</sup> More importantly, we should not think there is some sort of special set of virtues specific to playing games, as Sicart does (2009: 92-9). The six ludological virtues the researcher puts forward—sense of achievement, explorative curiosity, socializing nature, balanced aggression, care for game balance, and sportsmanship—seem focused on multiplayer games set in a competitive context. They do not guide players on how to negotiate the moral proposition of a whole range of single-player games. In what way these six virtues might help them react properly to the civilians trying to escape the totalitarian country of Arztoska in *Papers, Please* (3909, 2013) or the victims of the civil war in *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014)? How useful are they to identify moral flaws in games such as *Death Race* (Exidy, 1976), *Custer’s Revenge* (Mystique, 1982), or *Chillers* (Exidy, 1986)?

## What Does “Good” Mean in “Good Game”?

Debates about video games and morals sometimes echo concerns once raised in the history of art, such as the effects of sexual and violent representation on audience. However, another issue about the morality of artworks which has received far less attention for evaluating video games regards what Gaut calls the “intrinsic connexion” (2007: 8) between the aesthetic and moral domains. How can the aesthetic quality of a work depend on its moral values? Put in another way, how might praising an artwork, such as evaluating a play, film, or game as good or pleasurable, mean that it is also morally edifying? Gaut coined his position “ethicism,” a moderate view of moralism: “[Ethicism] holds that an artwork is aesthetically flawed in so far as it possesses an ethical flaw that is aesthetically relevant, and conversely that an artwork has an aesthetic merit in so far as it possesses an ethical merit that is aesthetically relevant” (10). In short, the aesthetic and moral domains are only connected under the relevance condition, which we will examine in a moment.

As does Gaut (2007: 27), we will understand aesthetics in a broad sense, including formal, expressive, and affective properties, instead of limiting the concept to beauty, for instance. These properties are those for which we use evaluative terms for criticizing art: “unity,” “balance,” “serenity,” “sombreness,” “exciting,” and “moving,” to cite Gaut’s examples—which may also be used to judge video games. In the philosopher’s theory, the emotional experience offered by an artwork is key to understanding the relevance condition. Gaut states that “the aesthetic relevance condition is secured when the ethical attitudes are manifested in the responses (these being affective—cognitive states) that works prescribe their audiences to have” (50). For instance, a work attempting to elicit amusement towards suffering could be qualified as manifesting a blameworthy attitude, and thus being aesthetically flawed. In short, as long as this emotional response is a product of the aesthetic domain, the moral attitude it reflects is relevant to criticize the artwork.

Following ethicism, we should also refer to the emotions prescribed by a video game when we are praising or condemning its moral and aesthetic values.<sup>5</sup> This is how we are going to proceed in the next analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line*. Its bombing sequence, in which the player is forced to watch horrifying events he participated in and reflect on them, is especially interesting. There are two reasons for that: first, the lack of in-game choices implies that we have to turn our attention to the player’s emotions, not simply his actions, to evaluate his moral character; second, even though the most excellent emotion the player should probably have is indignation or disgust, the emotional response the sequence prescribes is guilt, displaying a potentially praiseworthy attitude. But instead of concluding prematurely that *Spec Ops: The Line* is a good

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<sup>5</sup> It is not our aim here to provide a theory of how video games elicit emotions. But it is probably uncontroversial to claim that video games shape emotional experience by remediating aesthetics from other media, such as reusing cinematographic codes and narrative structures, and by exploiting more specific formal properties, such as shaping navigable worlds, delimiting player agency, configuring dynamic systems, and so on. Reflecting on video games from the tradition of aesthetic philosophy, Grant Tavinor also shares our assumption when thinking that emotion “is among the clearest of the connections of gaming to uncontested art.” (2009: 188). It will appear obvious following our game analysis that video games are able to appeal to much more than our “reptilian emotions,” as Steve Poole has once deplored (2000: 233).

game solely because it provokes this emotion, we will examine what kind of guilt is merited and should be experienced by the player aspiring to virtue. Beyond demonstrating the untenable view of amoralism, this will allow us to conceive what an emotionally virtuous player should be and how video games might be good by contributing to the flourishing of their audience.

### **The Design of Guilt in *Spec Ops: The Line***

*Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) is a third-person shooter in which we play the captain Martin Walker, sent in Dubai to investigate on the disappearance of an American battalion and their colonel, John Konrad. While the battalion's mission was to rescue civilians from catastrophic sandstorms and evacuate them from the city, we come to know during the game that a conflict has arisen among the American troops and has escalated into a war. As we search for clues about the outbreak of the war, we discover that Konrad committed atrocities upon rebellious soldiers and civilians in order to intimidate insubordinate survivors and rule over Dubai. Wanting at all cost to stop Konrad, Walker will slowly crawl into madness and take turn in perpetrating inhuman acts with the help of the player. Often compared to the novel *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1899) and the film *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), *Spec Ops: The Line* addresses the horrifying absurdity of war by making the player complicit in it.

At the beginning of the game, Walker seems like the usual American "hero" coming straight out of a Hollywood movie, who lands on a hostile land to eliminate evil, thus allowing the player to obtain pleasure from using violent actions and "playing soldier" (Monnens 2011, p. 86).<sup>6</sup> But this changes at the eighth chapter, called "The Gate", in which Walker and his two allies approach an enemy military camp, separating them from Konrad's hideout. Noting that they are severely outnumbered, Walker decides to bombard them using the only potent weapon at their disposal: white phosphorus bombs. The player may be unwilling to use the incendiary weapon since he previously witnessed soldiers dying in terrible pain from it, but he will quickly face the fact that there is no other way to progress in the game. Trying to infiltrate the camp by stealth will attract attention no matter what. Trying to shoot the opponents one by one will be countered by infinitely respawning enemies. Snipers will also appear on rooftops, preventing the player-character to find cover. As Heron and Belford (2014: 18) and Smethurst (2017: 211-2) put it, the moral choice to stop playing the game is available, but it should appear obvious now that, from a virtue ethics perspective, this decision remains unsatisfactory.

With no other way to progress in the game, the bombardment has to be done by remotely controlling a drone. At this moment, the perspective switches to a top-down view and the greyscale screen displays Walker's reflection. Here, Walker's position is compared to that of the player: both are using electronic devices which create distance between themselves and the act of killing, making it easier to rationalize their actions. However, after the bombardment, the game makes the player walk through the destruction and suffering instead of teleporting

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<sup>6</sup> By "playing soldier," David Monnens means taking part in a distorted enactment of war: "War games aren't about critiquing war: they are about playing soldier. In doing so, they suggest that all a soldier does is fight without asking why or what it means and how it affects him or her and the people left at home" (2011: 86).

him to the next level or mission, as it may be the case in other war games. While crossing the camp, the player-character cannot run or shoot his weapon. He has to watch the cruel consequences of what he has done, as mutilated soldiers are crying for help. At the end of his walk, a cut-scene shows a dying soldier telling Walker that the troops he killed were there to assist Dubai's population. The camera then reveals the corpses of numerous civilians inside a tent, a close-up shot insisting on the bodies of an adult embracing a child, both of them badly burnt, their faces frozen in fright. When Walker's allies realize their enormous mistake, one of them starts blaming the captain located in the foreground by pointing a finger at him, and thereby in the general direction of the player, as if his protest was also intended for the latter.

This sequence represents a change in the game's general tone. If the first part of *Spec Ops: The Line* mostly sticks to reproducing war games codes, the second part favours reflexive devices and keeps showing how the player-character's interventions are aggravating Dubai's conflict. These strategies' ultimate goal is to elicit guilt in the player. Following the bombardment, Walker and the player must deal with moral dilemmas which are either unsolvable or obfuscated by urgent decision-making and unexplicited choices. Hallucinatory scenes also take place repeatedly, showing the dead getting back to life to remind the player and protagonist of their actions. The loading screens, which at first provide tips about the game's rules and mechanics, later criticize the player directly with extradiegetic messages such as "This is all your fault" and "Do you feel like a hero, yet?" As a self-conscious emotion, guilt requires the self to acknowledge its own wrongdoings. Psychosociologists Tangney and Dearing summarize the process of guilt as the following: "In the face of transgression or error, the self turns toward the self—evaluating and rendering judgment" (2002: 2). *Spec Ops: The Line* attempts to create this level of self-consciousness by continuously condemning the player for participating in a hopeless war.

The experience of guilt in *Spec Ops: The Line* lies on the design of treachery: what Jesper Juul calls "complicity" and Staffan Björk names "feel-bad games." Juul (2013) borrows the term "complicity" from Brenda Romero to describe the design of the board game *Train* (2009), where players must compete in embarking people on their train only to find out the destination afterwards, when it is too late: that is, Nazi concentration camps. Juul explains that (2013: p. 109):

[...] players suddenly realize that they have been working toward an abhorrent goal. As it turns out, this use of deception and revelation opens up a whole range of new experiences, where the discomfort of having worked for something unpleasant turns out to be a strong emotional device unique to games.

There is treachery in *Train* because it does not disclose morally significant information right away, making players unaware of their complicity with in-game events. In a similar fashion, *Spec Ops: The Line* does not reveal the presence of civilians in the bombarding location before the worst has happened.

As for Björk, feel-bad games are defined as (2015: 173):

games with a well-done or even elegant design but a design that makes players feel regret about their own or other players' behaviour. Phrased more succinctly, feel-bad games make players break their own player frame.

In its Goffmanian sense, frame refers to the delimitation of a social activity or context, where the meaning of a given action is specific to this activity or context—sharing a similar logic to Huizinga's magic circle (1988), as Björk points out (2015: 172). In the same way as complicity, breaking the frame typical of gameplay requires to subvert expectations, to catch the unprepared player by surprise with treachery. In the case of *Spec Ops: The Line*, it means prompting the player to first interpret his actions in the usual mathematical or abstract amoralist way, according to which ammunition are numbers to be managed and enemies are mere shooting targets or scores, and only afterwards, inducing him to re-evaluate his actions in a moral way, favourable to the experience of guilt.

### **Reasonable, Rational, and Virtuous Guilt in *Spec Ops: The Line***

Following Aristotle's theory, guilt cannot be intrinsically virtuous, in contrast to naturalistic accounts which suggest that it has evolved to become morally good (e.g. Tangney and Dearing 2002; Haidt 2003).<sup>7</sup> Like any emotion, a virtuous guilt depends on the situation it responds to. Considering that the formal object of guilt is self-controllability, meaning that is only rational to feel bad for wrongdoings under our control, it would not be virtuous to have this emotion for something we are not responsible for, such as the persistent survivor guilt a car passenger involved in a driving accident could have. Similarly, not every kind of guilt would be virtuous following the bombing sequence in *Spec Ops: The Line*. To explore this hypothesis, we will refer to a framework developed by the philosopher of education Kristján Kristjánsson (2018), who identifies four hierarchical standards to evaluate the morality of emotions. The framework will allow us to conceptualize a morally optimal guilt reaction to *Spec Ops: The Line* and reflect on what an emotionally virtuous player should be.

The first standard, *sincerity*, is quite straightforward: “[an emotion] is sincere if we admit to ourselves that we are, in fact, experiencing it” (2018: 18). If the player feels guilt for what happens in *Spec Ops: The Line*, he should not deny it. Nevertheless, sincerity does not explain why the player should manifest this emotion in the first place, so we will not discuss it any further. The next standard is *reasonableness*. An emotion might be reasonable to the extent that it is “based on internally consistent reasoning,” according to Kristjánsson (18). The naïve player of *Spec Ops: The Line* might feel guilt after the bombardment, thinking that he could have done otherwise to avoid this disaster. But his perception of controllability of action would not fit the value of controllability as represented in the game's objective structure. If he had

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<sup>7</sup> This idea of a morally evolved guilt clearly occurs in this excerpt of Tangney and Dearing's book (2002: 127): “Humankind, however, has evolved not only in terms of physical characteristics but also in terms of emotional and cognitive complexity. With increasingly complex perspective-taking and attributional abilities, modern humans have the capacity to distinguish between self and behavior, to take another person's perspective, and to empathize with others' distress. Whereas early moral goals centered on reducing potentially lethal aggression, clarifying social rank, and enhancing conformity to social norms, modern morality centers on the ability to acknowledge one's wrongdoing, accept responsibility, and take reparative action. In this sense, guilt may be the moral emotion of the new millennium.”



explored the possibility of actions, he would have known that there is no other available option, as we have already pointed out earlier. Because of his partial access to the reality of the game situation, the naïve player would not be entirely right to have guilt, his emotions being not fully rational.

*Rationality*, the third standard, demands that an emotion be consistent with external reasons and values (2018: 18). The previous instance of guilt could be rational if the bombing sequence contains a branching structure, allowing the player to pick the better of two or more paths. Since this is not the case, one could remark that no guilt is rational in *Spec Ops: The Line*. But it could be rational if its object regard controllable states of mind, not controllable actions per se. Such guilt would occur in the form of meta-emotion, which film scholar Carl Plantinga defines as emotions “taking as their object either the spectator’s own responses or the responses of other spectators” (2009: 73). Good candidates to a rational guilt for our case would be joy, admiration, or pride for violent actions previously committed in the game. If the player had been concerned about Dubai’s conflict, the fate of its population, and the behaviour of the army, he would not have experienced any kind of pleasurable emotions in the first place. As a result, his meta-emotion of guilt would be rational.

One could still argue that *Spec Ops: The Line* also has a moral responsibility, by noting that it tries to lure the player into having these pleasurable responses. Gaut defends that emotional prescriptions “come in a hierarchy, with higher-order prescriptions taking lower-order ones as their objects” (2007: 230), which entails that we should not isolate individual emotions to evaluate the morality of a work. Regarding *Spec Ops: The Line*, the design of treachery makes guilt respond to pleasurable emotions, meaning it occupies a higher position in the hierarchy of emotional prescriptions. Thus, a rational guilt acknowledges that joy, admiration, or pride all misrepresent the higher-order values of the game. As it should be now clear, *Spec Ops: The Line* does not try to glorify military action, but rather depict the horror it brings.

Kristjánsson (2018: 18-9) claims that these three standards are still insufficient to determine whether an emotion is virtuous or not. *Moral justifiability*, the final and most compelling standard, corresponds to Aristotle’s aforementioned five criteria of virtuous (or morally optimal) emotion. We have claimed that rational emotion only fits the value criterion. It is not enough for a virtuous emotion to merely correspond to the values or structure of the game, as if it had some kind of undisputable moral authority. As Gaut indicates: “the question is whether the prescribed response is merited: whether it is appropriate or inappropriate to respond in the way the work prescribes” (2007: 231). The design of guilt in *Spec Ops: The Line* is no exception to this. If we pay attention to Aristotle’s criterion of end (or motive), which is missing from the previous case of rational guilt, we will have a better idea of what could make this emotion virtuous.

Since *Spec Ops: The Line* subverts generic characteristics of war games—some of them being, according to Monnens’ portrait of the genre (2011: 85), the absence of civilians and civilian

casualties, unquestioned goals, devalued life, and unrealistic painless death—a virtuous guilt must be felt for a better end than solely acknowledging an irrational emotion, such as pride for perpetrating massacres. It would have to be more reflexive and cultural, making the player aware of his generic expectations and, more generally, his gaming practices. In our case, a virtuous guilt would respond to the player’s emotional habits when playing imperialist war games, to his personal history of deriving gratification from fictional domination and destruction. This kind of guilt would occur in relation to the player’s own emotional dispositions, which better define his moral character as a player and individual because it is more stable and malleable than an isolated emotional occurrence. While experiencing this emotion, the player would think: “there is something wrong about me for having had all these pleasurable emotions when playing war games.” With treachery, *Spec Ops: The Line* is able to create this level of reflexivity because it taps into war games codes, luring the player into familiarity, only to prescribe a higher-order response which criticizes the way he emotionally interacts with them. This is how it sheds light on the player’s vicious relationship with war games and what they depict, and why the kind of guilt it attempts to elicit is morally justifiable.

## Conclusion

The previous analysis unveils the untapped potential of constructing an ethics of emotion adapted to the case of video gaming: an ambitious but feasible undertaking, sustained by the marriage of the cognitive theory of emotion with virtue ethics. Emotions are essential components to an exemplary moral engagement since they allow for the player to perceive values and practice virtues in accord with reason. An emotionless player could explore, interpret, and deliberate on an in-game moral problem, such as the philosopher entertaining a thought experiment, but he would not be exercising his emotional dispositions, nor would he be learning to react properly to the given situation. Scholars have long defended the emotional relevance of art. Noël Carroll argued for the ability of narrative art to clarify our emotions, in the sense that they represent “an occasion for us to deepen our understanding of what we know and what we feel” (1999: 142). When imagining the merging of interactive fiction with the computer storage and processing power, with the utopian example of the *Star Trek* holodeck, Janet Murray wrote: “[The holodeck] provides a safe space in which to confront disturbing feelings we would otherwise suppress; it allows us to recognize our most threatening fantasies without becoming paralyzed by them” (1997: 25). Both of these thinkers underline the possibility to acknowledge, understand, and untangle our experience of emotions thanks to art. This emotional clarification process is probably easier to accomplish in a fictional thus safe environment, as mentions Murray. We may be more sincere with ourselves when feeling guilt in *Spec Ops: The Line* because we do not have to fear societal punishments for our mistakes. On the other hand, this absence of consequences may also motivate moral disengagement, which brings us back to our initial problem. The pitfalls of amoralism are never far away.

## Games

CHILLERS, EXIDY, ARCADE, 1986.

CUSTER’S REVENGE, MYSTIQUE, ATARI 2600, 1982.

FABLE, LIONHEAD, XBOX, 2004.

DEATH RACE, EXIDY, ARCADE, 1976.  
PAPERS, PLEASE, 3909, WINDOWS, 2013.  
SPEC OPS: THE LINE, YAGER DEVELOPMENT, WINDOWS, 2012.  
STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC, BIOWARE, WINDOWS, 2003.  
THIS WAR OF MINE, 11 BIT STUDIOS, WINDOWS, 2014.

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