Cybersport 2.0: Ethical Dimensions of Videogames as Sport

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Introduction

As a society we place great value in participation in sports. This value is manifested in two levels. The prima facie good that we attribute to sports is fitness and the "playful" engagement in exercise activities. However, it is arguable that the primary good that society bestows upon sports is the ability to develop character within those who participate. Unfortunately, videogames are considered to exist on the opposite end of the spectrum. Videogames have the greater societal stigma that they drive participants into isolation and antisocial behavioral patterns. Any morally redemptive characteristics are conspicuous by their absence within the stigma. I propose that videogame's standing in society requires reconsideration in light of the tremendous progress made in regard to technology and the subsequent complexity of the videogames that permeate the market today. I intend to argue that videogames and sports, in their classic renditions, are engaged in many of the same ways, and that now with the advent of "motion-gaming" platforms, videogames have drastically blurred these distinctions in a sufficient capacity as to warrant a re-evaluation towards similar values that we attribute to sports. The argumentation will proceed with an analysis of key aspects of Dennis Hemphill's original "Cybersport" article and the reapplication of these ideas in respect to motion gaming. A metaphysical analysis on the state of games and a discussion about the advantages that they afford us will follow respectively.

Cybersport

Dennis Hemphill laid the groundwork for this piece in his article "Cybersport" by recognizing two key concepts. The first of which is titled *player-character identification,* and the second, is *body-controller synthesis.* These two ideas play off each other and are instrumental in developing a player's sense of agency in a videogame which will become key in a later discussion on the value of playing games. The first concept, player-character identification, is the phenomenon we see where the gamer does not distinguish between him or herself from the on-screen character. This is evident when the gamer refers to the in-game actions in the first person. For example, when the character falls when trying to jump over an in-game crevasse the player exclaims, "I died!" But as can be clearly seen the person playing the game is not dead at all. What we see here is transference of identity where the player has, at least for a moment, fused his or her personal identity with that of the character we see on-screen. This phenomenon is aided by the second concept elucidated in Hemphill's "Cybersport:" *body-controller synthesis.*

One of the biggest challenges for game developers is designing a game that players will "believe" or buy into. That is to say that when the gamer is playing the game he or she feels that

the game is governed by laws or rules that make sense within the context of the game. This is true for the means of controlling the game just as much as for the content of the game. The ways by which the player controls the character must be comfortable and reasonable in order for the player to develop a keen aptitude and creativity for navigating the virtual world before them. It is because of this body-controller synthesis that the levels of physical separation between the player and the game begin to dissolve and further the depth of player-character identification. Hemphill sums up the interaction by stating, "In spite of the fact that the game player occupies a third-person perspective [I include all game perspectives] in this particular game, the distinction between the game player and the game character seems to disappear, or at least merge, in the lived experience. In phenomenological terms, the game controller, as an extension of the body, recedes into the background, so to speak, as the player becomes immersed in the action." (Hemphill 2005: 201)

The immersion that Hemphill refers to plays a tremendous role in a player's sense of agency within the world of the game that he or she is playing. As discussed earlier, it is important that both the controls and the context or the game make sense so as to allow the player to feel that they are a part of and can in fact impact that world that he or she is involved with. Today's games are crafted with an adequate amount of "order" that encourages the player to emotionally invest in the experiences that are encountered throughout his or her playing of the game. The potential for emotional engagement in these virtual realms opens the possibility for a similar kind of personal discovery and exploration, the kind that society readily attributes to traditional sports. Before we get there though, we must address the classic slight against gaming that maintains that they are not physical enough to warrant consideration as sport.

Motion Gaming

The advent of motion gaming serves as the technological impetus for reexamining the ethical legitimacy of video games in society today. Since the release of the Nintendo Wii console in 2006, over one hundred million motion gaming peripherals have been sold by Nintendo's Wii, Xbox 360's Kinect, and the Playstation's Move combined. All of these system accessories are designed with the expressed purpose of getting the player "off the couch" and marrying physical activity to gaming. Motion gaming technology allows us to re-approach the ethical dimensions of videogames in comparison to sport because now games require much of the same "physicality" as sports. Now we see that even on a physical level, games and sports are being engaged in the same way, and this produces an opportunity to evaluate game's and sport's ethical similarities. Although the value of this new physical outlet is valuable we should not discount the physical dexterity and mental skillfulness that is already present in gaming and is on par with skills required to play sports.

To demonstrate the physical dexterity needed to play today's videogames we need only look at the modern controller. The Xbox 360 controller has eleven buttons, two joysticks that also can be depressed for actions, and a d-pad. All told, there are seventeen action buttons not including the full range of motion afforded by the joysticks. Needless to say the controller is a complex piece of equipment and is indeed a daunting foe for any first time gamer. The controller, like a golf club, seems deceptively straightforward. It is not until we attempt to wield these utensils that we

discover how much we have to learn. But as with sports, all we need is practice. After we have become familiar with the controller we can then venture forth and begin to test our new found skills in either a single-player or multiplayer outing. Ultimately, the discussion of physical prowess involved in playing a videogame serves only to help us overcome the initial hurdle in examining game and sport on equal ethical and metaphysical ground, and motion gaming technology further bolsters the argument.

In order to further develop an appreciation for these gaming skills I will do a step-by-step comparison between an average multiplayer gaming scenario and an American Football scenario. In this first situation we have made our first foray into online gaming with *Halo: Reach* and we will be playing a game of team death-match. The first step will be to navigate the map and acquire a foe to dispatch using the two thumb-sticks. The second step is to bring our target in line with our sights, which requires accurate readjustments by our thumb on the right joystick. Now, because we are playing a multiplayer match our enemy will not simply sit still and allow us to kill him. So not only must we keep our sights on a mobile target but we must also begin firing upon him. With today's games though it is not simply point and pull when shooting. Simply laying on the trigger will send our gun and our aim bouncing all over the screen. So to paint the final picture we are running around with our thumb on one joystick, looking around and targeting our foe with a thumb on the other, pressing the "A" button to jump and dodge, while simultaneously pacing our shots with our trigger finger. And finally, after no small amount of adrenaline, sweating, and maybe even a little squealing, we stand victorious over our enemy and allow ourselves a short moment of celebration before moving on to find our next foe. Keep in mind that this example describes the "classic" format for playing a videogame, i.e. with a controller. Motion gaming peripherals can now take videogames with sports themes and introduce a whole new way of playing the game by requiring the player to actually carry out the motion one would need to play the sport in a traditional setting.

For example, *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2012: The Masters* played on the Playstation Move requires the player to assume a golfer's stance and swing the motion-sensing controller in exactly the same way as he or she would swing a golf club. The Playstation Move tracks and translates this information into the game by using a camera pointed at the player, and a tracking sensor which follows the player's swing and records the exact path of the swing into the game. I feel it important to share that my brother is an avid golfer, and he also plays this game. He reports that the technology is so accurate that the "virtual" game of golf can become just as frustrating as playing on the course. And in his opinion, if he wanted work that hard at playing the game he would prefer to be out on the course to begin with. With this example we can see that the technology, despite its infancy, is already reaching a point where it is capable of tremendously "real" simulations.

Now we can examine the process of making a tackle in an American Football game for a comparison. As a defensive linebacker it is our job to tackle the ball carrier as quickly as possible once the play has begun. A linebacker must decide in a matter of moments how to react to what the offense is doing. First, do we need to charge the line of scrimmage to tackle the running back or do we have to drop into pass defense and cover a receiver? After we have decided how to defend the play we must make our move to tackle the ball carrier. Much like shooting in Halo, we must first find our target and bring him into our sights. Now we have to decide the angle of

pursuit we must take to make sure that we can even catch the ball carrier. The final step comes now that we are within striking range. Now we must break down into a proper athletic stance, slam our shoulders into his chest, wrap up with our arms, and explode forward with our hips to force the ball carrier off balance and bring him crashing to the ground. Thus the play ends.

Through this comparison it becomes clear to see that there are equal levels of physical complexity involved in playing sports and playing videogames. However, there remains the challenge that videogames are not "physical" enough because the player is relegated to the couch while playing. This is where motion gaming rises to the forefront. Whether playing sports games or just playing games in this new way, the experience has become drastically more physical in regard to the traditional definition of what is required for sports. Games that make use of the respective console's motion peripheral often require the player to mimic the actual motion used in the sport in order to play the game. This is still a very young technology and it remains to be seen how far it can actually extend but I believe that it has tremendous potential. The film *Real Steel* might be the best example for how far motion gaming can go towards becoming virtual sport. In this sci-fi film boxing is no longer conducted by two men in a ring but by robots. These bots mimic the movements made by the boxer (who is outside the ring) and robots conduct the fight while the boxer controls his fighter. There is also a potential for the technology to advance to a place where individuals who suffer physical handicaps are now able to enjoy the experience of sports where they were previously unable to. At present, traditional sports are extremely limited in the capability to accommodate individual's who are handicapped. Even an athlete who is able to overcome his or her handicap with the use of prostheses may still be barred from competing with non-handicapped athletes. Such was the case with Olympic hopeful Oscar Pistorius, a sprinter whose legs were amputated below the knee at the age of 11months old. With the help of prostheses Pistorius was capable of competing at near-Olympic speeds prior to the 2008 Beijing Summer games. But he has faced great resistance from the I.A.A.F. in regard to his eligibility for competition. Traditional sport governing organizations become caught up in the controversies over "performance enhancing/unnatural" aides in competition. This is an issue that is not encountered with gaming. Technological advancement is a key aspect of the gaming industry, and those who are able to play or compete in spite of their handicap is not mired in competitive controversy, but celebrated for once again becoming "able" where they once were disabled. However, I feel that getting too caught up in the physical requirements or qualifications for videogames to become sports misses the true heart of the argument.

I believe it is plausible to imagine the line of physicality between sports and videogames blurring due to the continuous forward march of technology but when we begin to examine these two activities we can see that they are engaged under very similar metaphysical conditions. In order to draw these similarities I would call upon an aspect of Johan Huizinga's original definition of games. For Huizinga, a key factor for engaging in games that is extended to sport is the presence of an "extraordinary realm" where the goals and rules of the game divert from the practicality and efficiency of the "real world." For instance, the goal of soccer/football is to put a ball into a goal, and one could do this by picking it up and throwing it, or shooting the ball into the goal with a cannon. But this would become a fairly simple task in short order, so we impose rules such as only being able to use your feet and out of bounds lines to make the achievement of the task more challenging. And finally when this too becomes easy we add opponents to the game with the expressed purpose of thwarting our goals. Now we can begin to see that sports do seem

to take place in a separate or at least isolated place within reality. It is important to identify that while these rules are integral to the creation of sports, it is the individuals that participate in them and willfully agree to enter into these altered realities that makes the sports noteworthy. In a way, the people who chose to play the game adopt an ethical responsibility to uphold the rules of the game or else they risk destroying that "reality" in which they are all playing. This same attitude towards play is regularly demonstrated in the gaming community.

Just like sports, players willfully and happily choose to play videogames and openly accept the imposition of the rules of an extraordinary realm for the accomplishment of specific goals. The rules governing games are constructed within the very programming of the game being played which in a sense makes the limitations of the participant more concrete than those that define the realm of "sport." So both games and sports appear to take place in the "alternate realities" where rules are willfully imposed in order to give the game a sense of direction. Gamer and athlete also share a distaste and low opinion of those who try to subvert the rules of the game. The introduction of cheating into the game brings all players to the abrupt realization that they are in fact playing a game. It is at the moment that the reality of the game is destroyed and any value that could be derived in the outcome is diminished, except in cases when the non-cheating team wins and is vindicated in their superiority. Now that the picture has been painted in greater detail, we can see that not only are sports and videogames constructed in very similar ways, but also the ways in which players engage with the game from a metaphysical standpoint is almost identical. Now that I have established a somewhat level field on which to examine the value of games and sports, we can begin to delve into some of the advantages that videogames have in regard to personal character development for their participants.

The Advantages of Playing Videogames

Videogames have several advantages over traditional sports with regard to personal character development. For me, the benefits fall under three categorizations: accessibility, replay-ability, and emotion and moral exploration.

When speaking about accessibility and videogames I must be clear to distinguish exactly how and what type of access I am intending. Sports are played by millions of people all over the world but to participate in the traditional forms of sport often requires a good deal of organization. Trying to organize a group of people, let alone kids, to be in a particular place at a particular time is not always possible, and to do so on a moment's notice is next to impossible. With videogames the whole world opens up to the player with the push of a button. In modern day gaming there are two sides to a game, the single player experience, and the world of online multiplayer competition. Whether a player lives far away from his or her friends, or there is poor weather outside, a gamer can simply turn on his or her gaming platform and gain entrance to a whole other world of gamers connected across the internet, but also a uniquely designed world that they are free to explore and adventure through as he or she sees fit. In a study conducted on the educative properties of games with young black men it was found that, "Some mentioned that games were a way to play sports when the real-world option was not available, such as when it was too warm or cold to play outside or when no one was available to play with." (DiSalvo 2008: 136)

I think that this is evidence for how valuable games can be even if only in a supplementary role to sports. There is one rather large caveat that precedes this vast world though. There is a technological barrier that precludes a gamer from being able to play. The first challenge to overcome is having a gaming platform to play in the first place which requires a rather large financial commitment in order to obtain a personal gaming platform, and very rarely is there free access to videogames. A large portion of the world's population does not live in an area that has electricity and a larger portion still does not have the financial capability to buy a TV, computer, game console, or access to the Internet. So while videogames do offer availability and immediate "access" to these extraordinary realms, games are not totally accessible by any who might wish to enjoy them. This access is beneficial for those to whom it is available, although the scope of that population is somewhat limited by extenuating circumstances.

The second category in which I find videogames to be valuable in is replay-ability. Much of how an athlete is measured is based upon how he or she performs "in the clutch." At the key moments in games does the athlete rise to make the plays that he or she needs in order to win? A judgment is then made depending on whether the player makes these plays or not. This judgment is made by those watching the sporting event but can also be made about the player by him or herself. In placing all of this importance on these highly pressured moments we as a society may actually be doing a disservice to kids and young adults who find themselves in such situations. While these moments may be illuminating, they can also be devastating. Someone playing a videogame may experience a similar feeling of pressure during key moments but despite how that particular event turns out there is still the opportunity to go back and retry it. Gamers enjoy the luxury of no do-or-die moments during their time playing. There is not a point at which a mistake or decision shuts down the game or makes that particular event impossible to re-do, where in sports there are no do-overs. One might argue that this replay-ability waters down these crucial moments but I contend that the ability to practice our behavior in such moments is invaluable in the development of young adults as it may allow them to prepare or be better able to function effectively in those kinds of moments in the future, either inside or outside of the game.

Finally, I think that the opportunities for emotional and moral exploration are vastly more dynamic and varied within videogames as opposed to traditional sports. Videogames have clearly evolved from the days of *Pong* and the game-playing experience encourages greater personal involvement and engagement with the content in the game, especially in regard to role-playing games. Bioware Studio's *Mass Effect* series is a trilogy of games that emphasizes decision-making where the potential consequences of the player's decisions or interactions can ripple throughout the events of the galaxies. Although very few gamers can be considered galactic heroes, this type of virtual environment provides a forum where a player can test and discover the potency of day-to-day decision-making and how it can impact the personal arc of life in a way that diminishes real-world consequences. One of the most difficult tasks for a parent or mentor is relaying the message that the decisions a person makes on a day-to-day basis will, in all likelihood, be a determining factor in how his or her life will proceed. Videogames afford the individual an opportunity to experience this concept first hand in a virtual realm where the consequences in his or her real life are drastically reduced, which can then be applied to the actions he or she takes in the real world.

Now in regard to moral exploration I will rely on a personal anecdote. While playing Lionhead Studios RPG *Fable III*, I discovered a key aspect of my personality. In the game I am presented

with a situation where I must chose to either execute or free my [virtual] brother whose rule I have overthrown. I found that it made me physically and emotionally uncomfortable to choose to execute the brother-character and it literally took my roommate chanting at me to do it before I acquiesced. (Note: this was my second playing of the game and I was trying to make all "evil" decisions as opposed to all "good" decisions in my first play-through. I am merely explaining the context of the situation so that my action cannot be dismissed as succumbing to peer pressure.) Similarly, once my character had assumed the throne I found it unbearably difficult to break the promises I had made to characters that helped me achieve victory in the game. I felt responsible to the characters that had helped me. In the most Kantian sense, I recognized the characters not as means to an end, but as being ends in themselves. I felt a very real weight to my "virtual" decisions. I felt the magnitude of the trust that had be given to me as a friend, and a leader, in a way that would mean to betray that trust would demonstrate at short-coming in my personal character. To be fair I did have a good idea that making these "good" decisions came much more easily and more naturally to me, but the scenarios in *Fable III* brought these aspects into sharp distinction for me personally. It is for these reasons that I feel that videogames have the potential to be tremendously effective and illuminating for gamers of all ages, but in particular in the formative years of a child.

It is important for me to mention that I do not intend for videogames to be a perfect substitution for traditional sports. In fact, I do believe that sports offer a number of valuable opportunities for developing character in kids and young adults. For instance, I believe that belonging to a sports team and being a member of a team is tremendously more effective for teaching personal accountability to other people, especially in regard to attendance, effort, and camaraderie. Also, as with almost any media, children and young adults still depend on guidance from their parents and care should be taken when choosing the games that kids will play. Parents must always be responsible for guiding their children towards appropriate scenarios.

Conclusion

The application of arguments from Hemphill's *Cybersport* have been integral in demonstrating the applied skills, both mental and physical, needed to play videogames skillfully. The entrance of motion gaming has hurled another stone at the classic requirements of at least "getting up off the couch." And finally, through a metaphysical analysis of sports and videogames we see that they are engaged on equal planes, and in fact videogames may offer a much more dynamic or at least valuable supplemental learning opportunity than those attributed to traditional "sports." The advances in motion gaming technology bring into consideration the future of videogame athletes playing "traditional" sports in a virtual media and affording less able participants the opportunity to enjoy a sport experience. It is for these reason that I feel it is time to re-evaluate the status of videogames as both a form of entertainment and a didactic resource in the development of an individual's moral and ethical constitution.

Games

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