# FROM SKILLFUL TO COURAGEOUS PLAYERS

*Vampyr and the Development of Virtues*

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We all may have once played a single-player video game that has tested our character, an extremely frightening or difficult game which has pushed us on the verge of giving up. For a moment, we had to endure a challenge, to experience significant frustration, apprehension, or maybe even distress, and wrestle with ourselves not to get discouraged. Despite the adversity, we did not stop playing and, thanks to our determination, we overcame the tremendous resistance coming from the game. Could we say that, in such situation, we have shown courage? According to Coeckelbergh, in his paper "Virtue, Empathy, and Vulnerability: Evaluating Violence in Digital Games", it is an absolute impossibility:

> […] virtues like courage, presuppose (bodily) vulnerability. If I did not have a vulnerable body, I could not act courageously in a violent conflict. The very idea of 'courage' as a virtue would not even make sense since the possibility to be (really) hurt would be removed. In other words, there would not be a real risk. (2011, p. 100)

The idea of courage depending on bodily vulnerability relies on common sense. Indeed, while it is unclear how video game players may be courageous, we do not wonder how it is possible for sports athletes, for example, to embody such virtue. The answer is straightforward: the athlete is courageous when

performing dangerous acrobatics, getting hit or competing despite an injury—and this may be one reason why occidental societies tend to value traditional sports above electronic sports. The video game player has the luxury to win a game by staying safely and comfortably seated in their chair. Most of the time, it is the heroic playable character who is demonstrating courage by putting *their* body at risk and facing death for a good cause.

Surely courage does not only presuppose vulnerability of the physical kind. Sometimes, one has to be courageous to tell the truth or denounce power abuse, accepting the social and emotional ramifications of sticking with one's beliefs. Even in the sphere of games, there is something admirable in going all-in when playing poker with real money or by being willing to play a game in front of a possibly critical audience. Many contemporary virtue ethicists have departed from the idea that courage responds solely to physical threats (e.g. Sanford, 2010). Indeed, the domain of courage does not seem as narrow as Coeckelbergh suggests, but is it sufficiently broad to include single-player video games? Are risks we take when playing these kinds of games relevant or considerable enough to exert courage? We are going to explore these questions by defining courage from a virtue ethics perspective and examining how it may intervene in the context of single-player gameplay. To support our demonstration, we will present a close reading of *Vampyr* (DONTNOD, 2018), a narrative action-adventure game in which saving non–playable characters makes the game more difficult to play. We will defend that *Vampyr* requires a form of courage supported by a good disposition to fear and confidence, not by skills, and propose that courage in single–player video games entail personal risks of all kinds as well as cautiously striving for greater benefits.

## WHEN PLAYING IS TRAINING ONE'S CHARACTER

How does courage present itself in the experience of single-player video games? One way to answer this question is to first understand what courage is. Virtue ethics may be of help in this endeavour. This normative ethics conceives courage as one of many virtues, including honesty, generosity, and justice. Virtues are dispositions of character, meaning that the virtuous person *tends* to act and react in a virtuous way (Achtenberg, 2002, p. 111). These dispositions are acquired by practice and, over time, become defining traits of a person, yet they are not something attainable once and for all. Aristotle, one of the most important proponents of this ethics, has famously compared virtues to skills: "we become brave by doing brave actions" in a similar way that "we become harpists by playing the harp" (1999, p. 19 [II.1 1103a-b]). Annas has further deepened this analogy, claiming that one fundamental similarity between virtues and skills are "the need to learn" and "the drive to aspire" (2011, p. 16). Both are dispositions we can possess if we willingly attempt to improve ourselves and if we know how and why we must behave in a particular way to get better. With practice, says Annas, we come to perform virtuous actions and have virtuous emotions with relative ease and pleasure. If neglected, though, we may start to slowly lose them. What the virtue ethicist emphasizes is that virtues are developmental in nature. They are not abstract ideals we assimilate through contemplation, as if having a good theory of virtue would be enough to become a good person. Unformed virtues are already in us and we have to engage with them in order to improve. Once they're developed, we have to keep them in good condition, again by practicing them.

To borrow examples from Sanford (2010, pp. 443-4), courage is tested early in our childhood when riding a bike for the first time or playing baseball against other kids who can throw the ball hard. At this point in our life, we're not familiar with virtues so we need parental figures to encourage us to properly deal

with such challenges. As we grow up, we learn to appreciate acts of bravery, whether they are coming from our relatives or fictional characters. At first, we may aspire to simply imitate them, but that is not enough. True virtue requires to identify situations calling for courage autonomously, to act accordingly and to give reasons to act as such. Once we understand this later in our lifetime, we may exert courage by following legitimate life paths despite the disapproval of our families or simply by standing up to a greedy boss who may fire us from a job we love. Through these kinds of experiences, in which we strive for virtue, sincerely practice courage and do it well, we reinforce our character. Surely video games can also fulfill a positive role in such ethical development.

Game studies have already pointed in this direction. Schulzke has encouraged scholars to see video games with ethical dilemmas as "training grounds in which players can practice thinking about morality" (2009, para. 3). Here, Schulzke refers to a particular form of thinking, that is *phronesis*, defined as "the ability to reason correctly about practical matters" (Hursthouse, 2001, p. 12). We shall adopt a more encompassing interpretation of the training ground metaphor: what we feel when playing games is as important for the development of our character as what we think. This is especially true if we acknowledge that courage "involves feeling the right mix of confidence and fear" (Stark, 2001, p. 450). Reconstructing Aristotle's ethics of virtue, Curzer explains why both of these emotions are essential to courage:

> A situation in which fear should not be felt is a riskless situation. Courage would be superfluous. A situation where confidence should not be felt is a futile situation. Courage would be useless. From an intellectual perspective, situations calling for courageous action demand that the agent weigh the risks and benefits of different options. (2012 p. 30)

In other words, the cognitive role of confidence is to evaluate the safeness of a situation, and that of fear is to evaluate dangerousness. Taken together, these emotions represent the epistemic value of courage. Without fear, we make reckless decisions and put our heads in the lion's mouth. Without confidence, we shrink away from every semblance of risk. For Curzer and other neo-aristotelicians, then, courage is not about getting over one's emotions, but rather refining one's disposition to feel the right emotions. If we face inner conflicts because fear and reason tell us different things, we are in a state of confusion which prevents us from being fully virtuous. Learning about how to react, through a proper emotional education and a relevant set of experiences, ensures that our emotions are themselves virtuous and enhances the ethical quality of our consequent actions. In the case of courage, the right mix of fear and confidence transforms rashness and cowardice into a desire to carefully push on, as Curzer says: "courageous people strive to avoid physical harms by going forward with courageous acts *in ways that reduce the risk*" (p. 60).[1] In this sense, courage is also prudence, otherwise we could unnecessarily risk everything, our lives and relationships, and still exhibit courage. Such futile sacrifice would be rather foolish. Hence, if courage involves prudence, the child is courageous by riding their bike while holding tight or by raising their glove to prepare catching a baseball; the adult is courageous by standing up for themselves in a careful way, making sure that they're not about to destroy their own life doing so.

Now that we are more familiar with virtue in general and courage in particular, we should explain (albeit roughly) how video games may be training grounds in which we learn how to have virtuous emotions. Referring to Hollywood films, Carroll notes an important characteristic of the emotional experience

1. As claimed earlier, there is a convincing argument to be made about courage responding to more than what Curzer refers as "physical harms".

of fiction works: "If in everyday life, our emotions criterially focus events for us, movie events have been, to an appreciable extent, criterially *pre*focused for us" (2010, p. 5). It goes without saying that what makes video games special is that they are also able to organize our emotional experience, especially narrative ones. For example, horror games tend to elicit fear by making us focus on the vulnerability of the playable character and the dangerousness of monsters; other games tend to make us feel guilty for choices we made by having non–playable characters making us focus on our faults, such as Clementine in the first season of *The Walking Dead* (Telltale, 2012) or Sans in *Undertale* (Fox, 2015).

Such events don't simply push our emotional buttons. By regularly reocurring, they manage to diminish or expand our emotional repertoire, defining what the objects of emotion types are and normalizing responses they elicit. This is what de Sousa calls "paradigm scenarios" in an effort to explain the role of culture in our emotional development (1987, p. 182).[2] Paradigm scenarios may inculcate various emotional dispositions. Think of the many war games eliciting pleasure from combat with questionable motives and contempt towards the other. These kinds of games are no doubt detrimental to our character, forming emotional habits that do not match the ones of the virtuous person. Conversely, there are war games that generate compassion for the innocents and horror towards death and destruction—such as *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014). These train us to react appropriately to armed conflicts by conveying paradigm scenarios that reflect the reality of war and that cultivate virtues of justice and such. Combined with virtue ethics, the concept of paradigm scenario allows us to explore how video games affect our character due, among other things, to how they manipulate our emotions and their cognitive

2. Plantinga also uses de Sousa's concept to show how Hollywood films structure emotional experiences (see 2009, p. 81-2).

content. In the following, we will explain how *Vampyr* enables the practice of cautious courage through a paradigm scenario in which risks and benefits are interrelated. We will understand that occurrences of virtuous emotions take into account one's own skills without depending on them to arise and that it is unfair to ask inexpert players to become skillful in order to be courageous.

## VAMPYR: RISKS OF FAILURE AND CAUTIOUS COURAGE

*Vampyr*'s story focuses on Doctor Jonathan Reid returning to London after having served in World War I. The opening cut-scene shows his birth as a vampire. Recovering consciousness in a corpse pit, visibly confused by his new nature and terribly bloodthirsty, Jonathan attacks the first person he sees upon awakening, taking their life after setting his fangs on them. Having quenched his thirst, he regains control of himself and realizes that he has killed his loving sister, Mary. Not understanding how and why he became this monster, he resolves to discover the identity of his creator and confront them. In the meantime, he meets Doctor Edgar Swansea, an ally of the vampires, who grants him a position at the hospital he administers, where Jonathan would be able to discreetly pursue his investigations. However, the streets of London are occupied by vampire hunters and infested with skals, which are bestial vampiric creatures, whose condition stems from contracting contagious diseases (unrelated to vampires' bites). Working with Swansea, Jonathan starts researching a vaccine for the virus that is ravaging the city.

The game is played in a third-person perspective and takes place in a relatively open world. The map of London is divided into four districts connected by labyrinthine paths, which are punctuated by roadblocks and ransacked apartments. The city can be traversed on foot at night only, mostly to complete quests

given by non–playable characters. In addition to districts, London is segmented into hostile and peaceful zones. The formers are invaded by the aforementioned enemies, who want Jonathan dead and can be defeated using the protagonist's weapons and supernatural abilities. The latter areas are populated by non–playable characters, approximately 15 per district, whom can be talked to. A particularly interesting interaction with these characters is the possibility to offer them medical help.

Indeed, the game's menus indicate the health status of each district, which can vary between six states: sanitized, healthy, stable, serious, critical, and hostile. The sicker the characters become, the more the health status of districts they belong to plummet. By falling into a hostile state, a district reaches a point of no return. Non–playable characters disappear (along with their quest) and are replaced by powerful enemies. The desire to save lives may lead the player to vigilantly look after the health of the citizens, as any virtuous doctor would. To this end, they have to find medicinal ingredients scattered all over the city, find recipes for certain vaccines by undertaking quests, and create and distribute medicines to characters in need. That being said, the game gives another much less virtuous reason to heal the population. The player can order Jonathan to hypnotize non–playable characters, lure them out of sight of witnesses and drink blood from them, which is rewarded with a considerable amount of experience points. A healthy character has better quality blood, which translates into many more extra points to acquire. When faced with a difficult quest or a particularly tough enemy, the player may be tempted to improve Jonathan's abilities this way – not to mention that the game makes sure to feature unpunished criminals among the protagonist's potential targets. Therefore, preventing the spread of diseases among the population may be instrumentalized by the player who is looking to accumulate experience points and gain power.

The game does not take a neutral stance on this matter. It dangles the temptation of killing characters or letting them die before the player. This is what happened to me during my first (and only) playthrough. Quite early in the main quest, I encountered enemies whose level was much higher than my character's, sometimes even twice as much. This imbalance is heightened by the interaction between two features of the game's system: the leveling mechanic and the disease behavior. To level up Jonathan, I have to send him to bed where he will spend the day. A menu will then allow me to improve his attributes (e.g. vitality and stamina) and skills (mostly special attacks). But the passage of time means that citizens might get new diseases or their health condition might worsen. Since I did not have sufficient resources to take care of everyone, I was forced to slow down the outbreaks of diseases by "freezing time", that is, by preventing myself from upgrading Jonathan's combat attributes and skills. By doing so, I have had to face fiercer enemies as I progressed in the main quest. I did allow myself to occasionally improve Jonathan's abilities when I considered the health status of districts under control and when the increasing difficulty of the game was not overwhelming. However, this does not take anything away from the fact that the game tries to spark a conflict between the choice of making Jonathan more powerful and the choice of preventing the spread of the epidemic.

There is something akin to cautious courage in playing *Vampyr* in line with the goal of healing and sparing citizens. Let us remind ourselves that courage relies on both emotions of confidence and fear. A reckless player would be disposed to feel confidence in their success, but not fear of failure. They would not be inclined to improve Jonathan's abilities, giving themselves a hard time even when there is no need to. If their skill level does not match their confidence level, they will submit themselves to continual failures and might not even be able to play the game anymore. A cowardly player would tend to fear risks of failure, but not

feel confident in their ability to succeed. They would not hesitate to spill the blood of healthy non-playable characters to give themselves an additional advantage in battle. They would just try to complete the game with the greatest of ease. A courageous player, on the other hand, is disposed to experience appropriate occurrences of fear and confidence, to look for success, but not at all costs. The structure of this courage follows the one described by Curzer: the risk of harming oneself (by indirectly increasing the game's difficulty) is cautiously taken in order to obtain a greater benefit (that of saving the population of London). This is a real risk, which makes *Vampyr* interesting to play. Indeed, the choice of leveling up Jonathan and the choice of keeping the population alive would be trivial if there was no downside attached to them. The increase of the game's difficulty provides a counterbalance to these otherwise obvious decisions, since it creates the risks of failing repeatedly, of going through unnecessary trouble, and of having one's progress entirely blocked. Thus, playing a game with courage is perceiving risks of failure (otherwise ignored by recklessness) while keeping an eye on the potential higher benefits of proceeding cautiously (something that cowardice cannot undertake).

It is relevant here to refer to one boss fight I had to illustrate a little more clearly what cautious courage is (or what it is not). A narrative twist around the middle of the main quest reveals that Jonathan's sister is in fact not dead. The bite she received actually turned her into a vampire. Although she survived, the metamorphosis has made her lose her mind. After committing a series of murders to get Jonathan's attention, she decides to punish him in the very cemetery where her funeral was held. The ensuing fight caused me a lot of trouble for two reasons. First, since I tried to play virtuously by healing non–playable characters without using them for gaining experience points, Mary had a higher level than Jonathan (21 vs. 16). I therefore had a competitive disadvantage compared to my opponent. Second,

Mary is a particularly fast boss, who also uses her supernatural abilities to keep Jonathan from attacking her. Notably, her scream produces a shockwave that kills her brother instantly if he stands too close to her. She also casts a large number of corrupted roots which spring up from the ground and form unpredictable irregular patterns. When she used one ability or the other, I had to make my character run away for safety, but by the time I brought him back within range of attacking, Mary was ready to launch her next strike.

The previous description only refers to one particular difficult fight, but there are many like that everywhere else in video games. It omits a detail responsible for triggering cautious courage, embodied by an unwell priest sitting in the center of the arena. As I move Jonathan towards him, an icon of fangs appears to communicate the possibility of biting him for blood (image 1). The first time I came across this choice, I had no good reason to actualize it. However, I soon discovered that Mary heads to the priest in mid-combat to sink her teeth into his neck and regenerate about a third of her health. As I kept failing, I became torn between drinking from the priest's blood before she did and fighting with a noble disadvantage. After 15 minutes (which felt a lot longer), I finally gave up and killed him in the hope of eventually defeating Mary. In some sense, I lacked courage, losing confidence in my abilities and taking the easy way out instead of enduring a few more failures. I could have spared the priest and vanquished Mary by persevering a bit longer, since some of my earlier attempts were undeniably promising. I perceived more risks than benefits, hence fear of failing again took over.


*Image 1: Jonathan is engaged in a fight with Mary. At the upper left is a priest vulnerable to the bite of one of the two vampires, as indicated by the fang icon.*

## BEYOND SKILLS

In light of the previous example, it is opportune to clarify how skills and courage are related. Typically, when we say that a player is good, we mean that they play a game with ease and are successful in attempting to achieve various goals and winning conditions. Such goodness is served by skills. We should not conflate the skillful player with another sort of good player, the virtuous one, whose playing abilities are signs of a well–disposed character. Although there are a lot of similarities between virtues and skills, some of their differences are important to point out. One of them is that skills, according to Annas, are "local" dispositions, while virtues are "global" dispositions (2011, p. 74-5). A skillful player is just that, skillful. Their abilities indicate nothing about who they are and how they fare in other areas of their lives. We all know famous skillful athletes or artists who are not embodiments of virtue. They may be good at their sport or their craft, but it does not follow that they are good people. Likewise, skills developed by players are mostly relevant to the games they play, not to other spheres of their lives.

On the contrary, a virtuous player is necessarily a virtuous person. Virtues are stable character traits that do not vary according to life contexts. This is why the virtuous person is reliable: whether they are with strangers or close relatives, at work, at home, on vacation or playing games, we expect them to act in a way that is consistent with their admirable character. Annas claims that "a virtue involves more than the activity performed in the situations in which it is first learned: it involves something on the person's part" (p. 84). This is why there's no such thing as a ludological virtue, as proposed by Sicart, who has established a list of virtues that are "only relevant within the game experience" (2009, p. 94). Virtues are by definition extra-ludic since they do not depend on the reconfiguration of the initial situation in order to be performed. From a virtue ethics standpoint, an ethics of gameplay must answer to an ethics of life as a whole. While skills are mostly bound to localized activities (e.g. a specific game, sport, or craft), virtues are not.

With reference to courage, Aristotle has distinguished skills from virtues in his books. According to Rodrigue's exegesis, the Greek philosopher believed that the former is no more than an asset to the latter. In Rodrigue's words:

> While not constituting a necessary condition of courage, expertise provides the agent with a benefit; this benefit does not lie in the elimination of danger (such effect rather proves to involve inferiority, as we have shown previously), but in the fact that competence contributes to the success of an action, i.e. to victory in a battle that the courageous person would have undertaken anyway. It is, in this perspective, supererogatory: its possession represents an asset, whereas its deprivation, although it may cause harm to the virtuous person, does not affect virtue. (2006, p. 293; freely translated)

Because virtue and skill are independent from each other, one may accomplish a virtuous but unskilled action or a skilled but vicious action. This applies to courage, which can be achieved despite not yielding the expected results, whereas recklessness

and cowardice can be achieved through great technical display. It is the same with video games. The unskillful or inexpert player, unable to progress in a game because they are facing a challenge beyond their skill level, may still be courageous. Despite their failures, they may be motivated by virtue, choosing it for its own sake. Regarding the skillful or expert player, nothing tells us that they are disposed to courage. Their skill level may facilitate their in-game progress so much that they never encounter risks of failure, hence lacking opportunity to engage with this virtue. That being said, skills are still beneficial to the courageous player, who may need them in order to simply play the game and reveal new situations which will challenge their character.

Coming back to the fight against Mary in *Vampyr*, how would the virtuous player show courage in such a situation? As we have established, we should take into account the matter of skill. Unable to overcome this challenge, the inexpert virtuous player must face the facts and adapt their performance. If they desire to keep playing the game and continue the ethical "conversation" they have with it, they have no choice but to attack the priest before Mary does.[3] However, they should not rush their decision. Discussing how normative ethics approach dilemmas, Hursthouse mentions that virtue ethics is more concerned about how to respond to a difficult situation rather than simply identifying what the right choice is out of the available options (2001, pp. 44-8). For instance, having to choose between two evils, one must act "after much hesitation and consideration of possible alternatives, feeling deep regret, and doing such-and-such by way of restitution" (p. 48). In the same spirit, the inexpert player who kills the priest must not take pride in it. They must disagree with this solution and look for alternatives. Once they realize their only chance is to take the life of the innocent

3. The metaphor of ethical conversation between the player and the game is detailed in Sicart's Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay (2013, pp. 11-3).

character, they have to feel some sort of negative emotion such as regret or disappointment. This would be the most virtuous response to this specific configuration of the situation, following Hursthouse's reasoning.

In my case, I hastily abandoned efforts to defeat Mary without attacking the priest even though I had the skills to win the fight. I did not respond in the best way I could. A virtuous player of my skill level would probably have hesitated longer than I did, unsatisfied with the convenient but brutal possibility of killing the priest to prevent Mary from regaining health. But it is precisely my skill level which allowed me to submit myself to this test of character: had I been an expert player, I would not have had to gather up the courage to persevere, since I would have not been concerned by the game's difficulty. I would not even have thought about what to do with the priest since I would have beaten Mary without any problem. (And if I was still looking to keep citizens healthy by administering vaccines, I would not have done it out of courage—perhaps out of benevolence, though.) In any case, my expertise would have kept me from encountering dangerous situations and experiencing fear.

It is clear now that the inexpert player is most likely to find themselves in a situation calling for courage than any other type of player. Sometimes, in difficult circumstances also comes the opportunity to be even more virtuous, as Hursthouse argues: "the harder it is for him, the more virtue he shows" (2001, p. 96). The inexpert player is able to demonstrate greater courage *because* they are struggling to complete the game's objectives, which entails more daunting risks. What this player must have to play well is another set of experiences than the one that shape skills, an expertise that let them know how to respond to safety and dangerousness. This sort of disposition is not merely acquired by playing games, but also by living a good life. This is why video games are only one of many possible training grounds for ethical development.

## CONCLUSION

The first applications of virtue ethics to single-player video games were limited by concerns about the effects of violent game content on players (McCormick 2001; Reynolds 2002). In addition to failing to differentiate between types of representation of violence, these philosophical explorations arrived at conclusions similar to the one's of behaviourist-inspired psychology: that exposure to interactively and graphically "realistic" violence desensitizes players or, in virtue ethics terms, corrupts their disposition to empathy, compassion, and such. However, by examining what it is like to play virtuously from a cognitive and emotional standpoint, we have given a hint of virtue ethics' true potential. Although more recent works have also pointed in that direction by shifting the discussion from exposure to attitude towards problematic content (Ostritsch 2017; Patridge 2011), their application of virtue ethics is cut short by other preoccupations. We must keep searching for ways to play virtuously, that is bravely, justly, honestly, generously, conscientiously, and so on.

Returning to Coeckelbergh's opening remark, it is now safer to assume that demonstrating courage in single-player video games is not an impossibility. Even if it seems to be more akin to the activity of a pilot learning to operate a plane with a flight simulator instead of a real plane, it still plays a formative role we should not underestimate. Ryan, Staines, and Formosa have also proposed that courage is compatible with gameplay when discussing "moral action" in *This War of Mine*. According to them, rescuing non–playable characters in need of help "requires real bravery" given that "the consequences affect the [playable] survivors' long-term prospects" (2016, p. 10). To this we could add that the playable characters are weakly armed ordinary citizens, that they are reduced in an absolute state of poverty, and that the permanent death rule severely punishes the player's mistakes. In this way, the game creates a paradigm scenario

similar to *Vampyr*, where the benefit of protecting vulnerable characters must be weighed against the risk of failure. Another scholar who seems to contradict Coeckelbergh's claim is Juul in *The Art of Failure*, where he suggests that playing games is a risk-taking attitude: "To play a game is to make an emotional gamble: we invest time and self-esteem in the hope that it will pay off. Players are not willing to run the same amount of risk—some even prefer not to run a risk at all, not to play" (2013, p. 14). In *Vampyr*, not to run a risk may consist of optimizing one's path at all costs, killing in the process innocent characters. The ethical return of such a low investment is not worth much, if not worthless. One needs to practice cautious courage, to improve one's disposition to both fear and confidence in order to make the right emotional gamble, which means assessing risks and benefits appropriately. Only then is the result of one's gamble, win or lose, an irreplaceable reward: virtue.

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