

Addressing Online Gaming Toxicity from a Confucian Perspective

Sta. Maria, J.E.; Ziliotti, E.

DOI

[10.22916/jcpc.2022..38.131](https://doi.org/10.22916/jcpc.2022..38.131)

Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture

Citation (APA)

Sta. Maria, J. E., & Ziliotti, E. (2022). Addressing Online Gaming Toxicity from a Confucian Perspective. *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture*, 38, 131–152. <https://doi.org/10.22916/jcpc.2022..38.131>

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download, forward or distribute the text or part of it, without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license such as Creative Commons.

Takedown policy

Please contact us and provide details if you believe this document breaches copyrights.
We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Addressing Online Gaming Toxicity from a Confucian Perspective

Joseph Sta. Maria and Elena Ziliotti*

Abstract

Can Confucian ethics contribute to diagnosing the root causes of video games' toxicity and formulating design requirements for redressing it? Contemporary Confucian studies on technology have not addressed these questions, although video games have become an important part of contemporary human life. This paper advances Confucian-inspired ethical studies on technologies by bringing attention to the moral dimension of this underexamined aspect of contemporary life. By focusing on *League of Legends* (one of the most popular toxic online multiplayer games), we argue that *League's* toxic environment hinders the cultivation of *ren* (仁), *shu* (恕), and *he* (和), but Confucian conceptual resources can inspire the formulation of at least three design recommendations against *League's* toxicity. The first is to eliminate killing in the game by banking on players' desire to express their skillfulness. The second is to include a re-watching feature to sanction toxic players with the aim of inculcating sympathy in them. The last is to add a procedure before and after each match, where players can cordially interact with each other and develop mutual respect.

Keywords: Confucianism, toxicity, ethics of technology, *League of Legends*

* Joseph Sta. Maria is a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Technology, Policy, and Management at the Delft University of Technology (TU Delft). E-mail: J.E.Sta.Maria@tudelft.nl

Elena Ziliotti is an Assistant Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy in the Faculty of Technology, Policy, and Management at the Delft University of Technology (TU Delft). E-mail: E.Ziliotti@tudelft.nl

** The authors would like to thank Sabine Roeser, Philip Brey, the audience at the June 2022 Internal meeting of the Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technology (ESDiT), and two anonymous reviewers for their comments and insights that improved this paper.

This work was supported by the Research programme "Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies", the Gravitation programme of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research [024.004.031].

I. Introduction

Developing human relationships conducive to moral cultivation is central to Confucian ethics. In classical Confucianism, the individual self is a dynamic “nexus of relations” partly constituted by social relations (Gergen 2009, 55, as cited in Thompson 2017, 889). The social relationships in which the individual is situated shape her attitudes which, in turn, influence the individual’s development and engagement in relations. This understanding of the self entails that attaining moral cultivation is possible only through harmonious human relationships at different social levels, from the interpersonal to the cosmic level.¹

The Confucian emphasis on human relationships has recently prompted some contemporary scholars of Confucianism to examine technology-mediated human relationships. For these scholars, the extensive development and sustainment of digitally mediated interpersonal relationships raise critical questions for Confucian ethics: How can the Confucian goal of moral cultivation be pursued in a digital and “hyperconnected era”? (Floridi 2015). Furthermore, is a Confucian-informed view of digital technologies possible?

A growing literature has emerged in recent years in response to the latter question, as scholars of Confucianism have begun analyzing disruptive new technologies, such as social media and robots. For example, in “Confucian Social Media: An Oxymoron?,” Pak-hang Wong (2013) proposes redesigning social media following Confucian values. Focusing on the Confucian understanding of the self, Matthew Dennis and Elena Ziliotti (forthcoming) develop a Confucian-inspired account of social media’s structure of human relations. In “AI and the Confucian Conception of the Human Person: Some Preliminary Reflections,” Sor-hoon Tan (2019) uses Confucian insights to pinpoint critical deficiencies in robot-human interactions. Robots are also the focus of Qin Zhu, Tom Williams, and Ruchen Wen’s “Confucian robot ethics” (2019), which proposes an innovative Confucian account of

¹ In the *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning), ethical cultivation begins with the self and gradually expands to greater relational circles, including the family, the polity, and ultimately the world (*Daxue* 4-5, as translated in Johnston and Ping 2012, 135, 4-7).

morally competent robots.²

These innovative works advance debates in Confucian philosophy and philosophy of technology. However, no study on the ethical implications of online gaming from a Confucian perspective appears to exist.³ Yet, online gaming has become an important part of contemporary human life. As it is estimated that three billion people (or 40 percent of the human population) play video games (“Global Video Game” 2020), sociologists and game study scholars consider video games to represent “an expression of life and culture in late modernity” (Muriel and Crawford 2018, 2).

Notably, so-called “toxic” games are often the most popular. These online video games contribute to morally deleterious behaviors, involving “abusive communications directed towards other players [. . .] and disruptive gameplay that violates the rules and social norms of the game” (Beres et al. 2021, 1). For example, *League of Legends* (henceforth *League*) is an online multiplayer game known for breeding toxicity (ESB Staff 2021; Brinks 2020; Bhatnagar 2020). However, *League* is one of the most played PC games in the world, with an average of 180 million monthly players (Spezzy 2022). The popularity of toxic video games, such as *League*, calls for more ethical scrutiny. It is unclear whether Confucian ideas can contribute to understanding the root causes of video games’ toxicity and help formulate design requirements for redressing it.

This paper advances the understanding of these issues by focusing on *League*, one of the world’s most popular toxic video games. We use Confucian intellectual resources to (a) diagnose the problems with such a game and (b) propose remedies to its toxicity. Following Dennis and Ziliotti (forthcoming), we present a “Confucian-inspired design proposition” to curb *League*’s toxicity. This method draws inspiration from Confucian ethical ideals without imposing specific Confucian

² Other examples of noteworthy works in Confucian ethics of technology are Wong and Wang (2021), Wong (2019), Mattice (2015), and Wong (2020).

³ To our knowledge, the only reported study on the relation between Confucianism and video games is Ferril Irham Muzaki’s empirical study on Confucian ideas on popular video games in Indonesia (Muzaki 1990). Furthermore, Robert Page (2012, 2016) uses Confucian philosophy as an explanatory lens for understanding Chinese players’ attitudes and behavior in two computer games. However, these works do not evaluate nor recommend changes to the games based on a Confucian ethical perspective.

moral ideas on technological design (Dennis and Ziliotti forthcoming, 1). Consequently, a Confucian-inspired method avoids questions of feasibility and justifiability that arise around a claim for a Confucian techno-design for pluralist and non-Confucian contemporary societies (forthcoming, 12).

This paper claims that at least three reasons make *League's* toxicity problematic from the perspective of Confucian ethics. Its toxic environment hinders the cultivation of *ren* 仁 (benevolence), *shu* 恕 (sympathetic understanding), and *he* 和 (harmony). However, Confucian conceptual resources can be used to formulate at least three remedies for *League's* toxicity. First, inspired by ideas in the *Mencius*, we propose to remedy *League's* valorization of killing by redefining characters' defeats such that players' non-moral inclinations can be used to pursue morally acceptable ends. Second, inspired by the concept of *shu* 恕, we suggest that toxic behaviors between fellow teammates can be corrected if players could put themselves in others' place. This idea can be realized through a feature that invites players reported for malicious behavior to re-watch the highlights of the match in which they exhibited negative behavior. Third, the idea of a code of conduct constitutive of the notion of *li* 禮 (rituals) can inspire the development of new scripted procedures to instill mutual respect among *League* players.

Section II opens by describing *League* and the causes of its toxicity. Section III analyzes *League's* toxicity in terms of Confucian ethics, while Section IV discusses how Confucian conceptual resources can inspire three design recommendations to mitigate *League's* toxicity. Finally, Section V summarizes the paper and suggests future research areas.

II. *League of Legends* and Its Toxicity

Before moving to *League* and its design elements, some terminological and methodological clarifications on the basic assumptions of our analysis of *League's* design elements are in order. Our analysis draws from philosopher of technology Philip Brey's approach to technology. Like Brey, we consider technological products unable to produce consequences deterministically (Brey 2018, 1). Instead, their

probability of having specific effects partly depends on their specialized function and the social context in which they are placed by virtue of that function (Brey 2018, 1). For this reason, we shall refer to the consequences brought about by *League's* design elements as "affordances" to signify that the effects of technological products are precisely only probable (2018, 2).⁴

League is a multiplayer online battle arena game in which two teams of human players fight against each other to attain a particular objective. *League's* primary game mode is "Summoner's Rift" (Kou 2020, 82). A standard match in Summoner's Rift consists of two opposing teams of five members each. Both teams have bases on the opposite sides of the game mode's map (Kou 2020, 82) and three lanes connect these bases. Built on the lanes are towers that teams should destroy to proceed to the enemy team's base. Between the lanes are areas known as "jungles" where monsters reside. Players can acquire advantages if they defeat any monsters. Both team bases have a "nexus" structure that creates "minions." These minions are continually produced, and they proceed to the lanes where they fight the minions of the other base. The victory condition of the match is the destruction of the opponent team's nexus. To achieve this, players can pick over a hundred "champions" to play as in their team (Riot Games 2022a). In a team, most champions fight in one of the lanes where they face enemy minions and champions, while one champion goes to the jungle to fight monsters. All champions begin at level one, where they can often use only one ability. A champion levels up when it kills minions, monsters, and other champions. As it levels up, it acquires more abilities and its traits⁵ are enhanced. Concomitantly, a champion gains more money because the latter can be acquired by personally defeating minions, monsters, and other champions. This money can purchase items that enhance the champion's traits.

The most prominent Summoner's Rift sub-type is Ranked Solo/Duo sub-mode or "ranked games" (Kordyaka et al. 2019, 2487). A ranked game

⁴ By "affordances," Brey means that a given technological product "may afford, enable, allow, induce, stimulate, cause, necessitate or require certain events or state-of-affairs" (Brey 2018, 2). In this paper, we will usually use the verb form, i.e., "affords."

⁵ A champion's trait, also called a "statistic" or "stat" for short, "is a number indicating how well a champion can do a certain thing" ("Champion Statistic" 2021).

allows individual players to become part of a ranking system in which they ascend or descend like a ladder. The “rungs” of this ladder consist of nine tiers: Iron, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, Grand Master, and Challenger (Kou 2020, 82). These tiers are each divided into four divisions. A player begins in “Iron IV” and, through winning matches, ascends to higher divisions (e.g., Iron III), although she can descend to lower divisions by losing or not playing for some time. Achieving a high rank is considered prestigious and motivates players to engage consistently in ranked games (Kou 2020, 87).

Ranked games are known to be more toxic than other game modes.⁶ Multiple design elements explain ranked games’ higher toxicity. One is the ranking system, which evaluates single players based on collective activities. This creates an overarching individual goal for players, namely to get a high rank, and motivates them to pursue it (Kou 2020, 87). However, this goal can be achieved only through a non-individual activity: winning matches with a team. The achievement of the latter goal depends heavily on each team member playing well (Vars 2021, 3:25-42), such that a player’s teammates are partly responsible for her progress or regress in the ranks (Paul 2018, 119). For instance, a player who performs well in a game can still lose that match and have his rank level drop if his teammates underperform during the game. This situation affords a hostile environment in which some players impose an overbearing demand on their teammates to play optimally and where they become furious at them for the slightest mistakes. As a *League* player explains:

My friend and I just started trying ranked. We got into a match and told our team that we were new to ranked so we would play extra carefully. However, when my friend died to the opponent ADC once, immediately one of our teammates said we suck, we are feeding,⁷ and wanted to report us after the match. (Kou 2020, 88)

⁶ Kate Grandprey-Shores et al. show that players of ranked games “were associated with higher toxicity indexes than players in normal matches” (2014, 1365).

⁷ “Feeding” refers to how champions make their enemies stronger by constantly losing to them. This is possible since defeating a champion results in monetary reward and experience.

The so-called “snowballing” phenomenon further increases pressure on teammates. Snowballing means that “all actions have repercussions for the duration of the game and come one after another in an exponential way” (Bonenfant et al. 2018, 143). Thus, even a single failure or defeat on the part of one team member can significantly raise the chances of the team losing the match. This increases the demand for optimal performance, the tension among players, and ultimately the likelihood of toxic behavior.

How the ranking system affects players’ perception of each other also affords toxic behavior. The ranking system can dispose players to see their fellow players as means to achieve a high rank. This instrumentalizing attitude diminishes the dignity of fellow players, making the one who has this attitude more prone to treat them disrespectfully. This is especially true when fellow players make mistakes; that is when the “‘instruments’ fail to perform as expected” (Kou 2020, 90). Furthermore, players can use ranks as the basis of their conduct towards one another (Cf. Kou 2020, 87). Often, the presence of ranks leads to displaying greater trust and esteem for people in higher ranks. However, it also promotes belittling players of lower ranks. This manifests in abusive communication. For instance, a *League* player attests that “Some players love calling Bronze [ranked] players monkeys or apes” (Kou 2020, 87).

Finally, the ranking system can afford toxic behavior also because teammates may not have the same motivation to win the match. Teammates may be at different places in the rankings, and this can lead to friction, lack of cooperation, and disrespectful behavior between team members. For example, one player may only require one more game to get a higher rank, she can be anxious about winning the match. Meanwhile, the rest of the team may have a more carefree attitude because they have several games to win before they move up in rank (Bonenfant et al. 2018, 149).

III. Evaluating *League* and Its Toxicity from a Confucian Perspective

Having clarified the game features that are usually associated with

League's toxicity, it remains unclear why these toxic features are problematic from a Confucian ethical perspective. This section answers this question by revealing the most troubling aspects of *League's* toxicity from a Confucian standpoint. It argues that crucial design elements of *League's* ranked games hinder the cultivation of fundamental Confucian attitudes: disdain for killing, sympathetic concern, openness and accommodation.

A. Disdain for Killing and Appreciation for Life

From a Confucian perspective, one problematic element in ranked games is their portrayal of killing. *League* construes killing as necessary for winning a match and even valorizes a player's ability to kill multiple enemy champions. In contrast, the ancient Confucian masters had a substantial appreciation for the value of human life: for instance, both Mencius and Xunzi considered the virtuous person as someone who would not take an innocent human life even if he would obtain the whole world through it.⁸ Mencius believed that a ruler should execute a person only if his entire country agreed to it *and* after he had examined the person.⁹ Furthermore, Confucius believed that during ideal times, when truly virtuous rulers reign, capital punishment would be dispensed with¹⁰ and the unjust would be converted to goodness through the ruler's powerful moral example.¹¹ The Confucians' disdain for killing can also be seen in their dislike of war. Mencius abhorred those who encouraged war and considered them guilty of a "crime even death cannot atone for."¹²

League seems to trivialize human life by making killing a necessary means of winning the game. One might object that since killing is merely instrumental for winning, players will not give it much importance. How-

⁸ *Mencius* 2A.2:24 as translated in Mencius (2008, 42-43); Xunzi 8:75-80, as translated in Xunzi (2014, 54-55). The citations of Xunzi are based on Hutton's translation (2014). The number before the colon is the chapter and the number(s) after it is the line number in Hutton's work.

⁹ *Mencius* 1B.7:5-6, as translated in Mencius (2008, 25-26).

¹⁰ *Analects* 13.11, as translated in Confucius (2003, 144).

¹¹ *Analects* 12.19, 15.5, as translated in Confucius (2008, 134, 175).

¹² *Mencius* 4A.14:2, as translated in Mencius (2008, 96).

ever, this is precisely the problem for Confucians: accustoming players to value human lives instrumentally to pursue their personal ends. Furthermore, *League* does more than construe killing as a means to win the game: it valorizes it by broadcasting a player's kills through the in-game voice announcer ("Announcer" 2020). These announcements are based on the number of consecutive kills: two kills in a row are called "double kill," three kills "triple kill," four kills "quadra kill," and five kills, which is the whole enemy team, "penta kill" ("Announcer" 2020). The higher the number of consecutive kills, the more excited and admiring the announcer's tone becomes. Although it is difficult to ascertain the specific effects of *League*'s valorization of killing on a person's disposition toward human life, what is apparent is that it does not align with the Confucian appreciation for life and disdain of killing. *League*'s valorization of killing might also be a matter of concern for those who do not hold a Confucian perspective. This is because violence in video games, which includes killing, is believed to have some correlation to aggressive and anti-social behavior (Anderson et al. 2010; Greitemeyer 2022; Prescott, Sargent, and Hull 2018).

B. Sympathetic Concern

From the perspective of Confucian ethics, *shu* 恕, or "sympathetic concern" (Tiwald 2010), is a distinctive attitude of the virtuous person (*junzi* 君子).¹³ Confucius prizes *shu* as the "method" by which one attains the supreme virtue representing moral perfection (*ren* 仁).¹⁴ Yet, some aspects of the ranked game mode can hinder players' ability to cultivate sympathetic concern. Indeed, *shu* entails caring for others by imaginatively putting oneself in their place (Chan 2000, 509-10). This creative exercise consists of two different but integrated acts (Tiwald 2010, 83). The first is imagining "the thoughts and feelings that [a person] might have under real or imagined circumstances." The other is imagining oneself *as that person* in those circumstances and caring for her with the same care one would apply to oneself.

¹³ *Analects* 15.24, as translated in Confucius (2003, 183).

¹⁴ *Analects* 6.3, as translated in Confucius (2003, 63).

However, cultivating sympathetic concern is difficult in ranked games. The system of individual reward, coupled with the instrumentalizing attitude discussed in the preceding section, can promote self-centeredness. It can incentivize players to focus on achieving their personal ends while deterring them from cultivating a genuine interest in their teammates. Under these conditions, developing sympathetic concerns toward other players is challenging. The ranking system aggravates the situation: if one sees others as of lesser worth than oneself, there seems to be little motivation for one to put oneself in their place. To be clear, instrumental relationships are not the problem from a Confucian perspective. Confucianism does not entail that individuals should value humans non-instrumentally under all circumstances (Tan 2019). The problem with the instrumentalizing attitude in *League* is that it can promote an inconsiderate and rude attitude towards other players, making it difficult for dispositions like sympathetic concern to develop.

Finally, another element of ranked games that challenge the development of sympathetic concern is the attention-demanding nature of matches.¹⁵ Sympathetic concern requires using the imagination and one's reflective capacities, such as when trying to determine the implications of applying one's self-care to another. This might take up attention and time, but players may be unable to make space for it if they are seriously playing a match. Players need to pay constant attention to the game since several things can happen within a few seconds that could give them an advantage or a disadvantage. For instance, enemy champions could ambush and kill one's champion if one becomes idle, even momentarily. Coupled with the snowballing phenomenon mentioned in the previous section, this can give the enemy team a substantial lead. Thus, there is a demand for constant and complete attention to the match that leaves little space for practicing sympathetic concern. Of course, it is conceivable that exercising sympathetic concern could take only little time. However, those who are still beginners to self-cultivation (which presumably is most people) would require a longer time to perform this.

¹⁵ This is true even for non-ranked games.

C. Openness and Accommodation

The elements of *League's* ranked games also hinder players' ability to cultivate openness and accommodation, which are requisite attitudes for attaining interpersonal harmony. Generally, harmony (*he* 和) is viewed in Confucianism as the unity of a plurality of things in which the differences of these things do not negate each other but complement or balance each other (Li 2014, 28-29). This is vividly expressed in the *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳 (Commentary of Zuo), where harmony is compared to cooking stew.¹⁶ In the passage, the word "stew" (*geng* 羹)¹⁷ refers to a dish that has ingredients with intense flavors (Li 2014, 26). However, in a good stew, these varying flavors do not overpower each other; instead, they are balanced so each can express itself while allowing the different flavors to do the same. Similarly, harmony is about diverse elements coming together and achieving an agreement that allows each to express their distinctiveness in a way that forms an "organic whole" (2014, 26).

Harmony also entails openness to novelty because it is not required to conform to a predetermined and absolute standard (Li 2014, 20-21). Furthermore, harmony does not exist only in inanimate objects such as the ingredients of a stew. It can also exist between humans and the natural world (2014, 17), among humans themselves (interpersonal harmony), and within the human individual (intrapersonal harmony) (Lewis 2020, 64). Interpersonal harmony entails "a community of mutual respect and consideration" (Lewis 2020, 134) in which the members' uniqueness is recognized as enhancing the group's quality (Confucius 2017, 55-56). For this reason, interpersonal harmony requires an attitude of openness to difference or, precisely, uniqueness. Included in this would be an openness to novelty since, as just said, harmony is not

¹⁶ The passage reads as follows: "Harmony is like a stew. Water, fire, jerky, mincemeat, salt, and plum vinegar are used to cook fish and meat. These are cooked over firewood. The master chef harmonizes them, evening them out with seasonings, compensating for what is lacking, and diminishing what is too strong. The noble man eats it and calms his heart" ("Zhaogong" 20.8a in *Zhuo zuhan*, as translated in Durrant [2016, 1587]). 和如羹焉，水、火、醢、醢、鹽、梅，以烹魚肉，燂之以薪，宰夫和之，齊之以味，濟其不及，以洩其過。君子食之，以平其心

¹⁷ In Li's account, he translates *geng* 羹 as "soup."

predetermined.

According to Chenyang Li (2014, 126), interpersonal harmony also requires an accommodating attitude, a tentative acceptance of “elements that are not yet conducive to harmony.” Accommodation is crucial because even though a person’s uniqueness is accepted, this does not mean the person does not need to change to harmonize with others. Harmony is about balancing elements, after all, and so all parties concerned must undergo some change to work harmoniously. However, change does not happen immediately, so other group members should be patient enough to accept those who still need to integrate themselves.

The elements in *League’s* ranked games can hinder the players’ development of the attitudes of openness and accommodation. Recall that the ranking system affords an intense motivation on the part of players to win matches and rise in rank. The snowball effect also affords a scenario where players are excessively wary of their team making even a single mistake since that might be enough to lose the game. Combined, these two affordances create a compelling demand to stick rigidly to conventional playstyles to ensure optimal game performance while making it difficult for players to tolerate different or novel playstyles for fear of losing. In fact, players are known to act toxic towards teammates who use unconventional playstyles (DongHuaP 2021, 7:50-55), and some even quit the game once they realize that a teammate is playing a champion outside the established norm (2021, 3:19-24).

This situation is adverse to the cultivation of openness because it predisposes players to be sceptic of differences and novelty. But these circumstances are also unconducive for cultivating the attitude of accommodation since players cannot tolerate people who are new to ranked matches and require some time to integrate themselves. An example can be seen in the quote from the previous section, where a beginner in ranked games was immediately ridiculed and blamed for causing the team’s loss after only being killed once.

This section has shown that the elements in ranked games and the toxic behavior they afford create an unconducive environment for cultivating fundamental Confucian values. However, Confucians were no strangers to living in such environments. It is believed that the ancient Confucian masters lived during less-than-ideal times when the socio-

political circumstances were hostile to cultivating the virtues they espoused. Due to this, they needed to think of means to develop ethical attitudes. In the next section, we shall discuss three of these means and explore how they can inspire concrete proposals to remedy *League's* toxicity.

IV. Confucian-inspired Measures to Lessen Toxicity

The ancient Confucian masters thought of several means by which people could achieve pro-moral or virtuous dispositions. This section discusses three of them and explains how these ideas can serve as inspirational resources for developing measures to remedy toxicity in *League*.

A. Redefining Characters' Defeats

The idea of utilizing or “channeling” one’s non-moral inclinations to achieve moral ends is derived from Mencius. It can be viewed as his practical method for encouraging the non-virtuous to begin the process of moral cultivation even though they have desires that (could) lead to vice. In Mencius’ dialogues with King Xuan, King Xuan confesses to Mencius that several inclinations prevent him from becoming virtuous. Examples are the fondness for inappropriate music, courage, wealth, and sex.¹⁸ In each case, Mencius does not tell King Xuan to stop entertaining such inclinations. Instead, he urges the monarch to channel his tendencies toward realizing moral goals. For example, Mencius tells the king to harness his fondness for courage by fighting injustice and bringing peace to the world, not by avenging himself against petty insults. Similarly, Mencius instructs him to use his passion for wealth to enrich not only himself but also his people.

The idea of channeling can be applied to *League* to address the game’s valorization of killing. As discussed in the previous section, *League's* valorization of killing can dispose players to trivialize human life and glorify killing. This can be problematic even from a non-Con-

¹⁸ Mencius 1B.1:1-8, 1B.3:4-8, 1B.5:4, 1B.5:5, as translated in Mencius (2008), 16-17, 19, 22-23.

fucian perspective since it might promote aggressive and anti-social behavior. However, killing champions in *League* is not generally done for its own sake. Instead, players kill champions to display their skillfulness and attain a high rank. Thus, we propose to remove killing from ranked games and replace it by portraying a character's defeat not as a "death," but simply a "retreat." More specifically, a defeated character can be re-presented as merely becoming weak and then "teleporting" out of the map. Furthermore, instead of announcing champion defeats as "kills," they can be stated as "wins" (on the part of the player who defeated the champion).

Replacing the element of killing in ranked games with the one of defeating will not repress players' inclination to display their skillfulness but channel it to a more morally acceptable end. Indeed, introducing the element of defeating does not deny players the opportunity to show their skills but ensures that they pursue this inclination towards the realization of a different goal. Admittedly, the goal of "not-killing" is not necessarily moral. Thus, strictly speaking, we propose channeling players' non-moral inclinations from an immoral end (killing) to a non-moral one.

One could object that removing killing will not eliminate aggressive or anti-social behavior because the rules still require champions to hurt each other, and thus commit violence. Although this might be true, we believe that our recommendation is a promising first step towards that goal. Further steps can be carried out by our two other recommendations that aim to instill moral and prosocial dispositions in players.

Another way of channeling players' inclination away from the valorization of killing concerns the kind of actions recorded during matches. The game records the number of times a player has killed an opponent and assisted an ally in getting kills. The number is visible for players both during and after a match. However, this tracking of life-taking actions glorifies killing and can suggest that lives are not noteworthy or valuable. To remedy this, we propose the game records life-saving acts, such as when players protect their teammates from being defeated by opponents. By doing this, the game can instill an appreciation for life rather than killing in players.

B. Re-Watching Feature

From a Confucian perspective, a lack of sympathetic concern (*shu* 恕) for players can contribute to toxic interaction between teammates. Furthermore, as we argued in the previous section, one of the most severe obstructions to cultivating the attitude of sympathetic concern in *League* is the attention-demanding nature of games. At a minimum, sympathetic concern requires attention and time to imagine other individuals' thoughts and feelings. Still, *League*'s players who are seriously playing a match are often unable to make space for it.

We propose to remedy this problem by giving players sufficient time and “attentional space” to put themselves in the place of others. Specifically, we suggest introducing a new feature in the game that allocates time to players who have been reported for toxic behavior to reflect on their behavior towards other players.¹⁹ At the end of a game, the feature will invite the player reported for toxic behavior to re-watch the highlights of their interactions with her teammates during matches. To help the player imagine herself in her fellow teammates' place, the recording will show the players' interaction from the standpoint of the players who have filed the complaint. This will allow the reported player to visually and aurally represent what her teammates have experienced while interacting with her. If the invitation mechanism proves unsuccessful, the feature can be made compulsory so that reported players must watch the highlights of their previous game to continue playing matches. Furthermore, after watching the matches' highlights, the player may be asked questions like “What do you think the other player felt because of your behavior?” and “If you were in his place, how would you want to be treated?”

C. A New Interpersonal Practice to Foster Players' Reciprocal Respect and Appreciation

For the ancient Confucian masters, *li* 禮, or “rituals,” were a set of individual and social practices to regulate human relationships at different

¹⁹ The report system allows players to report other players who express toxic behaviour. See Riot Games (2022b), Reporting FAQ section.

societal levels. At a minimum, rituals contribute to creating cordial interpersonal relationships. They serve as codes of conduct and social customs that prescribe the proper behavior for different situations (Lewis 2020, 43). Additionally, rituals are instrumental to personal moral cultivation because they specify the appropriate emotions and moral dispositions to inform such actions (2020, 78). For instance, Xunzi says that the funeral ritual resembles one's moving to another house to increase sorrow for the deceased's departure.²⁰ This shows that the mourning ritual is not just about the performance of specific actions during the funeral but also the development of a particular emotional disposition in the person who participates in the ritual. Notably, the practice of ritual was not expected to be mindless repetition. For instance, Xunzi emphasizes the importance of reflecting on "what is central to ritual"²¹ to achieve moral perfection.²² Similarly, Confucians believed that if one practiced rituals regularly and reflectively, one could come to appreciate their underlying ethical principles and develop an intrinsic motivation to enact them (Lai 2016, 29; Cline 2016, 18-19; Ivanhoe 2014, 49).

This idea of Confucian ritual can inspire new solutions for combating toxicity in *League*. As implied in Section III, toxic behaviors in ranked games are primarily rooted in players' intense and individualistic motivation to win a high rank. Players are motivated to attain a high rank so strongly that they disregard respecting their fellow players to pursue it. A possible remedy is introducing a countervailing interpersonal practice inviting players to foster more respectful and friendly relationships with fellow players. This opposing disposition can be promoted through an in-game feature that helps diminish players' obsession with high rank and increase their appreciation for other players. Our proposed feature is inspired by Confucius' description of the ritual that the *junzi* 君子 (virtuous persons) performed during archery contests. The ritual requires *junzi* to show respect and fellowship to each other before and after the contest. "Before mounting the stairs to the archery hall, gentlemen [*junzi*]

²⁰ Xunzi 19: 414-15, as translated in Xunzi (2014, 212).

²¹ The phrase is taken from the sentence: 禮之中焉能思索, 謂之能慮. "To be able to reflect and ponder what is central to ritual is called being able to deliberate" (Hutton translation).

²² Xunzi 19: 165-170, as translated in Xunzi (2014, 206).

bow and defer to one another, and after descending from the hall they mutually offer up toasts.”²³

Inspired by this passage of the *Analects*, we propose to develop a new feature in *League* that requires each player to give at least one positive message to one of her teammates and one to an opposing team player before and after each match. The exchanged message before the match would be a word of encouragement or friendliness, while the message afterwards could be praise or constructive criticism. To help players express openness and accommodation, the feature can even suggest players commend other players for their unique playstyles or give constructive criticism to those who seem to be beginners.

Similar to the idea of Confucian rituals described above, the proposed feature would not only indicate to players a course of action but encourage them to display the appropriate emotions while doing the action. In the context of *League*, this would be a respectful and friendly spirit proper to a sport or game. One way the feature can induce this spirit is by having the procedure’s instructions narrated by a warm and welcoming voice. This could influence the mood of the players when they relay their messages. Furthermore, the visual design of the feature can also evoke a sense of camaraderie and fellowship. Finally, to invite players to reflect on the purpose of this practice, the feature will inform players that the procedure aims to help them be respectful and kind to each other while playing *League*.

V. Conclusion

Video games have become a relevant aspect of contemporary societies in the past four decades, acquiring “cultural and social relevance” (Muriel and Crawford 2018, 22). This raises questions about the cause of popular video games’ toxicity and the possibilities to redress such a phenomenon. This paper advances the understanding of these two issues through a “Confucian-inspired approach” (Dennis and Ziliotti, forthcoming). Focusing on the multiplayer video game *League* of

²³ 揖讓而升，下而飲。 *Analects* 3.7, as translated in Confucius (2003, 19).

Legends as a case study, we have argued that *League's* affordances can hinder the cultivation of fundamental Confucian moral dispositions. However, Confucianism is a rich source of inspiration for conceptualizing possible remedies for *League's* toxicity. First, the idea of using a person's non-moral inclination to lead them to do moral (or non-immoral) actions can help remedy for *League's* valorization of killing, which is problematic from both a Confucian and non-Confucian perspective. Second, the Confucian disposition of *shu* 恕 (sympathetic concern) suggests the possibility of inviting hostile players to re-watch the highlights of the match in which they exhibited negative behavior. Finally, a code of conduct constitutive of the notion of Confucian *li* 禮 (ritual) can inspire new scripted procedures to foster players' mutual respect.

This paper provides a significant opportunity to advance Confucian-inspired ethical studies on technologies by bringing attention to the moral dimension of video games, a relatively underexamined topic. Furthermore, it suggests a new course of action for Confucian-inspired ethical studies of video games. While this paper has focused on *League*, online games' toxicity depends on their distinctive affordances. Thus, a key priority for future studies is to explore whether and how Confucian ethics can contribute to mitigating those forms of toxic online gaming behavior. Finally, certain Confucian virtues, such as mutual respect and sympathy, appear quite needed in our world today. Thus, another direction for future Confucian studies of video games is to explore how insights from Confucian ethics can help game designers who are working to unlock the potential of video gaming for engendering these important dispositions.²⁴

²⁴ Psychologists have begun to pay attention to the effects of game playing on pro-social character and with interesting results. Jamil Zaki discusses some of these works, particularly those involving gamified applications (See 2019, 144-67).

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Craig A., et al. 2010. "Violent Video Game Effects on Aggression, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior in Eastern and Western Countries: A Meta-Analytic Review." *Psychological Bulletin* 136 (2): 151-73.
- "Announcer." 2020. League of Legends Wiki. Last modified May 1, 2020. <https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Announcer>.
- Beres, Nicole A., et al. 2021. "Don't You Know That You're Toxic: Normalisation of Toxicity in Online Gaming." In *CHI '21: Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Yokohama, Japan, May 8-13, 2021*. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3411764.3445157>
- Bhatnagar, Rishabh. 2020. "Top 5 Most Toxic Video Game Communities." sportskeeda. August 24, 2020. <https://www.sportskeeda.com/esports/the-top-5-toxic-video-game-communities>.
- Bonenfant, Maude, et al. 2018. "Toxic Allies and Caring Friends: Social Systems and Behavioral Norms in League of Legends and Guild Wars 2." In *Social Interactions in Virtual Worlds: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Kiran Lakkaraju, Gita Sukthankar, and Rolf T. Wigand, 130-61. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brey, Philip. 2018. "The Strategic Role of Technology in a Good Society." *Technology in Society* 52: 39-45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2017.02.002>.
- Brinks, M. 2020. "12 Games That Can't Escape Their Own Aggressively Toxic Communities." Ranker. October 16, 2020. <https://www.ranker.com/list/video-games-with-toxic-communities/melissa-brinks>.
- "Champion Statistic." 2021. League of Legends Wiki. September 14, 2021. https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Champion_statistic.
- Cline, Erin M. 2016. "The Highways and Byways of Ritual: Pascal and Xunzi on Faith, Virtue, and Religious Practice." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8 (1): 3-25.
- Confucius. 2003. *Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Translated by Edward Slingerland. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- _____. 2017. *Understanding the Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations*. Translated by Peimin Ni. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Dennis, Matthew, and Elena Ziliotti. Forthcoming. "Living Well Together Online: Digital Well-Being from a Confucian Perspective." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*.
- DongHuaP. 2021. "League of Documentary - The Harsh Truth about Toxic Korean Culture." Youtube. July 2, 2021.Video, 27:13. <https://youtu.be/>

- u4FXLk-eOSg.
- ESB Staff. 2021. "Top 10 Most Toxic Gaming Communities in The World". Esportsbets. October 13, 2021. <https://www.esportsbets.com/news/toxic-gaming-communities/>.
- Florida, Luciano. 2014. *The Online Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*. London: Springer.
- Gergen, Kenneth. 2009. *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- "Global Video Game Consumer Population Passes 3 Billion." 2020. DFC Intelligence. August 14, 2020. <https://www.dfcint.com/global-video-game-consumer-population/>.
- Grandprey-Shores, Kate, et al. 2014. "The Identification of Deviance and its Impact on Retention in a Multiplayer Game." In *CSCW 14: Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*, Baltimore, February 15-19, 2014. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/2531602.2531724>.
- Greitemeyer, Tobias. 2022. "The Dark and Bright Side of Video Game Consumption: Effects of Violent and Prosocial Video Games." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 46 (101326):1-5.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2014. "A Happy Symmetry: Xunzi's Ecological Ethic." In *Ritual and Religion in the Xunzi*, edited by T. C. Kline III and Justin Tiwald, 43-60. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Johnston, Ian, and Wang Ping, trans. and eds. 2012. *Daxue & Zhongyong*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Kordyaka, Biastan, Michael Klesel, and Katharina Jahn. 2019. "Perpetrators in League of Legends: Scale Development and Validation of Toxic Behavior." In *Proceedings of the 52nd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Grand Wilea, Hawaii, January 8-11, 2019*. <https://aisel.aisnet.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1248&context=hicss-52>.
- Kou, Yubo. 2020. "Toxic Behavior in Team Based Competitive Gaming: The Case of League of Legends." In *CHI PLAY '20: Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play, Online, November 2-4, 2020*. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3410404.3414243>.
- Lai, Karyn. 2016. *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Kindle.
- Lewis, Colin, J. 2020. *Confucian Ritual and Moral Education*. London: Lexington Books. Kindle.
- Li, Chenyang. 2014. *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Mattice, Sarah. 2015. "Social Media and Living Well in a Chinese Context." In *Social Media and Living Well*, edited by Berrin Beasley and Mitchell Haney,

- 121-40. London: Lexington Books.
- Mencius. 2008. *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Translated by Bryan W. Van Norden. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Muriel, Daniel, and Garry Crawford. 2018. *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Muzaki, Ferril Irham. 1990. "Confucius Ideas on Popular Video Games in Indonesia." *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science, Engineering and Technology* 7 (6): 211-16.
- Page, Richard. 2012. "Levelling Up: Playerkilling as Ethical Self-Cultivation." *Games and Culture* 7 (3): 238-57.
- _____. 2016. "The Dao of Space Piracy: Ethics and Chinese Modernity in Eve Online." PhD diss., University of Hawai'i at Manoa.
- Paul, Christopher A. 2018. *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Prescott, Anna T., James D. Sargent, and Jay G. Hull. 2018. "Metaanalysis of the relationship between violent video game play and physical aggression over time." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 115 (40): 9882-88.
- Riot Games. 2022a. "Choose Your Champion." League of Legends. <https://www.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/champions/>. Accessed June 12, 2022.
- _____. 2022b. "Player Reporting Guide and FAQ." League of Legends Support. <https://support-leagueoflegends.riotgames.com/hc/en-us/articles/201752884-Player-Reporting-Guide-and-FAQ>. Accessed June 12, 2022.
- Spezzy. 2022. "How Many People Play League of Legends?—League of Legends Player Count in 2022 (March)." LeagueFeed. March 5, 2022. <https://league-feed.net/did-you-know-total-league-of-legends-player-count-updated/>.
- Tan, Sor-hoon. 2019. "AI and the Confucian Conception of the Human Person: Some Preliminary Reflections." Paper presented at *AI and Human Person: Chinese and Western Perspectives, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA, April 4-5, 2019*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345706982_AI_and_the_Confucian_Conception_of_the_Human_Person_Some_Preliminary_Reflections.
- Tiwald, Justin. 2010. "Dai Zhen on Sympathetic Concern." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 37 (1): 76-89.
- Thompson, Kirill. 2017. "Relational Self in Classical Confucianism: Lessons from Confucius' Analects." *Philosophy East and West* 67 (3): 887-907
- Vars. 2021. "Why League of Legends is SO TOXIC/League of Legends." YouTube. June 3, 2021. Video, 15:51. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VjLXObhtBc&t=618s>.
- Williams, Tom, et al. 2020. "The Confucian Matador: Three Defenses Against

- the Mechanical Bull.” In *Companion of the 2020 ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction, New York, 2020*, 25-33. New York: Association for Computing Machinery.
- Wong, Pak-hang. 2013. “Confucian Social Media: An Oxymoron?” *Dao* 12 (3): 283-96.
- _____. 2019. “Rituals and Machines: A Confucian Response to Technology-driven Moral Deskillling.” *Philosophies* 4 (4) 59: 1-12.
- _____. 2020. “Why Confucianism Matters in Ethics of Technology.” In *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Technology*, edited by Shannon Vallor, 609-28. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wong, Pak-hang, and Tom Xiaowei Wang, eds. 2021. *Harmonious Technology: A Confucian Ethics of Technology*. New York: Routledge.
- Xunzi. 2014. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. Translated by Eric L. Hutton. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zaki, James. 2019. *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*. London: Robinson.

■ Submitted: 20 Jan. 2022
Accepted: 22 July 2022