Well Played

a journal on video games, value and meaning

A Special Issue on Ethics

EDITED BY JOSÉ P. ZAGAL

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JOSÉ P. ZAGAL

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TO ETHICALLY PLAY WELL

JOSÉ P. ZAGAL

I "fell into" the issues concerning ethics and videogames by accident. In mid-2008 I was freshly graduated and fortunate to start working as an Assistant Professor at DePaul University. Prior to the start of the academic year, I was asked if I would like to teach their "Ethics in Computer Games and Cinema" course. At the time I had limited knowledge of moral philosophy and ethics but (naively) felt that I knew enough about videogames that this should not be too hard. Preparing for that class quickly cooled me of my bravado while also opening my eyes to the realization that there were a lot of interesting things to discuss, think about, and share with students. Unfortunately, there was not a lot of work on videogames and morality at the time[1] and I struggled to find "enough" readings for students. There were notable exceptions, including Reynolds' (2002) analysis of *Grand Theft Auto III* using different ethical theories, Sicart's (2004) call for the awareness of ethical concerns regarding the relationship between the game industry and scholarly researchers, Dodig-Crnkovic and Larsson's (2005) examination of the need for virtuous game developers, and Mia Consalvo's seminal book on

1. I was also sadly ignorant at the time of the rich body of work on sportsmanship and its associated moral questions.

cheating (2007). Articles such as these would form the backbone of the course and would significantly shape the way I thought about ethics and videogames.

Over the years, as I continued to teach the class, my struggle in finding videogame-related articles for students to read and discuss shifted. I now struggled to whittle down a rapidly increasing list of excellent readings to something that was manageable for the students. What a great problem to have.

This special issue of Well Played is the result of an open call for participation that encouraged its potential contributors to explore a third sense of well played. From the perspective of ethics and videogames and what it means to "play well", or for a game to have been "well played." For instance, are successful cheaters to be celebrated because they have subverted a game so skillfully that their opponents never became aware of the deception? Is this well played? Is it to play well to strive to win at all costs in the context of competitive games? In the context of sports, we often speak of sportsmanship – the consideration for one's opponents and respect for the rules of a game. How do ideas of sportsmanship relate to "playing well"? How do these notions also apply to esports and competitive videogame play? And then, how do we consider those games that are not competitive or framed in the language of domination or completion. Can you play well casually? Also, what does this sense of well played say about the player and their values and who they are, or aspire to be, as people. How do, and should, these values reflect in the kinds of games they choose to play and how they go about playing them? Is it to play well when ones' personal values are aligned with those that may be encoded in, or expressed by, a game? Do the games we choose to "play well" reflect on our character and integrity in any meaningful way? Are you a bad person for playing ultra-violent videogames well? Should you be celebrated for your skills and abilities to lie and deceive your opponents in a game of Poker despite the fact that

we find lying reprehensible outside of a game? Is it virtuous to play well in these contexts? Do we demonstrate virtue by always striving to play well?

As the response to the original call for participation, this issue represents an example of "how far we have come" – a special issue on ethics and videogames was unimaginable to me fifteen years ago. Especially one that purposefully attempted to narrow its scope to "only" the ethical meaning of well played.

Enjoy, thank you, and apologies for the indulgence.

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THE DILEMMAS OF A DISCO COP

Ethically Well Played Experiences in Disco Elysium

MIA CONSALVO, E. JULES MAIER-ZUCCHINO, & ROBERT MARINOV

A growing body of work has analyzed several of *Disco Elysium*'s complex interlocking elements, from the game's skill and thought cabinet systems to its representations of legal structures (Bernick, 2021; Novitz, 2021). However, researchers have not yet sought to interpret what it means to engage in these mechanics and representations in a 'well-played' manner. *Disco Elysium* does not require or test the skills that are traditionally connected with playing videogames well. Players interact with the game almost entirely through dialogue interchanges, meaning fast reflexes and physical dexterity are utterly inconsequential to progressing through the game's story. Rather, it is the act of deliberate choice that defines this game.

In some regards, this makes *Disco Elysium* difficult to analyze in the frame of a well-played game. The lack of an "optimal" playthrough (Vella & Cielecka, 2021) renders interpretation into a process of sifting through numerous, seemingly contradictory potentialities. Furthermore, the ethical dimension of much of the game's content ensures that what one person interprets as an ethically-defensible action could easily be debated as ethically-objectionable by others.

This uncertainty, however problematic it may appear on the surface, is precisely what makes the game so engaging. Rather than closing off meaning, the instability of *Disco Elysium*'s world and protagonist (Novitz, 2021) and the lack of conventional markers of progress encourage players to become comfortable with this ambiguity. They must find meaning in the choices they make to navigate the game rather than in the conclusions those choices lead to.

This essay reviews the processes that inform players' experiences of ethical gameplay and their enactment through both virtuous and dark playstyles, and discusses how *Disco Elysium*'s flexibility in this regard is afforded by its unconventional protagonist. We present three distinct perspectives that explore what it means to play *Disco Elysium* 'well.' Separately, none of these playthroughs can be claimed as an ideal form of the game. They are isolated stories and reflections generated by viewing the game through the specific lenses adopted by each researcher. Taken as a whole, however, they form a gestalt that parallels the game's themes, demonstrating a multiplicity of potential stories that, when layered together, reveal the persistent ethical currents that underpin the experience of playing *Disco Elysium*.

AFFORDANCES FOR ETHICAL EXPLORATION

Following Miguel Sicart and Jose Zagal, we view videogame ethics as arising primarily from system-based design choices and mechanics, which can either open or close affordances for ethical reflection, experience, and development for players. Sicart (2009, 2013) treats videogames as designed objects whose game world, rules, and mechanics produce and communicate opportunities for ethical experiences. As rule-based systems, games can be designed to either create certain values and ethical actions or behaviors as prerequisites to successful completion, or to open varied possibilities for ethical interpretation and choice: "Through a rule, the game is communicating a series of values

about how the game should be played," while the consequences of following or breaking those rules can "appeal to our ethical mind" as moral beings (Sicart, 2009, p. 108). Sicart (2013) then defines ethical gameplay as ludic experiences which "require from the player moral reflection beyond the calculation of statistics and possibilities" (p. 24), and as "an experience in and of play that disrupts the progression toward goals and achievements and forces players to address their actions from a moral perspective" (p. 29).

An ethically-designed game is thus one which avoids simplistic binaries of good/evil action and instead structures nuanced ambiguities capable of sparking ethical/moral reflection. A key example of such design structures is what Sicart (2013) calls 'wicked problems': situations with "unclear boundaries and no clear solution" that engage players in a moral dilemma (p. 100). Such dilemmas force players to use moral reasoning and engage with their personally-held values and knowledge (p. 106).

Zagal takes a similarly rule- or systems-based approach to videogame ethics. Developing on what he terms "ethically notable videogames" (Zagal, 2009), Zagal (2011a) views ethically-designed games as those which, "using a variety of design elements including narrative, gameplay, and more, create opportunities for their players to think about ethics" (p. 21). Through the interplay of game rules, systems, mechanics, and design, the ethically-designed videogame ensures that players are faced with "ethically interesting choices and situations" (Zagal, 2011b, p. 2) from which they can morally self-reflect. "A game that afforded ethical reflection would also … encourage players to assess their own ethical values, the social context of issues identified, and consider the ramifications of alternative actions" (Zagal, 2011a, p. 21). As such, key to both Sicart and Zagal's perspectives is how game design produces (or fails to produce) *ethical affordances*: those dilemmas or situations within which

players can engage in and be affected by ethical reflection and reasoning.

But what are the consequences of such ethical affordances to an understanding of a 'well played' game? Sicart's (2009) view of players as moral beings is key here. He argues that "[p]layers are not passive receivers, and they are not just bots clicking on the button to get their ludic fix. Players are reflective, virtuous beings" (p. 111). He therefore views videogame ethics as constituting a "distributed responsibility," a dynamic wherein "ethical issues are distributed over a network of ludic systems and game agents," including the player and their responses to the game's design/rule structures (p. 148). By recognizing this two-way dynamic between player and game, Sicart opens a path to analyzing videogames as material processes that exercise power (i.e., coercion, influence) and subjectivization:

> Power creates subjects, and so games create players. The process of experiencing a game and becoming a player needs to take into account how the nature of the game contributes to the creation of that subjectivity. … [T]he game as ethical object establishes the starting point for the process of subjectivization that takes place in the act of playing a game. *A player is then at least partially affected in her moral being by the game she is experiencing*. (p. 68; emphasis added)

If "computer games are power structures" to which players are subject through their gameplay (Sicart, 2009, p. 68), then Sicart's videogame ontology highlights how, in ethical terms, 'well played' games would entail *certain forms of subjectivization*. Namely, through a game-ethics perspective the question of 'well played' hinges on the flexibility of the game as designed object to open ethical affordances that allow player-subjects to be morally and ethically affected (subjectivized) through self-critical and constitutive ethical experiences/dilemmas. Rather than focusing

only on winning or losing, cheating or honoring rules, an ethical and 'well played' game can be understood as one wherein the player is enabled to critically self-reflect on their 'real-world' or embodied ethical positions, behaviors, and even, as Murphy and Zagal (2011) suggest, their emotional connections and relations of care.

The processes and designs allowing for the emergence of ethical gameplay do not always lead to virtuous behaviors, however, and it's important to consider that a player's choice to subvert conventional ethics can also emerge from the activation of their ethical imagination. One enactment of such subversions is dark play. There are many definitions of dark play, although most begin with (or depart from) Richard Schechner's view that it subverts order, contains hidden agendas, and employs "deceit, disruption, and excess" (quoted in Mortensen, 2015). This begs the question: can a person play well at dark play?

Dark play also has its own conventions – it is not simply unfolding chaos. These can be expressed through both gameplay fictions and mechanics. Bjork (2015) writes that some games actively try to make players feel guilt or shame through design elements. One well-known example is *Spec Ops: The Line,* which

> tries to provide a fabrication that people can play it as an ordinary military shooter – they can adopt the normal player frame. … *Spec Ops: The Line* makes use of both narrative and gameplay to provide players with a negative experience when the fabrications become apparent (p. 184).

In such situations there is little room for the player to express agency or make choices: the game is making an argument, first and foremost. Dark play can also be a way for players to explore different values or ways of thinking about ethical quandaries. Kristine Jørgensen examined the stealth game *Dishonored,*

arguing that "dark play is about exploring subversive or immoral behaviour and allowing the player to experiment with the sinister aspects of the human mind in a safe environment built around fictional events" (Jørgensen, 2015, p. 212). Employing both its storyline and gameplay mechanics, it tugs the player in different directions – suggesting through its Chaos Meter that performing fewer kills was the better path for players to take, but via its narrative suggesting that some deaths were clearly deserved. This combination forces players to actively reflect on different ethical perspectives in unique ways, as there is no one right way to play the game.

Similarly, Torill Mortensen had several elite players play alongside her in the MMO *Star Wars: the Old Republic* to see how they confronted the ethical challenges the game provided for those on both the 'light' and 'dark' side of the force. They expressed a range of responses to the game's ethical situations. One player felt no guilt for any actions taken, as it was simply "digital pixels," while another expressed concern about some dilemmas which caused him "inner conflict" (Mortensen, 2015, pp. 157, 161). And as with Jørgensen's reading of *Dishonored,* the fiction and gameplay mechanics both needed to be employed to promote these actions. As Mortensen concludes about dark play, it can put "our own conventions and assumptions into stark relief, displaying the weaknesses in what we accept without question" (p. 168).

These ethical dynamics converge within the numerous dilemmas of *Disco Elysium*. Players interact with this game primarily through navigating dialogue trees and selecting responses to a diverse range of situations that carry numerous ethical implications, be they obvious (taking bribes from a corrupt union boss) or subtle (choosing to arrest someone before they've committed a crime). A 'well-played' experience therefore requires near-constant engagement with the game's themes and the player's own ethical imagination.

DISCO ELYSIUM

Players engage in the world of *Disco Elysium* through the role of Harry Du Bois, a detective in the Revachol Citizen's Militia (RCM) tasked with solving a murder. At first, Harry appears as the traditional RPG protagonist. Players determine his strengths and weaknesses across four skill types: Intellect, Psyche, Physique, and Motorics, each containing six distinct attributes which can be improved throughout gameplay. This allows players to position Harry as distinct types of cop, such as the Physical type that solves problems with force or the Thinker who relies on observation to circumvent obstacles. This flexibility ensures "there is no obvious strategy for playing *Disco Elysium* with an optimal playthrough in mind" (Vella & Cielecka, 2021, p. 102). Players must make choices that will limit their available options, and these choices force the player to determine for themselves what it means to play well through developing Harry's character and making in-game decisions.

Harry's presentation as a rather unstable protagonist further enhances these complexities. Vella and Cielecka (2021) note that the conventional "ludic subject" is viewed as a "focused subjectivity" that is "coherent in its actions, and focused in rationally wielding its agency towards the gameworld" (p. 93). *Disco Elysium* denies players such coherence by giving a literal voice to each of Harry's attributes, allowing them to advise and comment on the player's actions as non-neutral subjects. Moreover, each one corresponds to disparate political positions, thus effectively "undermining the player's expectations of development toward mastery" (Novitz, 2021, p. 36).

Vella and Cielecka (2021) utilize the Bakhtinian notion of polyphony to address this destabilization, asserting that the "multi-voicedness" of Harry's interior life "invites the player as an essential part of the discourse. … they are forced to hear out the arguments, look for contexts, and make an informed choice"

(p. 102). *Disco Elysium* denies players the stability expected from a videogame protagonist and refuses to offer clear solutions to the many ethical dilemmas they encounter. In the absence of any traditional metrics of success in its mechanics or narrative, *Disco Elysium* configures a 'well-played' experience as one that requires players to actively pursue the outcomes that *they* value.

Harry, however, is not alone in this endeavor. He is accompanied by Lt. Kim Kitsuragi, a non-player-controlled character "who comes to function as something of an externalized sense of the social expectations that come with [Harry's] role as a police officer" (Vella & Cielecka, 2021, 98). In Kim, players are presented with one model of a (mostly) professional policeman who can serve as a moral beacon to emulate. However, as we argue below, Kim's actual role in the game is more ambiguous, thus encouraging players to read between the lines of each scenario.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

For our game-ethics analysis of *Disco Elysium*, we each undertook a playthrough from start to finish over the course of roughly six weeks in fall 2021. Progress and experiences were tracked using gameplay journals, frequent screenshots, and weekly meetings to discuss ethically-interesting experiences or dynamics. To structure our approach towards examining more diverse elements of the game system, narrative, and design, we established divergent playstyles prior to starting the game. Namely, Jules and Mia, who had previously completed the game, committed to a dark play approach, exploring the ethical dynamics when playing the role of an immoral cop. They used the game's pre-set character archetypes of Sensitive and Physical, respectively. Robert, having not yet played the game, committed to exploring the ethical dynamics when playing as a virtuous cop, using the Thinker archetype. Beyond these initial commitments to playthrough styles, no other methodological criteria were

enforced, allowing for free exploration of the game world while letting the players define for themselves what constitutes "dark" or "virtuous" actions.

Upon completion, we reviewed each playthrough journal and discussed our overall experiences, attempting to find similarities and disjunctures in the game and player experiences that highlighted ethically-interesting or significant mechanics, choices, and affordances. Several congruences became evident. However, rather than attempting to synthesize our experiences into an overarching thesis about the game ethics and their implications for an understanding of ethically well played games, we opted to each outline our most significant individual experiences. In this way, the next section offers a polyphonic set of analytical perspectives on *Disco Elysium*'s ethical affordances that interweave and diverge on several fronts – reflecting the polyphonic set of subjectivities made possible through the structure of *Disco Elysium* itself (see Vella & Cielecka, 2021).

ROBERT'S PLAYTHROUGH EXPERIENCE: THE ETHICAL-PROFESSIONAL COP

What does virtuous behavior look like for an amnesiac alcoholic who wakes up with no memory of who or where they are, unsure even if they are truly a cop? I approached my playthrough with the goal of avoiding unethical, unprofessional behaviors: I was going to do things by the book, be a serious investigator, and a professional, fair, and neutral cop. My view of what an ethical cop's job might look like in Martinaise was quickly problematized, however, by the striking amount of politically-contentious content: by mid-day of my first day on the case I was drawn into conversations surrounding child labour, worker's strikes, capitalism versus communism, racism, sexism, and 'delinquent' drug-addicted kids. If that wasn't enough, I was faced with ethical dilemmas over my own possibilities for action, including theft, drug use, breaking and entering, and more.

Where was I? Who was I? Getting to know and develop my character turned from a simple path of virtue-signaling to an uncomfortable attempt at navigating this complex socio-political world from a purportedly 'ethical' position.

My efforts didn't end well, and for good reason. *Disco Elysium* combines a rich, historicized socio-political game world with a design structure that defies moral centring and so serves, by default, to pause instrumentalist play and 'straightforward police work' while encouraging ethically well played experiences of *political subjectivization* (i.e., how interaction with the game design and mechanics engrains certain behaviors and subjectivities – in this case, politically reflective ones; see Sicart, 2009, Ch. 3).

Searching for a Moral Beacon: Kim and the question of corruption

Besides a few rebellious slips, I succeeded by and large to remain virtuous… at first. As mentioned above, Harry's partner, Lt. Kim Kitsuragi, acts as a sort of 'moral center' in the game: a reserved and professional cop keen to solve the case and uphold his duty to the RCM. Kim's 'prudent' voice seems designed to keep us on track in our investigation, frequently complaining when we diverge into side quests and offering a moralistic voice to our actions. From the start, Kim served as a genuine moral base from which I sought to shape my own understanding of being a professional cop in this unfamiliar world. I valued his presence and his calm and collected interventions in dialogue with other NPCs. I came quickly to see him as a friend and a role model.

Far from offering a clear beacon of ethical action, however, Kim's role in *Disco Elysium* is fraught with mixed signals. Corruption, as it turns out, is not so far removed from his image of duty. Whether we consider his suspiciously "confiscated" hub caps, him "conveniently" looking the other way as I stole a dock worker's ID card, or his indifference to breaking into apartments with chain-cutters to look for evidence, Kim's de facto role as a moral center is complicated by the gameplay's affordances for

unethical action and his complacency or encouragement thereof. In this sense, similarly to how *Dishonored* uses NPCs as "moral compasses" to stimulate ethical reflection by "explicitly commenting on the player's activities" (Jørgensen, 2015, p. 213), so too does *Disco Elysium* use Kim as a morally *ambiguous* compass for stimulating ethical dilemmas.

Several choice structures in *Disco Elysium* straddle the line between blatant corruption and excusably-utilitarian investigative work, depending on one's interpretation. One example in particular demonstrates how Kim's presence complicates these scenarios. During our first interaction, Evrart, the district's corrupt Union boss, asks Harry to open the door to the apartment of an anti-socialist "weasel" in order to intimidate him. Determined to avoid corruption, I discussed the situation with Kim, who expressed an uncomfortable yet surprising openness to the task (see Figure 1).

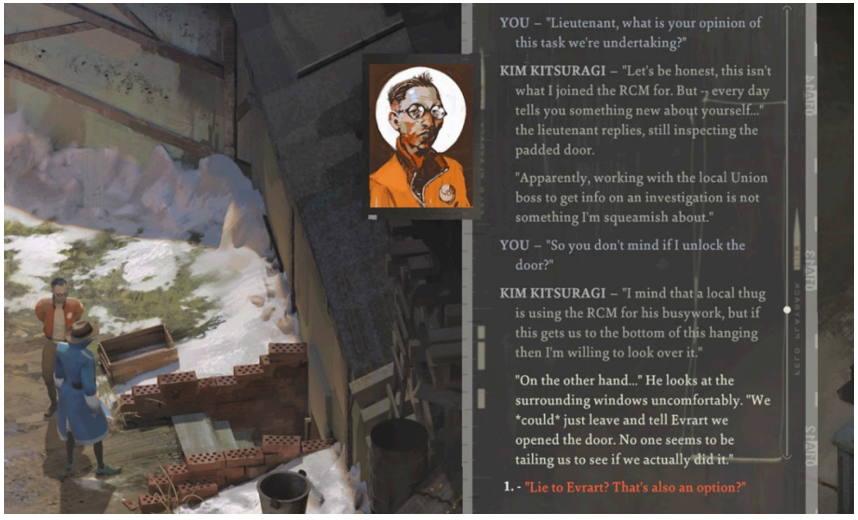

Figure 1: The Apartment Door, Disco Elysium, 2019.

After taking Kim's advice and lying to Evrart about opening the door – my attempt to advance the case while avoiding an overt breach of authority – I was soon out of leads and reconsidered my position. Would entering the apartment reveal any important

clues? Unsure how to proceed as an 'ethical-professional' cop, I faltered and broke into the apartment. At this point, Kim – to my disappointment – had nothing to say on the matter: how was I to interpret my actions without his 'prudent' guidance? Things got more complicated once we entered and discovered a collection of mugs with racist depictions, sparking Kim to exclaim that "I'm beginning to feel better about breaking into this man's apartment." With this narrative cue, I was again torn in reflection over how far I might be straying from ethical gameplay: I knew I was being corrupt, strictly speaking, yet Kim, my supposed role model, was there to ease my guilt. What was the ethical thing to do, then? Was I a bad cop for being unethically instrumental in my investigation? Did I play the game well by exploring for clues, or did I betray my own values? The conflicting values communicated by Kim and other NPCs (including Harry's own attributes) render such dilemmas commonplace. Kim, the game's apparent moral center, turned out to be a moral trap all along, a design element that only made affordances for ethical reflection more complex and nuanced. These built-in ambiguities are further complicated by highly-uncertain structures of authority.

Am I a legitimate cop? Ethical reflections in a vacuum of authority

Disco Elysium confronts players with a political and legal reality that defies simplistic notions of rightful authority. By design, players are pushed increasingly to question their own authority as a cop in Martinaise. As the main narrative advances, we quickly discover that a "militant" group within the Union, led by Titus Hardie, acts as a de facto police force in the city. Their immediate, if questionable, confession to murdering the Hanged Man leaves the player unsure of the extent of Harry's authority: unable to apprehend the "Hardie boys" Harry and Kim are left helpless, seemingly powerless cops in a hostile setting. While speaking with locals, the clear lack of recognition for RCM authority becomes apparent, due largely to its control by a foreign Coalition government that enjoys no support from

residents. Harry must also, at times, choose between enforcing or delegating his already questionable authority (see Figure 2). What are the ramifications of such ambiguities? Is Harry's role in Martinaise legitimate?

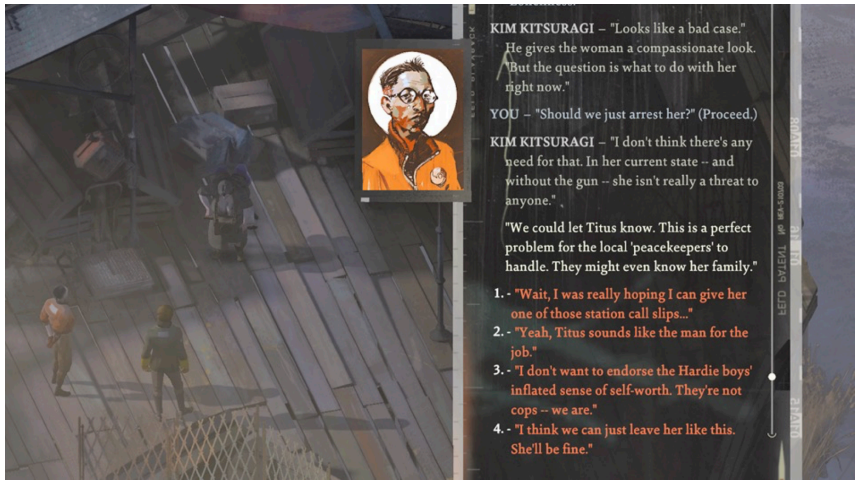

Figure 2: Interaction with The Pigs, Disco Elysium, 2019.

These unclear legal boundaries and political allegiances create a vacuum of authority within which players must negotiate their possibilities for action, all while facing the "demeaning" implications of their own lack of authority (Vella & Cielecka, 2021, p. 95). Players are forced to reflect on these dynamics and their own "cop" status to determine their actions: should Harry demand respect and aggressively uphold RCM authority despite the political oppression his own masters are effectuating? Does the Coalition's control of the RCM really justify its authority in a city opposed to their foreign rule? How can Harry's own activities, ethical or unethical, be interpreted in light of this vacuum? Navigating these moral ambiguities is further blurred by the political drama that engages players with an array of normative positions to consider.

THE HANGED MAN – With your hand numb from the recoil, you look at the body slump down. For a moment the man appears to *kneel* in front of you.

INLAND EMPIRE [Easy: Success] – Looking straight at you. Helpless, trapped within itself.

YOU – Who killed you?

THE HANGED MAN – Communism.[1]

One of my assumptions was that an ethical cop would abstain from political commentary and avoid taking sides: my allegiance was only to the law. Like Kim, whose (supposed) neutrality was made clear early in the game, I sought to abstain from commenting on a dockworker's strike, and despite frequent conversations about the game world's prior revolution, the authority of the Coalition, and the pros and cons of capitalism, I tried wholeheartedly to abstain from comment (earning me the achievement of "Unbelievably Boring F**k"). The game's narrative and dialogue choices, however, made such abstention exceedingly difficult – and ethically questionable. What are the ethics of such neutrality? Can you really play *Disco Elysium* well – or at all – through political abstention?

Wherever you go and to whomever you speak in Martinaise, politically-charged dialogue is not far away. Drawn into a fierce labor conflict in a post-revolutionary city teeming with resentment and discontent, Harry must make sense of his world all while being pegged between a representative of capital (Joyce the corporate negotiator) and a voice of social democracy, if not outright communism (Evrart). Players must navigate a myriad of

1. Game dialogue that appears after a corpse has been shot down. Disco Elysium often features dialogue from non-sentient and inanimate objects as well as dead bodies.

such politicized conversations to gain a grounding in the world following their amnesic episode. Indeed, the more one explores the city and talks with its inhabitants, the more difficult it becomes to avoid political persuasions and remain neutral. The player's political views have consequences, too, as they can shape dialogue choices, thoughts, skill checks, and NPCs' interactions. So, given these highly-politicized narrative and design structures, is it even ethical to remain a politically neutral, 'professional' cop?

Arguably, we may view ethically well played experiences of *Disco Elysium* as those which engage and explore political positions – anywhere on the spectrum from fascist to communist to free market fundamentalist – and avoid the narrow-sighted objective of professional police neutrality. Such engagement demands thoughtful ethico-political reflection and easily stimulates comparison with real-world issues, ideologies, and 'relations of care' (Murphy & Zagal, 2011). Indeed, we might argue that to remain neutral and fixated only on solving the case in the face of the highly-charged political environment of Martinaise would be to *unethically* remain blind to the suffering and injustices, or the corruption and dysfunctionality, of the city. In this sense, and contrary to my initial assumptions, it's clear that an ethical and well-played experience of *Disco Elysium* requires political engagement and expression. To avoid it would be to shut one's eyes to the actual meaning and substance of the story and blindly follow an instrumental approach towards a goal which is *itself* defined by competing political and moral positions.

Accordingly, without a clear moral beacon available to guide one's actions, in a vacuum of clear authority and duty, and in a suffering world of political strife, the only way to gain an ethically well played experience out of Harry's investigation is to turn him into a political subject. And in this sense, I believe that the joy of finishing the game and the measure of its being ethically well played is not in the completion of the goal – i.e.,

dutifully solving the case. Rather, it's in the realization that communism *did* in fact kill the Hanged Man, and in the joyful political subjectivization one finds in reflecting (whether positively or negatively) on this fact.

JULES'S PLAYTHROUGH: THE COMPLEX SIMPLICITY OF DARK PLAY

Whenever a videogame gives me the opportunity to engage in moral systems, I make decisions according to my real-world values. Every time I have played the *Mass Effect* games, my version of Commander Shepard has been a Paragon. Even when I'm revisiting the games for the third or fourth time with an explicit intent to play opposite my conventional ethics, I have difficulty engaging in dark play. This put me in a difficult position as I began playing *Disco Elysium* for the second time with only one requirement: I had to play darkly.

Stumbling around Martinaise in the dark

My first hurdle in this endeavor was to identify what it meant for me to perform a dark playthrough. Unlike *Mass Effect* and other games that involve binary moral positions, *Disco Elysium* contains a multiplicity of worldviews along which players can align themselves. I could have played as a racist, xenophobic fascist but this didn't seem like it would adequately engage my ethical imagination, essentially flattening ethical decision-making into "identify racist response, select racist response." Given the diversity of ethical affordances *Disco Elysium* offers players, this seemed a wasted opportunity to explore the game's ethical nuances.

I spent the first hours of the game exploring different choices open to my cop archetype, the Sensitive, reasoning that if I could discover actions that felt consistent with Harry's personality, I could extrapolate his ethical stances and worldview. The moment that clued me into my character's interior life was not

an ethically-loaded main storyline, but an optional interaction I missed during my initial playthrough.

Early in the game, players are tasked with paying off a debt Harry had incurred during his stay at the Whirling-in-Rags hostel. Players can recycle bottles and cans off the streets to scrounge for cents, take bribes from the Union boss, Evrart, or pursue other avenues of financial accumulation. One such avenue involves convincing an elderly woman named Lena to give Harry a souvenir pin that clearly carries sentimental value. Given my Sensitive archetype's "magnetic personality" (ZA/UM, 2019), I easily convinced her to part with the souvenir. I then took it to a nearby pawnshop and initiated a sale. The game offered a dialogue choice with which I could convince the pawnbroker to hold the pin for a few days, giving me the option to buy it back later and return it to Lena. Harry and I ignored this option. We sold the pin without a second thought, pocketed the money, and used it to buy alcohol.

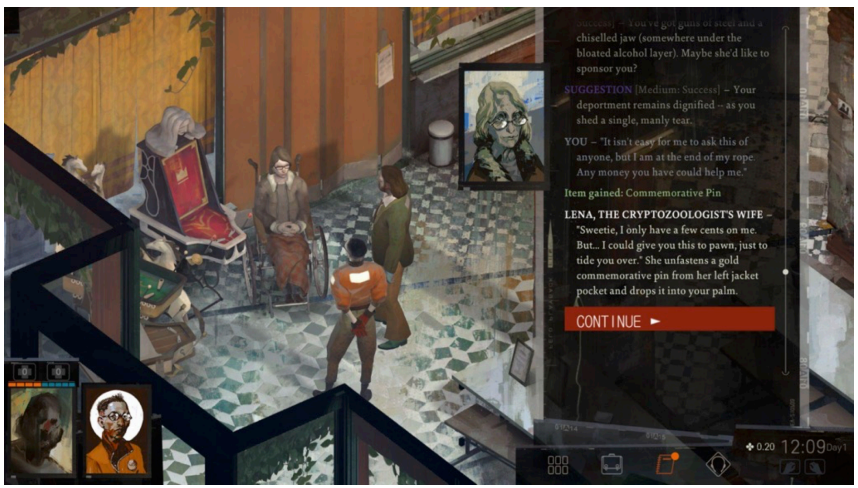

Figure 3: Obtaining Lena's Pin.

Figure 4: Pawning Lena's commemorative Pin.

Selling Lena's pin felt wholly wrong to me, yet it also opened intriguing ethical considerations for the rest of the game. Martinaise is a desperate district in the city of Revachol, wracked by poverty and corruption, and haunted by the memory of a failed communist revolution (Kłosiński, 2021). Completing the game does not solve the district's problems and players have precious few opportunities to effect any real change. As Bernick (2021) states, *Disco Elysium* "is about the hopelessness of *any* politics as a means of human empowerment and flourishing. The best one can do is more or less what Harry does; get your shit together and reduce a little harm here and there" (p. 30). Such sentiments indicate that *Disco Elysium*'s side quests are critical to the game's ethical world. The most concrete impacts Harry can have on Martinaise are by helping people with their mundane concerns, taking time out of his own busy schedule to improve his community. What happens, then, if the player doesn't try to "reduce a little harm here and there," and instead centers their own individual desires? Through this question, I discovered the nature of my 'dark' version of Harry: the unprincipled, selfish, emotional manipulator willing to say almost anything to benefit himself.

Following this encounter, I actively avoided pursuing side quests and consciously pushed myself toward failing others. This approach meant that I moved through the game quickly. Time in *Disco Elysium* does not proceed continuously but is "correlated with the length and intensity of the text presented in the form of dialogue between our protagonist and things, senses, mental abilities, feelings" (Kłosiński, 2021, p. 58). In other words, by not pursuing dialogue trees to their full extent, time passed slower in the game than it otherwise might, allowing me to accomplish more of the main quest each in-game day without engaging in the world's details. I completed side quests only as an extractive process to gain something tangible, like a useful tool or experience points that could improve my attributes.

"Accidentally" Helpful

This speed did lead to some roadblocks. On both the third and fourth day, I made decisions that resulted in Lt. Kim Kitsuragi departing to handle other business. In both instances, Kim's absence prevented me from progressing along the game's main quest. As a result, I found myself in a dilapidated town with nothing to do but get intoxicated and interact with some locals. I explored the nooks and crannies of the world, helped a cryptozoologist check their traps, and even went on a date. As a result of being bored, I had become what I wanted to avoid: a (semi-)upstanding member of the community.

I attribute part of this lapse to Kim's absence. Though Robert troubles the notion of Kim's status as a moral authority, Kim does still represent an example of how players can choose to act, his measured approach appearing especially virtuous in the context of my dark play. In my experience, Kim acted not as an example to aspire to, but a model to diverge from, and I based many of my dark play values around his presence. Without him, I lacked a perspective that had helped ethically orient me toward the game. Thus, a game's moral center does not necessarily act as a force

of attraction for the player; in the case of dark play, it can be essential to repelling players away from such ethics.

During this lonely period, I encountered a group of enthusiastic ravers trying to build a club in the remains of a decrepit church. The club, of course, would be a front for a drug lab. I bribed the ravers and then convinced them to build the club without the drug lab. This choice, however, felt inconsistent with my character.

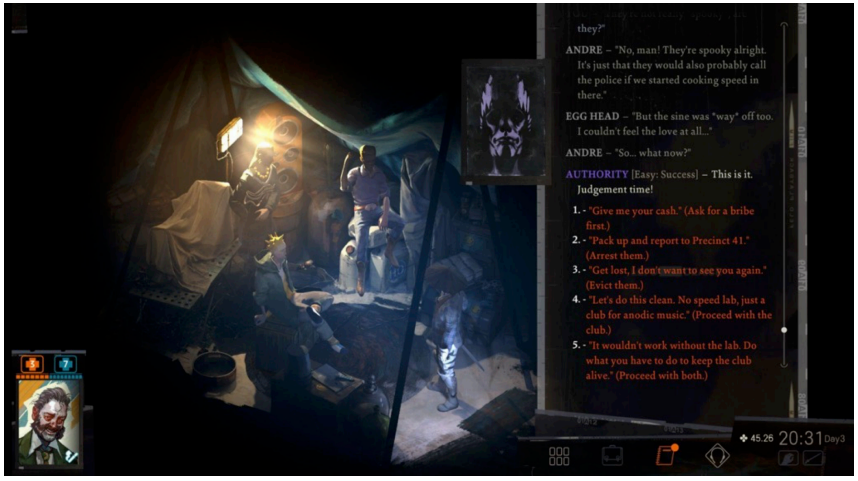

Figure 5: Options to deal with the encampment of "entrepreneur" ravers.

For me, Harry was a drug-addicted corrupt cop. Exercising my authority to arrest the ravers would have been more consistent with earlier actions, yet I chose to make the decision that would enrich their lives. However, this choice does align with how I had approached the game previously. In my earlier playthrough, the church/rave club questline was one of my favorite aspects of the game. Drawing on Souvik Mukherjee's work on player memory, Juan Francisco Belmonte (2021) describes how players' choices across previous playthroughs and save files "form layers of experience" that continue to influence their identity and in-game actions (p. 52). These layers of experience came into conflict at this juncture, forming a tension between my personal history and current intent. I was even aware of this tension as

I deliberated between the choices. Despite this awareness, I still chose not to arrest them. I simply couldn't make this once personally-significant part of the game become 'dark.' In the context of my current playthrough, this felt like a failure.

Success and Failure

It's easy to imagine dark playthroughs of previously-played games to be straightforward: take what I did the first time, then do the opposite. As noted by Sicart (2013), an ethically designed game troubles this dichotomy. If a dilemma is truly ethically challenging, then choosing a 'dark' action still requires ethical reasoning. Dark play in *Disco Elysium* is not simple. The multiplicity of choice troubling "virtuous" players also problematizes the ethical reasoning of those attempting to engage in dark play.

In *Disco Elysium* a player does not need to act in an 'evil' manner to play darkly but can engage and craft their own version of a 'dark' character. This happens through exploring the intersecting dynamics of Harry's personality, the game world's political ideologies, and the options available for interacting with that world. The player makes choices and then justifies them by continuing to pursue similar choices or rationalizing them through an ethically-reflective process. A successful dark play of *Disco Elysium*, then, is not one that instrumentalizes morality into "pick only [insert political ideology] responses," but that allows room to explore the multiplicity of Harry's identity while engaging the player's own ethical imagination.

It is functionally impossible to 'win' in *Disco Elysium*. Even though I knew the real murderer's identity and location beforehand, the game's structure prevents players from solving the case and resolving the conflict in Martinaise. Both Harry and the player will always fail in their quest. This tension, that players fail even as they succeed, is a core component of *Disco Elysium*. The game is one big, wicked problem, irresolvable and uncertain.

Through this uncertainty, players are challenged to reflect on the ethical, political, and personal meanings of their actions and define for themselves what it means to play the game well.

SUPERSTARHARRY & ME – MIA'S PLAYTHROUGH

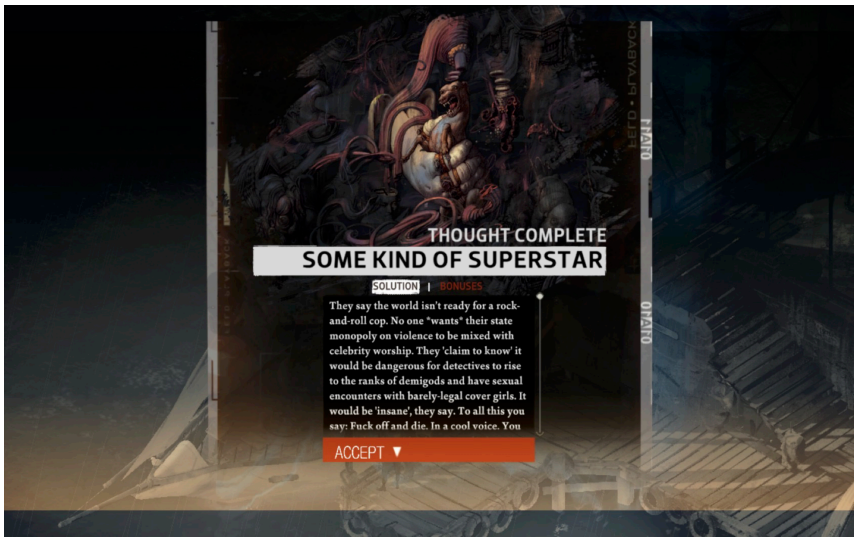

Figure 6: Unlocking the Superstar thought

SuperStarHarry and I could not be more different. SuperStarHarry embraces his physicality, loudly proclaims himself a superstar, is not embarrassed to ask others for money, and is blunt in his conversational style. SuperStarHarry also isn't that bright, but he isn't that mean, either (well, neither am I), particularly to his partner Kim Kitsuragi. He saves his harsh words for everyone else. SuperStarHarry is also, of course, a white man. SuperStarHarry emerged as my answer to what a dark path through *Disco Elysium* might look like. Determining the role was only one challenge – the next was seeing if I could play that role well, if at all. I was determined that SuperStarHarry would be very different from my regular playstyle. Normally in ethically-notable games I take on the role of a smooth talker, high in rhetoric and intelligence, more eager to talk my way out of conflict than to fight, but also the 'hero' who could be

counted on to do the right thing. In that, I solidly fit the model of most players who also enjoy games with moral choices (Consalvo et al., 2019). In contrast, SuperStarHarry was not much of a talker, but when he did talk, he said what needed to be said, whether you wanted to hear it or not. This Harry also flirted with some sexism, and tried drugs and alcohol, but saved his wildest expressions for his wardrobe. In this limited space, I'll overview three key points from my own attempt at dark play: being rude can be liberating; some gameplay/dialogue options almost destroyed any pleasure I took in playing; and trying to play a role different from my regular type is exhausting, almost becoming not-play in its enactment.

Performing SuperStar-ness

Men and women are socialized to interact with the world in different ways and are rewarded and punished accordingly. Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performing gender highlights this artifice, including how it accretes over time, solidifying one's gender identity. Gender(ed) performances happen in myriad ways: through one's clothing, hairstyle, walk, language, and decision-making style. Given the heavy role that language plays in *Disco Elysium*, how I chose to present SuperStarHarry linguistically, in dialogue as well as actions, ultimately contributed to, without my realizing it at first, a re-gendering of my playstyle.

> *"I'm going to have a REALLY hard time if I try to be a jerk to Kim in the game" – playthrough notes, October 31, 2021*

In an examination of presentation style, gender, and humility, psychology researchers Priebe and Van Tongeren point out that men use an *inflated presentation style* more frequently than women – they more often oversell or overclaim their own abilities (Priebe & Van Tongeren, 2021, p. 1). This is likely because "a woman stating her opinion in a straightforward manner may be perceived as aggressive, pushy, or bossy, while a man saying

the exact same thing might be perceived as confident" (p. 2). Playing as SuperStarHarry was like putting on an outfit that screamed "look at me" when all I wanted to do was blend into the background. Yet despite my discomfort, I persisted: singing karaoke, telling people how wonderful I was, physically threatening others, and refusing to play along with their obvious efforts to lead me astray. At first, I constantly worried how this might affect the case and character interactions. Yet as Priebe and Van Tongeren again make clear, in situations where women outperform others, they tend "to be preoccupied with how the other person perceived their immodest language; however, the men … thought that their immodest language made the other person like them even more" (p. 3). While I never believed that others liked my boasting, it slowly became an enjoyable thing to do, and I did look forward to seeing how often a reference to my superstardom would be offered as a dialogue option.

Yet in playing as SuperStarHarry, I worked hard to overcome gendered language conventions I didn't realize I had internalized. I didn't want to insult or let down any of my digital colleagues, or possibly provoke suspects or witnesses in the wrong way. Two weeks after I began, I was "still having trouble being mean" – conflating being frank with being unkind, possibly telling someone something they didn't want to hear. Of course, the game also offered "mean" dialogue choices, but those remained a step too far for even SuperStarHarry.

This playstyle required conscious and continuous decision-making, particularly in how I chose to respond to others. While choice-based games always offer players multiple ways to perform their characters, I needed to actively think past my normal responses, scanning the options for more showy or blunt remarks. This would definitely *"require a lot more work than my 'normal' play"* (playthrough notes, November 13, 2021). Being loud and showy was exhausting. Eventually I figured out some parameters and leaned into my role. The game also reassured

me that trying a different playstyle would not end in chaos and hatred. In an early interaction, for example, Kim suggested a course of action (see Figure 7) and I had the option to tell him I "don't take orders from anyone." Fearing the outcome, but wanting to push myself, I chose the option, and the game continued, with Kim retorting *"I see, yes. You're what we call a 'bad ass', aren't you? He makes little quotation marks around the words, indicating he is unsure of its actual badassery. "Tell me, does your bad ass see more in there or are we done here?" The lieutenant peers into the trash.*

Kim's joking reply negated my worry that I had forever earned his ire and gave me permission to try out other conversational options without worrying that I might 'break the game' if I was too rude. Yet this is a common concern for women, as "some men may view women who display dominance features as a threat to their own power" (Priebe and Van Tongeren, 2021, p. 2). But of course I was not me, I was SuperStarHarry, a white man. Taking on this role let me experience what being rude, egotistical, or just blunt might be like, for another type of person. It was something I grew to appreciate.

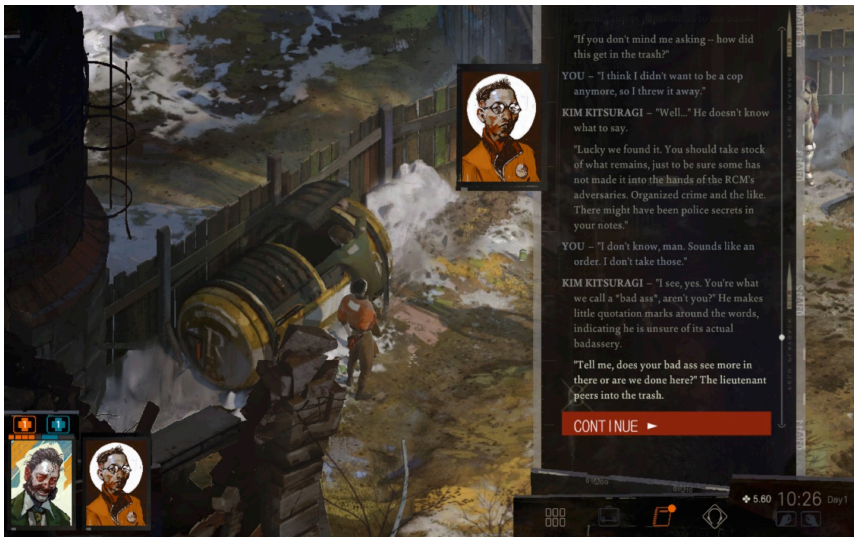

Figure 7: Being rude to Kim does not result in total chaos.

Play history

It wasn't simply gender socialization that made it difficult for me to engage in a different playstyle: gendered, dark, or otherwise. Sicart (2011) argues that players do not engage with ethical practices and concepts in games from a blank slate: "players interpret the game experience from their game cultural background" (p. 102). My own prior experiences playing "the hero" in similarly styled games created a familiar set of pathways, identifications, and expectations that proved difficult to push up against. I was used to being the Paragon version of Shepard in *Mass Effect*, and the Grey Warden from *Dragon Age* who always saved the mages. Playing those games and others like them for dozens or hundreds of hours provided me with a template for Hero Play, but no similar guide for a boasting superstar. I had to set aside my prior experience, where "players rehearse and potentially stabilize versions of themselves they wish to see" (Consalvo et al., 2019, p. 12), and had instead waded into new and uncomfortable territory.

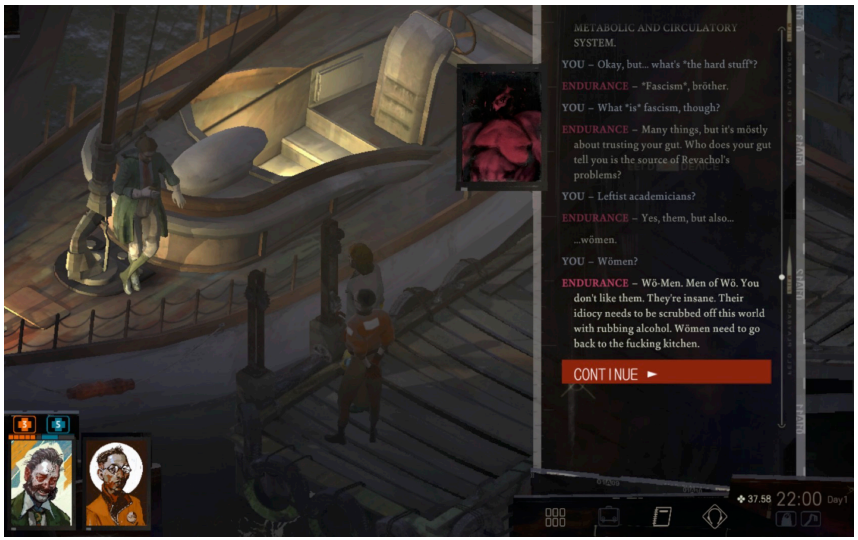

Figure 8: One of many opportunities for Harry to be sexist.

Finally, although I came to embrace this new style of play, it came with limitations. *Disco Elysium* offers the player multiple paths for Harry to follow, including being able to express extremely sexist and racist ideas. The game does limit some expressions. Curiously, the slur "f****t" is never fully written out or pronounced aloud despite its frequent use. Instead it is written out as previously or, if spoken, has static override the audio. But many NPCs spout sexist (along with racist, homophobic, and fatphobic) language, which can be supported or ignored by the player. But more troubling for me was how the game let Harry himself refer to women as whores, 'cock carousels,' insane, and needing "to go back to the fucking kitchen." This was not language I could get comfortable with. At one point at the very beginning of the game I was offered the chance to pound on a woman's door and when she didn't answer yell "Fucking whore" to see if that would generate a response. I tried it once and immediately felt ashamed. I later pursued a sexist resolution to a problem the hostel manager Garte was having, and was similarly troubled. After that I dropped the sexist lines, and never let SuperStarHarry make any racist comments or support any

homophobic statements made by others. All these actions were extremely uncomfortable simply to entertain, let alone engage in. Why was this the case, given it was a single-player game, with no one the wiser if I did so, even if only for "research" purposes? For me it destroyed the idea of play altogether, as doing so would have given me no joy, nor felt playful in the least.

To conclude, SuperStarHarry provided an entry point for me to engage in, if not dark play, then perhaps gray play. I could experiment with different presentation styles, ones mainly associated with white men. It was quite a bit of work, until I could get the hang of it. And there were some facets to a potential Harry – racism and homophobia – that I couldn't square with *any* kind of player I wanted to be. More than a decade ago, TL Taylor (2006) wrote that for women playing the MMO *EverQuest,* "the game may allow access to gender identities that often are socially prohibited or delegitimized offline" (p. 97). In that space they could move around freely, engage in combat, and become skillful and admired. While *Disco Elysium* is a single-player game and no one was there to admire my performance of SuperStarHarry, perhaps he has given me license to push back against some societal gender norms and consider what a different form of "playing well" in everyday life might entail.

CONCLUSION

The three explorations presented here only scratch the surface of what makes *Disco Elysium* ethically notable and what qualities are involved in a well-played performance of the game. Yet these narratives do point to how a game stripped of all combat, dexterity, or skill in movement can still generate feelings of success and/or failure by presenting scenarios that challenge players to ponder what is the best way out of – or through – a particular situation. In refusing to offer conventional markers of mastery and growth, players must determine their own definitions of the terms.

For each author that meant taking time and care to develop a particular playstyle for "their" Harry. However, as noted, each author also suffered lapses in Harry's ideological and behavioral consistency. This might be due to the fallibility of a supposed moral center (Kim) or the remembrance of favored elements in a prior playthrough (the dance/rave church). Yet, playing well does not equate to perfect play, and each of us was satisfied with our pathways through Martinaise, indicating that consistency of character may be less important than exploring and pushing the boundaries of one's player identity.

Perhaps the most ethically notable quality of *Disco Elysium* is that its very structure forces 'virtuous play' to sometimes be dark and 'dark play' to sometimes be virtuous, leading to the "gray play" discussed by Mia. Our conclusions are therefore less complex than the game itself – which provides for a multiplicity of ways to play well, whether in a dark or virtuous way, according to player preference.

That being said, it's important to note that both authors involved in the less-virtuous playthroughs found it difficult or impossible to take dark play to its extremes. *Disco Elysium* has its own dark elements that have largely been glossed over in popular reviews and discussions about it – namely its sexism, fatphobia, and homophobia. These components raise even more questions: Can one play well at being sexist? Is there humanity to be found in Jules's theoretical "racist, xenophobic fascist"? In particular, can one play these roles 'well' if, as indicated by Mia, to do so destroys the very act of play itself? *Disco Elysium*'s flexibility opens the door to ask these questions and future research should investigate these darker elements to unearth the game's less-examined qualities (e.g., what are the implications of using the same naming convention to earnestly call one character "Racist Lorry Driver" while another is ironically named "Fat Angus"?). The challenges and contradictions that *Disco Elysium*'s design and narrative structures provoke thus offer rich avenues for future

research into both the dark and virtuous affordances for ethical play, along with the ethics of dark design choices themselves.

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FROM SKILLFUL TO COURAGEOUS PLAYERS

Vampyr and the Development of Virtues

MAXIME DESLONGCHAMPS-GAGNON

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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TROPHIES, TYPHON, AND TROLLEY PROBLEMS

Moral Play and Playing Well in Prey

DAN STAINES, RYAN SCHEIDING, & MYLES BLASONATO

ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the relationship between ethical gameplay and trophies in Arkane Studios' *Prey*. *Prey* is relevant in this respect because it uses trophies to incentivise players to reflect on the ethical dimensions of their in-game choices, engaging in what Sicart calls "reflective play" (2010, p. 6). We look at two of these trophies and the criteria for obtaining them, exploring how *Prey* uses these meta-game rewards to incentivise player engagement with the game's moral themes and dilemmas. This leads to an analysis of how trophies mediate the relationship between "playing well" and reflective play. The paper concludes with a more general discussion of trophies, how they are used in other games to facilitate reflective play, and some remarks regarding potential future research.

INTRODUCTION

What is *Prey*?

Developed by Arkane Studios and published by Bethesda Softworks, *Prey* is a 2017 sci-fi game set in an alternate near-future timeline in which humanity has made contact with a hostile alien species, the Typhon. The player takes on the role

of Morgan Yu, a research scientist employed by the TranStar corporation to develop "neuromods" – neurological augmentations that grant the user incredible skills and abilities. After a brief introductory sequence and tutorial, it is revealed that Morgan (who can be male or female) is aboard Talos 1, a vast TranStar space station almost completely overrun by Typhon. From this point, gameplay consists primarily of navigating the station and its various sub-sections, avoiding or fighting Typhon, collecting resources, and gaining new abilities with neuromods, all of which is framed by an evolving story that culminates in the player deciding the ultimate fate of Talos 1 and everyone on board.

Prey is an immersive sim, a "particular flavour of first-person shooter RPG hybrid" that combines "the depth of *Dwarf Fortress* and the immediacy and spatial habitation of *Wolfenstein*" (Wilson, 2019). While immersive sims have existed for more than three decades, with the first example generally considered to be *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*, there is little academic and critical consensus regarding the genre's main characteristics – or even if it's a genre at all. For our purposes, we may draw from Wilson's definition and say that immersive sims combine deep systemic gameplay with richly realised narratives and settings where player expressivity and experimentation are paramount.

What is reflective play?

In a series of articles and books, games scholar Miguel Sicart (2010; 2011; 2013) outlines an approach to designing "ethical gameplay" derived in part from the 'Levels of Abstraction' concept within information ethics. He proposes that players interact with video games at two levels of abstraction: as procedural/mechanical systems to be mastered, and as semantic objects with cultural and ethical meaning. In the grim wartime survival simulator *This War of Mine*, the game's procedural rules and objectives compel the player to make choices whose

semantic, cultural meanings clash with commonly held real-world values. Caving in an old lady's head with a shovel to pilfer a tin of peaches makes us uncomfortable: there is dissonance between the game's procedural goals and their broader ethical and cultural implications, resulting in what Sicart calls ethical cognitive friction – a "contradiction between what to do in terms of gameplay, and the meaning and impact of those actions, both within the gameworld and in a larger cultural setting" (2010, pp. 6–7). The key to designing ethical gameplay, Sicart argues, is to focus on this dissonance, to provoke and exploit it and thereby compel the player to consider the moral significance of the game's procedural and semantic layers.

Crucially, Sicart recognizes that ethical cognitive friction is contingent on a player motivated to think about the moral significance of their in-game choices. Even the most morally sophisticated game can be played instrumentally, as a series of ludic challenges devoid of ethical resonance. Sicart calls this kind of play 'reactive' and contrasts it with the 'reflective' play of someone who actively thinks about their choices and perceives dissonance when it appears (2010, pp. 6–8). One of the defining goals of designing ethical gameplay is to encourage players to adopt a reflective stance – to promote what we refer to in this article as "reflective play". A reflective player is one who considers the moral significance of their in-game choices, who does not approach gameplay from a purely instrumental perspective but attempts to understand the rules and assumptions that constitute a game's ethical framework. Reflective players are not necessarily good in the sense of playing morally virtuous characters and making sound moral decisions: it's entirely possible, and sometimes quite valuable, to play evil reflectively.

The relationship between playing reflectively and playing well – in the sense of playing to obtain or maximise ludic rewards – is complex and somewhat fraught. Rewards for skilful play

are implicit evaluations: pats on the head from the omniscient, immutable designer telling you that you have done a good thing. When these same rewards are tied to moral choices in the form of "computable morality systems" like karma meters (ibid.) they act as an implicit evaluation of those choices and eliminate ethical cognitive friction by taking the player's responsibility for evaluating their own actions away from them. This diminishes any incentive to reflect on the moral dimensions of one's choices, saying in no uncertain terms that morality is governed by the same amoral ludic logic that determines, for example, whether the player has enough experience points to level up.

Trophies and other meta-game rewards can help ease this tension, incentivising reflective play by giving players a variety of long and short-term moral goals that require skill and perseverance to accomplish. Implementing trophies well is difficult and requires a great deal of skill and attention to detail, particularly with respect to how trophies interact with and contextualise the game's semantic and procedural layers. We believe the trophies in *Prey* are an instructive example and so it is to them our analysis now turns.

TROPHIES AND REFLECTIVE PLAY IN *PREY*

What are trophies?

Trophies are pieces of digital content that are used as rewards on Sony's PlayStation Network (PSN). They were first introduced for the PlayStation 3 console on Sony's official PlayStation Blog in June 2008 as a part of the PS3 Firmware v2.40 update (Firmware, 2008). The first game to feature trophy support was *Super Stardust HD* (Wood, 2008). At first, trophies were not part of every game released for the console but, by January 1, 2009, trophy integration became a mandatory part of Sony's verification and certification process to publish games on the PlayStation 3 console (Bramwell, 2009). In the period since then,

trophies have continued to be a part of games published for Sony consoles including the PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, and PlayStation 5. It should be noted that Sony's trophy system is not unique in the industry as it was predated by Microsoft's Achievement system for its Xbox line of products and has other equivalents such as Badges on Valve's Steam platform. In this paper we refer exclusively to trophies, but our analysis is equally applicable to equivalent digital reward systems.

Within the field of game studies, there has been little published research into trophies or equivalent digital reward systems. Lu et al (2020) analyzed Reddit posts centered on trophies and achievements using a data-driven approach to determine player interests and attitudes towards these reward systems. Stein (2020) studied the trophies in *The Last of Us Part II* as player motivators designed by developers to "move" the player through the game while also arguing that trophies in general are digital rewards steeped in traditional masculine gamer cultures based on mastery and achievement. Scheiding (2020) incorporates "trophy hunting" playthroughs (i.e., playing through a game with the goal of unlocking every available trophy) as part of his methodology for analyzing games. The small amount of work on trophies and other reward systems leaves a sizable research gap and allows for the further study of trophies, their connection to gameplay, their design, and their overall meaning within player communities.

Trophies in *Prey*

There are 49 trophies for the player to collect (38 Bronze, 6 Silver, 3 Gold, 1 Platinum) in *Prey*, encompassing a range of goals and challenges. Many of the trophies are connected to different types of playthroughs with specific goals such as "No Kill" runs where the player attempts to play the game without killing or "Typhon powers only" runs where the player attempts to finish the game using only Typhon derived neuromods. Other trophies

are connected to utilizing powers in specific ways such as the "Deprogramming" trophy which is unlocked when the player uses the Mindjack power to free a mind-controlled human. Finally, there are some trophies that are more comical as they require the player to perform actions that they normally would not. For example, the trophy "No Show" requires the player to kill Morgan by jumping into the blades of the helicopter that drops them off at the beginning of the game (hence making them a "no show" for work that morning).

It is beyond the scope of this study to examine what the significance of the trophies are for each player, or what the specific intentions were for the developers, but it is possible to surmise based on what is generally known about players, developers, and trophies. From a player perspective, the trophies offer additional challenges, an opportunity to earn digital rewards (i.e., the trophies themselves), the ability to show their prowess playing the game, or a set of goals that will allow them to experience all the content the game has to offer. In other words, the trophies offer some kind of value connected to common gaming and player practices.

From a developer perspective, trophies indicate a desire to guide player behaviour by incentivising fun, interesting, or especially challenging ways to play. However, trophies provide additional reasons for the player to continue engaging with the game and help in audience retention which is essential to game developers and publishers. This is especially the case when future content or DLC is planned. This was true for *Prey* which received paid DLC expansions, *Mooncrash* and *Typhon Hunter*, approximately one year after the initial release. Finally, it would be remiss not to mention that trophies are not only required to be in games by Sony but, even if they were not, they are expected by gaming audiences. In summary, then, trophies offer developers a way of encouraging players to play in certain ways and to play longer while also meeting player and business expectations.

Trophy 1: Do No Harm

The "Do No Harm" trophy requires the player to play through the entirety of the game without killing a single human NPC. For the purposes of this trophy the player is credited with a "kill" only if they deal the killing blow to a human NPC. So, for example, if an NPC is killed in the blast radius of a player's weapon (such as a recycler charge) the player will be credited with a kill. However, if a player baits an NPC into running into a deadly obstacle (such as a fire) they will not be credited with a kill. The player also cannot take actions during side quests that result in the deaths of human NPCs. For example, at one point the player is faced with a choice regarding an escape pod that has become jammed in its exit tube. If they decide to launch the escape pod before clearing away debris outside of Talos I, the NPCs inside will be killed, and the player will be credited with two "kills" (one for each NPC in the escape pod).

The primary challenge for this trophy is to be careful in combat and to make sure that no humans are the victims of splash damage or careless small arms fire. In addition, the player also must be careful to not make decisions during side quests that will lead to the deaths of human NPCs. Despite the seeming simplicity of this requirement the trophy has only a 6.0% completion rate, most likely because some fights (especially those against Telepath enemies that have mind-controlled humans) are much easier when human NPCs can be quickly dispatched or because players accidently are credited with a "kill" and are unaware. In terms of strategies for the trophy, the player simply needs to make frequent saves or quick saves before and after encounters, making sure that they have not been credited with a "kill".

Trophy 2: I and It

The "I and It" trophy requires the player to kill every Human NPC in the game with the official PSN trophy description

reading, "You killed every Human on or around Talos I". However, this description is somewhat misleading because one prominent NPC in the story, Danielle Sho, cannot be killed by the player and, therefore, is not included as a part of the trophy (despite the wording of the trophy making it seem like she would need to be killed by the player as well). The stipulation for what counts as a "kill" are the same as those outlined for the "Do No Harm" trophy. This means that, if the player wants to unlock the trophy, they must land the killing blows on a human NPC rather than simply making sure that all human NPCs are dead. In other words, the player must not only make sure that all human NPCs die, but they must also make sure that the human NPCs die by their direct action.

Unlocking the "I and It" trophy is exceedingly difficult to achieve, as evidenced by its 0.8% unlock rate on PSN. The challenge of the trophy comes from the fact that the player must make sure that they land killing blows and hope that the often chaotic, systemic nature of the game does not affect their ability to do so. For example, it is possible to spawn into an area that is supposed to have living human NPCs only to find that they have accidently killed themselves. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the player must use advanced strategies in particular fights to ensure that they land the necessary killing blows. For example, the player must use a GLOO cannon to scale the side of a greenhouse and dispatch a Telepath quickly and efficiently to prevent the enemy from executing three human NPCs. If the player is not aware of this enemy's location or this advanced strategy, they are very unlikely to be able to land the necessary killing blows. Indeed, under normal circumstances the player may not even attempt to play the game in this way because it involves the use of an excessive number of resources only to achieve the same result (i.e., the defeat of the Telepath and access to the greenhouse).

Given the difficulty of this trophy advanced strategies and planning are required by the player. The website PlayStationTrophies offers a 22-point guide that includes a YouTube video link. The official strategy guide offers a more concise 13-point guide for the "Awkward Ride Home" trophy that can be easily adapted to also unlock "I and It" with some clever manipulation of the save system (Knight, 2017). Thus, completion of the trophy requires both skill at playing the game along with a deep knowledge of its systems as well as the specific locations of human NPCs and enemies. Even with these and the help of the above-listed guides, players will find that they may need to create a checklist of human NPCs that must be killed and abuse the save system before and after every fight in the game to make doubly sure that they are being credited with a "kill" when a human NPC dies. Only then will they be able to unlock this "Ultra Rare" trophy.

Pacifism, genocide, and other "moral trophies"

This paper focuses solely on *Prey* and its use of trophies to structure moral play, but *Prey* is not the first game to use trophies in the ways we describe. Dating back to *Doom*, when speedrunners began competing to complete the game as quickly as possible without killing any monsters, players have pursued so-called "pacifist runs" across a diversity of games and genres (Budac 2021, p. 20). Unlike real pacifism, which abhors all kinds of violence, pacifist runs in video games typically refer to completing a game without *directly killing* an NPC (Pacifist Run, n.d.). As this practice became more widespread, developers began to incentivise it, first with in-game challenges and rewards (like in *Thief: The Dark Project*) and then, increasingly, with trophies (Budac 2021, p.70). Trophies that encourage some variation of the pacifist run are now relatively commonplace, appearing in games like *Cuphead*, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, Arkane's own *Dishonored* series, and, of course, *Prey*.

The dark mirror of the pacifist run is the ominously named "genocide run" in which the goal is to kill everything that can be killed, hostile or otherwise, or to kill every major NPC. Like the pacifist run, the genocide run can only exist in games where doing otherwise is an option. It is meaningless, for example, to talk about doing a "genocide run" of the classic top-down shooter *Galaga* because killing every single alien is necessary to complete the game. Trophies like "I and It" that incentivise genocide runs are less common than their peaceful counterparts, perhaps because wanton slaughter is so common in games that it does not warrant special recognition. That said, trophies are commonly used to reward specific instances of morally heinous behaviour. One noteworthy example is the "Dastardly" trophy in *Red Dead Redemption*, which incentivises players to hogtie a woman, leave her on a train track, and watch as she's killed by a speeding locomotive. Another example is the "Wait, Don't Kill Me!" trophy from *Nier: Automata*, which is awarded for killing ten "friendly machine lifeforms" – an act made particularly poignant by the adorable, almost childlike nature of the machines in question.

Featuring trophies for both pacifist and genocide runs, *Prey* continues the "moral trophy" tradition but does so in a way that plays with the "magic circle" of the game itself, making for a unique experience that we believe highlights exciting possibilities for the design of games intended to promote reflective play.

Analysis

In this section we examine how the trophies Do No Harm and I and It frame *Prey*'s moral gameplay. *Prey* is somewhat unique in that the entire game is framed as a kind of ethical thought experiment – an "immersive trolley problem" as Arkane designer Rich Wilson puts it (2019). How do trophies that explicitly

incentivise (im)moral goals fit into this experiment and *Prey*'s immersive sim design philosophy?

Looking at the criteria for obtaining trophies and the tactics for meeting those criteria, it is clear that obtaining either trophy is a complex, multi-step process involving many small but significant actions over the course of the game. There are many opportunities to fail and not all of them are obvious. Perseverance and adaptability are mandatory – even for players using a strategy guide. This kind of long-term commitment is not unusual for difficult to obtain trophies, especially coveted platinums, but is rarely required of players pursuing moral objectives. Moral content in narrative-driven video games often consists of "one and done" decisions occasioning immediate, unambiguous consequences. The "Last-Second Ending" trope – in which a "single choice made by the player determines the ending that they get, irrespective of … prior choices" (Last Second Ending Choice, 2022) – is a popular format for this kind of content and can be found in games as old as *The Bard's Tale* (1985) and as recent as *Shin Megami Tensei V* (2021).

The opposite of the Last-Second Ending choice is what Sicart calls the "aggregation of choices" (2013, p. 105). Instead of being limited to a few big, heavily signposted decisions, moral play is expressed in a multitude of small and large choices whose significance accumulates over the course of the game. One of the chief virtues of the aggregate approach is that it shifts the player's focus from outcomes to decisions, representing morality as more than big problems waiting for optimal solutions, but as an expression of one's identity – as something that one does, day-to-day, in a multitude of tiny but important ways.

In *Prey* the aggregate significance of the player's choices becomes clear in the ending cutscene when it's revealed that the game's events are part of a virtual reality simulation – an experiment – designed to cultivate empathy in a hostile alien species, of which

the player character is part. Again and again the game asks, in a variety of obvious and not-so-obvious ways: "How empathetic are you? How far would you go to help people in distress?" How the player responds to these questions in aggregate determines the result of the experiment and, by extension, whether or not the player character is killed (or "discarded" in the experimenter's sterile vernacular) before the credits roll.

Trophies add another layer of context, reframing aggregate choices as progress toward obtaining a meta-game reward. For the reactive player uninterested in participating in the game's moral fiction, this does not change much. If NPCs are morally inert automatons that exist to facilitate the player's goals, then the choice between saving and killing them *en masse* is purely instrumental. For a reflective player, especially one who is aware of the game's meta-fictional conceit, the issue is somewhat more complicated.

As we saw in the previous section, obtaining the I and It trophy means killing every (still living) human inhabitant of Talos 1 – 42 people in total. Significantly, pursuing this trophy means getting up close and personal with the very people you need to kill. Mechanisms that might help a guilty trophy hunter salve their conscience – like letting NPCs fall victim to "accidents" – are invalid: the killing blow must always be delivered by the player. For a reflective player this is further complicated by the fact that Arkane has taken special care to humanise the vast majority of *Prey*'s NPCs. Not only does every person aboard Talos 1 have a name and job, but many have intricate personal histories that players can piece together from emails and audio logs found all over the station. It is one thing to kill hordes of nameless gun-toting goons for a trophy; beating your paraplexic ex-girlfriend to death with a wrench for the same reason is quite another. The trophy therefore acts as a source of ethical cognitive friction: for a player who sees the people of Talos 1 as more than game pieces, I and It is a grim temptation reinforcing the game's thematic

concern with means vs ends moral reasoning. "Just how badly do you want that trophy?" the game seems to ask.

The Do No Harm trophy serves a different function, testing the player's moral resolve as they struggle to complete the difficult tasks needed to keep the people of Talos 1 alive. In so doing, it illustrates once again the value of the aggregate approach to designing moral content. One of the major drawbacks of the "one and done" format discussed earlier is that it involves little in the way of commitment from the player: the decision is presented, made, and resolved in a single conversation. But for real moral exemplars, for the people who actually go out of their way to help others and make the world a better place, morality is a way of life embedded in hundreds of little decisions made on a day-to-day basis (Colby & Damon, 2015). It is about commitment and self-awareness. It is saying to yourself "This is what matters to me" and consistently following through on those values. *Prey*'s Do No Harm trophy incentivises, in microcosm, the kind of moral commitment that real moral exemplars practice: the kind that is hard, that takes time, and that typically involves a lot of failure and repetition.

Or at least that may be the case for a first-time player, unaware of the game's meta-fictional conceit. But what does it mean to kill or save everyone on Talos 1 when you know that the whole thing is, in the game's fiction, a simulation? Part of playing reflectively is buying into the narrative and trying to engage with moral scenarios in ways consistent with your values or the values of the character you are playing. For a second time player who has seen and understood the ending, buying into *Prey*'s fiction means buying into the conceit that everything the player does during the game is part of a simulated experiment. The people of Talos 1 are not even fictionally real; they are variables, data to be preserved or erased as the test dictates.

For a returning player, Do No Harm and – especially – I and It reinforce this conceit, prompting an interesting mix of reflective and reactive play in which the player can treat moral scenarios instrumentally, but in a self-aware way that is consistent with the game's narrative and does not provoke ethical cognitive friction. In revealing that the events of the game are simulated, Arkane effectively gives the reflective player permission to experiment – friction free – with the game's ethical scenarios, with trophies providing a roadmap for obtaining meaningful results.

To summarise, trophies that appear to incentivise a reactive, morally indifferent playstyle in which human NPCs are reduced to checkboxes on a to-do list are recontextualised by the game's design and fiction to draw attention to their moral significance. First time players pursuing the I and It trophy will find that their grim task is made ever grimmer by the hard-to-miss humanity of Talos 1's inhabitants, a humanity that resists reduction to ludic arithmetic. The same first time player pursuing the Do No Harm trophy will discover that deciding to do a good deed is just the beginning: that being "good" is a matter of commitment and focus, about many decisions made consistently in the face of adversity. For returning players, the trophies take on a new meaning, slotting neatly into the game's "ethics experiment" meta-fiction and incentivising players to treat Talos 1 like the big, simulated sandbox it turns out to be. In all cases, we see that playing *Prey* well by obtaining trophies is harmonious with playing *Prey* reflectively.

To be clear, we are not claiming that anyone who tries obtaining the trophies we have discussed will necessarily engage in reflective play and think about the moral ramifications of their actions as they pertain to the "real" and "simulated" narrative realities in *Prey*. We are interested in methods and design patterns (Björk & Holopainen, 2006) for incentivising reflective play, in giving players good reasons to think about the moral implications of their choices – this is what *Prey* does so well. This

is a difficult design problem, not least of all because the same mechanisms games usually use to incentivise player behaviour – e.g., rewards in the form of new powers or content – focus the player's attention on ludic, rather than moral, outcomes. *Prey* subverts this tendency, first by using meta-game rewards to incentivise player engagement with the game's moral themes and dilemmas, and second by using a meta-fictional conceit – the "experiment" – to reduce the delta that usually separates playing well, in the ludic "get all the trophies" sense, and playing reflectively.

From this, we conclude that meta-game rewards like trophies possess a great deal of untapped potential when it comes to designing and incentivising ethical gameplay. If *Prey* is any indication, the key to doing this well is to be aware of how the game's content contextualises trophy criteria, and how those same criteria direct the player's attention to morally significant actions and scenarios. This last point is important and more complex than it initially appears. One of the great challenges of moral life is learning to "see" morality in everyday scenarios and choices, to recognise moral problems as moral problems (Narvaez, 2010). Getting players to "see" morality in game systems and narrative is similarly challenging, and trophies offer a relatively straightforward and unobtrusive means of addressing that challenge. This involves more than just rewarding players for choosing the good or bad option in a dialogue tree: as *Prey* demonstrates, trophies are a way of stealthily problematising or promoting morally relevant mechanics, strategies, and tactics and encouraging players to think about morality throughout the entire game.

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP

Trophies are an underexplored topic within the game studies literature and there is much potential for future research in this

area. In particular we feel there is a great deal to learn from conducting player studies on so-called trophy hunters – player communities dedicated to obtaining trophies and developing optimised strategies for doing so. What is it about trophies that motivates players to pursue them with such dedication? Here, Consalvo's (2009) concept of "gaming capital" may prove to be particularly informative: if acquiring trophies confers gaming capital, how do the criteria of specific trophies impact that relationship? Are trophies in harder games or games in historically "hardcore" genres like military shooters seen as more desirable than trophies from casual games? In certain games, such as the aforementioned *Nier: Automata*, it's possible to "purchase" trophies via in-game shops, a practice dismissed as illegitimate by certain trophy hunting guides. What other mechanics or genre tropes might delegitimise a trophy in this way?

With respect to the relationship between reflective play and trophies, there is much work to be done. At this stage, our work is purely theoretical: we have good reasons to hypothesise that trophies can be used to successfully incentivise reflective play, and now the next step is to test our hypotheses and examine actual player behaviour. The questions we are interested in answering encompass the impact trophies have on player awareness of moral content: for example, do players who obtain morally oriented trophies pay more attention to a game's moral content, or do trophies act like other ludic rewards encourage a reactive mindset? How do narrative, presentation, mechanics, and the broader culture around trophies contribute to this?

Moving beyond trophies, metagame mechanisms more broadly present another underexplored but potentially valuable avenue for provoking reflective, morally engaged play. The popular indie RPG *Undertale* is particularly instructive in this respect, using metagame elements like the player's save file and playstyle – exemplified by pacifist and genocide runs – to playfully poke

holes in the magic circle and draw attention to the moral significance of the player's actions (Budac, 2021). One of the more poignant examples of this occurs upon restarting the game after successfully completing a genocide run. Instead of getting the usual title screen, the player is greeted with a black void and the sound of howling wind. Pressing buttons does nothing and for all intents and purposes it seems like the game is now unplayable. After ten real-time minutes elapse, a text box finally appears, addressing the player directly:

> *Interesting. You want to go back. You want to go back to the world you destroyed. It was you who pushed everything to its edge. It was you who led the world to its destruction. But you cannot accept it. You think you are above consequences.*

The player is then given an option: they can leave the game in an unplayable state, or exchange their "SOUL" to start anew. Significantly, choosing the latter option does not result in a completely clean slate. The game "remembers" that the player has completed a genocide run, making it impossible to ever complete the "True Pacifist Route" and obtain what fans consider the game's "true ending" (True Pacifist Route, n.d.). As such, if the player completes a pacifist run first and follows it with a genocide run, there is no going back to the true pacifist ending. As Budac (2021, p. 133) points out, the upshot of this is that players must "leave an entire route of the game unplayed" (or fiddle with configuration files) if they want the best ending to "stay" in the game's meta-fiction. In other words, not playing the genocide route is a sacrifice the player must make for the greater good.

Undertale is not the first or only game to play with meta-functionality in this way. The 2009 Flash game *Execution* uses permanent save files to "remember" the player's actions, while players who want to obtain the "true ending" in *Nier: Automata* may be asked to delete their save, which by that point could easily

approach 100 hours of total play time. What these, *Undertale*, and *Prey* have in common is their commitment to using the player's awareness that they are playing a game to undermine or problematise unreflective, instrumental play. By puncturing the magic circle and incorporating metagame mechanisms and playstyles into the fiction and world of the game itself, these games imbue Sicart's "procedural layer" with semantic, moral meaning – ultimately making it harder for the reactive to *remain* reactive.

The question now becomes: how do we push this further in a way that does not frustrate players, undermine their willingness to engage in the game's moral fiction, or make them feel as though they have been ripped off? The willingness to make meaningful sacrifice, like deleting a save file or not replaying a game in a certain way, is a core value in most moral traditions, but perhaps it is unreasonable (or even unethical) to expect players to give up access to content and rewards in a product they have paid good money for. As Zagal, Björk, and Lewis (2013) ask: where is the line between psychological manipulation and good game design? Would it be manipulative, for example, to give players the option to "save" *Final Fantasy VII's* Aerith from dying by permanently deleting their save at the end of the game or by forgoing access to a platinum trophy? For certain platforms, like Xbox Live, the latter option is not even possible since their regulations forbid developers from making trophies inaccessible (Xbox Live Polices for PC and Mobile, 2022).

What all this points to is that, while it is clear that there is a great deal of potential inherent in using metagame mechanisms to promote morally reflective play, the actual design and implementation of these mechanisms is far from straightforward and ironically fraught with potential ethical and regulatory pitfalls. Nevertheless, we look forward to unravelling these issues as we continue to explore this fascinating and thus far underexplored strand of games scholarship.

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THE THRILL OF PSYCHOMACHIA

Deciding When Not to Stop Can't Stop

BARRY JOSEPH

ABSTRACT

This piece will explore the ethics of my use of the digitization of the board game Can't Stop, first to maintain engagement at work and then later to produce a state of psychomachia ("conflict of the soul") in order to work. These two uses combine to showcase examples of playing when one is only supposed to be working, and working when one is only supposed to be playing. It is designed to answer the following question: When the two are combined – the ludological and the non-ludological – in a manner not transparent to others, is this behavior unethical?

INTRODUCTION

The following story should not be taken as fact. It comes from an undocumented, unverifiable memory nearly two decades old. Perhaps best to treat as allegory.

I am in New York City in a long, thin second floor office in Chinatown. The walls are decorated with the boxes of classic tabletop games, nostalgic inspiration for the young indie game designers around me. This is the office of GameLab, founded just a few years earlier by game designers Eric Zimmerman and Peter Seung-Taek Lee, in the years leading up to their release of both

Diner Dash and Gamestar Mechanic. Eric is at the whiteboard, brainstorming early design concepts for what would eventually be launched as Ayiti: The Cost of Life, the first video game I ever produced (a worker-placement game about access to health care and education for a poor rural family in Haiti).

At the time, I worked at Global Kids, a youth development organization. Next to me is my supervisor, Evie, the Deputy Director, who came to youth work from a training in children's theater. Across from us sits Cornelia Brunnner, Deputy Director of the Center for Children and Technology, the organization hired to embed some "stealth assessments" within the game, to learn if player attitudes changed after playing the game.

While Eric was at the board, and all eyes focused on his illustrations, one set was elsewhere, on their device, playing a game. In my memory Cornelia was looking at her iPhone, but that can't be, as Ayiti was launched before Apple's invention. But in any case, Cornelia was playing a mobile game throughout. She may have mentioned she was testing a game under development. The game designers had no problem with this, incorporating her feedback when the topic would shift to Cornelia's area of expertise, but I could tell staff from Global Kids were put off. They wouldn't say anything about it, at least not until we exited, but I could tell by their expressions this behavior was seen as less than professional.

We were supposed to all be working. Why did Cornelia think she could also be playing? Personally, I found it fascinating, like a child seeing an adult getting away with acting in a way they didn't know was allowed.

This was the first time I recall seeing this occur, someone playing when they were at the same time working. A few years later, in 2008, I had the opportunity to do it myself. I was in Madison, Wisconsin at the Games, Learning and Society Conference. The

GLS always offered an amazing arcade, full of fantastic games to be played between sessions. I was supervising one of my students who I had accompanied to present and who, now free, was spending hours effortlessly killing it at Dance Dance Revolution. She was done working. She was just playing.

I, however, was still at work. I finished my round of Guitar Hero, a game I'd just discovered, but now I was late to a session on my schedule. Too late, it turned out; the room was full. Luckily, headsets were available for those wishing to listen remotely. I donned a set and, listening to the lecture, wandered back into the arcade, watching others play Guitar Hero (even though I could not hear). A guitar was offered. At first I declined then, recalling Cornelia, thought: Why not? I removed one side of the headset, allowing the music from the game to fill that side of my ear while the lecture continued in my other.

Strumming to Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" while listening to a panel on games and learning, I was finally doing it: working and playing at the same time.

SETTING THE STAGE

Fast forward to 2020, March. The global pandemic has shut everything down, for at least a few weeks. My small New York City apartment had transformed into both school for my children and an office for my partner and I. Space was tight. My mental bandwidth was even tighter. It was hard — between navigating the logistics and fears of a quarantine — to fully concentrate on my now 100% remote work for the Girl Scouts of the USA. I needed something to help me focus.

I found it, unexpectedly, at Board Game Arena, where I first began to integrate play into my work.

Board Game Arena (BGA) was, to me, a new web-based way to play board games, whenever I wanted, within a worldwide

community of players. Launched as a passion project by two IT professionals in 2010, Grégory Isabelli and Emmanuel Colin, it celebrated its 10 year anniversary in October, 2020 – just months into the pandemic – with some very impressive numbers (BGA, 2022):

- Four million user accounts
- Over 200 board games digitized for play on their web site
- A community representing 300 different countries

Within just four months, membership grew 25% to five million users, the number of online versions of popular tabletop games surpassed 250, and the games were offered in 40 languages. Shortly after they were acquired by the French Asmodee, one of the largest game publishers in the world (Asmodee, 2022).

During their period of explosive pandemic-driven growth, all that mattered to me was that for $4 a month, whenever I wanted, in whatever game I wanted, there was always someone free to play. In my life, the greatest limitations to playing tabletop games were access to people who wanted to play with me, access to the games themselves (many which cost more than an entire year of BGA), and the time to play it.

Their web site frames their users as people who want to "take the time to play." When, exactly, do they imagine us using BGA? They suggest "during your lunch break – or your commute home" or "quietly at home." (BGA, 2022)

BGA did not appear to envision my plan. I no longer had a commute, nor a lunch break. My home WAS my office. I did not plan to take time out to play on BGA. I planned to use it WHILE I was working.

Before I explain why I was playing games on BGA when I was also deeply engaged in keeping millions of Girl Scouts connected

with their troops, I need to first explain in more detail the game that took up my time and attention: Can't Stop.

CAN'T STOP THE GAME

One of the advantages of BGA was its all-you-can-eat access to popular and often pricey games: Azul. Carcassonne. Splendor. Agricola. King of Tokyo. My preference was for games that have shaped our new golden age of tabletop gaming, inspired in part by the uber Catan (formerly Settlers of Catan, named in a recent era when unquestioned colonization still seemed fun). BGA is less like Amazon and more like Netflix, turning the consumption of tabletop games from a store/product experience into a streaming/binge service.

So imagine my surprise when it turned out that the vast majority of my time on the site (69% of my 423 games, as of January 2022) was playing a simple game from Parker Brothers, Can't Stop, first published in 1980. To understand the experience of the game you need to understand its mechanics. A good description comes from a pair of computer scientists at Loyola College in Maryland, James Glenn and Christian Aloi. Together they published in 2009 a paper on their creation of "heuristic strategies for solitaire Can't Stop by generalizing an existing heuristic and using genetic algorithms to optimize the generalized parameters." (Aloi, 2009)

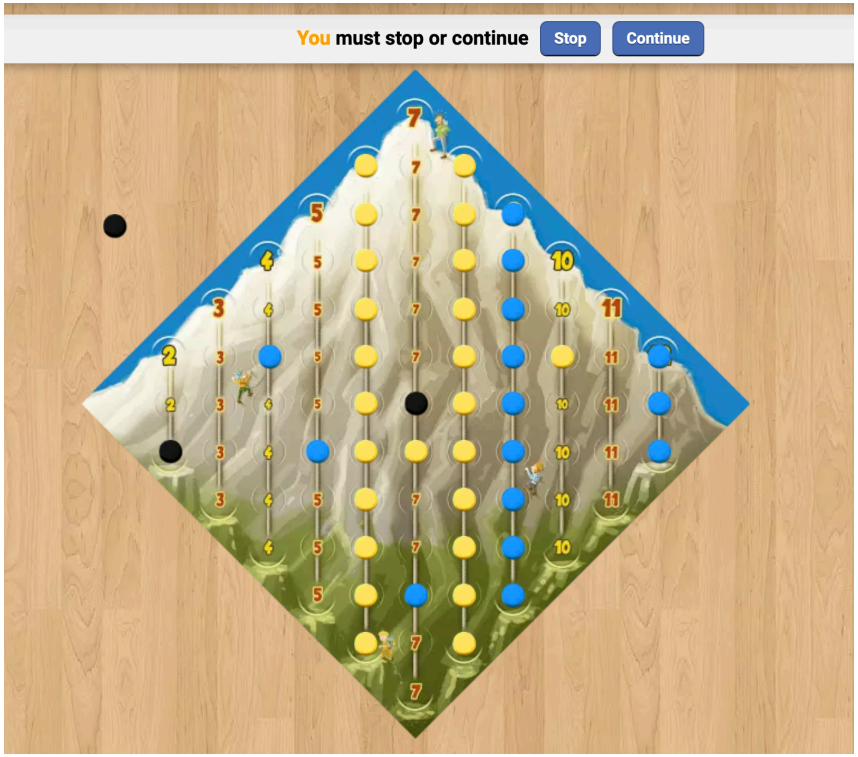

Figure 1. Should the player "Stop" or "Continue"?

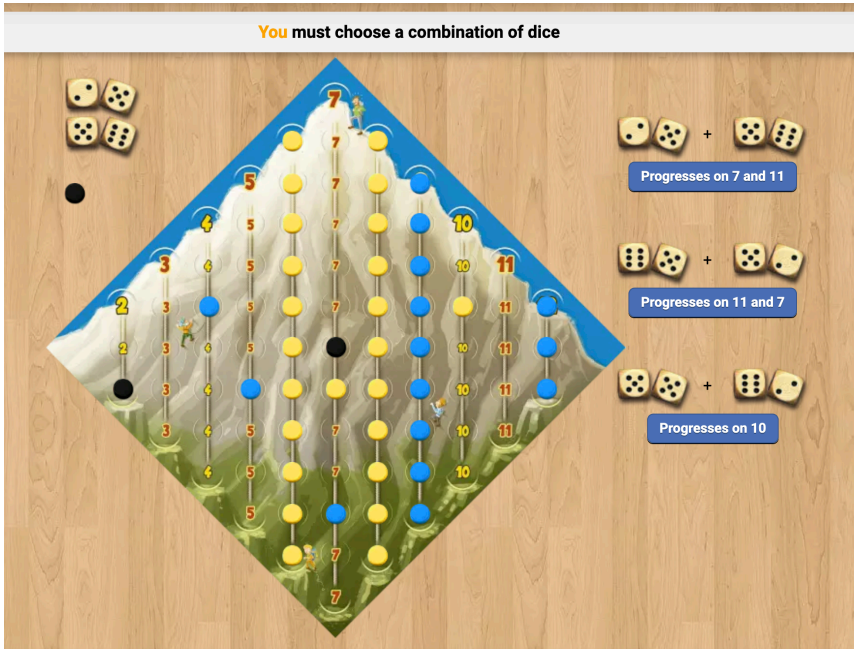

Figure 2. After the player hit the "Continue" button, a lucky role was made.

Within the paper they describe the game as:

> one of a class of games called jeopardy stochastic games (or jeopardy dice games when the stochastic element is supplied by dice) in which each player's turn is a sequence of stochastic events, some of which allow the player to make progress towards a goal, and some of which will end the player's turn immediately. (Aloi, 2009)

On their turn, each player rolls four dice. They can be grouped by that player into any combination of two pairs, using the total of each pair to advance to the top of one of eleven columns. For example, rolling 1, 3, 4, 5 could for example produce 4 and 9 (that is, 1+3 and 4+5), or 5 and 8 (that is, 1+4 and 3+5), or 6 and 7 (that is, 1+5 and 3+4). If the player chooses that last option, 6 and 7, they would advance on both the track labeled 6 and the track labeled 7. At this point, they need to make a decision:

> After each incremental step towards the goal, players can choose to end their turn, in which case the progress made during the turn is banked and cannot be lost on a later turn. Players who press their luck and choose to continue their turns risk being forced to end their turns by an adverse outcome of the stochastic event, in which case they lose any progress made during the turn. (Aloi, 2009)

An adverse outcome is producing numbers through a dice roll which cannot be played. For example, a player cannot advance on a track that has already been completed. Also, once a player on their turn has begun advancing on three separate tracks, they can not advance on any other track. In other words, if a player has advanced on their turn on tracks 2, 6, and 7, if they then fail to role any of those numbers all progress would immediately be lost.

The first player to get to the end of three different tracks immediately wins the game.

CAN'T STOP UNPACKED

Now that the general shape of the mechanics have been explained, it might also be useful to unpack what Glenn and Aloi meant by a "jeopardy stochastic" game.

Let's start with "stochastic". That simply means the game is based on the random occurrence of a predetermined set of events. Patterns will emerge, but can't be predicted. For example, in Can't Stop, two dice totaling 7 will occur much more frequently than combinations that total 2, and yet it is statistically possible for a player to roll four 1s.

Can't Stop leverages stochasticity within the game format termed a "roll and move." Geoff Engelstein, who wrote the comprehensive *Building Blocks of Tabletop Game Design: An Encyclopedia of Mechanisms*, defines this as "games where players

roll dice or spin spinners and move playing pieces in accordance with the roll." This describes most games with a track, from ancient Egyptians playing Senet, movement around a set of Backgammon, players circling a Monopoly board, or children racing to the finish line in Candy Land (with flipped cards instead of dice) or Chutes and Ladders. (Engelstein, G., Shalev, I., 2019). If you played a roll and move on your own, with no competitors, you would simply be recording your progression along the track; if you play with others, now you are in a race. Within a solitaire progression, you have all the time in the world. When it turns into a race, it is all about speed. The faster player wins.

When Glenn and Aloi referred to Can't Stop as a "jeopardy" game, they were not referencing the popular game show. Rather, they meant that the game married the regular occurrence of random events to the push your luck mechanic. Engelstein defined "push your luck" as a mechanic in which "players must decide between settling for existing gains, or risking them all for further rewards". (Engelstein, G., Shalev, I., 2019). In other words, once you make your move, do you decide as a player to lock it in, or risk it all to shoot for a more advanced goal? Now your speed is no longer determined by fate alone (the roll of the die, the draw of the card). Now you, as a player, have agency. You have to make a choice: stay or go?

If all players want to go as far as they can, why would anyone stop? Because to decide to keep going means to risk all progress, and perhaps even to lose the entire game. In a game of Poker, if your hand totals higher than 21, you're out. In Incan Gold, if a danger card appears twice before one exits the treasure-filled cave, you leave empty handed. In a push your luck game, there are always consequences.

Can't Stop iterates the race to the finish concept by breaking the track down from one to eleven. The game I play on BGA is

themed around mountain climbers, turning each column into a mountain peak. The playing pieces represent my climbers, one per mountain. My movement along each track represents my climbers racing to be the first to the top of their peaks. The most common number, 7, has the most climbing locations while the rarest numbers, both 2 and 12, have the least. The theme at first might seem to have little bearing on the game play itself, but in fact the metaphor of mountain peaks provides me with mental scaffolding to make the leap from a unified circular track like in Monopoly to the diffusion of action across eleven. Now I not only have agency in deciding whether or not to stop, but I also get to decide where I want to advance my climbers. Say I roll a 1, 1, 6, and 6; do I want to advance twice up the center 7 peak (1+6 and 1+6), or advance once each on the harder to roll 2 and 12 peaks (1+1 and 6+6)?

Unlike in some push your luck games, in Can't Stop you never lose your progress if you choose to end your turn (unless an opponent is the first to reach that peak). That means there is considerable incentive to hold on to your gains and avoid risk. An advance always feels like an advance. However, if everyone else advances faster, getting further ahead each round, even though I might be technically advancing, what I will feel is that I am falling behind, and the pressure will increase to take risks. If I am only two places away from winning a track, and you are six places below me, I can be more conservative and take less risks; however, if the numbers were reversed then so is the pressure – I will now feel incentivized to take bold risks, as I am likely to lose that track anyway.

As a result, Can't Stop becomes a game of balancing between emotional extremes, between knowing when to relax and taking one's time and when to take bold risks. One can play between those two, inching forward a little each time, but that strategy is not rewarded by the game (and, in any case, how boring!).

PSYCHOMACHIA

This brings us to the experience of playing Can't Stop and the power of psychomachia.

Psychomachia, or conflict of the soul, is the title of a Latin poem from the early fifth century (Holcomb, 2009), a sort of literary Super Smash Bros. of personified virtues and vices — Patience versus Wrath, Humility against Pride — but with considerably more blood and gore (Prudentius, 1743). The battle between Chastity and Lust, for example, ends after Lust thrusts a burning pine knot dipped in sulfur into the eye of Chastity who responds by piercing Lust in her throat with a sword, who proceeds to die as fumes and clots of blood are spat out of the wound.

This conflict survives in contemporary media like television and books through the trope known as the "Good Angel, Bad Angel" (TV Tropes, 2022), with a character struggling to resolve a debate between an angel on one shoulder facing a demon on the other. This is precisely how I feel when I play Can't Stop. There is a tension generated by the two opposing options generated through play of the game, the battling angels on my shoulders vying for my attention, one voice insisting I stop while the other goading me to throw caution to the wind.

These voices remain constant throughout the game, their urgency undiminished by the specific circumstance of each move. One always wants me to stop and consolidate my wins while the other always wants me to gamble for higher gains. What changes, however, is my reading of the strategic topography of the board as it emerges over the game, providing context for interpreting the competing angels. Am I falling behind in the game? If so, the bolder angel will get my attention. Am I ahead by a safe distance? If so, the cautious angel may rule that round.

After I make my decision, to either end my turn or roll the dice, an emotional arc has come to a close. Something fraught has been resolved. If I stop, I take stock of my progress and note the numbers I will quietly wish to roll in my next turn. If instead I don't stop, one of two things occurs: either all progress is lost as the dice fail to roll numbers I can play, dropping my climbers to the same points I found them at the start of the turn, and a pit opens in my chest, just momentarily, filled with despair and regret, before it quickly dissipates; or, hurrah!, the roll is successful, my climbers advance, my boldness rewarded, and I find myself yet again with competing angels on my shoulders yelling their advice in my ears.

This type of play is not for the weak of heart. Each turn is an emotional mini-roller coaster ride, a compressed moment of peak engagement. Whether I win or lose, I can't wait to return.

PLAYING WHILE WORKING

Rachael Hutchinson (Hutchinson, 2021) makes the case that "a person's gameplay style… will necessarily change over time, just as circumstances change in the world and as we change in ourselves…" During 2020, circumstances certainly changed in the world – the arrival of a global pandemic, the loss of my full-time job at the Girl Scouts (Surprise! That's coming up below) – and I changed in response to both. As a result, Rachael continued, "The game text is not a monolithic object but open to… different meaning-making experiences." In this piece I am exploring this idea, looking at one game that, in of itself, did not change during 2020 yet the context in which it was played, and my gameplay style, most certainly did.

I was introduced to Can't Stop during the high stakes, all-hands-on-deck frenzy that described my work in the weeks after the national pandemic shut down. What could we do to support the socially-isolated Girl Scouts, especially during the height of the

cookie season? With the office closed, the frequency of all remote meetings exploded, becoming their own form of pandemic. New rules were required to ensure there was time for staff to take "bio breaks" and stretches.

This was not a result of working remotely. For years the office culture had already integrated more than a quarter of its staff working remotely around the country, with meeting invitations expected to always include both a conference room and a video conference link. What changed, however, was the intensity of the work, and the almost desperate need to stay connected over video. At the same time, my mental bandwidth was so tight, due to the terror of COVID, of being quarantined at home, of the endless stream of ambulances dominating the street traffic on the streets outside. That meant I had little patience for pretending to listen to things that had nothing to do with my work. If meetings were held in person, I'd be doodling away, to keep myself engaged. Multitasking was not unusual during these remote video meetings, but hard to police, especially when cameras were turned off and most people were not needed to contribute most of the time.

I now found a new way to doodle. At home, remotely tele-connecting with my colleagues, I played Can't Stop.

The digital affordances of this analog game – both within the particulars of Can't Stop and the features of the broader BGA ecosystem – made this impossible idea – playing a board game in a work meeting – possible.

First, the attention requirements of Can't Stop are rather limited. Even though this is a live game, my attention is only required during my move. Certainly I can choose to enjoy the excitement of my opponent's play, but as BGA documents the results of each move in a side-bar I can start my turn catching up on what I missed while assessing the current state of the board, in an

instant. Contrast this with, say, Ping Pong. With Ping Pong, you lose if your attention wanders for a moment from the action, your precisely placed swing required every few seconds. With Can't Stop the time between turns can be a minute or more, and nothing is required of me before I return (and, if I am in another web browser tab, there are notifications to signal it's time to turn back). This means the game was well designed for me to focus for a few seconds on my turn, make a play for psychomachia, then focus for minutes at a time on my work requirements.

Second, as a digital game, in which a computer makes all the calculations on my behalf, the game is so much faster. When my dice are rolled the game instantly displays all of my options. No time or bandwidth is required to combine the pairs of dice. This means I can play a game within 5-10 minutes, from start to finish, and spend less mental resources on each turn.

Third, BGA provides a 2-dimensional representation of a 3-dimensional object. That flat representation fits perfectly on my computer screen requiring no physical footprint on my desk. At the same time, it shares the digital footprint with my work space – my web browser, my email, Microsoft Word. This allows me to switch between play and work as seamlessly as I multitask between a Photoshop file and a Twitter notification.

Fourth, BGA affords not just access to games but to a global always-on community of game players. It is very rare I look for a player without finding a taker within a minute or two. Their country of origin is visible on their player stats card – Yemen, Brazil, Thailand, Italy, France. There is no requirement to use the prominently displayed chat box, but most games begin with a round of "Good luck" and "Have fun" and invariably end with all sharing, regardless of who won, "gg" (for "good game"). During the early months of the pandemic, between rounds we shared reports on the impact of COVID on our local communities.

Fifth, Bernie De Koven, in his seminal book The Well-Played Game, describes his ideal encounter, in which two or more people use a game in order to challenge each other to remain engaged in an activity that calls out the best in each person. He told me in an interview in 2014 that the idea was that "even in the most competitive games there are, in the most professional games that you can imagine, there is such a thing that transcends the score of the game: the quality of the game." (Joseph, 2014) In the book Bernie recounts the tale of Bill Russell, the captain of the Boston Celtics, whose team, one night, was playing so brilliantly they were ahead by 30 points. Yet right in the middle he felt, "Wow, I wish those other guys were playing better, because it's just not fun. I know we are playing well, but we are not really playing well together. When we really are playing well, man, we would become like supernatural beings,… at a different level of consciousness, because we are playing so well together." (Mooshme, 2014) I love playing games with my family, but with my kids I sometimes need to make sure they win, or with my partner I need to make sure she is engaged enough to want to return to the board in the future. Not with BGA. On BGA, everyone is there not just to win but to also play well together, by playing their hardest to challenge themselves and each other. BGA is more than just a place to always find a player; it is a place one can go to always play well with others.

Finally, the statistics available provide deep opportunities for self-reflection. A player, I suppose, could theoretically record everything they do in their analog games. BGA, however, seamlessly captures everything you do and then shares it back to the curious, at the level of an individual play session, at the level of all sessions of a particular game, and at the level of your entire BGA footprint. At the time of this writing I can see I have played 423 games on BGA (69% of which were Can't Stop); of the 290 sessions I have played of Can't Stop I have won 53%. Stats like that, however, are trivial. The substance comes from a deeper

dive. Each game has its own stats. Can't Stop, for example, offers data on "Thinking time", "Reflection time standard deviation", and "Number of failed rolls," not just for me averaged across all of my games, but also across all players and, most importantly, all winners.

This means I can use the stats to determine in my meta-game of psychomachia which angel is winning. For example, winners average 34.58 dice rolled per game while the average player rolls only 32.77. The first lesson is clear: winners roll more dice than losers; heading the advice of the bold angel pays off. Where do I fit within those stats? Am I playing too cautiously, rolling less dice than the average, or more boldly, rolling more dice, perhaps even too many? BGA reports that I roll 34.49, nearly the same as the average winner. This not only affirmed my angel shouting "Don't Stop!" it suggested I might listen to him even more.

All of these affordances of BGA combined to make it easy and rewarding for me to play rounds of Can't Stop during lengthy work meetings in which I might contribute occasionally but was otherwise just waiting around. I never considered myself to have stopped working but rather multitasking, or taking microbreaks, which helped me to stay engaged for longer periods of time with remote work practices. I never played games when I was working on my own — writing a report or designing a user experience map — but when I was in remote meetings, forced by circumstance to sit still and perform looking engaged, I often couldn't resist a few rounds of Can't Stop.

All of this raises the question: Was I cheating at work by playing a game? If a supervisor had asked if I was playing games during meetings, and I had denied it, that would have been lying, and clearly unethical. But no one ever asked.

If I thought I was avoiding work, spending my time doing anything other than what I was being paid to do, that would also be unethical. But again, I don't think I was.

Contrast that with the two Los Angeles police officers who were fired after pretending not to hear a radio call about a robbery in progress, instead playing the mobile game Pokémon Go then lying about it to their Sergeant. That was clearly unethical; they avoided work and were not honest about how they spent their time. Certainly, if I were asked to fight crime, Can't Stop would have to go.

But in contrast all work required of me was my attention. Is momentarily splitting my attention taking something from my employer? What if, in fact, taking micro-breaks actually helps me to better focus during meetings, exercising my mind like a quick stretch keeps my body in shape to sit for a long period of time?

I know another who plays games during work meetings. Let's call her, for ease of use, "my wife." When required to log-in to a mandatory call, ones which requires little to no participation, I might see her playing Candy Crush on her phone. When I asked her about it she responded, "It's like a meditation, not a game." In fact, she wondered if upon returning in person to an office, in which it would be looked down upon to pull a Cornelia – playing Candy Crush in the middle of a meeting – she might need to start using a fidget cube. Meditation might be a good way to understand the way I used Can't Stop, not to suggest it helped me to become more present or relaxed but, rather, in how meditation can be a practice for controlling one's attention, to build that mental muscle.

Ultimately, I would argue that is the best way to understand my use of Can't Stop, as a way to control my attention during a time of intense stress. Habits form (both good and bad) when actions are associated with internal triggers (Eyal, 2014). When

my attention lagged during a meeting, and I needed a mental pick-me up, that need triggered my habit of turning to Can't Stop. If after the game I found my attention meter recharged, I would exit BGA; if the need remained, I might launch a new round of game play.

In the end, while I always played for fun, my motivation came from a deeper, more practical place: playing the game at work made me a more effective employee.

WORKING WHILE PLAYING

A few months after being introduced to Can't Stop, I no longer played it during remote work meetings. This was not due to a reduction in stress, nor actions taken to break this habit. Rather, it was because I was no longer invited to these meetings.

As a result of a COVID-related workforce reduction, I found myself, for the first time in over twenty years, without a job. I have been fortunate to have many incredible work opportunities since I entered the workplace in 1995, and even more fortunate to have never experienced a gap between them. Now here I was, in the middle of a global pandemic, without a steady source of income. I was unclear on my next step.

Like many during this period, I swung for the fences. I took the sort of career risk I would never have previously considered: starting my own company. The idea terrified me. I had no idea what was involved nor if I could pull it off. At the same time, I could no longer rely on the needs of an office job to dictate how I would spend each of my working hours. Yes, I was no longer assigned to endless hours of meetings, looking to a game to keep me focused. Instead, I was now assigned to nothing. I had to make intentional decisions about how to spend my time.

I always considered myself as someone who took calculated risks. I was never one to push my luck (see what I did there?).

To cultivate the attitude required to boldly launch a risky new endeavor, I realized at the start of each day I needed some sort of boost. Some people drink coffee to fuel their day. I needed the equivalent for getting gutsy.

I needed a workout regime for those parts of my brain that makes bold decisions so it could respond in the right way. I needed to learn when to trust that crazy angel telling me to keep going and when to ignore the calm angel that wants me to hold back. I realized I could do that through starting my day off with sessions of Can't Stop.

As Can't Stop is a game of balancing extremes — between staying and going, between conservative and aggressive moves — it is a game in which players are invited to repeatedly make decisions about how they want to act in the world. How much do I dare charge for my hourly fee? How aggressively should I reach out to old contacts to advertise my new services? During the early period of my company, starting each day with a directed round of Can't Stop set me up to make those bold moves once the game concluded, to ask for that higher fee, to sell my company just that much harder.

Now I was no longer playing when I was working. Instead, I was using the game as a tool for work. I was no longer motivated because it was fun. Rather, I was more interested in the ways I could instrumentalize it.

Which leads us to the second ethical question: Was it ethical for me to be engaging with the game for its practical effects when presenting myself as just another player? By using it for something outside the ecosystem of the game, was I somehow defacing the magic circle?

To resolve this, I look not at my motivation – which had changed – but the way I played. Was there something different about how I played, between that spring and that fall? And if so did

it undermine the compact made between players? I still opened every game by wishing my opponents well. I played as hard as I could, chatted occasionally, and sent them a hearty "gg" after each one. I never ended games early, nor made them wait unnecessarily between my moves.

If anything, the only difference between these two periods playing the game was that, in the spring, I was playing to win while now, in the fall, I was playing to make bold moves. And as demonstrated earlier, playing boldly is required to win at Can't Stop. So if anything, I was probably a better opponent the second time around.

CONCLUSION

There are clearly times when playing a game while working is unethical (and if it involves Pokémon and you are a police officer, might get you fired). And there are times when working when you are supposed to be playing can corrupt a magic circle. Yet if one is honest about one's motivations and actions, with one's self and those around them, there need not be any inherent conflict in mixing the ludological and the non-ludological. Lines often held up to separate the two might be more permeable than we think.

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THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE GAME PRODUCER

Am I a Bad Person if I Enjoy Doing Bad Things (in a Video Game)?

ROBERT DENTON BRYANT & JACK DONAHUE MUSSELMAN

A conversation between game producer Robert Denton Bryant, MFA, Assistant Professor of Video Game Development. and ethicist Jack Donahue Musselman, PhD, Associate Professor of Philosophy, both of St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. (This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.)

> "*Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.*" — Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

ETHICAL CHOICES IN GAMEPLAY

RDB: Consider a number of games over the last 20 years or so that have been touted as having ethical choices baked into the gameplay. For example, in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, you play as a Jedi, but as you choose to do good or bad things, it affects your light side/dark side meter, and unlocks good (or evil) force powers, as well as changing the types of choices presented to you later in the game and other characters' reactions to you. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* made headlines back in 2009 with its controversial "No Russian" level, where you play as a soldier embedded with a terrorist team that massacres civilians at a commercial airport. (I've played "No Russian." It's possible

to complete the level without shooting anyone. The gameplay outcome is the same.)

All of this is to say that many game designers have an awareness of ethics and are trying to engage players through choices that have moral implications. A wave of indie games over the last dozen years or so have placed players in very thorny ethical situations–like *Papers, Please*, and a host of others–where what's the right choice morally in the context of the game may conflict with what's the right thing to do to beat the game. But much as the game designer builds the rules of the game system that determines what the player can do, does the game designer also dictate the moral parameters of the game world so that the player is making decisions based on the designer's moral value system?

JDM: I have a few things to say as someone who teaches and researches ethics. First, we might play a game and then inquire how we will operate under the structures, or constraints, established by the game designer. The analogy here is that I operate in the face-to-face world every day, making my choices embedded in structures and constraints not of my own making. I might then insist even if I alone don't set the conditions of my society (i.e., democratic, capitalist, etc.), I can fairly, more or less, be held accountable for what I do within those constraints because I still have control, more or less, over many choices in them (e.g.,rr to vote for public officials, work to unionize Amazon, etc.). IMHO this means suggesting that someone else set up the game board's ethical ground rules (or F2F IRL the world we live in) doesn't, by analogy, entirely absolve one morally from the consequences of one's choices. In both situations we don't make the rules, but we still have to make choices within the ways those rules operate. I can imagine a player saying "I didn't create the rules here, so it isn't my fault if I do something wrong (or right) and someone else dies." My retort would be "Sure it is. Like IRL, you made a choice." No one has complete control over those situations, either, but we still

ask if choices, with consequences here and now, might well be subject to moral criticism and praise about who the agent is and what her actions say about her. Of course, the stakes for killing a person IRL are higher. But in a game, they are still your choices and so you are responsible for them.

RDB: This is the crux of the analysis, I think. *Someone* has designed the system, whether it's a gameplay system, or a constitutional system, or a religion. Even before I started making games, as a player I found myself often asking "what does the designer *intend* for me to do, versus what is it *possible* for me to do" in a given situation? A subset of players are natural contrarians who will reliably try to break a game. When the gameplay reflects some type of moral reasoning, conscious or unconscious, some players will choose to do the wrong thing simply because the wrong thing is doable.

JDM: We might ask if players in "No Russian" who kill civilians make that choice in ways that reveal something about their values and character. Since no real people die, I wouldn't want to push too hard on my next claim. But I might say about the "No Russian" players who choose to be killers of civilians something like this: Do they reveal little concern at all about (fictional characters') lives compared to those who don't make that choice? Can this tell us about the moral rules they brought to the game and to which they appealed (as-is or altered to fit the game)? If so, does their choice of so-called moral rules, and why they acted, tell us (even a little) about who they are?

RDB: Thousands of video games for decades enable the player to "kill" (or, in a kid's game, "defeat") waves of look-alike enemies. One of the lessons I learned in Hollywood is that it's okay for your hero to murder dozens of anonymous henchmen because they're not individualized. (I once had to promote a Chuck Norris movie by writing a "Chuck's Body Count" trivia quiz as a prompt for ticket giveaways through radio stations.) The more

depersonalized–or othered–an enemy is, the easier it is for you to treat them as obstacles to be eliminated, or puzzles to solve, rather than individual lives.

JDM: My son Liam's maternal grandfather is a veteran of Vietnam and the first Gulf War. He once told me that the soldiers in WWI who fired at their "enemy" had very low accuracy for hitting (and killing) their targets, as they didn't perceive the Other as menacing, but rather saw them as people.[1] (There's that famous Christmas truce of WWI suggesting as much.[2]) He added that's why boot camp trains soldiers to perceive the enemy as less than humans who are individual people. I bet the same psychological mechanisms are at play in gaming.

RDB: The line "No Russian" purported to cross, and the reason it was so controversial at the time, is that the player is part of a terrorist squad slaughtering individuated, if still anonymous, passengers in a commercial airport, even when their hands are raised in surrender. (This is done, the designers have said[3], for plot reasons. You play as an American double agent embedded with the terrorists, so you're a good guy among the bad guys, within the narrative of the game.). Video games are a powerful

1. Some historians of the military dispute this claim. See "Men Against Fire: How Many Soldiers Actually Fired Their Weapons at the Enemy During the Vietnam War," Russell W. Glennt, in HistoryNet, accessed 29 January 2022, https://www.historynet.com/men-against-fire-how-many-soldiers-actually-fired-their-weapons-at-the-enemy-during-the-vietnam-war.htm. In any case, it seems clear the U.S. Military has changed basic training to reflect similar statistics.
2. "WWI's Christmas Truce: When Fighting Paused for the Holiday," by A. J. Baime and Voker Janssen, 06 December 2021, accessed 29 January 2022, https://www.history.com/topics/christmas-truce-1914-world-war-i-soldier-accounts.
3. "Modern Warfare 2 designer explains the thinking behind No Russian mission," by Tom Senior, 09 August 2012, accessed 14 June 2022, https://www.pcgamer.com/modern-warfare-2-designer-explains-the-thinking-behind-no-russian-mission.

medium because you can experience life from a wide range of perspectives. Although novels and film can expose audiences to worlds and viewpoints they may never have seen, games give the player some agency within those worlds. They can make choices and thereby curate their own experiences. It's chilling to play "No Russian," as it makes me feel like a mass shooter. (I replayed the level without killing *anyone* to see whether there was any better outcome. There wasn't.) Does it make me, personally, empathize with sociopathic mass shooters? No.

ON GRANDMA'S AWFUL FRUITCAKE

JDM: And still I'd say the way you played the game (given its designed constraints) might tell us about your character in much the same way people act IRL (given its natural and social constraints) tells us about their characters. A case I use in class is telling one's Grandma what one thinks of her Christmas fruitcake. In this case Grandma is 80 years old and brings her awful fruitcake again to your house as a gift. I didn't create the cultural conditions, *viz*., Christmas at home, my parents are watching me reply, we should be gracious about gifts, and kind to generous and elderly grandmas. So how should one proceed? A Utilitarian mostly concerned about producing a net balance of good (happy) outcomes over bad (unhappy) ones might suggest a little white lie like "Grandma, this is so out of this world!" to please her, and your parents, and not make everyone feel bad.

If you were honest and said "It tastes like s#$@!" then a Kantian might argue that you cannot lie and say "it's out of this world!" because that can't be a universal rule anyone in this situation can follow and that does not respect Grandma as a rational and autonomous agent. Put another way, maybe the "out of this world" reply is not one anyone in my situation should offer. A social contract theorist might say our reply should be one that we could have constructed together, by sitting down and finding out what rules we'd all agree to live by, and so the "out

of this world" reply is permissible (for being nice to Grandma). However, I think most of us might say the "out of this world" reply is, somehow, not quite right. We want Grandma to think that means her fruitcake is "wonderful" but of course we don't mean that. So if we say this to make everyone happy, or we think others could say it, too, in our place, or we think we'd all agree it was acceptable, that doesn't quite make it the right thing to do for those reasons. What we are looking for is the right thing to do in this situation that is morally right or good in and of itself.

RDB: I would love to give a corollary example from video games, but I'm not certain I can, as each game has its own rules of moral engagement, and not every game is set up to encompass that range of nuanced approaches to the problem. It's typical of many role-playing games to offer dialog-based gameplay in which you interact with a range of non-player characters who gatekeep, sell items, etc. While some games (*Fallout* comes to mind) include the ability to lie or flatter, and the probability of success in doing so is based on various of your character's attributes (such as charisma, charm, or factional alliances), these systems often pit the right thing to do morally against what's best for the player's success in the game. (Many RPGs allow you to level up a pickpocketing skill as well.) So it's often hard to segregate moral choice exclusively from gameplay impact.

JDM: If we wanted an approach to moral assessment of gamers at play that was perhaps more nuanced, I'd suggest we turn to virtue theory. Virtue theory tells us that we should do something precisely because it is the right thing to do even if it doesn't make us happy. For virtue theorists, doing the right thing takes practice, deliberation, and choice. In virtue theory, our reasons to act, and our actions, show others (and ourselves) the kinds of people we are or the values we cherish by revealing the virtues that inform characters we create and live by: *viz*., virtues like being courageous, considerate, honest, etc. instead of cowardly, mean and dishonest. There is no one algorithm for figuring this

out, but that doesn't mean there is no right or wrong here. Instead, it just means that determining the right thing to do takes some work.

RDB: Now you've got the game designer part of my brain trying to formulate such an algorithm. What you've just described maps onto a lot of fundamental game design: reward the player for effort expended. Easy tasks earn fewer experience points (XP, or whatever reward system motivates the player); harder tasks earn more. But that seems to miss the point of virtue theory (if I'm understanding it correctly), which is that we should act virtuously without thought of reward. (Even though feeling self-righteous is sort of a reward, isn't it?)

JDM: Yes, more or less. The virtuous agent does the right thing for its own sake and not primarily for the extrinsic reward (e.g., honor, money, fame, reputation, etc.). One modern translator of Aristotle's *Ethics* renders this as doing acts because they are "fine."[4] A modern Aristotelian calls this doing the moral act to earn the rewards internal to the practice (doing it for its own sake) and not for the external rewards.[5] Aristotle calls this doing acts that are virtuous ("living well and doing well")[6] in ways that bring their own rewards (the virtuous act has "pleasure within itself" or these acts are "pleasant in their own right.")[7]

I should probably add, though, that virtue theorists admit that, when we are young, we learn virtues by "cultivation" and

4. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, Terence Irwin translator, 3rd edition, 2019, 376.
5. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Bloomsbury 2013, 173.
6. Irwin page 11, Ethics Book 1, Chapter 8, Section 4, Lne 20.
7. Irwin page 12, Ethics Book 1, Chapter 8, Section 12, Line 18 for "pleasure within itself" and page 13, Book 1, Chapter 8, Section 13, Line 20 for ""pleasant in its own right"

practice,[8] so children might well require external praise, at first, to learn the habits that are courageous, etc. Aristotle argues these virtues "arise in us neither by nature nor against nature,"[9] which is to say they aren't automatic but can, given our natures, be learned by practice (perhaps copying those who are brave, etc.). At some point in our maturation (maybe when someone is 12-15?) we internalize these virtues. We start to do the right thing, not for praise from others, or for pay (as that's not authentic), but because we choose to do it for its own sake. You should develop a character that, as you decide, reaches for the virtuous act more or less out of habit and disposition.

OK, now for the complicated part (as if it isn't already!). One prominent virtue theorist[10] asks if one should praise more someone who finds it hard to be courageous, etc., and does it anyway, or praise more someone who finds it easy to be courageous, etc., and goes ahead and straighaway does the virtuous thing.

Take, for example, my Grandma's fruitcake. Suppose I think I could lie ("It is great!") or tell the truth ("Tastes like s@#$!") But let's suppose I find a way to be honest (more or less) and kind (more or less), automatically. Let's call this the "Easy Virtuous Actor." Might you think about the Easy Virtuous Actor "Gee, he really learned, through habit and practice, how to develop his character and dispositions so it came easy to him to do the right thing at the right time for the right reason?" Maybe this makes her (OK, me as this is a true story) virtuous because I've worked at it my whole life and now it comes more or less easily.

But as I say in class, I'm actually the "Challenged Virtuous Actor." I personally, really want to tell the Big Whopping Lie ("I love it!")

8. Irwin pages 13-14, Ethics Book 1, Chapter 9, Section 5, Line 20.
9. Irwin page 21, Ethics Book 2, Chapter 1, Section 2, Line 25.
10. Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices" (1-18) in Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy, Oxford 2002, makes this kind of claim.

to make her happy or just flat out say what I really think ("It tastes like s@#$!") as I'm tired of eating these every Christmas, and it takes me, actually, quite a long time (mulling it over as my family waits for my answer) to say the right thing for the right reason at the right time and do the right thing for its own sake. Am I *more* virtuous than the Easy Actor since I face a difficult challenge and overcome it? Or am I *less* virtuous because at this late stage in my life I'm still working on my dispositions and values and it takes some effort to do the right thing? I don't think there's any easy answer here, but I raise the question as you might say something analogous about gamers.

Perhaps one should be considerate as much as possible ("Grandma, I love you and it was so kind to bring us a home-made dessert"), courageous ("and I want to be honest and tell you what I think and feel, since that's how you raised my parent and I want to do that, too"), and honest as much as possible ("I don't really like dates and raisins in cakes, so this isn't my cup of tea.")

Maybe this makes Grandma and the family happy, and maybe not. Maybe this is what anyone could say, or maybe not. But if virtuous people do virtuous things, and that tells us about their values and their virtuous character, how we act in this situation is a mirror for the kinds of people we are.

RDB: First of all, I'm generally fruitcake-positive, so Grandma has my sympathy and respect. But your example here shows that ethical decision-making is (a) not easy, and (b) often non-binary.

JDM: Yes and yes to challenging and not binary. (I do have some concerns about your fruitcake positivity…)

RDB: So much of existing video game "ethics" in play put us in the position of making fairly narrow, "easy" choices. There's either the right thing or the wrong thing to do. It's binary, which is natural, since that's how computers (and many people) think. Or there's some type of trade-off that puts the in-game player

character's moral reasoning in conflict with the real-life player's desire to make choices that will give them advantages in gameplay.

JDM: Maybe players are more like the Challenged Virtuous Actor, then, since they have their own personal moral dispositions (learned by choice, deliberation, practice, etc.) but as players they are drawn in other directions.

RDB: *BioShock* gives you a decision in each level to either rescue a damsel-like "Little Sister," or "harvest" them to strengthen your character. The first time you encounter this decision, it seems like a dilemma, literally a binary choice: "I should save this innocent child, but what if I need more power for later levels?" And, as we find out later, ultimately it doesn't matter much, either in terms of narrative impact or the virtuous player's ability to complete the game. (I always chose to rescue them, and I never lacked for power.)

JDM: Interesting! So even within the constraints set up by the game designer, you had options (that didn't really diminish your power or ability to act) that didn't thereby make it difficult (or impossible) to make good choices (for advancing in the game as a better person rather than one who does the wrong thing). I might say something similar about people IRL and then people as players: there are macro-level constraints in both domains (which I don't choose and can't really alter) that still provide room for doing the courageous, considerate, etc., act done for its own sake, that don't, sometimes or often, diminish your life choices (in the game or not).

I'd love to see a case study of someone who plays to win at all costs, doesn't really want to be a good sport, cuts corners, etc. I could run a similar virtue theorist analysis on that case study. What's missing from the case study above (among other things) is that the virtuous person's incentive (more or less) for doing the

honest, compassionate act is that the reward for being virtuous is internal or intrinsic to the act. That is, we are kind or honest and the reward or incentive comes along with (or is simultaneous to) doing that very act (or we are honest or kind for its own sake). If the reward is external to the act (fame, glory, money, power, etc.) a virtue theorist would likely say that we aren't acting (choosing to act, deliberating about the act, and then acting) for the right reason. I think the gamer who wins at all costs etc. isn't really playing the game for its own sake (challenge, fun, community, etc.) but has some external reward in mind.

THE ROLE OF EMPATHY

JDM: David Hume's moral theory focuses on our feelings of approval of positive traits (the virtues): "Moral distinctions are derived from the moral sentiments: feelings of approval (esteem, praise) and disapproval (blame) felt by spectators who contemplate a character trait or action." From Hume in the 18th century[11] to Jonathan Haidt today, there are moral philosophers and psychologists of morality who focused less on our rights and duties and more on how, to no small degree because of our feelings, we respond to others and what they do. Since we are embodied creatures living in societies, I think the sociologists and psychologists might say that empathy for others (in our clan or otherwise) is an important factor in moral judgements. Our ability to emotionally connect to others is important because if I think your suffering matters, I can then care for you. (Virtue theorists might agree with this, too.)

11. Rachel Cohon, "Hume's Moral Philosophy," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018, accessed 29 January 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/#symp. The quote is from Cohon's introduction. That introduction refers to the entry's Section 7: "Our moral evaluations of persons and their character traits, on Hume's positive view, arise from our sentiments. The virtues and vices are those traits the disinterested contemplation of which produces approval and disapproval, respectively, in whoever contemplates the trait, whether the trait's possessor or another."

I imagine that game developers want the players to feel that way too, right? Game developers want players to connect to the characters in the game even if they're not real. Maybe players don't feel that for those characters they kill senselessly. Maybe that suggests something about the gamers' values and characters? Or maybe that's a step too far because a player doesn't care about those fictional characters (who may be Nazis or zombies, after all), but of course at some point all sorts of anthropological adaptive evolutionary processes may be triggered and it's like "you matter, so I have to do something about you" (even if you're a Nazi). Empathy certainly plays a part for Aristotle, because to talk about the virtues is to talk about being with others, and I can't be virtuous on an island by myself. If you're Tom Hanks in *Castaway*, Wilson the volleyball is not quite doing it.

RDB: Although I think that Hanks' character creates Wilson and makes him a companion in order to meet many of his own human needs being alone on that island for so long. He needed someone to talk to, to relate to, and to be virtuous toward. His last words to his pretend friend were "Wilson! I'm sorry!" and there wasn't a dry eye in the movie theater.

When we're talking about doing "immoral" acts in a video game, it strikes me that a lot of my own feelings about myself, whether I'm choosing to slaughter civilians in the "No Russian" level or not, say something about my innate sense of my own identity or agency. (So, maybe virtue theory is relevant here!) A lot of how I feel about what I'm doing in the game is informed by the fact that I have empathy for the digital characters in the game. You as a player can arrive at your moral approach to a game based on the cues of the game world itself. Different games have different designs and different tones. Some are very kind of cynical or devil-may-care, like a Tarantino movie. When you're watching a Tarantino movie, you're entering a stylized reality, and part of that is a stylized *morality*. Moving back to games, *Grand Theft Auto* is obviously one of those very successfully stylized game

realities, in which everybody's either a gangster, or has some finger in some criminal pie, or is a random victim. But even then, I think that one of the untold stories of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise is that it's been controversial for 20 years and kind of like a lot of pop culture, a lot of people react to what they've heard, and so they don't engage. When I finished *Grand Theft Auto IV*, I was impressed with how *satirical* it was. It really gave me a sense of these British designers, the Housers, making a kind of heightened American urban crime game that reflects their fascination with and fear of America. When you have cues like that from the creators, you are given a license to kind of feel less guilty about doing immoral acts.

JDM: Suppose the creators of the game are saying it's make-believe, it's got some violent episodes in it, maybe in some kind of cartoonish fashion, and it's satirical. I wonder how many players appreciate the creative satirical take as opposed to "Hey, I get to kill a prostitute" or whatever else the game lets you do. Even if it were satirical and of course not IRL, shouldn't that give the player pause? By analogy, it would be like reading a poem or story or novel about a murderer and think "Gee, I know it is not real, but maybe I should think about stepping into his shoes and think about what that's like?"

WHY BE MORAL?

JDM: The big question in my discipline for people who teach ethics is "why be moral?" There's a story in *The Republic* about the Ring of Gyges, where a shepherd finds a magic ring in a cave. It gives him the power of invisibility, so he uses it to seduce the queen, kill the king, and engage in similar mischief. And the big question is, why should he not do that? Of course, lots of people have said "if you can get away with it, then go for it!" But the deeper question in any moral system is *why* should I be a good person, and there may be many answers. But for Aristotle's virtue theory, the big question is not answered by saying you'll give

me props for doing the right thing, or not because that I'll get ahead in life, but because doing the right thing matters to *me*. It's a motivational question: why be a good person? Because it's intrinsically valuable and I want to be that person for my own sake and for its own sake. But you might ask people in the game, why be a good person in the game? I guess you could answer "I don't have to because that doesn't get you to the win." The object of the game is the object of the game, and so often, the moral choices you make to win the game are incidental to it.

RDB: One of the things I tell writing students is that the villain thinks he's the hero of his own story. Many mass murderers think that they're the good guy in the story, they were just misunderstood, like the clichéd mad scientist. "I was forced to do this because nobody appreciates me!" No matter what they do, there's still the victim. They're the hero of their own story.

JDM: Basically, the whole point of *The Republic*, from early on to last, is are there intrinsic reasons be good? And some may say no, the bad guy wins, you should be secretly bad because you don't want to be called on the carpet for it, but you should be bad for all the extrinsic gains for that way of life. It takes Socrates the whole of *The Republic* for him to say no, there are reasons to be good for its own sake. And also, bad guys don't win out in the end. (That part isn't true. Bad guys totally win sometimes. Not everyone's caught like Jeffrey Epstein.) But it's got to be the case that there are some reasons to be good for its own sake, and not to put on the Ring of Gyges. It's about what kind of person I want to be and look at myself in the mirror and go, "yeah I'm not that guy. I don't want to be that guy. I can't live with myself. That's just not the right way to do things." I don't know if that has any currency for all players. It sounds like some players are just going to play to win.

RDB: I want to read up on the Ring of Gyges, because in one way when we play a video game, we put on that ring. We give

ourselves license to misbehave. Video games allow us to engage in power fantasies. I may not feel as though I have any power IRL, but in the world of the game, I have agency that I do not have in my actual life. Entering the world of the video game is akin to putting on that ring. The difference is that in the story in *The Republic*, it was really happening, and he really did use the invisibility to murder the king and misbehave. And there were presumably real-world consequences, or would have been, if he hadn't been invisible.

Part of the promise of the video game is the freedom *from* real-world consequences. A video game allows us, and often encourages us, to indulge in those immoral fantasies. So should we then choose to misbehave, or do we temper it somehow? When I was playing *Grand Theft Auto IV*, I was aware that I was playing this very morally conflicted story as a very morally conflicted character, Nico Bellic, a tortured immigrant from the Balkans. He was a mercenary and now he's just trying to make it in New York. So as Nico, I killed a lot of people, I crashed a lot of cars, I robbed a lot of banks. But there was a difference between me playing the missions to serve my own agenda and me just turning into a complete slaughter-everything sociopath. I considered myself as I played that game a sort of a reasonably competent criminal, but I wasn't a sociopath. I never killed as many civilians as I could. I never assumed the same role that I could have assumed in "No Russian." And even though, when the cops were chasing me, I would run away from the cops and there would be spectacular car crashes and people inevitably died, I tried to avoid engaging with the cops, not just because I would get into trouble in the game and waste time on another chase that would distract me from my mission, but also just because even though it's a little virtual world, I wanted there to be some type of order. (And let's recognize that as an adult white male, I may have a different attitude about the cops in the game than many other players might have.)

JDM: It sounds like you as a player are not going to be looking for that ceiling escape hatch that the designers forgot to close, because that's not central to the game is it?

RDB: Not central to the designed experience of the game, certainly. But also because I started in the industry as a game tester, so I got paid for years to break the game systems, find the holes in the floors, and otherwise test the boundaries of the game. So when I play for pleasure, I really want to experience what the designers intended. I'm not interested in breaking the rules so much.

Sometimes you can't help it. In *GTA IV*, there's a swing set in a playground in the middle of fake Manhattan. And there's a physics bug in the game that if you take your car and you run full-tilt boogie, like 60 miles an hour, into that swing set, at a 45-degree angle, it will launch you and your vehicle, like a trebuchet would, and you find yourself 20, 30 stories up in the air. And it's spectacular because it's so surprising. "Whee, I'm flying!" So once you figure out you can do this, you can't wait to go find another vehicle and do it again. You stop playing the lurid crime video game and are now playing with this fun electronic toy, this buggy swing set. It stops being this immersive narrative experience and now you're just having fun seeing how far you can launch yourself into the troposphere.

I'm convinced that when they were testing this game, a tester at Rockstar Games probably found this bug and reported it, but the producers and designers were smart enough not to fix it because they figured that when players found it, they would love it. They chose to keep it in, because it's fun. No matter how carefully we craft a game experience, the player is always going to find ways to pierce that designed reality, to break the fourth wall and remind themselves that this is not real life.

JDM: It's a video game, which plays on imagination and character and plot. You get to be somebody else and I'm not against any of that *per se*, but I suspect that if identity is more or less persistent over time, I'm kind of the person I was at five, ten, 20, 30, and 57 years old. I don't think I'm going to change all that much, although who knows? If I'm trying to draw a narrative line through our discussion, maybe it's this: What does gaming and all its complexity tell us about the people who play it? And it may tell us a little and that might be enough. I'll play a violent game and be super destructive, and then and then ten minutes later I'm doing the dishes and talking to my family about my day. I don't think that makes me a bad person. I'm a good person in real life. I'm a good person in the game, but there might be something it tells me about who I am all the time and that might be worth thinking about.

RDB: But we're all a data set of one. We need to do more research. Just because you, or your son, is mature enough where he's able to separate his realities, not everybody is that highly functioning. I will defend violent video games on freedom of expression grounds, but I have to recognize that video games have frustrated me to the point of throwing controllers and banging stuff in real in real life. I have been violent after playing video games, maybe stopping short of putting my fist through the drywall, but I have been very, very, very animated and angry about what happened in a video game and it takes me a while for the adrenaline to subside. I don't let it affect me as much anymore, because I like to think I'm more in touch with my body and my feelings, and maybe that's what "maturity" is.

As an adult in my 40s I was playing *GTA IV*, where you spend a lot of time driving. Then I would save the game and leave pretend Manhattan and get into my actual car in actual Long Beach, California. And when traffic got a little slow, I had to consciously say no, no, no don't do what you've been doing for hours, which is just pull up onto the sidewalk and drive past the other cars. You

can with very minimal consequence just get anywhere you want to go really fast by just sidewalk driving in *GTA*. But in Long Beach they frown on that.

JDM: Yeah [laughing] there's probably lots of places where that's not good.

RDB: But the urge was there. I'm not gonna lie. And it wasn't fantasy, it was my muscle memory, part of my semi-conscious brain saying "just drive on the sidewalk, come on!" That overlap can be real in many players. I'll insist based on my own experience that an overlap exists, and we need to study it a little more.

JDM: Well, I don't know about video game violence. But I bet it is analogous to the studies about whether people who watch violent pornography become violent in their personal (sex) life. I think the bottom line is that if you have inclinations, dispositions, or attitudes preceding the use of violent pornography or video games and then you play the violent game, or watch the violent porn, it may essentially aggravate those already preexisting inclinations, but if we don't already have them, then they're not very powerfully reinforced. You might reinforce them in a game or watching a movie, and so develop them, but there's probably not enough of a causal connection that if I watch the game and I don't have the violent disposition I'm then going to go out and do in the real world what I was doing in the game or the porn. It's a complex causal question.

But your urge to drive on the sidewalks is interesting, because you as a person acknowledge the effect the game had on you, but of course when you're driving through to Long Beach you aren't thinking "I'm just going to go up on the sidewalk and knock off a grandma because I can get to my destination faster." You made the distinction, obviously, between game and reality. And, more to the point, you're not the kind of person that would

drive on the sidewalk. There's just no way you would do that intentionally, because it's not you.

RDB: No, but, after I play the game, back in real life, for a while the lines blur. It was the subconscious. At no point did I, with intentionality, drive up on the sidewalk. But I had to stop myself from pursuing that idea any further, and it was a conscious behavioral kind of regulating. It's kind of like if you're the type of person who belches with impunity at home. When you're out in public, with that first burp you have to remind yourself, no, no, no, no. Rules.

JDM: But if I'm Aristotelian about it, I might say the line was blurred. You really did have to think about it for a second. When you're immersed in the game and that becomes your reality, but you yourself have had years and years of driving responsibly. There was really no way you were actually going to drive on the sidewalk, so your character was set, and that's telling. I don't know if there are any *GTA* players who would drive on the sidewalk because they played the game. How much of your character is established and developed by all sorts of other factors tells you a lot about what you'd be willing to do in real life, of course, and not run over people on the sidewalk.

RDB: What I'm hearing you say is, there's what you take out of the game, but there's also who you bring into the game.

JDM: That I'm writing down. I think that's exactly right.

RDB: To paraphrase Nietzsche, "if you gaze long into the game, the game gazes into you." And there's a concept that doesn't necessarily come straight out of games, called "identity tourism,"[12] which I think is only going to get bigger as we move towards the so-called metaverse. And it is exactly what it sounds

12. Lisa Nakamura, Cybertypes: race, ethnicity, and identity on the Internet, Routledge: 2002, page 87.

like. I can be, in a game or in any virtual environment, any avatar I choose, so I can pretend to be someone I'm not. Different gender, different appearance, et cetera, like the old New Yorker cartoon, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." But *you* still know you're a dog. You know you're *you*.

In games, identity tourism can be very low stakes. When we play a *Tomb Raider* game, we're all playing as Lara Croft, and if we're not already a wealthy and athletic cis white woman, we're engaging in some level of identity tourism. In other games, like the *Saints Row* franchise, you can have a crazy level of control in how you customize your avatar, down to choosing what your in-game voice sounds like. I have engaged in light identity tourism for years now, because my default character in *World of Warcraft* was a gnome warlock. I am a tall man, she is a short woman. I style her to be cute but not sexy and I'm able to express myself in the game through her but also see how people react to her, which might be very different than if my avatar was a white human male. But what I'm hearing you assert is that you can engage in identity tourism in terms of these other aspects of your identity, but your character, your moral profile, is reasonably immutable.

JDM: I think so, and it's elastic on the boundaries. (I don't have any research to cite to prove this). There's obviously some give and take. I learn things, I become more experienced, that may change me a little for the better or the worse. The people in psychology would probably say at age 13 or 14 that's done with. Who you are is you are, plus or minus. You're done developing. I think if you did identity tourism, playing the gnome in *World of Warcraft* or the killer in *Grand Theft Auto*, at some point the "you" would come out. Even in real life, I can put on a costume or an accent or pretend to be a character, but I'm still me underneath. I'm wondering if that part would dictate that I can't kill all those innocent people in the airport in "No Russian," because that's just not me and it's not good. Yet I can, in a role, experiment a little bit, but there are limits to what my avatar will do because I'm still

me underneath. My guess is in a game a lot of people are limited like that, and not in a bad way.

My son Liam is playing this stupid game at his high school called Assassin, where you are assigned a target and you "kill" them by marking their skin with a Sharpie. He and his friends got their assignments, and there are 100 or 200 kids in the school doing it. He picked me up after class recently and drove up wearing a full body suit like a ninja. He explained that you're not allowed to hit people on the school grounds or in their house, but him picking me up put him at risk, hence the body suit. And they have honor among thieves, and little contracts, and it sounds lovely. But one of the limits he accepts is a girl at his high school is playing the game, but she's got a broken ankle so she's on one of those rollers to help her move about with a cast on her foot. They've made a rule to accommodate her: you can't run any faster than she can move on the roller. So there's some humanity and empathy, still, in this game where you pretend to assassinate people. And I'm sure that in online games you occasionally have these sort of like humanistic or virtuous features, because it's a carryover to who we are in real life.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert Denton Bryant has worked in Hollywood in marketing and production, and in video games as a publisher and a developer. He served as Executive Producer on dozens of games for platforms ranging from CD-ROMs to the iPad, including the bestselling *World Championship Poker* and *Pinball Hall of Fame* console franchises. He is co-author of *Game Testing All-In-One* and *Slay the Dragon! Writing Great Video Games*. He has lectured in the US and Europe on game writing, and is currently Director of Video Game Development and Animation at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas.

Jack Donahue Musselman taught philosophy at a large state university, a community college and a small liberal arts college before joining St. Edward's University to teach ethics, environmental ethics, legal ethics, philosophy of law and ancient philosophy.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Myles Blasonato
Academy of Interactive Entertainment
Sydney, Australia
myles.blasonato@aie.edu.au

Robert Denton Bryant, MFA
St. Edward's University, Visual Studies
Austin, Texas
rbryant@stedwards.edurbryant@stedwards.edu

Mia Consalvo
Department of Communication Studies
Concordia University
Montreal, Canada
mia.consalvo@concordia.ca

Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon
University of Montreal, Department of Art History and Film Studies
Montreal, Canada
maxime.deslongchamps-gagnon@umontreal.ca

Barry Joseph
BarryJosephConsulting.com
New York City

Evan Jules Maier-Zucchino
Concordia University, Department of Communication Studies
7141 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
evanmaierzucchino@gmail.com

Robert N. Marinov
Concordia University, Department of Communication Studies
Montreal, Quebec (Canada)
robert.marinov@mail.concordia.ca

Jack Donahue Musselman, Ph.D.
St. Edward's University, Philosophy
Austin, Texas
jackgm@stedwards.edu

Ryan Scheiding
Concordia University, Communication Studies
Montreal, Quebec
ryan.scheiding@concordia.ca

Dan Staines
AIE Institute
Sydney, Australia
dan.staines@aieinstitute.edu.au

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