

Playing a Better Me: How Players Rehearse Their Ethos via Moral Choices

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Mia Consalvo¹, Thorsten Busch² and Carolyn Jong³

Abstract

This article is an exploration of players' understandings of games that offer moral dilemmas in order to explore player choice in tandem with game mechanics. We investigate how game structures, including the presence of choice, a game's length, and avatar presentation, push players in particular ways and also how players use those systems for their own ends. We explore how players "rehearse their ethos" through gameplay and how they are continually pushing back against the magic circle. It is based on two-dozen semi-structured interviews with players conducted in 2012. It illustrates that there are no clear-cut answers—game structures, including narratives, character designs, length, or save systems, can push players to act in certain ways that may or may not align with their own beliefs and goals.

Keywords

ethics, players, morality, magic circle, RPGs, interviews, qualitative methods

¹ Department of Communication Studies, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

² TAG Centre, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

³ Humanities Program, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Mia Consalvo, Department of Communication Studies, Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke O, L-CJ 4.407, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3X 3T1.

Email: mia.consalvo@concordia.ca

In trying to define what a game is, well-known creator of the *Civilization* series Sid Meier made the now famous statement that a game is “a series of interesting choices” (Rollings & Morris, 2004, p. 61). In expanding on that definition, professional designers Rollings and Morris argue “to be worthwhile, [those] gameplay choices must be non-trivial” (p. 61). Much ink—by scholars, other developers, and games journalists—has been spilled in debating, clarifying, expanding on, or rejecting that definition, from what “choice” might mean, what encompasses “interesting or nontrivial,” and to what a “game” is or could be (Sicart, 2009, 2013; Weaver & Lewis, 2012; Zagal, 2011). As games have grown in sophistication, player choice and decision-making have expanded in scope and complexity. Game studies scholars have followed that trend and investigated the phenomenon of player choice from a variety of angles.

For example, early work done by Miguel Sicart takes a philosophical approach to understanding the content of the games themselves to see what sorts of choices are offered and how they align along various philosophical spectrums. He argues that the virtuous player, for example, is one who engages with a game and enjoys the experience but also “uses the practical wisdom acquired by playing that game, and all those games that form her repertoire, in order to make the most ethically informed choice” (2009, p. 92). Sicart also believes that game design itself has responsibilities such that “it has to implement consequences, subsystems of rewards tied to the initial choices. Otherwise, players will react to the dilemmas not with a moral stance, but with their player logic, focused on achieving their goals in the game experience” (p. 160). Turning more fully to their design in his second book, *Beyond Choices*, Sicart introduces the concept of “wicked problems” and how they might help developers create more meaningful choices for players by considering things like player complicity, moral and political engagement, and ethical–cognitive friction (elements of a game that introduce “tension between the procedural and the semiotic levels and potentially generate moral reflection”; 2013, p. 95).

Sicart’s work, although formative in this area, mostly considers the implied player or ethical subject rather than investigating the beliefs and practices of actual players. Many other scholars have taken this approach and produced useful analyses of various games including those in the *Fallout* series (Melenson, 2011; Schulzke, 2009), *Ultima IV* (Zagal, 2011), *Fable* (Schrier, 2012), and the *Final Fantasy* series (Voorhees, 2009) among many other games. But what of the players themselves and how they think about such games?

Scholars who have studied players and their pathways through games have discovered that while some do enjoy “being bad,” many more seem to have great trouble in making that leap (Weaver & Lewis, 2012). For example, Weaver and Lewis had 75 individuals play the first full act of the game *Fallout 3* and complete a moral foundations questionnaire and found that “not only did most players avoid anti-social behaviour, but they cited moral considerations for their behaviour” (p. 4). Likewise, those players who did make antisocial choices during gameplay “reported feeling more guilt at the conclusion of the game than those who behaved morally”

(p. 4). Indeed, at the 2015 Game Developers Conference, developer Dan Nagler spoke of the difficulties of getting players to play “morally difficult characters” and experiment with morally ambiguous situations, which meant that the work developers put into creating such options are often ignored or even shunned by many players (Johnson, 2015). In another session, Amanda Lange reported on a survey of 1,000 gamers, finding that “59% of players consistently choose to play a game’s ‘good’ path the first time” and only 5% choose the “evil” path the first time (Collins, 2015). Digging deeper into her data, Lange found that players do diverge when we consider if they play a game more than once, where “of the 60% who played more than once, about half made good choices in the first play through and evil in subsequent play throughs” (2015). This suggests that players are constantly in negotiation with games and how to play them—that although there is certainly a suspension of certain real-life strictures (“killing others is wrong”)—that players cannot always so easily set aside their own moral systems and beliefs when they pick up game controllers; likewise, that other elements of a playthrough can influence how players react—for example, if they intend to play a game more than once. This means that players are constantly considering a game’s prospective actions and demands “in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups, legal situations, and homes” (Consalvo, 2009, p. 408).

Yet, as much as research in this area has progressed, most of it has focused on analysis of games themselves or overviews of player experiences. Considering the ways such play can deeply impact players, we believe player voices demand greater attention when theorizing this domain. In consideration of these multiple and competing demands, we believe the best way to understand moral choice in games is through focusing on play as it is enacted and how it is framed and understood by players themselves. Therefore, building off that past work, we focus here on players’ beliefs and understandings of games that offer moral dilemmas in order to explore player choice in tandem with game mechanics. We want to investigate how game structures, including the presence of choice at all, the length of a game, avatar and character presentation, and so on, can push players in particular ways and also how players use those systems for their own ends. In doing that we explore how players “rehearse their ethos” through gameplay in varied and interesting ways and how they are continually pushing back against notions of the magic circle.

Method and Data

This article is a qualitative study of players’ attitudes toward moral choices in games and how they make sense of and critique them. It is based on 28 semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2012 in person, via Skype, or through e-mail. While this number of interviews allowed for rich descriptions and a diversity of viewpoints, it is not enough to give us reliable statistical breakdowns on how players may have diverged (or not) in their opinions and practices based on demographic

factors such as gender, age, or education level, and so we do not make those comparisons here. Instead, we report on broader themes and patterns that we identified from participants' beliefs, examples, and reported actions.

The average interview lasted approximately 1 hr. Interviewees were recruited using posters, mailing lists, Twitter, and game forums. The recruiting materials specifically targeted players who had significant experience with mainstream games that feature moral choices, that is, mostly single-player role-playing games such as the *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, and *Fallout* franchises. In terms of demographics, of the 28 respondents, 8 identified as women and the rest (20) as men.¹ Most respondents were in their 20s and 30s, with a small minority in their 40s. All respondents lived in the United States or Canada, and most had at least a college degree. While most of them did not self-identify as hard-core gamers, our respondents are not necessarily representative of the player population at large, as most of them are more educated and game literate than the average gameplaying population, with each of them having had many years of gameplay experience. As a result, our respondents are likely to be more critical of current game design practices than the average mainstream audience.² Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed, coded thematically, and analyzed in relation to our research questions, which asked how players chose to play such games, what decisions or choices they made while playing, how they thought about the choices offered and the structures of such games, their relationship with game avatars and characters more generally, as well as how they negotiated their own ethos relative to game structures and mechanics.

Research in this area tends to use the same terms to mean very different things, and so here we would like to clarify our own terminology. We use the term "ethics" when we mean the critical philosophical *reflection* of moral norms and behaviors. "Moral norms," on the other hand, are *empirically observable notions* of what, in any given community, is considered acceptable behavior with respect to right and wrong (but not necessarily in a legal sense, i.e., not codified in formal rules of law). When we talk about players' moral stances and who they aspire to be as a moral person, we generally use the term "ethos." In short, contrary to the colloquial use of these terms, players do not "have ethics," but an ethos that is part of their moral identity, and they will make use of ethical theories in order to question and criticize de facto moral norms in and around games. This distinction is important because it will allow us not to confuse the level of theoretical reflection (ethics) with the level of the phenomenon itself (ethos at the individual level, moral norms at the collective level).

How Do Players Approach Moral Decision-Making?

Although much is made of choice, most discussions about players and moral decision-making default to a binary—how and why players engage in good or evil acts, and many players use this language. Previous research has found that the majority of players consistently choose the path of good or 'right' for their journeys

(Collins, 2015). Many games mark for players certain sets of actions as good or evil, such as the light or dark side of The Force in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (KoTOR)* and good or bad karma points in *Fallout 3*. Other games are not so clear-cut, such as Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, where players might never know if their decisions actually affect gameplay. And even in games with more obvious "morality meters," not all choices are so easily evaluated, and players must grapple with their complexities. Yet players do attempt to characterize their play along a range of styles, helping us better understand their actions and how games themselves let them rehearse their ethos through play.

Playing at being evil or good. Playing evil or good in games is not a monolithic or even consistent activity. Some players initially decide on their character's ethos but then change their mind during play. Others play a game multiple times, and so playing good or evil is one choice among many, while others play some games in altruistic ways and other games as selfish or in repugnant ways. This means that we cannot necessarily point to certain types of players but instead play styles. One overarching consistency is the centrality of a game's first playthrough as a meaningful experience. Even for players who might play a game multiple times, the first time through is often the most meaningful one and therefore serves as their central or core experience of a game.³ So, although in this article, we investigate *all* playthrough experiences that players wanted to share with us, we focus on those first experiences.

Confirming prior research, most players that we interviewed told us that they chose to play on the side of good. Those decisions ranged from the absolute to the situational, depending on the player and their personal approaches. For Malcolm, playing good is not a choice: "I can never be evil. . . . I always go with the paragon type decisions." Josie likewise is

always a goodie-two-shoes, often to the consternation of my fellow players (she laughs). It kind of became a running joke at Dungeons and Dragons campaigns that my little cleric would always make little speeches about how she was fighting for justice, and all the other player characters would always roll their eyes and say oh god, not again . . . but . . . I don't want to be evil, I like being nice.

For both Malcolm and Josie, playing good feels right—it is tied to their personal sense of identity, and even a fictional universe cannot disengage them from their own stated moral values but in fact supports and encourages it. For other players, the good path is also taken, but shades of gray appear in their play style and talk about play. So, for example, some respondents qualified their actions by stating they "usually" or "tend to" play in a particular style. Bianca explains that she

. . . almost always, particularly on single playthrough, or games . . . like *Dragon Age*, I almost always go good? . . . Occasionally, if it's a nuanced system, I will play around with that.

Likewise, Emmett usually plays more on the good side because it feels like the more comfortable option, relative to his personality:

... I always find the evil side ... to feel more fake for me, that I've tried playing a lot of evil characters, especially on second playthroughs, but it always feels less like I'm ... concerned with the moral dilemmas than I am choosing the evil option because I've decided to play an evil character. It's just much less natural and I don't have that emotional connection.

Many players made a point of stressing to us that the good option is more in line with their natural disposition or moral alignment as a person.⁴ Emmett's clarification that his choices are related to emotional connections is also important, suggesting that decisions can be tied to what "feels right" rather than what might be a more optimal gameplay decision or challenging the belief that players will default to what is the best option to take in terms of a game's reward structure (Mosberg-Iversen, 2012).

On the other hand, Reggie says his decision to play as "male and morally upright" on his first playthroughs cannot be considered simply as his preference. He isn't sure "whether this is a reflection of how I'd like to see myself, or whether I think it's what the game wants me to play as." Comments like these raise important questions about how games create subject positions for players, which potentially nudge them to enact certain roles or behaviors. Reggie's choice to be "morally upright" directly aligns with most games' positioning of the player-character as the game's hero—destined to save the world. Players who consider themselves essentially "good people" are rewarded via game logics for playing the hero, for making choices that (re)affirm their desires to enact justice but also to attain glory, wealth, and power by doing so (Jong, 2013).

Players who choose evil playthroughs as their primary focus are in the distinct minority. Some make conscious decisions to do so before play starts, even if the choice is difficult to make. When Jose first played *Fallout 3*, he had decided to be "bad," yet

I found it so hard to believe that my character would do any of the things that my character did, and I was making those decisions (laughs) like I was the one who [was doing it] ... I did not enjoy that experience.

Other players have no regrets about playing evil and instead enjoy the experience for its transgressiveness. Sam played *KoTOR 2* as "partially evil" and remembers at one point he had the option to force push a character off a bridge, and

so I did an evil cackle, I may have even done the evil hand gesture, and then I did it, cause I was like, this is awesome to do this totally different thing that I wouldn't normally do, and just get away with it.

Sometimes players attempt to deeply engage with the game's fiction as inspiration for character development. For Alicia, a betrayal in *KoTOR*'s game fiction pushed her to move from the light to the dark side of The Force:

I chose [switching over to the Dark Side in *KoTOR* after the game's Giant Plot Twist] because I had decided that my character would now be evil—he would now work to destroy everything he had helped build because those he trusted most betrayed him, used him for their own purposes—and once I chose to be evil, there was no going back regardless of how heartfelt my former friend's pleas [were]. I then watched a cut-scene that showed [my friend] pleading with me and the Wookiee as he sadly and reluctantly murdered her in front of me. In that moment, I felt goose bumps—a chill of watching my evil decision reap its evil consequence. As a person I would never do anything like that, and as a rule, I try to be good hearted. I had never before felt so evil. It was both horrifying and exhilarating.

For Austin, that particular game's morality is not always so clear-cut, which is especially appealing. He explains that in *KoTOR 2*, the Wookies are dealing with slavery, and “the game sets it up so they give you lots and lots of rewards if you keep the current system of having them in slavery, or you can go out of your way and free them from this slavery system.” Yet things aren't so simple for those wishing to play the dark side:

even as the dark side, you initially think ‘Alright, I'm just gonna leave them in slavery,’ but . . . one of your [companion] characters is . . . from that planet who escaped from slavery, so they influence you . . . they want vengeance and anger, and it's . . . not your simple ‘We're just going to stop the slavery,’ it's that they put both sides into why someone might be angry about these situations, and how their anger might push the situations into dark ways.

Agency, choice, procedural rhetoric. Games cater to contemporary desires for individual agency (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Wendell, 1996), offering players the privilege of shaping the narrative in a variety of ways. Of course, even if players do have preferences for how to approach moral dilemmas, that doesn't stop at least some from experimenting with different paths. Sometimes that experimentation is aided by the game's procedural rhetoric—what it pushes the player to do and how it rewards or punishes players (Bogost, 2007). For example, Alice believes that game actions exist within a context bounded by “the [game] universe, and because I like to play a character, whether I play a bad character or a good character, I do see an ethical action differently depending on what the universe is set up to say.”

Some players don't want to take a strong moral stance and instead choose a middle-ground or consensus-building style rather than engaging in more polarizing actions. Jonas explains:

I've always been a mediator, I've always been able to see the legitimate arguments of both sides . . . and I've always sought compromise. In-game, I attempt to choose the middle road. In *Mass Effect*, this is done easily enough if one has a high enough Paragon or Renegade score, as one can choose a persuade option in order to allow the Quarians and Geth to coexist peacefully. In *Dragon Age 2*, however, the Mage/Templar conflict is not so easily rectified, and, for me, therein lies the true issue—I find it difficult to choose a side in something that seems too ambiguous, as to me, both sides have truly legitimate claims and choosing either side could lead to horrible consequences. In this case, I resort to whatever my player character would do, rather than myself, since I can't choose.

Yet even when players are decisive about their actions, they are also aware of the paths not chosen, the decision that could have gone another way. Part of the pleasure of gameplay is that “what if” moment, and with games, players can explore those options via another playthrough and version of the story. Although, as we have learned, that option is not always as simple for players as gaming rhetoric might suggest.

Multiple playthroughs. Some players do engage in multiple playthroughs of games they enjoy, but those attempts can be difficult to complete. Most of the games discussed require at least 20–30 hr of gameplay just for their main story lines, making repeating that experience multiple times impractical to impossible. As Alice explains, many people she knows, including herself, “won't get around to finishing the second time,” and so “they'll miss out on [being the] bad guy” as usually that is their second option. Her solution: “If I feel like playing the bad guy first time I'll just play bad guy first time.” For Richard, second playthroughs result in declining interest, such that even if he tries new options or experiences they usually result “in moral choices that I don't feel engaged in.” This also squares with comments that players often don't feel as invested in the choices they make the second time around—reducing second (or more) playthroughs to less intensive, less emotionally engaging experiences.

If second playthroughs *are* attempted, they are more often about experimentation with game mechanics and alternative story lines, which can be rewarding but still different from those first experiences. John admits second playthroughs are rare for him because

I feel like when I play a game through the first time, that's the story to me, and playing it again any different way, would just not be right, I guess? It would be kind of denying the legitimacy of the first playthrough.

Through the activity of play, individuals construct a history of the game, their character, and their story line. Multiple playthroughs can challenge what is the actual version of events for players to recall. While players can have different conceptions

of which playthrough might matter most, for many of them, the most emotionally engaging and morally “true” experience is their first playthrough. An important part of that experience is the player’s avatar—which is explored next.

The Player/Avatar Relationship

Players do not rely only on their own ethos or a game’s fiction to decide how to play—characters and avatar representation options also influence player actions and choices. Games vary how characters are presented, although more games are offering players increasingly intricate options for character–avatar customization as well as backstories. The original *Dragon Age: Origins* allowed players to choose a customizable male or female avatar but also play one of the six different origin stories—some of which varied by the avatar’s race, job, and social standing to create very different sorts of characters on which to build their experiences. Likewise, *Fallout 3* offers players extensive avatar customization and also guides players through creating a personality and skill profile via an in-game exam. Players for the most part appreciate such efforts, although the levels of detail can impact how players think about avatars and characters, and in particular how close they are to the “me” of the player. Importantly, players are often not just constructing avatars for play—they’re also constructing themselves as individuals with a particular moral code or ethos. That “self” is still a character to some extent, but it’s a character that is intimately tied to how players rationalize or make sense of the decisions they make in daily life.

The avatar is an empty vessel for me. In considering how players think about the role of avatars, it’s useful to consider their beliefs as falling along a spectrum. At one end, the avatar is largely conceptualized as an empty vessel for the player herself, such as Pearce wrote about avatars as being slightly modified versions of the self for players in spaces such as *Uru*, *Second Life*, and *There* (2009). For some players, this means designing an avatar that closely resembles themselves in both appearance and character. It might also mean that the avatar is a proxy for the player, and any action taken will be “her own.”

Many players were emphatic that the choices they were making, no matter what the avatar might have looked like, were their own. Sandy, for example, clearly put herself into the role of the main character such that

I think of them as decisions that *I* made [emphasis her own]. I would say that I project my own emotions onto the player character and their relationships. I usually become emotionally invested in their story and what happens to them and what other characters do to them.

Hyacinthe also sees game characters as extensions of herself, not only in terms of their moral alignment but also in their physical appearance:

In games like *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect*, I create the way the character looks and what their back story is, so often, they take on a lot of my own characteristics (physically, if I'm feeling like it, and definitely morally). So, my relationship with them is very personal, as is my relationship with characters that interact with my character, as that becomes tied to my personality as well.

The ability to play “as oneself” through an avatar was also something that was usually linked to one’s first experience with a game. First playthroughs often represented a time when players were less likely to experiment with options outside of their comfort zones. For example, Faith stated plainly, “with first-run characters, I tend to think of them as my decisions” although “any character after that the decisions are the character’s.” Reggie concurred that

my character is usually merely an avatar for me, and I pick the options I would do, so the choices are ‘mine.’ It is usually only when I replay the game that I sketch out a personality for my character that will affect the decisions they make, and thus the decisions are ‘theirs.’

Games can promote and extend that linkage by creating complex universes that persist and change over time—such as *Mass Effect*’s trilogy of games, where players invest dozens of hours into the progression of the central character, in this case Commander Shepard. For Sutter, that ability led to a deep identification with Shepard, such that

by probably the start of the second game even, I was like . . . this is my character, this is me, I have made the decisions that have made this character who I am, so I was heavily emotionally invested in all of my decisions, I felt like I was a part of the game and felt I was trying to make decisions that I would make if I was in that situation.

Yet even players who strongly identify with a game’s central character can change their approach with a different game that is also deeply engaging and requires many hours. For Sutter, *Fallout* in contrast let him build a character that was more “archetypal,” where “I decided I was going to do a character who was super quiet and stoic and only used hand-to-hand weapons . . . so I would make decisions based off of that type of character.” Sutter believes that some games allow for or encourage him to become “sort of emotionally attached to your character, and they sort of become you . . . they become an extension of your own opinions, of your own feelings toward the game,” whereas at other times, a more impersonal archetype will suffice. Likewise for James, it all

depends on the quality of choices/writing and the kind of character: is it one I personalize, make choices for, . . . treat as my own? Or does the game put me ‘on rails’ to the point that my contribution is simply ‘Hero made it through plot.’

The avatar is a “better me.” In addition to players who see their avatars as blank slates to fill, some envision their avatar as better versions of themselves. Warren believes that his avatars “probably represent an idealized state of who I’d like to be,” and games with difficult situations create spaces where he can “make choices I can be proud of.” James further conceptualizes the practice as acting: “I’m offering an interpretation of the choice here, so I may be putting on another mask or identity, but I’m still definitely leaking through in choices.” James also sees his characters as opportunities to experiment with different personal qualities and traits. When playing *Skyrim*, he explained that his first character, an elf, was “quite a villain” but also “had a sense of decorum and politeness.” He saw this character as

if anything, an idealized version of me, with more bravery and self-control: often in life, when I react in anger to situations, it is unhelpful and gets in the way, and I wish I could be calm in the face of injustice like my characters seem to be able to.

Other players create avatars that are also better looking or more highly skilled versions of themselves. So for Josie, her in-game avatars are “a slightly idealized version . . . a smarter, faster, more capable version of . . . your actual self.” This confirms prior research which has consistently found that players will opt to create avatars that are conventionally attractive in terms of either improving one’s own appearance or simply creating physically attractive avatars (Dumitrica & Gaden, 2008).

Yet some players carefully acknowledge that their avatars are playing in a world that they themselves are not a part of, one they could not inhabit. Hyacinthe believes

no matter how much you try to be yourself in a game, there is always the reality that it is a game and that the decisions you make aren’t real. Also, the heightened level of violence in these games makes it so that your decisions are very far from ones that you would have to make in your daily life. I know that in *Dragon Age*, I would cut the head off of [alleged villain] Loghain, but I would never be able to behead someone in real life, no matter how evil they are.

I am not my avatar. Lastly, we come to players who see their avatars or characters as quite different from themselves for different reasons. In some cases, players feel the game itself has set up a character or situation that does not allow them to place themselves in the character’s role. That isn’t necessarily a shortcoming, but it does affect how they view their character and their place in the game. For Wesley, playing games like *Oblivion* and *Skyrim* is “magnificent,” but at the same time, “I never feel like my character is a reflection of me.”

Likewise, Jose felt that in *Mass Effect*, Commander Shepard is “a really strong and well-defined character,” such that when making tough choices

I sat down and thought about, what would my version of Commander Shepard do, so I sort of imagined, ‘Well, this is what she’s seen, in her experiences, this is her experience with the [alien race of the] Geth, I think that she would make this decision,’ and then I’d go with that and hope it was the right one.

Even though Jose had “his” Shepard as a guide, the game also functioned to construct a particular Shepard that would make particular kinds of choices.

Other players view their characters as having personalities or taking actions quite different from their own. For Alicia, constructing a character is a complicated process with many decisions to make, but

once I have decided my take on my character’s personality, decision-making becomes a fairly quick process. Is my character a spoiled arrogant noble who only cares about herself? Then I will generally choose options that gain me gold, prestige, or power. Does my character have a dark past that he’s trying to atone for? Then I will generally choose options that exhibit my kindness, honesty, and compassion. . . . Once I’ve decided who my character is, which usually occurs within the first hour of the game, all further decisions become much easier unless a character twist is thrown into the game.

And once that character type is chosen, deviating from it can be difficult, producing feelings of discomfort, of not being true to their character. Alicia related

if it was a decision between doing really well at the game, like a utilitarian choice, versus role-playing my character correctly, that’s where I kind of a feel a little dissonance because I would have to think about ‘Well, do I want to be true to the character that I’ve decided I’m playing as, or do I want to just reap whatever the reward is?’

These findings build on past research, which has also explored whether players see avatars as tools, as extensions of themselves, as well as in other complex ways (Consalvo & Begy, 2015; Linderoth, 2005). Our point here isn’t to disentangle (or retheorize) the player–avatar/character relationship as much as it is to investigate how avatars end up serving as proxies for players’ judgments about in-game actions. Players use the tools made available to them to craft characters that may or may not resemble themselves physically, emotionally, or intellectually, and they also respond to in-game events and fictions as well as histories to build characters with particular backgrounds in order to approach moral challenges. Sometimes those characters are quite close to themselves, and at other times, they are very far apart. Yet even when players say they are playing as “themselves” or “better versions” of themselves, we must remember these are staged versions of selves, constructed and tested out via gameplay. In a way they are one version of Foucault’s technologies of the self, a way of managing identity and conflicting elements through recourse to avatars (1988). And so in choosing to play in ways that accord with their own ethos, players rehearse and potentially stabilize versions of themselves they wish to see; in

violating their ethos, they experiment, experience discomfort, and possibly separate those actions from their own moral beliefs, justifying it either through the creation of a character separate from their selves or tying it to the game's fictional pull toward that kind of portrayal. In either case, players are using game tools—avatars, characters, story lines—to think through what certain actions might be like to enact and how those actions support, reinforce, or work against their own personal ethos (Sicart, 2013).

What Playing Evil “Says” About Someone

How do players feel about morally repugnant choices? What do they think of players who do engage in those actions, if they cannot? Initially, we conceptualized deviant choices as akin to cheating in games—something perhaps frowned upon but also possible and almost experimental in nature—given the relatively “safe space” that games afford from most real-life consequences (Consalvo, 2009). Yet as we learned, players for the most part did *not* consider game spaces as “judgment-free zones” for either their own play or that of others, instead freely admitting that feelings of discomfort or shame (or sometimes more) were appropriate for deviant acts they took in-game.

A few players differed—Stella believes that games offer “a safe environment, so usually people . . . will try more things that they wouldn't do in real life,” such as her friend's sister, who enjoyed killing sims in *The Sims 2*. For Stella, shock gave way to acceptance because “this is the kind of stuff we do in-game, and I think well-designed games actually don't put boundaries because they want you to make those choices, but the ones that are well designed have repercussions.”

Sometimes this acceptance of “deviance” is localized to a particular choice, especially when a game presents a situation where none of the options seem satisfactory. For example, Faith (along with several other players we talked with) related how the decision to reprogram or kill the Geth separatist robots in *Mass Effect 2* caused her great discomfort when she chose to reprogram them: Even after “a lot of internal debate . . . I'm still not comfortable with that choice but forced myself not to go back and change it.” In the same series, other players experienced great difficulties with whether or not to save the Krogan race via the release of a cure for the genophage, a genetic disorder that destroyed their ability to reproduce. Alicia related her difficulty with this decision, even though she was playing a “surly renegade” character at the time:

If I trick the Krogans into believing their plague has been ended, I will gain their aid as well as the aid of the Salarians, but in so doing, I will betray one of my Krogan crewmates (Wrex) as well as one of my Salarian crewmates (Mordin), who has engineered the cure of the plague. I was uncomfortable enough making the decision to betray Wrex and doom the Krogans to suffer the plague forever, but betraying Mordin was one of the most [gut] wrenching things I've had to do. . . . You, as the player, are

actually required to pull the trigger on your controller in order to shoot Mordin, then watch the rest of the cut scene where Mordin, mortally wounded by your betrayal (and bullet), tries desperately and valiantly to crawl to the console to save the cure before he bleeds out. Unfortunately, he dies just inches away from his goal, and your betrayal is completed. . . . I had to stop playing for a bit after that happened.

Discomfort isn't limited to scattered moments within games. Sometimes it can extend to an entire playthrough or build and then culminate as more and more consequences become apparent. In *Dragon Age 2*, Faith played a character that went against her own personal ethos and supported the Templars, a group of knights who at first control and then ultimately kill mages because of their instability and danger to the population. In the game's finale, the player must choose whether to support the Templar leader's quest to kill all mages or rebel against her (increasingly insane) rhetoric. Faith "felt like utter crap when the final decision was made, despite it making perfect sense for the character in question." In such ways, games push players to engage with the consequences of their narrative decisions via ludic actions—which can build on each other to create even more unease for the player.

Story lines aren't the only ways that players can experience discomfort for making unpopular or unconventional choices. A player's in-game companions can offer support or criticism, depending on their alignments and how those compare with a player's choices. *Baldur's Gate* offered Stella the option of companions, although at first she didn't realize that her virtual friends had alignments independent of her own:

I hadn't thought of checking people's alignments, so . . . my people started fighting on my team and I was like 'What the hell is going on?!' and I reloaded two or three times before I realized that . . . they don't agree with what we are doing. And after that I was trying to play with the [good characters], and . . . after that I . . . wanted to pick up only the bad people, and I was having trouble keeping them on my team because I had to steal and be mean When I played that I was . . . ten or twelve or something, and . . . I was feeling so bad to kill those people. But it was like virtual peer pressure, that's the worst thing—those were idiotic NPCs.

Similarly, while playing *The Walking Dead*, Jose realized the young Non-Player Character (NPC) girl Clementine had witnessed his killing of a character he had deemed a threat, which completely changed how he thought about his actions:

I chose to kill him, and then it was revealed that this girl that you're caring after was right there watching you kill this guy, and I just felt awful, I felt *so* bad. I can't believe I made that decision because . . . I thought about my moral decision in that case, and I was like, 'I really don't know if I should kill this guy, but he's a threat, I'm going to do it.' And so, . . . after I weighed my moral decision and then committed to it and made that act, and then I see the repercussions for that, my decision is that much more

meaningful to me because I know that it wasn't just picking between A and B. I genuinely thought about it, and now I have self-doubts.

Ludic rehearsals—Replaying unsatisfactory choices. When players feel badly about a particular choice, they have two options: They can either stick with the decision and press on or replay either the scene or the game in order to change the outcome.⁵ Malcolm felt so guilty about his choice in *Fable* to side with the thieves rather than the villagers that he went “back to a save [point],” so he could instead side with the villagers and “kill off all the thieves.” Richard felt he made the “wrong” decision at the end of *Mass Effect 2* about which characters to use on which missions, resulting in several companion-related deaths. That choice made him feel “like absolute shit” which led to him “restarting the mission until I got it right.” Yet a game’s length can prevent a player from going back to replay the entire story again for a different result, and the increasing use of autosave in many games means that players can be “stuck with” certain decisions they cannot undo, unless they want to go back to a much earlier checkpoint. Likewise, games that push players down one particular path or another encourage certain decisions at the expense of others, despite what the player might prefer in that particular situation, such as more options to change their actions or responses. It is not only a game’s narrative and interactive structures that shape how players approach choices but also technical and other features that may seem separate or neutral in terms of morality, such as the use of autosaves or manual checkpoints, the ease or difficulty of returning to certain decision points, the overall length of a game, and the opacity or clarity surrounding the ramifications of player decisions all also contribute to how players approach gameplay and moral dilemmas.

“Yes, *I am judging you.*” How do players think about other players’ decisions, particularly when people they know make choices they consider evil, selfish, or repugnant? Most players don’t make a one-to-one connection between evil play and evil individuals, but they do draw links between how people play and their individual personality. For Wesley, that connection is clear and absolute—first playthroughs in particular demonstrate one’s “real” character. Of course, Wesley also believes that his characters “deeply mirror” his own personality, so it is logical that such an association would carry over into how he sees others playing.

For most players, however, things are more complex. Sandy told us that her brother, “one of the most nonviolent people I have ever met,” also likes to do his first playthroughs of games as the villain. While she believes that such acts are “purely for entertainment and fantasy purposes,” she also told us “I’m not going to say I don’t judge people a little for making what I view as ‘evil’ choices in a game and then not caring about the outcome.” Similarly, James allows that people can express all kinds of character traits when playing a game, but

if someone spends an hour exploring the most brutal and gruesome options a game allows, they aren't actually choosing to do those things [in real life], but it does say something about them as a person, that that's what they're interested in. But it doesn't mean that they are necessarily violent or condoning those activities. It's complicated.

In some cases, one person's choices have led to arguments with friends over what might be the "right" way to play a game. Malcolm told us he'd had big arguments with a best friend who decided to play the *Mass Effect* series as a renegade. Malcolm had trouble with that decision because he felt it didn't really reflect his friend's true nature: "I know he isn't like that, yet he's making those decisions. So, he was able to do that, while I wasn't able to, so he obviously sees it differently." Malcolm ultimately rationalized the decision as "he's playing through for a story line, while I play it through it as *my* story line."

Other players had difficulty spelling out exactly what evil choices might say about another player, but they seemed certain that *something* was going on. Emmett explained

it's not direct. . . . I mean, if a person likes role-playing as an evil character, it doesn't mean they're evil. . . . [but] there's a reason why, there's something in them that makes them want to try that. . . . I don't think it reveals their own opinions. . . . So, it definitely reflects the person, but I don't think it directly communicates anything specific.

Disapproval or concern over others' "deviant" gameplay might mean many things. It could be that players display the "third-person effect" espoused by mass communication theorists, where individuals believe that others are much more (negatively) affected by media than they are themselves (Davison, 1983). Believing there are negative consequences for playing evil would tie in with players' concerns that others are somehow negatively impacted by that play style. Alternately, players' apprehensions may not say as much about other players as much as it says about *their own* beliefs and practices. If playing evil "says something" about the person in question, then playing good likewise says something about those who take that path. If players are indeed rehearsing an ethos in and through play, it makes sense that they would believe such play says something about them and about others. If players are Sicart's moral beings, they will want their morality acknowledged, just as they want to question the ethos of those who do not play as they do, revealing the discursive nature of moral decision-making. What about players who play evil some or all of the time? If those gameplay sessions are second playthroughs, less emotionally engaging, or encouraged by the game's fiction, they are less a ludic rehearsal of ethos. And for those who do enjoy playing as evil on their primary playthroughs, their explanations point us back to the constructed nature of the experience—they are "just games" or it is "only characters" who are doing this, rather than an inner self being expressive. For such (a minority of) players, who are closer to Mortensen

and Linderoth's dark players, the magic circle is reinvoked to explain their behavioral choices (2015).

Conclusion

Talking about the difficult decisions we encounter in video games is a popular pastime among players, as any visit to a game's discussion forums will reveal. The opportunity to reflect on decisions made and actions taken leads to fascinating accounts of the extraordinary care that players take when playing games they are invested in or the meanings they construct from their playthroughs. Before coming to this project, we were doubtful of the usefulness of the concept of the magic circle, but at the same time, we thought that games still offered players a safe space in which to try out certain ways of being or thinking that they might not normally do in daily life. Yet almost all players we talked with felt almost compelled to "play the hero" in games, which they talked of as playing a version of themselves or an improved version of themselves made virtual. They also mostly expressed discomfort—sometimes great discomfort—at choosing evil or repugnant pathways. Those same players also claimed not to explicitly judge others for different play styles, but tellingly they also often claimed that evil choices "said something" about a person, just as perhaps their own altruistic gameplay said something about the person they were or wished to be. These accounts suggest that although players recognized that fantasy violence was just that—a fantasy—they would not or could not completely disentangle their sense of morality from their gameplay. Those self-imposed boundaries that players created provide further evidence for the limits of the magic circle as a way to understand how players engage with games.

Our findings also demonstrate that players will often justify committing repeated and increasingly devastating acts of violence in the name of being "the hero" or acting in some altruistic manner. Although many players attempt to disengage from some consequences of play—"it's only a game"—they more often grapple with feelings of discomfort or disgust—even in virtual scenarios. For those who have fewer problems with evil decisions or actions, the game is more easily a fantasy space distinct from their everyday life—the magic circle does hold in this instance and, as Mortensen and Linderoth (2015) have found, elsewhere in relation to dark play. Yet in terms of better understanding moral dilemmas in games and player studies, this research illustrates that there are no real clear-cut answers—game systems or structures, including narratives, character designs, length, save systems, and the like, can push players to act in certain ways, and yet those same players can make different decisions in different games. Finally we are left with the knowledge that gameplay is contingent and contextual, but just as players (claim to) desire choices or actions that matter to the outcome of a game, those choices made are ultimately produced in and through the social systems that players are a part of in conjunction with the technical systems from which games are created.

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Notes

1. All names here are pseudonyms.
2. Moreover, we also need to acknowledge potential biases due to the North American cultural background of our respondents, particularly acknowledging our targeted social media recruitment of them, which likely limited participants to those with ready Internet access and the skills and interest to use game forums as well as Twitter.
3. For a good example of this, see Todd Harper's essay in *Queer Game Studies*, forthcoming.
4. It may be the case that at least some players want to reassure the researchers that they are good people who would not condone such acts in daily life. However, we also talked with players who had no hesitation in telling us about evil or morally troublesome acts they committed in games, often with little regret. Thus, we are not overly worried that participants are giving us a "whitewashed" version of their gameplay or their various choices and feelings while playing.
5. Actually, players do have a third option, which is to stop playing the game. This does happen, in some cases temporarily for some players and at other times permanently.

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Author Biographies

Mia Consalvo is a professor and Canada research chair in game studies and design at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. She is the coeditor of *Sports Videogames* and author of *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. She has most recently completed *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*, a book about Japan's influence on the video game industry and game culture.

Thorsten Busch is a visiting assistant professor in Management and Corporate Social Responsibility at the University of Konstanz, Germany; a lecturer in Digital Business Ethics and Game Studies at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland; and affiliated faculty at Concordia University, Montréal, Canada.

Carolyn Jong is a doctoral student in the Humanities Program at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.