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## 8 Guilt in *DayZ*

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I get a sick feeling in my stomach when I kill someone.

—Player #1431's response to the question "Do you ever feel bad killing another player in *DayZ*?"

Death in most games is simply a metaphor for failure (Bartle 2010). Killing another player in a first-person shooter (FPS) game such as *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003) is generally considered to be as transgressive as taking an opponent's pawn in chess. In an early exploratory study of players' experiences and processing of violence in digital videogames, Christoph Klimmt and his colleagues concluded that "moral management does not apply to multiplayer combat games" (2006, 325). In other words, player killing is not a violation of moral codes or a source of moral concern for players. Subsequent studies of player experiences of guilt and moral concern in violent videogames (Hartmann, Toz, and Brandon 2010; Hartmann and Vorderer 2010; Gollwitzer and Melzer 2012) have consequently focused on the moral experiences associated with single-player games and the engagement with transgressive fictional, virtual narrative content.

This is not the case, however, for *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive 2017), a zombie-themed FPS survival game in which players experience levels of moral concern and anguish that might be considered extreme for a multiplayer digital game. The subjects of virtual violence in *DayZ* are not virtual agents, but real human opponents. When killed, players lose all in-game advancement, a significant penalty in the harsh virtual environment. Further, *DayZ* is a "sandbox" game, in which players are not in clearly delimited teams and no linear narrative is provided; choice—particularly around how players engage with other inhabitants of the virtual world—is left to the player.

These unique configurations facilitate a wide range of highly evocative moral experiences that are core to *DayZ*'s wide appeal, including pronounced feelings of player guilt and moral anguish. Here, we report the results of our analysis of 250 responses to

a player motivations survey, which contained both Likert-scale and rich-text-response questions regarding their experience playing *DayZ* and focused centrally on the question “Do you ever feel bad killing another player in *DayZ*?” We highlight how the results overwhelmingly indicate a breadth of challenging moral choices, ethical concerns, and feelings of personal guilt and anguish. Through identifying the clear moral disengagement strategies (Bandura 2002) used by players when discussing their *DayZ* play, we demonstrate that despite occurring in the ludic context of *DayZ*, player killing can be a source of moral concern and guilt.

It is in this context that player killing in *DayZ* can be understood as a form of transgressive player practice. Drawing on Chris Jenks’s definition of transgression as going “beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention” (2003, 2), this chapter demonstrates how player killing violates and infringes a player’s personal moral code. Further, the nuances of the ways that players do or do not feel guilt while playing *DayZ* provide novel insights into how we might understand the ethics of competitive and transgressive gameplay in multiplayer games. Despite the strong negative experiences we describe in this chapter, we conclude that player killing in *DayZ* demonstrates the potential for transgressive play to be part of the appeal of play.

### **Moral Disengagement and Guilt in Multiplayer Games**

Transgressive play practices can occur when play oversteps or violates a player’s own moral code. To examine this type of play in *DayZ*, we draw on Albert Bandura’s (2002) theory of moral disengagement. Bandura characterizes morality as a process of self-regulation in which people compare their own actions to their learned moral standards and avoid taking actions that they anticipate might induce guilt. Moral agency is described as both a constraining mechanism to prevent immoral action and a proactive power to act in morally positive ways. Yet moral self-regulation is effective only when it is activated. People who are involved in conduct they perceive to be inhumane electively disengage their moral self-regulation by evaluating their actions and their context in a way that defuses the potential for self-censure (Bandura 2002, 102). As a consequence, moral disengagement can also be thought of as evidence of a person’s awareness of overstepping a moral code. Bandura identifies eight mechanisms for selective moral disengagement, each of which involves a self-serving interpretation of either the action, the effects of the action, or the nature of the victim.

There are several similar theories on moral disengagement and management, such as Gresham Sykes and David Matza’s (1957) *neutralization techniques* as well as Alvaro Barriga and John Gibbs’s (1996) *secondary self-serving cognitive dissonances*. In a review,

Denis Ribeaud and Manuel Eisner (2010) found close overlap among these theories, concluding that they capture essentially the same cognitive processes. Here, we apply Bandura's theory of moral disengagement because it has previously been applied to digital games.

The earliest example of this application is in the study by Klimmt and his colleagues (2006), which demonstrates that the moral disengagement described by Bandura happens when people play digital games. Based on interviews with ten German players of violent videogames right after they played such games, mostly in the FPS genre, Klimmt and his colleagues argue that although moral disengagement applies, players also actively engage in a *continuous* moral-management process, which means that "players mostly do not find it difficult to cope with moral concern; they frequently seem not to experience any moral problems at all" (2006, 326). They attribute this moral management to the player's reliance on game-reality distinctions and within-world justifications, such as violence being narratively appropriate or required to complete the game. In the interviews, phrases such as "it's just a game" were frequently invoked and were the reason put forward most strongly to divert moral judgment. However, Klimmt and his colleagues suggest that the game-reality distinction is a weak defense because games are increasingly immersive. This interpretation is up for debate; although in our survey respondents frequently cited a feeling that *DayZ* is unusually "real," this realness is rooted less in the immersive quality of the virtual world than in the individual emotional stake in gameplay (Allison, Carter, and Gibbs 2015).

Of note to this chapter, Klimmt and his colleagues (2006) found that moral management is salient to single-player gaming but not to multiplayer gaming: "In multiplayer games, when typically teams fight against each other, no moral reasoning at all seems to take place. All that counts is that one's own team wins and that members of the opposite team(s) are defeated. It is apparently not important if the moral position of one's team is 'evil' or 'good'" (2006, 323). They suggest that this moral ambivalence can be explained by a performance orientation in competitive multiplayer gaming as opposed to the orientation toward narrative frameworks and a game's imaginary in single-player gaming. *DayZ* notably fits neither the single-player template nor the competitive multiplayer template. Although it is played with multiple players online, it features neither a common goal toward which players are working nor set teams to which players belong. This means that negotiation and social risk management are a larger part of the experience, creating a game situation that is not accounted for in the Klimmt study. Other more recent studies (Hartmann, Toz, and Brandon 2010; Gollwitzer and Melzer 2012; Joeckel, Bowman, and Dogruel 2012; Hartmann, Krakowiak, and Tsay-Vogel 2014) consequently focus on the moral experiences associated with

single-player games and the engagement with fictional, virtual narrative content that can evoke moral concern.

Research into the moral experience of multiplayer gameplay beyond this framework is limited. A notable recent exception is C. Thi Nguyen and José Pablo Zagal's (2016) examination of the ethics of multiplayer gameplay, which contributes a distinction between ethical and unethical competition that is useful for understanding *DayZ* play. As they note, competition in competitive games has a moral value. Nguyen and Zagal draw on Bernard Suits (2005) to argue that although most competitive play is based on causing violence to frustrate an opponent's plans, striving to win a game provides an arbitrary in-game goal in service of the players' real goal, which is to have a positive experience of struggle. With that real goal in mind, one player's "mere violence" against another player may be transformed from a negative act to a positive one by contributing to this positive experience of struggle. This understanding explains why players typically lack moral engagement in playing FPS games and why killing in multiplayer games is generally not understood to be transgressive. Nguyen and Zagal's approach also provides a framework for understanding why behaviors such as "ganking" (the killing of a weaker player who poses no contest) and "spawn-camping" ("staying in a location that provides a strategic advantage over the location where enemy players spawn, or appear, in a game" [Nguyen and Zagal 2016, 9]) are ethically flawed: in essence, they unbalance the player's in-game goals. However, research into extreme multiplayer competitiveness in *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003) (Carter 2015b) highlights the way these kinds of play styles can be acceptable in certain contexts rather than fitting into an absolute "unethical" category.

### ***DayZ***

*DayZ* is one of the first games in the emerging massively multiplayer online FPS genre, which combines the persistent virtual world of massively multiplayer online games such as *EVE Online* and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) with the control and gameplay typical of games in the FPS genre, such as those in the *Call of Duty* series. As a sandbox game, *DayZ* provides no linear narrative or explicit goals; it has only a "rudimentary narrative structure ... necessarily constructed by the player" (Schmeink 2016) to survive in the harsh, zombie apocalypse of its post-Soviet setting.

Play begins on the shore of Chernarus, a 225-square-kilometer environment with more than 50 villages dispersed between farmland and forest, based on a real-world area in the Czech Republic. Each replication of the virtual world can host up to 64 users

simultaneously. Players begin with few items and must scavenge everything they need to survive the zombie-infested virtual environment, including food and water (which the players' characters must constantly consume to maintain health), medication (needed to heal wounds, infections, and sickness), weapons, and ammunition. These resources are scarce, and players have a limited ability to store these items, requiring constant and careful resource management. Some items (such as tents) can be deployed to increase a player's ability to store items.

Collaboration in this harsh virtual world thus offers numerous incentives—security, resources, and capability—to survive. Players can speak to one another using a proximity voice system (Carter, Wadley, and Gibbs 2012), which allows them to communicate by voice or text if their avatars are within 50 virtual meters of each other. Some players use this system to negotiate peaceful encounters and trades or for ad hoc collaborations while others use it to trick and play treacherously (Carter 2015a). However, *DayZ* provides no mechanism for formally designating friends, teams, or foes. Commonly, however, players with preexisting relationships will communicate with their friends during *DayZ* play via a third-party voice application in order to overcome this limitation. In either case, any new player encountered in the game is thus ambiguously friend or foe: a potential collaborator, trader, or murderer.

This feature of the game is significant because *DayZ* features what game designers refer to as “permadeath”: if killed—by zombies, starvation, sickness, or other players—a player's character is permanently removed from the game (Carter, Gibbs, and Wadley 2012). The player returns to the shores of Chernarus with a different avatar, and all the player's advancement in the game is lost, representing hours or even days of effort. Because players cannot choose where a character spawns, this may mean they are now hours of nervous scavenging and travel away from reconnecting with their friends, who might be located on the other side of the map. This experience of dying has been shown to engender extremely strong, negative emotional reactions (Allison, Carter, and Gibbs 2015).

When a character is killed, their corpse drops, and the items the character scavenged from the virtual world can be looted from the body by other players. Of course, this provides a strong incentive to kill and betray in *DayZ*, but in fact players regularly act as “ideal survivors” (Schmeink 2016), gathering in camps, trading, forming communities, and helping sick and wounded players. Indeed, many players are willing to risk their in-game advancement for the opportunity to have a tense and thrilling social experience with another player in the apocalypse.

In this chapter, we argue that although killing other players offers significant in-game reward, players will often avoid killing others. Players of *DayZ* are—nearly

always—likely to have experienced permadeath prior to killing other players, and they have thus experienced the strong negative emotional experience that comes with it. Despite the zombie apocalypse imaginary, despite the competition over resources, despite the FPS gameplay, we show that players do sometimes feel guilt when killing other players because they recognize the pain and agony it causes in their opponent. This feeling of guilt—well evidenced by the exhibition of moral disengagement strategies—is exacerbated by the fact that *DayZ* places moral responsibility on players for their in-game actions. That is, it is the freedom to choose not to kill that means killing can be transgressive in *DayZ*.

### Research Design

This chapter draws on data from a survey that aimed to identify and investigate the different motivations *DayZ* players have to play this unusual game. It replicates Nick Yee's (2006) template with minor changes to suit the practices available to *DayZ* players. Such minor changes include the removal of questions that pertain to *World of Warcraft* guild play and in their place the introduction of questions that interrogate high-consequence death. The final questionnaire included 41 questions addressing the player's enjoyment of or behavior toward game elements and situations, each asked on a five-point Likert scale. An additional 10 open-response questions were included that asked players to elaborate on favored and disfavored aspects of *DayZ* and to describe player interactions they had experienced. Respondents were surprisingly generous in the detail of their responses to the rich-text questions.

The online survey was advertised on the *DayZ* forums, a Reddit subforum (*/r/DayZ*), and Twitter. A majority of the responses came directly after the game's developer, Dean Hall, promoted the survey on Twitter. There were more than 4,000 hits on the survey (1,704 completions), of which 98.4 percent were from male participants (the highest gender bias we are aware of in a game studies survey).<sup>1</sup> Respondents were from 64 different countries, with an unsurprising dominance of First World, English-speaking countries. The top-ten countries composed 77 percent of the sample: United States ( $n = 426$  participants), United Kingdom ( $n = 349$ ), Germany ( $n = 138$ ), Canada ( $n = 90$ ), Sweden ( $n = 89$ ), Australia ( $n = 74$ ), Netherlands ( $n = 55$ ), Norway ( $n = 54$ ), and Finland ( $n = 42$ ). The average age was 23.3 years (standard deviation = 6.37), with 28.8 percent of participants selecting "18" as their age, the lowest option available in the survey because the survey was intended for (and advertised to) players older than 18 due to human-research ethics requirements. Less than 30 percent of the sample respondents were older than 25. We do not believe that these percentages accurately reflect the

demographics of *DayZ* players, as the forums through which we advertised our survey are likely to be spaces in which young men are overrepresented.

Based on the rich-text responses, we believe that because of the developer's promotion of the game, some participants thought their responses would be incorporated in the ongoing design of *DayZ*, despite a page detailing the purpose and origin of the research shown to participants before they consented to participate. This misunderstanding could account for the high level of detail in responses and the high completion rate. It may also have influenced participant responses in other ways and may have motivated respondents younger than 18 to participate, selecting "18" as their age, which would account for the disproportionate number of (supposed) 18-year-olds in the sample.

For this study, we randomly selected a subsample of 250 respondents who answered the open-text question "Do you ever feel bad killing another player in *DayZ*?" We conducted a thematic analysis of these responses using the collaborative coding tool SaturateApp. Moral management was employed as a sensitizing concept—that is, as a way of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience, according to theory development (Bowen 2006)—for replies that exhibited moral management. Responses relating to negative feelings were open-coded through a thematic analysis of 40 sample responses, which was then reviewed and updated in consultation with colleagues. To identify differences in player preferences with regard to character death, each player's responses were cross-referenced against the player's quantitative answer to the five-point Likert-scale question "When you play *DayZ*, how enjoyable do you find the consequential nature of death?"

We strongly believe that the responses examined in this chapter honestly reflect player experience. First, the perception that the survey would influence *DayZ*'s ongoing design most likely motivated players to be more honest because they understood that false answers might affect the development of a game they enjoy. On this, we note that the quantitative version of the question was in the context of 41 questions that covered the breadth of *DayZ* play on a "never"-to-"always" scale. We suggest that this context obfuscated any particular interests the researchers might have had, resulting in responses that actually reflect how often a player feels bad and overcoming any social desirability bias (Nederhof 1985). Similarly, the qualitative version of the question at the conclusion of the survey was an optional one wherein players could expand on four broad questions relating to permadeath, feeling bad, general like, and general dislike. Although several of the responses shared here may seem extreme, they correspond with what we have found in general in online discussions, reviews, and ethnographic play with others.

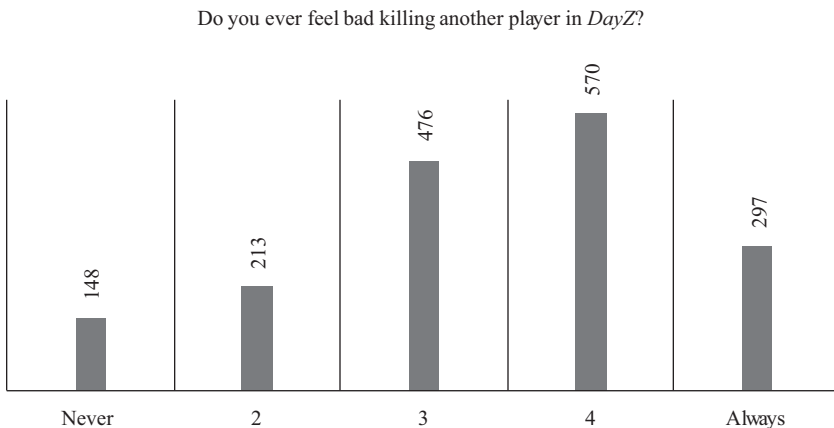
## Results

### Feeling Bad

When asked whether they ever felt bad killing another player in *DayZ*, more than 90 percent of the survey respondents said that they had, and 17 percent reported that they always felt bad to some degree (see figure 8.1). Of the 250 respondents, 105 described specific instances or conditions in which they felt guilt or regret after killing other players.

The severity of the negative emotions varied considerably among respondents. Some said that they felt only “a bit” bad, whereas others reported “extreme regret” or that they felt “horrible.” At the most extreme, one player described several nights of disrupted sleep and guilt continuing for more than a year: “I once accidentally killed a team mate in crossfire, I actually had some really bad nights of sleep following. I still feel bad. ... And he guilts me into being ‘bait’ by reminding me (this was over 12 months ago in the mod)” (#37).

Most responses explained the conditions under which killing another player was regrettable or unjustified. Relatively few referred to the consequences for the victim. Those who did so described their empathy for the victim-player’s loss of accumulated gear (“I would usually think how much time did it take them to find, scavenge the items they used to have, at least before I ended them” [#217]) and, by extension, the



**Figure 8.1**

Quantitative responses to the survey question “Do you ever feel bad killing another player in *DayZ*?”



termination of their investment in playing time. No respondent mentioned feeling empathy for the virtual character itself.

### Unprovoked Attacks

The most commonly cited circumstance in which players felt bad after killing another player was when the act was unprovoked. The killing could have been done because they wanted the other player's gear, because they were unsure if the other player would attack them, or simply because they were bored. In many of these cases, players expressed only minor regret, reasoning that unprovoked killing is part of the nature of the game:

Yes, we opened fire on a geared guy who was minding his own business and it was fun but we felt a little bad afterwards ... not too much though. (#42)

Sometimes when I kill a player out of fear I feel bad after but never in self defense. (#171)

This issue arises because there is no way to play *DayZ* without consenting to player-versus-player (PvP) combat; there are no non-PVP servers. In other cases, respondents specifically described their victim as "friendly" or "innocent." These responses were characterized by much stronger expressions of guilt, which suggests that the players experienced more self-recrimination when they focused on the nature of the victim than when they focused on their own actions and whether their actions were justified by the circumstances: "At best I try to avoid other players or watch them from a distance. Although if I can't leave the area I may have to kill the other player. I feel extreme regret afterwards knowing that player may have been friendly and no threat whatsoever" (#142).

As noted elsewhere (Carter 2015a), the geography of *DayZ* influences the way players interact with each other. Players have more pronounced feelings of guilt if they kill in areas closer to where players spawn and less regret in committing unprovoked attacks in "end-game" areas such as the military base.

A number of respondents reported feeling bad after they killed another player by accident. This is consistent with the point made earlier because it suggests that when players do not have a justifying framework for their actions, they are forced to confront the outcome rather than thinking in terms of their own motivations: "I was attempting [to] show my friend that the sights on the nagant [rifle] were off so I fired a shot at a distant player who appeared AFK [away from keyboard]. The inaccuracy of the sights combined with the distance meant that he should have been safe but he moved just as I fired the shot so he was killed" (#137).

Similarly, some respondents articulate their regret around the potential lost opportunity for a friendly, social interaction. One player referenced feeling “kind of bad” after killing another player, “since he may have been friendly but simply scared so the situation could have gone differently” (#189), and another player wondered afterward “if we had stopped and talked a little maybe we could have done some trade or barter” (#124).

As a result of the ambiguous relationship between players in *DayZ*—Are other players enemy combatants, potential ad hoc collaborators, or a source of social encounter?—these particular players imagined how the encounter could have gone differently if not for their decision to kill the other player-character. In the *DayZ* online community, stories of unique and appealing player encounters typically celebrate social interactions, and, for many, the opportunity to have one of these encounters is a core appeal of *DayZ*.

### **Victim Was Not a Threat**

The second most commonly cited condition under which respondents felt bad for killing another player was when their victim was not a threat. This lack of threat could have been due to friendly intentions or a lack of weaponry, and it was cited both by players who chose to kill their victim for personal gain or entertainment and by players who did so out of fear.

If he clearly isn't a threat and I am bored and just kill him, I am pretty much devastated. (#207)

Yes, [I feel bad] if it turns out that they were not a threat or were looking to interact instead of just a shootout. (#49)

The assessment of harmlessness was most often based on the victim's lack of effective weaponry, which can be discerned somewhat by the appearance of the victim's avatar (if it is carrying a gun or a rake). In many cases, respondents reported feeling guilty even when they had no way to tell that their victim was not a threat prior to their decision to kill them, such as when the victim was holding a weapon that the respondent later learned did not have ammunition.

A particularly common subtheme is guilt over killing players who had only recently spawned and had not yet had time to accumulate gear with which to defend themselves. This guilt had the appearance of following a widely held social rule; many respondents specified that they never felt guilty in the particular case of killing a player whom they had seen killing newly spawned players.

Yes, [I feel bad] if it's a player who just spawned. They should be able to spawn and not be spotted right away. (#143)

Sometimes [I feel bad], when they're new players but they want to kill me. (#101)

The social rule against killing new and underequipped players appeared to be only partly a concession to fair play and sympathy for the underdog. It also seemed to reflect a sense of regret that the player who killed did not gain materially by doing so. Several players said they did not feel bad after killing others unless they discovered that the killed player had no useful gear for them to loot: “It feels like I’ve killed them for no reason” (#165). In one sense, this response contradicts the finding that some respondents felt empathy for other players’ loss of time and gear when they were killed. However, in another sense it is consistent with that finding: players had no moral qualms as long as their focus was on their own gain, and the negative sentiment appeared when there was no personal gain to justify their actions.

### Unfairness

A small number of respondents reported feeling bad when they thought they had acted unfairly toward another player in killing that player. Lying to and betraying other players were cited as specific sources of guilt:

I was a bit of a bandit when I first started playing, I tricked a few people before killing them and did shitty stuff like that, I feel bad for those ones:P. (#155)

Depends, if I tricked them and they seemed like a nice person then yes I’d feel bad. But most of the time no, I don’t feel bad about it. (#169)

This finding aligns with research into betrayal in games such as *EVE Online* (Carter 2015b), which has indicated that for some players the social action of deceiving another player can feel more like a real transgression than the virtual act of killing the other player’s character. Like theft, the virtual act of killing in *DayZ* deprives an opponent of the resources they have accumulated in games—different means to the same end.

### Moral Disengagement in *DayZ*

We have established so far that players feel bad when killing others in *DayZ*, but this feeling alone does not demonstrate transgression in the form of violating a player’s personal moral code. As noted earlier, moral disengagement can be treated as evidence of a person’s awareness of overstepping or violating a moral code, whether in reference to a “real” or ludic act. Bandura (2002) notes three sets of moral disengagement practices: (1) the cognitive restructuring of immoral acts; (2) the diminishment or obscuring of an individual’s agentic role in causing harm; and (3) the focusing of disengagement on the victim of the actions. Klimmt and his colleagues (2006) note that the game context provides a further set of moral disengagement strategies, which we also discuss.

**Table 8.1**

## Moral Disengagement Practice

<i>Moral Disengagement Practice</i>	<i>Number of Examples</i>	<i>Average Score</i>
<i>Moral Justification</i>	23	3.65
<i>Advantageous Comparison</i>	6	3.83
<i>Euphemistic Labeling</i>	5	3.80
<i>Displacement, Diffusion, and Distortion</i>	5	2.60
<i>Dehumanization</i>	22	2.86
<i>Attribution of Blame</i>	59	3.35
<i>Game-Reality Distinction</i>	9	2.11
<i>Sportslike Conduct</i>	8	3.25
<i>Narrative Justification</i>	0	–
<i>Total</i>	137	Average from 1,704 responses, 3.38

**Moral Justification and Advantageous Comparison**

Moral justification refers to disengagement operating on the “reconstruction of the behavior itself” (Bandura 2002, 103), which renders conduct acceptable by portraying it as a positive behavior and thus allows people to preserve their own pro-moral view of themselves. Whereas moral justification reconstructs behavior as moral, *advantageous comparison* makes reprehensible acts acceptable by contrasting them to other, more unacceptable acts by exonerative comparison. In responses to our survey, we noted 23 instances of moral justification (average score 3.65). In some instances, killing a player was judged as morally justified because the player killed was considered immoral for some reason:

If I kill a player who is killing other players then [I] feel extremely satisfied. (#207)

Sometimes I kill less geared players because I saw them harming other players. (#216)

In the data collected, it was difficult to distinguish between instances of moral justification and instances of advantageous comparison ( $n = 6$ , average score 3.83). In many comments, players described killing other players as moral for one reason or another, and in other comments players alluded to a preventative aspect of their murdering, seeing it as a way to save friends or to protect others or even themselves: “When I know they are pure bandits or backstabbers, I enjoy it so much, it makes me feel like I just removed a big threat on the game” (#187).

### Euphemistic Labeling

Through sanitizing language, conduct can be constructed as less problematic, thus reducing personal responsibility (Bandura 2002, 104). Soldiers “waste” the enemy; attacks are “clean, surgical strikes”; civilian casualties are “collateral damage.” In *DayZ*, terms such as *opening fire* and *serving justice* are used to exculpate conduct.

[I feel bad] each and every time. Even if they are “bad spawns” asking to be put down. (#91)

Cruel people in *DayZ* deserve to die, and when they do, justice is served. (#43)

Sanitizing language follows the theory of moral cleansing, or the “Macbeth effect” (Zhong and Liljenquist 2006), wherein moral concern “evokes a desire to physically cleanse oneself” (Gollwitzer and Melzer 2012, 1356). In this sense, many of these terms exaggerate the seriousness of the interaction so that it will resemble morally justifiable conduct in real conflicts, as opposed to the use of game-specific terms discussed later that can also be categorized as a form of sanitizing language.

*Agentless passive voice* is another form of euphemistic labeling: using language to attribute acts to nameless forces rather than to specific people (Bolinger 1982). According to Bandura, with agentless passive voice “it is as though people are moved mechanically but are not really the agents of their own acts” (2002, 105). A response quoted earlier in the discussion of the need for justifying frameworks is appropriate here as well: “I was attempting [to] show my friend that the sights on the nagant [rifle] were off so I fired a shot at a distant player who appeared AFK. The inaccuracy of the sights combined with the distance meant that he should have been safe but he moved just as I fired the shot so he was killed” (#137). Here, though the player had a causative role in the death of the other player, he described the actual killing in the passive voice. “He was killed” rather than “I killed him” draws attention to how players use agentless passive voice to further suppress moral concern.

### Displacement and Diffusion of Responsibility, Disregard or Distortion of Consequences

Studies such as those of Nazi prison camps (Andrus 1969; Milgram 1974) and the My Lai massacre in Vietnam (Kelman 1973) have demonstrated how people can exculpate themselves of moral control by viewing their own actions as being under another’s authority. We did not observe this moral management strategy in our data, likely due to the lack of situations where players are subject to another player’s authority in *DayZ*.

In the absence of an authority, personal agency can be diffused through the division of labor, such as by group decision making (Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson 1975).

Bandura notes that “any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behavior of others” (2002, 107). Because players of *DayZ* often play in groups, other members of the *group* were at times attributed with blame: “A member of my squad is a loose cannon and has forced me into confrontations w[h]ere [I] would rather have a positive social interaction such as trading” (#160).

Moral control can be further obfuscated by diminishing the harm of an action via the *disregard or distortion of consequences*. This distortion can be seen through attempts to minimize the harm attributed to one’s actions or through discrediting any evidence of harm.

It is like in paintball, do i feel bad that i stained someones top? (#75)

They will be able to start over anyway. (#28)

Klimmt and his colleagues (2006) point to the “game–reality distinction” as a game-specific moral management strategy; to suppress moral concern, attention is drawn to the fact that the acts happened within a game. We discuss this strategy further later in the chapter, but one interpretation of it is as an attempt to minimize the harm attributed to the player’s actions via such a hierarchical game–reality distinction, which can be seen as a special case of *disregarding consequences*. Not including these game-specific diffusions, we noted only five instances of these disengagement practices, with a low average *feel bad* score of 2.6.

### Dehumanization

Perceived similarity is a trigger of empathetic reactions. Thus, a variety of disengagement strategies attempt to dehumanize victims, to see them as subhuman, stripped of their relatable human qualities. Terms such as *mindless savages* and *gooks* have been widely utilized historically to dehumanize opposing forces in wars. *DayZ* players pervasively utilized the term *bandits* to refer to a type of player whom it is always acceptable to murder:

I usually only go for bandits or people that kill others. (#14)

I only kill bandits, so no. (#240)

This term negatively refers to players whose only goal is to kill and steal from other players. Although it is not commensurate with dehumanizing terms used historically, it similarly works to dehumanize an opponent in *DayZ*. Another common dehumanizing strategy Bandura discusses is to refer to people using the names of lower animals and demonic qualities: “I mostly kill bandits or ‘vampires’ that I have spotted killing or robbing others during my travels and don’t really feel bad about that” (#230).

Bandura notes how social practices (such as urbanization and high mobility) can divide people into *in-group* and *out-group* members, facilitating dehumanization. Thus, as well as diffusing responsibility, group play in *DayZ* leads to a hierarchy of the lives of in-group and the lives of out-group players, facilitating disengagement: “I kill players if they attack me or my friends” (#95). In total, we identified 22 instances of this disengagement strategy, with an average score of 2.86 in response to the Likert-scale question.

### Attribution of Blame

The most prevalent form of moral disengagement in *DayZ* appears to be attribution of blame: blaming victims, blaming circumstances, and blaming the game code itself. Attribution of blame self-exonerates immoral conduct by positioning agents as “faultless victims driven to injurious conduct” (Bandura 2002) by some external means. We coded 56 responses as some form of attributive moral disengagement, almost as many as all other strategies combined (78), with an average score of 3.35. Self-defense was the most common example of attribution of blame; “I’ve only killed to defend myself after being shot at or attacked first” (#185). When a player claims self-defense, they are exonerating themselves by fixing the blame on their victim.

We noted earlier that one of the more unique elements of *DayZ*’s design is the way all players consent to PvP combat just by playing because there are no non-PvP servers. In our discussion of elements of the game that made people feel bad, we showed that this issue of consent to PvP is a key source of feeling bad for players. The repetitive nature of *DayZ* play suggests that a moral management strategy can alter a player’s behavior moving forward; when moral concern is successfully repressed, players may seek out the conditions in which they can use that strategy again, perhaps as a form of moral growth. Viewed through this lens, self-defense can be seen a common and successful moral management strategy because *attacking another player is explicitly consenting to PvP*, thus absolving players of moral concern around PvP consent.

However, many cases of killing in *DayZ* do not meet this standard. Thus, players have to seek out other ways to suggest that the players they killed were consenting to PvP or in other ways deserved being killed. Reflecting the power of language in the process of moral disengagement, survey respondents commonly used words such as *hostile* and *threat* to legitimate attributing blame to a player who was not explicitly attacking them: “No cause i only kill if the player is a threat” (#3). These terms accompanied other play factors that gave permission for killing much in the same way self-defense does, but perhaps less convincingly for suppressing moral concern. These factors included the victim not talking on direct chat (the proximity voice system) or

there being “no way to contact them, e.g. a player with a sniper rifle looking over a field that I need to cross” (#29). Such factors may be a form of gatekeeping around the “right” way to play the game.

However, the victim was not always the target of blame. Several players exercised more complex disengagement strategies, attributing blame to the game. One player blamed the sociality of the game or perhaps the configuration of risk through per-madeath for forcing specific conduct and in this way absolved any moral concern they might have had: “Yes I do, but the simple risk of them turning on me, even if they are equipped worse than I am, is too large to not do anything about it. With doing something about it, I mean killing the other guy, even if you have handcuffed him and he’s been super cooperative and a nice guy. You might even like him, but he still needs to die” (#183).

Alternatively, the game’s specific geographies were attributed blame. One of the authors of this chapter has discussed elsewhere (Carter 2015a) the ways in which different areas of the *DayZ* gameworld are attributed different norms. The farther players venture from the starting areas, the more likely they will have to “gear up,” which will lead to harsher and more ruthless player interactions. The military bases—the best location for finding high-powered guns and ammunition—are the most common example of how different areas have different norms: “In a highly contested area like a military camp. It is always kill or be killed in a situation like that” (#201). The circumstances of the place where opposing players meet are to blame rather than the victims’ specific behavior. Being surprised (or “spooked” or “crept up upon”) was discussed earlier as a form of diffusion of responsibility, but the circumstances in which two players meet can also potentially be blamed.

### **Game-Specific Moral Disengagement**

As Klimmt and his colleagues have noted (2006), the game context of actions provides its own unique disengagement strategies. They identify the game–reality distinction, the “violence as necessary part of (sports-like) performance” justification, and the narrative-normative justification as moral management strategies that emerge from game violence (318). In our sample, we noted several examples of the game–reality distinction and the sportslike performance justification, but no explicit narrative-normative justifications. The absence of the latter is likely due to the lack of a linear or explicit narrative presented to *DayZ* players, although we expect the *zombie movie-esque*, apocalyptic setting to provide some resources to players attempting to suppress moral concern.



We coded nine comments as invoking the game–reality distinction, which has one of the lowest average quantitative scores for a response category (2.1) and prompted some of the briefest replies, such as “sometimes I feel bad for these players but it is just a game and they will be able to start over anyway” (#26). The responses that Klimmt and his colleagues categorize as this type of moral management strategy invoke a clear reality–game distinction—for instance, the explicit statement “This is something outside of reality” (2006, 317). Although phrases such as “just a game” perhaps claim that the player’s conduct within *DayZ* is simply outside the application of real-world moral concern or at least suppress moral concern as a form of diffusing responsibility, other responses are not so succinct and total.

Never, why would I? Its a game and death is a part of it. I don't kill if its avoidable. I will kill if i have to. (#7)

I know i am not truly killing someone i am just annoying someone and getting better survival gear for my team; It is like in paintball, do i feel bad that i stained someones top? (#74)

To claim “death is a part of it [the game]” is to acknowledge the negative effect of game death in the context of the positive experience players are attempting to achieve (Allison, Carter, and Gibbs 2015) and to acknowledge that there is a balance. This assertion is less totally exculpatory than “it’s just a game.” Despite this distinction, in this case the respondent continued to explain their conduct as killing only if it was unavoidable—if they were forced. Further, respondent #74 drew a parallel with paintball, seeking to diffuse responsibility by minimizing the harm done by their actions and by using euphemistic labeling (“annoying someone,” not killing them). Thus, we see here how the game-specific context of play does provide some absolution from moral concern, but that it is not necessarily powerful in *DayZ*, where the harm is befalling—in a ludic context—real people, as it is in the linear, single-player games studied in previous work (Hartmann, Toz, and Brandon 2010; Gollwitzer and Melzer 2012; Joeckel, Bowman, and Dogruel 2012; Hartmann, Krakowiak, and Tsay-Vogel 2014).

Klimmt and his colleagues categorized an emphasis on performance and achievement as a form of disregard of consequence; by “emphasizing the aspects of ‘winning’ involved in most videogame violence, other aspects such as physical pain or the destruction of living creature are neglected” (2006, 318). Further reflecting a distinction between *DayZ* and the games these authors studied, the sandbox nature of *DayZ* perhaps reduces the applicability of this strategy. This reduced applicability notwithstanding, we categorized eight comments as invoking sport, performance, or achievement metaphors, with an average “feel bad” score of 3.25. Notions of sportsmanship and fair competition were key:

I sometimes even enjoy outplaying the bandits I hunt. (#111)

Sometimes. If I lied to them or was unsportsmanlike in some way. (#147)

Killing players with guns feels like fair game. Whether they have ammo or not. Though if after killing them we find out they do not in fact have ammo I do feel a bit bad. (#10)

## Discussion

Whereas Klimmt and his colleagues conclude that “moral management does not apply to multiplayer combat games” (2006, 325), this chapter has clearly demonstrated that it does apply in *DayZ*, an admittedly unique survival-themed multiplayer combat game unlike those available during the study conducted by Klimmt. We have shown how *DayZ*'s lack of formally designated teams burdens players with the choice of who to kill and not to kill, thus introducing moral choice to gameplay. When combined with the harsh permanent consequence of in-game death, *DayZ* affords strong feelings of guilt, well demonstrated in this chapter by player responses and the breadth of moral management practices that players enact to exculpate their moral concern about whether their actions have violated a moral code.

Yet why feel guilty at all? *DayZ* is a multiplayer combat game that looks and feels like the majority of other games in the FPS genre. In fact, *DayZ*'s game engine and combat system is based on the game engine for *ARMA II* (Bohemia Interactive 2009), a military FPS simulator. Violence is the primary type of interaction players are afforded to have with other players by the game mechanics. In addition, the scarcity of resources and the substantial advantage gained from killing other players heavily incentivizes killing other players in the playing of *DayZ*. To apply Nguyen and Zagal's (2016) understanding, the lusory goal of a positive experience of struggle requires that players kill each other for there to be an actual challenge in the sandbox gameplay. John R. Sageng's chapter in this volume discusses how players routinely bracket external norms during their gameplay. It is understandable, therefore, to expect players not to feel bad about killing in this incentivized, military sim.

To understand this, we need to look beyond the design and mechanics of *DayZ* and into the social norms and codes revealed by the negative feelings expressed in the survey data. The primary categorization of killing in which players expressed negative feelings was the killing of new, unarmed, or “innocent” players, typically newly spawned players who were weaker and potentially inexperienced. Wrong-doing in this sense reflects notions of sportsmanship with respect to the competition in the game, where the challenge and meaningfulness of *DayZ*'s permadeath originate in the balanced competition between opponents. Similarly, players also reported feeling bad

about killing a player who was not a threat, such as when the latter did not have any ammunition for the guns they carried. These chivalric notions of a “fair fight” are preconceived notions about competitive play that players bring to *DayZ* but are also in turn reinforced by community rhetoric around “new spawns.” These notions are in contrast to “ganking” and “spawn-camping,” which Nguyen and Zagal (2016) have identified as unethical competitive play.

However, a sense of sportsmanship or chivalry toward weaker players does not explain the guilt and moral concern evoked from killing an armed and experienced player who was or might have been “friendly.” This moral discomfort, we argue, is a result of the “demarcation problem” in multiplayer games (Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold 2015): players’ inability to distinguish between the “right” and “wrong” ways to play a game. Informal rules are a thought province (à la Geertz 1982) developed by players as part of an effort to collectively maximize the appeal of playing. For “friendly” *DayZ* players, the appeal of play is found in the opportunity for social experiences and encounters with other players. With respect to this understanding, players’ guilt around killing friendly players originates in a conflict between the different and competing codes of conflict in *DayZ*, where “hostile” players (who kill all those they encounter) play alongside and in the same virtual environment as “friendly” players. Viewed through Nguyen and Zagal’s (2016) lens, this inner conflict further explains why players were less affected by guilt when killing in the “end-game” areas, such as the military base. The geographies of *DayZ* create different places of ludic interest where people pursuing different kinds of lusory goals can gather, similar to PvP zones coded into other massively multiplayer online games.

The results described in this chapter are significant because they demonstrate the potential for online digital games to employ transgressive play such as consequential player killing as an opportunity for ethical lessons and growth. Ultimately, providing players the freedom to choose which actions are “wrong” and which actions are “right” opens them up to making the “wrong” decision—a choice they can feel bad about and regret. As demonstrated in this chapter, these feelings of regret can have significance for players, and the competitive context of gameplay or similarity to other games in the FPS genre does not necessarily override player capacity for moral anguish. For *DayZ* players, the choice to kill or not to kill is an opportunity to exercise their own moral agency, which provides the opportunity for moral growth.

Yet these results also indicate a further, perhaps paradoxical, finding echoed in several of the other chapters in this collection—the negative experience of this kind of transgressive play is attractive to players. *DayZ* was an enormous success. Released first as a buggy and incomplete free mod and developed by a single designer, *DayZ* sold

more than 3 million copies of *ARMA II*, which was required to play it. A total of 3.7 million copies of the standalone version, a similarly incomplete perpetual “early access” title, have been sold. When first released, *DayZ* was celebrated for “giving PC gamers an experience they weren’t getting elsewhere, but which they were clearly hanging out for” (Plunkett 2012)—an intense and brutal experience, peppered with moral anguish and guilt.

### Note

1. Online surveys of game players show varying levels of participation by women, but the 30–40 percent range is more typical, and national surveys consistently find more than 40 percent of all digital game players are female (Brand and Todhunter 2016; Entertainment Software Association 2016). The game research consultancy Quantic Foundry has found that tactical shooter games, such as the *ARMA* series on which the original *DayZ* mod was built, have the lowest proportion of female players: only 4 percent in its data set, drawn from a self-selecting online questionnaire (Yee 2017). We speculate that the widespread use of proximity voice communication in *DayZ* may expose female players to a greater than usual risk of gendered harassment, leading to their lower participation in the virtual world—particularly in the context of the game’s established culture of simulated violent coercion as a form of play. This conclusion is based in part on comments from two of the female respondents to our survey, who described incidents in which they received gendered abuse from male players. A small number of male respondents also described aggressively sexist behavior between players.