

“It felt wrong to me to play that way”

Understanding Moral Decision-Making in Video Games through Focus Group Discussions

Elisabeth Holl, Steve Bernard, and André Melzer

University of Luxembourg

Author Note

Elisabeth Holl, Steve Bernard, and Andre Melzer, Institute for Health and Behaviour, Media and Experimental Lab, University of Luxembourg.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elisabeth Holl, Institute of Health and Behaviour, University of Luxembourg, 2, avenue de l'Université, 4365 Esch -sur-Alzette, Luxembourg. Email: elisabeth.holl@uni.lu

Abstract

Moral dilemmas become increasingly popular in video games, although the entirety of facilitating and influencing factors is still widely unknown. Extended philosophical and theoretical analyses were made on video games like *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008; Schulzke, 2009; Sicart, 2013), *Fable III* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2010; Schrier, 2012) or *Spec Ops: The Line* (2K Games, 2012; Heron & Belford, 2014), to only mention a few. But also unrelated to any specific gaming title scholars tried to apply morality in the context of gaming (moral cleansing: Gollwitzer & Melzer, 2012; moral disengagement: Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010; moral foundations: Tamborini, 2012). In addition, empirical data illustrates how moral decision-making in video games evolves (e.g., Joeckel, Bowman, & Dogruel, 2012; Tamborini et al., 2018; Weaver & Lewis, 2012). However, due to its rather recent status as a field of research that is also overshadowed by the focus on violent game content (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2007), studies on moral processing in video games are still rare and lacking firm theoretical groundwork. Therefore, the present project wants to gain novel insights on moral behavior that go beyond virtual violence. More specifically, our research questions are: Why are players motivated to engage in moral decisions in video games in the first place? And if they do, how is their engagement influenced by (a) user characteristics (e.g., personality, game preferences), and (b) game-specific characteristics (e.g., game narrative, graphic realism)? These questions will be answered through the method of focused group discussions. A focus group is defined as a semi-structured, qualitative approach gathering 4-12 participants to discuss concrete individual experiences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). This explorational interviewing tool allows to assess morality in video games to a broader extent, thereby providing

access to identifying promising topics for future research. Furthermore, the focus group approach centers the user itself and his or her subjective gaming experience, which is often neglected but promising as moral beliefs have a high inter-individual fluctuation (Klimmt, Schmid, Nosper, Hartmann, & Vorderer, 2008; Triberti, Villani, & Riva, 2015). In three different sessions, a total of 16 gamers discussed moral decision-making in gaming and its influencing factors to understand prerequisites and mechanisms of moral processing in virtual worlds. Gamers shared their experience with morally-laden gaming situations and pre-formulated statements such as: “I never felt sad or guilty after an in-game decision”. Their expressions were grouped for relevant topics supported by direct quotations. From the interpretation of these findings, conclusions for moral processing and new research questions for following experimental studies are drawn.

Keywords: morality, decision-making, video games, qualitative data, focus group

References

- 2K Games. (2012). *Spec Ops: The Line* [Video game]. Novato, CA.
- Anderson, C. A., Shibuya, A., Ihori, N., Swing, E. L., Bushman, B. J., Sakamoto, A., ... Saleem, M. (2010). Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy, and prosocial behavior in Eastern and Western countries: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *136*(2), 151–173. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018251>
- Bethesda Softworks. (2008). *Fallout 3* [Video game]. Rockville, MD.
- Ferguson, C. J. (2007). The good, the bad and the ugly: A meta-analytic review of positive and negative effects of violent video games. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, *78*(4), 309–316. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-007-9056-9>
- Gollwitzer, M., & Melzer, A. (2012). Macbeth and the joystick: Evidence for moral cleansing after playing a violent video game. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *48*(6), 1356–1360. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.07.001>
- Hartmann, T., & Vorderer, P. (2010). It's okay to shoot a character: Moral disengagement in violent video games. *Journal of Communication*, *60*(1), 94–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01459.x>
- Heron, M. J., & Belford, P. H. (2014). Do you feel like a hero yet? Externalized morality in video games. *Journal of Games Criticism*, *1*(2), 1–25.
- Joeckel, S., Bowman, N. D., & Dogruel, L. (2012). Gut or game? The influence of moral intuitions on decisions in video games. *Media Psychology*, *15*(4), 460–485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2012.727218>

- Klimmt, C., Schmid, H., Nosper, A., Hartmann, T., & Vorderer, P. (2008). 'Moral management': Dealing with moral concerns to maintain enjoyment of violent video games. In A. Jahn-Sudmann & R. Stockmann (Eds.), *Computer games as a sociocultural phenomenon: Games without frontiers war without tears* (pp. 108–118).
https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230583306_11
- Microsoft Game Studios. (2010). *Fable III* [Video game]. Redmond, WA.
- Schrier, K. (2012). Avatar gender and ethical choices in Fable III. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 32(5), 375–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467612463800>
- Schulzke, M. (2009). Moral decision making in Fallout. *Game Studies*, 9(2). Retrieved from <http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/schulzke/>
- Sicart, M. (2013). *Beyond choices: The design of ethical gameplay*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (2014). *Focus groups: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Tamborini, R. (2012). A model of intuitive morality and exemplar. In R. Tamborini (Ed.), *Media and the moral mind* (pp. 43–74). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Tamborini, R., Bowman, N. D., Prabhu, S., Hahn, L., Klebig, B., Grall, C., & Novotny, E. (2018). The effect of moral intuitions on decisions in video game play: The impact of chronic and temporary intuition accessibility. *New Media & Society*, 20(2), 564–580.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816664356>
- Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 19(6), 349–357. <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042>

Triberti, S., Villani, D., & Riva, G. (2015). Moral positioning in video games and its relation with dispositional traits: The emergence of a social dimension. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *50*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.03.069>

Weaver, A. J., & Lewis, N. (2012). Mirrored morality: An exploration of moral choice in video games. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *15*(11), 610–614. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2012.0235>