MEASURING MORALITY: MORAL FRAMEWORKS IN VIDEOGAMES

A Thesis

by

JOHN CLAYTON WHITTLE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2010

Major Subject: Communication

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Srividya Ramasubramanian
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ABSTRACT

Measuring Morality: Moral Frameworks in Videogames. (May 2010)

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The video game is, as we know, one of the most popular and quickly growing mediums in the United States and the world in whole. Because of its success, the video game industry has been able to use their resources to advance technology of many kinds. Two very important technologies which have been advanced by the game industry are artificial intelligence and graphic design.

With advances in the videogame industry constantly increasing the realism of gaming, those who game are finding themselves rapidly transported into new worlds. The Combination of the elements of narrative transportation, character identification, a videogames ability to enable mediated experience create a situation in which players may be able to rapidly learn very complex concepts.

This project begins with a classification of videogame moral systems, both on a theoretical and logistic level. Given this understanding of how videogames themselves define moral involvement, the project then seeks to answer how the players understand their own moral involvement in the game by directly involving player/participants in the conversation. The data produced strongly suggests that videogames have great potential to teach even the most complex concepts of right and wrong to players.

DEDICATION

This is for every person in my life that told me I should stop playing so many videogames. Also, to every level boss that costs me hours of true social interaction. Without their blinking rage, I would not be the man I am today. Finally, this is for the Alliance of One, a true group of heroes, to whom I will always be loyal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document would not exist without my family. They have always challenged me to be the best that I can be, and I could not have done any of this without their help. Nothing in this world comes even close to how important all of you are to me.

I give my deepest thanks to the second family I have found here in College Station. Gene, Alex, James, Hunter, and Mike, the struggles that we have endured and the triumphs that we have celebrated have kept me honest to myself and to you. More than anything, you have all supported me in a way that no one else could have. None of this would have been possible without your help.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

You open the gate and step into the light. It is the first time you have ever seen the sun in your life. Today you leave the vast underground shelter in which you have always lived, known as "The Vault," and now take your first steps into the barren wasteland of post-apocalyptic Washington D.C. You take a short look behind you as the immense mechanized door closes and slams into place, you realize that you have long passed the point of no return.

As your eyes adjust to this new source of light (which you would not have known is called the sun), you notice a large structure standing out against the desolate sands and the rotting remains of the derelict suburban town outside "The Vault." As you enter the structure, you realize an entire town of survivors exists within this ramshackle assembly of airplane fuselages and tin siding; built straight into a crater surrounding an unexploded nuclear bomb.

You are not in this city for more than five minutes before a well dressed man, a Mr. Burke (Fig. 1) man who is clearly not from this place, approaches you with an offer. This man tells you that he can help you find your father (the reason you have left the underground refuge of "The Vault") and pay you an immense amount of bottle caps, which are used as the rudimentary currency of this land. All you must do in return is attach a small explosive to the nuclear weapon which sits in the middle of this town.

This thesis follows the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

You have no connection to any person in this town and no real reason to care if they live or die. You know that the information this man promises will be very helpful and that the money he can pay you will surely help you to find your father, or at least to keep you from starving to death in the unforgiving wasteland that you are now stuck in. What is your answer?

-Interpreted from *Fallout 3*, Act 2 (Fallout 3, 2008)

Fig. 1. Mr. Burke

The video game, which had its rise in the 1980s, is now as much a part of American culture as baseball or rock & roll. Children flocked to arcades in the 1980s

and 1990s, with pockets full of quarters meant for machines. Now, children can download games direct to their computers or consoles from DSL connections, and only minutes are required. In addition to the accessibility of video games, the technical and narrative details have grown exponentially.

Where once children hopped over mushrooms and fire breathing plants in an inexplicable floating city of bricks and tubes, in order to rescue a princess from a tiny dinosaur/turtle (Nintendo Entertainment, 1985), now players struggle through the streets of Liberty City as a Russian immigrant hiding from his past and being forced in to a life of petty crime and scandal in order to protect his cousin from outstanding debts (Grand Theft Auto IV, 2008). And where once children interacted with 8-bit polygonal representations of little square shaped people, now players see computer generated faces, which are manipulated by dozens of software muscles to create realistic human expressions. Clearly, the video game is advancing and it is doing so fast.

As much as the video game is advancing technologically, it is advancing in its social and economic importance even more rapidly. According to a Nielson Company market research campaign conducted from 2006-2009 time spent playing video games is on the rise. In fact, gaming hours have gone up an average of 4 hours/week from 14.75 to 18.75 in the past three years (Pererira, 2009). According to the Nielson report filed on the study "Primarily, we believe mainstream gamers are playing more of the broadly appealing games pushing their hours of gameplay up" (Pererira, 2009).

In addition to people spending more time on video games, people are spending substantially more money on video games as well. According to www.gamertell.com, a

prominent video game industry news website, in 2008 over $21 billion was made in game software and peripheral sales associated with that software. That's a 23 percent rise from 2007 (Allen, 2009). Startlingly, 26.7% of those sales were from rated "E" (everyone) games designed to be suitable for young children while only 15.0% was from rated "M" (mature) games designed for adults (Allen, 2009). This means that approximately $5,607,000,000 was spent on video games which "may contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language" while $3,150,000,000 was spent on video games that "may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language" (ESRB, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to determine how players perceive the importance of their agency in video games (Gonzalo, 2001) in the context of moral standing measurement systems. The study will seek to answer this question through focus group discussion and interviews (Tudor, 1995). In order to accomplish the primary goal of this study, however, a typology for morality in video games had to be created. This study will focus on perceptions of complex video game content including morality and freedom of choice. Through grounded theory analysis of focus group discussions this study will explore the influence of character identification theory and narrative transportation on gamer perceptions of morality (Peng, 2008).

The video game is critically and significantly different from previous mediums. In a television show characters are given specific lines to speak in specific situations. Every scene is thought out and practiced so that can be acted and filmed a very specific way. The final product of all that planning is recorded and aired on television. Every

time that show airs it will be exactly the same as the time before. For instance, in the last episode of Seinfeld ("The Finale", 1998) the main characters all go to jail. That is how the writer, Larry David, wanted the series to end and that is how the series will end for every person who watches it, every time they watch it. However, a video game can be different for every player, every time it is played. The short excerpt from *Fallout 3* (Fallout 3, 2008) which opened this thesis can serve as the perfect example.

From the point the story left off, hundreds of new stories can surface. The player can disarm the nuclear weapon and make the city safe from any future exploitation. If they do this, the player can then move into a house in the city and begin to form relationships with the rest of the game world based on being a citizen of that city. The player can also choose to report the offer to the sheriff of the city. If they do this, the sheriff will confront the well dressed man and a gunfight resulting in the sheriff's death will ensue. With hundreds of choices such as this in each video of these modern games, the player has the power to shape the hyper-realistic world they play in and craft the story as they want to be a part of through their own agency.

This unique ability to generate hundreds of stories from the same plot line is one of the many aspects of video games which is made possible by the unique interactivity of video games as an entertainment medium (Crawford, 2005; Gonzalo, 2001). Video games are not the only entertainment mediums to feature an interactive element. As early as 1992 Milton Bradley® was creating board games with interactive elements. The board game *Omega Virus* featured a talking electronic voice which reacted to the players' choices by taunting them (www.Angelfire.com, 2009). What sets the video

game apart is that its entire structure and development is based on interactivity between a free thinking human being and a number of prewritten equations meant to simulate thought. Though a board game is capable of interactivity, it is not dependent on it.

Because video games are absolutely dependent on interactivity (Crawford, 2004), it has been a main focus of research and development in the industry. Recent developments in software have made it possible for the video game to truly set itself apart. If a player insults a non-player character, that person may be unwilling to speak with them again. If the player acts in an extremely violent fashion, the non-player characters will perceive the player as frightening or unsavory and respond accordingly. Character scripting, the act of writing the code and dialogue which create a "digital personality", has become so complex that non-player characters can remember the previous social interactions they have had with the player and modify their behavior based on their opinion of the player.

The increase in the level of realism in the modern video game has affected the narrative, the characters and the environment which gamers interact with. That realism has brought with it a unique and unprecedented level of interactivity, in which the player can affect and be affected by any number of elements within the game (Brooks, 2000). One of the many outcomes of this level of interactivity is the new focus on choice and morality within games.

Role Playing Games and Moral Dilemmas

The levels of interactivity and realism vary from video game to video game. Some games have relatively little interactivity, but are extremely realistic. Others are very realistic, but are not highly interactive. Role playing games are often both highly realistic and highly interactive. Additionally, role playing games more than any other video game genre have a particular emphasis on the concepts of moral questions. The role playing game (RPG) is a unique kind of video game. RPGs have their roots in classic table top gaming, which was first popularized by Dungeons and Dragons in the mid 1970s (Gygaz and Arneson, 1974) and saw a resurgence in the late 1980s with the introduction of the *Warhammer 40,000* series (Priestley and Chambers, 1987).

In an RPG players take on the role of another person. This happens in many games, but in an RPG the player is expected to invest a significant amount of time in developing that role. In fact, in many RPG genre video games the player spends more of their time talking to non-player characters and developing social relationships with them than anything else. In a sense, the RPG is more about interacting with digital personalities than anything else. A second major aspect of the RPG is story line. While all video games have a story, either implicit or explicit, the RPG focuses much of its energy on developing the story line and the necessary characters within. After all, who would want to spend a significant amount of time getting to know all of the characters in a story, and find out that the story is absolutely terrible? The focus of RPGs on interaction and story is the reason I have chosen to examine the video game through the RPG lens.

Interactivity and Realism

The interactivity and ability to create multiple plots in video games make them both theoretically and practically separate from any other medium. However, researchers from many fields still employ theoretical assumptions and experimental approaches designed to understand television and film media to study the video game (Dill and Thill 2007; Arriga 2008; Bartlett 2008). But in a field where technology advances faster than research can be published, great pains must be taken to address the newest and most current aspects of video games. The ever increasing realism in both the artistic and literary design in video games brings to light new ways of understanding their influence on gamers and their role in our culture.

With recent advances in digital graphic design characters in video games appear ever more realistic. Players are able to create their own character in many games, often to a level of detail never thought possible. Games such as *WWE Smackdown Vs Raw 2008* (THQ, 2008) even allow players to adjust the bone structure of their characters so that the character actually looks like a digital representation of the person playing. The players are then thrust into a digital world which has been created by some of the most talented digital artists in the world. This world can look and feel real on many levels (Bailey et al., 2009) . Many of the worlds created by game development companies, such as *World of Warcraft* (2004) and *Jade Empire* (2005) have weather, physics, pedestrian traffic, ambient noise, animals and bystanders simply having conversations.

These worlds are utterly immersive and it can be quite easy to see the people in them as real.

The increase in realism does not end with the physical design of the world. Games have, in recent years, grown exponentially as narrative mediums. No longer are players asked to simply shoot their way through mazes of zombies with little to no explanation. Now, many games have highly complex plots involving dozens of characters, each with their own story and each with their own motivation. Realistic characters which come complete with facial expressions capable of conveying emotion are no longer simply objects to interact with. Players can begin to identify with those characters on both a physical and emotional level (Peng, 2008).

Furthermore, the worlds those characters "live" in can envelop the gamer in many ways. And with engaging story lines developing throughout gameplay it can be easy for the gamer to find themselves experiencing a sense of belonging to the story (Schneider, Lang, Shin, Bradley, 2004). Viewers of television often report perceiving events, characters and places of their favorite shows as both realistic and desirable. This tendency, known as narrative transportation, is study in great detail in print and televised media, but is not commonly explored within the video game (Green, Brock, and Kauffman, 2004). In short, the levels of interactivity and realism in video games have continued to advance to the point where social science will need to make major adjustments in order to legitimately study them.

Agency and Morality

The results of the evolution of video game realism are for more than just those of the academic pursuit. The increase in realism has been joined by a demand by the consumer to be given agency over the game world. Players go where they want and do what they want within the game world, often bound only by their own abilities. This agency is not total. It is, instead limited by the rules and code of the game. Because of this, the goal of many designers has become to create as much agency as possible within the code of the game by creating choices for the player to make. In many games those choices are as simple as "do you want to go left or right", but in an increasingly large number of games those choices are deeply complicated.

I have already said the realism of the characters and the realism of the world the game characters "live" in can be quite convincing. But the world is essentially static without the player, that is to say that nothing changes without the player changing it. This can give the sense that the player is in control of those characters' lives. Game designers have realized this and built many of the modern games' choices around this. These highly complex choices often involve moral decisions which have an effect on the game world.

Key to understanding the importance of these decisions is understanding their effect on the player. This is where the moral standing measurements which this project will study come in to play. In games which feature a moral standing measurement, the player's choices do not exist within a bubble. Each action results in a reaction. If the

player does something which the game considers evil, the player receives evil points. If the player's evil points reach a certain level, it can change the way which game characters react to her or him. Additionally, many games featuring moral standing measurements use the overall moral score (good or bad) to determine what will happen to or be said to the player's character in certain situations. The moral measurements are clearly an increasingly significant aspect of video game culture, however, there is little in the way of research for good reason.

A major hurdle in studying these moral choices has been that there is no classification or categorization system for them. The systems used to create these moral choices were built by a commercial industry, which has no real reason to categorize them. For the producers and writers of video games, the moral choices are a tool to be used in the creation of game narratives. This position is understandable, but it is also quite inconvenient. With no standard of measurement and no official rulebook on the creation of moral systems, there is little chance for researchers to begin studying them on any legitimate basis. For this reason I have dedicated a chapter of this thesis to the task of creating a system of categorizing and understanding the use of moral standing measurements in games.

Organization of the Thesis

The second chapter of the thesis will present a theory for defining moral content in videogames. The third chapter of this will serve two purposes. First, it will create a framework for understanding the complex conceptualization of agency and moral choice

as presented in modern video games. Each video game uses a unique code to create its concept of morality, and a complete map of these codes would be impossible to create. Therefore a more generalized theory of these concepts will be created using exemplar games to illustrate their operation.

Chapter IV will create a theoretical framework in which this thesis may be interpreted. When working in an interdisciplinary fashion with literature from fields such as media studies, video game studies, Ludology, literary analysis, ethics and psychology, the theories and literature can become unwieldy or disorganized. The major function of the second portion of Chapter II will be to organize and simplify the relevant literature. This literature will introduce the key concepts necessary for understanding the research questions of this project.

The fifth chapter will discuss the methodological approach that will be used to answer the proposed research question. The methods of inquiry, recruitment and analysis will be detailed and justified, and the variables and potential concerns will be identified and explained.

The sixth and seventh chapters on results and discussion will describe the process by which the data was analyzed and discuss the findings. Finally, the appendix will provide a list of recruitment scripts used both in and out of the classroom, consent and informational forms and details of compensation for participants. Finally, the eighth chapter of this thesis will offer a conclusion.

CHAPTER II

DEFINING MORALITY IN GAMES

The overarching goal of this study was to determine the importance which players ascribed to their in-game ability to make certain choices. Those choices were focused on the freedom of each player to affect the moral standing of their playable character. Before any understanding of the effect of these moral standing games can be explored, it is necessary to create a common frame of reference. I will, then, in this chapter attempt to design a system of categorizing how games measure morality so that the interaction between gamer and game can be better understood in the context of moral choices. To date, no official method of classifying video games by this standard exists within the industry. Additionally, no scholarly writers have made an attempt to create a theoretical framework for understanding the complex interactions seen within Role Playing Games (RPGs). This chapter will use exemplar games, which clearly display specific qualities and coding to categorize all RPGs with moral standing measurements into two major categories, scale systems and multiple achievement path systems, with two sub-categories each.

Morality in Recent Games

Moral standing in videogames is not a new or unique concept. As long ago as *Ultima IV* (1996), players were given a numerical account of how their choices affected the world. Due to technological advances in the past several years, however, complex

conversational and narrative flow chart systems have been introduced. These technological advances have allowed for morality and agency to be determining factors in many new games such as *Fallout 3* by Bethesda (2008), *Oblivion* by Bethesda (2007), *Knights of the Old Republic* by Bioware Inc. (2003) and *Rise of the Argonauts* by Codemasters (2008). In a video game moral standing can refer to many complex concepts or a single simple idea. For this study it will be necessary to narrow the definition. The easiest and most efficient way of doing so would be to focus this research (and therefore the definition) on a specific genre of video game. Because moral choice has by far the strongest standing in role playing games (RPGs), it would be most logical to focus on the RPG genre.

The RPG is a genre of video game which traces its roots to tabletop games such as Dungeons and Dragons (Wizards of the Coast, 1974). Many qualities of table top games, such as in depth stories, epic narrative structure, chance based interaction and character growth/customization also define the RPG. RPGs usually involve a character (in some cases several characters) controlled by the player being thrust into an epic battle between good and evil. In most cases, the character which the player controls, also known as the player character, is going about what is considered in the narrative setting as a normal life, when their destiny is suddenly dumped upon them, often by the antagonist or the antagonist's cronies. The player character then resolves to triumph over evil, travels throughout the game world to meet people and gain experience enough to defeat the evil enemy, defeats the enemy and like in any good cowboy movie the player character either dies or is cast out by those she/he originally set out to help.

Apart from this standardized narrative structure, the RPG has two extremely important, interrelated aspects which define it. Much of what happens in an RPG is based on chance. For instance, if I were to tell my player character to strike another in-game character, the game would have several equations to complete before deciding the results of my command. Though the content of these equations changes from game to game, the goal remains the same: calculate the percent value of the likelihood that the player character will perform the action (striking), then create several "striking" simulations and present the results based on the percent likelihood. Therefore, if my percent likelihood to strike were 100% and I made four attempts, I would succeed four times. If, however, my percent likelihood to strike were 25% and I made four attempts, I would most likely succeed only one time. Nearly every action in an RPG is based on this electronic "roll of the dice".

This is where the fourth definitive aspect of RPGs, growth/customization of characters, begins to have its greatest effect. The percent likelihood to succeed in any action is based on the player character's abilities. These attributes are often separated into two categories, one of which is very broad and the other very specific. An example of a broad attribute would be something like physical strength. If my player character has 10/10 strength, they are assumed to be quite strong. An example of a specific attribute could be something like lockpicking. If my player character has 10/100 lockpicking, they are assumed to not be very good at picking locks. These attributes are often the mathematical basis for calculating the percent likelihood to succeed in an interaction. They are also determined by the player. As the player character grows in

experience, the player can customize the abilities of their player character to fine tune their skill set to the players liking. One of the increasingly common attributes found in RPGS is moral standing.

Theories of Ethics

Not all RPGs have a moral standing aspect, but those that do usually have highly complex systems and definitions. The goal of each moral standing system is, however, simple: to provide a method of judging the playable character's actions. The developers of the game use complex situations to illustrate moral conundrums to the player, who then chooses a course of action, and is informed of the moral weight of the decision. The first step that must be taken, however, is to determine how moral behavior can be defined and categorized in video games.

One of the most interesting aspects of morality in gaming, is that nearly every game which measures morality has a unique way of defining moral action. Even when multiple games are developed by the same company, they often have separate parameters by which a player's morality based actions can be measured. In short, an action that is considered evil in one game may be considered justifiable in another. Before measuring morality can be discussed, it is necessary to outline the basic tenants of some of the more popular theories of ethics, and discuss how each can be implemented in games. In this Chapter I will discuss several major ethical theories, outline a system of classifying games by their ethical content, and provide examples of this classification.

To this end I have created a simple system of ethical triangulation, which can be used to classify the ethical content of a video game on a theoretical level. By comparing and contrasting the ethical content of a videogame with three ethical theories, the system determines which theory is most strongly represented by the game. However, would be unwise to discount the two other ethical theories completely, as very few games would be capable of perfectly representing a single ethical theory. To account for this, the system operates on a three-point sliding scale. A marker, representing the final ethical content of the game, is placed in the scale to give a visual representation of the game's ethical content as defined by the three chosen theories, hence the system's name.

For the purposes of this project I have used consequentialist, deontological, and virtue theories of ethics. Because the basis of this project is an understanding of ethical measurement, it was important that these three theories were chosen, as they represent three very diverse approaches to ethical theory. The system of ethical triangulation is not all encompassing. That is to say, it only takes into account the basic versions of popular ethical theories. It would, however, be fairly simple to replace one or all of these theories with other ethical theories in order to classify ethical content of videogames by different parameters.

Before I discuss the mechanics and details of this system, it is first necessary to outline a basic understanding of each of the three ethical theories used in its creation. The following is not an all encompassing discussion of any of the ethical theories included in the triangulation system. Rather, it is a basic interpretation of each theory for the purposes of putting the triangulation system in context.

Consequentialism

The first ethical theory I will discuss is consequentialist ethics. Though consequentialism has deep roots, the term was first used by G. E. M. Anscombe in 1958. Though there are many branches of consequentialist ethics, often called utilitarianism, the theories are united by an emphasis on the consequences of actions in evaluating if they are wrong or right (Mackie, 1990). Though each consequentialist theory is different, each must address three very important questions: "what is a good consequence, for whom should the consequence be most beneficial, and who can judge a consequence". How these questions are answered creates the split between the many variations of consequentialist ethical theory.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is perhaps the most well known version of consequentialism. First introduced by Jeremy Bentham, and later made popular by John Stuart Mill (Mill, 1974), utilitarianism is based on the principle that an action can be ethically qualified by its ability to bring happiness to people. In short, the number of people that are made happy and the amount of happiness they experience as a consequence of an action is positively correlated with the ethical "good" of an action. Mill makes a point of distinguishing between pleasure and happiness when considering an action. The former, Mill argues, is a more base desire, which can be satisfied by immoral action. Happiness, however, can only be achieved from following virtues, according to Mill.

Utilitarianism has two primary theories: rule and act utilitarianism. Rule utilitarianism, much like Kantian ethics, argued that the consequences of any action should be considered, and that if the action can be reasoned to produce favorable consequences (happiness), it should be taken as a rule that the action should always be taken (Lyons, 1965). John Stuart Mill proposed a form of utilitarianism known as "weak rule". This specific version of utilitarianism accounted for specific circumstances in which a rule could be broken. For example, one could say that it is wrong to kill another human being. However, a weak rule utilitarian would argue that if placed in a situation in which killing one person will save the lives of thousands, the rule can be broken. The popularity of weak rule utilitarianism is often cited as a cause for the rise of act utilitarianism. Simply put, act utilitarianism denounces the need for all encompassing rules, and instead views each act as necessitating its own consideration.

A uniquely interesting version of utilitarianism is negative utilitarianism. While most utilitarian ethical theories encourage the maximization of happiness, the negative version of the theory prefers a minimization of suffering and pain. Karl Popper justifies this approach with the claim that "the greatest harms are of more consequence than the greatest goods" (Popper, 1945).

Ethical Egoism and Altruism

Ethical egoism and altruism represent two related but vastly different approaches to consequentialism. Both egoism and altruism follow the same basic tenants of general consequentialism, however, each has a very specific answer for one of the most

important questions of consequentialist ethics: “consequences for whom”. Ethical egoism, as the name implies, emphasizes the importance of the agent. According to this theoretical approach, the agent must consider the consequences to themselves as more important than the consequences to anyone else (Sidgwick, 1907). Conversely, ethical altruism supports the theory that the consequences of others should always be considered more important than that of the agent’s. To believe in the principles of ethical altruism is to, as Auguste Comte said, “live for others” (Comte, 1974).

Observers

One aspect of consequentialist ethics that applies directly to videogames is the presence of “observers”. When creating hypothetical situations to illustrate ethical conundrums, consequentialist writers often create an uninvolved third party, who is capable of judging the consequences of the actions of the agent. This applies directly to videogames as the narrative structure of videogames and the user interface (UI) system allows programmers to actually create a character to act as an observer, and inform the player of their observations.

There are two basic types of observers employed by consequentialist ethicists: the ideal observers and real observers (Scheffler, 1988). The ideal observer is either an omniscient account of the events or a neutral observer, who happens to have all the information necessary to make a proper judgment of the consequences. The function of the observer is one of perspective. If an action is ethically sound, the consequences will be seen as favorable from the ideal observer’s viewpoint. The second type of observer,

the real observer, is a response to the claim that no agent can ever know all of the facts, and therefore can never be held to the standards that an ideal observer would create. Instead, the agent can only act on what they know. The real observer reflects this understanding by sharing in the lack of omniscience of the agent (Mackie, 1990).

Deontological Ethics

Deontological ethical principles are quite opposite from that of consequentialism. Rather than judging the ethics of an act by determining the ethics of its consequences, deontological ethics operates within a system of rules and duties governing the ethical make up of actions. The most famous example of deontological thinking comes from Immanuel Kant, one of the ethical theory's most prominent figures, when claimed that it is always long to lie, even if a murder is wants you to tell them where to find a potential victim (Korsgaard, 1998). Though deontological ethical theories are extremely complex, they all follow the basic principle that if "X" is good, then all rational people should desire that "X" happen (Broad, 1930). In short, there are good actions and there are bad actions. Much like consequentialism there are several forms of deontological ethics. The most pertinent issues to this project include divine command ethics, the writings of Immanuel Kant, pluralistic deontology, and the principle of permissible harm.

Divine Command Theory

Perhaps the most relevant branch of deontological ethics is the Divine Command Theory (CDT). CDT states, quite explicitly, that an action is right if God declares it to

be right (Wierenga, 1983). From this perspective, one can claim that an action is right because it is an agent's duty follow the commands of God. It could be argued quite reasonably that CDT is the least relevant form of ethical theory to any videogame, as videogames rarely have gods or divine commands to follow. However, both of these claims could be refuted.

Though videogame characters do not necessarily have gods, they do have creators. These creators, teams of programmers, created the physical rules, the geography, and the actors of the videogame world. More importantly, in an RPG focused on moral decision making, the programmers often do create a set of rules for what is right and what is wrong. And though a player may act as they wish in these games, the rightness and wrongness of those actions is judged by an absent creator.

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant and his ethical theories are perhaps the most well known of all deontological ethical theories. Kant's version of deontological ethics is based on two basic principles: 1) for an action to be good, an agent must have acted out of duty and 2) and the action must be good without qualification, meaning that it must not be able to make a situation ethically worse in any circumstances (Kant, 1785).

By Kant's own reasoning, only good will can be considered good without qualification. With this considered, Kant goes on to claim that the only way to judge the ethical content of an action is to judge the intent of the agent, as it is possible for malevolent intent to result in good consequences. In order to normalize the judgment of

intent, Kant put forth that a good will is present when an agent is acting out of a duty to moral law (Kant, 1785). Simply put an action when an agent takes the action out of an obligation to do what is right.

Pluralistic Deontology

Pluralistic Deontology, most famously supported by W. D. Ross, is a form of deontology which focuses solely on an agent's duty to certain principles. These principles, known as the prima facie duties, represent seven key ethical ideals, which every agent must consider when making an ethical decision (Ross, 1930). Though Ross encourages agents to follow all of the duties whenever possible, he also states that the more important (listed top-down)duties should overrule the less important ones, when they come into conflict. The seven prima facie duties are:

1) Duty of beneficence: to help others. Much like utilitarian theorists, Ross claims that an agent should strive to increase the happiness of others

2) Duty of non-maleficence: to avoid harming others. Similar to negative utilitarianism, Ross claims that an agent should take actions which minimize harm to others

3) Duty of justice: to ensure that others receive justice, either in a positive or negative sense

4)Duty of self-improvement: to improve ourselves in all ways

5)Duty of reparation: to compensate those who you have wronged in any way

6) Duty of gratitude: to benefit or aid those who have aided and benefited us

7) Duty of promise-keeping: to always act within the limitations you have set for yourself through promises, both explicit and implicit

Principle of Permissible Harm

The Principle of Permissible Harm (PPH) was introduced as a deontological addition to ethical theory in recent years by Frances Kamm (Kamm, 2007). Kamm's additions are not necessarily unique theories in the way that pluralistic deontology or CDT are theories. Rather, PPH adds a kind of trump card to deontological principles as a whole. Kamm claims that a case by case approach to ethical decision making can be taken, while still effectively following the theories of Immanuel Kant. PPH argues that an agent can take an action that would usually not be considered to be of "good will", if the agent is acting out of a desire to prevent a much greater harm, the agent does not directly cause the imminent harm, and the situation is one in which harm will be done with or without the agent's action.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics, or the judgment of ethics based on the character of the agent, is by far the oldest theory of ethics in the western tradition. In this theory agents are capable of possessing certain virtues, desirable habits or behavioral patterns, which enable them to live a more complete and ethically sound life. The theory is based in the writings of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle (Crisp and Slote, 1997).

While different philosophers and cultures have debated which virtues are to be considered ethical, all proponents of virtue ethics as a theory agree that there are a group of normative characteristics which make a person ethical, and make their actions and the consequences of those actions much less important. This is not to say that virtue ethics contradicts deontological or consequentialist thinking. Instead, virtue ethics is traditionally considered by its proponents as a way of developing morally desirable virtues, with the goal of creating a more ethically capable agent. In more recent years, virtue ethics has, however, risen as an increasingly popular theory. Though modern virtue ethicists do not, in general, disregard deontological or consequentialist ethics, they prioritize the virtues of the actor over the actions and the consequences.

Eudaimonia

Eudaimonia is not so much a principle of virtue ethics as it is a goal of virtue ethics. Eudaimonia, loosely translated to "happiness" in ancient Greek, is an objective state of well being that Aristotle claimed could only be achieved by living a virtuous life. Though Eudaimonia was narrowly defined by Aristotle and Plato (Devettere, 2002), modern virtue ethics has a much broader understanding of what "well being" can encompass. The primary goal of possessing virtue, according to virtue ethics, is to live a complete and proper life. This is done by exhibiting the necessary virtues to do so. However, many philosophers disagree on the true purpose of human existence as a whole and the purpose of an individual life. Therefore, there has always been debate

over which virtues must be present to achieve a "proper" life and eventually a state of Eudaimonia.

Virtue ethics as a stand-alone theory has fallen out of popularity in contemporary philosophy. Since the age of enlightenment, more complex theories such as deontological ethics and consequentialist ethics have garnered increasing support from philosophers. Because virtue ethics does not directly conflict with the philosophies of these, it has seen much less in the way of development in the past three hundred years. However, videogames are often forced to take much more simplistic approaches to different aspects of human existence. Ethical debate is amongst those aspects, and because of this, virtue ethics' less confused approach has seen much use in the development of moral gaming.

Nihilism

Finally, I would like to address moral nihilism as an ethical theory. Nihilism in general is the philosophy denying meaning in those aspects of life that many people find most meaningful. Moral nihilism translates into a denial of any inherent good or evil moral value of actions or consequences. In short, a moral nihilist would tell you that there is nothing ethically wrong with murder. Society only thinks there is due to social traditions and arbitrarily constructed ethical meaning (Rose, 1995).

Nihilism and moral nihilism are not present in the ethical triangulation process which is used to classify games in the next section of this chapter. However, it is important to note that it is an ever present option in videogame play. In a videogame

without a system of moral measurement, a player can choose to ascribe ethical value to their actions, or they can choose to ignore the ethics of their actions completely, claiming that there is no right and wrong in a game. In a videogame that explicitly measures morality the potential for moral nihilism is just as present. Though game programmers, much like societies, can ascribe ethical meaning to certain actions (deeming that "X" is evil and "Y" is good), a moral nihilist gamer can choose to regard those declarations as arbitrary in the same way that he or she would do in a real life situation. Because this specific ethical philosophy is both ever present and never present in videogame play, I have chosen not to include it on the triangulation diagram, as doing so would only result in a skewed measurement of all sample videogames.

Ethical Triangulation

As stated before, the system I have created to classify the ethical content of videogames is a form of triangulation. Each point on the triangle represents a pure form of one of the ethical theories outlined in the previous section. The area in between the three points represents the varying degrees of overlap between multiple philosophies.

This system of ethical triangulation was created for two reasons. First, though moral standards in videogames have become increasingly complex in recent years, very few, if any have become so complex that they can accurately and purely represent a single ethical philosophy. Instead, most videogames either intentionally, or by their own failures, measure ethical "goodness" and "badness" by a mix of several ethical standards such as virtue ethics, consequentialist ethics, and deontological ethics. To create a

system of classification which took into consideration this aspect, a non-binary measurement was necessary. Hence, the triangulation system was introduced. Secondly, most of the video games involving moral measurement feature multiple standards of ethical measurement. For instance, a single game can have one standard for what is "evil" and a separate standard for what is "good". Good and evil can be defined by the same standard (e.g. consequentialist ethics), but this is not always the case. For this reason, it is necessary to classify each standard using the ethical triangulation system, rather than simply classifying the game as a whole.

While this system could theoretically be used to classify the ethical content of any videogame, it will only be used to address a specific kind of game in this project. Because the intent of this project is to investigate videogames which feature explicit mathematical measurement of moral behavior, the classification of those games must be based on the mathematical measurement. Therefore, the classification of the ethical content of each game as a whole is to be based on the ethical content of individual situations, which result in the "morality points" being given to the player.

The systems by which these morality points are given are described in detail in the following chapter. However, simply put, the classification of the game reflects the situations the player encounters. For example, if a game were to have 20 situations in which the "good" decision was defined by consequences, and 10 situations in which the "good" decision was defined by the overall virtue of the player, the classification of the game's "good" moral standard would lie approximately one third of the way between the

point of the triangle representing virtue ethics and the point representing consequentialist ethics. Figure 2 represents this measurement.

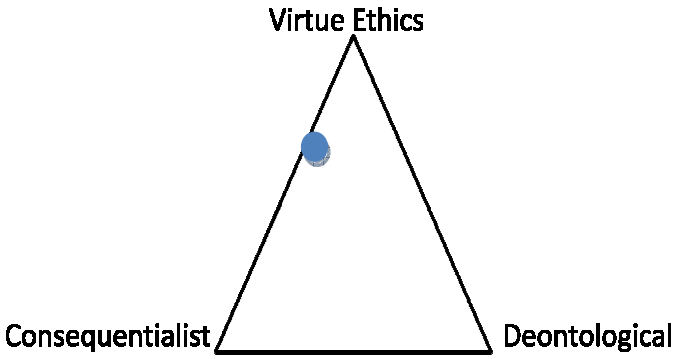

Fig. 2. Triangulation Example 1

To better illustrate how ethical triangulation can be applied to videogames, several examples will now be presented. Each example videogame will be classified and the reasons for the classification will be illustrated by exemplar situations. To avoid an in depth analysis of each philosophy's worthiness, they will be assigned neutral variable nomenclature such as "*X, Y,* and *Z"*. These nomenclatures will represent their corresponding ethical philosophies on the illustration of the ethical triangle. The examples will be organized based on their system for measuring morality. There are two basic systems for mathematically measuring morality in videogames. In the first, Scale system, morality is defined dichotomously. Usually this manifests itself as good vs. evil. In the second system, Multiple Achievement Path System (MAPS), morality is defined

non-dichotomously. This can take many forms, but usually has a strong emphasis on specific virtues. Both of these systems are described in detail in Chapter III.

Jade Empire (2005) utilizes a system in which *X* is defined by deontological pluralism, the obligation to perform seven prima facie duties above all else, and *Y* is defined by act utilitarianism, the philosophy that one must act in a way which benefits the most sentient beings, and virtue ethics.

In the second chapter of the game, the player encounters a large town. This town, which relies heavily on trade from the nearby river, is in dire times. The dam blocking the river has recently been closed, and the path to the dam is extremely dangerous. The mayor has asked you to open the dam. The player eventually has two options: *X* option is to open the dam and save the village, ultimately fulfilling the duty of non-maleficence. *Y* option is to break the device which closes the dam, leaving the town in a dire situation. Though the deed itself seems evil, the consequences are that the people of the town must become strong and self reliant. Figure 3 shows the *X* and *Y* values on the ethical triangle.

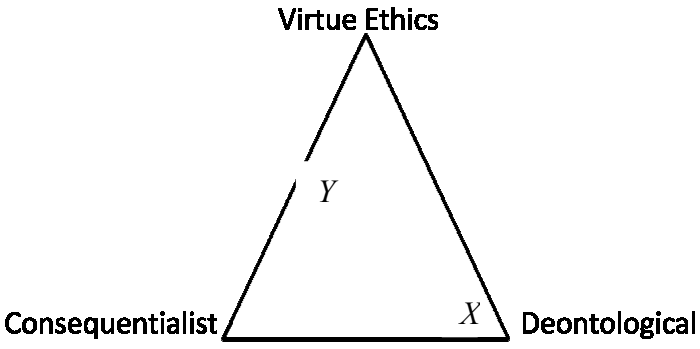

Fig. 3. Triangulation Example 2

Knights of the Old Republic 2 (2005) employs a morality system in which *X* is based on virtue ethics, specifically the virtues of wisdom and selflessness, combined with consequentialism. *Y*s standard is a combination of consequentialism, virtue ethics, and deontological ethics, specifically the idea of permissible harm. The virtues supported by Y are different than those of X. *Y* emphasizes strength and stoicism. The consequentialist element is strongly emphasized and supported by the presence of an ideal observer. This observer is present at nearly all times, and often informs the player of the possible and actual consequences of their actions.

A key example of this comes at the beginning of the third act. The player enters a large city which is filled with refugees from a great war. A beggar approaches the player and asks for money for food. In this situation the *X* response would be to give the beggar money, showing a key virtue, selflessness. However, the player later discovers that the beggar was later killed for that money by other beggars. The *Y* response is a cold refusal to help the beggar, claiming that the player will need the money much more than the beggar. This claim is based in the knowledge that while the beggar likely needed the money for food, the player is on a quest which will save countless live, and the money is needed for supplies. If they player chooses the *Y* response, they will later discover that the beggar murdered and robbed another man in order to eat. Figure 4 represents the *Knights of the Old Republic 2* ethical triangulation.

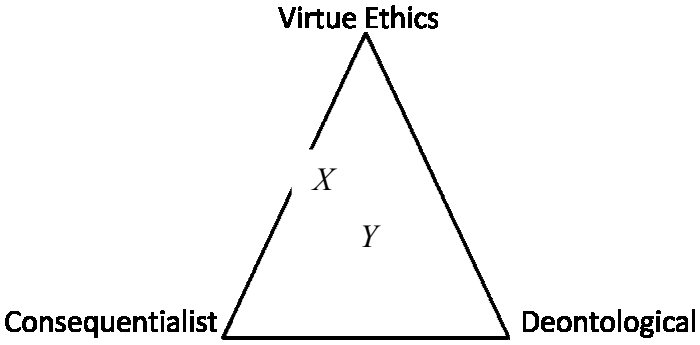

Fig. 4. Triangulation Example 3

As with all theories, it is important to note the limitations of the ethical triangulation method. The most prominent and relevant is that the ethical triangulation method would be difficult to employ (at least with any sense of objectivity) in games such as *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), in which there is no system of measuring morality. Though the game contains a staggering number of moral conundrums, there is no explicit measurement, and the player is free to assign or not assign ethical meaning to actions as they wish. In short, any attempt to use this system in a situation where no numerical values are assigned to ethical judgment would ultimately result in the researcher simply assigning their own meaning to situations, and skewing the results of the triangulation.

CHAPTER III

SYSTEMS OF MEASURING MORALITY

I have devised two major systems of measuring moral choices in video games, the Scale System and the Multiple Achievement Path System (or MAPS). The Scale system involves positive and negative numbers being added to a total value. The positive and negative numbers usually signify two mutually exclusive philosophies. The outcome is a single axis scale with two poles as indicators of philosophy. The second system, MAPS, is only slightly more complex. In MAPS values are not added to a single scale, instead they are added to multiple single axis scales. For instance, a player may receive a value of "3x" for a decision. This would raise the value of the "x" by three points. Each of these basic systems of measurement has two approaches, simple system design or complex system design. In each the simple design indicates a straightforward approach to understanding morality with a simplistic "good" or "bad" definition. By contrast, the complex designs indicate systems in which morality is conceptualized as much more subjective.

First, moral standing can be measured numerically and dichotomously. In this system, which I have named the Scale System, players make choices in both action and speech which are assigned a positive or negative value. Each time a choice is made and a value achieved, the scale shifts to one side or the other. Often in these dichotomous systems, the scale's sides are good and evil or can be associated with good or evil. Key to these dichotomous systems is the aspect of the encounter. An encounter is the term

used by game designers to describe any in game situation in which the player "encounters" non-player characters (characters controlled by programming) in a narrative situation. These encounters often force the player to make a decision based on moral aspects, therefore forcing the player to move their moral standing either up or down on the game's scale. This concept is, however, at best abstract. In order to understand this game style and its advantages, disadvantages and implications, it is necessary to put these abstract ideas in context through the use of example.

Scale Systems

First, it will be necessary to explore an example of this scale system using both a simple design and a complex design. For this we will turn our gaze to two recent releases: *Jade Empire* (2005) and *Fallout 3* (2008), which was introduced in the beginning of this study.

Simple

Fallout 3 (2008) will be our example of a simplistic scale system. *Fallout 3* uses what is called a "Karma" scale to track the player's moral decisions throughout the game. Simply put: act like a terrible person and you will receive bad Karma; act like a decent human being and you will receive good Karma. The reason for the simplicity of the scale is embedded in the actual story of the game. As mentioned, the game takes place in Washington D.C., several hundred years after a nuclear apocalypse. With no government, no law, no society and very little civilization, the only real consequence of

your actions are the responses of those still left in the world. Treat people poorly and they will treat you poorly in return; bad Karma. In this game all actions are given either positive (good karma) or negative (bad karma) value. Each value is then added (or subtracted) to the total Karma value of the player, which in turn affects the reactions you get from those you interact with in the game. (See Figure 5 for example structure)

Furthermore, total karma values are given meaning through linguistic and visual description. The player can, at any time, access their karma score. Karma scores range from "Savior of the Waste" (very high) to "Terror of the Waste" (very low) and have dozens of milestones in between. Each karma milestone is also represented by a cartoonish image. If the player's karma drops so low that they achieve the "Terror of the Waste" label, the cartoon representation displayed on their karma screen is one of a man covered in weaponry and blood, foaming at the mouth.

Once the internal variables such as good and bad are defined by the programmers, the processes used by the simple scale system are fairly transparent. For example, let us say that the player has a karma value of zero, indicating moral neutrality. The player is walking in an open desert, when they happen upon a man who is clearly dying of dehydration and exposure. The nameless man weakly offers to buy any water the player can spare. The player is four possible options: 1) sell the water to the dying man for a price standardized by the in game economic system, 2) refuse to sell your water and leave the man, 3) give the water to the man and do not charge him anything, 4) kill the man and take anything of value on him.

Options 1 and 2 considered by the game mechanic to be actions of neutral karma value. Option 1 is a situation in which two people trade what they have for what they want. Morality is not considered in the trade. Option 2 is much more stoic, but still quite neutral. The player may be low on water and know that they need every last drop in order to survive in the desert. They are not being good, but survival is not necessarily bad. Being neutral, either of these choices would result in no change to the player's overall karma value.

Options 3 and 4 are clearly morally good and bad, respectively. If the player chooses to simply give the water away, they have earned good karma in the form of positive points on their karma scale. The value then shifts from 0 to 1, indicating that the player has a total positive (good) karma value. Likewise, if the player chooses to murder and loot the valuables of the dying man, their karma value would shift to -1, indicating a total negative (evil) value.

Figure 5 represents a situation in which the total value on the scale is equal to -10 as shown by the red arrow. This would be possible for many situations, the simplest of which would be the player having made ten consecutive evil decisions worth a value of -1 each (assuming a zero starting point).

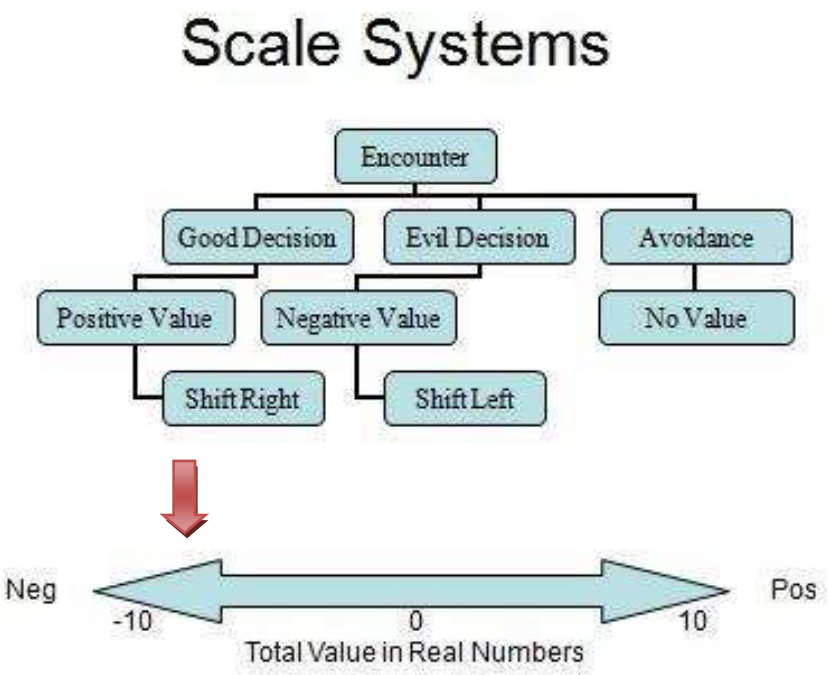

Fig. 5. Scale Systems

Complex

Jade Empire, created by Bioware Inc. (2005), will serve as our example as a complex scale system. What makes *Jade Empire*'s moral standing system so complex is the need for philosophical interpretation of each decision's meaning. Unlike *Fallout 3* (2008) , which had a scale based on very easily seen "good" or "bad" decisions, *Jade Empire* (2005) used a scale based on making either consequentialist or Kantian decisions. The complexity of this design flows from the complexity of the situational morals. In essence, a clear "good" or "bad" decision is not always presented. This

creates a situation in which the player must analyze complex moral elements for themselves.

It would take a years of research and discussion to illustrate the truly intricate differences between the two philosophies. Therefore, for the sake of space we will simply say that for each action the player makes in the game, they must choose between acting with a focus on what the good or bad of the consequences of their action will be (consequentialism) or choosing a focus on the good or bad of the actions themselves rather than the outcome (Kantianism). By using such complex definitions for the dichotomous aspects of the scale, Bioware Inc. (2005) is able to use the simple dichotomous scale system to represent very complex concepts. The picture below (Fig. 6) is a character status screen from *Jade Empire*. The vertical bar directly to the right of the avatar represents the character's moral standing. This particular character is leaning towards the "way of the open palm", which is represented by the small yellow triangle.

In order to truly understand how these systems operate it will be necessary to study an example case. For that purpose we will examine a major encounter from the second Act of *Jade Empire*. The situation begins with the player infiltrating the island fortress of a local crime boss and slave market leader. The player finds a small alcove where a man is beating a young woman in front of an older woman and an older man. The man beating the woman attacks the player and is defeated. The old man then explains that he was going to buy the young woman and was having her beaten in order to break her spirit. The man offers to pay you a substantial sum of money if you simply

leave and let him keep the young woman. The older woman, who is revealed to be the mother, then begs you to free both her and her daughter from slavery.

Fig. 6. Character Screen 1

The player is given four choices: 1) leave immediately; refusing to participate in the situation, 2) take the money from the old man and allow the young woman to be taken as a slave, 3) Threaten the old man, forcing him to leave and freeing the young woman, 4) Give a weapon to the young woman and inform her that if she wishes to be free, she must free herself (it is apparent in the game that the young woman will be able to dispatch the old man with little effort). In this situation choice, 1 would result in no

points, because the player refused to take any action other than inaction. Choice 2 would also result in negative points, because the player allowed for evil to take place. Choice 3 would result in positive points, because the player made a righteous choice and put no one in harm's way. Choice 4 would result in no points, because the player made the righteous choice of freeing the young woman, but forced her to become a murderer in the process (Jade Empire, 2005).

Though the simplistic and complex scale systems share a unit of analysis and a system of measurement, they differ greatly in their operation. Each is interacted with in an essentially different manner by the player. The simple scale system is generally very predictable. The player is often given three options which clearly represent a morally good, bad and neutral choice. Complex systems, however, can be very difficult to predict and understand. Often, the player does not know which decision will lead to what karma value. It then becomes very difficult for players to intentionally be good or bad in a complex system.

Multiple Achievement Path Systems

The second system of measurement is what I call the "multiple achievement path", or MAP. The multiple achievement path is similar to the scale system in that MAP assigns point values for actions and dialogue. However, in a MAP system those values are not simply positive or negative. Instead, the values are all positive, categorical values. For example, if the multiple available paths are *x, y* and *z*, the assigned point value could be 4*x*. This would indicate that 4 points should be allocated to

the *x* path. Like scale systems, there are both simple and complex versions of the MAP. (See Figure 8 for example structure)

Simple Multiple Achievement Path Systems

Mass Effect (2008) will be our example for a simple measure of multiple achievement path systems. The game story follows a celebrated career soldier in a futuristic, space faring society. Elemental to this soldier's story is that he or she (the player can choose their gender before the story begins) has recently been granted a nearly infinite amount of power by the governing body. Because of this new found power, the player has the ability to make the choices which allow him or her to move one way or the other on the morality scale. What makes the moral path in this particular game so simple is that the choices are not necessarily measured by good or evil. Though each choice which can be made has the potential to carry implied good or evil, the measurement definitions are actually of a separate nature. The moral path, instead, measures the player's tendency towards being a "Renegade" or a "Paragon".

Rather than being forced to make complex moral decisions and not knowing with certainty in what way they will be judged, the player need only ask his/herself "is this decision one that supports the current in game power structure by obeying the rules, or one that indicates that I am going to use my new infinite power by ignoring the rules?" The picture below is a character status screen from *Mass Effect*. The red and blue bars on either side of the character's face represent her progress along the "paragon" and "renegade" paths.

Figure 8 represents the player's total accumulated morality in a simple MAPS system, in which the player is able to choose from three paths during an encounter. In this particular instance, the player has overwhelmingly chosen to make decisions resulting in path 3 points being accumulated. As MAPS does not necessarily imply duality, the player has also accumulated moral points in both path 1 and path 2.

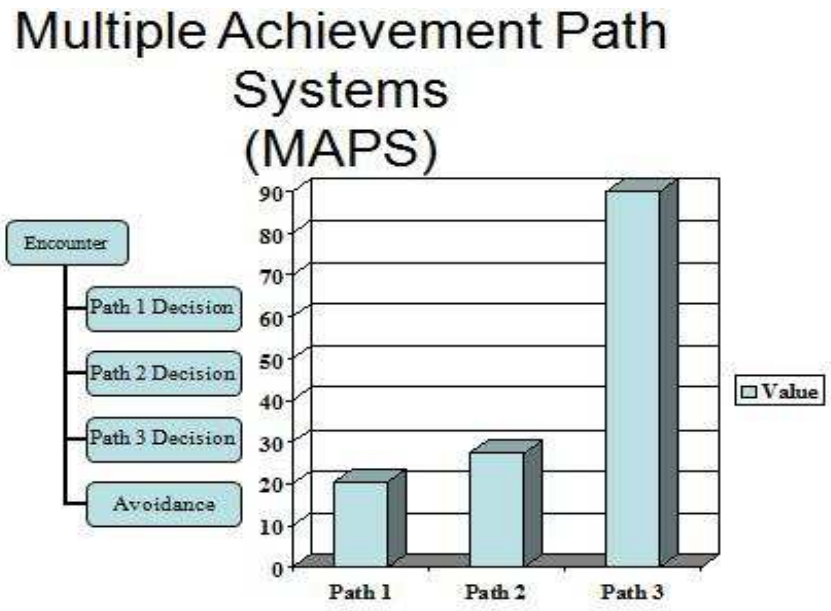

Fig. 7. M.A.P. System

Complex Multiple Achievement Path Systems

Rise of the Argonauts (2008) will be our example of a complex MAP. Unlike *Mass Effect* (2008), in which players are given a positive value in to either the "Renegade" or "Paragon" path for each decision, *Rise of the Argonauts* uses four major paths and allows players to choose one of multiple directions through each path. The

setting of *Rise of the Argonauts*, the journey of King Jason through mythological Greece, allows for this system by naming the Greek gods and goddesses Ares, Hermes, Apollo and Athena (paths Ar, H, Ap and At) as the four major paths. When the player is awarded a point for any major path, they are allowed to choose from a flow chart of abilities granted by that path (called divine gifts), which allows for the player to further customize the path they choose. Though common conceptions of morality do not directly play into the understanding of Greek gods, the game creates a moral system by associating each god with a philosophy of action: actions of deception are given values in the H path, actions of aggression are given Ar path values, actions of respect and generosity are given Ap path values and actions of justice and law are given At path values.

Fig. 8. Character Screen 2

The best example of a MAPs system in action would be a conversation. Because technological aspects prevent the player from being able to type in any questions or comments, conversations are often broken down into multiple choice format. The player will usually be given a list of topics, comments, or questions from which they may choose. A common way of gaining measurable points in a MAPs system is by choosing dialogue options associated with a specific path. For example, in *Rise of the Argonauts* (2008) the player is approached by a group of drunk men from the mythological nation of Ionia. The alpha male of this group proceeds to goad the main character by slandering the character's wife, who has recently been murdered by an Ionian.

The character is given the option of using words to stand up for his wife's honor, reporting the men to the guards for attempting to start a fight, using wit to make a fool of the man in front of his friends or simply striking the man. In this encounter the first choice indicates an Ap path decision as it represents peaceful honor and would result in Ap path values, the second choice allows the law to punish the wicked and would result in At path values, the third would result in no value as it does not represent the virtue of any given god in the game and the fourth choice would result in Ar path values as it openly supports violence as a means of seeing your will imposed.

These systems are simply the most commonplace systems and the most popular, in terms of use. The Scale System represents an overall approach to the measurement of morality which conceptualizes behavior as dichotomous. The simple and complex designs within Scale Systems are identical in method, but have great discrepancy in the complexity with which they envision the ideas of "good" and "bad". The MAPS

represents a system of measuring morality based on decisions being independent from one another and morality not being necessarily defined by dichotomous concepts.

In MAPS simple and complex designs most often differ in the number of concepts represented (simple having only two, while complex can have three or more) in the measurement system. It is very important to note that the two proposed systems of measuring morality in video games are not the only systems in existence. Rather, there are many different systems used to measure morality in games. There are in fact many systems of measurement, including refusing to measure morality at all.

CHAPTER IV

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

One of the more difficult aspects of conducting research in the field of video games is the reliance of experimental research on aggression indexes. Though many researchers see aggression indexes as reliable indicators of effect and reliable manipulation checks, this experimental crutch has hindered the growth of applied video game research in the social science fields. Researchers such as Lillian Bensley and Juliet Van Eenwyk (2001), M.K. Miller (2007) and Christopher Bartlet (2008) have explored nearly every facet of the video game's ability to affect simple, measurable behaviors through traditional quantitative methods. Only a few researchers, such as Moshe Sherer, who studied the ability of video game to affect moral reasoning levels in high school students (1998), have done research into the increasingly complex relationship between the player and the game. There is, however, an immense amount of literature from the social science fields pertaining directly to video games and several very important sections of social science literature which can be very directly applied to video games if considered from certain perspectives.

The three fields from which I will draw literature are the video game industry, communication and psychology. The video game industry has long fought to "corner the market" on the literature discussing video games by creating its own literature, apart from that of academics. One of the most notable achievements of this insulated field of literature is the creation of two theoretical perspectives through which to study and

understand the video game. Those perspectives, Ludology and Narratology, will be outlined at the onset of this chapter in order to provide a necessary lens for understanding the literature which follows.

I will then provide a justification and explanation of this study based on the literature of communication and psychology scholars. I will draw heavily on concepts of narrative transportation and character identification from the field of communication to illustrate strong connection between player and character created specifically in RPG video games. Thirdly, I will explore the literature of moral development as approached from the field of psychology. Through an understanding of how moral values are learned by vicarious experience and empathetic viewing, I will illustrate the potential influence of character identification and narrative transportation on moral development. Finally, I will review the relatively small literature pertaining directly to the presence of complex moral choice in video games.

Ludology and Narratology

The literature of the video game industry is highly insulated. Like many industries before it, the video game industry has sought to define itself rather than allow itself to be defined by "outsider" scholars. This is why I look to the writings of those involved in the actual video game industry when looking for a meta-theoretical framework through which I can study video games. Just as communications scholars have the best theories for understanding communication studies, videogame writers and producers have the best theories for understanding video games.

There are two primary meta-theories of the video game study: Narrativist and Ludologist. The two theories of game are a culmination of interpreting the dozens of aspects of video games which involve creating a game. These theories are currently and most likely eternally locked in debate over the nature of the video game as either Narratology or Ludology. Narratalogy sees the video game as an interactive story for the player, where a sense of playing a role (usually a key role) in the creation and execution of plot (Ryan, 2008). Narrativists, as they call themselves, allow that there are distinct limitations on the ability of the player to interact with their environment, but posit that the ability of the player to influence the world and story even in the slightest way create a narrative context (Ryan, 2001; Eskelinen, 2004; Aarseth, 2004; Crawford, 2001; Jenkins, 2004).

Opposite the Narrativists stand the Ludologists. Ludologists view the video game from a play perspective. Focus is shifted from the narrative context and the narrative action onto the actual act of play. Ludologists study and perceive video games as large groupings of coded rules. These rules determine the every action and interaction of the player. (Eskelinen; 2004). The two theories are not, by any means, mutually exclusive. Rather, Ludologists view the video game as a like a narrative, but refuse to accept that the two are identical. Ludology, which is also known as “game theory”, separates the video game from the pure narrative by highlighting the key differences in story structure and development based on the game rules and the player’s interaction with those rules.

The most famous and accepted argument of Ludology is that in a narrative a single story exists. However, in a video game the player's action or inaction can lead to multiple story lines. The best example of this comes from Bremond (1973) who claims that abstention from tasks is an option that is always available and can critically alter the game. At the onset of any video game, players have the option to simply abstain from taking part in the major task of the game; an act that would clearly change the story by cutting it short either in a tragic or comical sense.

The current study works from a Ludology perspective. The rules which govern the interaction of the player and the player's actions and inactions are the necessary focus of understanding choice within the game. It would be, in fact, impossible to begin to study moral choice in a video game from a Narrativist perspective, as any true choice would necessarily violate the Narrativist theory (Prince, 1987). A Narrativist examining the same phenomenon would likely argue that the choices in the game are not really choices at all, because the story will end in the exact same world saved or world doomed manner and the "choices" will have been pointless. If, the player allows evil to win, which is often the choice, the Narrativist theory would hold much weight since the result is usually the end of the known world. And if the world ends anyway, what does any choice matter? However, because the option to have the in game world continue on exists, the Narrativist argument would not be able to explain the idea that a choice in the game can have an individual outcome.

The distinctions between these two meta-theoretical approaches to the modern study of video games are many. Narratology focuses on the story of a game as being

removed from other elements, while the Ludogist perspective sees many (if not all elements) as connected through the rules and play of the game. However, many researchers acknowledge that the two meta-theories can be used in conjunction as complementary theories of understanding (Crawford, 2004).

Though both perspectives offer valid and unique understandings of videogames, this project tends to lean towards a narrativist view of videogames. This is not because the narratology perspective is any more accurate. It is, instead, because the nature of the study itself is more focused in the narrative. The ideas of morality and the situations in which they are presented in a videogame cannot be removed from the videogame's story. They are necessarily intertwined as they help to identify each other.

Character Identification and Narrative Transportation

Though many modern scholars agree that video games are not a pure narrative, they do still hold that a critical aspect of a successful and enjoyable video game is constructing it in a way that highlights the narrative. (Ryan, 2001; Crawford, 2005; Jenkins, 2004; Perlin, 2004; Strickland, 2004; Douglas and Hargadon, 2004; Juul, 2005; Juul, 2008). The concept of players being directly involved in a narrative through the videogame is key as this involvement increases the likelihood that a videogame can influence thought or behavior patterns. Greene and Brock's Transportation theory measures the transportation into a media world on a 15-item self-report scale which taps cognitive involvement (2000). As Krzywinska states in her article, the cognitive involvement of a player in an open-ended video game environment is greatly increased

due to their key agency in advancement of the game (2008). In short, the player cannot avoid involvement in the game and still be playing it, as it would simply cease to progress without their cognitive involvement.

The concepts of Transportation and involvement are further detailed by Cohen, who found that the transportation effect was increased by identification with a primary character (2006). Cohen tells us that transportation is highly affected by similarities with a primary character in both attitude and physical appearance. As narrative potential, which allows for the player to behave as they wish, has slowly increased, so too has the visual capability of the technology fueling video games. RPGs now begin almost universally with the creation of the physical appearance of the player character and sometimes the ability to name and assign an age to that character; allowing the player to create an image that he or she can identify with.

Character Identification

As discussed in the introduction, video games have advanced several aspects in their representation of in-game characters. Most important to this study are the advancements in digital imaging of characters and advancements in the complex personality development. In modern games the intricate plots created by creative designers cannot function without intricate characters to enact them. This means abandoning the two dimensional character models from older games such as *Bad Dudes* (1988) or *Contra* (1987) and replacing it with in depth back stories, believable motivation brought on by past experiences and realistic emotional reactions.

Add to this the ability of the modern video game to create realistic representations of the human face and have every word of a video game voice acted and the result is an interactive digital person. Why is this important? Because, a single color polygon is not something an adolescent can readily identify or realistically interact with. However, a 30 something infantry woman with a conflicted past and a drive to overcome the famous failure of her grandfather is a character that can convey a sense of identity. She can be sad or angry, she can tell you what is on her mind, she can fight with you or fall in love with you, she can live or she can die. Her name is Ashley Williams and in *Mass Effect* (2007) how the player chooses to interact with her determines her digital fate. But, how does this interaction affect the player in turn?

Character Identification as a Theory

There are no fewer than four individual definitions for character identification. For the purposes of this project I have chosen to use the definitions put forth by J. Cohen (2001) and Maccoby and Wilson (1957). Cohen defines character identification as "an imaginary process invoked as a response to characters represented within mediated text." Maccoby and Wilson's much more general definition summarizes the concept by stating character identification is a process "by which a viewer shares a character's perspective and vicariously participates in his/her experiences during the [television] program." Identification includes cognitive, emotional, motivational and perceptual dimensions. The resulting accumulation of these dimensions is a sense of being absorbed into the environment where the character exists (Peng, 2008).

Character identification is pertinent to the current project for two reasons. The first is a mainstay of media studies: character identification has the ability to increase narrative transportation, engagement and has the potential to increase effects models in laboratory settings (Green and Brock, 2004). The second is far more centralized. Recently scholars in both the theoretical and experimental realms of video game research have theorized that character identification will be significantly stronger in modern games than in any other previous medium. This hypothesis is based on the central concepts of customization (Fischer et al., 2009), enactive role-playing (Peng, 2007) and wishful identification (Konijin, 2007).

Previous Research in Traditional Media

Before exploring the potential applications of character identification in video games, I will outline the previous application of this theoretical concept to the more traditional media of television and film. There are two basic divisions of character identification characterized by their basic research questions. The first division of research focuses on the factors which cause viewers to identify with specific characters (Reeves and Greenberg, 1977; Reeves and Lometti, 1979; Reeves and Miller, 1978). The second division of research focused on the effects of character identification in televisions programs on the viewer through experimental design (Austin, Pinkelton and Fujioka, 2000).

There are many attributes which researchers believe cause both children and adults to identify with a character. Albert (1957) and Liss, Reinhardt and Fredriksen (1983) found that viewers were more likely to identify with a character who was

perceived as successful, even when the viewer disapproved of the character's behaviors. Additionally, Fernie found that males were more likely to identify with characters who displayed strong physical and social abilities (1981). It has also been found that viewers identify with character of the same gender (Albert, 1957; Miller and Reeves, 1978), however it is worth noting that research suggests that female viewers will identify with a male character more often than male viewers will identify with a female character. This particular pattern has not been definitely explained, but researchers such as Huston believe it to be partially due to the number of male characters in major, essential roles in television and film (Huston, 1983).

As mentioned earlier, the second division of character identification research deals with the effects and potential effects of media on viewers who identify with the characters in a television or film program. Effects research involving character identification has commonly come to the conclusion that the effects of simple character identification are usually temporary. During the time period in which character identification is most actively influencing the viewer, the viewer displays and reports an increased activation of trait characteristics displayed by the character (Cohen, 2006). This indicates two major effects. First, the viewer is indicating that they are identifying with the character and seeing their characteristics as desirable. Secondly, they are indicating that they are more often associating those traits with themselves. This can be more easily understood through the use of example.

Let us say that the viewer is watching a classic John Wayne movie. I choose John Wayne, because he displays many of the characteristics found to cause

identification in males. After watching the movie, the viewer will first begin to identify John Wayne's bravery, toughness and willingness to act violently as basically good characteristics to have. The second stage then involves the viewer beginning to see themselves as brave, tough and willing to act violently (to varying degrees based on the truth of the claims).

This theoretical effect structure has been associated with several behavioral patterns in laboratory settings. After viewing alcohol advertisements featuring positive social results for those consuming alcohol, viewers had an increase in positive expectancy about drinking behavior. This effect was increased when viewers reported identifying with the actors (Austin, Pinkelton and Fuijioka, 2000). Harrison also found that viewers who identify with underweight television characters are more likely to develop eating disorders or negative eating behaviors (1997).

Most relevant to this study is the work advanced by Green and his associates in relation to character identification's role in promoting narrative transportation. Though an explicit connection between the two is difficult for researchers to claim as fact, Green, Garst and Brock have found that an increase in character identification with any main character will have a positive correlation with an increase in narrative transportation (2004), which is the process of becoming immersed within a narrative. The effects of this relationship between identification and transportation will be discussed in detail in the narrative transportation section of this literature review.

Character identification, or the process of becoming attached to and associating with a fictional character, has been studied in depth in both the television/film and

literature realms. Its causes have been theorized to be physical and philosophical similarity and its effects have been theorized to include both behavioral and cognitive pattern changes. This focus of research has only recently been transferred into video games as a medium.

Character Identification in Video Games

Character identification has been discussed by researchers in its application to nearly every medium. Video games, however, are only recently becoming "acceptable" as serious research subjects in academic culture, and the amount of social science research directly applied to them is limited. There are, however, three highly important concepts of character identification which researchers have noted apply specifically to and occasionally only to video game studies. These concepts are wishful identification, customized/personalized characters and enactive observation.

There are two basic types of identification. The first, similarity identification, indicates a situation in which a person identifies with some one based on shared characteristics. The second, wishful identification, an individual observes a character and desires to emulate them in future behavior and identity development (Hoffner and Cantor, 1991). Wishful identification is generally theorized to be the more common among video game players as it is logically assumable that most gamers are just average people rather than super heroes, crime lords, professional athletes or space explorers. Konjin, Bijvank and Bushman (2007) directly addressed the role of identification in video game effects models by running an experiment.

The researchers theorized that adolescent males, who are prone to deviant models of behavior such as anti-social violence (Arnett, 1992; Moffitt, 1993), would be more likely to identify with violent, independent male characters in videogames. Furthermore, the researchers theorized that character identification would be positively correlated to aggressive behavior in a post-stimulus check. Konjin, Bijvank and Bushman reported two major findings (2007). First, participants who had higher levels of wishful identification with the main character were more likely to demonstrate higher levels of violence in a laboratory setting. Second, players who indicated high levels of narrative transportation or immersion based on realism also indicated higher levels of character identification. These findings indicate that RPGs, which are often most in depth games in terms of narrative and physical realism, would be the most likely to encourage character identification and therefore be at a higher likelihood to affect the behavior of players.

Players are not limited to wishful identification in video games. Though, behaviorally, gamers are much more likely to identify wishfully, technology has advanced to the point that physically, the player can fully identify with their main character. In recent role playing games such as *Mass Effect* (2008), *Fallout 3* (2008) and many others players have the ability to mold their character's physical experience to great detail. They can make a character old, young, fat, fit, fair skinned, dark skinned, tattooed, scarred, ugly, attractive, or anything else. In short, the character can be a fairly accurate digital representation of the player.

Unfortunately, customization on this level is fairly rare, and customization of characters is only now gaining popularity on an industry wide level. Because it is not one of the more common aspects of gaming, customization and its effects has not been very heavily researched. However, what research does exist indicates that this relatively new ability in media consumption will have a significant effect on the level of emotional investment, narrative involvement and character identification (Fischer et al., 2009; Bailey, Wise and Bolls. 2009). Specifically, Fischer et al. found that the use of a customized character when playing violent games increased aggressive behavior in post-stimulus lab tests (2009).

While no direct measure of character identification was present, it can be reasoned that this increase in aggression is directly related to having higher levels of character identification with a fully customized character. Additionally Bailey, Wise and Bolls found that playing with a customized character increase physiological and emotional involvement in the game play (2009). In short, the small literature on customization's effects indicates that videogames' ability to give players the opportunity to custom design the main character is both unique to the medium and a positively correlated with character identification and therefore level of effect.

Though character identification in video games has only recently become a focus of research, the methods and practices of traditional research in character identification have helped to advance the new focus. Researchers have completed studies that indicate not only the presence of character identification, but the potential for largely increased levels of identification in video games.

Narrative Transportation

Closely related to the concept of character identification is that of narrative transportation. Narrative transportation refers to the idea that people who expose themselves to a narrative have the potential to feel as if they are part of that narrative in some way (Greene, Brock and Kauffman, 2004). The concept was originally envisioned as applying directly to literature and television/film. The causes of narrative transportation include many factors such as identification with key characters, perceived realism and parasocial interaction (Rubin, 1995). It is theorized that the effects of narrative transportation (or the presence of narrative in some cases) can often increase the many effects that media can have on the viewer/reader (Berkowitz et al., 1974). More recently the theories of narrative transportation and the associated effects models have been applied to video games as a medium based on video games' ability to create realistic narrative environments (Peng, 2009). This section of the review of literature will detail the theory of narrative transportation, trace is previous use and application in traditional media forms, its use and application in video games and explain its importance to the current project.

Narrative Transportation as a Theory: Cause and Effect

Narrative transportation is defined as an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events (Gerrig, 1993). The reader or viewer finds themselves transported into a narrative and loses access to their world of origin. As the elements of the narrative become more real, the transported may consciously or

unconsciously disregard facts of the real-world in order to replace them with the facts of the narrative (Green, 2004). For example, in a video game a player's character may have the ability to fly, use magical abilities or die and be reborn. These abilities are decisively unrealistic. However, the player pushes aside their understanding of what is possible in the world they live in to accommodate for what is possible in the world they are being transported into. Once this is done, the player can operate on the assumption of what is real in this new world, and make judgments based on this assumption.

The conditions which encourage narrative transportation are many. They are in fact, so many that researchers have not yet determined them all. There are, however, several conditions which key researchers in the field feel are the primary determining conditions. These conditions include the quality of writing, realism, previous experience with the topic/characters or knowledge of the content, repeated exposure to the narrative, and personal involvement.

Literary Quality

Research suggests strongly that literary quality is a key determinant of transportation. In the words Green and Brock "For transportation to occur, some narrative world must be created; characters and settings must be evoked, not merely emotions" (2002). Many different forms of writing include the aforementioned elements. A psychological research paper or a thesis project can easily include characters and a setting. However, these elements are far stronger and explored with much more detail and depth in the setting of fictional literature.

The effect of a strong presence of literary elements was explored by Miall and Kuiken (1994) in a study which found that narrative transportation was far more likely to occur when participants in their experiment read literary fiction than when participants read contextually similar academic style writing. One of the many theories as to why the writing style has an effect on the transportation of a reader is that higher quality writing can more effectively convey realism.

Realism

Realism is believed to play a key role in the effects of transportation. This is theorized to be because realism increases the reader/viewer likelihood to associate events within a narrative with person experience (Fazio and Zanna, 1981). If a reader perceives the events as more realistic and can therefore associate the events with personal experience, the lessons learned from such events are seen as much more applicable to real world experience (Green, 2004). Critical to the study at hand is that realism does not necessarily imply factual. Realism can be seen in the impossible examples of character being able to fly or shoot lightning from their hands by a reader or viewer engaged in a narrative. In essence, a reader engaged in a narrative allows the context of that narrative to define what is and is not real based on the fictional setting. Bruner (1986) claims that this willingness to accept something impossible or improbable as realistic is due to the reader/viewer treating narrative differently that scientific or logical argument. In short, narratives are not held to the same standards of fact and truth, when evaluating realism.

Experience, Involvement, Exposure

While realism is defined almost entirely by the narrative itself, transportation also relies on elements which can only be solidified by the transported, as well. These elements, previous experience, personal involvement and repeated exposure, are subject to the transported's life and motivation. Previous experience with a narrative can take many forms. Perhaps the reader/viewer has a professional knowledge of the content giving them a unique insight into the narrative (Zillman, 1991). For example, if I were to read a book on the life of a graduate student, I would have a substantial amount of knowledge as to what does or does not happen in that setting.

Previous experience can also mean that the reader/viewer has experience with a particular narrative by reading a prequel or having watched many television shows with similar premises. Personal involvement, in this context, refers to the reader/viewer's relationship to the content and characters of a narrative (Larsen and Lazlo, 1990). This concept is closely related to that of character identification in that the personal involvement of a reader/viewer is often subject to their emotional attachment to the events and characters in the narrative. Finally, the presence of either or both of these elements can lead to repeated exposure. Repeated exposure occurs when a reader/viewer engages particular narrative several times or engages many similar narratives.

Previous experience is relevant to engagement in narrative at every level. First, previous experience with the content of a narrative can influence the reader/viewer's motivation to engage in a narrative at all. A reader/viewer may choose not to even watch a television show if they feel it is completely irrelevant to their previous

experiences. Conversely, seeing a movie on the shelf at a video store which deals directly with situation you have lived through may be motivation enough for a viewer to purchase it. Additionally, Green found that personal experience or familiarity with the content of a narrative can actually increase the potential for transportation into that narrative (2004). Furthermore, that previous experience also increased perceived realism and endorsement of story-consistent beliefs.

Personal involvement is one of the more interesting elements of narrative transportation. As discussed before, involvement usually entails a personal or emotional connection between the events and characters of the narrative with those of the reader/viewer's real life (Larsen and Lazlo, 1990). What makes this concept so interesting is that it is both encouraging and discouraging of narrative transportation. When a reader/viewer finds themselves relating their real life experiences to those present in the narrative, it actually removes them from the narrative. By relating these events they cease their involvement in the fictional world and begin to consider the real world. This suspension of involvement results in the ceasing of transportation due to the explicit recognition that the narrative world is not the real world (Green, 2008).

Simultaneously, however, personal involvement creates greater potential for future transportation. The relation between the real world events and those of the narrative create a more favorable environment for readers to feel interested or involved in the narrative (Wirth, Hartmann, Brocking, Vorderer, Klimmt, Schramm, 2007). Though, personal involvement immediately interrupts narrative transportation, it can greatly increase transportation as the explicit connection between real and fictional

begins to fade, and becomes an understood connection, no longer necessitating conscious recognition.

Repeated exposure as an element is relatively rare in comparison to most transportation experiences. For repeated exposure to happen a reader/viewer must either find a narrative so engaging that they wish to rewatch or reread it several times, or they must find themselves engaged in narratives with very similar content. An example of similar content could be found in the fantasy literature world. Though the many fantasy literature novels are written by different authors and include varying plots, they often draw on similar lore. Many of them even include the same kinds of characters, such as goblins, dwarves, elves, etc.

Repeated exposure to similar concepts allow the reader/viewer to gain fluency in the language, and become more proficient in understanding the narrative world, increasing transportation potential (Green, 2008). Additionally, repeated exposure may create expert reader/viewers. These experts have a substantial understanding of the narrative, before they engage it, and are capable of noticing details not readily seen by the untrained reader/viewer. These details are theorized to heighten the cognitive component of narrative transportation (Bortolussi and Dixon, 1996). Finally, repeated exposure offers the potential for reader/viewers to reconnect with favorite characters and participate in parasocial interaction, the act of enjoying a fictional relationship with a fictional character, and for reader/viewers to enjoy particularly exciting events in that they remember from that interaction (Tannenbaum, 1985).

It is important to note, however, that repeated exposure also has the potential to limit transportation. Curiosity and suspense are often reduced in a repeated reading (Brewer, 1996), which are both likely to increase involvement and transportation (Zillman, 1991; 1994). Though it is more common for rereading to decrease suspense or curiosity, Gerrig (1993) found that some readers actually maintain levels of suspense through multiple readings.

Narrative Transportation and Video Games

One of the most critical concepts of narrative transportation is that the effects and causes of transportation are interrelated. Previous knowledge or experience of content can increase perception of realism, which can in turn increase transportation. Increase in transportation is associated with an increase in perceived realism and presence (Green, 2004; Green and Brock, 2000, 2002; Peng, 2009). In short, the presence of any of these elements has the potential to increase the other elements and increase the level of effect on the reader/viewer.

In modern video games all of these elements are highly sought after by developers. Role playing games in particular pay attention to the elements of personal involvement and previous knowledge. Many games, such as *Mass Effect* (2008) and *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) compose massive literatures on the history and culture of the fictional world created by the game. These literatures are contained within the game and can be read at the player's leisure or sometimes as a requirement, forcing the player to gain knowledge of the culture, before they can participate in it. Additionally, role

playing games make an explicit effort to emotionally engage the player in the story through their interactions with non-player characters, increasing the level of personal involvement in both the narrative environment and the progress of the story.

Finally, realism can be seen as the ultimate goal of many video game developers. This realism takes form in complex physics engines which simulate reality, realistic character development which reflects the complexity of human nature, and constantly advancing graphic technology which displays the virtual world ever more closely to the real world.

Narrative Transportation in Video Game Research

Narrative in the game has been a subject of much theoretical debate for many years. The theoretical nature of the interaction between the player, the game and the immersion which may or may not result has come from researchers in fields such as literature, information technology and game development. One of the fields most recognized scholars, Marie-Laure Ryan was among the first to address the idea of transportation by drawing a distinction between "immersion" and "interactivity" (2001). Ryan saw immersion as an idea which can be compared closely to transportation, but claimed that it was in direct conflict with the more prevalent interactivity, which represented the co-creation of story through game play (2001). This perspective supports the much more Ludologist style theories of the game, and makes the claim that interactivity cannot coexist with true narrative.

More recently, researchers from the social sciences have begun to address the presence of narrative and narrative transportation in video games from their own perspectives, resulting in drastically different conceptualizations. One of the most productive examples of this literature is the research of Wei Peng in the realm of video game transportation and agency (2008). Peng 's work highlights the difference between previous forms of narrative and the modern video game by building on the theories of interactivity and immersion popularized by researchers such as Ryan (2001, 2008).

Peng combines the ideas of enactive experience and observational experience from social cognitive theory, or SCT, (Bandura, 1997) to attempt an explanation of the self-efficacy of game players based on narrative. Bandura theorized that the two ways in which a person could learn behavioral change were through enactive experience, the actual participation in a mind-changing event, and through observational experience, in which third parties learn through the mistakes and triumphs of others (1997).

Peng's theory combines these concepts into an idea of mediated experience, in which players can gain enactive experience through the mediated video game. Peng's basis for this theory is the narrative immersion experienced by players of RPGs and their identification with their avatars (2008). Peng's following experimental research indicates that narrative play a strong role in determining game effects. She found that the presence of strong narrative increased the mediated enactive experience, making it more effective in convincing players to adopt a healthy diet (2008).

Narrative transportation has also been explored directly by scholars in the communication field. Schneider et al. found that the ability of a video game to affect

aggressive behavior in a player is greatly increased by quality and emphasis on story in the game (2004). Additionally, the research of Konijn, Bijvank, and Bushman investigated the effects of realism in the video game (2007).

Their research used realism as a manipulation of narrative transportation and immersion into the game, operating on the understanding that increased perceived realism would increase transportation/immersion experienced by players. Konijn, Bijvank, and Bushman then used an aggression index to measure the effect of transportation on the participants. The findings indicated that the level of realism directly affected narrative transportation and had a direct positive correlation with character identification, which in turn had a positive correlation with increased aggression. In short, the more immersed or transported into the game narrative the player felt, the more likely they were experience a cognitive effect (increased aggression) from playing a game.

Psychological Theory on Moral Development

"In a developmental context, it is shown how the operant-learning paradigm – with its emphasis on action and extrinsic stimuli – can account for both moral behavior and moral rules as joint outcomes of conditioning processes."

"Moral behavior is a result ultimately of socio-environmental contingencies effected by the consequences resulting from the behavior. Because the behavior is learned, it can be modified/managed, even reversed or eliminated."

-Excerpts from Jacob L. Gerwitz and Martha Pelaez-Nogueras "Proximal Mechanisms Underlying the Acquisition of Moral Behavior Patterns" (1991).

In any potential academic study the researcher must take time to ask the most important and inconvenient question of all: so what? Evidence must be given that the conclusions of the research will contribute knowledge of some importance to the field of study. The most central concept in this project is moral choice. But, how does moral choice in a video game impact the field of communication or the world we live in? A critical assumption of this project is that the potential for players to learn concepts of morality and moral reasoning from a video game exists.

Davidson and Youniss propose that children experience their morality through relationships with parents and other adults (1991). However, we live in a society where children are increasingly left in the care of a digital babysitter as mommy and daddy go to their second job. The video game and television are increasingly becoming primary sources of learning for children whose parents are unable, uncaring, or otherwise not socializing them into normality. The video game offers satisfaction of many developmental factors.

Levels of Development

Selman defined five levels of social development which were based on perspective taking. The levels increased in complexity as a person ages and is able to adjust their view to encompass the viewpoints of others and of increasingly abstract concepts such as societal needs and constraints (1980). The video game provides for the

acceptance of a different perspective as a requirement of its play. One does not play a video game as themselves (at least not until technology allows), but as a character within the setting, and from that characters view the player must always see their new world. Selman and later Keller and Edelstein posited that the moral development is also subject to self review and expectation outside of true reward or punishment (Selman 1980, Keller and Edelstein 1991). Given a system of expectation of consequences, a person will normalize behavioral patterns based on a presumed outcome of external and internal sanctions. Those sanctions can include guilt, punishment, forcible justification, anticipation of praise, or pride (Keller and Edelstein 1991).

Given the increasingly complex nature of morality systems in video games (*Mass Effect* 2008*, Jade Empire* 2005*, Knights of the Old Republic* 2002*, Fallout* 1997*, Fallout 3* 2008*)* which incorporate extensive systems of punishment and reward based on actions in a moral setting, the video game presents itself as an increasingly capable model of moral behavior. For instance a child can play *Mass Effect* and elect to either act towards a figure of military authority with resentment and disdain or to act like "an officer and a gentleman" (2008). The consequences of this act of defying or accepting authority are presented immediately in a form of differentiating rewards and punishments. Given these consequences the child can then project a new model of how to treat authority figures based on the models of Selman (1980) and Keller and Edelstein (1991).

Empathy

Finally we consider empathy as a motivation for moral development. It is believed that empathy may also play a distinct role in moral development. That empathy is activated when seeing someone in distress that does not have to be present and can activate feelings of guilt, distress, or empathetic anger (Hoffman, 1991). Hoffman also proposed that empathetic effects may provide motivation of operation of moral principles (1991). Finally, he believed that that empathy would be activated when the person in distress could be helped by the empathetic subject and when the empathetic subject could identify with the distressed.

This theory plays into video games twofold. It is the nature of the RPG that the player be increasingly powerful and almost constantly more powerful than all those around him or her. This mechanic is essential to game play and its violation would result in an unplayable RPG. As a powerful agent within the game the player possesses the ability to help or hurt those in distress and is often capable of doing so without great effort. Additionally, it is most likely that players of video games are not all powerful agents within their own lives. They are unlikely to have complete control and power to change their own situations and solve their problems. Empathy, however, is not situation specific. Hoffman theorized that distressed individual could be empathized with depending on the involved parties. For instance, even a sociopath could be empathized with by another sociopath (1991). It is therefore much more likely that the game player would identify greatly with the distressed character within the game. This would create an ideal situation based on Hoffman's theory to activate empathetic distress

as a powerful agent capable of acting on a potentially familiar character in a situation and therefore stimulate an elaborate moral developmental model (1991).

Psychological theories of moral development propose that people gain most of their moral grounding through two methods: experience of consequence and empathetic observation. The video game as a medium is unique in that it offers the ability for players to experience both of these, simultaneously. The combination of players experiencing the consequences of their choices and observing the consequences on characters they empathize and identify with creates a situation in which there is high potential for moral development.

Videogames and Morality in Research

The current literature on video games which involves complex concepts of morality is quite limited. It could be argued that studies of effects in gaming involving violence, sexuality or criminal behavior incorporate morality on some level, as it can be argued that any of these three things possesses a natural morality or immorality violence (Arriaga et al., 2008; Barlet et al., 2008; Eastin and Grifiths, 2006; Dill and Thill, 2007; Power, 2008). However, effects based studies which include these concepts consider morality as an afterthought.

There are, however, several scholars who have conducted notable research into morality through the medium of video games. The first study was conducted by Moshe Sherer in Israel. Sherer sought to measure the effects of a computer simulation on the moral development of a group of junior high and high school students (1998). Sherer

used a linear progression model which measured only the ability of the participants to reason morally on a simplistic ethical connotation of good and bad. The participants received negative points for bad decisions and positive points for good decisions, and were randomly assigned points for some decisions to stimulate the interest and cognitive process of the students.

Sherer cautiously reported finding that the students' overall capability of moral reasoning had advanced on the basic MOTEC moral development measure (Ziv, 1976). Sherer cautioned that the sample size was small, but the findings within her study were sound and accurately predicted that the capacity of simulation would inevitably increase quickly in the technological age, but never returned to this work.

The second work on morality in video games was a thesis paper written by Peter Rauch of M.I.T. (2007). Rauch did not discuss in his work the ability of the game to affect the player, but instead the ability of the game to display a solid moral message. Though Rauch's conclusions are suspect, as he often over-generalizes and over-simplifies, he is to be commended on being the first person to ever write specifically on the subject in an academic manner. Rauch found in his case study that the RPG has great potential for moral message, but has not yet reached a level of singular message to create proper context for that morality. By taking on several case studies, Rauch came to the conclusion that the video game, in its modern state, created far too many conflicts in message. He believed that that no solid moral axiom could exist in a virtual world where one must do certain things in order to progress the story.

Additionally, Rauch claims that the systems of punishment and reward within video games are still far too simplistic and that the grounds on which "good" and "bad" are determined are too open to interpretation. An example that Rauch uses to illustrate this point is an early stage in the game *Fable.* Rauch uses several moral situations in the game to illustrate that the game creates too many situations in which the player could ask "why did I get a bad point for this?" Rauch's critical failing, however, is that he uses *Fable*, a game which is filled with poorly thought out moral situations in comparison to its many competitors, as a means of making generalizations about all games.

He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster... when you gaze long into the abyss the abyss also gazes into you...

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the role of agency in the process of gamers' engagement with morality in video games?

RQ2: What is the role of character identification in the process of gamers' engagement with morality in video games?

RQ3: What is the role of narrative transportation in the process of gamers' engagement with morality in video games?

CHAPTER V

METHODOLOGY

Data for this project was collected using focus groups. Category 1 was three focus groups made up of gamers recruited from public pool, Category 2 was one focus group of gamers recruited from college populations and Category 3 was two focus groups made of non- gamers. For the purposes of this study gamer will be defined through self report of participants. Each participant was asked to report the hours/week which they play video games, when completing the information sheet prior to participating (appendix B-2). Participants who play 5+ hours/week will be considered gamers. Data collected will be analyzed with a basic grounded theory approach.

Grounded Theory and the Use of Focus Groups

In order to create usable data from the interviews and focus group I have used a grounded theory analysis approach (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). Because so little previous research has been done in this field, it seems most logical to approach the process with no theoretical basis and no assumptions. There are risks associated with this type of approach (sometimes a lack of theoretical focus can result in difficulty when attempting to make conclusions), but in this situation it is both necessary and rewarding to use this approach. The benefit, however, far outweighs that small risk. In conducting the coding and thematic analysis of the text of the focus group, several unexpected themes may appear. With grounded theory it was possible to analyze all themes evenly

to determine which themes are likely to have bearing on the research question or on the field of communication as a whole.

Focus groups were determined as the proper method for data collection based on the use of grounded theory as an analytical and theoretical tool. Grounded theory lends itself to focus groups for several reasons. First, grounded theory requires a substantial amount of data. If claims are to be made with little previous literature, the researcher must ensure that enough data is present to substantiate any claim made. Focus groups are logistically capable of creating large amounts of data in a very short amount of time. The focus group setting allows for 4-8 participants to be asked the same questions at the same time. With eight people in a room there is always an answer to a question and often the participants will debate with or respond to specific answers and comments. This style of research often results in data saturation, however, in a situation such as this where little to nothing has been written on the topic, there is no such thing as too much data.

Secondly, focus group as a research method encourages discussion between participants. In many research situations researchers find themselves asking "what if participant 2 could have heard what participant 3 said". It is often the case that participants can have their opinions on the subject matter challenged or changed within the research setting. When attempting to understand some phenomenon, this occurrence could be seen as detrimental to the research, however, when studying a socialized culture such as gamers, it is a more natural setting for gamers to be able to discuss rather than simply be listened to by an interviewer.

Recruitment

Public Gamers

Recruitment for Category 1 was enacted by two of the standard methods: the use of fliers in relevant areas (e.g. video stores) and announcements in university class rooms. Fliers were created to recruit participants from the Bryan/ College Station area. These fliers (appendix B-1) give basic information about the study that would be conducted, the requirements for participation, how the participants would be compensated and an email contact. Fliers were placed in several public locations which were chosen for their likelihood to be frequented by gamers. The primary locations were commercial retail centers which carried a substantial number of video games for sale or rent. These included, but were not limited to the commercial chains such as Blockbuster Video®, Hastings Video® and Pay N Play Game Exchange®. Several comic book stores, table top gaming locations and coffee shops also agreed to post fliers, as these are cultures which often coincide with gamer culture. In addition, several fliers were placed in the Communication Department building at Texas A&M.

Any emails that are received were responded to in accordance with the approved IRB format (appendix B-3). Each person who sent an email was replied to with a standardized message including the detailed information sheet for the study (appendix B-4), a request for participation availability, a request for contact information and a brief message of our appreciation of their interest. The information sheet and the email detailed the requirements of participants, the risks associated with the study (minimal to

none), participant compensation and scheduling logistics. If the contact responded and completed all necessary information, they were notified that they would be contacted as soon as a time slot was available to them.

In addition to posting fliers, gamers were recruited from classes in the Communication Department at Texas A&M. I announced the information to the class before the lecture begins and a sign-up sheet (appendix B-5) requesting basic contact information was passed to the class. All personal and contact information provided to myself by the participants was placed in a secure location with only myself and Dr. Srivi Ramasubramanian having access.

Each of the publicly recruited participants was compensated for their completion of the focus group. Upon arriving, participants were offered pizza dinner and an assortment of drinks. In addition, participants were each offered a $10 gift certificate card to a retail chain. To ensure that Category 1 will be made up of gamers, fliers and class announcements stated that participants "must play a minimum of 10 hours per week." In addition to this, there was a basic age requirement posted on the fliers and announced in class. Each participant was required to be a minimum of 18 years of age in order to have the legal and mental ability to make the decision to participate. A summary of each focus group is located in Table 1.

Student Gamers

Category 2 was composed of equal level gamers to that of Category 1. The only differences was in the recruitment and compensation of participants. Rather than being recruited from public, participants in Category 2 were recruited directly from the Comm

460, an undergraduate class concerning theoretical approaches to the study and development of video games at Texas A&M (Fall, 2009). These participants did not receive monetary compensation for their participation. Instead, their participation was counted as a lab assignment and they were given class credit for attending.

Student Non-Gamers

Category 3 will be composed of non-gamers. The inclusion of a non-gamer category was necessary for one primary reason: the non-gamers were not acclimatized to the level of complexity in videogames that the gamers were. In fact, few of the participants in the non-gamer groups played a video game featuring the moral systems outlined earlier in this study. The non-gamers therefore had a separate perspective on the issue than that of the gamers. It is unknown what that perspective will entail, but to ignore that perspective would be to ignore a substantial portion of the culture being studied. With the rise of social gaming as an acceptable social activity for youth, many people find themselves observing game play even though they are not gamers. It would be fallacious to assume, then that only gamer populations are influential in or influenced by the phenomenon discussed within this study.

The non-gamers were included in separate focus groups for two reasons. First, the non-gamers recruited were assumed to be predominately women. This assumption was found to be correct. It is, therefore, logical that the separate demographic group be allowed a separate space in which to express their opinions. This brings to light the second reason: it is predicted that the non-gamers will have distinctly different opinions

than those expressed by the gamers. Because the gamers would also have the advantage of having more experience and authority with the issues discussed in the focus groups, it would be illogical and unscientific to ask that the non-gamers be forced to compete for voice in a group where they may easily feel overpowered. The participants from Category 3 were recruited and compensated in the exact manner as those in Category 2. Figure 4-1 illustrates the breakdown of groups and the additional information that will be recorded.

Table 1: Summary of Focus Group Participation

Category	**Group**	**Hrs in Discussion**	**Number of Participants**	**Male/Female**
Category 1	*Group 1*	2	8	5/3
	Group 2	2	7	6/1
	Group 3	2.25	7	7/0
Category 2	*Group 4*	1.75	6	2/4
Category 3	*Group 5*	1.25	4	2/2
	Group 6	1.75	6	1/6

Focus Group Questions

The following is a justification of the use of each guideline question to be used during the focus group process. I will discuss how each question was formed, its theoretical basis in the discussed literature and the goals it seeks to achieve.

The first line of questioning is not intended to further the research goals of the current study directly. Rather, the questions are aimed at promoting general discussion within the group. The question was explicitly worded to account for any potential answer, so that any and all participants could share their opinions. The follow up questions were meant to elicit a lengthier response in cases where the initial responses were limited. The goal being to illustrate to participants that the environment of the study is safe and social and that they should feel encouraged to be honest and open.

The following questions will focus on how the players define moral choice in game play. Most important to the forming of the following questions is that they are not proceeded by an explanation of moral choice in video games. In each group, the words "moral choice" will be defined as the group sees fit. It is very likely that the group will have already discussed the concept of choice on some level as the current most popular titles all benefit from being customizable. The wording of the questions is therefore designed to encourage participants to define moral choice as they see fit, at least in the onset of the focus group. Since participants are being encouraged to define moral choice themselves, examples are asked for. This will give me some idea as to the gamers' individual experience with moral choice in gaming and produce discussion amongst

participants as they share examples and expand each others' understanding of moral choice in the game.

Because specific aspects and effects of moral choices in video games are explored by later questions, a general, open ended follow up question will be used to encourage the widest range of responses, before later questions limit the participants' focus and conceptualization of the topic. In short, it will ask what they think of the topic, before I as a researcher interfere too much with their thought process.

Question 3 was meant to narrow the focus of the moral choice discussion. It will be preceeded with a brief description of moral standing if one has not already been given during the discussion. The initial question is open ended and allows for a great diversity of responses. The focus on narrative is intended to highlight the first of many aspects of what I am considering "importance". The narrative aspect question will be followed with probing questions with the goal of defining how morality in the game and moral choices in the game actually affect the story lines and the narrative meaning of the story line. In this case, narrative meaning describes the lessons or concepts which can be implied by a story. For instance, in the famous tortoise and the hare story, the plot is simply about a race, but the narrative meaning is a lesson on hard work, laziness and pride. This will likely be done through the analysis of examples provided by the participants. If the initial question fails to elicit responses directly related to the affects of morality on the story line or narrative meaning, the second, more specific question will be asked to help guide the participants towards the direction of the study.

Question 4 directly addresses the second aspect of "importance" as defined by this study: character identification. At this point in the discussion, it is likely that each participant will have begun referencing specific games, when discussing the previous questions. If participants are still discussing the concepts in abstracts (i.e. not with references to real games), I will wait to ask this question. The is because question 4 will be likely to elicit a more specific and thought out response if the participants already have in mind a character.

The overall goal of question 4 is to determine the participants' likelihood to identify with a player character in a game with moral choices. Though terms such as "easier" or "harder" are not commonly used in the literature of character identification or communication theory, it seemed prudent to simplify the concept in order to present it to the participants without needing to allot a substantial amount of time to explain it. The initial question is open ended to allow for neutral responses. Because this question can be seen has having two mutually exclusive answers, it is possible that the group may overwhelmingly choose one answer. However, in the interest of hearing all voices, follow up questions were designed to encourage those who may see themselves as being "the odd one out" to voice their opinion on the subject.

Questions 5 and 6 deal directly with the agency aspect of the discussion. Question 5 reintroduces the concept of narrative and the effect moral choice might have on a narrative. However, question 5 is worded in a way which empowers the player character as the driving force of change. This question was designed to revisit the

concepts of question 3, but from a perspective which encouraged participants to consider their own agency in the matter as key element.

Question 6 again addresses agency. However, question 6 attempts to explore the non physical agency which player often have. It is likely that the majority of responses to question 5 will pertain to agency of the player character in action. Question 6 will explore the agency which comes from being able to choose what you say to the non-player characters. I It was necessary to make the distinction as there is no information available on the subject, and additional details could lead to an increased understanding of the phenomena discussed in this study. The follow up questions for question 6 are again aimed at increasing the knowledge gained from this study by investigating the related categories separately. In this case the questions separate the effects of moral agency on the perception of the game into two categories: perception of agency with player character and perception of agency with non-player character.

Because qualitative research is often based on understanding the perspectives and ideas held by participants, it can be very helpful to be open with the participants. In each focus group I ended the discussion by explaining my personal involvement with the topic and explaining my research. I then asked the group what is essentially my research question. Though each question before 7 was aimed at answering 7, it is unlikely that the answer is complete or that the questions are complete. The final question is a way of making up for any gaps in the discussion by allowing the participants to add any commentary or bring up anything which they find unclear in regards to the actual research question. In short, the final question is a kind of scattershot question aimed at

hitting anything missed by the first six questions. The full list of focus group questions is located in the appendix (appendix C-1).

Discussion of Appendix Items

Participants being recruited from public domains were recruited with the use of a flier (appendix B-1). The flier will indicate the basic nature of the study and inform potential participants that they will be compensated for their time. Additionally, each flier will have contact information on it. Fliers will be posted in high pedestrian traffic areas on campus as well as in commercial businesses with high foot traffic. Fliers will specifically be located in commercial businesses selling or renting videogames.

The screening questionnaire (appendix B-2) will be used to gather information which will determine which group (gamers/non-gamers) each participant is assigned to. The questionnaire will ask for age and gender, which will not be considered during any part of the data collection phase, but recorded only for purposes of data analysis. Participants will also be asked for contact information and availability for scheduling purposes. Finally, the screening questionnaire will include a short survey asking participants to rate their video game usage and provide examples of favorite games. This section will allow researchers to determine which group (gamers/non-gamers) each participants should be assigned to.

When participants contact researchers they will be responded to either by phone or by email. Responses will follow the recruitment scripts in appendix B-3. During initial contact, researchers will supply any potential participants with an information

sheet (appendix B-4) containing all necessary information for them to make an educated decision on their participation. The information sheet will include basic Internal Review Board information such as notification of audio recording and details on participant compensation. Additional information regarding the Internal Review Board and the application for research approval will be located in appendix B-5 in the final edition of this project.

Finally, the focus group questions and explanations of purpose for each can be found in appendix C-1. Each question is followed by a brief description of its theoretical goal in the study.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS

As a whole, the focus group method proved incredibly effective in creating a relevant data set for answering the initial research questions. Participants were exceedingly cooperative both with the overall goals of the research and with each other. This resulted in highly productive focus groups in which a substantial amount of information was exchanged. Additionally, because the participants shared a common interest in gaming (a community which is famous for its devotion), they were willing to divulge much more about their personal experiences with gaming, in detail, than expected.

After transcribing and coding the collected data, several themes and clusters were identified. There were two major categories of themes: (I) morality and (II) narrative, and (III) character. The first theme category, morality, is broken into the three sub-categories of (a) decisions, (b) ignoring morality, and (c) recognizing moral content. The second major category, narrative and character is broken into the four sub-categories of (d) narrative transportation, (e) character identification, (f) altering the narrative, and (g) altering the character.

Each sub-category possesses several themes. Each of the themes in a sub-category represents a collection of related ideas, which either individual participants or the sample as a whole emphasized. Though, the sub-categories overlap at points, they are mostly self-contained and the themes they contain are highly relevant to each other.

The themes occasionally refer to very general ideas, however, for the most part the individual themes are broken down in a way which allows them to refer to only highly specific concepts presented by project participants. In this section I will outline the makeup of these themes, give examples of their being used/ talked about by participants, and illustrate relationships between themes. A brief outline of the themes is shown below in Table 2.

Table 2*:* Thematic Structure of Findings

Sub-Category	Theme	Theme	Theme	Theme
Decisions	Outcomes	Plot relevancy	Playing with morality	
Ignoring morality	Playing with NPCs	Greed is Good	Nihilism	Game completion
Recognizing moral content	Seeing the consequences	Complexity and simplicity of morals		
Narrative transportation	Being in the world	Meeting the people	Getting in the zone	
Changing the narrative	Making it your story	How I changed the world		
Character identification	Customization 1.0	Customization 2.0	Similarity	Multiple play-throughs

I- Morality

The first major category of themes is the (I) morality category. This major category contains substantially more diverse themes in comparison to the major categories (II) narrative and (III) character. Because all major categories overlap at specific points, it was necessary to provide a clear distinction. Morality is often

dependent on character and narrative on many levels. Likewise, narratives and character development often depend on morality to play a key role in storytelling. The major category (I) morality was separated based on the fact that participants often used character and narrative to discuss morality. However, themes contained within major category (I) morality are the themes aimed at discussing morality or specifically attempting to discuss morality. This includes themes which require the use of narrative or character, but ultimately address moral issues. The sub-categories to be discussed in this section are (a) decisions, (b) ignoring morality, and (c) recognizing moral content.

A-Decisions

The (a) decisions sub-category is the most directly relevant to the initial research goals of this project. (a) Decisions, in this context, does not refer to all points during a game in which a player has the option to do one thing or another. By that definition (a) decisions would include every time the player had to decide to go left or right, decide to pick up a new gun or keep the one they had, fight an enemy or retreat, or turn the game off or keep playing. Instead, the sub-category (a) decisions refers to the specific moral decisions which could potentially be measured by the Scales and MAPs systems outlined in Chapter III of this document. These include decisions in which the player must mentally weight the ethical connotations of their actions or inaction, and make a choice as to how to behave.

The (a) decisions sub-category contains eight specific themes. These themes are (1) “outcomes”, (2) “plot relevancy”, (3) “playing with morality”.

1-Outcomes

The first theme in the sub-category (a) decisions is (1) "outcomes". This theme was first introduced during the second focus group. After the second focus group, the theme began to appear more often. There are two sub-themes in (1) "outcomes", obvious and hidden. Obvious outcomes refers to a specific viewpoint on how morality in gaming is written. Players focused on this theme were often expressing frustration that they were not finding it challenging to differentiate between the "good" and "bad" choices during a moral encounter. As one participant said:

> *Like, the only thing, if you were the good guy, you just saved a couple people. Bad guy, you destroy a town and you kill puppies.*

To her, this decision was obvious. Either you were extremely evil or you were extremely good. The decision, in her eyes, had no real moral conundrum. Instead it offered clear choice of being bad or good. Many players expressed a desire to be challenged by videogames on some level. Though no players in the study made specific reference to wanting difficulty in the moral decisions presented, several expressed that simple decisions with nothing but the thinnest moral context were unrewarding. Another participant, in a later group mentioned was discussing *Mass Effect* (2009) with the others in the group. He was explaining that each time you were engaged in dialogue, the player could easily see which dialogue option corresponded with which moral standard. The

dialogue was, in fact, color coded to make the connotation of each statement as obvious as possible. The participant complained:

> *Each one is shaded green, grey, or red, to tell you which the positive or negative influence is of it. I think that actually breaks some of the, I guess, the immersion in it.*

The frustration expressed by this participant is indicative of how all participants which emphasized this theme felt. Though it would be erroneous to assume that all participants wished to be confronted with difficult moral decisions, it was obvious that those who wished to see moral decisions in games also wished those decisions to be somewhat complex.

The second sub-theme in (2) "outcomes" is hidden outcomes. Hidden outcomes are very much the opposite of obvious outcomes. This theme was most prominent in players who expressed interest in games with substantial amounts of moral content. Hidden outcomes refer to the idea that players do not know if what they are doing will be considered "good" or "bad" by the moral measurement standard of the videogame they are playing. For instance, I may believe that what I am doing would be considered justified, but when the videogame registers my action it assigns my actions a meaning that I did not intend or consider. For Example:

I think one of the missions was there was a guy who's paranoid, and you go talk to him and you go talk to him, and basically as you're talking to him, you find out that he thinks people are watching him or whatever. Then as you're walking away from him, a guard sort of steps out from behind something and goes, "Are you talking to so and so? You should be careful. He's a …" And so they start to give you sort of both sides, and you have to, by talking to other characters, try to figure out which side you want to, I guess, to be friends with. I think that works really well.

As this participant implies, with more challenge in a moral decision comes more satisfaction. Specifically, this participant found that the decision was more fun to make, because he did not know if the character in question was simply paranoid or if the conveniently appearing guard was actually part of some conspiracy. Though this theme was only explicitly mentioned a few times, it surfaced as an implication on many occasions over the course of all of the focus groups.

2- Plot Relevance

The third theme, (2) "plot relevance", refers to a moral decision made by players and their relationship to the overall plot of the game. The participants indicated to major aspects of (2) "plot relevance", relevant and irrelevant decisions. Many players expressed that decisions which affect the overall plot were substantially more engaging than plot irrelevant decisions. Participants indicated that they felt less inclined to

consider the consequences of their actions when they did not think that the overall story would be changed. As one player put it:

> *It comes to the situation to where it's like, "I have to save the guy," or save the girl, and how do I do this, or whatever, and you can't do both. And having the moral choice between choosing to try to save both or choosing one or the other, if it actually makes a difference, I think it makes it to where it makes it that much more immersive to where it is your experience. It's your choice, not just … you're not just watching the movie, or you're not just watching an interactive story. A linear story that you can control.*

These plot relevant decisions vary in both importance and context. For instance, the decisions may appear to be utterly irrelevant, but be discovered to be extremely important at a later time. Additionally, choices can be as unimportant as gender of the playable character, which has very little effect on the overall plot of the game, to deciding if the playable character should decide to help the antagonist, which would completely change the ending of the story.

3- Playing with Morality

The last theme of sub-category (a) decisions is (3) "playing the morality". There are four sub-themes present. Those sub-themes are "trying to be good", "trying to be bad", "trying to role play", and "trying to be yourself". These themes all refer to in

game behavioral patterns self-reported by participant during focus groups. The themes are not a reference to a specific set of actions, rather they are a reference to a desire to behave according to a certain standard. Trying to be good and trying to be bad are the simplest versions of these behavioral patterns. Trying to be good refers to a desire of players to use each interaction to achieve the maximum number of "good" morality points in a game.

This theme, however, does not refer to any and all actions. Instead, it refers only to decisions where the player can be "good" or "bad" in a way that affects their overall moral standing in the videogame. This does not necessarily mean that they accomplish their goal. Often, the outcome of their actions is not obvious or the player is motivated by another source to act in a less than altruistic manner. However, neither "trying to be good" or "trying to be bad" necessitate that the player succeeds in achieving their goal. They are, instead, a reference to the idea that players are wishing to direct their actions towards a single philosophy. As one participant said:

> *Just do whatever you want and it's not going to really matter. You're going to know it's wrong, but I want to do it anyway to see what happens.*

It is important to note that when players reference this theme, they are indicating that they are attempting to adhere to the moral standard of the game they are playing. That is to say, they are not attempting to be "good" or "bad" by their own standards.

They are attempting to adhere to the standard of moral "good" or "bad" as introduced by the videogame.

Unlike "trying to be good" and "trying to be bad", "trying to role play" is a sub-theme that indicates a desire to adhere to a specific behavioral pattern not necessarily defined by the videogame. This often means that players decided before they began playing that they were going to act in a specific fashion. Participants reported playing varying roles, from pacifists, who refused to hurt anyone in the game unless absolutely necessary, to sociopaths, who even hurt those who helped them. As one participant said:

> *I have the identity of the character there, so I don't do anything that that character wouldn't do.*

The goal of playing a specific role was not directly addressed in the focus group sessions, however, more than one participant indicated that the act of playing a role both increases the challenge of playing a game, and increases the transportation into the narrative world, as the player takes on a persona which fits the setting.

The sub-theme "trying to be yourself" is the direct opposite of "trying to role play". "Trying to be yourself" is a theme which surfaced as players indicated that they often attempted to play through videogames as if they were the main character. One participant noted that each player had a different set of characteristics, which could lead to different gaming styles:

Each person brings to the table their own background, culture and morality.

This sub-theme was more often referenced by participants than "trying to role play". "Trying to be yourself" was closely related to (1) outcomes. Participants often used these themes in conjunction, indicating that they were more interested in the outcome of their actions, when they were attempting to act as they believe they normally would in the presented situation.

B-Ignoring Morality

The second sub-category of major category (I) morality is (b) ignoring morality. These themes necessitated separation from the (a) decisions category for several reasons. Most importantly, while it could be argued that every action involved some level of moral consideration, the themes indicated in the (b) ignoring morality sub-category refer directly to players' explicit recognition that morality in a videogame has no real world consequences. These themes reflect the tendency of some players to act in highly anti-social or absolutely illogical ways in order to accomplish a number of different goals. Because all of these themes refer to the same basic action of ignoring the moral consequences and implications of an action, they are separated and organized based on their ultimate goals. These themes, named for the goal they are associated with, include (4) "playing with NPCs", (5) "greed is good", (6)"nihilism", and (7) "game completion".

4-Playing with NPCs

The first theme in sub-category (b) ignoring morality is (4) "playing with NPCs". An NPC (non-player character) is a term used by gamers and game developers to indicate any anthropomorphic character in a videogame that is not the player. The theme (4) "playing with NPCs" is in reference to an explicit desire to experiment with the NPCs in a game by taking certain action with the sole purpose of seeing how the NPCs are affected. This theme can appear in many different actions. Participants often referenced in game occurrences in which they would attack an NPC (or multiple NPCS) simply to see them die in a specific way. Other times, players would say something to an NPC (often something crude or utterly inappropriate) simply to hear the reaction of the NPC. The best example of this theme's occurrence comes from the first focus group conducted.

> *Games like Oblivion and Fallout 3, where you can spend 30 hours not even doing the main quest, just going and killing people or helping people or setting them on fire. Stuff like that. I have some fun in Oblivion.*

5-Greed is Good

One of the more interesting themes to emerge from the major category (I) morality is the (5) "greed is good". The greed is good theme is exactly what it sounds like. This theme is in references to statements by participants that their actions were motivated solely by a desire to amass more in game wealth. This theme often exists

within moral conundrums, but operates without regard to them. Participants referencing the (5) "greed is good" theme implied that the "goodness" or "badness" of an action was often irrelevant to their game play style. Instead, the player simply did what would get them the most amount of money. For example this participant explains that even though she was attempting to play a specific role, the introduction of a monetary reward to her character altered her usual in game behavior.

> *But I have the identity of the character there, so I don't do anything that that character wouldn't do. And she didn't want to blow it up, but she didn't want to live Tympani. She wanted to do something else, but she blew it up anyways. They offered me money!*

The (5) "greed is good" theme could be construed as being associated with the concepts of deontological permissible harm or with the basic tenants of consequentialist ethics. If this association were made, it would be quite easy to make the argument that greedy actions were simply taken in order to achieve the "greater good" of strengthening the player's financial situation and increasing the player's chance of success in their mission. However, the (5) "greed is good" theme refers specifically to situations in which the participant was more interested in hording in game possession or increasing their virtual net-worth than actually accomplishing any goals set by the videogame.

6- Nihilism

The third theme in this sub-category is (6) "nihilism". (6) "Nihilism" is, simply put, the complete disregard for anything that can be considered ethical or social meaning in the world. The ethical concept of nihilism is much more complex, however, the game play theme apparent in the text of the focus groups is not. Players indicated on many occasions that they often played videogames in a manner that disregarded all social conventions and thrived only on immediate satisfaction. Game play like this was not often reported in reference to RPGs, as there are usually consequences associated with such behavior in RPGs. Instead, this theme was more often present in reference to "sandbox" style videogames like the *Grand Theft Auto* series. As one player said about *Fallout 3* (2008):

I'm a little schizophrenic in the game because I would help people and then kill people.

7-Game Completion Motive

The final theme in sub-category (b) ignoring morality is (7) "game completion motive". This was, by far, the most common theme in sub-category (b) ignoring morality. In brief, this theme was representative of "completionist" desires in participants. The basic element of this theme is that players will often take an action for no other reason that it is the easiest or most efficient way of completing the game. This appears most often in reference to in game dialogue. When players are presented with a

list of dialogue options from which to choose, they often reported randomly choosing or not reading the options at all. Instead, they simply selected a random option in order to expedite the conversation and the overall process of beating the game.

> *Yeah, I'm one of those. I'm a level 70, but then I still have to go visit them and let them know about my awesomeness!*

As this quote implies, participants also indicated a desire to experience every possible encounter in the game, as a secondary form of completion. Some said this was out of a desire to get their money's worth from an expensive game, while others simply claimed to enjoy continuing to play a game even after the primary goals had been completed. An example of this theme would be:

C-Recognizing Moral Content

The final sub-category in major category (I) morality is (c) recognizing moral content. In sub-category (a) decisions players indicated that they were capable of recognizing the content which referred to moral or ethical concepts, however, the themes contained within (a) decisions are focused on ethical content only as it pertains to the rule of game play or the effects on the participants' gaming experience. This can include affecting the outcome of an in game encounter, affecting the player's moral standing, and many other aspects. However, the (c) recognizing moral content sub-category contains themes that are more focused on players' ability and experiences in considering

the moral meaning and moral implications of the moral conundrums presented to them in the videogames. In short, sub-category (c) recognizing moral content is a collection of themes focused on players' comments which indicate they have been seriously thinking about morality in gaming.

8-Seeing the Consequences

The first theme in this sub-category is (8) "seeing the consequences". This theme is often related to themes pertaining to narrative elements, which will be outlined in a later section. (8) "Seeing the consequences" is, however, associated only with moral consequences. The moral consequences may be intertwined with the narrative consequences, but they are not the same. Moral consequences that were reported as being seen by players include changes in their in-game social interactions, negative and positive consequences on ability to accomplish goals, feelings of parasocial guilt or pride, and many more. When referring to RPGs, this theme was referenced by nearly all participants with experience in morality driven gaming. When talking about a recently released RPG, one participant expressed her own emphasis on the consequences of in game action, and how those consequences are related to the complexity of moral choice in gaming.

> *Yeah, where you're not so much a good guy. You might make some of the villagers mad at you for doing this, but in the end, they'll see your path, what you meant to do.*

9-Complexity and Simplicity of Morals

The second theme in the sub-category (c) recognizing moral content is (9 "complexity and simplicity of measurements". This theme appeared when players talked about moral measurement systems. Specifically, when players referred to the complexity or the simplicity of measurements being taken of their actions by the videogame they were playing. This theme refers to the tendency of participants who played moral games to consider the measurement systems as either over simplifying or over complicating a moral issue. This theme is closely associated with a frustration shown by players who feel that they had taken an action with a specific reasoning in mind, but been surprised when the videogame calculated their decisions in a way that did not align with that reasoning. This is most easily illustrated through example:

> *It says it has a morality built in there where you have a choice, but it's restricted to either/or. And there are a lot of games out there that are restricted to either/or, and you're stuck in that niche.*

This desire to see and understand moral complexity within the videogame also translated into a desire for morally complex characters. A participant in a later focus group said:

> *And real characters, real people, have good and evil sides. They don't just … they're not Superman, who's goodie goodie two shoes, and Lex Luther who's just going to blow up the world. There's dynamics, and you're going to have consequences for even all the good actions you have.*

Morality Conclusion

The major category (I) morality encompasses a substantial number of themes with highly complex concepts serving to interconnect them into larger sub-categories. Those sub-categories, (a) decisions, (b) ignoring morality, and (c) recognizing moral content, represent a wide range of opinions and situations outlined by six different focus groups. Though each focus group addressed morality in a different way, and each participant had their own opinions on the use of morality in videogames, it was apparent that the topic was one that gamers were already thinking about. Throughout all of the focus groups, the conversations about morality in videogames were by far the most intense. Players were clearly seriously considering the implications of their moral choices.

II-Narrative

As noted before, the second major category is (II) narrative. Originally, this category was split into two separate categories. However, it became apparent that these two elements were inseparable as they constantly interact with one another. Because the ideas of narrative transportation and character identification are critical to the goals and

theories of this project, the themes of major category (2) narrative and character were organized in a way that presents these elements as separate from other narrative and character elements. Major category (II) narrative contains two sub-categories: (d) narrative transportation and (e) changing the narrative. Each of these sub-categories and their relevant themes will be outlined in the following pages.

D-Narrative Transportation

The first sub-category of (II) narrative, (d) narrative transportation, is by far the most commonly referenced. (d) Narrative transportation contains themes which highlight player experiences associated with the theory of narrative transportation. I have broken down the contained themes to reflect the major aspects of narrative transportation theory. This organization helps to show how each critical element of transportation is present, and how the theory as a whole is represented. These themes include (10) "being in the world", (11) "meeting the people", and (12) "getting in the zone".

<u>10-Being in the World</u>

(10) "Being in the world" was one of the most commonly reported overall themes. Players often referenced thinking of the game space as a functional entertainment device. However, much more common was the tendency of players to both refer to and think of the game as a different world. This world was one that they were capable of entering via their avatar. Players referenced experiences had in the

game as if they were experiences they had first hand, in a separate world. As one participant said:

> *In a really good game, you can get lost in the world. You want to be there, and your character or your avatar is your conduit into this world, in this awesome thing that you're involved in.*

This quote illustrates an explicit recognition by the participant that they are thinking of the videogame as reality that is separated from this one. Most interesting to this specific quote is the specific language chosen by the participant, who seems to indicate that he understands the videogame as a separate space by using phrases like "into this world". Additionally, players often referenced concepts of immersion in a game space, prioritizing videogame goals, and considering certain in game tasks to be responsibilities.

11-Meeting the People

The idea of immersion and responsibility connects well to the second theme in this sub-category, (11) "meeting the people". This theme was much less prevalent than the (xvi) being in the world theme. As the name of this theme implies, it entails ideas associated with forming interpersonal relationships with characters present within a videogame. The idea of being able to form an interpersonal relationship with a virtual personality requires several prerequisites (time, specific game genre, specific

personalities), and very few participants were willing to divulge information on in depth parasocial relationships with game characters such as virtual spouses.

Several participants made reference to in depth game relationships, but seemed remiss to elaborate on them. Though it is impossible to know for certain, this may imply that even in gamer communities such a high level of involvement is unusual and outside of social norms. However, it was not uncommon for players to recognize that they had some level of superficial relationship with major characters in a game narrative. It is interesting to note that players put much more emphasis on the parasocial relationships formed with plot relevant or quest relevant virtual personalities. This is most likely because more relevant NPCs are given much more complex and realistic personalities, much like main characters in a book or movie. As most NPCs in an RPG are not plot relevant, this means that it is much more common for the relationships to be surface level only. However, some gamers, such as the ones quoted below do put emphasis on their in game relationships:

***P#1**: You have a reputation there.*

***P #4:** Yeah, you have a reputation not in the game, but in the eyes of other people, I guess, and other characters.*

12-Getting into the Zone

The final theme in sub-category (d) narrative transportation is (12) "getting in the zone". The "zone" is a common term indicating a heightened state of productivity in

one specific task that results in a decreased awareness. A common example of this term is the "runner's zone", which refers to a feeling of euphoria and concentration that long distance runners commonly experience when running alone. This theme, however, refers to what one would call the "gamers' zone", in which players are able to concentrate greatly on playing a videogame, but become unaware of their surroundings. This theme was referenced by the most participants and from the most diverse number of participants.

This "gamer zone" was reportedly experienced by very avid gamers playing an extremely in depth video game and casual gamers playing a simple puzzle game. (12) "Getting in the zone" includes elements such as losing track of time, apathy towards personal relationships, apathy towards responsibilities, and procrastination when referenced as a negative effect of gaming. It includes increased game productivity and increased game skill when referenced as a positive effect. One participant went so far as to say:

> *I don't know, it's like, you don't even have to do the imagination for yourself. The game does it for you, so you can just be brain-dead in front of the computer, and you have this immersive universe in your head just going on through this game alone. It's just a great way to dope you up.*

E-Changing the Narrative

The third sub-category in major category (II) narrative is (e) changing the narrative. This sub-category contains three themes which relate directly to players'

desires or experiences with having a visible effect on the story of a videogame. These experiences are quite varied, often seeming to depend on the genre of game a participant was most likely to play. The major factor that separates this sub-category from (d) narrative transportation is that the (e) changing the narrative is limited only to elements in which the unique interactivity of the videogame medium allows a player to have a large influence on how the story progresses. It is important to note that the presence of these themes does not necessarily confirm any transportation into the narrative. Though there is no evidence to confirm that being able to shift a narrative's direction would prevent transportation, it would be presumptuous to assert that this ability could encourage narrative transportation. Therefore, the sub-categories were made separate to prevent association.

13-Making it Your Story

The first theme in this sub-category is (13) making it your story. The "your" in "your story" is a reference to the player. This theme was most commonly present in RPGs, but was used in association with much more simple games such as racing and first person shooter genres as well. (13) "Making it your story" specifically addresses instances in which participants said that they had used their ability to change narrative to make the story of the videogame more a reflection of their life. This does not mean that they made the avatar get a job at a gas station and amass student loan debt. Instead, these changes were more often very subtle allusions to the players' lives. Often, the changes mentioned by players were nothing like their own lives. Instead, they were

presented with several story paths from which to choose, and chose the story path which was most like their lives, or was most like the life they wished for.

14-How I Changed the World

The second theme, (14) "how I changed the world", is a more general version of the (13) "making it your story" theme. This theme was found in phrases and comments from participants who explicitly reflect on their impact in the entire game world. This does not necessarily mean in comparison with their own lives. More importantly, this theme does not necessarily refer to impacts made on the game story. Rather, this theme encompasses many different impacts that a player can have.

Some of these impacts are major changes to critical elements of a game such as one participants reference to her decisions to detonate a bomb in one of the last remaining human settlements in the post-apocalyptic world of *Fallout 3* (2008). They can also, however, be seemingly small impacts such as picking up a power up in a racing game, and having that action deny the power up to every racer behind you. Participants put more emphasis on major game impacts, indicating that their emphasis was caused by this impact having an effect on the player's ability to perform some task. For example, one participant said this about a major decision made in the game *Fallout 3* (2008):

> *It's nice because what's your doing is impacting the way the game replies to you, and so you feel like you're actually having an impact on the game world and the storyline.*

III-Character

F- Character Identification

The sub-category (F) character identification contains themes directly relating to key concepts in the theories of character identification outlined in the literature review of this document. Participants rarely referred explicitly to these theories by saying something along the lines of "I identify with…." Instead, they referred to the concept as a whole using their own language, and focusing more on what aspects of the character caused them to identify with that character specifically rather than the theoretical implications of or theoretical causes of that identification. The themes indicated in sub-category (e) character identification reflect that tendency.

15-Customizations 1.0- Who Am I

In sub-category (f) character identification there are two themes focused on the idea of customizing one's avatar. The first theme is (15) "customizations 1.0- who am I". This theme refers to statements made by participants that reflect a desire or a tendency to customize their character's behavior. The majority of players expressed an increased level of enjoyment and a higher probability or liking a character when they have the ability to act in a way which suits their own desires. This can be seen most often in RPG based discussions, but also appeared in discussion of many other genre's of videogames. The behavioral customization took many forms. A participant from one focus group provides an example:

Choices at all allow the player to feel like the experience is more theirs and they are not just turning pages in a book. They feel like they are actually characters in a book.

The "who am I" is a specific element of theme (15). This element is a reference to using customizable behavior in games as a method of identity searching. Some participants indicated that being able to customize behavior challenged them to create an identity for their character. That identity was often, but not always, based on the identity of the player. This meant that players found themselves thinking about their own moral values in order to determine what the videogame character would do. This element of (15) "customization 1.0 – who am I" is one of the most important and relevant findings of this study as it provides evidence that players are seriously considering the moral actions of video games and using the videogame as a comparison for their own values. An example of this element is evident in this quote.

It depends on what you go into it with, because the thing with the customizable characters is that change can come, because it's easier to identify because we change with growth, and as that character levels up, he changes or you decide to do whatever with it, so you know, it kind of grows with you, and so do the decisions. I think that's really impacted the way we play video games.

16- Customizations 2.0 All Dressed Up

The theme (16) "customizations 2.0 – all dressed up" refers to a more superficial, physical element of customization. This element most often comes in the forms of avatar design and itemization. Avatar design is an increasingly popular game element which allows players to create an avatar's appearance. This is usually done through the use of design tools, and can be so detailed that players often create avatars which look just like the player. Players reported feeling much more attached to or engaged by a character which looked like themselves, or looked like they wanted to look. This indicates that customization has the potential to influence both identification and wishful identification. The following exchange about in game character customization serves to illustrate the amount of emphasis participants put on physical customization.

P#6*: I can spend hours on that, more on that than on the game.*

P#5*: And in the end, have a character that you can respect. I like that.*

P #2: *Or you turn the game show, and you tell people, "You see that? That's me!" Or, "This is my cat right here, this is my dude."*

P #5: *Going with something like Fable, though, where you're just that one guy and you can only change into so many ways …*

P #3: *There have been games I've bought, or at least bought parts of solely for the character creation, like Spore.*

Itemization was less often mentioned in reference to identifying with a character, than it was as simply a favorable element of a video game. Itemization is a concept used by developers to create large numbers of desirable items that a player's avatar can interact with. In some games these items are usable, such as a weapon or medical supplies. In other games the items are for decorative purposes only; serving to increase the avatar's aesthetic appeal. This can take the form of clothing, accessories, or even pets.

17-Similarity

The (xxi) similarity theme refers to instances in which participants indicated identifying with a character which had been created by the game developers. This theme is different from both customization themes for two critical reasons. First, the participants are identifying with a character much less like them than a customized avatar. Though many similarities still exist, they are likely not near the number that exists between a custom made avatar and its creator. Second, these pre-generated characters are not always the player avatar. In fact, on several occasions, such as the quote below, participants indicated that they found themselves identifying more with an NPC than with the playable character.

> *But the side characters are, because of that, seem more real because they actually have choices, or they seem to, and they have personality, which is the main thing.*

Participants noted several reasons for identifying with a pre-generated character. Among those reasons physical similarity, behavioral similarity, sense of humor, and situational similarity surfaced as the most common.

18-Multiple Play-throughs

The final theme in the sub-category (f) changing the narrative is (17) multiple play-throughs. A play-through is a term used by gamers to indicate a completion from start to finish of a videogame. The term multiple play-throughs is used when a player has completed the same videogame multiple times. This fits into the sub-category (f) changing the narrative as it affects the narrative two way. First, participants reported that, when playing through a game a second time, they were inclined to make different decisions than the first play-through. Players indicated that they wished to finish the game in a different way, showing a conscious and willing desire to affect the narrative in the opposite way than they had in the first play-through. Secondly, players indicated that on a second play-through they were influenced by their knowledge of the narrative from a previous play-through.

Summary

There are 25 individual themes, each of which was present in at least two of the focus group conversations. While focus groups offered the same general level of data, it should be noted that a larger number of themes appeared in focus group two than any of

the other groups. This is likely due to the unusually high percentage of self reported "hard core gamers" present in focus group 2. Additionally, member of focus group two were overwhelmingly more likely to enjoy RPGs than the other groups. Though many of the 25 total themes have highly related concepts and have similar content, each represents a unique idea or concept. How those concepts are related to one another will be outlined in the following section.

CHAPTER VII

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Relations to Literature

Though the thematic structure of these focus groups is in and of itself an interesting collection of information, much more important is the relation of these themes to the theories discussed in the literature review. Some of those relations are explicit and obvious, such as the presence of character identification, while some others, like the presence of elements which provide potential for moral development, are less apparent. In this section I will discuss the how the presence of certain themes points to strong presence of specific theoretical elements, how these theoretical elements may interact with each other, and finally I will present a theory on the overall significance of this data. I will begin by discussing how specific themes related to the theoretical structures of character identification, narrative transportation, and moral development theory.

Implications for Character Identification

I will begin with the theory of character identification, as its elements are the most apparent and easily connected. As stated before, the theory of character identification claims that people identifying with a specific character will be more likely to increase narrative transportation, and that the presence of character identification has a direct, positive correlation with effects patterns in laboratory settings (Fischer et al.

2009, Bailey, Wise, Bolls, 2009). In Chapter III of this project several studies are introduced which indicate that character identification in a videogame can cause a player to be more directly affected by the game content. Bailey, Wise, and Bolls (2009) specifically claimed that increased identification with the main character in a violent videogame could increase the chances of violent tendencies manifesting. This effect was associated with an ability of certain test participants to customize their character.

The themes (15) "customization 1.0- who am I?" and (16) "customization 2.0- all dressed up" would seem to support the claim that customization is correlated with effect on behavioral patterns. The data collected during this project, however, offers a new perspective on the claims of Bailey, Wise, and Bolls. Laboratory settings are often used to produce objective tests of participant behavior through extensive testing. In this case, the participants were given an aggression measure, exposed to a videogame stimulus one group being able to customize their characters), and given a second aggression measure.

While the data gathered from such studies would support the theory that customization increases character identification, and therefore likelihood of change in behavioral patterns, it leaves much room for outside variables to have an impact. The self reported data in this study supports the findings of Bailey, Wise and Bolls by providing evidence that the players themselves also feel more likely to identify with customized characters. While neither data set can be taken as proof individually, together they provide substantial evidence in support of the theory.

Additionally, the data provided by these focus groups provides some understanding of the reason behind customization's effect that Bailey, Wise and Bolls

(2009) could not provide in their experiment. More specifically, the data indicates that customization of both behavior and appearance are important factors in the player's likelihood to identify with a character. Though this data does not in any way contradict the findings of Bailey, Wise, and Bolls, it would suggest that further investigation into which of these two has a greater effect, which in turn could prove useful in future studies.

Finally, (17) "similarity" appears as a common theme causing self reported character identification. This theme plays a much vaguer role in the final effect on character identification in this process. The lack of clarity comes from a lack of supporting evidence for actual similarities. In short, players often claimed that they identified with characters because of behavioral or physical similarities, when those similarities did not seem to be present. The participants were, on average, college students. Though I am uneasy making too large of an assumption, very few of them seemed to have behavioral similarities to the heroic characters they claimed to identify with. While these participants claimed to experience similarity identification, it seems much more likely that the participants were experiencing wishful identification with their avatars. This distinction is key, as Hoffner and Cantor's (1991) wishful identification theory claims that players will desire to emulate characters that are wishfully identified with through future behavior and identity development.

Implications for Narrative Transportation

The second theory I will address in its relation to the presented themes is the theory of narrative transportation. The concepts of narrative transportation are not as explicitly addressed in the text o the interview as those of character identification. However, there is a clear link between several key themes which indicate a strong potential for an increase in narrative transportation in video games, especially in reference to RPGs. In this section I will address the impact of narrative immersion on the player's interaction with the videogame and how it affects narrative transportation, finally I will address the theoretical interaction between narrative transportation and character identification as it applies to the project data set.

The two themes that directly interact with narrative transportation theory are (10) "being in the world", and (11) "meeting the people". These three themes, as stated in the previous chapter, refer to the statements made by participants which express a feeling of immersion, and indicate a transportation experience. The most basic of these themes, (10) "being in the world", was highly referenced by the majority of participants. As stated above, this theme encompasses players' feelings of being closely involved and immersed in the setting of the videogame. This could include an emphasis on aspects such as history, geography, and many more.

Most often, players expressed that they were immersed in the visual realism of the game world. This is not surprising as many videogame developers put an immense amount of effort into creating the most realistic looking word that they can. Participant who had recently played the games *Fallout 3* (2008) or *Oblivion* (2004) were the most

focused on this theme. Each of these games uses a design in which the entire game world is continuous. In essence, the developers created a patch of land spanning several square miles and simply filled it with whatever they wanted. Participants often indicated that they felt most transported into these games, which were RPGs. It can be theorized that players find these games the most immersive, because the lack of separated levels more closely resembles the real world, and increases the realism factor of narrative transportation.

The second theme relating directly to transportation is (11) "meeting the people". This theme is one of the most interesting in its theoretical implications. As explained in the previous chapter, parasocial relationships with videogame characters can vary in complexity, longevity, and intensity. One player may think of the virtual personalities in a videogame in the same way they think of a calculator or a T.V. remote. In this manner, they would interact with the personality only as a tool for completing some in game goal. However, as reported by several focus group participants, some players interact with virtual personalities on a very intense level; forming friendships, doing favors, getting in game phone calls, and even feeling bad about hurting them. What this information ultimately means, and how it affects the gaming experience is debatable. However, one thing is clear just from the presence of this theme in the data set: players are experiencing personal involvement when gaming.

Personal involvement, one of the key factors in predicting narrative transportation, usually involves a connection between the events or characters of a narrative and the events of characters of a person's real life (Larsen and Lazlo, 1990).

The personal involvement that participants reported experiencing in game play was closely related to this concept, but somewhat altered. Rather than feeling connected to a series of fictional events by some similarity to a personal experience, several participants indicated that they felt connected to a series of in game fiction events, because those in game event were, to a certain extent, personal experiences. It is important to point out that the intensity of this personal involvement was varying in degree, with the most intense involvement only being reported by a small number of participants. With this in mind, the fact that even a few participants indicated that they considered their in game accomplishments to be personal experiences on some level provides a good deal of support for Peng's theory of mediated experiences (2009), which stated that videogames provide an experience unlike any other in that they allow players to directly experience situations through a mediated environment.

This indication of narrative transportation is relevant for several reasons. The first is that an increase in narrative transportation is directly associated with an increase in perceived realism, character identification, and personal involvement which increases the likelihood that a player would associate narrative events with their real life personal experiences (Fazio and Zanna, 1981). The potential effects of this association are discussed in great detail in the following section on theory of moral development. The key theoretical effects, however, are that players associating in game experiences with real world experiences would experience increased potential for learning from observing in game consequences, experiencing in game punishments/rewards, and sorting through complex moral situations.

Secondly, the self reported importance of the narrative elements and the likelihood that players will be highly immersed in a videogame provide substantial support for Peng's theories of mediated experience (2009). Much like Bailey, Wise, and Bolls (2009), Peng (2009) used a laboratory setting to investigate specific elements of videogames. Peng used pre and post stimulus surveys to study the effect of mediated experience on players' ability to learn dietary habits. Peng found that mediated experience indicators increased likelihood of learning the desired behavior. Peng theorized that character identification and narrative transportation were the key predictors of mediated experience, however, like all survey based experiments, it is impossible to be certain, as unaccounted for variable may still exist.

In the current data set, participants expressed feeling transported into the narrative without being prompted. Additionally, participants associated narrative transportation with several experiences which are closely associated with Peng's mediated experience theory, such as (xxiv) how I changed the world, and (xxii) seeing the consequences. This correlation was an unexpected element of the focus group, and occurred naturally in the majority of focus groups. While Peng's (2009) experiment provides substantial evidence that mediated experiences can create ideal situations for learning, the data collected during this project provides substantial support for her theory that mediated experience is directly related to the presence of narrative transportation, or as she calls it, immersion.

A Theory of Moral Development in Videogame Play

The data collected strongly suggests that there is increased potential to learn behaviors and thought processes by playing highly involved games with complex narratives and realistic characters. This is done through both narrative transportation and character identification, which have been associated with increased likelihood of adopting stimulus behaviors in many laboratory settings. Additionally, Peng's theory of mediated experience, which claims that effects of both narrative transportation and character identification are increased through videogame play by an ability to learn from in game events as if they were real life (2009), is highly supported by the text of the focus groups. All of the data and research compiled heretofore suggests that RPGs have a potential to influence their players more than any other current medium.

There is one particular area of influence that I will focus on: the ability of an in depth RPG to influence the patterns of moral reasoning in a player. Given the strong presence of character identification, narrative transportation, and mediated experience, a player of a morally driven RPG, with explicit measurements of morality programmed into the mechanics of the videogame, could learn moral behaviors based on observing the direct consequences of their in game actions.

As Selman argues, there are two methods of moral development which are directly relevant to this project. The first is perspective taking, and the second is expectation of consequences (1980). The act of perspective taking is a necessity of playing any videogame. While the level of perspective taking may vary from player to player, it is impossible to not play as a videogame's main character. Some players

choose to simply adapt their own behavior and personality to a new setting. However, several participants indicated that they often gave serious consideration to the thought process of their virtual avatar by role playing in the videogame.

Additionally, Selman made claims that being able to observe and predict the consequences of actions was a critical component of moral development. Specifically, the internal or external rewards and punishments for behaviors are used to determine future behaviors based on presumed outcomes (Selman, 1980). The videogame provides a unique setting for moral experimentation. A player can experience the exact same moral conundrum infinite times, exploring every possible method of solving the problem. While game developers are clearly not at the point technologically where the player can literally do anything they want, there are already several videogames in which every moral encounter can be solved several ways. By experimenting with outcomes to moral encounters a player is able to learn some of the possible consequences to extremely difficult decisions. Though those decisions have no real world effect, the player can see a potential outcome of a similar real world situation. In the focus groups conducted for this project, players made a number of references to observing the consequences of their actions. These references were evidenced in the themes (14) "how I changed the world", and (8) "seeing the consequences". The presence of each of these themes would support the claim that players often pay close attention to the consequences of their actions in a game, and remember those consequences in some detail, as many participants were able to describe in game moral encounters quite precisely. Given Peng's theory of mediated experience (2009), there exists a potential

that players can learn from observing the in game consequences just as well as they could from observing real world consequences.

Finally, the potential for moral development is increased by the presence of an explicit system of punishing or rewarding behavior. As discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, many new RPGs possess systems which are used to assign a moral value to a player's actions. Though the content of these systems is different in every game possessing one, they share one common attribute: the values assigned to an action are clear, constant, and instantaneous. Not every player would consider a negative (evil) point to be a punishment, and not every player would consider a positive (point) to be a reward, when acting within one of these systems. However, any player seeking to behave in a specific manner or achieve a certain moral standing within the game could consider a point in the desired category a reward or a point in the undesired category a punishment. Keller and Edelstein (1991) wrote that being able to predict and understand the reward and punishment systems in which we operate is one of the most basic stages of developing moral reasoning. The explicit measurement of morality provides one of the most clearly explained and easily understood systems of reward and punishment for actions that any person can currently find.

The punishments and rewards are not limited to the moral measurement systems, either. In most morally driven RPGs the punishments can be harsh for the player and the rewards can make game play much easier. For example, if you commit a crime in the videogame *Oblivion* (2004) and you are caught by the authorities, you must either pay a hefty fine or spend time in prison (during which your character loses a significant

amount of in game progression). In the videogame *Fallout 3* (2008) if a player decides to altruistically protect the weak and defend those in need, they will eventually be hunted by mercenaries employed by anonymous, yet very angry, villains. In short, in a morally driven game developers try very hard to show that all actions have both costs and benefits, and that those consequences are as complex as the moral decisions themselves.

These findings also have broader implications. If the videogame has the ability to influence the development of such guarded and complex concepts such as understanding of right and wrong, then there is great potential for the videogame to be applied as a pedagogical tool in many other situations. The ability of the videogame to produce short term consequences to actions and integrate the skill being taught into the play itself could easily improve the way we teach children simple skills like math and language. More in line with the focus of this study, the ability to play through a narrative could provide a powerful tool for teaching older children and young adults the intricacies of some of the most complex literary works.

Though the data collected in this project is not proof that a videogame can influence moral development, the evidence contained within suggests that it is very possible. Through a strong sense of immersion in the game, an ability to experience potentially realistic moral conundrums, a high likelihood to identify with customizable characters, an ability to see several potential outcomes of situations, the use of explicit moral measurement systems, and the presence of a clear system of reward and punishment a player may have access to all of the tools necessary to develop a new understanding of right and wrong.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS

Limitations

Three factors stood out as the most prominent limitations of this project's method. The first, was the amount of time spent discussing the topic with participants. Though each participant was involved in a focus group for an average of two hours, few had the chance to speak for more than twenty to thirty minutes. This amount of time is often more than enough to produce viable data for a research project. However, this project required players to answer in depth questions about very complex issues. Many participants were not able to provide immediate answers, and their voices were therefore less heard. In the future, projects of this complexity should be more inclined to use individual interview techniques rather than focus groups. This shift in method should make the produced data set much richer in information. Secondly, the number of participants in the focus groups was relatively limited. Though the project was able to secure more participants than originally predicted, the fact remains that the data set is limited. Unfortunately, this is a problem in many research projects.

Finally, the level of familiarity participants had with the relevant material was not always satisfactory. Several participants were totally unfamiliar with the videogames and the aspects of videogames being referenced by other participants. Though this number was relatively low, the presence resulted in two distinct problems. The first being that time was taken away from almost every focus group to elaborate on

concepts that most participants were familiar with, in order to bring one or two other participants in to the conversation. The second problem associated with this lack of knowledge was that several participants' voices were not heard, as they were intimidated by the knowledge of other participants. The focus groups were organized in a fashion intended to minimize this effect, however, it was still present. In the future, it would be wise to either recruit only gamers of a specific skill/ experience level, or to devise a more detailed method of assigning participants to focus groups to improve validity.

Future Possibilities

One distinct future possibility stands out above all others. The findings from this study indicate that gamers are becoming very interested in the complex concepts of morality being presented in videogames. Though not all participants indicated a serious interest in the moral connotations of videogames, a substantial majority showed a genuine interest in the ethical decisions presented, and a desire to truly consider their implications. With participants providing evidence that both narrative transportation and character identification are becoming greatly increased as videogames become more complex in their graphical abilities, narrative elements, and other aspects, a question as to what the future may hold is raised. The modern theories of moral development of psychology may very well hold the key to answering that question. Data gathered in this project suggests that players involved in complex, moral RPGs are being heavily exposed to elements required for moral development. With consequences clear, and

punishment/reward systems clearly laid out, the questions surfaces “can video games affect a player’s definition of morality?”

This project was not intended to answer the question “can video games affect a player’s definition of morality”. Rather, this project was undertaken as a first step in a long process of answering the question. The ethical triangulation system, scale system, and MAP system were created as a first step in understanding and objectively defining the moral content of video games. The next step in this research line would be to develop a measure for ethical inclination in human beings. If a system of objectively identifying where a player’s own ethical standing would fall in an ethical triangulation could be created, then comparisons could be drawn. These comparisons could be used to determine if shifts in ethical understanding could be caused by exposure to videogames with explicit ethical content.

One might ask themselves, “What good would this data do?” The answer to this question is simple. Morality is one of the most complex ideas a human mind can be taught. Additionally, it is one of the most difficult to learn, unlearn, or relearn. If it can be proven using objective measures that a videogame can teach a player a moral belief system, then evidence that videogames have the potential to teach nearly any skill would exist. With this in mind, an overhaul of educational practices worldwide would be possible. If it could be objectively proven that videogames cannot alter a person’s moral tendencies, then evidence would exist that there is a clear and definite line of what a videogame can and cannot affect in a human being’s psyche.

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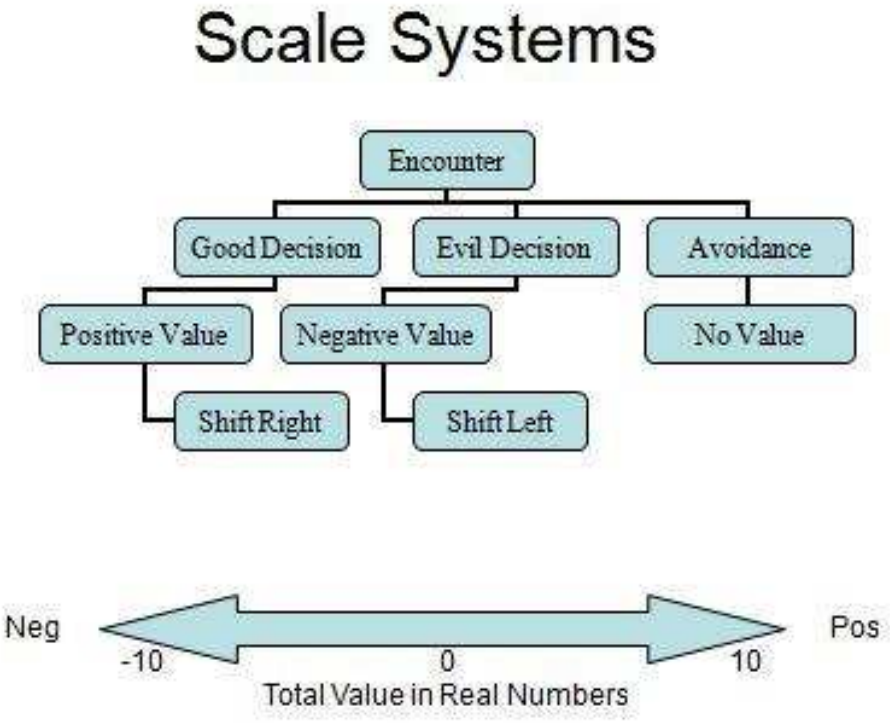
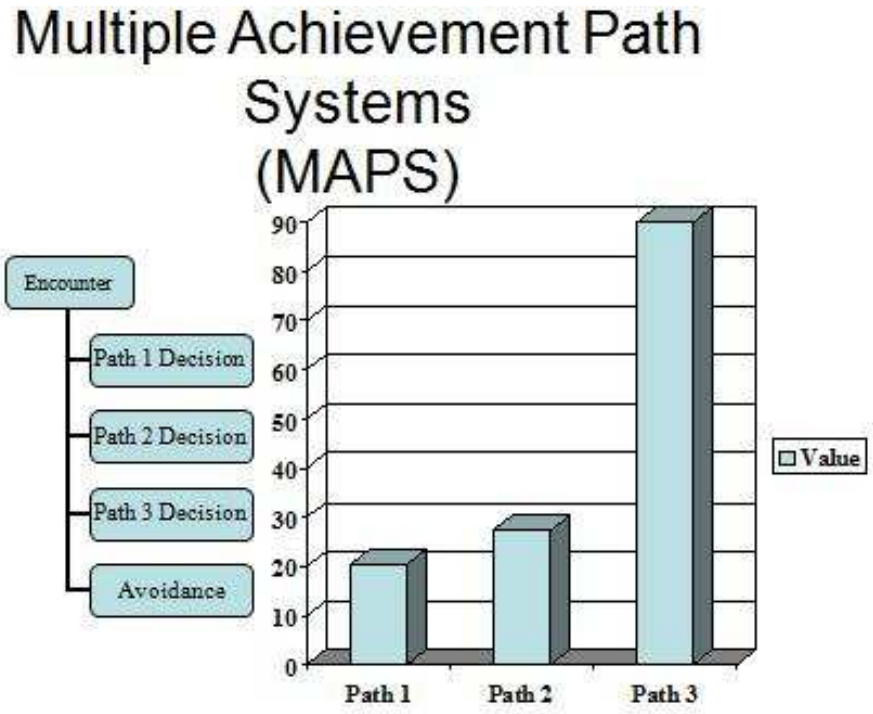
APPENDIX A

A-1



A-2


Multiple Achievement Path Systems (MAPS)
Encounter
Path 1 Decision
Path 2 Decision
Path 3 Decision
Avoidance
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Path 1
Path 2
Path 3
Value

APPENDIX B

B-1

Flier 1

Flier 2

Gamers, want some free pizza?

Texas A&M Department of Communication is recruiting for a video game based research project.

(approximately 2 hours of your time)

And all you are required to do is talk to other gamers and a researcher about the games you play.

We are looking specifically for gamers between the ages of 18-30

Who play upwards of 10 hours/week

Times and contact info will be provided here.

B-2

FOCUS GROUP INFORMATIONAL SHEET

Name: _____

Gender: Male ____ Female _____

Age: ____

Contact phone number(s): _____

Email: _____

Availability to participate in research study on campus:

04/07	04/08	04/09	04/10

Please indicate below the appropriate number for each statement as it applies to you.

1=Very True
2= Somewhat True
3= Neutral/undecided
4=Somewhat False
5=Very False

Video games are my primary form of recreation. _____

When I am choosing a game to rent or buy, I consider several factors_____

I have played a variety of different kinds of games. _____

I have played or know people who have played many of the different games on the market today.

_____

How many hours/week would you estimate you spend playing video games?___

What are your favorite video games?

B-3

Flier Call in Script

If person calling indicates they are interested in the study:

My name is _____. I'm working with the "Video Game and Enjoyment" study. I am glad to hear that you are interested in participating in the study which you were referred to by our flier.

Could I get your name please?

Ok _____(name), thank you for your interest in our study. To start off, I will need some basic demographic information. Is it alright with you if I ask you a few basic questions?

If no:
Well, _____, thank you for your time and interest.

If Yes:
Are you a student at Texas A&M or any other college level education system? If yes: What year are you in your studies? What is your major?

How old are you?

Could I also please get your contact information? I'll need a phone number you can be reached at and an email address if you have one.

Which of the times listed on the flier would you be available for?

Thank you, _____(name). I'd like to ask you some basic questions about your video game habits if that is ok.

If no: That is ok. Thank you for your interest in our project. We will contact you if you are chosen for participation.

If yes:

Please rate how true the following statements are in regards to yourself on a scale of one to five. One will be "very true", two will be "somewhat true", three will be "neutral/undecided", four will be "somewhat false" and five will be "very false"

The first statement is: "Video games are my primary form of recreation".

The second statement is: "When I am choosing a game to rent or buy, I consider several factors".

The third statement is: "I have played a variety of different kinds of games".

The fourth statement is: "I have played or know people who have played many of the different games on the market today".

I have two final questions for you. How many hours per week would you estimate that you spend playing video games?

What are your favorite video games?

Thank you so much for answering all of those questions. Is there anything that you would like to add or expand on as to why you are interested in this study? Do you have any questions?

Thank you very much for your time. You will be contacted soon if you are selected to participate in the study. If you have any further questions feel free to call me at _____(phone number) or to email me at claytonwhittle@tamu.edu. Thank you again for your time. Have a nice day.

B-4

INFORMATION SHEET
Video Games and Enjoyment

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record the consent of those who agree to be involved in this study.

You have been asked to participate in a research study about player enjoyment and video games. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in reasons that players enjoy certain types of video games. You were selected to be a possible participant because you either signed up in a class or contacted us after receiving a flier at one of several retail locations. This study is being sponsored/funded by The Glascock Center For Humanities Stipendiary Fellowship Award.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a two hour, informal group interview in which you will be asked to express and discuss your opinions on several aspects of video game content. Because your privacy is important, you will not be asked to reveal your real name during this group interview, but will instead be allowed to choose a pseudonym. This study will take no more than two hours of your time.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

What are the risks involved in this study?
The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, your participation will benefit and improve not only the video game, but also our understanding of it.

Do I have to participate?
No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University. Though this lab is for class credit, alternative assignments are available if you do not wish to participate.

Will I be compensated?
Though participants will not receive direct monetary compensation, dinner will be provided at the focus group.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?
This study will be confidential. Any identifying information provided by the participant (including name, age, or any other information deemed to be identifying) will be kept under secure and safe confidence of the researchers alone. No person or persons other than Dr. Srivi Ramasubramanian and John Clayton Whittle will have access or will be allowed access to that information at any point.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Dr. Srivi Ramasubramanian and John Clayton Whittle will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for three years and then erased.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact John Clayton Whittle at tamugaming@gmail.com .

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?
This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

Participation
Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. If you would like to be in the study, please contact John Clayton Whittle at tamugaming@gmail.com.

APPENDIX C

C-1

Focus Group Guide Questions

1. *What aspects of a game make it interesting or engaging?*
    - *Is there an order to which one of those is more important? Why?*
    - *What are some more specific qualities of that which attract you to that aspect?*

The first line of questioning is not intended to further the research goals of the current study directly. Rather, the questions are aimed at promoting general discussion within the group. The question was explicitly worded to account for any potential answer, so that any and all participants could share their opinions. The follow up questions were meant to elicit a lengthier response in cases where the initial responses were limited. The goal being to illustrate to participants that the environment of the study is safe and social and that they should feel encouraged to be honest and open.

2. *What would you consider the weakest and/or strongest examples of moral choice in a video game and why?*
    - *How did the presence of weak/strong moral choice affect the game?*

Most important to the forming of this question is that it was not proceeded by an explanation of moral choice in video games. In each group, the words "moral choice" will be defined as the group sees fit. It is very likely that the group will have already

discussed the concept of choice on some level as the current most popular titles all benefit from extremely being customizable. The wording of the question is therefore designed to encourage participants to define moral choice as they see fit, at least for this portion of the focus group. Since participants are being encouraged to define moral choice themselves, examples are asked for. This will give me some idea as to the gamers' individual experience with moral choice in gaming and produce discussion amongst participants as they share examples and expand each others' understanding of moral choice in the game.

The follow up to the question is an extremely general question. Because specific aspects and effects of moral choices in video games are explored by later questions, a general, open ended question will be used to encourage the widest range of responses, before later questions limit the participants' focus and conceptualization of the topic. In short, it will ask what they think of the topic, before I as a researcher interfere too much with their thought process.

3. *How, if at all, can the changing of the moral standing of a character alter the overall narrative of the video game as a story?*
    - *Is the story of an "evil" character in the same situation different than a "good" character? If so, how?*

This question was meant to narrow the focus of the moral choice discussion. It will be proceeded with a brief description of moral standing if one has not already been given during the discussion. The initial question is open ended and allows for a great diversity of responses. The focus on narrative is intended to highlight the first of many aspects of

what I am considering "importance". The narrative aspect question will be followed with probing questions with the goal of defining how morality in the game and moral choices in the game actually affect the story lines and the narrative meaning of the story line. In this case, narrative meaning describes the lessons or concepts which can be implied by a story. For instance, in the famous tortoise and the hare story, the plot is simply about a race, but the narrative meaning is a lesson on hard work, laziness and pride.

This will likely be done through the analysis of examples provided by the participants. If the initial question fails to elicit responses directly related to the affects of morality on the story line or narrative meaning, the second, more specific question will be asked to help guide the participants towards the direction of the study.

4. *In what ways can it be easier or harder to identify with a character whose moral standing can be altered?*
    - *Can a morally alterable character seem more like yourself?*
    - *Can a morally alterable character seem too fluid in opinion to identify with?*

Question 4 directly addresses the second aspect of "importance" as defined by this study: character identification. At this point in the discussion, it is likely that each participant will have begun referencing specific games, when discussing the previous questions. If participants are still discussing the concepts in abstracts (i.e. not with references to real games), I will wait to ask this question. The is because question 4 will

be likely to elicit a more specific and thought out response if the participants already have in mind a character.

The overall goal of question 4 is to determine the participants' likelihood to identify with a player character in a game with moral choices. Though terms such as "easier" or "harder" are not commonly used in the literature of character identification or communication theory, it seemed prudent to simplify the concept in order to present it to the participants without needing to allot a substantial amount of time to explain it. The initial question is open ended to allow for neutral responses. Because this question can be seen has having two mutually exclusive answers, it is possible that the group may overwhelmingly choose one answer. However, in the interest of hearing all voices, follow up questions were designed to encourage those who may see themselves as being "the odd one out" to voice their opinion on the subject.

5. *How can the ability to change the main character's moral standing alter the outcome of the game narrative in a negative or positive manner (based solely on your opinion), if at all?*
6. *Can being able to explain your in game actions to other characters make a game more engaging/entertaining? If so, how?*
    - *Does that ability make you feel more/less in control of the character's morality?*
    - *Does that ability make you feel more/less in control of the non-player characters?*

These last two questions deal directly with the agency aspect of the discussion. Question 5 reintroduces the concept of narrative and the effect moral choice might have on a narrative. However, question 5 is worded in a way which empowers the player character as the driving force of change. This question was designed to revisit the concepts of question 3, but from a perspective which encouraged participants to consider their own agency in the matter as key element.

Question 6 again addresses agency. However, question 6 attempts to explore the non physical agency which player often have. It is likely that the majority of responses to question 5 will pertain to agency of the player character in action. Question 6 will explore the agency which comes from being able to choose what you say to the non-player characters. I It was necessary to make the distinction as there is no information available on the subject, and additional details could lead to an increased understanding of the phenomena discussed in this study. The follow up questions for question 6 are again aimed at increasing the knowledge gained from this study by investigating the related categories separately. In this case the questions separate the effects of moral agency on the perception of the game into two categories: perception of agency with player character and perception of agency with non-player character.

7. *What importance, if any does the freedom to choose a character's moral standing in a video game hold?*

The final question had a very clear aim. Because qualitative research is often based on understanding the perspectives and ideas held by participants, it can be very helpful to be open with the participants. In each focus group I will end the discussion by

explaining my personal involvement with the topic and explaining my research. I will then ask the group what is essentially my research question. Though each question before 7 was aimed at answering 7, it is unlikely that the answer is complete or that the questions are complete. The final question is a way of making up for any gaps in the discussion by allowing the participants to add any commentary or bring up anything which they find unclear in regards to the actual research question. In short, the final question is a kind of scattershot question aimed at hitting anything missed by the first six questions.

VITA

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