THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE GAME PRODUCER

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

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

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

ETHICAL CHOICES IN GAMEPLAY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ON GRANDMA'S AWFUL FRUITCAKE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE ROLE OF EMPATHY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHY BE MORAL?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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