“It felt wrong to me to play that way”

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

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Abstract

Moral dilemmas become increasingly popular in video games, although the entirety of facilitating and influencing factors is still widely unknown. Extended philosophical and theoretical analyses were made on video games like *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008; Schulzke, 2009; Sicart, 2013), *Fable III* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2010; Schrier, 2012) or *Spec Ops: The Line* (2K Games, 2012; Heron & Belford, 2014), to only mention a few. But also unrelated to any specific gaming title scholars tried to apply morality in the context of gaming (moral cleansing: Gollwitzer & Melzer, 2012; moral disengagement: Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010; moral foundations: Tamborini, 2012). In addition, empirical data illustrates how moral decision-making in video games evolves (e.g., Joeckel, Bowman, & Dogruel, 2012; Tamborini et al., 2018; Weaver & Lewis, 2012). However, due to its rather recent status as a field of research that is also overshadowed by the focus on violent game content (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2007), studies on moral processing in video games are still rare and lacking firm theoretical groundwork. Therefore, the present project wants to gain novel insights on moral behavior that go beyond virtual violence. More specifically, our research questions are: Why are players motivated to engage in moral decisions in video games in the first place? And if they do, how is there engagement influenced by (a) user characteristics (e.g., personality, game preferences), and (b) game-specific characteristics (e.g., game narrative, graphic realism)? These questions will be answered through the method of focused group discussions. A focus group is defined as a semi-structured, qualitative approach gathering 4-12 participants to discuss concrete individual experiences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). This explorational interviewing tool allows to assess morality in video games to a broader extent, thereby providing
access to identifying promising topics for future research. Furthermore, the focus group approach centers the user itself and his or her subjective gaming experience, which is often neglected but promising as moral beliefs have a high inter-individual fluctuation (Klimmt, Schmid, Nosper, Hartmann, & Vorderer, 2008; Triberti, Villani, & Riva, 2015). In three different sessions, a total of 16 gamers discussed moral decision-making in gaming and its influencing factors to understand prerequisites and mechanisms of moral processing in virtual worlds. Gamers shared their experience with morally-laden gaming situations and pre-formulated statements such as: “I never felt sad or guilty after an in-game decision”. Their expressions were grouped for relevant topics supported by direct quotations. From the interpretation of these findings, conclusions for moral processing and new research questions for following experimental studies are drawn.

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


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