

Video Games, Power, and Social Responsibility
Erica L. Neely

A. Introduction

Video games are ubiquitous, and not simply the traditional kind involving a single player at his computer. People play games on their phones while waiting in line for groceries. They play games online with their friends, whether through social media pages such as Facebook or in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004). They can download games easily from Apple’s App Store, from third-party platforms such as Steam, or from retailers such as Amazon.com. People can access and play games more easily and in a wider range of environments than ever before. Moreover, people do not simply play games by themselves; they form communities surrounding games and interact with other players or interested fans. They populate forums, read gaming websites, and even attend conventions devoted to video games.

We can consider two levels of video game-related communities: the communities which form around specific games and the broader community of video game players. Like all communities, each of these types can flourish or decay based on the actions of their members. Specifically, there are three groups that have considerable power to influence these communities: designers, players, and the game community as a whole. Each of these has a distinct scope of influence – designers affect a game very differently than players – but each affects the flourishing of specific game communities as well as the broader community.

Moreover, there are two kinds of people who are frequently disempowered by common behaviors and assumptions in gaming. First, many players disdain new players (“newbies” or “noobs”); they are apt to discount their experiences and denigrate their remarks or questions.¹ Second, people who do not fit the stereotype of a typical gamer – i.e., who are not straight, white, male players – are often negatively affected by choices that both players and designers make. While the demographics of video game players do not reflect the stereotype, power comes from perception, not actuality. The fact that men do not dominate video gaming is irrelevant; the perception that they do means that their wishes are given more credence and the wishes of those who are perceived as outsiders are secondary.

I am going to argue that we have social responsibility that involves video game communities. Specifically, I claim that those with more power have a greater responsibility to ensure that existing inequalities are not simply reproduced within these communities; this is true regardless of whether they voluntarily put themselves in a position of power. Duties of justice in particular require potential players to be treated equally, thus excluding or dismissing people for arbitrary reasons is not ethical. Who holds the most power in game communities varies, as do the responsibilities that power engenders. I will discuss duties of designers, players, and the broader gamer community in turn.

¹ Note that this disdain is rather odd given that new players are required for the continued existence of the community.

B. Framework

Briefly, I want to discuss the moral framework underlying my arguments on social responsibility. Specifically, there are two ways in which people may acquire relevant moral responsibilities. First, we have an ethical responsibility as persons to treat other persons well. Coming from a deontological standpoint, this plays out in terms of recognizing the intrinsic worth of others and not simply viewing them as a means to accomplishing one's own ends. At this level, we have relevant ethical responsibilities simply because, being social animals, we interact with other persons and have to treat them ethically when we do so.

Second, we have more specifically social responsibilities that come from belonging to particular communities. While we can argue about exactly what those responsibilities entail, there is at least some responsibility not to destroy or prevent the flourishing of communities we voluntarily participate in, assuming those communities are not themselves somehow unethical.² This stems from the fact that it is unreasonable to seek to reap the benefits of belonging to a particular community while also taking actions that will destroy that community. Moreover, members may have positive duties to help maintain their communities if by nonaction their communities will be harmed. In particular, I want to emphasize duties of justice, namely that a community has an obligation to treat its members fairly.

In terms of video games, our general ethical responsibilities towards others requires us to recognize that players and potential players are also persons.³ As such, players have ethical constraints on how they may treat other players that they encounter; I will discuss specific instances of this later in the paper. I would note that players may also have ethical obligations to themselves which arise out of game playing, but I am going to set that question aside for this paper.⁴ Game designers have obligations not merely to current players but also to potential players of their games; indeed, their design choices greatly affect who chooses to engage with a game at all, which gives them influence over who is likely to become a player. While I will discuss specific obligations of designers in the next section, it is worth highlighting that designers have a duty to consider the ends of players and potential players; a game which is exploitative towards a group of players or simply ignores them during the design process is unlikely to meet this duty.

Focusing more specifically on the communities that arise around games, there are two layers of community that result in additional obligations. I will use the term "game community" to refer the community which forms around a particular game; likewise, I will use the term "gamer community" to include the amalgamation of specific game communities as well as, perhaps, more casual gamers who are not specifically invested in a single title.⁵ As members of both

² In other words, it probably would be ethically permissible to destroy or prevent the flourishing of a neo-Nazi organization, for instance, although that seems unlikely to be an action taken by a member of the community.

³ As are game designers; there is a trend toward player abuse of game designers in online forums and the like which is also concerning. While I am setting this issue aside for now, the responsibility of players towards designers deserves further investigation.

⁴ See Neely (2016) for further discussion of this.

⁵ I recognize that this definition is imprecise; it is not my intent here to sharply define the borders of these communities, although I lean towards being inclusive. Specifically I want to stress that I do not believe it is

specific game communities and the gamer community as a whole, players and designers each have obligations to those communities. In particular, as we will see in more detail below, they should contribute positively to the flourishing of the community and avoid actions which actively harm the community.

One might object that this seems to be a fairly heavy burden for something as frivolous as video games. Yet video games have a large impact that we cannot responsibly ignore. Media of all types both reflects and promulgates society; we worry about what messages television shows or movies send, and thus that concern should extend to the game medium as well. Just as a television show may be criticized for how it portrays persons of color, say, the same may be said for video games. Moreover, it is not simply the overt messages that matter – the implicit messages are also morally relevant, and in some ways are more insidious because we are less likely to notice them; in video game terms this means that we need to consider not simply what happens to the main character but also how the game world is designed.

Second, the fact that video games are largely used for entertainment is irrelevant from a moral perspective; entertainment is not exempted from moral burdens just because it is viewed as less important than other matters. Culturally we have acknowledged that there are moral obligations associated even with seemingly frivolous pursuits. For instance, the United States did not simply desegregate schools and work places; it also ended segregation in movie theaters. If video games or the gamer community has problematic actions or attitudes, those are open to scrutiny, regardless of how important video games are from a broader perspective.

Lastly, video games have a vast cultural reach, which lends an urgency to these considerations. Recent research (Duggan 2015) shows that approximately half the adult population of the United States play video games; furthermore, this percentage holds irrespective of race or gender.⁶ While far fewer people identify specifically as gamers, all players are influenced by designers' choices while playing games. In addition, since there are many popular games centered around social media such as Facebook, even casual players frequently interact with other players. As such, behavior in video game communities affects many people, and we cannot ignore the ethical ramifications of this behavior.

In summary, designers and players have ethical responsibilities that stem from simply being moral persons as well as from belonging to the communities that form around games and gaming. Video games, like other entertainment media, are subject to scrutiny due to their ability to reflect and influence societal opinions; this holds regardless of video games' optional or frivolous nature. Moreover, there is an urgency to these responsibilities which stems from the vast cultural reach of video games. Having established that there are moral responsibilities relevant to video games, I turn now to the specific responsibilities of designers and players.

necessary to self-identify as a gamer in order to be a member of a game community in the sense relevant to ethical responsibility.

⁶ Note that the report only distinguished three categories for race: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; and Hispanic. Given the prevalence of Japanese-designed games, among others, it is a bit strange that there was not a category for Asian players; this flaw could affect the results reported.

C. Responsibilities of Designers

Let us first consider the ethical responsibilities of game designers.⁷ As the creators of the game itself, clearly game designers exercise a considerable degree of power when it comes to creating and supporting a game. There are two distinct stages in a game's development which entail ethical responsibilities for game designers. First, designers have certain responsibilities while they are creating a title. Second, they have somewhat different responsibilities involving the ongoing support of an already existing title. I will consider each of these in turn, setting aside for the moment the issue of what role designers should play in the context of the larger gamer community.

At the game creation stage, designers have the power to shape the game itself. In doing so, they must make many choices about the kind of game they wish to create; these fall into three broad areas. First, there are the paired questions of *what* the players will be doing, generally in the form of missions or quests, along with *why* the player is doing those actions, which takes the form of the overall plot. Second, there is the question of *how* the players will be accomplishing their tasks; these are structural choices concerning gameplay. Third, there is the question of *where* the players will be taking these actions, which entails the design of the game world. While not sharply distinguished – the questions of what a player is doing and how the game allows her to do it are obviously related – they raise slightly different basic concerns.

For the sake of time, I will be skipping over the issue of plot and quests in order to focus on examples about gameplay and world design. I will, of course, be happy to discuss any of these in more detail during the Q&A period.

One of the key questions related to gameplay is how characters are represented and, indeed, avatar-creation is one aspect of game design which clearly exhibits a designer's ethical responsibilities. Some games change the player's experience based on the traits of his or her avatar; in the Elder Scrolls series of games, for instance, there are race-specific bonuses and penalties to various skills.⁸ In other games avatar creation is purely cosmetic; it is simply a way to represent the player within the game. In these cases an avatar's race, gender, and similar characteristics are irrelevant to gameplay, which has led to authors such as Miguel Sicart (2009, 2013) dismissing them as ethically uninteresting. However, I disagree with the notion that only aspects of the game that directly affect gameplay are deserving of ethical attention. On the contrary, many of these seemingly cosmetic details matter. For instance, there was a great deal of controversy in 2014 over Ubisoft's decision to have only a male playable character in the cooperative mode for *Assassin's Creed Unity* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014), particularly when designers described having a female playable character as a "feature" which had to be cut; it seemed to underscore a vision of male characters as required and female characters as optional features.⁹ Similarly, as David Dietrich (2013) discusses, while many games offer the ability to customize the skin tone of one's avatar, that is frequently the closest they come to truly allowing

⁷ I will use "designers" to cover both the specific designers of a game title and the company that employs them, in the case where those entities are distinct.

⁸ These choices can represent a problematic game world, as I shall discuss further in the next section.

⁹ See, for instance (Connolly 2014).

the creation of a non-white human avatar; it is rare for games to contain options for facial features or hair that would truly represent a person of color.

These limitations may not affect gameplay in the way Sicart envisions, but the designers have certainly made a choice with moral ramifications. One of the consequences of limiting avatar choice in these ways is that it may affect who chooses to engage with the game at all; there are many women who do not like being forced to play male characters or overly-sexualized female characters and thus choose to avoid certain games. Similarly, a person of color may grow tired of being unable to play an avatar that reflects herself and decide that video games are not a media worth pursuing. In this way, the design of avatars can affect their gameplay, because it has contributed to them having none.¹⁰

Moreover, the design choices reinforce underrepresentation in the game's community by making it more difficult for certain players to create avatars that reflect themselves; the game has simply carried over existing power structures that center around the experiences of white male players. Yet there is no reason to believe that a more diverse group of players would harm the game community – indeed, it seems likely to be beneficial – which makes this minimization of their desires unwarranted. While all games will have some kind of target audience and some limitations on what they are trying to do, these need to be more obviously game-relevant. It is reasonable that a role-playing game is not welcoming to a player who wants to play a first-person shooter; those games are fairly distinct genres. It is not reasonable that a game be unwelcoming to a player who wants to have a female avatar.

a. Where: Designing the Game World

Gameplay occurs in some kind of game world, and the third set of choices that designers make involve the game world. Every game takes place in a setting, which the designer generally has a great deal of control over. However, that power comes with responsibilities – in particular, designers need to avoid importing existing biases into the game unthinkingly and designers need to consider the effects of their choices on potential players.

In terms of avoiding bias, I am primarily concerned with choices which a designer is likely to make without much thought. One reason I believe it is important to focus on these kinds of “background” choices is that I believe it is easy for designers and players who are not directly affected simply to miss them. White players of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) simply may not notice that, while you can create a human with a variety of skin tones, all of the important human non-player characters are white. Male players may not notice that having a faction in *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010) deny rights to women may mean that a female player will not ally with that faction regardless of any in-game benefit

¹⁰ Note that, in theory, there is nothing wrong with having a game with only male or white protagonists; if games were evenly distributed as to the type of main character, then people would have a wide range of choices, and avoiding one game would simply mean they played a different one. However, in practice, there are not many prominent games with only female protagonists (*Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996) and its sequels aside), and very few with only non-white protagonists (*The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012) being a notable exception.) As such, while in theory it may be fine to have your game tell a story about a white man, in practice one might wonder why we don't seem to have many stories to tell about other groups of people.

for doing so simply because she cannot divorce her real-world self so completely from what she does in the game.¹¹ American players of *Sim City* (Maxis 1989) may see it as natural that taxes must be low to encourage inhabitants, whereas European players may see that as odd.¹²

Both the designers and players of a game approach it from a particular cultural standpoint, and we cannot simply ignore that. Moreover, as players are actual people, not ideal ones, we cannot assume that they will always notice the background assumptions or reflect critically on the game's values. While many authors worry about the undue influence of games on children¹³, due to their presumed lesser ability for moral reflection, I believe that we must also acknowledge that adult players of games are also capable of being influenced by representations and choices in video games. The way in which designers choose to structure a game world affects players and thus should be done with deliberation.

This ties into my second point which is that designers should carefully consider the effects of their choices on potential players. It is certainly possible – and perhaps sometimes desirable – to create games which make players uncomfortable; media does not have to be fun or even palatable at all times. However, a designer should ensure that players are uncomfortable for game-relevant reasons, not simply because they see an uncomfortable fact of society reflected in the game.

For instance, *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) is set in the early 20th century and depicts a white supremacist society, Columbia, which is a fictional city-state that has broken away from the rest of the United States of America. Many players find the setting makes them supremely uncomfortable. However, this was not a choice that was made unthinkingly – the creative director of the game, Ken Levine, emphasized that the society was designed that way because it more accurately reflected race relations in the time and place of the game's setting; while the game takes place in a fictionalized version of our history, he wanted to highlight certain aspects of our real society. (Lahti 2012) In this case, the player should be made uncomfortable, because that is one of the themes of the game.¹⁴

This is rather different than the controversy over the *Elder Scrolls* series of games. (Bethesda Softworks 1994; Bethesda Game Studios 1996, 2002, 2006, 2011) All of the games in this series are set in the fictional world of Tamriel, which is populated by different races, each of which had certain traits associated with them. For instance, the Khajit are a cat-like race of people that are described as agile and stealthy; they also have the ability to see in the dark. The Altmer (or High

¹¹ I believe that Sicart (2013) overlooks the fact that players cannot necessarily ignore aspects of their real-world selves when playing games; his discussion of the Caesar's Legion from *Fallout: New Vegas* stresses how players who value order will likely side with this faction, but I do not think he is sensitive enough to how different kinds of players will react to this faction.

¹² I found this example from Sicart (2009) striking, particularly since he ultimately does not seem to take up the cultural context in which we experience games in much detail.

¹³ Sicart (2009) and Tavinor (2009) discuss this explicitly; Coeckelbergh (2007) raises the question of whether adolescents might be more subject to influence by video games.

¹⁴ Note that making a conscious choice is not sufficient for doing a good job handling the issue; there are criticisms of *Bioshock Infinite* for using the racial themes as window dressing rather than engaging more deeply with the issues. See, for instance, Fussell and Pressgrove (2014).

Elves) are supremely intelligent and skilled with magic; they have various bonuses to their magical abilities. The Redguards, however, are the only dark-skinned humanoid race in the game, and they are known for being hardy and tough warriors – and, in early chapters of the series, for being unintelligent. While the decision to give races different bonuses and penalties is not necessarily problematic (issues with racial essentialism aside), making your only dark-skinned race consist of athletic but unintelligent people mirrors racist beliefs that we have seen from colonialism through the present-day. Simply replicating real-world prejudiced belief systems in a fantasy setting is not reasonable. Unlike with the *Bioshock Infinite* case, there is no justifying reason for making players uncomfortable; instead it seems like the designers just failed to consider how a non-white player might react to a world where people of color are inherently unintelligent. Once again a group of players is treated as an afterthought rather than as having intrinsic value, which is unethical.

b. Multiplayer Concerns

The previous areas of concern apply to designers of all games. However, multiplayer games additionally require designers to consider their responsibility in allowing or encouraging particular types of player interactions. While some player interactions involve gameplay and are integral to the game itself, such as when players compete against each other for an objective, many multiplayer games also contain social functions such as chat. These may be used for game purposes, such as coordinating a team of players, or they may be more generally social, allowing players to converse in ways that do not directly impact gameplay. Here, too, designers have choices about what kinds of social functions to allow. For instance, *Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014) is an online collectible card game. The main mechanic of the game echoes that of physical collectible card games: players buy packs of cards and use them to assemble a deck; the game then pairs them with another player and they use their decks to try to defeat the other player. From a gameplay standpoint, there is no real need for a chat function in order to play the game, as there is nothing to be coordinated. Blizzard has, however, implemented a kind of limited chat function wherein players can choose from a short list of possible generic messages to display to the other player.

This kind of limited chat circumvents a variety of unpleasant online interactions; essentially Blizzard does not have to enforce any kind of restrictions on speech because they built those restrictions right into the mechanic. A player cannot target derogatory speech towards another player because that is not an option Blizzard provides. Moreover, as players have an option to automatically suppress messages altogether, it is possible for them to completely avoid any speech from other players. While many other online games have to deal with the issue of players sending abusive messages, Blizzard's design choice prevent those, though obviously at the expense of sending targeted positive messages either.

In this case, the designers had to weigh both positive and negative effects on the game's community in order to make a decision. Many competitive games inspire viciously derogatory comments from players; this behavior poses a threat to the community because it can both discourage new members and influence current members to leave. In either case, it seems probable that players who are sensitive to the importance of respecting and interacting well with others – and with treating them as an ends – are those most likely to be excluded; in essence, the

behavior drives away the ethically-sensitive members and replaces them with unethical members. By limiting communication to pre-selected messages (none of which are derogatory), Blizzard eliminates a channel for damaging behavior.¹⁵

c. Ongoing Obligations

Decisions about how to deal with abusive social interactions online introduces a second stage of designer involvement. While clearly designers hold a lot of power during the game creation stage – and thus have responsibility for what occurs at that stage – they do not cease having responsibilities once the game is created. Multiplayer online games are obvious examples of how designers can continue to have responsibilities; since players interact with each other in order to play the game, designers need to decide how to respond to issues that may arise from those interactions. However, even single-player games are not immune from ongoing responsibilities, as games can have expansions or downloadable content (DLC) which can be influenced by player feedback. Furthermore, designers also make choices in how to respond to player feedback when continuing a series of games.

Consider the *Dragon Age* series of games (BioWare 2009, 2011, 2014). BioWare is well-known not only for having romance options for the main character, but for providing both same-sex and opposite-sex relationship options. In *Dragon Age: Origins* two of the four potential partners could be romanced by either gender, in *Dragon Age II* all potential partners could be romanced by either gender, and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* for the first time introduced partners with purely same-sex interests; it had characters with opposite-sex and same-sex interests in addition to characters who could be romanced by anyone. BioWare thus has a long-standing commitment to providing players access to this content regardless of sexual orientation.

While players seem positive about this in general, a design choice from *Dragon Age II* caused a great deal of controversy. One of the male characters, Anders, will express romantic interest in the lead character, rather than waiting for the lead character to initiate romantic involvement. As he is written to be bisexual, he will do this regardless of the main character's gender. This caused an uproar among players as a number of (presumably heterosexual) male players were extremely uncomfortable with the fact that they might be the recipient of a romantic advance from a male character; one even went as far as saying that a “no homosexuality” option could have easily been implemented and chastised BioWare for omitting it. (Bastal 2011a)¹⁶

At this point, BioWare had to make a choice about how to respond, and it is unlikely that any option existed which would make all players happy. In a response complaints on their forums, the lead writer, David Gaider, stated the following:

¹⁵ This does not, of course, eliminate the behavior itself; there are plenty of other ways in which people can interact as they play games through voice chat programs or video streaming. Note also that there is a cost to the community as well by limiting player interaction; while the nature of *Hearthstone* is such that superficial interactions are probably sufficient, this solution would almost certainly not work for a game which tries to build lasting bonds between players.

¹⁶ I believe that this is the original post, since it appears to be the one cited in Kris (2011) and Fahey (2011), which were contemporary with the post. Unfortunately, the post and its reply are now only available in archived format, which makes it difficult to determine for certain whether it preceded or followed (Bastal 2011b).

The romances in the game are not for “the straight male gamer”. They're for everyone. We have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male, and they deserve no less attention. We have good numbers, after all, on the number of people who actually used similar sorts of content in [*Dragon Age: Origins*] and thus don't need to resort to anecdotal evidence to support our idea that their numbers are not insignificant... and that's ignoring the idea that they don't have just as much right to play the kind of game they wish as anyone else. The “rights” of anyone with regards to a game are murky at best, but anyone who takes that stance must apply it equally to both the minority as well as the majority. The majority has no inherent “right” to get more options than anyone else. (Gaider 2011)¹⁷

This is perhaps the best possible response to the issue from an ethical perspective. First, the employee did respond to the player’s concern, demonstrating that the designers were receptive to feedback from players.¹⁸ Doing so both acknowledges the player’s ends and treats him as a full member of the community. Second, while the employee provides a pragmatic response at first, namely, that there may be a significant number of players who desire the content, ultimately his response is egalitarian: he asserts that all players have equal rights to play the kind of game they wish. This reinforces the idea that, in fact, the desires of the majority of players do not outweigh those of the (possibly) minority. Rather, all of the players’ desires are worthy of consideration because all of the players essentially have equal status; all players are, if you will, intrinsically worthy. The company thus refused to limit the options of a subset of their players purely to please a different group of players.

Moreover, this commitment was reinforced by the design of the sequel, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), which not only continued the practice of having multiple kinds of romance options, but also contained a quest line that explicitly dealt with familial reactions to a character’s sexual orientation; it was also praised for including a well-developed transgender character. (Makuch 2014) While they considered feedback provided on *Dragon Age II*, ultimately they chose to continue the series with an ongoing commitment to making a game community which is inclusive to potential players, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

D. Player Responsibilities

In addition to game designers, those who play games also have certain responsibilities. In a single-player game, players have very little power over the game itself. Players have a certain amount of financial power, in that they can choose to buy or abstain from a game, but their main ability is to give feedback for future titles. Thus while players cannot generally affect a current game title, they may be able to affect what a designer does in the future.

¹⁷ Note that the ellipsis in this quotation was in the original post.

¹⁸ Note that I recognize it is not necessarily possible to respond to every forum post; doing so is not a necessary condition for being responsive to feedback. It does, however, provide some evidence that the designers are monitoring the avenue for feedback.

In a single-player game, a player's in-game choices only directly affect herself. As such, I have argued (Neely 2016) that a player can only be faulted for her choices if those choices make her less virtuous (and thus, indirectly, more likely to cause harm to others.) In such cases, a player may have an obligation to refrain from playing such a game. While I remain somewhat pessimistic about our ability to tell whether a game is harming our character,¹⁹ it is easier for a player to judge other design choices, such as the plot and the game world. A player thus has a responsibility to pay attention to those choices and decide whether they should be encouraged or discouraged. Thus a game company that makes inclusive character designs should be praised for making the community more accessible to gamers of various types, whereas a game company that tells a very exploitative or stereotypical story should be criticized for reinforcing cultural stereotypes that, ultimately, may prove hostile to potential members of the community. In essence, the players provide a kind of check on game designers in that they can provide feedback about whether (or to what extent) the designers have fulfilled their ethical obligations to potential players and the game community.

Multiplayer games are more complicated because a player's behavior in the game can directly impact other players; as such, a player's choices have a wider scope of influence than in single-player games. One of the most famous examples of harm occurring within a game setting took place in *LambdaMOO* (Curtis 1990). A MOO (also known as a MUD) is a Multi-User Object-Oriented Dungeon or world. Within this setting, players can create characters and interact with others; they also can often create objects or rooms within the world and imbue them with various capabilities. In the *LambdaMOO* case, which was most famously described by Julian Dibbell (1993), a character named Mr. Bungle created a voodoo doll within the game; he used the doll to control two of the other characters in the MOO, raping and torturing those characters. The women whose characters he took over described themselves as feeling violated because of what had happened, and the general consensus within the community was that he had acted wrongly. As Huff, Johnson, and Miller (2003) agree, the harm that he had caused was not simply to the characters in the game – he had caused real moral harm to the users as well.

The idea that we can cause moral harm to others in virtual settings, such as games, has recently led to cases where people have been held legally responsible for causing such harm, notably a pair of cases in 2009 where Dutch judges convicted minors of theft for stealing virtual objects from the MMOs *Habbo* and *Runescape* (Strikwerda 2012); although the stolen objects were virtual, since they were obtained either through the use of real world currency or in-game effort of the player, they have value that transcends the game.

This idea of transcending the game world and having consequences inside or outside the game raises ontological issues with regard to virtual worlds. I follow Johnny Søraker (2012) in distinguishing intravirtual (inside the game world) and extravirtual (outside the game world) consequences of actions. Thus in the Dibbell case above, the intravirtual consequences concerned taking the character over and forcing it to act in certain sexual ways. The extravirtual

¹⁹ Indeed, the empirical studies are decidedly mixed in their results, and I tend to agree with Mark Coeckelbergh's assertion that "philosophers are tempted to pick out the one or few [empirical studies] that suit their arguments best." (Coeckelbergh, 2007, p. 220)

consequences were the feelings of violation those actions caused the other players; those feelings existed outside of the game, even if the actions primarily took place inside the game.²⁰ .

The intravirtual and extravirtual distinction applies to all games, but multiplayer games are particularly illustrative examples because the potential for harm and benefit at these two levels is easy to see. Although nominally all players interact through their avatars, there is frequently a distinction made between what the character is saying or doing and what the player is. If, upon defeating an enemy, one of the players types “Good job!” into the chat window, most other players will attribute that sentiment to the player in question, not to their character. While some players engage strictly in role-playing and never say anything which their characters would not, this is relatively rare; most players communicate on a meta-level wherein everyone involved knows that it is the player speaking, not the character. This is relevant because it allows us to make an interesting distinction between two very different ways in which harm or benefit can occur.

a. Harm/Benefit arising from character actions

First, there are consequences of character actions, where a player uses their character to harm or benefit another player. Certain arenas for cooperation or competition are frequently built into a game, signaling what sort of player behavior the designers wish to encourage. For instance, in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) certain bosses are not possible for a single player to defeat. Instead, players must band together in order to tackle the challenge. Moreover, frequently sheer numbers are not sufficient – the group must strategize in order to overcome the specific mechanics of the fight.²¹ As such, cooperation and coordination are frequently required, and a player who is uncooperative can ruin the group’s chances of success; similarly, a player with an abrasive attitude can make the experience much less pleasant for the other members of the team. Thus one way in which players gain responsibilities is by being part of a team – if players are engaged in an endeavor as a team, they have certain fiduciary responsibilities.²²

In addition to cooperative norms, there are norms for competitive behavior as well. *World of Warcraft*, like many online games, has too many players to operate efficiently with all of them in a single game world; its solution is to offer many different servers with copies of the world on it. Players then interact with the other players on their chosen server (or sometimes group of linked servers). Some of these are worlds where it is possible to battle the other players’ characters, not simply the monsters. Players then face questions about what circumstances, if any, would render this unethical: is it acceptable to attack a character when that character is already engaged in

²⁰ I say “primarily” because video games are particular states instantiated on physical devices and thus have an extravirtual component simply in terms of the bits on the machine; all of the characters, objects, and actions within the game thus have an extravirtual component in this sense. This is rarely the sort of extravirtual consequence we are concerned with from an ethical perspective, however.

²¹ See Golub (2010) for a description of such a fight.

²² In essence such players have joined a small (and sometimes temporary) sub-community which is aimed at accomplishing a particular goal. It thus has its own norms and expectations on top of any more general norms from the game community.

combat with a monster? Is it acceptable to attack a character which is much lower in level than your own?²³

An interesting aspect of this debate is that it does not simply concern what the game permits; it concerns what players view as right: many players do not see either of the aforementioned actions as appropriate because, in essence, the fight is not fair. If a player or a guild²⁴ has a reputation for unfair actions, other players or guilds on the server may respond; in this way, the battle for appropriate behavior is waged not merely in forum posts and external discussions about the game, but also within the game itself.²⁵ While players widely disagree on appropriate standards of behavior – and the battle among guilds is far from over – the fact that they engage in this deliberation and will act accordingly reflects the notion that certain actions within the game are perceived as wrong to take, even if they are permitted by game mechanics; how one chooses to act in the game has moral consequences.

In addition to what the designer permits, therefore, a player is also subject to informal rules of conduct. These are generally not as stringent as designer-imposed rules, because players have access only to a narrower range of possible punishments; a designer could ban a player for bad behavior, say, but other players lack that ability.²⁶ However, in a social game, ostracism can have weight. Thus if one's character becomes known as a "loot ninja" – i.e. a player who abuses certain capabilities of the game in order to obtain better items inside the game – it may become more difficult for that player to find people to play with. Similarly, a player may be held responsible not only for his own actions but for those of his associates. Some guilds have reputations for violating player vs. player (PvP) norms; one example of this is when players repeatedly kill others who are much lower in level, which is called "ganking." In addition, many PvP guilds maintain a KOS ("Kill on Sight") list, which means that their members will attack other members of that guild without waiting for provocation. A guild with a reputation for ganking may end up on other guilds' KOS lists. This results in their members generally having more trouble playing the game, since large parts of the community are essentially self-policing by punishing the player for belonging to a group that violates the community's norms. This is a way in which the community can hold power over both individual players and groups of players within the community; they enforce intravirtual consequences for the actions a player takes.

b. Harm/benefit from player use of game structures

²³ Sicart (2009) discusses this in some detail, although aspects of his discussion are outdated.

²⁴ A guild is a collection of players, frequently arranged around a particular objective such as wishing to raid or engage in PvP content; there is often a shared ethos in a guild such that a guild may gain a particular reputation for certain kinds of behavior.

²⁵ Sicart (2009) argued that players were not able to effectively police their own communities within the game and that Blizzard's introduction of the honor system into *World of Warcraft* was thus unethical. While I agree that players are limited in what they can do, I believe he underestimated the ability of players and guilds to counter each other's behavior; if a member of your guild kills a low-level character who belongs to my guild, then higher-level characters from my guild may come defend the low-level character, providing a form of protection. If your guild has a reputation for doing things which other guilds frown on, other guilds may not wish to group with yours. These and similar ways assign in-game consequences for actions which people view as inappropriate.

²⁶ There have been some interesting hybrids with respect to this where a player group has responsibility for policing behavior, such as the tribunal system in *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009).

In addition to using particular game mechanics to harm or benefit others, there is a second sort of case in which the player may not be doing anything specific with his character to help or harm another player intravirtually, yet may still affect them; in this case the harm is more directly a result of player actions rather than being mediated through a character. For instance, most games display the names of other characters and the names of their guilds or clans.²⁷ While not directly impeding the gameplay of others – and thus not having any intravirtual consequences – naming choices can cause extravirtual harm. As an example, there is an ability that rogues have in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) called “Sap.” This ability incapacitates a being if applied prior to combat; a standard combat technique for rogues is to enter stealth mode, sneak up on an enemy, and sap it in order to keep it from joining the fray. A guild name of “Sapped Girls Can’t Say No” thus translates roughly to “Incapacitated Girls Can’t Say No,” which amounts to open advocacy of rape. While a player who runs around the world with that guild name over his head may not be causing intravirtual harm, there are many players who will experience extravirtual harm as a result. The sort of reaction (and degree of harm) will vary among individuals, but it is generally upsetting to a female player to encounter threats of a very real, personal nature when playing a game that should, ultimately, be a safe space for them to enjoy themselves. Furthermore, it indicates an attitude that minimizes and trivializes rape and aggression towards women, effectively normalizing it. While this is a single instance with a limited scope of influence, the total effect of these tropes, in aggregate, is likely to have a substantial subconscious effect on people’s attitudes towards women and what sort of behaviors and attitudes are allowable, both in the game and in society as a whole.

There are two major effects on the game’s community as a result of this kind of harm. First, it places a barrier to female players’ enjoyment of the game. While male players can certainly find the name offensive, it is not an open threat against their persons; as such, the experience of encountering the name will be less directly harmful. Thus while male players are free to wander the world without worrying that they will encounter this kind of threatening name, female players will have to be somewhat more wary. This detracts from their ability to simply enjoy the game in a way that does not occur for male players.²⁸

In addition to causing individuals to have unpleasant experiences, this kind of name also makes the game’s community (and perhaps the gamer community at large) more hostile to female players by demonstrating and reinforcing an attitude of casual misogyny within the community. If allowed to flourish, the attitudes will likely cause players in targeted groups to leave the community. There is thus a moral imperative to take action against this sort of behavior that stems from two sources. First, there is a requirement of justice – if female players will have a harder time enjoying the game than male players simply due to the attitudes of other players, the community is not behaving justly towards its members. Second, there is a duty not to impede the flourishing of the game’s community, which this sort of behavior clearly does.²⁹

²⁷ These cannot always be hidden, so players may not be able to avoid seeing the names.

²⁸ I would note that this can be generalized more broadly, as there are also names that include slurs against race or sexual orientation.

²⁹ I would note that *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), like many games, has avenues for reporting offensive speech or names; they thus are trying to address this kind of problem.

c. Unequal responsibility

In a multiplayer game, both designers and players share a certain amount of social responsibility to try to create a flourishing game community. The nature of their responsibilities varies because of their disparate spheres of influence; while designers control what is even possible to try to do within the game, players are capable of acting within those limits in ways the designer never imagined. Furthermore, players can create informal norms and punishments for actions on top of those imposed by the designer. Nevertheless, even within a single sphere of responsibility, not all members have equal responsibility.

Games are rarely truly egalitarian. Whether through designer-created structures or player-created hierarchies, some members of the community have more power and influence than others. Sometimes this is due to inherent game structures. For instance, if a guild or clan structure is designed so that there must be a single leader, then there is no way to avoid an unequal distribution of power. A guild may attempt to run their affairs in a more democratic or egalitarian way – perhaps by having a group of officers that share authority – but, ultimately, since the game requires the group to designate a single leader, that person will have more power whether they want it or not.

In addition to designer-created structures, however, players are excellent at creating their own hierarchies. For instance, in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) guilds can be designed with many different ranks of membership, each of which may have different rights and responsibilities, depending on the desires of the guild leader. While the designers provide the underlying capability for this power structure by allowing players to create ranks and assign them different rights, the designers do not provide the details; a guild can choose to add or promote people for whatever reasons they desire.

Furthermore, there are player-created social structures which do not necessarily rely on designer-created structures. Players may defer to people with better gear, with particular accomplishments in the game, or simply to particularly charismatic individuals. These social patterns do not necessarily result in a rigid social structure, since not all players value the same things, and thus not all players will defer to others based on gear, say. However, they do frequently result in a hierarchy of sorts.

Moreover, members of certain groups are likely to have less power within a game's community. New players' opinions are frequently given less weight than those of long-time players. Players who are openly a member of a minority group face harassment and are given less power than those who either are members of the perceived majority or are able to pass as members. The internet is clearly not a level playing field, and ignoring these power differentials risks reproducing existing social disparities from our communities as well as reinforcing or exacerbating the unequal treatment of minority groups online. Put simply, not every player has an equal ability to affect the game community's culture.

Consider a female player who has recently joined a guild. One night as she is playing, one of her fellow guild members types a rape joke into the shared guild chat, which makes her uncomfortable. While the woman certainly could object, her objection will likely carry less

weight than if, say, the guild leader censured the member for that joke. Moreover, if her objection is belittled or dismissed by the guild leader, her actions will almost certainly prove ineffective; she has far less power to shape the guild community than the leader does and is also more subject to retaliation from other members of the community. While to some extent this is true of all new players, we cannot ignore the intersectional nature of identity here. Women are frequently chastised for being “too sensitive” or “unable to take a joke” if they object to rape jokes, in addition to facing greater harassment online simply due to their gender. As such, if this player is known to be female, she also runs the risk of having her objections dismissed and/or facing retaliation simply on those grounds.³⁰

Given that not all players have an equal ability to defend themselves or influence the community, those with greater influence have a responsibility to use it on behalf of those whose voices are ignored or silenced by others in the community. The atmosphere of a game is shaped by the actions and attitudes of members of that game’s community. It is not sufficient simply to refrain from engaging in actions that deny other players’ humanity; a small minority of unethical actors can damage or destroy a community if left unchecked, and silence is generally taken as agreement. As a result, to prevent the destruction of a community – and to prevent the community from treating some of its members as having less intrinsic worth, by making them into objects of scorn or ridicule – players have positive duties to help enforce ethical norms within the community.³¹

This may seem fairly unobjectionable when applied to guild leaders and others who have accepted a position of power; voluntarily taking such a role within the community seems like it should entail the player with corresponding responsibilities. A guild leader can largely shape the atmosphere of the guild by who they allow to join and remain in the guild and by what actions they encourage or tolerate. A raid leader has similar influence over the atmosphere of a raid. If these leaders choose not to act and simply ignore certain behaviors, that is itself a choice that has moral weight. But what about players who have not explicitly taken a position of authority in this fashion but are simply deferred to by other players for some reason? Is it still reasonable to require them to use their authority in this fashion?

While such players may not have voluntarily placed themselves in a position of authority, the fact remains that they have more power than others in the community; whether they should is, ultimately, fairly irrelevant in terms of assigning a moral duty. If two actors can prevent a moral harm, but one can do so at much less risk to himself than the other, clearly that actor has a greater duty to help; this is why we have institutions like the Coast Guard to rescue people rather than requiring anyone who can swim to jump in and help. Thus while all players have some duty to help enforce community norms, those who are in positions of power have a greater duty because they are less at risk from any backlash.³²

³⁰ Note that this possibility does not disappear simply because a player is no longer new; she may escape the identity of “newbie” but a perceived as female player always runs the risk of being dismissed for her female identity.

³¹ Note that they have duties to enforce ethical norms, not simply whatever norms the community desires. If a community has unethical norms, members should not be enforcing those.

³² This obligation holds outside of the game, as well, so a person with greater status on a message board or forum also has an obligation to enforce norms; this is why most of them have moderators who can remove messages if they are deemed inappropriate.

E. Gamer Community's Responsibilities

In addition to the responsibilities that players and designers have when engaging with particular games, I would be remiss if I ignored the broader game community. The problematic attitudes displayed by certain gamers came crashing into the public eye in 2014 with a scandal called GamerGate. This began when a programmer made a series of blog posts about the end of his relationship with a video game developer named Zoë Quinn. In those posts he accused her of having sex with a video game journalist in exchange for good reviews of a game she had created. While this was fairly clearly false – the journalist in question never reviewed her game and was cleared of any wrongdoing in an investigation by his employers – the movement took on a life of its own. While ostensibly about ethics in journalism³³, it took on an extremely misogynistic tone and further fuelled threats against Anita Sarkeesian (who already was receiving death threats for her web series on sexist tropes in video games.) At this point the movement expanded to other women in the gaming industry, like Brianna Wu, who were targeted simply for supporting Quinn and Sarkeesian. (Dockterman 2014) To be quite clear, this movement resulted in actions such as doxxing (having personal information like bank records hacked and released), death threats, and rape threats; ultimately a number of the women targeted left their houses and went into hiding. (Dewey 2014)

While many members of the gamer community did not support the actions of GamerGate, the movement highlights the fact that we cannot simply consider the community that surrounds a single game; we have to consider the wider context of gaming as well. This is not to say that we should somehow ignore what happens within particular game communities. On the contrary, the gamer community contains the members of those communities, and the actions taken within the scope of a single game thus will have an effect on the community as a whole. This is particularly true if those actions stem from a large and influential game or publisher.

As an example, many game tournaments are streamed so that players can watch the competitions; the watchers often will comment on what is occurring via social media or chat panels for the stream. In May 2016, during DreamHack Austin, one of the *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014) competitors was African-American; players watching the tournament used a great many racial slurs while commenting on his performance in the game.³⁴ (Campbell 2016) As a result, the game's designer is working with one of the main streaming companies, Twitch, to implement changes to chat stream moderation that will hopefully prevent this from occurring in the future. (Frank 2016) This is particularly notable because prior to this incident Twitch has left policing chat behavior up to individual streamers. A small developer likely would not have had enough power to get an outside company like Twitch to work with them on such a problem; however, a developer such as Blizzard which has numerous games that are played competitively does have enough power to prompt a change. While it is not clear what the result of this action will be, it has the potential to benefit the game community as a whole; once effective tools have been found for use with *Hearthstone*, it is likely something that can be

³³ Although pretty clearly not actually about ethics in journalism, since Quinn was targeted far more than the journalist who had allegedly committed the breach of ethics.

³⁴ For specific examples of what was said, see (Fenlon 2016).

extended to other games on the same or similar platforms. A single developer will not change the gamer culture, but they can move in a direction which encourages others to implement similar changes; together the designers have power to change the culture.

Designers do not bear all of the weight of changing the community; players also have a responsibility to create a good environment. While I have discussed ways in which players have responsibilities inside a particular game environment, those obligations extend to other interactions within the gamer community. As an example, a single game's community may encompass behaviors outside of the game, such as posting on a related website or forum; beyond that, there are websites that cover gaming³⁵ where players interact. Leaving the virtual world, there are multiple conventions which aim to bring gamers together ;³⁶ the ways in which attendees interact also affect the culture of the community. My arguments from the previous section apply to player behavior in these settings as well – members with greater power have a responsibility to use it in order to assist the community.

Ideally the gamer community should place a check on specific games and game communities; if a designer creates an offensive game or allows a community to become toxic, the gamer community should object. Unfortunately, even if the designer agrees with the objection, it is not always clear how to fix it. *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) has a famously toxic environment, recognized by the designer, players, and the gamer community as a whole – the game has a very bad reputation for player misbehavior.³⁷ However, Riot Games has attempted many fixes with little success; they have created a team of scientists to try to shape player behavior (Hess 2014), updated how they handle reports (Lyte 2015a, 2015b), tried a system of automatic bans (Orland 2015), thrown in-game events to promote cooperation with other players (Williams 2015), and even fired their own employees who turned out to be toxic gamers (Benter 2016)³⁸. The game continues to have a bad reputation despite all of this. As such, even if a designer agrees with the community that change needs to occur, it is not necessarily possible without the cooperation of a sufficient portion of the community.

Riot's difficulties highlight the problem with collective responsibility; it is easy to say that the gamer community has an obligation to do something, but it is more difficult to determine what that implies at an individual level. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that there is a subcommunity within the gamer community that is highly exclusionary, clinging to the idea of being the Real Gamers.³⁹ The subcommunity of Real Gamers⁴⁰ is damaging to the gamer community as a whole because it embodies the idea that there is a single right way of being a

³⁵ E.g., MMO Champion, Polygon, and Kotaku.

³⁶ E.g. PAX, E3, Gamescom, and Blizzcon.

³⁷ There has been a great deal of speculation as to why this is the case; see (LeJacq 2015) and (Hinkley 2015) for thoughtful analyses as to why *League of Legends* engenders this behavior.

³⁸ Note that Riot fired their employees largely because they found that toxic behavior in the game correlated with toxic behavior in the workplace. ("Riot Games" n.d.) However, in doing so they demonstrated that even their employees were not ultimately safe from consequences if they engaged in such behavior.

³⁹ They are particularly notable for moving the goal posts any time one of their contentions might be disproven. Hence if they state that women do not play video games and are confronted with evidence that they are wrong, they will likely counter by explaining that women play "casual" games and thus still are not Real Gamers.

⁴⁰ Also sometimes referred to as "true gamers" or "hardcore" gamers.

member of the community – moreover, this can involve not simply what games you play or how good you are at them, but also identity traits. The controversy over Anders in *Dragon Age II* (BioWare 2011) that I discussed above is a perfect example of this; by centering the experiences of a specific demographic – the “Straight Male Gamer” from Bastal (2011a, 2011b) – this gamer excludes other members as being of lesser importance.

On the surface, this might appear to be a way of maintaining status; such gamers see themselves as the best and wish to be recognized as the Real Gamers. However, that is not always the case; frequently such gamers do not wish to be at the top of the hierarchy – they see themselves as encompassing the entire community. In their eyes, the gamer community is identical to the community of Real Gamers.⁴¹ In essence, this is a kind of gate-keeping which tends to exclude new players in addition to players of various social demographics. While there certainly needs to be a distinction between members and non-members of any community, it is problematic for a community if the membership is unduly restricted; ultimately, this prevents the growth and flourishing of a community. Pragmatically, multiplayer games depend on having a reasonably large player base; excluding new members will ultimately harm everyone in that community, since they community is not viable below a certain size. Ethically, the distinction should be made on some relevant grounds – it makes sense that a person who has never demonstrated any interest in video games is not a member of the gamer community; it is less clear why a person should have to play a particular game or belong to a particular demographic in order to qualify as a gamer.

Moreover, this form of exclusion is indefensible. Rejecting new players exclusively on that basis is generally justified by noting that they are deficient in the knowledge and/or skills necessary to play the game – both of which will likely be rectified over time if they are permitted to participate in the community. Rejecting players because they do not fit a particular identity description is arbitrary. There is no better reason for excluding women or non-white people from the gamer community than there is for excluding tall people; each of those traits is equally relevant to playing games. True, players from outside the perceived majority may point out uncomfortable facts about the games and players they encounter, which may make some gamers unhappy. Justice is not always comfortable.

One of the difficult aspects of dealing with the gamer community is that it is difficult to enforce social norms within a large, diffuse community. Ostracism is generally the most powerful tool a community has – if all else fails in correcting the actions of a member, a community can reject that person. However, there is no real way to apply this to the gamer community. Even if someone were banned from a game, there are many other games to play (and many ways around bans.) Even if somehow we banned a person from all games, they could still comment on websites or attend conventions. The fact that we cannot effectively prohibit someone from participating in the gamer community is a useful trait when it comes to disempowering True Gamers – they may think that a person should not game because of her gender or race, but they cannot actually prevent it. Nonetheless, this aspect cuts both ways: they cannot exclude others from the gamer community, but neither can the gamer community effectively exclude them.

⁴¹ Plus, perhaps, designers and the like, although it is not clear they are always included in this view of the community.

There are some positive steps that can be taken. The first important component is simple awareness – as with any social issue, unless people know something is happening, it is unlikely to change. People should be aware that this happens and stay alert for instances of it; furthermore, they should believe other players if they report bad experiences. The second component is generally in the hands of the designers. While designers clearly have a duty not to contribute to the harmful elements of the gamer community, they also are obligated to provide tools aimed at stopping it. Most designers seem to recognize that a healthy community is desirable for their games, hence they try to provide ways for players to report others; they are obligated to follow up on this and see whether their tools are effective. The third component relies on players not simply to avoid acting unjustly themselves but also to avoid being a bystander. Silence and passivity are dangerous to the community because they allow a minority to dominate the conversation; moreover, in the realm of the internet where the main action one can take is in the form of speech, choosing not to speak is choosing not to act. Ultimately all members of the gamer community are responsible for working to ensure that the community does not exclude or disempower people for traits that are either irrelevant to gameplay and out of the player’s control (such as race and gender) or that limit the community’s flourishing (as in the ostracism of new people.)

F. Conclusion

Fundamentally, power underwrites every aspect of the game experience, from the designers who have the power to create the game environment to the power (or lack of power) that players have to change that environment and interact socially. Even among players, I have argued that power is shared unequally in game environments. Partially this is due simply to designer choices in structuring games; in a competitive game, for instance, players who do well will have more status than those who do poorly. However, players are also more than willing to create their own less formal social hierarchies and bestow power upon other players.

In order to create flourishing communities, we have a responsibility to treat players and potential players justly. In particular, we should avoid reinforcing existing inequities from the actual world in our games. Specifically, we should avoid penalizing players for not matching the stereotype of a “typical” gamer – by catering solely to straight white male gamers we replicate our society’s power imbalances unnecessarily. Thus design choices should be made consciously and should be scrutinized for bias; we should ask whether particular design choices are necessary for the game, or whether the designer is simply importing his own assumptions into the game.

Ultimately, people with more power to influence a game’s community (or the gamer community as a whole) have a correspondingly greater responsibility to do so in a positive way. The demands of justice require us avoid excluding people from the community for arbitrary or irrational reasons; however, there are many within these communities who desire these exclusions. Those members who are high in the social hierarchy can challenge such attitudes with less risk than a disempowered member, and they are ethically required to do so.

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