No Player is Ideal:
Why Video Game Designers Cannot Ethically Ignore Players' Real-World Identities
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A. Introduction

Video games have an increasingly pervasive reach in modern society; people play games on their computers, consoles, phones, and online. While not all players actively identify as gamers, recent research suggests that approximately half of the adult population of the United States play games. Moreover, this percentage holds regardless of race or gender, highlighting the fact that gamers are not simply young white men playing games in their parents' basement; gamers are a diverse group. (Duggan, 2015) Unfortunately, this idealized picture of who plays video games is also pervasive, which poses a significant ethical problem. By assuming, even unconsciously, that all players fit a particular mold, designers run the risk of ignoring important social factors that impact the experience of players. Ultimately, this can result in neglecting their ethical duties to treat players and potential players justly.

In this paper, I focus on the ethical responsibilities that game designers have towards players. In particular, I emphasize the ways in which players' identities affect their game experience and the entailing responsibilities this places on designers. These responsibilities emerge in different aspects of game design. First, they emerge from the game's content, such as the design of the gameworld. A second, related, group of issues arises with respect to avatar creation; this is an aspect of the gameworld but also a fundamental game mechanic affecting how a player interacts with that gameworld. An additional type of game mechanic concerns what players physically have to be able to do in order to play a game; my third focus will thus be on questions of accessibility. Lastly, players' experiences are fundamentally altered when other players are introduced; I will focus on player chat as an example of how multiplayer games lessen a designer's power while not entirely removing certain responsibilities. All of these cases will serve to illustrate my primary claim, namely, that designers are morally required to consider how design choices will impact diverse groups of players; this will prevent them from placing unnecessary barriers to players' ability to engage with the game.

B. Framework

Before examining specific ethical obligations, a few words about my general framework are in order. First, I approach our ethical obligations from a deontological perspective. People have intrinsic worth and we are not entitled to use them simply as tools to further our own ends; furthermore, our actions should be rationally universalizable. In the realm of video game design, this entails that designers have obligations to players (or potential players) of their games.[1] While in general video games are made to be sold – and hopefully make a profit – players should not be thought of simply as a means for achieving monetary gain; their desires are also ethically relevant. Moreover, a difference in how players are treated must be justified by some rational difference between those players; it cannot be arbitrary.

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[1] Players also have obligations to each other in multiplayer situations; essentially, anyone in the video game community will have obligations to others in that community. I discuss this at some length in (Neely, 2016)

This connects to my second point, which is that players are a diverse group. A great deal of research has shown that the stereotype of video game players as young, white, males is not adequate for understanding the community of players. Particularly with the rise of smartphone games, more people play video games than ever before – and they are a diverse group. (Duggan, 2015) While not every person who plays a video game identifies as a gamer, that is not necessary for moral standing in this context. Even people who are arguably on the fringes of the video game community are entitled to being treated as an end. By considering only an idealized section of the gamer community, designers risk ignoring ethical obligations to others. As a result, they may act unjustly in not treating players as equally valuable.

Third, people play games for particular reasons.[2] These reasons are not necessarily as simple as entertainment – many games evoke reactions that are far more complex than mere enjoyment. If they did not, there would be no space for serious games such as *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014); few people are apt to describe the grim experience of trying to survive as a civilian in a war-torn city as enjoyable, exactly. Similarly, the reason a person continues to play a game may well change over time; for instance, a person might start playing a Massively Multiplayer Online game out of curiosity but continue playing it because he enjoys the community of players. Reasons for playing are varied and malleable; nevertheless, a person plays a game for some reason – she is pursuing some end in playing that game.

Designers cannot cater to all possible reasons for playing a game. Someone who enjoys hidden object games because he relishes solving that sort of puzzle is likely not able to achieve that end by playing a first-person shooter (FPS); they are very different kinds of games. It is not unethical for designers to prioritize the achievement of particular ends when designing a game, nor is it unethical to design a game such that only some people will likely achieve a particular end; designing games which require fast reflexes, for instance, is not necessarily problematic, nor is designing a highly complex strategy game which requires an ability to analyze many future possibilities.[3]

Problems arise when designers create a game where certain players or groups of players are less able to achieve an end based on a feature which is not itself relevant to achieving that end. How fast your reflexes are is relevant to whether you can complete a game that requires fast reflexes, such as a platform game; players with slow reflexes will be less able to achieve that end. However, the feature that class shares (slow reflexes) is directly connected to the type of game (platformer); this is fine. On the other hand, if you design a fantasy setting for your role-playing game that is inhospitable to non-white players, say, those players may be less able to enjoy the game for reasons that are not themselves relevant; it is reasonable to require fast reflexes to succeed at certain kinds of games, but it is not reasonable to require that a player be white.

In general, designers have an obligation to ensure that players are not unnecessarily hindered in their ability to pursue their desired ends. What "unnecessarily" means is, of course, where most of the work will come in – while I have given a quick gloss, further examples will help elucidate the concept. I will thus consider four areas as examples of designer obligations: design of the

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[2] Albeit not always for the reasons designers intend, I suspect.
[3] Though see section E below on obligations pertaining to player capability.

gameworld, avatar creation, accessibility to disabled players, and governing interactions among players in a multiplayer game. These will help clarify the general nature of those obligations.

C. Content

A defining aspect of a video game is, of course, its content; this encompasses the game's plot, quests/missions, gameworld/setting, and so forth. In this area, both academic writers and the popular press tend to focus on violent or sexualized videogames. With respect to violence in video games, many are troubled by the question of whether it is morally acceptable to perform an act in a game which would be morally reprehensible in real life; others are simply interested in seeing whether performing those actions has any effect on the player which carries over into their interactions in the real world. (McCormick, 2001) Similarly, since female characters in video games are frequently sexualized (Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016), much research concerns what effect that has on players or potential players of a game. (Fox, Ralston, Cooper, & Jones, 2015)

These are two areas that demonstrate that what is portrayed in video games can have real-world effects on players. The converse is also true: players cannot necessarily separate themselves from their identities while playing games; instead, players experience games from their own particular social contexts. Moreover, it is unreasonable to expect a player to completely ignore his or her identity while playing a game. This is not to say that games have to be completely realistic worlds in which players simply embody a virtual version of themselves; designers can create a game where everyone belongs to a race of spacefaring fish-people if they want. Accepting the fantastic or grotesque is part of gaming. However, in the fictional space fish game all players are equally removed from their identities. This is frequently not the case for existing games.

Miguel Sicart discusses the Caesar's Legion faction from *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010), which is a militaristic, extremely hierarchical group. He claims that players who "believe that order is the most important value, even at the expense of freedom…will join the Caesar's Legion." (Sicart, 2013, p. 125) However, this faction views women as sub-human; they do not have any rights. A female player may well find herself unable to ally with this faction – even if she values order – because of who she is in real life; it is not a trivial matter to choose a faction that would devalue her as a human being. Although in some sense this is "just a game," meaning that it is fictional, the faction reflects a real-world attitude towards women; female players are going to experience this faction from a very different standpoint than male players.[4]

Does this make it unethical to have such a faction in the game? Not necessarily. However, there are two points that need to be considered. First, while there may be nothing wrong telling a particular story, it may be worth examining why we think that particular story is worth telling at the expense of others. Thus having a game based around rescuing a princess is not necessarily bad, but it is worth asking why we do not tend to see games based around rescuing a male character. Similarly, having a misogynistic faction is not necessarily bad but, again, we must

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[4] There are many problems with attempting to dismiss video games as "just a game" (or somehow separated from real life); one excellent article that discusses it in more detail is (Patridge, 2011).

consider why we rarely have factions in games that oppress men in the same way. It seems unlikely that the designers devised these tropes independently; rather, they are the products of particular social experiences and expectations which may, themselves, be unethical. Simply importing ethically problematic stereotypes and expectations into a game unconsciously is insufficient – designers need to consider why they are making those choices.

Second, even if such a choice is ethically defensible, a designer should recognize that not all players will experience this faction as a viable option. If the game's experience depends on players having a real choice, this faction may not be sufficient to provide it. Now, in the *Fallout: New Vegas* case, there were other major factions, all of them more egalitarian than the Caesar's Legion; one of them, the New California Republic, seems intended as a direct contrast to the Legion since it prohibits discrimination based on a multitude of factors, including gender. There are thus multiple factions available to all players, even with the removal of the Legion for some of them. *Fallout: New Vegas* thus provides similar experiences for all of its players, although the general prevalence of misogynistic characters or factions in video games deserves further examination.

While sometimes the problematic content occurs in the plot or a faction existing in the game, other times it pervades the gameworld itself. For instance, Tanner Higgin (2009) examines the lack of nonwhite characters in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. In *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) all of the human non-player characters are also white. While it is possible to create a dark-skinned avatar, it is simply a matter of changing the color of the model; there is no further modification permitted. As such, players can make a light-skinned human with Caucasian features, a medium-skinned human with Caucasian features, or a dark-skinned human with Caucasian features.[5] Furthermore, the cultural representations of humans are European; while non-human races incorporate aspects of Jamaican, Chinese, and Native American cultures, these are not represented in humans. As such, a nonwhite player may well enter this gameworld and wonder what happened to all the nonwhite humans.

This is not a mere aesthetic complaint, nor is it a complaint about a single game; it is pervasive. Games tends to represent nonwhite characters in a stereotypical fashion; moreover, these representations negatively affect the real world attitudes and behavior of white players towards people of color. (Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, & Brown, 2011) White players do not always notice these representations; sometimes they may simply absorb the underlying assumptions and messages without consciously reflecting on them. Nonwhite players, however, almost certainly do notice when the gameworld sends a message that people like them do not exist (or exist only as criminals, fighters, and other stereotypes.)

Ultimately, designers need to be aware that groups of players will react to their gameworld in different ways. While obviously some part of the reaction is idiosyncratic and thus beyond the designer's control, some of it is more predictable. In order to make their gameworld have a similar effect on all players, designers need to step outside the stereotype of an ideal gamer and think about how the world would be received by other groups of players. Even background design choices play a large role in how the game is received and whether players are equally able to engage with it.

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[5] I discuss the inability to create truly nonwhite avatars in further detail below.

D. Structural Choices: Avatar Design

In addition to background choices about the gameworld, designers must make choices concerning the structure or mechanics of the game – what does the player have to accomplish and how? One key mechanic that affects players' experiences is the creation and customization of avatars. Some games do not permit this; players take the persona of a specific character and play through the game from that character's perspective. However, many others allow players more freedom in how to represent themselves.

Designers make choices when they permit or forbid certain types of customization; what they allow reflects their decisions about who populates the gameworld and what kind of variation is permitted. While there may be reasons to allow some types of playable characters and exclude others, a designer should carefully consider why they are forbidding certain kinds of variation. Players' ability to customize their avatars affects their ability to empathize with that avatar (Turkay & Kinzer, 2014) and ultimately their desire to play the game again. (Teng, 2010)

Unfortunately, it is often quite difficult to create a truly nonwhite avatar. (Dietrich, 2013) In the majority of cases, the only nod to this is allowing players to darken their characters' skin color; customization of facial features and hair are not available. This limitation renders it impossible to create an avatar who truly appears nonwhite. Such a restriction may not be morally significant if the designer forces everyone to adopt a radically different avatar; all players will then be equally unable to create characters who reflect themselves. However, suppose the avatars are more realistic representations but the designer only allows for the creation of white humans. This reflects a value choice, one which places a barrier to the enjoyment of nonwhite players in a way that it does not for white players; this disparate treatment is unethical.

In addition to permitting customization, the type of customization also has ethical import. Happily, games have largely moved away from the older identification of genders with particular roles. In *Diablo II* (Blizzard North, 2000) two of the roles (Sorceress and Amazon) are female and three of the roles (Barbarian, Necromancer, and Paladin) are male; *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012) has no such limitations. However, female characters are frequently highly sexualized (Lynch et al., 2016) in ways that male characters are not; even if there are customization options, there may not be appealing options. This is complicated by the fact that not everyone in a group has the same desires – some women enjoy playing sexualized avatars and some do not. Similarly, some men enjoy playing muscle-bound characters and some do not. (Geraci & Geraci, 2013)

There is nothing unethical about sexualized characters in video games per se. However, it is particularly troublesome when the sexualization is not implemented equally. For instance, the Jade Breastplate is a piece of armor in *World of Warcraft* that looks like a normal breast plate on a male character but turns into essentially a plate bikini on female characters. Thus, male characters have armor that appears functional and female characters have armor that simply appears sexy. This is not balanced. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014) a piece of armor called Antaam-saar involves a chest piece that provides minimal coverage to the upper torso while otherwise consisting largely of straps. Although the armor looks somewhat

ridiculous, its coverage is equally minimal on both genders. This satisfies the universalization requirement – female characters are not being singled out.

One game that has expanded its avatar options in interesting ways is *The Sims 4*. (Maxis & The Sims Studio, 2014) In this iteration of the series, characters are offered a number of gender options. While characters (known as sims) are still specified as male or female, players can independently choose their physical frame, clothing preference, whether they can become (or make others) pregnant, and whether they can use the toilet while standing. Clothes are also no longer restricted by gender. It is still possible to sort them that way – they are classified as "masculine" or "feminine" – but that filter can be turned off; a male-identifying sim could wear a dress, a female-identifying sim could wear a tuxedo, etc. This is particularly good to see in a game that is, essentially, a simulation of real-life. Avatars are intended to reflect the real world in various ways, and designers must consider potential players and the options they might desire; in *The Sims 4*, designers are acknowledging that a transgender player should be able to create a character that reflects himself if he wishes to (perhaps by identifying as male but still being able to become pregnant.)

Now, of course a designer cannot please everyone; choices and trade-offs have to be made. However, there are two arguments that frequently emerge in response to exhortations of representation in video games: first, that "it's just a game" and thus representation is irrelevant, and second that representation would be too resource-intensive. Neither of these arguments is particularly convincing as a defense of limited representation in avatar choice.

First, I have noted that games cannot be divorced from their social context; it is not possible to consider them as ahistorical works. Moreover, the idea that an avatar's race and gender does not matter seems to be empirically untrue, given the reaction to works such as *Rust* (Facepunch Studios, 2013) that have challenged the dominant paradigm of avatar representation. In *Rust*, players are assigned an avatar with a randomly chosen race and gender; this avatar is permanently linked to their account. The designer's stated reasoning behind this move was, in part, to echo the claim that these features should not matter. (Newman, 2016) If this were true, then players should not object, since the avatar's race and gender do not affect gameplay in any fashion.

Unsurprisingly, players have objected. (Grayson, 2015) While research suggests that the designer is incorrect in his assertion that avatar customization does not matter, the reaction of players also affirm this result. The reason that avatar options frequently do not seem to matter to many white male players is because white male characters are usually the default; they do not generally encounter games that exclude them. *Rust*'s decision not to allow customization may not promote player identification with their avatar, it also is not unethical; assuming that the process truly is random, then each player has an equal chance of being assigned an avatar that corresponds to her real life identity. There is no distinction in treatment between different racial or gender groups.

Second, it is difficult to argue that it would be too resource-intensive to create more options for avatar customization when considering games with budgets that can run into millions or hundreds of millions of dollars. A designer who lovingly designs a race of cat-people could provide a few non-white hair textures if they choose; it is a question of priorities rather than

capability. Moreover, if these options truly do not matter and it is simply a matter of limited resources, then creating only female protagonists or only non-white humans ought to be equally viable. In a situation where that is the case – where race, gender, etc. were evenly distributed across game design – then it would be much less problematic for any single game to limit players' choices; there would be viable alternatives for players who preferred not to engage with a given game's restrictions. However, in truth these choices are not random or evenly distributed, and players frequently do not have other similar alternatives. As such, designers have a duty to carefully consider what possibilities they are allowing in their games and why.

E. Structural Choices: Player Accessibility

In addition to internal game mechanics, designers face structural choices concerning what a player physically needs to be able to do in order to play the game. These can range from what sort of controls a player needs to manipulate to whether the game is accessible to those with visual or hearing impairments. While games will always have some limitations on accessibility, designers need to consider whether they are unnecessarily placing barriers to the participation of players with disabilities.

For instance, many adventure games have various sorts of puzzles. One popular type involves replicating an aural pattern such as recreating a particular series of musical notes on an instrument; the correct pattern can be deduced from an audio clue in another location. An example of this would be from the first episode of *Forever Lost* (Glitch Games, 2012), in which a player must play a sequence of notes on a xylophone; the correct pattern may be found by listening to a radio elsewhere in the game. As a result, players who are deaf or hearing-impaired will have no way of completing these puzzle (and progressing in the game) without seeking outside assistance. If sound is only relevant for one or two puzzles in the game (as in this instance), this is creating an unnecessary – and easily prevented – barrier to players with hearing impairments.

Many designers have realized this and provide visual clues for such puzzles in addition to or instead of aural clues. In *Forever Lost*, since the xylophone keys are different colors the designer could have provided a color pattern clue in addition to the sounds.[6] In other games, such as *The Hunt for Lost Treasure* (Lone Wolf Games, 2015), while players must enter a musical sequence on a piano, the puzzle is not itself aural because the keys have patterns on them; the clue to solving the puzzle is available in terms of patterns, not sounds.

Accessibility has become something which designers are increasingly aware of and pursue; indeed, there are good business reasons for doing so, since there are many people who would like to play games but cannot.[7] Color-blind modes, for instance, are becoming increasingly popular. Subtitles are also fairly common for dialogue in many games. Because many first-person

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[6] The addition of this clue would be better than replacing it, since a color pattern may raise accessibility issues for someone who is color-blind. In striving to make a game more accessible for a group of players, designers need to ensure they are not making it less accessible for others.

[7] Microsoft makes an excellent business case for accessibility, both in order to reach disabled players and to help players who might not be disabled but would also benefit from certain improvements to accessibility. (Microsoft, 2017)

shooters can cause motion sickness in certain players, there is also work being done on changing the field of view (or allowing players more control over it) in order to decrease nausea. These are all changes that can be useful for many players. Being able to adjust the colors can be helpful if the gaming environment is very bright, which makes dark objects difficult to see; similarly, many people playing on mobile devices play without sound so as not to disturb the people around them and thus are reliant on subtitles or other textual communication.

Of course, accommodations can be done poorly. Subtitling only dialogue may allow a deaf player to follow the main plot of a game, but the player will still miss out on ambient noises which set the mood or background conversations that flesh out the story and gameworld. In contrast, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* subtitles conversations of people near your character in the same way that a person might overhear the conversation; this allows hearing-impaired players to have a very similar experience to unimpaired players. Another problematic attempt at accommodation is when designers implement color-blind modes that simply apply a filter to an entire screen; this can cause the game to look very unnatural to a player with color blindness. (Hardin, 2016) The accommodation is likely better than nothing, since the player can still experience the game with some approximation of what the developer intends her to experience. However, as a group, players with color blindness will not have as good an experience as players with normal vision. A much better alternative is the way in which *FTL: Faster Than Light* (Subset Games, 2012) ensures that none of its information is conveyed strictly by color – it has patterns or markings in addition to color. For instance, if a segment of the ship is depressurized it has a striped pattern in addition to turning a different color. Similarly, when a system is disabled, they put an X over its indicator in addition to changing its color.

I have argued that there is an ethical problem if a player or group of players are less able to achieve an end for a reason unrelated to that end. In the *Forever Lost* example above, sound was not required for most of the game; the barrier to players with hearing impairment was unnecessary. In an audio game, it may be that sound is intrinsic to the game and cannot be easily translated into an accessible version. Other cases can be more questionable.

For instance, suppose a player is susceptible to motion sickness. As a result, he is generally unable to play first-person shooters because they make him too nauseous to enjoy the game. Small changes to gameplay are unlikely to help with this, since the very nature of the genre involves sneaking around avoiding enemies (and shooting them); being able to react quickly to a potential threat by whirling around and shooting it is integral to this kind of game. For a long time, such a player would simply have been unable to play the game. While a designer might well want to overcome the propensity for nausea in certain players, she may lack the knowledge of how to do it in a way that maintains the basic integrity of her game.

This is not itself unethical. I can acknowledge that there is a problem that needs fixing – the fact that many people in the world suffer from famine, say – without actually knowing how to fix it, though I might have some ethical obligation to try my best or not to ignore the problem. Similarly, the designer is not required to be a miracle worker. She does have an obligation to do her best – maybe see if game-testers react to certain changes of camera or movement style – and she has an obligation to keep up with work in the field so that in the future she may be able to address the problem. In these ways she acknowledges this player group as having intrinsic worth

and that her game is placing barriers to their participation; she simply is unable to avoid it presently.

The future always has the possibility to change this. There has been more attention paid to nausea and field of view issues, driven in part by a push to embrace virtual reality devices; these cause nausea in many people who have not previously experienced it while playing games. As the research into this field changes, so will the designer's obligations; once she has the necessary knowledge, her reason for not making the game more accessible disappears. It is hard to tell what the future will bring in this regard. The idea of making graphically-based games accessible to the blind might seem impossible, but people have been working on it. (Engström, Brusk, & Östblad, 2015) Similarly, while twenty years ago many mobility impairments would have been impossible to accommodate, our technology has developed in ways that make this far easier.

I will note that in addition to a lack of knowledge, there are many who use a lack of resources as a reason for not making a game accessible. However, this justification is less plausible. First, as noted before, frequently the designer does not truly lack resources – she simply does not wish to use her resources in that way and potentially sacrifice something else. In this case, the player with disabilities is clearly regarded as less important than other players since something that is required for one group to participate in the game is being sacrificed for something that is desired by another group. This is different from a case where groups of players simply desire different things; a designer may have to disappoint one group, but this is not inherently unethical. Sacrificing something that one group *requires* for something that another group simply *desires*, however, is much more questionable. In this case, there needs to be an ethical justification for ignoring the first group's needs in favor of the second group's desires; this is typically not present.

Second, not all accommodations are resource-intensive; subtitles are fairly easy to do, for instance. Moreover, just as technology becomes less expensive over time, the resources required for a particular accommodation will likewise diminish. Thus while this justification might excuse a designer from providing some sorts of accessibility, it seems unlikely to excuse the designer from all of it. While partial accommodations are not completely sufficient, they do provide players with an experience of the game that is closer to that of a player without disabilities. They are a reasonable start, if not a justifiable ending place for the industry.

Designers are thus obligated to carefully consider what is truly physically required to develop their envisioned game. This will likely involve a greater integration of players with disabilities into game-testing and design in order to truly understand what players' capabilities are and what kinds of adaptations would be helpful; designers are not always aware of the capabilities and limitations of different user groups. (Gerling et al., 2016) While not every player can be accommodated, their needs should not simply be overlooked or dismissed; doing so fails to treat them as persons deserving of moral consideration.

F. Multiplayer Games

Thus far I have discussed game aspects which are completely under a designer's control. However, it is somewhat trickier to tease out designers' responsibilities when we consider

multiplayer games, as in these games a player's experience is shaped not simply by the choices of the designer but also by the actions of other players. Moreover, players interact in many different ways. Consider chat, whether textual or spoken. There are good reasons for enabling this in a multiplayer game – it enables coordination of a group, it may foster a greater sense of community if a player can socialize with others while playing, and so forth. However, players do not simply use features in ways that designers intend, and thus chat is also used to abuse and harass other players. This poses an ethical quandary, because the unethical behavior is not being committed by the designer (nor is it completely under her control) – what responsibilities does she have in this situation?

It would be far too strong to require designers somehow ensure that all players behave ethically and always recognize each other as having intrinsic worth. This is putting too much weight on designers, at least given what is pragmatically possible at this time. On the other hand, it is ethically insufficient to put all of the weight on the players and absolve designers of any responsibility. Designers do control the framework and in many multiplayer online games are actively involved in updating and improving the game.[8] As such, it is reasonable to expect them to bear some responsibility for action if a piece of the game is being misused.

There are several ways designers have approached this issue. One strategy is to limit communication between players in ways that will make it more difficult for abuse to occur. *Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014) is an online collectible card game. As with physical collectible card games, players buy packs of cards from which they assemble a deck; the game then matches them against another player in a competition. From a gameplay standpoint, chat is not really necessary – the game is multiplayer in the sense that you play against other people, but players are not part of a team; no coordination among players is truly necessary. However, Blizzard chose to implement a limited chat function wherein players can send a message which they pick from a short list of possible generic messages. Because these messages are controlled by Blizzard and they do not offer any offensive or harassing options, players cannot use this kind of chat to abuse other players.

This strategy will not prevent all such abuse, unfortunately, since there are communication channels outside of a game. Thus while abuse is not possible inside a game of *Hearthstone*, during a competition in May 2016, an African-American competitor received a torrent of derogatory comments featuring racial slurs on Twitch. These did not occur directly from his competitor but rather from other players who were watching the live stream of the game on Twitch and commenting on it. (Campbell, 2016) This kind of abuse is much harder for a designer to prevent since the designer only partially controls the environment; a player might be penalized if caught using racial slurs, but it is more difficult to penalize a random person watching online.[9]

One of the main problems with this strategy is that it involves a large trade-off: a designer is severely limiting players' abilities to communicate in order to prevent abuse. Frequently this would make the game much more difficult to play; any team-based game is going find the

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[8] Even for other multiplayer games designers have a responsibility to learn from player experiences and thus make changes to address these problems in future releases.

[9] I would note that Blizzard is not completely ignoring this problem, however; they are working with Twitch to implement some preventative measures. (Frank, 2016)

limited communication options insufficient. There are other approaches. In *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), players will often type "gg" at the end of a match, meaning "good game." Certain players started typing "gg ez" instead, essentially implying that the game was easy to win (and thus denigrating the team's success.) In response, Blizzard implemented a patch which replaces "gg ez" with a variety of phrases ranging from "Great game, everyone!" to "I could really use a hug right now." (Reading, 2016) Players can circumvent this by simply rephrasing the insult, but it serves as a tongue-in-cheek way of pointing out the bad behavior. Whether this succeeds in shaming the individual involved or simply requires them to be slightly more creative is hard to say; at the very least, it seemed aimed at taking the sting out of this particular insult.

Unfortunately, it is not always clear exactly how to solve a problem, particularly when a game has a pervasive problem with abusive players. *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) has a reputation among gamers as having a horribly toxic community; while the percentage of abusive players may not be huge, there are enough players to ruin the experience for other players. Riot has tried many approaches to fix this with mixed success. The community seems to be improving, but there are still many toxic players, some of them even becoming well-known in part due to their toxicity. (Friedman, 2017) In this instance, the game designer is fulfilling the relevant ethical duty: Riot has paid attention to the complaints of people in the community, taken them seriously, and continues to attempt to fix the problem. Had Riot simply given up after one or two attempts to improve the community, there would be an ethical problem; as it is, while the players may still be treating each other unethically, the designer is not at fault.

All players can be affected by abusive behavior of others, but both racial slurs and misogynistic speech are extremely common, making the behavior particularly problematic for women and nonwhite players. This reinforces my earlier point that players do not abandon their real world identities when they step into a gameworld; just as a female player may not be able to ally with a misogynistic in-game faction, other players may bring their stereotypes and social expectations along with them. As a result, their assumptions about other players' identities translates into poor treatment for certain groups. Voice chat in particular is problematic because players affix identities to others via what they hear, leading to the harassment of both women (Cote, 2015) and nonwhite players. (Gray, 2012) Frequently this leads to the harassed players removing themselves, either from voice chat or the game.

Clearly, some groups of players are less able to enjoy the game or pursue their desired ends if they are, in essence, forced to either leave voice chat or endure targeted harassment. Since this treatment is pervasive, designers have an ethical obligation to take action. Preventing the behavior altogether is probably beyond the scope of their power; the harassment reflects larger problems with both society and video game culture. However, most designers have at least implemented some method for reporting abusive players; various punishments such as blocking a player's ability to participate in textual chat or issuing temporary or permanent bans may result. This is a reasonable response, given two conditions. First, the designer must follow through on those reports with appropriate punishments; if punishments are not issued (or are too trivial), then essentially the designer is simply paying lip service to the idea of preventing player harassment. Second, dovetailing with this, the designer must work to promulgate a sense among players that this behavior will be taken seriously and is worth reporting. In some communities,

players do not see racial abuse as worth reporting simply because it is so common and nothing happens to abusive players; the reporting system might exist, but the community has no faith in it. (Gray, 2012) In this case, the designers' actions are insufficient.

Lisa Nakamura (Nakamura, 2013) observes that players can also engage in a kind of self-policing by using shame or ridicule to bring attention to the harassment they receive. While this is laudable, if designers leave responses to harassment in the hands of players, they are essentially imposing a greater burden on certain groups; players who fit the stereotype of a gamer will not have to engage in this sort of labor, whereas women, players of color, and other targeted groups will. Although I have noted that people have different goals in playing games, I take it as fairly clear that people rarely play them with the hope of having to expose the vile behavior of others. Requiring them to do so (or to simply ignore that behavior) once again places a barrier in the way of those players achieving their desired ends in the game.

G. Removing Unnecessary Barriers

All of the cases I have discussed illustrate ways in which video game designers' ethical responsibilities emerge. Ultimately, designers have an obligation to consider players' likely ends in playing particular games and not erect unnecessary barriers for a subgroup of potential players to achieve those ends. Furthermore, a barrier is unnecessary if it could be removed without substantially altering the nature of the game. For instance, suppose a designer is creating a racing game. The designer is not ethically required to make the game appeal to players with no interest in racing; the fundamental mechanic of the game is racing, and thus an interest in it is directly connected to the nature of the game. On the other hand, although in our society racing is typically deemed a masculine interest – and thus the game is most likely to attract male players – there is no logical tie between race cars and the male gender; it would be entirely possible to create a racing game that featured anthropomorphic genderless socks as drivers. As such, if a designer chooses to have only male avatars in the game and women occur solely as sexualized sidekicks, that is placing an unnecessary barrier to the enjoyment of many female players; it essentially says that in the gameworld their place is not to drive a car (and thus play the game) but to decorate it.

Similarly, there is no logical connection between a fantasy role-playing game and an all-white society. Even granting that the template for many such games is an idealized version of medieval Europe, there were people of color in medieval Europe; fidelity to history does not require whitewashing all of the characters in a game. On the other hand, a game such as *Drama in the Delta* will necessarily have a more limited range of racial diversity given that it is set in one of the concentration camps where the United States government interned Japanese citizens during World War II.[10] In this case a desire for historical accuracy will impose some racial restrictions on who appears in the game, which is appropriate to its content.

For multiplayer games, determining whether a barrier is necessary must take into account what kinds of player interactions need to be permitted to facilitate their gameplay. While *Hearthstone* could eliminate customized communication between players, that will not work in a game that

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[10] *Drama in the Delta* is a video game that was in development by a group of researchers at the University of California, San Diego. It appears to have gone into hiatus; the last update to the webpage is from 2011.

involves a great deal of coordination. Designers thus must carefully consider how to balance their obligation to ensure that players are equally able to pursue their own ends (despite their possible treatment from other players) with what mechanics are necessary for the game itself. However, they have to pursue this actively; they cannot simply ignore harassment or other abusive behavior among players.

The obligation to avoid excluding players unnecessarily should not be confused with an obligation to make players comfortable. *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) is set in a fictionalized version of the United States during the early 20th century; moreover, the society is unabashedly white supremacist in nature and this theme is central to the game – it is not something that a player can overlook or ignore easily. The director of the game, Ken Levine, explained that it accurately reflected race relations at the time; the game had a fictional setting but was attempting to highlight difficult aspects of our real society. (Lahti, 2012) The attempt is admittedly imperfect (Mafe, 2015) but neither the goal of forcing players to confront how race has been handled historically nor the particular way in which it was implemented is unethical. While many players find the game highly uncomfortable to play, that reaction is not limited to a single racial group; both white and nonwhite players find it uncomfortable and have to wrestle with this discomfort in order to continue the game.

This is different from the discomfort many nonwhite players faced while playing games in the *Elder Scrolls* series. This series of games is set in the fictional world of Tamriel; players create a character drawn from the many races that populate this world, each of which has certain traits associated with the race. 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 only dark-skinned humanoid race in the game are the Redguards, who are hardy and tough warriors. Unfortunately, early games in the series also made them unintelligent.[11] While many white players probably did not think twice about this particular set of traits, making your only dark-skinned race athletic but unintelligent clearly mirrors racist beliefs in our world that have extended from colonialism through today. Moreover, it is a stereotype that nonwhite players will have encountered in their daily lives, probably multiple times; the game simply replicates these real-world prejudices. Unlike *Bioshock Infinite*, there is no need for this – the goal of the game is not to wrestle with racial issues. Instead, the designers seem simply to have failed to consider how a nonwhite player might react to a gameworld where people of color are inherently less intelligent than other races; nonwhite players are overlooked or ignored, which is not ethical.

The same set of considerations apply to accessibility. Games can be difficult – there is nothing wrong with requiring a set of skills (even physical skills) for a player to succeed at a game. However, if possible, the game should present a similar level of difficulty for both able-bodied and disabled players; for instance, *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami, 2001) permits players in wheelchairs to play with their friends by using a regular controller rather than the typical dance pad. Our ability to make games accessible without fundamentally altering them in part depends on our technology; our ability to adapt a game's input and output systems continually improves. As we become more able to adapt our games, there will be more disabilities that we can accommodate without fundamentally altering the nature of the game; our moral obligations will thus grow over time.

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[11] See, for instance, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2002).

H. Conclusion

As video games flourish, designers have a responsibility to treat players and potential players justly. In particular, we must avoid replicating or reinforcing existing prejudices from the actual world. By designing solely for an idealized gamer – who is typically a straight white male[12] – we replicate our society's power imbalances unnecessarily and penalize players who do not match this stereotype. Design choices must be made consciously and with an awareness of their disparate effects on different groups of players.

In particular, designers have a duty to consider whether a particular design choice is placing an unnecessary barrier to the ability of players to achieve their ends in the game; the key question is whether a game could be adapted to accommodate these players without altering its fundamental nature. I examined the design implications of this with respect to creating a gameworld and the avatars in it. Furthermore, it imposes a moral requirement to carefully consider the physical requirements for playing a game; while our ability to make games accessible is limited by current technology, we are increasingly able to accommodate a wider range of player capabilities and have an ethical obligation to do so.

Lastly, I acknowledge that designers cannot always control the entirety of a player's experience; in multiplayer games a player will also be affected by the behavior of others. However, designers cannot use this as an excuse for remaining uninvolved. While they cannot directly control what their players do, they do provide the mechanisms for interaction as well as mechanisms for punishing certain types of behavior. This provides them with a way of influencing the player community. Ultimately, a careful balance must be found between what is necessary to create the game a designer envisions and what is necessary for treating all players as intrinsically worthy.

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[12] Note that for the sake of space I am unable to consider stereotypes pertaining to sexuality, however, they also exist in many games and are problematic.

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