

Dr Eva Murzyn

Video games and morality

This is Forward Thinking, I'm Isabella Melking.

Are the video games that we play affecting our moral compass?

Can gaming ethics spill over into real life?

Psychology researcher Eva Murzyn thinks gaming has more to do with self-exploration than simply siding with the 'paragon' or the 'renegade' within games.

Science communications student Alex Perry talks to Dr Eva Murzyn about her research into single-player gaming ethics and the effects of playing video games with other people.

Alex:

I am here today with Eva Murzyn. Now Eva, I understand that in your research you are investigating ethical questions for video games, like good versus evil.

Eva:

Yes, that's right. So, my main interest in video games is how people, when they play video games, make moral choices that the games present to them. So there's a huge share of the gaming market that allows people to actually have a lot of active say in how they are playing the game rather than just kind of sitting down to a game and knowing "well, if I'm meant to win this game, I don't know, I have to shoot people or race a car," these games give a lot of choices as to how the outcome will be achieved. So, you can for example achieve the goals, I don't know, save the world by being kind and helpful and avoiding aggression or you can do that by being very brutal and violent and possibly selfish.

What really fascinates me is how people navigate these choices and the features of the people themselves and of the games that intertwine to co-create these narratives.

Alex:

Are there particular games which you find more useful than others when you are doing your research?

Eva:

Yeah, so the research is focused on so called role playing games.

They actually grew out of the old school pen and paper Dungeons and Dragons role playing games. And they're basically there to give players an experience of being in a world of talking to people and achieving their goals, and sometimes setting their own goals.

Myself, I play a lot of video games and role playing games are my favourite category.

So, games like Mass Effect, BioShock, [Star Wars:] Knights of the Old Republic, Dragon Age.

All of these [games] allow the player some sort of freedom in terms of how they achieve their goals.

Alex:

So, imagine I am sitting down to play Mass Effect, what am I trying to do in this game?

Eva:

Save the world from horrible evil aliens! It's one of my favourite game trilogies where you set off from a fairly small scenario and end up pretty much saving the entire galaxy, not just the planet; the whole galaxy. It has a very interesting approach to how you make these decisions in game. So in that game you are generally rewarded for keeping to a single type of decision that you make, and there's two decisions you can make – well, two types of decisions that you can make. So you can either play the Paragon, which tends to be the co-operative, kind, non-aggressive game play, or you can play Renegade, which tends to be the 'means justify the ends, violence solves a lot of the problems' type of game play.

Alex:

So, Paragon as in Paragon of Virtue?

Eva:

Exactly.

Alex:

Someone who always does the right thing?

Eva:

Exactly

Alex:

And Renegade as is troublemaker "don't mess with me"?

Eva:

Exactly. So, there's a lot of ways in which games conceptualise the good and the evil choice. And Mass Effect has moments where these two choices beautifully overlap with philosophical concepts. So, Paragon maps onto deontological morality, which holds that there are rules, things like don't kill people, be kind to others, don't steal or cheat, that you have to hold onto regardless of what the consequences are.

In the game you have, if when you make those choices, you have to be prepared sometimes for short term losses but in the end you do end up being rewarded for sticking to your guns and actually playing it as that Paragon of Morality.

Alex:

This is a character often found in many films where someone, because they have to do the right thing, thinks they're going to lose to the bad guys but hopes that they will win in the end.

Eva:

Yeah, pretty much. Playing that game as that character gives you that sort of experience of doing the right thing. On the other hand, the Renegade in this particular set of games, quite often maps on to the utilitarian morality, which still tries to achieve good in the end. Because in the end, your goal is to save the galaxy. But that particular approach thinks that

the ends justify the means. So if, in order to save the galaxy, you need to kill people, you need to cheat and lie and be cruel, so be it; you have a reason to do those things.

Alex:

Would I be right in thinking... because I remember seeing the recent Star Wars film Rogue One and sometimes the leading characters would do things you wouldn't expect leading characters to do, like shoot allies or harm innocent people if that's what it takes to defeat their enemies. Is this the morality you are talking about?

Eva:

Yeah, that's a beautiful example of that. Well, you think, well shooting someone, especially someone unarmed, someone who's my ally, is the wrong thing to do by deontological standards, by the Paragon standards. But if it achieves the goal that we're fighting for, which is the liberation of the entire galaxy from the evil empire, then it's a worthwhile goal and you will do that.

So, yeah, Mass Effect kind of has that tension as well, between feeling like a good person and feeling like you will save the world. Now because both ways of playing are absolutely valid in the game, you will achieve your goals and save the world regardless which one you choose, so it's a bit of a personal preference rather than there being the only way to win the game. So when you do large scale surveys of people, most people tend to play the good guy in the games they play. I think its 70% or 80% of players will choose to play the good guy in the games that they are given. The people who play the bad guy will often do that in their second play through. So for example, they've played the game once being the good guy or the Paragon and then they think "well, the game is written from both sides, from two perspectives, which means that if I want to get the full story I should probably also replay it from the other side, either the bad guy or the Utilitarian or any other way in which the game was set up." So you often have people who make those choices as a way of experiencing the story again.

Alex:

Does playing the game the second way teach you things about yourself?

Eva:

It's quite likely. So our relationship with games is very odd. They are kind of like books; they allow us to experience stories, but they give us a lot more control over the narrative. Which means that you can test yourself, how you would act in various scenarios.

So, a lot of people might, for example, discover that that path is not for them or that there are certain things that they are not willing to do. And there's a beautiful, practical ways of looking at how people feel bad about their decisions in game. So, in games you can save at various points of time, so if something goes wrong you can return to that particular moment of time in game and continue again. And we find that – this is at this point anecdotal evidence – but there are a lot of players who after they have done something in game that makes them feel bad because the decision they made, for example, had unintended bad consequences, they will sacrifice a couple of hours of their time that they spent playing to

return to the save point in order to, I don't know, save a non-player character that they inadvertently killed.

Alex:

You mean like, almost like the film *Groundhog Day*? They'll relive a certain experience and see if making a different decision would lead to a better outcome.

Eva:

Yeah. Players often go to pretty extreme lengths to make sure that they don't feel bad after finishing that type of a game. Because the games tend to promote a type of engagement with the characters in the game, with the non-player characters, with the storyline. They build up a particular vision of [themselves] in the game: "I'm the hero, I'm the helpful person, and I'm someone who takes care of the characters around me." And if that's broken inadvertently or [on] purpose, a lot of people feel really bad and decide "I'm going to redo that."

Alex:

Do you find that the style of the game, the characters of the game, affects how people play?

What I mean is, does someone choose to be or more likely to be a renegade in a science fiction game and less likely in a 'knight in shining armour' game, or it doesn't matter?

Eva:

Well, I think game mechanics have a lot to do with that. The way in which the choices are presented is very important.

So you have generally one type of good character, because they are the shining beacon of good and helpfulness and kindness and selflessness. But the way in which the bad part is represented often differs.

So, in *Mass Effect* you actually have a very clear reason for being cruel and violent. But other games tend to present these things like kind of a kick the dog thing, where you are selfish and cruel for no good reason, just because you have the opportunity to do that.

I would pose it that the way that people engage with these types of dilemmas differs a lot. So in certain games like *Fall Out*, one of the main reasons for being the bad guy is that it gives you a lot more money. But after a couple of hours of game play money is no longer an issue, because you generally end up having enough for your immediate needs which kind of makes gathering more money in game pretty pointless. So that's an example of evil decisions or evil choices that aren't actually...

Alex:

Fulfilling?

Eva:

Yeah, they are not really fulfilling, they are not giving you anything. *Knights of the Old Republic* is based on *Star Wars* so if you play a bad guy there, you are actually tapping into this giant mythology of the Sith Lords. And as you progress, and as you continue doing decisions that are evil, you progress in terms of your powers, you start being able to use

force lightning and moves that were no longer available, which rewards people for making those choices, even though they might subjectively feel a bit bad about them.

So it's all about how big the rewards are, how they are presented in terms of their internal coherence. And also, whether you are playing sort of as yourself or a particular character matters.

In certain games, you are a blank slate. You have complete authority over how the character looks, how they act; they don't really have a background. Which usually means that people tend to project their selves on them. So this is not a separate character, "this is me in a post-apocalyptic wasteland" or "this is me in space", while other games give you a very specific backstory.

So, a game like [The] Witcher you play a very particular character – a monster killer – who has his own very detailed background, which means as people play it, they will be more likely to follow the moral code for the character rather than for themselves.

Alex:

In these games that you describe, do you tend to play on your own, or do you tend to play with other players?

Eva:

So all these games are single player games. Because a lot of the moral choices I am interested in happen in the context of a narrative of a story that the game presents.

Now of course, people when they play games in multiplayer, so with other people, there is a whole new level of moral choices to make. Do I help that other person in game or do I hinder them? Am I kind to someone who's just started playing the game and clearly needs help? Or am I rude and aggressive towards them? But that's a slightly different level of moral interactions.

Alex:

You're not just interacting with the game, you're interacting with other people.

Eva:

Yeah.

Alex:

And do you find that there is anything about how people might think about ethics in a game that might spill over to how they relate to other people [in real life]?

Eva:

So, there is some research that shows that the way we act in games is at least somewhat related to how we think about these things in real life.

So I have done a study on Mass Effect players. We had around 2000 players complete a questionnaire where we were looking at their personality, game preferences and also how they would react in the so called "Trolley Problems".

Alex:

What is a trolley problem, sorry?

Eva:

That's a really fun way of looking at how people make moral decisions and it consists at its core of two scenarios. The first one is as follows:

You are standing next to a trolley line and you can see that there is an out of control tram just hurtling down it. Down the track you see five workers, they can't get out of there in time, and they're basically kind of 'walled in'. If you flip a switch, and you are next to kind of a lever, the trolley will get redirected to another track where there is only a single worker, who is currently working and just can't see or hear it.

So, there is a choice between five lives and one. Do you flip the switch? Majority of people say "yes, that seems to be the right thing to do."

And this is actually what, when I was looking at video games players, the vast majority of the [players] said; "yes, yes, this is the right thing to do, flipping that switch. One person will die but we are saving five."

The other version of that scenario is slightly different:

So you are on a footbridge above that track and you see the trolley coming. Next to you is a worker with a very heavy backpack. If you push them on the track they will stop the trolley; you yourself you are too light. But if you don't it will kill those five workers further ahead on the track. Do you do the thing?

It's the same maths, it's one versus five, but the proximity and the fact that you actually actively have to push someone means that most people will actually say "no, this is the wrong thing to do, this is not something I could live with."

Alex:

So what you are saying is, in that first scenario you describe with flipping the lever, that is almost like a consequential theory of morality, whereas for pushing someone directly into the path of a trolley, that makes people think of a rule based approach?

Eva:

In a way, yes, but the people who do say that pushing the worker on the tracks is moral, because there is about 10%, 20% of the population who will say that "yes, this is the right thing to do" and they are specifically using consequentialist reasoning.

You will still have about 10% of people in the first scenario who say that they still wouldn't flip that switch because that would be taking an action. So it's all about when your reasoning changes from one to the other depends on a lot of factors. So in the study I have done, we had Mass Effect players complete these two scenarios and we had them fill in a personality questionnaire. So what we found is that while pretty much all of them were happy to flip the switch in the first trolley scenario, only the 'renegades' were mostly comfortable with pushing the person onto the tracks.

Alex:

Interesting.

Eva:

Which is exactly what I was predicting because renegade players in Mass Effect have to embrace that sort of consequentialist reasoning where you will do terrible things as long as the final maths is right, you save enough lives; that justifies anything.

Generally in population you would have about 10% of people doing the consequentialist pushing action in the second scenario. But 50% of renegade players said that they would [push the person onto the track].

And again, this is a self-report, this doesn't necessarily correspond to what these people would actually do if actually put in that situation. We tend to think a lot about how we would act in our fantasies. Now, what happens when placed in front of a track and a real person standing there with a backpack? We can't predict that. But we do know that people who play games as renegade, specifically [those] who play Mass Effects as renegade, they are more embracing of the utilitarian reasoning.

Alex:

That's interesting. So typically now every day, we use the internet more and more to make decisions in our lives. Do you think there is a possibility that people might make different decisions using the internet than if they meet somebody face to face? Or people still in their minds distinguish between fantasy and real life?

Eva:

Internet is real life though.

Alex:

Yeah.

Eva:

What happens on the internet is real. The fact that it is slightly further away doesn't make it any less real. It's kind of like correspondence.

Alex:

Okay

Eva:

It's immediate but still letters going in the 19th century between people in different parts of the continent were still seen as real rather than fictional.

There is a lot of research specifically looking at how being online disinhibits people.

In videogame communities as well there is a problem with so called 'trolling' or toxic communities. Because people are mostly anonymous and hidden behind you know the face of their in game avatar, some of them feel that they have the freedom to start bullying people to start being incredibly rude or sexist or racist and start using basically bullying tactics towards other people in the game. So there is that thing happening, but on the other

hand that is not a large percentage of the players there. For a lot of people what happens online is broadly relevant to how they would act in real life.

Alex:

That's very good to know! And as you look to the future in your research, is there any new question you would like to investigate?

Eva:

I am quite interested in how the full immersion of virtual reality might affect the way people make these choices. There's a lot of interest in how the proximity to action affects moral decision-making.

So, like in the trolley switch problem, the idea is that because flipping a switch is a much more distant thing than just pushing someone on the tracks, it activates different ways of thinking about moral decisions.

So, what happens if we actually play that game in virtual reality, where we have full surround sound and surround vision so we are a lot more immersed? Do we become more deontological? Do we stick to rule-based morality a bit closer? Or will some people decide that this just gives them leeway to explore other options? And in the end, for a lot of people who play these games, even if they do choose to play the bad guy it just becomes a way of exploring how they would act. It's kind of like watching horror movies or reading particular types of books. It's about testing yourself and seeing "how do I feel in this particular situation." It's about self-exploration more than, I don't know, cruel impulses I guess.

Alex:

Thank you for speaking to me today, Eva, it's been very interesting for myself and I'm sure for everyone listening.

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