The Ethics of Role-Playing Video Games

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The Ethics of Role-Playing Video Games

Keywords
ethics, video games, response moralism, escapism
The Ethics of Role-Playing Video Games

Connecticut College Philosophy Honors Thesis
Riordan Frost ’10

Abstract

In this project, I explore the ethics of interactive role-playing video games. After explicating a wide range of issues contained in these games, I argue that they belong in the realm of fiction. Using the theory of Response Moralism, I argue that the emotions we feel in response to fictions, which includes role-playing games, are real and morally assessable. I then present an attack on escapism, which I challenge by arguing that evincing virtues and vices is possible within a video game or virtual reality. I end my project with a discussion of the ways in which race and gender are represented in video games, alongside an applied case of response moralism. I make the conclusion that role-playing video games are morally significant works, which are worthy of philosophical attention.
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Thank you to my readers, Professor Pfefferkorn and Professor Turner. After reading the whole thesis myself, I’ve realized how much of a monumental task it is to read it and provide the critically helpful comments they both did. Lastly, my gratitude goes to the Connecticut College Philosophy Department, for allowing me to pursue such a unique and relatively unexplored subject.
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Introduction

What are the common perspectives on video games, the views held by those unseasoned by long nights and victorious, controller-raising sessions? Most view video games as simple things, little more than a pastime of bad graphics, simple objectives, and crudely violent means of accomplishing those objectives, if that. Most also believe that their purpose is to provide enjoyment, and that the player’s only objective is to win, which is only done by defeating every enemy. Those who regularly play video games have a better grasp of them, but many players view their gameplay as little more than a hobby, one with no larger significance or meaning than the enjoyment and distraction it offers.

Modern video games are a multifaceted form of entertainment, and I intend to argue that each group just mentioned, the typical gamer and the typical non-gamer, is mistaken. For several reasons, I shall commit all of my energy to the interactive role-playing video game. First, they are technologically advanced, which is shown in their dynamic objectives, aesthetics, stories, and choices provided to the player. Second, they carry a great deal of ethical significance, both in how they are created and in the moral choices that are oftentimes presented to the player. Though I discuss role-playing games throughout this thesis, many of my arguments and conclusions do still apply to video games in general.

In this thesis, I shall argue that role-playing video games (henceforth RPGs) are an immersive and interactive form of fiction. They fit into the view of fiction that reception theorists hold, which I shall explicate. The status of RPGs as fiction is important because of a theory called response moralism, which I present and expand in my second chapter. Response moralism claims that the emotions we feel in response to fictions are both real and morally assessable. There are some philosophers and other scholars who hold that the emotions in response to fiction are not real, primarily because their objects are fictional. These people take issue with response moralism for this reason exactly. Even if one does accept the reality of the emotions, response moralism remains controversial, because it contains the claim that these emotions are morally assessable. This is controversial because some theorists will argue that because the emotions are responding to fiction, they cannot be morally assessed. The argument that RPGs are fictions, together with the argument of response moralism, leads to the conclusion that the emotions one feels in response to a video game are morally assessable.

After I have presented the argument for response moralism in my second chapter, I shall address Robert Nozick’s challenge to the escapist nature of an experience machine in my third chapter. Nozick presents his challenge, which I apply to RPGs, in his famous chapter, “Experience Machine” (Nozick, 1974). In response to the challenge, I shall argue that it is possible to evince virtues and vices in RPGs and in virtual reality in general. My fourth chapter then explicates the representation of race and gender in RPGs, and gives an application of response moralism.

My project is a philosophical examination of the many ethical issues present in video games, which makes it primarily a project in applied ethics. As I progress through my chapters, however, I also use broader ethical theorizing, especially when I argue
that one can be ethical in a virtual reality. Due to the identification that occurs with the sole player’s character, most players refer to their characters as themselves when discussing gameplay, and I shall as well. I often refer to my character as myself, and I also switch the agent-focus from ‘my character’ to ‘me’ (as well as ‘your character’ to ‘you’), which is a switch that occurs frequently in game discussions. For example, when discussing *Fallout 3*, I often switch the statement: ‘my character grew up in an underground vault’ to ‘I grew up in an underground vault’\(^3\). Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox explain this phenomenon in their book *Philosophy through Video Games* by claiming that “talk of ‘losing oneself’ in another person is not metaphorical, but rather a literal description of how our extended selves interact, overlap, and combine with one another” (Cogburn and Silcox, 2009). This is common, but while most players identify with their character and play as themselves, they rarely (if ever) believe that they are their character and that they should behave as such outside of the video game. Also, the identification with my character, combined with the fantastical situations that RPGs place me in, can aid my self-knowledge. Knowing how I am disposed to behave in situations I may never find myself in can aid in the development of my character and my morality\(^4\).

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\(^1\) See the glossary (located in the appendices) for my definitions and distinction between a role-playing game and an interactive role-playing game.

\(^2\) When I use the acronym ‘RPGs’ throughout this project, I shall be referring to interactive role-playing video games. Even though the acronym can denote pen-and-paper role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, and other role-playing video games that are not interactive (see glossary), I am only referring to interactive role-playing video games when I use it in this thesis.

\(^3\) I shall still use ‘my character’ in some cases where I refer to myself as the player, to avoid confusion.

\(^4\) My thanks to Professor Turner for this point. Also, this issue is analogous to the function of thought experiments (see IV.V).
Chapter I: An Explanation of Role-Playing Games and their Moral Relevance

I. Introduction

In this first chapter, I shall present an exposition of the features of RPGs that have moral significance as well as importance to the genre. This is meant to help those unexperienced with RPGs to understand them, and it is also meant to demonstrate why these games deserve philosophical attention. This chapter has six main sections, which I shall briefly summarize. In the second section (this introductory section being the first and not primary), I explore the storytelling nature of RPGs, from main plot to side quests to the more subtle narrative of exploration. In the third section, I discuss how my character can affect the game’s world, and how this affects gameplay. In almost every RPG, there is only one character whom the player has primary control over in creation, dialogue, and combat. This is mostly due to the constraints of narrative, coupled with the limitations of technology.

In the fourth section of this chapter, I explore escapism, which constitutes a strong aspect of these story-based RPGs. In my fifth section, I bring up the issue of violence and the integral role it plays, and I delve into the history of video games and the United States military, in order to give the issue a larger context. In the sixth section, I explore the element of RPGs that accommodates failing and trying again. This element is the ability to save my progress in a game at one point in time, and consequently be able to load it at that point whenever I wish. In the seventh section, I very briefly discuss the aesthetic quality of the games, which has progressed exponentially and become unrecognizable in relation to early video games. At the start of each section, I shall present the ethical questions that arise from the features discussed in the section, and explain where I shall discuss them further, if I do. I believe that RPGs are the most philosophically relevant genre, and as such an explication of the genre is necessarily expansive. Therefore, I do not thoroughly discuss every issue I raise or every feature I explain in this chapter, due to my limits on time and space. I present them nonetheless, because they help to show the multifaceted and morally relevant character of RPGs.

II. Exploring Goals and Exploring the World

In this section, I discuss the presence of stories within RPGs. In the first subsection, I address how RPGs deliver stories to my character in the form of quests. In the second, I explain how certain quests contain moral dilemmas that make RPGs ethically relevant. In my third subsection, I explain the nature of the games in relation to accomplishing goals and completing quests, and how RPGs are and should be played for their own sake. I conclude with a subsection on the pleasure of exploring the vast worlds that the RPGs provide. This exploration develops a narrative of its own as my character delves into dungeons and traverses forests. Several ethical issues are raised by these features, including:

- Do the decisions I make in a moral situation reflect anything about my own moral character?
- Should a player care about the fate of fictional non-player characters?
• Is exploration and immersion in a virtual world a good thing?
• Does killing fictional beings - whether monsters or people - have moral significance?
• Does the simple decision to play a RPG reflect anything about my character?

I address the first of these questions in my second chapter, where I discuss response moralism. The second question is related to my second chapter, in that it is about emotional investment with fictional characters, but I do not address it directly. The third question raised is one that I discuss in length in my third chapter, which addresses escapism and virtual world behavior. The last two questions are not discussed in length in my thesis, but they are fascinating issues nonetheless.

One of the most paradigmatic RPGs at the time of this writing is a game called *Fallout 3*, developed by Bethesda Game Studios. This is a game based in post-apocalyptic Washington, D.C., and it puts me in the role of a young man or woman (see I.IV.A1) who has lived all of his life in an underground vault. Throughout the game, my character explores the post-apocalyptic world, which is full of apocalypse survivors, both good and evil.2 I shall use this as a paradigm example throughout much of my project.

### II.A Goals and Quest Logs

One of the most distinctive features of RPGs is their main plot (or story line), which forms the backbone of the game. The game developers focus primarily on this plot, and once the player completes it, the game usually ends (though it does not always). Often when playing the game, I am not aware of what my character’s end goal really is. In *Fallout 3*, my character has grown up in an underground vault for all of his life. One day he wakes up to discover that his father has mysteriously left, and he has to escape the vault in order to avoid the fatal retribution of its overseer. I control my character, and once I’ve escaped, I am launched out into the bright, desolate world of post-apocalyptic America. I then have the freedom to set out in any direction and play as I desire (see I.II.D), but I know that I want to find my character’s father. I know this because the game provides a quest log that keeps track of the quests (also known as ‘missions’, but I shall use the term ‘quest’ in this project) that I am on, as well as those I have completed. In every RPG, there is a main story-line as well as numerous peripheral stories, and all of the RPGs I discuss demarcate these in their quest logs. I know that finding my character’s father is part of the main quest in *Fallout 3*, because it is my first major objective in the game, and it has great importance to my character. What I am not aware of when I start playing the game, however, is what will happen when I find my father, and how the main quest will progress after that. In this way RPGs are like life because my goals are not always clear to me, though some clarity is gained with the quest log. If I try to play the game without caring at all about progressing the main plot, I can still spend a great deal of time exploring and completing side quests, but it is in my interest to progress the main plot to some extent. It is in my interest because in most RPGs, different side quests and new areas to explore become available as I progress the main plot, for reasons explained by the main plot.

Having a quest log is familiar and strange to the player. It is familiar in that the quest log imitates the organization that people have of their own goals and projects in life. This is important because the more RPGs imitate life, the more a player can identify and immerse himself in them. Having a quest log is strange because the concept of a quest log that updates as I play, dependent on my actions but independent of my direct
interaction with it, is quite unlike life. For example, in *Fallout 3*, there is a town called ‘Megaton’ where an enthusiastic ‘non-player character’ (see glossary) named Moira Brown runs a general store. While talking to her, she tells my character of her dream of making a survival guide, but she also tells me that her dream cannot be achieved unless she has more field research. If I agree to help her, the text “Quest Added: Wasteland Survival Guide” appears across the screen, and the quest, along the objectives required to progress the quest, are added to my quest log. My actions therefore determine what appears in my quest log, but it is not like a journal that requires me to write in it.

In fact, the quest log can be used as a reference tool, since quest logs are updated with objectives as I complete them. It is not uncommon for a player to be uncertain of his next objectives, and for him to consult the quest log in order to learn what they are. For example, the first objectives under the ‘Wasteland Survival Guide’ quest are: “Objective: Find food in the Super-Duper Mart; (Optional): Find medicine in the Super-Duper Mart” (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008). After I have accomplished these tasks, they will be checked off and new objectives will appear. In this case, “Report back to Moira Brown” appears as an objective once I find the food. Quests are only completed when all of the objectives have been fulfilled, and quests can be very long and expansive.

II.B Making Moral Choices in Side Quests

The main plot is called ‘main’ to distinguish it from side quests. Side quests are quests that can be gained through interactions with non-player characters (henceforth NPCs), and through exploration of the world. The ‘Wasteland Survival Guide’ is a great example of a side quest, gained through conversing with Moira Brown, an NPC. Side quests are usually isolated, separate stories that do not significantly affect the main plot, but many of them present opportunities to make moral choices. Side quests are almost always optional in the sense that I while I am free to play through them, they are not necessary to complete in order to continue playing the game. Despite this, I still play through side quests (though I sometimes do not play every side quest available, due to their sheer number) because the quests are still part of the game itself, and it seems a waste not to play through parts of the game just because they aren’t required. By ‘waste’ I mean both a waste of opportunity for fun, and a waste of maximizing my experience with the game. If the developers create five cities in a game, each full of NPCs and quests, I would not be taking advantage of all the game had to offer if I only explored three of them. This is a common mentality shared among people who play RPGs.

Side quests not only give my character more experience, they also allow me to play through the stories they contain. I say ‘stories’ because each quest has different possible outcomes, which means that there are several stories, from which I indirectly choose through my character’s actions. The choices that affect the different outcomes are usually morally laden, which gives the game ethical significance, which warrants philosophical attention. It is important to note that the morally laden choices in side quests are left open to the player. Side quests are fairly isolated situations that do not significantly affect the main story, which is major and defining for my character. This means that the choice is open due to the lack of larger implications for my character.
To give a rather extreme example of a morally laden side quest, in the game *Fallout 3* there is a town called ‘Megaton’, which is built around an atom bomb. The sheriff of the town, Lucas Simms, offers my character a reward for diffusing this bomb, but a morally questionable NPC named Mister Burke offers me a similar reward for detonating it. Now, it is important to note that no decision actually needs to be made. I can just walk away and continue exploring or playing through other quests, and my character will not be hampered in doing so. In a way, deciding to do nothing is a decision, but it is important to note that if I walk away from Megaton, I can come back at any point in time and decide to detonate or disarm the bomb. If I decide to detonate or disarm the bomb, the game will judge my character on a moral scale, depending on which I choose. If I detonate the bomb, my character will lose ‘karma’, and if I diffuse it, he will gain ‘karma’. This is communicated by the game through text appearing on the screen, which says either “You’ve lost Karma!” or “You’ve gained Karma!” (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008). This is also communicated through an image and a title which depends on how much (or little) karma I have and how far I am in the game. This title appears on my character summary screen, and the possible titles range from ‘Mercenary’ to ‘Harbinger of War’ to ‘Last, Best Hope of Humanity’. The moral choice in the Megaton case is left open to me through the isolation and optional status of the side quest. Even though there are conflicting interests concerning the bomb, neither Simms nor Burke will attempt to do anything to the bomb, because the game leaves the fate of the bomb (and the town) up to me.

### II.C Playing to Win versus Playing to Play

The overarching purpose of RPGs is not necessarily to win. Most of the time, the immersion in the game is so great that the enjoyment comes from playing the game, rather than winning the game, or even trying to win the game. Single-player RPGs (see glossary) typically offer noncompetitive play, because they are played by one person. This type of play is very conducive to immersion in the game and exploration of the game’s world and the game’s stories. RPGs offer anywhere from twenty to one hundred hours of gameplay (in some cases, even more), depending on the game and depending on how I play. If I only play through the main story line, the game will not last as long as it could, and gameplay will likely be much less dynamic than it could be. If I play and immerse myself in the game, and explore every part of it, it will last for a long time, and my experience will probably be very multifaceted. Though there are goals to accomplish, the overarching point of the game is not to win and complete it, but to play and immerse myself in the world and stories that the game presents. By ‘play’ I mean that I choose my character’s every move (through different commands on the video game controller), complete quests, explore the world of the game, and interact with NPCs. My claim about the purpose of the game is empirical in so far as the game’s structure supports this purpose, but the claim itself is a philosophical one. I believe that this is the real purpose of RPGs, and if they are to be fully enjoyed and experienced, they must be approached with the purpose of immersion in mind. This means that they should be approached with an open mind, which is willing to identify with one’s character and dive into a virtual and fantastical world.

Winning and losing still exists in RPGs, though they can refer to different things. Winning a game can refer to completing a game, but generally speaking, winning most
often refers to winning when competing against other players (real people, not NPCs). In these RPGs, this type of competition does not exist, so players do not play with this type of winning in mind. Fighting and overcoming enemies in battles in a game could be seen as winning, but winning out over my character’s enemies is not the ultimate purpose of RPG-play either, because defeating enemies is usually used as a means to an end alone. This end is gaining experience and completing the multifaceted quests I have already mentioned. Battles are distinct from quests in that battles are fights with enemies, and quests are tasks that I take on, which do not necessarily include or require battles. Quests are an important and focal element of RPGs, and their completion is a form of winning. Again, this is not the purpose of the game, because quests are frequent and seldom bring an end to the game. Most players enjoy playing quests more than completing them. The only quest that does bring an end to the game is the final quest in the main story-line. Some recent games, however, allow the player to continue on after completing the main story line, letting him continue exploring and completing side quests at will. Those who play RPGs should not do so for the sake of winning, but for the enjoyment of playing the game - hence ‘playing to play’.

In some games, winning is the result of cooperation with party members. In my game profiles (see Appendix B), I have classified each game as having a ‘party system’ or a ‘lone hero’ system (see glossary). In the games with a party system, my character is accompanied by party members whenever he ventures out into the world, and they are an essential aid to him in battles and quests alike. In what I have called ‘lone hero’ games, the character almost always travels alone, completing quests and fighting enemies on his lonesome. In the former, there is a great deal of cooperative engagement with my NPC party members and in the latter there isn’t.

II.D The Pleasure of Exploration

The freedom to set out in any direction and play as I desire is an integral part of RPGs. The game Oblivion, made by Bethesda Game Studios (the same developers as Fallout 3), has a tutorial-prologue (see glossary) that I play through in the beginning, after which I am launched into the game’s world. Most RPGs have this type of beginning, which is usually plot-oriented but simple, and is designed to orient a player to the game and its controls. In Oblivion, my character begins as a prisoner in a cell which happens to hold a secret passage to the outside, which the emperor uses in the process of fleeing. I gain control of my character at this point, and I have no choice but to follow the emperor as he flees. After the prologue is completed and I have received direction from the emperor to go to a priory, my character escapes through the sewers and the following message appears on the screen:

The red arrow on your compass shows the direction of Weynon Priory. You can walk there by following your compass, or use your world map to travel there directly. Or you can set off in any direction and begin exploring the world on your own. Good luck! (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006)

This marks the end of the tutorial-prologue, and it shows the structure of these interactive RPGs; there is a direction for my character to head in order to progress the main story line, but there is the freedom to go explore and find other quests to complete and other areas to explore.
Exploring is a crucial part of the game, because it is what I spend a great deal of my time doing when I play. Exploring in a video game is similar to exploring in life, except for the fact that there are usually monsters to fight in the places I explore. ‘Monsters’ is a blanket term, and it can mean a variety of things, depending on the game. They can be anything from wild animals to droids to more typical monsters, like trolls or zombies. In *Fallout 3*, it is radiated creatures, from mutants to ghouls to ‘radscorpions’, or even humans of opposing factions, from raiders to bounty hunters, who challenge my character as he ventures through the world. Fighting most often occurs while exploring, but the role it plays in the game is discussed in more detail in the section on violence (see I.V).

Exploration can also be less action-packed, as when I am discovering the numerous facets of a city, or appreciating the aesthetic qualities of my character’s surroundings. Depending on the environment, this can be a beautiful or dreary experience. In *Mass Effect*, the planets I visit have sweeping landscapes of all different climates, meaning that exploring may or may not be aesthetically pleasing, which has a serious bearing on how much I enjoy it. *Oblivion* has verdant landscapes, surrounded by the soaring archways and buildings of cities, and the modest, run-down cottages of villages. Fighting is often used by developers to break up the exploration, but exploration and fighting can, admittedly, be unenjoyable, or tiresome. As Moritz Schlick says, however, “in the process of execution working acts involved can either become so mechanized that they hardly enter consciousness, or else develop so much charm and attractiveness that they turn into artistic play themselves” (Schlick, 66). Exploration and fighting in RPGs can be seen as these ‘working acts’ to which Schlick refers, making his statement apply to them. These routine parts of an RPG can become mechanized, or they can become artistic themselves.

III. Achievement and Effects on the World

One reason that people play RPGs is for the sense of achievement they provide. In this section, I shall explore that achievement in several ways. First, I discuss the element of experience points, which serve as directly quantifiable evidence of character achievement and works closely with the concept of player achievement. I use the second subsection to explore the immersive element of NPC-reactions to my character’s actions. Lastly, I present an argument from a gaming website which claims that one of the most typical reasons that people play video games is for their predictable outcomes. The ethical issues raised by this section include the following:

- NPCs respond to my character’s moral behavior through their own moral judgement. Are developers responsible and accountable for all of these diverse moral opinions, and for morality in general in the game?
- Is the way a player responds to praise and/or blame from NPCs morally assessable?

I discuss the first question to some extent in the fourth chapter, which focuses on the portrayal of characters and the problems therein. The second question is related to my discussion in the second chapter, which is about response moralism and the way I behave through my character.

III.A Experience Points and Experiencing the Game
Every RPG tells many stories, but in between key plot moments the other aspects of the game are played in order to provide a continuous experience. My character must spend time improving himself in order to be able to complete quests well, and he improves himself by gaining ‘experience points’. Every RPG has the element of ‘experience points’, which are usually gained by defeating an enemy, or completing a quest, though more points are given for completing quests, since they are more multifaceted than battles, as I’ve said before. After my character gains enough experience, he gains a level, which gives me the opportunity to improve my character’s abilities, feats, and skills. Gaining levels, or ‘leveling up’, is an integral part of progressing through the game, and it enables my character to face more difficult foes and tasks.

Experience points give corresponding feelings of accomplishment, depending on how many experience points I’ve gained. If I defeat a simple enemy, I’ll only get a handful of experience points, and feel slightly accomplished. Every time I complete a quest (main or side), however, I gain a great deal of experience and I have a great feeling of accomplishment. Interestingly, when it comes to completing simple tasks, the accomplishment for the player is focused on the experience points gained, since the task is rather ordinary, like picking a lock or repairing a broken weapon. When it comes to major tasks and quests, the sense of accomplishment is much more focused on the experience of the tasks themselves, since they are usually dynamic and unique. I shall use the aforementioned quest of helping to research for the ‘Wasteland Survival Guide’ as an example. This quest is very extensive, because the guide itself has three chapters, each with three different sections, resulting in nine smaller quests within the one big quest. After trying to find food in the ‘Super-Duper Mart’, there are other sections that need research, from investigating a ‘Mirelurk’ nest (a type of radiated creature) to discovering the history of ‘Rivet City’, a prosperous post-apocalyptic city. This enjoyment is similar to the enjoyment found in developing my character’s skills by increasing his skill points, which dictate how skilled my character is at certain actions. In Fallout 3, skills range from ‘lockpick’ to ‘repair’ to ‘sneak’, which determines my character’s proficiency at picking locks, repairing items, and sneaking past other people, respectively. I have the option of allotting more points to a skill when my character ‘levels up’. A character usually begins at level one, and then gains a level after gaining a certain amount of experience points (determined by the developers). When a character levels up, the player is informed by the game, and is then presented with menus for increasing a character’s skills and statistics. This is how my character grows and gains the abilities necessary to overcome the challenges the game presents. It is interesting to note that some of the skills that my character can develop are morally problematic, or at least questionable. Each skill has its uses, and the game usually leaves it up to me to decide how I wish to use them, and it definitely makes both moral and immoral acts possible.

The feeling of accomplishment from experience points is usually directly related to the amount of time and energy I have put into gaining them. This has a real-world application as well. In an iTnews article by Liz Tay entitled “Employers: look to gaming to motivate staff”, it is reported that in 2009:
Lee Sheldon of the Indiana University ... replaced the traditional grading system in two of his
game design classes with a system that was based on experience points (XP), which were
typically used to track progress in role-playing games. (Tay, iTnews)

Sheldon’s new system was met with ‘much greater enthusiasm’ by students, in his
words. He even goes so far as to claim that students in ‘non-game-related classes’
would respond just as enthusiastically. This example proves that experience points give
feelings of accomplishment.

RPGs require a certain amount of skill at gameplay, which is how well the player
can execute commands on the controller to best control his character, especially in
combat. For example, in Fallout 3, guiding my character through an abandoned subway
tunnel full of traps takes a keen eye for detail and a careful manipulation of movement.
Sneaking up on a group of enemies and fighting them with minimal harm done to my
character also takes skill to accomplish successfully. The game presents a multitude of
challenges in its different situations, and this is a central feature of play, as Johan
Huizinga argues in his book, Homo Ludens. He states that:
The element of tension in play to which we have just referred plays a particularly important
part. ... Baby reaching for a toy ... little girl playing ball - all want to achieve something difficult, to
succeed, to end a tension. Play is ‘tense’, as we say. It is this element of tension and solution that
governs all solitary games of skill and application (Huizinga, 10-11).

Developing these skills usually takes nothing more than time and practice, but
mastering these skills and controlling my character well in all of the situations he finds
himself in is enjoyable in itself. It is enjoyable because of the efficient play it allows, but
it is also enjoyable because of the intrinsic value of being skilled at playing.

III.B Recognition, Praise, and Blame from Non-Player Characters

Another reason that gameplay is enjoyable is the effect that my character has on
the world of the game. In almost every one of these games, my character may start out
as an insignificant one, but as the game progresses, my character becomes an
indispensable ally to some, a significant enemy to others, and an enormous factor in the
world itself. When I am immersed in the game, the status of my character in the world
and the effect (positive or negative) he has on it make me feel as though I have affected
the game’s world. This is enjoyable because it makes me feel that my character is
important, which contributes to the escapism RPGs provide.

RPGs that have a party-based system enable the main character to have NPC
companions, who can be controlled while the party is in combat, but cannot usually be
controlled outside of combat, such as in dialogue and exploration. In the game Dragon
Age: Origins (Bioware, 2009), I can switch between characters during exploration, but
my character is always in the venturing party (see glossary). There is even a ‘camp’ in
DA:O where my character’s party gathers in order to heal and sleep, and the only
character I can control there is my own. As I mentioned before, other games, like Fallout
3, do not have a party system, meaning that there is only ever one character that the
player controls. The NPCs are all of the other characters in the tale I help to spin. A
significant part of RPGs is that these NPCs often react to my character, which includes
recognizing my character’s actions and responding to them accordingly.

In the game Fallout 3, there is a radio station called ‘Galaxy News Radio’ that I
can tune into at almost any time, and it greets me with big band songs, as well as news
broadcasts by a revolutionary character dubbed simply ‘Three Dog’. Going back to the
example of Megaton, I can decide to disarm the bomb, and if I do, ‘Three Dog’ will catch wind of it and report on it in his news reports. Since his goal is the protection of people ‘fighting the good fight’ - morally good people simply trying to survive in a world of raiders and mutants - he congratulates my character and speaks well of him for disarming the bomb. In the game *Fable II*, there are bards throughout the medieval setting that sing of my character’s adventures and accomplishments. There can be negative responses as well, serving to balance the moral judgements. In *Fallout 3*, choosing to destroy the bomb in Megaton and thus detonating the town will cause ‘Three Dog’ to condemn my character. If I commit enough evil acts in the game, an organization of ‘Regulators’ will send agents after my character, which sparks occasional battles.

Even though none of these NPCs are real, their reactions are important because they are the characters that make up the world of my character. My character’s life is defined by his actions, which are in turn shaped and defined by the NPCs. Allying myself with one group of NPCs and following their orders often puts me at odds with another group of NPCs in the world, and before I know it, my character has a place in his virtual world. I take the reactions of and interactions with NPCs seriously when I am playing, simply because they are the other actors on the stage that the game provides. When I play RPGs, I immerse myself in them, and interacting with NPCs is central to participating in the fiction of the game.

### III.C Comfort in Predictable Outcomes

Achievement can also be enjoyed in another, more specific fashion. On the video game blogging website *Destructoid*, a writer with the screen-name ‘walkyourpath’ wrote an article entitled “It’s More Complicated than just Escapism”. In this essay, he argues that there are three main reasons that people play video games, “1. Entertainment, 2. Escapism, 3. Social Interaction”. He discusses the first and third reasons briefly before dismissing them from his attention because they are not wholly unique to video games. When he comes to escapism, he acknowledges that general escapism is not unique to video games, but the specific type of escapism that video games offer is, because it is one that allows us to escape the undetermined nature of life. He explains this by stating that “in videogames [sic], we are assured that performing the right actions will provide us with the desired result.” This claim is accompanied by his argument that life is not fair, and it is never guaranteed that certain actions will have certain results in our lives. He says that this is one of the primary reasons we play games, because “it affirms our belief in cause and effect.”

The observation that walkyourpath makes is one of philosophical importance, because it points out that the problem of evil is very different in video games. Under his argument, if I am skilled enough, I will succeed and nothing bad will happen to me. Not all games are exactly as he described, which is mostly because he was focusing on older games with simpler objectives. Having the right amount of skill is not always enough with more complicated games. Furthermore, RPGs add the aspect of morality into this mix. The argument would follow that if I am morally good enough, things will generally go well for me. Again, this is not always the case, but it is definitely a notable feature of the games. Thus, the problem of evil in RPGs is not solved or dissolved, but
simply altered in a way that makes it much easier to handle. Indeed, the alteration of the problem of evil adds to the escapist quality of RPGs.

This is a fascinating argument, because it focuses on the fact that every video game relies heavily upon cause and effect. The effect of each action is literally programmed into the game, and though I have freedom to play as I wish, my actions are limited to the programmed realm of possibility. In my experience, this predetermined cause and effect can be comforting, but I find the games that allow more freedom to be more enjoyable. Modern RPGs allow much more freedom on the player’s part than older games did, mostly because of the state of technology. The more freedom the game allows, the more I feel as though my actions have some sort of independence from the programming of the game. This is related to the difference between hard determinism and compatibilism, which will be discussed in Chapter III when I discuss Nozick’s experience machine.

IV. Escapism

One of the most important reasons that RPGs are so enjoyable is their intriguing ability to tell stories. This is the very fabric of RPGs, and it is one of the reasons they are created. I am involved in the story through my character, and the stories in these games are usually rich, complex, and highly immersive. As I play, I can escape into the world of the game and into a story in which my character plays a central role. The pleasure found in playing through a story in a video game is similar to the pleasure found in enjoying a story in a book, or even a film. I believe that the enjoyment and emotional involvement in a video game is more elevated than in typical fictions like books or films, however, precisely because of the player’s active involvement. In fact, opponents of video games even grant this point, albeit for different reasons. One example of this is given by South Australian Attorney General Michael Atkinson, who was recently embroiled in a fierce policy debate over whether to add an R18+ rating for video games. The current highest rating for video games in Australia is MA15+, despite the fact that the highest rating for films is R18+. Atkinson is opposed to adding an R18+ rating for video games, stating:

I don’t want the extremely violent, sexually depraved and drug use games in Australia at all. Interactive games are, I think, a greater risk than films because they are interactive. (Atkinson)

Atkinson gave this statement in a program on Australia’s ABC Radio National. It is a common and accurate perception that video games are unique, and perhaps more deserving of attention, because of their interactive nature.

In this section, I shall address how my character is created, and why this makes a difference for gameplay. Escapism shall be discussed at much greater length in Chapter III. The ethical issues relevant to this section include:

- Is there ethical significance in a player creating a character different from himself in race and/or gender?
- Are the ways race and gender portrayed in the creation process directly problematic?
- Is escapism permissible?

The first two questions are related to my discussions in Chapter IV, which is about the portrayal of race, gender, age, and class in RPGs. The first question is not addressed directly, but the second question is specifically discussed. The third question is discussed at length in Chapter III, which is about escapism and the nature of play.
IV. A Character Creation

At the beginning of most modern role-playing games, there is a process called 'character creation'. This process usually involves choosing a name, abilities, and appearance for my character from a series of menus (see IV.II). This makes the process more of an assembly than a creation, but 'character creation' is the term universally used in the games and the gaming industry, so I shall use it for the purposes of consistency. The abilities define my character's attributes and skills. Common attributes in RPGs include strength, dexterity, intelligence, and charisma. Each of these affects my character's skills, which are more specific than attributes. Skills are used throughout the game, and each game is usually designed to enable characters with wide varieties of skill sets to maneuver through challenges in different ways.

A very important part of this process is the creation of appearance. In earlier games, like *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Knights of the Old Republic II*, I can choose from several predesigned character appearances, both male and female. In the more recent games (which are more technologically advanced), I actually design my character using scales which adjust anything from height to hair style to chin pronunciation. This means that my character can look strikingly similar to myself, or to how I would like to look, or another way entirely. It does have its limits, however, in that the appearance choices are usually limited to young, athletic men and women. While race and gender are usually options I can control, age and weight are usually not.

The customization of appearance leads most players to create a character they identify with in some way, whether or not they look alike. This identification makes the immersion in the game all the more encompassing, and deeper immersion means deeper personal involvement in each feature of the game. As I play the game, controlling my character's actions at every turn, I become emotionally invested in what happens to him. The more I identify with my character, the more I play as though I am my character. This means that I respond to moral dilemmas as I myself would, and behave in conversations as I myself would. Identification is what makes moral choices in the game personal, because I make the moral choice that I believe I would make in the situation. Not only that, but if I play as an evil character, or just compel my good character to act in evil ways, like detonating Megaton or attacking civilians, I feel bad. By 'bad', I mean that I feel morally queasy and uncomfortable, and I also feel sympathy for the characters that I harm. I do not enjoy the game when I am acting as an evil person, and I do not find it easy to commit evil acts, even in the context of a game. Of course, other players may find this easy, and this raises several questions, including whether acting evilly in these games provides a cathartic effect to evil or encourages it instead. I shall discuss these questions in Chapter IV.

V. The Integral Role of Violence

RPGs are multifaceted, and one of their multiple facets is violence. In fact, violence is one of the central facets in these games. It does not constitute the core purpose of role-playing games, as it may constitute other genres (e.g. 'shooter' games), but it is quite important. In my first subsection here, I discuss the nature of the violence, by explaining the types of combat systems that RPGs use. My second subsection
explores the relationship between video games and the United States military. The ethical issues raised by this include the following:

• Can one be courageous in a combat situation in an RPG if there is no real danger?
• Does the violence in RPGs desensitize one to violence? If so, is this morally bad?
• Is the violence in RPGs equivalent to the violence in action games? Does the developer’s intention concerning violence’s role in each game matter?

The first of these questions is specifically discussed in Chapter III, which is about evincing virtues in a virtual reality. The second two questions are worthy of investigation, but I do not directly address either of them in my thesis.

V.A Combat Systems

A character must explore the world if he wants to gain experience and improve, and one of the most common ways to gain experience is to fight enemies - whether they be malicious bandits, wild beasts, or gruesome monsters. Fighting enemies is frequent during exploration, and common during quests. Whenever an enemy comes close to the player’s character, the combat system launches. This system is something that differs depending on the game, and it is either turn-based or realtime. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* has a turn-based combat system, meaning that combat is carried out in turns, which are taken by each agent involved in combat. For example, if my party encounters three Sith Troopers, each of my party members and each of the troopers gets a turn (in an order and fashion too complex to explain here), and the game can be paused at any time to issue commands for subsequent turns. Luckily, the technology of the game is such that automatic, basic commands are issued (unless told otherwise) to my characters, and enemies are entirely controlled by the computer, giving a somewhat continuous experience to the battle.

*Fallout 3*, on the other hand, has a realtime combat system, which is a bit more realistic. For example, if my character were simply walking through the wasteland, and a ghoul came into sight, my character has the option of attacking it through any means he possesses. If the ghoul sees my character, it will attack on sight, using whichever tactic or means the game programs it to. I do not issue commands to my character, but rather control him directly, using weapons through an execution of controls on my controller. This ends up providing a much more energetic, challenging, and occasionally stressful time for the player than turn-based combat.

These combat systems offer a great deal of enjoyment, because they offer a challenge that is frequently presented, but varied enough so that separate fights are never identical. Not only that, but fighting and defeating enemies grants experience points, which help to develop my character. The violence itself is usually enjoyed for the instrumental role it plays, allowing me to defeat enemies in order to get past them, gain experience, survive, or gain the items that I can take from the enemy. Defeating enemies most often means killing them, though some battles can be nonfatal, which sometimes happens when one of the characters stops the fight. Violence also has something of an intrinsic pleasure, however, which is primarily present in the accomplishment found in successfully defeating a foe, or at least skillfully harming them. Unlikely or unexpectedly successful hits against enemies can be enjoyable just for the sake of significantly harming my enemy, who is trying to significantly harm my character.
The style of a combat system can make or break a game, and this is because the violence in the game is so much enjoyed. The combat is just another challenge, and the complexity of the system offers an immersive and dynamic experience. The frequency of combat makes the violence in these games routine and routines often serve to condition people. It could be (and often is) objected because of this that the routine and often graphic violence desensitizes players to violence. I believe that this makes RPGs problematic, but I do not believe that it makes them outrightly ethically bad, especially since it is not their focus.

V.B Video Games and the U.S. Military

Video games as a whole have a lengthy history with the military, one that has its roots in the origins of video games themselves. The first electronic game ever made was called the “Cathode-Ray Tube Amusement Device”, according to D.S. Cohen of About.com in an article entitled “Cathode-Ray Tube Amusement Device – The First Electronic Game”. It was developed by “physicists Thomas T. Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann” and it was “based on the World War II radar displays” (Cohen, About.com). In this primitive game, “players use knobs to adjust the trajectory of light beams (missiles) in an attempt to hit targets printed on clear screen overlays” (Cohen, About.com). This game received its patent in 1948, but “due to the equipment costs and various circumstances ... [it] was never released to the marketplace” (Cohen, About.com). Electronic games became video games, and they developed significantly in technology and type from this point, but it is worth noting that the game credited as the first electronic game was a war game.

Since that point in time, the United States military has recognized the potential in the technology of video games, and has been using them as simulators at least as far back as 1980. According to a Discovery Channel documentary entitled “History of Video Games”, the arcade game Battlezone, a 3D tank simulator made in 1980 by the pioneering American game company Atari, “even inspired a training version for the U.S. Army.” The details behind the military’s use of video games as training are vague when it comes to the early years of video games, but in the new era of technology, the military has taken a strong and visible role in the game industry.

America’s Army is a free online, multiplayer first-person shooter game, and it is now actively being used to recruit for the U.S. Army. This game has attracted the attention of numerous critics as well as multitudes of players. Peter Singer, director of the 21st Century Defense Initiative at the Brookings Institution, recently wrote an article for Foreign Policy entitled “Meet the Sims ... and Shoot Them”, where he discusses the rise of virtual war games, or ‘militainment’. As Singer describes it, America’s Army quickly became one of the top 10 most popular games on the Internet, and within its first five years, some 9 million individuals had signed up to join America's video-game army, spending some 160 million hours on the site and making it one of the top 10 of all video games, online or otherwise. (Singer)

This is not an uncommon type of game, either. As Singer correctly points out, “its main commercial rival is Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 ... [which] racked up $310 million in sales” in its first two days on the market.

Another interesting connection between the military and video games is that certain types of military technology have become very similar to video games. The most
common and notable of these technologies are ‘aerial military drones’. As William Saletan points out in his article “War is Halo” on Slate, “drones are the future of warfare”, and controlling them “looks and feels like a video game” (Saletan, Slate). In the article, Saletan discusses how Raytheon, a ‘high-tech defense contractor’, redesigned the way drones are operated. After realizing that drone-operation was difficult and faulty, Raytheon “hired game developers to redesign drone operation” (Saletan, Slate). Their redesign was a success, with its result being “a user-friendly array of throttles, switches, and thumb controls” which is “based on an Xbox processor [which] looks like a PlayStation” (Saletan, Slate). This is an example of video game technology being used to aid in military technology, which is not terribly uncommon. The two entities are definitely connected in several ways.

It is also common for video games to imitate the military and use historical military battles and wars as settings. A paradigmatic example of this is Medal of Honor: Allied Assault, which puts the player in the role of a soldier in the allied forces in World War II. This game even goes so far as to contain a mission which tasks the player with storming Omaha Beach during D-Day. This type of setting for a video game is not without controversy, however. One of the most heated debates about this type of game revolves around the recently developed game Six Days in Fallujah. Laura Sydell of NPR reported on this game, which is “based on the actual battle for that Iraqi city in the fall of 2004” (Sydell, NPR). Sydell interviewed Peter Tamte, “the president of Atomic Games”, who “saw an opportunity to use a game to inform” (Sydell, NPR). Retired Marine Captain Read Omohundro, a ‘consultant on the game’, supported it by saying, “as a result of this particular format, having to make decisions in a quick manner in order to increase your survivability, hopefully that’ll explain more to people in a manner that helps them associate why war is not a game” (Omohundro - Sydell, NPR). There has also been heavy opposition from members of the military involved in the war. According to the Daily Mail:

Tim Collins OBE, a former colonel of the 1st Battalion Royal Irish Regiment ... said: 'It's much too soon to start making video games about a war that's still going on, and an extremely flippant response to one of the most important events in modern history. 'It's particularly insensitive given what happened in Fallujah, and I will certainly oppose the release of this game.' (Daily Mail)

The increased opposition caused Konami, the Japanese game publisher that had planned on publishing the game, to pull their support. The game has not yet been published or released.

More relevant to my project, the military has also been involved in making role-playing games to train its soldiers. According to Katie Drummond of Wired.com, the Pentagon has invested in “a ‘First Person Cultural Trainer’ designed to teach one-on-one cultural sensitivity to American troops” (Drummond, Wired.com). This game is a simulator that shares many things with an RPG, using “cultural data provided by the military” (Drummond, Wired.com). Unlike America’s Army, the purpose of this game is to “enter a village, learn about the social structures and relevant issues, and then ‘work with the community’ to successfully finish assigned missions” (Drummond, Wired.com). The U.S. military is only at the beginning of their use of video games, and it is safe to assume that they will remain involved as the technology develops.

VI. Failure and Trying Again
If you fall off of your horse, you brush yourself off and get back on. Nothing really teaches you this lesson quite like video games do, except maybe horseback riding. There is an interesting and uncommonly discussed element of RPGs called the save/load system. This system, as I detail in my subsection here, is a dynamic one that can save states of narrative. There is one ethical issue that comes to mind when considering it, which is this:

- Since routine is conditioning, can the practice of saving, loading, and repeating the same actions and scenarios condition a player to certain actions? Including morally impermissible ones?

This question and this phenomenology of video games is important, but I do not discuss at length in my thesis.

VI. A Saving and Loading and the Dependence they Create

In RPGs, there is always a save/load system, which is a necessity for any game longer than a few hours, since most people don’t sit down and play for increments any longer than that. Most role-playing games allow me to save the game exactly where my character is, whatever he is doing. This is opposed to limiting me to certain ‘save points’, or starting me at the beginning of whatever location I was exploring, as other games (and older RPGs) do. Saving and loading may seem mundane, but players use it on a very frequent basis, and it accommodates failing and trying again. This can apply to anything in the game that I can fail at, from a ‘skill check’ to a battle. A ‘skill check’ is a check that occurs any time my character needs to use one of his skills. The check usually uses some type of formula to calculate success or failure at the skill, which is primarily based on my character’s relevant skill level and the difficulty of the task, but the systems differ depending on the game. In *Fallout 3*, if I want to pick a lock, I need to reach the minimum skill level required, and then solve a puzzle by maneuvering a bobby pin and a screwdriver around a lock in the game. If my skill level is too low, my character will not even be able to access this lock picking puzzle. In *Knights of the Old Republic*, my character simply attempts to use the skill, and the game conducts a formula in its programming, and then tells me whether or not my character succeeded.

If my character should fail a skill check, I should likely desire to try again. If the failure is nothing more than breaking a bobby pin in a lock, I can keep trying (assuming I have more bobby pins) without needing to save or load. If my character had no more bobby pins, or if the failure was something more harmful, like using my essential supplies in a minor battle that went awry, I can simply load the game from the most recent time I saved it. This fact often inspires obsessive behavior in saving the game, to ensure that if anything goes wrong, nothing bad will actually happen, because I can always load from a recent save file. I have the practice of saving the game before my character takes any risks, or even before an important conversation takes place. That way, if the situation does not play out to my liking, I can always load the game and try again. This is another aspect of video games that adds to its escapist quality, because there is no presence of this system in life. Always being able to go back and do something again, even and especially in the case of my character’s death, is a fantastical notion. To a certain extent, however, this aspect detracts from the immersion in the game, because it hinders the suspension of disbelief. Also, it is important to note
that unlike typical games, there is no ‘game over’ in these games when my character dies, because I can just load the game from one of my numerous save files.

As far as ethical significance is concerned, it has been objected that this ability to start over desensitizes and disconnects players from the situation at hand. The aforementioned NPR broadcast concerning 6 Days in Fallujah featured Karen Meredith, who is “with Gold Star Families Speak Out, a group made up of families of veterans who died in Iraq” who are “trying to stop the game from being published” (Sydell, NPR). Meredith is opposed to the game trying to take on such a serious subject “because it’s a game, because there can be different endings, because Ken [her son] did not get that opportunity to reset and start over in the battle where he was killed” (Meredith - Sydell, NPR).

VII. Aesthetics

A common perception that needs to be challenged is the view that these RPGs have terrible graphics, and that they can’t possibly have any artistic quality, nor can they be too similar to life with their unrealistic aesthetic quality. This is now far from true. Some of these games have incredibly realistic and cinematic graphics, which the progression of technology in video game consoles has made possible. Furthermore, there are several other aesthetic elements to RPGs, including the way characters are represented, as well as perspective views and character identification. I shall briefly explain the feature of perspectives in this section. The issues of RPG aesthetics include the following:

• How much does the aesthetic quality affect a player’s moral behavior in the game?
• Do the aesthetics of RPGs affect gameplay pre-cognitively (i.e. independently of cognitive judgement)?
• Are developers morally assessable for the ways characters are represented in a game?

The first two questions are intriguing, but I do not specifically address them in my thesis. The third question is very similar to a question raised earlier in this chapter (see I.IV), with the difference being that this one addresses all characters, NPCs and the player-character alike. As such, I shall be addressing this issue in my fourth chapter.

VII.A First-Person versus Third-Person Perspective

The aesthetic shift of perspective is a fascinating one that has a great deal of moral significance. Fallout 3 is played in the first-person perspective: what I see is what my character sees, and I cannot see any part of my character besides his hands and whatever weapon he is wielding, if any. This is not common among the games I am studying, however. Most games are played in the third-person perspective, with the view on the screen usually being over the shoulder of my character. This is called the ‘camera angle’, despite the lack of an actual camera. This has an enormous effect on the identification I feel with my character, and what I see as my character. It also directly affects my level of immersion in the game. The less distance there is between my character and I, the more I shall become immersed in the game.

VIII. Conclusion
Modern, interactive RPGs contain dynamic worlds, which are full of expansive quests, frequent combat, and multifarious characters, all of which have morally relevant aspects. When I play an RPG, I am put into the role of a character and his world, and immersed in the stories of each. I play each game as much as possible, taking advantage of the numerous potential hours of gameplay that the game’s developers have enabled through their programming. There are a multitude of other gamers who do the same thing, and though RPGs and their player-base have not been taken academically seriously until this point, I believe that they should be. I have shown in this chapter that there are not only a variety of features in RPGs, there are also a variety of ethical issues connected to RPGs. Now that I have explicated this philosophically important genre, I shall delve more deeply into some of the aforementioned issues.

1 I.IV.A means Chapter I, Section IV, Part A. This format will be the same for all in-thesis references, though it may not necessarily include the ‘part’ if it is not applicable.

2 For a summary of this game and the others I shall explore, see Appendix B - ‘Game Profiles’.

3 I am still referring to my character in the game, not my moral character, though the two are closely related in this instance.

4 Though I give the literal meaning of ‘play’ here, I shall be discussing the philosophical nature of play in Chapter III.

5 My thanks to Professor Turner for this point.

6 Having my character act as I believe that I would in these moral situations is closely related to responding to an ethical thought experiment in philosophy. This relationship deserves a closer look, though I cannot provide it in this project.

7 I also believe that it is more difficult to commit evil acts in these immersive RPGs than it is in violent, controversial games like Grand Theft Auto IV, because the framework of the RPG, from the reactions of NPCs to the moral judgement of actions (through scales of morality), is essentially different from games like Grand Theft Auto IV, which do not have such frameworks.

8 Called ‘loot’, items can usually be found on the corpse of one’s enemy, or in the belongings - from footlockers to cabinets to treasure chests - that belonged to one’s enemy.

9 Because this is a philosophy honors thesis, I feel it is necessary to point out that this is not the well-known utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, author of The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty (New York: Random House, 2009). This is instead the political scientist and military analyst, Peter Warren Singer, author of Wired For War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century (Penguin, 2009).
Chapter II: Video Games, Fiction, and Response Moralism

I. Introduction
Imagine that I am sitting in a room with four of my friends, each of whom I shall give an invented name. I am playing the game *Fallout 3*, and my friends watch as I detonate the atom bomb in Megaton (see I.II.B), destroying the town and all of its inhabitants for the whims of a wealthy NPC, all the while showing signs of discomfort and pity for the inhabitants of Megaton. “Wow. Look at what you did - you’re a bad person!”, *Dane* proclaims as the atom cloud in the distance billows skyward, visible from my character’s safe lookout point. *Garrus* comes to my defense, proclaiming, “That’s impossible. It’s just a game!” Meanwhile, *Morrigan* chimes in by saying, “Well, it’s not just a game, he’s acting badly. But he’s not a bad person.” *Miranda* responds to all three by saying, “It is just a game, and if he had enjoyed that act of evil, he would be blameworthy at least. But look at him - he’s saddened by the action. He did not take any pleasure in it, so he is not blameworthy.”

The position that each of my friends holds here are major positions on the issue of whether actions in RPGs and their emotional responses are morally assessable. Two of these views, belonging to *Garrus* and *Miranda*, hold that RPGs are a type of fiction, with *Miranda* believing the player’s responses to be morally assessable, and *Garrus* viewing the player’s responses to as not morally assessable. *Dane* and *Morrigan* both believe that behavior in RPGs constitutes virtual action, and that RPGs aren’t fiction. In *Dane’s* opinion, this makes the actions morally assessable, but in *Morrigan’s* view, it does not. In this chapter, I shall delve into each of these views and respond to them in kind, ultimately taking *Miranda’s* side. In order for *Miranda’s* view to be correct, however, I must argue both that RPGs are a form of fiction, and that response moralism applies to them.

II. Role-Playing Video Games as Fiction
In this section, I shall define fiction and then demonstrate how RPGs constitute a form of fiction. The unique qualities of RPGs are targeted when objections are raised against their status as fictions, but I shall show that they are not drastically different from other fictions, using reception theory. I shall then address these objections directly.

II.A Defining Fiction
In his essay, “How To Defend Response Moralism”, Allan Hazlett gives a definition of fiction, which states that fiction includes “novels, plays, many films, as well as many paintings - any work of art that intuitively ‘tells a story’” (Hazlett, 244). The central criteria for fiction under Hazlett’s definition is the presence of a story being told, through whatever means. Another definition of fiction is provided by Gregory Currie in his book *The Nature of Fiction*, where he states:

Fiction ... is the product of a communicative act; an act that shares with other communicative acts like asserting or requesting a Gricean intentional structure. In performing such a communicative act the author attempts to elicit a certain response from his audience. (Currie, 70)

This definition puts the focus on the author of a fiction, who is both communicating and attempting to elicit response. The lattermost part of this definition is especially relevant to response moralism, because it implies that the author has a certain emotional
response in mind (see II.III.A). The focus on author intention stems in part from H.P Grice’s definition of meaning, which he provides in his essay “Utterer’s Meaning & Intention”. It is as follows:

"U meant something by uttering x" is true iff, for some audience A, U uttered x intending
1) A to produce a particular response r
2) A to think (recognize) that U intends (1)
3) A to fulfill (1) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2) (Grice, 151)

This definition of meaning constitutes a communicative act, when all the conditions are fulfilled. Admittedly, this compilation of definitions of fiction is very brief and incomplete, but it will be sufficient for my purposes here.

RPGs tell a story, and they also have all the typical features of a fiction, with authors, participants (their version of audiences), and a medium for portrayal. The medium is different from typical fictions in that it uses the technology of a gaming console and the participation of the player in telling the story. I believe that RPGs are types of fiction, and the only thing that sets them apart in any way is the unique way they are presented.

II.B Reception Theory and Video Games

Reception theory is a theory of literature which “examines the reader’s role in literature” (Eagleton, 64). As Terry Eagleton puts it in his book Literary Theory: an introduction,

Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author.

(Eagleton, 64-65)

This theory is a relatively young one in the grander scheme of literary theory, and it is one that has many claims relevant to video games. The theory puts much more emphasis than usual on the reader, which is appropriate for video games, where the player has an active, integral role. Not only that, but reception theory also puts focus on what a literary work does to a reader, and how a reader reacts and changes because of the work. I believe that the active form of video games, combined with the identification with one’s character in RPGs makes them clearly literary works under this theory.

One of the most prominent reception theorists is Hans Robert Jauss, whose book Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics contains pioneering arguments for reception theory, some of which I shall explore here. For Jauss, who draws much from the Aristotelian tradition, aesthetic pleasure is split into three experiences: ‘poiesis, aesthesis, and catharsis’. The lattermost of these is the ‘communicative’ aesthetic experience, and Jauss defines it as “the enjoyment of affects as stirred by speech or poetry which can bring about both a change in belief and the liberation of his mind in the listener or spectator” (Jauss, 92). This type of experience is arguably the most important of the three for reception theory, because it:

presupposes the dialectical interplay or self-enjoyment through the enjoyment of what is other and makes the recipient [sic] an active participant in the constitution of the imaginary, something which is denied him as long as aesthetic distance is understood according to traditional theory as one-directional (Jauss, 92).

By presenting this definition of catharsis as a keystone of aesthetic experience, Jauss is supporting the argument that the traditional one-directional theory should be replaced by reception theory.
The claims that Jauss makes that turn out to be relevant to RPGs are primarily found in the section of his book entitled “Interaction Patterns of Identification with the Hero”. In this section, he outlines five different types of identification, three of which are relevant to the identification with one’s character in an RPG. The second type of identification that Jauss outlines is the ‘admiring identification’, which requires a perfect hero model, one that must ‘transcend expectation’ and cause astonishment for the reader, inspiring admiration. The third identification that is relevant to RPGs is the ‘sympathetic identification’, which Jauss defines as “the aesthetic affect of projecting oneself into the alien self, a process which eliminates the admiring distance and can inspire feelings in the spectator or reader that will lead him to a solidarization with the suffering hero” (Jauss, 172). The fourth type is ‘cathartic identification’, which Jauss defines as:

the aesthetic attitude ... that frees the spectator from the real interests and affective entanglements of the world, and puts him into the position of the suffering and beset hero so that his mind and heart may find liberation through tragic emotion or comic relief. (Jauss, 177)

The first type of identification is ‘associative identification’, which requires “modes of communication, which ... orient social life” (Jauss, 165), making it more applicable to multiplayer games than single-player RPGs. The last type of identification is ‘ironic identification’, which requires aesthetic distance, and therefore is not relevant to the character-identification of RPGs.

Each of the three relevant types of identification occurs within RPGs, and all three of them can occur within a single game. When I am playing the role of a hero in *Dragon Age: Origins*, for example, I often admire my character’s abilities and deeds, even while I cause and control them. Most of the time, RPGs make the playable character the hero of the story, and give him abilities that can be increased to epic levels, which facilitates Jauss’s admiring identification. When my character’s mentor dies in *DA:O*, I feel sad and upset about it, despite the fact that I am not my character, and I acknowledge that his mentor is fictional. This is an example of sympathetic identification, which usually comes about when something negative happens to my character. Lastly, cathartic identification seems to be the most common type of identification in RPGs, because it is directly connected to escapism. Playing the role of a hero who faces numerous conflicts and challenges in a long, multifaceted story that I am helping to weave allows me to take on this cathartic identification easily. When the story is especially emotional, I lose myself in my character, and temporarily forget about my own troubles and preoccupations. I derive a great deal of enjoyment from this when I play these games.

Reception theory is plainly relevant to video games, and I believe that it helps to secure them as types of fiction. The ‘player’ is the new vocabulary for the ‘reader’ when it comes to video games, but they have the same important role. A participant in fiction helps in the fiction’s literary process, and in the case of a video game player, this happens quite literally. Not only that, but reception theory focuses on the participant and what happens to him as a result of the reception of the fiction. Terry Eagleton summarizes it well when he says, “the whole point of reading, for a critic like Iser, is that it brings us into deeper self-consciousness, catalyzes a more critical view of our own identities” (Eagleton, 68).³ Jauss’s multiple types of identification support this claim, and the relevance they contain for video games strengthens their position as fictions.
II.C Objections to Role-Playing Video Games as Fiction

Dane and Morrigan presented the view that behavior in RPGs is a form of virtual action, and they also object to the claim that RPGs constitute a form of fiction. Their first objection focuses on the fact that RPGs are multifaceted, and their stories depend upon the player’s interaction, which differs from typical fictions. These friends reject reception theory, adhering instead to the traditional view of fiction, which has one direction - from author to reader. There is both narrative participation and narrative creation required on the part of the player in an RPG, because there are several different possible stories (see I.II.B) created by the developers, and the player’s actions determine the story. This means that RPGs cannot be fictions under Currie’s definition, because they put too much of the creation of the narrative with players. The narrative creation on the part of the player is primarily carried out through the quests he undertakes, and how he behaves within these quests. Therefore, author intent and meaning exist, but another element entirely outside of the definitions of fiction is present as well. Since the stories in RPGs depend on something indeterminate (i.e. players and their decisions), then they do not have a concrete story, nor do they contain valid communicative acts.

After making this objection, Morrigan does not have much more to argue, except that behavior in RPGs is virtual action, which is not real, and emotions responding to it are therefore not morally assessable. She would argue that if the actions were real actions, then the emotional responses to them would be assessable, but since they are only actions in the vacuum of virtual space, they are not. The actions in a video game only affect NPCs, and since these characters are entirely programmed and artificial, then the actions have no moral status, and neither do the emotional responses to them.

Dane followed along with Morrigan until this point, but now he diverges, arguing that even though behavior in RPGs constitutes action in a virtual reality, these actions are morally assessable, and so are the emotional responses to them. They are assessable because Dane rejects the view that actions in a virtual reality have no moral status. Even though the actions are virtual and do not directly affect any real person, the player is still acting and emoting in ways that are morally assessable. If the game can give moral judgement to actions, there is no good reason to think that because it is only virtual we cannot also cast moral judgement on these actions and the emotions that respond to them. Dane’s conclusion comes into concordance with mine to an extent, because we both believe that the emotional responses to actions in RPGs are morally assessable. The important difference, however, is that Dane believes this is so because the virtual action bears no limiting difference to real action. I believe it because I argue RPGs are fictions, and I believe that my emotions are responding to their non-fictional content.

II.D Role-Playing Video Games as Collaborative Fiction

The response that Garrus & Miranda provide first states that RPGs are a collaboration between the author and the player, and then admits that the author does not have sole creative control. They go on to argue two things: that narrative participation does not rule RPGs out of the realm of fiction, and that the developers have much more creative control than it may appear.
RPGs fit into fiction in reception theory with their player interaction, but the interaction is so direct that I shall give an alternative argument, which reaches the same conclusion. Direct narrative participation is not unique to RPGs, for this participation is common in collaborative, or interactive, fiction. An example of this type of fiction is the popular “Choose Your Own Adventure” book series, which is comprised of books that give the reader freedom in choosing some of the actions of the main character. By doing this, the books allow the participant to have some control over the progression of the plot. There are numerous potential stories within each book, which are told through different choices of action for the main character. This is incredibly similar to the nature of RPGs, and this type of book could even be seen as the early version of these games. Perhaps more appropriately, the games could be seen as a continuation of the interactive form of fiction, simply more technologically progressed.

As for the second part of Garrus & Miranda’s argument, there is more storytelling power in the hands of the developers than the objection has realized. The framework of the universe and the stories that the player can trigger and play through are all created by the developers. The developers of the game Mass Effect created its universe, which happens to be our current universe about 180 years in the future, where humanity has been unexpectedly launched onto a galactic political stage already dominated by three other alien races. The developers have created this futuristic galaxy with all of its facets: alien races, advanced technology, galactic politics, corporate planets, crime lords, xenophobic factions, and so on. In this sense, they have set up the background for any narrative the agent creates, and even though the game’s world is affected by the agent’s choices, the overarching universe will remain the same. The only way there can be an exception to this is if the developers have programmed the character’s ability to change the overarching universe of the game, in which case it is still in the hands of the developers.

Not only do the developers create the universe of the game, they also play a very strong role in the narrative in that they create each and every quest my character can undertake, along with every element of every quest. They create the character’s choices for dialogue by using a menu of choices, which are often contradictory to one another, allowing for meaningful choice to be made (see IV.IV). They also create reactions from non-player characters to those dialogue choices, or to any of my character’s actions. Therefore, the developers play a crucial role, and the communicative act is comprised of authorial intent and context. RPGs, along with other types of collaborative fiction, simply allow the context to be interactive, which is where the participant enters the fiction. The participant is creating the story in that he is weaving together threads provided by the author, to form a tapestry that fits into the overarching framework the author has made. RPGs therefore satisfy the definitions of fiction, and withstand the objections focusing on their unique qualities.

III. Moral Assessment of Responses to Actions in Role-Playing Video Games

Now that the argument between the friends about the status of RPGs as fiction has been addressed, I shall address their second major disagreement. This disagreement revolves around the issue of whether or not emotional responses to actions in RPGs are morally assessable. Dane and Miranda both believe that emotional responses are morally assessable, but they have different reasons. Dane believes that
emotional responses to virtual actions in RPGs are morally assessable because they are actions with moral status, whereas Miranda believes that responses to actions in RPGs are morally assessable because they are responding to something non-fictional. Miranda’s view depends on both the reality of emotions felt in response to fiction, as well as the moral assessability of those responses. These two views are included in the theory of response moralism, which I shall present and subsequently apply to RPGs.

III.A Response Moralism

The theory of response moralism is defined by Allan Hazlett as “the view that some emotional responses to fictions are morally right, and others morally wrong” (Hazlett, 241). In Hazlett’s essay “How to Defend Response Moralism”, he defends the theory against the attack presented by what Hazlett calls the ‘reality argument’. The version of this argument that he presents is as follows:

1. Morality concerns how we think about, feel about (i.e. emotionally respond to), and treat (in action) other people.
2. A person’s emotional responses to the content of a fiction are not emotional responses to other people.
3. Therefore, a person’s emotional responses to the content of a fiction cannot be morally right or wrong. (Hazlett, 245)

After considering several possible ways to respond to this argument, Hazlett ends up focusing his energy on attacking the second premise. Hazlett rejects the second premise of the reality argument by arguing that “all fictions have non-fictional content” (Hazlett, 248). To validate this claim, Hazlett explains the ‘import’ and ‘export’ principles, which are used when participating in fiction. The import principle states that a participant in fiction imports background assumptions from the real world into the fiction, unless he already knows that a particular background assumption is false for the fiction at hand. To illustrate this principle, Hazlett states that “it is not legitimate to import the truth that most people have bank accounts into the fictional world of The Lord of the Rings; it is legitimate to import the truth that most people need to eat food to survive” (Hazlett, 251). This is supported by Gregory Currie in The Nature of Fiction, when he says, “what is said in the text, together with certain background assumptions, generates a set of fictional truths: those things that are true in the fiction” (Currie, 70).

The export principle, on the other hand, states that one can export non-fictional aspects of fiction into the real world. Serving as both an inspiration for Hazlett for these categories as well as an example is Gendler’s essay, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance”. In this essay, Gendler says, “I export things from the story ... adding them to my stock in the way that I add knowledge gained by testimony” (Gendler, 76). She gives a few examples of the export principle by saying, “in this way, for instance, I might learn how women wore their hair in nineteenth-century France, or when the serfs were emancipated, or how far away a particular village is from London” (Gendler, 76). Hazlett gives an example as well, saying, “according to The Fugitive, Chicago has an elevated train” (Hazlett, 252). The import and export principles together prove that fictional content is closely intertwined and dependent upon non-fictional content. Hazlett concludes by stating that “one’s emotional response to a fiction can be right or wrong only to the extent that said response is a response to real people or events” (Hazlett, 254).
III.B Objecting to the Export Principle

One might object to the export principle by arguing that while many fictions have non-fictional content, other fictions do not have any non-fictional content, which means that nothing can be exported from them. After all, it is the nature of fiction to deal with imaginary characters and events, so while a genre like historical fiction may have non-fictional content (in the real history it is based on), not all other genres do. The objection could find some support in the bizarre characteristics of many science-fiction novels, which don’t seem to be anything but fictional. This objection is a threat to my own theory because without the export principle, no one would take anything non-fictional from fictions. This would mean that no one would be responding to anything non-fictional about the fiction, which would cripple response moralism.

Hazlett predicts this objection in his paper, and responds to it by saying that “we should be suspicious of the possibility of a fiction with no non-fictional content” (Hazlett, 254). I agree with this response, but I shall go one step further and argue that humans are not capable of creating anything that is entirely fictional. First, a fiction with no non-fictional content would not contain anything in our real, non-fictional world. Creators of fiction live in this real, non-fictional world, and their experiences are a part of it. People draw from their experiences when they create fiction, because it is not possible to imagine anything that is not a compilation of prior experiences. This means that the only way something can be fictional with no non-fictional content is if it is entirely separate and distinct from our experiences. Humans cannot create or understand fiction with no non-fictional content, which means that there is no such thing as fiction with no non-fictional content.

III.C Objecting to the Reality of Emotional Responses to Fiction

Works of fiction are known for invoking our emotions, to the point where a fictional work is popularly commended (or condemned) for the emotions it inspires. We cry, laugh, and curse along with the characters and at the events in the story that we read, watch, or play, yet this poses a problem for philosophers and psychologists alike, for these characters and events are fictional. If Hazlett is incorrect, and our emotions really do not have any non-fictional object, then they are not real and they are not morally assessable.

The major objection against the reality of emotional responses to fiction is presented by Susan Feagin in her essay “Imagining Emotions and Appreciating Fiction”, where she states:

beliefs identify the object of the emotion, and help explain why the emotion is a fitting one. But when reading fiction, precisely because we know it is fiction and we are appreciating it as such, we do not have the relevant beliefs. (Feagin, 485-6)

Since we do not have the relevant beliefs, what we take to be our emotions are lacking a key element, and thus cannot be real emotions. James Gribble offers an argument similar to this in his essay, “The Reality of Fictional Emotions”, aided by the argument of C.A. Mace and R.S. Peters from their paper, “Emotions and the Category of Passivity”. Mace and Peters argue that “every emotion or affective state involves a ‘judgement’; an appraisal of the situation, a perception of some feature of the situation, some kind of cognition” (Mace and Peters, 139). Gribble complements this with his statement that “it
is part of the ‘cognitive core’ of our emotional responses to a book or a play that what we are perceiving is not real” (Gribble, 53). Both of these objections emphasize that fiction is not real, and claim that this fictional status is something that we as participants always recognize and bear in mind. Under this view, immersion can never go deep enough to truly suspend disbelief, because the knowledge that it is fiction is omnipresent in our minds. So to ‘lose oneself’ in a book, film, or even video game, is not possible for these aforementioned views, even though that contradicts what many of us experience when engaged in an artistically crafted fiction.

In Feagin’s essay, she offers a response to the objection she presents, which ends up serving as another objection to the reality of emotional responses to fiction (though it still does serve her aims). She claims that a participant in a fiction imagines that a fictional character has beliefs and emotions, even while acknowledging that the character isn’t real. For example, when I read *The Odyssey*, I imagine that Odysseus has feelings of frustration and sadness during his trials, even while acknowledging that Odysseus is fictional. Feagin continues her argument by claiming that after the participant imagines these beliefs and emotions, the participant would then imagine the same emotions for himself. Going back to the example I just presented, after I imagine the sadness of Odysseus, I would subsequently (and perhaps consequently) imagine sadness for myself, which explains why I seem to feel sad when I read *The Odyssey*. Feagin’s imagined emotions theory has one importantly relevant conclusion: that the emotions we feel are imagined and therefore not real.

Hazlett’s theory has a reply to these objections built into it already, and it is one that revolves around the non-fictional content of fiction. For Hazlett, it is the non-fictional content of fiction that is the object of our emotional responses, which means that these emotions have a non-fictional basis. This provides a response to the aforementioned objections, because when emotions have a non-fictional basis, they are real, in the words of those very objections.

There are also a few other responses to these objections from different philosophers, however. H.O. Mounce offers one response in his essay, “Art and Real Life”, where he argues:

> it is evident that there are things in life that move us. This being so, why on earth should it be surprising that we should be moved by representations of these things? (Mounce, 188)

James Gribble uses Mounce’s quote in his own essay (aforementioned in this section), immediately after he states the following:

> the emotions we experience in response to the representations or portrayals of events and characters in literary works are not less real because they have, as their objects, representation or portrayals of characters and events. (Gribble, 54)

Gribble’s argument is more distinct from the others, because it relies more on the fact that fictions are representational than on the non-fictional content in them alone. Being representational and having non-fictional content are two elements of fiction that are similar, but also importantly different. They are different because fictions can contain representations of both fictional and non-fictional characters, events, and general content. Indeed, our own knowledge is nothing more than representations of people, events, and things, which makes this separation between fictional and non-fictional representation a much less significant one.

*III.D Response Moralism and Role-Playing Video Games*
In this chapter, I have thus far argued that RPGs are a form of fiction, and that response moralism applies to all fictions, making emotional responses to them morally assessable. From here, I can logically conclude that response moralism applies to role-playing games. This conclusion has several important moral implications, which I shall now explore.

If emotional responses to fictions are morally assessable, then emotional responses to RPGs are morally assessable, because RPGs are fictions, as I have already argued. As I showed earlier, however, RPGs are different from typical fictions in that they require the player to collaborate with the developers to create a story that the developers have made possible. This means that a great deal of what a player will be emotionally responding to will be his own actions - both in terms of his decisions of how to control his character and his character’s actions. This has significant moral implications, because it means two things. First, that unlike the way in which response moralism works with typical fictions, response moralism in RPGs will apply to responses to actions that the player is directly responsible for (in that he directly caused them using the video game controller). Second, it means that his actions in a video game are morally assessable when accompanied by his emotional responses to these actions.

This carries great significance, for it provides a definitive answer to the conversation at the start of this chapter. This answer is concordant with Miranda’s view, and it states that if I had destroyed the town of Megaton and done so with glee, enjoying the evil action, my response would be morally wrong. If, on the other hand, I detonated the bomb and subsequently felt sorrow for the inhabitants of Megaton, my response at least could be judged morally right, even if my action is judged negatively for different reasons. In this case, my action could be seen as nothing more than collaborating with the developers’ skillful programming to unravel a tale that involves the destruction of Megaton. RPGs do muddy these waters, however, because I may also feel remorse when I destroy Megaton, and feelings of remorse seem to be entirely unique to this collaborative, interactive form of fiction.

The other emotional responses in a game that are not directed towards player actions are directed towards the framework and overarching universe of the game, from past events to enemy factions to the political structures of cities and even worlds. Players often find that much of what serves to commend a role-playing game lies in how the developers have created the various aspects of the game, even if the player does not directly interact with these aspects. The fact that the setting of *Fallout 3* is a post-apocalyptic wasteland, which was caused by a war between America and China, is a fact that I never have to pay much attention to in order to play the game, but it is also a fact that can merit emotional response. To use a more specific example, my character in *Fallout 3* eventually comes into conflict with an organization called the ‘Enclave’. This is an organization that is in the process of attempting to seize control of the ‘Capital Wasteland’ (the name given to post-apocalyptic Washington, D.C.) throughout the game, and they have declared themselves the popularly elected government of America. They do this by broadcasting patriotic propaganda in favor of their organization across the wasteland, led by ‘President Eden’, who assures the nation that he was elected by popular vote but explains that he cannot provide details, “in the interest of national security” (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008).
Whenever I encounter the Enclave in *Fallout 3*, I find myself frustrated and angry with them. It is not that I am angry at the actual Enclave, however, for they are a fictional organization in a fictional world. Instead, I am responding to the concept of an organization that tries to seize control no matter how many casualties they inflict or how much freedom they trample upon. I am responding to non-fictional tyranny and self-righteous oppression, which I find to be morally reprehensible. These emotional responses and their objects are much more similar to responses to typical fictions, and they serve to further validate the view that fictions have non-fictional content. When someone asks what a fiction is about, they are asking about its non-fictional content. *Fallout 3* is about war, the human struggle for survival, and corruption. These are just a few meanings, and they are all non-fictional aspects of the fiction. One of the reasons that *Fallout 3* is such a well-made and successful game is because of the skillful way in which the developers have created a fictional world with so much political and ethical relevance.

IV. Conclusion

After this lengthy discussion, all of my friends have presented their theories, which have been either criticized or defended. Garrus has found comfort in the shared view that RPGs are fictions, but he now has much more to ponder about what this really means for players. Dane has found some comfort in that our conclusions are similar, for while I rejected his view that RPGs just contain virtual actions, I have concluded that the responses to actions in RPGs are morally assessable, which he agrees with. Morrigan’s argument is the only one that has been entirely rejected. I have argued here that RPGs are fictions, and they contain a great deal of non-fictional content, which is made all the more significant by the fact that the players are directly involved in the world the game provides. Emotional responses to these actions and stories are directed towards their non-fictional content, and as such, are morally assessable. In the succeeding chapters, I shall demonstrate how this conclusion can be applied to RPGs in several different ways.


2 By this I mean fictional works, because ‘literary work’ literally refers to something that is written. In the interest of clarity and conformance with the language of the theory, however, I shall continue to use the term ‘literary’.

3 Eagleton is here referring to Wolfgang Iser, another pioneer of reception theory. There are several prominent reception theorists that I did not have the space to mention here. Robert Holub’s *Reception Theory: a critical introduction* and Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* do a much better job of providing an overview of these theorists.

4 Developers, also known as designers, of video games are equivalent to authors.

5 This vacuum exists only in the single-player RPGs I am considering. I have decided to exclude online gaming from my project because the moral implications of acting in a virtual world where other real people are also acting and being affected by my actions are too plentiful to be able to focus on the arguments I wanted to make here.
Chapter III: The Philosophy of Play

I. Introduction

I have now thoroughly explored some of the major philosophical issues that role-playing games face, and I have argued that these games are fictions whose stories and moral situations are ethically significant. I shall now embark upon a discussion of what is central to RPGs: play. It is by playing a game that a player interacts with its world and all the stories that the developers have made within it. There is one major objection to the escapist play that RPGs provide, and this objection is presented in Robert Nozick’s chapter, “Experience Machine” from his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Nozick’s chapter does not specifically focus on RPGs (since it was written in 1974), but it does focus on a hypothetical machine that shares enough elements with RPGs to make it strikingly relevant. In this chapter, I present and explicate Nozick’s arguments, showing precisely how some of them can and do apply to RPGs. Following this discussion is a deeper discussion about the significance and nature of play. In that third section, I delve into arguments posed by Johan Huizinga and Moritz Schlick. Overall, this chapter provides an explication of the philosophy of play, which is necessary as well as relevant to RPGs.

II. Escaping through Virtual Experience

In this section, I shall focus on Robert Nozick’s hypothetical experience machine, followed by his objections to it. Nozick’s objections are primarily aimed against escapism, specifically the type used when entering into a machine that provides nigh-unsurpassable immersive experiences. This machine is essentially a role-playing video game on a much grander technological and philosophical scale. In fact, it is not outside the realm of possibility that technology will eventually progress to the point where this type of machine becomes the new way to play RPGs (and video games in general). Therefore, responding to Nozick’s objections to the machine will serve as a defense of RPGs as well as a defense of the escapist play that they provide. My first subsection here introduces Nozick’s experience machine as he presents it originally, accompanied by my two different interpretations. My second subsection is comprised of Nozick’s challenges and objections to his hypothetical experience machine. The third subsection contains my replies to Nozick’s challenge, including my argument that virtues can be evinced in RPGs and the experience machine alike. My fourth and final subsection considers several possible replies that Nozick might make to my third section, as well as my own rebuttals to those replies.

II.A Nozick’s Experience Machine and its Two Possible Interpretations

Robert Nozick’s chapter, “The Experience Machine”, is a piece that manages to raise significant challenges to escapism and RPGs alike, despite its very short length. In this chapter, Nozick presents a thought experiment wherein there is an “experience machine that would give you any experience you desired” (Nozick, 42). This machine would give you experiences, but your physical person would be doing nothing more than “floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain” (Nozick, 42). He goes on to stipulate that you would have no experience of being in the tank, and the only
experiences you will have are the ones that you chose before entering the tank. Nozick elaborates on his thought experiment by stating that you can choose new experiences every few years. Thus, after plugging into the machine and experiencing a virtual life for two years (or however long you choose), you would then exit the machine and “have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your next two years” (Nozick, 42-43).

Nozick then goes on to argue that “we can continue to imagine a sequence of machines each designed to fill lacks suggested for the earlier machines” (Nozick, 44). To expound on this, he gives the example of a ‘transformation machine’, which would transform a participant into whomever he wants to be. He does this to satisfy any desire we may feel to not only experience something but also to ‘be a certain way’. To complement this, Nozick also gives an example of the ‘result machine’, which would produce any change we wish to make in the virtual world. He does this to satisfy any desire we may have to not only experience but also to make a difference (for good or ill) in the world. After the thought experiment has been thusly furnished, Nozick poses the question of whether or not you should “plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences” (Nozick, 42).

I have come up with two significantly different ways to interpret Nozick’s thought experiment, each of which corresponds to determinism and free will, respectively. These interpretations differ in how the agent can program the experience machine. To illustrate, I shall outline the first interpretation, which I shall refer to as ‘Machine A’, which is the machine that corresponds to determinism. This interpretation reads that when you choose your experiences before entering the machine, you choose the specific experiences that you will have. For example, I could program Machine A to simulate the experience of going to Connecticut College and taking courses in philosophy. There may be an illusion of choice when I am actually in the machine, for example, in choosing what courses to enroll in, but I would have already chosen these when I programmed the machine. This would mean that the programming of Machine A would be likely be very intricate. The question of how specific the Machine A programming could be is up to the programmer, but the significant decisions would be predetermined, and the more minute ones would have to be caused by other pre-determinations. For example, if I were to enter Machine A, I could program my decisions for courses and my academic major, and even if I do not program what meals I take, other aspects of my pre-programming would help to determine this. This interpretation of the experience machine corresponds to determinism because I would be experiencing a virtual life wherein all of my significant decisions and actions have already been determined, in this case by programming. Despite this, I would feel as though I was making the choices freely while I was in the machine.

The second interpretation, which I shall call ‘Machine B’, corresponds to the concept of free will. In this interpretation, the only things I would program into the machine are parameters and potential experiences. For example, I could program the parameters of a Connecticut College career, but leave the choices of what to study and how to live entirely open. The idea behind this is that I would decide which experiences to have, out of those programmed, whilst in the machine. My decisions, as well as how I react to and feel about those decisions, would not be programmed at all. This machine corresponds to the concept of free will because my choices are not determined. Despite
the difference with Machine A, both would provide the same first-person experience of feeling free, because one has no experience of being in the machine while one is hooked up to it.

Machine B would provide a structure similar to life, as well as to role-playing games. It would be similar to life in how the experience feels, because of the sensation of free will, but it would be even more similar to role-playing games because both the experience and the framework are basically identical. Developers of role-playing games create parameters and potential experiences in the same way that they create several potential stories, which is done through offering the player choices throughout the game. While playing the game, I am free to make whichever choice I wish to, though the choices available have been determined by the developers, mostly because of the restrictions of narrative and technology. It is worth noting that *Dungeons & Dragons*, one of the original pen-and-paper RPGs, does not have these limits on freedom of choice, because everything is acted out in the imagination. As Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox point out:

> no computer RPG has come close to realizing the radical open-endedness of tabletop games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*. Great tabletop game-masters achieve non-linearity by crafting detailed maps if the diegetic world, ... changing the quests assigned to players as the game develops, and acting out the personalities of non-player characters. ... During an average campaign, tabletop game-masters must routinely be responsible for dozens of NPCs, all of whom must be imbued with enough character and intelligence for players to feel that their avatars inhabit a fully articulated universe. (Cogburn and Silcox, 109-110)

D&D is the foundation of role-playing video games, and several developers are still attempting to reach the level of freedom of role-playing that D&D provides.

**II.B Nozick’s Objections**

Nozick has very negative views of the decision to enter the experience machine for the rest of your life. He justifies his distaste for the machine by providing a short list of objections, which I see as focusing into two major arguments. The first of these is that the experience of doing something is different from actually doing something, and since the experience machine can only provide the former, it is inferior to the real world, where both having the experience of doing something and actually doing something are possible. This objection applies to RPGs as well, because RPGs immerse me and give me the experience of acting, through my character, without requiring me to do anything more than interact with a controller. Both RPGs and the experience machine provide experiences of acting, and to engage in these experiences is to escape from the real world.

Nozick’s second major argument is one that claims that there is simply ‘no way’ for a person to be “courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, [or] loving” (Nozick, 43) while they are in the experience machine. He claims that someone in the tank is just an ‘indeterminate blob’, morally and philosophically speaking. This argument claims that no one can be virtuous (or vicious) while they are in the experience machine, and the reason for this is rather simple to explain. The reason is that this theory presumes that one must be in the real world, in contact with real people and real situations, in order to be virtuous. This argument also applies to RPGs because they are fictional, and therefore not real. This means that it is impossible to be virtuous in role-playing games. For example, disarming the bomb in Megaton in *Fallout 3* (see I.II.B) is not an act of
virtue because there is no real bomb, nor are the people or town of Megaton real. Without real danger, there cannot be real courage, because without real danger, there is nothing for me to overcome in order to act ‘courageously’. This conclusion is specifically meaningful for the games that I am considering, because each of them has a moral system that judges my actions as good or evil in the game. Also, it is interesting to note that the moral systems in RPGs almost universally follow the commonsense morality of modern, Western society. Nozick’s argument implies that no matter how my actions in the game are judged by the game, those judgements and my actions do not reflect anything about or affect my moral character. Even if NPCs laud my character’s actions as virtuous, I as the player, responsible as I may be for causing these actions, am not virtuous.

Nozick makes two other objections that apply to the experience machine, and though they have potential to be relevant to RPGs, I do not believe they end up applying to video games. The first of these is Nozick’s argument that the decision to enter into the machine for a long period of time would be a ‘kind of suicide’, for you would simply stop being the person that you are. This would be the case because you would be entirely isolated from society, and you would only ever have the experience of doing and acting, while never actually affecting anything or interacting with anyone in the real world. The only way that this objection could apply to role-playing games would be if role-playing games were addictive, and though online video games are often considered addictive¹, single-player role-playing games are not addictive to the same degree. I view any addictive quality of a single-player role-playing game as being equivalent to the addictive quality of a good book, which is simply not strong enough to warrant the criticism that engaging in them is a ‘kind of suicide’.

The second of these non-applicable objections focuses on the fact that being in the machine limits us to a ‘man-made reality’, and one way to respond to this involves the famous brain-in-a-vat thought experiment², but I do not need to respond to this on behalf of video games, because it does not apply to them. It does not apply to video games because while they do try to make gameplay a realistic experience by having the characters and surroundings look and seem real, they never attempt to replace reality. RPGs offer an escape from reality, but their purpose and structure provides a limited escape through play, not total immersion for life.

One objection that Nozick could have made is that there are numerous opportunity costs associated with the experience machine³. No matter which machine I enter into, I am giving up a great deal of opportunities by doing so. This argument could continue by claiming that the experience machine could never accurately capture the diversity and depth that life offers. The argument would then conclude that because of this inferiority, the experience machine incurs too many costs to opportunity, and it would be wrong to enter it for life.

II.C Challenging Nozick

When it comes to Machine A, the experiences that a participant has would be determined and manufactured. When it comes to Machine B, I do not believe that the participant would be anything close to an ‘indeterminate blob’, because he would be behaving freely, to a certain extent. My challenge to Nozick is twofold, because I believe
it is possible to evince virtues (or vices) in both Machine A & B. Participants in the two possible experience machines cannot actually be virtuous because they are not in contact with real people and real situations. They can evince virtues, however, because the people and situations that they are in contact with have non-fictional content, just as fictions do (see II.III.A), and it is the non-fictional content with which they are interacting. Evincing a virtue means that I am displaying or imitating a virtue, but I am not actually being virtuous. It is a subtle difference, but evincing virtues can be thought of as one step away from acting virtuous, just like a painting of a table is one step away from an actual table (to paraphrase Plato).

The ability to evince virtues in the experience machine is possible to a lesser extent in Machine A than in Machine B, since all of the major experiences in Machine A are determined. Machine A participants can still evince virtues, if one accepts the compatibilist argument that people can still be virtuous and vicious in a determined universe⁴. As I have already pointed out, Machine B has more freedom than Machine A, which makes evincing virtues plainly possible in Machine B.

As I have already argued, RPGs are incredibly similar to Machine B, and I believe that this similarity means that a player can evince virtues in an RPG as well. There are a few important differences between RPGs and the experience machine which I shall briefly summarize for clarification. For one, RPGs are not nearly as immersive as the experience machine, because RPGs function on gaming consoles, which require a controller and a physical separation between the player and the television (or computer) screen. Second, RPGs are by nature limited in the amount of experience they can offer. As long as a one hundred hour long game may seem, the experience machine outstrips that time immensely. Third, and perhaps most importantly, I can create a character in an RPG that I do not identify with, and instead simply use as a puppet⁵, entirely separate from me. This is possible, and it is also common in some other games. Grand Theft Auto IV, a controversial action-shooter game, puts the player into the role of ‘Niko Bellic’, a violent criminal. As Mike Gringas wrote on Bitmob:

I frequently hear gamers discuss how they do not empathize with the main character, Nico [sic], because he has few redeeming qualities. They don't agree with his choices in the game, but as they play, they glean an understanding outside of their moral code, whether or not they realize it. Their revulsion is indicative of this. (Gingras)

Though Grand Theft Auto IV is not an interactive RPG, it does have the role-playing element that makes it relevant. If I chose to create a character like Niko Bellic, I would not identify with him, and I would instead simply play the game with a physical and moral distance. This is not exactly possible with the experience machine, if for no other reason than the totally immersive quality it holds. Even considering these differences, however, I believe that one can evince virtues in RPGs, as well as both machines.

As for the stipulation of the transformation machine and the result machine, I believe that neither stand in the way of evincing virtues, though the former does present some issues worth addressing. As Nozick outlines it, the transformation machine “transforms us into whatever sort of person we’d like to be” (Nozick, 44). This means that I could transform into a different person, and it is possible that I could also change my moral character. I do not think that this possibility lasts for very long, however, because Nozick says that transforming into another sort of person is “compatible with our staying us” (Nozick, 44). While my virtues and vices can change over time and
throughout my experiences, I do not believe that I would stay myself if I had a machine suddenly change them for me. Using the machine in this way would give me a new moral character, which would change me in drastic and essential ways. Without delving too deeply into the philosophical questions of the self at work here, I shall simply state that I think such a transformation would prevent me from staying me. As such, it is not within the realm of possibility for the transformation machine.

Thus, when a participant uses the transformation machine, he still retains his moral character and personality, which means that he can still evince virtues. This contains relevance for RPGs because they put me into the role of a character in the game’s universe and stories. I can still identify with the character and play as myself, which means that I can still evince virtues. For example, in the game Mass Effect, I play the role of Commander Shepard, and even though he is a different sort of person than I am, I can still play as myself through him, giving him all of my morals and personality traits. This is the equivalent of the transformation machine, and it is compatible with evincing virtues. The result machine, on the other hand, does not affect the ability to evince virtues, it simply confirms it. It does this by generating the results of my actions on the virtual world of the experience machine, which role-playing games do as well (see I.III), especially through reactions of NPCs in the game’s world.

I think that the objection Nozick could have made about opportunity costs is a strong one, but it is not as strong as it seems. As I see it, the experience machine could be programmed by me for my own experiences, or it could be designed by the equivalent of a video game developer. This developer could collaborate with other developers, and they could combine their resources and experiences to imitate life as much as possible. If the opportunity-cost argument is objecting to the person not actually doing anything real, then it reverts to arguments I have already responded to. If, however, the opportunity-cost argument is objecting to the opportunities being withheld from the person in the machine alone, I think that the machine could have sufficiently complex programs to very nearly imitate life. In this case, the person in the machine would face some opportunity costs, but not nearly as much as it originally seemed.

II.D Conversing with Nozick

There are several strong objections that Nozick could make against my argument that one can evince virtues in virtual reality, and they primarily stem from the fact that while participants are in the machine or playing these role-playing games, they are not interacting with real people or real situations. The objections that stem from this are numerous, though similar in quality, and they include the questions: How can one be loyal without anyone to be loyal to? How can one be courageous when there is no real danger? My reply is one that only has to focus on clarification, because evincing courage in the machine is not the same as being courageous in the machine, and I only claim the ability to evince virtues in these virtual realities. For example, if I choose to disarm the bomb in Megaton in Fallout 3, and I do so out of concern for the lives of the inhabitants of Megaton (not just for the reward), then I have evinced the virtue of kindness. I have not been kind to any real person, but I have displayed the virtue of kindness.

As I stated earlier, however, Nozick’s view requires one to act and behave in the real world, in contact with real people and situations, in order to be virtuous. Therefore,
Nozick could simply reject this virtue-evincing by stating that evincing a virtue in a world without any other people has no ethical value. He could argue that the only things I am affecting through my actions in these virtual realities are nothing more than programs and fictional worlds, so affecting them has no value. Indeed, the virtual world that I affect, as well as the storyline I help create, remains private to me. As of yet, there is no RPG with any ability to share the complete story you create with anyone else.

On the contrary, I believe that evincing virtues does have value, because it serves as a reflection of what one would do in a similar moral situation in the real world, or it could serve as a reflection of one’s general moral character. There are two underlying arguments here, one of which is that evincing virtues can develop them, and the other is that evincing virtues in a virtual reality is defended by response moralism. As for developing one’s virtues, I shall take the Megaton example again. It is fairly safe to say that I will never find myself in a similar situation, so disarming the bomb does not have much value if just reflecting what I would do in a similar situation in life. Instead, I believe that disarming the bomb can serve to reflect my moral character, and even serve to develop it. It can serve to develop it for the primary reason that making moral decisions develops our moral character, and so making the moral decision to disarm the bomb helps in this development. Also, since I would (probably) never face such a situation in my life, the game has helped to develop my moral character by presenting it to me. It is worth noting that if you decide neither to detonate nor disarm the bomb, the game will not judge you or punish you in any way (see I.II.B).

As for the claim that evincing virtues is defended by response moralism, I simply have to emphasize my earlier arguments. When a participant is making moral decisions and affecting the world of a virtual reality, that participant is specifically evincing virtues in response to the non-fictional aspects of the virtual reality. When I disarm the bomb in Megaton, I am evincing kindness because I am disarming the bomb for the good of the people in the town. I realize these people are fictional, but in my behavior in the game I am actually responding to real people who are threatened by harm beyond their control. This is along the same lines as Hazlett’s defense of response moralism, which states that “one’s emotional response to a fiction can be right or wrong only to the extent that said response is a response to real people or events” (Hazlett, 254). To tie Hazlett’s argument in even closer, the virtues or vices that you evince in the machines or role-playing games can also be morally assessed.

III. The Nature of Play

One of the most significant aspects of RPGs and all video games is that they are games, and their primary purpose is to be played. I play and enjoy RPGs, and it is no coincidence that when I participate in RPGs, I am ‘playing’ them, and I am a ‘player’. The language of play is pervasive in the terminology used with video games. The nature of play is a significant and important subject of discussion, and there are several who argue that play is not only incredibly important, it is central to life itself.

III.A Significance of Play

Johan Huizinga, in his book Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture, explicates and thoroughly explores the nature and cultural significance of play in a very philosophical manner. He begins the book by stating, “Play is older than
culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing” (Huizinga, 1). He goes on to argue that the “first main characteristic of play [is] that it is free, is in fact freedom”, while the second is that “play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life” (Huizinga, 8). The “third main characteristic [is] its secludedness, its limitedness” (Huizinga, 9), which seems to contradict the first principle. This seeming contradiction is resolved by the first principle being freedom in the sense that “all play is voluntary activity”, because it is “never a task” and it is “done at leisure, during ‘free time’” (Huizinga, 7-8).

Huizinga’s definitions and discussions of play were made during the 1940s, before video games even began to be developed, but I shall show that there is a great deal of relevance to video games. One of Huizinga’s first observations of play is that:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. ... The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen ... are all in form and function play-grounds ... Inside the play-ground an absolute and particular order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order. (Huizinga, 10; italics mine)

Video games are programmed and designed within a limited framework, provided by technology as well as story. The video game console, the controller, and the screen on which it operates all create the play-ground of a video game. Every video game, and every RPG especially, is strictly governed by rules, from how skills are formed to how combat is played out. Dungeons & Dragons, the pioneer role-playing game, is a game created from the concept of adding rules to guide imagination. Its rule-books are plentiful, and many of the core rules and systems have found their way directly into the programs that govern role-playing video games.

The escapist quality of video games, which has been thoroughly discussed in this chapter, is also present in Huizinga’s discussions. Summarizing the characteristics of play he has thus far presented, Huizinga states that play is “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (Huizinga, 13). Closely related to this escapism is the role-playing that is so essential to the subject of this thesis. Huizinga argues that:

The ‘differentness’ and secrecy of play are most vividly expressed in ‘dressing up’. Here the ‘extra-ordinary’ nature of play reaches perfection. The disguised or masked individual ‘plays’ another part, another being. He is another being. (Huizinga, 13)

When I play an RPG, I take on the virtual disguise of another character, and then become the character, further explaining the switch I make from ‘my character did X’ to ‘I did X’. As I stated in my first chapter (see I.I), this is never a total transfer of self, because the player is like the “actor on the stage [who] is wholly absorbed in his playing, but is all the time conscious of ‘the play’” (Huizinga, 18). This is directly related to Nozick’s transformation machine as well, because it speaks of a person who changes while still remaining himself.

III.B Play and the Meaning of Life

Moritz Schlick has written a poetic philosophical essay entitled, “On the Meaning of Life”, wherein he explores the nature of philosophy and life, of which play plays a meaningful role. He states that play is the “name for free, purposeless action, that is, action which in fact carries its purpose in itself” (Schlick, 64). Schlick means here that play is a self-rewarding activity, and that it has intrinsic value. It has great significance in
human existence, as Friedrich Schiller implies when he states that “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only Man when he is playing” (Schiller, 80) in his fifteenth letter in his book On the Aesthetic Education of Man: in a Series of Letters. Schlick discusses play in a different light than Huizinga, but they agree on the idea that play is “any activity which takes place entirely for its own sake, independently of its effects and consequences” (Schlick, 65). Schlick’s different light is shown in his claim that “the meaning of existence is revealed only in play” (Schlick, 65), putting more emphasis on play’s philosophical meaning than its cultural meaning.

Schlick continues his line of thought when he argues that youth “do not really care about purposes” because “goals are merely an invitation to rush in and fight, and this enterprising ardour is the true fulfillment of the youthful spirit” (Schlick, 69). Youth, in this context, “can by no means be confined to the early stages of life” (Schlick, 71). Rather, “its true nature ... [is found in] the time of play, the time of activity for the pleasure of acting” (Schlick, 71). Youth is “present whenever the state of man has reached a peak, where his action has become play, where he is wholly given over to the moment and the matter in hand” (Schlick, 71). Schlick concludes his essay with the claim that “the meaning of life is youth” (Schlick, 71), which is dependent on the presence of play, not age.

The relations to video games that I drew from Huizinga’s discussions appear throughout Schlick’s descriptions, though to a much lesser extent. The escapist quality is found in Schlick’s lattermost quote, where he states that man is ‘wholly given over’ to play. Schlick’s descriptions also capture the youthful spirit and joy that I feel when I play RPGs. The statement that all play is ‘purposeless’ is somewhat related to the RPGs that give a great deal of freedom and open-ended narrative, but for the most part this statement does not apply to RPGs. Huizinga’s characterization of play is much more relevant to video games, but Schlick’s argument demonstrates how crucial play is.

IV. Conclusion

Robert Nozick’s experience machine is a machine that provides the ultimate immersive experience, to the point of great philosophical worry. The relevance of Nozick’s chapter to RPGs is not likely something he could have predicted when he wrote it, but it is strikingly relevant, lending itself to a significant application. Arguing against Nozick’s objections to his experience machine, I have developed a defense of the escapist form of play that video games revolve around, and I have argued that there is some degree of moral activity within RPGs. When engaging in an RPG, players are engaging in a fiction, evincing virtues, and responding emotionally to the fiction, all of which is morally assessable. It is important to note that I do not promote playing video games in anything but moderation, because I do not believe that only ever evincing virtues is healthy or wise, which is a conclusion that Nozick would probably agree with. I do believe that evincing virtues has ethical value, however, and as such I believe that playing RPGs has ethical value.

In addition to their ethical value, video games have a deeper significance as well, in that they are games that are played. Play is a valuable type of action, and it is one that holds it purpose within itself. Video games are a nuanced, multifaceted form of play, and the arguments of Schlick and Huizinga imply that these games deserve to be
placed alongside all of our typical forms of play. It is relevant and noteworthy that the one of the first commercially successful video games, the one dubbed simply *Pong*, was a simulation of a ping-pong game. Since its release in 1972, *Pong* has been followed by a very strong genre of sports-themed video games, which has incorporated major franchises, from the NFL to FIFA. The play of video games has mirrored common forms of play at the same time as becoming a significant form of play itself.

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1 Video game addiction, for both online and offline games, is evidenced by a number of research studies on the matter. There is also a website devoted to it, entitled “Video Game Addiction”, sponsored by the CRC Health Group. There are also rehabilitation centers for video game addiction. One example of this is the “Wild Horses Center in Amsterdam”, which is “designed to help you replace the excitement of the fantasy world with real world experiences such as therapy sessions and group interaction”, and it is “staffed with certified psychologists and addiction specialists”, according to Stan Horaczek of *Engadget*.

2 Since there is a possibility that we are all brains-in-vats, I could reply to Nozick’s objection by saying that we have no real knowledge of whether or not we are now in contact with any deeper reality. It could be, instead, that we are all brains-in-vats simply experiencing the contact we feel with some deeper reality. I make this reply none too seriously (hence its location in an endnote), for it is Nozick’s most obvious reply to say that if this is the case, it would surely be worse to enter into another brain-in-a-vat type of scenario, namely the experience machine. If we are already brains-in-vats, then entering into the experience machine would mean entering into a manufactured reality of a manufactured reality, and Nozick would have at least Plato on his side for condemning this as artificial.

3 My thanks to Professor Turner for this point.

4 Compatibilism is the view that “there is really no conflict between determinism and free will” (Kane, 12). Many philosophers believe that one cannot be virtuous in a determined universe, since any virtuous action would not be freely chosen. Compatibilists refute this conclusion, however, since they believe free will is possible within a deterministic universe, meaning that at least some virtuous actions are chosen freely, and therefore they are legitimately virtuous.

5 My thanks to Professor Turner for this point.

6 This is analogous to the argument that thought experiments can “sharpen or strengthen our intuitions” (Brendel, 105). It is also related to my brief discussion of moral development in IV.V.
Chapter IV: The Portrayal of Race and Gender in Role-Playing Video Games

I. Introduction

Most modern RPGs are focused around allowing the player to create his character however he would like to, from appearance to race to gender, and even to background. The creation process is focused on the freedom to choose your character’s defining characteristics. This comes with several limitations and problematic portrayals, however. One of the most significant of these is that in most RPGs, race is presented as a stark species-difference rather than a vague mix of biology and culture. Most races are presented in the games in an essentialistic fashion, complete with disadvantages and advantages for each race. This is very problematic, especially when one starts to draw parallels between a species in a game and real human cultures and peoples.

The problematic portrayals of race and gender are best demonstrated through character creation and dialogue. The dialogue system is the primary method of progressing the plot, and developers usually use conversations with NPCs to introduce challenging moral situations, as well as to frame the conflicts and settings of the game’s world. In this chapter, I shall focus on the character creation systems of Mass Effect and Oblivion. In addition, I shall present a moral situation found in Dragon Age: Origins. I shall also include challenges originating from within the gaming community about the problems with representation in video games, especially the representation of gender.

The last thing that I shall consider before I conclude my project is the problem of patriarchy in RPGs. No matter how you create your character, each RPG has created part of your character’s role, filling out enough details to guide your actions, while still allowing you to define the rest. When it comes to the pre-determined part of this role, the majority of RPGs hold one important thing in common: your character plays the role of a warrior to some extent. It is this patriarchal tendency that I shall point out and challenge in my final section.

II. Creation Systems in Mass Effect and Oblivion

The process of character creation involves choosing your character’s attributes, skills, class, gender, appearance. This process is very important, because it affects both how your character will look and what your character will be capable of doing. Mass Effect, created by Bioware, and Oblivion, created by Bethesda Game Studios, are two games that take slightly different approaches to the creation systems. One of the reasons for this is the different universe in which each game takes place, but another is due to the constraints (or freedom) of each game’s story. To begin, I shall explicate Oblivion’s character creation system, followed by Mass Effect’s creation system, followed by a discussion of the important aspects of each.

II.A Oblivion Character Creation

At the end of the introductory cinematic (see glossary) in Oblivion, the imperial city is shown in full on the game screen, before the camera zooms into a prison window to find your character standing in a prison cell. In order to help you create your character, a series of menus appears. First, you are asked to enter a name for your
character, which can be anything of your choosing, within a certain character limit. The second menu in the creation is titled ‘Gender’, and gives the two options of either male or female. After that is chosen, a menu appears entitled ‘Race’, and contains the options, “Imperial; Khajiit; Nord; Orc; Redguard; Wood Elf; Argonian; Breton; Dark Elf; High Elf” (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006), all of which fit the fantastical theme of Oblivion.

Succeeding the ‘Race’ menu is a menu containing a series of menus, the ones you first see being, “Face; Hair; Eyes; Age; Complexion” (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006). With the exception of age and complexion, all of these menus contain many more menus, leading to a plethora of customizable options for the creation of your character. For example, under the ‘Face’ menu is another menu entitled ‘Tone’, in which the following options are given: “Skin, Beard, Eyes, Eyebrows, Lips, Nose” (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006). Within each of these menus are options, accompanied by sliders which you can adjust to change the appearance of your character. Some sliders change their features gradually, while others just cycle between preset options. For instance, under the ‘Tone’ menu is the ‘Jaw’ menu, which contains a ‘jaw width’ option, the slider for which gradually thins or widens your character’s jaw. In the ‘Beard’ menu, however, the slider just cycles through different styles of beards, likely due to the amount of possible beard styles.

After choosing your character’s appearance, race, and gender, the game puts you into a first-person perspective view, allowing you to control your character and view the character’s actions as if they were your own. The tutorial-prologue of the game then commences, teaching you how to play the game while introducing you to the story you will be a part of. Throughout this process, two more facets of character creation are introduced. One of these is your character’s birth sign, which you choose from a list of birth signs, each of which gives you strengths and weaknesses. The other is your character’s ‘class’, which is not socioeconomic class, but rather more the occupation of a character, which can be anything from ‘rogue’ to ‘bard’ to ‘fighter’. The class of your character determines which skills your character excels in. For example, a Rogue is skilled at picking locks, hiding, and setting or disarming traps. A Ranger is more skilled in alchemy and archery, while a fighter is skilled at using all types of weapons, and capable with heavy armor. Classes can be thought of as trades, and the skills usually go along with the trade in a commonsensical manner.

II.B Mass Effect Character Creation

Mass Effect has you play the role of a commander in the military of humanity, so the very beginning of the game is set up as though you are connecting to a military personnel database. The game has the connection ‘fail’, and then asks you to supply your profile information. This is a clever way of introducing the character creation, and the creation itself is a bit more simple than the system in Oblivion. You must choose your character’s gender, but your character’s race as human is set.

The first choice it gives you is what your character’s background will be, from ‘Spacer’ to ‘Colonist’ to ‘Earthborn’. Each background gives a short description of your childhood, and each has you enlist in the military at age eighteen. After that, it gives you options for a ‘psychological profile’, which are either ‘Sole Survivor’, ‘War Hero’, or ‘Ruthless’. Each defines your character’s previous actions in a key moment in his
military career, or in how he behaves generally. Each gives you a description and tells you that you have an accompanying reputation. For example, the ‘ruthless’ description is as follows:

Throughout your military career, you have held fast to one basic rule: get the job done. You've been called cold, calculating, and brutal. Your reputation for ruthless efficiency makes your fellow soldiers wary of you. But when failure is not an option, the military always goes to you first. (Bioware, 2007)

The choice of history and psychological profile that you make for your character does have an effect on gameplay, which I shall cover in a later section.

The next aspect of the creation system is choosing your character’s class. Each of these is a specialization in the military of the Mass Effect universe, and they range from the combat-heavy ‘Soldier’ to the tech-savvy ‘Engineer’, and primarily govern combat skills. After you have chosen your character’s military specialization, the ‘profile reconstruction’ stage appears. There are a variety of presets available, but for those who want to customize their character, the following options appear: “Facial Structure; Head; Eyes; Jaw; Mouth; Nose; Hair” (Bioware, 2007). Just like the creation system in Oblivion, each of these options is full of scales, which change things from ‘skin tone’ to ‘eye shape’ to ‘hair color’. Also similar to Oblivion, some of the scales change features gradually, while some cycle through preset options.

The Mass Effect creation system does not delve into race as Oblivion does, but rather seems to leave it alone.² Your character is human in that sense of the word ‘race’, but as far as our society’s concepts of race are concerned, the only way you can emulate race is by changing your character’s skin tone. Whereas in Fallout 3, you must choose between four options for race, “African American; Asian; Caucasian; Hispanic” (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), Mass Effect simply provides a scale of skin color with no labels involved.

III. The Portrayal of Race and Gender

There are two major aspects of one’s character that affect his interaction with non-player characters in significant ways: race and gender. There are other things that affect interaction as well, like the history and psychological profile of one’s character in Mass Effect. A ‘ruthless’ character is approached as one by the NPCs who know his reputation, and a character with a ‘colonist’ background may have better interactions with colonists. These things are part of a character’s background, however, making them not easily known to just anybody. Race and gender, on the other hand, are much more easily known, especially in a game like Oblivion, where races have whole sets of attributes that make each unique. The decision to include issues of race and gender, and the degree to which they do it, is an important decision for developers to make. It is also a decision that has fascinating results, well worthy of investigation and critique.

III.A Race Affecting NPC Interaction

In Bioware’s fantasy role-playing game, Dragon Age: Origins (henceforth DA:O), you can choose between the races of human, dwarf, or elf. In the history³ of the DA:O world, humans and elves have had very negative relations. If you choose to be an elf when you play the game, humans will oftentimes express disdain when interacting with
you, be surprised that you are interacting with them, or exhibit general wariness during your interactions, depending on the human and on your responses in dialogue.

Similarly, in *Oblivion*, you can choose from the aforementioned ten different races, all of which are humanoid, though two in particular are more bestial. One of these is the ‘Khajiit’ race, which is excessively feline, and another is the ‘Argonian’ race, which is reptilian. Both of these bestial races are much lower in the social order of the world of *Oblivion* than any of the other races, and if you choose either of them you should be prepared to have racial slurs tossed your way by the occasional passerby. Direct interaction is not as affected here, besides the fact that rival races will generally like you less than usual.\(^4\)

**III.B The Construction of Race and its Real-World Parallels**

The most interesting and morally relevant considerations of race are in the games that make race more like different species. In these games, race is often representational, or at the very least contains parallels to our concepts of race. Each race in *Oblivion* and *DA:O* alike have their own homeland, history, and culture, which often end up corresponding to cultures and demographics in our own world (commonly called the ‘real world’ when spoken of alongside the world of a video game). This comes as little surprise, due to the fact that the developers are drawing on their experiences, but it does generate problems. Real-world racial parallels may exist in these games, but there is also a problem of accurate representation of races in terms of numbers. According to Paul Marks of *New Scientist*, “the first ‘virtual census’ of the human characters that inhabit US video games exposes just how much they diverge from reality” (Marks, *New Scientist*). Marks reports that “Dmitri Williams at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, carried out the study with colleagues at Indiana University, Ohio University and Virginia Polytechnic Institute” (Marks, *New Scientist*). As for the results, Marks reports that:

- the survey reveals that males, adults and white people are over-represented in games. Females, black people, children and the elderly are correspondingly under-represented. ... African Americans were under-represented by 13 per cent and Hispanic/Latino people by 78 per cent.
- Asians were over-represented by 25 per cent and white people by 7 per cent. (Marks, *New Scientist*)

This study covered top-selling video games, meaning that RPGs were not exclusively studied, but they were almost definitely included.

**B.i Elves in Dragon Age: Origins**

Let us delve more deeply into the issues of race in *Dragon Age: Origins*, where Bioware decided to make race affect many things, from average interactions to entire quests. According to the lore of *DA:O*, which can be learned from the ‘codex’ (see glossary) and NPCs, elves used to live in prosperity and even immortality, until humans arrived in their homeland and fought with them. After the years of war and contact with humans that ended the immortality of elves, the humans enslaved the elves for a long time. They were eventually freed and given their own land, which was called ‘the Dales’. After some time of relative peace, war broke out between humans and elves once more, the humans again emerging victorious. This time, however, the elves faced a different consequence. As the codex entry entitled ‘City Elves’ says:
We were not enslaved as we had been before, but our worship of the ancient gods was now forbidden. We were allowed to live among the humans only as second-class citizens who worshipped their Maker, forgetting once more the scraps of lore we had maintained throughout the centuries. (Bioware, 2009)

Those elves who stayed in the human cities were forced to live in the city’s ‘alienage’, which is a gated, poverty-stricken portion of town. Most elves there are only employed as servants to humans. The codex entry entitled ‘Alienage Culture’ says the following:

But don’t be so anxious to start tearing down the walls and picking fights with the guards. They keep out more than they keep in. We don’t have to live here, you know. Sometimes a family gets a good break, and they buy a house in the docks, or the outskirts of town. If they’re lucky, they come back to the alienage after the looters have burned their house down. The unlucky ones just go to the pauper’s field. (Bioware, 2009)

Some elves decided not to live in these alienages, and instead escaped into the wilds in order to preserve the culture and lore of their people. The former of these are called ‘City Elves’, and the latter are ‘Dalish Elves’. If you choose to be an elf in DA:O, you must choose between one of these two, and the one that you choose will affect your character greatly, especially since they each have a unique origin story that start the game (hence the word ‘origins’ in the game’s title).

The Dalish Elves are characteristically proud, hostile to strangers, and nomadic. As the codex entry entitled ‘The Dales’ says:

We took a different path. We took to the wilderness, never stopping long enough to draw the notice of our shemlen [elven name for humans] neighbors. In our self-imposed exile, we kept what remained of elven knowledge and culture alive. (Bioware, 2009; brackets mine)

The Dalish Elves are those who have chosen exile over any form of servitude, while the City Elves have mostly forgotten their people’s lore, focusing instead on the survival of their immediate community. Every once in a while, City Elves, who mostly know of the Dalish in little more than rumor, venture outside of their city in order to find and join the Dalish Elves.

The parallels in both factions of the elven race to our world are numerous and significant. Alienages bear resemblance - in concept if not actual appearance - to ghettos throughout our world history, from the Jewish ghettos of Europe to the African American ghettos of America. The treatment of city elves as second-class citizens due to their race mirrors a multitude of minorities throughout history and location that have been or are treated as second-class citizens. The plight and history of the Dalish Elves closely parallels that of the American Indians, especially when the following codex entry is considered:

But the humans brought worse things than war with them. Our ancestors proved susceptible to human diseases, and for the first time in history, elves died of natural causes. What's more, those elves who spent time bartering and negotiating with humans found themselves aging, tainted by the humans' brash and impatient lives. (Codex Entry ‘Arlathan: Part One’, Bioware, 2009)

There are several other parallels between Dalish Elves and American Indians, from the slavery they endured at the hands of explorers like Columbus to their nomadic lifestyle and affinity with nature. Not only that, but the story of the Elves also has parallels to African Diaspora, because it mirrors slavery and forced upheaval from their home and culture.

B.ii Races in Oblivion

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The character creation in *Oblivion* sheds the most amount of light on the races and racial differences in the game’s world. When choosing your race, each of the races is accompanied by a description of it. For example, the description of the Khajiit is as follows:

Hailing from the province of Elsweyr, they are intelligent, quick, and agile. They make excellent thieves due to their natural agility and unmatched acrobatics skill. All Khajiit can see in the dark. (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006)

To contrast this, the description of the Imperial race is as follows:

Natives of the civilized, cosmopolitan province of Cyrodiil, they have proved to be shrewd diplomats and traders. They are skilled with heavy armor and in the social skills and tend to favor the warrior classes. (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006)

Thus, there are significant racial differences between the races in *Oblivion*. They are presented as distinct species, each with different characterizations and reputations. Also, I cannot choose for my character to be biracial (e.g. half-Khajiit, half-Imperial), because there is very little racial mixing in the world of *Oblivion*.

The racial differences are present in more than their descriptions and characterizations alone, however. There are both racial advantages and disadvantages that affect your character’s statistics and abilities. As far as attributes are concerned, a Khajiit starts out with a bonus to his agility, but a penalty to his willpower and endurance. The Nord, on the other hand, starts out with a bonus to strength and endurance, but penalties to intelligence, willpower, and personality. As far as skills are concerned, Khajiits receive bonuses to skills including acrobatics, sneaking, and hand-to-hand combat. Imperials receive bonuses to skills including speechcraft, mercantile, and wearing heavy armor.

Again, parallels exist to real world cultures and peoples. The Nords are described as follows:

Citizens of Skyrim, they are a tall and fair-haired people. Strong and hardy, Nords are famous for their resistance to cold. They are highly talented warriors. (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006)

They are a rather apparent parallel to people of Nordic cultures, deriving even their name from the parallel. There are problems, however, that lie in both drawing parallels to these races, and in the construction of these races.

The traits and attributes of races in *Oblivion* are analogous to racial stereotypes in our world. The reason that drawing parallels quickly becomes problematic is that paralleling cultures of the real world to the races of *Oblivion* immediately assumes that real cultures are as essentialistic as the fictional races in the game. To say something like ‘Japanese people are quick and agile’ is to attribute characteristics to an entire culture of people. Indeed, in a world where anthropologists and social scientists have moved from defining social groups as a ‘race’ to a ‘culture’, and even further specified as an ‘ethnic group’, the construction of race in *Oblivion* seems to be taking several steps backwards.

This leaves us with several questions resonating in our minds. Are developers at fault if there is a negative portrayal of race in their games? Does the portrayal of race affect the attitudes that players hold about it, positively or negatively? If the developers are portraying race as it is portrayed in modern culture, there could be a perception that they are blameless, because they are just mirroring the current state of affairs. This is
problematic, however, because games take an evaluative position on race through their representation of it. Additionally, most of these RPGs have a fantasy or science-fiction setting, which functions outside of the direct influence of our society, meaning that they do not even have the weak argument that they must mirror society. I believe that the essentialistic portrayal of race in *Oblivion* and other RPGs is definitely problematic, but I also believe that the portrayal of race can serve as a literary tool that is not directly racist. These and other issues become even more relevant when I demonstrate how these issues are engaged in some of the games, which I shall address in the fourth section of this chapter.

### III.C The Construction of Gender

Gender usually affects interaction with NPCs in ways that parallel real-world interactions. At times, the issue does not explicitly arise, but at other times it does, either positively or negatively. Notably, these issues more often arise when your character is female. If your character is a woman, there is a great deal of flirtation possible when she interacts with a man. In fact, in the game *Fallout 3*, there are two gender-specific perks - ‘Lady Killer’ and ‘Black Widow’. The former is only available to male characters, while the latter is only available to female characters, and both give your character an additional 10% damage against the opposite sex in combat, as well as unique dialogue options when conversing with an NPC of the opposite sex.

Your character’s gender does not usually make a difference when it comes to attributes, skills, and abilities in RPGs. The main issue is instead how the two genders are portrayed. Though this thesis deals primarily with RPGs, this is an issue that permeates all genres of video games. According to the ‘FeministGamers’ blog, “games that portray women in positive ways with more realistic body types are in short supply ... women are highly sexualized as a matter of course, and men are only mildly (if at all) sexualized” (*FeministGamers*)

Meagan VanBurkleo recently wrote an article called “The Gender Gap” in the widely respected video gaming magazine *Game Informer*. In it, VanBurkleo explores the lack of women in key roles in video games, whether they be lacking in the leading roles or lacking in the player’s choice of a character. She asks a quintessential question: “when narrative, setting, or historical context doesn’t dictate the gender of a character, why are females noticeably missing from the action?” (VanBurkleo, 18). As it turns out, there are many considerations that go into this decision on the part of the developers, which I shall summarize.

Demographics is one of the most limiting and influential factors when it comes to the gender-decision for developers. As VanBurkleo points out, “the number of female gamers is obviously growing ... [but] female gamers are still the minority” (VanBurkleo, 19). For this reason, developers find it less risky and more profitable to focus on male characters in their games.

Another reason for consideration is that “gender roles still heavily influence decisions in regards to character development” (VanBurkleo, 19). The gender roles referred to here mostly revolve around the stereotype that women are not suited to combat situations and protagonist roles. In short, they are meant to be the supporting roles. There is another issue for video games that is connected to this one, which is about physical appearance of characters. As VanBurkleo puts it, “sex sells, and there is
a stigma against less attractive female characters in games” (VanBurkleo, 21). The issue at hand here is the balancing act between representing a physical change as skills are increased. For example, if a character’s strength doubles over time, he will realistically need to look much more muscular than he once did. Developers and players struggle with this concept when it comes to female characters, however, because they want to balance “traditional beauty and brute strength” (VanBurkleo, 21). As Sandra Lee Bartky says, “today, massiveness, power, or abundance in a woman’s body is met with distaste” (Bartky, 28). Even though Bartky wrote that in the 1980s, it remains true today. Consider the following paradigmatic examples of character appearance:

Figure 1.3 is the protagonist ‘Lara Croft’ from the popular video game series *Tomb Raider*. She is a strong and able-bodied heroine, and she also has stereotypical feminine beauty. Figure 1.4 is the protagonist ‘Marcus Fenix’ from the popular video game series *Gears of War*. He is rugged, tough, and very muscular - all together, a very stereotypically masculine character.

The concept that both developers and players are missing when they struggle with the need for drastic appearance change and the need for traditional beauty in a character is that neither of these ‘needs’ are actually necessary. For one, a character can maintain the same general appearance, and simply have a menu that keeps track of skills. Most RPGs already have this menu, which is usually called the ‘character page’, and it keeps track of skills, abilities, experience level, and more. Many RPGs take the strategy of not drastically altering the appearance of the character as well. The strategy that few games seem to take is the one that ignores traditional beauty. Struggling to find a way to make women look muscular but also traditionally feminine is greatly problematic, because it relies on the idea that traditional feminine beauty is a good thing. The *Fable* series is unique in this regard, which is something that VanBurkleo points out. In *Fable II*, “male and female heroes can dress how they want, sleep with whom they desire, and behave as they please ... women bulk up just as much as the men when certain stats are maxed” (VanBurkleo, 21). Furthermore, though Lionhead Studios (the developer of *Fable II*) realized that the physical development of the female character faced ‘poor reception’, they made it clear to VanBurkleo that they “would never take away the players’ ability to make an ugly character” (VanBurkleo, 21).
This marked contrast is indicative of the last reason stated in VanBurkleo’s article, which is that it is difficult to technically design both male and female playable characters. VanBurkleo puts it well when she says:

While creating a female avatar isn’t any more difficult than a male counterpart, including both genders as playable characters is a monumental commitment, requiring double the render work, motion capturing, and voice acting. Close attention also needs to be paid to dialogue and ambient chatter so as to avoid gender-specific references. (VanBurkleo, 20)

All of these technical considerations can be significant obstacles for developers, especially if their budget for development is limited. As an example of this, VanBurkleo cites the game Crackdown, which began developing female playable characters, but later had to cut them out of the process. VanBurkleo states that this is not uncommon for developers, and “in Crackdown’s case, splitting the animation team across two sets of playable characters wasn’t feasible” (VanBurkleo, 20).

In the popular gaming community site Bitmob, Gabriel Shelnutt wrote a piece entitled “The Vagina Effect: Portrayals of Women in Video Games”, in which he pointed to the flaws in the ways that developers currently sexualize women. He summarizes the problem very well when he says:

What are women supposed to think about our medium when the majority of our games are populated with scantily clad female characters portrayed in impossible physiques? We can argue that men are similarly endowed with bulging muscles and cleft chins, but I have yet to play a game where the camera lingers lovingly on a male character's generous package. The issue isn’t that women in games are attractive; rather, the problem lies in the way that many are portrayed and viewed.

The presence of this argument on this community site proves that this issue is recognized by gamers as well as professional critics, like Meagan VanBurkleo.

It is important to note that the limitation of gender choice is not nearly as prevalent in RPGs as it is in other video games, because RPGs are focused on choice and customization, especially in the character creation process. The problems in the construction of gender, which were summarized well by Shelnutt, is still an issue that RPGs face, however.

IV. Dialogue

The dialogue system in the RPGs I discuss in this thesis is one of the primary factors that distinguishes them from other video games, even in their own field. I am not discussing role-playing video games that do not have dialogue systems or moral systems, nor am I discussing video games in general, for I believe that the interactive role-playing games are the ones with the most serious philosophical merit.

The dialogue system is one that is used to generate every conversation your character has with NPCs. Through choosing what you want your character to say in conversations, you shape his character and what NPCs will think of his character. Different dialogue options shape your character and determine whether he is helpful, rude, hostile, intimidating, charming, a mix thereof, or something else entirely. If you choose for your character to be rude or hostile and generally impolite, and you enjoy doing this, you may be acting morally poorly. The reasons for character behavior vary amongst players, however. If the player believes he can do some good using a little hostility or intimidation, then he is not as blameworthy as someone who is hostile for the sake of being hostile. I shall discuss this issue further in Section V.
IV.A Applied Case: City Elf Origin Story in Dragon Age: Origins

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, there are six different origin stories, depending on what background you choose. As I discussed briefly earlier in this chapter, the City Elf origin story has many racial issues within it. In the world of *Dragon Age: Origins*, the elves have a rocky history with the humans, full of servitude and racial war (see III.B.i). The city elves, at the time of your character’s journey, live in separated portions of cities called ‘alienages’, which mirror ghettos in their nature.

Choosing to be a city elf starts your game in one of these alienages, in the city of Denerim. No matter which gender you choose for your character to be, it is the day of your arranged wedding in the alienage. I played this origin with a female character, so I shall speak through those experiences in the succeeding discussion. My character’s friend awoke my sleeping character and reminded her of the wedding day, which is the first conversation in the origin story, and how I as the player know what is happening.

You then have control of your character, and the freedom to explore the alienage and speak to people. Certain people trigger quest progressions or cutscenes, and who these people are is usually made clear to you. For example, you can talk to several different people in the alienage, but once you talk to your cousin (who is marrying someone else alongside you and your fiancé in a double-wedding ceremony) and tell him that you are ready for the wedding, the wedding will commence. This is done through a cinematic wherein you watch your character and the other characters involved in the ceremony, and occasionally have the option of contributing to dialogue.

During the cinematic, a human noble - the son of the city’s arl (a title in the *DA:O* world) - and a few of his friends abruptly walk in and interrupt the ceremony. He explains in an arrogant manner that he is having a party, and needs some girls for it. He seizes the elves involved in the ceremony through sheer force, ignoring all of the objections and attempted resistance. This is all still a cinematic, leaving you as the player to watch the events unfold, with little interaction besides when the game allows your character to contribute to the conversation. Your character is knocked unconscious, and the next thing the game shows you is your character regaining consciousness in a room in a large manor, surrounded by the other female elves that were attending the ceremony.

After some discussion with the other elves, three armed guards enter the room and give an ultimatum: to follow them to the arl’s son for his entertainment, or to die. One elf, your cousin’s bride-to-be, pleads with the guards and is consequently cut down and killed on the spot. Just as they begin to advance towards your character, your cousin enters into the room and slides you a sword across the floor. The dialogue ends, and a battle begins. The combat system of the game is then implemented, and if you succeed, your character and your character’s cousin kill the guards.

You then make your way through the manner, fighting the various guards along the way, until you reach the room where the arl’s son is taking advantage of one of your elven friends. When you enter the room, she is lying (clothed) on the ground, crying, and the arl’s son, flanked by two of his friends, turns and surveys you bewilderedly. The dialogue system comes into play as he realizes what your character has done in order to get to him, and how much danger he is potentially in.
Vaughn, the arl’s son, says: “Think for a minute. Kill me and you’ll ruin more lives than just your own. By dawn, the city will run red with elven blood. Think about it. You know how this ends. Or we could talk this through... now that you have my undivided attention.”

At this point, you have the following options:
1. I’m done talking. Time to die.
2. If you have something to say, say it.
3. How dare you threaten us!
4. We’ll tell the city what really happened.

You can choose any one of these options in the game by scrolling down the list and selecting one, and each one has a different response. The first option ends the dialogue at that moment, and engages the combat system for you and your cousin to fight and kill Vaughn and his friends. As for the other options, the dialogue system blooms quickly into a tree of branching options and differing replies, occasionally looping back upon itself, and mostly ending in one choice that your character can make.

One possible and significant conversation thread is made by responding with the second option, demanding that he speak his deal. In response to this option, Vaughn says the following:

“Here’s our situation. You are skilled, obviously. If we fight here, perhaps you may even manage to kill us. My father won’t let that go. Your pigsty of an alienage will be burned to the ground. Or, you turn and walk away with 40 sovereigns in your purses. You take that money and leave Denerim tonight. No repercussions, and you can go wherever you like.”

To the response “What about the women? Will you let them go?”, Vaughn replies by saying, “The women stay. They’ll go home tomorrow, slightly worse for wear, and you’ll be long gone. That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.” Responding by saying “No deal” engages the combat system. However, if you had instead responded by agreeing to the deal, you are given the money and a cinematic watches your character promptly leave the place.

An alternate conversation thread is formed by responding with the fourth option, “We’ll tell the city what really happened.” Vaughn replies to this by saying: “You think people care about elven whores? You think my father will ignore my death simply because I used some animals as they were meant to be used?” Your dialogue options are then brought back to the original four you began with. Each conversation thread ultimately ends in the decision of whether to fight Vaughn or to accept the bribe, leaving your fellow elves with Vaughn’s disgusting character. Rape is what is implied in these scenes, though it is never explicitly shown or discussed.

V. Implications for Response Moralism

The aforementioned example is a powerful one, but it is not a wholly unique situation in these games. Situations where you have to make moral choices often occur in RPGs, and while they are sometimes clear-cut and simple, they can also be much more vague. Whichever decision you make in the above situation is not judged by the game on a moral meter, since Dragon Age: Origins has no such meter. The game’s moral system instead lies in the more realistic realm of reactions from members of your party. Different members have different codes and perceptions of morality, and your relations with them are affected by your moral choices (see DA:O Game Profile in Appendix B).
Regardless of what you decide to do in these situations, the choice is a moral one, and it is tied closely to response moralism. Situations like these quite clearly contain nonfictional content. The case given above is about rape, racism, classism, and justice. When I grow angry when I play, I am reacting to Vaughn and his actions, but more importantly, my anger focuses on that which is nonfictional about Vaughn and his actions: racial discrimination, sexism, misogynist attitudes, et cetera.

This is where response moralism is applied in RPGs with the most fascinating results. The emotions that you feel in this situation are in response to your own actions, because you are helping to create the literary work that is the game. When I refused Vaughn’s deal and killed him, saving my elven friend in distress, I felt vindicated as well as concerned for the harmed friend. I was emotionally involved in the game in several ways, and I feel as though my emotions were appropriate for the situation. If I had taken Vaughn’s bribe and left, I would have felt appropriately horrible, though I might have tried justify my actions on the utilitarian grounds of protecting the alienage from harm. If, on the other hand, I had happily taken the bribe from Vaughn, and gleefully left the manor with no concern for my elven friend or for the alienage, I would be acting in a morally problematic manner. My actions in the game\textsuperscript{13}, combined with my inappropriate emotional response, would make my behavior morally reprehensible. Similarly, if I detonate the bomb in \textit{Fallout 3}, and destroy an entire town of people with glee and satisfaction, I would be responding in a morally poor way.

This does not just apply to major moral decisions in the games, however. It also applies to smaller actions and behavior, like how you decide to control your character in dialogue. Acting rudely and being needlessly hostile with people in conversations does more than just break rules of decorum, it reflects your own character. Going back to the example raised in Section IV, if I am hostile towards an NPC with the goal of doing some greater good as a result of it, my behavior is problematic, though not necessarily wrong. I am not enjoying myself in this hostile behavior, which means that my responses to my actions are appropriate. If, however, I did enjoy my harsh behavior, I would be responding inappropriately. One of the main inspirations behind my decision to write this thesis was my experience with evil actions in RPGs. I found that when I decided to play as an evil character, and do evil things, I did not enjoy myself. I felt bad when I harmed innocent civilians, or cheated people, or worsened the crime in a city, and I did not have fun playing as a result of this.

One interesting issue to note is that these situations, like the aforementioned one in \textit{Dragon Age: Origins}, are ones in which I will rarely, if ever, find myself. The developers are setting up this situation as a fictional scenario, but I believe that it has the same function as an ethical thought experiment in philosophy. Both an ethical thought experiment and a morally laden situation in an RPG elicit moral intuitions. When a person is put into a situation in which he may never find himself, he makes a judgement as to what he would do, or should do. The difference with RPGs is that his decision is made within the virtual reality of the game, whereas in a thought experiment, the decision only exists in the imagination. I believe that these morally laden situations can actually develop a player’s moral character, which makes them beneficial. If I find myself in a morally laden situation, I have an intuition about what I should do. In an RPG, I make a decision and then control my character to carry it out. When I observe the action and its consequences, I respond to them emotionally, and I consider my
decision. Oftentimes, the situations that RPGs put my character in are situations in which I shall most likely never find myself. Therefore, my usual moral codes are challenged by RPGs and their unusual, morally laden quests and scenarios. When this happens, my moral character can develop as a result of it. This is a very brief argument, but I would have to write a separate essay in order to do the relationship between ethical thought experiments and RPGs justice.

V.A Uncharacteristic Violence and Morality

One of the most controversial subjects that RPGs and video games bring up is the uncharacteristic violence and moral decisions that players often exhibit. There are several arguments that violence in video games causes players to be violent, and this that negative moral behavior causes one to behave morally poorly. I am not a proponent of these arguments. Instead, I believe that while there is some risk with negative moral behaviors, the potential harm is to one’s moral character, not one’s actions. I do not believe that video games alone cause the violent behavior that is often pinned on them.

One way I could reply to these common arguments is by saying that bad behavior and violence in video games is cathartic. This is analogous to one of the arguments that exists in defense of pornography. This argument is summarized by Nadine Strossen in Defending Pornography, when she says that “pornography might have other beneficial effects, including ... relieving people of the impulse to commit crimes” (Strossen, 163). If engaging in pornography relieves people of the impulse to commit crimes, it is possible that acting violently in video games has the same effect.

Another possible reply is presented by community writer Mike Gingras on the gaming site Bitmob. In his article, “Musings of a Gamer: Are Religion and Gaming Mortal Enemies?”, Gingras considers the fact that he often breaks the Ten Commandments through his character’s actions in video games. His argument is that:

games, like any art, are a means of authorial expression and participant reaction. In a game, a person can safely dabble in behavior or thoughts that they may not necessarily agree with. ... As a gamer and a religious person, I believe that virtual worlds with unfixed consequences are a safe way to learn about your own beliefs and values. (Gingras, Bitmob)

I strongly agree with Gingras’s sentiment here. This sentiment is also voiced by Ethan Gilsdorf in an opinion piece for USA Today, where he says that video games “let people safely try out aspects of their personalities — often dark, evil sides, or extroverted or flirtatious — that they can't or won't flex in ‘real life’” (Gilsdorf, USA Today). Video games, alongside thought experiments, are virtual and hypothetical realms in which you can behave in morally different ways, and face morally different situations than you normally would. I believe that it is safe to explore your morality in these situations. I also believe, along with response moralism, that if you explore this morality and behave morally badly, and find yourself enjoying this behavior, then you are morally blameworthy.

VI. Patriarchal Structures in RPGs

As I mentioned in my introductory section to this chapter, most RPGs put you in the role of a warrior, to some extent. I add the qualifier because these games allow for your character to excel in a variety of skills and classes (as in occupations - see IV.II.A), which can be wide ranging and unique. There is usually a ‘warrior’ or ‘soldier’ class,
which strongly emphasizes combat ability, but there are also classes that emphasize non-combative skills, like ‘bards’ and ‘rogues’. No matter what your character’s class is, however, your character will always know or quickly learn how to fight, because it is a central part of each game. Your character’s life is usually multifaceted, but it revolves around and is defined by fighting countless enemies, be they beast or human, and this is patriarchal to an extent.

Allan Johnson defines patriarchy by saying that “a society is patriarchal to the degree that it is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered” (Johnson, 5). In a male-centered society, male characteristics and values are quite apparently dominant. As Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette point out in their book, *The Warrior Within*, there are traditionally masculine tendencies, but these alone do “not justify the assumption that men are inherently violent, inordinately aggressive, insensitive, and uninterested in intimate relationships” (Moore and Gillette, 8). Moore and Gillette argue that patriarchal societies “tend to institutionalize a particular kind of masculinity, prone to exploiting and oppressing other human beings, other species, and the environment” (Moore and Gillette, 4). They do not believe, however, that this masculinity is ‘mature’. They claim that “patriarchy is set up and run not for men as a gender or for masculinity in its fullness or in its mature expressions but rather by men who are fundamentally immature” (Moore and Gillette, 4). Their view is that patriarchy is “a manifestation of the infantile grandiosity suffered by its leaders” (Moore and Gillette, 4). A patriarchal society, ‘fundamentally immature’ as it is, enforces these aggressive masculine tendencies, making the focus on violence strong.

RPGs have an inherently patriarchal structure in their heavy emphasis on combat, and while I have admittedly enjoyed them, I believe that these structures need to be challenged. Patriarchy is a counter-productive system that promotes detrimental mentalities and actions. For one, “at the heart of patriarchy is the oppression of women” (Johnson, 11). Additionally, it is harmful to all of society in its focus on aggressive power. As Moore and Gillette put it:

Understandably everyone fears power. We fear it in others, and we fear it in ourselves. If possessed by the aggressive might of the Warrior, we believe we will endanger the lives of our fellow human beings, and put at risk the well-being of the entire planet. (Moore and Gillette, 47-48)

They go on to argue that there are positive aspects to aggression, but that the patriarchal focus usually lies on the inappropriate possession of aggression.

Games do not necessarily need to have patriarchal structures, and some do not. Structures vary amongst the various genres of video games, and I shall explore two very different genres to illustrate this fact. One major genre of video games is the ‘action’ or ‘shooter’ genre, which entirely focuses on combat, and does not emphasize plot nearly as much as RPGs do. A paradigmatic example of this genre is the *Gears of War* series. In the second installment in this series, *Gears of War 2*, you control a character who has been wholly created and defined by the developers. This character’s name is Marcus Fenix, and he is an ex-Army soldier who has been imprisoned for a crime that is not made clear to you. When the game begins, it becomes clear that the prison has been abandoned, and Fenix is rescued from his cell by an old Army friend. He then has to fight his way out of the prison, which is infested with aliens, with which the world has been overrun. The rest of the game revolves around fighting these aliens
and undergoing missions given by what is left of the army. There are usually no side-quests, no significant story choices, and for the most part, no dialogue system. The script is set, and the plot is usually progressed by cinematics with voice acted dialogue between characters.

Another major genre of video games is called the ‘simulation’ genre. A paradigmatic example of this genre is The Sims series. The first installment of this series, simply called The Sims, revolves around managing the lives of a small group of people, or ‘sims’. At the start of the game, you are given a plot of land in a neighborhood, and you are tasked with creating a house and ensuring that your sims have everything that they need to be happy, using the limited funds that the game provides for you. In order to get more funds to expand your house and provide better for your sims, you must develop the skills of your sims, from fitness to computer skills to charisma, and find them jobs. It is called a simulation game because it simulates life. This series has been excessively popular, and it has had many sequels and expansions. As Katie Hafner of the New York Times points out, “manufacturers are starting to think about making games that are more appealing to women, like the Sims, a role-playing game that is viewed as one of the most popular games among women.” It is notable that a social simulation game is more popular with women than a game like Gears of War, which is very popular with men.

If the challenge is to take the patriarchal structure out of a game, the question of feasibility is raised. For action/shooter games like Gears of War, there does not seem to be much option. For games like Oblivion, however, the patriarchy is not as essentially central to the game. The classes that have emphasis on non-combative skills are classes that do not need to be involved in combat. Indeed, a bard would most realistically focus on performing in a city for his income anyway, were there not some pressing conflict of arms that RPGs usually create. Fortunately, not all RPGs rely on emphasized combat in every aspect of gameplay. There are several quests in Oblivion that do not involve any combat at all, and instead focus on solving a mystery or problem through dialogue or some other non-violent means. Interactions with party members in Dragon Age: Origins portrays their personal, emotional lives, which often have nothing to do with combat. Characters in Gears of War are defined by their combat prowess, while sims in The Sims are defined by their lives and social interactions. Oftentimes in interactive role-playing games, characters are portrayed as regular people who are skilled at combat because they have to be - it does not necessarily define them.

VII. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that there are several problematic features of RPGs and video games as a whole. There are patriarchal structures, essentialistic representations of race, and perceptions of gender that follow typical (though not necessarily permissible) gender roles. All of these are problematic, and even if they seem to be innocently mirroring the representations of society, they may be perpetuating the negative norms that exist. I do not mean to conclude that RPGs and video games are morally reprehensible because of this, however. There are many pioneers, especially in RPGs, that deny stereotypical representations, or even criticize them through their medium. The conclusion that I wish to make relies on my now established fact that RPGs are dynamic and morally laden. If this chapter has
definitely proved one claim wrong, it is the claim that RPGs are ‘just games’, and as such their developers and players are not morally assessable. My conclusion is that developers of RPGs are responsible for the content of their games, and they are morally assessable for the representations they choose to use. Additionally, the responses of players to their actions in RPGs are morally assessable.

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1 Gamers frequently have ‘gamer tags’ or ‘gamer names’ that they use in these situations to name their characters, or else they make up a name for each game - it is an uncommon practice for a player to use his real name for his character.

2 When I say that Mass Effect leaves race alone in its creation system, I do not mean that the issue of race is left alone in the game as a whole. There are several races in the futuristic universe, and several issues of xenophobia and racism come up in the game. Similarly, in Fallout 3, being African American, Hispanic, or White doesn’t have the same consequences (good or bad) that it does in our society today. However, NPCs who have suffered from excessive radiation are called ‘ghouls’, and despite their physically ghoulish appearance, they are no different from human NPCs. ‘Feral ghouls’ are those who have faced such extreme radiation that they have lost their minds and become hostile to everyone. In the Fallout 3 world, ghouls face a great deal of discrimination for their appearance, despite their difference from the feral ghouls, which is directly analogous to racism.

3 Every interactive, modern role-playing game has a world within it, which has history and lore just like our own world. In the games, you learn about this history through dialogue with non-player characters, in books your character can find or purchase, or through a codex that the game provides. A codex is something like an encyclopedia, but it only fills up with entries once you encounter the subject of an entry. For example, if I fought with a creature called a ‘Mylock’ for the first time, an entry about the creature would probably appear in my codex, which is usually accessible alongside the quest log.

4 In Oblivion, the NPCs you choose to interact with will have a pre-determined opinion of you, which is determined by several factors, from race to sex to what situation you are in with them. If your character is a Khajiit, fellow Khajiits as well as people you have helped will have a kinder disposition towards you than an Argonian would, since Argonians and Khajiits share a mutual hatred in Oblivion’s world. This disposition can be increased (or decreased) by the persuasion skill.

5 The codex in Dragon Age: Origins is one wherein every entry is written from the perspective of a scholar or another character who would have cause to know what the codex entry details. For example, this codex entry entitled ‘City Elves’ has “Sarethia, hahrem of the Highever alienage” written at the bottom of the codex entry. This explains the use of the first-person pronoun in the codex entries I quote from this game.

6 There is racial mixing in Dungeons and Dragons, however, which is noteworthy because it is the pioneer of RPGs. The most common biracial option in D&D is the ‘half-elf’, which is half-elf and half-human, but other pairings exist as well, like ‘half-orc’, which is a pairing of human and orc.
There is also a fascinating, related issue in RPGs, which is about sexual orientation. So as to not conflate gender with sexual orientation, however, I shall briefly summarize the issue here:

One of the most important ways in which sexual orientation affects the game’s story is through the love interest of the character. Most of the games that have a party-based system will have characters in the party that become love interests of my character. By this I mean that a love story has been created by the developers for several different non-player characters. Most of the time, these stories are progressed through conversation with the NPC that is playing the role of the love interest. Potential love interests depend on the game, since the developers have to create the story that unfolds between the NPC and your character, so it is very often reserved for major characters in the game, most often party members. Conversations affect a party member’s opinion of your character, mostly depending on how you treat them and what you generally say during the conversation. What this leads to depends again on the game, but sex has become a possibility in recent games.

In the majority of RPGs, the character who acts as the primary love interest is the opposite gender of your main character. In earlier games, this may have been due to the limitations of technology to allow more freedom, but it continues in modern games, and it reflects a heterosexual approach to romance. I find this to be highly problematic, because games that are based around the freedom to play one’s own role and develop one’s own character should not have built-in limitations to this freedom that are not directly due to technological limitation. Bioware has been a pioneer in the issue of the freedom of romance in their games. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, your character can develop love interests with people of either gender.

A ‘perk’ in *Fallout 3* is the near-equivalent of a ‘feat’ in *Dungeons & Dragons*. When you level up in *Fallout 3*, you are presented with a menu wherein you can add to your skills and attributes (as it is in most RPGs), and you are also presented with a list of perks. Each perk gives your character a bonus of some kind, from ‘Entomologist’, which gives your character a 50% increase in damage against insects, to the ‘Strong Back’ perk, which allows your character to carry 50 extra pounds of equipment. (Bethesda, 2008)

Neither *Gears of War* nor *Tomb Raider* are interactive RPGs.

To explain the lingo here: ‘stats are maxed’ refers to skill and ability statistics being maximized in terms of the number of points put into them. The points reflect the development of the skill, so a ‘maxed stat’ refers to a highly developed skill.

‘Character’ is qualified by ‘playable’ here because a playable character needs a great deal more technical development than a non-playable (or non-player) character - an NPC. This is due to the fact that an NPC’s movements can be pre-programmed and limited, whereas a character that the player controls must be capable of any movements the player chooses, whenever (and in whatever order) the player chooses them. This is much more technically demanding.

By its very nature, an interactive dialogue system is difficult to explain through written text alone. It is best demonstrated through playing the game, which I strongly advise if you wish to learn more.

To a certain extent, this assumes that I have identified with my character and take a certain amount of ownership of his actions. If a player disassociated himself from his character and simply controlled the character like a puppet, these conclusions may not be applicable to him. I would respond to this by saying that this player will still have emotional reactions to the behavior of the character, as well as the situations the character is in. This means that the conclusions will still apply to the player, because he cannot totally separate himself from the game by simply disassociating himself from his character.
Conclusion

Modern, interactive role-playing games are multifaceted and philosophically important. In this project, I have shown this to be unequivocally true. RPGs are suffused with morally laden situations, in which a player can evince virtues or vices. A player not only evinces virtues in gameplay, he also responds emotionally to the characters and situations in the game. As it turns out, an RPG is a unique form of fiction that requires and relies upon the player’s involvement. When the player responds to a fiction, he is responding primarily to the non-fictional content of the fiction. Under response moralism, a theory which thus far not been applied to video games, these emotional responses are both real and morally assessable. Through the numerous morally laden situations in RPGs, developers of RPGs provide an opportunity to test and explore morality. RPGs are prime material for ethical consideration, as I have plainly demonstrated, and I believe they warrant the serious academic attention of philosophy.

The RPG genre, as well as video games in general, have largely not been taken seriously in an academic light, primarily due to their reputation as a lighthearted pastime or a child’s plaything. As I have shown in this thesis, however, interactive RPGs deserve a great deal more attention than they have received, and than I have given them. I hope that my work serves as a philosophical gateway to the rich material that RPGs readily provide.

“I’ve met hundreds of gamers and geeks. Their reasons for embracing fantasy and gaming aren’t about mindless escapism. Games teach social skills, leadership and strategy; they inspire creativity and storytelling. They provide rites of passage, accomplishment and belonging, even belief systems.”

-Ethan Gilsdorf
Works Cited

Note on the citation of work from video games: At several points in this thesis, I reference and discuss content from the video games I have listed here. Due to the unique nature of these games, however, I am not able to point to any specific page number or time-stamp for readers to be able to easily access what I reference. Whereas films have set run-times and books have pages, video games must be played in order to progress their plot and access all of the content available. These games also allow a great deal of freedom in how they are played, which makes citing a point in time in my gameplay (e.g. 2 hours and 13 minutes in, X told me that...) essentially useless, since another gamer could access the same conversation at another time entirely, or miss it altogether. Therefore, I have simply cited the developer responsible for creating the content I discuss in the thesis, along with the year that the respective game was released. When I discussed content that was covered in a game’s codex, I used quotations as well as the title of the codex entry because there was text available, but even the codex does not have page numbers. When discussing the mechanics of the game or presenting a summary of any game’s lore (as in Chapter IV), I can do little more than assure you that I am drawing from my experiences in the game, which was entirely created by the developer of the game.

Here, I have created a citation format for video games that closely mirrors the way books are cited using MLA. The developer is listed first (as the author), the game’s title is listed second, and the publisher and release date follow that. Lastly, I have listed the platform(s) the game was released on, or the platform that I played the game on, if I am talking about my experiences in the game (because there are sometimes differences in the same game between platforms). These developers deserve both praise and credit, and I hope that I have done them justice through adequate citation.


Epic Games. *Gears of War (series)*. Microsoft Game Studios, 2006-2010. Xbox 360.


1 While I did not ever directly quote or cite GamePolitics, I have used the website extensively to learn about and access newsworthy and notable articles about video games, some of which I subsequently included in this thesis. Therefore, the site very much deserves a place in the Works Cited section.
Appendix A: Glossary

**Cinematic:** The term denoting a movie-interlude during gameplay. In a cinematic, the player has no control over the actions of the characters involved. The point is to observe what happens, listening to the conversation and watching the situation unfold. Many RPGs use cinematics to present key plot moments.

**Codex:** A dynamic, encyclopedic compilation that updates as the player progresses through the world. It compiles extensive entries detailing various aspects of the game’s universe, from history and lore to explanations of creatures to major current events. This is one of the most effective ways in which the game furnishes its fictional content. Most interactive RPGs have a codex.

**Lone Hero:** My term for the game that puts the player into the role of a character who travels alone and has no party or party members to accompany him. These games occasionally allow the character to have an NPC follow him and fight alongside him. This NPC can be anyone from a hired bodyguard to a loyal dog to an indebted warrior the player rescued. These NPCs aid in combat, but noticeably lack any presence in role-playing situations, because they do not usually speak unless spoken to. Lone hero games focus entirely on the main character.

**Main Plot/Story-line:** The story that is composed of a long sequence of quests which provide the primary focus of the game. This story-line is the one that the developers have put the most amount of work into, and it is usually the one that, when completed, ends the game. During gameplay, there is usually a main-plot quest available to the player, even if the overarching purpose of the main plot is hidden to him. Most of the main quests are not time-restrictive, so the player is allowed freedom to explore and complete side quests at will.

**Non-Player Character (NPC):** A character that is not controlled by the player. This is essentially every character in an RPG besides the main character. They are not real people, and they are governed entirely by pre-programmed artificial intelligence. They are the fictional characters of the narrative of an RPG.

**Party System:** This is a term for a game which is played with a main character who is accompanied by fellow ‘party members’, which he met along his travels. Most of these games allow several NPCs to join the party and travel with the group which is formed around the main character, but usually only two or three are allowed with the main character in his voyages and combat. For example, in *Mass Effect*, Shepard can have six party members, but only two can come with him when he leaves his ship to explore a planet.

**Single Focus:** This is my own term for specifying the type of party system in which the player can only control the main character and no other party member. **Interchangeable:** The party system in which the player can switch between party members, usually in order to use their separate talents, or issue specific
commands during combat. Dialogue is still performed through the main character, and the primary focus remains upon him.

**Player:** The real person playing the video game through interacting with the video game controller.

**Player-Character:** The fictional person that the player is controlling, and usually the main character of the game, whom the story focuses on.

**Role-playing Game (RPG):** Quite simply, games which have put the player into a role. The games are usually extensive and immersive, each complete its own world and plot. Side quests not required, but they have become expected as the technology to allow them develops.

**Interactive RPG:** This is the type of RPG which gives the player the ability to choose the type of character, both morally and physically, he plays. This is contrasted with RPGs which tell a story and place the player in a pre-determined role. All interactive RPGs have dialogue systems, as well as some form of moral system.

**Side Quests:** These are quests which do not progress the main plot, but contain their own stories. One of their purposes in the game is to give the character more experience, aiding his ability to complete the main quest, which is usually much more difficult.

**Single-Player Games:** A single-player game is one that allows only one player at a time, meaning that the solitary player interacts with the pre-programmed non-player characters in the game as opposed to real people, as would happen in a multiplayer game.

**Tutorial-Prologue:** A term that I created to serve as a label for the first segment of role-playing games, which is one that usually serves as a prologue to the character’s story, as well as a tutorial for the player, teaching him how to play the game. Tutorial-prologues usually take several hours to complete, but after they are completed, players usually have a basic mastery of the controls as well as an idea of the plot.
Appendix B: Game Profiles

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game Profile: <em>Fallout 3</em></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Developer:</strong> Bethesda Game Studios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perspective:</strong> 1st-Person; Lone Hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral System:</strong> Karma, NPC Reaction Changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location:</strong> Post-apocalyptic Washington D.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year:</strong> 2277, 200 years after world-ending war</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Main Plot:** Raised by your father in Vault 101, he disappears when you turn nineteen, and you are forced to escape the Vault Overseer’s wrath by fleeing the vault. You try to track down your father, and in so doing discover the Brotherhood of Steel. After finding your father, you take up his dream of supplying clean water to the people of the Wasteland.

**Universe Background:** The world of *Fallout 3* is located in the U.S.A, which is identical to the non-fictional U.S.A until post-WWII. At that point in time, the *Fallout 3*-U.S.A saw incredible technological progression, and cultural stagnation, as it remained fixed within the ‘world of tomorrow’ social mentality of the 1950s. In the year 2077, the climax of a long war between America and China resulted in the nuclear devastation of the world of *Fallout 3*.

**Moral System:** Judged by the game after moral decisions are made, making your character either gain or lose karma. Karma level affects interactions with NPCs at times, especially if you are dealing with an NPC who is very good or very evil, whom you usually interact with while playing through quests. Deeds are spoken of and accordingly praised or blamed by a radio show called ‘Galaxy News Radio’.
**Game Profile: Dragon Age: Origins**

**Developer:** Bioware

**Perspective:** 3rd-Person; Party System - Interchangeable  
**Moral System:** Party Member Reactions, No Moral Meter

**Location:** Medieval fantasy world

**Main Plot:** In a world beset by the scourge of evil beings called Darkspawn, a small band of people called Grey Wardens have taken the responsibility for alerting the world to the problem and spearheading the war against them. You become a Grey Warden, one of the very few, and you must convince and garner support for the war in order to save Ferelden from destruction.

**Universe Background:** A medieval fantasy world entirely created by Bioware. Two books, *The Stolen Throne* (New York: Tor Books, 2009) and *The Calling* (New York: Tor Books, 2009) were written by the lead writer for *Dragon Age: Origins*, David Gaider, and contain events and stories preceding the events that take place in the game.

**Moral System:** There is no set moral scale in this game, but there are scales of influence with your character’s party members, who each have separate moral codes. In this game’s party system, three members can accompany you anytime you leave the party camp to explore in the field (which can be anything from a city, to a mountain path, to an ancient crypt). The influence scales for the characters that accompany you are affected by the moral decisions you make on your journeys, since they are present for these decisions - those who remain at camp cannot make judgements about that which they do not know about. While in the field, accompanying characters may even speak during a conversation to support, question, or even condemn the decision you are making.
**Game Profile: Oblivion**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Developer: Bethesda Game Studios</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perspective: 1st-Person; Lone Hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral System: Crime, Fame/Infamy; NPC Reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location: Medieval fantasy world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Main Plot:** After the assassination of the emperor, you are given the important task of delivering his amulet to his only heir, and thereafter must aid the new emperor in stopping the evil of Oblivion, a demonic realm that has recently invaded the realm.

**Universe Background:** A medieval fantasy world entirely created by Bethesda, which is a continuation of the world of The Elder Scrolls series, of which this is the fourth entry.

**Moral System:** There is not a strong moral system in this game except for the law. If your character is witnessed attacking someone unprovoked or stealing, then the NPC witness can report you to the guards (though not all NPCs will). If reported, a bounty will be placed on your character, which you can see in your character screen. Apart from this, there is a Fame/Infamy system wherein your character can gain points in one or the other for completing certain quests. Saving a town from evil demonic creatures gains you Fame points, whereas completing quests for the Dark Brotherhood, a guild of assassins, earns you Infamy points. These sometimes affect NPC reactions, especially if the NPC is very good or very evil. In fact, if your character becomes infamous enough, bandits will no longer attack her on sight, instead interacting with her as they would another bandit.
Game Profile: Mass Effect

Developer: Bioware

Perspective: 3rd-Person; Party System - Single Focus
Moral System: Paragon v. Renegade, Party Member Reactions

Location: Our galaxy, in a science-fiction future
Year: 2183 CE

Main Plot: As the first human Spectre (elite government covert operatives) in the universe, your task as Commander Shepard is to stop the nefarious deeds of the rogue Spectre Saren, while making a mark on the galaxies and planers you visit - for good or for ill.

Universe Background: In the year 2148, explorers from Earth found a mass relay device that can transport a spaceship at light-speed to another relay. The humans used it and found themselves thrust into the global political stage already established under the powers of three dominant alien races.

Moral System: After significant moral decisions are made, the game judges you by awarding you Paragon or Renegade points. Party members occasionally judge your actions if they are accompanying you, and some NPC attitudes are affected as well.
**Game Profile:** Knights of the Old Republic (KOTOR)

**Developer:** Bioware

**Perspective:** 3rd-Person; Party System - Interchangeable

**Moral System:** The Force; Appearance & Party Reaction Changes

**Location:** Star Wars universe

**Time:** Old Republic - before any of the Star Wars films

**Main Plot:** As an unknown Republic soldier, you become a Jedi and are tasked with stopping the Sith lord Malak, who is reigning over the Sith forces in a war against the Republic.

**Universe Background:** Star Wars Galaxy before all of the film events. The Republic is the central government for the galaxy, and they are closely allied with the Jedi Council, who are infamous for making decisions independent of the Republic, yet they remain morally good. Both are battling the Sith, which is both a military and governmental power, and it is backed and led by the Sith Lords, who are powerful and evil force wielders.

**Moral System:** The game awards you light side or dark side points after you make moral decisions or actions. Your appearance also changes according to how many points you have on either side. If you are moderately or very far towards the dark side, then your character's hair will gray, her complexion will darken, and after evil actions she exudes a red glow. On the light side, your character's appearance does not change too drastically, though a light blue light may be exuded after good actions.
Appendix C: Brief Overview of Game Systems

All of the above games are playable on the Microsoft Xbox 360, which has been my primary research console. The Xbox 360 is a next-generation gaming console created by Microsoft. For informational purposes: there are currently three major game consoles, made by three competing companies. Below is a short rundown of the companies and their most recent and relevant consoles.

**Microsoft**: A very large computer corporation based in America, with a very strong (and relatively new) gaming division. These consoles have taken the gaming world by storm, being most well known for the *Halo* series, which are made exclusively for Xbox & Xbox 360. Microsoft is now the major competitor for Sony for the ‘hardcore’ gaming community, and most notable role-playing games are made for their consoles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Console Name and Logo</th>
<th>Pictured</th>
<th>Production Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>XBOX</td>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>XBOX 360</td>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
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</table>

**Nintendo**: A very popular and well-known Japanese gaming company gearing its products, especially its most recent console, to families and casual gamers. Popular recently for *Wii Sports* and *Wii Fit*. Expansive modern role-playing games are not usually made compatible with this platform.

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<th>Console Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>NINTENDO64</td>
<td></td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NINTENDO GAMECUBE</td>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
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</table>
Sony: A large Japanese corporation with a strong computer entertainment division. An old competitor for Nintendo, this company has created consoles in nearly the opposite vein, aimed much more at a ‘hardcore’ gamer audience. The Final Fantasy games were exclusive to this line until the most recent entry in the series, Final Fantasy XIII, was made compatible with Xbox 360 and the PS3.

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<tr>
<th>Console Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wii</td>
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<td>1994-1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>PS2</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="PS2" /></td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PlayStation 3</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="PlayStation 3" /></td>
<td>2006</td>
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Appendix D: Note on ESRB Ratings

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is the company that controls and issues ratings for all major video games in the United States. It is not a government organization, but rather “the game industry’s self-regulatory body” (ESRB). All of the major publishers of video games, together with the major retailers of video games, will not publish or sell games that do not have an ESRB rating. The ESRB website can be found at www.esrb.org. It does not extend outside of the USA, however, because other countries have their own rating boards and systems in place. For the reader’s information, the ESRB rating of each game listed in the profiles, along with their ESRB description, is listed below.

**Fallout 3:** *Mature*; Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Sexual Themes, Strong Language, Use of Drugs.


**Oblivion:** *Mature*; Blood and Gore, Language, Sexual Themes, Use of Alcohol, Violence.


**Knights of the Old Republic:** *Teen*; Violence.