# ETHICS IN GAME DESIGN: APPROACHING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS AND THE WELL-BEING OF PLAYERS

**Maria NOVAC**

*Department of Industrial and Product Design, DJ-221, Faculty of Design,*
*Technical University of Moldova, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova*

Autorul correspondent: Maria Novac, maria.novac@dip.utm.md

Coordinator: **Liliana PROZOR-BARBALAT**, University Assistant, liliana.prozor@lm.utm.md

***Abstract.*** *As the gaming industry continues to evolve and expand, the number of individuals it affects and the ethical aspects surrounding game design also increase. This article explores the moral attitudes and responsibilities that game designers face and ponder on in the process of video game development. Emphasis is put on two crucial factors that affect players directly: controversial content (violence and interactivity, sexual objectification, cultural appropriation) and the well-being of players resulting from the interaction with these factors. By addressing these issues, the article sheds light on the complex interconnection between ethical principles and behavioral outcomes within the space of game design.*

***Keywords:*** *controversial content, ethical game design, morality, player's well-being.*

### Introduction

The rapid growth of the creative gaming industry has brought with it a variety of ethical issues to consider in the process of video game development. Although quite controversial, these aspects require knowledge and interest by both game designers and gamers in order to avoid problematic products, recognize patterns and hold those responsible accountable, preventing the same mistakes happening in the future.

Video game genres and styles are diverse and continually evolving. However, some particular genres posses controversial qualities, namely first-person/third-person shooters, action/adventure explorers or fighting games. These games, based on exploration and fighting mechanics, choices between "good" and "evil" and just plain violence raise certain questions: whether the choices in design, development, and storytelling are ethical and what consequences follow after the player interacts with them. As C. Macklin stated in one of his studies (Macklin, 2010), these moments form a paradoxal situation, because they stand as the foundation for creating an interesting and interactive gameplay for the vast targeted audience (male adults and teenagers) with the design process itself being a set of ethical choices and actions that illustrate the essence of ethics in game design: representations, rules and mechanics.

### Ethical dilemmas in games

A wide range of video games, aiming for "fun and engaging" experiences, introduce players with post-apocalyptic, war-themed, terrorist, and science-fiction settings which are generally based on choice-effect narrative that have, if not permanent, then at least a significant effect. This interactive model revolves around dilemmas that "demand" choosing between so-called good and evil. Most players of this genre enjoy such tropes and when asked why, they say that they are aware the game is "not real" and are not affected by the visualized violence within it. However, T. Hartmann's research in "The Moral Disengagement in Violent Videogames Model" that follows experimental models (Hartmann, 2017), suggests that players, in some way, tend to feel present in that virtual world and instinctively perceive the characters as "human". As a result when the player attributes human/moral status to the virtual characters, violence against them might be justified

and translated into the player's real-life, blurring the thin line between virtuality and reality at times.

An example that we can draw a parralel to is the Stanford Prison Experiment, where students were invited to participate in a prison simulation and assigned roles either of guards or prisoners. Said experiment was cancelled after only 6 days due to extreme violence of the guards toward the prisoners, which actually was difficult to predict because if asked earlier about the outcomes, the students wouldn't have expected such behaviour from themselves. „By the end of the study, the prisoners were disintegrated, both as a group and as individuals. The guards had won total control of the prison, and they commanded the blind obedience of each prisoner", said Professor Philip G. Zimbardo about this experiment (Zimbardo, n.d.). Even if this simulation was based on the psychology of imprisonment, as S. R. Balzac emphasized (Balzac, 2010)- it's still a real example of how role-playing can corrupt young minds and change the behavioral patterns in a background of power and abuse, especially with children under 10 years old, numerous studies showing high risk of agression towards parents/siblings, both verbal and physical. This issues needs immediate measures of caution from developers and parents as a whole and use the gaming space in favor of young people.

### Ethnic and gender representation

As games became more popular and globalized over time, topics like communities, ethnic minorities, cultures and experiences managed to become fundamental components of a high quality product. Game design ethics claim discussions on these aspects as one of the most important processes due to the major responsability in making decisions in the representation of ethnic or gender indentities. All of these done in order to avoid gaming sessions with negative experiences, directly affecting the players' well-being.

A . Shaw stated that this issue refers to marginalized groups, ethnic communities and even women and the way they „should look and behave like" in video games (Shaw, 2010). Before the gaming industry even aknowledged the marginalized communities as potential consumers, this groups were often represented as no-name NPCs or even enemies that should be killed off. It took some time and patience to be able to see female lead characters or of different colour than white in games, and when it started, it still was shaky.

For example, let's take one game that has become an iconic one and it's still one of the most recognized and played games of all times : „GTA (grand theft auto) : San Andreas". The game was a succes but it actually showed how the audience sees people of colour when it comes to violence, creating and internalizing a negative picture of the black comunity as being "loud, scary and prone to violence" (Taylor, 2022). A research on "Effects of Avatar Race in violent video games..." that tested the effects of playing any violent game as a black or non-black avatar on racial stereotypes and agression (Grace S. Yang, 2014), found out and showed that when white players played a black character in a violent game they were prone to using negative language and slurs more often than usual toward other players. This displayed implicit aggression and reinforced stereotypes that people of colour are violent..

Female characters of all races also had and still have a rough time being represented in a decent image in most of the video games ever created. This topic was disscused in the research "...A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 years" (Teresa Lynch, 2016). According to the authors the issue arises with the reproduction in an overly sexualized and objectified manner: minimal clothing, unnatural forms (enlarged breasts and narrow waists), seductive characteristics and secondary roles affecting the perception of a real woman regarding feminine aesthetics and the "role" of a woman. Such designs were accepted due to the largely composed audience of men, as games were developed for a male target audience, sticking to the stereotype that „only boys play video games" leaving girls and women out of the picture completely. Now, things should urgently change in the new era of gaming and game dev, since reportedly over 47 % of gamers right now are female (Otterson, 2016), and they obviously tend to avoid games that feature overly sexualized and objectified female characters.

**Player well-being and ethical decision-making**

The matters discussed above sure have solutions implemented and waiting to be implemented in order to provide ethical gaming spaces, safe for everyone and everywhere. If we're talking about the representation of marginalized groups in games, in our case American Native people, the developers of the greatly loved „Red Dead Redemption" game found a way to avoid controversy and actually involve players into history: they set the game at the turn of the 20th century and rather than ilustrating them directly they are instead noticeable only by their already removal from their lands, as disscused in the blog "Race and Resistance in American Popular Culture and Cinema" (Reid, n.d.). This decision was intentional and over the course of the gameplay the players learn about the out of date ideas held by many at those difficult times.

Studies saying that women are still overly sexualized to this day sure had beloved games make changes according to the critique of the audience, showing that they care about every player individually. Let's take "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider" as an example. In the initial version of the game, this particular lead was designed to appeal to the male audience only, meaning she had minimal clothing like shorts and a tight shirt, exposing her unrealistic body forms like enlarged breasts and narrow waist. The fact that a female tomb raider, explorer and fighter, wears only shorts in a dangerous environment is kind of unrealistic itself. This caused a stir in the gaming community over time and the developers decided to make some changes in the recent version of the game. Now Lara wears pants and has a more realistic body which matches the overall character archetype of a powerful and athletic woman.

Games in general can be a source of important life aspects and lessons and it's the responsibility of ethic game design to unsure positive experiences for players from all around the world and to guarantee a secure environment where players can return to anytime. As C. Swain suggests, games should be the fun and engaging teachers who help explore crucial life aspects like quick decision making while ensuring completion of tasks and team-work building with peers in a virtual world where "adult things" can be learned, loved and eventually mastered (Swain, 2010).

The spectrum of values that can be interpreted from games is vast and it sure in the power of game designers to create and implement safe learning spaces for youngsters in which they feel immersed, seen and heard.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, exploring the ethical landscape of game design requires a delicate balance between creativity, responsibility and sensitivity, especially when it comes to controversial topics and player welfare. As the gaming industry continues to grow, it is increasingly necessary for both developers and gamers to engage in important discussions about the ethical implications of their creations and interactions in virtual worlds. From addressing the psychological impact of violence in games to reimagining marginalized groups and designing inclusive environments, ethical aspects of game design play a critical role in shaping the experiences of players around the world. By recognizing the potential impact games have on attitudes, behaviors and perceptions, designers can take responsibility for building immersive, rich experiences that prioritize the happiness and dignity of all players.

The purpose of this article was to inform and remind about the important issues in the creative industry we all are part of and to learn from the mistakes of our teachers in this field in order to create a welcoming environment for each individual. Through thoughtful consideration, collaborative effort and a commitment to ethical decision-making, the gaming community can work toward a future where games are not only fun, but also inspire a positive social change and personal growth.

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