Exploring player choice and morality concepts in video games

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ABSTRACT

Though there are numerous video gaming studies on player choices and morality within and without virtual worlds, most of the research in the area has been quantitative in nature and focused on very specific questions, such as whether players prefer to make 'good' or 'evil' decisions (Weaver and Lewis, 2012) or the effects of violent games on players' morality (Hartmann and Vorderer, 2010; Grizzard et al., 2014). However, this might have produced limited insights into the reasons why players may choose one choice over all others or whether morality even plays an important role in the context of video games or not. This study used semi-structured interviews to explore such questions further. Thematic analysis was employed in order to analyse the data, and three themes were constructed; solitary vs group game play, roleplaying as an extension of the self, and choices and implications in game play and narrative. The findings suggest that player choices in video games, and the reasons behind them, are nuanced and complex, and often go against what critics in the industry may uphold

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Introduction

Over the years, the video games industry has grown to incredible proportions. As of 2016, the global revenue for video games was estimated at USD $101.62 billion whereas the value of the entertainment and media market is estimated at USD $1.81 trillion, for comparison (Statista, 2016). As the economic force of video games was growing, so did the number of studies that concerned them. Back in 2006, when the industry was still very much growing with sales and revenue being less than half of what it is today, Gee (2006) argued that video gaming studies were becoming increasingly relevant. One of the arguments he made was that even in those games that move in a linear fashion, in contrast to the so-called open-world video games which afford the player with additional degrees of freedom, players will still do things differently, react in different ways, and approach game-play in a different manner. The suggestion that no one player will have the exact same journey is paramount to research underlying player motivation in general, as well as this research in particular.

Today, a large sub-genre of video games exists in which players are afforded choices of morality. Video games such as the *Mass Effect* series (Bioware, 2007-2012) and *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015) present choices of morality in measured systems. In the *Mass Effect* series, players can make choices which fall into the 'Paragon' (good) or 'Renegade' (evil) of the in-game morality scale. In *Fallout 4*, players' actions are measured against a 'Karma' system which is affected by almost every action undertaken such as stealing, killing evil or innocent characters, and generally acting in a way that is pro-social or anti-social. Aside from those, other video games opt for more complex systems of morality without any visible, measurable systems of morality. For instance, *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED, 2007) does not have any obvious moral system but does present players with morality choices which often have lasting effects, such as a non-player character (NPC) helping, obstructing, or outright betraying a player based on their previous actions. Finally, an increasingly popular subgenre of video games such as *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) and *Life Is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment) represent an evolution of the choose-your-own-adventure games of ages past and focus on continuously providing players with morality-based choices in order to advance their storylines.

Defining morality, particularly in a video gaming context, is challenging. After all, different societies and cultures have widely different definitions of the mere concept of morality. For the purposes of this report, morality will be defined as argued by Hocutt (2010):

"Morality in the real world consists not of a priori principles but of customs and conventions, tacit understandings about what conduct will be accepted and what will not"

(Hocutt, 2010:34)

Morality, in essence, is anything that is constituted as "right" or "wrong" by social practices. Research in the field of video game morality has been quite excessive, especially in regards to whether it has a connection with real-world violence or not. Bartel (2015) used Harry Frankfurt's compatibility theory of free will as a foundation to argue that players could be held morally responsible for any and all actions that they took. However, he did acknowledge that such concepts are limited and hard to define in the virtual world of video games. Furthermore, he made the argument that while

video games could certainly be constituted as fantasies and fake worlds, fantasies themselves can also be morally reprehensible. He makes the point that physical harm is not necessary for a thought to be psychologically harmful, with the example of a person who frequently thinks of cheating on their partner.

In sharp contrast, Young and Whitty (2011) suggested that gamespace, in their research defined as the "computer-mediated single-player gamespace", should be considered as a taboo-free zone. Their argument was that morality only applies within the rules, conventions, and limits of our own world and not those of virtual ones. Their major concern and question was whether or not we should hold anything in the gamespace as morally unjustifiable simply because our concepts of morality label it as 'disgusting' or not, especially since there are no real-world victims or action effects inside a gamespace. Instead of asking what is and is not moral within gamespace, which might be the wrong kind of question to ask, the authors suggest a redirection towards the concept of seeking psychological parity. More specifically, they suggest that aggressive players may tend to make more 'evil' choices in video games as they attempt to seek a link between the virtual and real worlds.

An important distinction to make here is that such suggestions are mostly limited to single-player games, where users only ever interact with virtual characters. In Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, players can also interact with other players, in real-time. In such cases, their actions may well affect real people instead of NPCs. Powers (2003) argued that in gamespace, violent acts themselves are secondary to how the players feel about them, especially in cases where there is a perpetrator and a victim involved. In *LambdaMOO* (Pavel Curtis, 1990), a text-based, online virtual world, players can interact with each other through in-game commands. One player, who managed to effectively 'hack' the system, used a virtual 'voodoo doll' to force other players to perform sexual acts without their consent. His actions resulted in an uproar of complains and shocked reactions from the players in what was effectively termed as a cyber-rape.

How morality can be applied into video game research has proved to be a difficult and somewhat controversial topic. Weaver and Lewis (2012) found that most players did indeed make moral decisions and even their engagements with NPCs as real interpersonal interactions. Other researchers (Hartmann and Vorderer, 2010; Grizzard et al., 2014) have also focused on the concept of moral disengagement. This concept argues that disconnecting morality from video game playing can have considerable effects on game enjoyment, guilt, and even increases in moral sensitivity. The context of each video game, such as whether or not players have to kill for pro-social or anti-social reasons, also seems to affect post-play aggression as well as pro-social behaviour and cognition (Happ et al., 2013; Gitter et al., 2013). It should also be noted some researchers, like Ferguson (2016), have suggested that video gaming research that focuses on societal values and norms should take external factors, including politics, into account.

Links between morality and video game play have also been explored and investigated by various researchers. Coeckelbergh (2007) argues that video games should not be looked in the context of their virtual worlds only, or even in the real world only, but in a general, combined world, suggesting that there is a spill-over effect between the two. Raney (2011), talking about entertainment media in general, attempted to explore whether links between morality and entertainment are viable or not, and if they are

even desirable. The main argument there is that appreciation-based entertainment, i.e. consuming media for the sake of artistic or otherwise appreciation, is preferable to pleasure-based entertainment, i.e. consuming media for the sake of pleasure. Tamborini (2011) makes similar arguments, including the suggestion that agreeing with the morality portrayed on the digital screen is positively linked to evaluating its content and enjoyment. Bilandzic (2011) in a direct answer to Tamborini, argues instead that even when the morality views of the audience, or the players, is violated, enjoyment can still be had for reasons unrelated to morality.

Most of the research in this area has been quantitative in nature and has focused mostly in questions and concerns with a certain degree of specificity. This, however, may have resulted in limited insights into the reasons why players might choose to make one choice over another, whether morality even plays a major role in the context of video game playing or not, and how players approach play when moral decisions are involved. This research attempted to explore such questions further, along with any other concepts that players might feel are important.

Research aims

This qualitative research originally identified a certain gap in the literature concerning qualitative video gaming studies on the concept of morality-based decisions. Even though identifying 'gaps' in the literature might be the most common way of developing a research question, this methodology has been deemed problematic as it tends to reinforce existing research rather than challenge it (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2010; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). Instead of relying solely on that, this research attempted to also use problematisation in order to identify and challenge existing assumptions in the current body of literature. As a qualitative project, this research aimed to explore players' views on their video game play, particularly surrounding decisions of morality and choice, in far more depth than restricted frameworks from quantitative research might allow. As the video gaming industry grows even more, and more people identify as gamers, it is important to understand what guides the game play of players in regards to decision-making in video games, and what the role of morality, if any, is in such processes.

Thus, the main research question that this research projected focused on is:

"What influences player choice in morality-based decisions in video games?"

Methodology

Design

This research used semi-structured interviews processed through thematic analysis. Qualitative research in Psychology is thought to open up different pathways in comparison to quantitative research, as it can be more reflective while also allowing for a wider range of responses from participants (Giles, 2002; Willig, 2013).

Semi-structured interviewing in particular has been named as "the most widely used method of data collection in qualitative research in psychology" (Willig, 2013:29). As mentioned before, quantitative research has dominated the field of video gaming studies, which may have barred more in-depth responses from participants.

Importantly, qualitative research is seen as a way to enable the researcher to explore phenomena, in this case players' experiences with video games, while being grounded in theory but also by immersing into the subject and placing a lot of emphasis on the insider perspective that the participants can give (Lapan et al., 2012). Moreover, participants are not simply 'allowed' but rather encouraged to talk about their own experiences because while the focus of the study may be predetermined, the in-depth responses from qualitative data, which in this case was processed through thematic analyses, can allow new themes and points to be identified (Silverman, 2013).

Participants

A total of five participants were recruited for this study. One participant was recruited through the research participation pool of the Psychology department of Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Currently, there is no consensus in the scientific community regarding the number of participants required for studies using semi-structured interviews. Experts seem to suggest that "it depends" (Baker and Edwards, 2012:6) with the only real deciding factor being to reach data saturation. However, it has been suggested that "there is no one-size-fits-all method" of accomplishing that (Fusch and Ness, 2015:1409).

Participants were recruited solely based on having experience with video games, particularly console games. The main reason for this inclusion criterion is that console gamers are most likely to have more experience with the types of video games that offer a wide variety of choice, particularly in regards to morality-based decisions. There was no other reason for exclusion other than not having experience with video games.

Data collection

An interview schedule (APPX 9) was constructed based on previous research such as Weaver and Lewis (2012), Bartel (2015), and Young and Whitty (2011). Though these studies were quantitative in nature, this research project attempted to challenge their assumptions and expand knowledge on the field further. As Knox and Burkard (2009) suggest, the qualitative interviews enabled participants to freely talk about their own experiences and share whatever information they were comfortable with. Moreover, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to somewhat steer the conversation towards the chosen topic while also eliciting in-depth responses from participants (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Steinar and Svend, 2009; Edwards and Holland, 2013).

As most interviews were conducted over the phone, the researcher attempted to use the techniques of active listening (Hoppe, 2011) and to prompt the interviewees to talk about subjects that seemed interesting to them. Moreover, the interview schedule deliberately started with simple, more casual questions related to the video gaming history of the interviewees, which resulted in them talking not only about their first time playing video games but also about their favourite video games. This allowed some rapport to be established quickly, despite the time restrictions of the phone interviews. Overall, this study followed the principles of data collection through qualitative interviewing as outlined by similar studies and research guides (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015; Knox and Burkard, 2009; DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). These included building rapport with participants, allowing them to express their thoughts without obstructions, and prompting them with additional questions which emerged spontaneously with the interview schedule as a main guide.

Data analysis

After the interviews were conducted, the data was transcribed verbatim. Because verbatim transcription can potentially produce errors (MacLean et al., 2004), several passages were cross-checked with the original audio files to ensure the quality of the transcription (Poland, 1995). Halcomb and Davidson (2006) argued against verbatim transcription due to human errors, time and cost restrictions, and issues of misinterpretation. However, the above quality checks, the limited number of interviews, and the fact that the researcher both conducted and transcribed the interviews personally hopefully eliminated or at least significantly reduced associated errors. Furthermore, the process of transcription itself can be seen as a key phase of analysis, though there are no set guidelines for this process in TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The researcher adopted a phenomenological approach in which the focus was place on the participants' own experiences and the meanings they attributed to those (Willig, 2013). Even though other methods, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), are more deeply connected to the phenomenological epistemology, thematic analysis was consciously chosen. Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that thematic analysis (TA) has traditionally been a widely used qualitative analytic method that has nevertheless been poorly approached by many researchers. However, TA can be applied in a broad range of subjects and within many different contexts. Because this research project attempted to explore experiences which may not have been processed in the field of video gaming studies before, this flexibility of TA was deemed as its single biggest advantage. It should be noted that there are contrasting views of this method. Boyatzis (1998) considered TA as merely a tool rather than a specific method of its own right, while Ryan and Bernand (2000) consider it as merely a process within other analytic conditions, such as grounded theory.

Nevertheless, the present study approached thematic analysis as a qualitative method in its own right and followed the principles and guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), particularly the six-step phases of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006:86-93).

Ethical considerations

Though the semi-structured interviews did not cover any sensitive topics, every care was taken to ensure that participants were fully aware of their rights and what the interviews entailed. The researcher submitted an ethics approval form (APPX 1) which was approved by the Manchester Metropolitan University. Each participant was given a participant information sheet (APPX 4) to read through which detailed some basic items of the study. At the same time, a consent form (APPX 5) was provided, with the clear instruction that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that even if they chose to take part, they could withdraw at any time.

Physical copies were only provided to one interviewee. The rest were provided with amended forms specifically designed for the phone interviews, as outlined in the ethics form (APPX 1). Following each interview, each participant was provided with a de-brief sheet (APPX 6). Despite the fact that no interviews touched upon sensitive topics, the de-brief sheet al.so contained information on counselling services. Each participant was asked whether or not they had any questions about any of the forms or the study, and everything was explained to them fully. Moreover, the participants were reminded about their right to withdraw at the end of each interview. Documents specifically designed for phone interviews were also created (see APPX 10 and 11 for examples).

The raw data from the interview was collected in a password-protected, encrypted device. The data was then uploaded to a secure drive in MMU's own servers. They since been fully destroyed after final data analysis in accordance with the Data Protection Act (Great Britain, 1998), the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics, and the guidelines outlined by MMU. No personal information was used and all participants were given random nicknames to protect their anonymity in the included quotes.

Analysis & Discussion

After processing the data with thematic analysis, three distinct themes were constructed: solitary vs group game play, roleplaying as an extension of the self, and choices and implications in game play and narrative. All three will be detailed below, with excerpts from participant interviews alongside a critical review with references to the literature throughout.

Solitary vs group game play

On the topic of making morality-based decisions in video games, all participants either expressed a dislike, discomfort, or disinterest in such processes while other people were present, or suggested that they would certainly change their play in such occasions. Sam notes that immersion is far greater when playing role-playing games on your own, whereas playing with friends means simply having fun:

'If you're playing Skyrim by yourself, or any role-playing game by yourself, you want to really try and get into it. And then when you're playing in a room full of friends, you're playing basically to muck about and not really getting into it. So like, you will be going in a killing spree sort of way!' (Sam, 67-70)

'In a way, you just kind of want to see […], be a prick and kill him or you might decide of going the path of killing them instead of actually saving them' (Sam, 73-75)

Similarly, George suggests that entertainment is more important than making morally justifiable decisions when in a group:

'I think [decisions] *would actually* [be affected].*I think I would be a bit more risky, I would make less moral decisions simply for entertainment' (George, 87-88)*

It should be noted that all participants did mention that they enjoy playing video games with other people. This is important as it contrasts research that denotes video games as solitary or downright unsocial experiences (Kowert and Oldmeadow, 2014). However, role-playing and making decisions is seen as a solitary activity:

'I don't really like playing games with other people around, unless it's something like an FPS online. But if it's something like an RPG, I don't want anybody to watch me playing, because it's just annoying then' (John, 137-139).

Sarah also had similar thoughts, as she believed that other people can simply be annoying when trying to influence choices in a video game:

'I'll sort of do it on my own, but if anyone else wants to play with me then I will. […] If it was something that we were doing together, then I'll obviously do it with them. But if

they're like, just press that, then I'll be like, don't bother me, you know?' (Sarah, 80 & 83-85)

The notion of committing actions which are less morally justifiable for the group's enjoyment could be suggested as a form of social desirability bias. Usually, that means that people tend to project a favourable image of themselves in order to avoid social repercussions, imaginary or otherwise, and particularly in self-report measures (Fisher, 1993). In this case, the participants opt to keep morality-based decisions to their individual play while making less moral decisions because they perceive that as being more entertaining to the group. Naturally, this comes in contrast to most established video game studies on morality which suggest that most players will make moral decisions, though they are always playing on their own (Weaver et al., 2012; Lange, 2014).

Alternatively, this could be the result of conformity, defined here simply as a process where individuals perform actions based on what they think their audience thinks they should do (Xiao, 2017). Such processes could also be the result of a type of peer pressure. As Calvo-Armengol and Jackson (2010) suggest, our peer can have an influence on our decisions across a large range of topics, both good and bad, from smoking to performing acts of charity, and more neutral ones such as following certain trends. Here, peer pressure would not necessarily have a negative connotation, but it would rather be an explanation of why some video game players might choose to perform certain actions, even if those go against what they would normally do. Importantly, such actions can also be neutral and some may not be related to morality. Hannah, for instance, would simply change her play to reflect her best skills:

'If my friends were around, I'd probably try to show off, because I want to look good! So if I was playing Uncharted, I'd totally be like, swinging from trees and shooting people in mid-air and stuff. I would try and show off' (Hannah, 103-105)

She also mentions that her friends would possibly try to influence the narrative, but that she would not be affected in morality-based choices:

'Of all my friends, I'm probably the most moral person so they'd probably be like, "Oh do that, it'd be banter!' (Hannah, 109-110)

In another example, John's girlfriend pressured him to kill someone in The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda, 2011) even though he did not want to, a decision he later regretted.

Roleplaying as an extension of self

All participants regarded roleplaying as important, to different extents. When describing roleplaying, participants often spoke in terms of 'being' a certain character. John, for example, roleplayed a character based on his own personality and thus couldn't bring himself to commit immoral actions:

'No, I couldn't rob anybody! I felt bad for doing it because it affected my person and it because it was supposed to be me playing, it felt weird' (John, 45-56)

John also found it very difficult to do bad things, even though he could not explain why:

'Roleplaying, I mean, kind of […] it's really weird, I always do the good thing! I don't know why I do it, but I cannot bring myself to do the evil things' (John, 39-40)

Nielsen (2015) notes that role-playing games afford players with the option to play as digital version of themselves, which in turn may allow them to explore their offline identities further. Sarah had a similar response, though she also added that she often became attached with "really good characters":

'I think sort of, when you're in a storyline, and you are a certain character, you really get emotionally attached I think, especially if they are a really good character or a really good storyline' (Sarah, 23-25)

She also noted that making decisions makes her feel more connected to her characters:

'Because it sort of makes them more like you, if you get me, like the character, because you are making their decisions, not on their own. So you are more "them"' (Sarah, 50-51)

Even though the virtual worlds of video games are often seen as underdeveloped (Champion, 2015), it has often been suggested that people who play video games make some form of connection with the characters that they are controlling. For instance, (Tavinor, 2017) argues that the player-character (PC) a key vehicle which allows players to contribute in the narratives of video games. Moreover, there mere representation of a person, albeit fictional, forms the basis on which players can adopt a role within the virtual world. For example, Sam believed that connecting with your character was linked to game enjoyment:

'Because if you don't have that connection with that character, then you won't find it a very enjoyable experience, in a way' (Sam, 25-56)

Hannah went even further by establishing role-playing in the virtual world, where the physical rules might be completely different than the real world:

'I think it is important. You kind of have to set into your character and their world in the video game 'cause every game there are like, different things you have to accept. Like in Resident Evil, you can just heal and the other people can just heal and you kind of have to get into that mindset and accept the physical rules of that world so yeah, I think it's important' (Hannah, 22-25)

The ability of video games to produce strong emotions, such as guilt, has been well documented (Hartmann et al., 2010; Hartmann and Vorderer, 2010; Grizzard et al., 2014; Weaver and Lewis, 2012). As some have noted, this is particularly true of role-playing video games due to their complex narratives (Mahood and Hanus, 2017) and was also evident here. Both George and Sarah acknowledge the fact that they are simply playing a game but cannot help but feel bad about potentially immoral actions:

'Sometimes you might feel guilt if you've done something bad. Like in Fable 3, where you have a lot of influence, because you become the ruler of the land and everything, you have to make loads of decisions and that has consequences on the people' (George, 31-34)

'I always tend to be the good person, like even if like I'm saying, you should totally do it, it's just a game; it doesn't matter, I'll still go for the right choice (laughs). Because I feel really bad!' (Sarah, 37-39)

Thus, roleplaying is seen as an important exercise when playing, particularly in certain types of video games. Mahood and Hanus (2017) argue that this might be a form of transportation, the idea that players become laser-focused on a narrative and the real, outside world takes a secondary position for a period of time. Lewis et al. (2008) argue that one of the central elements of role-playing games is developing a character and story through actions, and that one of their main purposes is to immerse players into their world and their own characters.

Choices and implications in game play and narrative

Making choices in video games was generally seen as a very positive feature. The idea of having a direct impact to the game, particularly to its narrative, was also very important for all the participants. John, for instance, suggested that decisions are enjoyable because they are also impactful:

'*The impact that they could have in your story, I mean, some games give you a full sense of, that your choices will make a difference […] I like the idea that the choice had an impact, that there was a consequence for it*' (John, 66-72)

There has been a lot of contention amongst video game researchers about the connection between game play and narrative as well as whether video game narratives are even impactful or not (Juul, 2001; Webb and Mallon, 2005). Such researchers argue that narrative is a passive process and video games are interactive, ergo they cannot have an (impactful) narrative. This notion, however, is apparently not shared by players themselves. John, for instance, argues that choosing where the narrative goes makes for more personal experiences:

'It's really interesting how games are developing and your choices actually have an impact on the narrative, it makes it more personal. And I like that!' (John, 160-161)

George shares similar opinions. He believes that making decisions makes video games more personal, and having a say over the narrative helps to invoke more emotions:

'I think it's far more immersive when you are able to make those decisions and it can make the emotion that it invokes in you far more emphasized' (George, 30-31)

[On Skyrim's most enjoyable attributes] *'The massive world and the choices, there are so many different things. You are having enormous influence over the narrative, and what you do, you can personalise it so much. It's such an individual world'* (George, 19-21)

Some researchers have thus argued that narrative and game play are linked, at the very least by the game's rules, that techniques can indeed be developed to allow for a harmonious relationship between game play and narrative (Ip, 2011), and that video games which allow thoughtful moral problems do exist (Schulzke, 2009). The fact that video games allow player decisions to influence the narrative seem to have a positive effect on players, regardless of what game scholars and ludologists may believe. Sam

also believes that making choices is "quite interesting", and that it makes the player think more about how to develop the character and how to guide the story:

'I find the fact that you can choose quite interesting. Like, for a lot of the quests, you follow that quest through but then you won't know until later that it's actually a sort of evil quest, and you have started to go down through that evil path. That makes you think a lot more about, if you want to follow a certain path, what sort of quests to take and how' (Sam, 29-32)

Whereas other forms of media, such as film, might offer an entirely passive narrative, the fact that video games are interactive does not automatically exclude them from telling stories of their own. Having control over decisions regarding the story, which are often linked to game play, is here considered as a positive feature. Both Sarah and Hannah, for example, appreciate the fact that they can choose moral directions in video games:

(On video games that you give choices to be "good" or evil") *'I think they are really good. Bioshock is one of them, like when you harvest or rescue the Little Sisters. I think they're really good because it gives you some sort of control over the decisions' (Sarah, 28-30)*

'Yeah I actually really enjoy those kinds of games [which allow you to choose moral directions] *to an extent, because I like having the freedom and being able to do whatever you want basically. And I like being able to pick a side, because you don't want to be the good guy all the time and it's nice to be the bad guy' (Hannah, 28-30)*

Simons (2007) argues that narrative and gameplay, particularly in games studies, have had a very difficult relationship which is only complicated further by disagreements in the field over what constitutes a good narrative in video games, and whether a link between interactivity, play, and story can even be achieved.

Concluding remarks

By analysing the interview data, the researcher constructed three themes for this report; solitary vs group game play, roleplaying as an extension of the self, and choices and implications in game play and narrative. As seen above, these themes confirm much of the existing literature of video gaming studies but also go further to explore new ideas and concepts. More specifically, it seems that players offer a variety of reasons for their in-game decisions, many of which refer to connections between themselves and video game characters as well as the virtual worlds themselves.

Limitations

Though the researcher attempted to follow the principles of thematic analysis as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), TA is not without its own limitations. First and foremost, it requires a careful analysis of the data and a subjective interpretation. The fact that the researcher was solely involved in both collecting and analysing the data may have led to becoming intimately familiar with the data but it may also have negatively affected the interpretation and analysis processes, though the researcher also acknowledges that thematic analysis, and qualitative research in general, is interpretative by its nature (Willig, 2013).

The limited number of participants could be considered as a limitation. As mentioned before, there might not be a consensus in the scientific community regarding the number of interviews required for a qualitative study, but assessing whether or not this particular research reached data saturation was challenging. This is an important point because failure to reach data saturation is believed to have a negative impact both on the validity of the presented results (Ker et al., 2010) and the quality of the data (Fusch and Ness, 2015). Because this study focused on a relatively unexplored area of gaming studies, in regards to qualitative research, the quality of the data was certainly an important factor.

Reflexive analysis

As Willig (2013) notes, there are two types of reflexivity that a qualitative researcher should acknowledge: personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. Personally reflecting on this study, my experiences as a gamer, and my identification as such since my early childhood, certainly influenced this study in numerous ways, including my interest in it, the way the qualitative interviews were conducted, and even the literature review.

Though I did try to remain somewhat impartial during the interviews, so that the interviewees would not be affected by my own experiences, I did find each topic that we talked about inherently fascinating. Under any other circumstances, I would have been more than happy to share my own experiences and thoughts about video games with each and every participant. However, I believed that I managed to convey a passion for the subject with the participants without influencing them too much, except in the fact that they could freely talk about their experiences.

In the epistemological side of things, however, my limitations as a novice researcher are far more obvious. First and foremost, the interviews themselves were lacking. Though there is no consensus on the quality of phone interviews vs face-to-face ones, some research has suggested that the latter is better (Knox and Burkard, 2009) which was disappointing as I could simply not get enough participants from the participation pool. Due to my inexperience, with research as a whole and with qualitative research in particular, I was often afraid to ask more questions so that I would not lead the participants and so that I could remain somewhat distant and objective. I realise now that this is a wrong approach for qualitative research, particularly in a study that attempted to find new meaning in video game studies and the subject of choice and morality in particular. With that said, I also do acknowledge Oswald et al.'s (2013) notion that players give varied and complex meanings to video games and so this piece of research might also be able to contribute to the pool of knowledge, despite its limitations.

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