

**T.C.
BAHCESEHIR UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN**

**WHEN OUR CHOICES MATTER: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN
IMMERSION AND MORAL DECISION-MAKING IN DIGITAL GAMES**

MASTER'S THESIS

BERNARDO XAVIER SANIZ BALDERRAMA

ISTANBUL 2023

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**THESIS ADVISOR
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This thesis was read by us, quality and content as a Master's thesis has been seen and accepted as sufficient.

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ABSTRACT

WHEN OUR CHOICES MATTER: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN IMMERSION AND MORAL DECISION-MAKING IN DIGITAL GAMES

Bernardo Xavier Saniz Balderrama

Master's Program in Game Design

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Barbaros Bostan

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This thesis explores the intricate relationship between immersion and moral choices in video games, analyzing their impact on a player's gaming experience. Through a literature review, the concept of immersion, how it is achieved, and what game design components produce it are explored. Furthermore, the role of moral choices in video games, their effect on player experience, and their implications for a player's sense of agency and responsibility are investigated. The interplay between immersion and moral choices and how these elements shape a player's gaming experience are analyzed by conducting a close reading of the video game *Papers, Please*. The findings from the reading are synthesized into a guide for designing for immersion and morality in games, which describes how game design components affect each other and how to avoid common pitfalls. It is concluded that understanding the interplay between immersion and moral choices can inform game design, leading to more satisfying gaming experiences and increased player enjoyment. Additionally, it suggests that such research can contribute to discussions about the emotional effects of video games on players and prompt further investigations into the relationship between immersion, moral choices, and real-world behavior.

Key Words: Immersion, Presence, Empathy, Guilt, Games

ÖZ

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Bernardo Xavier Saniz Balderrama

Master's Program in Game Design

Tez Danışmanı: Prof. Dr. Barbaros Bostan

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Bu tez, video oyunlarında kendini kaptırma ve ahlaki seçimler arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırıyor ve bunların oyuncunun oyun deneyimi üzerindeki etkisini analiz ediyor. Literatür taraması yoluyla immersiyon kavramı, nasıl başarılı olduğu ve hangi oyun tasarım bileşenlerinin onu ürettiği araştırır. Ayrıca video oyunlarında ahlaki tercihlerin rolü, bunların oyuncu deneyimi üzerindeki etkisi ve oyuncunun eylemlilik ve sorumluluk duygusuna etkileri araştırır. İmersyon ve ahlaki seçimler arasındaki etkileşim ve bu unsurların oyuncunun oyun deneyimini nasıl şekillendirdiği, Papers, Please adlı video oyununun yakın okunmasıyla analiz edilir. Bu okumadan elde edilen bulgular, oyunların içine kendini kaptırma ve ahlaka yönelik tasarım için bir rehber halinde sentezlendi. Rehber, oyun tasarımını bileşenlerinin birbirini nasıl etkilediğini ve yaygın tuzaklardan nasıl kaçınılacağını açıklar. İmersyon ve ahlaki seçimler arasındaki etkileşimi anlamaların oyun tasarımına bilgi sağlayabileceği sonucuna varılmıştır. Bu da daha tatmin edici oyun deneyimlerine ve artan oyuncu keyfine yol açar. Ek olarak, bu tür araştırmaların video oyunlarının oyuncular üzerindeki duygusal etkileri hakkındaki tartışmalara katkıda bulunabileceğini ve kendini kaptırma, ahlaki seçimler ve gerçek dünyadaki davranışlar arasındaki ilişkiye dair daha fazla araştırma yapılmasını teşvik edebileceğini öne sürüyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kendini Kaptırma, Varlık, Empati, Suçluluk, Oyunlar



For Derin, my eternal Player 2

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IEQ	Interactive Experience Questionnaire
CEGE	Core Elements of the Gaming Experience
SCI	Sensory, Challenge-based, and Imaginative Immersion
RPG	Role-Playing Game

Chapter 1

Introduction

Digital games have evolved significantly since their inception in the mid-20th century. Since the release of the popular arcade game Pong in 1972, they have transitioned from simple games with basic mechanics to complex and immersive experiences that model deep, intricate systems and narratives. One trend that has gained popularity in recent years is the integration of moral dilemmas into gameplay mechanics. Successful games such as Detroit: Become Human, Mass Effect, Fallout, and The Last of Us all touch on morality in one way or another. Similar to other forms of media such as television or books, digital games have the ability to elicit strong emotional responses from players. Each medium has its methods for drawing the audience in, from nuanced characters to intricate fictional worlds and convincing visuals. Empathy plays a crucial role in stirring emotions in an audience, allowing them to understand and connect with the feelings and experiences of others.

While traditional media has been successful in evoking empathy, video games have a unique advantage—their ability to provide a participatory experience. Unlike other media forms, video games allow players to actively engage in the events of the game, interact with characters, and even influence the outcome of the story. One phenomenon in particular seems to be important to the video game experience: immersion. What exactly immersion entails differs between sources on the topic, but it generally refers to a state of focused engagement to the exclusion of outside stimuli. Immersion plays a critical role in determining the level of enjoyment and emotional involvement experienced by players and is frequently brought up in game reviews and player testimonies. Although it is not yet clear what immersion is, its characteristics are fairly well-understood. Players report that, while immersed, they experience a sense of being present within the virtual world of the game. This is accompanied by an intense concentration on game-related stimuli, to the exclusion of real-world sensory inputs. The player is also emotionally affected by the game to a high degree, a fact that relates immersion to empathy (Brown and Cairns, 2004).

The affective influences of video games are not limited to evoking empathy. Their participatory nature makes them able to evoke a significantly wider range of

emotions than traditional media. One emotion that is prominent in some games, but is not present in other forms of media, is guilt. Guilt is a social emotion that provides us with feedback about the social and moral acceptability of our actions. To feel guilt, a person must have some degree of moral agency, which in turn requires the participation of some kind (Grizzard et al., 2014). In recent years, there's been a rise in the use of morality as a game mechanic in popular games (Weaver and Lewis, 2012). These games provide the player with moral agency in some way, which opens the possibility of inducing guilt. Human morality has empathy at its core, and empathy is differentially related to guilt (Tangney, 2007), confirming the relationship between empathy, guilt, and in-game morality mechanics. The role of empathy in immersion, together with the popularity of morality mechanics in video games, suggests that morality can improve, or at least affect, a player's sense of immersion. However, moral choices in video games can also make the players uncomfortable or feel disconnected from the game. This is especially the case when players are forced into immoral actions against their will (Bartel, 2016).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In the literature, there is evidence that immersion and morality systems in games interact with each other in potentially beneficial ways. However, no specifics about this relationship are currently known.

1.2 Purpose Of The Study

This paper aims to explore the interaction between immersion and moral decision-making in video games. By examining how morality systems promote or hinder player immersion, we can gain insights into the psychology of immersion and its relationship with in-game morality. The study will involve a comprehensive literature review, a close reading of the popular video game *Papers, Please*, and a synthesis of the findings to provide practical recommendations for game designers.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The following is a literature review on three different topics: the concept of immersion, games and morality, and close reading in video games. All three are critical and must be thoroughly understood for the success of this study.

2.1 Immersion in Digital Games

The concept of immersion has been historically vague and numerous definitions exist in the literature. Despite the nebulousness of the concept, most agree that immersion is critical to video game enjoyment. While there is consensus on many of the characteristics of immersion, there is disagreement as to what experiences are part of immersion and which are merely related. As a result, numerous attempts have been made to define and model immersion (Brown and Cairns, 2004; Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005; Calleja, 2011). The proposed models can describe immersion's characteristics quite well but do not offer conclusive insight into the nature of immersion.

Some of the more successful attempts to describe immersion will be discussed. The most convincing or well-supported models will be included in the analytical framework with which the close-reading data will be discussed.

2.1.1 From the ground up: Brown and Cairns' notion of immersion.

One of the seminal works on immersion in digital games is “*A Grounded Investigation of Game Immersion*” (Brown and Cairns, 2004). In this paper, the authors use player testimony to form a clear and robust concept of immersion. Their findings suggested that immersion is a measure of the level of involvement experienced by players during gameplay. They identified three levels of immersion: engagement, engrossment, and total immersion.

Engagement, the lowest level of immersion, involves players concentrating on the game and having a desire to continue playing. To reach this stage, a player must invest time, effort, and attention into the game (Brown and Cairns, 2004). As such, the

barriers to this level of immersion are mostly player-dependent. Firstly, the player must decide to play a given game. This depends on how well the game aligns with the player's interests. The player must then be able to play the game in a way that they find enjoyable. This means that the game's controls should be sufficiently accessible, as no one will invest time in a game they struggle to interact with. Finally, the player must be willing to focus their attention on the game. This partially goes back to preferences, but also depends on the design of the game. If a player suspects, from his experience with the game and others like it, that his invested time and effort will be rewarded, he is more likely to invest his attention in it.

In the second stage, engrossment, the game becomes the player's primary focus. Players become less aware of themselves and their surroundings (Brown and Cairns, 2004). They have invested enough time and energy into the game for their emotions to become directly affected by it. To achieve this, the game must provide an experience that the player can invest in emotionally. All aspects of the game's construction can contribute to this – visuals, plot, mechanics, level design, etc. The player can tell when attention and effort were put into the creation of a game, and when it was not. High-quality aspects and details of a game are appreciated and can contribute to emotional investment. Although this stage is largely dependent on the design of the game, the player can have some agency in reaching it. Distractions from the environment can hinder the player from becoming engrossed, so some players may turn off lights, put on headphones, and take other steps to minimize external distractions.

The third stage is total immersion. In this state, the player becomes completely detached from reality. Their thoughts, emotions, and perception are exclusively affected by the game. Players that had experienced total immersion described a feeling of presence, or being “in the game”. This experience was usually fleeting and occurred fairly rarely (Brown and Cairns, 2004). The players' testimonies suggested to the authors that the game must elicit empathy and provide the right atmosphere for a player to reach this state. According to the authors, this empathy arises from the attachment that the player develops to the game and its characters. Gameplay factors can facilitate the progression from attachment to empathy, as they do with features like first-person perspectives or character creation. Meanwhile, atmosphere arises from the degree to which elements of the game's construction are relevant to the player's actions. Visuals,

sounds, mechanics, and other elements that the player perceives as relevant become sources of attention, further immersing the player. This role of attention in achieving immersion gives atmospheric games a higher chance of immersing the player.

The authors concluded that progression from one stage of immersion to the next is modulated by factors they call cognitive barriers. These barriers may reside in the player's psychology or in the design of the game being played. They block the progression to the next stage of immersion until they are removed, but their removal alone is not enough to guarantee the player will become more immersed. However, removing these barriers alone does not guarantee increased immersion. While this interpretation provides valuable insights into achieving immersion and understanding its progression over time, the concept of immersion itself remains elusive.

2.1.2 The IEQ: Measuring the depth of immersion.

Some researchers have taken a quantitative approach to study immersion in video games. Jennett et al. (2008) recognized that immersion is connected to, but distinct from, other related concepts such as flow, cognitive absorption, and presence. To objectively measure immersion, they developed the Immersive Experience Questionnaire (IEQ) by drawing on previous research on these concepts. The IEQ comprises five factors grouped into two categories: person factors and game factors.. The parts in the first group are called person factors, which depend on the player's psychology. These are emotional involvement, cognitive involvement, and real-world dissociation. The two remaining factors are challenge and control. They are called game factors, as they are dependent on the design of the game being played by the player.

Person factors are player-dependent as they reflect the individual's personal preferences and predispositions. The first factor, emotional involvement, refers to the player's empathy with the game's characters as well as empathy with the game's purpose or story. The second factor, cognitive involvement refers to the player's mental engagement with the game. A player is cognitively involved when they are actively thinking and mentally interacting with the virtual world. The last person factor is real-world dissociation, which is the extent to which the player feels disconnected

from the real world. In other words, it aims to measure the extent to which game stimuli prevail over real-world stimuli in the player's mind (Jennett et al., 2008).

Game factors, in contrast, are a product of the virtual environment with which the player is interacting. The first game factor, challenge, measures the perceived difficulty or complexity of in-game tasks. The greater the challenge, the more the game demands mental effort from the player. The other factor, control, measures the sense of agency, freedom, and influence that the player feels when immersed in a game. This control is important to the player's sense of engagement and satisfaction with their in-game actions.

The IEQ was then used in three experiments, which demonstrated that it was possible to measure immersion subjectively and objectively (Jennett et al., 2008). It also allowed the five factors mentioned above to be identified as important components of immersion. Due to good support for the validity of the IEQ, it has been cited and used in many studies since (Cox et al., 2012; Iacovides et al., 2015; Dwyer et al., 2018). However, a clear definition of immersion was not reached, and the similarities and overlaps between immersion, cognitive absorption, flow, and presence raise a question.

2.1.3 An immersive spectrum: Other approaches to immersion.

Immersion, fun, and challenge are consistently reported in games, even among wildly different genres and players. These three concepts all share a connection to flow. The degree of overlap and interconnected nature of all these concepts suggest that immersion may be nebulous because it is simply a repackaging of other game-related experiences. Realizing this, Cairns et al. (2014) sought to compare different definitions of immersion and other gaming-related experiences. By observing commonalities and differences between the models, they hoped to either isolate the essence of immersion or break it down into its constituent parts. Many models and perspectives were discussed, but a focus was placed on data-driven models.

The first major model they analyzed was devised by Calvillo-Gamez et al. in 2010. They used game reviews to identify the factors contributing to a good experience. The data they gathered resulted in the Puppetry theory, so named because the player has agency in the game while still existing externally to it. Puppetry can be

broken down into components, which were named the Core Elements of the Gaming Experience (CEGE). Cairns et al. concluded that the CEGE was a requirement for the achievement of engagement, the first level of immersion. However, they also noted that the presence of all the factors in CEGE is not sufficient to guarantee this. Higher levels of immersion must therefore depend on other factors of the gameplay experience outside of the CEGE.

Poels et al.'s approach from 2007 was next. In this approach, player testimony was used to identify and compile a comprehensive set of all the major components of the gaming experience. Poels et al. came up with the following list: enjoyment, flow, imaginative immersion, sensory immersion, suspense, competence, negative affect, control, and social presence (Poels et al., 2007). There is an overlap between these concepts and the concepts that make up Brown and Cairns' three-level formulation of immersion. However, some of the concepts in Poels et al.'s set lie completely outside immersion. Flow, for example, is related to immersion but is distinct from it (Cairns et al., 2014).

Following a similar approach, Calleja (2011) argued that immersion should be understood as part of a larger experience. The resulting concept was called incorporation. It describes the way a player assimilates the game environment in their consciousness and are themselves assimilated into the game through an avatar. In this view, immersion forms part of incorporation together with presence. It arises from the player's involvement in one or more of the six types of involvement defined by Calleja. Cairns et al. point out that immersion is not composed of these six types of involvement, but rather changes as the player's focus changes. Additionally, immersion can be affected by factors outside of this involvement model. These attempts to define immersion as something larger introduce complications and confounding factors, so a better strategy may consist in finding new ways to split immersion into constituent parts.

2.1.4 Three types of immersion: Immersion as a multifaceted construct.

Ermi and Mayra (2005) proposed a model featuring three different types of immersion: sensory, challenge-based, and imaginative. The resulting model was dubbed SCI to reflect these three types. In this model, sensory immersion results from

the audiovisual stimuli produced by the game. In this light, games become ever more immersive as they become more visually sophisticated and better drown out stimuli coming from the real world. Challenge-based immersion arises from satisfaction in overcoming challenges and exercising agency in the game world. Imaginative immersion is achieved when the player becomes absorbed in the stories and characters in the game, identifying and empathizing with them. Ermi and Mayra compared different games and concluded that different kinds of games create a different balance of the three immersion types, which they described as different modes of involvement.

Another model that categorizes immersion into three different types is by Adams (2004). He identified the three types of immersion as tactical immersion, strategic immersion, and narrative immersion. Tactical immersion occurs when the player is receiving and reacting to stimuli very quickly. The player's actions are reflexive and the player may appear to be in a trance. In this state, the player does not think in strategic terms but focuses on what is immediately in front of them. Strategic immersion arises from observing the game and calculating the best way forward. Players who become immersed in this way enjoy mental challenges and devote all their attention to their plan, and pay less attention to the story. Games provide narrative immersion in much the same way that books or films do. A player achieves narrative immersion when they empathize with characters and feel a need to see how the story ends.

For Ermi and Maya's Types of Immersion, Cairns et al. (2014) argue that the different involvement types of the SCI model correspond to the different components of immersion described by the IEQ. They state that challenge-based immersion overlaps with the factors of control, challenge, and cognitive involvement in their model, while imaginative immersion corresponds to the factor of emotional involvement. Sensory immersion corresponds to real-world dissociation but also includes the characteristics of presence, which is treated as external to immersion by the IEQ model. Unfortunately, the questionnaire developed by Ermi and Mayra for measurement of the SCI model was never published, so Cairns et al. were unable to compare the two models in greater detail.

For Adam's model of Immersion, Cairns et al. state that tactical immersion corresponds to the control factor and partially to the challenge factor of the IEQ. Strategic immersion relates to challenge as well but also encompasses the factor of

cognitive involvement. Narrative immersion in this model corresponds to emotional involvement. Real-world dissociation is not present in Adams' model. Cairns et al. concluded that immersion arises when Adams' three immersion types work in harmony, with real-world dissociation arising as a byproduct of this harmony.

2.1.5 Not quite there: Separating presence and immersion.

There is another concept in games research that is closely related to immersion: presence. Lombard and Ditton (2006) define presence as "the artificial sense that a user has in a virtual environment that the environment is unmediated". Through a meta-analysis of the literature on presence, they further found that presence can result from six different factors: the quality of social interactions, the agency of the player in the environment, the sense that virtual entities are intelligent social agents, environmental realism, the sense of transportation, and psychological and sensory immersion. The former three factors can each contribute to a sense of social presence, while the latter three can give rise to a sense of spatial presence.

Cairns et al. argued that their notion of immersion corresponds to the factor of psychological immersion described by Lombard and Ditton. They also added that the combined factor of psychological and sensory immersion corresponds closely to Ermi and Mayra's concept of immersion. They concluded that the concept of presence is sometimes used to cover the term of immersion but is also often defined to be different from immersion. To investigate this further, they compared social and spatial presence to immersion, each independently (Cairns et al., 2014).

Cairns et al. (2013) suggested that there is tension between social play and immersion. Social play involves stimuli that are external to the game, and might therefore represent a distraction from the player's immersive experience. They devised three experiments investigating the relationship between social presence and immersion. The results showed that players felt more immersed when playing with another person. It did not matter whether the other was physically present, however, as most interaction between the two players occurred primarily through the game. Social presence alone was not sufficient to explain the results of the experiments, indicating that they are distinct, if related, concepts.

Slater (2002) suggested that spatial presence is based on the perpetual evaluation of a perceptual hypothesis. Stimuli from the virtual world support the hypothesis that the player is located in the virtual environment. Presence occurs when this hypothesis wins out over the hypothesis that the player is located in the real world. Cairns et al. proposed that there are games, such as *Tetris*, that offer little to encourage a sense of presence but can still immerse the player. To confirm this, they ran an experiment in which spatial presence and immersion were dissociated from each other. They found that both presence and immersion can vary independently from each other, which supports the idea that immersion and spatial immersion are distinct from each other.

2.1.6 Is immersion real? Cairns et al.'s conclusions.

After having reviewed all of these approaches, and many others, Cairns et al. concluded that immersion is distinct from other gaming experiences like attention, flow, fun, and presence. They could not concretely define immersion, however. Since then, no models or definitions of immersion have yet been proposed that claim to significantly improve upon the models mentioned here. The three-level, IEQ, and SCI models of immersion have all been used extensively in game research, which is state-of-the-art in our understanding of immersion. The SCI model has one downside for the purposes of this paper, in that it includes *presence* in addition to the IEQ factors. This paper will focus on the three-level and IEQ models for simplicity.

2.2 Morality in Digital Games

Morality was not considered a part of the gameplay in the early days of video games. The first digital games were simple both in their mechanics and in their visuals. Old gaming consoles had limited graphical capabilities, resulting in highly pixelated game objects and characters. Because of this, many games used abstract representations of characters and items, such as the tennis paddles and ball in *Pong* or the eponymous Pac-Man from *Pac-Man*. Featuring abstract representations of real-world games, or cartoon-like characters at best, there was little moral content in these early games. As games became more advanced and graphics technology improved, it

became possible to represent characters, environments, and in-game events with a higher degree of realism. This came to a head in 1992 with the release of the arcade game *Mortal Kombat*, which is a martial arts fighting game similar to previous titles such as *Street Fighter* or *Fatal Fury*. While many games had previously featured human characters, *Mortal Kombat* was set apart by its realistic visual approach. Character images and animations used real-world martial artists as references, making them look like real humans, as opposed to cartoony representations. This realism also extended to the violence portrayed in the game. Character attacks are often sadistic and regularly result in blood sprays, decapitations, disembowelment, exposure of human bones, or the burning of flesh (Alexander, 2009), setting the stage for a flurry of ethical concerns surrounding video games.

2.2.1 Innocence lost: Video games and moral disengagement.

Mortal Kombat was a huge success, becoming the most popular arcade game in the United States in 1993 (Electronic Games, Vol 1). Its success led to secondary releases of the game for home gaming consoles. That same year another violently realistic and massively popular game was published: *Doom*. It is a first-person shooter that was critically acclaimed for its graphics, high-paced combat, and level design. Like *Mortal Kombat*, it features plenty of blood and gore, but in addition, features satanic imagery and firearms. Several other similarly violent games were released around the same time. Up until that point, video games were widely considered to be intended for children, leading to concern among legislators and the public that exposure to these games may make children themselves violent (Crossley, 2014).

On April 20, 1999, high school students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire at Columbine High School in Colorado, killing 12 students and a teacher before both committing suicide. It was the deadliest high school shooting in U.S. history at the time (Onion et al., 2009). The investigation into the shootings revealed that both perpetrators were avid fans of first-person shooters, *Doom* in particular. In a journal, Harris had written that the massacre would “be like the LA riots, the Oklahoma bombing, WWII, Vietnam, *Duke*, and *Doom* all mixed” (CNN, 2001). Video games came under intense public scrutiny following the findings. Many academic papers discussing the effects of video game violence on aggression and moral behavior were

published in the years following the massacre. Most of these were focused on the potential negative impact of virtual violence on real-world behavior (Bartholow, 2005; Klimmt, 2006, Weber, 20006). In 2010, Hartmann and Vorderer (2010) wrote a paper discussing how players frame in-game violence as “just a game” to decrease feelings of guilt and negative affect as a result of their actions. This phenomenon, called moral disengagement, is what allows for the enjoyment of violent or otherwise immoral actions in video games.

2.2.2 Virtual guilt: The rise of morality as a game mechanic.

Nonetheless, moral disengagement is not necessarily present in all gaming experiences. In another paper published later that year, Hartmann et al. (2010) studied how players themselves experience their immoral in-game behaviors. They found that immoral in-game actions do induce guilt in players when they are perceived as unjustified, especially in empathic players. When the same actions were perceived as justified, however, even empathic players could easily enter moral disengagement. The ability of games to induce guilt was determined to arise from the human mind’s tendency to identify social entities based on biological movement and other cues. Essentially, people tend to automatically behave as though computers and virtual characters are real people. This allows for social responses such as guilt to be experienced as a result of interaction with them.

At around that same time, morality systems and moral decision-making were becoming popular features in major video games (e.g., *The Witcher 2*, Telltale’s *The Walking Dead*, *Fallout: New Vegas*). Noticing the popularization of moral choice as a game mechanic, Weaver and Lewis (2012) decided to investigate whether players’ real-life conceptions of morality can inform their in-game decisions. They conducted an experiment in which players were made to play the game *Fallout 3*, an immersive first-person RPG in which players have the freedom to behave morally or not. The players’ real-world moral intuition was recorded before play, and it was found that real-world intuition indeed significantly predicted the players’ in-game behavior. The players also filled in a questionnaire after play, which revealed that behaving immorally led to increased feelings of guilt in players. Weaver and Lewis noted that moral disengagement did not occur for the majority of their test subjects. Moral

disengagement is at odds with our cognitive tendency to consider game characters to be real social entities. Therefore, reaching moral disengagement requires either cues from the game or a conscious moral rationalization from the player. In games with explicit moral choices, like *Fallout 3*, players are encouraged to think of characters as people, lending weight to the player's moral decisions. It then requires greater mental effort to remain detached, breaking moral disengagement (Weaver and Lewis, 2012).

In 2014, Grizzard et al. (2014) found that aside from merely inducing guilt, immoral in-game actions could also increase players' moral sensitivities. They highlighted the interactive nature of games as a basis for moral agency. This component of the gaming experience distinguishes it from other forms of media and is what allows games to induce guilt in players. This guilt acts as a mediator between in-game events and the player's moral intuitions. If the player feels guilt as a result of their actions, the relevant moral intuitions become more sensitive. If the player does not feel guilt, their moral intuitions are unaffected. This evidence suggests that antisocial in-game behavior can have prosocial effects on players in the real world, contrary to popular belief at the time.

2.2.3 Tactful or tactical: Different approaches to morality systems.

While it is clear that video games can elicit genuine moral responses from players, it is not yet clear what the characteristics of a good morality mechanic are. Lange (2014) identified three different approaches to morality in games. The first and most common one is the binary choice system. In this system, there are explicitly labeled "good" or "bad" actions. The player's choices are tracked by increasing or decreasing some morality scores. This score in turn affects the game in some way, usually by changing the attitudes of other characters toward the player or by unlocking bits of narrative or gameplay. The second approach is narrative-based. Games using this approach do not track a score but instead, present the player with multiple unlabeled options that affect the game's narrative in morally relevant ways. This is essentially a branching story in which some of the player's actions have a moral connotation. The third approach is the hidden moral decision. In this approach, it is not clear what options the player has, and they are typically encouraged or even forced to act in the heat of the moment.

Through a survey, Lange also gained insights into moral choice system design. She found that the majority of players, regardless of gender, will follow their real-world morality on the first playthrough of a game. Players who played the game a second time reportedly wanted to experience whatever alternate content the game offered. The majority of respondents also believed that playing morally was more rewarding than playing immorally and that it is fair for a game to punish evil actions. Some players reported feeling frustrated when forced or tricked into acting immorally, or when none of the options at hand aligned with their moral intuitions. Despite this, an overwhelming majority of players also felt it was fair for games to reward immoral behavior and a majority cited the game story as the basis for their in-game morality. Lange concluded that more nuanced moral options lead to a greater sense of control in players, increasing enjoyment and causing binary-choice systems to go out of style. In a 2016 video essay discussing morality in games, Mark Brown (2016) argues that binary choice systems do make sense in the case of RPGs, in which the players have the option to choose a moral alignment of their character and act accordingly, rather than applying their moral intuitions.

2.2.4 Nudged in the right direction? Pushing players to be bad.

Meier and Bellini (2021) studied *Detroit: Become Human* and identified several ways in which players could be influenced to make certain moral decisions without taking away their freedom of choice. In political and social sciences, this is known as a nudge (Meier and Bellini 2021). Instances of nudges were found in four aspects of the game: the narrative, the story world, the characters, and the game's interface. Narrative nudges begin when first starting the game. The android protagonists are framed as objects or slaves from the beginning, encouraging empathy. Each of the three main characters presents narrative tropes: one is a rookie detective, another escapes an abusive relationship in defense of a child, and the third is a slave-turned-revolutionary. These tropes carry clear moral understanding, encouraging empathy with the main characters.

The story world in *Detroit* is built around nudges. Environments are small but highly detailed, offering many clues and pieces of information that become relevant in later moral decisions. Each clue provides an argument that supports a certain choice.

Clues are placed such that information supporting the preferred decision is easiest to obtain. Players also explore and make choices by mimicking the actions of the in-game character, supporting empathy. The characters are well-written and complex, making them prone to eliciting emotions. It is easy to empathize with them, and this gives the characters' opinions some influence on the player's decisions. Character-specific music is used to encourage certain emotional reactions, offering another nudge. An example of an interface nudge occurs even before gameplay begins. It is made clear in the difficulty selection screen that characters may die, adding weight to the player's choices (Meier and Bellini 2021).

It's been established that moral decision systems in games are predicated on empathy and agency. While agency implies freedom of choice, developers can influence players to make certain decisions by embedding nudges into many different aspects of the game. Some common player behaviors and preferences have been identified, suggesting that developers can likely predict common player experiences and design nudges accordingly. Empathy is important in both moral decision-making and immersion, suggesting some deeper relationship could be uncovered through the right method of analysis.

2.3 Close Reading in Digital Games

The analysis of video games at an academic level is challenging. Like any work of media, they are very multifaceted and open to interpretation. Therefore, a robust and comprehensive method of analysis is necessary to investigate the way immersion and moral decision-making in games interact. In literary theory there is just such a method, known as *close reading*. Close reading is a detailed examination, deconstruction, and analysis of a media text. It first appeared in the 1930s as a technique for the study of literature, but has since been expanded and adapted to other forms of media such as cinema (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011). As close reading traditionally deals with the reading of text, it would need to be adapted to video games in such a way that the method encompass the full gameplay experience.

2.3.1 It's how you look at it: Lenses for game analysis.

In 2006, Consalvo and Dutton formulated a methodology for video game analysis centered around the construction of different analytical lenses. Their method bears close resemblance to close reading, but does not draw directly from close reading's literary tradition. As a result, it cannot be considered a comprehensive tool for video game research (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011). Similarly, Carr (2009) drew on a set of five different analytical lenses in her analysis of the game *Resident Evil 4*. Her lenses were based on five groupings of textual signifiers established by Barthes in 1974. Barthes argued that text should be considered a multi-voiced interpreted experience, and that by focusing on one of these groupings at a time it was possible to isolate specific facets of a text, laying bear important details about the text and the medium in general (Barthes, 1974).

Carr acknowledged that applying Barthes' lenses to a video game was difficult. Many of the groupings seem to overlap, and it is at times impossible to draw a line between intentions of the game and the reality of gameplay for the player. To account for the potential disparity between the text's connotations and the associations made by the player, Carr drew on Bennett and Woollacotts' work on inter-textuality. They point out that texts cannot be understood in isolation because each reader brings their own set of 'reading formations' to the experience. It is these formations that determine which aspects of the text resonate with the reader (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987). When performing close readings, the scholar similarly approaches the text with their own set of theoretical issues and observational lenses. These lenses include literary traditions, traditions from other forms of media, and concerns drawn from cultural studies (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011).

Expanding close reading to be applicable to video games requires the notion of text itself to be expanded. In the formalist approach to narrative advocated by Innis and McLuhan (Innis, 1971; McLuhan, 1997), new digital media must be treated differently from old media due to the variance in experience that arises from computational mediation. In the formalist perspective, different mediums privilege different types of communication. The result is that structure or form takes precedence over the content or meaning of a narrative work when analyzing a text (Bertens, 2008). Winthrop-Young claims that the relationship between form (media technology) and content (narrative) is more reciprocal. He argues that:

1. Narrative is a media technology

2. Narratives depend on media technologies
3. Narratives deal with media technology (Winthrop-Young, 1997)

This perspective rejects the traditional division between form and content, suggesting that text should be understood to be the sum of the medium, message, and all the interactions between the two. This view allows video games to be considered as texts despite often containing minimal written text. A close reading approach to video game analysis is therefore potentially feasible.

2.3.2 Hardcore readers: The difficulty of close reading in games.

However, there are some challenges facing any attempt to read a video game. By their nature, video games are indeterminate when compared to other media. One cannot guarantee that two readers will encounter the same media assets, that they will encounter assets in the same order, or even that they will observe the same details of the experience when all other things are equal. Video games inherently undergo an explicit and literal restructuring of their content and presentation throughout the reading. There is also an issue of scope, in that the narratives in games can be up to hundreds of hours long and are often set in large worlds that may take many weeks to fully apprehend. This is compounded by minimal bookmarking, as the player cannot freely return to a previous point in the narrative as they would in a film or book. Then there is the issue of difficulty in games. Unlike in other media, the skill level of the player and the difficulty of the experience are relevant, as players of different skill will attend to different details of the experience. The skill of the player also increases over time, which must be taken into account when performing a reading of a video game (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011).

Traditionally, close reading entails a deep immersion in the text. For this to remain true when reading a video game, the scholar must allow themselves to engage with the game in an authentic manner. It is not sufficient for the scholar to approach the game solely as a critic. They must also experience the game openly and on its own terms. In effect, the reader must maintain two modes of cognitive attention throughout the reading. On one hand, the reader must role-play the naive gamer, as though they were encountering the game for the first time and engaging with it openly and without preconceptions. On the other hand, the reader must remain distanced from the

experience, maintaining objectivity and recording critical details. When close-reading the reader must oscillate between these two states to build reliable, consistent, and comprehensive observations (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011).

2.3.3 Serious play: Role-playing as an analytical tool.

This imagined naive player allows the scholar to account for the difference in perspective and variability in experience during close reading. The naive interactor can focus on the experience of the game without being distracted by technical details. It is also useful to construct additional fictional readings with specific player types in mind. A single, neutral reading may not properly represent the variety of possible gameplay experiences that a game can offer. Imagined players with specifically constructed biases may reveal new details and insights about the game. The constructed biases should be designed so as to experience a specific aspect of the game's design (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011).

Once the scholar has completed the reading, they must make sense of it. In effect, they attempt to use the experience to reverse-engineer the mechanics and dynamics of the game's design. The vast amount of data obtained from close reading may be overwhelming to analyse, so it may be useful for the researcher to focus their attention on specific aspects of the experience. By constructing analytical lenses, the scholar can constrain the interpretations of the data they collected. However, they must also keep in mind that the nature of their analytical lens may evolve during the reading itself and account for this fact (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011).

It is clear that close reading is a powerful tool for the analysis of works of media. It has also been established that, given the right methodology and considerations, close reading can be applied to video games as much as to any other form of media. By making use of imagined player types during the reading, the researcher can narrow their study to those aspects of the game most relevant to their work. By then also analysing the data gathered through different lenses, the researcher can uncover relationships between specific aspects of the game's design. This methodology forms the basis for the close reading of *Papers, Please* that follows.

2.3.4 Getting documents in order: Preparing for close reading.

Having extensively researched immersion, moral decision-making, and close reading techniques in the context of video games, it is now possible to establish a concrete plan for the reading and analysis of *Papers, Please*. The first step is to conduct a reading of the game from the perspective of Bizzocchi's naive interactor. The gameplay of *Papers, Please* consists of a sequence of one-on-one interactions with different non-player characters. This is convenient because it provides the player with easily-identifiable opportunities to oscillate between the mental state of the imagined player and that of the scholar-critic. The reader should allow themselves to be fully immersed for the duration of each interaction and make use of the time in between non-player characters to reflect on and record the details and affects of the interaction.

Once the reading is complete, the data gathered must be analyzed through the lenses that seem most likely to shed light on the relationship between immersion and moral decision-making. The first lens that will be used is that of Brown and Cairns' three-level model of immersion. By identifying the barriers, or lack thereof, to immersion, the reader can identify what broad aspects of the game's design are relevant to immersion. The second lens is the IEQ, which offers the opportunity for a more granular and detailed analysis of individual design elements in the context of immersion. The following lens is that of the player's moral agency, and the final lens concerns itself with game design elements that can nudge the player towards specific moral behaviors. These last two are expected to provide further insight into how the game morally engages the player.

With a concrete methodology established, it is time to perform and discuss the close reading of *Papers, Please*.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Literature Review

There will be a discussion of the literature on immersion, moral decision-making, and their roles in digital gaming experiences. A comprehensive literature review will be conducted to understand the existing research on and the role of immersion and moral decisions in video games. The literature review will encompass studies, academic articles, industry publications, and video publications related to game design, immersion, and moral decision-making in video games. Relevant data will be extracted, including theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and design principles. The principles of close reading and its application to video games will also be similarly discussed.

3.2 Close Reading

Close reading is an analytical technique originating in literary theory. It is based on the reading of a work of media through multiple analytical lenses, which allows the reader to focus on different aspects of the work in isolation and in context. A relevant game will be read through the lenses of immersion and morality, exploring how they attempt to create immersion and how they present the player with moral decisions. This approach is expected to provide concrete insight into how moral decisions affect immersion, and in turn how an immersed player makes moral decisions differently from a less immersed one. Detailed observations will be made regarding the gameplay dynamics, narrative progression, and the emotional and cognitive responses evoked by moral choices. These will be analyzed in an attempt to discern patterns, themes, and variations in player experiences, focusing on the relationship between immersion and moral decision-making.

3.3 Game Selection

For this study to be successful, the game chosen must both incorporate moral decision-making in its mechanics and narrative, and must have a reputation for being immersive. It must also be relatively short, as close reading is a labor-intensive process and it must remain practical to play through the game several times over. Considering these factors, the award-winning indie game *Papers, Please* is a strong candidate. It features a wide array of morally compelling dilemmas and has been praised for its immersive and emotional power (Machkovech, 2013). Each playthrough of the game is only a handful of hours long, making it quite suitable for a close reading approach.

3.4 Data Synthesis

The findings from the close reading will be synthesized to identify aspects of the relationship between immersion and moral decision-making. Key insights and observations will be compiled into a comprehensive guide for game designers seeking to incorporate moral decisions into their games. The guide will provide practical recommendations and design principles based on the analysis of how moral decisions impact immersion and player experiences. The insights gained from this analysis can also give rise to more questions and prompt future research to investigate the relationship between immersion and moral decision-making.

Chapter 4

Findings

Papers, Please is a pixel-art narrative-based puzzle simulation game created by Lucas Pope and released in 2013. It went on to win 9 game awards and be nominated for many others, many of them for the game's innovation and design. By August 2016, over 1.8 million copies had been sold (Pope, 2016). *Papers, Please* does an excellent job of creating a hostile and oppressive setting. The art style, narrative, and even the unique dragging-and-stamping mechanic all create a sense of grim finality and constant anxiety. It also does a good job of making players feel empathy with the characters they encounter, adding even more weight to their actions. The many ways the game can end all make the player feel the consequences of their actions. *Papers, Please* is an immersive game full of moral choices if ever there was one (Machkovech, 2013; Croshaw, 2013).

4.1 The Naïve Interactor's First Day of Work

In *Papers, Please*, the player takes the role of a border guard in a fictional Soviet Union analog called Arstotzka. The guardpost that the player is assigned to is faced with a long trail of travelers, some of them refugees, from neighboring countries all seeking to gain entry into the country. It is the player's task to check each entrant's documentation and refuse entry to anyone with discrepancies in their documents.

From the beginning, the game's atmosphere is cold and oppressive. At the start, the player is assigned their new job as a border guard in the city of East Grestin and is provided with a small dwelling for himself and his family. Each morning, the player walks to work through gray concrete streets, arriving at a cramped, dimly lit passport control booth. The colors are drab and the faces of the people the player interacts with are gaunt, tired, and sad. Outside, the player can see metal fences and armed guards, as well as the endless stream of people waiting to meet him. Aside from the main theme, which plays during cutscenes and in the main menu, the game has no music. There is nothing to distract the player from the seriousness of their task.

On their first day at work, the player is presented with a book of rules and instructions that they are to follow. The first entrant comes inside and presents the player with a passport. The player must inspect this passport for any detail that might be out of place. Names, birthdates, expiration dates, height, weight, sex, age, official seals, etc. must all check out if the player is to allow them through. The player is provided with a stipend for each entrant allowed to enter and is cited for allowing people with discrepant documents to enter. Rejecting a traveler with valid documentation will also cause a citation. The player makes their decision by dragging the person's passport under one of two stamps, one red, and one green, and pressing down. They must then return all the traveler's documents before the next person can enter. The act of diegetically placing the stamp has a certain finality to it, and the bright colors of the player's decision stand out against the rest of the environment, reinforcing this.

The work is tedious but not difficult per se. To provide a sense of challenge, the game applies pressure in three ways. Firstly, it provides the player with a daily time limit. This incentivizes the player to go through passports quickly, increasing the odds that the player makes a mistake. Secondly, the money that the player receives at the end of each day is given a purpose. The player shares their dreary apartment with their family, composed of their wife, son, uncle, and mother-in-law. Each night, a part of the player's earnings are spent on rent. The player must then decide on what to spend the remainder of their money. They can choose between food, heating, and medicine, or they can choose to save what they've earned that day. If the player has played very well, they may be able to afford all their necessities and even set some cash aside for a rainy day, but this is usually not the case. Thirdly, on the second day, a terrorist jumps the fence and throws a grenade, killing a border guard and ending the day early. This contrasts starkly with the first day, which is designed to most likely go by without a hitch. The grenade attack wakes the player to the sinister reality of the world in which they are participating.

The result is that players may begin to engage in risky behavior to ensure their safety and that of their families. They may forego heating for a night to ensure there is food on the table. The risk is that, without both food and warmth, any member of the family might fall ill and require expensive medicine to survive. The player may also let people through without thorough inspection to process more travelers and receive

better pay. Here, the obvious risk is that the player may let someone through who they should not have. The player will find that the first two mistakes they make result in warnings, with increasingly expensive monetary penalties beginning with the third error. The grenade attack on the second day serves as a counter to this, showing the player that there may be dire consequences to their decisions. At this point, the player has learned to take calculated risks to ensure their family's well-being.

To push the player further, the game ramps up the difficulty regularly, adding new rules and introducing new ways in which unsavory visitors may try to circumvent the system. Entry tickets are introduced on the third day. This is an additional document that the player must review and cross-check for errors, costing them precious time and making the job more confusing. Other documents follow, such as entry permits, work passes, etc. Soon the player is juggling an entire pile of papers for each entrant. Other mechanics are also added. From day 7 on, some characters may need to be checked for contraband weapons, drugs, and the like. On day 8 the player is given a tranquilizer rifle that they are to use whenever a traveler attempts to cross the fence. Eventually, the player also receives a Wanted Criminals list that he must check for every traveler. This wave of information, rules, and competing interests makes the game very stressful and makes costly mistakes ever more likely as the game progresses.

4.2 The Borders of Morality: Ethical Dilemmas in Papers, Please

The game already requires the player to disregard laws and make painful decisions, but the truly difficult decisions are the moral conundrums that the player begins to face. Travelers will sometimes discuss their personal lives and reveal information about themselves that the player will have to take into account. Some travelers may present recently-outdated documents or enter without any documents at all. When questioned about this, many will reveal having experienced oppression or abuse in their country of origin. In some situations, strict adherence to the rules may require families to be separated or persecuted refugees to return to their oppressors. Some other characters may make allegations against other characters that the player may meet. The player may decide to interrogate the accused entrant when they enter, and they will likely receive an explanation or excuse. The player may still accept or

reject them, keeping in mind that accepting them will earn them much-needed income while rejecting them will spare the player a potentially painful citation and any other consequences of letting the wrong people in. They are forced to make a moral choice between another's life and their self-interest.

The player soon learns that their actions also have farther-reaching consequences. On day 6, a woman hands the player a note stating that a man named Dari Ludum will be entering the country that day. The woman is afraid that Ludum will force her and her sister to work in a brothel if he is allowed through. Ludum arrives later the same day, presenting valid papers. If the player manages to recognize his name, they may detain him. At the beginning of each day, a newspaper is presented to the player, containing articles on local happenings in East Grestin and international affairs. This newspaper is kept in the player's booth throughout the day as a reference. If Ludum is detained, the news will report the apprehension of a "mastermind of human trafficking" the following day. If he is not detained for whatever reason, the news will instead report the deaths of several dancers at the brothel in question. This is the first time that the player sees their actions have direct consequences in the world and may persuade them to take the word of entrants more seriously or to be more diligent in their inspections.

Not even the player's home is safe from moral dilemmas. On day 21, the player is informed that their sister has been arrested for unknown reasons. The sister has a daughter, the player's niece, and the player is given the option to adopt her in exchange for 40 credits. If the player declines, their niece disappears the following day. If the player accepts, their niece joins the household. She brings 100 credits with her, resulting in a profit of 60 credits. However, she will also increase the family's food costs by 5 credits per day, potentially putting strain on the player. The player is not aware that they will be rewarded if they adopt their niece, and so must be willing to make themselves vulnerable to do so. The increased costs that result from adoption may make the player feel regret at adopting her, while the guilt of her disappearance may make them regret not adopting her. The game does not shy from making the player feel the weight of their decisions at any time.

As if all of these stress factors weren't enough, the player eventually encounters members of a mysterious organization called EZIC, who are attempting to topple Arstotzka's authoritarian government. The player may choose to cooperate

with, or ignore, members of EZIC. Regardless, the player will soon come under investigation by the Arstotzkan government and risk execution. There are 20 ways in which the game can end, depending on the player's actions throughout the game. The game ends after 32 days, but the player can be arrested or executed before then, ending the game early. If the player reaches the 32nd day, they may escape to Obristan, become a member of EZIC, or simply return to work the following day, among other possibilities.

4.3 Drag and Drop to Heart and Soul: Papers, Please and Immersion

Papers, Please is certainly immersive. From the beginning, the game presents few barriers to engagement. Although the dark theme and pixel graphics may put some players off, once a player has picked up the game it is easy to get into. The mechanics consist primarily of dragging and dropping documents with the mouse, which is very intuitive and natural. The core game mechanic is also easy to understand: check all the data correctly and earn money for your family. Fail to do so, and lose money. The story is excellent and multifaceted and is provided in small pieces, making it easy to digest. To anyone who likes suspenseful narratives, there are very few barriers to achieving engagement.

Once a player is engaged, the game offers an easy path to engrossment as well. Several aspects of the game lend themselves to emotional investment. The most obvious is the player's family, who are wholly dependent on the player's performance for survival. Another may be the EZIC organization and its schemes, as the game does a good job of making the Arstotzkan government decidedly unlikeable. Some players may invest in the plight of the incoming masses, while others may simply enjoy the satisfaction of a good day's work. There's enough variety in the game for most players to have an easy time reaching engrossment.

The barriers to total immersion are empathy and atmosphere, both of which *Papers, Please* manages to provide in spades. As previously discussed, it does an excellent job of conveying a dark and oppressive atmosphere. The music (or lack thereof), color palette, and dialogues tint every aspect of the game with a somber hopelessness. The mechanics reinforce this by applying pressure onto the player, giving rise to a sense of anxiety that goes hand in hand with the setting. It is easy to

sympathize with the main character's impossible situation. The game is played from a first-person perspective, and the player character's face is never revealed. This allows the player to imagine themselves in the role, encouraging more empathy. The other characters the player meets are well-written, and most players will find themselves empathizing with one or more of them at one point or another. Only the pixelated visuals of the game seem to pose a potential barrier to empathy. However, this may be by design, which will be discussed later. Aside from this detail, it seems safe to say that *Papers, Please* offers few barriers to total immersion.

If we look at the game through the lens of the IEQ, we can isolate the different factors that give this game its immersive power. First come the game factors of challenge and control, both of which *Papers, Please* offers to a high degree. The challenge is provided by the increasing number of rules, threats, illnesses, and other problems that the player faces throughout the game. Control is provided by the player's agency over the lives of those around him, whether they are family or strangers, good or bad. The fact that this game excels in in-game factors is in agreement with the idea that it poses few barriers to immersion. While the person factors are in principle dependent on the player's personal attributes, *Papers, Please* does have some design characteristics that can encourage them. Emotional involvement is facilitated by the gameplay perspective and very well-written characters. Alternatively, players may also feel emotional involvement in the struggle against authoritarianism that is prevalent in the game's plot and mechanics. Cognitive involvement is provided by the increasing amount of rules and subplots that are presented to the player. Real-world dissociation is perhaps harder to influence through game design, but one can argue that the lack of music removes a potential source of distraction, allowing the player to focus on game-related stimuli.

4.4 Free Will in a Totalitarian State: Moral Decisions in *Papers, Please*

Initially, it seems that *Papers, Please* offers little freedom of choice, as decisions are limited to a binary stamp press. However, the game is actually full of hidden moral decisions embedded into the interactions between the player and the entrants. The player often receives additional documents, items, and bits of dialogue that can be used to change the outcome of a decision even before a passport is stamped. The game is not very long and, like *Detroit: Become Human*, has many different

endings. This potentially encourages players to play multiple times, which allows them to discover the extent of their freedom and agency in the story.

Papers, Please is loaded with moral content. Every stamp has the potential to become a moral judgment. Many complex dilemmas are presented to the player, and doing the right thing is deliberately made difficult or even painful. The oppressive setting, family situation, and risk of being arrested nudge the player to behave immorally when it results in personal gain. The pixelated visuals likely decrease the possibility of empathy with entrants, as mentioned before. There may be a benefit to this, however. Although many characters offer some interesting narrative or a moral dilemma, most characters are fairly mundane. If the player were to empathize with each entrant they meet, it may weaken the impact of more interesting decisions. The visual style might then serve as a nudge to morally disengage from the entrants unless they offer a sufficiently-interesting moral quandary to break the player's detachment. Mark Brown (2016) suggests that players are constantly nudged to behave immorally for the sake of their own survival, and comments that the game represents how good people can be driven to act immorally by environmental factors very well.

Chapter 5

Discussions and Conclusions

Papers, Please features complex and relatable characters with whom the player can easily empathize. This empathy contributes to immersion by making the player emotionally invested in the game and their characters. This same empathy forms the basis for moral reasoning in the game. Moral dilemmas compel players to think critically and consider the potential consequences of their actions. This is reinforced by making it clear to the player that consequences can be grave, in many cases leading to the possible death of important characters. This heightened level of cognitive engagement is often paired with atmospheric, narrative, or mechanical cues that can lead a player to identify more strongly with their character, and to a deeper sense of being “in the game”. In other words, moral choice systems have the potential to increase player immersion by placing them in a similar emotional and perceptual state as the character.

However, the impact of moral choices on immersion can be negative if they are not seamlessly integrated into the game. One important characteristic of a good moral choice system is agency. The player expects that they will be able to make choices that align with their personal moral intuitions (Lange, 2014; Bartel, 2015). They also expect that their actions will have meaningful consequences. When a game’s morality system empowers the player in this way, the player feels a sense of control and satisfaction when they see the effect they’ve had on the game world. They can identify strongly with the result of their actions, which supports immersion and presence. If the choices offered by the game feel forced or out of place, they serve as reminders that the player is participating in a game. The character then commits some act that the player cannot identify, disconnecting the player and character in the player’s mind. This weakens empathy, disrupts immersion, and can lead to frustration or resentment in the worst cases. Therefore, game developers must thoughtfully design and present moral choices in a manner that enhances rather than detracts from the player’s sense of immersion.

Moral choices can also evoke feelings of guilt and regret. If players make choices that contradict their own moral compass, they may experience remorse or even

shame. Although these emotions are considered negative, they are not necessarily unwelcome feelings in a game. If the player made their decision based on their own moral intuitions, they will not feel the disconnect mentioned above. In the games discussed in the case study, the feelings of guilt or disempowerment that the player feels are in line with the game's atmosphere at that time, encouraging immersion rather than disrupting it. The difficulty in this approach is to ensure sufficient moral ambiguity, or otherwise entice the player to behave immorally. *Papers, Please* uses mechanical nudges to achieve this, making it increasingly difficult for the player to get by without transgressing on their moral intuitions.

The interplay between moral choices and immersion is reciprocal. While moral choice systems can modulate immersion, players may also approach moral decisions differently when they are highly immersed. A more immersed player likely feels more empathy for the in-game characters, which may lead them to weigh their options differently. A highly immersed player may also make choices that they would not make in real life if they are empathizing with an immoral character. This is relevant because the wide range of invisible choices hidden in the game allows the player to roleplay as someone very different from themselves if they so wish.

Through this literature review and close reading analysis, we can learn that creating a truly immersive and morally engaging video game experience requires a careful balance between character design, narrative, gameplay mechanics, and player agency. Striking the right balance will help draw players into the game world, while the wrong balance may break the player's immersion. *Papers, Please* bases its moral systems and immersive power on complex and interesting characters. The player invests emotionally in these characters, making moral dilemmas more compelling and making them feel connected to the game world. What has become clear is that these games' different approaches to moral decisions are trying to accomplish the same goal. By temporarily and subtly altering the calculus of the morality system, they encourage players to think about their situation differently, adding weight and atmosphere to the game that was not as noticeable previously.

5.1 Data Synthesis: Designing for Immersion and Morality

Some patterns have been uncovered in the way that *Papers, Please* manages the interplay between immersion and moral choice. A short guide follows below, highlighting useful guidelines and potential pitfalls in the design of such games.

5.1.1 Character design.

Immersion and morality systems both start with empathy. However, immersion tends to be focused on empathy with the player character, while moral choice systems can offer more compelling conundrums when the player empathizes strongly with other characters. The games in the case study above suggest that a strong cast of interesting, relatable, and complex characters is critical for immersive, morally charged gaming experiences.

5.1.2 Narrative design.

The narrative is a crucial component in designing for immersion and morality. A well-crafted story can draw players into the game world and make them care about the characters and their choices. Large, advanced games may offer branching narratives in which moral choices have a significant impact on the overarching story of the game. Smaller games can create smaller, isolated moral dilemmas that have, provided the player and characters are affected by the result of the encounter. For maximum effect, the narrative should present players with morally ambiguous situations that challenge their beliefs and values.

5.1.3 Gameplay mechanics.

The choice and design of gameplay mechanics play a crucial role in creating a truly immersive and morally engaging experience. The mechanics of the game should promote player agency and control, both to facilitate immersion and to ensure players can act according to their moral intuitions. The mechanics should also allow the game designer to apply pressure on the player or otherwise nudge them towards morally-relevant behaviors. The consequences of the moral choices that the player makes will

be felt more strongly by the player if the game's mechanics can make the player feel and identify with the situation facing the in-game characters.

5.1.4 Player agency.

The player's level of agency is crucial in determining how players will feel and act when presented with a moral dilemma. Although a high level of agency promotes both immersion and the enjoyment of moral choices, temporarily tampering with a player's agency can nudge them to make morally interesting choices, while also providing a change of atmosphere that can promote further immersion. Essentially, player agency is the variable that a game designer can nudge in order to provide the player with whatever in-game experiences that the designer wishes.

5.2 Implications and Future Research

This research has succeeded in finding some preliminary connections between immersion and moral decision-making in video games. One implication is that by understanding how immersion and moral choices interact, developers can design games that provide players with meaningful choices and a deeper sense of immersion. This can lead to more satisfying gaming experiences and increased enjoyment. Another implication is that this research could help inform discussions about the potential effects of video games on players. By understanding how video games can affect players' emotions and moral intuitions, researchers can better understand how games may impact players' behaviors. This can help inform debates about the potential benefits and risks of playing video games. This research has also once again proven the usefulness of close reading as a methodology for analyzing video games.

In terms of future directions, researchers can continue to explore the relationship between immersion and moral choices in video games. This can include investigating what new insights can be obtained by using different formulations of immersion (e.g. Emri and Mayra's SCI model or Calleja's concept of incorporation) as analytical lenses, as well as examining how individual differences (e.g. personality, culture) influence the emotional impact of moral choices in games. Finally, it would be valuable to investigate how the emotional impact of moral choices in video games

might influence real-world behavior and decision-making. This could have important implications for fields such as education and psychology, as well as for the video game industry itself.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has delved into the intricate relationship between immersion and moral choices in video games, shedding light on their profound impact on a player's emotional experience. Through a comprehensive exploration of scholarly literature and a close reading of the popular game *Papers, Please*, the interplay between these elements and their implications for game design, player engagement, and real-world behavior have been partially unraveled. By understanding the multifaceted nature of immersion and the potential emotive power of moral choices, game designers can create experiences that transcend entertainment, offering players meaningful and emotionally resonant gameplay. Balancing game components and leveraging the power of moral decision-making can lead to more satisfying gaming experiences and increased enjoyment.

This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on the emotional effects that video games have on players. By shedding light on the intricate dynamics of immersion and moral choices, new avenues for understanding the potential impacts of video games on players' emotions and behaviors have been opened. This knowledge can inform debates regarding the benefits and risks of gaming and guide future research in fields such as education, psychology, and the video game industry.

As this exploration draws to a close, it has become evident that understanding the interplay between immersion and moral choices in video games holds great potential for the future of psychology, moral ethics, and the games industry as a whole. Future investigation into this relationship and its implications can further enrich the landscape of video game experiences and deepen our understanding of the intricate connections between virtual worlds and the human experience. Ultimately, the dynamics uncovered in this paper have the power to shape not only the gaming industry but also our perceptions of interactive storytelling and the transformative potential of digital media.

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