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Video Games in the Classroom. Highlighting Biases, Player Behaviours, and Ethical Decision-Making

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Abstract
Video games offer a wealth of potential topics for instruction at the university level. Theoretical content can be made more concrete and accessible and allow students to consider course content in new ways. Topics related to biases, stereotypes, behaviour, representation, and ethics can be explored. This is particularly true for narrative-rich games, like role-playing games and games that feature religion. These aspects of some video games can support and extend course content on numerous topics including structural inequalities, cultural influences, and player motivations as they relate to narrative content and contexts. Taken together, instructors can use examples from video games to support student discussion and learning by pairing video game content with higher-level theory and course materials. These approaches are effective in engaging students, grounding course concepts, and supporting learning outcomes.

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Video games present players with many opportunities, from exploring facets of identity (Consalvo 2013) to building senses of empathy, if the affordances of the game allow (Greitemeyer, Osswald and Brauer 2010). Beyond players' experiences with video games and one another during play, however, games can also be used to understand cultural and social facets of life, serving as reflections and interrogations of society (Ruberg 2018). This includes elements of morality (Shafer 2012), social ties,

and the place that religion can hold in these contexts (de Wildt and Aupers 2019).

Games of all kinds can influence players, offer learning opportunities, and potentially be integrated into courses to introduce students to many concepts. Many of these games are formative games – those that, "lead the player into a new way of thinking about their own identity, a new attitude to others or a new understanding of their community of relationships" (Hutchings 2023, 2). Often, these kinds of games encourage players to struggle with philosophical questions that can challenge conceptualizations of morality and ethics in video games (Hutchings 2023). These kinds of struggles or ethical questions can also be deeply explored and experienced through games that may not be specifically developed as formative games. Narrative-heavy games, including role-playing games (RPGs), often include emotionally charged choices that cause players to evaluate different circumstances through player capital, a combination of their experience with the game and their physical world understandings (Ferdig 2014). This capital is further bolstered by relevant in-game knowledge (Tomlinson 2023) and players' emotional attachments to video game content (Tomlinson 2021).

Video games can provide ample opportunity in the classroom to explore theory, biases and stereotypes, and moral decision-making. These conversations are relevant whether they focus on video game content or player behaviours. While these approaches are relevant for many fields, the discussion below is drawn from approximately six years of social science classroom observations of using video games to help students explore a wide range of material, to make theory more concrete, and to investigate player experiences and motivations.

I will start with a review of the literature, briefly outlining teaching with video games;

worldbuilding, agency, and ethics in video games; representation; and religion in video games. The discussion will then highlight the in-class experiences and observations that these findings are derived from. I will then discuss the specific applications of video games in class, including incorporating video game content to support learning and assessing player behaviours in the context of course materials. While most of this discussion centres on role-playing games (RPGs), which are games that can take substantial time, as a means of investigating and evaluating elements of society, I argue that this approach is achievable with clips of video game play.

Additionally, I note that religion in video games as a means of interrogating social issues and institutions is a good example and case study of approaching this kind of teaching. I will follow this with recommendations for incorporating this kind of content into one's own course before discussing the broader implications and impacts of these approaches. I have found in my own teaching – and will argue – that video games and player discussions around video games can be important additions to courses, even in cases where the class itself is not focused on video games. I conclude that video games offer unique opportunities for instructors to tackle abstract and challenging course content in ways that can make material more concrete and more engaging for students while also offering opportunities to allow students to interrogate their own understandings and beliefs.

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Teaching with Video Games

Video games can have important impacts that can facilitate and enhance cognitive function (Ashinoff 2014) and critical thinking skills (Ellis et al. 2006). As such, using video games in the classroom can also lead to a "transformative impact for the learner and the potential social influence for change that learner may be able to

exert" (Baird 2022, 363). This is true even in the context of common problematic representations in video games (Sturrock 2022). These elements of video game content can be further highlighted by educators, including tendencies toward biased, reductive, or stereotypical content (Coopilton 2022, Sturrock 2022). In this regard, training students with a critical eye toward video games, the games industry, and game content can be important for literacy tied to and beyond in-class critical thinking (Coopilton 2022).

Often, educational goals that feature or incorporate video game content can be achieved through including video clips during lectures, particularly for narrative-heavy video games (McCall 2022). Learning can also be facilitated by having students use their own play experiences with games that they are familiar with to explore concepts presented in the classroom (McCall 2022). Incorporating innovative approaches in the classroom, including using video game content as a means of engaging students with critical thinking (Ellis et al. 2006), can assist students with unique means of practising important skillsets (McCall 2022). These factors, from impacts on learning to making content more engaging for students, highlight the usefulness of video games in the classroom.

Worldbuilding, Player Agency, and Ethics in Video Games

Many elements of video game worlds rely on problematic and often troubling representation, which will be discussed more below. There exists an opportunity in video games to push back against many of these stereotypes and trends that bolster cultural appropriation as part of their design (Sherriff 2015, Sturrock 2022). There is some level of discomfort in the gaming community with the idea of design that deviates from the norms that guide video game narratives and worldbuilding, but it

can be argued that, "despite ... fears of censorship ... this kind of approach to design would create better and more original art, freed from the conservative remediation-upon-remediation culture of conventional fantasy and science fiction game designs" (Sturrock 2022, 403-404).

Video games, due to their interactivity (Shinkle 2008), also afford some level of agency to players within the bounds of the game (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012, Greer 2013, Muriel and Crawford 2020). This is particularly salient in RPGs that allow players to shape narrative outcomes (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012, Irizarry and Irizarry 2014). Often, this means that players are responsible for the direction of the story, to at least some extent, making choices and decisions that alter the trajectory of the game (Tulloch, Hoad and Young 2019) and influence their experiences and in-game connections (Tomlinson 2021).

In games that allow for decision-making and narrative steering by the player, ethics and morality can be important emotional underpinnings of a gaming experience, relying on moral questions to raise the stakes of a game (Melzer and Holl 2020, Tomlinson 2021). Players often also feel connections to their in-game avatars (Wang, Zhao and Bamossy 2014). The emotional bonds that players develop and establish with characters can make these decisions even more difficult or impactful (Tomlinson 2021), in addition to players generally wanting to influence the gameworld for the better (Murzyn and Valgaeren 2016).

Topics and Issues of Representation

Representation in video games is a broad topic that lends itself to a range of conversations in the classroom, particularly for subjects related to the social sciences.

Representation in video games often relies on stereotyping and limited portrayals of diverse individuals (Burgess et al. 2011, Sherriff 2015, Sturrock 2022). Often, these limited representations also tend to *other* individuals, most frequently based on race or ethnicity (Burgess et al. 2011, Srauy 2019), including stereotypical portrayals of religious others (Šisler 2008, Trattner 2016).

The active othering of characters based on religion, however, can also be an opportunity for designers to incorporate social dynamics by exploring religious difference and related narrative events (de Wildt and Aupers 2019). Depending on how the narrative is handled, experiences with role-playing can open players up to new viewpoints, including those related to religion and religiosity (de Wildt and Aupers 2019). These instances of othering can also have important implications for classroom discussion, given that there are often opportunities to view characters from different religious backgrounds in ways that might influence player decision-making (Tomlinson 2023). Through discussion, the analysis below suggests that exploring these dynamics in the classroom can expand students' viewpoints as well.

Religion and Religious Landscapes in Video Games

When incorporated, religion holds a unique position in video games and can also be an excellent discussion point in the classroom for conversations surrounding bias, morality, and ethical decision-making. Religion can be explored in video games – and thus by players – through a variety of elements, including the characters that players encounter, the stories that are explored, and even the ways that games are played (Ferdig 2014). While it is sometimes the case that these illustrations aim to educate players about religion (Anthony 2014), this discussion will focus more on those that interrogate religion as a facet of society.

Video games can use religion, religious practice, or expressions of religion to critically engage with topics of morality or social structures (Tuckett and Robertson 2014). In other cases, it can be used as a metaphor (Anthony 2014) or for worldbuilding and creating more fleshed out social dynamics in a game (Gregory 2014). Some of this worldbuilding becomes more about examining religion and religious groups through a more critical lens (Tuckett and Robertson 2014). In other cases, religion and religious elements can be used to enhance a fantasy-based world and its facets (Tuckett and Robertson 2014). Often, the games that are focused on for their inclusion of religion are also RPGs with deep lore and extended player agency (Knoll 2015), although these can also serve to some degree as reflections of or metaphors for physical world belief structures, as seen in games like *Mass Effect* (2021) (Irizarry and Irizarry 2014). Alongside these depictions, however, incorporating familiar social structures – including religion – can increase players' senses of being present in the game world (Tamborini and Skalski 2012). Because of religion's prominence in some RPGs and its role in representing and exploring social institutions and dynamics, religion can be an excellent case study for discussions in the classroom.

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Data and Overview of the Classroom

This assessment of using video games in teaching is based on approximately six years of classroom observations across four individual social science courses taught 18 times across terms that emphasize video games and their content. The data therefore come from in-class observations of student reactions to course content, course-based online discussions, and in-class exchanges in response to prompts. Because of the sensitive nature of this data and due to study permissions, student information has been removed and responses are largely discussed in general terms and with aggregated quotes summarizing reactions and experiences in the classroom to

protect student privacy. This article additionally aims to be a guide for instructors interested in using video games in the classroom to address, interrogate, or investigate a variety of social phenomena although the emphasis here is on how ethics, morality, and social institutions can be highlighted by analysing video game content.

Video games can be an important and effective part of "active learning, critical thinking skills, knowledge construction, [and] collaboration" (Ellis et al. 2006). When combined with other class activities and content – even in cases where instructors use different approaches in the classroom – video games can help to serve as useful pathways for students to understand and explore questions of ethics (de Sousa, Rasmussen and Pierroux 2018). Student engagement and the effectiveness of these approaches can be evaluated through both student performance and reception of course materials in student evaluation responses (Wainwright 2014).

As a social science instructor at the university level, my courses have covered many elements of video games ranging from design to direct play to spectating play online. The following discussion is based on using video games and examples of video game content in courses to help students explore society, choice, and player behaviours, interrogating video games as reflections of social structures and culture as well as critiques of them.

One potential challenge to these lessons is that video games with narratives that deeply explore ethical or moral considerations – and those with religious themes or institutions tied in – are often too long to require students to play during a single course. With many requiring 60 or more hours to traverse gameplay, often these concepts are more easily explored when presented as clips to students or queued up

for live gameplay by the instructor. With video clips of gameplay or examples of specific scenes, students can explore game content specific to moral and ethical questions in contexts facilitated by the instructor, allowing students to examine and analyse content (McCall 2022) without placing the time or financial pressure that can be associated with direct play.

This article focuses on integrating video games to highlight course content related to biases, inequalities, player behaviours, and social structures. This advice, however, may not be appropriate for every instructor and every classroom. On average, the courses that I have implemented this in – and the advice that follows – is based on classes of approximately 20 to 100 students. These courses are designed with active learning in mind, emphasising student discussion and activities to facilitate understanding. These classes are also developed within the School of Social Sciences and include courses on culture as a more general topic as well as those focused on video games more specifically.

Teaching with Video Games and Fostering Discussion

Using video games in the classroom can be a rewarding and engaging approach to teaching about a variety of social and cultural topics. Video games open windows into both the use of popular culture and media as a reflection and critique of society as well as to explore how people act, interact, and assess moral quandaries. For students, this can present new dynamics and possibilities to explore and expand upon their understandings. They may be able to relate course content to their own video game play, examine topics from new viewpoints that they had not previously considered, or establish deeper connections to and understandings of lessons in class. This section will focus on using video games to engage with biases and

assumptions and discuss broader landscapes related to morality in video games.

Video Games, Biases, and Challenging Assumptions

Video games can often surprise students and using them alongside or as part of coursework can challenge students in new ways. As a foundation for understanding and discussing ethics in video games, acknowledging and investigating biases is essential. Even in cases where students are video game players, information about players and their behaviours can be surprising and encourage students to challenge their own biases and perceptions. If asked to estimate the average age of video game players, for example, students tend to guess numbers that reflect stereotypes of who video game players are and what they look like. Students in courses centred around video games and courses not directly related to games alike shout their answers, "17!" "20!" "15!" Typically, students guess numbers that average around 16-22, which is much lower than the actual average of approximately 33 years old (Entertainment Software Association 2022).

This is also true when students are asked who comprises the bulk of the gaming population. Their conceptualizations reflect the stereotype that a majority of players are boys and men (Apperley and Gray 2020), despite the movement toward gender parity among video game players with approximately 48% of video game players identifying as women (Entertainment Software Association 2022). This trend exists even when the class is comprised primarily of students who do not identify as men and also play video games. This opens the possibility for in-depth discussions in the classroom about the impacts of longstanding stereotypes about video game players. While discussions about other stereotypes – the image of a video game player as mostly antisocial, for example – have fallen out of favour with students over time based on observations of responses during in-class discussions, assumptions about

age and gender as they relate to video games have maintained a hold even among seasoned players at the undergraduate level.

These pervasive stereotypes, even among players themselves and students who frequently have – in the cases of the courses I teach – a background with social science education are important to consider as a part of ethical education in the context of video games. This opens the possibility of talking about issues of bias and how this can paint interactions between players and contribute to gatekeeping behaviours that are still frequent among video game players (Salter 2018), particularly toward marginalised players (Apperley and Gray 2020), and which have resulted in a shift in conversations among players that highlight how tiring gaming communities can be (Tomlinson 2022). Based on in-class dynamics, this is a good foundational point for beginning conversations about biases and ethics and to allow students to begin reassessing their own viewpoints.

Given the realities of in-game hostilities and often-highlighted toxicity in online play, when questioned about what players are likely to do during play, students often also assume the worst. When asked to respond to a prompt in class about how players are most likely to play – paragon or renegade, to borrow from *Mass Effect* – most postulate that the majority of players are engaging in games in ways that tend toward destruction and damage, even in single-player experiences. This opens more opportunities to discuss players, their behaviours, and interesting trends that are seen in the gaming landscape. When no one is watching a player in a single-player experience, what types of ethical decision-making occur?

Students are surprised to find out that for role-playing games, players are often inclined toward prosocial decision-making and role-taking that emphasises the

overall well-being of the gameworld, despite not having other physical world people to assess their judgments and actions. Based on other pervasive behaviours, students do not often expect that players of role-playing games frequently feel responsible for the gameworlds that they inhabit as an avatar (Murzyn and Valgaeren 2016, Tomlinson 2021) and that emotional bonds to characters promote a deeper experience with role-taking that can weigh on players when they are faced with difficult in-game moral decisions (Tomlinson 2021).

The discussions that ensue based on these factors often feature students including their own experiences and behaviours as players – what they aspire for in their games, how they relate to characters, and why other players might feel responsible for making the supposedly best decisions. Students often push back against these ideas, however, suggesting that video games are also meant to be about exploring fantasy, and there is room for fantasy to include power and destruction. The most common student reaction to asking questions about how players engage with morality and ethical questions in gameplay is that they assume players would want to create havoc or engage in socially less permissible or acceptable behaviours. This reaction is not surprising, especially given that most news about video games – and even a great deal of research – focuses on hostilities, harassment, and toxicity among players (Birk et al. 2016, Lee 2016, Sengün et al. 2019). Alternatively, students in these courses suggest that sometimes being evil might be fun and since video games are meant to be a fantasy, why would players want to play paragon? During these discussions, particularly when students do not believe the research, it is important to facilitate in a way that engages students and allows them to consider the research at hand. Not 100% of players will play a particular way, but there can also be *types* of players that look for specific experiences or types of game that encourage specific behaviours among players.

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In these conversations, students often arrive at the conclusion that many players simply care about the game and the non-playable characters (NPCs) within it. Further, players inclined toward violence, like the "Mercenary" type (Vahlo at al. 2017, 97-98), may be less inclined toward playing games with heavy ethical decision-making and prosocial behaviour than the "Companion" type (Vahlo et al. 2017, 98). Within discussions of ethics, these conversations make for fascinating co-creation of meaning among students, from highlighting drives to use in-game experiences and player capital (Ferdig 2014, Tomlinson 2023) to exploring why inner senses of morality and its meaning in virtual worlds may result in surprising behaviours.

Philosophical Discussions and Considerations of Morality

Using examples of online discussions among video game players to facilitate classroom conversations is also useful for highlighting the unique dynamics and decisions that players experience. Video games are more than just their content. The interactivity of video games (Shinkle 2008) and the "bounded agency" (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012, 394, 401) that they present become integral parts of the discussion of morality and ethics in video games. Players have opportunities in narrative-driven games to make choices and shape outcomes (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012, Murray 2017). Within these choices lies an important part of the conversation and students can rely on their own gameplay, videos of others' gameplay, or online conversation analyses to incorporate the player element in their understandings.

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Although many of these games are large time investments, gameplay or discussing games that students have played can make these conversations more meaningful and relating the content to students' own experiences and perceptions can provide more grounding for course content. Regardless of whether or not students themselves play the games, however, player choice is still important for understanding the broader

implications of game content. What choices do players make when presented with the option to shape a narrative (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012, Murray 2017)? In these cases, moral grounding is related to emotional ties to game content and the role-taking that many narrative-based games with an emphasis on players shaping the story encourage (Tomlinson 2021). In these regards, highlighting the ways that emotional ties and familiarity can reduce othering (de Wildt and Aupers 2019) can be an important part of the conversation for students to explore.

During these conversations, I typically add additional context about the complexities of player interaction, including the competitive elements that can contribute to hostility in play (Lee 2016) and the tendencies of a smaller percentage of players to harass a larger percentage (Ballard and Welch 2017, Lee 2016). Additionally, there are elements of games that encourage prosocial behaviours and interactions, particularly when play is cooperative (Velez 2015). With these factors in mind, however, classroom observations reveal that students are generally surprised that a large portion of players want to improve and make decisions that may benefit the gameworld (Murzyn and Valgaeren 2016) and the characters within it (Tomlinson 2021). Ethics and morality in video games – and for players making decisions within them – are often not obvious to students and the elements of human nature at play can produce generative and engaging conversation in course discussions and papers.

Ethics, Video Game Content, and Representation

Conversations about video game player behaviours also open the possibility of considering other ethical questions, including those related to the industry, video game design, and the ethical implications of representation in video games. For courses that engage with social landscapes and inequalities, linking the games

industry with STEM-related fields is a useful point to explore structural issues and barriers that can contribute to an absence of diversity behind the scenes. This, however, also links to what we see in content, in video games as well as other media. These elements of video games are also painted by the broader cultural contexts in which they are created, allowing instructors to engage with complex social issues by discussing examples from video games. This section will focus on the use of video games – particularly narrative-focused RPGs – in teaching about worldbuilding and social institutions like religion in the contexts of representation and player decision-making.

Structural Factors, Culture, and Representation in Video Games

Who we see and how we see them is often interwoven with representation among video game makers, cultural constraints and assumptions, and worldbuilding in video games. This can be an important space for interrogating and investigating issues of inequality in society, from both structural and cultural perspectives. This also promotes the possibility of discussing ethical design and the ethics of possible solutions to these problems.

The connections between structural barriers and biases, for example, can be linked to experiences within the games industry, gaming culture, and video game content. Overall, students are surprised by sexism in the industry, but easily make connections between these experiences and theory. For example, students commonly note that they are surprised by the amount of influence social perceptions have on both the industry and in player dynamics and interactions. At the same time, however, they tend to mention that these dynamics and their impacts make sense given how entrenched stereotypes become in society and pervade social life. They also suggest that these dynamics are influential on representation and on who often ends up

making video games.

Instructors can facilitate further explorations of these concepts through in-class discussions, considering the potential solutions and broad outcomes for these issues. If social barriers and potentially *chilly* environments contribute to the dearth of diversity among those making video games (Liang 2022) leading to poor representation in video game content which can link to broader issues among video game players, what are potential solutions? These discussions give students an opportunity to link different pieces of course content together, drawing from theory to put ideas into practice.

In my courses, I build from a starting point of theory bridging concepts with discussions where students can make connections between different course materials and concepts over time. This allows students to build their perspectives and take on new challenges in the class, including engaging in direct application of concepts or their own analyses. For example, early on in one course focused on video games, a number of social scientific and sociological theories are covered and students need to bridge their understandings by applying these theoretical frameworks to other discussions we have had. A summary across student thoughts in in-class and online discussions illustrates that this often results in building connections between ethical issues and dilemmas related to games and gaming:

> "Thinking about the theoretical lenses that we learned related to gender, symbolic interactionism helps to understand how people present themselves and interact. This is useful for looking at behaviors between players, how they react to each other, and how they present themselves in groups. We can understand how players talk to each other in some circumstances and not others, like when there might be pressures to act a specific way, like being toxic, because of social assumptions. Through feminist theory, we can also think about how players might hide what they play if a game they like doesn't match up

with social expectations about gender."[i]

Students often make strong connections between the varied topics discussed in the class in online and in-class discussions and conversations, from a general lack of representation among video game makers to the influences that video game content can have on dynamics between and among players.

Representations are also an important part of these conversations, considering the impact of cultural biases and stereotypes on video games, particularly through a historical lens. Representations of characters have frequently been reliant on stereotypes in addition to being infrequent. Students consider these elements of video games in the context of these broader theories and considerations. Across courses, students highlight both issues with representation and changes over time. As one summary of the most common student thoughts reads:

> "A lot of games have racism in them, especially looking at characters of color being included as lacking intelligence, as enemies, or being involved with crime. A lot of the time, these characters are just shown negatively, but now a lot of these representations are changing, which is good. But early on, you can see how most games were building on social stereotypes and there is still an issue with games including these characters."

These conversations can be framed in the context of ethical considerations with course content taken into account. If, for example, we know that video games can either promote hostility (Birk et al. 2016, Lee 2016, Sengün et al. 2019) or prosocial behaviour depending on the content (Velez 2015), then students can deliberate the possible solutions. One example of this in class is providing a discussion prompt for students to grapple with the possibility of requiring specific kinds of representation in video games. Often, students' discussions on this point have been nuanced and reflective of an array of ethical considerations – students weigh the implications of

limiting creativity against social impacts.

Role-Playing Games, Morality, and Religion

Video games can be an excellent topic to centre discussions of bias, stereotyping, and even theory around, but RPGs in particular offer unique opportunities to dig into these conversations and dynamics in deeper ways. Because narrative-focused RPGs frequently include morality-based decision-making for players and often emphasise worldbuilding that highlights dynamics between characters and their in-game factions, these games and even religious groups within them offer ample space to consider morality and ethics.

In cases where religion or religious expression are framed as a negative social force or groups are presented as cults or fanatics, students discuss the implications of these representations. While social and cultural others are not isolated to religion in video games, or to video games at all, this also has a bearing on the moral and ethical decisions that players often need to make in these games. How, for example, are players potentially steered away from the Hanar in *Mass Effect*? In *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), *Dragon Age II* (2011), and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), how is religion illustrated as a structure of power and how does it perpetuate inequalities? Further, how can players use these elements of religion as it exists in the games as a tool to influence the world in *Dragon Age*?

The framing of religious others in the context of these games can build on external player capital (Ferdig 2014) while interacting with in-game capital (Tomlinson 2023) to produce interpretations and player action. To grapple with these ideas, it is useful to give students an opportunity to engage directly with readings as part of in-class or discussion-based prompts. As a summary of an online class discussion, students take

course readings into consideration to think about the impact that religion can have in a game's narrative and thus the players' experiences. As a summary of these responses:

> "Religion can be used by players to try to mold the narrative based on their knowledge of in-game religions and societies. Ferdig is helpful for understanding this because religion can be used to give players more information about the game world. Simon and Tobias further this because it shows that players are gaining more information on what interactions are happening in a game through religion."

These types of game content also link to broader conceptualizations of social barriers, discrimination, and inequality. In some cases, these games provide support for discussions of such obstacles as they relate to moral goods and ethical action, whether these are directly related to religion or not. Issues of structural inequality and power structures (Aldenderfer 2010) or related to cultural beliefs and stereotypes linked to religion (Edgell and Tranby 2007), can be explored in some game narratives and contexts.

While these discussions are not always supported by game content, games like the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series incorporate such questions as part of gameplay and do, to varying degrees, include religion as part of these discussions. These games also, however, highlight the ways that religion can promote and encourage prosocial and community-based behaviours (Shariff 2015), allowing students to consider additional cultural and social influences that can affect interpretations of religion within the gameworld and beyond. Additionally, students can consider how these dynamics and factors can be used as tools by the player (Tomlinson 2023).

A useful point of discussion or activity for students in this case is to explore player

reactions to and interpretations of events that are meant to be complex, troubling, and emotionally provocative. In my own research, much of my emphasis is on using public online spaces to see how individuals interact, discuss, and react to video game content. This can be a useful tool to expand discussion among students, by having them review reactions to and discussions of such matters. On the lighter end of the spectrum, students can consider discussions of religion and religiosity in contexts where religion is incorporated to signify difference, as in *Mass Effect*'s Hanar species, which appears to be played to some degree for laughs. Discussions of perceived religious belief – such as players interpreting potential models of modesty among the Hanar – can be an interesting exercise.

On the other end of the spectrum are more serious examples that make players inclined to fight or, at the very least, disagree. Often these are the more morally troubling events to players, such as the destruction of the Chantry (the in-game equivalent of a Christian church) in *Dragon Age II*. In discussions of this event, clips may not be necessary and students work well with prompts and online discussions among players debating the moral implications of these actions. Specifically in this case, a character who is a member of the player's team and a potential romantic interest is fighting what he views as injustices against mages (magic users) in the game who are held in towers and separated from society. They are under the control of the in-game church and the character decides that – without the player's input or agency – the best path forward is to destroy the local church building. This has divided players who fall on different sides of the issue, some seeing this as a moral imperative when options have run out and others viewing the action as – in players' own terms – terrorism. While these discussions deal with sensitive subject matter, they also get to the heart of some of the moral and ethical struggles that can be represented in video games and also take into account the influence and impact on

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the player who often has to piece things back together and make decisions after such an event.

Supplying online conversations such as these for students to read through and examine players' dynamics allows for new angles on in-class discussion and engagement. Given the emotional impact of video game content and students' consideration of these elements of play, students can evaluate the role of emotional connection in these impacts. In this case, students often focus on the nuance in these discussions. Players' attachment or lack thereof to the character in question prompts students to identify why and how emotional dynamics make evaluating this event – and the decision about whether or not to execute the character – difficult in the context of moral decision-making as a player.

Representations of Religion in Video Games and Beyond

The integration of religions and religious information or dynamics in a video game allows students to explore reciprocal relationships between physical world realities and game design. These interactions can serve as an additional discussion point, considering how these pieces influence each other and fit together. In *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), for example, how do the tendencies to depict religion as fanatical or as a negative social influence (Tuckett and Robertson 2014) mesh with broader narratives in the game? How do these potentially reflect the cultural contexts in which the game was made?

Many of these discussions can be hypothetical and link with readings, lectures, or other course content. When students can explore these elements of video games, they can reinforce and re-examine other course content as well. Whether religion serves as a worldbuilding tool or a broader social critique, these elements of video

games provide ample space for classroom discussion and investigation. Comparing two approaches can open different perspectives and allow students to engage with opposing forms of religion in games, with religion as a critique in *Fallout: New Vegas*, a potential barrier to interaction in *Mass Effect*, or a powerful social force in *Dragon Age*. Students can evaluate these different approaches and their meanings. The cultural and social intricacies of some video games are often somewhat surprising to students, even in cases where they have a great deal of video game experience.

As an overview of reactions that students have in response to expanding their understandings in these contexts, most students are surprised by the amount of detail that goes into worldbuilding in video games. They often acknowledge that understanding the additional dynamics involved with creating cultural and social structures, including religion and its myriad of incorporations, helps them understand the amount of work that goes into creating narrative video games with player input. Beyond the game content itself, this helps students contextualise the influences of social and cultural factors on video games and vice versa. Discussions or papers analysing these differences build on understandings of broader concepts, such as Berger and Hefner's (2003) religious marketplace or political and cultural dynamics of religion in society (Wuthnow 2007), and are also useful for exploring these elements further.

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In many of these discussions, nuance once again becomes a focal point for students. For many students, religion can add new dynamics and potential obstacles for players' decisions. This is especially true in cases of role-playing games where religion may shape in-game inequalities, such as circumstances where religious figures or institutions are responsible for limiting in-game groups' access or social standing. As one example aggregated over these observations, this can occasionally be related to

using religion in video games as a social critique, but also adds depth to ethical decision-making in games. Students illustrate this with comments touching on the following concepts:

> "Religion in video games is useful for understanding social problems related to conflicts over difference in belief. Because video games are created within society, they tend to reflect what we see in real life, including norms and beliefs. Having religion as part of a game introduces interesting dynamics and the possibility of more gray options or decisions for players, whether players feel like they should work with or against religion in a game. Sometimes video games explore how religion can cause problems through destructive followers, repressive influences, or reinforcement of social stereotypes that can limit access for groups. Having religion included as a positive or negative force has an impact on players, especially when they need to make decisions. There is a lot of room for players to think about and reconsider decisions in light of these dynamics because they can gain more information about where the game is taking place and who characters are."

These dynamics of worldbuilding in video games allow for examinations of broad social issues, player decision-making, and cultural institutions and artefacts. This also allows for students to consider the impact that such worldbuilding and issues like player capital can have on the play experience, guiding players to potentially deeper and more meaningful play.

Content can be further discussed and explored in terms of how morality and ethics are hedged within these representations, from the narrative elements alone to factors involving play. For example, in *Fallout: New Vegas*, there is not much space for players to engage with religious identity building during play. On the other hand, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* does give players the option to play as true believers while substantiating many religious beliefs as less mythical and more reality-based. Students can discuss the broader messages telegraphed by these representations, particularly as morality and ethics are concerned. If, for example, we have a game that

does not portray many positive elements of religion, does this convey a specific message about the sources of morality? If we have a game that engages with broader, more varied illustrations of religion, how might this influence interpretations or decision-making? In these cases, students can compare and investigate different dynamics, how these influence the player, and what effects this has on the narrative as a whole.

Implementing Video Game Content in Your Course

Video games as a point of discussion can be very useful, but sometimes difficult to integrate into course content. One major potential hurdle in this context is how to actively show students relevant content to interrogate. Many of the games with the most acute focus on morality and religious content, including those discussed above, require many hours of gameplay to experience and influence the story. This can be a barrier to inclusion because of the financial and time burdens it may place on students if they are required to play the games themselves. An alternative, however, is showing clips with some context for students, as the instructor can also not anticipate or expect a baseline of experience with these games among their students (McCall 2022). Although this does change the way that students can experience these game elements, instructors can pair clips with a bit of background to highlight important turning points, decision-making segments, and outcomes of those decisions alongside discussion or short paper prompts. This has been an effective strategy in my own courses, as it gives students enough information to form opinions and assess the content with class materials in mind.

As briefly outlined in the above analysis sections, laying the foundation for theory and course concepts is an important first step before deciding how, when, and what

to integrate in terms of video games as part of class discussions. Depending on course format, games can be introduced in class or as part of online discussions between students. In either case, offering students opportunities to link this to their own observations in video games or to broad options from course content is useful for supporting student engagement and creativity. In many cases, for example, I introduce prompts asking students to select one general theory related to social science that we learned about earlier in the course and apply it to the gaming landscape or a specific game or in-game event.

Allowing students to build ideas together is also a valuable part of this process. While individual assessments can be important, allowing students to share ideas has illuminated alternative viewpoints and often points out pieces of information or analyses that may initially not come to mind for every student. This also offers students a chance to hear about links to other course concepts that they had not considered previously. Because of this, I emphasise group work and group discussions to promote better understanding and application of materials. For example, providing a prompt where students can identify specific elements of representation and how these representations may influence the player in one direction or another can be a useful starting point.

In some cases, however, the discussion may evolve organically from a clip where students make these connections on their own, as discussed above in the example of *Dragon Age II*. Writing assignments are also great spaces for students to investigate these topics. In particular, papers where students can apply research on religions and religious practice to video game content or even fandom. Although I often use work by Jindra (1994) on the *Star Trek* fandom, this last point can be extended to consider video game fandom and fan behaviours and the ways that player agency can interact

with fandom to develop and foster a sense of duty among players.

Results from Courses

Tackling big, sometimes uncomfortable ideas in the context of video games can open new, unexpected paths of discourse for students. Students – whether they are engaging with classes specifically about video games or other content – often convey that they have benefitted from discussions and incorporations of video games as a means of bridging course content. This is true even in cases where video game play is not employed as part of the course. For example, a common reaction among students to using video clips rather than direct play is that it was surprising not to play games, but they still liked learning about the games and gaming culture through the examples. In my own class observations, mixing and linking media content and higher-level course concepts can help students understand new framings and angles of relevant materials.

Students also enjoy learning with video games in mind, considering how games can fit into broader elements and aspects of society. Students note that this often makes course content feel more accessible, exciting, and engaging. These discussions can become helpful in other contexts as well, whether those are conversations with others or in future courses and work. Overall, most students have found these discussions helpful and, as an overview of student responses, many students share sentiments that align with the following summary:

> "I wasn't expecting video games to help this much with understanding other portions of society and how people behave. Knowing how these theories and concepts apply is helpful in other courses, but a lot of my friends also game so it's been fun to share these ideas with them."

Although students may have a great deal of experience with game content, the

bridges between games and broader patterns in society may not initially be obvious. Building those connections with students has provided them with new perspectives and understandings, as well as creating opportunities to recontextualise other class content and even their own perceptions, as discussed above. Further, presenting the opportunity to discuss topics in the context of video games allows students to examine issues in new ways, connecting them differently than working with topics in more abstract terms. Students can relate pieces of information and examples to their own experiences with games, examine issues from different angles, and make examples more concrete.

Sometimes students also find the content more surprising, ultimately relaying that it helps them reassess their assumptions. Counter-intuitive discussions like those noted above regarding player motivations cause students to reassess what they think they know about human nature and social interaction. For example, in the discussion about what ethical and moral decisions players might make, especially in the case of single player experiences, it is surprising for students that players tend to aim to improve the gameworld, especially when they are invested in the outcomes (Murzyn and Valgaeren 2016, Tomlinson 2021).

Conclusions

Video games have gained more legitimacy as an area of study in recent years, particularly regarding examining stereotypes and related barriers that players often encounter (Apperley and Gray 2020). The landscape of video games, from video game content that can be restrictive and stereotypical (Coopilton 2022, Sturrock 2022) to dynamics that highlight behaviours that surprise students – like players behaving in prosocial ways when not being watched by others (Murzyn and

Valgaeren 2016, Tomlinson 2021) – offer an array of opportunities to discuss theory and information related to biases, inequalities, behaviour, and social institutions. Of particular interest may be narrative heavy RPGs and games that feature deep lore about in-game social groups and religions.

Video games provide unique and dynamic spaces for discussion in the classroom, allowing for the exploration and deep interrogation of not just game content, but perceptions of and experiences with society on a broader scale. While not all video games are useful for discussions of morality and ethics, those that include ethical and moral quandaries (Knoll 2015) as well as those incorporating religions or religious elements (Anthony 2014, Ferdig 2014, Tuckett and Robertson 2014) can centre the discussion on player agency in addition to investigating issues of representation. These game elements can help support in-class discussions and combine well with other class resources to provide support for learning and reinforcement of class content. Using video games to support and supplement course content allows students to engage with abstract theory or concepts more concretely to reinforce student understandings.

These opportunities also present potential challenges. Students will not always believe the research, particularly if it goes against the perceptions that they have developed based on cultural obstacles within the gaming community. It is important for instructors to facilitate conversations and engagement and have students consider broader connections between different pieces of information. Students are, in general, excellent at piecing the landscape together, particularly when it comes to linking cultural influences to video game content and ultimately to barriers that exist for marginalised groups in gaming (Apperley and Gray 2020, Gray 2014). There is also the additional barrier of money and time when it comes to requiring students to play

a video game during the term to discuss major implications. Fortunately, clips may be shown to facilitate discussion (McCall 2022), and this has been an effective part of my courses over the last six years.

Much of what we see related to video games, from video game content to player behaviours, is often predicated on cultural pressures and assumptions, including stereotypes about video game players (Apperley and Gray 2020) and institutional pressures on video game content behind the scenes (Burgess et al. 2011, Srauy 2019). This promotes the possibility of discussions with students about the sources of what we see with biased perceptions of gaming, biases in video game content itself, and possible solutions. Further, students can consider larger theoretical concepts in the context of video games, tackling topics of inequalities and structural barriers by examining who is making video games as well as game content and narratives. Discussions about these issues can usefully incorporate course materials, including readings, to engage students in deeper analyses of these issues and dynamics. Having class discussions that encourage an exchange of ideas – whether these are online or face-to-face – is also essential for these explorations among students and offers the potential to co-create understandings and meaning.

Questions of morality and ethical decision-making can be examined in useful and dynamic ways for students, from players' use of in-game justifications for morally questionable actions (Klimmt et al. 2006) to the emotional connections that make decisions more difficult (Tomlinson 2021). Content can be surprising, grounding, familiar, or entirely new. Combined with theoretical concepts, instructors can use video games to accompany many discussions, from the design process and its biases (Burgess et al. 2011, Srauy 2019) to the ways that video games can reflect physical world considerations of inequality (Aldenderfer 2010) and the implications of fantasy-

based structural inequalities for player behaviours and motivations. Video games, representations of religion, and the moral questions that they sometimes pose to players illuminate many facets of society and social experience while helping instructors present content in new ways.

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[i] This and later such quotations are not quotations from any one student, but rather fabricated amalgamations of actual student responses designed to represent overall student thought.