Choosing Who to Sacrifice: Embodying Death in Indie Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Keywords

Eudaimonic gaming, morality, death, choice

INTRODUCTION

Judge, jury, executioner or more accurately: grim reaper or recycling factory supervisor. The player is allowed to embody death in macabre yet morally fascinating ways in three indie games: *Death and Taxes* (Placeholder Gameworks, 2020), *Death Coming* (NEXT Studios, 2017), and *Organs Please* (Techhome, 2023). While death is an integral part of gameplay across genres, it is rare to find gameplay mechanics which place the power of sacrifice in the hands of the player in such a direct and morbid way. This paper seeks to examine how the integral game design elements, as per Schell's framework (Schell, 2018), namely aesthetics, mechanics, and narrative, combine to desensitise and challenge the player leading to a darker eudaimonic gaming experience (Daneels et al. 2020; Holl et al. 2022). These three games stand out by turning the player into Death personified, going beyond the standard approaches to sacrifice in RPGs and delving into darker territory than *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2013). By utilising nudges and cognitive biases as part of the three games design lenses, these games create a darker eudaimonic experience that the paper seeks to examine with a focus on the degree of emotional connection, defamiliarisation, and rationalisation.

DELVING DEEPER INTO THE LENSES

To understand the intricacies of the player's fateful role, one must first delve into the detail of how the three games perform across the three lenses. In Death and Taxes, the player embodies a grim reaper supervised by Fate who decides which person lives or dies based on a brief bio, while the choices made mysteriously impact the world. In Death Coming, the player is a reaper asked to follow the Grim Reaper's instructions and orchestrate accidents to fulfil kill quotas. In Organs Please, the

player is a recycling factory supervisor in a post- apocalyptic world following orders which lead to recycling, incinerating, or allowing citizens to board the 'Ark' rocket. Across the three lenses, several key questions arise. From a mechanics perspective, how does the existence or absence of a morality meter affect the player's choices (Formosa et al. 2022; Consalvo et al. 2016; Ryan, et al. 2017)? What's cumulative effect of the sacrifices on the player's psyche at different moments in the game? From an aesthetics perspective, how does the cartoonization of the game affect how quickly the player habitualises tough moral choices? How do the visual and auditory elements of the game convey behavioural nudges? From a narrative perspective, how does the limited information provided about each potential life to be sacrificed signal the value of these lives and weigh on the player's actions? What cognitive biases are the game designers exploiting? Does the game set up a moral framework and guide the player through it? The paper will delve deeper into these three lenses and assess how they create a darker eudaimonic experience.

(IM)MORAL FRAMEWORKS

The three chosen games create effective sandboxes to test emotional connection, defamiliarisation, and moral rationalisation. Current research indicates that gameplay which has powerful narrative that evokes emotional responses, moral challenges, and reflections leads to an augmented eudaimonic experience (Daneels et al. 2021), but not enough research has been done yet about darker eudaimonic experiences and the positive or negative effects they can have on the player beyond the magic circle. Further field research would be required to assess how real players are affected by these games and test the assumptions of this paper. Going beyond the analysis of the three games design lenses, the paper will challenge these games further by testing additional aspects. To test emotional connection, the paper would look at how players connect with each game and how their embodiment of Death as a character affects this connection. To test moral rationalisation, the paper would examine how each game creates a setting for justification or dehumanisation via environmental storytelling. Additionally, whether in accordance with Holl (2022) players show a general tendency to behave morally. Another element to test is Formosa's research on whether players do tend to become more morally disengaged after their first full playthrough of a game, with an increased curiosity and appetite to try immoral choices on subsequent plays (Formosa et al. 2022). To test defamiliarisation, the paper will look at the interactivity of the player's actual and perceived choices and whether they positively correlate with their sense of control and their willingness to continue playing (Turkay, 2015). Defamiliarisation is also affected by the perception of the value of life and following the game rules, taking into account how cultural differences impact player experience (Awad et al. 2020).

CONCLUSION

Games are powerful interactive worlds that allow the player to affirm human values by living human experiences and posing ethical questions that they may not have otherwise had access to (Belman and Flanagan, 2010; Schott, 2017). The paper seeks to test the contribution of these games to eudaimonic experiences as well as how well they encourage ethical reasoning and reflection (Zagal, 2009). The overarching position of this paper is that game designers should encourage and nudge players to navigate challenging moral playgrounds to learn something new about themselves.

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