

Existential Ethics and Tactical Realism: Sartrean Moral Frameworks in *Ready or Not*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines *Ready or Not* as a tactical shooter that operationalizes existentialist ethics through procedural, visual, and relational design. Moving beyond traditional moral frameworks, the study adopts a Sartrean perspective—emphasizing situated freedom and accountability—to analyze how the game’s first-person realism, implicit choice, irreversible outcomes, and procedural randomness create a structure of finitude and moral ambiguity. *Ready or Not* innovates in its representation of intersubjective ethics by embedding moral tension within multiplayer cooperation. Finally, the article argues that the game’s frequent adaptation of real-world crises produces a distinctive moral proximity that heightens existential reflection. The analysis thus contributes to the developing field of existentialist game studies by demonstrating how realistic tactical shooters, often dismissed as procedurally conservative, can in fact function as sophisticated laboratories for ethical inquiry and self-knowledge.

Keywords

Moral Gameplay Systems, Existential Ethics, Realistic Tactical Shooters, Procedural Moral Ambiguity, Sartrean Game Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Ready or Not (VOID Interactive 2023) is a first-person tactical shooter renowned for its realism. Through its simulated reality, this game dramatically stages Sartrean boundary situations, offering players a visceral experience of existential deliberation. This capacity to provoke reflection suggests its potential as an effective medium for interpreting and engaging with Sartrian thought. Each of its missions presents a unique scenario in which players assume the role of a SWAT officer tasked with

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leading a team of human co-operators or AI companions in responding to high-risk situations, such as hostage rescues and counter-terrorism operations. Although categorized as a first-person shooter (FPS), the game distinguishes itself markedly from conventional titles in the genre. It incorporates a simplified simulation of real-world policing protocols, inserting a critical moment of decision-making before the core interaction of FPS gameplay - aiming and firing. Within complex and threatening environments, players must continually make instantaneous choices to advance the mission. Each action represents a moral challenge, often situating the player in dilemmas with no clearly defined ethical standard. Further intensifying its existential weight of procedural ethics, the game employs a random reset system, permadeath mechanics, and the removal of quick-saving. Consequently, every choice carries permanent consequences. This paper employs a methodology combining close reading of *Ready or Not*'s gameplay systems with philosophical analysis of the core tenets of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism as presented in his key critical and fictional works. The first section provides a critical review of relevant previous work and existing ethical frameworks for analyzing games. The Sartrean existentialist framework offers a distinct alternative to traditional ethical systems—such as Kantian deontology, utilitarianism, or virtue ethics—typically applied in studies of moral gameplay. It allows for a deeper investigation of moral dilemmas that reveal the limitations of these conventional approaches. The analysis focuses on the case study of *Ready or Not*, a realistic first-person multiplayer tactical game. It employs a rare form of implicit choice architecture in its moral interactions, eschewing explicit branching narratives. Coupled with mechanics such as procedural randomness and irreversible permadeath, the game provides a unique framework for exploring the existential structure of ethical choice.

This paper contends that *Ready or Not* achieves a distinctive form of realist artistic expression in virtual gaming through three characteristic design approaches: the verisimilitude of its first-person perspective, the systematization of authentic policing protocols into game mechanics, and the implementation of procedural randomness. Furthermore, by incorporating a complex ethical framework involving multiplayer relational dynamics into the player experience, the game effectively puts into practice Sartre's concept of "freedom under constraint." By foregrounding this lens, this study addresses a research gap concerning the design mechanisms for implicit moral choice in realistic tactical shooters. By foregrounding this lens, the paper addresses key gaps in current research. It elucidates the potential of realistic shooters to function as philosophical thought experiments and contributes to emerging discussions on procedural ethics and the dynamics of reciprocal freedom in multi-player contexts. In doing so, it highlights the unique advantages of this game medium and expands the scope of existentialist game studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Moral Frameworks in Video Games

Moral theory and game-design concepts have become indispensable lenses through which to examine ethical controversies in digital games. Game scholars broadly concur that ethical frameworks are essential for interpreting the meanings players derive from gameplay. A content-centred approach assesses a game's capacity to express moral positions and guide moral reasoning from two complementary perspectives: (a) the medium itself, and (b) the design of thematic mechanics. Filipović locates digital games within media ethics, positioning them as a subset of

entertainment ethics. She emphasizes that any moral assessment must account for the medium's distinctive attributes: interactivity, immersion, and the aesthetic dimension of acting through virtual agents (Filipović and Franzetti 2018; Lamers and Filipović 2020). Pohl's comparative analysis draws on ethical literary criticism and possible-worlds theory to juxtapose games with established art forms like literature and film, demonstrating how narrative structures and gameplay mechanics collectively stimulate ethical deliberation and emotional resonance (Pohl 2008). Rauch's comparative study of *Fable* (Lionhead.com 2016), *Command & Conquer* (EA.com 2003), and *The Punisher* (Capcom 1993) illustrates how "moral engines" and "conscience scoring" systems operationalize philosophical positions—notably utilitarianism and Kantian ethics—thereby demonstrating games' unique potential for conveying morality through integrated design and narrative (Rauch 2007). However, the content-centred paradigm has been critiqued for treating thematic design as the primary carrier of moral meaning, consequently downplaying player agency (Patridge 2008). By focusing on narrative and mechanics, this approach tends to obscure the decisive role of player behavior, creating significant challenges for analyzing how individual players engage with, interpret, and contextualize game content (Patridge 2008). In cases relying on limited empirical evidence, purely content-based perspectives may fail to capture the behavioral dynamics that transform in-game situations into genuine moral issues.

As player participation constitutes the core of the video game medium, approaches emphasizing players' roles in moral appraisal are widely regarded as more robust than exclusively content-focused methodologies (Patridge 2013). Consequently, contemporary game theorists have shifted ethical debates from game texts to the player as moral subject. McCormick examines how three dominant Western traditions—Kantianism, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics—illuminate player conduct (McCormick 2001). Utilitarian reasoning suggests playing computer games is generally permissible (Cassone 2017), though specific contexts may render it morally objectionable and causally linked to real-world harm (Schulzke 2010). While utilitarianism can quantify in-game outcomes and demonstrate correlations between virtual games and reality, evaluating players' virtual behaviors relies on empirical data. Its outcome-oriented framework, however, is constrained by its experiential focus, often leading to insufficient attention to the morality of the action process itself. Kantian analysis, on the other hand, struggles to demonstrate that in-game actions necessarily translate to real-world behavior, faltering at the intersection of fictional conduct and practical duty. In response to these limitations, Coeckelbergh (2007) advances virtue ethics as a more natural framework for addressing character formation in digital games. From this perspective, a game's moral standing "must always be assessed against the background of the player's corresponding attitudes" (Ostritsch 2017). By foregrounding character, player attitudes, and moral identification, virtue ethics avoids pitfalls inherent in content-driven approaches: while the existence of distinct in-game obligations remains debatable, the player's moral orientation remains objectively present (Ostritsch 2018). However, most games rarely present complex moral dilemma, especially each branch in a moral dilemma often possesses its own rational justification, creating scenarios that extend beyond virtue ethics' conventional evaluative scope. Utilitarianism lacks sufficient focus on the morality of actions themselves, Kantianism is constrained at the boundary between the virtual and the real, and virtue ethics provides an unreliable basis for evaluating genuine dilemmas. Therefore, analyzing complex ethical media fictions requires a more comprehensive theoretical framework. Existentialist philosophy, drawing on Sartre's classic critiques

and works, offers a perspective that integrates media phenomena with subjective action in artistic analysis, focusing specifically on complex moral dilemmas that traditional ethics find difficult to resolve. This makes existentialism more adaptable than traditional theoretical frameworks in the ethical analysis of today's digital game media.

Existentialism and Its Relationship to Art

Sartre's works focus on artistic media's role in conveying philosophical ideas and probing boundaries between real and fictional behavior, offering a distinct lens for analyzing moral dilemmas. The existentialist movement permeated public consciousness through literature, theatre, cinema, and later, digital interactive media. Although not philosophy per se, such aesthetic forms continue to provoke scholarly debate concerning their capacity to shape—or simply illustrate—philosophical inquiry. Popular media can serve as gateways to existentialist thought by illuminating aspects of the human condition (Pamerleau 2009). As a philosophy centred on subjective experience, existentialism engages each individual as both contributor and beneficiary. Sartre explicitly invited people to “rediscover themselves” (Sartre 2007) through reflection on lived experience. Subsequent existentialist thinkers, confronted the task of devising effective methods for disclosing the human condition—particularly through media accessible beyond professional philosophy. Sartre's own theatre functioned as “existential laboratories” (Sartre 1946), offering audiences reticent towards the dense dialectic of his treatises an accessible entry point into his philosophy. Sartre and his contemporaries in post-war French theatre pioneered a dramaturgy of “perspective by situations” (Sartre 2007), a new paradigm for manifesting existential themes. Practitioners soon extended these techniques across media, with cinema emerging as a particularly potent vehicle.

Film uniquely merges philosophy with affective audiovisual grammar, creating a distinctive aesthetic synthesis (Chatman 1980). Its technical capacity for simultaneity and perceptual immediacy generates a hyper-real simulation of lived experience, granting spectators a sense of existential agency. Because film's signification remains open, viewers must actively complete its meaning, transforming consumption into reflection (Smith 2008). A spectator's response—whether identificatory or oppositional—constitutes an existential micro-choice (Carr 1991). As a predominantly receptive medium, its efficacy depends heavily on the audience's experiential engagement with the narrative and their post-viewing reflection. The existential dilemmas portrayed can create barriers for viewers who experience detachment from their own identities. Cinema's narrative fluidity not only underscores existentialism's continued cinematic relevance but also lays groundwork for interactive digital media. Feige proposed the concept of imitative identification based on the participatory framework of games. In narrative-driven games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series, players experientially engage with a rich storyline encompassing the protagonist's criminal activities, friendships, and career achievements, leading to a recognition and adoption of their virtual identity within the game world. Therefore, aesthetic power emerges not merely from observational detachment, but from players' capacity to inhabit dramatic roles and actively shape the storyworld (Feige 2015). In a game like *The Legend of Zelda*, the constructed experience of eternal recurrence, absolute freedom, the anxiety of choice, and Kierkegaardian repetition demonstrates the medium's potential to facilitate self-actualization through solitude, while simultaneously concretizing philosophical ideas

for the player during the experiential process (Lay 2024). Different gameplay styles determine how players engage with the world, so analyzing gameplay can lead to deeper existential explorations of this artistic medium. These aesthetic principles, originating in film and other arts, provide the foundation for interpreting how games like *Ready or Not* materialize existential themes through player agency.

Video Games as Vehicles for Existential Inquiry

Unlike the predominantly receptive medium of cinema, video games are fundamentally structured around deep interactivity. Games that confront players with ethical dilemmas are thus uniquely suited for existential analysis and hold significant promise for disseminating philosophical ideas to broader audiences. While sharing narrative techniques with traditional media, video games transform spectators into co-creators of the storyworld through distinctive interactive mechanisms. The dynamic interplay between narrative, rule systems, and lived experience fosters moral reflection far richer than passive viewing permits. This discussion proceeds along two interconnected dimensions: the medium's formal properties and the player's agential role. Salen and Zimmerman (2003) characterize computer games as offering "immediate yet bounded interactivity". Player input elicits instantaneous feedback; computational capacity sustains expansive, seamless worlds, networked functions enable mass multplay. These affordances grant digital games a cultural reach exceeding film's capabilities—yet simultaneously impose medium-specific constraints. As Koster observes, rules simultaneously enable and circumscribe interaction. Echoing Sartrean existentialism, players experience freedom within a structured framework (Koster 2013). However, not all titles function effectively as existential thought experiments. Game worlds exhibit wide variation in complexity and resist straightforward mapping onto reality, being fundamentally delimited by design boundaries and simulation rules. Meaningful engagement presupposes cognitive mastery of these systems (Juul 2011). While virtual scenarios simplify real-world contexts, their ethical dimensions remain partially traceable, enabling players to evaluate in-game choices through moral lenses (Rollings and Adams 2003)—thus offering novel perspectives on players' in-game existence and conduct.

Virtual worlds provide audiences with safely mediated experiences of danger—a core appeal shared with cinema (Crawford 2003). Because in-game actions lack tangible consequences, the emotional cost of "unethical" behavior is attenuated, potentially echoing Sartre's notion of bad faith: the temptation to evade responsibility by retreating behind fiction's shield. Consequently, research must examine both the virtual layer and the player's role. Unlike film spectators, players constitute active communities capable of ethical reflection, social connection, and creative invention (Foucault 2019). Each play session embeds the player within a network of decisions. Games present constrained choice architectures, players devise strategies to achieve objectives (Becker 2000, 2003). Where film viewers freely interpret narratives, game players exercise freedom through action. This moral practice is voluntarily undertaken by agents who must accept responsibility for character development while preserving play's intrinsic pleasures. Video games diverge decisively from cinema through their interactive structures and conferral of moral agency upon players. The imperative to own each in-game choice mirrors Sartre's call to embrace freedom and responsibility. When game worlds achieve sufficient complexity to evoke genuine ethical stakes—and when players engage

those stakes earnestly—the medium becomes an unparalleled vehicle for exploring existence and choice.

Scholarship connecting video games to existentialist philosophy clusters around two primary objects: game design and player conduct. Regarding design-focused studies, Khodakarami et al. (2024) demonstrates that titles engineered for “existential dialogue” provide interactive arenas for confronting meaning, choice, and angst. However, focusing exclusively on bespoke art-games limits applicability to complex commercial works whose systemic depth remains under-analyzed. Harlock contends that games’ systemic interactivity offers uniquely potent rhetoric for staging existential situations, merging aesthetic intensity with profound immersion (Harlock 2015). While existing case studies emphasize action games and choice-driven narratives, this essay extends the inquiry to the highly immersive tactical shooter *Ready or Not* — a title whose realist scenarios remain underexplored. Desrochers-Trahan operationalizes four existential concerns — meaning, freedom, death, and intersubjectivity—into design heuristics: procedural rhetoric, emergent play, permadeath, and interactive narrative (Desrochers-Trahan et al. 2019). He posits that existential frameworks can both depict the human condition and catalyze self-knowledge. While this research engages debates about games-as-art, it holds untapped potential for examining games’ impact on players’ existential thinking. Regarding player-focused studies, Kania maps Sartre’s freedom-responsibility dialectic onto player-avatar relations: many players willingly submit to a game’s “rule of law,” merging self with avatar in acts of bad faith that grant “responsibility leave.” High-stakes competition or severe penalties can disrupt this complacency, altering configurations of seriousness, self-deception, and meaning (Kania 2015). Players observe fictional characters and respond to their situations (Crandall and Taliaferro 2014), a co-constructive relationship potentially triggering existential reflection on the “other self.” The translation of fictional content’s existential effects into players’ real-world thinking requires case-specific analysis. Building on such insights, Kouratoras formulates an “existential-theory-gameplay” paradigm based on *The Walking Dead* case study (Kouratoras 2020), mapping Sartrean motifs to concrete design patterns (Björk and Holopainen 2005). However, the game’s largely linear plot causes its existential charge to dissipate upon replay when outcomes become known. Therefore, to fully understand games as existential vehicles, it is necessary to apply a methodology that combines design analysis with sustained observation to moral games with complex interactive situations. This article applies a philosophical close reading of the mechanical, visual, procedural, and relational dynamics of play in *Ready or Not*, and by engaging with its distinctive level designs grounded in real-world events initiates a pioneering discussion on the game’s realism-driven ethical ambiguity, thereby elucidating how it simulates existential concepts through interactive forms and reveals their latent pedagogical significance.

ANALYSIS

Game Visual Design and Abandonment

The designers of *Ready or Not* utilize the Unreal Engine to construct a world for the player in which their virtual avatar is a SWAT officer, effectively enabling the player to share the avatar's perception. It vividly manifests the philosophical insight of abandonment described by Sartre: "A person exists first, finds himself thrown into the world, and only then makes himself—while bearing the full responsibility for that existence" (Stumpf 2003). This is concretely realized through the game's

mandatory first-person perspective (FPP), which offers a significantly stronger immersive quality compared to other perspectives (Mäyrä 2008). Furthermore, the game prioritizes realism: the absence of conventional FPS UI elements (such as ammunition counters or health meters) at the edges of the screen reinforces that the on-screen display simulates exactly what the avatar's eyes perceive (see Figure 1). This establishes the prosthetic agency (Klevjer 2012), a prosthesis of the player's physical body in the game which becomes his second nature as a prosthetic avatar. The prosthetic avatar is a mediated agency within the game environment in extension to the physical body, in the sense of an extension of the player's own being. The game's scenarios and adherence to physical laws are highly mimetic of the real world while the incident locations are fictionalized narratives, their inspiration is drawn from actual crime scenes. The collective effect of these design is to immerse the player as deeply as possible within the experiential perspective of the avatar. Tim Michiels employs *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt 2015) to illustrate how games convey the concept of abandonment through pre-established role identities and the consequential relationships with NPCs. Michiels argues that players are fundamentally "thrown into" these predefined relational webs and responsibilities that shape their existence within the game world (Michiels 2024). However, in non-role-playing games (non-RPGs) like the present case study, *Ready or Not*, this specific relational framework for conceptualizing abandonment is less applicable, despite the game similarly assigning the player a predetermined role identity. Instead, *Ready or Not* chooses to depict a perceptually authentic reality and an inescapable life situation through its simulation-centric optics and sound design. This insight has obvious resonance for anyone analysing how an agent—whether a flesh-and-blood individual or a player inside a game—shapes a role and makes moral choices.



Figure 1: Simulated screen display design.

The player is thrust into the incident site with the pre-assigned identity of a SWAT officer. The character role and the scenario itself impose constraints upon the player, defining a situation they did not choose. All known case information and mission details are confined to the briefing presented on the in-game tactical tablet. The immersive realism sought by the game's visual style compels the player beyond the role of an external observer; they are led to identify with their SWAT officer avatar, experiencing its sensory input and actions as if they were their own. Effectively, 'what you see is what you do'. Beyond its overall realistic visual style, the game also pursues verisimilitude in minute environmental details. In the level "Neon Tomb," (see Figure 2) for example, the incident occurs in a nightclub modeled explicitly after the infamous Orlando gay bar shooting (Stonehem 2016). Drawing from news

reports and interviews with responding officers, the game depicts scene details that brutally reconstruct the grim reality of the actual event. Although the scenario is intensely graphic and potentially disturbing, survivors within the level perceive the player as their hope, civilian NPCs immediately call for help upon sighting the player. In these moments, the player is no longer a passive bystander but an active agent capable of intervening to save others and alter the dire situation. Crucially, the game provides no background information beyond the immediate case, loading completes, and the operation begins instantly. This design strategy starkly reflects the creators' intent to abandon the player directly into a dire, uncontrollable situation of which they possess no prior experiential knowledge or meaningful context. These scenarios are not designed explicitly to teach Sartrean ethics, but they inadvertently simulate such conditions. Through the meticulous simulation of these crime scenes, the game confronts the player with experiences profoundly alien to their everyday cognition. Despite possessing the institutional authority of a police officer, the avatar places the player amidst perilous conditions devoid of fail-safe protocols. This necessitates that the player continuously make consequential choices within an evolving, precarious situation. Through the shared perception between player and virtual avatar, coupled with a game design that delivers a direct and authentic law enforcement experience, the case study's distinctive approach effectively showcases the medium's strengths. It presents the philosophical concept of 'abandonment' to the player in a highly concrete and visceral manner.

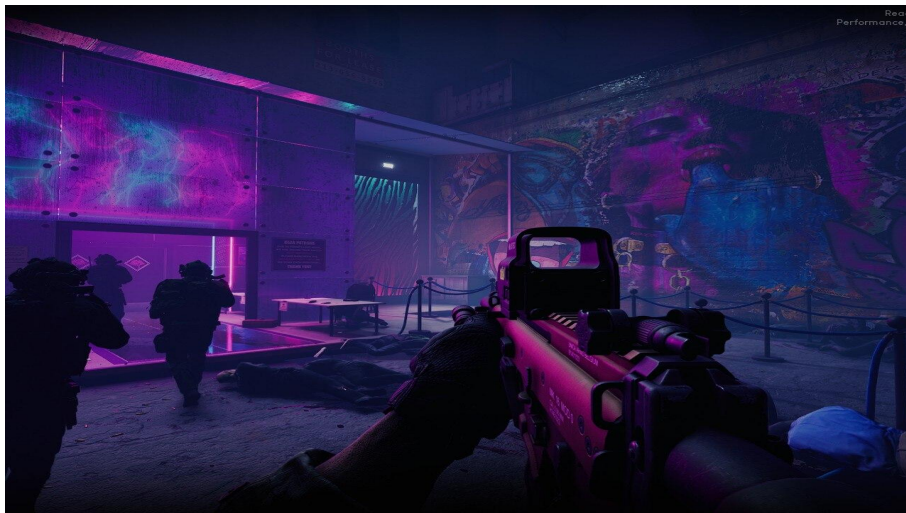


Figure 2: The brutal scene in the mission 'Neon Tomb'.

Game Mechanic Design and the Existential Dilemma

While moral games simulate ethical dilemmas by presenting players with genuine choices, such scenarios differ fundamentally from utilitarian calculable options or virtue-ethical binary judgments; no optimal solution is predefined in these dilemmas. The case study in question further qualifies this structure through specific design implementations. Ready or Not constructs an implicit choice scenario constrained by its death and procedural reset mechanics, differing fundamentally from the explicit moral dilemmas of branching narrative games and offering a potent representation of existential struggle. Existing research has applied an existentialist framework to analyze conflict and death in the third-person shooter Spec Ops: The Line, exploring player reflection that transcends mere entertainment (Chittaro and Sioni 2018).

Unlike depictions of war-related death, death or failure in *Ready or Not* is directly linked to player actions, leading to a distinct form of in-game reflection. Sartre observed that death constitutes both the limit and constitutive element of freedom (Sartre 1992). Leino (2012) extends this, noting that games materialize resistance through failure states, compelling players to navigate tensions between liberty and responsibility. Similarly, Warren (2013) suggests that games offering distinct encounters with death, like *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive 2018), can foster authentic living. Permadeath mirrors real death's finality, creating a tension akin to death anxiety and forcing players to confront finitude, live in the present, and ascribe greater weight to their choices. I concur with Warren's analysis regarding the existential efficacy of permadeath mechanics. Choices presented as irreversible within narrative-driven games possess a similar potency, effectively confronting the player with meaningful finitude. Indeed, some games strategically fuse both mechanics—permadeath and irreversible narrative choices—to heighten player constraint and responsibility. If the player, as an existence, were granted temporally unlimited being, they could realize all possible outcomes. Their individuality would dissolve, and their choices concerning dangerous or irrevocable possibilities would lose meaning. The death of the player-controlled character in the game results in mission failure. Even upon replaying the mission - where the overall map environment and objectives remain identical - enemy placements and environmental interaction elements (such as traps) are procedurally reset.

I argued that this procedural randomness simulates the contingency of existence. Death and the random reset mechanism act as punitive consequences resulting directly from player choices, their efficacy as gameplay functions is inherently limited. Many popular choice-driven ethical games on the market allow players to backtrack through the narrative arc, enabling repeated experiences or altered outcomes. Games incorporating explicit moral frameworks, such as *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012) or *The Witcher 3* or *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream 2018), typically rely on branching linear narratives. Player choices within these games (often presented as dialogue options) can steer the plot trajectory; however, from a mechanistic standpoint, these choices are rarely irrevocable (Picucci 2015). Players retain the ability to reload saves and replay sections to experience different narrative branches. The type of replayability as is defined by Thygesen, is not mechanical, but rather emotional (Thygesen 2014). The virtuality of games preserves for the player the option to remain a spectator or to immerse themselves in a role. The procedural design of choice-oriented games allows players to exhaustively explore every narrative branch or retrace the steps of their own choices. Neely extends the concept of fiction by distinguishing internal and external virtuality, demonstrating how mechanisms like save-reload loops and checkpoint systems can significantly diminish a game's capacity to foster genuine moral reflection and weighty decision-making (Neely 2019). This multi-path game design functionality tends to encourage players to experiment with various choices primarily to access previously unseen story content - an inclination seemingly in conflict with the existentialist tenet that "man is free." As Simone de Beauvoir observed in *La force de l'âge*, "if our lives were infinite, they would merge into universal indifference." Were the player's existence timeless, where every decision could be corrected or superseded in the future, the conception of choices as momentous and possessing intrinsic importance would fail to emerge (De Beauvoir 1986). This would lead to the perception that no choice truly leads to a definitive outcome, ultimately eroding the player's sense of authentic freedom. Conversely, in *Ready or Not*, player death forces mission restart. While core mission parameters

remain unchanged, interactive elements and enemy positions within the scene are procedurally reset. Because outcomes in *Ready or Not* cannot be ‘gamed’ for divergent endings, every choice becomes an irreducible act of meaning-making.

Relational Ethics in Multiplayer Gameplay

Ready or Not gamifies real-world policing ethics through its unique evaluation system, simulating actual case scenarios to confront players with existential dilemmas inherent in law enforcement operations. The game’s rule-based evaluation system and law enforcement interaction mechanics represent a simplified adaptation of real-world police conduct protocols. This design philosophy distinctly sets *Ready or Not* apart from conventional FPS games. Traditional first-person shooters provide players with an interactive loop centered on aiming and firing (Jansz and Tanis 2007). However, their mechanics often facilitate the player’s ready resort to violence, making it difficult to assign clear responsibility for actions within the game world. Alternatively, these games may employ fictionalized moral evaluation systems that are fundamentally disconnected from reality, thereby stripping player actions of any meaningful ethical significance. Instead, *Ready or Not* imposes a requirement for professional restraint upon the player, embodied by their police officer avatar. This manifests concretely in several ways: the imperative to ensure the safety of civilians within the incident zone; the obligation to positively identify targets before engaging; and the restriction that firearms and other weapons of force can only be used reactively as countermeasures after a subject has initiated hostile fire. This complex web of professional constraints exists alongside - and often directly conflicts with - core mission objectives and the player’s own embodied survival. The conflict among these divergent ethical perspectives is further intensified in the game’s multiplayer cooperative mode. While each player makes choices independently, their decisions indirectly or directly impact other players, thereby planting the seeds of potential interpersonal conflict. This stands in sharp contrast to Michail Kouratoras’ analysis of *The Walking Dead*, which focuses on the existential dramatization of conflict between the player character (Lee) and non-player characters (NPCs) whose behaviors are predetermined by the game’s narrative design (Kouratoras 2020). Interplayer dynamics remain rare within games centered on moral choice, primarily due to Single-player narrative constraints.

In *Ready or Not* co-op mode (see Figure 3), the “Other” is embodied by actual fellow players. Their actions, driven by personal will and not pre-scripted algorithms—unlike NPC allies, who, however complex, remain predictable and player-directed—are independent and directly influence mission outcomes. In a multiplayer environment, poor communication may lead some players to engage in toxic behavior that negatively impacts others’ experiences. This can diminish the narrative potency of the game, as players may cease to identify with their in-game actions or respect the experiences of others. Such situations complicate discussions surrounding interactive freedom within the game. The inherent tension between respecting another player’s freedom of choice and pursuing one’s own expectations profoundly amplifies the game’s existential tension. Each player enjoys the freedom to act based on their own judgment. This autonomy extends to, but is not limited to, selecting equipment, managing hostage crises, identifying suspects, and responding to threats—all situated within morally charged contexts. This resonates with Sartre’s assertion in *Existentialism is a Humanism*: “We cannot will our own freedom without at the same time necessarily willing the freedom of others (Sartre and Mairé 1965) To will the freedom of others is equally a condition of authenticity.” The game

incorporates two communication systems to facilitate coordination: a contextual tactical command prompt system and a built-in voice chat. The contextual command system, deeply integrated with various interactive actions, allows players to mark suggested tactical maneuvers (such as breaching a door loudly or picking the lock silently) directly on interactive points within their vicinity. However, the player who ultimately performs the action must still exercise independent judgment based on their own equipped gear and the immediate situational context. Complementing this, the push-to-talk voice system simulates real-world radio communication, providing the flexibility needed to supplement the more structured command prompts. While players can opt to communicate and coordinate strategies, this does not permit coercing others into choices against their personal will (Sartre and Douglas 1955).



Figure 3: Ready or Not co-op mode

The game entrusts each player with the authority to act independently. This tension inherent in player interaction is acutely palpable in the mission “Relapse.” Set in a hospital recently attacked by terrorists, the peril escalates as some suspects disguise themselves as medical staff to ambush players (see Figure 4). This deception forces players to navigate heightened risks when interacting with hostages and civilians, potentially sparking disagreements within the squad regarding engagement protocols. This discordance of player wills mirrors the ethical core of Sartrean existentialist drama: “Conflict is the original meaning of ‘Being-for-others.’” Furthermore, “If reciprocity exists, it is because ‘when I try to enslave the other, the other simultaneously tries to enslave me.’” Disrespecting the existential freedom of others inevitably invites critique. Players might reasonably adopt divergent strategies: employing efficient, permissible intimidation tactics (e.g., firing warning shots) to control civilians while remaining prepared to use lethal force against disguised combatants, or relying solely on verbal commands and prioritizing less-lethal options. Both approaches are mechanically viable. Their divergence stems from individual moral standards and their consequent impact on the systemic evaluation score. *Ready or Not* stages precisely this coexistence of divergent wills, granting each participant the autonomy to shape their interpretive experience of the scenario. This design aligns with Sartre’s dictum that authentic freedom necessitates not only individual autonomy but also the recognition and respect of the freedom of others—a fundamental precondition of authenticity (Sartre 2007). The immense spatial pressure of the expansive level, inevitably forces cooperating players to

separate. In these moments of isolation, each player retains the freedom to confront moral dilemmas according to their own chosen approach—a course of action that cannot be coerced by others. Through its thoughtful design of environmental interaction and enemy engagement, the game deftly situates players within cooperative scenarios laden with inherent conflict potential. Crucially, the disagreements that arise among players stem from their divergent moral perspectives. Such situations are relatively uncommon in both multiplayer games and morality-driven choice-based games. Moreover, the existentialist theory of interactive freedom demonstrates a strong analytical affinity for examining these distinctive moral scenarios, offering a robust theoretical framework to capture their dynamics.



Figure 4: Suspect disguised as medical staff.

Subjectivity, Bad Faith, and Moral Choice in Simulated Praxis

In virtual environments, the meaning of in-game entities is necessarily conferred through player interaction. It is the player's conscious activity—through their countless choices—that assigns significance to these entities and renders them salient within the game's moral universe. The ethical framework of a game assigns moral value to digital interactions, transforming player behavior into actions that are ethically evaluable. This constitutes a form of “practical conduct”—requiring players to comprehend and recognize the real meaning of objects, spaces, and themes within the game context (Sicart 2011). Although the player does not physically enact their in-game actions within the real world, their will and agency are mapped onto the game character through interaction. This process can be defined as simulated praxis. Since the player's actions stem from their personal volition, they bear responsibility for all their conduct within a morally structured game. Should the player act arbitrarily—pursuing pure entertainment without reflection—they risk losing themselves and forfeiting the subjective experience inherent to role-playing. From a Sartrean perspective, seeking passive submission to one's impulses or accepting a deterministic mindset constitutes bad faith. This dynamic is exemplified in the *Ready or Not*'s mission “Ends of the Earth.” The suspects' father (a civilian) pleads desperately with the player to talk to his sons rather than shoot them. Yet, the suspects themselves, armed with automatic weapons, pose an extreme and immediate threat; any hesitation could place the entire player squad in mortal danger. The mission constructs a palpable moral dilemma that differs significantly

from traditional choice-driven games, both in interactive mechanics and narrative delivery. The dilemma is immediate—no explicit options are presented. Instead, the player must undertake a series of subjective interactions to resolve the crisis, mirroring the split-second judgments required in real policing. This demands that the player operate within a moral framework that integrates self-preservation, professional duty, and social virtue—even when these moral conflict.

As Sartre illustrates in his plays, dilemmas arise because each course of action has its justification. The problem is that these reasons spring from different kinds of morality: they are so radically incompatible that they cannot be compared on the same level. Preserving player's own life is grounded in the existential freedom of survival, protecting civilians constitutes professional ethics, and apprehending suspects while ensuring their survival fulfills the official mission. When such divergent moral demands collide, no overarching rule can determine the "right" choice, since any such rule would inherently prioritize one moral framework over others. This phenomenon aligns with the existentialist conception of freedom: the player's choices are always made within a specific situation. This contextual grounding stands in stark contrast to the binary, often reductive "good vs. evil" choices presented in branching narrative games. The game mechanics consistently place the player in states of risk and potential loss, ensuring that decisions are not confined to a rational framework aimed solely at minimizing suffering or maximizing utility through predictable cause-and-effect. The high degree of simulation of reality in games means that moral weight is not an accidental effect of game design, but a designed affordance based on reality. Intimately tied to the player's freedom is their personal responsibility. As the agent of their actions in the game world, the player bears full responsibility for all consequences resulting from those actions. Crucially, it is not lessened by later regret or by refusing the failure inherent in the act itself. The weight of the choice remains. Through immersive identification, the player adheres to the salient rules of the fictional scenario—even when those rules conflict with absolute moral demands—because they are perceived as intentional and legitimate cues within the game (Ulbricht 2022).

From the perspective of traditional ethical frameworks, fictional acts that contravene real-world moral norms might be deemed inherently immoral. Yet the critical limitation is that within constructed moral dilemmas—like those in *Ready or Not* and other ethical games—there is no pre-established, fully right or wrong behavior. From an existentialist viewpoint, the player's fictional actions are ultimately delineated by their actual psychological volition—driven by situated intentionality within the game's constructed framework. In real life, we are ultimately called to face facts and assume responsibility (Crowell 2015). However, virtual game spaces—shaped by their thematic content and design—may lack moral standards consistent with real-world norms. Alternatively, as in games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games 2013), the rules may superficially resemble reality but structurally encourage evasion of responsibility, allowing players to easily shed burdensome consequences. This systemic design further invites players to adopt a detached, spectatorial stance when confronted with moral dilemmas and self-evaluation of their in-game behavior. This existential inauthenticity can inhibit personal growth—even the cultivation of a meaningful life. The extreme situational factors in *Ready or Not* evoke an overwhelming sense responsibility. Faced with such moral weight, players may succumb to bad faith, psychologically distancing themselves from their avatar. Yet existential freedom demands far more: the acting agent must also be capable of reflection and desire-regulation. For Sartre, personal

responsibility is “overwhelming” because the individual not only makes things happen but also “makes themselves” through their choices. *Ready or Not* uses the virtual space to immerse players in the intense pressure of realistic dilemma-driven choices. Its primary intent is not whether players can achieve a perfect outcome, but rather focuses on their experiential journey throughout the process—confronting them with the fundamental existential choice: to pursue authenticity and shape the self through moral decisions, or to refuse the consequences of choice with superficial justifications and lapse into self-deception. This framework renders all player actions evaluable within an ethical framework, effectively transforming the game medium into a veritable laboratory of existentialism.

The Ethical Ambiguity Between Game and Reality

The previous section discussed the nature of player choices as “real” or “unreal.” In specific contexts, a player’s in-game choices carry moral orientation, and likewise, the reflection prompted by these interactions is also morally oriented. This is especially true for games designed for repeated playthroughs, whose mechanics inherently guide players to review and reflect upon their prior experiences. Existing research indicates that both the content and mechanics of a game can influence a player’s process of moral reflection. On the topic of transgressive behavior in games, Strang offers the insight that “Virtual wrongdoing may stem from desires that can be judged immoral, and if such wrongdoing fosters vicious tendencies in the real world it corrupts the player’s character outside the game” (Strang 2009). Ulbricht further argues that “When a player derives pleasure from cruel or malicious depictions and strongly identifies with the perpetrator, virtual behaviour may expose genuine elements of the player’s moral psychology” (Ulbricht 2022). However, in some games, a player’s engagement in transgressive acts like violence is not merely an indulgence in visceral pleasure, but rather an deliberate choicemade within a complex moral environment. For instance, in *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020), players assume the roles of Ellie and Abby, characters who unquestionably act as killers. Yet, through the journey from vengeance to forgiveness, players can derive significant value from the experience. Role-playing as a killer or an antagonist can foster empathy and an appreciation for human complexity and fragility. The transgressive acts performed by players in these roles often involve scenarios rarely encountered in reality. However, most morality-centric games rely on designer-scripted narratives to fabricate moral dilemmas, as seen in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us Part II*. These games’ worlds are often detached from reality, serving artistic expression and entertainment. Other titles, like *Grand Theft Auto V*, are set against a realistic backdrop but allow players to easily evade the consequences of severe transgressions. While such games can provoke moral reflection, they simultaneously reinforce the player’s awareness of being in a fictional world entirely separate from reality. This clear separation may hinder genuine moral reflection, potentially reducing the existential validity of the gameplay experience.

The player’s identity as a character in the virtual world will also become an important consideration for the player to decide whether to commit violent acts. This analysis aligns with the observation that “Culturally sanctioned forms of violence (such as those associated with the military, police, frontier justice, or humanitarian peacekeeping) rarely appear in games.” Bogost (2007) observes that “relatively few video games present sufficient moral complexity to spur critical ethical reflection”—a view shared by other researchers. The use of force by law enforcement remains a intensely debated topic globally. Even when such violence is

legal and constrained, real-life complexities spark controversy, amplified in the age of social media. Some games have engaged with this theme, using interactivity to simulate Common police scenarios and encourage reflection. *Ready or Not* deepens the moral scenario of law enforcement violence through its distinctive level design, presenting an experience that feels more tangibly connected to real life. The level "Elephant" (see figure5) adapted from the Columbine High School massacre of April 20, 1999 —a connection underscored by its shared name with the film *Elephant*— offers a perspective distinct from passive media (Voorhees et al. 2012). In the actual incident, the fact that the perpetrators were students complicated the law enforcement response, necessitating difficult distinctions between hostages and suspects, while operational protocols emphasized apprehension and legal adjudication. The incident concluded with the two suspects taking their own lives after being surrounded, an outcome that sparked public debate over the law enforcement response. The genuine dilemma of the situation, however, remained largely inaccessible to outside commentators. By casting the player as a first responder, the mission immerses them in the crisis situation, fostering recognition of the dilemmas faced by characters dealing with profoundly difficult problems devoid of simple solutions. This perspective makes it easier for players to connect their experience to the real-world event. Another level, "23 Megabytes a Second" is based on a swatting incident against a streamer. This scenario, rooted in real events, forces players to confront the dangerous consequences of inappropriate viewer-streamer interactions from the perspective of the responding officers (Burgess 2018; Lamb 2020; Manna 2018). This kind of ethical simulation differs from ethical instruction where the audience acts as an observer. The game encourages deeper engagement and facilitates personal reflection on actions and consequences. When players see the world through the eyes of someone with a different value system, they gain an opportunity to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own values. As Sartre suggests, self-reflection allows us to observe the "image of the self" reflected by our "work upon the world". Therefore, the issue prompting player reflection lies not merely in the content of their actions, but in the underlying psychological motivations for those actions. Thus, even when players enact violence, "violent scenarios can still serve as valuable moral training provided the design confronts players with dilemmas analogous to those encountered in real life" (Schulzke 2010). The ethical significance of in-game conduct is shaped not simply by the game's content, but more fundamentally by the player's judgment of potential outcomes and their inner will when executing actions. In this way, digital play can indeed become "a rich source of value formation, enjoyment, introspection and self-knowledge" (Bartel 2020).



Figure 5: The level 'Elephant'.

CONCLUSION

This study has employed an existentialist philosophical framework and a method of philosophical close reading to analyze *Ready or Not*, examining it through the dual dimensions of game design and player behavior. The findings indicate that the gaming medium holds significant potential to simulate existentialist thought experiments via deliberate design. While a game's design and mechanics construct the virtual environment for player interaction, the core interactive choices within a moral game reside in player behavior. The former provides the scene and context for reflection but does not directly elicit a player's response; the latter—the player's own choices—serves as the direct catalyst for reflection. Player actions, when confronting in-game dilemmas, can be ethically evaluated and, under certain conditions, reflect the player's authentic agency. The realistic simulation genre amplifies this moral ambiguity, as gameplay situated at the boundary between virtual and real worlds guides players toward self-reflective engagement with their own existence, thereby fostering deeper self-knowledge. Through its simulation-centric design, *Ready or Not* effectively "throws" players into pre-constituted, high-stakes situations. Rather than dogmatically teaching Sartrean theory, it provides an immersive experience that allows players to grasp the principle that "existence precedes essence" firsthand. Mechanically, the game simulates the finitude of life and worldly contingency through irreversible failures and procedural randomization, underscoring freedom's burdensome yet precious nature. This approach markedly differs from choice-driven, linear narrative games; players cannot exhaust all possibilities through replays. Each choice becomes an existential act—irrevocable and responsibility-laden—thereby touching more authentically on the essence of being. The focus on a tactical realism shooter deepens the analysis of the player as a moral agent. The game creates a "simulated praxis" that situates players at the heart of a Sartrean dilemma, forcing them to navigate between "bad faith" and "authenticity" under the full weight of free choice. Multiplayer dynamics further elevate the ethical drama from a "player-versus-system" to a "player-versus-player" context, enriching the psychological dimension. Players become responsible not only for in-game actions but also for acknowledging the freedom of other participants, unable to compel teammates yet obliged to coordinate through mutual recognition—realizing Sartre's principle that willing one's own freedom necessitates

willing the freedom of others. The philosophical close reading method used here integrates interpretive and empirical strengths, offering a systematic framework for analyzing ethically rich game worlds. *Ready or Not* showcases forms of culturally sanctioned violence seldom seen in other games, with levels adapted from real incidents enabling players to engage "ordinary cases" from new perspectives. This provides a valuable reference for using game media in existentialist pedagogy. However, this study has limitations. Its primary reliance on existentialist philosophy leaves little room for comparative analysis with other frameworks, and its single-case focus limits generalizability. Future research would benefit from integrating multiple philosophical theories and expanding case diversity to deepen investigations into morality in digital environments, paving the way for more nuanced studies of moral engagement in interactive media.

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