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Avatar Gender and Ethical Choices in *Fable III*

Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society
32(5) 375–383
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DOI: 10.1177/0270467612463800
http://bsts.sagepub.com
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Abstract

This study investigates how players make ethical decisions in *Fable III*, a video game, with consideration to avatar gender. Thirty males, 18 to 34 years old, were recruited; 20 were assigned to play *Fable III*, with half assigned to play as a male avatar (Condition 1), and half assigned as a female avatar (Condition 2). Any ethical thinking skills and thought processes used were identified using a researcher-developed coding scheme. Analysis suggests that all game players, regardless of avatar gender, practiced ethical thinking—35 skills and 19 thought processes were identified and categorized. There were few differences found between conditions; however, when gender was a salient factor in a decision, this affected ethical decisions more frequently. Those in Condition 1 more frequently reported a personal connection to their avatar, and Condition 2 participants reported that gender factored into decisions more at the beginning of the game rather than at the end.

Keywords

games, ethics, gender, avatar, identity, ethical thinking, gaming, digital games

How do people make ethical decisions in gaming environments, and how is one's avatar gender related to this process? Research has suggested that gender affects one's ethical choices in workplace contexts (e.g., Glover, Bumpus, Logan, & Ciesla, 1997; Glover, Bumpus, Sharp, & Munchus, 2002), yet there is little empirical research on how avatar gender relates to how we think through ethical decisions in a game. Avatars are digital representations of an individual, which an individual controls to play a game or explore a virtual space. Depending on the game, avatars can be customized to change an avatar's gender.

Ethical thinking—the ability to assess, interpret, and reflect on our decisions, empathize with others, and comprehend the complexities of ethical questions—is essential for citizenship in today's world (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006; Schrier & Kinzer, 2009). Moreover, both adults and children are increasingly spending time in games and virtual environments, with the number of gamers increasing by 241% since 2008, to 135 million people in the United States (Parks Associates, 2012). Research has suggested that games may support the learning and practice of skills and concepts in formal and informal contexts (e.g., Gee, 2003; Shaffer, 2006). Yet there is little empirical research on games and their pedagogical potential, though there are few exceptions (Squire, 2005; research from the Microsoft-NYU Games for Learning Initiative). A few frameworks have indicated the potential of an intersection of games and ethics (Bogost, 2007; Consalvo, 2005; Sicart, 2009), yet only a few studies have empirically investigated ethical thinking in games (Schrier, Diamond, & Langendoen, 2010; Simkins & Steinkeuhler, 2008). This research fills that gap, and investigates not whether games, or time spent playing games, are "ethical," but considers how gamers navigate ethical decisions in games, and how a player's relationship with an avatar relates to the ethical thinking process. By investigating how participants think through ethical decisions in games—and the factors that affect this—we can not only understand how to better use and design games to support ethics practice but also further assess the limits and potentials of games as environments for learning ethical thinking skills.

Defining Ethics and Ethical Thinking

We can distinguish between ethics and morals; many definitions consider morals to refer to more "universal truths, or public rules or principles—norms and customs of one's community" (Tierney, 1994, p. ix), whereas "ethics" are more individual and private (Tierney, 1994). In this study, however, I will be using the term *ethics* throughout and referring to public rules and customs, as well as one's individual ethics, when considering how people practice ethical thinking. Ethics, as defined by Sicart (2009), is the practice of enacting choices and moral judgment to achieve the life of a good human being, that is, the process of making choices according to one's own conception of how to be a

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"good" person. Dewey (2008) explains that unlike general judgments, ethics involves making judgments of value (e.g., rightness or wrongness), significance and meaning. However, in this study, I did not focus on what participants believed to be right or wrong, good or bad, but rather the skills and thinking processes associated with reaching their decisions.

Games and Ethics Connection

Games are potentially compelling environments for the practice of ethical thinking because they offer the ability to iterate and reflect on multiple possibilities and consequences without real-world risks and enable participants to take on the identity of someone else, from within an authentic context (Schrier et al., 2010; Schrier & Kinzer, 2009). Salen and Zimmerman (2003) explain that games are about choices and consequences, suggesting an inherent relationship to ethical thinking, "Every action taken results in a change affecting the overall system of a game." Likewise, Sicart (2009) views games as being "designed ethical objects" that do not just feature ethical choices as part of their game play, but are themselves ethical systems and the products of, played by, and discussed by human beings, who are also active ethical agents embedded in complex social, ethical, and cultural systems.

Moreover, Zagal (2009, 2011) explains that while not all games support moral reflection and reasoning, he calls those that do "ethically notable" games, and investigates the design principles that may further these practices. Zagal's (2011) textual analysis of three videogames suggests that the design choices made by game developers, and the resulting game experience, may affect the potential ethical reflection and reasoning in a game.

On the other hand, some researchers have debated whether the ethical situations that appear in games are nuanced enough to authentically reflect a realistic ethical conundrum, or whether they are too simplistic and do not reward players for creatively considering alternate possibilities or acting with ambiguity (Melenson, 2011; Švelch, 2010). Moreover, so-called morality meters in games, such as the karma point system in *Fallout III*, and the renegade/paragon system in the *Mass Effect* series do not necessarily encourage ethical reflection, but rather support strategies for maximizing "goodness" or "badness," as if they are another in-game advantage, such as magic ability, agility, or strength (Švelch, 2010). Zagal (2012) further complicates these questions by exploring how moral reflection can potentially occur even in the everyday choices in a game, such as *Heavy Rain*, rather than merely the more obvious ethical dilemmas or choices posed in a game.

Thus, while researchers have begun to suggest that games may or may not provide an authentic context for ethical thinking or moral reflection, they have neither empirically reviewed which ethical thinking processes occur in games, nor empirically tested the factors that potentially support the practice of such processes.

One study suggests that an empirical approach to understanding ethical thinking in games may be useful. Simkins and Steinkeuhler (2008) argue that players that participate in role-playing games enact ethical decision making, and games are a place to make situated decisions and then reflect on the consequences or results of those decisions. This research, however, does not consider components of ethical thinking besides reasoning, such as empathy, and looks primarily at how the player makes decisions in the game (e.g., through social context), rather than the skills used to reason through ethical decisions.

Gender, Avatars, and Games

Prior research frameworks have suggested that games may be potential environments for not just play, but for experimenting with identity, including gender, and reflecting on our values and behavior through a new perspective (Turkle, 1995). Kafai, Field, and Cook (2007) describe a virtual environment as "an identity playground" suggesting that games may be places to try on new gender identities, and also new ethical identities as well.

Research has also suggested that the gender of characters in a game or virtual world may affect one's choices, behavior, and perceptions. For example, Ogletree and Drake (2007) found that participants rated female video game characters as more helpless, and less likely to be aggressive or strong, than male characters. Yee, Ducheneaut, Yao, and Nelson (2011) found that participants do exhibit gender bias when interacting with real people's avatars in a virtual environment. However, these are perceptions of other characters, and not one's own avatar.

When "swapping genders" or deciding to play as an opposite gender avatar in an online game, Huh and Williams (2010) found that typically, males playing as females did not exhibit stereotypically female behaviors, whereas females playing as males were more likely to exhibit traditionally male behaviors. While the authors explain that this could be due to the type of females playing the online game, I argue that it could also be due to the opportunities afforded by game play (in *EverQuest II*, in this case), which reward traditionally male behaviors such as aggressiveness or fighting. Participants will be more likely to exhibit such behaviors, regardless of gender, as it helps them compete in the game. Moreover, these findings were based on those participants who chose to select opposite gender avatars, not those who were assigned.

Thus, although there is research on how players in virtual environments and games interact with their own avatar (e.g., Kafai et al., 2007; Schroeder, 2002; Schroeder & Axelsson, 2006), no studies have specifically focused on how avatar gender may affect one's ethical thinking process in a game.

Method

A multiple case study with mixed methodologies was conducted to investigate ethical thinking in *Fable III* (2010), a role-playing game developed by Lionhead Studios.

Participants

Thirty participants were recruited and completed the study. All participants were male, aged 18 to 34 years old, who have access to an Xbox 360, play games regularly (at least 1 hour per week), and had never played *Fable III*.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned into one of three groups: Condition 1 (n = 10), Condition 2 (n = 10), or the Control Condition (n = 10). In both Conditions 1 and 2, participants spent up to 1 month playing *Fable III* for at least 9 hours. Participants also filled out a journal entry at five specific intervals in the game. Participants in Condition 1 were asked to select the male avatar to play, and participants in Condition 2 were asked to select the female avatar.

Control Condition participants did not play *Fable III*. Instead, they were provided with five different written ethical scenarios based on those encountered in *Fable III*, and were asked to fill out a journal entry on how they thought through these scenarios. The Control Condition was used to compare how participants work through similar ethical scenarios, though not within a game context. Since the five scenarios were *read*, rather than *played*, this could help to reveal any differences in the ways ethical thinking was practiced in a game, and how its elements, such as game mechanics, avatar relationship, gender of characters, and so on, may relate to these differences.

Research Protocol

Once participants were recruited, they were asked to fill out a survey that included demographic and attitudinal questions, as well as a series of five written scenarios based on *Fable III*, updated for a contemporary context.

Additionally, participants in Conditions 1 and 2 took part in an in-person observation of their game play, where they were asked to play *Fable III*. Participants were instructed to "talk aloud" while making any decision in the game, or express aloud any inner thoughts when approaching a decision, completing a decision, or interacting with elements of the game involved in an ethical decision. Immediately following the in-person observation, a 40-minute semistructured interview (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) was conducted.

For the control condition, a 40-minute semistructured interview was conducted following the submission of the five journal entries.

Coding Scheme

Using a researcher-developed coding scheme, ethical thinking skills and thinking processes employed by the participants were identified, classified, and analyzed, based on 150 journal entries from 30 participants, 30 interview transcripts, and 30 responses to scenarios on a survey. To create the coding scheme, 10% of the total transcripts were analyzed to discover discrete skills and thought processes. To clarify, "discrete" refers to how the skills and thought processes were coded, and not to how they may be applied or used by the participant. Skills were defined as an action performed in relation to, or applied to, thinking through a scenario. A thought process was any act of cognition in relation to, or applied to, thinking through a scenario, based on application of a skill.

First, the transcripts were analyzed using Invivo coding, which involves coding the individual words used by the participants in how they described their skills and thought process. Next, the same transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding, which involves the researcher labeling passages of the transcript with concise themes describing the skills and thought processes used. Finally, all of the phrases and words were consolidated for repetition. A total of 44 discrete skills and 41 discrete thought processes emerged.

The skills and thought processes identified were then organized into four categories: reasoning-related, reflection-related, empathy-related, and information gathering–related. For example, the skills "consider relationship with another character" and "consider another's character or values" were marked as empathy-related because they involved seeing the world through another person's or character's eyes and factoring in their perceived perspectives. "Using evidence to support choices" and "weighing different options" were considered reasoning-related because they involved analyzing and interpreting evidence, data, and other information to help make a decision. The coding of the transcripts was then tested for an interrater agreement of at least 85%, which was exceeded following the first round of testing.

Summary of Game and Scenarios Used

Synopsis of Fable III. *Fable III* was released in October 2011 and set in the same universe as prequels *Fable* (2004) and *Fable II* (2008). The *Fable* series include story-driven role-playing experiences where participants play as the prince or princess of Albion, via an avatar. The first half of the game involves building alliances with nonplaying characters (NPCs; artificial intelligence–driven digital characters not controlled by a human player) by going on quests, with a goal of overthrowing the evil King Logan.

Once Logan is overthrown, the player becomes the King or Queen of Albion. In this half of the game, players make choices about how to rule Albion, such as tax-related, environmental, and social decisions. Each decision affects how well the player will be able to protect the citizen NPCs of Albion from a coming threat, which could potentially kill all of the NPCs in the game.

Throughout *Fable III*, the player builds his or her avatar's reputation through interactions with NPCs and any decisions. As a result, the avatar's moral standing and role is shaped, and the larger world of Albion also evolves. For example, players, via their avatar, can choose to kill an innocent townsperson, and this may decrease their moral standing; NPCs in the game may also then treat the avatar more derisively.

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on three of the ethical decisions experienced in *Fable III* and focus on differences between Condition 1 and 2, rather than between game players and control participants. To ensure that these scenarios were considered ethical decisions, participants were asked to identify any ethical decisions in the game, and all participants identified these as ethical decisions.

The participants identified these three scenarios as ethical decisions through their journal entries. In their journals, participants were asked to play different segments of the game, to name the ethical decisions they made as part of the quests or activities, and to explain why it was an ethical decision for them. While there were hundreds of smaller and larger decisions in the game (e.g., from should I walk right or left, to should I use a sword or a spell on this enemy), 100% of the participants identified the following three specific decisions in the game as being "ethical"—that is, having a choice that involves a value judgment. The reason that I did not predetermine which scenarios to include prior to the study is to reduce any interviewer bias and to ensure that I was analyzing appropriate scenarios. While there were many more scenarios that were identified as being ethical by the participants, I chose to focus only on these three because they were all identified as being an ethical decision *and* helped to elucidate the complex relationship between avatar gender, one's own gender, and ethical thinking.

"Surrender a Friend.". The "Surrender a Friend" scenario occurs near the beginning of *Fable III*. The prince or princess meets up with a childhood friend, named Elise or Elliot, depending on the avatar's gender. (The friend is Elise if the avatar is male, and Elliot if the avatar is female.) Soon after the beginning of the game, the prince/princess is brought to King Logan, who has caught three protesting villagers. Participants are asked to decide between sacrificing Elise/Elliot or sacrificing the villagers. Participants must make this choice; if they forgo it, both Elise/Elliot and the villagers are killed. During this scene, Elise/Elliot begs to be sacrificed.

"Walter.". The "Walter" scenario occurs in the middle of the game. Walter is the mentor of the prince/princess and is helping the player overthrow Logan and regain control of Albion. At this point in the game, an enemy has blinded Walter, so the prince/princess needs to drag Walter out of a cave and toward safety. Dragging him involves moving extremely slowly, which is a highly frustrating experience for the player. Once the participant reaches the end of the cave, Walter collapses and explains that he cannot go any further. At this point, the participant must decide whether to continue to drag Walter across a wide desert or leave him behind.

"Build a Brothel.". In the "Build a Brothel" scenario, which takes place near the end of the game, the participant must decide whether to build a brothel in Albion or repair a shelter/orphanage. If the participant decides to build a brothel, the treasury will earn over $1 million, which protects 1 million NPC citizens; if the participant decides to repair a shelter it costs the treasury $50,000, and puts 50,000 citizens in harm.

Results

The data were analyzed with consideration to the general research questions:

1. What types of skills and thought processes do players use to make ethical decisions in *Fable III*? How does gender of the avatar relate to this?
2. Does avatar gender relate to reported identification with one's avatar?

General Results

Using a researcher-developed coding scheme, 44 different ethical thinking skills and 41 thought processes were identified, and 35 skills and 19 thought processes were categorized into one of the following four categories: reasoning-related, empathy-related, reflection-related, and information gathering–related (the others were more specific to *Fable III*; see Tables 1 and 2).

The results did not suggest that if a player used reasoning skills or thought processes, they then more or less frequently used empathy-related skills or thought processes. Seventy-five percent of game group participants at some point referred to their own emotional state or used their personal emotions to help them make an ethical decision in *Fable III.* Seventy percent of Condition 1 participants and 80% of Condition 2 participants at some point referred to their own emotions or considered their own emotional state, when making an ethical decision. Fisher's exact test was conducted to note significant differences and there were none.

Participants were also asked a number of gender-related questions during the survey. The number of participants who typically choose a male as their avatar choice (when they have a choice) was the same for both conditions (80%). When asked on the survey if the respondent typically identifies with his avatar, the median response was "I usually identify with my avatar" for those in Condition 1 and "I sometimes identify with my avatar, I sometimes do not" for those in Condition 2.

Fisher's exact test was conducted to see if there were significant differences between game group participants' self-report that they would have made different or similar decisions as the opposite gender avatar that they played, and there were no significant differences. For those who played as a male avatar, 60% said they would play similarly and 40% said they would play differently if they played as a female avatar. The following subsections will provide more detailed results by scenario.

Results by Scenario

To evaluate the ethical thinking skills and thought processes performed in the three individual scenarios, statistical analysis was conducted. In general, frequency counts were derived and Fisher's exact tests was conducted to note any

Table 1. Highest Frequency Skills Used Overall in *Fable III*

Skills	Category
Providing reasons for decision	Reasoning related
Using evidence to support choices	Reasoning related
Consideration of consequences	Reasoning related
Analysis of situation or context	Reasoning related
Interpretation of information	Reasoning related
Prioritizing goals	Reasoning related
Weigh different options	Reasoning related
Identify pros and cons	Reasoning related
Consider relationship with another character	Empathy related
Consider another's character or values	Empathy related
Financial assessment	Reasoning related

Table 2. Highest Frequency Thought Processes Used Overall in *Fable III*

Thought processes	Category
Imagining what-if scenarios	Reasoning related
Integrating perspectives from another character	Empathy related
Prioritizing relationships over other factors	Empathy related
Prioritizing other's perspectives over other factors	Empathy related
Using someone else's feelings to make a decision	Empathy related

significant differences on responding to scenarios between Conditions 1 and 2, on any ethical thinking skill or ethical thought process that emerged. Because of the limited sample size, even if results were statistically significant, they should still be considered trends, and studied further.

"Surrender a Friend.". Frequency counts were derived and Fisher's Exact Test was conducted to note any significant differences in the ethical thinking skills and processes in Conditions 1 and 2 in the "Surrender a Friend" scenario. In this scenario, 40% of the Condition 1 participants chose Elise to live, while 60% chose the villagers to live. For the Condition 2 participants, only one participant chose Elliot to live, while 70% chose the villagers to live (the rest chose neither; see Table 3). While there are no significant or directional differences between Condition 1 and Condition 2 participants, there is a significant difference between the two choices that Condition 2 participants made. Using Fisher's exact test, there was a significant difference between the choice of Elliot versus the choice of the villagers for Condition 2 participants ($\alpha = .0198$).

Using Fisher's exact test, there was a significant difference on the use of one reasoning-related skill ("Consider pros and cons") in this scenario, when comparing Condition 1 (10%) versus Condition 2 (80%) participants ($\alpha = .0055$). There were no other significant differences found in ethical skill or thought process use.

"Walter.". Frequency counts were derived and Fisher's exact test was conducted to note any significant differences in the ethical thinking skills and processes in Conditions 1 and 2 in the "Walter" scenario. Using Fisher's exact test, there were no significant differences on any ethical thinking skills and thought processes and no significant differences between the decision made in the "Walter" between Condition 1 and Condition 2 participants; most participants chose to help Walter (90%).

Table 3. Frequencies of Decisions on "Surrender a Friend" by Condition

Decision	Condition 1; $n = 10$ (%)	Condition 2; $n = 10$ (%)
Choose Elise/Elliot to live	40	10
Choose the villagers to live	60	70
No decision	0	20

One quarter of all game participants wanted to save their friend (Elliot/Elise) in the "Surrender a Friend" scenario, whereas 90% of participants wanted to save Walter in the "Walter" scenario, and this was significant, $\alpha = .0001$, using Fisher's exact test. There is also a significant difference between the proportion of Condition 2 participants who wanted to save their friend (Elliot) in the "Surrender a Friend" scenario (10%) versus Walter (90%), $\alpha = .0011$, using Fisher's exact test. However, there is no significant difference between the number of Condition 2 participants who wanted to save their friend (Elise) in the "Surrender a Friend" scenario (40%) versus Walter (90%), $\alpha = .0573$, using Fisher's exact test.

The choices in the two scenarios, "Walter" and "Surrender a Friend," are not analogous, as you are not choosing between sacrificing Walter and other NPCs, but rather, you are choosing to save Walter versus putting your avatar in danger.

"Build a Brothel.". Frequency counts were derived and Fisher's exact test was conducted to note any significant differences in the ethical thinking skills and processes in Conditions 1 and 2 in the "Build a Brothel" scenario. Using Fisher's exact test, there was a significant difference on one ethical thinking skill and one directional trend, as described in Table 4.

There were no significant differences for ethical thought processes. Finally, there were no significant differences between the decision made in the "Build a Brothel" between Condition 1 and Condition 2 participants, as 85% of the participants chose to repair the shelter/orphanage.

Self-Reported Results

Identification with avatar. Game condition participants were asked to what extent they identified with their avatar during *Fable III*. The mean self-reported identification with one's avatar for Condition 1 is 6.90 (on a scale from 1 to 10). The mean self-reported identification with one's avatar for Condition 2 is 5.70 (on a scale from 1 to 10). Spearman's rank correlation analysis was conducted to note any significant differences between Conditions 1 and 2 in the average mean. It was found not to be significantly different, $f(2, 17) = 3.446$, $p = .081$.

Spearman's rank correlation analysis was conducted to note if there was a correlation between two data points: (a) whether the game group participants self-reported that they typically

Table 4. Differences in Skills in the "Build a Brothel" Scenario, by Condition

Skill	Condition 1; *n* = 10 (%)	Condition 2; *n* = 10 (%)	Significance
Financial assessment	100	50	$\alpha = .0325$
Consideration of game status or moral standing	10	60	$\alpha = .0573$

identified with an avatar on the survey and (b) the participants' identification with their avatar in *Fable III*, as self-reported during the interview. There was no significant relationship found, $f(2, 17) = .249$, $p = .305$.

In Condition 1, 78% of participants reported that their avatar in *Fable III* represented them, whereas only 20% of participants in Condition 2 reported this. There was one with no response. This difference was significant, $\alpha = .0230$, using Fisher's exact test. Thirty percent of participants in Condition 1 reported that they identified with their avatar's physicality, whereas no participants in Condition 2 reported this, which was never asked directly to the participant. There were no significant differences.

No participants in Condition 1 reported that they had "no relationship with their avatar," whereas 50% of participants in Condition 2 reported this. This difference was significant, $\alpha = .0325$, using Fisher's exact test. No participants in Condition 1 reported that they identified more with their avatar over time in the game, whereas 50% of participants in Condition 2 reported this, though this was never directly asked to the participant. This difference was significant, $\alpha = .0325$, using Fisher's Exact Test.

In Condition 1, 30% of game participants referred to their avatar in the third person during their journal content or "talk aloud," whereas 60% of participants in Condition 2 referred to their avatar in the third person. There was no significant difference between these, $\alpha = .3698$, using Fisher's exact test.

In Condition 1, 90% of participants reported that they put themselves in their avatar's shoes, whereas 50% of participants in Condition 2 reported that they did. This difference is not significant, but a directional trend, $\alpha = .1409$, using Fisher's exact test. Thirty percent of participants in Condition 1 reported that they were role-playing a specific character, when referring to their relationship with their avatar. Sixty percent of participants in Condition 2 reported this. This difference is not significant, and was not asked directly to the participant. Thirty percent of participants in Condition 1 reported that their avatar was themselves, or an embodiment of them. No participants in Condition 2 reported this. This difference is not significant.

Discussion

The results of the present study suggest that a variety of ethical thinking skills and thought processes were employed during the experience of *Fable III*, regardless of avatar gender. Despite a perception, by 40% of Condition 1 participants, that they would think through ethical scenarios differently as a female avatar in *Fable III*, participants in the two conditions thought through scenarios similarly, in general. Some possibilities for this are that avatar gender was not a strong factor in one's ethical thought process, was not a salient characteristic of the game experience, or the sample size was not large enough to reveal any differences. Another possibility is that over time in the game, avatar gender became a less important aspect of play, or was not a salient enough aspect of the *Fable III* scenarios. This is suggested by the fact that half of participants in Condition 2 reported that they identified more with their avatar over time, whereas no Condition 1 participants reported this, which was not asked directly to the participant.

There were a few intriguing differences between Conditions 1 and 2 in choices made, game-play experience, and skills used when gender was a salient part of the scenario. For example, in "Surrender a Friend," the male participants in Condition 2 were significantly less likely to choose to save Elliot, a fellow male, perhaps because they had a harder time imagining a potential relationship with a male romantic partner. However, those who saved Elise wanted to see how the relationship would unfold with her, even if they had much interaction with Elise thus far in the game. For example, a participant in Condition 1 said,

> I want to see how the relationship develops with my character and Elise. I made that decision because I felt that Elise had a connection with my character. I wanted to see where she would be in the future of the game.

A Condition 1 participant, who chose to sacrifice the villagers, reported that he regretted his decision afterward, because he felt he missed the opportunity to build a romantic relationship with Elise. None of the Condition 2 participants expressed regret at not saving Elliot.

Although the game participants chose to sacrifice their friend more frequently than they chose the villagers, they used the same types of ethical thinking skills and thought processes to assess the situation, regardless of their choice.

All participants who sacrificed the villagers reported that if they had had more time to build a relationship with Elise/Elliot, they would have been less likely to sacrifice him/her. This is further supported by the results of the "Walter"

scenario. Most of the participants decided to save "Walter" rather than sacrifice him, putting their own avatar in more danger. There were no differences found between Condition 1 and Condition 2 participants on the "Walter" scenario, not only because gender was not a factor in the scenario but also because participants had more time to build a relationship with him. Thus, experiencing a relationship over time, regardless of avatar gender, or the gender of the NPC, seemed more influential in one's ethical decision process in *Fable III.*

"Build a Brothel" occurs later in the game and is not related to gender, and there were no significant differences between Conditions 1 and 2, except on financial assessment. Instead, Condition 2 participants seemed to focus more on building their avatar's moral status, rather than the cost of the brothel. This discrepancy may be because Condition 2 participants felt more like they were playing a role—the "good" character—so they were more focused developing their avatar's moral status, rather than the Condition 1 participants, who were more likely to feel like their avatar was themselves or an extension of themselves. This distinction between how Condition 1 and Conditio 2 participants related to their avatar is unpacked further in the next section.

Gender and Avatar Identification

While there was no significant difference between mean self-reported avatar identification between the Condition 1 and Condition 2 participants, there was a directional difference. Most other measures of avatar-player connectedness were significant, suggesting that Condition 1 participants felt more akin to their avatar than Condition 2 participants. Sixty percent of Condition 2 participants reported that they focused on playing a character (rather than themselves), and made decisions simply because it was the "good" one or the one to raise their character's moral status, rather than thinking about the decision's implications or their own personal ethics. For example, one Condition 2 participant said, "At this point I'm starting to simply go for all of the good options." This is not surprising given results by Trepte, Reinecke, and Behr (2009), which showed that when choosing an avatar for a virtual environment, participants typically choose one of their own sex, as this helps them more closely identify with their avatar.

Although no significant differences in ethical decision making emerged based on the connectedness of the player to his avatar, 30% of participants in Condition 2 reported that they felt influenced by the gender of their avatar and played differently as a result, because of the ways they were treated by NPCs in *Fable III*. For example, a Condition 2 participant, who killed NPCs who catcalled him in the game, also said,

> I always made sure she was nicely dressed. It's almost like I was taking care of her. . . . When I've played as guys, I generally just put them in the bare basic clothing and just kept it the same or just put the default clothing.

Thus, when gender was a factor in an interaction, this player felt that it affected his normal game behavior. This complicates Huh and Williams's (2010) research, where their results suggested that men who play female characters were not more likely to engage in stereotypically female acts than men who play male characters.

Another Condition 2 participant noted that initially playing as the female avatar helped him, "separate the story a little bit more from myself," but over time it did not affect the way he thought through ethical decisions, as the physicality and gender of the avatar faded in importance. On first judgment of the avatar, these participants considered superficial characteristics to assess their avatar, which helped them to judge their avatar's similarities to themselves. However, over time, as the participant embodies the avatar through action, they began to judge their avatar as increasingly similar because he or she was making decisions and behaving the way the participant wants to behave.

Complicating the avatar gender relationship further, more participants in Condition 2, rather than in Condition 1, referred to their avatar in the third person, though not significantly. Previous research suggests that those participants who use first-person pronouns when referring to a game or virtual-world experience are more engaged, and likely to be more immersed in the role (Schifter, Ketelhut, & Nelson, 2011). More research is needed to better understand these relationships.

Finally, we should not overstate any differences between Condition 1 and Condition 2 participants as indications of a strong avatar-player relationship. Even if participants initially may have been affected by (or attentive to) the gender of their avatar, equal proportions of Condition 1 and Condition 2 participants reported that they identified with their avatar's *choices* (without being asked directly), even if not the avatar itself, explaining in part why there were so few differences between Conditions 1 and 2 in how the participants worked through the ethical scenarios.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that participants practice ethical thinking skills and thought processes in games such as *Fable III*, regardless of avatar gender. As suggested by this study, game players may be slightly affected by the avatar gender initially in the game, however, this effect fades over time as the participants make more choices for the avatar, and see their decision making mirrored by their avatar. However, when gender is a salient characteristic of game play, a choice or scenario, gender may be again taken into consideration when the participant thinks through his or her decision, but otherwise does not become a factor in the decision-making process.

Results indicated that participants playing as the same gender avatar were more connected and identified more strongly with the avatar as a representation of themselves,

particularly superficially. Participants playing as the opposite gender more frequently deemed their avatar as a separate character to play rather than as themselves; however, this did not appear to affect most ethical decision-making skills and thought processes in the game. This should be considered further, as this distance may affect one's motivation to play a game or the ability to use the avatar to reflect on one's own values and ethical thought process. A larger sample size and inclusion of female game players in the same experimental design would also be useful in further understanding the relationship between gender and ethical thinking in role-playing games.

Finally, we need to consider that games, such as *Fable III*, are legitimate sites of study for researching ethical scenarios and for further investigating the complex relationship between gender, ethics, and the virtual realm.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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