Video games – a moral game changer?

August 19 2016

Dr Malcolm Ryan and Dr Paul Formosa. Credit: Chris Stacey

With 98 per cent of Australian households with children having at least one form of video game, it not only seems logical but indeed ethical that we discuss the moral content of videogames.

A recent paper by Macquarie University researchers challenges the concept that games are amoral spaces where actions are without ethical significance.

Dr Paul Formosa from the Department of Philosophy explains that artists across every medium engage audiences with challenging moral questions concerning topics of war, crime corruption, fidelity and the abuse of power. However, Formosa argues relatively few videogames invite us to engage deeply with the morality of the worlds they depict or the behaviours they encourage us to adopt.

"Somewhere along the way, the idea that 'it's just a game' has been used as a way of saying that 'my behaviour here doesn't matter because the purpose of gameplay is nothing more than winning or losing'," he says.

"In our research we are interested in examining the different ways in which videogames can engage with ethical expertise. What are the different things designers can do to make players more or less morally engaged by the videogames they play?"

Co-author and senior lecturer for Game Design and Development, Dr Malcolm Ryan, says it is easy for players to adopt a pragmatic approach to optimising their gameplay outcomes and ignore the moral significance of their behaviour.

"What is interesting is when the designer encourages the player to make choices morally in spite of the inherent systems of the game.

"To take an example from the Grand Theft Auto series, we want to prompt the player to think 'well I actually feel bad about running over the sex worker and taking her money and perhaps this is not something I should be doing'," he says.

"To be clear, we aren't advocating against these games, we are simply interested in expanding the scope of games to allow deeper, morally complex works – not to replace one with the other."

Dr Formosa explains there has always been discussion and debate about whether playing violent videogames can make you more violent which leads to the question: can playing violent videogames make you a 'worse' person?

"Our research is more interested in looking at the inverse question: can playing morally engaging videogames make you a 'better' person?"

Provided by Macquarie University