

THE IMPACT OF CONFLICTED MORAL DILEMMAS
ON MORAL EMOTION AND
DESIRE TO REPLAY IN VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to explore the impact of conflicted moral dilemmas in video games on guilt and desire to replay the scenario in an online experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to watching a gameplay video that either emphasized one moral foundation (overriding salience) or a gameplay clip that emphasized two moral foundations (equivocal salience). Then participants were asked to make an in-game decision as if they were the player in the game. Afterwards participants completed items measuring their perception of conflict at decision making point, guilt regarding the decision, and their desire to replay the scenario. Results suggest that participants reported experiencing more conflict in the equivocal condition than the overriding condition. Perceived conflict at the moral decision point led to greater feelings of guilt and a stronger desire to replay the game. Guilt partially mediated the relationship between perceived moral conflict and a desire to replay.

Keywords: moral foundation theory, moral conflict, moral decision, game narrative, guilt.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	3
Moral decisions in video games	3
Guilt response to immoral behaviors in video games	5
Morally conflicted dilemmas in video games	6
Effects of moral conflicts in video games	8
Moral decision, guilt and replay value	9
METHOD	11
Design	11
Participants	11
Procedure	11
Stimulus Materials	12
Measures	12
RESULTS	14
DISCUSSION	17
Results Implication	17
Limitation and Future Direction	18
CONCLUSION	20
REFERENCES	21

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Descriptive Statistic	14
Table 2. Correlation between key variables	15

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Hypothesized Model	10
Figure 2. Test of Hypothesized Model	14

INTRODUCTION

Picture this: An apocalyptic zombie outbreak in the near-future USA. You and your group of fellow travelers are locked in a small room and are trying to find ways to get out. Suddenly, one member of your group has a heart attack, and you must decide if you should help heal him or allow him to die and potentially become a zombie. Your group has different opinions on whether you should try to save this person. One of your group members says: “We have to kill him now, because he will die eventually, turn into a zombie, and eat us all!” Another group member says: “No, we have to save him, he is a member of our group!” Your group turns to you, asking you to make decision on whether you should save this person or not. What do you do?

This is one of the sequences in *The Walking Dead* (TWD) (Telltale, 2013). *The Walking Dead* game has received several rewards such as “Game of the Year” award in 2012. The game has won huge financial success, too. The fact that more than 28 million episodes have been sold suggests the game’s popularity in market (Ohannessian, 2014). The game is a narrative role play in which players take on the role of a character and must make various moral choices, such as the one described above. Players’ decisions have either a short or long-term impact on their relationships with other Nonplayable Characters (NPCs) and the narrative of the game.

These features of games have made them a popular testing ground for examining how people make moral and immoral decisions. Previous studies have shown that players rely on their moral intuitions to make decisions during gameplay (Weaver & Lewis, 2012, Ellithorpe, Velez, Ewoldsen & Bogert, 2015). Furthermore, acting in an immoral way in the game can make players feel guilty, an indication that in-game behaviors may have consequences similar

to behaviors out of game in terms of moral consequences (Hartmann, Toz & Brandon, 2010; Mahood & Hanus, 2017). However, past studies examining moral decisions and subsequent emotions in games have focused on relatively simple moral decisions, in which there are clear moral/immoral choices. Although simple moral decisions are good for providing clean tests of theory, relying on overly simplified choice situations can obscure the effect of moral complexity on feelings of guilt, and player behavior.

Another feature of games which have not been explored in the context of morality is the ability to replay a moral decision. Most games offer players opportunity to “remake” decisions, by allowing the player to return to a decision point and replay the scenario. Yet, few studies have examined the role of moral emotions in games on the decision to replay game scenarios.

This study fills in these gaps to understand the emotional impact of making conflicted moral decisions in video games. The main purpose of this study is to explore (a): whether the level of salience of the moral foundations presented in the moral conflicted dilemma will affect players’ perceived conflict at decision-making point; (b): whether players’ feeling of guilt after decision making will vary based on players’ level of perceived conflict; (c): whether players will have a higher level of intention to remake decisions (try out other alternatives) if they feel more guilt after their decision.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Moral decisions in video games

Video games have distinguished themselves from other media platforms due to the unique experiences they offer to players. Unlike TV or film, video games allow players to explore different identities and storylines in a safe digital space. In games, players are given the freedom to perform different actions to progress through a narrative. For example, there are many recent games involved tasks that ask players to make moral decisions through an overall linear narrative or levels. Due to the agency control over the decisions and the narrative, it is valuable to examine players' reasoning behind their decision-making as well as the impact of their decision-making. Several studies show that players will use moral reasoning when making moral decisions in games in some contexts, and Moral Foundation Theory (MFT) is a predictor of their choices in games (Weaver & Lewis, 2012; Krcmar & Cingel, 2016).

MFT suggests that when people make moral decisions, they rely first on the intuitive system (which emphasizes more gut-level responses and affect), and only subsequently turn to rational, deliberative systems (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). MFT lays out five intuitive systems that drive people's moral choices (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). These moral systems are "interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible" (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010, p.800). The five foundations within MFT include: (1) care/harm, which deals with the concerns for others' suffering and empathy; (2) fairness/reciprocity, which relates with the notion feelings of reciprocity and justice; (3) authority/respect, which concerns the obedience toward dominant hierarchies; (4)

ingroup/loyalty, which concerns the bias towards ingroup and punitiveness toward outsiders; and (5) purity/sanctity, which suggests the principles of living a noble life and staying away from basal tendencies (Haidt & Joseph, 2004).

Hartmann (2010) states that players tend to make moral decisions in game through automatic route (experiential processing), which is conceptually similar to the intuition-based approach stated by MFT (Krcmar & Eden, 2017). Weaver & Lewis (2012) content analyzed players' gameplay experience and found that the degree to which players' place emphasis on certain aspects of moral foundations (care/harm, authority/respect) significantly predicts their moral decision in-game (level of care or level of deference to authority). Krcmar and Cingel (2016) used the think-aloud method to examine players' reasoning behind moral decisions and found that players used moral reasoning more frequently than strategic reasoning when making moral decisions. Over one-third of all decisions made were based on the care/harm foundation and over one fourth of all decisions were made based on fairness/reciprocity and authority/respect, respectively.

Moreover, when a certain moral foundation is salient to an individual, he or she is more likely to choose not to violate that moral foundation in game (Joeckel, Bowman & Dogruel, 2012). For example, if the module of fairness is very salient to an individual, he/she is less likely to choose to cheat in games. These findings may seem at odds with the fact that virtual violence plays a central role in video games. One possible explanation is that most of these games put more emphasis on the pragmatic outcome (e.g.: win or lose) and it often provides cues such as completion of tasks or dehumanization of game characters so that players can justify the virtual violence (Weaver & Lewis, 2012). However, for games that have a strong focus on narrative, players may want to be involved in the narrative and don't

want to engage in extra cognitive efforts to remind themselves “this is just a game” or “these characters are just pixels” because these efforts may lead to psychological detachment and experience less enjoyment (Schramm & Wirth, 2008; Cupchik, 2002; Krcmar & Eden, 2017). Therefore, players will treat game characters as social entities instead of objects and will rely on moral reasoning to make moral decisions.

Guilt response to immoral behaviors in video games

In non-mediated situations, when people violate a moral standard, they will feel guilt (Kugler & Jones, 1992). Guilt is a self-conscious emotion that is often triggered by people’s perception that they have done something wrong, specifically, because of how their behaviors influence others negatively (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007). In the context of narrative video games, because characters are increasingly depicted in a more photorealistic way, players may treat them as real humans (Krcmar & Eden, 2017). Therefore, if players’ in-game decisions hurt a game character, they may feel guilt even though they are harming digital characters that are not living beings. Examining this phenomenon, Hartmann, Toz & Brandon (2010) conducted experiments to test guilt responses towards unjustified violence in game. Participants were assigned to play as a soldier to attack a torture camp to restore humanity (justified condition) or play as a soldier continue cruelty without a justified reason (unjustified condition). Results showed that players felt guiltier when the violence was unjustified. This result has been reconfirmed in Grizzard et al (2014)’s study, too. However, what about players’ emotional responses towards a moral-dilemma choice in which all options could be justified?

For example, consider the example provided in the introduction from the Walking Dead video game. In this scenario, there are potentially multiple “correct” moral choices that

could be perceived as right or wrong by the player. The Walking Dead is a narrative video game, which adopts a scripted approach to craft a diversity of moral scenarios within the context of a narrative. The moral scenarios are very explicitly presented with rich and dynamic characterization to give players feedback after their decision making. For example, choosing to not save the character may make other characters angry with the player, or save the character may make them less trust the player. Both responses may affect subsequent gameplay. The nature of the game asks players to evaluate the morality of their actions on their moral values more prominently than their strategic goals. This means players' decisions (e.g., choosing to save or not save a character) will not result in losing the game, but rather will influence player's ethical identity development throughout the game. The moral choices in these types of narrative games thus may be considered *morally conflicted*.

Morally conflicted dilemmas in video games

Moral conflict can be defined as decision point in which the presence of two or more moral foundations are presented as important. Compared with a non-conflicted narrative, complex narrative which involves multiple moral intuitions in conflict may require more effortful moral deliberation (Tamborini, 2011). If only one moral module presented in the game is salient to players, players may rely on simple intuition and adhere to their strongest moral intuition when making decision. However, if multiple modules presented in game scenario are salient to players, they may feel conflicted when making a decision and take more time to contemplate on the moral issue.

According to Tamborini, et al., (2019), the main source of moral conflicts presented in a narrative are when moral intuitions are presented in conflict with each other. Moral intuitions, may be presented either with overriding salience or equivocal salience. In an

overriding salience decision scenario, one intuition or set of intuitions are clearly elevated in importance with diminishing the importance of other intuitions (Tamborini, 2013). For example, in a decision of whether leaving a character who has a heart-attack to help your group to escape from a dangerous situation, a game scenario may elevate the intuition of ingroup/loyalty by emphasizing how saving the character may put the group in danger, while at the same time diminishing the intuition of care/harm by mentioning this person may not be able to make through the heart-attack. By elevating one or a set of intuitions and diminishing (or at least, not elevating) the others, this may make the elevated intuition more salient to players. In other words, in this situation there is overriding salience of one intuition.

In comparison, a scenario in which equal emphasis is given to all or multiple moral intuitions, is called equivocal salience of intuitions (Tamborini., et al, 2019). For example, a game scenario may elevate the importance of *both* care/harm and ingroup/loyalty intuitions by emphasizing that a) not saving the character is cruel and b) saving the character may put the group in danger. Although ingroup/loyalty and care/harm intuitions are in conflict in both above decision scenarios, the equivocal salience-based scenario makes both ingroup/loyalty and care/harm equally salient to players. This makes the moral dilemma overall more conflicted than the overriding salience decision scenario above. Therefore, the first hypothesis is:

H1: Players will perceive higher level of conflict when making an in-game decision featuring equivocal salience of moral intuitions, than when making an in-game decision featuring overriding salience of one moral intuition.

Effects of moral conflicts in video games

According to Kubany and Manke (1995), when individuals are confronted with a “Catch 22” situation, in which all options will violate important values, it is likely that no matter which choice is made, individuals will experience guilt. The occurrence of guilt is predetermined by the nature of the situation, because no matter which course individuals choose, they will inevitably choose an option while knowing the bad outcome is very likely to happen. The same logic could be applied to the game decision making context. When players encounter morally conflicted decision scenario, it will result in violating certain moral values. This violation may, in turn, elicit guilt in players. One factor that may influence the level of guilt players experience is how the moral conflict is framed in a game decision. Equivocal salience decision scenarios suggest that both options unambiguously violate certain moral values. This presentation may make players hold the perception that both options will lead to negative outcomes. For example, the game may make two game characters tell the player it’s so cruel to leave a friend to suffer to death while another two characters tell the player that the whole group may die if saving this person. Thus, no matter what players decide, they will violate one moral concern while serving another.

In contrast, in an overriding salience decision scenario, one or a set of intuitions are elevated in importance and thus may be perceived as more salient to players than other intuitions. This design may lead players to be biased toward the elevated intuitions, thus they may perceive that violating the diminished (or not elevated) intuition is a better option, which may lead to a less severe result. For example, the game may have three game characters who keep telling the player that saving this character may put the group in danger and only one game character mentioning it’s cruel to leave a friend suffering alone. Even though the options

may actually lead to the same negative outcomes in both scenarios, the moral conflict in the overriding salience decision scenario is diluted by diminishing (or not elevating) certain intuitions. This makes players perceive that there is a “less evil” option that leads to an overall less severe result, thereby leading to less conflicted feeling and less guilt. Based on the above rationale, the second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: Players' perception of conflict is positively related to guilt.

Moral decision, guilt and replay value

Another feature that this kind of interactive narrative Role Play Games (RPGs) offers that differs from real life is that they often give players the option to remake their decision. For example, TWD offer players the opportunity to replay after finishing each episode. In a video game, the function of replay could have various meanings depending on the nature of the game. That is, players may want to engage in replay for the purpose of unlocking more achievements, getting more rewards or adopting different roles. However, in this study the decision to replay a scenario focuses on remaking decisions at single point in a game in order to discover a different outcome from a moral decision.

When making moral decisions, players' level of desire to re-play a decision might also reflect the level of guilt that the players experience after decision making. Because guilt is an emotion that is often accompanied with the belief that “one should have thought, felt, or acted differently” (Kubany & Watson, 2003, p.53), this appraisal often motivates people to engage in corrective behaviors after experiencing guilt. While in real life, people could only imagine another alternative to their decisions, in a game, they could replay the game and redo their guilt-inducing choices. The guiltier players feel after decision making, the stronger their urge

to want to correct the past decision in order to reduce their feelings of guilt. Therefore, the third hypothesis is as follows:

H3: Guilt is positively related to replay desire.

Finally, given that the overall model examines the desire to remake the decision as a function of feeling greater conflict and guilt, and feeling of conflict is hypothesized to result from scenarios when moral foundations are made equivocally salient, the overall model predicts the following:

H4: The effect of level of moral foundation salience on remake decision, is mediated by player's feeling of guilt and perceived moral conflict.



Figure 1. Hypothesized Model

METHOD

Design

A two conditions (Overriding salience vs Equivocal salience), between-subjects online experiment was conducted in a large Midwestern University. Students received course credit as compensation for participation in the study. Students were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions.

Participants

Undergraduate students ($N = 125$) were recruited from a large Midwestern university and they would receive course credits for participating. Composition of the sample was 67.2% male and 30.4% female. The average age was 20.32 years old ($SD = 1.70$) ranging from 18 to 27 years old. Educationally, the greatest number of participants stated they were currently sophomore (25.6%), followed by junior (24.8%), freshmen (21.6%), senior (21.6%) and fifth or later year of college (4.8%).

Procedure

Participants were asked to make a decision within a “Choose Your own Adventure”-style gamebook version of a scene from episode one of *The Walking Dead: A TellTale Games Series* (2013). The scene asked participants to choose either save or not save a character who has a heart-attack. Participants were first provided with a description of the background story to introduce the characters’ information. After reading the background information, participants watched the gameplay videos and were asked to make the decision to either kill or save the character. Participants were randomly assigned to either the “overriding salience” condition or the “equivocal salience” condition. After making the decision, players were asked

to fill out a questionnaire measuring their perceived conflict, experienced guilt, and desire to remake the decision.

Stimulus materials

A decision scenario from the game “The Walking Dead” was recorded into a video format and was edited to emphasize different moral foundations. The gameplay video depicted a scene that happened during the zombie apocalypse. The protagonist and his group were being locked in a meat locker by a group of cannibals. While the group tried to find ways to get out the locker, one group member was having heart-attack. The protagonist had to choose either save or not save a friend who has a heart-attack. In the “equivocal salience” condition, the clip emphasizes on saving the character is the most ethical thing to do (emphasize on care/harm) and mentioning how saving the character may put the group in danger (emphasize on group loyalty). In the “overriding salience” condition, the clip only emphasizes on care/harm foundation but without mentioning the group/loyalty.

Measures

Perceived decisional conflict. Conflict was measured using a two-items decisional conflict subscale adapted from the Decisional Conflict Scale (O'Connor, 1995). The two items assessed how certain participants perceive the decision they made (e.g. This decision is hard for me to make or I'm unsure what to do in this decision) on a 7-point scale (from 1=*I do not agree at all* to 7=*I totally agree*) ($\alpha=.77$, $M=3.24$, $SD=1.57$)

Guilt. Guilt was measured using a 7-item guilt subscale taken from the state shame and guilt scale (Marshall, Sanftner & Tangney, 1994). The five items assessed in the moment feelings of guilt (e.g.: I feel remorse, regret; I feel tension about something I have done) on a

7-point scale (1=*Not feeling this way at all* to 7=*Feeling this way strongly*) ($\alpha=.87$, $M = 2.67$ SD = 1.28).

Intention to replay. Replay intention was measured using a 1-item measurement to measure participants' desire to remake the decision: "I want to remake the decision" on a 7-point scale (1= *I do not agree at all* to 7= *I totally agree*) ($M=2.74$, $SD=1.77$)

RESULTS

In order to test H1, a one-way ANOVA was run. The mean score of perceived conflict in the equivocal condition (M=3.60, SD=1.59) is higher than the mean score of perceived conflict in the overriding condition (M=2.92, SD=1.49). The result is significant. ($F(1, 123) = 5.87, p < 0.05$). H1 is supported.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistic

	Perceived conflict		State Guilt		Desire to remake decision	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Overriding condition	2.92	1.49	2.58	1.33	2.56	1.69
Equivocal condition	3.60	1.59	2.75	1.25	2.72	1.45

Hypothesized model Testing

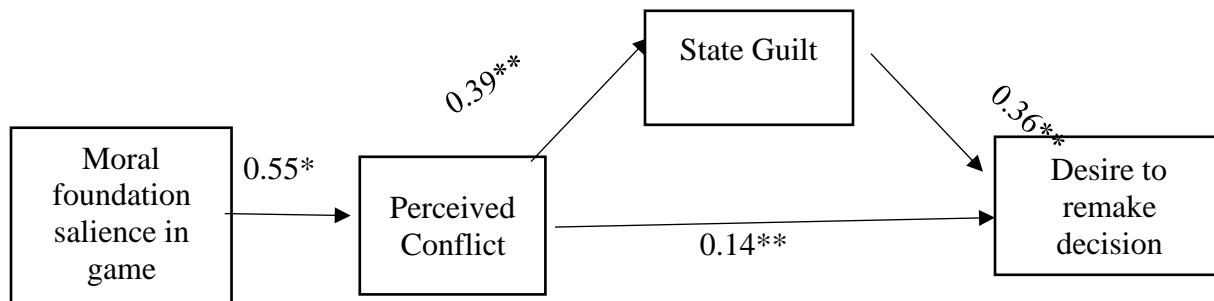


Figure 2. Test of Hypothesized Model

* indicates $p < 0.05$, ** indicates $p < 0.01$

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to test the Hypothesis 2 and 3. Results from an overall correlation matrix indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between

perceived conflict and state guilt ($r = .46, p < 0.01$). The correlation matrix also indicated that a positive relationship between state guilt and desire to remake decision ($r = .42, p < 0.01$).

Therefore, Hypothesis 2 and 3 are supported.

Table 2

Correlation between key variables

	Guilt	Perceived conflict	Remake Decision	Age
Perceived Conflict	.458**			
Remake Decision	.420**	.387**		
Age	-.067	-.106	-.120	
Gender	-.049	.165	.011	.037

Note: ** indicates $p < 0.01$, * indicates $p < 0.05$

To test the overall model, a multiple linear regression was first conducted with condition (manipulation of moral foundation salience) as independent variable; with guilt and perceived conflict as mediators and desire to remake decision as the dependent variable. This study uses PROCESS model 6 (Hayes, 2017), with a bootstrap estimation with 1000 samples, controlling for age and sex. Results indicate that manipulation of moral foundation salience is a significant predictor for perceived conflict, $B=0.55, SE=0.25, p < 0.05$. However, it is not a significant predictor for guilt, $B=0.20, SE=0.24, p > 0.05$ and not a significant predictor for desire to remake decision, $B= -0.027, SE=0.26, p > 0.05$.

Then multiple linear regression was conducted excluding the condition variable. This study uses PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2017), with guilt as independent variable, perceived conflict as the mediator and desire to remake decision as the dependent variable, controlling for age and sex. with a bootstrap estimation with 1000 samples. Results indicate that perceived conflict was a significant predictor of state guilt, $B=0.39, SE=.069, p < 0.01$, and that state guilt is

a significant predictor of desire to remake decision, $B=0.36$, $SE=0.14$, $p<0.01$. The perceived conflict is a significant predictor of desire to remake decision after controlling for the mediator, state guilt, $B=0.25$, $SE=0.093$, $p<0.05$. These results suggest that guilt partially mediate the relationship between perceived conflict and desire to remake decision. Approximately 23% of the variance in desire to remake decision was accounted for by the predictors ($R^2= .230$). These results show that the indirect coefficient was significant, $B=.14$, $SE=.054$, 95% CI= .044, 0.258. Perceived conflict was associated with desire to remake decision that was approximately 0.14 points higher as mediated by the state guilt.

DISCUSSION

Result Implications

The results indicate that participants report experiencing more conflict in the equivocal condition than the overriding condition. The more perceived conflict participants feel after the decision-making, the more guilt they would feel. The guilt, then, leads them to have more desire to remake the decision. This result has two main implications for video game and morality research.

First, just like other forms of media entertainment, the moral values presented in game narrative can be complex in nature. This study sheds light on exploring the impact of complex game narrative on players. In particular, the study tries to capture the complexity of video game narratives by manipulating the salience of different moral foundations in game decision scenarios. The results suggest that when the participant is asked to choose between two moral foundations in conflict in game narrative, narrative cues can shape their responses. Participants report experiencing more conflict when the narrative emphasize on both moral foundations versus just emphasize on one moral foundation and diminish the other. One possible explanation for this maybe that when game narrative represents moral foundations in conflict, the extent to which narrative emphasizes one foundation over another may influence players' cognitive appraisal of the moral conflict. When players are presented with equal amount of information about each of the conflicted foundations, both foundations are salient (accessible) to them and lead to deliberation thus feel more conflict. This finding suggests the potential of using moral conflicted dilemmas to teach players moral lessons. For example, players may reflect and contemplate on the moral issue if they feel conflicted after making in-game moral decisions.

Furthermore, it is clear that players can not only feel guilt after game when they violate their own moral code or when the in-game behavior is unjustified (Hartmann and Brandon, 2010), but also when they experience more conflict while making moral decision in game. The guilt feeling triggered by the game narrative may have positive social implications such that players may engage in prosocial act in real life to diminish the guilt feelings. Furthermore, guilt may also diminish the aggressive effects that may result from the virtual violence in game.

Second, this study serves as an initial exploration on the replay value in narrative video games. The results imply that participants will have more desire to remake decision when they feel more guilt after making decision as guilt is a mediator between one's perceived conflict and desire to remake decision. One of the implications of this result is that the function of remaking decision may serve as a persuasion mechanism, for example, persuading players to adopt another alternative by making them feel guilt. Therefore, it is interesting to further explore if game narrative can foster behavioral change by making people trying out different alternatives in game.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are three main limitations in this study. Although the manipulation of moral foundation salience does have significant effect on participants' perceived conflict at a decision-making point, it doesn't produce significant effect on participants' guilt feeling and desire to remake decision. game narratives may have the potential to temporarily increase players' moral value accessibility and further influence their subsequent emotions, the stimulus may not be able to fully achieve this effect because they are gameplay videos instead of actual games. Participants were being told that they were the protagonist in the game narrative and they were also the one

who made decisions, however, they were not actually control the game character. This may decrease the connection participants feel with the avatar thus, they may less likely to feel hurting (harming) a character is result of their own action compared with players who actually play the game. Future studies can ask participants to actually play the game episodes. In this way, participants get the chances to play the game for a longer period of time and this can increase their involvement with the narrative.

Second, this study only tests how moral foundation salience in game narrative influence players' feeling of conflict when confront with moral dilemmas in game, but it is very likely that players' feeling of conflict is influenced by their own moral value differences. For example, if the moral intuitions of care/harm and group loyalty are both very strong to an individual, he/she may feel conflicted when confronting game decision scenario that made these two modules salient. In contrast, individuals may feel less conflict in this case when care/harm module is a much stronger intuition for them than group loyalty intuition. Therefore, future study can explore further on this topic by examining how media content may interact with individual' moral intuitions to have impact on one's moral decision making in game.

Third, this study only used self-report scales to measure an individual's perceived conflict and desire to remake decision. Future study can adopt other measurements such as thinking aloud or physiological measurement to gain more insights to individual's cognitive and emotional responses towards conflicted media content. For example, a think-aloud method may tell us whether people spend more time and efforts to deliberate /contemplate on the moral dilemma scenario when they feel more conflicted. The physiological measurements such as measuring one's skin conductance while playing the game may give us more insights to individuals' affective responses in addition to self-report measurements.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to extend research examining the impact of morally conflicted dilemmas in video game on players' moral emotions and their desires to remake their decisions. Findings suggest that when players are asked to choose between two moral foundations in conflict, they will feel more conflict when both moral foundations are made equally salient than only one foundation is made overridingly salient to them. More perceived conflict at moral decision point lead to greater feeling of guilt and a stronger desire to replay the game. This finding advances our understanding of how game narrative cues can shape players' subsequent emotional responses in the context of moral conflicted dilemma.

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