

Playing as "Evil" Characters
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Abstract

Playing as an evil character is an option available in a number of video games. Both single player games and MMOs support this choice. What motivations, then, do players have for taking this option? This research project includes a study of fifteen individuals who have played as both good and evil characters in either single player games or MMOs. Their experiences and opinions show several common themes, but also a wide variance in personality and preferences.

Overview

This study explores several aspects of playing an evil character in video games. It investigates the motivations people express for playing evil characters, as well as how this affects decisions made in the game. As a necessary component of these questions, I am interested in players' perspectives of their characters as well. It seems that if players view their characters as truly evil, it will affect decisions made in the game. It might also alter a player's personality. On the other hand, players might not view their characters as evil, though the game narrative might suggest that distinction. All of these things link back to the question of why players play as evil characters.

If researchers understand why people choose to play evil characters, this knowledge might have real world application. There could be a connection between the attraction to role-playing an evil character and the attraction to participating in real world crime. Understanding this question could help explain some of these darker aspects of human nature. On the other hand, if there is little correlation between virtual evil and evil in the real world, the research can still be useful. For example, it might help game designers construct a better framework for game lore and game play. If good and evil are simplified to washed-out stereotypes, there is truly no difference between the two, because they are both fabrications to the same end.

Literature Review

Psychological implications of evil

In order to study aspects of why people choose to play as evil characters, it is useful to understand why people commit evil acts in real life. Though the former is role-play, and distinctly separate from committing actual crimes, playing an evil character seems a step removed from actually choosing to do evil things. Some of the motivations or attractions may be related. One must therefore answer this question: what are the psychological implications of evil?

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<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/students.html>

Staub (2003) asserts that evil stems from basic needs and the influence of circumstances. Theorists have many opinions on identifying the basic needs of humanity, so the list is negotiable. Most often these include identity, safety, and pleasure, among others. Staub notes the importance of these needs: "If they cannot be fulfilled by constructive means, people will attempt to fulfill them by destructive means" (pp. 52-53). Basic needs fit together with more complex desires and goals to influence interaction between people as well as one's personal well being and worldview. As a result, unfulfilled needs combined with these other factors can push a person to commit evil acts. Perhaps MMOs provide a space in which a player can fulfill these needs.

In contrast to the idea of basic needs, some psychologists divide human identity into positive and negative parts. Freud's theory of the unconscious is well known. In relation to this, Diamond (1996) speaks of the "shadow" as the darker side of the unconscious. The concept of the shadow, in this context, is taken from Carl Jung's attempt to explain the relationship between evil and the unconscious. The attributes one dislikes and wishes to remove or conceal are thrust upon the shadow. With this negative identification, the shadow is also identified as the entity responsible for causing evil actions (Diamond, 1996).

There are several broad categories which might serve as motivations for or attractions to evil behavior. Katz (1988) and Baumeister (1997) overlap in their portrayal of these classifications. The three major categories are religious or self-righteous conviction, pride and reputation, and sadism. Conviction may be the easiest to superficially understand, since history is rife with holy wars and genocide. However, this is probably the least likely cause for a player to choose an evil character. Pride and reputation is a much more likely motivation which conceals several subcategories. Katz speaks of the "badass" and "street elite" while Baumeister notes egotism and revenge as sources of evil. This seems much more plausible in relation to gaming, because self perception, reputation, and social interaction are a big part of virtual worlds. The third category is sadism – people can derive pleasure from evil acts which hurt others. This seems it would apply to Bartle's concept of "killers" as a method of play rather than motivation to choose an evil character. Nonetheless, it could perhaps influence that as well. Katz also describes "sneaky thrills" as the exhilaration achieved when committing crimes like shoplifting (p. 53). Perhaps playing as an evil character could afford the same bursts of euphoria.

The cause of evil actions is quite difficult to grasp and summarize. The most basic view shows evil as a result of unfulfilled needs, as with Staub (2003). These needs breed a negatively charged side of the self, which Diamond speaks of as the shadow (1996). Then, when combined with personality and situational differences, certain categories of motivations arise. It will only be possible to uncover and analyze the latter in my research, but it is helpful to be aware of the other underlying concepts.

Media portrayals of evil

In films and literature, villains portray different facets of evil. In some cases, the protagonist must muddle through his or her own confusion in order to identify what is good and what is evil. As a result, certain characters are classified as evil when they

support ideas unaccepted by the main character. They serve as a plot device to further the development of the story (Taylor, 2002).

Other villains inspire fear, respect, and even admiration. Gates (2002) calls them "super villains." These characters are portrayed as powerful and evenly matched with the hero of the story. Their intelligence and will make them dangerous, because they do not have the morality of the hero (p. 183). The qualities required of a hero and a villain are often mirrored. The strength, intelligence, confidence, and belief in a cause are aspects which appear with both good and evil character portrayals. Beck (2003) explains that these things are attractive but also inspire fear, depending on the characters' use of them (p. 25). Motivation and how actions are performed cause the difference in whether the actions are acceptable or not. Both heroes and villains kill people, but for different reasons and sometimes with different methods.

Media representations can help audiences understand evil by portraying different types or degrees of evil. Norden (2000) claims evil is a "social construct," not a separate realm of influence (p. 52). Yet, movies portray evil as a part of mythology or ideology, which reinforces this notion in the audience. Gates (2002) claims that in *The Usual Suspects* (Singer, 1995) and *Se7en* (Fincher, 1995) the audience is shown the motivations of the villains and can understand them. As a result, "perhaps we do not mind that the villains are getting away" with their actions (p. 194). In addition, Beck (2000) muses about the possibility that the audience's threshold for the portrayal of evil has become progressively higher, so people see protagonists in gangster movies as "charming and amusing" rather than being shocked at their behavior (p. 26).

A study of individuals' perceptions of media villains showed that people can possess more compassion for certain characters whose past experiences influence their motivations. For example, knowledge of childhood abuse or neglect could have an impact on the audience's perception of the villain (Sanders, 2005, p. 17). Rather than judging a villain based on that label, viewers may be more likely to relate to a character through traits he or she possesses. Then, the audience can judge by the actions of the character to what extent he or she fits the category.

Herbert (2004) makes a distinction between "evil in behavior and evil in being," citing Lucy's becoming a vampire in *Dracula* (p. 66). He also outlines a pattern for the personality of a vampire, which can at least partially be generalized to evil beings or motivations for evil deeds. Attributes include self-centeredness, need for control, denial of reality, lack of conscience or heart, great intelligence and will, intolerance, anger and hatred, and double standards (pp. 68-70).

Defining evil

Evil is incredibly difficult to define. Some scholars try to make a distinction between evil persons and evil behaviors. Kekes (2005) defines evil as something which does "serious harm." He claims it does not have to be physical harm, though effects of that kind of harm is harder to measure. His criteria for evil involves "fatal or lasting physical injury" and is restricted to actions taken by and done upon humans. These actions must also be unjustifiable and inexcusable (p. 1). Katz (1993) takes a much wider view, encompassing Kekes' definition but adding significantly to it the number of actions which can be classified as evil. He claims that evil is "behavior that deliberately

deprives innocent people of their humanity" (p. 5)., and emphasizes the importance of human dignity and demands respect for it.

Both Kekes and Katz focus on behavior and its affect on others. Rather than evil persons, they see evil actions. Kekes, however, does acknowledge "malevolent motivation" as part of the criteria for an evil action (p. 2). Baumeister and Vohs (2004) confront this distinction immediately by asserting that those who commit evil acts often do not consider themselves evil, and even believe their efforts are good. The two authors keep a division between the thought processes of "evildoers" and those who condemn them (p. 85). They offer four causes of evil: instrumentality, threatened egotism, idealism, and sadism. They also claim the main cause of evil actions is a "breakdown in self-control" (p. 98).

Oppenheimer (1996) questions whether evil is banal or perhaps natural. He describes evil in flowing words, though his point is that the concept itself is almost beyond comprehension. It is difficult to grasp and hard to explain. Oppenheimer chooses to describe it as something which begins with criminality that is "huge in scope" (p. 3). It is again an action against human dignity. However, he uses the word evil to describe persons or monsters who are committed to changing humanity. In this view, humans are not evil, and a man or woman who is evil has rejected his or her humanity and become something else (Oppenheimer, 1996, p. 4). Alford (1997) views evil differently. He claims evil is "an experience of dread" (p. 3). The distinction between evil itself and an evil action is that the act is a means to avoid the feeling of dread by passing it to others. In this view, evil is not an attribute, but rather an emotion.

Study Design

I was interested in several aspects of the experience of playing an evil character in a video game. First, what motivations do people express for playing evil characters? In addition, how did they make decisions in the game? Perhaps playing as an evil character would affect these decisions or the personality of the player. I was also interested in learning whether the players viewed their characters as truly evil or not.

Participants

My recruitment of participants involved posting a message (see Appendix A) on several gaming forums (see Appendix B) which explained my interest in studying motivations for playing evil characters and asked for those willing to be interviewed to contact me at the provided e-mail address. In addition to posting this message on forums for Everquest II and World of Warcraft, I posted on forums for Fable and Knights of the Old Republic. These single player games are designed so that every decision made in the game affects the morality of one's character. If the character makes bad decisions, he or she becomes progressively more evil. If the character makes good decisions, he or she becomes good. It is also possible to remain neutral. This is significant, because it is based on actions within the game, rather than a choice made at character creation.

The message was changed slightly when posted on LucasForums, as it is against their policy to publish e-mail addresses on the forum. In that case, I asked people to

reply if they were interested, and I contacted through private messages those who voiced interest in participating. The only forum which did not provide participants was the one for Fable. I received a single one-shot e-mail providing a few sentences on why that person chooses to play as an evil character. This type of response occurred frequently. Many people were content to post a reply with a few sentences rather than contact me to participate in an interview. I contacted a few of these people to ask if they would be willing to answer further questions. One responded positively but never answered my other questions. A few of the others took part in a survey which I set up on surveymonkey.com (see Appendix C).

Procedures

I asked various questions which generally fell into two categories: style of gaming and motivations/perceptions about gaming (see Appendix D). Interviews were conducted through e-mail, private messages through forums, instant messages, and in-game chat in Everquest II. One interview took place as an MSN instant messenger voice conversation where I asked questions through text and the participant responded audibly. (It would have been entirely voice, but my computer did not support the technology required.) The various styles of interviews were conducted at the preference of the participant. Time zone differences were also an issue. Work schedules and other unspecified obligations caused some participants to choose e-mail as the interview method. Voice chat was preferred to eliminate typing long responses. Instant messenger and chatting in game were convenient and offered a real-time question and response session. It was often easier to ask for further explanation, and it seemed more casual and comfortable for some participants. Interviews through e-mail and private messages were more formal and broken up, since I chose to send a few questions at a time. This method was to better simulate a conversation rather than a formal survey, but it was still more one-side than interviews through other means. In addition, I created a survey through surveymonkey.com (see Appendix D) and recruited five more respondents through that method.

Results and Discussion

With the diversity of forums I used for recruitment, I spoke to people with very different experiences. As a result, some of the information I gathered reflects game-specific responses, while other opinions cross through those boundaries. The most common themes for the reason to play an evil character were game content, comfort level while playing, and more freedom within game-play. These ideas, though common throughout responses, were manifested differently according to the game referenced.

Among Everquest II players, atmosphere was an important factor in the appeal of playing an evil character. This applied to the realism of Freeport, the main city for evil characters, as well as the attitudes of other players. Three of the six respondents who played Everquest II mentioned the behavior of other players in relation to good versus evil characters. Interestingly enough, the relationship was somewhat inverted.

The maturity level of the players on the evil side tends to be higher. They are more helpful, polite, and genial. How's that for irony? (**Respondent 3**)

All three shared this sentiment. Two of the three and another respondent also commented on the difference between Freeport and Qeynos, the evil and good cities, respectively. They preferred the realism of Freeport to the overly good aspects of Qeynos.

i started in Qeynos when i 1st started playing and found the city to be wonderful and exciting. people being helpful and cheerful. Then when I started my necro[mancer], I got to see how different Freeport was. Grey, dismal, drizzling rain. everyone looking out for their own, wanting to cut your throat for looking at them wrong. and i loved it! the evil city fits my mood and character soo much better then Qeynos. **(Respondent 1)**

I see the formula cheesiness in FP [Freeport] too, but it is less obvious there. Visually, it appears lived in rather than cleaned to sparkly-goodness by magic elves every night. People scowl at you and say rude things, just like they used to in real life when I had to take public transit. ... Basically, Freeport isn't nearly as plastic as Qeynos. I feel like I'm going to be ambushed by smurfs or see My Little Ponies as mounts when I'm in Qeynos. ... I feel it caters to a much younger audience with its blatant lack of depth. **(Respondent 4)**

In this study, only the respondents who played Everquest II spoke of the environment as a factor in choosing to play an evil character. For one player, it was the main reason.

Another factor was access to alignment-specific content. All of the respondents had played as both good and evil characters. For some, the creation of an evil character came from the desire to have certain abilities or to play as a certain type of character.

I've played with characters of both alignments, just to see if there is any content made specifically for a player of a certain alignment. **(Respondent 10)**

Seriously it's that I got to play the race I wanted and he was only available in the evil city. **(Respondent 3)**

Others wanted to explore the game narrative further.

[Playing as an evil character] let me explore the other possibilities available. Joining Bastila and killing the others, while not necessarily the option I wanted to take, added a certain level of 'excitement' to the playthrough. **(Respondent 12)**

These things are fairly external and provide ways for the player to interact with the game. They are not intrinsic features of an evil character, though they provide incentives to play as one.

The matter of comfort levels while playing a character come closer to the relationship between player and character. For some players, an evil character is more appealing and more comfortable to play than a good character.

In some games your character has no choice as to what their alignment is. If the option to be evil exists, however, I will take it. ... It simply feels the most natural. **(Respondent 7)**

Doing good deeds isn't me. I'm not some boy scout. (Respondent 9)

However, this is not always the case. Sometimes playing an evil character can be uncomfortable. Players often made distinctions between the alignment of their characters and the actions taken by the characters. In general, characters were not viewed as wholly evil, but rather flawed or perceived as evil by an outside source. In other words, the game narrative dictated the alignment or cumulative actions resulted in such a judgment.

Players also commented on the freedom inherent in playing an evil character. For many, the ability to make decisions without considering consequences or moral arguments was an attractive feature of playing as an evil character.

[The most appealing aspect of being an evil character is] no rules, being able to do what you want. when I play my paladin, I feel compelled to jump in and save people that might be in trouble or be helpful to someone in need. Playing my necro[mancer], I can let that same person die and laugh about it especially if they['re] good. I like to solo a lot so it allows me to be on my own and have no cares about anyone else. **(Respondent 1)**

Though the majority cited the ability to do as they please one of the benefits of playing as an evil character, at least one person sees it a bit differently. Instead of focusing on all of the things it is possible to get away with while playing the evil side, there is a focus on the opposite aspect.

You can decide how good you want to be :) . Meaning, I can decide to be a good person in spite of living in an evil town. ... I must've been doing something right, because I met several folks from Queynos [sic] who would say "Gee, you guys are a lot nicer than we thought" or "Wow, you Freeport folks are nicer than some of the guys in Queynos [sic]!" **(Respondent 6)**

The freedom claimed by certain respondents most often referred to actions without consequences, but depending on the game, those actions do not necessarily have to be bad. One could just as easily perform good actions and disregard the consequences. The difference is the choice which is present.

This choice seems to fall to the players, not just their characters. In my findings, most of the players did not role-play their characters. Only two of the respondents claimed to actively role-play their characters, while three others said they engaged in role-play casually. The majority of respondents claimed that the decisions made in game were based on their own personal choices. Some even said they projected themselves onto their characters, and played according to what they would choose in that situation. Of these, very few viewed their characters as evil. Likewise,

several played evil characters after playing good characters, as a way to further explore the story or to gain different abilities for their characters.

It is interesting that many of the respondents did not necessarily consider their characters to be evil. Since evil is a very complex term, I did not define it during the interviews. I asked the respondent to explain their view of evil in the context of their character. Since many did not view the character as evil, most definitions were of the action and consequences type. Two respondents claimed evil was a matter of perspective. Most offered a variation of selfishness, not caring for others, and doing whatever they wanted. One related evil strictly to the game, citing acts which cause a "drop in alignment" as evil (Respondent 10).

It seems reasonable that the way many respondents classified their characters as evil is precisely one of the main attractions of playing an evil character. The ability to perform actions which do not have consequences is most useful for the character with selfish motivations. Since MMOs are somewhat disconnected from real life, making selfish choices within the game has very few consequences. The only danger is carrying that attitude from the virtual world into the real world, where consequences are harsher. One of the limitations of this research is its inability to measure that sort of carryover.

This study was conducted with a very small sample, and it covered both single player games and MMOs. As a result, the sample was spread out even further across some fairly diverse boundaries. This is why the results are sometimes specific to a particular game, such as the atmosphere of Freeport being an attractive aspect of playing an evil character in Everquest II. Single player games like Knights of the Old Republic do not have the same construction or structure as MMOs like Everquest II. Though some aspects will be similar in the player – character interaction, the surrounding environment is quite different.

In addition to the size of the sample and the difference in game types, there is also the question of evil itself. Attempting to define evil is a difficult task, and when working across games, the problem is worse. Even if only one game was studied, the question of defining evil by a player's view or through the game narrative remains.

Conclusion

Respondents had many different reasons for playing as evil characters in a video game. From technical aspects to the level of comfort afforded by additional freedom, many players used the category of evil as a means to an end rather than the end in itself. Those interested in the storyline played an evil character to experience a different point of view. Likewise, players interested in abilities and powers available created an evil character to explore those things. Many wanted more control and freedom than is possible in real life, or even when playing a good character. Creating an evil character is an easy way to achieve this.

The majority of respondents playing MMOs either played an evil character in order to play with friends, or played alone and justified not helping others through their character's alignment. The former generally did not view their characters as evil. The latter often classified their characters as self-centered, uncaring, and thus evil, but not

generally tyrannical or truly evil. The varying shades of gray were individually defined, though selfishness was a common theme. This idea also carried over into the single player games. Players of Knights of the Old Republic reported using the game as a "stress release" and an opportunity to explore the opposite of what they want to be (Respondents 8 and 11). It was also here that respondents claimed to be more comfortable playing as an evil character.

It would be interesting to study the differences between MMOs and single player games with respect to playing as an evil character. With single player games, the player is responding to the game itself. However, in MMOs, other players can influence decisions the player makes. Also, it seems there would be a bit more self-censorship even as an evil character in an MMO, since the game creates a virtual community. In a single player game, morality is interpreted by one mind, but MMOs allow a collective approach.

Appendix A. Sample recruitment message

Hello,

My name is Sarah, and I am an undergraduate enrolled in a course on virtual worlds at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Our class has been playing Everquest II for the past four months, with characters ranging in level from 10 to 27.

As part of an ongoing research project, I would like to speak with people over the age of 18 about their thoughts on the many reasons people have for playing as "evil" characters. If you enjoy playing as an antihero or part of the darker side of the game world, I would greatly appreciate your insight.

These interviews could take place via e-mail, in-game, or over an anonymous instant messaging connection. I will preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants.

If you are willing to be interviewed about your thoughts on this topic, please contact me at:

elentari270@hotmail.com

I understand that the gaming community is bombarded with survey requests that never lead anywhere. This request is different. Our class is committed to sharing its research findings. At the end of the semester, all student papers and presentations will be linked to the course web site and made available to anyone with an Internet connection.

For more details about our course and the research project, visit:

<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/faq.html>

Thank you in advance for your time.

Sarah

Appendix B. List of forums

Flee! Flee while you can! (Journeyman of the Overlord)

This forum is for a guild in Everquest II. It is the eighth largest guild on the Antonia Bayle server.

<http://com1.runboard.com/bjourneymen.ffleefleewhileyoucan>

The Seafarer's Roost (Eternal Darkness)

This forum is for the 47th largest guild in Everquest II. It was listed in the top 100 for guilds with the most members worldwide. It is the third largest guild on the Kithicor server.

<http://eternal.guildportal.com/Guild.aspx?ForumID=107700&GuildID=23292&TabID=210745>

Knights of the Old Republic: Ahto Spaceport Cantina (LucasForums)

This forum is a general topic forum for things related to Knights of the Old Republic. It has a very active community.

<http://www.lucasforums.com/forumdisplay.php?f=325>

Fable Discussion Board (Neoseeker Forums)

This forum is for topics related to Fable. There was already a thread posted about good versus evil, so I thought there might be some interest in my research topic.

http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/index.php?fn=browse_forum&f=2232

Everquest II General Forum (Sony Online)

World of Warcraft General Forum (Blizzard)

Appendix C. Survey Questions

1. Player Information (will remain confidential)
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Location
 - Occupation
2. Game Information (will remain confidential)
 - Which MMOs or games do you play?
 - How long have you played MMOs?
 - How many hours per week do you spend in game?
 - Which level is your highest character?
 - How often do you chat with other players?
 - How often do you join groups?
3. Do you role-play your character? What kind of connection do you have with your character?
4. When playing, do decisions made in game reflect what you would choose in that situation, or does your character have his/her own personality and motivations?
5. Have you played as both good and evil characters? If so, how has playing both alignments enhanced your gaming experience? If not, what are your reasons for only playing one side?
6. Do you view your character as evil?
7. What does the word "evil" mean to you in the context of your character?
8. What is the most appealing aspect of playing an evil character?
9. Do you have any additional comments about playing "evil" characters in games?
10. Please provide an email address if you would like me to send the results of my research project when it is completed. (Response is optional; the address will not be used for any other purpose.)

Appendix D. Interview questions

1. How many hours per week do you spend in game?
2. What aspects of playing this game do you find most appealing?
3. Do you actively role-play your character?
4. Have you played as both good and evil aligned characters? If so, how has this enhanced the gaming experience for you?
5. How do you make decisions in the game? Are they based on what you would do in a similar situation, or are they based on the personality and motivations of your character?
6. What are your character's primary motives?
7. What does the word "evil" mean to you in the context of your character?
8. Do you consider your character to be evil?
9. Do you think the game narrative constrains your character to being evil? How do you feel about this?
10. What is the most appealing aspect of playing as an evil character?

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