Ethically, must game designers respond to all player requests?
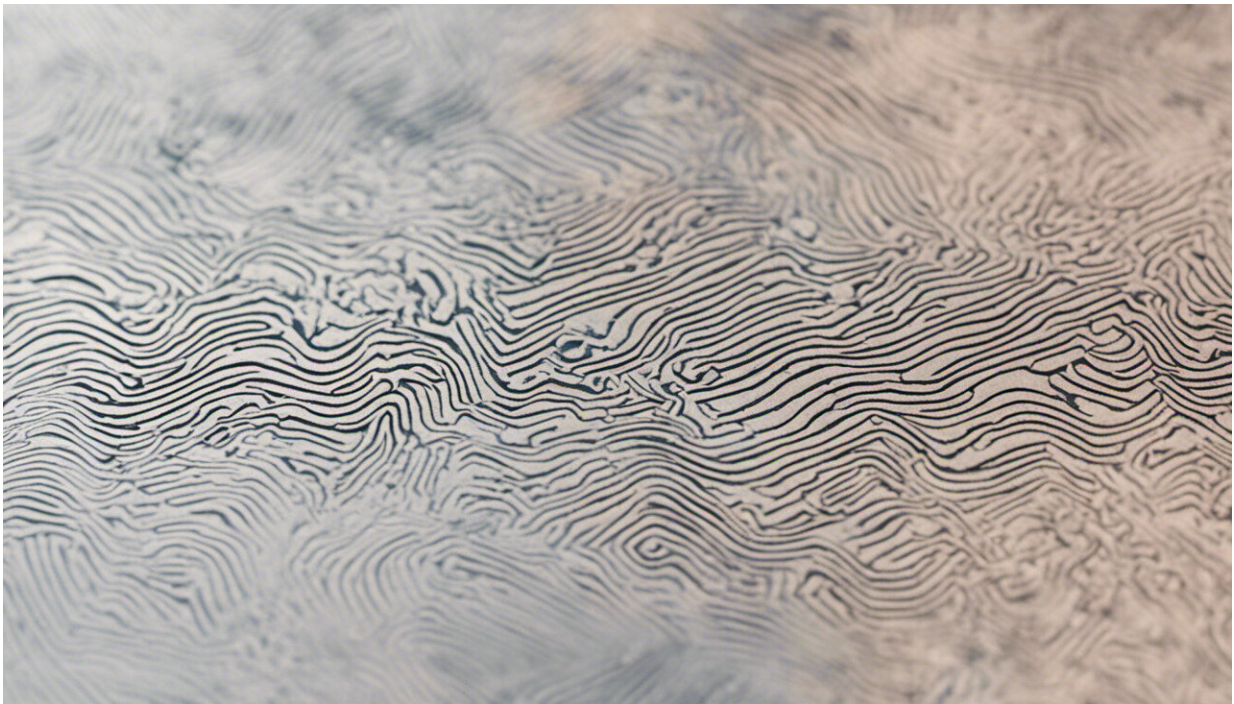
July 20 2016, by Erica Neely

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Video games are supposed to be fun. Maybe when you're grinding your way to max level it doesn't always feel that way, but on the whole we play games because we enjoy them.

But what exactly does enjoyment mean? If you're a game designer, what

issues should you care about? If you're a player, do you have to worry only about whether you are having fun? Or do you have some kind of ethical responsibility to make sure other players are having fun too?

As a philosopher who focuses on ethical issues surrounding video games, I've discovered that fun is a complicated business. Players, designers and the broader gamer community all have different sorts of power in relation to video games, which lead to quite different ethical responsibilities. Designers' power is perhaps the most pervasive – they are, after all, creating the world the players will inhabit and deciding how the players will interact with that world.

A key element of enjoyment, it turns out, is the ability to fully experience a game. This isn't as easy as it might seem. From time to time the issue of a game's playability by all potential players becomes an issue of public concern. Recently, some players of Pokemon Go who have various physical disabilities – such as limited dexterity or low vision – have complained the game does not make enough accommodations for them to be able to completely engage with the game. What ethical obligations do game designers have to respond to concerns like this?

Ethical obligations

In general, game designers have ethical obligations toward both current players and potential players. While these duties can arise from a variety of sources, the most basic ones are those we have toward other people simply because they are people. That's why you can't ethically just walk up and hit someone, even if you don't like him and believe it would be fun to make him suffer. As a person he has a right to be treated as having intrinsic worth; he isn't there simply to be used by other people.

Similarly, a game player cannot ethically be seen simply as a source of revenue, because that would be using a player as a tool to create money.

Instead, designers must appreciate that players have their own objectives when buying a game (like having fun); the designers can pursue their own goals but have to respect the players' desires as well.

The xylophone puzzle and the radio that gives the clue to solve it, from Forever Lost.

One way of doing this is to consider feedback and ideas from potential players – but not every opinion matters. It's completely ethical for a game designer to pick a genre of game and make design decisions appropriate for that approach. That may include ignoring an idea from someone who wants to play a different type of game; when designing a real-time strategy game such as Starcraft II, it's fine to ignore the desires of someone who wishes to play a first-person shooter such as Call of Duty. These are allowed to be different games with different target audiences.

Unnecessary exclusions

Where things get sticky, ethically speaking, is when designers start excluding potential players unnecessarily. As an example, consider adventure games like Myst. These generally consist of a series of puzzles that are held together by some sort of plot; solving the puzzles is necessary to progress in the game.

While there are many different kinds of puzzles, one popular sort involves music. Usually a player will have to recreate a particular sequence of notes on a musical instrument, based on an obscure clue left at another location. For instance, the first episode of Forever Lost requires people to play a particular sequence of notes on a xylophone in order to progress. The hard part is finding the clue that will reveal the sequence. Fun, right?

For a lot of players, the answer is yes. But unfortunately, the only way to discover the correct sequence is by listening to a radio elsewhere in the game. As a result, this game is not solvable for deaf players on their own. Instead, they must seek outside assistance, either from another player or an online walk-through that provides the sequence for them. Yet the ability to hear is not a key aspect of this game: It emerges only in a single puzzle. The puzzle's design means its author has created an unnecessary barrier to potential players of this game.

A lot of game designers have realized this and provide visual clues in addition to or instead of aural clues. In the above example, since the xylophone keys are different colors, the designer could have provided a color pattern clue in addition to the sounds. Similarly, in The Hunt for the Lost Treasure, while players must enter a musical sequence on a piano, the piano keys have patterns on them; the clue is available in terms of patterns, not just sounds.

These simple adaptations are helpful not only for people who are hearing-impaired; they also help those fans who like to play games on our tablets

late at night without disturbing their spouses.

The piano puzzle – with patterns on the keys – from The Hunt for the Lost Treasure.

Designing a character avatar

Similarly, a lot of games allow players to customize an avatar that they use to represent themselves in the game's world. While these are typically cosmetic choices that do not affect gameplay, they have a huge impact on player enjoyment. Part of a game's appeal for many players is

the ability to customize these characters; video game enjoyment is tied to identification with the player character, which is in turn tied to the ability to customize that character.

Unfortunately, many games give only a passing nod to being able to create a nonwhite character; research has shown that while many games will allow a player to darken the skin tone of their avatar, even many games with large budgets (what the industry calls "AAA games") don't provide different facial features or hair types that would be necessary to make a character with a truly nonwhite appearance. This isn't necessarily difficult: Given that many of these games contain nonhuman races, clearly the designers are capable of creating a wide variety of facial features and hair – they just choose not to do so for human avatars.

A lot of people like making avatars who are idealized versions of themselves. Limiting how representative in-game avatars can be may result in excluding people who might like to play the game, but are essentially discouraged for cosmetic reasons. (For another example of how much players care about avatar choices, look at the fuss over Ubisoft's decision to only release a male avatar for the cooperative mode of Assassin's Creed Unity in 2014.)

At the end of the day, we all want to have fun. While designers don't have an obligation to ensure that people *actually* have fun playing their games, they do have an obligation to ensure that everyone is in a relatively equal position to *try* to have fun. After that, it's up to the players.

This story is published courtesy of The Conversation *(under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).*

Source: The Conversation