Summary. Bioware games are known for their emphasis on the story and the characters. Bioware not only makes the game narrative uniquely appealing, but also it creates an interestingly dynamic world that responds to every move by the player. The playable characters are not fixed. They develop in the course of the game. They are not the only ones that change. Other characters in the game also develop through the choices of the game protagonist. They have background stories that are revealed to the player as the protagonist earns their respect and trust. The protagonist may change them. The actions of the player, therefore, matter to every element of the game. This is why the developers have introduced moral choices. The player now has to face the consequences of their decisions. The game narrative takes a different direction every time the player chooses a course of action. Bioware makes you assume moral responsibility for your fictitious decisions. The player becomes a moral being. Nevertheless, s/he is bound by the automated game system which limits his/her actions. Operating within an automaton, the players lose the freedom of action that is further reduced by the nature of the moral system within which they operate. This paper argues that in Bioware games, a pragmatic system based on exchange reigns. The players become part of the automatic processes of the game. Their actions are measurable, predictable and controllable. This reduces action to labor and dehumanizes the playing and literary experience.

Keywords: videogames, ideology, bioware, literary experience, playing experience
In the preface to his 2008 book *Playing with Videogames*, James Newman writes:

As I sit at my desk to write an introduction to this book, I find myself surrounded by the evidence of a lifetime of videogaming [...]. My bookshelf groans with the weight of books about every aspect of videogames from artwork, design and production through to scholarly criticism and analysis. Along with these, decades of archived copies of gaming magazines [and] printout of player produced [materials] (vii).

The same maybe said today. The desk of the videogame researcher should grow heavier as the amount of academic and non-academic literature on the subject continues to expand in every direction. Despite the huge amount of formal research carried out since the 1950s,¹ much of our work has been done outside the academy. Many of the terms that will be used in this article have been coined by game developers, critics or fans outside the academy. The field of video game studies is still at the periphery of the academy. It also lacks an established tradition. Indeed, even as “a growing number of scholars and cultural critics are coming to recognize the social, cultural and economic importance of this form of entertainment,”² it is difficult – probably forever premature – to speak of a unified discipline or a connected cross-disciplinary academic tradition. Academics from different disciplines have recently started to investigate the literary and cultural aspects of video games. They published a number of books, articles and conference papers on the subject. Their interest is fueled by the tendency of some leading game developers to focus on the intricacies of the game story and to create lore-rich game worlds. Bioware games, a Canadian game developer, is one of the pioneers of this tendency. They try to make the playing experience more addictive by introducing quest decisions and dialogue options that alter the course of the main story of the game. The choices of the player matter. Action in videogames defies classical theoretical and philosophical approaches. Despite its fictitious nature, it can be owned by the players. Therefore, the players are morally engaged in two worlds, both of which we may call ours.

This article seeks to investigate the nature of action in Bioware CRPG games from a literary and philosophical point of view. It is concerned with the aesthetic as well as the ideological implications of the introduction of in-game choices. It intends to prove that, despite the introduction of moral decisions, the player has little control over the game. While the players are given the choice between different

¹ According to Murray Cambell, academic research on the subject of videogames probably started in 1950 with Claude Shannon’s article *Programming a Computer for Playing Chess*, “Philosophical Magazine” vol. 41, 1999.
moral alternatives, they operate within a single unquestionable value system that strips their actions of any meaning beyond their pragmatic value. They are under the grip of a hegemonic value system that subjects them to its amoral standards, and Bioware games systemically reproduce and naturalize these standards. The player can only act in accordance with the rules of the system. The technical framework significantly limits the freedom of the player, subjecting them to the values of the socioeconomic and cultural system of consumerism. They consciously or/and unconsciously contribute to their propagation.

Since 1995, Bioware has been credited with the creation of many iconic CRPG video games. Many of these games earned the company the reputation of one of the most revolutionary game developers in the world. The games of Bioware are known for their emphasis on the literary aspects of the playing experience and focusing on these aspects helped Bioware games break into the category of the literary. Accordingly, dealing with Bioware games necessarily involves invoking critical concepts such as character, setting, plot, story, etc. Bioware teams generally try to create engaging stories, well-crafted plots, multi-dimensional characters and dynamic settings full of secrets and adventures. Bioware promises intrigue, intimacy and the thrill of exploration, hence, the motto “Rich Stories, Unforgettable Characters And Vast Worlds.” This slogan promises the player a uniquely immersive playing experience. The story, the setting and the characters are usually well developed and they are full of intriguing secrets.

The players experience a world of possibilities, being no longer confined to fighting bosses and receiving rewards. The degree of detachment from the game world has significantly been reduced by the growing emphasis on the literary experience of videogame. The Players no longer simply “carry out [fictitious] acts of murder and barbarism [in a fictitious world] for fun.” They rather interact with the game world in a more complex manner. This world dynamically and flexibly responds to their actions, thus the relationship between the player and the different game elements is now dialogic in nature. The setting and its AI inhabitants are no longer accessories; they do not only frame the action, but they also shape it. As the player is given the choice between different paths, s/he needs to take into account the effect of his/her decisions on the game-world and its inhabitants. Every time the player goes through the main story, s/he is likely to meet a new character or uncover a hidden secret, which may dramatically change their understanding of story. The re-playability of Bioware games has placed them among the most addictive games worldwide. Indeed, its titles usually achieve remarkable commercial

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success. They also receive positive reviews from accredited game critics and some of them even win awards.

The company is usually praised for its versatile gameplay. Bioware has a reputation for making its games emotionally and morally engaging. With Bioware, the player’s identification with the playable character (PC hereafter) has reached a whole new level: the player now assumes the moral responsibility for the actions of the PC. The choices of the player determine the moral standing of the PC and their relationship with the game world and the game characters. The PC is a moral being whose actions have a cosmic significance in the game world, which is transformed by the player’s choices. S/he, therefore, is an agent that actively participates in the story. S/he is both the co-author and the protagonist of the game. The players’ decisions determine the course of the narrative which is centered around them. The main camera follows them as they move from one area to another. The game tells their story. Every aspect of this story revolves around them. Their actions even have cosmological impacts on the game-world.

At the surface level, moral choices play a central role in all Bioware games. In *Jade empire*, for example, Smiling Mountain (a non-playable character, henceforth NPC) tells the game protagonist about the significance of their actions: “You are the sum of your actions. The harmony and discord that you sow will weigh on your shoulders as surely as any physical yoke.” (*JE*) In the game, the playable character (and the player) may choose to follow the open fist or the closed fist moral paths. These two paths not only determine the moral standing of the playable character, but they also affect their physical and mental attributes. They determine the quests they can embark on and the skills they can learn. This emphasis on the moral dimension of the game makes the playing experience more engaging. It is no longer simply the classical beat them all play-style. Indeed, in *Jade Empire*, the PC (and the player) can relate to the game world both emotionally and morally. The decisions of the players affect the PCs and their world. Players can take sides and decide who wins a conflict; they may even betray other characters and cause their demise. For example, in the 2017 Lionhead studios game *Divinity Original Sin 2*, the PC’s companions are their rivals. At a certain point in the story, they may have to eliminate them or defeat them, especially if they are controlled by other players in the co-op mode. The PC and the world around them are visibly shaped by the player’s decisions and by the decisions of the other human or AI players. A game is now “an interaction between several agents whose decisions affect each other.”

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A similar game is *Fable III* by the defunct Lionhead Studios, where the PC acquires an angelic or devilish appearance and powers because of the choices they make. In *Fable III*, the game world is also shaped by the player’s decisions: Indeed, as the PC assumes the role of the King/Queen of Albion, their decisions bring about dramatic changes in the game world and affect the “lives” of its AI inhabitants. The populace will view the PC either as a benevolent ruler or as a despicable tyrant depending on how they would decide on the major political, social and economic issues the kingdom of Albion faces. The AI characters may join the final battle on the PC’s side if they like him/her.

The decisions of the players are not necessarily about good and evil. In *Fable III*, after the PC overthrows his/her tyrannical brother, they discover that his tyranny was dictated by the impending threat of darkness. The player has to defeat the darkness at any cost. They usually find themselves in a dilemma. Whether they continue the now-justifiable policies of Logan (the previous king of Albion) or whether they change the lives of the people for the better is not a simple matter of right and wrong. Like *Fable III*, Bioware video games present players with tough moral choices; they cannot determine what is right and what is wrong. The thin line that separates good and evil is hazy. Bioware games generally emphasize the negotiated nature of morality. While they are about a hero/heroine who is trying to save his/her worlds from the forces of evil, certain decisions these heroes/heroines make may seem worse than the evil they are supposed to eradicate. These heroes/heroines have to save the world, but, as it always comes to pass, they cannot save everyone and everything. They may be required to sacrifice themselves, their companions, a faction or a location to achieve their ultimate goal. The decision is not always simple, especially if there is a sequel or if the game is still at the beginning.

The PC is no longer a hero on a simple journey to beat all the game bosses and their minions in order to save the world. In Bioware games, some game bosses may side with the PC. In *Dragon Age Awakening*, for instance, the Architect (one of the leaders of the darkspawn) may either be an enemy or an ally depending on the player’s choices. Different factions may either be enemies or allies depending on the player’s decisions. In *Dragon Age II*, for example, the player has to decide whether he/she would side with the mages and lead a rebellion against the Templars or side with that ruthless religious order and become Kirkwall’s Viscount. Both choices are morally questionable. The game, therefore, challenges the Manichean vision of the world tacitly advocated by the classical beat-them-all adventure games.
The tendency to make games morally engaging is lauded by a number of academics. According to Lars Konzack, "video game theorists need to learn how to appreciate these attempts at expressing ideas and integrating philosophical questions into the game system." (34) Video games have started to offer the player the opportunity to create and develop the PC through gameplay. The story is now more dynamic as the game system flexibly responds to the player’s choices.

The game programmers now take the player’s preferences into consideration. As a matter of fact, they resort to flexible programming syntax that gives the player the chance to choose between different alternatives. The following screenshots depict the coding of an event in RPG maker:

They reveal the procedural as well as the conditional nature of the game coding syntax in RPG maker. Even more complex coding systems loosely follow this syntax. Programming languages are “formal logical systems.” As a matter of course, they tend to have a linear structure. If a condition is met, a result follows automatically. Every action leads to a calculated and predetermined result (or system reaction that is usually based on the maximin principle). We may, therefore, speak of “system behavior.” The word behavior implies a certain degree of automation and repetition. This automation is brought about by the interaction between the predefined and measurable properties of the entities that compose the system.

The automated nature of the actions of the non-playable characters in some Bioware games is quite evident. For example, the player can set the combat behaviors of the NPCs that compose his/her party of adventurers. S/he can even automate the combat behaviors of the PC. In the *Dragon Age* and *Neverwinter Nights* series, for example, the combat behaviors of all the game characters are mostly automated. There is a set of combat behaviors that may be edited by the player but if s/he chooses not to edit them, they are set by the system. Every time the PC engages in combat, they perform the same set of actions.

There are other instances in which the player has no control over the PC. For example, in the cut-scenes, the player is no longer in control. In these scenes, the PC performs certain actions or engages in verbal exchanges with some NPCs without interference from the player. The latter may still learn more about the game-world, receive quests or earn rewards after unlocking the cut-scenes. These scenes, therefore, are story knots set by the developers to be triggered by the PC and, therefore,

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The Moral of the Story: Ideology at Play in Bioware Games

by the player’s actions. However, the player cannot alter the automated outcome of his/her actions. Indeed, while the choices of the characters certainly matter, they lead to predefined results. S/he is only allowed to perform a finite set of actions made possible by the system. In *Jade Empire*, the fox spirit puts it clearly that the player (and the PC) is only “following the path [she] laid down for [him/her]” (JE)
Accordingly, one can hardly surprise the system. When we interact with a game, we become part of an automaton. All our actions are predictable to the internal mechanism of the system. They have automated responses assigned to them, hence these actions are subject to a high degree of automation.

According to William Robert Cook,\(^8\) “[a]utomization is useful even without customization, but customization requires automation to be useful.” (2) As a matter of fact, customization, which is the manual action of the program user, is by no means external to the system. The PC (and the player himself/herself), therefore, is a part of the highly-automated system of the game. As such, the degree of automation of the players’ actions is by no means reduced by the introduction of the choices. These choices are “plot-forks” to use the expression of the fox spirit from *Jade Empire*. They are a set of predefined actions that have predetermined system reactions. The player should choose between alternatives that would lead to different preset results. Therefore, their actions are still controlled by the game system, and as such they are neither free nor unpredictable.

While CRPG games certainly require thinking, this thinking is determined by the game system, which imposes a linear structure on the playing experience. The player explores the story and the game-world in a linear manner. The PC moves from one place to another and from one story knot to another; they are revealed to him/her one after the other. This linearity is reminiscent of the classical narrative genres. The reader or audience are never allowed to see the whole picture until they go through the entire tale. Likewise, the player is trapped in a narrativist structure whose linearity is another form of automation. S/he cannot break free from the linear automatic logical relations of causality that govern their actions.

The players’ actions, therefore, are automated to the highest degree. This leads us to ask whether they can be considered actions in the strict philosophical sense of the term. From the point of view of action philosophy, “the basic idea about action is the following: there is a conscious being, e.g. a human, bringing about some change (in his body, in an object, in a situation) with a given purpose, under certain circumstances.”\(^9\) In Video games, the player is a conscious being interacting with a complex system of predetermined mechanics through a conscious choice between a limited set of available alternatives.

In this sense, the playing experience in the story-rich CRPGs of Bioware is more gratifying than the reading experience associated with the classical literary genres.


Although these games are also characterized by a structural linearity that traps the players, they offer them the opportunity to experience some of the what-if scenarios s/he used to create in his/her imagination as a reader. Furthermore, the degree of identification with the principal character of the story in video games is unprecedented. No other story-telling medium could make us assume the responsibility for “fictitious” actions taking place in a “fictional” world. They are actions that can be interpreted from a moral as well as psychological perspective. Lexi in Mass Effect: Andromeda provides the player with psychological reports about the PC that address them as “you.” These reports are based on their dialogue choices and their quest decisions. The distinction between the player and the PC is blurred. Game actions, therefore, belong to two distinct worlds.

According to Talcott Parson and Edward A. Shils (1962), “the interest of the theory of action [...] is directed not to the physical processes internal to the organism but rather to the organization of the actor’s orientation to the situation.” (4) However, in video games, the actions of the players can only be understood with reference to the internal mechanisms of the game. These mechanisms are both standardized and automated. This means that even if the player is a conscious being, s/he is bound by the goals set for them by the developers. Acting freely – if there ever is such a possibility – does not help the player win the game. The player’s actions, therefore, may be conscious but they are by no means free. S/he does not set the goals for themselves. They strive to achieve the aims set for them by the game. Players’ actions, therefore, can be seen as a challenge to action theory, since this theory comes short of explaining the player’s situational interaction with the game system.

Since action theory cannot explain game actions, performance theory could lend us a hand in our attempt to understand their complex nature. According to Richard Schechner,10 play, games, sports, theatre and ritual have “several basic qualities [that] are shared by [them]: 1. Special ordering of time 2. A special value attached to objects 3. Non-productivity in terms of goods 4. Rules. Often special places – non-ordinary places – or constructed to perform these activities in.”11

A video game can metaphorically be described as an “hour upon the stage” (Macbeth 5.5. 24-5) in which a story is being enacted a virtual world. Indeed, in CRPG adventure video games, we play a flexible story on a special platform. Though it exists in the virtual world, the game-world is not totally unrealistic. In fact, the game world is subject to the laws of physics just like the “real” world. Game engines such as Unreal Engine 3, which was used by Bioware to create the Mass Effect Series,

11 Ibidem.
have physics simulation mechanisms, where game objects and props are invested with physical properties. Even magic is calculable and substantial. It is nothing but the transformation of natural energy sources into magical energy. In *Dragon Age*, for example, it is lyrium, a mysterious substance that can be collected from lyrium veins, that is the source of all magical energy in the game. This energy is channeled and transformed into spells. It seems that the game has cracked the mysteries of magic. Indeed, unlike other fantasy genres, the game is full of explanations. In the game-world, the player enjoys mastery rather than mystery; they uncover the secrets of the world and use them. Video games, then, can be described as the utopia of scientism where even the archenemy of science (magic) is bound by the laws of physics.

Being an hour on a special platform, special management of time is another intriguing characteristic of video game design. There are two time-frames at work in the gaming experience. The first is the time the player spends playing the game while the second is the time that elapses in the story. The former is sometimes calculated by the game system. In games such as *Fable III* you can see how much time you have spent playing. The latter is a fictitious time that is revealed directly or indirectly but it does not correspond to the time the player spends playing. This time can be conveyed directly through the game’s interface or a special map. It can also be conveyed indirectly through other game props.

In *Dragon Age II*, for example, the time system is quite intriguing. Because there are quests that can only be performed at night and there are other quests that can only be performed in daytime, the developers created a map that allows the player to choose the quests freely. This map reflects the spatio-temporal division of the game world. It depicts the city of Kirkwall (day or night) and the area that surrounds it (daily quests only). The use of quest maps is also typical of many other Bioware CRPG games. In *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age Inquisition*, the map is a game prop, which is integrated in the game world. In *Mass Effect* 1, 2 and 3, the galaxy map is part of the Normandy (the spaceship of Shephard, the PC). In *Dragon Age Inquisition*, it is in the strategy room. In both maps, main quests and side quests are marked but the map does not indicate time. Time is rather rendered through other game props that exist in the quest scenes (this includes the color of the sky, the stars, the position of the sun, etc.) The quest maps allow the player to choose what quests to embark on first and what quests to leave for another time. This affects the arrangement of events in the story. The player can make his/her own self-narrative through this arrangement of events. However, s/he can hardly alter the arrangement of the main events of the story, as the main quests can only be unlocked one after the other.
In Bioware games, the story is generally divided into Acts. After the main quest(s) of an act is/are completed, the player automatically moves to the next act. This brings about changes in the world of the game. In *Dragon Age II*, for example, if Hawk (the PC) takes his/her brother with him/her to the Deep Road (a game location) in the first act, the latter dies there. If s/he leaves him behind, he turns into a Templar (which would worsen their rivalry, especially if Hawk is a mage). Many side quests disappear as the PC moves from one act to another. The player, therefore may have to postpone the transition from one act to another until s/he finishes the side quests and earns enough experience points to level up before s/he faces the game bosses. Indeed, as some game bosses will prove quite a challenge if one rushes through the acts, the players are very likely to focus on the side quests to level up and gain more skills. Some side quests may also be difficult for low level PCs. The player, therefore, is not totally free to choose where to go first. The map, therefore, hardly guarantees the freedom of the player as s/he is likely to arrange the quests according to their difficulty.

In Bioware games, the progress of the story depends on the completion of the main quests, not on the fictional or real time spent by the player or the PC on any quest. Therefore, we may speak of the developers’ story and the players’ plot. The classical distinction between story and plot may help us shed light on the literary aspects of the gameplay experience. The story “is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence,”12 whereas the plot is “a narrative of events”13 where the emphasis [is] on causality.”14 Accordingly, the plot is the re-structuralization of the story in a manner that attracts the reader’s attention or works on his/her responses. In video games, developers flexibly arrange the events of the story in a manner that keeps the player thrilled. Games use narrative techniques such as the flash-back, flash-forward, shifting point of view, etc. In order to crack the mysteries of the game, the player needs to pay attention to the game lore and narratives. Characters, factions and locations have histories. Only by understanding them can the player make choices, fulfil quests and make his/her own story.

At first sight, it would seem that the developer controls the “what” and the player controls the “how” and “when.” While the players may impose their pace on the game, they need to understand the web of relationships preset by the developers. The relationship between the developer and the player is dialogical in nature; the latter can only maneuver within the options predefined by the former. The side

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13 Ibidem, p. 61.
14 Ibidem.
quests and the moral choices generally result in a change in experience, morality and relation/influence points. The experience points help the PC advance to a different level and learn new skills. In non-Bioware games such as Divinity II: Ego Draconis, the PC (the dragon Knight) can pay experience points to read the minds of NPCs. This highlights the economic pattern underlying the playing experience. In Bioware games, the process is subtler but the pattern is the same. They also follow the economic pattern of exchange. Indeed, the different types of points are accumulated to be exchanged for skills and events.

All the aspects of the gameplay and the elements of the story are measurable. They are also subject to the rules of an exchange-based economic pattern. This shows that the technical aspects of video games are not independent from their sociocultural context. The games’ representation of the emotional lives of the NPCs is a case in point. Indeed, it reveals the ideological undertones of the game design and the playing experience. Emotions are represented as logical relations based on exchange. Indeed, if the player accepts quests from NPCs, the PC may win their favor. Certain moral decisions also affect the PC’s relationship with different NPCs. Love, friendship, enmity and rivalry are represented mathematically. They increase or decrease depending on the calculable impact of the player’s (highly predictable) actions. They, therefore, can be reduced to mathematical formulas. This scientistic understanding of human nature presumes that impulses, emotions and desires are explainable, measurable, predictable and thus controllable.

Human actions are valued according to a scientistic model based on exchange. Implied in this is the myth of the equivalence between labor and reward. Underlying the scientism of games is the capitalist belief in the exchangeable nature of human labor. Both the players and the developers operate within the consumer society and the exchange-based economy. This economy is embedded in the game design. Therefore, neither the developers nor the player can confidently declare: “I limb’d this night-piece and it was my best” (The White Devil 5.5. 297). Whether consciously or unconsciously, the game system reflects the sociocultural world order to which the game industry belongs.

The economic pattern of the playing experience consigns the player to a world of labor relations. These labor relations are governed by the rules of exchange which strip actions of any value beyond the exchange value. According to Hanna Arendt, actions are the precondition for being human. She distinguishes between action and labor. For her, labor satisfies basic needs. It is a means of survival. By contrast, action is fundamental to what Arendt describes as a life “that in earnest has

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renounced all appearances and all vanity in the biblical sense” (176). Its value does not depend on its usefulness. It transcends the worldly and the pragmatic.

This can hardly apply to game actions. In video games, the distinction between action and labor is blurred. Trapped in a network of relations based on exchange, the player seems to be more of a laborer than an actor. The player is but an element in the production and the supply chain(s) that reproduces the world order. His/Her interaction with the game system is determined by preset rules. These rules are hardly independent from the socioeconomic context in which the game is produced and distributed. The play-space in Bioware games is by no means free from the determinants of the reigning consumer culture. The playing experience, therefore, is a reproduction of the values of the consumer society.

Morality and emotions, therefore, cease to have any inherent value. The games’ moral systems reflect the exchange-based structure of the sociocultural context of their production, distribution and consumption. Even the conscious moral choices made by the player are subject to the rules of exchange. They are pragmatic decisions made to earn the favor of a faction or to gain the respect, loyalty or love of an NPC companion. As a result, the player may be seen as a laborer who must perform according to the laws of the game system in order to win.

Video game actions are subsumed by the system. They cannot be called actions in the humanist sense of the term. Indeed, in spite of the introduction of moral decisions in the game play in some games, the game structure does not allow gameplay to challenge the ideological framework within which both the players and the developers operate. Both of them are elements of the system. They are connected by what may be called a complex network of (fictitious) labor relations that reproduce the myths of the consumer society.

As a literary form, Bioware CRPG games should be read against the grain. The ideological undertones of games makes the playing experience less free than it promises. Bioware games are certainly innovative and revolutionary, but they could not escape the common lot of classical video games. They are still bound by the game system which is based on the economic pattern of exchange. This pattern reduces the players’ choices to their pragmatic value. They are no longer moral choices. Instead, they can be described as the predictable (if not automatic) players’ responses to the game. The player is at best a laborer trying to meet the standards set by the system. Bioware games, like many other games, reproduce and naturalize the value system of pragmatism and exchange. As a highly automated and standardized literary product, the story of the game in Bioware subjects every aspect of the playing experience to the hegemony of the dehumanizing consumer culture.
To conclude, action in Bioware games is not free or simple. Because of the high degree of automation and standardization of the playing experience, the players are inextricably under the grip of a hegemonic value system that reduces their actions to their pragmatic usefulness within the game system. It is true that Bioware games challenge the Manichean ethics of classical philosophy, but they advocate another ethical system based on exchange. Certain socioeconomic relations are tacitly reproduced and naturalized (Accordingly, games may be seen as a powerful means of indoctrination). Games, therefore, are a locus of power play. Their internal structures are governed by patterns that cannot be described as purely technical. The actions and choices of the players are shaped by the ethical system of the games. They can only be understood within it. The players are but a part of a chain of reproduction. They labor to reproduce the ideology of the consumer society.

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