Reframing ethics in gaming R&D: beyond compliance

*"You can only do that if you go beyond compliance. So it is not just ticking the box [...] but to think [...] about how we can be responsible and mainstream Social Sciences and Humanities meaningfully, not just as a cherry (on the cake) or an add-on stuff"* – *quote from an interview with a policy maker.* **P14**

Keywords: cultural value, dialogue, Ethics and Games, impact evaluation, institutional funding, knowledge sharing

Who will find this scenario particularly interesting? Developers, Policy makers, Researchers

Description
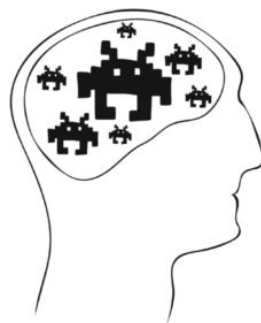
The notion of what is ethical in research and development is currently rather limited. Our own work focused on gaming and gamification in the European context, but the implications are broader. We talked to many experts and carried out an in-depth analysis of how research and development are framed as priorities in the European

flagship funding programme: Horizon 2020. We found that ethics in R&D are almost exclusively focused on compliance, where compliance refers to the need to abide by ethical requirements and conditions. These requirements and conditions are concerned exclusively with the process of research, for instance in terms of ensuring informed consent or equal gender representation in R&D teams, rather than with its outcomes, or with the design principles that inform the process from the outset.

In this scenario, we describe a situation in which a more complex, nuanced and positive idea of ethics informs the design and development of video games. Rather than being narrowly framed as a collection of requirements that may constrain innovation and creativity, ethics becomes a positive mindset that puts the entire R&D process in a different light. Ethics, in other words, becomes synonymous with aspirations for social and cultural relevance – something aligned with the humanistic, democratic and egalitarian values that underpin the European project. In this alternative scenario (and in its 'child' scenarios), policy makers, developers and researchers also begin to challenge strict accountability criteria that revolve exclusively around utilitarian goals and measurable outcomes. Alternative definitions of cultural and technological value, this time more negotiated and dialogic, begin to be explored.

Meet Michel (an EU policy maker), Simone (a social researcher), and Rita (a game developer)
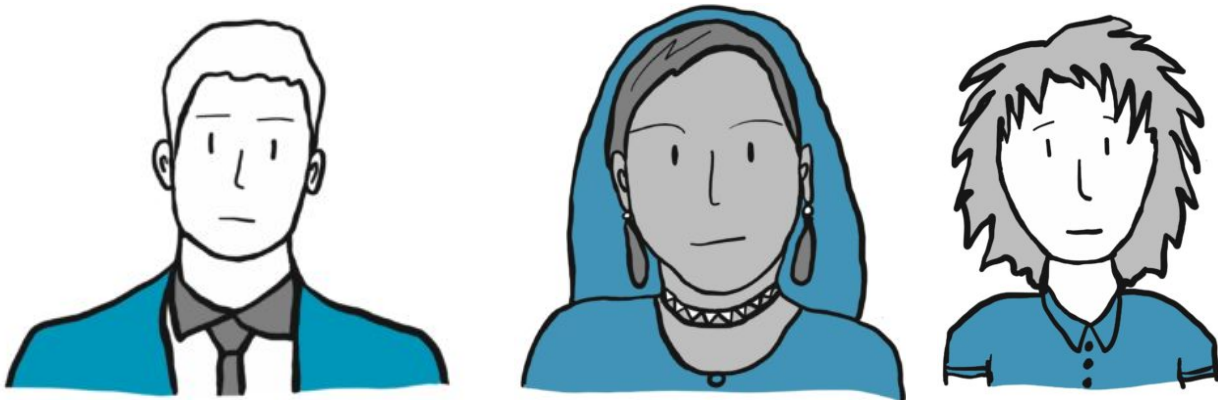
Michel, Simone and Rita have been invited to an international round table to discuss the future of the gaming industry in Europe. The event is sponsored by the EU Commission and the focus is, predominantly, on the role of institutional support and public funding. The EU Commission is worried that its R&D strategies are beginning to be out of touch with the concerns and priorities of the various EU publics. Games are viewed as a profoundly 'social' and pervasive technology and they receive a significant amount of funding. As such, they are an area where concerns for cultural relevance and impact are particularly pressing.
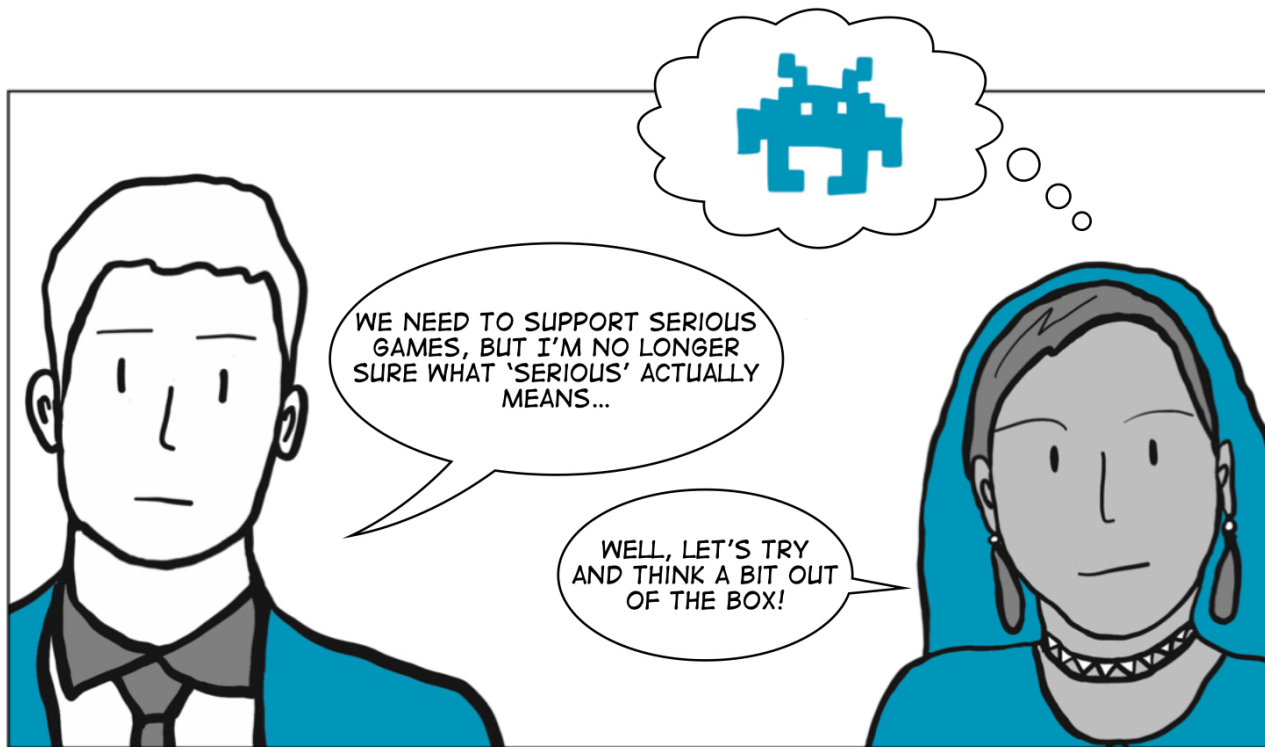
The event provides an interdisciplinary forum to discuss games 'for good', which therefore have a distinctly ethical dimension. The event also provides concrete opportunities to examine examples of best practice, focusing on the experiences of developers (and users too) whose games don't fit into pre-existing categories such as 'serious' or 'educational' but still have recognisable cultural and educational value, and at the same time manage to operate in the market conditions of the leisure-oriented gaming industry.

During the event, Michel, Simone, and Rita begin to outline a number of alternative cultural dimensions associated with games: narrative poignancy, appropriate representation, responsible usage, and so forth. They also begin to explore alternative ways to evaluate the cultural and social impact of games. One approach is forming citizen panels collectively recruited through social media; these examine, through a form of 'crowd-sourced' evaluation, the social of cultural impact of games developed under the patronage of the EU Commission.

In a nutshell

Ethics in research and development are often viewed as a restrictive set of requirements simply to be complied with. In our project, we often came across this limited interpretation, but we also saw signs of a different position where ethics are part of a more positive mindset, and where notions of what is good, decent, and worth pursuing are grounded in the priorities and concerns of society.

Funders and key institutional actors like the EU Commission could make more efforts to establish platforms (including face to face events and social media initiatives) to explore definitions of responsible research and innovation in a dialogic and democratic fashion.

Resources
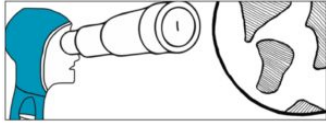
- Lyst (conference, http://lyst-summit.org/)
- GaymerX (conference, https://gaymerx.com/)
- Game Happens (conference, http://www.gamehappens.com/)
- The work of Miguel Sicart provides many valuable insights in the complex relationship between video games and ethics: https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/ethics-computer-games

Our own analysis of EU Funding offers a critical perspective on how ethics and social responsibility are accounted for in the flagship EU R&D programme: https://www.gaminghorizons.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2017/05/D2.2_critical-analysis-of-H2020-sources.pdf

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Partners