Directions:

1. **Read and annotate** the following article.

2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark the text with questions and comments.

3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper. Don’t forget your MLA heading!

**Playing the Hero: Why We Make Good Moral Choices in Video Games**

Stefanie Fogel, Venture Beat – September 8, 2012

Last month, developer Telltale Games [released statistics on The Walking Dead](http://venturebeat.com/2012/08/15/telltale-games-the-walking-dead-statistics-trailer/), its latest point-and-click adventure game series, and found that when it came to making difficult, often morally ambiguous decisions, the majority of players tried to do the “right” thing, even if it meant endangering their characters or others.

“Some of the stats we’ve seen coming back from player decisions have created a perception that even in dire times – and when faced with no-win situations where each decision is morally gray – the majority of people will try to do the ‘right’ thing if they can, even if there’s really no ‘right’ decision to be made,” Telltale Games senior director of marketing Richard Iggo told GamesBeat at the time.

Although Telltale’s statistics are fascinating, they left me wondering why many players feel the need to make good choices in video games when no real-life consequences are at stake for being bad. Dr. Brad Bushman is a professor of communication and psychology at Ohio State University whose work has been featured in scientific journals, on ABC News, 20/20, and the Discovery Channel. He thinks it’s a tough question to answer.

“One thing I thought of is maybe it has to do with feelings of guilt,” he said. “We know that guilt is a moral emotion and motivates people to behave well.”

Unlike shame, which can have negative effects on a person’s behavior, Bushman said guilt is a positive. “If players are playing these games and they’re thinking about the consequences of their behavior, and how it might make them feel to engage in such behavior, I think either they anticipate feeling guilty or maybe they behaved in that way before and they felt guilty,” he said. “In either case, I think guilt is a powerful emotion that motivates prosocial behavior.”

However, Dr. Chris Ferguson, an associate professor of criminal justice and psychology at Texas A&M International, said it’s not guilt that motivates players to do good. “Where is the fun in that, really?” he said. “Would you play a video game that made you feel guilty all the time? I’m being a little bit facetious here, but you could go to church for that, essentially.”

Instead, Ferguson believes many use video games as a way to explore moral choices in a way that might be different from what they would do in their normal lives. “Games, to a larger degree, seem to be something a lot of people use to fulfill needs that they have difficulty meeting in their lives,” he said. “These may be needs for autonomy, needs for competency. So the idea is, essentially…if you’re working at a day job shuffling papers from one side of the desk to the other all day and you’re getting money…but you’re really not getting integral psychological needs met through that boring routine activity, video games can be an outlet for that.

“I think the need that most of us have is to be prosocial to a large degree, to perhaps be the hero, the person that makes sometimes difficult, but right choices, even if those aren’t the best choices for ourselves. Video games are a reflection of ourselves to a large extent, rather than something that’s done to us.”

A 2011 study by the University of Essex seems to support Ferguson’s claims. The study, published in an issue of Psychological Science, investigated the idea that millions of people around the world enjoy playing video games because they allow people to “try on different hats.”

“A game can be more fun when you get the chance to act and be like your ideal self,” explained study co-author Dr. Andrew Przybylski. “The attraction to playing video games and what makes them fun is that it gives people the chance to think about a role they would ideally like to take and then get a chance to play that role.”

The research, which involved hundreds of casual and dedicated gamers playing everything from The Sims and Call of Duty to World of Warcraft, found that players who adopted a new identity during gameplay, be it hero or villain, felt better about themselves and less negative. The study also found participants enjoyed the games more when there was at least some overlap between their actual self and their “ideal self.”

According to humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, our personalities are composed of the ideal self (who we want to be) and the real self (who we actually are). If a discrepancy exists between a person’s actual behavior and their internal standards, Bushman explained, that person might be motivated to either “shape up or ship out,” so to speak. “They can shape up by matching their behavior to the standard, or they can ship out by escaping the self-aware state. “[It] makes sense that people, when they’re playing a video game, if their actual behavior matches their internal standards, they’re not going to feel this need to ship out and they’ll feel good about themselves. But if they don’t, they feel anxious and [have] negative feelings that their behavior doesn’t match their standard.”

Ferguson said video games also give us an opportunity to be quite different from our ideal selves. “There are people out there that like to do things that are completely different, be the bad guy, go ahead and kill the police officers, or whatever else, just to explore that as well. But I think most of us…tend to gravitate toward doing what we would think is the ideal thing or the right thing, and video games do give us opportunity to do that when we might not have that ability in real-life.”

**Reflection Prompt:**

**Do you agree with the statement that people tend to make morally correct choices when they play video games? Why or why not? Reread the last three paragraphs. Given this information, would Hester, Dimmesdale, or Chillingworth benefit from the opportunity to make good choices in the gaming world? Why or why not?**