

Alignments & Alliances: Associations of value

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Avatars are not alone. While avatars invite players to experience the world through (usually) a single digital embodiment, this body is only meaningful because it is situated in specific historical, social, and material contexts. They are constructed through associations between players, games, and stories, and between people, technologies, and fantasies. Through these associations, the digital representation of self is rendered into a subject with values and positions, with histories and futures, with friends and enemies. In this chapter, we will further investigate the avatar's relationship to other actors, features, and symbols in and outside the game (see Bowman, this volume), and how they construct a preferred way of playing by unpacking the social components of alignments (the relative values held by the avatar as a character) and alliances (the formal associations held by the player and/or avatar).

Drawing on actor network theory (Latour, 2005), avatars may be understood as distributed through networks, or assemblages, as the avatars engage in different alliances to position themselves as encoded / enacted constructs. This approach highlights the relational; how phenomena come to be through associations between different actors (both human and non-human), and how such associations produce avatars with specific values and worldviews. Our investigation looks at four ways the avatar's alignments are created through alliances: alignment through systems, alignment through factions, alignment through players, and alignment through technologies. In each section, we will discuss how different values are inscribed (Akrich 1992) in the game, and how these scripts are enacted.

Alignment Through Alliances: Systems

As a way to map a set of morals onto avatars (and their players), some games feature explicit ways to "align" them with particular values, standards and principles, to direct thought and behavior. By keeping track of the decisions avatars make as they select alternative approaches to in-game problems, the game will score the avatar behind-the-scenes and classify them within predetermined paths that correspond to an alignment. The predetermined paths are set by the game's developers, partly as a way to allow avatars to express different values and positions, but also encourage players to define and role-play their characters. In return, the game will react to an avatar's alignment in given situations. Alignment may thus be described as how avatars are morally positioned within the game's system, shaping what worldview the avatar has and how the world reacts to it.

Textbook examples of such alignment systems can be found in the BioWare role-playing games, beginning with *Baldur's Gate* (1998) and continuing onto their other RPGs such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (KotOR; 2003) and *Mass Effect* (2007). In each of these games, alignment is made a feature of the avatar that is viewable when looking at its character sheet—an in-game screen that displays stats and details about the selected character that a player controls. This literal alignment both encourages action and limits the avatars possible interactions in the game world.

Table 1: The alignment system in *Dungeons & Dragons* and, thus, *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*

Lawful Good	Neutral Good	Chaotic Good
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Lawful Neutral	True Neutral	Chaotic Neutral
Lawful Evil	Neutral Evil	Chaotic Evil

Baldur's Gate employs the alignment system of *Dungeons & Dragons* first introduced in its 1977 *Basic Set* (see Table 1). During *D&D* character creation, a player specifies which alignment their character follows, along two axes--good vs. evil and lawful vs. chaotic--resulting in a character who is chaotic good or lawful evil or anywhere in between (Wizards of the Coast, 2008). Good characters generally act to help others and to value community-oriented goals. They act out of compassion or some other motivation to help those in need, sometimes at the cost of their own needs. Evil characters act out of selfishness or sometimes out of hatred, believing the world is there to be exploited, rewarding those who can manipulate others and take what they want. Lawful characters obey societal rules and norms. They believe in order and hierarchy. Chaotic characters have little use for laws and codes. By combining the two axes you can get, for example chaotic good characters that bend the rules in seeking optimal fair outcomes, such as stealing from the rich and corrupt to help the poor, or lawful evil characters that obey laws or strict codes but do so out of greed.

The BioWare games do not force the avatar to act in accordance with alignment, keeping the scripted alignment open to opposition, so a player could choose to be lawful good and still attack innocent people in game. Nevertheless, the system primes the player to consider ethical dimensions during character creation, and, for some players, this brings an important layer to the avatar's story and thus the potential for roleplaying. Choice of alignment can also impact on how the game treats the avatar on a mechanical level. Certain items and abilities are limited by alignment, as is treatment from non-player characters (NPCs). For example, an NPC might consider whether it is morally defensible to join a Lawful Evil character's party, or if they are going to be able to achieve their sinister goals if they team up with a Lawful Good character. In later BioWare *D&D* games, such as *Neverwinter Nights*, acting against one's specified alignment does have lasting game effects. Avatars could be stripped of their character class (e.g., paladins losing their paladin-hood) or prevented from using certain weapons if they switched alignments mid-game, based on avatar-player actions up to that point.

BioWare's later non-*D&D*-style games used alignment systems that work in similar, but simplified ways. In both *KotOR* and *Mass Effect* avatar morality is represented across one just one axis that approximates good vs evil (respectively, light vs. dark or paragon vs. renegade). Unlike in *Baldur's Gate* where alignment is chosen at character creation, avatars in *KotOR* and *Mass Effect* start out neutral and the alignment grows out of choices made during play, primarily through dialogue options and dilemmas posed by the game. The idea here is that whatever values and ideals the avatar holds are representative of the actions of the avatar, rather than its intentions, and the alignment has several consequences. In *KotOR* and *Mass Effect* alignment affects how the avatar looks, where light side avatars look smiling and healthy and dark side avatars have greyish skin with a frown. Perhaps more importantly, in *KotOR*, the avatar's alignment affects the cost of abilities, where light power abilities, like healing, are far cheaper (and thus more optimal to use) for light side characters. Likewise, dark power abilities, such as the iconic lightning shock, are far cheaper for dark side characters to use, thus weaving alignment together with measurable outcomes. In some cases, alignment also limits what equipment the avatar can use. In this way aesthetics, story, and game mechanics work together to create an avatar assemblage where values and ideals are integrated.

However, the instrumentalization of values is not without its problems. Frequently a game's alignment system is so simplified that the labels "good" or "bad" can appear indiscriminate or arbitrary, to the point of pushing the player away from considering ethical dilemmas (Heron & Belford, 2014). Players need to feel like the decisions they make are significant where those choices have effects on the world, which does not happen when alignment systems are reductionist or only giving superficial dilemmas for the players to handle (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008).

Another problem is how alignments communicate two vital, yet conflicting messages: 1) that morality is a key component of gameplay, implying that the player should care about making values-driven choices during play, and 2) that morality is a game mechanic, implying that the player should make decisions to elicit the most lucrative or beneficial outcomes. Where the first invites alignment choices from what Gee (2003) calls the "projected" self; an imagined, ideal self that role-players attempt to realize through the sum total of their in-game actions, the second invites players to simply "game the system" by maximizing rewards or scores. This is the case in *KotOR* (and many other games) where players, for the most part, are made aware of the consequences their value-based choices will have. Because of this Sicart (2010) argues that the game discourages ethical reasoning, what he calls *ludic phronensis*, in favor of strategic calculation.

Interestingly, even if ludic phronensis does occur and the player takes a step back to consider the ethical implications of a choice, the player might decode the inscriptions in other ways than the developers had intended. For example, in two separate playthroughs of *KotOR*—one as a Light Jedi and then as a Dark Jedi—one could choose to save a Wookiee friend in both instances. As a Light Jedi, the choice might be based on loyalty and friendship, while, as a Dark Jedi, it may be for the Wookiee's future usefulness (Chen, 2009). Neither the design nor the outfall changed, but a change in the player's disposition caused the actions to take on completely different meanings. This serves as a reminder that alignment systems are limited in what dimensions of play they can capture through direct input and thus react to. For the alignment system to be worthwhile, the player has to engage with it and give it value, something which cannot be guaranteed by the design alone.

In summary, alignments are both a representation of the avatar's possibilities—a way to map a system of values onto the avatar—as well as a way to encourage play with value-based choices. While some systems are reductionist to the point where they create distance between the player and the world, others bring nuance and complexity to the avatar's story and progression. As the player deliberates about which choices to make, the engagement with and through the avatar takes on moral qualities that potentially deepens the connection with the avatar, and consequently enriches the play experience. By positioning the avatar in a wider system of values, the avatar is also positioned in the world. However, alignment systems are not the only way the avatar's worldview and values are constructed.

Alignment Through Alliances: Factions

In the same way alignment systems are an attempt to position the avatar by giving it values and attitudes about the world, allying an avatar with a faction is a way to connect the avatar to a world view. Factions can be made up of NPCs, players, or both. Similar to how alignment systems dictate how NPCs react and how plot progression is motivated, alliances are a way to orient the avatar in relation to the rest of the world; who are considered friends and enemies, what is praised and what is shunned. And much like with alignment systems, some game-forced alliances have lasting impacts on gameplay, while others are relatively ambiguous.

This is strikingly clear when comparing the games *Pokémon Gó* and *Deus Ex*. In the role-playing shooter

game series *Deus Ex* there are vying factions that want to reshape the world's societies to their image of idealized life. Opting to align with one of these factions is designed to alter the story in significant ways, leading to a different climactic ending that favors the chosen faction by giving it secret control of the world. In the series second installment, *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, the player must make many choices about whether and how to support the various factions such as the Knights Templar or the Illuminati (or to attempt a neutral path between all the factions). Allying oneself with a faction is intended to provide certain cues about what actions and social structures are considered "right" or "wrong" based on how the faction presents itself, and has consequences for how further action is motivated and how past actions are understood. In this sense the alliances represent a value system that the avatar can adhere to and be judged against.ⁱ

The opposite is the case in *Pokémon GO*, where the team choice has little impact on the actual gameplay. In *Pokémon GO*, players are forced to join one of three teams upon reaching level five. The teams have names (Valor, Mystic, and Instinct), are led by in-game characters that are meant to embody each team's values and attitudes (domineering strength, thoughtful strategy, and uncritical chill), and include a team color (red, blue, and yellow) (Belinkie, 2016). However, the choice of faction has little impact on gameplay, other than to help designate which teams you are (indirectly) competing against and the interface color palette, effectively functioning as a McGuffin for inter-team battles. Players on Team Valor will, for example, not have stronger pets, nor are Team Mystic players rewarded more for playing strategically. Ignoring the stated values of each team, a player could choose a team solely based on its color or even how its name sounds rather than what it means, for example choosing Valor because it sounds differently than the others without any sibilant essencesⁱⁱ.

This does not prevent players from making the factions' values part of how they construct their player and avatar identity. Many players have engaged with the broader *Pokémon GO* community online, creating a plethora of fan narratives where team solidarity and uniqueness is expressed. What the game lacked some players made up for on their own, with ample support of the preexisting vast Pokémon-verse (see McKnight, this volume). Many games have been defined as much by the communities made by players, as by the game design itself. This indicates a third source of alliances that has effects on alignments; the alliances between players.

Alignment Through Alliances: Players

The role of alliances depends both on how alliances are scripted in the game and how player communities interpret such factions. Compare *Pokémon GO's* choice of team with the choice of faction in *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. Unlike in *Pokémon GO* where players must choose a team but are largely free to ignore it for the duration of play, the majority of content in *WoW* is scripted as group play. For players to explore and (hopefully) enjoy epic battles, they are reliant on forming player alliances such as guilds. Each guild has its own identity (though of varying strength and uniqueness), placing different values on things like friendliness, skill, competitiveness, and humor (Williams et al. 2006). For a player to truly become a member of a guild, the player is expected to adhere to the guild's ideals. Depending on the guild's identity and purpose, this can put limitations and expectations on the player and the engagements of the avatar, including how to customize the avatar, what type of play to engage in, or how to treat fellow players.

A roleplaying guild might expect the avatar's story to continue the guild's lore (e.g., as an evil doomsday cult) as they are concerned with narrative aspects of play, while a competitive PvP guild might require the player to adopt a more elitist attitude and instrumental approach to play as elitism and success is frequently framed as mutually dependent (Ask 2016). Since guild tags are visible under avatars' names,

affiliations to guilds are known to other players, and a guild's reputation will in turn shape how other players perceive the avatar-player (see Johnson, this volume).

When joining a player community, describing (reading and describing) the design of the game (and community) turns into a collective endeavor, and players spend a considerable amount of time and effort in ensuring that a shared understanding of virtues of play are achieved. In this sense, the avatar is assembled not only by the values and ideals inscribed into the game but also by those constructed by the player community. This configuration takes place through several associations: between player and guild, between guild members, and between guild members and non-guild members. Furthermore, alliances are also made between the avatar and other technological systems as a considerable amount of community work takes place outside the constraints of the game they play.

Alignment Through Alliances: Technologies

Moving outside the gameworld to other online spaces can be motivated by curiosity, competitiveness, or by deficiencies of the game. Seeking out new tools, communities, and alternative stories for play is commonplace. Many players make out-of-game technologies, i.e., valued non-human allies that allow engaged players to modify their identities, communities, and practices. By associating the avatar to technologies, discourses, and practices outside the game, the avatar can take on new meanings that run against the game's script.

Many players attempt to ensure their alignments have meaning; they create a projected self with desired ideals and values. The ability of individuals and groups to choose what they value (i.e., their alignments) and who they ally with truly showcase the subversive potential of play. This seems especially important for minority group players who are poorly represented. Many such different subgroups thrive, sometimes in the shadows of official alliances, from Dads of Destiny (<https://dadsofdestiny.net/>) and LGBTQ-friendly guilds to furies and pacifist gamers. These player factions facilitate play with identities that are obviously important to the players, but are not freely or easily provided in most mainstream games which continue to cater to the perceived power fantasy of white, cisgender, heterosexual men (Kafai, Richard & Barnes 2016; see also Fox, this volume). Through alliances with other online platforms and technologies (e.g., forums, blogs, databases, videochannels) alternative avatar alignments can be constructed, and values that are nowhere to be found in the script can be interwoven into play.

The inclusion of other technologies into the avatar assemblage can also be more direct, such as in *WoW*. Many guilds have specific requirements for membership consideration where use of software modifications (mods) to improve information flow and cooperation during play is mandatory. The addition of mods increases the capability of the avatar, as they help to keep the player informed about key events during battle or assist in keeping track of progression, making a material extension of the avatar. The mods help organize and discipline players in performing the type of play they have configured as desirable, be it lazy exploration or high-paced combat, filling such key roles that they can be considered 'non-human players' in the vernacular of ANT where non-human actors (e.g., technologies) are included in the analysis (Taylor, 2009; Chen, 2012; Ask, 2016).

These alternative ways of playing the same game signal a diversity of play styles and desires. Attempting to play in one of these ways is to affiliate or ally oneself to a particular tradition of play informed by the game design, the player community, alternative technologies and oppositional readings. The tradition of play consequently create a particular framing of the avatar. All this is to emphasize that alliances can be game defined or socially defined, but will always be an amalgamation of both game/genre-constrained

choices *and* emergent self-imposed choices.

Conclusion: Avatars <3 Alliances

In summary, the avatar's values and worldviews are shaped by their associations. Players are frequently given the task of choosing these associations, either in formalistic systems that represent morality, by picking sides in a conflict, or by choosing who to play with. Some choices are scripted as carefully considered decisions for players to make, with meaningful consequences and that may alter the experience or suggest a particular play style. Others are largely superficial with faction- or dialogue choices that invite deliberation, but has little actual impact on how the game world reacts to the avatar, which consequently encourages strategic rather than moral reasoning. However, since players tend to find other and alternative values and worldview to associate with their avatars through community participation, superficial alliances between avatars, alignment systems and factions do not always equate to meaningless associations.

Emergent social alliances may be more powerful than game-defined ones in shaping the values and worldview of the avatar and player. Recognizing this gives power to the players, decentralizing designed experiences and artificial labels in that players have freedom to make choices about their avatar's alignments and alliances, and emphasizing the avatar as a sociomaterial process where avatar values are not inherent, but made through interactions with other technologies, games, NPCs, and players.

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ⁱ The associations between the avatar and faction produce the potential for ludic phronesis, since many players make decisions based on a meta-gaming strategy (see Paul, this volume), sometimes opting one faction over another purely out of curiosity over how the game system works.

ⁱⁱ Nod to Amaranth Borsuk for pointing this out to the authors.