Ethics and Video Games – when it's not just a game

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Video games are pretty awesome

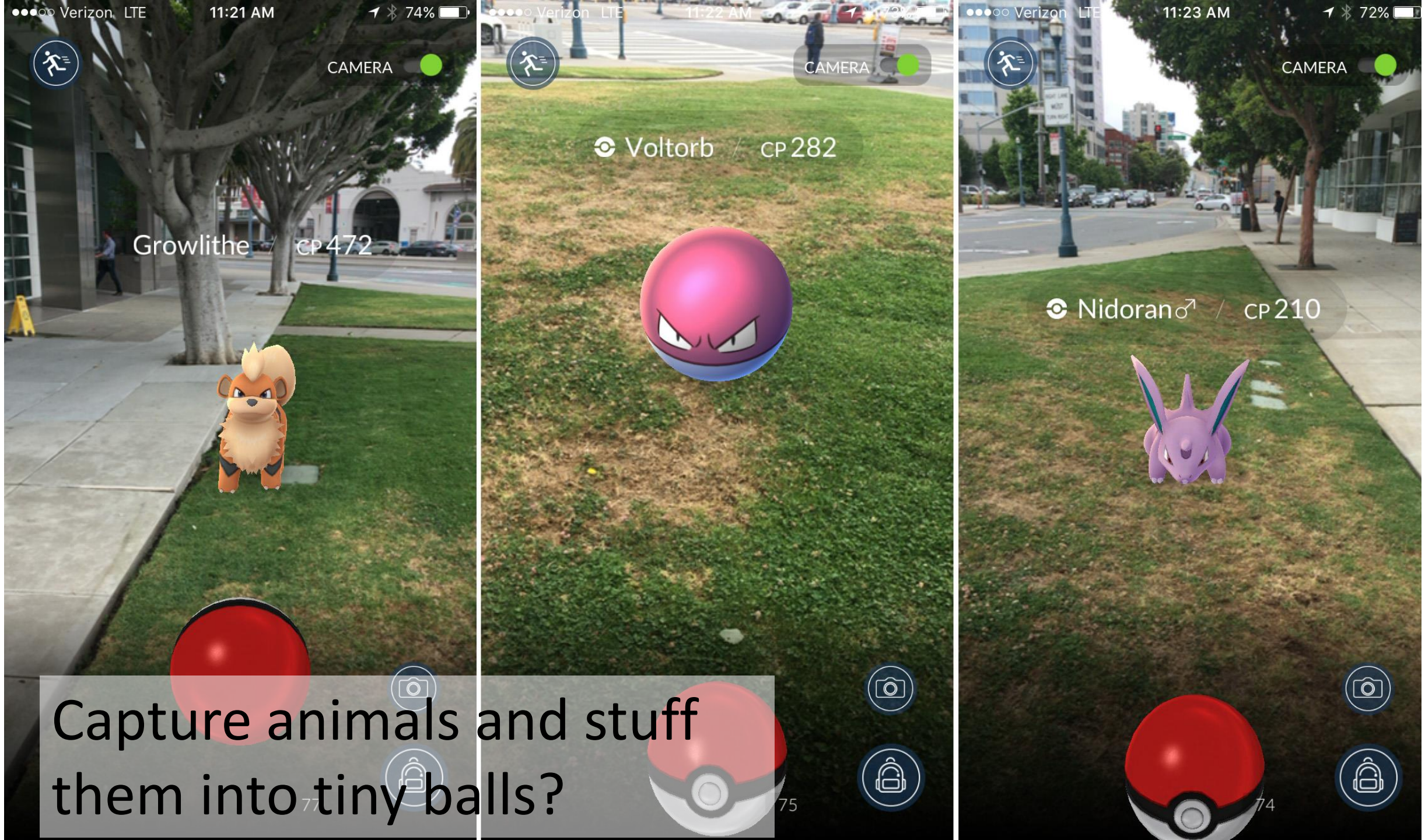
What do you do in video games that you don’t do in real life?
NMSAS-Flick-11-Rotegulaist
41.2°C
0.9 Rad
5.8 Tox
The Atlas
Your Destiny lies in the Beyond
Press M to open Galactic Map

Kill people?

Steal cars?

Stomp on small creatures?

Raid people’s houses?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Voltorb / CP 282
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CAMERA
Nidoran♂ / CP 210
Capture animals and stuff them into tiny balls?

Be the hero…

Fly spacecraft…

Build castles…

Grow crops…

Save the world…
0
B
Item
A
Raise shield
C
Z
Lock on
Swing sword

Pick flowers...
60

Players as Ethical Agents

- You never just play a game
- You bring your background, your life experiences, your culture, your interests, your education, and many other aspects into playing games
- Some games have lots of things you can make obvious decisions about doing
- Some games don’t do this but still bring these aspects into play
- Players respond to morally relevant gameplay
- Games can have significant effects on players too

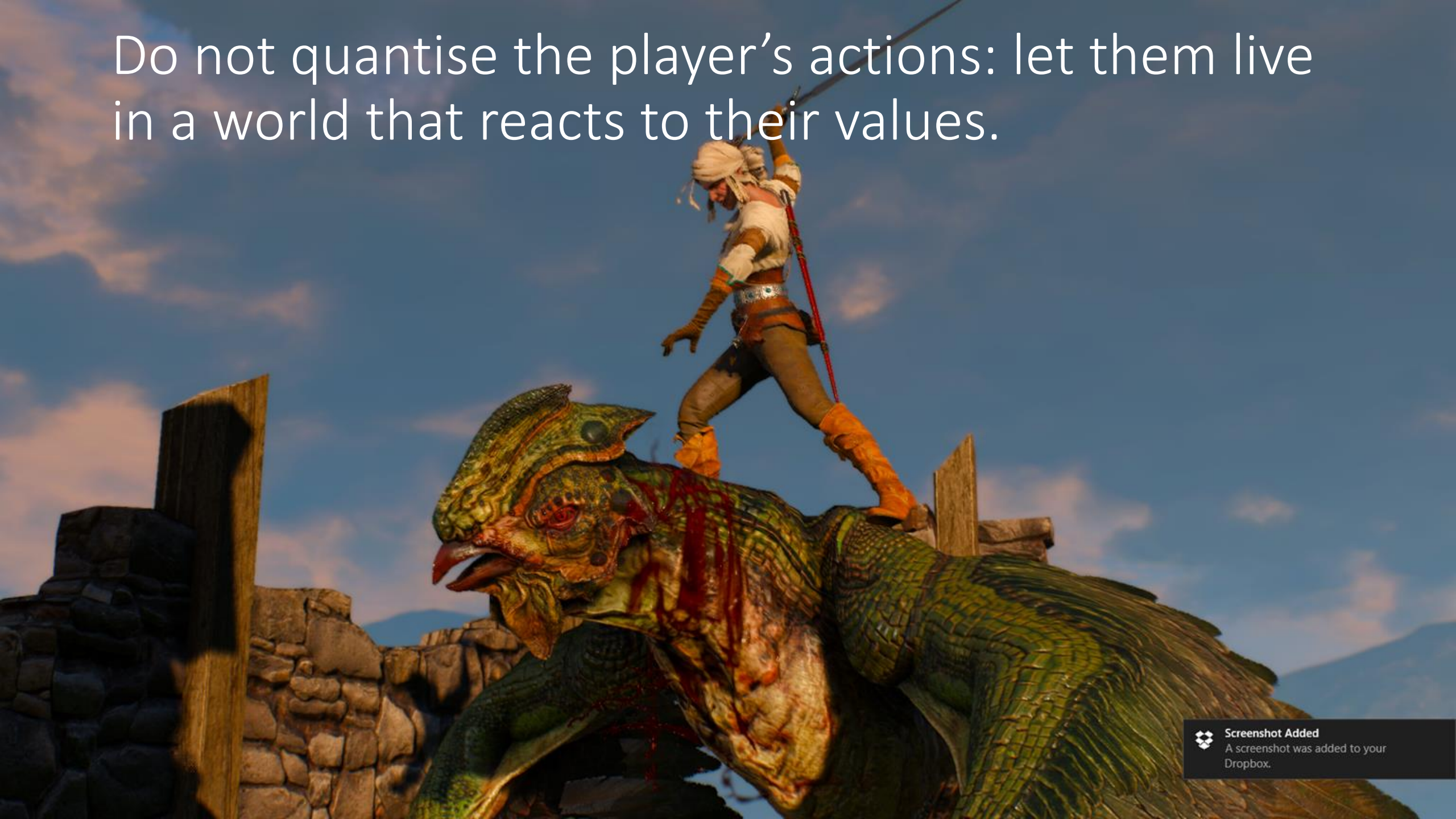
What morally relevant games should do (Sicart)

- Create an ethically relevant game world.
- Do not quantise the player's actions: let them live in a world that reacts to their values.
- Exploit the tension of being an ethical player.
- Insert other agents with constructivist capacities and possibilities.
- Challenge the poietic* capacities of players, by expanding or constraining them.

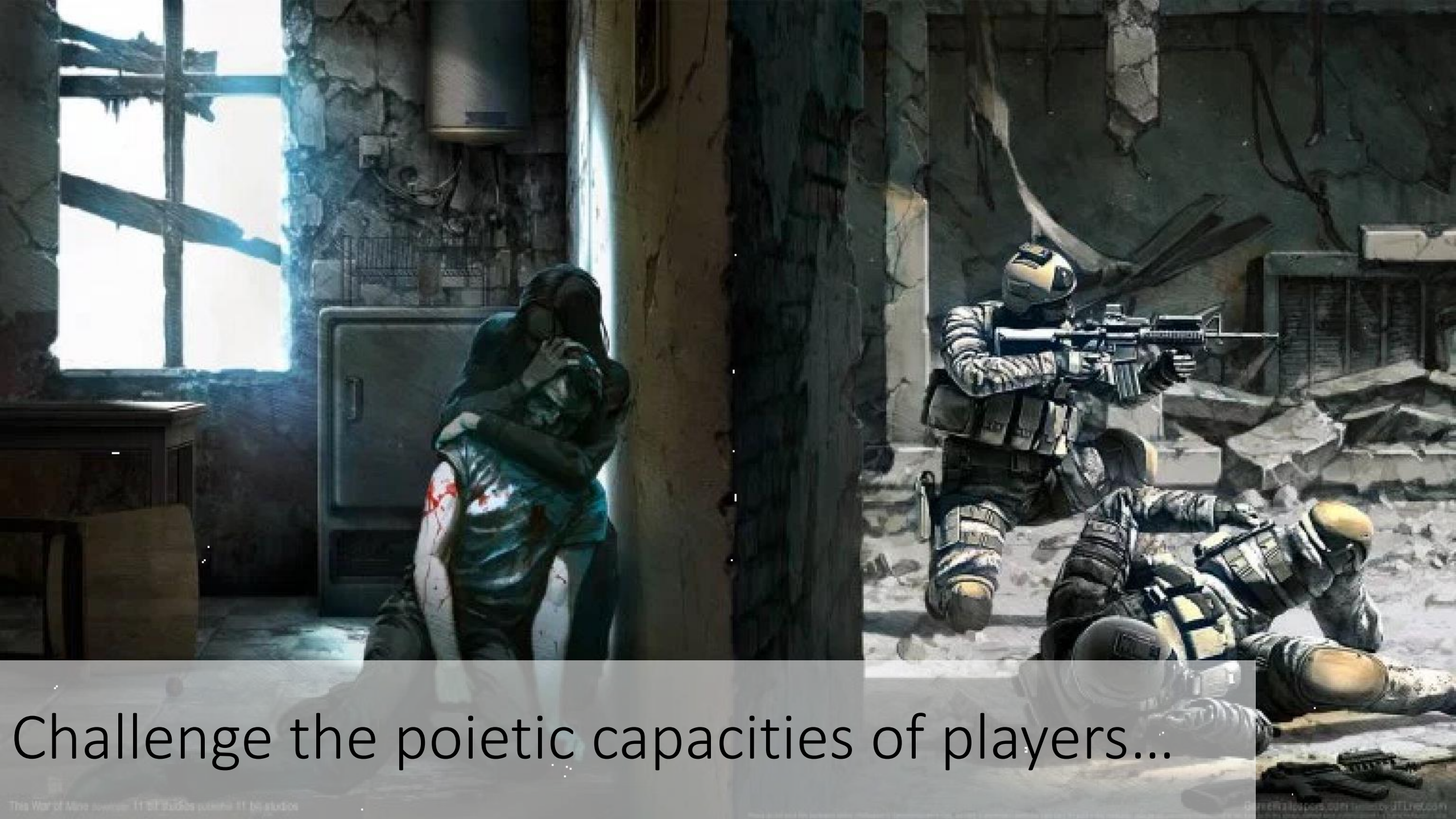
*poietic: productive/formative

Create an ethically relevant game world

Do not quantise the player's actions: let them live in a world that reacts to their values.



Exploit the tension of being an ethical agent



Challenge the poietic capacities of players…

…by expanding or constraining them

In summary… (according to Sicart)

- Some of the best games are games with ethical decisions/ethical reflective capability in them
- Developers shouldn’t give players numbers and bars to help them aim for things, let the world naturally respond to their choices
- They should make players make tough decisions (that have ethical dimensions/consequences)
- They should let players work out their own ethics in games (multiplayer-type games) in a responsible social manner
- For extra credit, they should make games that make players question their in game decisions by constraining or expanding the players’ perspectives

But people respond to games that don't do this too

- My (forthcoming) qualitative studies into gamers' emotional connections with games show huge influence of:
  - Characters and character development
  - Narrative/story
  - Music
  - Social aspects unrelated to rules
  - "Being there for them in down times"

- So don't despair if your game doesn't follow Sicart's "rules" – moral gameplay is not the only way to engage players
  - But if you claim to allow players moral choice you should probably take a look

Some other video game research I do

- Advise on ethics for 3D-Tune-In (gamification of hearing aid tuning/education about hearing loss)
- PAX East outreach
- Representations of chickens in games
- Pokémon Go and perceptions of mental health
- Pokémon Go and automation
- Ethics advisor to the No Man's Sky Archaeological Survey

- PhD students:
  - researching women's representation and experiences in games
  - VR for children with disabilities

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Reference
Sicart, M. 2009. The banality of simulated evil: designing ethical gameplay. Ethics Inf Technol 11:191–202