Even today, we want our heroes to know right from wrong

July 2 2019, by Jeff Grabmeier

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In a world of sympathetic villains and flawed heroes, people still like fictional characters more when they have a strong sense of morality, a new study finds.

Researchers found that people best liked the heroes they rated as most moral, and least liked villains they rated as most immoral.

Antiheroes and morally ambiguous characters like Walter White—the chemistry teacher turned drug kingpin in the show Breaking Bad—were more complicated for people to rate on likability.

But across all of the [character](#) types, morality and likability were closely related to each other, said Matthew Grizzard, lead author of the study and assistant professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"Character morality is intricately tied to how much people like them," Grizzard said.

"People still don't like evil characters."

The study was published online in the *Journal of Media Psychology* and will appear in a future print edition.

Scholars have long believed that character morality is linked to how much people like them, Grizzard said.

"But then in the 90s we started to see antiheroes get popular in our culture, in TV shows like The Sopranos and NYPD Blue, for example. Characters did bad things, but people still rooted for them," he said.

"That got us thinking: Does charcater morality not matter anymore? Or does it matter and we're just not seeing the whole picture?"

So Grizzard and his colleagues put this question to the test by asking 262 [college students](#) to think of characters they liked or characters they disliked.

All of the students were given descriptions of three character types—heroes, villains and "morally ambiguous characters," or antiheroes. They were then asked to recall a fictional character in one of

those categories that they either "really liked" or "really disliked."

Some of the liked characters participants chose included Superman and Batman as heroes, Deadpool and Batman as morally ambiguous characters and The Joker and Voldemort as villains.

Some of the disliked characters also included Batman and Superman as heroes, Dexter Morgan (of the TV show Dexter) and Spiderman as morally ambiguous characters and The Joker and Voldemort as villains.

Participants rated how much they liked the character they chose and how moral they thought the character was on scales from 1 to 7.

This put some participants in a difficult and unnatural position: They had to choose a villain they liked or a [hero](link) they disliked, Grizzard said.

"If there is really no connection between morality and liking, we should clearly see it here. But that's not what we found," he said.

The disliked heroes were rated as less moral than the liked heroes. The liked villains were rated as more moral than the disliked villains. And the liked antiheroes were rated as more moral than the disliked antiheroes.

"The more moral a character is, the more I like them. The more I like a character, the more moral I perceive them to be. It is nearly impossible to separate these factors," Grizzard said.

It was most difficult for researchers to predict the relationship between liking and morality in the morally ambiguous characters.

These antiheroes show that it may be too simple to say that as characters increase in morality, they will always be more liked.

"This middle ground where the characters are somewhat good and somewhat bad are harder to predict. But even then, there is still some relationship between morality and liking," he said.

Grizzard gives the example of Walter White, the main character in the show Breaking Bad, who starts producing and selling crystal meth to help secure his family's financial future after he is diagnosed with cancer.

In many movies, the Walter White character would be the villain and no one would root for him, Grizzard said. But in Breaking Bad, White still is more moral than most of the other characters, so viewers root for him.

"It is a relative morality. Because all of the other characters are worse than he is, we have something to compare him to. We don't exactly like him, but he is the best we can hope for in this show."

  More information: *Journal of Media Psychology* , DOI: 10.1027/1864-1105/a000257 , econtent.hogrefe.com/doi/abs/1 … 27/1864-1105/a000257

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Even today, we want our heroes to know right from wrong (2019, July 2) retrieved 1 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2019-07-today-heroes-wrong.html