'It's only a game' - ethics, empathy and identification in game morality systems

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Abstract

In this paper the authors argue that games have not yet lived up to their potential in acting as compelling engines for moral or ethical reflection. Despite the prevalence of moral choice systems within games, modern titles currently lack the nuance and sophistication required to permit insight into anything meaningful regarding moral and immoral behaviour. The role games play in shaping moral outlooks is contentious and controversial. It is necessary to address this topic within a firm academic framework which we can use to understand the limits game developers have with regards to building emotionally resonant and morally complex games. To this end, the authors have reviewed the literature on the topics of morality and ethics in computer games with the intention of outlining this framework.

While the narrative structure of games may offer opportunities for empathy and identification with player characters, the ludic requirements of balance serve to instantiate limits on both player agency and the viable set of actions. Within the context of games with a significant ethical component, these serve as the ideological limits within which moral context is bounded. Existing moral systems within games tend to adopt a perspective that is both binary and utilitarian, and the lack of real consequences for a player's choice imposes a shallowness on subsequent reflection. We discuss how this problem has been addressed to date within modern video games and evaluate the success of such endeavours.

For games to truly meet their potential in this regard, it is necessary for them to offer something that is not present in other forms of literature. The nature of interactivity here offers some promise that players being made to enact rather than simply observe a choice will spur deeper consideration of the implications. This is predicated, however, on a sufficient level of player ownership of the actions a character takes. Current research on this topic is conflicted, and in the conclusion of the paper the authors outline a research agenda aimed at addressing this issue.

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1: Introduction

Playing games is common to many species. The young of many animal species play games. These games exist to teach specific skills, inculcate values and social hierarchies and provide an outlet for pent-up energy. In order to accomplish these goals, it is necessary for games to engage on an

emotional level. Within the human species, we play games partially as tools for learning, but partially for their entertainment value – part of that value though is in their ability to trigger an emotional payload, that is to say a reward that is aimed at the emotional centres of the brain. We experience this payload on several levels, but two of the levels most relevant to this paper are those of the ludic and the narrative. Emotions triggered by the ludic elements of a game mostly focus on accomplishment: the thrill of victory, goal attainment and the consequences of failing to achieve game objectives. Emotions triggered by the narrative elements are those most familiar to other forms of recreational entertainment such as movies, books, theatre and poetry. That games are capable of engaging on both of these levels is uncontroversial, but there is a paucity of genuinely engaging narrative content in games. This means that there are relatively few examples of truly resonant narrative emotional payload. The nature of emotional engagement is different for every player, and every player will experience both ludic and narrative elements to a greater or lesser extent. [1-3]

However, the general rule holds – games in general are better at triggering ludic emotional responses than they are at triggering deeper narrative engagement, and it is the latter that seems most important in facilitating epiphanies on the nature of moral decision making in real life. In this paper we conduct a review of the literature regarding moral decisions in gameplay, and propose a research agenda that is driven by the need to address current gaps in the academic record. Within this paper we use the term **ethics** to refer to codified structures of moral guidance which in some circumstances may be externally imposed; and **morality** to refer to an individual's personal sense of right and wrong. Thus, we acknowledge the possibility that moral behaviour is not necessary ethical and ethical behaviour is not necessarily moral.

2: Emotion in gameplay

There are many examples of games which do manage to combine ludic elements and narrative elements into a coherent whole, but those games that stress the latter rarely manage to stress the former. One example of the dichotomy can be seen in Quantic Dream's (2010) title *Heavy Rain*. The gameplay progresses very slowly, with an emphasis on the trivial. Player interaction is largely limited to going to a certain part of a mundane environment and pressing a particular combination of controls as they are presented on the screen. There is little sense of ludic payload upon accomplishing such game tasks. As the game progresses though it evolves into an emotionally compelling story touching on themes of loss, regret, guilt and redemption. The cost of sacrificing the ludic element is a sense of distancing between the player and the character. The experience can be more akin to watching a movie than it is to playing a game. A title which adopts a similar gameplay mechanism is that of Telltale Games' (2012) episodic title, *The Walking Dead*. Within this game, a point is made of showing the persistence of decisions that you make and conversational options that you choose. In real terms the impact of this decision making is limited, but there is a tangible feeling of weight upon making choices. The consequence of the persistence of conversation is to create a compelling emotional setup for the final episode's conclusion. Other games manage to marry the two elements more successfully. One example of a series that accomplishes this is *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2008). The sweeping story from beginning to end is coupled with highly interactive, skill based game mechanics and a significant amount of player impact on the eventual outcome of the narrative. The sense of accomplishment on a ludic level is comparable to the emotional payload of the narrative level. [4,5]

Emotional involvement is a bedrock of effective gameplay, but it is the narrative emotional payload that is most important in building a sense of empathy with the agents within a game world. Those games that offer a significant emotional connection with these agents are those that are best placed to act as a mirror on real life human relationships. If we have an emotional response to game agents, we can create an empathic bond between our characters and the agent. However, there is question

mark over whether or not it is possible to create a similar bond between ourselves and what Bayliss (2007) termed our 'locus of manipulation'. [2, 6-8]

There is much that is novel about gameplay as an activity, and as tools for teaching and engaging games are unparalleled. However, if games are to serve as a truly effective mechanism for teaching moral decision making, which is a role that games have increasingly taken upon themselves, then we need to address some important questions. For how long does empathy persist in the real world, and what weight does it have upon our real world decision making? If a game is to offer a vehicle for this, then what does it offer beyond what other forms of entertainment have been able to accomplish for centuries? Whenever ludic control is wrestled from us through a mechanism such as a cut-scene or expository text, we lose the ability to imprint our own sense of self onto the story, and this in turn can trigger a sense of cognitive dissonance when a character behaves at odds with how we have mentally characterised them. The result is that the game becomes largely a complicated container for a series of short movies. If we are passively experiencing a largely linear story, such as in *Heavy Rain*, why should we feel responsible for the actions that the character takes in our name? [1, 9-11]

This is an issue that isn't entirely linked to the way in which a game balances ludic and narrative elements. It's also an issue of identity, empowerment and actualization within a game world. Some games permit you to create an entirely personalised character, with a name, appearance, background and skillset entirely chosen by you. Others permit you only to inhabit the mind of an already existing character – you might be able to steer and influence this character, but they will act without your explicit instruction where necessary. Commander Shepherd in *Mass Effect* is a good example of this kind of character. We may have some control over how Shepherd engages with others in conversation as an example, but the exact words, phrasing and intonation are decided for us. We may choose to be aggressive or conciliatory, but the exact form this takes is beyond our ability to influence. This is an important aspect in the design of moral systems within games, because if we feel no ownership of a character then it follows that we will feel no ownership for the consequences of their activities.

3: Definition of immersion and engagement

To address these issues, we must first discuss the ways in which a game can provide narrative emotional resonance. Two important concepts here are those of immersion and engagement although the terms overlap significantly within the literature and will be used largely interchangeably within this paper. In many ways immersion and engagement are mediated through two key traits – the believability and quality of NPC interactions, and the verisimilitude of the player's interactions with the underlying game world. [12]

Immersion relates to the degree with which we lose the sense of ourselves as being distanced from the game world. We become less aware of our physical presence and begin to experience reality as if from the perspective of our locus of manipulation. While many researchers have stressed the importance of graphical fidelity and first person perspective in building immersion (e.g. Jorgenssen, 2010), others such as Lankowski (2007) offered compelling counter-examples of engaging and immersive games that have no emphasis on a first person viewport. In a previous paper, we highlighted the immersive power of the written word – text adventures such as those of Infocom would have been much less compelling or immersive if graphical fidelity were a perquisite. [2,7,8,12,13]

Bayliss (2007) defined immersion in three categories: [8]

- 'playing through' - in which the character is a merely prop or tool for the player;
- 'playing as' - in which the player identifies as the locus of manipulation and focuses on the characterisation and narrative of a game experience; and,
- 'playing with' - with focuses on games as ludic artefacts bound up in thematic trappings.

Each of these categories represents a certain level of immersion, and each comes with its own expectations for the degree to which a player will 'lose themselves' in the game. Other systems of differentiating levels of engagement exist, e.g. Adams' (2004) separation of immersion into elements that are tactical, relating to skill; strategic, relating to mental challenge; and narrative, relating to story elements. [14]

Brown and Cairns (2004) created the following hierarchy: [15]

1 *Engagement* - the lowest level in which the mechanics of play, such as the controls, are the key focus;
2 *Engrossment* - at which point emotional involvement is possible; and,
3 *Total Immersion* - in which one begins to disassociate with our physical presence.

Lankowski (2007) defined goal-related and empathic engagement – the former is ludic; whilst the latter is narrative: [2]

> 'Goal-related engagement is fundamentally an "I" experience; it is about the players acting to reach their goals. Empathic engagement on the other hand is essentially about reacting to the character's actions.'

There is considerable agreement within these and other definitional schemes, but the key lesson is that there are differing levels of immersion and engagement. By their very nature not all of these will lend themselves to the kind of moral instruction that games aspire to with their growing emphasis on moral choice systems. A certain amount of immersion is required for a player to identify with their locus of manipulation, but that immersion must also be of the right kind to be able to engender empathy through emotional resonance.

The player's engagement with the game world is one element of immersion, but the autonomous agents within that world, often referred to as Non-Player Characters or NPCs, are a large part in building an empathic web of relationships. We must care about NPCs in order to care about what happens to them. Games such as *Command and Conquer* (Westwood Studios, 1995) invest no effort into characterisation of units – they are interchangeable, easily replaceable and lacking in personality. When they die, we have no sense of loss other than at a ludic or tactical level. Their importance to us as a player is in the role they provide. We see a similar lack of concern for 'favour NPCs' in games such as *Left 4 Dead* (Valve, 2009). The rare 'NPC survivor' character is most often seen as a source of med-kits rather than as a fellow victim of the apocalypse. [7, 16]

On the other hand, games such as *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008) have NPCs that can be killed to give access to their shop contents, but these NPCs are not lacking in personality. We may feel no remorse at killing them, but the possibility exists for us to create an empathic relationship. The more interactions we have with an NPC and the more involved those interactions are, the more of a relationship we build. This is not always a thing that will 'protect' an NPC – within *Fallout 3* for example, familiarity with the NPC known as 'Moira' has often caused players to kill her out of sheer irritation. Not all players will care about all NPCs, and perhaps a majority will never care about any.

But there are compelling examples of NPCs that have deeply affected people who played their games. Clementine in *The Walking Dead* (Tell Tale Games, 2012); Floyd in Infocom's (1983) *Planetfall*; and Bill from *Left 4 Dead* have all had much forum and blog-based content written about their eventual fates. Other extreme examples exist, such as one cited by Kavil (2012) in which a male gamer marries an in-game NPC because he fell in love with her character. [17]

The last aspect of a game that must be discussed is that of verisimilitude. This is the degree to which a game world is consistent, knowable, and with sufficient opportunities to suspend disbelief. It is not important that a game be realistic, it is simply that it must be realistic enough for us to construct reliable mental models as to how the game mechanics can be manipulated. A game does not require photo realism but it does require social realism. Grimshaw *et al* (2011) argued that it is not authenticity, but verisimilitude that is required for immersion to be possible. The degree to which a game world conforms to this determines the ease with which we can retain immersion. Verisimilitude does not immerse by itself, but it removes the barriers to staying immersed. Anything can jar us out of a state of immersion – an anachronistic phrase, an unbelievable outcome from an action, or an inconsistent game mechanic. We have more reasons to reinstate our disbelief than we do to suspend it for the long term. [12, 18]

Thus, if a game is to make us feel the consequence of actions, we must become immersed into the game world. If our characters are simply props, or tools, then we cannot invest them with the necessary perceived agency to feel their actions have weight. Immersion then is likely to be a pre-requisite of a game which has meaningful moral instruction built into its game mechanics. We can appreciate such mechanics on a ludic level, but on a narrative level we must care. If we don't care about an NPC, then we don't care that our actions may have caused it to come to harm.

4: Self representation versus characterization

While the verisimilitude and believability of game worlds has an important role in facilitating immersion, the role of the player character is also tremendously important. Broadly speaking, player characters fall within a spectrum between those that are fully characterised by the game developer, such as Lara Croft, or *Spec Ops: The Line*'s Martin Walker (2K Games, 2012) and those that are fully characterised by the player, such as in *Fallout 3* or most MMOs. Some games permit a blending, such as in *Mass Effect* (Electronic Arts, 2010-2012) where the character of Shepherd is fixed but the player can alter certain representational and ludic aspects such as appearance, outfit, and skillset. [19]

Pohl (2008) differentiated the first class of player characters as being either flat or round. Flat characters are those lacking in any significant characterisation, existing as a kind of empty shell upon which the player can imprint their personality. Much like in the television series *Dollhouse* (Mutant Enemy Productions), their role in activities is defined by utility – if the player needs a powerful warrior character, the generic flat avatar can fill that role without requiring much in the way of personality. The player then fills the void with their own characterisation. Pohl (2008) argued that flat characters present the greatest opportunity for players to identify with their avatars since they are the ones responsible for giving them depth. Gordon Freeman is perhaps the best example of such a character. While his look and occupation are fixed, he is intentionally mute so the player can envision a particular style of interaction with the NPCs within a game. The movie *Chaplin* (1992) expressed this idea through the medium of the talkies: [20]

> "The Tramp can't talk – the minute he talks, he's dead."

Round characters on the other hand are those that are well characterised in advance, such as Kate Walker from the game *Syberia* (The Adventure Company, 2002). Round characters have personalities, histories, and firmly defined characteristics. The player does not create their personality, but they do inhabit that character's psyche for as long as the game is being played. Players must conform to the perspective of the round character. This raises the question – can you truly conform to the perspective of a round character if you do not empathise with the character? This is perhaps best expressed in the game *Spec Ops: The Line*, where the main character descends into madness and anarchy while we as players become increasingly uncomfortable with the role we play in facilitating his madness. Lankowski (2011) argued that 'characters facilitate empathic engagement through recognition, alignment and allegiance'. [2, 20, 21]

Allegiance defines the degree to which a character inspires the qualities of sympathy or antipathy in those who may be controlling them. A flat character will not act against its controller's desires. A round character will often interact with the game world in ways that we may not necessarily agree with even if we are ostensibly the ones in control. You can play a character even if you don't approve of their actions, but moral instruction in this regard requires a certain element of collusion – you must accept that you have at least some role in the outcome of the actions within the game. Frasca (2001) stated, 'The more freedom the player is given, the less personality the character will have.' [22]

The inversion of this is that the less freedom the player is given, the more personality the character will have, and thus the less responsibility the player will feel as a result of character actions. Characterisation then is a tension between ludic conventions and narrative pragmatism.

The perspective with which we view a game also has a role in setting up our empathic engagement with the character. Games which are primarily first person perspective offer few layers of abstraction between the player's perspective and that of the avatar, and it has been argued that this creates the ideal conditions for player immersion. Other perspectives, such as the third person or the more unusual second person, obscure our connection with the character through the visual presence of the interface. We are not looking through a character's eyes, we are looking over their shoulder and this in turn creates psychological distance. [7, 12]

Control schemes in turn also make a difference in how we are presented with our interaction opportunities. The abstract cursor of Command and Conquer presents a relatively clean disassociation between ourselves and the units we are controlling. We have no presence within the game; we exist only as a set of detached tactical instructions delivered through a computer interface. In later versions even when there are narrative cut-scenes they are delivered 'to camera' and never to a representation of the commander.

Jorgensen (2009) reported that within *Diablo 2* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2000), players felt distanced from their player character because of the presence of the interface as a disembodied hand: 'Respondents compare playing *Diablo 2* to puppet theatre.' This is further underlined by the perspective of the game which is top down and isometric – the player never directly inhabits the viewpoint of the character, they are instructing it from on high. [7]

However, these views are not unchallenged – others have argued that there is no impact of perspective or interface in immersion and that the level of characterisation is what defines engagement. Grimshaw *et al* (2011) argued that the most effective way to build immersion is through the vehicle of empathy. It is clear though that immersion plays a part in building an empathic relationship with the character, and in turn with the NPCs and game agents with which the character interacts. This would seem like a foundational element of feeling ethical and moral responsibility for the outcomes that occur within a game. We must collude with the actions in order to be complicit in

their consequences. If games are to teach moral decision making it is necessary for us to feel like our decisions have actual weight upon us as individuals. That is mediated through our relationship with our characters. [8, 12]

5: Character ownership and identification

All of this serves as a theoretical discussion of the games academic literature on the topic of emotional engagement and immersion. In this paper we argue that immersion and engagement are pre-requisites for individuals being truly influenced by computer games on anything more than the shallowest of levels. The fact that games can trigger chemical reactions in the mind and body is uncontroversial, but for games to truly influence they must extend their influence beyond the temporary. For this then, we require three elements to cohere together in an environment in which a player is fully immersed and feels a genuine empathic relationship with the character and the world in which the character resides:

Ownership of actions

Firstly, one must be willing to accept an ownership of actions. Games offer a potential layer of perceived interactivity that could, in theory, offer something beyond what more reactive forms of entertainment offer. We may identify with the moral decisions of Oskar Schindler in the movie bearing his surname, but we have no sense of ownership for his actions. He is Schindler, and we are the viewers. However, the interactivity of a video game alters this dynamic considerably. A player character within the interactive elements of a video game does nothing unless we instruct it. We are the reason why things in a game happen. However, the interactivity in a game is limited by that which is presented by the developer. With this in mind, can we expect players to feel ownership of actions when their options are so limited by technical and ludic requirements?

Smahel *et al* (2008) conducted a survey and found that 68.7% of players agreed with the statement that 'they sometimes feel proud of their avatars', and 14.5% believe 'both me and my avatar are the same'. This is in relation to MMORPGs where considerable investment of time is expected to make any kind of progress, and these figures may not be transferable to single player games. It is in the realm of the single player game, however, that the ludic convention of the 'moral choice system' is most common. Within MMORPGs, the social context offers its own framework for assessing, rewarding and judging ethical behaviour in players. However, these statistics do imply that, certainly within the group discussed by Smahel *et al* (2008), there is evidence to suggest that players feel a certain kind of ownership over the rewards that their characters accumulate. [23]

Reward and punishment

The second pre-requisite for influence to persist must surely be the sense that rewards, and correspondingly punishments, have been earned. Without the expectation that what happens to a character is a direct consequence of player actions, then the traditional reinforcement mechanisms of human psychology lack their usual force of impact. If our rewards are arbitrary, or worse, guaranteed then there is no peril or uncertainty that we can learn from. 'Everyone gets a biscuit' or 'sometimes you get a biscuit regardless of what you do'. In such cases, why should anyone try to strive for a biscuit, or read anything into the fact that they have been given one?

Impact of decisions

Finally, the impact of decisions is important. Games are very good at creating an illusion of choice – within *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream, 2005) choices feel meaningful and the time-pressures within which a player can work create a sense of urgency in how the decisions are to be made. However, upon a second playing through of most branching games, it is revealed to be a magic trick – you were going to end up in the same place regardless of what decisions you made, the only difference is in how certain decisions 'flavour' that outcome. This is of course down to the pragmatics of game development. As is evidenced in the stats available for Valve's *Steam* service, most players never complete a game, and many never make it more than half the way through. There are hugely diminishing returns on investing significant amounts of game development time on genuinely narrative re-playability. Some educational games (such as *Quandary* by Learning Games Network (2012)) offer an engine for exploring issues of ethics and morality. However, these are aimed at offering tools for exploring moral consequences rather than having to make a largely uninformed, intuitive decision and live with the consequences. It is often very clear what the 'correct' decision is although it may be necessary to select from a pool of 'equally plausible' possible courses of action. [6, 20]

However, in order for our decisions to influence us in the real world, they must feel meaningful. An example of this is the game *One Chance* (created by Dean Moynihan in 2011) in which players are permitted one single attempt at the story. Further attempts, unless one cheats, are not permitted – you either win the first time, or you lose forever. Such finality in game outcome is perhaps only feasible in freeware indie games where a commercial market is not necessary. We need to feel that the decision we made was one that had to be made, and one that we had to make. Within the current conventions of video games, this is hard to justify from a development standpoint – content is costly to develop. For a decision to have weight, it must open up some options and close off, ideally permanently, others. There are very few games that can offer this, and as such it is difficult to see how decision making within a game can carry real emotional weight beyond it. In a later section of this paper, we will discuss the game *Spec Ops: The Line* (2K Games, 2012), which offers a framework by which real moral decision making can extend outside of the ludic conventions of the genre. However, the implications of these kinds of moral decisions require a certain level of nuance in interpretation on the part of player. In many ways, they expect more of the ethical antennae of players than can reasonably be expected. Many will miss the nuance, either as a result of an unsophisticated view of morality and decisions within games, or as a consequence of the 'magic circle' within which much game-playing occurs.

6: Moral Systems

Many games have take the route of building some measure of moral representation within their mechanics. Perhaps the first mainstream game to offer a formal role for morality was Origin System's *Ultima 4* (Origin Systems, 1985). There are more obscure games such as *Alter Ego* (Activision, 1986) that incorporated moral decision making more deeply into the narrative, but *Ultima 4* is significant for the importance morality was afforded as a core gameplay feature. *Ultima 4* was in many ways entirely bound up in its morality system, and the game could not be completed without the player buying into this.

Morality systems within games however seem to have taken several steps backwards in terms of the sophistication and depth of the morality presented. Significant modern examples of games incorporating moral systems include the *Knights of the Old Republic* (LucasArts) 2003 series, *Fallout 3* and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), and the various incarnations of the *Mass Effect* (EA, 2007-2012) franchise. The vast majority of these games attempt to represent the complex nuance of moral

decision making within a binary system of 'right' or 'wrong. Within *Knights of the Old Republic*, your choice is between the light side and the dark side of the force. Within *Fallout*, it's a straightforward Karmic 'good' versus 'evil' axis. Within *Mass Effect*, it becomes 'renegade' versus 'paragon', although the system is a little more sophisticated in that you can accumulate points in both 'alignments' simultaneously. While in *Mass Effect* there is no implicit or explicit value judgement being made with the naming of the axes, it still represents the same basic system – choices are between, for the most part, three courses of action – one 'good', one 'evil', and one 'neutral'. More experimental games such as *Papers Please* (by Lucas Pope, 2013) offer a more sophisticated representation of moral choices as an accumulation of small, rapidly made decisions within a reward structure. [7]

While a full discussion of the subtleties of various moral frameworks is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth taking a little time to discuss some of the more significant schools of thought so as to frame the rest of the discussion. Aristotle stressed 'practical ethics', where ethical knowledge must be tempered with life experience – it is not enough to know virtue, one must also be virtuous. Sicart (2009) noted the possible role of video games in permitting ethical scenarios to be encountered in a 'safe' environment. Schulzke (2009) wrote, 'Aristotle avoided giving definitive rules for moral conduct as there are in utilitarian and Kantian ethics and instead argued that moral behavior is learned through practice.' [10, 11]

Kantian morality on the other hand 'focuses on the will behind the action, and ignores circumstances'. For such a framework to make sense within the context of game design, it would be necessary for the game to be able to reach behind the limited set of player input and extract the intention behind that input. Until such things are possible, and let us hope such a day never comes, Kantian morality is a difficult thing to situate within video games directly. [24]

Other significant schools of moral thought exist, such as duty-based morality, right-based morality and contract based morality. However, these systems of moral philosophy are rarely well represented in the choices players make within games although they may be aspects of the larger narrative arcs within which players function. [25-27]

Being unable to assess intentionality within a game restricts the developer to a more simple moral framework – that of utilitarianism (as outlined by Bentham (2009)) where an action is assessed by its outcome rather than by its intention. While these systems offer a tractable and understandable mechanic, they lack much in the way of discriminatory power to select between genuine moral quandaries. Stealing, murder and lying are coded as 'negative' actions. Charity, healing and allowing those that flee to live are considered 'positive' actions. [28]

Within gameplay, this creates significant incongruity where actions which are at best indiscriminate and at worst intentionally immoral are rewarded with positive morality. The act of murder within such games is often rewarded positively if the target is one which the game has deemed to be 'bad'. Within *Fallout: New Vegas* for example are a group of persistently aggressive tribal warriors known as the 'fiends'. Regardless of your motivation as a player, killing a fiend earns you positive karma. This may be consistent with the simplest kinds of interpretation normally ascribed to utilitarian morality, but cannot possibly hope to capture the nuance of a more sophisticated, Kantian view of ethics. Binary moral systems within games are hugely reductive and lack any possibility of truly representing the difficult moral decisions that offer the most compelling instructional opportunities.

However, if binary morality lacks the ability to articulate nuance, and intentionality is impossible to assess, what can we do? Perhaps some of the answer lies in an extension of systems such as those of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (AD&D) (Tactical Studies Rules, Inc., 1997), where morality, or alignment, is represented in multiple axes. The AD&D system stresses two axes - good/evil and

lawful/chaos, which gives a total of nine broad dispositions. This permits significantly more expressiveness than the three possibilities (good, neutral, evil) permitted by binary systems. However, while the AD&D system offers more representational fidelity its earlier incarnations had it as a choice you made at character creation – it became a restriction within which you functioned rather than a reactive lens through which to evaluate your actions. For *Epitaph Online* (Heron, 2013), the alignment system makes use of four axes, drawing partially from the work of Haidt and Graham (2007), which permits a very large amount of discrimination. Such systems allow for much finer-grained representation of moral activities without applying particular judgement to where one is positioned within the various axes. They are easily developed, easily controlled and can be queried in as many axes as is necessary to give a multi-faceted algorithmic representation of a player's actions within the game. [13, 29]

The simplicity of the choices presented within games and the paucity of nuance with regards to interpreting player actions are only one element of why games currently offer little genuine opportunity for compelling engagement with issues of morality. For a moral choice to have real meaning, it must come with some kind of significant cost – anyone can be moral when there is no associated cost. Ludic conventions, however, view morality systems within games largely as a mechanism for ensuring re-playability and key to this is that morality paths cannot be significantly unbalanced with regards to player progression.

One can easily imagine a moral choice whereby the cost of doing the right thing is to end the game prematurely, but it is hard to simultaneously envisage that being considered 'good game design'. True morality often comes at personal cost – either in terms of opportunity costs (such as refusing to take advantage of a competitor's weakness), monetary cost (such as charitable donations), or costs in time (such as volunteering). At best, moral systems in most games will provide a minor punishment for certain kinds of behaviour, or smooth peaks and troughs between the two. Being evil might maximise benefit in one choice while being good maximises the benefit in another. In this way, both moral paths receive the same rewards by the end of the game.

However, to follow this path of game design is to ignore the reality that morality can be, and often is, asymmetrical. A true moral system would offer a player few, if any, rewards for following socially accepted mores and, in many cases, the largest rewards for violating them. Indeed, such a system would often offer no rewards, even including simple acknowledgement, for 'doing the right thing'. Such a framework is not 'balanced' from a game design perspective – certain paths through the game would offer hugely disproportionate rewards. However, if we want games to live up to their possibilities as engines for teaching important lessons, we must address the fact that the goals of good game design are not necessarily compatible with reflecting the reality of ethical decision making.

There are some exceptions to the general rule here, the most significant recent example being *Spec Ops: The Line*. While taking on the form of a relatively generic tactical shooter, the game builds lessons of moral instruction throughout as the brutality of the story progresses. Your characters start off being clean-cut, relatively heroic American soldiers looking to rescue survivors from a ruined Dubai. By the end of the game they have been massacring fellow soldiers, enemy insurgents and civilians largely indiscriminately. Within the context of the game itself, the progression is subtle and unless you are watching your own actions carefully you may not realise how things have escalated beyond the point of sanity.

Much has been written of the clever moral lessons woven through *Spec Ops* (a full length critical reading of the game was written by Keogh in 2013). One of the key elements that makes it so revolutionary is the way that it explicitly frames the player's options to include 'you have the choice to stop this horrible scenario by simply not playing'. Within *Spec Ops*, a conscious decision is made in

the game design to present the player with this option. It is an option with a real cost (you don't get to play the game anymore) and no formal acknowledgement of the performing of a moral action. The choice to stop playing is in fact the only real moral choice you have in the game. While some have dismissed this as a cop out , it is hard to deny that there is a genuine element of significant moral instruction in this approach. To do the right thing, you must sacrifice. [21]

Within the ludic structure of a game, the designer and the developers are the ultimate arbitrators of what is and is not possible. It is not just the narrative structure of a game that lends itself to moral instruction, it is the game mechanics themselves. By subtly framing what may and may not be done, those responsible for constructing a game are also responsible for creating the ideological parameters between which moral lessons can be contextualised. [11, 30, 31]

Within *Fallout: New Vegas*, it is possible to kill every NPC in the game, including significant quest givers. However, it is not possible to kill or harm the children that you may encounter. This enforces a morality upon the player regardless of the choices that he or she might make. It leads to the ultimately cruel scenario whereby one might kill every responsible adult in a settlement surrounded by violent tribes and dangerous creatures and leave the children to fend for themselves.

That such a scenario is possible is only as a result of consciously designed game mechanics. We are not permitted the moral choice of killing children or not – that decision is taken out of our hands. This in turn removes much of the nuance that might otherwise be associated with moral decision making within the game. There is no weight to leaving the children alive in *Fallout: New Vegas* in the same way there would be if, within a game an active choice was made to do no harm. In no way are we suggesting that the developers should have permitted infanticide as a game option. We are simply pointing out that an ideological boundary was constructed which limits the agency of the player to engage in decision making.

It is inevitable that any game will have to place significant limits on the freedom one might have to engage within the game world. However necessary or justifiable as they may be, they remain limits and these limits frustrate our ability to engage in genuine self-reflection of our actions. As Sicart (2005) wrote:

> 'The way an ergodic artifact is coded, its "material ergodicity", implies ethical values that are imprinted in the code strings, and that permeate the architecture of the ergodic artifact as experience. To understand the ethical nature of ergodic artifacts we have to analyze not only the architectural level, but also the code level. In the dialogue between the ergodic experience of a user and the invisible code that delimitates and generates that experience, ethical values are transmitted and upheld.' [30]

Within the game *Spec Ops*, one of the most controversial elements relates to the dropping of white phosphorus rounds on the soldiers blocking progress. The scene is expertly constructed in the way in which it first disassociates the player from the action, creating an ideal space for the ‘otherization’ of the enemy. As the section terminates, the video screen into which you had been looking gradually reflects more and more of the main character back at the player – the effect is, as you realise the implications of what you have done, to 'take a good long look at yourself in the mirror'. The symbolism and execution is masterful. However, here the limits of player agency are significant. You can either drop the WP rounds and leave the soldiers, and as it later transpires civilians, writhing in agony and flames; or you can delay and be picked off by snipers. Those are the two options presented in the game. You either drop the rounds, or you die.

This element has been cited by many gamers as the point where they formally renounced any responsibility for the actions they were making their character perform. Most balk at the idea of using chemical weapons to progress through the game narrative, but here they are given no choice if they wish to progress. To engage in the moral action is to stop playing, but such a choice is never highlighted, at this point, in the game itself. As a ludic convention, that this is a 'choice' at all is not yet fully accepted. This underpins the difficulty of using games as we currently think of them as a way of teaching important moral lessons – while the consequences of taking moral actions within the game have no real cost to us, the imprint they leave is no more significant than that associated with other forms of literature.

7: Games and the Magic Circle

Whether games have the capacity at all to provide for opportunities to make meaningful moral decisions is also complicated by the traditional framework through which players interpret in-game activities. Empathy is often argued to be a foundational element in guiding moral behaviour as has been discussed above. There is however little empirical research, if any, regarding to what extent individuals are willing to take personal responsibility over the moral actions that that they take within computer games.

Indeed, the orthodox view seems to be the opposite – that ludic spaces function according to what Huizinga (1971) termed as a 'magic circle'. These are separate areas within which the normal rules of social interaction are suspended and a new, usually temporary, social contract is formed. The example of a boxing ring is a traditional example of this – the nature of the new social contract formed between consenting participants overrides, within this specific context, the normal societal approbation regarding aggressive action. The circle encompasses not only the participants, but also those who choose to observe the activities within the circle. Games often provide rewards for actions that would be considered unconscionable by any reasonable external rule set and some have argued (for example, Consalvo (2005)) that to attempt to apply real moral standards to video games is to rob them of their distinctiveness as ‘walled off spaces’. With the lack of real evidence, it is currently not possible to address the issue as to whether or not players think it is they who are responsible for performing actions within the games, or simply guiding their avatar as a largely disassociated prop within the game world. [32, 33]

What makes *Spec Ops: The Line* so notable in this regard is its explicit rejection of this hypothesis. In functioning, as it does, as a formal commentary on the morality of violence in video games it embraces the counter hypothesis that the actions a player takes within the game are still undertaken voluntarily. While you act within the game within the explicit limits of a magic circle, it is still your moral choice to move within its radius.

However, outside of comparatively rare exceptions such as these, it appears the magic circle is the accepted framework within which we must evaluate player decisions within a game. What happens within the magic circle stays within the magic circle, and individuals are therefore not personally responsible for what happens within the narrative or ludic structures that are presented to them. It then seems unlikely that there is any possibility that the moral nuance of the choices computer games offer will provide significant opportunities for self-reflection. Even if there is identification with a character, and even narrative empathy with his or her trials and struggles, it still remains the case that fundamentally the character is just a tool the player uses to interact within set ludic constraints. However, it must be stressed at this point that while the magic circle offers a certain kind of intellectual affordance, the empirical evidence as to its veracity is not yet available for analysis.

Where this hypothesis breaks down most obviously is in the area of multiplayer games. Within single player games, the only sentient individual directly impacted by the narrative is the one who is responsible for all of the genuine agency. The real consequences for moral decisions are based entirely on how the player chooses to reflect upon actions they take. Those who take no interest in the narrative, justification, or reason for what they do, require only the game mechanics to validate their interactions (figure below):

Figure: an illustration of a player who only uses game mechanics to validate decisions

Within multiplayer games, decisions taken within the game have an actual weight to them – they will impact on other players. For many, the magic circle still reigns as a framework for setting the acceptable parameters of interaction, with societal pressures serving to moderate, as far as is possible, behaviour which is deemed to be unsporting. However, it is often difficult for players to disassociate that which happens to their avatars from what happens to them as a person. [9, 31, 33-35]

Craft (2009) discussed one specific example of an incident within the game *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003), in which the magic circle (Guiding Hand) was violated through players working both in and out of game to defraud fellow players of their virtual assets. Craft noted:

> 'When Guiding Hand operatives violated the trust of their victims, the victims expressed betrayal not just as characters by other characters in a representational environment, but as users by other users in an actual communicative environment. The Guiding Hand, by contrast, argued that they had merely been acting in character, and warned their victims against reading too much into representational friendships.' [31]

A magic circle within multiplayer games is a shared construction, and the asymmetrical nature of trust in relationships means that the understanding one party may have of what is acceptable may not be shared by another. Thus, while some individuals may choose to see their relationships with other players within the game as entirely a mutually constructed fiction, others may see friendships, relationships and alliances as having real world value. It is not uncommon for in-game relationships to blossom into out-of-game friendships, and for virtual sex to culminate in real romance. Within such contexts, our actions have consequences for real people regardless of the circle constructed. While

one player may view racist, sexist and homophobic insults as mere 'trash talk', another may take genuine offence or be dissuaded from participating in the social environments entirely. Dismissing such issues as 'it's just a game' reflects the disconnect between the individuals concerned as to what is permitted within the circle.

There may be little empirical evidence regarding the extent to which the magic circle moderates and mediates players' understanding of their ethical responsibilities. There is however abundant evidence to suggest that the playing of games can have real world impact beyond the game experience itself. The evidence regarding the role of games in building capacity with regards to certain kinds of physical and mental activities is well established. Key to understanding the ability of games to impact on ethical decision making is whether the playing of games can bring about changes in perceptions beyond the game world. [36, 37]

There is evidence to suggest that the way in which some individuals choose to portray themselves within games is at least partly reflective of their own self-image, and that engagement can bring about a sense of deep involvement and attachment. There are examples of players projecting their own inner world onto the game that they play. There is also evidence to show the degree to which players can be affected in the real world after playing a game on measures such as happiness, confidence and general satisfaction. It is easy to conceive of various 'pay it forward' scenarios in which manipulating any of these traits might result in real world change, but studies of actual positive impact are harder to come by. [38-41]

Much of the work available focuses on negative areas such as:

- degrading school performance; [42, 43]
- addiction; [44, 45] and,
- aggression. [46, 47]

However, as Gentile *et al* (2009) noted: [48]

> 'Like many others before us [...] we have noted that the processes underlying media violence effects on aggression are based on broader learning theories, and have offered the General Learning Model, in which any stimulus (including video games) is posited to have short-term and long-term effects through several learning mechanisms.'

Gentile *et al* (2009) offered a compelling correlation study which showed robust evidence that pro-social effects within games are observable. Saleem *et al* (2012) supported these findings with children, identifying that pro-social games increase helpful and decrease hurtful behaviour. Further to this, there is evidence to suggest some correlation between active video games and the promotion of physical activity in children (e.g. Biddiss and Irwing, 2010), and more evidence to suggest video games can increase compliance with medical treatment in adolescents and effectiveness of psychotherapy (e.g. Ceranoglu, 2010). [48-51]

The nascent field of Captology has some relevance to this topic – if technology generally can be seen to bring about lasting behavioural change, video games as a subset of technology would perhaps be an especially effective mechanism. The principle of 'gamification' similarly offers opportunities by which gameplay principles can bring about behavioural change. While evidence on the efficacy of these techniques is limited and highly contextual, it does exist in some form for realms as diverse as technical documentation, peer-to-peer trading and exercise. Most of the work in these two fields is currently conceptual and unproven in any generalisable fashion. [52-56]

8: Further Work

This discussion of ethics and morality in video games reveals a significant set of gaps in the existing literature. While this paper is intended to serve as a discussion of these issues there remains a considerable amount of work to do with regards to filling these gaps. What we find as a consequence of this literature review are compelling but currently incompatible hypotheses:

Games have short-term and long-term effects on players' behaviour

First of all, as to the value of games in teaching moral behaviour, we can see that there is evidence to suggest that games can have short and long term impact on behaviour after the player has put down the controller. Furthermore, this behaviour can be observed across a relatively wide range of categories. This argues strongly that moral and ethical instruction can be one of the areas in which video games impact upon their players.

Games may not damage a player's moral outlook any more than other passive forms of media

Secondly, with regard to the value of morality and ethics within game systems we find two significant obstacles. The first is that the nature of morality systems present in most mainstream games is shallow, bound up in ludic conventions and driven by the market forces of replayability. The second regards the prevailing view of games as taking place within a morally discontinuous magic circle. This strongly implies that even if the ethical decisions made available to players were more interesting and instructive, there is little reason to suppose that they would be any more compelling than that of more passive media such as books and movies. The interactivity of games is what makes them special as a category of entertainment, and if there is no sense of ownership over decisions taken by players then moral instruction will be confined to being narratively embedded in the text.

As yet there is no empirical evidence that serves to demonstrate the validity of these moral hypotheses either way, but further work to extend from this paper is aimed at addressing this. To understand the possibilities, we must answer three key questions:

- Does it make a difference to character attachment if a player takes on the role of a fixed character as opposed to an avatar they construct?
- Does the degree to which character attachment holds true determine the extent to which a player will take ownership over the actions they make their character perform?
- Does the existence of the presupposed magic circle mean that ethical decisions taken within a game have no weight unless they have real world impact?

To address these questions, the authors are developing a self-contained text game that has the explicit intention of examining each of these questions. As discussed in a previous paper, certain kinds of game are best expressed through the nuance of text. It is the belief of the authors that a game of this nature intended to unpick subtle and complex issues of ethics and morality falls into this category. Further work on this topic will focus on the applicability of the Epiphany game engine to ethically charged game scenarios, and on the degree to which character attachment, avataric identification and real world consequences impact on decisions taken within the magic circle of the game world. [13]

9: Conclusion

While there is much discussion on this topic in the academic literature, there are few answers. The issue, however, remains important. The extent to which games inculcate moral values remains an element of fascination within the media, and the violent content of many games is a matter for concern amongst politicians and pressure groups. As we have discussed, there are considerable question marks as to whether games can realistically have any genuine impact on the moral perspectives of those who play them. The presence of the magic circle and the rarity and fragility of genuine immersion may be the most compelling arguments against accusations of moral degeneration. This remains, at the time of writing, a theoretical answer to the issue.

We have outlined a research agenda designed to address this issue of ownership of and responsibility for character actions. In this paper we present a theoretical overview of some of the relevant literature, but the lack of agreement on these complex issues does not cohere into a compelling view. The lack of focus on the issue of player ownership of actions is a critical gap in academic knowledge on the topic. The first course of action in our research agenda will be to determine the extent to which characterisation impacts on the moral perceptions of those that play computer games. This is an important question, and it remains one with a large question mark.

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