Chapter 15
Leveraging Digital Games for Moral Development in Education:
A Practitioner's Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Ethical and moral development is a result of cognitive structures generated through experience in the pivotal stage of adolescence, during which formal education plays a critical role. Recent advancements in cognitive psychology have explored the very nature of moral development, as well as the critical role education plays in that development. Digital games are potentially powerful learning environments to shape moral development for students. This chapter describes two case studies of digital games used in a middle school classroom to enhance moral development. Finally, it reflects upon and analyzes these cases using the developmental theories of Robert Selman and others as a framework.

INTRODUCTION

Recent advancements in cognitive psychology have demonstrated that education plays a powerful role in ethical and moral development (more than age alone), influencing one's ability to make sophisticated judgments using moral reasoning (Fischer, Yan & Stewart, 2003). Specifically, adolescence is seen as a critical period where one's development in these areas is framed for adulthood: "These are the years not only for learning specific social skills and strategies but also for the growth of our capacities for social understanding and empathy" (Selman, 2003). As a result, in our experience, many teachers concerned with student moral development seek tools and methodologies that help them positively shape this with their students

As digital gaming is increasing in acceptance for use in education, practitioners have begun exploring their potential to develop a classroom environment that will facilitate experiences to

support healthy community and interpersonally oriented moral development—developmentally appropriate progression as "children become socially wise" (Selman, 1980, p. 311)New and emerging web-, computer- and console-based games and simulations can provide further support to the ethical development that pushes early adolescents to coordinate social perspectives, a key foundation for moral development. Within a classroom setting, games can provide both a tangible experience and a structure for intellectual exploration. Certain computer games, while not specifically created for an educational purpose, could potentially be a powerful platform for exploring and guiding the complex relationship that exists in an individual and in groups between thought and action—ultimately helping to shape ethical development at this opportune stage of development.

This chapter describes a case study on the application of such technologies to promote positive community and interpersonally focused moral development, combined with an analysis of the literature on human development of ethics. We argue, through our observations and reflections on the use of computer games in the classroom, that some games have the potential to be a powerful platform for promoting ethical development during the critical stage of adolescence.

Ethical Development

What are ethics and how do they develop? The fields of psychology and cognitive development have much to offer our understanding of ethical development, and therefore we will define *ethics* from a psychological perspective:

A set of principles derived from personal experience and informed by cultural mandates informs ethical behavior; contextual variables challenge these principles, and a highly ethical person will integrate awareness of himself and of others, to recognize how different contexts affect his thinking

and action, and then act from consistent principles despite diverse contexts.

In essence, "ethics" is one's "operating system" for navigating interpersonal and intercultural relationships and behavior. The field of cognitive psychology has made incredible advancements in the last several decades, with an increasing focus on understanding the nature of moral development. Researchers have found that this area of human development in particular is considerably influenced by the individual's surrounding environment—in particular education, where the environment has a structured purpose and focus (see Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs, & Lieberman, 1983; Dawson, 2002; and King & Kitchener, 1994). Critically, leaders in this field note that a "stimulating environment *must* catalyze the development of the highest stages of moral and reflective judgment, and it may be essential for other domains of adult development as well" (Fischer, et al., 2003). Therefore, not only must moral development not be left to chance, but education has a powerful position in affecting the nature of that development for students.

This literature suggests three central components that build an "operating system" for ethical behavior. Developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg was a pioneer in this area through the 1960s and 1970s, and concluded that human psychosocial competence (including ethical development) lies in the ability to see another's perspective (Kohlberg, 1969). Therefore, *social perspective-taking* "is critical for the growth of moral reasoning" (Selman, 2003). Selman, building on Kohlberg's work, saw that in addition to perspective-taking, "…a second key assumption was that *positive peer relationships* are an essential environmental or social condition for this growth" (Selman, 2003). In other words, how one negotiates interpersonal actions affects the positive outcome of peer relationships directly. Finally, Selman suggests a third key component of psychosocial competence: *Personal Meaning Awareness*, which addresses the question: how

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