

Chapter 1

Values between Systems: Designing Ethical Gameplay

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors define ethical gameplay as a consequence of game design choices. The authors propose an analytical model that defines ethical gameplay as an experience that stems from a particular set of game design decisions. These decisions have in common a design method, called ethical cognitive dissonance, based on the conscious creative clash between different models of agency in a game. This chapter outlines this method and its application in different commercial computer games.

INTRODUCTION

It all begins in the Middle East. Two militiamen drag me to an old car. I am powerless. I can only look around, wonder when my time for revenge will come. I am thrown in a car. I am hit. I think: my time will soon come. The car drives through narrow streets plagued with troops. It is clearly the aftermath of a recent uprising. The car stops. I am knocked out. I wake up in what seems a market place. I am being dragged to the centre of a square. There is a pole there. It is waiting for me. I can hear the roaring crowds. I see him, my enemy. I think: my time

shall soon come. I am tied to the pole. Time slows down. He approaches. He shoots. I die.

The introductory sequence to *Call of Duty 4* (Infinity Ward, 2007) is a brief narrative masterpiece that combines player agency and a highly effective narrative. At all times, the player is free to look around while she is being driven around the fictional Middle Eastern city where part of the action takes place. But looking around is the only possible action: at this point in the game, players are still unarmed and at the mercy of their enemies. Since the game is a conventional first person shooter, players may await eagerly the time where they are given weapons and a chance for revenge. But that time never comes: the introductory sequence concludes with

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the execution of the character the players were controlling. After that, the game starts, but for many, what came afterward could not be played like any other FPS games.

Call of Duty 4 uses game design techniques to convey a gameplay experience of deep moral dimensions. The introductory sequence gives agency to players, but only so much that they can feel helpless and disempowered. This design breaks the conventions of the genre, suggesting a critical interpretation of the game itself. *Call of Duty 4* can be enjoyed as just an action game, but many of its design elements are encouraging players to take a critical stance toward what they see and experience. The critical experience of simulated modern warfare is what makes *Call of Duty 4* a moral game.

But, what constitutes a moral game? In this chapter I will explore the nature and design of ethical gameplay, understood as the moral experience of a computer game. Introducing an ethical dimension in computer games is not a new aspiration: *Ultima IV* (Origin Systems, 1985) already included a basic morality system as part of the core gameplay. Ethics-based decision making, however, has more recently become a unique selling point in many commercial titles, from *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare, 2002) and *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare, 2003) to the *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004, 2008) saga or *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007).

Most of these titles understand ethical gameplay design as the elaboration of narrative-based decision trees that the player has to follow to complete the game. These decision trees are articulated accordingly to an often binary good/evil moral system. Ethics, however, is more than just making choices (Tavani, 2004). Ethics describes the rationale for the moral systems with which we live. In the case of games, then, ethics should be understood as the systems by which we take choices and experience the gameworld in which we are voluntarily immersed.

This understanding of ethics in computer games has already been introduced in the work of practicing game designers (Hocking, 2007) and in the field of Value Sensitive Design (Flanagan, M. & Nissenbaum, H., & Howe, D. & Belman, J. 2007). In this chapter I am specifically looking at the tradition of design reflections on the ethical capacities of game design, or how to create games that convey ethical experiences. This chapter focuses on game design as a general practice, and in computer games as valuable means for creating mature moral experiences.

I propose a model that explains the structure of computer games as creative objects that can generate ethical experiences in their users. The model is based on game design research (Juul, 2005; Järvinen, 2008), adapting the concept of Levels of Abstraction (Juul, 2007) to provide a conceptual framework for the understanding of ethical gameplay. This model is an abstraction of the structure of a game system, deconstructed into the elements that are relevant for the design of ethical gameplay. With this model I suggest that we need to understand games both as systems and as gameworlds, and that each of these levels requires a different, yet complementary player model who experiences the game in a morally relevant way. Based on this model, I will propose a definition of ethical gameplay that will lead to the suggestion of a design principle for the creation of ethical experiences in players. This design principle should be understood as an ideal that should inform different design approaches that can be applied to the creation of ethical gameplay.

This chapter uses knowledge and theories from game design, user interface design and user experience, and philosophy, in order to develop the aforementioned design model and principle that guide my understanding of what ethical gameplay design is, and how it can be practiced. All the examples in this chapter come from my own reading and interpretation of the mentioned games. I have built narratives around my moral experience

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