Chapter 2
Video Games for Prosocial Learning

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors consider the capabilities video games offer to educators who seek to foster prosocial development using three popular frameworks: moral education, character education, and care ethics. While all three of these frameworks previously considered literature and film as helpful tools, the authors suggest that video games are unique from these other media in the multiple levers through which they can influence the worldview, values, and behaviors of players. Similar to literature and film, video games possess content—plot, characters, conflict, themes, and imagery—with which participants interact. Unlike other media, however, video games scaffold players' experiences not only via narrative and audio-visual content but by the rules, principles, and objectives governing what participants do. Moreover, many video games possess an ecosystem that impacts players' interpretation of the game itself—for example, on-line hint guides and discussion groups as well as the opportunity to play in the company of peers in either physical or virtual proximity. The authors consider opportunities and challenges presented by each of these unique facets of video games for fostering the prosocial development of participants.

INTRODUCTION

Video games, writes linguist and educator James Gee, are "good for your soul" (2005, p. 1). This is a sweeping claim, not just because video games sometimes occupy a vulgar position in public perception, but also because edifying the "soul" is not something often investigated methodically. Gee's bold assertion motivates the present chapter. We consider what it might mean for video games to be "good for your soul," specifically from the perspective of learning and education. Video games, we believe, have the capacity to deepen moral reasoning, open players to new perspectives, shape

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or reinforce positive behaviors, and provide a field for practicing cooperation. To structure our exploration of these possibilities, we will draw upon the contemporary understanding of moral and character development as well as of video games as media and learning environments.

How can a video game—or any experience, for that matter—be "good for your soul?" This question has been central to teaching and learning across many cultures and epochs. The philosopher Socrates is said to have stated that the mission of education is to help people become both smart and good (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). Likewise, civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr., asserted that, "Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education" (Carson & Shepard, 2001). At the risk of over-simplifying a complex issue, over the past several decades, American educators in agreement with Socrates and King have generally fallen into two camps: moral educators and character educators. Moral education emphasizes reasoning and reflection, while character education focuses on providing models and shaping habits. For example, when Gee (2005) argues that "good video games are good for your soul when you play them with thought, reflection, and engagement with the world around you," he adopts the language of moral education (p.1). But Gee, and other game researchers also highlight how video games model behaviors by example. We will use the terms "moral education" and "character education" as shorthand for two modes by which people are believed to deepen their capacity for moral behavior as individuals and members of society. To prevent confusion between the broader concept of moral development and the specific approaches of moral educators, we use "prosocial learning" as an umbrella term that includes both moral and character education.

What, then, is a "video game?" For the purposes of this chapter, we stipulate that video games are games substantially instantiated through electronic computation. What constitutes a "game" is controversial (e.g., Salen & Zimmerman, 2003; Juul, 2005), and we are inclined to define the concept broadly as a human practice bounded by rules, requiring some human input, and with variable outcomes related to the inputs (such as, but not limited to, "win" / "lose" conditions). This definition of "video game" is broad and flexible enough to include the following phenomena:

- Commercial products such as *Peggle*, *World of Warcraft* and *Grand Theft Auto*, both single- and multi-player, whether played on a dedicated game console (e.g., Nintendo Wii), PC, mobile phone, or other digital device;
- Experiences and interfaces that reach outside the boundaries of the computer (e.g. "augmented reality games" like *World Without Oil*);
- Games deployed for non-entertainment purposes such as job training (e.g. Stone Cold Creamery's *Stone City*[1]).

Ultimately we are less interested in drawing lines around what constitutes a "video game" than we are in considering the possibilities that video games and video game-like experiences offer to prosocial learning. Because this chapter serves as a preliminary survey of the field, we prefer to leave our definitions open-ended so as not to overlook promising avenues for later research.

This chapter begins by describing in greater detail these two competing schools of thought—moral education and character education—within the general project of prosocial learning. We then consider various means by which video games might advance the goals of either or both approaches to prosocial development. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for researchers, game developers, and educators for utilizing video games to foster prosocial development among gamers.