Chapter 4
The Good, The Bad, and The Player:
The Challenges to Moral Engagement in Single-Player Avatar-Based Video Games

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors create a theoretical model to analyze the challenges inherent in the implementation of moral choices in single-player avatar-based video game. Based on previous research in moral psychology and game studies, the authors investigate the relationship between the player's moral emotions and the events she causes to happen in the fictional world of a video game. The authors find that there are two factors that govern the identification with the moral content of the game's fiction: the implementation of moral agency into the game, of which they identify two basic scenarios (fixed justice and accumulation of deeds), and the style of gameplay the player chooses to follow. The authors give numerous examples from interviews, on-line discussions and gaming press of instances when players feel moral emotions about im(moral) actions they have taken in a video game.

INTRODUCTION

"When I play a BioWare role-playing game, my characters tend to not only lean toward the nicer side, but almost immediately start twinkling with the magical pixie dust of purity. It's embarrassing, but I just make the decisions I believe I'd really make, and end up that way." - John Walker, Eurogamer.com (Walker, 2009)

"I laugh out loud when I run pedestrians over in Grand Theft Auto and get a kick out of unleashing Godzilla on my Sim City. In fact, I can't name a video-game that did evoke any sadness or true ethical dilemma in me until BioShock." - Osama, TowardsMecca.com (Osama, 2008)

In February 2009, John Walker, a well-known video game journalist, started an intriguing experiment.

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He revisited *Knights of The Old Republic*, a 2003 role-playing video game designed by the Canadian company Bioware and set in the *Star Wars* universe. The game lets players choose between the Light and the Dark side by carrying out good or evil actions in its fictional world. "Playing evil" results in your character having different sets of skills and looking haggard and scarred. Revisiting the now-classic game, Walker set out to become the vilest character possible—"the bastard of the old republic." His series of articles chronicle not only his bastard's deeds, but also his own reflections on the actions he took. At one point, his character encountered a doctor who was "secretly treating the very poorest citizens, for free, against the wishes of the crimelord Davik" (Walker, 2009). Given a number of conversation options ranging from altruistic to gruesome, Walker made the bastard tell the doctor that: "If he didn't give me all the money and health packs he had, I'd report him to the authorities." Walker confesses that "it hurt to do it." "Seriously, I physically winced," he adds (ibid.).

Walker is, of course, not the first player to experience a clash of his avatar's and his own moral identity while playing a scoundrel in a video game. Neither is he the first player to feel real emotions about a fictional event in a video game. Besides a blooming academic debate on emotional engagement in video games, there are ongoing conversations on gaming forums and even a couple of "saddest moments in gaming history" lists on the Internet (TheFluffyFist, 2006).

On the other hand, as Osama from the *Towards Mecca* gaming blog reminds us, games—even the same games that make certain people sad—can be played in a calculating, ruthless, emotionless way (see Sicart, 2009). We can run over pedestrians in an organized crime simulation like the *Grand Theft Auto* series without giving the slightest thought to ethics.

In Walker's case, we can observe a certain degree of *moral engagement*, which is lacking in Osama's account. What makes the player feel or not feel morally engaged? What drives our moral choices in games and how do we relate to them? These are some of the questions this chapter is trying to answer. To do so, I develop a theoretical approach that can conceptualize moral engagement in video games and hopefully give us a better understanding of how games can provide moral experiences. I believe this type of approach is necessary to find a place for games in the project of moral education.

In this chapter, I have chosen to focus exclusively on single-player games, as opposed to multi-player, to shed more light on the relationship between the player and the designed experience of a video game, instead of analyzing interaction among players. To limit the topic even more, I focused on avatar-based games only. The avatar is "an embodied incarnation of the acting subject" (Klevjer, 2006, p.87). In referring to avatar-based games, I mean games in which the player controls one character or a small group of characters led by a main player character. The relationship between the player's and the character's morality is one of the key topics of this chapter.

My project has two complementary parts. On one hand, I will examine how game design can contribute to moral engagement. On the other hand, I will be looking at styles of gameplay that enhance or hamper one's moral engagement with a game. Most examples will be from recent and fairly recent mainstream games. The theoretical investigation will be bolstered by accounts of gamers' experiences, some of them coming from gaming blogs and discussion forums, others from interviews I conducted for the purpose of this study. Six students from my Spring 2009 game studies course at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic signed up for participation in a moderated focus group. All of them are experienced players, but none had any theoretical background regarding the topic before being interviewed. The two central discussion questions that drove the interviews were: "How do you decide when you face a moral choice in a video game?" and