

Chapter 5

Playing with Ethics: Experiencing New Ways of Being in RPGs

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ABSTRACT

Role playing games (RPGs) are compelling spaces for ethical play. Participants can take on roles very different from their own and experience the world through a variety of social contexts. This form of play can be encouraged by good game design principles including the balanced use of consequence, mirroring, social context, and freedom. This chapter examines the structure of ethics in role playing games and uses case studies of expert role players and analysis of game design to explore the effective use of the four design principles in popular games.

INTRODUCTION

RPGs and the Ring of Gyges

In Plato's *Republic* (1992), Socrates expresses the danger of power unlimited by social norms and controls through the story of Gyges. In the story, this otherwise unremarkable man finds a ring of invisibility, which allows him to act without fear of social reprisal. As he gathers wealth and power, he is compelled to increasingly perverse action because he is unconstrained by traditional morality. He can act as he pleases within his environment.

A player in a role playing game (RPG) plays one or more characters in a story. They control the character's actions and make choices for the character. In some games, the player's options are quite limited, and the player's choices, successes or failures determine whether or not the story continues. Other games are more open-ended. There are usually still restrictions, but players are allowed a much greater freedom to follow their own interests through the game's setting, making their own stories as they go. Games that offer great freedom are often called *sandbox games* because they provide the setting, the sandbox, but do not determine what actions the player takes within it. In a sandbox RPG a player is often given the freedom to choose whom

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to kill, what to steal, and which factions, if any, they choose to serve. A player of one sandbox RPG, *Baldur's Gate 2* (BioWare, 2000), may choose to join a guild of thieves. Ultimately the player's character may rise through the ranks of the thieves' guild, eventually taking over the local guild chapter, allowing the character to organize all of the crime within a city. In *Baldur's Gate 2*, and most single-player RPGs, the game allows the player to save their game at any time, and the player is allowed to return to any previous saved game. Many players will try an action and then reload to a previously saved game if they do not like the result. This gives the player the ability to always succeed at any challenge, if they have sufficient patience and time and have avidly saved previous games. If the most recent game does not give them the result they hoped for, they can go to earlier saves and try again. The Internet also provides a tremendous amount of information about games, including step by step instructions, or walkthroughs, for finishing areas of the game, and lists of secret areas, items, encounters, etc, within the game and how to find them. Information exists about almost all games somewhere on the Internet. It is, therefore, possible for a player to go online, learn about all of the options available in a game and choose the experience they want most. This combination of knowledge and the ability to replay events or roll back time gives the player of a single-player RPG powers within the game environment that are like the powers wielded by Gyges in Socrates' story.

Baldur's Gate 2 is one of many games that give the player tremendous freedom. Some other examples of RPG games that provide the player with wide-ranging freedom to create their own experience include *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004), *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare, 1998) and *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008). These games provide the player the freedom to be deceitful, malevolent and wicked, though they often also allow the player to be honorable, benevolent and good. Because the player can

have their character break norms and laws we normally uphold, the games have been reviled by some for allowing players to play out immoral and violent stories. When a discussion of an RPG game focuses only on social norms broken and not on the whole of the experience, one might dismiss it out of hand as reprehensible. Similar attacks have been laid on other works of fiction, using the moral breaches of the main characters to justify banning or condemning the work. One might rightly point out that games are not movies. Nor are they written fiction. A game is a new media type where the player does not just watch the action, but performs it, and when the player wields the power of Gyges within the game, the experience is much different than merely watching someone powerful act on screen. There are many aesthetic differences between these media, but in this chapter I want to focus on the experiential nature of games, and how it relates to ethics, by listening to the designers and players themselves. First, however, I want to expand the conversation by offering another way to evaluate ethics, other than comparing actions against existing social norms.

Ethics and Culpability in Games

The ethics of a game environment are significantly different from the ethics of other spaces in life, other than at the most abstract level. We may still strive to treat others as we wish to be treated, but the application of this guideline is very different in a game than at work or home. When we kill a character in a game, even one played by a real person, we have not actually committed murder. When we steal from programmed, fictional entities, we cause no suffering that has moral valence. In our current state, where death of an avatar does not kill the player, treating the killing of an avatar like murder would be a misappropriation of a word from one context into a very different context, where what is at stake has entirely changed. To insist would be to act as if ethical language has

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