

Chapter 10

Ethics at Play: Patterns of Ethical Thinking among Young Online Gamers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how young people think about ethical issues in online games as seen in the GoodPlay project's interviews with fourteen online gamers, ages 15 to 25. After providing background on the GoodPlay project and relevant moral psychology and video games research, this chapter describes individualistic, interpersonal, and communal models of ethical thinking that describe young players. These observed models suggest that online games are encouraging players to practice sophisticated ethical thinking skills and therefore might be valuable tools for fostering ethical thinking. The chapter concludes with a discussion of future directions in the study and use of games to foster ethical thinking.

INTRODUCTION

In online multiplayer games, players interact with people they have never met to learn new skills and norms, compete for resources, and complete complex tasks in large groups—situations that raise myriad ethical issues and demand informed decisions. The presence of such ethical content suggests that games might be valuable tools for helping young people think about and deal with

ethical issues. Games, in other words, might help foster ethical thinking skills—such as the ability to take the perspectives of others or predict the consequences of an action—that inform one's decisions about how to act in life. But do players, and young players in particular, engage with ethical issues in games in meaningful ways that might encourage stronger ethical thinking?

In this chapter, I describe the different models of ethical thinking that online gamers apply to the ethical issues they encounter in games. These models

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are derived from the GoodPlay project's in-depth qualitative interviews with fourteen 15-25 year old gamers. Together, these interviews show that all young people face a variety of complex ethical issues in online multiplayer games, but think about and resolve these issues using diverse strategies and thought processes. In particular, subjects show different capacities for taking the perspectives of others, evaluating the consequences of their actions, and assessing game rules—three important components of thinking ethically in games. Based on these differences among subjects, I discovered three models that fall along a spectrum of ethical thinking. Subjects described by the individualistic model are primarily focused on the self and judge their actions according to personal consequences. Subjects described by the interpersonal model consider players who are close or similar to the self and judge their actions according to reciprocity and fairness. Subjects described by the communal model consider the game community and its many stakeholders and judge their actions according to their role within and responsibilities to that community. As we will see, any given subject's observed ethical thinking tendencies often do not perfectly fit one of these three models, but I was able to roughly categorize each subject according to the model that best described him or her.

After providing relevant background on moral reasoning, games studies research and the GoodPlay project's research design, I describe in greater detail these three models of ethical thinking and the subjects each model best describes. In the concluding discussion, I will speculate about the factors that might account for subjects' different ethical mental models and discuss how the GoodPlay project's findings might guide future research, game design, and educational practice in the service of fostering ethical thinking among young people.

BACKGROUND

Moral and Ethical Development and Education

The approach to ethical thinking in games used in this chapter stems from research into the psychology of moral reasoning and child development (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1981; Turiel, 1998). As opposed to making normative claims about what is ethical or unethical, the field of moral psychology is concerned with characterizing the ways that individuals think about ethical issues and identifying those cognitive faculties that— independent of one's particular ethical stance—are relevant to ethics. Kohlberg (1981), for example, posits six stages of moral development based on empirical research into how young people reason through various hypothetical moral dilemmas. Each of these stages involves certain ways of thinking about rules and authority, responsibility and obligation, and people and groups.

Character Education initiatives such as "*Character Counts!*" (Josephson Institute, 2009) have gained prominence in U.S. education in recent decades in an attempt to foster particular values and virtues, but past U.S. moral education movements (Howard, Berkowitz & Schaeffer, 2004) as well as current ethics and citizenship education initiatives (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003; Fischman & Gardner, forthcoming) draw heavily from the tradition of psychological research discussed above. That is, they focus on developing particular cognitive skills or ways of thinking that are relevant to ethics. In trying to foster ethical thinking, these educational initiatives make heavy use of hypothetical dilemmas and role-playing scenarios, teaching tools that have game-like qualities, but video games thus far remain outside of this domain.

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