Chapter 18
Reality from Fantasy:
Using Predictive Scenarios to Explore Ethical Dilemmas

Stephen R. Balzac
7 Steps Ahead, USA

ABSTRACT

A major difficulty with teaching ethics is that it is relatively easy for participants to state the "right" thing to do when they have no personal stake in the outcome. One way of dealing with this problem is to teach ethics through engrossing, immersive, predictive scenario games in which players are forced to deal with ethical issues as they arise, where they have a personal stake in the outcome, and where there is not always a clear right answer. Predictive scenario games are a form of serious live-action roleplaying in which participants take on the roles of people involved in complex situations. In these games, knowledge of the game world is distributed among the players through overlapping and conflicting goals, and in which ethical dilemmas emerge naturally, without fanfare, much as they would in the real world. There is a high level of tension between cooperation and competition among the players. This structure creates the opportunity for players to experience the consequences of their own judgment in realistic, ethically fraught situations, to receive feedback, and to engage in constructive discussion, within a relatively short time period.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM WITH TEACHING ETHICS

Ethics is defined in the Miriam-Webster dictionary as, "the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation." A characteristic of ethics is that, presented with a clearly outlined ethical dilemma in a classroom setting, most people have little difficulty identifying the correct or socially appropriate course of action. At a fundamental level, there is a huge difference between ethical knowledge and ethical behavior (Bandura, 1999). As Bandura illustrates, it is easy to make correct ethical decisions when under no pressure, when the ethical situation is clearly identified and fairly simple, and when the contextual environ-

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ment encourages a particular answer (1999). For example, in one psychology graduate program, the ethics class required students to write a brief commentary on the ethics of plagiarism. There is a clear answer—and most students write that it is never appropriate to plagiarize.

While some ethical lapses are arguably knowingly and deliberately criminal, by far the vast majority result from people making alternative choices based on their particular situation and gradually and unconsciously slipping into error. There are a variety of ways in which this can occur. Albert Bandura describes a number of methods by which people disengage their moral compass, ranging from moral justification, advantageous comparison, euphemistic labeling, minimizing or ignoring consequences, to dehumanization of the victims (Bandura, 1999). A person or group might apply one or more of these techniques to justify unethical behavior. The process is largely unconscious.

The Stanford Prison Experiment is, perhaps, the most famous experimental example of ordinary people adopting inhumane behaviors. In the experiment, college students randomly assigned as guards in a prison rapidly became cruel and abusive to the students assigned as prisoners (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). The situation deteriorated so rapidly that the experiment had to be halted after only six days. It is difficult to imagine that, if asked ahead of time, any of the students would have ever imagined that they would behave as they did.

Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience provide support for this point. In Milgram's experimental scenario, randomly selected individuals were instructed to shock a "learner" who failed to correctly answer certain questions (Milgram, 1963). Out of 40 participants, 26 applied the maximum possible shocks. Psychology students, presented with a description of the scenario ahead of time, predicted that at most 3 percent of the "teachers" would apply the maximum shock. The class mean was 1.2 percent. Even observers were reportedly stunned that the "teachers" continued to apply the shocks. A recent replication of Milgram's experiment found that obedience rates today were scarcely different than they were almost fifty years ago (Burger, 2009).

Excluding situations in which someone is deliberately choosing to act in an unethical fashion, it is useful to look at sport psychology to understand why ethical knowledge does not automatically lead to ethical behavior. It is well known in sports that there is a tremendous gap between learning a skill and being able to exercise that skill under pressure or when tired or distracted (Cox, 2002). One does not learn baseball or tennis by reading about it; physical practice is required. It takes time to practice a skill so that it becomes automatic. Until that happens, executing the skill requires concentration and attentional resources. Attentional resources, a term from sport psychology, is used to denote the amount of attention an athlete is able to focus on a particular situation or at a particular time.

If those resources are not available, the skill will be executed incorrectly or not at all. Only when the skill is automatized can it be executed without needing to focus attention on the process. Because attentional resources are finite (Cox, 2002), it is easy to see that under conditions requiring significant cognitive demands, non-automatized skills become increasingly subject to failure. Furthermore, another key component of executing a skill is recognizing from context which skill should be executed. This is a process known as "cueing," and also requires practice. For example, it is not enough for an actor to just memorize her lines; she must also know the cues that will trigger her lines. In the case of ethics, merely having ethical knowledge does not guarantee ethical behavior: the situation must be recognized as one requiring the application of ethical knowledge, the knowledge must be recalled from memory, the knowledge and situation must be evaluated for fit, and then an appropriate course of action selected. The number of opportunities for error or for the process to be derailed is significant.