Chapter 2
Ethical Reasoning and Reflection as Supported by Single-Player Videogames

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ABSTRACT

Ethically notable games are those that provide opportunities for encouraging ethical reasoning and reflection. This chapter examines how games can encourage rational and emotional responses. By examining ethically notable videogames, it illustrates a few of the different design choices that can be used to encourage these responses and the effects they have on players. It also identifies five challenges toward creating ethically notable games and examines each in the context of commercially released videogames. Each of these analyses serves as a framework not only for reflecting upon and understanding ethics and morality in games but also for outlining the design space for ethically notable games.

INTRODUCTION

As recent work in moral psychology has shown, emotions (e.g. Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley & Cohen, 2001) as well as moral rules, each play a critical role in moral judgment (e.g. Nichols & Mallon, 2005). These findings echo, in some sense, the fundamental qualities of games: activities prescribed by rules to elicit and create emotionally meaningful experiences in their participants (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). It would seem that games provide an ideal medium for

providing players with experiences that make them reflect on their ethics and moral reasoning. In practice, this potential has been elusive.

Ethical reasoning is reasoning about right and wrong human conduct. It begins with the identification of a moral or ethical issue. A game that afforded ethical reflection would also, among other things, encourage players to assess their own ethical values, the social context of issues identified, and consider the ramifications of alternative actions. I call games that provide opportunities for encouraging ethical reasoning and reflection ethically notable. In this chapter, I aim to explore

some of the ways in which games can be ethically notable as well as the challenges in achieving this.

In the first part of the chapter I discuss what I mean by games that encourage ethical reasoning and reflection. I focus principally on two aspects that I call the rationalized and emotional responses. Games that encourage rationalized responses typically engage players' critical thinking and problem-solving skills in moral contexts or situations. Games that elicit emotional responses often encourage players' investment in the narrative and fictive elements of a game while simultaneously facilitating their reflection on their in-game choices and decisions.

In the second part of the chapter, I closely examine three videogames I propose are ethically notable. First, I analyze the fantasy role-playing game *Ultima IV* (Garriott, 1985) and explore how it attempts to make the player feel personally invested or responsible for their in-game decisions. I also examine the ethical system it encodes and describe how it requires the player to learn and follow it in order to succeed. More specifically, I look at how it encourages rationalized responses by providing players with dilemmas or situations in which their understanding of the ethical system is challenged. Next, I analyze the controversial action/stealth game *Manhunt* (Rockstar North, 2003). I argue that different design elements in *Manhunt* create moral tension between the game's rewards structure and the motivations of the characters as defined by the narrative. Via an emotional response, *Manhunt's* design helps the player question the motivations behind their actions, especially when they run counter to the game's narrative. Finally, I examine tactical role-playing game *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* (Intelligent Systems, 2007). In this game, by cleverly manipulating the way the narrative is presented and by forcing the player to control a variety of characters as its multi-faceted plot unfolds, the game helps create moral tension between the player's goals and those posed by both the narrative and the gameplay. The analysis of

each of these ethically notable games highlights some of the different ways that ethical reasoning and reflection can be encouraged through gaming environments.

In the final section, I shift focus from success stories to concentrate on the challenges faced when attempting to create ethically notable gameplay experiences. My analysis, grounded in examples from multiple games, identifies five challenges for creating ethically notable games. The first challenge lies in helping the player understand when, and why, certain actions or moments in a game are morally relevant. For example, if a game encodes a particular moral framework, the player should be able to understand why given actions are right or wrong and be able to deduce the moral consequences of his actions. The second challenge lies in achieving the proper focus of the moral tension. For instance, many games attempt to achieve an emotional response from their players, by showing characters troubled by moral situations. It is often the case, however, that the player becomes detached from the emotional impact of these moments because the focus of the moral tension is on the character, rather than the player. The player may simply be a witness to a moral situation and lack the agency to guide the decision made by the player's character. Third, I examine how games that challenge their players to make moral choices often see these goals subverted by gameplay. For example, a moral choice may be understood by the player as one of play style or choice of gameplay. Fourth, I ponder the desirability and possible ethical limitations in providing strong emotional responses in gameplay experiences. Finally, I wonder whether the design goal of providing meaningful consequences is, in fact, shared by players. I conclude with a discussion of the main issues presented. The discussion highlights how our analyses serve as a framework not only for reflecting upon and understanding ethics and morality in games but also for outlining the design space for ethically notable games.

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