Chapter 3

A Framework for Classification and Criticism of Ethical Games

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ABSTRACT

For those seeking an entry point into the complex topic of ethical games, a framework for classification and criticism can be a helpful tool, if only to provide a more gentle and coherent introduction to the subject. This chapter provides one such framework, based on identifying the overarching trends in contemporary ethical game design. It provides descriptions and examples of three different categories of ethical games, each of which are then considered within the context of the most prevalent critical flashpoints currently being debated by ethical game designers and detractors alike. By understanding the distinctions between the primary types of ethical games, readers will gain the ability to more effectively delineate which design decisions are likely to make a particular game susceptible to each of the critical pitfalls outlined.

INTRODUCTION

This is a discussion of ethics and game design, and as such, it is only fitting to begin by invoking a higher authority: namely Shigeru Miyamoto, the game designer responsible for *Super Mario Bros.* (Miyamoto, 1985) and *The Legend of Zelda* (Miyamoto, 1986). With regard to the distinctive qualities of adulthood, Miyamoto stated that "an adult is a child that has more ethics and morals, that's all" (Sheff, 1993, p. 51). At the time that Miyamoto made this claim, the target audience for

digital games was primarily comprised of younger players, but we are currently in the midst of a sea change. The same children who spent their misbegotten youths being captivated by digital games have retained a seemingly insatiable appetite for the medium as they have grown older, and consequently there has been an increasing demand for the games themselves to mature, to expand their thematic and conceptual boundaries to remain relevant to an increasingly sophisticated player base.

As independent game creator Jonathan Blow (2006) has remarked, an important next step in the evolution of digital games is the creation of

interactive experiences that speak to the human condition. Miyamoto's premise, provided we accept it, would seem to indicate that incorporating ethical concepts into our designs is a potentially viable technique for creating games that resonate with this rapidly expanding contingent of adult players. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that games that facilitate ethical exploration on the part of players are currently a subject of great interest within both academic and commercial domains.

In many ways, this interest in ethical games is a natural progression of the view of game design as a form of expression. There is ample precedent for the practice of using our available modes of expression to illuminate ethical concepts, whether in the form of linear media, such as Ursula K. Le Guin's (1975) use of concrete literary description to formulate a theoretical critique of utilitarianism in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, or in more playful forms such as the traditional "Parable of the Long Spoons" folk riddle, which seeks to impart the values of altruism and cooperation by encapsulating them within the revelatory "eureka!" moment that accompanies the realization of a puzzle solution (Landers, 1995).

Yet even among those who consider ethical game design a worthy avenue of pursuit, there is little consensus regarding how to best utilize the innate potential of digital games to provide a compelling context wherein players can engage in ethical exploration. While certain techniques are gradually beginning to gain support, it is safe to say that contemporary approaches to incorporating ethical ideas within digital games remain in a nascent phase, and while the resultant atmosphere of experimentation is exciting, it can also be bewildering for those who are merely seeking a basic primer regarding the current ethical game development landscape. This presents a challenge both for ethical game designers who are attempting to formulate their own methodologies, as well as for educators who are attempting to structure a curriculum that includes a thorough examination of current ethical games.

This essay attempts to alleviate this problem by introducing a framework for classifying ethical games into three types—static, adaptive, and systemic—based on a coarse set of essential high-level design properties common to the games found in each individual group. These categories are not intended to be either definitive or mutually exclusive, but rather to serve the more pragmatic purpose of providing an anchor point for readers as they attempt to glean further insights regarding the most crucial design tradeoffs endemic to ethical games.

The presentation of the framework itself is organized into three sections:

The first section, *Three Types of Ethical Games,* describes the aforementioned typology of ethical games and provides examples of games that are representative of each category. This overview serves as the lynchpin of the framework, and all other topics discussed are considered within the context of these primary groupings. Some of the most crucial questions posed in this section include: What prevailing distinctions can be used to separate and categorize existing approaches to ethical games? What are some examples from games that help clarify these distinctions?

The second section, *Debating Ethical Design: Key Issues and Critical Perspectives*, examines some of the most divisive and recurrent issues surrounding the design of ethical games. Understanding these issues not only yields a greatly enhanced comprehension of the current state of ethical games, it also confers upon readers the ability to perform honest, unsparing appraisals of how effectively each of the approaches outlined in the first section actually manages to involve players in thinking about ethical concepts. Questions considered in this section include: What are some of the more frequently cited criticisms and sources of contention with regard to current ethical games? Of the categories identified in the first section, which are most likely to be susceptible to each of the criticisms discussed?

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