

Chapter 4

The Axis of Good and Evil

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ABSTRACT

Many games classify player decisions as either “good” or “evil.” This ignores the full range of moral behavior exhibited in real life and creates a false dichotomy: morally gray actions are overlooked or forced into one category or the other. The way actions are assigned to each category is subjective and biased toward the developers’ own moral beliefs. The result is a system that fails to capture ethical nuance and take morality seriously. This chapter examines how a good-and-evil moral framework compromises gameplay, and then proposes a solution.

INTRODUCTION

Q: *What do newspapers, 1950s television, and video games have in common?*

A: *They all present the world in black and white.*

Decades have passed since computer screens were limited to white text on a black background, so when I use the term black and white to describe video games, I’m referring to the way games today convey ethical choices. Consider: game developers are now capable of generating entire worlds filled with lush forests, azure rivers, and characters so detailed you can count the freckles on their cheeks. When it comes to creating complex ethi-

cal dilemmas and choices, however, developers are still painting with a two-toned palette. Rather than presenting ethical situations using nuances and shades of moral gray, many role-playing games (RPGs) classify strategic decisions, such as whether to attack a guard or sneak past him, into one of two categories: good or evil. Sneaking is good. Killing is evil. Benevolent actions earn the player “good points” and malevolent actions net “evil points” with each type of point counter-acting the other. The results of this zero-sum game are often represented by what I call a “moral axis,” which serves as a visual representation of the player character’s ethical composition.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-120-1.ch004

Before continuing further, I feel it is important to discuss the term “ethics.” While much has been written on the nature of ethics and what constitutes right and wrong, such specific definitions and investigations are beyond the scope of this chapter. Numerous philosophers have debated the word, devising complicated theories and systems, hoping to arrive at an adequate explanation of what is good and how to achieve it. Because it is a question unlikely to be resolved, I will instead use “ethics” in the broadest sense of the word: the behavior and thought processes that lead us towards producing the greatest good for the greatest number of people while still respecting the rights of the individual. For a more thorough discussion of the topic, I recommend reading David Simkins’ chapter, *Playing with Ethics: Experiencing New Ways of Being in RPGs*, in the first volume of this series.

Moving along, let’s take a look at a sample moral axis:

Many games use a moral axis to show the player his “moral alignment” in the game. Whenever the player receives good or evil points, the axis’s needle moves closer to either the good or evil end of the spectrum. This metric is then used to determine many Non-Player Character (NPC) reactions to the player. For example, it wouldn’t make sense for the local sheriff to greet you with a smile if you’ve spent the game stealing candy from babies. Conversely, the thieves’ guild shouldn’t want to accept you into their group if you’ve got a reputation as a righteous kitten protector.

In effect, a moral axis is a tool that is used to simulate authentic ethical relationships to immerse the player in the game. Just as luxurious graphics seek to draw the player in visually, a moral axis attempts to create meaningful character and story interactions by allowing the player to make ethical decisions that impact the game world and play possibilities. Increasing the game’s range of responses to ethical behavior and increasing players’ freedom to behave in a manner of their

choosing only makes a game more interesting and enjoyable (Simkins, 2010).

Unfortunately, although the moral axis was designed to help simulate ethical interactions and dilemmas, in practice it oversimplifies morality. In this chapter I will discuss four major problems with the moral axis as a moral framework:

1. The moral axis creates a *false dichotomy* by classifying all moral actions as either good, or evil. This ignores the entire spectrum of morally gray behavior.
2. The moral axis treats morality as a *zero-sum* game. Good points cancel out evil points, and vice versa.
3. The moral axis’s *judgments are subjective* and determined by the game designers. The developers may feel that stealing from the rich to give to the poor is moral. The player may not.
4. The moral axis *cannot assess a player’s intentions*. Any action that yields a bad result awards evil points, regardless of the player’s goals or motivations.

These four problems, in turn, disrupt the sense of immersion the moral interactions were intended to provide. (I’ll discuss a notable exception to item number two— BioWare’s *Mass Effect*—in more detail later on.)

MORAL AXIS PROBLEM #1: A FALSE DICHOTOMY

Day and night. East and West. The New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox. It’s easy to cleave the world into diametrical opposites, but it’s also a mistake—which brings us to the first problem with the moral axis: its framework rests on the fundamentally incorrect assumption that all actions can be categorized as either good or evil. Real life contains shades of moral gray, where the right choice isn’t always clear, if such

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