

Chapter 5

Ethical Dilemmas in Gameplay: Choosing Between Right and Right

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses ethical dilemmas and their role in game design. The chapter first defines what ethical dilemmas are and then argues for why they are compelling in games. This argument will analyze the role of decisions in games, what makes for interesting decisions, and then address how avatars and the magic circle nature of games indulge several kinds of fun while still having players experience a sense of moral residue. Finally, the chapter will provide recommendations on how designers can incorporate and analyze ethical dilemmas into their own games, tying our recommendations to examples to show how ethical dilemmas can provide interesting gameplay.

INTRODUCTION

Computer game designers have attempted to incorporate ethics into their games for quite some time now. One of the earliest examples of this was with *Ultima IV* (Origin Systems, 1985) where Richard Garriott attempted to create a game about “the player’s personal virtues” (Computer Gaming

World, 1986). Since then, other games have played with ethics and ethical decision making, in some cases using it as one of the primary selling points of their games. Lionhead’s *Fable* (2004) used the tagline of “For Every Choice, a Consequence.” BioWare’s *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), abbreviated *KOTOR*, asked, “Can you master the awesome power of the Force on your quest to save the Republic? Or will you fall to the lure of the dark side?”

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KOTOR and *Fable*, while lauded for their attempts to tackle morality and ethical issues, were still heavily criticized. *KOTOR* was viewed as not about ethical decisions, but instead about optimizing towards one of the extremes of light or dark side (Hocking, 2004). The explicit binary choices that the player had to make were largely heavy-handed and obvious in their implications with virtually no middle ground or ambiguity to decisions. Players could choose to either provide money to a beggar (light) or threaten the beggar with physical harm (dark). The designers for *Fable* “put very little effort into deciding why given actions are right or wrong” with “few clear principles ... defined to guide ... decisions” (Rauch, 2007). As such, players were often given seemingly contradictory feedback as a result of their actions, or were punished/rewarded with no regard for the potential intent of the player. In critiquing these games, it should be said that there is nothing inherently wrong with either games’ approach, and both managed to be financial and critical successes. However, in terms of providing an ethically meaningful game (that is to say, a game that approaches the subject of ethics in a manner that encourages deep reflection and thought in their player), both left something to be desired.

One concept that has been pointed out to be a characteristic of particularly ethically notable games is the ethical dilemma (Zagal, 2009). In this chapter, we will define what an ethical dilemma is, and then argue for why they can create compelling gameplay by analyzing the emotions they illicit and examining the potential role of games as ethical sandboxes.

DEFINITIONS AND VOCABULARY

In this chapter, ethics refers to the study of systems of rules which are used to distinguish “right” actions—those which are ethical, moral, and valuable—from “wrong” actions. These systems are referred to as ethical systems, while specific

rules that comprise an ethical system are called ethical principles.

Ethical dilemmas are situations where an agent has a number of different options, each of which they have a moral obligation to select, but they cannot select all of them (McConnell, 2006).

A commonly-cited example is that there is a young man in World War II-era France. He is his elderly mother’s sole means of support, yet he feels an obligation to leave to fight in the war to defend his homeland. The young man’s ethical system judges both options as morally good, yet they are mutually exclusive. He is forced to select which is more important to him (Sartre, 1957).

From this definition, it becomes clear why the situations presented in *KOTOR* were largely not ethical dilemmas. There, the conflicts involved a player selecting which ethical system (light side or dark side) they followed, rather than having to select between options that were conflicting moral imperatives to their side. Other games such as *Fable* and *Mass Effect* work similarly.

One key characteristic of ethical dilemmas involves the sensation an agent has after making a decision. Recall that the agent has a moral obligation to select all options, but cannot. Having failed to select all options, the agent has morally failed. The sensations of guilt and remorse at not having selected the other option(s) is called moral residue (McConnell, 2006). Consider the example of Sartre’s student mentioned above. It would be entirely appropriate for the young man to feel guilt after abandoning his mother. Likewise it would be expected that he feel remorse at not helping his country. Note that these feelings do not mean that the agent believes they have performed the ‘wrong’ action as all actions should be considered ‘right.’ With an ethical dilemma, the agent should feel a genuine need to perform all options, and regret when they ultimately cannot.

The difficulty of ethical dilemmas and the phenomena of moral residue are part of what make these situations compelling and meaningful in for games.

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