

Chapter 3

Beyond Choices: A Typology of Ethical Computer Game Designs

Miguel Sicart

IT University of Copenhagen, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article presents a typology for classifying computer games designed to create ethical gameplay. Ethical gameplay is the outcome of playing a (computer) game in which the players' moral values are of relevance for the game experience. The article explores the different types of designs that create these types of experiences, and how they are characterized. The author provides an analytical framework for classifying games according to the experience they create and how they create it. The article is informed by both game design theory and postphenomenological philosophy, and it is intended to provide a theoretical framework for the study of the design of ethical computer game experiences.

INTRODUCTION

In his Game Developers Conference talk “Exploration: From Systems to Spaces to Self” (Hocking, 2007), game developer Clint Hocking argued that computer games can be experienced not only as explorations of systems of rules and game world spaces, but also of the players’ subjectivities, that is, the construction of our self, who we are and how that is expressed in a series of ethical values with which we relate with others and the world. Hocking’s central example was *Ultima IV* (Origin

Systems, 1985), a game that encouraged players to explore the values they were playing by.

The main question developers like Hocking pose are: how do games explore the ethics of their players? How are computer games designed to create this type of ethical exploration? This article will present a typology that can be used to classify games according to how they appeal to their players’ ethics. This typology will argue that there is such a thing as ethical gameplay, and that there are sufficient recurring design elements in computer games to justify a typology of ethical

gameplay designs. Computer games can create deep ethical experiences, which, as this article will argue, can be categorized according to abstract game design concepts.

Though this article may be of interest to game designers, the intended audience is academics with an interest in the formal analysis of computer games as designed objects and how they engage players in ethical experiences. Nevertheless, the typology presented here can be used in specific design practices as a reference framework, or even as an inspirational tool. The topics discussed will expand these possible uses and expansions of the typology in the closing section of the article.

The conceptual model of how ethical gameplay is created by means of general design choices can help elucidate the role of computer games in our ethical landscape, further arguing for the recognition of computer games as not only a form of entertainment, but also a medium capable of contributing with its expressive capacities to the shaping of contemporary culture. This being said, I will not directly address the ubiquitous issue of violence and computer games. Directly addressing this issue is a side path from the essence of this article.

My goal is to introduce the concept of ethical gameplay, understood as the morally relevant outcome of the experience of a game system by an ethical agent. This concept will be used to argue for a typology of ethical design principles based on the analysis of a number of computer games. These games were chosen for their relevance in terms of ethical discourses created by means of their procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), not necessarily by the ethical motives of their theme, or game world. The games used as illustrations of this typology create ethical experiences primarily by means of game design, that is, by the way the game system, its rules and mechanics, its affordances and constraints (Norman, 2002) affect the player experience of the fictional world (Juul, 2005). This typology is inspired by the work of Järvinen (2008) and Bjork and Holopainen (2005), even though my scope is narrower, since the intention

is to present a typology of game designs that can potentially cue ethical gameplay.

Ethical gameplay is a concept inspired by the works on gameplay by Bateman and Boon (2006), Salen and Zimmerman (2003), and Juul (2005). This tradition will be put in the perspective of phenomenology (Gadamer, 2004) and postphenomenology (Ihde, 1990, 1995; Verbeek, 2005), and so ethical gameplay will consider both player and game system ethics as an integral part of the ludic activity.

Computer games that appeal and challenge our ethical values are a step towards the expressive maturity of the medium. Computer games challenge what we think and who we are and by understanding how they do so, we can imagine new ways of describing, developing, and playing computer games, incorporating ethics as a gameplay challenge.

DEFINING ETHICAL GAMEPLAY

Ethical gameplay is the ludic experience in which regulation, mediation, and/or goals require from the player moral reflection beyond the calculation of statistics and possibilities. This type of gameplay requires the understanding of games as objects with values embedded in their design (Latour, 1992; Winner, 1986), that establish a mode of relation with the player, limiting their agency in the game world with a pre-determined, designed purpose; it also requires the understanding of players as moral agents, capable of using ethical reflection to act upon choices in game experience. The implications of this perspective for the analysis of games as cultural objects are significant: not only game design is ethically relevant, but also play is a moral action.

The player I will invoke here is an implied, model player (Eco, 1978), one that has experience playing games, and that has the ethical maturity to understand games not only as means for entertainment, but also as expressive medium (Bogost,

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