

Playing around with Morality: Introducing the Special Issue on “Morality Play”

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Abstract

This special issue of *Games and Culture* focuses on the intersection between videogames and ethics. This introduction briefly sets out the key research questions in the research field and identifies trends in the papers included in this special issue.

Keywords

Serious games, ethics, morality, game design, moral psychology, war, feminism

Videogames and ethics are hardly strangers. While not every game is, or needs to be, rich in moral content, there is a long history of “ethically notable video games” that “provide opportunities for encouraging ethical reasoning and reflection” (Zagal, 2009, p. 1) – from early titles such as *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Origin Systems, 1985) to more recent games such as *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), *Undertale* (Fox, 2015), and *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt Red, 2015). The recent surge in interest in this area, both academically and commercially, can be seen as a sign of the growing maturity of the medium. Players and designers alike are recognising that games need not only be escapist fantasies, with nothing morally meaningful to say. There is a persistent hope that, by virtue of their interactivity, games can present a very different, and perhaps more powerful, type of ethical engagement than other art forms.

Videogames however, raise at least two unique difficulties when it comes to ethics and morality. First, players often regard videogames as moral vacuums where playful experimentation, taboo breaking or maximizing outcomes, are preferred modes of engagement. This creates a barrier to direct engagement with the moral issues in videogames. Second, putting the player in control means authoring stories and systems where players’ choices have meaningful ethical consequences. While morally-charged themes such as crime or war have always been present in games, comparatively few games invite us to engage deeply with the morality of the worlds they depict or the behaviours they encourage us to adopt.

Not only are ethics difficult to enact in video gaming, they are also difficult to theorise about, and historically dominant theoretical discourses have impeded, and diverted, development of rigorous frameworks for conceptualizing the ethical dimension of play. As Consalvo (2005) has noted Huizinga’s (1955) concept of the “magic circle” has problematically been used to divorce in-game actions from extra-game contexts, which has the consequence of rendering game play immune from moral analysis. In extremis, this position leads to the argument that games are mechanical systems pure and simple, and any attempt to give them ethical significance is misplaced (Koster, 2005, p. 84).

The relationship of player to game, however, is more complex than the instrumental framing of games as systems to be mastered and optimized assumes. Sicart (2010, p. 5) has termed the player who plays games purely to achieve the goals of the game, and not for the moral significance of the behaviours that they

depict, a *reactive* player, “a strategist concerned with directly interacting with a system regardless of the actual meaning of her actions”. The approach of such a player stands in the way of a deep engagement with the implicit and explicit value systems and moral content that exists in many games. To move beyond this limitation, designers need to learn how to encourage what Sicart (ibid.) calls a *reflective* player, who step outside the magic circle and for whom “playing is understanding the values of the gameworld and developing an ethical persona”. While the ethical persona that the reflective player adopts in a game might be good, bad, subversive or conflicted, there is nonetheless a direct engagement with the meaning of in-game ethical and moral actions in their own right. This can lead to an approach where other things than just winning or maximising outcomes matter for the player, such as gaining the esteem of fellow characters or doing the right thing at some personal cost. While not every player needs to play every game reflectively, game designers who want players to engage deeply with the moral content in their work need to encourage reflective play.

Videogames differ from other artistic mediums in that they can give players direct control over moral actions and choices, rather than have an audience who can only sit in judgment on actions and choices over which they have no control. The agency that videogames grant players has the power both to make moral problems much more personal and to test a players’ moral capacities. But it also presents a host of design problems in providing moral choices with depth, nuance and complexity, and in motivating players to engage with the moral content in the work. In the past, some videogames have engaged with moral themes and issues in an unsophisticated manner by using scripted choices clearly labelled “good” and “evil” (Heron & Belford, 2014) and having few long-term consequences for either choice. But it is hard for players to reflectively engage with morality in videogames where their options are limited, pre-given, clearly labelled, and lack important repercussions. Other games have modelled morality as just another in-game score by using morality meters. But this approach runs the risk of turning morality into a mere point-scoring exercise by enacting morality as an instrumental outcome to be optimised, and thereby encouraging reactive play and hindering the adoption of an in-game ethical persona. Some recent videogames offer a more sophisticated approach to morality and there is a growing body of design theory supporting this change (e.g. Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Sicart, 2009). For example, games such as *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013) and *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) attempt to encourage reflective players with morally sophisticated stories and game mechanics without using morally labelled-choices or morality meters (Ryan, Staines, & Formosa, 2017). Nonetheless, Stevenson (2010, p. 37) notes that “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”. The papers in this special issue seek to undertake some of this much-needed work.

The study of videogames and ethics is a multidisciplinary domain. Researchers come from a wide variety of theoretical backgrounds including computer science, cultural studies, gender studies, philosophy and psychology. This multidisciplinary nature brings both advantages, insofar as it opens up new disciplinary connections, as well as difficulties, as each discipline brings with it its own approaches, styles and methodologies. One way of appreciating the complexity of issues that arise from thinking about videogames and ethics is by outlining the different sorts of research questions that it leads us to ask. Some of these questions are *psychological* and revolve around measuring the impacts, whether good, bad or indifferent, that playing videogames can have on us. Can playing violent videogames make us more violent? Can videogames lead to social isolation and withdrawal? Are videogames addictive? Can

videogames have a positive role in moral education and development? And what, if anything, is the relationship between in-game moral choices and real-world moral choices? Other research questions relate to issues to do with the *design and development of videogames*. How can we model morality and moral systems in games and what are the technical limitations? What design options are there for including ethics within games? And how do different design choices impact on the type and degree of player engagement with morality in games? Another set of questions are *philosophical*. What are the relevant ethical theories, such as Kantian ethics, Consequentialism and Virtue theory, which might be drawn on by game designers? And are there ethical and justice issues in the production, distribution, and playing of videogames? Another set of questions revolve around various approaches to videogames which draw on different *critical frameworks*, such as cultural and gender studies. How is morality depicted in games? How are gender, race or sexuality depicted and performed in games? How is sexism manifest and reinforced in gaming culture and the games industry? As we can see, many of these questions are classic lines of enquiry in their fields, yet rarely are they framed as ethical issues, and rarely do we observe and reflect upon the ethical and conceptual links between them.

One of the key purposes of this special issue is to highlight the overlaps, continuities and divergences between different disciplinary approaches to video gaming ethics. Given the breadth of work that can fall under this topic, we have had by necessity to focus and limit our coverage. While this issue brings together a range of theoretical and methodological approaches, it offers only a small sample of the diversity of this area. Each article is unique in focus and style: some are based in experimental and analytic methods, others contain theoretically informed critical readings. All offer direct insight into the complex and dynamic relationship between videogames and ethics. Together, the papers complement and challenge one another, and hopefully are a step towards a more expansive discussion of these issues.

Thematically we see strong shared ideas and concerns across the papers. Three of the papers in this issue focus on how to effectively design videogames that engage with players' moral capacities and explore how videogames can be used as tools for moral education and training. Schrier, in "Designing Games for Moral Learning and Knowledge Building", distinguishes two kinds of serious moral games: "moral learning games" which use game-based learning techniques to train moral skills, and "moral knowledge games" which simulate open moral problems from the real world in order to crowd-source possible solutions. She presents a thorough survey of existing literature in game design and moral education, as well as a variety of ethically notable games, from which she derives a set of 95 design principles for the design of moral games. In "Training Moral Sensitivity Through Video Games – A Review of Suitable Game Mechanisms", Katsarov, Christen, Schmocker and Tanner perform a similar review, but with a particular focus on the problem of training moral sensitivity, which they define as "the ability of people to recognize the moral features of a given situation when they arise in practice". They provide a toolbox of twenty different game mechanics drawn from a variety of existing games, analysing each in terms of relevant moral psychology to show how it could be used to improve players' empathy, alertness to values and awareness of their own biases. Finally, Staines, Formosa and Ryan delve deep into moral psychology in "Morality Play: A model for developing games of moral expertise". They examine social cognitive and dual-process theories of moral functioning and development and relate them to existing theories of game-based learning. They combine these to propose a model for the design of games for training moral expertise. They call for the design of "moral toys", complex simulations of morally significant domains, which engage players' various moral skills, and "moral games" which scaffold play through a series of stages of increasing moral depth and complexity.

The compromises, absences, and oversights in recent enactments of ethics in videogames feature heavily in the final three papers. These papers highlight the tensions between creativity and profitability, and between entertainment and moral purpose. In “The Case of This War of Mine: A Production Studies Perspective on Moral Game Design”, De Smale and Kors look to existing design practice to see what problems arise when a moral game is developed. They interview four team members of 11 bit studios, creators of *This War of Mine*, to investigate how production contexts can affect developers' ability to design moral experiences. Donald looks at the issue of how war is depicted in videogames, particularly in the Modern Military Shooter sub-genre, in “Just War? War Games, War Crimes and Game Design”. In the face of criticism from the Red Cross, he examines the ways in which these games violate the principles of Just War theory and the rules established by the Geneva Conventions and other bodies of international humanitarian law. He asks whether these violations matter, and if so how can the games be improved to reflect the legal reality of modern warfare. Lastly, Dunne and Butt’s paper, “Rebel Girls and Consequence in *Life is Strange* and *The Walking Dead*”, analyses how even games that feature empowered female characters can fall back on gender stereotypes. In particular, they look at *The Walking Dead* and *Life is Strange* and show how both games present a choice to sacrifice the rebellious female protagonist for the greater good of the game world community. These games employ a utilitarian notion of good, where one life is lost to save many, without acknowledging the long history of women as sacrificial ‘objects’ within western culture and art.

The papers featured here offer us a glimpse of the crucial and exciting work emerging as different disciplinary approaches converge to analyse the ethical dimensions of video gaming. They illustrate the challenges the games industry faces in embedding ethics more strongly in this varied media form, as well as the difficulties academia faces in theorizing about game and player ethics. But they also point to possible future directions, potential solutions, and productive theoretical responses. As a medium videogames can offer immersive fantastical experiences, violent visceral spectacles, complex open narratives, emergent worlds, and rich and creative communities; they are microcosms of our ethical beliefs and practices. To understand the ethics of ourselves, our world, and our lives, is there any better place to begin than by looking at that most contemporary of entertainment forms: the videogame.

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