

# Four Lenses for Designing Morally Engaging Games

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## ABSTRACT

Historically the focus of moral decision-making in games has been narrow, mostly confined to challenges of moral judgement (deciding right and wrong). In this paper, we look to moral psychology to get a broader view of the skills involved in ethical behaviour and how they may be employed in games. Following the Four Component Model of Rest and colleagues, we identify four “lenses” – perspectives for considering moral gameplay in terms of focus, sensitivity, judgement and action – and describe the design problems raised by each. To conclude, we analyse two recent games, *The Walking Dead* and *Papers, Please*, and show how the lenses give us insight into important design differences between them.

## Keywords

game design, lenses, ethics, empathy, judgement

## INTRODUCTION

As video games have matured as a medium, there has been increasing interest among designers and academics alike in exploring morally complex themes (e.g. Sicart 2009, Zagal 2010, Zoss 2010, Schrier 2015). Arts and media have a long history of wrestling with difficult moral problems, but video games present a unique opportunity – and unique challenges – for engaging an audience. By putting the player in control, we give them the chance to make the hard moral choices themselves, rather than just sit in judgement over the choices of a character in a story. This agency has the power to make moral problems much more personal, but presents a host of design problems in motivating players to act morally and in providing choices with depth and moral complexity.

While video games have in the past engaged with moral themes and issues, this has often been done in a fairly blunt and unsophisticated way, with scripted choices clearly labeled “good” and “evil” (Heron and Belford 2014) and few long-term repercussions for either choice. Some recent games offer a more sophisticated approach to morality and there is a growing body of design theory supporting this change (e.g. Sicart 2009, Belman and Flanagan 2010), however the focus remains on a narrow subset of the array of skills that

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comprise moral expertise. Morality is not just about deciding right and wrong; it is about developing an ethical identity, taking the perspectives of others, planning how to implement moral decisions and acting with courage and persistence. We need to think more broadly about all the aspects of moral behaviour and how they are engaged in play.

To achieve this, we turn to moral psychology and draw on the prominent Four Component Model of James Rest and colleagues (Rest et al. 1999). According to this model, moral expertise consists of four core abilities: focus, sensitivity, judgment and action. Based on this work, we develop a series of “lenses”, in the manner of Schell (2014), which can be used to think critically about the various aspects of moral expertise that can be engaged by video games.

To demonstrate the value of these lenses, we analyse two recent games: *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012) and *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013). These analyses allow us to understand in detail the two different, but similarly successful, design approaches to building ethically engaging and complex video games. We show significant differences in approach across all four lenses, allowing a structured critique of the advantages and disadvantages of each.

## **BACKGROUND**

Questions of morality are a pervasive topic for media and the arts. Morality is crucial to how human beings understand themselves as societies and individuals, and art – from Greek dramas all the way to modern television – has proven to be a particularly effective vehicle for its interrogation and transmission (Cain 2005, Carr 2005, Vaughn 1990).

Games, however, have historically been viewed as amoral spaces. The concept of the “magic circle” (Huizinga 1955) has been (mis)used to defend the idea that actions in a game should only be judged for their instrumental value in achieving the goals of the game, and not for the moral significance of the behaviour they depict (Koster 2005, 84). This attitude has led to a generation of games that depict acts of gross violence that never give the player pause to consider the morality of such behaviour. Those games that have attempted to deal with ethical problems have often suffered defects that undermine the impact of their moral content (Sicart 2009, 199, Heron and Belford 2014, 42). Stevenson (2010) notes, “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” (p.37).

Nevertheless, there is a long history of “ethically notable video games” – i.e. video games that “provide opportunities for encouraging ethical reasoning and reflection” (Zagal 2010) – from early titles such as *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Origin Systems 1985) to more recent games such as *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt Red 2015), *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014), and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012).

Multiple frameworks exist for the classification, criticism, and design of ethically notable games, including Flanagan et al.’s Values at Play methodology (2007), Belman and Flanagan’s four principles of empathetically engaging game design (2010), Schrier’s EPIC framework (2015), and Sicart’s “ethical cognitive friction” approach (2010, 2013). Examining these and other approaches in depth is beyond the scope of this paper. We do not seek to disagree with any of them here, but rather to complement them with insight from moral psychology.

## **Moral psychology**

Moral psychology is a blanket term encompassing “diverse literatures and fields of study” (Narvaez and Lapsley 2009) that are concerned with providing an empirical account of moral functioning and development. For most of the twentieth century the field was dominated by the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, who argued that deliberate rational inquiry is the cornerstone of moral judgement and the engine of moral development (Kohlberg 1981, 141, Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer 1983, 69). Subsequent research has since called Kohlberg’s approach into serious doubt (Lapsley and Narvaez 2005b, Krebs and Denton 2006, Vozzola 2014), and currently there are a few promising alternatives vying to replace it as the discipline’s dominant paradigm. One of the more empirically and theoretically robust of the new alternatives is the so-called “Minnesota Approach” championed by James Rest and colleagues (Rest et al. 1999).

The cornerstone of the Minnesota Approach is the Four Component model: a systematic breakdown of the cognitive and affective processes implicated in a moral act (Rest 1983). Under the guidance of Narvaez and colleagues, the Four Component model has developed into a blueprint for ethical expertise, comprised of four broad categories of cognitive/affective capabilities:

1. **Moral Focus** – the extent to which one is committed to one’s moral choices and the degree to which one prioritises moral concerns over others.
2. **Moral Sensitivity** – the ability to identify morality in the real world, to understand the motivations of others, and to perceive the consequences of one’s behaviour.
3. **Moral Judgement** – the ability to understand moral concepts and reason about moral issues.
4. **Moral Action** – the ability to overcome temptations and persist in the face of adversity. Doing the right thing even when it’s hard. (Narvaez 2006, 716)

Within each of these categories Narvaez and colleagues have identified sub-skills that can be targeted as part of moral expertise development. One can enhance their moral sensitivity, for example, by routinely “taking the perspective of others”, whereas fostering moral action typically involves “taking initiative as a leader”, “resolving conflict”, and “communicating well” (Lapsley and Narvaez 2005a, 156).

## **THE FOUR LENSES**

In our view the Four Components and their associated sub-skills provide a valuable framework for the design of morally engaging content in video games (Staines 2010). As Sicart argues, designing ethical gameplay implies recognising and leveraging the player’s status as a moral agent who “will determine who they are in the game, and how that being is related to the being outside the game” (Sicart 2009, 199). The Four Component model describes that agent in detail, providing designers with new avenues to engage and challenge the player’s moral self.

As such, we provide below four “lenses”, one for each component, through which to consider the player’s ethical engagement with a game. These lenses are not intended as an exhaustive taxonomy of moral gameplay, but rather as a collection of perspectives to help inform design and criticism. In what follows, each lens will be described with examples,

with a list of relevant questions to consider with regard to the game in question and an outline of some of the design challenges it raises.

### **The Lens of Moral Focus**

According to Blasi's (1980) influential account, acting morally involves more than simply making moral judgements: one must also take the (often scary) leap from thinking to doing. Moral focus is what makes such leaps possible. Individuals with highly developed moral focus prioritise moral concerns above others, possessing a strong moral self that drives them to "keep faith with identity defining moral commitments" (Narvaez and Lapsley 2009, 43). Sub-skills associated with moral focus include acting responsibly, helping others, and cooperating. Moral crusaders like Abraham Lincoln and Susan B. Anthony are both exemplars of moral focus, as are highly spiritual individuals such as the Dalai Llama (Lies and Narvaez 2001).

#### ***Examples: Spec Ops: The Line and Grand Theft Auto III***

One effective method of harnessing moral focus is to have the player role-play identities with implicit (or explicit) moral commitments. *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012) does this splendidly, placing player's in the role of Martin Walker, a Delta Force commander. Unlike many third-person action heroes, Walker is keenly aware of his duties and responsibilities to his squad-mates, to the people of post-catastrophe Dubai, to his values and the values of the United States Marines. Prompted by Walker's reactions to and scrutiny of morally significant story events, the player is invited – at first implicitly, and then explicitly, with loading screen messages – to reflect on their complicity in Walker's moral debasement, and their own enthusiasm for a game that depicts this. "We [the player] are responsible for what happens, not because we picked a moral choice within a game but because we simply didn't exercise our ultimate sanction – to halt the unpleasantness by revoking our participation" (Heron & Belford, 2014, p.18).

Contrast with *Grand Theft Auto III* (DMA Design 2001), in which players take the role of a voiceless, personality-free protagonist named Claude. Claude is a career criminal on a bloody-minded quest to kill his traitorous ex-partner. Claude's moral vacuousness reflects the moral vacuum at the game's core, in which committing violent crime is fun, profitable, and largely free of negative consequences. Particularly egregious crimes – running down multiple pedestrians in broad daylight, attacking a police officer – attract the attention of law enforcement, but for skilled players this acts as a kind of reward: you can't have a thrilling police chase without the police. The player's actions often have grim implications for non-player characters (NPCs) in the narrative, but they are seldom shown in any detail or dwelt on after the fact. In these ways, the game says to its players: "In this world, morality is not a priority".

### **Design Challenges**

Video games frequently teach players to ignore the moral dimension of their in-game behaviour in favour of maximising ludic outcomes. This is in keeping with the view of games as essentially amoral spaces – so-called "magic circles" (Huizinga 1955) where nothing is permanent and everything is permitted. Getting the player to break habits cultivated by playing dozens, if not hundreds, of morally inert games is no easy task. The player must become "complicit" (Sicart 2013) with the game's morality, making moral decisions for moral, not instrumental, reasons.

As such, "morality meters" (including implicit morality meters such as Fable's good/evil avatars) ought to be avoided when designing for moral focus. In addition to

“desensitis[ing] the agent to their ethical thinking about the simulation ... focusing it on the procedural layer” (ibid., p.198), morality meters are a frequent source of frustration (Melenson 2010), judging players in complete ignorance of their motives and the specific circumstances surrounding their decisions. For example, in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2007), “good” karma points are awarded for killing violent raiders and “bad” karma points for stealing medical supplies, but one can easily imagine scenarios in which the player might reasonably disagree – maybe the medical supplies are for treating a life-threatening injury, maybe the “violent raider” is asleep and unarmed. Scenarios like these are especially problematic in games where a morality meter is tied to ludic rewards like experience points, treasure, or new abilities: not only is the player frustratingly misjudged by an “omniscient axis [and] transparent proxy for developer opinions” (Melenson 2010, 67), they’re denied progress and other rewards on the basis of said misjudgement. This incentivises players to conjecture about the developer’s moral judgements in order to maximise ludic outcomes rather than make their own moral decisions.

Fortunately, there are a number of “hooks” available to designers interested in appealing to the player’s moral focus. First and foremost, the game must communicate to the player that morality matters in its own right (Belman and Flanagan 2010). As we saw with *Spec Ops: The Line*, giving the player a strong moral identity to role-play is one of the more effective ways of achieving that end. Roles in the real world – professional, social, familial – come with obligations and expectations, many of which the player will already be familiar with. In much the same way that educational content “sticks” better when it’s related to familiar real-world concepts (Gee 2007), familiar roles, duties, and dilemmas can be leveraged to make moral situations more intelligible and impactful. We know (or at least should know) that soldiers aren’t allowed to shoot unarmed civilians, so we don’t need it explained to us why it’s problematic for Walker – and by extension, the player – to do just that.

Non-player characters (NPCs) are another effective vector for communicating the importance of morality to the player and encouraging its prioritisation. In contrast to the omniscient morality meter, NPCs provide “localised, individual ... assessments of the player’s persona” (Melenson 2010, 67) – assessments contextualised and invested with emotional resonance by their personalities and relationship with the player. This can be particularly effective in party-based RPGs where the player spends a great deal of time interacting with allied NPCs. Despite featuring a morality meter, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II* (Obsidian Entertainment 2004) is an instructive example. Not only do companion NPCs – most notably the fallen Jedi, Kreia – provide a running, mostly unsolicited commentary on the player’s behaviour, they also follow the player’s example and can change quite radically over the course of the game. These changes are represented in three ways: in the position of the needle on the NPC’s morality meter, in their appearance, and – most importantly – in how they talk and act. For players invested in the story, it can be quite shocking to observe changes in a favourite NPC’s demeanour: a stark reminder that our behaviour affects others, even when we don’t want it to.

### **Questions to Consider**

- Why is morality a priority? What motivates the player to treat moral decisions as moral decisions, and not instrumentally?
- Are players encouraged to role-play a moral identity? If so, how does it impact how players perceive their own behaviour in the game?

- Are players given opportunities to reflect on their behaviour? How can that kind of reflection be prompted?
- How are the consequences of moral choices represented and what do they say about the importance of morality in the game world? Are narrative and mechanical representations consistent in this respect?

### The Lens of Moral Sensitivity

Exercising moral sensitivity involves making an “empathic interpretation of a situation” (Endicott 2001, 7), identifying issues and stakeholders, and imagining possible responses and consequences. Experts in moral sensitivity “are better at quickly and accurately reading a moral situation and determining what role they might play” (Narvaez 2006, 716) while at the same time exercising critical awareness of their own limitations and biases. Associated sub-skills include identifying emotions, perspective taking, working with interpersonal differences, and controlling bias (Endicott 2001, 7). Moral innovators and social activists who perceive entrenched inequities are exemplars of moral sensitivity, as are highly empathic individuals.

#### *Examples: Deus Ex and Mass Effect 2*

In *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm 2000), the player takes the role of JC Denton, a cybernetically enhanced counter-terrorist operative working for the UN. Using JC’s rookie status as a framing device, the game encourages the player to reflect on the moral dimensions of the world around them by having JC’s superiors and co-workers routinely comment on his behaviour, drawing attention to its implications and consequences. Even very minor breaches of social decorum – such as using the wrong bathroom – prompt response and, in some cases, reprimand. However these actions are rarely signaled as moral choices in advance. The player is challenged to recognise and respond to morally charged situations as they occur in real-time, *in situ*. One such situation occurs early in the game when the player overhears a pimp menacing a prostitute in a seedy alleyway. There are no messages or prompts to provoke the player’s intervention. In fact, the player needn’t intervene at all, and if they do the nature and extent of their intervention is largely in their hands. Thus *Deus Ex* challenges the player, not only to spot morality “in the wild” during regular gameplay, but to generate responses to it as well.

Compare this to *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware 2010) in which moral dilemmas are invariably quarantined to cut-scenes explicitly prompting player response. One of the unique features introduced in this game are so-called “interrupts” – mini quick-time events that occur during dialogue that give players an opportunity to take morally significant action, signalled by the icons shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** The Paragon and Renegade icons used by *Mass Effect 2* to signal moral decision quick-time events.

If either of these icons appears during the course of regular dialogue, the player has a few seconds to press the corresponding button (in this case: left-trigger or right-trigger) to have the protagonist, Commander Shepard, perform an action. The type of action depends on the type of icon. The blue icon represents “Paragon” actions, which are generally compassionate and heroic; the red icon represents “Renegade” actions, which are generally ruthless, selfish, and insensitive. Before pressing the button, the player has no way of knowing what specific action Commander Shepard will take: only the type.

The “blink and you’ll miss it” nature of interrupts are intended, we suspect, to keep players on their toes and alert to the possibility of taking moral action during dialogue. However, because the player has no way of knowing (on the first try) what action Shepard will take when an interrupt is activated, responding to a prompt is more a matter of reflexes than moral perception. Similarly to morality meters, by focusing the player’s attention on the “procedural layer” (Sicart 2013, 198) of the decision – on clicking the button Simon-says style in almost total ignorance of what it implies – players are induced to treat interrupts as mechanical challenges in much the same vein as more traditional quick-time events. Further, by limiting morally significant action to cut-scenes, the game effectively gives the player permission to “switch-off” their moral sensitivity during the course of regular gameplay. Where *Deus Ex* says to the player “moral scenarios can happen anywhere at any time, so pay attention”, *Mass Effect 2* says “morality is here and nowhere else, so don’t bother looking”.

### ***Design Challenges***

Designing for moral sensitivity means striking a delicate balance between overtness and subtlety. If the player can’t “see” why a given scenario is morally significant, they’ll fail to treat it as such. Many games therefore clearly signpost moral scenarios with cut-scenes, dialogue, and aesthetic cues like colour coded text to let players know they’re about to make a moral choice. There are obvious benefits to this approach, but the downside is that, by catering to the player so completely, it diminishes their incentive to exercise their own moral sensitivity skills. Conversely, games that don’t signpost moral scenarios run the risk of alienating players who don’t perceive the moral significance of their actions and feel “cheated” by the consequences.

One alternative is to avoid explicitly scripted “moral choices” and instead offer morally-loaded material choices, such as the option to stun or shoot the pimp in the *Deus Ex* example above. These actions employ the same mechanics as the rest of the game, it is the context that gives them moral meaning. It is up to the player to decide what the moral significance is. Done without care, however, this approach can leave the player unaware of the moral choice altogether.

Another problem of moral sensitivity is engaging the player’s empathy. Empathy – the ability to cognitively and emotionally place oneself in another’s shoes – is at the core of moral sensitivity and moral life more generally. This challenges our ability to design characters that are relatable and recognisably human (Bandura 2002, Belman and Flanagan 2010). It is important not to inadvertently cue the player to “turn off” their morality and treat NPCs as outside their “scope of justice” (Hartmann and Vorderer 2010, 98). One of the more common and overt ways this can occur is when “enemy” characters are depicted as unrepentantly evil or inhuman, and killing them is framed by the narrative as an act of just retribution (ibid., p.99). Other, subtler cues – such as rewarding kills with experience points – simply reinforce to the player that they are playing a game, and that

NPCs are just tokens or pieces within that game. Once again, this is the opposite of complicity.

### **Questions to Consider**

- How is moral content presented to the player? Is it clearly signposted or are players expected to “see” it themselves?
- How can the player express their moral agency? Are they limited to selecting pre-generated options or is there scope for other kinds of morally significant action?
- How are NPCs presented? Do they have personalities and perspectives with which the player can empathise? Are there elements in the game that might cue the player to dehumanise other characters?

### **The Lens of Moral Judgement**

Moral judgment describes one’s ability to reason about morality and encompasses “basic cognitive skills that enable [one] to thoroughly and systematically complete the decision making process” (Bock 2001, 7). Associated sub-skills include the ability to use codes and identify judgement criteria, to reflect on process and outcome, and to plan to implement decisions. Rigorous moral thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Confucius are exemplars of moral judgement, as are certain conscientious members of the legal community, such as Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes (ibid., p.40).

### **Example: *Fallout 3***

The post-apocalyptic *Fallout* series of games are celebrated for their moral ambiguity and difficult moral choices (Schulzke 2009). The Oasis quest in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2007) is an excellent example of this. Isolated from the rest of the wasteland by a natural barricade of steep cliffs, Oasis is distinguished from the rest of *Fallout 3*’s unique locations in that it is a lush natural paradise, not unlike a post-apocalyptic Garden of Eden. The reason for this miraculous fecundity is Harold: a sentient tree whose seeds spread vegetation wherever they land. Worshipped by the locals as a god, Harold has nevertheless come to despise the tedium of his immobile existence, and bluntly asks the player to end it for him in an act of compassionate euthanasia.

However it is Harold’s tree that has protected Oasis from the ravages that have affected the wider world. Killing Harold would destroy Oasis and harm the community of people who live there. If Harold is kept alive, his growth could be accelerated, to spread his seeds further into the wasteland, or hampered, to keep Oasis safely isolated from the rest of the world. Different members of the Oasis community argue for and against these alternatives. There is also a young girl, Sapling Yew, who has no agenda to push but merely tells the player of her affection for Harold, who is her “bestest friend”. Choosing how to best act in this situation is a complex moral choice between the good of individuals, a community and the wider world.

### **Design Challenges**

The immediate problem in designing for moral judgement is creating genuinely morally complex decisions. The easiest decisions to design are *moral temptations* – choices with a clear right/wrong division but with a greater material reward for choosing the immoral option. Such choices involve little moral judgement; they are more concerned with the player’s moral focus and the priority they place on morality over personal gain.

In contrast, genuine *moral dilemmas* present multiple alternatives that can be argued to be right. The Four Component model emphasises that moral reasoning involves integrating



multiple ethical frameworks, from personal interest, to the simple codes of conduct attached to specific religious, ethnic or professional roles, to wider societal norms, to high-level, universal concepts such as the categorical imperative, the hedonic calculus, or the Golden Rule. Dilemmas can be created both within a single framework and when different frameworks are in conflict, such as when a soldier's duty to obey orders conflicts with a religious prohibition against murder or a personal ethic of mercy.

When ethical decisions are treated as isolated scenes disconnected from the wider narrative of the game the player is discouraged from maintaining any consistent ethical framework. Choices can be made on an *ad hoc* basis, for reasons unrelated to morality. In the *Fallout 3* example above, the player can leave Oasis after making their decision and never think about it again. They are not invited to explain their decision, nor are they ever expected to repeat or improve their process. To truly challenge a player's ethical reasoning, a game should give the player opportunities to reflect, learn and improve, just as they would learn to improve other physical or intellectual skills.

Greater ethical continuity in a game can help achieve this by providing a stronger moral theme to the work. Just as in an action game we might scaffold a series of increasingly difficult physical challenges, a series of thematically linked moral problems of varying complexity can examine a broader question from multiple perspectives and test the boundaries of the player's moral values, making for a more coherent whole.

### **Questions to Consider**

- What kind of moral choices are you asking the player to make? Are they moral dilemmas (right vs. right) or merely temptations (right vs. wrong)?
- What codes and ethical norms can players rely on to help them make moral judgements? How are these represented and enforced? Do they ever conflict?
- How is the process of making a moral judgement represented? Are moral dilemmas and temptations one-time choices or part of a larger framework of objectives? Is the player invited to reflect on their reasoning?
- How difficult to understand and resolve are the moral dilemmas the player encounters? Consider scaffolding to facilitate competence: start with a simple dilemma and revisit it in a variety of guises of increasing difficulty.

### **The Lens of Moral Action**

Moral action is the ability to follow through and do what you judge is morally best, even in the face of adversity or temptation. Experts in moral action possess interpersonal skills such as “conflict resolution and negotiation, leadership, [and] assertiveness” as well personal skills like perseverance, courage, and initiative (Narvaez et al. 2001, 8). Exemplars of moral action include courageous and committed activists like Rosa Parks and Nelson Mandela, as well as expert communicators, negotiators, and problem solvers like Ghandi and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

### **Example: This War of Mine**

*This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014) is a war game with a difference. Rather than playing a soldier, as is often the case in games, the player is instead responsible for the lives of three or four civilians in a city under siege. Days are spent repairing and improving the shelled-out house in which they take shelter. At night one of the group is sent out to ‘scavenge’ – i.e. to visit neighbouring buildings and collect (or steal) food, materials and other supplies necessary for the continued survival of the group.

During these scavenging trips, the player may encounter other survivors and it is in these encounters that their morality is tested. For example, in an abandoned supermarket the player encounters a woman being harassed by a soldier. It is clear that the scene is likely to end in violence if the player does not intervene, but doing so also means putting their own character at risk. Rescuing the woman and surviving the encounter requires skillful play. Even if the player escapes unharmed, the night's scavenging is likely to be over and the player will have to return home empty-handed. This is not a simple abstract choice the player can make and then walk away from. It requires real bravery to intervene, and the consequences affect the survivors' long-term prospects.

Another encounter in the game tests the player's resolve in a different way. At a decrepit squat a homeless man named Grisha begs the player for food. If the player has none, he will not complain; he will merely follow the player from room to room describing his sad tale. He puts up no resistance as the player ransacks his home, but his constant presence and sad demeanor tests the player's persistence and emotional resilience while committing a morally dubious act.

### ***Design Challenges***

The key to designing for moral action is to clearly distinguish choosing from doing. In games where moral agency is limited to selecting from dialogue or menu options, the distinction collapses: the player makes a choice and the action follows automatically without further intervention. Compare this to the supermarket scene above. Rescuing the woman is not simply a matter of choosing "rescue" from a dialogue tree: one must venture in and face the soldier personally. The player must work to implement their decision and face danger. This requires skill and bravery. A moral decision can be complicated by the fact that the player may simply not be skilful enough (physically, intellectually, socially) to put their choice into effect.

When acting on a moral decision takes time and effort there is an opportunity to put the player's resolve to the test. Danger, squeamishness, guilt, and other personal costs can tempt the player to reconsider their choice. On the other hand, sunk costs may encourage the player to persist, if they think they've come too far to give up.

### ***Questions to Consider***

- Is a moral problem solved once a choice is made, or does the player have to put it into action?
- How difficult is it to put your choices into action? What skill is required for the player to succeed?
- Does moral action require persistent action? If so, how is the player's resolve tested over time? Is their opportunity for the player to back out of their choice?

## **ANALYSIS**

To illustrate the value of these lenses, we will use them to analyse two recent game titles *The Walking Dead* and *Papers, Please* both of which attempt to ethically engage players but which use significantly different approaches to do so. Our lenses help us to develop a more detailed understanding of these games and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each.

In offering this demonstration, we recognise that analysis and design are related but distinct activities. Lenses such as these are not simply patterns that can be applied to do design work for us. Rather they are reflective tools that allow us to understand and

critique our own work and the work of others. For this reason, we hope our analysis shows its value to designers as well as critics.

## **The Walking Dead**

*The Walking Dead* (henceforth *TWD*) is a graphic adventure game developed by Telltale Games. It tells the story of Lee Everett, a man with a murky past trying to survive in a near-future USA coming to terms with a zombie outbreak. Over a series of five episodes, Lee meets and sometimes joins forces with a collection of other survivors who have different approaches to staying alive. One constant companion throughout the series is an orphaned 8-year-old girl, Clementine, whom the player, as Lee, rescues early in the game. The resulting foster-parent/child relationship between Lee and Clementine is central to the work.

Unlike many adventure games, the focus of *TWD* is not on puzzle solving but on ethical decision-making and interpersonal relationships. While there are occasional action elements, the player spends the majority of their time in conversation with the other characters, resolving arguments and negotiating solutions to the survival problems that face the group. Mechanically, the game uses a standard “string of pearls” narrative structure with a number of branching dialogue “beats” strung together in an overall linear narrative (Schell 2014, 298). Decisions affecting particular characters, however, may be remembered and can alter the player’s interaction with those characters in later beats, so to some extent the player’s decisions matter. While there are a few choices that can “lose” the game, the main impetus in the game is to tell a good story rather than to “win”.

**Moral focus:** It is this emphasis on story that engages the player’s moral focus. There are few “right” or “wrong” decisions in the game, and mostly it is left to the player to evaluate their decisions based on their personal morality (or a moral code they are choosing to role-play) along with the reactions of the characters around them. This is not to say that moral choices don’t have consequences, but rather that material outcomes are less important than moral outcomes. A choice, for instance, of whether or not to take supplies from an apparently abandoned car, has no effect on the long-term survival of your group, but does affect your relationships with other characters in the game, some of who will criticise your choice in ethical terms. In this way, the designers make it clear that moral decisions matter most in the game.

Of particular importance for this lens is the ongoing relationship between the player character, Lee, and the girl Clementine. As a replacement father figure, the player is often reminded that Clem is watching and learning from their example. This places the player in a position of moral responsibility and encourages them to consider their behaviour carefully.

**Moral sensitivity:** The majority of moral decisions in the game are presented as explicit choices in a dialogue tree (or, occasionally, as quick-time events). In some cases, these choices are clearly signposted as moral decisions with characters arguing for them in terms of right and wrong. In other cases the choice is presented as merely a material choice, and it is left to the player to be sensitive to its moral dimensions. For example in the second episode the player is required to distribute limited food supplies among the members of the team. The game makes no particular arguments for the right or wrong ways to do this, but relationships with the characters make the decision morally charged.

Outside of these critical decision-making moments, the player is given opportunities to simply talk to other characters and get to know them. These moments are often not necessary for driving the plot, but they invite the player to build relationships that will later colour the choices they make. This is also an element of moral sensitivity: caring about others and understanding how they will be affected by our decisions. These non-critical interactions are important in fostering this sense of empathy.

**Moral judgement:** *TWD* exhibits a greater variety of moral decision types than many games of this nature. There are fewer direct moral temptations (choosing between a selfless ‘good’ option and a selfish ‘evil’ option) and more true dilemmas with more than one arguably ‘good’ action. Temptation choices are more likely to be expressed in terms of other characters rather than direct benefit to the player themselves: the player’s choice is often between pleasing a character they like or a character they dislike, and this choice may be at odds with what they believe is right or wrong.

The choices in *TWD* follow a strong theme, pitting morality against survival in a world where the stakes are high and life-or-death choices are everyday. The player must repeatedly choose how and when to place moral issues above survival, and how to police others who disagree. Honesty is also a strong moral theme, and Lee's secret criminal past is often an issue. The same problem is revisited from multiple angles, inviting deeper consideration of their commonalities and difference between each instance.

**Moral action:** This repetition invites the player to consider their moral behaviour as a whole rather than as disconnected choices. Maintaining a consistent moral stance is a matter of perseverance and courage; you cannot simply make a choice and walk away. Decisions continue to affect relationships between characters long after they are made, and it can require long-term work to repair divisions. The multiple-choice dialogue does not offer a lot of scope for subtlety, however there is still some skill involved in choosing the right things to do or say to avoid upsetting particular characters, particularly when response times are limited. In some situations there is also an option to remain silent when others are arguing, or choose not to act when a situation demands a time-critical response. This alternative adds some strategy to the player’s choice, as they can choose to risk delaying their response to see how a situation unfolds before intervening, or choose not to act at all.

## **Papers, Please**

*Papers, Please* (henceforth *PP*), by Lucas Pope (2013), explores the story of a nameless citizen assigned the role of customs inspector at the border of the fictional political regime of Arstotzka. As inspector the player must process the documents of travellers, deciding who to admit and who to reject or detain. A commission is paid for each correctly processed traveller and this income must be spent to keep the inspector’s family housed, warm, healthy and fed. As days pass in the game, the rules for determining whether to admit or detain a traveller become more complex and often more draconian. It becomes clear that the player is serving a corrupt and oppressive regime and moral questions arise about their own complicity in that regime. Opportunities arise to break the rules and assist travellers in need, but these must be weighed against the cost to the player and their family.

*PP* limits the player’s ability to interact to only those actions that control the functions of the inspection booth: examining papers, detecting discrepancies and stamping passports. Some travellers talk about various things, but the Inspector’s dialogue consists almost

entirely of stock phrases, “Papers, Please”, “What is the purpose of your trip?” etc. The player has no ability to control this dialogue; their agency is limited to operating the controls of the booth.

The game has a mostly linear narrative, with alternative endings allowing the player to side with the government, revolutionary forces, or to save their own skin (and possibly some family members) by stealing passports and fleeing to another country.

**Moral focus:** Being motivated to act morally is more problematic in *PP* than in *TWD*, and deliberately so. Ultimately the game is a reflection on the banality of evil (Arendt 1965, Formosa 2007), and it invites the player to be its instrument. Pope (personal communication, 7 February 2015) explains that he “wanted to show how even a good person, who cares about their family and others ... can be turned into uncaring cogs”. Correctly processing papers, and thus making enough money to survive, is challenging and requires a lot of the player’s attention. Giving time to consider the ethical impact of your actions seems like a distraction, and a focus on practical problem solving prevents the player from seeing the ethical dimension of their choices.

And yet the world of *PP* is a world where ethics matter. Particular scripted encounters highlight the personal impact of the player’s strict adherence to the rules: a husband and wife are separated, a wanted murderer is able to escape, a human-trafficker is free to terrorise vulnerable women. These moments make the player uneasily aware of their moral responsibility, creating what Sicart describes as “ethical cognitive friction” (2010, 2013).

**Moral sensitivity:** *PP* leaves a lot of room for the player to discover the ethical import of their behaviour for themselves. Every decision is made using the same set of mechanical actions, rather than offering a particular set of morally loaded alternatives. It is left up to the player to realise that in some circumstances stamping a passport or operating a scanner may be a moral or immoral action

Take for instance the X-ray scanner introduced into the game on Day 6. This is a new mechanic, added to the booth as the result of a terrorist incident and justified as a way to detect illegal weaponry and contraband. And indeed, the player can use it to detain travellers carrying concealed weapons, but it can also be used to check the sex of travellers whose facial features do not appear to match their sex as noted on their passport. The scanner produces a full-frontal nude image of the traveller with which the player can check their apparent genitalia. If these don’t match the passport information, the traveller can be denied entry or detained.

This is clearly morally problematic – it demonstrates creeping surveillance, gender discrimination and invasion of privacy – and yet the game makes no overt issue of it. It is merely another example of increasing state oppression and player complicity.

**Moral judgement:** Thematically, *PP* explores the tensions between obedience to authority, personal interest, responsibilities to one’s family, and the rights and needs of (often vulnerable) migrants. Decisions often have multiple sides: the need to support the player’s family, the needs of the travellers and the (sometimes valid, sometimes tyrannical) demands of the government. Decisions are complicated by connection; sacrificing income to show sympathy to one traveller may leave you too poor to help another or to feed your family, and ultimately the player’s position is morally invidious.

Moral behaviour in the game is not simply a matter of solving neatly packaged problems. Finding any fair and consistent policy, apart from blind obedience to the law, is strongly challenging.

**Moral action:** Even if the player knows the moral thing they want to do, the game makes it difficult to carry it out. First of all, morality is expensive in this game. The player needs to work hard in order to make enough income to be able to afford the opportunity to break the rules. On top of this, some moral problems call for their own kind of diligence. Keeping an eye out for certain travellers to stop or let through (in spite of their documents) adds a demand on the player's already divided attention. Overall the game shows moral action is difficult; it is much easier if the player is willing to ignore the demands of their conscience.

## CONCLUSION

Designing a morally engaging game is not simply a matter of scripting a series of moral temptations or dilemmas with multiple-choice outcomes. The player must first be convinced of the importance of taking a moral stance and the game must take their moral choices seriously. The game must then provide the player with the means to play with moral sophistication – sensing, judging and acting on moral problems in complex and challenging ways – and to increase their skill over time. We are still some way from achieving this goal in our games, and there are no easy solutions, but we believe the lenses provided in this paper can help designers think rigorously through all of these design elements needed to provide greater moral depth to games as an expressive medium.

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