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Moral Dilemmas in Digital Games

JEFFREY WIMMER

How COMPUTER GAMES CAN PROMOTE ETHICAL REFLECTION

Classical game theories illustrate that the game phenomenon has always been seen as a significant source of human self-awareness. From this perspective, the act of gaming manifests itself as an elementary component of human culture. Games possess the power to not only trigger cultural processes, but to influence them as well. Digital games, in the form of today's computer games, should also not be underestimated in having an impact on individual personal development, and in turn, on social and societal contexts.¹ As they now play an integral role in the media repertoire of a majority of the population,² the question is not so much "if, but rather how they can potentially change the social behavior of individuals and how people coexist."³

- 1 Wimmer, Jeffrey: "Digital Game Culture(s) as Prototype(s) of Mediatization and Commercialization of Society," in: Johannes Fromme/Alexander Unger (eds.), *Computer Games/Players/Game Cultures: A Handbook on the State and Perspectives of Digital Game Studies*, Berlin: Springer 2012, pp. 525-540.
- 2 Quandt, Thorsten/Chen, Vivian/Mäyrä, Frans/Van Looy, Jan: "(Multiplayer) Gaming Around the Globe? A Comparison of Gamer Surveys in Four Countries," in: Thorsten Quandt/Sonja Kröger, *Multiplayer. The Social Aspects of Digital Gaming*, London: Routledge 2014, pp. 23-46.
- 3 Krotz, Friedrich: "Computerspiele als neuer Kommunikationstypus: Interaktive Kommunikation als Zugang zu komplexen Welten," in: Thorsten Quandt et al. (eds.), *Die*

Computer games offer players a complex, structured experience. This in turn allows players room for creating meaning and other learning processes, which, in addition to game logic and experience, always refer also to the contexts of representation and appropriation.⁴ This structured experience, however, cannot be considered in isolation. Instead, it is only analytically graspable through playing behavior and game practices. Prototypical examples are the various virtual interactions and chat spaces in the world of online gaming. These shape the awareness of gamers in many ways. This applies to their sense of time, attention control, the forming of emotions, relevance and guidance models.⁵

For players, the mediated worlds of computer games represent a living environment for self-construction, identity experimentation and shared experience. These worlds can be understood as a kind of social laboratory free from physical and real-world obstacles. Despite their mediated nature, however, these communicative processes of constructing meaning are no less physically and psychologically powerful under certain conditions and in specific contexts, and are from a real world point of view constructive for both identity and community. Seen in this way, virtual entry into the computer game world—beyond dispersion and mere entertainment—is not only an act of individual perception, but it also possesses deep ethical and moral character under the described conditions. From this perspective, the previously neglected research question of ethical implications of computer games plays a significant role.⁶

Computerspieler. Studien zur Nutzung von Computergames, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag 2009, pp. 25-40.

- 4 Mitgutsch, Konstantin/Huber, Simon/Wimmer, Jeffrey/Wagner, Michael/Rosenstingl, Herbert: "Context Matters! Exploring and Reframing Games and Play in Context—An Introduction," in: Konstantin Mitgutsch et al. (eds.), *Context Matters! Exploring and Reframing Games in Context. Proceedings of the Vienna Games Conference 2013*, Wien: New Academic Press 2013, pp. 9-16.
- 5 Wimmer, Jeffrey/Nickol, Jana: "Sports Videogames in Everyday Life. A Meaning-Oriented Analysis of the Appropriation of the Online Soccer Manager Game Hat-trick," in: Mia Consalvo et al. (eds.), *Sports Videogames*, London et al.: Routledge 2013, pp. 236-251.
- 6 Sicart, Miguel: *The Ethics of Computer Games*, Cambridge: MIT Press 2009; Zagal, Jose P.: "Ethically Notable Videogames: Moral Dilemmas and Gameplay," in: DiGRA (ed.), *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://www.digra.org/wpcontent/uploads/digital-library/09287.13336.pdf>

COMPUTER GAMES, ETHICS AND MORAL DILEMMAS

Computer games can be understood as both moral objects and agents of ethical values. At closer inspection, not only are ethical values and moral statements rooted in their design, but they also mediate them.⁷ Game narratives, rules, achievements or high scores suggest what is to be considered both right and virtuous. This aspect is closely connected to the game experience. Therefore, the morality of computer games lies not only in what they tell, but also how they tell it.

This complexity can be illustrated by the third level of the military ego-shooter game *CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2* from 2009.⁸ It includes one of the most controversial and most discussed scenes in the history of digital games. In this very provocative yet elaborately designed stage of the game, the player, set in the role of a US American secret agent, is involved in a massacre by Russian terrorists. This act of terrorism in the game is the starting point for a global military conflict between the USA and Russia. The player has three options:

- In order to maintain cover, the player can participate in the shooting of helpless civilians.
- The player can decide not to shoot, and instead simply follow the other terrorists through the game world.
- The player can shoot the terrorists. If the player decides to do this, the cover is blown. The role is not successfully filled and the game ends.

In the censored version of the game, such as in Germany, it is forbidden to shoot civilians. In the uncut version, however, this option is the most logical option from the perspective of the game narrative. The empirically unresolved question that arises from this situation is to what extent the player distances, or can distance, his or herself from the virtual brutalities of the event. Without this distance, the game experience—simulating participation in existential actions—does not work.⁹ Another game in which the discussion of morality in computer

7 M. Sicart: *The Ethics of Computer Games*.

8 *CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2* (Activision 2009, O: Infinity Ward)

9 Spieler, Klaus: "Ethik der Computerspiele: Computerspiele in Kultur und Bildung." in: Stephan Günzel et al. (eds.), *DIG4REC Lectures 2008/09*, Potsdam: Potsdam Uni-

games manifested itself prominently, is a game from 2003 called MANHUNT.¹⁰ Here, the player plays the role of a convicted criminal who is ransomed by a media mogul to murder people on camera. What is particularly controversial is that the player can determine the degree of violence used, which is then further explicitly represented. Consequently, the game was indexed by the German Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Minors. In this case, however, there are also opinions that would even classify the game as ethically noteworthy as it allows for a change in perspective and forces the player to come to particular moral decisions.¹¹ Apart from these two prominent examples of integrating elements of moral decision-making into the game, there has recently been an upsurge in game concepts that put the player in the position to make moral decisions, often in the form of moral dilemmas that can greatly influence the course of the game. In such a constellation of decisions—if one follows the analytical approach of some game researchers—there lies a great potential for establishing a kind of ethical gaming experience. This is because the player's decisions within the game, and their underlying values, transform them to ethical actors, and therefore create a moral gaming experience. Examples include games and game series such as DEUS EX,¹² FABLE,¹³ GTA,¹⁴ MASS EFFECT,¹⁵ STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC,¹⁶ THIS WAR OF MINE,¹⁷ FATE OF THE WORLD¹⁸ and SPEC OPS — THE LINE, among others.¹⁹

The basic idea of a moral dilemma can be defined as a predicament in which someone has a choice between two or more options.²⁰ The alternatives generate

versity Press, 2009, pp. 84-92, http://opus.kobv.de/ubp/volltexte/2009/3329/pdf/digarec02_S084_092.pdf, accessed February 28, 2016.

10 MANHUNT (Rockstar Games 2003, O: Rockstar North)

11 J. P. Zagal: "Ethically Notable Videogames".

12 DEUS EX (Eidos Interactive 2000, O: Ion Storm Austin)

13 FABLE (Microsoft Studios 2004, O: Lionhead Studios)

14 GRAND THEFT AUTO (Rockstar Games 1997, O: DMA Design/Rockstar North)

15 MASS EFFECT (Microsoft Game Studios/Electronic Arts 2007, O: BioWare)

16 STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC (LucasArts 2003, O: BioWare)

17 THIS WAR OF MINE (Deep Silver 2014, O: 11 Bit Studios)

18 FATE OF THE WORLD (Red Redemption Ltd/Lace Mamba Global 2011, O: Red Redemption Ltd)

19 SPEC OPS: THE LINE (2K Games 2012, O: Yager Development)

20 Lind, Georg: *Moral ist lehrbar. Handbuch zur Theorie und Praxis moralischer und demokratischer Bildung*, Munich: Oldenbourg 2003, pp. 78ff.

from the fact that, due to a contradiction between the norms and values of the acting person and the norms and values of another frame of reference, a conflict arises in which the acting person feels lost and cannot decide which way he or she should go.²¹ Sellmaier speaks of three general aspects that make up a moral dilemma.²² On one hand is the lack of a clear guideline, and on the other hand is the need for moral failure. The acting person is therefore compelled, regardless of what he or she decides, to violate a moral principle.²³ This moral failure always leads to guilt and remorse for what has been done.²⁴ Third, a decision includes an emergency situation, in which not deciding has significantly worse consequences than the competing options.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MORAL DECISIONS IN DIGITAL GAMES

What is the particularity of moral dilemmas that apply to game context? In reference to the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, Schulzke postulates that games and their numerous decision-making situations have inestimable educational value.²⁵ By way of moral actions during the game, players gain practical experience with morally correct decisions or can evaluate their actions by experiencing the consequences of immoral decisions. The gaming experience also touches on the intellectual and emotional attitudes of the player as he or she is essentially forced to interact with the specific rules and ethics of play.²⁶ Under this assumption, moral dilemmas within the game can sensitize players to real-world moral dilemmas, and as a result, promote ethical reflection.

21 Statman, Daniel: *Moral Dilemma*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2003, p.7.

22 Sellmaier, Stephan: *Ethik der Konflikte*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2008, pp. 38 ff.

23 G. Lind: *Moral ist lehrbar*, p. 18 ff.

24 Railton, Peter: "The Diversity of Moral Dilemma," in: H.E. Mason (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas and Moral Theory*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996, p. 153.

25 Schulzke, Marcus: "Moral Decision Making in *Fallout*," in: *Game Studies* 9/2 (2009), <http://gamestudies.org/0902>, accessed February 28, 2016.

26 Pohl, Kirsten: "Just a Game? Simulating Moral Issues," in: Sybille Baumbach et al. (eds.), *Literature and Values. Literature as a Medium for Representing, Disseminating and Constructing Norms and Values*, Trier: WVT 2009, p. 279.

The factor *consequences of action* can be regarded as a decisive factor.²⁷ As a negative example of this, Sicart²⁸ refers to the surprisingly popular and critically acclaimed role-playing shooter BIOSHOCK.²⁹ In this game, players are faced with the decision of killing “little sisters” (avatars of young children) in order to gain ADAM (a resource within the game), which will make them more powerful. If a player chooses not to kill, he or she receives only half of the available ADAM. Sicart argues that this game scenario only presents an ethical decision at first sight; its implementation is incomplete as the player’s decision has ultimately no effect on the course of the game.³⁰ Additionally, there are no reactions of computer-controlled avatars during the game which would determine the moral point-of-view of the player and would give meaning to the player’s decision. Therefore, Sicart assumes that players are acting according to the game’s logic—that is to achieve objectives as efficiently and effectively as possible—instead of making decisions dependent on moral bearings. A changed distribution of game resources—comparable to a slight cosmetic correction—would be not considered enough of a consequence to make the player feel the weight of his or her actions.

Sicart additionally points out the important factor of technical integration of good and evil of the player’s actions into computer games which could be achieved with the help of both visible and invisible moral evaluation systems.³¹ The systematic and visible evaluation of player actions, for example through the display of *karma points* or from avatar facial features, could detain players from taking responsibility for every moral action. Following this assumption, the process of self-evaluation would be considered as another regular element of gameplay, and it would play no special part in the moral reflection that a player experiences. This is because with the implementation of a visible moral system, the player would only make decisions that the game evaluates.³² Pohl illustrates with her case study of FABLE³³ that a simplified division of good and evil actions is not conducive to morally involving a player in the game.³⁴ Neither course of

27 M. Schulzke: “Moral Decision Making in Fallout.”

28 M. Sicart: *Ethics of Computer Games*, pp. 159f.

29 BIOSHOCK (2K Games 2007, O: 2K Boston/Australia/Marin)

30 M. Sicart: *Ethics of Computer Games*, p. 159.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 212.

33 FABLE (Microsoft Studios 2004, O: Lionhead Studios)

34 K. Pohl: “Just a Game? Simulating Moral Issues,” p. 117.

action creates doubt or ambivalence in a player since the player can predict in advance how his or her actions will be evaluated, nor are none of the options ultimately linked to a restrictive consequence.³⁵

So, how can a moral dilemma be well-depicted in a computer game? Zagal argues that rewarding specific points, for example, does not create a moral dilemma, as the decision is based more on the basis of game mechanics than on ethical guidelines. In general, he says that a moral dilemma only exists if the player has the direct decision-making power over the outcome of an ethical conflict. A decision based on previous gameplay is therefore excluded.³⁶ Pohl mentions another categorization that defines two depictions of moral dilemmas within a game.³⁷ On the one hand, there is a fundamental conflict of having to make a decision that affects the course of the game, and on the other hand, there is an explicit simulation of a moral situation that is implemented into the structure of a game. The transfer of responsibility to the player and the necessary assessment of his or her decisions are seen as a form of a moral situation simulation. The explicit declaration of the player's decision being either good or evil is seen as another form of simulation of a moral situation.³⁸

The player has strict rational reasons for choosing an option, but every decision is also an individual and emotional decision for the player. Therefore, each player assesses him- or herself and behaves differently in particular game scenarios.³⁹ A prototypical scenario for a moral dilemma is one with the potential for good and evil decisions that have a significant impact on the course of the game. However, the player should not obtain complete information over the details of the dilemma, for example when the true intentions of a computer-controlled non-player character (NPC) remain hidden from the player, or are first seen later in the game.⁴⁰ With little information available, moral dilemmas are more challenging for players and are thus more conducive to the reflection of moral actions. Pohl also mentions a similar scenario that, in her opinion, makes a game morally valuable.⁴¹ This requires players to answer, consciously or unconsciously, for their morality. This would be the case if in a game “the player is forced to make

35 Ibid., p. 118.

36 J. P. Zagal: “Ethically Notable Videogames,” p. 7.

37 K. Pohl: “Just a Game? Simulating Moral Issues,” p. 284.

38 Ibid., p. 285.

39 Ibid., p. 284.

40 M. Schulzke: “Moral Decision Making in Fallout”, p. 9f.

41 K. Pohl: “Just a Game? Simulating Moral Issues,” p. 119.

an uninformed decision and/or has to accept consequences that are irreversible or create a situation that, under different circumstances, would not exist.”⁴² Important for a moral decision in a game is therefore to connect an ambiguous situation with fixed player restrictions,⁴³ thereby personally involving the player in the game.⁴⁴

LIMITATIONS AND OUTLOOK

The extent in which players accept these moral decision-making situations cannot be answered at this point. An exploratory survey from Lange shows, for example, that players prefer the good path as well as player reincarnation as opposed to evil.⁴⁵ The basic settings of a game or a current emotional state could also significantly influence decisions within a game. For example, it is unclear to what extent an emotional connection in the game can influence player decisions during a dilemma. Assuming a player is emotionally involved in a game, moral dilemmas may have a completely different effect on a player. A decision in a particular area may be simplified, while in another it may be more difficult. A life or death situation has a completely different meaning to a player if they have an emotional attachment with an NPC, or as Hablesreiter claims, if the player were to lose a ‘virtual friend’ from a decision.⁴⁶ Even if the decision has no impact on the course of the game, it can still affect the player: a player might feel guilty about a particular decision and, at least on an emotional level, experience an altered form of game play. It is also analytically stronger to consider that any gaming experience and evaluation is embedded in real-world contexts. Page has identified this important context factor in his analysis of Chinese computer gamers, among whom virtual killings are judged as morally positive in the context of

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., p. 199f.

44 Ibid., p. 279.

45 Lange, Amanda: “‘You’re Just Gonna Be Nice’: How Players Engage with Moral Choice Systems,” in: *Game Criticism* 1/1 (2014), <http://gamescriticism.org/articles/lange-1-1>, accessed February 28, 2016.

46 Hablesreiter, Roland: *Film vs. Computerspiel—Storytelling als gemeinsame Stärke*, Master Thesis, Film Academy Vienna 2010, p. 120. http://storage.maehring.at/TEMP/Diplomarbeit_Roland_Hablesreiter_100428.pdf, accessed February 28, 2016.

neoliberal reforms in China.⁴⁷ To enable ethical and moral reflection, not only should conflict in future games be comprehensibly portrayed and moral decisions explicitly required, but their impact on the game world as well as players should also be strictly enforced so that players can learn to evaluate their ethical and moral attitudes. An ideal scenario for a moral dilemma is one with the potential for good and evil decisions that have significant consequences for the course of the game.

This paper focused strongly on player and game-oriented dimensions of computer game ethics that will continue to gain relevance as popularity of computer game ethics increases. Apart from these inherent ethical aspects of the game, further issues regarding media ethics at the meso and macro levels of digital game ecology can also be formulated, in which theoretical and empirical answers have yet to be provided: What is, for example, the ethical responsibility of game developers and the gaming industry in regards to individual games and society in general? What role, if any, can games play as critical, cultural correctives compared to other (traditional) mass media games?

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47 Page, Richard: “Leveling Up: Playerkilling as Ethical Self-Cultivation,” in *Games and Culture* 7/3(2012), pp. 238-257.

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