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Focus, Sensitivity, Judgement, Action

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 these skills can 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 these games.

Keywords

game design, lenses, ethics, empathy, videogames, moral psychology, Four Component Model

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, 2011, Zoss, 2010, Schrier, 2015)(Sicart 2009). 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 hard moral choices themselves, rather than 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 engage morally with the work 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 comprising 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 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 requires four core abilities: focus, sensitivity, judgement 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. In adopting this approach, we follow Schell’s philosophy of providing questions and provocations rather than prescriptive answers. Our aim is not to make all games moral, or for all moral games to fit a particular mould, but to enrich the discussion of moral play with new perspectives. Our lenses are intended as tools for designers and critics alike to more rigorously understand the player’s moral engagement with a game.

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 leads to the design of games for what Sicart (2010) calls the reactive player, “a strategist concerned with directly interacting with a system regardless of the actual meaning of her actions.” This instrumental attitude toward play limits the expressive power of the medium. To reach beyond it, we need to learn how to encourage reflective players for whom “playing is understanding the values of the gameworld and developing an ethical persona” (Sicart, 2010).

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 (2011, 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”. 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, 2011) – 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 insights 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 moral action (Rest, 1983). The Four Component Model is a descriptive account of what constitutes ethical expertise, rather than a normative account of what morality requires of us. 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 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 to 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 is 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. For example, one can enhance their moral sensitivity 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 provides designers with new avenues to engage and challenge the player as a moral agent.

To achieve this end, we provide four “lenses” below, 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, a prescriptive model of what a moral game should be, or guidelines that all games must meet, 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 regarding the game in question, and with 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 a highly developed moral focus prioritise moral concerns above other concerns, and possess 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 Lama (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 players 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 players] 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 and Belford, 2014, 18).

Contrast this 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".¹

Design Challenges

Video games often encourage players to ignore the moral dimension of their in-game behaviour in favour of maximising ludic outcomes (Hartmann and Vorderer, 2010). 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 previously playing numerous morally inert games is no easy task. The player must become "complicit" (Sicart, 2013) with the game's morality, making moral decisions for moral and not instrumental reasons. This is the foremost challenge for designers seeking to make morally engaging games. For moral content to be recognized and treated as moral content, designers need to encourage the player to take a reflective stance rather than take a purely reactive approach to play.

As such, "morality meters", which mechanically record a morality score for the player and add or remove points of "karma" for different in-game

1. This is by no means intended as a criticism of the game. *GTA III* is an enormously fun game because it is a moral vacuum.

acts, ought to be avoided when designing for moral focus. In addition to “desensitising the agent to their ethical thinking about the simulation ... [by] focusing it on the procedural layer” (Sicart, 2009), morality meters are a frequent source of frustration (Melenson, 2011), 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 with this – maybe the medical supplies are for treating a life-threatening injury and 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 such as experience points, treasure, or new abilities: not only is the player frustratingly misjudged by an “omniscient axis [and] transparent proxy for developer opinions” (Melenson, 2011, 67), they are 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 in the game (Belman and Flanagan, 2010). This can be achieved with the fictional framing of the game: the setting, the role of the player, and the responses of other characters in the game. 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 facilitating moral focus. 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. For example, we know (or at least we 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 in the game 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, 2011, 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 and 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 in the game? What motivates the player to treat moral decisions as moral decisions and not as instrumental decisions?
- Are players encouraged to role-play a moral identity in the game? If so, how does this impact how players perceive their own behaviour in the game?
- Are players given opportunities to reflect on their behaviour? How

is that reflection prompted?

- How are the consequences of moral choices represented? What does this 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 on 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 need not 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, signaled 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. Similar 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 involves – 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 discussed above. These

actions employ the same mechanics as the rest of the game and 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.

Empathy – the ability to cognitively and emotionally place oneself in another’s shoes – is at the core of moral sensitivity. To engage the player’s empathy, we need 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., 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.

Questions to Consider

- How is moral content presented to the player? Is it clearly signposted as moral content or are players expected to “see” morality themselves?
- How can players 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 judgement 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 how 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.*, 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 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 all seem to be morally justified or required. 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 or professional roles, to wider societal norms and universal concepts such as the categorical imperative or 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 decision-making processes. To better challenge a player’s ethical judgement, 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 to 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.

Questions to Consider

- What kind of moral choices is the player asked 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 to 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 using 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 as 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 the player's group takes 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 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 skillful enough (physically, intellectually, socially) to put their choice into effect.

The size of the solution-space matters here. Giving the player more ways to solve moral problems by stringing together fine-grained actions provides more scope for them to exercise skill and creativity, rather than just picking a solution from a predetermined list. This can engender a greater sense of ownership in the solution.

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 the choice into action?
- How difficult is it for players to put their choices into action? What skills are needed to do this?
- How big is the space of solutions? Is there room for the player to

be creative in solving moral problems? Or are they forced to choose from a predetermined list of options?

- Does moral action require persistence? If so, how is the player's resolve tested over time? Are there opportunities 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 these games attempt to ethically engage players, but they use significantly different approaches to do so. Our lenses help us to develop a more detailed understanding of these games and highlight the features of each approach. However, we offer here only a partial analysis of these two games in order to illustrate our four lenses.

In offering this demonstration, we recognise that analysis and design are related but distinct activities. Lenses such as these are not simple 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 game 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 in the long term. 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. For example, a choice of whether or not to take supplies from an apparently abandoned car has no effect on the long-term survival of the group, but does affect the player’s relationships with other characters in the game, some of who will criticise the 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: Most 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 empathy.

Moral judgement: TWD exhibits a greater variety of moral decision types than many games of this nature. There are few direct moral temptations (choosing between a selfless ‘good’ option and a selfish ‘evil’ option) and more moral dilemmas with several arguably ‘good’ options. Temptation choices are more likely to be expressed in terms of benefiting other characters rather than benefiting 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 faced every day. 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 often revisited from multiple angles, inviting deeper consideration of the commonalities and differences between each instance.

Moral action: Repetition of moral dilemmas 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. For example, one task in the third episode involves Lee trying to get Kenny, who is upset about his son and feeling guilty about his past actions, to stop a speeding train. The challenge is to do this without resorting to anger and violence by making a series of interconnected dialogue choices. This difficult task requires persistence, calmness, emotional intelligence, empathy, and conflict resolution skills. Without these advanced skills in moral action, you can't get Kenny to stop the train without using force. 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 totalitarian 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

servicing 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. Sacrificing 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 matters. 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 (Formosa, Ryan and Staines, 2016).

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 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 that 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 in the game 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, prioritising and acting on moral problems in complex and challenging ways – and to increase their skill over time. While there are no easy solutions, we hope to have demonstrated that the four lenses provided in this paper can help designers to think rigorously through all the design elements needed to make games with moral depth.

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