Foreword

"What a videogame does at heart is teach you how, in the midst of utter chaos, to know what is important, what is not and act on that" -- *Colonel Casey Wardynski*

"I'm reviewing the situation. Can a fellow be a villain all his life?" or so asks Fagin, the scheming and ruthless mastermind of an army of thieving young boys, at a key moment in *Oliver!*, the musical based on Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Fagin's "situation" may be an odd place to start in thinking about the potential role of games in providing ethical and moral instruction—after all, Dickens used Fagin to embody the negative influences that besieged young men when society turned their backs on them—but bear with me.

In *Oliver!*, through the song, "Reviewing the Situation," we have a character digging deep into his own goals, values, and place in the world, and openly proclaiming that his experiences as a "villain" make him ill-suited to most of the trappings of a "normal life." Fagin's self-reflection leads him to construct and test a series of scenarios (marrying, joining respectable society, getting a job, living alone, freeing the young men in his employee, reaching old age), each embodying an alternative version of himself. Fagin plays out their consequences as a series of thought experiments, before pulling back and deciding to "think it out again." In the course of "Reviewing the Situation," Fagin engages in a range of different cognitive processes—projecting alternative versions of himself, and speculating about possible choices and anticipating their consequences—all in a particular kind of mental space that has no immediate consequences for his current social situation, though it has the potential to reshape the way he sees himself and his place in the world. Here, for example, he explores what it would be like to work for a living: "Is it such a humiliation for a robber to perform an honest job? So a job I'm getting, possibly, I wonder who my boss'll be? I wonder if he'll take to me...? What bonuses he'll make to me...? I'll start at eight and finish late, At normal rate, and all …but wait! ...I think I'd better think it out again."

Now consider a typical adolescent, seated in front of her computer screen, beginning to construct a character for a role playing game, and facing the same range of questions about her potential identities and goals. Should she join the dark horde, embrace a life as a villain, commit atrocities on other players, and in the process, begin to experiment with and potentially exorcise the darker side of her own personality? Or, should she become one of the good ones, going out to do heroic deeds, sharing the loot with others in her party, rescuing those in distress and helping newbies learn to play, and developing a sense of responsibility and accountability to others in her guild? Should she design an avatar that reflects the way she sees herself or should she embrace a fantasy radically different from her real world personality or situation and in so doing, see what it might be like to walk in a different set of moccasins?

Like Fagin, she can try on different personas, test different scenarios, and imagine alternative moral codes through which she might navigate the challenges of her day-to-day existence. She has the option of taking risks, dying, rebooting, and exploring another course of action: "I think I'd better think it out

again." While young people have often found it difficult to anticipate the future consequences of their current actions, the game offers her a powerful tool through which to accelerate life processes and thus play out in the course of an afternoon several different scenarios and their consequences. And through in-game cameras that allow players to record and replay their actions, she can literally review the situation, going back to key choice points and retrospectively evaluate where she went wrong and how bad decisions led to negative consequences. Seen in this way, the computer game constitutes an incredible resource for self-reflection and personal exploration, one with rich potentials for moral and ethical education. No other current art form allows such an intense focus on choices and their consequences; no other art form allows us this same degree of agency to make our own decisions and then live through their outcomes.

Shortly after Columbine, while the news media was full of sensationalistic speculations about whether video games constituted "murder simulators" and whether they deployed operative conditioning to brainwash otherwise normal young men into school shooters, MIT's Comparative Media Studies program was approached by a group of business men who had plans to construct a Christian-themed amusement center. They had taken at face value the prevalent misconception that games were a magic device that could turn good kids into bad people. They wondered if it might be possible to reverse engineer existing games and design play experiences that could transform the bad kids into good ones (or at least into better ones) through reinforcing pro-social values. Thankfully, we were able to convince the group that what they were proposing relied on a reductive model of the educational value of games, though that critique left open the prospect that games might nevertheless be an appropriate platform for exploring ethical issues. And it is this terrain that is so well explored by the various contributors to this volume.

While these contributors approach the ethical value of games from many different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, I am happy that none of them start from the premise, widespread less than a decade ago, that games were programs that programmed their players. Thankfully, games are now being discussed through a language of media ethics, which emphasizes what the player does with the game, rather than a language of media effects, which stresses what the game does to the player.

Instead, most chapters in this volume start from a scenario similar to the one involving Fagin illustrated above. That is, games represent tools that enable personal reflection and ethical exploration, often through the construction of what James Paul Gee (2007) calls Projective Identities. Gee uses the word, Projective, here in two senses. First, the player projects aspects of herself onto the game avatar, maintaining an emotional relationship with this fictive identity that is intense and intimate and yet at the same time, preserving some degree of separation and distance from the game character, who is like us and yet not us, even if we are able to control the character's actions. Second, the player, in embracing the character, also embraces their "project": the game constructs a set of goals and roles that motivate, and to some degree constrain, our actions and determine what the costs and rewards may be for different choices we make during our play experience. Taken together, these two conceptions of "projection" explain what allows games to serve important ethical functions. Such a balance between intimacy and distance, between free will and pre-articulated rules, roles, and goals, allows us to embrace a particular stance toward the represented events, allowing players to speculate and explore ethical alternatives. The game thus supports both embodied/situated and abstract moral reasoning, often at the same moment. Our agency over the character pushes well beyond the empathy we might feel for a fictional figure in any other medium, and yet we hold onto the recognition that the character lives in a world that operates on fundamentally different principles than our own.

Much like Fagin, who discovers that he cannot change who he is, even at what seems to be a turning point in his life, the player controls a character and yet also faces fundamental constraints in the character's programming that restricts what she can do with them. One gamer/filmmaker (Jenkins and

Bertozzi, 2007) once described to me that the process of making movies using *The Sims* is like working with trained animals: you can try to get them to do what you want but you can't prevent them from peeing on the floor. Fagin, like Jessica Rabbit, isn't bad; he's just drawn that way, or rather, he is the product of a lifetime of choices that determine that he may indeed be a villain all his life. The game character is not altogether bad, but it is really difficult (though rarely impossible) for a player to override its basic programming. You can play *Grand Theft Auto*, going around rescuing people, rather than bashing them in the head with a baseball bat, but what's the fun in that? The player who makes that choice faces a penalty, pays a cost, which, in the end, suggests just how challenging it can be for an ex-con to change their situation.

The game designer, Will Wright (*The Sims, Spore*) (Personal Conversation, 2006), has said on more than one occasion that games are the only medium that allows us to experience guilt. Think about it. If a character in a novel or a film does something we find morally reprehensible, we can always pull away from the character; we can blame the author for making immoral or amoral choices; or we can critique the character as a "villain" who does not deserve our moral sympathy. Yet, in playing a game, should our protagonist make a choice that has reprehensible consequences, we as players are always partially to blame. We mashed the button; we moved the join stick; we made the choice that put the character into that situation in the first place, even if we rarely made the choice from a position of total control. Confronting such a situation, we learn something, potentially, about ourselves and we learn something, potentially, about the rule system of the game itself.

I say the player "potentially" learns something through the rule system because there is no guarantee that either the game design or the player's mental attitude will yield meaningful ethical reflection. Such a moment of reflection is only as powerful as the ethical model underlying the game allows it to be. The game as a system simulates certain processes according to pre-coded principles; the designer makes choices about what kinds of consequences might emerge in the course of the game play; the designer often frames the choices the character confronts and determines what possibilities are available to the player at any given moment of play. A powerful game design can embody and dramatize certain core ethical debates; it can provide resources that encourage us to ask certain questions and enable us to explore their ramifications. The game designer can arbitrarily narrow the range of potential responses, so that in confronting an ethically-charged situation, we may have no options but to shoot or flee. Yet, throughout the history of the medium, there have been designers—Peter Molyneux (*Fable, Black And White*), Brenda Laurel (*Purple Moon*), and Wright himself come to mind—who recognized and realized some of the potential games offer as ethical systems. Game designers talk about "possibility spaces" to describe the range of potential actions built into the game, yet we might also talk about the "probability space" to reflect the likelihood that a player will chose one set of options over another, much the way a magician may "force a card," making it harder for the rube to foul up the trick. The ethical system of a game emerges both from what the game allows the player to do and from what the game doesn't support or actively discourages.

And I say that the player "potentially" learns something about themselves because the potential for self-reflection rests also on the mental framing and social context the player brings to the experience. Again, assuming we reject the brainwashing or conditioning or programming metaphors, then we have to assume that the player takes active agency over what they do in the game and over what they bring from their game play experience back with them into the world. For reflection to occur, the player has to invest enough of themselves—intellectually, emotionally—into the game to be willing to ask hard questions about the events that occur and their relationship to their own everyday experiences. They have to engage in what various people have called "hard fun" or "serious play," rather than dismiss the game play as inherently frivolous and meaningless. The Good Play project at Harvard University (James

et al., 2008), for example, has found that many young people do not apply their emerging ethical understanding to online experiences because they have been taught by their teachers and parents that what happens on line doesn't really matter. They often ignore the humanity of the actual people with whom they interact online and aren't always projecting ethical questions onto the bytes and pixels with whom they interact in a computer game. Yet there is some hope that pedagogical interventions may teach players new ways to deploy games as vehicles for self exploration, and may give them the ethical frameworks through which to ask questions about and through their play which might not emerge elsewhere in their everyday lives. As players review their situation, they may do so in an opportunistic or formalistic way, seeking only to best the game's system and enhance their opportunities to win. But they may also do so on a deeper level, seeking to use the game as what Sherry Turkle (2007) might describe as "a tool to think with," asking themselves why they are drawn toward certain kinds of characters or why they favor certain options in their play over time.

I am often reminded of one of my former graduate students—a young mother who had gotten divorced just before she left Europe to come to our program. She was spending time in the evening playing *The Sims* and using her fictional persona to imagine what it would mean for her to re-enter the dating scene. What she did not know was that her preteen son was playing the same game, entering the same reality, and seeking to construct for himself the perfect family. As fate would have it, her more seductive character lured away the husband from her son's idealized family, shattering the illusion he had constructed for himself. When the mother discovered what she had done, she was horrified by the implications of her own choices and soon mother and son were playing together, doing what they could to heal the rift in the fictional marriage, only to discover that what had been done could not be undone. The game, thus, became a tool for them to talk through the dramatic changes that were rewriting the terms of their relationship to each other, allowing the mother and son to share some of their emotional experiences and to better understand how choices they were making impacted each other's lives. They could do so both because the game's programming opened up or foreclose certain options in a way that offered a particular model of the moral universe and because the players were receptive to the possibilities that there might be meaningful connections drawn between their game world and real life experiences. The two had conversations through their game play that they had found emotionally difficult to confront on a more literal terrain.

Of these two challenges (encoding a moral vision into the game, developing a moral framework around the game play experience), the first requires an intervention on the level of design, or encouraging the people who make the games to take seriously their potential as a medium for exploring ethical issues. The second requires an intervention on the level of education, or fostering a mode of play that encourages players to use games to perform meaningful thought experiments and using them as a vehicle through which to explore and refine their own emerging ethical perspectives. Here again, we are well served by this collection, whose contributors seek both to understand specific games as sites of ethical exploration (and thus to focus us on design issues) and seek to place games in their larger social context or discuss ways that games can be deployed pedagogically to encourage ethical reflection. Keep in mind, as you read them, that games are still an emerging medium, which is still trying to find and achieve its fullest potential. Game studies as a discipline is at an equally formative stage; each new book helps to expand the range of theoretical paradigms and methods that will shape the work of future generations. In recent years, we've seen a growing body of scholarship that explore games as a space for aesthetic expression and experimentation, as a form of political rhetoric that models the world it seeks to change, as a set of pedagogical practices that encourages a new epistemic understanding, as a model of economic relations that allow us to suspend or reshape the rules governing human commerce, and as a set of geographic practices that encourage us to see the urban landscape through new eyes and engage with the community

around us on new terms. It is exciting to see this book expand these discussions to consider more fully what games might teach us about morality and ethics and as importantly, how they may do so.

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