Chapter 3
Videogames and Moral Pedagogy: A Neo-Kohlbergian Approach

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ABSTRACT

The Four Component Model of Moral Functioning is a framework for understanding moral competence originally developed by James Rest and subsequently revised with Darcia Narvaez. It posits that moral competence can be broken up into four distinct components: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral action. The purpose of the present chapter is to demonstrate, via an examination of three commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) videogames (Ultima IV, Fallout 3, and Mass Effect), how this model can function as a blueprint for the design of moral content in games intended for pedagogy and entertainment.

MORAL PSYCHOLOGY: KOHLBERGIAN AND NEO-KOHLMERGIAN APPROACHES

Research into the psychology of moral development has experienced something of a renaissance over the last two decades. Where the field was once defined by the views of Lawrence Kohlberg and the cognitive-developmental paradigm, new perspectives informed by recent research in the cognitive sciences now predominate. Chief among these is the so-called “Neo-Kohlbergian” program championed by psychologist James Rest and colleagues (1999).

To understand the neo-Kohlbergian approach to moral psychology, it is first necessary to appreciate the work of Kohlberg himself and the cognitive-developmental tradition in general. Developed by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget in the first half of the 20th Century, the cognitive-developmental approach to moral psychology is rooted in two key claims: 1) that moral competence “stems from structures of moral reasoning” (Krebs and Denton, 2005, p.631) and 2) that these structures develop over time in
a sequence of stages or phases, with each stage representing a “better cognitive organization than the one before it” (Kohlberg, 1981, p.26).

In ‘The Moral Development of the Child’ (1932), Piaget argued that moral stage development is characterized by two distinct developmental phases: Heteronomous and Autonomous. During the Heteronomous stage, which starts in infancy and ends in the early teens, children think of morality in terms of obedience, and the validity of moral rules as a function of authority. But as children grow older and interact regularly with peer groups, they develop an appreciation for the motives behind moral behavior, for the utility of reciprocity, and for the status of morals as entities separate from the authorities that enforce them (Krebs & Denton, 2005, p.629).

In his 1958 doctoral dissertation, Kohlberg—seeking to expand upon Piaget’s work—developed a series of nine hypothetical moral dilemmas and read them to a sample of 81 boys, recording their responses and probing extensively to determine the rationale for their judgments (Krebs & Denton, 2005, p.629). Over the next twenty years, Kohlberg followed up with more than half of his original respondents, re-interviewing them and refining his moral dilemmas as well as the methodology used to obtain response data. On the basis of these longitudinal studies, Kohlberg developed a six-stage model of moral judgment maturity (see Table 2) representing an “invariant sequence” of moral development (Kohlberg, 1987, p.20). Each moral stage entails “a new logical structure” – an organized way of thinking.

Kohlberg insists that cognitive development must always precede its moral counterpart (ibid. p.138), although he does allow that in many cases a person’s cognitive maturity can outstrip their moral competence. Although moral stage development is universal to humans, most of us (as the cynical reader might expect) do not make the most of our potential in this regard, with the majority of adults tested by Kohlberg and colleagues classified as “conventional” – i.e., in Stage 3 or 4.

Insofar as it places deliberative reason at the core of moral cognition, Kohlberg’s approach to moral psychology is typically classified as rationalist or Kantian (Hauser, 2006, p.16). On this view, the most reliable measure of a person’s moral competence is the sophistication of their moral reasoning. This emphasis, or perhaps over-emphasis, on rationality constitutes the main

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