Chapter 15

Applied Ethics Game Design: Some Practical Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study of the design and development of two original ethics games entitled Veritas University and Knights of Astrus. Through this case study and a review of relevant literature, the authors explore the content creation of, and theoretical rationale for, the design and development of ethics games. Both games use the Adobe Flash® platform and are geared toward an undergraduate student audience as casual games to be completed in a few hours of gameplay. To ground the development of these games, the authors review contemporary research on identity, cognition, and self in relation to video game environments; they also argue for the need for further research and development in this area. From this literature base and their applied design experiences, the authors offer six guidelines as practical suggestions for aspiring ethics game developers.

INTRODUCTION

Designing games for education presents a number of challenges arising from the need to seamlessly incorporate learning content into an engaging interactive experience. Designing games for teaching about ethics is perhaps a more complex process given the inherent ambiguity that arises when there are not necessarily “right” or “wrong” answers and responses can be largely contextual and based on personal value systems as well as situational factors. Such is the challenge associated with the question of learning in applied ethics, a field attempting to more directly address social problems from a moral standpoint via the philosophical method (e.g., Bayertz, 2003). These challenges motivate our chapter, and we use them as a stepping off point for the following set of questions devised to help bound the complexity inherent in developing games for applied ethics:

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What types of design approaches are most useful for teaching or exploring ethical content?

How does one begin the task of designing an applied ethics game with limited resources?

Is it better to start with a strong story, a capable technology base, or fun and interesting gameplay mechanics?

Do the core gameplay ideas come from existing ethical scenarios that can be translated into a more interactive form?

Should ethics games use pre-developed scripts, or include some mechanism for players to author their own ethical scenarios based on issues from their own lives?

How can we conceptualize the notion of player identity so that actions and behaviors in the virtual domain are also useful in the real world?

In this chapter we recount the lessons learned from our own experiences in building two different types of ethics game projects to explore these questions. We hope these experiences will offer useful information and some practical guidelines for other ethics game authors in various stages of conceptualization and development. Before exploring our case studies, we present an argument for games as useful vehicles for teaching ethics.

BACKGROUND: A BRIEF ARGUMENT FOR APPLIED ETHICS GAMES

The idea that computer games can be viable tools for learning has been discussed for several decades, starting with the often-cited work of Malone (1981) and his research with game variants and intrinsically motivating game features. Since then, games have progressed rapidly into forms that would be largely unrecognizable by some of the pioneering video games researchers in the 1980s. Modern games—from role-playing games to first-person shooters - now offer a much more visceral and immediate experience for the player, especially in light of the new affordances allowed by the first-person perspective. For example, Dickey (2005) writes, “the shift from an outside orthographic perspective to a first-person agent embedded in the game space marks a shift in moving the player from outside of the game into becoming part of the gaming environment” (p. 71). From this, it is plausible that games with ethical dimensions are more likely to be impactful through the use of these new immersive technologies. We observe ethical aspects of gaming when players are asked to consider the principles of morality or experiment with different value systems as they play.

These aspects materialize through players’ decision making in modern games such as the Grand Theft Auto (Rockstar Games, 1997-2009), Fallout (Black Isle Studios and Bethesda Softworks, 1997-2009), and Fable (Lionhead Studios, 2005-2008) series. Many of these games are explicitly designed with multiple pathways (and not always a simple “good path/evil path” binary dichotomy) to success so as to encourage players’ nonlinear explorations, feelings of authorship, and desires for replayability.

Unexplored Territory

Despite the commercial success of the games listed above, applied ethics games remain largely unexplored as tools for teaching for learning. This is unfortunate because they potentially offer rich, personalized scenarios for exploring humanity in new and interesting ways. As Bogost (2007) notes, video games make claims not about what it is like to be a machine, but rather about what it is like to be human in different types of unusual situations and embodied circumstances (e.g., as a Greek god, as a plane crash survivor, or as an anthropomorphized hedgehog). Despite its technological underpinnings, then, the act of playing video games is fundamentally a human