Videogames and the Ethics of Care

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ABSTRACT

Videogames have the potential to create ethical experiences and encourage ethical reflection. Usually, this potential is understood in the context of the dominant moral theories: utilitarianism and Kantianism. However, it has been argued that a complete moral theory must also include the concept of an ethics of care. This paper utilizes the ethics of care as an alternative lens for examining the ethical frameworks and experiences offered by videogames. The authors illustrate how this perspective can provide insights by examining Little King’s Story and Animal Crossing: City Folk. Little King’s Story’s fictive context, gameplay, and asymmetrical power relationships encourage the player to care for the citizens of his or her kingdom. In Animal Crossing: City Folk, the player is a member of a community that encourages him or her to care for his or her neighbors as part of a larger interconnected social ecosystem. Both games encourage players feeling an emotional attachment to the game’s characters, and the value placed in these relationships becomes the motivation for further ethical player behavior. The conclusion outlines future research questions and discusses some challenges and limitations of a care ethics perspective.

Keywords: Care, Ethical Experiences, Ethics, Moral Theories, Videogames

Videogames have been shown to encourage ethical reflection in players (Pohl, 2008). As described by Sicart, games can enact ethical frameworks with which players interact (Sicart, 2009). They do this by encouraging players to engage in some behaviors while discouraging others. Placing a framework of what is correct and incorrect in a narrative context can connect the ethics of the game system to a player’s understanding of the ethical rules and values in the world outside of the game (Rauch, 2007). In doing so, the player is encouraged to reflect upon the ethical values of the system and how they relate to the player’s own values. Videogames can create these ethical experiences in several ways. The game’s ethics can be engineered to reinforce real-world ethical ideals (Brown, 2008). They can also present the player with moral dilemmas (Zagal, 2009). Games can allow players to enact scenarios that they could potentially experience in real life, but would rather not because they know that the ethical consequences would be severe (Stevens, Satwicz, & McCarthy, 2007). In this way, players reflect on their personal identity and relationship to the world outside of the game by comparing and contrasting their in-game behavior with that in the real world. In

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general, games allow for ethical experiences by allowing the player to learn something about themselves and their personal values through their assessment of the meaning of their interactions with an ethical framework.

In videogames, some actions are rewarded and encouraged while others are not. In the context of the game, those actions that are encouraged are good; those that are not are bad. When contextualized by a narrative framework, this evaluation of in-game actions can enact an ethical framework (Zagal, 2009). The ethical frameworks of videogames and player’s interactions with them are often discussed in terms of traditional moral philosophies. These analyses examine games using utilitarian or Kantian moral philosophy, or some combination thereof. For example, Rauch used theoretical alterations of the moral choice system of Fable to highlight how the ethical framework of a game could be altered to represent utilitarian or Kantian philosophies (Rauch, 2007). In a utilitarian system, the costs and benefits of each option can be weighed and the outcome of a player choice reflects all of those positive and negative effects. In a Kantian system, a decision that violates an absolute moral rule might not have negative repercussions in the game world, but the game would need to represent some sort of afterlife at which point the player would face consequences for his immoral actions. Rauch goes on to describe a game design that he feels would allow for an exploration of a specific real world situation, combining elements of these two philosophies in order to discuss the issue of torture. Many games that create ethical situations by giving the player ethical choices are more specifically creating situations where the pros and cons of various options are weighed, compared, and calculated. This encourages ethical reflection from the perspective of utilitarian moral philosophy. Alternatively, games can present players with abstract moral rules to which they are encouraged to adhere, encouraging reflection from a Kantian perspective. videogames can encourage ethical reflection based on either of these philosophies or from those combining elements of both philosophies, but these are not the only perspectives that can, or should be considered.

It has been argued that a complete model of ethical reasoning must include an ethics of care (Held, 2010). Consequently, we believe that an understanding of ethics in videogames will be more robust if the perspective of care ethics is taken into account. In this article, we briefly describe the ethics of care and discuss how it can be a valuable tool for understanding ethical experience and reasoning in videogames. Despite the potential for alternative perspectives like care ethics to provide insight into ethics in videogames, analysis from such perspectives is scant. We illustrate the application of this perspective by analyzing two games using the ethics of care as a lens. For each, we discuss how their game design, fictive context, and gameplay can encourage players to build caring relationships, thus creating opportunities for moral reflection from the perspective of care ethics. In particular, we examine the question of how a videogame can implement an ethic of care and what it means for it do so. More generally, we ask how we can look at videogames from the perspective of care ethics and what consequences follow from taking this perspective.

THE ETHICS OF CARE

Utilitarian and Kantian moral models represent the traditional and dominant moral philosophy points of view (Held, 2010). It has also been argued that they are distinctively masculine concepts of morality (Noddings, 2008). Feminist moral philosophers have criticized these traditional models as not taking into account a female point of view (Noddings, 2008; Held, 2010). When moral philosophers developed the currently dominant models of morality, men dominated the public sphere. Models of moral philosophy came to emphasize aspects of public life, such as duty, bargaining, contractual obligations, and calculations of costs and benefits. There was also an emphasis on impersonal relationships, rational thought, and decision making that had to take into account the
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