

# Ethically Notable Videogames: Moral Dilemmas and Gameplay

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## ABSTRACT

In what ways can we use games to make moral demands of players and encouraging them to reflect on ethical issues? In this article we propose an ethically notable game as one that provides opportunities for encouraging ethical reasoning and reflection. Our analysis of the videogames *Ultima IV*, *Manhunt*, and *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* highlights the central role that moral dilemmas can play towards creating ethically notable games. We discuss the different ways that these are implemented, such as placing players in situations in which their understanding of an ethical system is challenged, or by creating moral tension between the player's goals and those posed by the narrative and the gameplay of a game. We conclude by noting some of the challenges of creating ethically notable games including ensuring that the ethical framework in a game is both discernable and consistent as well as ensuring that the dilemma is actually a moral one and that the player, rather than the game characters, is the one facing it.

## Author Keywords

Ethics, videogames, moral dilemma, ethical reasoning

## INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that certain qualities present in the medium of videogames can provide valuable opportunities for learning [10, 36]. Furthermore, games are a unique medium because they present a new form of persuasive rhetoric [3]. In what ways can we use games to make moral demands of players encouraging them to reflect on ethical issues? Ultimately, what role can games play in help us become better people?

In this article we will analyze and discuss some of the videogames we have found to be ethically notable. By ethically notable, we are not referring to the controversies or media attention they may have received. We are also not referring to whether or not they encode ethical frameworks that are consistent or complete. Rather, ethically notable games are those that provide opportunities for encouraging ethical reasoning and reflection. This may be because their ethical frameworks are well developed, more easily accessible to the players, or simply because they provide an experience of play that is particularly moving or

compelling. As we will show, however, there is a commonality that helps make each game ethically notable: the use of ethical or moral dilemmas.

A moral dilemma is a situation in which an agent morally ought to do A and morally ought to do B but cannot do both, either because B is just not-doing-A or because some contingent feature of the world prevents doing both [11]. Moral dilemmas occupy an important part of our history both as a central topic of philosophical discussion as well as the substance of much of our creative and expressive work. The power of drama, as witnessed in theatre, literature, and film, often relies on placing characters in seemingly irresolvable moral situations. Using a variety of rhetorical devices and strategies, the spectator, reader, and viewer not only witness the emotional turmoil of the characters but are also captivated by it. These media have the potential for encouraging ethical reflection and reasoning because they involve their readers not only at an intellectual level, but also at an emotional one. How will the characters resolve the situation? What would you do if you faced the situation depicted in that film or novel? The first question is answered by spectating: keep on watching or reading to know what happens. The second question, since it requires some form of participation, is never truly answered. At most, an opinion is formed about what was seen or read [26]. Computers, however, allow their users to play equivalent roles to both the drama performer as well as the audience member [16]. In this way, they can potentially help answer both of the questions posed. What this means is that since games provide play spaces where people not only transform the gameworld, but also themselves [24], they can be used to explore ethical reasoning. When used as a transformative tool, videogames can empower people to learn what it means to live ethically and how to go about doing so.

## Perspectives on Ethics in Games

However, what does it mean to talk about ethics and games? Is it the same to ask about the ethics of a game or about those in a game? How about the ethics of playing a game? These are some of the many perspectives involved in understanding the ethics of games.

**Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009**

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For instance, we may want to consider the ethical value that a particular game has as a cultural artifact. Reynolds asks, for example, whether *Grand Theft Auto III (GTA3)* [31] is good or bad in a moral sense [29]. He argues that perhaps *GTA3* is a bad game because of its depictions of violence and crime or because it may have negative effects on society as a whole. On the other hand, perhaps it is a good game because of its technological and game design achievements and because it brings pleasure to those that play it [29]. Deciding which of these factors to consider, and how we should weigh them, is one of the questions we need to ask when wondering whether a “mere game” can be good or bad in a moral sense. Should we condemn Danny Ledonne’s game *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*<sup>1</sup> simply because it is a game about a serious and emotional topic? [17] Does the act of playing a game inherently trivialize the issues it tackles and thus render any game about a serious topic inherently unethical? We think not. These examples demonstrate, however, how complicated the discussion surrounding the ethical value of a cultural artifact such as a game can be.

Another way to talk about ethics and games is to consider the ethics of their production and creation. What does it mean to create games ethically and, what issues are most salient given the current state of the videogame industry? The International Game Developers Association (IGDA), for example, is concerned with crediting standards and how to ensure that people who work on game projects receive appropriate credit for their work [14]. Unreasonable demands of working hours are another issue that has also received attention [e.g. 30]. Although many ethical issues surrounding the production of games are common to other businesses and industries, they still need to be examined and discussed.

**Table 1: Selection of Ethical Perspectives on Games**

Perspective	Common Questions and Concerns
Value of Artifact	Is it ethical for this game to exist? Should a particular game have been created in the first place?
Business Ethics	How do we create, produce, market, and sell games ethically?
Ethics of Play	What does it mean to play ethically? What is sportsmanship? How do we understand the meaning of cheating?
Framework	What in-game actions are defined as “good” by the game?

<sup>1</sup>This game recreates the Columbine High School Massacre of 1990. In it, players assume the roles of the gunmen and recreate the massacre, experience flashbacks of the shooters’ past experiences, before ending with their fictional adventures in hell.

A third perspective concerns the ethical issues surrounding the activity of play. What does it mean to play a game ethically? Games create spaces that mediate our understanding of the ethics of players’ actions. Actions considered unethical in an out-of-game context may be expected or even demanded while playing a game. A good player may be one that best exploits his opponent’s weaknesses or deceives his fellow players most effectively. Is it unethical to do so? Similarly, what does it mean to play fair? What are the values of good or bad sportsmanship? Some work has been done to explore the ethical issues surrounding play. For example, Taylor explores the importance that informal (or unwritten) rules have in supporting positive play experiences [42]. Consalvo, on the other hand, explores how players negotiate how, when, and for what reasons to subvert a game’s rules [5]. Woods notes how some boardgame players negotiate the integrity of the social fabric during competitive game playing: oftentimes, not playing to win is the correct choice [45]. As Consalvo notes, cheating is a complex phenomenon whose meaning is continually negotiated by players, the games industry, and various gaming sub-cultures that revolve around specific games [5].

A fourth perspective concerns the ethics of actions in games as defined by the games themselves. Modern videogames are no longer about “mindlessly” pushing buttons. Instead, players engage rich narrative storylines and employ complex discursive practices and problem solving strategies in order to understand and master underlying game mechanics [10, 36]. In practice, the narratives, symbols, and rules that make up a game constitute an ideological framework. The player participates in a simulated environment with its own rules and narratives. What happens when some of these rules are normative? When does an ideological framework become an ethical one?

Table 1 summarizes a few of the perspectives we can assume when discussing something as broad as the ethics of games. Other perspectives might include, for example, the ethics of doing research on games [e.g. 22, 39]. We should expect new perspectives to become more salient as both the medium of games, and our understanding of it, mature. For the purposes of this article, we focus on the fourth perspective, games as ethical frameworks.

### Games as Ethical Frameworks

In videogames, certain behaviors and actions are rewarded while others are not. Those behaviors that are encouraged can be considered desirable or good while the opposite holds for those that are discouraged. By coupling the evaluation of in-game actions with the narrative framework that contextualizes them, a videogame can both represent as well as enact an ethical framework. For example, consider the fantasy role-playing videogame *Fable* released for the Xbox in 2004 [23]. In *Fable*, the player begins as a child in a fantasy village.

*“On the day in which the game begins, it is the protagonist's sister's birthday, and he needs money to buy her a gift. His father, eager to cultivate noble habits in the boy, offers the protagonist a coin for every good deed he does. The player is then presented with several conflicts demanding his or her intervention: each allows the player to make right or wrong choices, and the player is explicitly told the morality of his or her choices by a change in the protagonist's ‘alignment.’”*[27]

One of the conflicts the player is presented with involves finding out what a philandering husband is doing. The player finds out that the man is, in fact, amorously involved with another woman and must, upon discovery, decide whether or not to accept a bribe from the husband to remain quiet. Accepting the bribe results in two “evil” points and a monetary reward. However, it is also possible, to “balance those points out by breaking [the] promise to the adulterous husband and telling his wife the truth.” [27] In *Fable*, some of the actions performed by the player are categorized as good while others are considered evil. The player, by learning and understanding which (and when) actions are considered good or evil, can begin to understand the ethical framework that is procedurally encoded in the game.

In some games, the ethical framework may not be particularly interesting, consistent, or transparent to the player. The narrative context, for example, may not provide the player with enough information to contextualize his actions in the game. This is not the case in all games. *Fable's* moral system, for example, is ethically notable despite its issues and shortcomings [27]. In particular, it is interesting because of how and when it uses moral dilemmas. In the following section we will discuss how moral dilemmas are presented in games and how players are affected, emotionally and rationally, as they go about resolving them.

### **Ethical Dilemmas in Games**

Pohl argues that it is the emotional involvement that characterizes computer games [26]. She also distinguishes two forms of emotional involvement: the instantaneous (we play because we want to win) and the spontaneous (we continue to play because we identify with and care about the story). The narrative frame draws us in and makes us care about the game character's fate, we feel for him, we identify with his concerns and want to know how the story turns out for him and for us [26]. Theatre, film, literature and games can all present troubled characters facing moral dilemmas and, hopefully, emotionally involve the spectator, reader, or player. However, as discussed earlier, games are particularly well suited to directly present the player with a moral dilemma. This is not the same as presenting the player with a dilemma faced by a character. We call this the distinction between the character's dilemma and the player's dilemma. The dilemma faced by the character is,

by definition, one step removed and thus potentially less powerful or effective for eliciting ethical reflection. In the following sections we present three case studies that illustrate some of the ways that games can create moral dilemmas for their players.

### **THE VIRTUES OF ULTIMA IV**

*Ultima IV: The Quest of the Avatar (UIV)* is perhaps the earliest videogame to explicitly encode an ethical system and require its players to discover, learn, and adhere to it in order to win. *UIV* was designed by Richard Garriott and was released in 1985 for the Apple II computer [9]. After creating the first three *Ultima* games, Garriott noted how the narratives of computer RPG games were simplistic and player actions were mostly devoid of consequences. The storyline of these games was essentially “here's some money, here's some weapons, here's some monsters, go kill them and you win.” [40] *UIV* was different. It attempted to use gameplay as a means to build a story and a message with philosophical and ethical implications [21]. In doing so, it helped develop the computer role-playing game genre to another level of maturity by emphasizing social and cultural conflict over “hack ‘n slash” [2, 4, 13]. Garriott explained how “the idea I'm trying to put forth is more philosophical than religious- that in a society where people have to interact with each other, there are certain kinds of rules whose rationale you should be able to understand.” [1] Scorpia's review of *UIV* explains the goal of the game:

*“You, an ordinary person, are called upon to make the long and arduous journey that will culminate in your becoming an Avatar, a perfect mortal. There is no central evil to defeat here; no Mondain, no Minax, no Exodus awaits you<sup>2</sup>. Rather, this is a quest where you seek to perfect your inner being, to become enlightened in the eight virtues of Compassion, Valor, Honor, Justice, Humility, Sacrifice, Spirituality, and Honesty.”* - [35]

Success in *UIV* required players to learn about, and adhere to, the eight virtues listed above. Failure to follow the requirements for each virtue resulted in a setback. In gameplay terms, acting in a virtuous manner would result in positive progress towards achieving enlightenment in a particular virtue<sup>3</sup>. For example the virtues of compassion and sacrifice could be “increased” by donating gold to beggars and blood to healers respectively [1]. Conversely, fleeing from combat would result in a loss of progress towards valor. Also, what mattered was the net effect over a multitude of independent actions. It wasn't enough to do one good deed; you had to do enough of them.

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<sup>2</sup> Mondain, Minax and Exodus refer to the main villains in the earlier games *Ultima*, *Ultima II*, and *Ultima III*.

<sup>3</sup> There are other requirements as well, but the main one is to act in accordance to the virtue long enough.

Garriott felt it was important that the players feel a degree of personal and social responsibility towards their actions in the game. His reasoning was that “in most of these games you are the puppeteer running this puppet around the world. If this puppet is doing bad things, it’s not you, it’s the puppet.” [40] So, rather than create a character by choosing from available options or using random dice-rolls, the character in *UIV* was supposed to be “the essence of you as an individual”. [40] In the introductory sequence of the game the player meets a gypsy woman who asks the player to answer seven questions:

*“On the table before you lie two cards, one representing the virtue of Valor, the other representing the virtue of Justice. As though from a distance, the gypsy’s voice floats across to you, saying: ‘Consider this: Thou halt been sent to secure a needed treaty with a distant lord. Thy host is agreeable to the proposal, but insults thy country at dinner. Dost thou: a) Valiantly bear the slurs or b) Justly rise and demand an apology?’.”* [35]

Each question posed a moral dilemma with two possible answers. Since each response represented a particular virtue in the game, answering the dilemma was interpreted as favoring one virtue over the other. In the example above, answering “a) Valiantly bear the slurs” meant favoring the virtue of valor over that of justice (“b) Justly rise and demand an apology”). The purpose of this sequence of dilemmas was to determine which of the 8 virtues was favored by the player and thus have their character in the game be of the class (or profession) represented by that virtue.<sup>4</sup> Garriott describes how, anecdotally, when people were asked to rank the eight virtues in order of importance, their responses were almost exactly the same as what was determined by the game [40]. In this way, the character used in the game was determined by the players’ personal ethics, rather than simply by choosing, or randomly generating, a character at will. [35]

*UIV*’s use of moral dilemmas was a novel approach to character creation. It wasn’t, however, the only time players faced them. One of Garriot’s design goals was to make sure the game was full of ethical tests [20]. He describes one of the tests as follows:

*“One of the things that I was very proud of in Ultima IV is a room I had created in the final dungeon and the room included a lever in middle of the floor and when you threw the lever it opened the gates on some cages that were in the corners of the room and the cages*

*were full of children. The children were in fact really monsters, because that is all they could be at that level of technology, and the children would attack you in the center of the screen next to the lever. You’d be surrounded by these children who were attacking you and since you were the Avatar at this point and you were at the very end of the game, I knew - or I hoped - that players would be very worried about what to do about the situation. They wouldn’t want to kill the children because they’d be in fear of losing their compassion or their honor or a wide variety of other metrics that the game really was watching. I assumed players would struggle over what to do in this room”* [20]

The goal of the “children’s room” was to make the player uncomfortable and question the game. Is the game really asking me to slaughter children? What should I do? The dilemma is twofold. First, the game apparently requires an action that is morally repugnant in the real world. Second, the game appears to require the player to do something that contradicts the stated goals of the game. Virtuous people don’t kill children. Fortunately, there were multiple ways around the dilemma. Player’s could cast a sleeping spell, force them to run away, and so on. While there is no formal evidence of the effectiveness of the “children’s room” in provoking ethical reasoning, issues with its design did come up during playtesting.

*“A few weeks prior to us publishing Ultima IV, my brother [Robert Garriott] came into my office with a letter that he’d received from one of our QA testers and the letter basically read: ‘I refuse to work for a company that so clearly supports child abuse.’ And they referred to this room as a game design that encouraged child abuse because I had forced the players into harming these children in this room. My brother came to me up in arms and going like, ‘Oh my god Richard, how could you have included such a horrible thing in your game?’ To which I responded and said, ‘First of all, the fact that someone would take it that seriously and be so emotionally moved by this incredibly simple thing that I put in this game, I find is a statement of success.’”* [20]

While the QA tester’s reaction was perhaps unwarranted (after all, there was a way to solve the dilemma), it serves to illustrate how games can make players feel personally invested or responsible for the decisions they make in a game. Thus, we argue that *Ultima IV* is an ethically notable game because:

- It attempts to make the player feel personally invested or responsible for the decisions they make in the game.

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<sup>4</sup> The virtues / classes are: Honesty / Mage, Compassion / Bard, Valor / Fighter, Honor / Paladin, Justice / Druid, Humility / Shepherd, Sacrifice / Tinker, and Spirituality / Ranger.

- It encodes an ethical system and requires the player to learn it and follow it in order to succeed.
- It provides players with dilemmas or situations in which their understanding of the ethical system is challenged.

### MANHUNT: THE DILEMMA OF VIOLENCE

*Manhunt* is a videogame developed by Rockstar North and originally released for the Playstation2 in 2003 [32]. In the game, the player controls James Earl Cash, a death row criminal who is rescued from his execution and coerced into starring in his kidnapper's snuff film productions. The kidnapper, also known as 'The Director', witnesses and records Cash's carnage through a network of security cameras. The director also goads, threatens and provides instructions via an earpiece worn by Cash. The player controls Cash in a 3rd-person perspective and the gameplay is best described as requiring both elements of action and stealth. Cash is outnumbered and must carefully, and quietly, make his way through his dilapidated surroundings in order to surprise and execute his victims using a variety of items including plastic bags, shards of glass, bats, bladed items, and firearms.

*Manhunt* is in many ways the opposite of *UIV*. The player isn't encouraged to be good or carry out good actions. In fact, it actively encourages the opposite. However, through a series of design decisions, the game is capable of creating an emotional experience in the player that has a similar effect to *UIV*: encourage reflection on morality.

*Manhunt* created a controversy when it was released due to the graphic nature of the violence it depicted. The most notorious element of violence in the game is the execution system. Executions are perhaps the most effective way to eliminate opponents and are required in order to progress in the game. However, the player decides how brutal an execution will be. Let's say Cash sneaks up behind a gang member with a plastic bag. Pressing the attack button will result in Cash yanking the bag over the victim's head and suffocating him. If the player holds down the button for a few seconds, the execution is more violent and Cash might punch the victim in the face in addition to suffocating him. The third, and most brutal, type of execution is carried out by holding down the attack button even longer. Thus, by deciding how long to press the attack button for, the player determines the degree of brutality of the execution.

The premise and violence in *Manhunt* are undeniably gory and brutal. However, from an ethical perspective, this game isn't notable due to the violence of the executions. It is notable because of the position the game places the player in. As mentioned, the brutality of an execution is a choice made by the player. *Manhunt* effectively forces the player to question and evaluate his actions and motivations for how to play the game. Essentially, the player is forced to examine the role of successful play as a moral dilemma itself. There are no intrinsic (in-game) benefits for carrying

out executions in the most brutal way. Extrinsicly, players are rated at the end of each area and, by obtaining high ratings (three or five stars, depending on the difficulty level), they can unlock bonus features and codes. However, this only applies to five of the twenty areas and there is no discernible benefit for getting five stars in all the areas [33]. So, why should I, the player, choose to execute Cash's opponents in the most brutal way possible? How far are you willing to go, as a player, in carrying out the executions?

*Manhunt's* player-based (rather than character-based) moral dilemma is made all the more intense through the use of a USB headset. Playing the game using the headset allows the player to use his voice to distract enemies in the game. It also allows the player to hear the Director's instructions directly via the earpiece. Both elements narrow the distance between the player and the grotesque world of *Manhunt*. The microphone does this by allowing a more direct form of agency while the headset heightens the tension by channeling the Director's wishes and desires directly to your ear. In this way, The Director assumes the role of the "evil conscience". As a player, you hear him inside your head. His voice goads, taunts, and cheers you on when you cave in to his desires. There is nothing more sickening and disturbing than hearing the Director cackle maniacally as Cash murders a gang member. As expected, the Director derives more pleasure from the more gruesome executions.

However, what context is the player afforded when deciding if he should execute gruesome executions instead of "regular" ones? The choice is obvious from the position of the narrative. Cash is a convicted death row criminal. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that, when placed in a kill or be killed situation, Cash wouldn't hesitate to kill. The Director wants Cash to be as brutal as possible. His illegal snuff-film operation demands it. Cash, however, has no motivation to perform the most brutal types of executions. The Director is the antagonist, what reason would Cash have to want help him? Also, executions are risky to execute. While the player keeps the attack button pressed, he is exposed and vulnerable to attack. We might expect Cash to reason that a solution to his predicament might be to kill as few enemies as possible and to do so in the least gruesome way (thus not allowing himself to further the Director's ends). From the context of the narrative, the player has no reason or motivation to opt for greater brutality in executions. Role-playing Cash does not exculpate the player from Cash's actions.

From a game design perspective, the context for deciding the dilemma is the opposite. In a macabre twist, the player is awarded "extra points" for completing more gruesome executions. As mentioned, higher ratings serve no function or purpose within the context of the game. In the game, nobody knows or cares that you, the player, got a 3 star rating in the previous area. Their only purpose seems to be to tempt the player. To force the player to question how much he really values a meaningless measure of achievement. How far would you go for the 5 star rating?

As a game player, how do you value your competitiveness and achievements as a player (get the most points and unlock the most extras) versus doing the right thing in the context of the narrative? The juxtaposition of the games' reward structure and its narrative highlights the true moral dilemma of *Manhunt*. We argue that *Manhunt* is an ethically notable game because:

- It creates moral tension between gameplay rewards structure and the motivations of the characters as defined by the narrative.

### **FIRE EMBLEM: RADIANT DAWN**

While *UIV* encodes a virtue ethics framework that is arguably positive, it would seem that everything about *Manhunt* is negative. Is it possible to create a player's dilemma without a salient ethical framework or morally repugnant gameworld?

*Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn (FE:RD)* is a tactical role-playing game for the Wii console developed by Intelligent Systems and released in 2007 [15]. It features a multi-faceted storyline in which the player follows (and controls) characters from different factions that occasionally intersect. It is at these intersections that the game becomes ethically notable.

*FE:RD* is divided into four sections. In the first section, the player controls a group of characters led by a character called Micaiah. In section two, the player controls two different groups of characters from earlier versions of the game. In the game's third section, the player controls each of the three groups separately. In the final chapter of the third section, the player controls a group of characters led by Ike who faces an enemy force led by Micaiah. Micaiah's force includes many characters the player has, until recently, been controlling and improving. Totilo describes how in this chapter:

*"[The goal] was to annihilate every character on the other side. Was I reading this right? I had to slaughter all of the enemies? All of Micaiah's forces? [...] I could not believe what the game was asking me to do.*

*I sat dumbfounded. Really? I have to destroy all of those characters I spent all that time improving? Zihark, and all the rest, had to bite the bullet?"* [44]

Faced with the dilemma and his unwillingness to blindly accept the missions' goals, Totilo ventured online to see if there was a way out. He discovered that instead of annihilating enemies he cared about, he "only" needed to ensure that 80 enemy combatants perished. So, Totilo's solution to the dilemma was to ensure that the characters he cared about remained as far from each other as possible, regardless of whether or not they were labeled by the game as "the enemy".

*"And as soon as I did it, I felt a bit sick. Video games always require you to value some characters' lives over others. Goombas' lives don't matter. Mario's does. But here I was deciding that some of my enemies should die and that others shouldn't. It got more twisted. After a few turns of action I noticed that the kill-counter in the upper right hand corner of the screen was counting deaths of enemy soldiers and unnamed partner soldiers who were fighting alongside Ike as part of the same total. That meant I could reach my goal of 80 battlefield deaths not just through the slaughter of certain enemies but through the death of my own allies.*

*Is it creepy that I took this as good news? This meant the mission would end sooner, that my chosen people on both sides would be out of harm's way faster. I began to root for my "enemy" Zihark when he strode out into the battlefield again and started chopping down my allies."* [44]

Totilo realizes that he is subverting not only the game's narrative but also the established game goals. Micaiah views Ike as the enemy and the gameplay goal is consistent with that. Why should he not do as instructed? Totilo was clearly uncomfortable with the dilemma and how he responded.

*"I had made quite a judgment of gameplay-based morality. I had decided that some characters, some who were with me and some who were against me, deserved to live. I'd judged that others, some with me and some against me, were better off dead. I'd chosen favorites. Essentially, the characters with names, the ones I had trained — they deserved life. The unnamed grunts both helping and harming me? Expendable. I'd cheered for the deaths of supposed friends and allies and was relieved when they failed to kill enemies I had once trained. I refused to assist some allies in need. I'd transgressed traditional battle lines.*

*Like I said above, I felt a twist in my gut. What kind of battlefield general had this game made me? What kind of commander of men and women?"* [44]

We could argue that Totilo's solution to his dilemma was an unethical one. However, that would miss the point: Totilo was emotionally invested to such a degree that he was willing to forgo the context of both narrative and gameplay. Unlike *UIV* and *Manhunt*, he faced an ethical dilemma that, while intended by the game's designers, wasn't about a particular in-game ethical framework. Thus, we argue that *FE:RD* is an ethically notable game because:

- It creates a moral tension between the player's goals and those posed by both the narrative and the gameplay.

## DISCUSSION

We have argued that an ethically notable game is one that provides opportunities for encouraging ethical reasoning and reflection. We have also argued that a specific device for achieving this is the use of ethical dilemmas. By examining three games, we have shown different ways that ethical dilemmas can be incorporated in games. However, it can also be valuable to consider the following questions in order to analyze and better understand the ethics of a particular game.

### Is the ethical framework discernible and consistent?

The effort that goes in to creating an ethical framework in a game will ultimately be for naught if the player isn't able to discern right from wrong (according to the game). More importantly, the player should understand **why** given actions are right or wrong and from this be able to deduce the moral consequences of his actions. Ethical systems that are opaque to their players risk becoming perceived as morally irrelevant. Ethical systems that are inconsistent face a greater risk: confusing the player. Confusion subverts the efforts of establishing an ethical framework by making the evaluation seem arbitrary. We note that it isn't necessary for the framework to be both comprehensive (consider all actions in the game as ethical in some sense) and complete (ethically consider all possible intentions/goals behind player actions). Rather, the ethical rules must apply when the player expects them to, and when they don't it must be possible for the player to understand why. For example, in many adventure games players are free to steal or loot objects with no apparent consequences: it doesn't matter if the object came from a treasure chest found in the woods or if it came from a chest located inside the house of a friendly neighbor. Other games discriminate if the item was from an urban location (ie. a villager's home) or from the wilderness (say, a dungeon). Rauch notes how "*Fable* is at times very vague with the distinction, and since 'examine' and 'take' use the same key, I have often found myself 'stealing' items by accident. At moments like these, the rules of both *Albion* and *Fable* itself can seem alarmingly random, and this randomness interferes with player experience by frustrating both the ability to grasp the intricacies of the rule system and the ability to maintain suspension of disbelief and become emotionally involved in the narrative." [27]

### Who faces the moral dilemma?

The power of moral dilemmas in games is that they can require the player to participate (rather than simply spectate). However, it is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that simply because there is a moral dilemma in the game, the player will become personally invested. Many games, especially those with well-developed storylines, involve the characters in moral situations. It is often the case, however, that the player is merely a witness to the

moral situation and lacks the agency to guide the decision made by the player's character. We have referred to these cases as character-based moral dilemmas and juxtapose them with player-based moral dilemmas. For example one of the most-often remembered and discussed moments in *Final Fantasy VII* [41] is the death of the character Aeris [8, 18]. Aeris, who is at certain times a player-controllable character, chooses to sacrifice herself in order to save the planet. However, her decision is one that is made by the game's designers. It's a dilemma the character faced and is troubled by, although the player has no real say in the matter. Similarly, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person-shooter game *Max Payne* [28], although the character Max is depicted as troubled by his situation and many of the decisions he makes, the player doesn't participate in those decisions. Should Max ally with a known criminal in order to gain equipment and resources that will let him take out another mob boss? Max decides, not the player.

### Is the dilemma actually moral?

Difficult decisions aren't always moral decisions. A player wracked by the decision of how to spend a limited number of points on character upgrades is arguably more concerned with gameplay than ethics. It isn't hard to realize that these situations aren't moral dilemmas. The danger lies when dilemmas are presented as moral but, for some reason or another, aren't regarded as such by players. This often happens when a moral choice is subverted into a choice of gameplay or play style. In the first-person shooter game *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II (JK)* [19], the player controls Kyle Katarn. The game follows Katarn as he journeys to confront his father's murderers while simultaneously discovering (and developing) his latent abilities in The Force.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of the game, the player earns points that can be used to increase a variety of (Force) abilities categorized into three groups: dark, light, and neutral. During the game the player can, for the most part, spend the points on any of the abilities he fancies. Once the player is approximately 2/3 through the game, "Kyle finally decides on the light or dark side of the Force, and acts accordingly. (This decision is determined both by the powers you've taken, and how you've treated civilians throughout the first parts of the game.)" [43] The decision to embrace evil (or not) is arguably one that shouldn't be taken lightly. However, two things conspire against players considering this as a moral dilemma. First, the player isn't allowed to make the decision at that specific moment in the game. This is because the result (join the Dark/Light side of the force) happens as the result of an accumulation of multiple decisions that have been made over hours of gameplay. Second, and perhaps more importantly, there are no real consequences to the decision. As Dulin noted in a review, "many [players] will also be disappointed to learn

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<sup>5</sup> A metaphysical power in the Star Wars universe that has two "sides": light side (good) and dark (evil).

that the distinction between the Light and Dark sides, once the choice has been made, is not as striking as one would hope. [...] The Light Side is obviously the path you are supposed to take - you get more cutscenes and more narration throughout the last few levels. But apart from this and the different Force powers at your disposal, choosing the Dark Side only leads to one really shocking plot element, a slightly altered level, and a completely different ending (which is, in many ways, far more satisfying)." [7] When faced with what is perhaps the game's key moral dilemma, the player must choose between light and dark side based on what content they want to experience and what force powers they'd like to use for the rest of the game. Evil and good are understood by the player at a procedural level, a state in the machine, rather than at a semantic one [37, 38].

## CONCLUSIONS

Delwiche argues that videogames have affordances that can shape attitude and behavior [6], Bogost argues they can persuade [3], and Gee holds that games can provide valuable opportunities for learning [10]. However, can we use games to make moral demands of players encouraging them to reflect on ethical issues? We have shown how games can achieve this through the use of moral dilemmas. Specifically, our analysis of *Ultima IV*, *Manhunt*, and *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* highlight how games can make the player feel personally invested or responsible for the decisions they make in the game. They can also encode an ethical system and require the player to learn it and follow it in order to succeed. Sometimes, games may present players with dilemmas or situations in which their understanding of the ethical system is challenged. For example, by creating moral tension between the player's goals and those posed by both the narrative and the gameplay. We believe, however, that there is still much work to be done and that we have yet to fully explore the potential for ethical reasoning and reflection that games can help promote. As recent work in moral psychology has shown, both emotions [e.g. 12] as well as moral rules play a critical role in moral judgment [e.g. 25]. These findings echo, in some sense, the fundamental qualities of games: activities proscribed by rules to elicit and create emotionally meaningful experiences in their participants [34]. If ever there was a perfect test-bed for helping people learning about ethics and ethical reasoning, games would be it. We believe that the medium has only just begun to scratch the surface and we wonder what other mechanisms we can develop to foster ethical thinking. In what additional ways can we use games to help explore ethical questions? We look forward to continue exploring these questions and issues.

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