

Choose Your Own Morality: Using video games to promote moral reflection¹
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A. Introduction

Greg Costikyan claimed that “The thing that makes a game a game is the need to make decisions.” In general, video games require players to make decisions and allow players some freedom of choice. The choices are usually constrained – it’s not likely that a player can do absolutely anything in a game – and are not always hugely significant: players may choose a particular set of tactics while fighting, or choose to perform quests in one zone of the gameworld rather than another. However, Costikyan is correct in his claim that games require decision-making and choice. Without them, we are not so much playing a game as experiencing an interactive novel where the choices are essentially already made for us and we just have to advance the story via some minimal interaction.

Frequently, however, games attempt to incorporate more significant choices. Sometimes this is done by creating a situation where, by its very nature, people would have to make hard choices. *This War of Mine* is about a group of civilians in a war-torn city who are simply trying to survive. The game is broken up into day and night phases. During the day, the characters can do things like rest, cook, create objects (if they have the raw materials) and so forth. Each night the player can select one character to venture out into the city to scavenge. However, the various locations on the map have different resources and different levels of danger. The player has to decide if it is worth risking a higher danger for a better reward. Moreover, the player has to decide whether it is better to go after food, since the people are starving, or after raw materials, which might help them make upgrades to the shelter or other items. The narrative behind the game (along with the very cleverly-designed gameplay, in which it is simply not possible to do everything at once) makes these choices seem very real to players.

In *This War of Mine*, the choices are not exactly at odds with each other in a moral sense – all of your possible choices seem to be right, although there is also the sense that you have made the wrong choice no matter what you do; this is an excellent illustration of the difficulty of this situation in real life. Other games frequently try to incorporate significant choices by giving them a more obviously ethical component. For instance, in *Arcanum*, the main character needs to cross a particular bridge which is held by bandits. The character can pay a toll, kill the bandits, try to persuade them not to charge the fee (if the character is good at persuasion), or do a favor for the bandits in return for passage. The favor is to blow up bridge materials that the town plans to use to build another, bandit-free, bridge. While doing the favor is probably the easiest way to resolve the situation, players have to decide whether they are okay with helping the bandits hold the town hostage.

This is only one of many situations where video games try to incorporate moral choices. Before diving into the details of how those choices are handled, one might wonder whether ethics is even relevant to this topic. I have argued elsewhere that moral standing is tied to having

¹ This was an invited talk and incorporates portions of my paper “The Ethics of Choice in Single-Player Video Games” along with my more recent work.

interests. These can range from very simple interests such as being free of physical pain to more complex interests such as those involved in our legal understanding of property ownership, however, if a thing, such as a rock, lacks interests, it is difficult to understand how one could either harm or benefit it. Within the realm of a single-player video game, one interacts with virtual characters; there are no other players. In one sense, video game characters do not have interests, since they are not real – they are much like characters in dreams or fantasies. As such, it would appear at first glance that one could treat them however one wished: lacking interests, they also lack the ability to be harmed or benefitted, thus they seem to stand outside of morality; one's actions towards them are neither morally praiseworthy nor morally blameworthy. Thus it may seem that there is not much to be said on this topic.

This is slightly hasty, however. Following Johnny Søraker we can distinguish intravirtual (inside the game world) and extravirtual (outside the game world) consequences of actions. From an extravirtual standpoint, video game characters, indeed, are fictional and thus cannot be harmed or benefitted extravirtually; only the player can be affected in an extravirtual sense. However, interesting ethical situations can occur if we consider things from the former standpoint, i.e., examining the characters within their own context, as members of a particular virtual world.²

The ability to choose different actions has become an important part of many modern video games, and players expect the game world to reflect those actions; there should be different in-game consequences for different choice. In these games, actions towards the denizens of the game may have moral import because one's decisions have impact *within the game*. If the characters seem to be harmed (or benefitted) within the game world by your actions, then it is easier to attach moral standing to those actions. For instance, in the *Arcanum* example I mentioned, if you choose to blow up the bridge materials, then at the end of the game you discover that doing so causes the town to wither from lack of trade. It would appear, therefore, that your character has taken a morally wrong action – or at least one which has negative moral ramifications. On the other hand, if your character aided a person without any thought of gain, then you have likely done something virtuous.

In order to handle the intravirtual moral consequences of our actions, many games have introduced systems that track the players' choices. I will now consider some of the ways in which intravirtual morality is handled, beginning with a fairly crude explicit system before turning to more complex instantiations of the system. While all of these systems have limitations, I will argue that they all permit an important type of moral exploration on the part of the player; there is thus a connection between the intravirtual moral consequences of the character's actions and the extravirtual moral exploration of the player. Video games, therefore, have the opportunity to elicit moral reflection from their players.

B. Choices and Morality Meters

² This is, presumably, the same sort of distinction we make for other art forms such as novels or films; on the one hand, it is false to say that Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty are enemies, since neither exist. However, in general when someone is making such a statement, they are actually talking about what is true within the fiction and, in this context, Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty are enemies. This distinction is discussed at length by Kendall Walton (1990) and is applied specifically to videogames by Grant Tavinor (2009).

The idea that actions can have moral import within a game context is presumably the genesis of morality meters in video games. This is a fairly crude system for measuring morality. The simplest form is what we may call a single-stream morality meter. While there are variations, in general one extreme represents pure evil and the other pure virtue; the main character's morality is measured using this meter. Various actions will cause the meter to move incrementally in one direction or the other, depending on the scope of the action. A minor misdeed will make you only slightly less virtuous, while major scheming may cause the meter to drop significantly.

A serious issue with single-stream meters is that they display a single score to represent the player's morality – each action either is deemed morally good (adding points to the score), morally neutral (leaving the score unaffected), or morally wrong (subtracting points from the score.) This implies that enough morally good actions can cancel out a morally wrong action. Hence a player who performed an extremely evil action and then many extremely good actions to counter it would be viewed as no different than a character who has performed no evil actions and only a few small good actions. Yet one might well argue that the latter should be deemed morally superior to the former; at the very least, it seems there is a relevant difference between the two which is not captured by the game mechanics.

To address this concern, some games have separate scores to measure morally good and morally bad actions; we may call this a dual-stream morality meter. *Mass Effect* and its sequels divided actions into two categories; a character could amass paragon points (if she performed a compassionate or heroic action) or renegade points (if she performed an apathetic or ruthless action.) For instance, when faced with the last surviving member of an alien species, choosing to set it free will earn paragon points while choosing to kill it will earn renegade points. In this way the designers ensured that one's actions never truly disappear; a character's new virtuous actions may outweigh his previous unethical actions, but they do not negate those actions. This is surely a more accurate representation of real world morality, since one's previous actions do not cease to exist simply because one has atoned: you may no longer steal, you may have repaid the person you stole from, but the fact remains that you once stole, and that cannot be undone.

There are large assumptions bound up in these meters, even if viewed only as intravirtual measures of morality. One critical problem is that they rarely take intent or context into account – all instances of X will drop or raise your morality by Y. Hence an accidental act is not distinguished from an intentional act, nor is there room for nuance; a poor character stealing bread because they are starving to death would be no different than a rich one stealing out of avarice.³ *Tormentum: Dark Sorrow* makes an attempt at this – it is the only game I have ever played that opens by quoting Kant's Second Formulation of the Categorical Imperative – but even it suffers from the difficulty of judging intent. For instance, I tried to zoom out of a close-up in a particular scene with the touch screen gesture from a different game; as a result, I accidentally pressed a button that killed someone. At the end of the game, I was judged to be morally evil as a result. The game could not distinguish an accidental erroneous gesture from an intentional one.

³ As Heron and Belford (2014) note, this flaw generally rules out using Kantian ethics to measure morality in the game world, as there is no seamless way to determine the intent behind the actions.

Another issue is that one may question the moral system underlying the meter. For instance, *Arcanum* contains a quest in which a farmer asks the player to kill some wild animals that are damaging his crops. If the player does so, her character's morality decreases and any good-aligned characters in her party will object. This supposes that killing these animals is an immoral act, which betrays an unfamiliarity or lack of care displayed for the amount of damage that vermin can do to crops. If the designers presented killing the animals as simply one of several ways of completing the quest, then perhaps this would be a plausible representation of morality; it could be the least virtuous way to achieve the goal. Since they did not, however, the moral message appears to be that allowing wild animals to ruin crops (and this farmer's livelihood) is more virtuous than removing those animals; this seems a rather questionable moral conclusion.

Morality meters, therefore, represent a particular view of morality within the game, and one with which the players may disagree. This is not in itself necessarily problematic. Grant Tavinor discusses the fact that players of a game are engaged in a kind of "make believe," in which we do not so much suspend our disbelief as agree to a set of fictions for the purposes of play. Thus when we play a game, one thing we do is engage with the game's world, which can include a particular moral stance.⁴ Yet players will not always simply accept this stance uncritically, particularly if it does not seem well-supported by the rest of the game's fiction. In *Arcanum*, there is nothing to indicate that killing the animals should be seen as immoral, nor are there any other relevant experiences that would reinforce this message; this is a single instance of the moral situation, and it thus seems poorly motivated.⁵ The morality meter seems, if not incorrect, at least debatable in its judgment of this instance.

Moreover, there is a very utilitarian (or at least consequentialist) feel about this assessment of morality. Single-stream morality meters, which simply adjust one way or the other due to your good and bad actions, represent an extremely simple hedonic calculus: if the amount of utility (positive morality points) outweighs the amount of disutility (negative morality points) then a character is good.⁶ While dual-stream morality meters are somewhat more complex, they still seem largely consequentialist in character; awarding points based on each specific action, for instance, would not sit well with a virtue ethicist's idea that character is displayed through habituation, not single acts. A virtue ethicist approach simply does not fit well with an explicit morality meter, even though such meters are often presented as attempting to represent the character's moral character. This may be why, aside from *Ultima IV*, we rarely see explicit attempts to incorporate virtues into video game morality.

A more fundamental objection to the idea behind morality meters is presented by Miguel Sicart when he argues that morality meters may have little to do with the player's ethical engagement, since they become just another mechanic to strategize over and manipulate. If a player knows that the game world will respond to him in certain ways if he takes certain actions, or if he

⁴ Sicart (2013) refers to this as being morally complicit with the game and its world.

⁵ Sicart (2009) also discusses conflict between the rules of the game and the fictions of the game world, particularly when he discusses how the game *XIII* (Ubisoft 2003) portrays the character as a ruthless killer but the game will not allow her to kill police officers or innocents.

⁶ Indeed, the entire scheme of awarding points is reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham (1823/1996), since actions which are more harmful or greater in scope do seem to award more negative points than those which have smaller consequences. It is not a perfect representation of his hedonic calculus, but it is in the same vein.

crosses a certain threshold on the meter, then he may pay attention to the morality of his actions not for its own sake, but because he desires certain results in the game. This issue arises on multiple plays of a game, since one has an idea of what results will occur for certain actions based on past experience. However, many games have the ability to restore to a previous point via saving and reloading; this would enable a player to take an action, see what the effect is on her score, and redo it if she did not like that result.⁷ While Sicart argues that such actions are purely strategic and devoid of moral reflection on the part of the player, I disagree. This, too, displays a kind of consequentialism: a player has her character take an action, evaluates the consequences, and then decides whether those are good consequences for the game *as the player wishes it to progress*. Admittedly, this represents a form of meta-gaming: the player is not necessarily concerned with the moral consequences as evaluated by the game. However, it enables the player to develop particular kinds of characters easily and see what happens to them within the game universe. This will not necessarily result in moral reflection on the part of the player, but it does not seem to prevent it either; the reflection simply will be over the character's actions/game as a whole – what kind of character do I want to be? – rather than over the consequences of a single action.

One way that games attempt to prevent this kind of meta-gaming is to attempt implementing more complex systems of morality. For instance, many games lack explicit morality meters but will alter the game world and people's reactions to you in response to what you do. This can be relatively simplistic; for instance, in *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, if a character is seen stealing a bounty is placed on his head. If the town's guards see him while he has a bounty on him, they will attempt to apprehend the character, forcing him to pay a fine or go to jail. This is a pretty simplistic way of representing the idea that thievery is viewed as wrong. Alternately, the game can involve complex adaptations which are sensitive to dialogue and plot choices; in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* there are many conversational paths with party members, and the dialogue choices a player makes will affect their attitudes toward her character. This is an attempt to display game-world consequences of one's actions in a less arbitrary fashion than through an explicit meter.

Such attempts can still be subject to Sicart's objection if they are too simplistic. For instance, if a particular dialogue seems to go poorly, a player may restore and try again. While I do not find his objection totally persuasive, as argued above, his concern is further mitigated in some games by making the long-term effects of choices unclear.⁸ One of the most interesting recent examples is in the game *Life is Strange*, which has a mechanic wherein the lead character can rewind time for short bursts, allowing her to try different options and see the results.

Three things make this mechanic particularly fascinating. First, the character is intensely self-reflective; in many situations, no matter what choice a player picks, the character wonders aloud whether she should choose the other. Unlike games with clear black and white paths, this

⁷ Assuming that there is much of an effect on the gameworld; Heron and Belford (2014) criticize many implementations of morality meters because they are fairly shallow – the choices have few real consequences. This is an objection to how a system of morality is implemented in practice, however, rather than a fundamental objection to the idea of morality meters which Sicart appears to have.

⁸ Sicart (2013) looks at this in greater detail, particularly praising *Fallout 3* as an example of a game which does this well.

leaves the player doubting and reflecting on his actions as well. Second, the rewind mechanic only works for a short period of time and does not continue indefinitely; once you have left one area and entered another, you cannot rewind past that point. Thus at some point one's choices are static – the player ultimately will have to make a decision and stick to it, unless she wishes to replay a large portion of the game.⁹ Since many of the choices have long-term consequences, the player can pick what *seems* best, but he may be wrong about whether that choice actually *is* best. Third, partway through the game the character starts losing the ability to rewind time in some situations. This lends an unexpected urgency to dialogue and action choices in those cases – when the character is faced with trying to talk someone out of committing suicide, knowing that you cannot rewind makes the player's choices feel more significant. The fact that the game explicitly built in the players' ability to try different options and then took it away lends a weightiness to the consequences beyond what typically seems to be present in video games. These factors combine to make the game world's adaptation to a player's choices extremely compelling and promotes a greater thoughtfulness with regard to moral decisions than most games.¹⁰

One of the interesting aspects of *Life is Strange* is how wildly unrealistic its implementation of moral choice is; in real life we cannot try out different options and rewind to see what would happen if we tried another path. In general, while morality meters are fairly crude devices, they are attempting a fairly realistic representation of morality: just as we judge people by their actions in the real world, the designers attempt to do so in the game world as well. These systems have limitations – most of us view morality as slightly more complex than simply reducing a person to a number or pair of numbers, and we cannot generally engage in the sort of meta-gaming that the ability to save and reload allows. Yet despite these limitations they still can promote moral thinking. Going a step further, *Life is Strange* explicitly embraces some of the artificialities of typical play by incorporating it into the story line, and in doing so it demonstrates that even a wildly artificial system does not preclude moral deliberation.

Having said that, the way in which the moral thinking occurs will likely differ depending on how obvious or artificial the system is. Attempts to modify the player's experiences based on his actions in the game clearly is a reflection of what happens in the real world. Our actions have consequences; the world (and people in it) respond to what we do. There is a need for some system of in-game morality if the game world wishes to seem realistic; in general, a world in which observed stealing has no consequences is not convincing.¹¹ Similarly, it is easier to be immersed by a world where not all actions are presented as having the same moral ramifications. The morality meter or adaptation reinforces the fiction of the world.

The attempt to make a convincing game world has interesting consequences, as our identification with our characters affects what we are willing to do with them. Michael

⁹ Unlike many games which allow a player to save whenever he wishes, *Life is Strange* only allows saves at particular checkpoints; to change options after the rewind window closes, a player would have to reload to the previous checkpoint and play the game through to that dialogue or action choice again.

¹⁰ This is in part because *Life is Strange* has a stronger narrative than many games due to its linear nature and way of handling player choices. While I agree with Tavinor (2009) that frequently games have difficulty with narrative due to gameplay constraints, *Life is Strange* uses moral choices to reinforce different narrative possibilities in an extremely effective manner.

¹¹ Presumably even if a game is set in a lawless dystopia, people will be annoyed if you take their belongings.

Nagenborg and Christian Hoffstadt noted that the more a player sees her avatar as a reflection of herself, the more her own ethical code comes into play.¹² If she strongly identifies with a particular character in a game, she will be less willing to have that character commit actions she views as morally wrong; if she does not strongly identify with that character, then she is more likely to pay attention to the fictional nature of the game and thus feel that any action is morally acceptable (since, after all, the action is not truly occurring.) A sufficiently immersive game world, then, has a very strong potential for prompting moral deliberation. Even if a player does not see his avatar as a perfect reflection of himself, retaining his own moral code, immersion can promote ethical thinking. For instance, if he sees his character as embodying particular traits, then he may react as he believes such a person would react. In this case, he is not seeing all actions as permissible; he is approaching the scenario from a particular moral standpoint, albeit not the same one as he likely has in the real world.

Immersion is one way to promote ethical reflection, but it is not always required. As I noted earlier, I believe that players will sometimes engage in meta-gaming to aim for a particular kind of game experience. Similarly, games such as *Life is Strange* use the artificial nature of the game to allow for a greater freedom to explore options than real life allows. I do not necessarily regard these approaches as ethically inferior to a game in which a player is more directly immersed (or where the moral system is less obvious). Rather, I believe they promote different kinds of potential ethical experiences. A game in which a player strongly identifies with a character will engage her ethically at each decision point. She may agonize over what to do in various situations because her avatar is an extension of herself – the choices seem very real. However, when a player is engaged in meta-gaming, there is still the potential for moral evaluation. That evaluation, however, is more likely to be of the ultimate experience of the game as a whole: if I pick choices X, Y, and Z, did the game react in a convincing or satisfying way? What happens if I play an evil character? The player's character is thus much closer to a character in a book or a movie, but one which the player directs – the player makes choices, but there is little identification with those choices. It is thus about the particular experience of the game as a whole.

C. Taking away choice

Up until this point, I have been focusing largely on games that promote moral choice. There is nothing inherently better (in an ethical sense) about a game that gives players a lot of choices and a game that gives them few, or between a game that makes choices significant as opposed to a game where the choices are largely cosmetic. While people are deeply attached to autonomy in real life – we like the ability to make our own choices and control our own lives – we are frequently willing to give it up while being entertained; we do not complain that the movie we see in the theater does not allow us to decide what happens next, because we enjoy watching someone else's artistic work. Similarly, good games can be designed that embody different degrees of player autonomy without running afoul of ethics.¹³ (These games might not encourage ethical thinking, but that does not make them unethical to create.)

¹² Although I would note that some research (Lange 2014) suggests that the majority of players engage with moral choice systems using their own moral code regardless of how much they identify with a character.

¹³ With the aforementioned provision that a case in which a player makes no choices at all – has no autonomy – is probably more like a visual novel than a game.

With that said, one of the interesting things to think about is deception with respect to choice, i.e., when designers cause players to think that they have more choice than they actually do. Any time deception occurs, a moral red flag is likely to appear; after all, we do not generally take lying (the simplest form of deception) to be morally good under most circumstances. The situation is a bit more complicated for deception in a novel, game, or other work of art, however. In general, lying is wrong because we value having correct information ourselves; universalization thus demands that we extend that same privilege to others. But fiction is a special case. When we intentionally engage with a work of fiction, we are aware that it is not real – that, in some sense, it is not telling the truth about the world. We thus consent (and likely expect) to be deceived in certain ways by the work’s creator.

Games are not fictions in the same way that a novel is, but they often contain fictions that are propagated by the design of the game world, the narrative that surrounds the character and her actions, and so forth. Classically, games have been described as occurring inside a “magic circle,” which separates the game’s world from our own; by stepping into the circle, so to speak, we have agreed to be bound by the rules and fictions of the game. This notion has been questioned to some extent – the boundary between our world and that of the game is not so obvious, as designers and players import their real world experiences into the game – but the idea that, in general, we knowingly enter a game is relevant here. By stepping into the circle, we agree to the game’s deception.

Of course, there is deception and then there is *deception*. At one level, we are deceived because the game world is not identical to our own; this is to be expected in any game. But at another level, we may be deceived about the game world itself. The ways in which a game presents its world or its narrative can be straightforward, but designers can instead choose to mislead players. This is simply the game equivalent of a long-standing literary device, namely, the unreliable narrator. In literature, events are described to the reader, and it is easy to take that description at face value. However, sometimes the reader discovers that the descriptions are themselves deceptive; the “narrator” of the story is not in some neutral, objective position – they are putting their own spin on things.

How does this play out in a game? Consider *Bioshock*. *Bioshock* is a first-person shooter in which the main character, Jack, is involved in a plane crash and ends up in the failed utopian city Rapture (now a dystopia). The plot of the game is essentially about trying to escape Rapture, which is complicated by the fact that the inhabitants have discovered a gene-altering material that gives them incredible powers. Over the course of the game, Jack receives requests to do various tasks, preceded by the phrase “Would you kindly.” Eventually he learns that he has been hypnotized into obeying any order that follows that phrase, meaning that he never actually had any choice about completing the game’s missions after all. The latter half of the game involves regaining his free will and, of course, killing the person who was responsible for removing it.

In essence, *Bioshock* used the unreliable narrator mechanic to make players believe they were freely choosing to accept the missions (well, as freely as one ever chooses in a game with a fairly constrained set of choices). This was a plot twist that had a lot of emotional resonance with players; while they were deceived, it was seen as fitting in with the rest of the game’s narrative

and thus enjoyed. It was particularly interesting because first-person shooters are frequently simply a matter of receiving an objective, completing that objective, and moving on to the next one – there isn't always much thought over whether completing the objective is the right thing to do.

Bioshock is far from the only game to use an unreliable narrator, and many games trade on having the player slowly figure out that something is wrong; *Portal*, for instance, has areas where the façade partly slips and reveals that there is more going on than the AI narrator wants you to know about. What makes *Bioshock* interesting, however, is that it is an instance where the player's decisions ended up not mattering (in some sense) but that players did not hugely object to; they embraced it as part of the game. Removing player choice does not always go this well.

BioWare's *Mass Effect* series explicitly has the player make moral choices; these are tracked – indeed, as I mentioned earlier, players earn paragon and renegade points, depending on what actions they choose. Furthermore, the actions are portrayed as having large-scale effects, such as deciding which of two species (the Geth or the Quarian) to save; the other is eradicated. The entire game series is predicated around the idea that the player's choices matter.

Unfortunately, the original ending to *Mass Effect 3*, which was the culmination of the series, did not live up to this promise. Players receive the same ending scene regardless of their choices, except for a few minor variations (largely what color the scenes were tinted.) This enraged fans, and even caused the Better Business Bureau to state that BioWare had engaged in false advertisement for *Mass Effect 3*. Ultimately, after vociferous complaints from players, BioWare released downloadable content which expanded upon and slightly changed the various ending scenarios. People are still complaining about this.

So why the difference between *Bioshock* and *Mass Effect 3*? In both cases, players find out that their choices are, to a large extent, illusory, yet in one case it was regarded as an interesting plot twist and in the other case it was regarded as a betrayal. There are two noteworthy differences, however. First, *Bioshock* reveals the lack of agency partway through the game, allowing players to feel like they have triumphed over this (temporary) lack of autonomy. *Mass Effect 3* does not reveal the irrelevance of player choice until the very end, so players have no chance to try to regain that autonomy.

Second, the deception occurs at different levels for the two games. In *Bioshock*, when the players entered the game, they consented to the game's fictions based on certain expectations; if it had appeared to be a first-person shooter but turned out to have 3 minutes of shooting and then 50 hours of, say, fishing, this would rightly seem problematically deceptive. But given that it was set in a dystopia that had genetic modifications as part of the gameworld, the fact that your character had been manipulated fit right into the story. It was something that players could find plausible within the parameters of the game; the character was being deceived, not just the player.

In *Mass Effect 3*, the players also consented to the game's fictions based on certain expectations. However, in this case those expectations involved the idea that player's choices would make a

big difference in the game (which was never part of *Bioshock*'s marketing.) The ending of the *Mass Effect* series seemed to violate that because whatever the player chose would lead to roughly the same events; what felt like a sweeping, branching narrative ultimately turned into a single funnel, directing all players toward the same endpoint. In this instance, it was not the character who was deceived in the game; it was the players who were deceived about the game.

From an aesthetic standpoint, the desire to wrap up this very successful trilogy with a dramatic ending is understandable. However, narrative and choice are sometimes at odds. The more you give players choice in a game, the less a designer controls the narrative. The more the designer wants to ensure a particular narrative arc in a game, the less control the player has (and the less weight her choices have.) To truly have an ending that dramatically reflected player choice, BioWare would have had to be willing to run the risk that some of the endings wouldn't be very interesting ones, simply due to the series of choices that players made. And while it might be possible to have a game in which players try to shape what is going to happen but fail – a game which operates on the idea that some events are too big for an individual to stop – that's something that likely needs to be telegraphed somewhere in the game's events.

While deceiving a player about how much autonomy they have opens the door for very interesting moral explorations, it needs to be handled a lot more carefully than it was. Unfortunately, as a result of BioWare's design choices, a series of games that was great for encouraging careful moral reflection about the player's choices ended in a way that essentially invalidates all of that deliberation. This is probably the worst possible situation, since instead of simply not involving moral reflection the game encourages it *and then discards it*. It is not surprising that players were angry.

D. Extravirtual Reactions

One of the interesting features of the controversy over *Mass Effect 3* is that players had very strong extravirtual reactions to events that occurred intravirtually. In other words, while they were aware that, in an extravirtual sense, none of their choices would make a real difference (those galaxies do not really exist!), they could still be upset that their intravirtual choices made no difference inside the game. This is an example of how we can be aware both that a game "isn't real" and thus our actions within it have very little extravirtual effect on the world and yet still, ourselves, be affected by what occurs.

This is not a rare occurrence – people are often affected by what happens in video games. To take a somewhat fanciful example, *World of Warcraft* contains a quest in which you are instructed to take a sharp stick and poke baby monkeys to cause them distress. Within the game context this action is essentially seen as a necessary evil – the fact that you are asked to do this by a particular faction is motivation to later repudiate that faction. However, it is possible for a player to feel uncomfortable doing this – since generally we frown on torturing animals in the real world, somehow that discomfort carries over into the game world.

This ability of games to affect us (despite not being "real") is what opens the door to using games as a tool to promote moral reflection. I am not making the claim that there is a direct connection between an action in a game and one's real-world moral tendencies. For instance,

consider a player who steals in a video game. Since frequently games will allow rogues or thieves as characters, this player may see these behaviors as tacitly endorsed within the game. As such, he may see his behavior as divorced from the real world: he can simultaneously see stealing as wrong in this world while believing it permissible in the game world. Our relationship to the game world is complicated, which is why playing *Grand Theft Auto* will probably not actually turn you into a murderer.

However, we are not always this removed from our actions in games, and some games are designed to encourage us to wrestle with what actions to take. As mentioned before, *Life is Strange* delays the appearance of many consequences in a way that lends significance to player choices and encourages players to try different paths and see what happens. When thoughtfully done, this kind of experimentation can be morally beneficial to the player by increasing her sensitivity to ethical choices and their ramifications.

Thus, with respect to the aforementioned *World of Warcraft* quest, poking baby monkeys with a stick in the game could actually lead to a positive moral outcome. If, say, the player takes the quest and experiences moral revulsion while performing it, the quest may be morally beneficial by showing her something about her reactions to torture or animal cruelty. This is a kind of philosophical thought-experiment in video game form; while the trappings may be fantastic, the moral dilemmas faced in games can reflect larger ethical questions about the treatment of animals, the lengths one should go to in order to appease authority figures (such as quest givers) and so forth.

Now, I want to be a little careful here, because I do not intend to imply that moral reflection is a necessary outcome of doing this quest. Indeed, I think that some writers, Sicart in particular, overstate the moral reflection among gamers. This is likely in response to the popular portrayal of gamers as being almost passive puppets in the hands of violent video games, shaped into hateful, violent beings through playing first-person shooting games. That is clearly a caricature of gamers and their responses to games. Yet, Sicart risks swinging too far the other way when he notes that “When I write about players, I am referring to an implied, model player...who has experience playing games and has the ethical maturity to understand them as an expressive medium.” (Sicart 2013, p. 25)

Similarly, he claims that a “player is a moral user capable of reflecting ethically about her presence in the game, and aware of how that experience configures her values.” (Sicart 2009, p. 17) I don’t think he is entirely wrong about this; I do think that the vast majority of gamers are capable of moral reflection and are not doomed to simply absorb the morality that is represented in a game without any thought.

However, while players are clearly *capable* of moral reflection, this does not imply that they always *engage* in moral reflection. Sometimes you just want to play a game, not have a deep meditation on the nature of right action. This can lead to simply accepting aspects of a game that are questionable, sure. But one of the really interesting things about video games is that sometimes you just want to play a game but end up thinking about its philosophical aspects anyway. So, even with the caveats I’ve given, I think that video games do show promise as a way of promoting moral reflection, in part because they are a lot more fun for the average person

to engage with that an ethical treatise. Not a lot of people are going to sit down with *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, but a lot of people are going to play a BioWare game like *Dragon Age* or *Mass Effect*.

E. Conclusion

So where does this leave us? In intravirtual terms, a desire to adapt the game world to player choices has, in part, led to the advent of morality meters and other systems of morality tracking within the game. While these systems have their limitations, I have argued that even explicit or obvious systems of morality in video games may be useful for ethical reflection. Designers also have to be very careful if they decide to take *away* player choice, as that runs the risk of making players feel like their ethical reflections were pointless.

Interestingly, we have extravirtual reactions even though we recognize that our actions don't have much effect outside the game. This is what opens the door to moral reflection. While I generally agree with Sicart that a player *can* engage in ethical reflection, I'm a little less optimistic in saying that we always do engage in it. Nonetheless, I think that games are a useful tool for getting people to think about moral dilemmas in a slightly more interesting fashion than giving them an ethics textbook and can help bring ethical contemplation into the everyday lives of a lot more people.