Overview of Useful Distinctions and Concepts in Starting to Analyze and Extract Values in Video Games

Daniel Rosiak

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Introductory Comments

While we all undoubtedly already have some working understanding of what a "videogame" is, in speaking of the values in videogames, it will be useful to have a more explicit definition of what we mean by this term. Additionally, by unpacking some of our preconceptions about videogames, e.g., what is paradigmatically a videogame and what is harder to identify as such, perhaps a slightly sharper image of what we all have in mind will emerge, and even begin to indicate what we should expect in "looking for values" in videogames.

A videogame is *a lot of things* and can be extremely complicated! It is not just content that gets consumed by a user, or information content that gets transmitted from a source to a destination via a medium, but can be closer to a language learned and then evolved by a community. A key part of a computer game is that its intended audience is not really an *audience*, if that means a passive receiver of a message or information content, but rather are meant to be active collaborators that ask and answer questions about the system of rules operationally defining the game.

In offering a definition of X (videogames), we do not want to just *list* all the things that come to mind when we use such a word; we are seeking to isolate those fundamental units or features, those particular elements/things without which X ceases to be X. Let's try to give such a definition.

Definition 0.1. A *videogame* (or *computer game*) is any (i) system of rules or mechanics, (ii) realized computationally (e.g., as a piece of software/code run on computer hardware or some other platform), that is (iii) designed to be dynamically interacted with by a user or users, i.e., designed to integrate into its program flow the results of user input (received through some interface or controller), which interaction (iv) can determine the sequence of events and which is displayed to the user through visual (and/or possibly other, e.g., haptic, auditory) feedback, and where (v) this interaction is at once goal-oriented and unconstrained by material utility.

In other words, it is (i) *mechanics* (computer code), (ii) realized on some *platform*, (iii) with a particular *interface* (input device) allowing users to dynamically interact with the functioning of the code, the results of whose interactions are (iv) displayed through visual (and/or possibly other sensory) *feedback* through an output device, and where this interaction is (v) freely undertaken in the *context of play or diversion.*

A computer game or videogame is *all* of these things. It seems to be perhaps most importantly (i). But without (ii), something that had each of the other four characteristics, would not be a *computer* game. For instance, a game of (standard) chess, played on a physical board with a friend, would meet such criteria, and presumably we would not want to count such a thing as a computer game (so we cannot dispense with (ii)). Without (iii), something that met the other four characteristics would be indistinguishable from a computer producing output, say text on a screen, or transmitting information or a message to a recipient. Without (iv), it is not clear how users could continue to interact dynamically with the underlying mechanics. Finally, without (v), our definition would have to include things like a computer-operated "torture machine" that let an (unwilling) participant press buttons on a controller and receive painful "zaps" as punishment for "wrong moves," or a computer-operated medical device that integrates user input and displays the results on a screen, or a "videogame" (something that had all the other hallmarks of a videogame, but) that you had to win in order to stay alive or receive food. It seems likely that few would be willing to count such things as computer *games*, so we need the fifth characteristic as well.

This is not meant as a dogmatic or final definition. It is simply a first attempt at narrowing down the sorts of key features of computer games without which we would no longer be dealing with a computer game.

Values in Games

Ethics/values in games are frequently approached along two major lines:

1. **Game-Centric Approach** ("Game as Object"): here it is fundamentally an issue of *game design*, i.e., the values in games are held to emerge by virtue of the game *as a designed object*, and one accordingly looks at how the design and structure of the game as a system already embeds or contains certain values (even before, or independently of how, the player or consumer engages with it).[1]

2. **Player-Centric Approach** ("Game as Gameplay"): here it is fundamentally an issue of the form of the activity of game-play/participation in the game, i.e., the values in games are held to emerge *in and through the (allowable) forms of user involvement*.

This is not, of course, meant as a mutually exclusive distinction; (nearly) all writers who write intelligently about values in games and media recognize that *both* aspects are involved in any cogent analysis of a game, and that there are interesting interactions between the two aspects, i.e., between the values "embedded in a game's system" and the values that emerge in the act of interacting within the game for the players/participants. So you should not think of these as two entirely separate "options" on how or where to

[1] One possible glib response to the idea that values emerge in games insofar as they are *designed objects* might be: aren't there values in *all designed objects*?

Perhaps it does not seem like it on the face of it, but one could make a decent argument that your coffee mug or the desk you are sitting at conveys certain values. Does that then entail that there is no need to talk about the "values in video games" in particular, or that this is a more or less trivial consequence of how *any* value gets embedded in a designed object?

I think not, but it is something worth thinking about. (By the way: see Ian Bogost's short video on "Interviews with Game Designers" for one way of thinking about this, here: `https://www.valuesatplay.org/interviews-with-game-designers`)

locate values in games. However, it does remain an important distinction to keep in mind as you read and think about these questions, especially as many authors will sometimes narrow in on one of the two aspects, and go on to speak of, for instance, "design values" on the one hand, or the "player values" that emerge in gameplay.

Brief General Remark

Assuming there *are* values in games—whether that means embedded in the games as designed objects or emerging through gameplay, or some combination of the two—this is actually a rather complex matter to parse. For one thing: video games are themselves rather complex *objects*. At a very general level, a video game could be said to just be "a particular piece of software created and run on a particular computer hardware at a particular moment in time" (Bogost, 2009). But really a video game must clearly be more than this, and any given game manifests itself as many things, as involving many different components: it is code; it is a platform; it is narrative; it involves a particular community of users; it can be "art"; it typically creates certain "mental states" in the regular participants; it is embedded within a certain cultural and economic context, e.g., is usually designed for profit, etc. So the "transmission of values" in and through games would appear to have to be a function of a number of parameters, including (but certainly not limited to) factors like

- the form of game, e.g., single-player game, role-playing game, multi-player online role-playing game
- the content of game, e.g., adventure, education, shooter game
- the time expectations, e.g., the kind of values that can be transmitted in a game meant to be played once for 5 minutes is very different from the sorts of values transmissible in a game that "builds on itself," meant to be returned to over the course of months or years
- the target audience and context of play, e.g., the sorts of values transmissible in a game aimed at educating school children in a classroom is obviously very different from the sorts of values that can get transmitted in a fantasy game aimed at adults playing at home and communicating with one another
- external factors and contexts

Unpacking Values in Games

Let's now look, in more detail and in a somewhat more structured way, at how values can emerge in games. I'll organize discussion of this by dividing things according to the two main "lines" or paradigms for thinking about values in games. We'll start by digging more deeply into the first paradigm, which holds that values in games are to be located mainly in the way games are designed objects. Discussing such matters will also blur into discussion of "player-centric" elements at times, since these can be intimately related, so one shouldn't take this division too seriously or sharply (it is just there to help you organize your ideas a bit).

Values in Games: Game-Centric Approach

Values are held to be "embedded" within the games themselves, as designed objects, in any (combination) of the following ways (or with respect to the following components of the game design):

- **Simulated World**: via the "simulated" or fictional or virtual world/environment created by the game. This can of course take many forms, e.g., as in massively multi-player online games, with two or three-dimensional graphical representations, combined with auditory and/or touch sensations, presenting a "model world" some of the elements of which can be manipulated by users more or less in "real time" mediated by a virtual self represented within that world. These model worlds are designed in tandem with certain *rules*, which can include things like how objects/actors move through the model world (locomotion), how information is transferred (communication), how the space unfolds (topography), but also things like gravity (physical laws borrowed from the "real world"). The simulated worlds are thus characterized by their own rules and laws. The basic idea is that the choices involved in these rules/laws, as well as the sorts of perspectives, behaviors, and tasks they enable, reflect any number of values.

  In many video games, the rules that help constitute the model world borrow inspiration from guiding narrative of science fiction, from the nature of real-world physical laws (modified or not), from sports games. (More on rules below.)

  The "game world" created by the simulation of a video game often incorporates simulations of other systems, for instance, the ball dynamics in a sports game typically simulate the laws of physics, or the musical instruments played in a musical band game typically replicate the laws of acoustics. Sometimes "fictional elements" are incorporated as well, or are used to modify or exaggerate features of those systems, as when balls in a soccer game can travel at speeds that seem unreasonable following "ordinary physics."

  Depending on the game, this "simulation" factor, and its "immersiveness," can be more or less important. For instance, in MMOG games or VR games or in games such as *Grand Theft Auto* or *Zelda*, and many others, the properties of the "simulated world" of the game are very important to the game experience as a whole, and already seem to express certain values. Part of the appeal of these games has to do with the particular "worlds" they create. On the other hand, for other games, such as online poker or online chess or some of the first computer games such as *Pong*, this "simulation" aspect is of less relevance. If I play online chess, I really don't care about how the pieces look. In fact, I am usually *distracted by* platforms that try to create 3d simulations of chessboards or intricately designed chess pieces; I tend to prefer programs or platforms that are pretty "minimalist" in terms of graphics, and I know many online chess players are similar in this respect. So in such a game, one might say, the "simulation" element is far less important to *what the game is* and to the experience of the typical player. Yet there is still an element of "simulation" and of representation of one's "virtual self" (even if this is just a paddle, as in *Pong*, or a mouse, as in online chess).

  For some games, the actual simulated physical areas of the game world are "locked" or inaccessible ("invisible walls"), which forces the player to ultimately follow a predefined trajectory or path through that environment. In other games, players may

be able to access, explore, and toy with the environment and elements of that environment in certain (still limited) ways that are not entirely pre-determined or may not form part of the "game narrative." *Grand Theft Auto* is one of the first and most notable examples of such a game. (These are sometimes called "closed" and "open" games, respectively; note that this is not to be confused with Sicart's "open/closed game design" distinction discussed below.)

In general, the "worldliness" of a fictional world of a video game is created by means of several ingredients, including graphics, sounds, narrative text, information prompts, cut-scenes, back-stories, etc. These elements combine to support certain distinctive "physics" or set of "physical laws," which can mimick those of the "real world," modify them, or break them in a variety of ways.

The measure of a successful game-world is obviously not how "real" it is—if that means how well it duplicates the laws of physics as we know it "out here"—but how *coherent* the fictional environment, with its particular distinctive limitations and potentialities, appears to the participant. A game that had "physical laws" very different from those of the "real world" could indeed be *very real seeming* to players. Actions and behaviors have *consequences* within that world, even if those consequences are not what they would be in a "real world" analogue. So, again, the point is that the coherence of these laws and the types of behaviors they allow, is really what matters—not how closely they approximate the physics of our day-to-day lives on Earth.

That said, many writers have noted that it is ultimately the operational *rules* of the game that configure the interaction possibilities within the game world and even are ultimately responsible for determining the particular "world" of the simulation. As Sicart writes:

> Computer games are designed experiences in virtual environments with rules and properties that, in general, cannot be adapted or corrected by their users. When playing a casual game of basketball with friends, some of us change the rules to make the game more or less physically demanding, or to become what we believe is an offense-oriented, beautiful game. For instance, we could decide that the team that scores a basket keeps the ball, instead of the turnaround that we find in basketball's official rules. When I play a casual game of basketball on my console, with my friends, we cannot do that. The computer system upholds the scoring and turnaround rules, so it is not possible for us to change them...We can, obviously, change our play style, because players determine how games are played, but the game world and its hardwired systems of rules are impossible to modify. Much like professional, refereed sports, computer games do not allow for players to change the rules while playing. (Sicart, 15)

So let us think a little more about how *rules* work, and what this means for values and for the simulated worlds created by a game.

- **Hard Rules**: via the "hard rules" (both negatively and positively, i.e., what the rules disallow, and what they allow, and how these (im)possibilities cannot be negotiated as play occurs). They key element of this is that these are the rules

that cannot be changed in gameplay. This might include the inherent limitations entailed by the "physics" of the spatial and temporal virtual world created by the game, or it might include rules of engagement imposed by the designers, such as not being able to shoot an "ally." These are basically the rules that form the *mechanics* of the game; they are not things that the user is asked to "accept" or "approve," but are rather "built into" how the game itself unfolds.

- **Soft Rules**: via the "soft rules," where these capture the rules that emerge in gameplay and bind the participants in less constraining ways than the previous sorts of rules, perhaps as implicit social contracts gradually adopted by the community of players, or as general "codes of conduct" or acceptable/"normal" behavior (from the perspective of the constraints of the game, the goals of the characters, the narrative, the need to cooperate or compete with other players, etc.). These soft rules can also just include constraints on behaviors and interaction patterns of users that develop, throughout repeated gameplay, on the basis of the implied premise of the game. In other words, as Sicart writes,

  > If I tried not to follow the rules of the game [*Rez*] and refused to, for example, shoot at the nonplayer characters, then the game would "punish" me with a "game over" screen. But if I follow the instructions, I enjoy the designed ludic pleasures of *Rez*. Only because I acknowledge that there is a game with clear rules, and only because I voluntarily accept to play by those rules [at least eventually], the game *Rez* comes into being and so do I as a player. (Sicart, 68)

  The point to notice is that the "rules" Sicart describes above are not quite the same as the "hard rules" discussed earlier, since they are ultimately not enforced without exception, they are not things that cannot be changed (he can, after all, choose to keep "losing" the game by failing to do whatever "one is supposed to do" in this game). The point is: after all, if he wants to enjoy what that particular game has to offer, he will eventually start to do what it takes to "win" or receive rewards or advance in the gameplay. The sorts of things he needs to do within the game, the sorts of things he needs to avoid, and the sorts of "soft constraints" he has to agree to respect in order to move forward in the game—these are all characteristic of a game's "soft rules." They are "soft" because they *could* be broken, but it is still legitimate to refer to them as "rules" because they do acts as constraints on gameplay and serve to delimit what is possible within that game in a number of defining ways.

  Question for you: whether in terms of "hard" or "soft" rules, or both, or some combination of the two—what is the difference (if any) between *values* and *rules*? Is a value just a rule? How so? If not, how does it differ?

- **Designer Lenses**: because everything about a game's world is *designed*, including the typical and possible "perspectives" the avatars can have as they move through and modify that world, it is inevitable that since the user's participation is mediated by representations of itself as a simulated actor—with perhaps certain physical depiction, a reward and punishment structures in place guiding their behaviors, the "physics" of that virtual world, etc.—certain ways of "viewing the world," or "lenses," will be adopted by users of that game. There are values inherent in the

choices that went into the use of certain lenses or perspectives and not others. (These values do *not* have to be conscious on the part of the designers; in fact, very likely they often will not be.)

In short, what I am referring to as a "lens" is any perceptual, emotional, cognitive, or political bias that influences how the information of the game (and that transmitted within the game) is received, processed, and contextualized by the player. (A 'bias' here is not meant pejoratively; it is practically unavoidable. The point is: as a designer and player, one should strive to become *conscious* of these influences.)

Note that this category, especially, bleeds into the other "player-centric" approach.

- **Narrative**: values conveyed narratively. Lots of games are structured by their narratives. Ever since human beings first started telling one another, recording, and transmitting stories, we have used these stories to convey values. It might seem blindingly obvious to you, but much of human history has shared stories through word of mouth and the written word (like literature). Films, TV, and computer games have largely supplanted these older traditional forms, and in a longer view of history, this shift in media is extremely sudden and dramatic. Yet games and films of course still employ narratives and are structured by stories and everything that goes along with this.

  Perhaps more *clearly* (yet not for that reason, more *strongly* or with the greatest effect) than any other aspect of game design, narratives carry values. This might be because we are simply accustomed to extracting values or "morals" from stories, as this is something we have been doing for millenia. For instance, children's stories, however heavy-handed in the values they mean to convey, are a good example: one almost cannot help but read *Little Red Riding Hood* and understand that "do not talk to strangers" is a rather important lesson the author means you to take away. In great works of literature, things are more complicated and subtle, yet we are still fairly practiced in extracting values from such things.

  Video games (and most films, for that matter) also contain a strong narrative component, even if we happen to be less practiced at extracting the values of the narratives when presented in these forms. But in general it is still "easier" for us to locate values when some narrative element is present. This is in part due to the fact that narratives almost always (always?) are structured by *goals* of some sort, by a "mission" if not a lesson, or at least by a development or trajectory of the characters involved that progresses in accordance with a certain (implicit or explicit) understanding of what is to count as "accomplishment." And this structure that informs about *what is to count as accomplishment* is what really carries much of the weight of the inherent values of the narrative of the game.

  For instance, in a soldier game where the soldier's "mission" is to defend their country, many of the values are as transparent as can be: i.e.,"patriotism is important," "the lives of enemies are less important than those of allies," etc. For a different example: *Minecraft* has everything to do with building, resourcefulness, and creativity, and despite all the different variations the tasks can take, these values are usually pretty transparently a key component of the game. The game *Crazy Taxi* has each player assume the role of a taxi driver who is tasked with accumulating as much money as possible (by driving passengers to their destinations as quickly as possible and earning extra tips by performing "stunts" along the way). Ostensibly

at least, however crude it may seem, at least one of the values implied by this narrative is that "making as much money as possible in the shortest amount of time, while simultaneously performing risky and exciting stunts, is desirable."

Narratives in games are also common in the form of a particular re-telling or representation of history, together with a particular understanding of the decisive causal factors shaping the progression of those historical events. For instance, in the game *Civilization*, technological innovation is what enables military dominance, which the player can then use to progress through history successfully. This does not, of course, entail that the game (and game designers) are "saying" that "military dominance via technological innovation is good"; however, it does represent a particular understanding of history, one that could be disputed or problematized in a number of ways, and one that does indeed seem to have certain "hidden premises" and assumptions.

- **Explicitly Promoted**: when values are deliberately and explicitly "built in" to the game, with the express purpose of fostering certain attitudes and beliefs "out in the real world," or educating the participants. Many examples of this can be found at both `https://www.valuesatplay.org/about-vap` and `http://www.gamesforchange.org/games/` . The group associated with the former link is also responsible for curating and designing a number of games that exemplify this approach. For instance, one such game, *Akrasia* (described below), is meant to help players understand (and thus, presumably, better empathize with) the psychology of addiction:

  > *Akrasia* is based on the abstract concept of addiction, which is expressed metaphorically throughout the game.
  >
  > The game is set in a maze that represents the mind. The maze has two states—a normal and a psychedelic state. To enter the game, the player has to collect a pill-shaped object and thus enters the game as "addict". From "chasing the dragon" and the experience of dependency to working your way through "cold turkey stage" where willpower is mapped onto navigation skills, this game models the essential dimensions of the addiction gestalt as identified by its creators.

  A similar game is the "McDonald's Game" described below:

  > Making money in a corporation like McDonald's is not simple at all! Behind every sandwich, there is a complex process you must learn to manage: from the creation of pastures to the slaughter, from the restaurant management to the branding.
  >
  > For decades McDonald's corporation has been heavily criticized for its negative impact on society and environment.
  >
  > There are inevitably some glitches in such activity: rainforest destruction, livelihood losses in the third world, desertification, precarization of working conditions, food poisoning and so on...
  >
  > Denying all these well founded accusations would be impossible, so an online game was created to explain to young people that there are prices to pay.

You can play and read about some of these games (and many more), here:

`https://www.valuesatplay.org/play-games`

Values in Games: Player-Centric Approach

- **Character Roles**: values are instilled through "subjectivization" in particular ways. What this means is this: one interacts with and modifies elements of a game world typically through the medium of a "virtual self" or avatar (this need not be an exclusively "first-person" perspective, but could be "third-person" or some mix of the two), a graphical representation of the user to the user, who understands this representation to be their "self" within the game. Obviously, in being represented to the user, this "virtual self" or "virtual subject" will have certain characteristics (perhaps physical), distinctive perspectival features (perhaps they "see their world" in a particular way), and even sorts of characteristic (or defining) behaviors/typical actions/responses to stimuli presented within that virtual world.

  In many such games, your experience as a user is mediated, and so strongly colored by, the sort of defining characteristics of the represented "virtual self" or agent through which the user understands themselves as engaging with the world (even when there is some flexibility and dynamism in these characters). As Sicart writes:

  > It is possible to understand the act of playing a computer game as an act of subjectivization, a process that creates a subject connected to the rules of the game. (Sicart, 21)

  Games also require *commitment*, and just like with our "real selves," our identities or "subjectivity" is something that only really begins to take shape after some time and experience, assimilation of knowledge, coping with failures and challenges, adoption of certain values, and after we become *attached* to certain aspects of our representations of ourselves. Something very similar happens in many video games, and this element of *attachment* (of players to certain characters, their distinctive embodied "virtual self" and way of moving through that world) seems rather important to many video games, their allure, and their "value-chargedness."

  As you think about values in games, it will be important to try to isolate the particular values that emerge through the particular ways the game represents agents to themselves.

- **Reward-Punishment System**[2]: this is just as it sounds. Many games involve a component of rewards or prizes for certain actions or achievements, and punishments or "losses" for other behaviors. Such things act to incentivize the player to ultimately conform or adapt their behavior to the sorts of behaviors demanded by what it takes to "win." Reward and punishment is an ancient—even for non-human creatures—highly effective, if sometimes "indirect," way of enforcing certain values by incentivizing and highlighting certain behaviors while punishing or ignoring others.

[2]This might have equally been included under the "narrative" heading, since frequently the reward and punishment system of a game is structured by the narrative.

As you begin to isolate values in games, try to think about the sorts of values implicit in the reward-punishment systems that structure the progression of the game and game-play.

- **Core Audience/Stakeholder-Oriented**: guided by the perceived values of the "core audience" of gamers and/or community of players for whom the game is meant. E.g., designing game for children or to be used in classroom setting sets very different expectations and constraints on designers than an entertainment first-person shooter game aimed at teenage boys. This describes, then, something like a sort of "feedback loop": certain audiences gravitate towards certain games, and developers occasionally change their development goals, and the values embedded in the game, in response to the shared values of that "core community" of players.

  As you begin to isolate values in games, try to isolate the "core audience" at which the game is being aimed, and think about the kinds of values perhaps tacitly understood to be held by such a community.

Things not falling in one of the above

There are a few other ways one frequently hears people speak of "values in games," ways that do not seem to fall under any of the previous headings, or to neatly qualify as belonging to either the "game-centric" approach or the "player-centric" approach.

- **Connection to Outside World/Current Political Context**: values modified and constrained by way of connections to events happening in "outside world." For instance, Electronic Arts' decision to eliminate the Taliban from a later version of the *Medal of Honor* first-person shooter game after public pressure about the "impressionable gamers" taking on the role of Taliban fighters during the contemporary war in Afghanistan). The implicit "argument" here seems to be that games invite users to ultimately identify (or at least sympathize) with the avatars or characters of the game, so only those "types" or characters that are "good" in the "real-world" should be depicted in games.

  For our purposes, the point here is that sometimes game development, and in particular the implementation of certain values in games, is influenced by "external events." Accordingly, in thinking about the values of a game, it will occasionally be useful to pay attention to how the game is inserting itself into the larger political or cultural climate.

- **Shareholders/Economic Context**: this refers to how, sometimes, game development can be influence "from outside" by those that own the "market share" and have a mostly monetary interest in the game's form/content/development. These interests can, and often do, influence the development of games, or put constraints on which aspects of games the developers decide to develop and promote. Specifically, these are aspects that typically are expected to appeal to whatever audience is perceived to yield the largest profit.

  This might seem like an "extraneous" consideration, but such things can shape the values that ultimately get "built in" to the final product. Accordingly, in unpacking the values of a game, it can sometimes pay to understand what economic/market interests are behind the development and promotion of the game.

Finally, an extreme position that one finds occasionally in discussions of video game values, especially in the media, is the following: **game-playing itself as good/bad**. Here, the act of "playing games" is regarded as 'good' or 'bad' in itself, regardless of the game. For instance, one sees this sort of idea in the (usually unsupported) claims that video-games can act to "de-socialize" teenagers. In other words, on this "argument," the mere act of playing a video game (regardless of its content or the nature of its virtual world) is held to be already morally-charged, i.e., something that can be 'good' or 'bad'. This is not really a position on how particular computer games can carry or convey certain values, so much as it is an extreme position on the "ethics" of the *medium* of computer gaming itself, as compared to other "ethically-charged" human activities.

General Guidelines for Extracting Values

When analyzing a game, and attempting to "extract" or isolate the core values conveyed by that game, one can start by considering each of the above aspects: that is, by considering which values are conveyed via the game as involving the user in a *simulated world*, together with its *hard and soft rules*; which values are prominent in the game's *narrative* (and sub-narratives); which, if any, are *explicitly promoted*; which, now from the player's perspective, are implicit in the *character roles* and various forms of *subjectification* and *perspectival lenses*; which are implicit in the game's *reward-punishment system*; and which values seem to arise from *external considerations* such as how the game embeds itself within certain political and economic contexts. While there are certainly other approaches and considerations involved in finding values in games—and I encourage you to consider such things—these main areas will furnish a decent starting point.

A Question

At least implicitly, the idea in the above has been that one first extracts values from games and then examines, independently (using the tools of moral philosophy), the respective merit of these values. This is a plausible and well-motivated approach, and we will certainly be doing some of this.

However, one response/challenge to this might ask the following natural question:

> Can't games with "bad" values—let's accept, for the moment, that we have more or less agreed upon what that might mean, or at least that we share some minimal value judgments—be "good" (say, for those who play them, or perhaps for society at large)? And conversely: couldn't a game with "good" values—same qualifications as in the previous question—end up instilling "bad" values?

Question for you: can you think of examples of this? (Either in gaming or in other contexts.)[3]

[3]I mean this to be very open-ended, and for you to try to come up with a variety of your own subtle examples. However, if you cannot think of anything, to get you started, here is a "low-hanging" example of the sort of thing the question has in mind: the game *Grand Theft Auto* is often singled out as one of the "most unethical games ever designed," probably because nearly all of the interactions of the players involve simulations of behaviors like robbery, murder, blackmail, assault, carjacking, etc. However, one could argue (and some have), that within the world of *GTA*, crimes have a price: if you commit a crime

After all, while it would be harder (though certainly possible) to argue that performing "bad" actions in the "real world" could have "good" effects (and vice versa), a key component of video games is that the "simulated world" is just that—*simulated*. Thus, the argument seems to imply, it is at least conceivable that in certain controlled contexts (such as video games, where one's simulated actions cannot harm anyone in the "real world"), simulating "bad actions" could be instructive and "used for good." Do you think this is plausible?

As you think about this question, don't just think about games like *GTA*. For instance, what about the *Akrasia* game described above? Arguably, addiction is "not good" and the sorts of behaviors one engages in while in such a state, at least as simulated by the game, can be destructive. Yet the game purports to be "ethical" in ultimately helping players better understand, and thus better empathize with and support, those who struggle with addiction.

One writer on the ethics of gaming puts it this way:

> Games that take ethics into account beginning with their design need not be good ethical games. A Gandhi simulator could be the most unethical game experience ever made, depending on the design choices that the developers make, and how the players and their communities interact with the system. A game in which there is no conflict, or there are no interesting ways of resolving conflicts, may seem an ethical game, but such a game will eventually fail because games are essentially about resolving conflicts of one kind or another. Games are experiences, and game designers and players are responsible for making these experiences satisfactory not only from a ludic perspective, but also from an ethical point of view. (Sicart, 220-221)

Thus, for Sicart (and a few others), *ethical game design* is less about the merit (measured, perhaps, in terms of traditional philosophical considerations) of the particular values that get embedded and conveyed in a game (for instance, implicit in a first-person shooter game, or a game meant to teach young people about exploitation), and more about the degree to which the game raises the participant's awareness of ethical matters, or involves and challenges their "moral faculties." In other words, according to Sicart, ethical game design allows gamers to reflect on ethics and exercise moral choices, while unethical game design disallows this reflection. Notice that, at least in principle, gamers can "exercise moral choices" even in a game that, to all appearances, was "morally vexed" in containing all kinds of seemingly troubling content; while on the other hand, a game could "disallow ethical reflection" even when its ostensible purpose is to instruct and instill conventionally "good" values.

Also relevant in this connection is Sicart's distinction between what he calls "open" and "closed" ethical game designs (a distinction that is not meant as mutually exclusive, but involves some overlap). He says this:

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and a police officer sees it, they will chase you, with greater intensity the greater the severity of the crime, and if you are caught, you will lose some money or weapons, or even fail the entire "mission." One might then try to argue—I am not suggesting this is a *good argument*, but it is a common one—that the game is really instructing players that actions (specifically criminal ones) have (often grave and negative) consequences, the implication being that this "lesson" is a "good" thing to learn, despite the game's appearance of inviting and endorsing violent criminal behavior.

That is not the best of examples, but perhaps it gives you an idea of the sort of thing the question means to suggest.

> An open ethical game design is a game in which the values of the player and the player community can be implemented in the game world or are reflected dynamically by it. This results in either new content or community-driven practice, or an adaptation of the game world to the ethical choices of the player. Massively multiplayer online games of any kind should fall into this category...But this is not a category exclusive to multiplayer games: single-player titled like *Civilization*, *Balance of Power*, or *The Sims* are games in which the player can effectively experience the game in different ways depending on her ethical judgment. For instance, a player can choose to be abusive toward her Sims, or to create a pacifistic civilization that will expand by means of science and commerce. These choices have a weight in the ethical configuration of the game experience. Single-player ethical games are often based on the development of the storyline by player input: *Deus Ex* is the classic example of open ethical design. Other single-player open ethical game designs would be *Fable* and *Fahrenheit*.
>
> Open ethical games are those in which the players' values can be used in developing a relation with the game world, and in which the game world accepts and encourages this player-driven ethical affordance, and on occasion reacts accordingly. That relation can be a strategy to win the game, but also possibilities to modify the game world, or to create new content. The player will use her moral reasoning and her values, both as player but also potentially as a human being, in her relation with the game world, and the game world will be open to the results of that reflection. An open ethical game experience is based on production, participation, and creation.
>
> In a closed ethical game design, the game creates an ethical experience in which the player cannot implement her values beyond the constraints of the game. The game is designed to create a set of possible actions with different moral weights, and the player will create her values as a player according to the game's values, without the possibility of contributing her values to the game itself. The game is designed with a moral agent in mind, trying to give her ethical choices that are ultimately limited and determined by the game design. Most single-player games fall into this category, especially character-driven adventure and role-playing games, like *Tomb Raider3* or *Planescape: Torment*...
>
> A closed ethical game provides the player with the values she is going to live by in the game world...If they want to play the game, they will have to adapt to these values...This creates an ethical experience of both disempowerment, since the player cannot exert direct moral action on the game world, and reflection, since players have to reflect on the values they are playing by. (Sicart, 214-217)

Sicart also speaks of closed game designs as thus having two sub-types or modalities: "subtracting ethics" and "mirroring ethics." The so-called "subtracting ethics" patterns "leave players the task of understanding the values they are playing by, and reflecting on them"; on the other hand, "mirror ethics" patterns "are more direct experiences of predetermined ethical situations, a much harsher kind of experience that can also yield intense reflection when we are not players" (218).

In short, open ethical games are those that afford the player ethically creative choices, may even integrate these choices into the game design itself, and react accordingly, ultimately letting the players (and the community of players that arise) "create their own sets of values, within the boundaries suggested by the developers, and then those values can be implemented in the game as codes of practice" (219). Closed ethical games supply the player with pre-fabricated values, having them "adapt" to those values and "act those out," even if this occasionally encourages them to reflect on such actions.

Question for you: Can you think of examples of "open" and "closed" game designs (in Sicart's sense of these terms)? Does this seem like a useful distinction?

Wait, but what is a "Value"?

We'll look more closely at this question throughout the course. And soon we'll start to see what some of the *systematic* approaches to values look like.

For the moment, we could begin with our "intuitions" about such matters. Typically, when one thinks of values, one thinks of conventionally "positive" values, for instance those moral values that come from religions, or that are socially sanctioned, like "charity" and "honesty." While for now it is fine if these are the first things that come to mind when you think "values," you should also realize that these sorts of values do not at all exhaust what is meant by the term "value," which should also be understood to include (conventionally, mostly according to Western Christian moral standards) "negative" valuations as well, for instance "greed," "toughness," "sensuality," "vengefulness," etc.

When we think of values, we typically think of things like

- honesty/truthfulness
- pleasure
- tranquility
- strife
- self-control
- patience
- intelligence
- courage
- autonomy
- compassion
- meekness/subservience
- confidence/self-assertiveness/pride
- stoicism (resiliance in the face of hardship and privation)

but remember that values can (and will) also include things that seem "negative," i.e., "pride" is just as much a value as "meekness" or "self-denial," even if your first instinct is to believe that "self-denial" is somehow "better" than the former.

The "common denominator" of a *value* is that it identifies a particular sort of stable behavior, way of life, character, or pattern of responses and moreover endorses this as preferable to its (usually implied) antithesis. So in isolating values, don't just look for "good things"—you should look for the *forms of life or behavior* the game seems to be endorsing.

Again, if this is too indeterminate for you, rest assured that we will revisit what it means to be a value throughout the quarter, and make all this more precise. For now, I just want you to be able to (roughly) identify "value-like" things.

Final remark: in identifying and thinking about values, an important thing you can (and should) do is "unfold" a value into its underlying argument. What do I mean by that? Well, take for instance, "honesty." All on its own, this word is actually not very illuminating, and is too vague. Really, one should try to be more explicit. For instance, is the person/text/game implying that "truthfulness *at all costs*, in every situation, etc., is always preferable" or do they have a more nuanced approach (spell it out)? Furthermore: describe, in as careful terms as possible, the situation or event or characteristic (in the game, for instance) that led you to believe that this was the value being endorsed. Then, try to spell out as explicitly as possible the underlying argument behind this value endorsement.

Typically, there is an *argument* buried within a value judgment (even if it is a *bad* argument). Try to isolate this. For instance, very roughly, instead of just saying that the game *Akrasia* promotes "compassion," it would be much better to spell out their (implied) reasoning, which might go something like this

> (Premise) The more one *understands* the particular form suffering takes (and can appreciate how it alters one's motivations and perspectives on things), the better one can help those in need of being helped.
>
> (Premise) Those suffering from addiction are in need of being helped.
>
> (Premise) Helping people who suffer is desirable.
>
> (Premise) One can increase their understanding of a particular form of life by participating in simulations of that form of life.
>
> (Conclusion) Therefore, by participating in simulations of an addicted mind, one will better be able to understand those suffering from addiction, and so be better equipped to helping them.

As you isolate values in games, try to "go beyond the words" and think in terms of the *underlying arguments* behind such endorsed values. You will usually have to do some work/thinking in order to figure out what these arguments are.

D. Rosiak, College of Computing and Digital Media, Depaul University, Chicago, IL
E-mail address: drosiak@depaul.edu