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MORAL COMPLEXITY IN VIDEOGAMES: A PRAGMATIST APPROACH

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Abstract

The field of videogame ethics has already achieved a differentiated view on many ethical questions in regards to videogames, their players and the industry. However, most of these approaches have neglected the benefits of a less abstract, more pragmatic view on videogame ethics. Thus, in this paper, I will introduce the concept of moral complexity to formulate a device that allows a pragmatic identification, categorisation, discussion, and design of moral content in videogames. Moral complexity is defined as (or by) the degree to which a game offers alternatives and/or commentary to violence and deceit to players and is exclusively referring to how the issue of morality is implemented in past and contemporary game design. It is a reductionist approach, which treats morality as a game design element and shall help to understand the experience of morality in a closed player/game circuit. To introduce and explain the notion of moral complexity, this paper will begin with a brief overview of fundamental developments and perspectives in the field of videogame ethics. Further, moral complexity is introduced based on a rendering of Kantian metaphysics into virtual space. Then, elements of Aristotle's ethics, Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow and Habermas' principles of communicative action are defined to articulate the phenomenological aspect of experiencing moral complexity in-game. Based on these theoretical building blocks, a comprehensive definition of moral complexity is presented. To illustrate this construct, cases of videogames (*Grand Theft Auto V, Spec Ops: The Line* and *Detroit: Become Human*) are introduced to exemplify different degrees and manifestations of **moral complexity** in contemporary game design. Moreover, a discussion on issues shall forward a differentiated picture of the concept. In the end, a conclusion presents prospects and chances for the notion of moral complexity.

Keywords: *moral complexity; videogame ethics; game design; game studies; morality; violence*

1 Introduction

The history of videogames is intimately tied to a discourse on morality and ethics (cp. Ferguson, 2010, p. 68). This discourse entails discussions on violence in videogames, mechanically implemented and also visually represented, as well as debates on the impact of virtual violence on players and critical interrogations of dubious business practices in videogame production (Zagal, 2013). This discourse which was majorly dominated by Western media and *worried parents* until the dawn of the 21st century (Squire, 2003, p.55; Ferdig, 2016, p.318), but has been taken over by various thinkers from the fields of game studies and design since then.

As a reaction to these political and emotional opinions on videogames and violence, a discourse developed that sought to find more critical perspectives towards games' moral worth (Zagal, 2013), by employing ethics and moral psychology in videogame research (Squire & Jenkins, 2003; Consalvo, 2005; Rauch, 2009; Staines, 2010; Sicart, 2011; Bartel, 2015; Staines et al. 2019; Ryan et al., 2020).

However, although these approaches have achieved a more differentiated view on ethical questions concerning videogames, most of these approaches have neglected the benefits of a less abstract but more *pragmatist view* on videogame ethics (Pereira-Santos, 2019, p. 155).

The rich corpus of research Zagal named *videogame ethics* (2013) often speaks of *morality*, *moral realism*, *moral encounters*, *moral dilemmas*, or *moral complexities* (Sicart, 2011; Zagal, 2013; Groen et al., 2020). Unfortunately, the meaning of these terms is not always consistently elaborated nor congruent with the identically named notions in circulation used within other research. Hence, we face diverse research about a normative understanding of morality that uses different notions and descriptions, ultimately making the discussion on videogame ethics vague and opaque. On the other hand, one can argue that ethics are an intrinsically ambiguous subject, as long as we deal with ethics in the *real world* where we face *real consequences* (Kiel, 2020, p. 218). Yet, once we are talking about videogames, I argue that a reductionist and more straightforward notion of morality can be applied as we deal with closed simulations; limited virtual realities that abide by the logos of programmed code (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 440; Bogost, 2009, p. 40).

Thus, in this paper, I introduce the concept of moral complexity to formulate a device that allows a pragmatic identification, categorisation, discussion and design of moral content in videogames. Moral complexity is the degree to which a game offers alternatives and/or commentary to violence and deceit to players. This reductionist approach treats morality as a game design element and helps to understand the experience of morality in a closed player/game circuit (cp. Görgen & Simmond, 2020, pp. 241-242).

Consequently, to introduce and explain the notion of **moral complexity**, this paper will begin with a brief overview of fundamental developments and perspectives in the field of videogame ethics. Further, **moral complexity** is introduced based on a rendering of Kantian metaphysics into virtual space. Then, elements of Aristotle's ethics, Csikszentmihalyi's concept of **flow** and Habermas' principles of **communicative**

action are defined to articulate the phenomenological aspect of experiencing moral complexity in-game. Based on these theoretical building blocks, a comprehensive definition of moral complexity is presented. To ground this construct, cases of videogames (*GTA V*, *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Detroit: Become Human*) are introduced to exemplify different degrees and manifestations of moral complexity in contemporary game design. A conclusion will present prospects and challenges for the notion of moral complexity (in the field of videogame studies).

2 Videogame Ethics

The game *Death Race* (Exidy, 1976) is considered the genesis of ethical discussion on videogames, especially regarding violence and its influence on players (Kocurek 2012; Krapp, 2016, p. 345; Hayse, 2016, p. 467). In this arcade game, the goal is to drive over gremlins that have humanoid shapes to score points. *Death Race* is considered "the first game subjected to moral panic" (Bowman, 2015, p. 28). Moral panic is a mass reaction to a practice or event considered a threat to society and its values. As discourse, it is usually dominated by conservative stakeholders in politics and media. Especially in the US, it has often led political parties to polarise voters by exploiting suchdebates for their election campaigns (Šisler 2005; Bowman, 2015, p.30). More videogame-related moral panics sparked with the advent of popular fighting games such as *Mortal Combat (Midway Games, 1992)*, which causedintense controversy through its graphic aestheticization of violence through *fatalities* (Ballard & Wiest, 1996; Tear & Nielsen, 2014, p.9). Not much later, *Doom 1* (id Software, 1993) and *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design, 1997) revolutionised violence with handguns in games (i.e, increased player agency, more graphic violence). A number of school shootings in the late 90s and early 00s were instantly connected to these games and caused another moral panic that has dominated the public discourse on so-called "killer games" until now (Paulsen & Grossman, 2016; Markey & Ferguson, 2017).

The discussion on violence in videogames is and was the fertile ground to what would then become a discourse on videogame ethics which began in the early 00s (Reynolds, 2002; Squire & Jenkins, 2003). In order to find less politicised and superficial perspectives towards the impact of violence on its players, researchers started to take a closer look at the interaction between players and games through the lens of ethical theorems by Aristotle, Bentham, Kant and others (Zagal, 2012; Groen et al., 2020). New questions are formulated to treat not violence exclusively, but the whole dimension of morality experienced in player/game interaction.

"How do players make choices about what they will or won't do in games? Do they follow rules in all circumstances or bend rules to achieve a greater good? Would a player shoot a dog in a game if that was the only way to win? How does a player justify murder in a game? Do players position the experience as 'just a game' or as a cathartic release from everyday pressures?" (Consalvo, 2005, p. 9).

Studies under these questions have helped to construct critical opposition to the mostly demonising perspectives of media and politics towards videogames. These new progressive studies have also led to the understanding that games may

even hold the potential to have a positive impact on moral reflection and values of players (Squire & Jenkins, 2003; Sicart, 2011; Schrier, 2015; Gabriel, 2020).

The field of videogame ethics operates, nowadays, from three angles in studying (a) morality as a game design element, (b) moral impact on players, (c) production standards in the industry.

(a) Morality as game design element

This approach regards moral encounters as triggers to engage players by granting agency to them (Görgen & Simmond, 2020). Moral dilemmas that appear as expositions to situations with no *right* solution, are often used to give players choices and engage them rhetorically to reflect on how they intend to proceed within a game (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 82; Sicart, 2011). Morality systems in game design have been conceptualised, such as Hayse's *moral economy* (2016) that analyses how the game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Origin Systems, 1985) "monitors player progress in the eight virtues via an 'internal karma counter' that invisibly tracks the avatar's moral progression and regression" (2016, p. 469). This approach tries to reduce morality to a formula that engages players through moral challenge. Still, rarely, systems such as Hayse's have been developed to pragmatically assess morality in games as a limited and reproducible phenomenon.

(b) Moral impact on players

This approach tries to investigate short-term or long-term effects through moral engagement with games and tries to highlight (or disprove) the educational benefits in regards to ethics in videogames (Schrier, 2015; Gabriel, 2020; Hanussek, 2021). Much research in this field also focuses on the phenomenological dimension of ethics in action – how it feels like and what it means to act as a moral agent in a videogame; arguably a form of videogame philosophy (Rauch, 2013; Schallegger, 2016; Sicart, 2020). This branch has received, so far, the most attention and has provided the most publications in the field of videogame ethics (Zagal, 2013; Groen et al., 2020).

(c) Production standards in the industry

The study and critique of production standards in the industry is the most recent branch that has emerged in videogame ethics and investigates the circumstances under which videogames are produced (Dyer-Withford & de Peuter, 2009). This field criticises exploitative production cycles, dubious business practices and discriminatory working climates in the videogame industry (Hodent, 2019; Cole & Zammit, 2020). This branch acts predominantly in the spirit of critical theory and regards videogame production as an unethical and alienated domain in which the current extent of exploitation needs to be addressed.

All of these branches have achieved much for the (a) consideration and refinement of moral encounters in videogames as a crucial game design element today, (b) re-evaluation of videogames as morally progressive activities, and (c) exposure of unethical production standards in the videogame industry.

However, in regards to most research done in these fields, we face either a complete adaptation of real-world ethics onto

virtual spaces, or vague and unhandy definitions that do not allow for an effective detection and discussion of the phenomena of morality in videogames. The former means that applying for example the categorical imperative (McCormick, 2001; Waddingtion 2007) or virtue ethics (Sicart, 2011) poses problems in assessing the moral dimension of simulated experiences with no real-world consequences for a person. The latter means that the construction of complex morality systems or player ethics for virtual spaces seems, in most cases, to overcomplicate the moral dimension in-game (cf. Formosa et al., 2016; cf. Sicart, 2019; cf. Sicart 2020). Or, in short, if we regard games as limited simulations, we must consider a reductionist approach towards moral phenomena encountered within the game (Pereira-Santos, 2019). Thus, I argue that research in videogame ethics should consider a stronger emphasis on regarding morality as a game-design element. Allowing a more pragmatic approach towards morality and videogames may allow a more straightforward discussion among (non-)scholars. It might even help designers to refine their implementation of moral content in-game.

3 Moral Complexity

Before introducing the concept of moral complexity, it is important to clarify what is meant when speaking of morality or ethics. I agree with Hayse's interpretation that describes the difference of both terms as follows:

> "Armchair philosophers often use the words ethics and morality interchangeably. Indeed, the overlapping concerns of each word render their meanings ambiguous. Nevertheless, the two words are not coterminous. Often, morality—from the Latin *moralis* or *mores*—refers to particular values and practices in one's personal, social, and cultural life. In contrast, ethics—from the Greek *ethos*—often refers to the systems, methods, and schools of thought by which persons come to determine what is moral and what is not. In other words, morality tends to address the concrete while ethics tends to explore the abstract. Morality frequently presents and recommends a code of conduct. Ethics presents philosophers with a process for the critical and theoretical assessment of moral claims." (2016, p. 466)

When speaking of moral complexity as a game design element, we address the concrete. Moral complexity is not a set of values or principles, not an ethical system but a form of moral content in video games. This form of moral content is a simplified representation of what it means to encounter morality in the real world (see fig 1.). According to Kant, morality itself "is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself" (1998, p. 42). Without morality, we would not be able to consider a thing as good in itself; such as, for example, the act of helping. Henceforth, we all have an understanding of morality, but morality as a domain is unintelligible. Morality is metaphysical and ontologically aloof. Yet, morality appears to us in manifestations that we can regard as moral phenomena (1998, p. 56). These phenomena do usually surface to us as encounters that we interpret as morally charged. These encounters provoke us to make judgements and decisions of which we cannot know if they are morally right or wrong (1998, pp. 48-49). Hence, we consult ethics, systems of principles, for orientation.

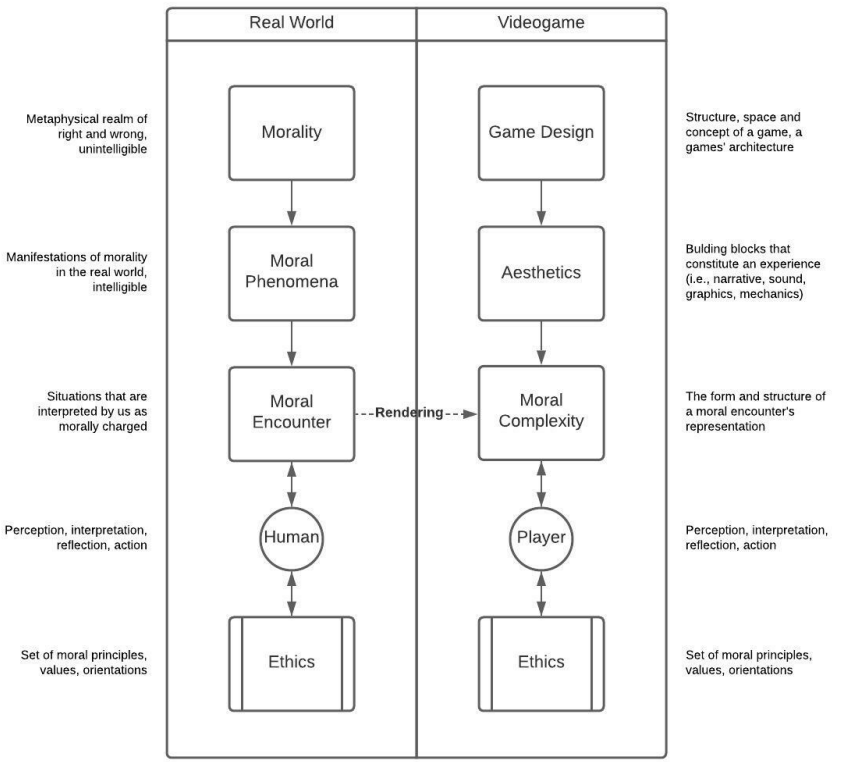


Figure 1: Moral complexity as a form of moral content which is a simplified representation of actual moral encounters

In videogames, moral encounters are simplified and engineered as a simulation of what it would mean to encounter a dilemma in the real world. But what does moral complexity look like in video games?

Moral complexity is the degree to which a game offers alternatives and/or commentary to violence and deceit to players. Encountering the phenomenon of morality, so the experience of being challenged to think about or act according to *what one is ought to do* (Kant, 1998), is highly subjective. If we encounter a moral dilemma, it is simply a set of circumstances that triggers confusion in our day-to-day decision-making process (Lind, 2019, p. 14). The art of game design, in this context, is to craft universal and clearly identifiable moral

content for an international and culturally diverse audience, something Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca would label as meta-communication (2020, p.304). Thus, most games embed moral triggers by exposing players to violence and/or deceit, as both are universally considered to be morally wrong (Lind, 2019).

In order to further elaborate on moral complexity and how it operates, it is necessary to regard what motivates players to engage with moral phenomena. After all, if implementing moral encounters in videogames would not cause a rewarding feeling in players, their place in game design would be arguably questionable (Kiel 2020, p. 220). I have selected the works of Aristotle, Csikszentmihalyi, and Habermas to articulate the experience of moral complexity from a player perspective

Aristotle/Eudaimonia

In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle investigates virtuous behaviour in connection to happiness. The question of why people behave in certain ways is answered through the notion of happiness (eudaimonia); even if people do not explicitly know how happiness looks or feels like, they are striving for it. Aristotle argues that this is because happiness is the highest good.

> "Happiness in particular is believed to be complete without qualification, since we always choose it for itself and never for the sake of anything else. Honour, pleasure, intellect, and every virtue we do indeed choose for themselves (since we would choose each of them even if they had no good effects), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, on the assumption that through them we shall live a life of happiness; whereas happiness no one chooses for the sake of any of these nor indeed for the sake of anything else." (Aristotle, 2004, p. 10)

Thus, actions that are ends in themselves and follow no extrinsic goals, so virtuous actions, are sources of happiness. And as humans strive for happiness, they take an interest in virtuous behaviour (Sicart, 2011, pp. 99-100).

Csikszentmihalyi/Flow

Flow is a concept developed by the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi and described as "a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself" (2014, p.230). It is a phenomenon experienced when a skill to complete a task is in proper relation to the challenge inherent to the task. Meaning that flow can be experienced with sufficient skill for the task at hand, on which one has to concentrate completely to succeed. The complete concentration of one's cognitive (and physical) faculties to match the challenge of a task results in the total absorption into the executed activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p.184). The idea of flow is an essential notion applied in game design and game studies. Kiel explains:

> "Experiencing flow means perceiving the challenges at hand and one's own skills as balanced, being highly concentrated and achieving clearly defined goals. As the experience of flow is usually inherently rewarding

> and pleasurable, the activity enabling it will likely be engaged in voluntarily and repeatedly. Accordingly, flow can be considered as a type of intrinsic motivation and as highly relevant for supporting learning processes." (2020, p. 220)

Habermas/Communicative Action

For Habermas, moral action is unthinkable without communication that is directed towards reaching an understanding. This kind of communication he calls **communicative action and it** is an end in itself as it does not try to achieve an external goal; otherwise, it would be called *strategic action* (Habermas, 1990, p.151). The difficulty in **communicative action** lies in finding a consensus between opposing perspectives.

> "Every agreement, whether produced for the first time or reaffirmed, is based on (controvertible) grounds or reasons. Grounds have a special property: they force us into yes or no positions. Thus, built into the structure of action oriented toward reaching understanding is an element of unconditionality. And it is this unconditional element that makes the validity (Gultigkeit) that we claim for our views different from the mere de facto acceptance (Geltung) of habitual practices." (Habermas 1990, p.10)

Bringing conflicting views into harmony by communicative action requires not only accepting different views, but having to go a step further in transforming these views into revised perspectives that complement each other. "[T]he power of communicative action enables participants to overcome distorted communication by critical reflections on communication as well as through critical self-reflections." (Klikauer, 2008, p.14)

Thus, if we look now at these three building blocks, we can understand that moral complexity as a form of moral content in games is engaging because it triggers the fundamental **pursuit of happiness** in players (Aristotle). Making challenging moral decisions in a gamified environment can also feel like an optimal self-rewarding and absorbing experience (Csikszentmihalyi), and the logic of solving moral conflicts requires a cognitive process of self-reflection and transformation that aims for an understanding between opposing positions (Habermas).

On the basis of this, we can argue that moral complexity in videogames is built to cater to these dispositions by exposing players to alternatives and/or commentary to violence and deceit. Moral complexity can be regarded as the structure and appearance of moral content in a game. Hence, lower moral complexity never, or seldomly, triggers a moral experience, while higher moral complexity does so more often, or even always.

Alternatives

Alternatives to violence and deceit constitute a set of diverse options to engage with a situation in a game (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2020, p. 216). If violence and deceit are morally wrong, we ought to find ways to solve situations peacefully and honestly. If a game allows us to progress in a game by solving conflicts without violence and deceit, we can speak of a higher degree of moral complexity. If game design declares violence and deceit mandatory to progress, we face a lower

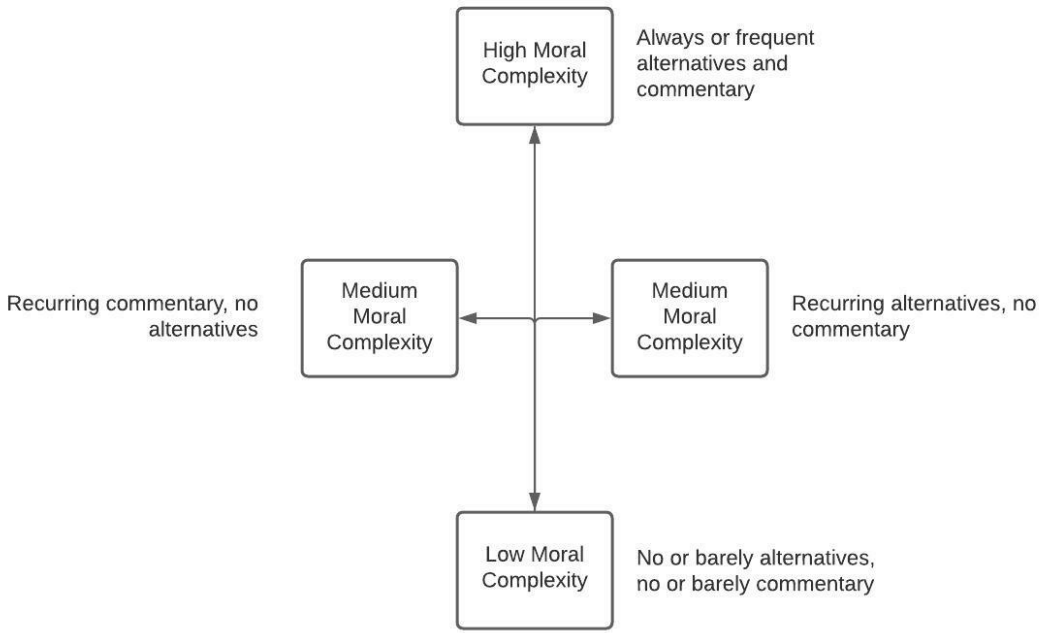
degree of moral complexity. Logically, if happiness and reaching an understanding are the goal and operation of moral behaviour, violence and deceit are contra productive.

Commentary

Even games that do not allow alternatives to violence and deceit can contain a considerable degree of moral complexity. Moral complexity can be communicated through commentary, which is the critical framing of morally wrong actions by narrative and other forms of intradiegetic feedback, comparable to Wilson and Sicart's idea of abusive game design (2010), although not necessarily that drastic. Another more suitable idea of commentary is what Bogost suggests by regarding games as capable of making arguments about the systems they represent (2009). In practice, that means that if we have no choice other than violence, then the game may frame this circumstance as a critique towards our society that puts people in a position where they are systemically pushed to harmful actions.

4 Moral Complexity Scale

Moral complexity functions as parameter that allows to categorise games and their moral content from low



moral complexity to high moral complexity. Moral complexity is hence scalable (see Figure 2).

Low Moral Complexity

A game possesses low moral complexity when players are offered little or no alternatives to violence and deceit, and no commentary that critically frames these aspects. Games with low moral complexity provide gameplay that does not allow alternative choices to, or the framing of, violence and deceit. These games usually utilize violent and deceitful actions as the essential gameplay experience. Decreasing violence would disrupt the *intended* experience of the game by its developers.

Case: Grand Theft Auto V

Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar, 2013) is an open-world action-adventure game and the fifth part of the mainline GTA series. In the game, one plays as one of three characters (Michael, Franklin, Trevor) and follows a streamlined story that focuses almost exclusively on making money through heists and assassinations. The story itself is fairly complex and narrated through switching perspectives of all three characters. Although all protagonists are inherently different in terms of character, their interest in making money unifies them (cp. Dyer-Withford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 162).

The game itself clearly exhibits low moral complexity, as we are offered almost no alternatives to violence or deceit in order to progress the game. In the game, we are not able to complete missions without using violence against others. Most missions are constructed under the logic of *a heist gone wrong*. So, in the main story events, we prepare for a heist and go to execute it, but suddenly we run into police, rival gangs, or mercenaries, which will force us to shoot our way out. In some cases, we have the chance to escape (non-violently) by car. However, we also have missions in which we are ordered to assassinate other persons. Again, we are given no choice.

The game barely deploys any critical commentary towards violence and deceit. Only at a few points, monologues of the games' protagonists will actually refer critically to violence, like during a controversial torture scene where Michael seems shocked (Girina, 2018). Most of the time, violence and deceit are justified with social advancement in an unfair and corrupt society. In that sense, we find a narrative about resigning from the attempt to improve ones' life by moral action because of a "wrong life that cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno, 2005, p. 39). The games' narrative arguably inspires violence and deceit as legitimate ways of dealing with an unfair world. However, the cynical and sarcastic undertone in the game's design and narrative can also be read as a critique towards capitalism, which is however through its implicit and subvocal tone not considered as critical commentary that addresses players to act according to moral principles.

Medium Moral Complexity

A game possesses medium moral complexity if players are offered recurring alternatives to violence and deceit or commentary that critically frames these aspects. Games of medium moral complexity remain thematically and mechanically violent/deceitful at their core but offer alternatives or commentary as an essential enhancement of the gaming

experience. Games could still function without moral aspects, but they would lose substantial depth in potential player engagement and narrative.

Case: Spec Ops: The Line

Spec Ops: The Line (Yager Development, 2012) may seem at first glance just like another military third-person shooter, but provides significant moral elements within its game design that justify a medium moral complexity categorisation.

The game itself is an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and sends players on a journey into horror and chaos. We play as Captain Martin Walker and have to investigate the city of Dubai for survivors after a massive sandstorm destroyed the whole city. We lead our Delta Squad, reconnaissance unit, into the city and encounter a cult-like militia that seems to have formed in isolation. The more we penetrate the town, the more obscure things get. In the end, players will have to decide if what they perceive is actual reality or if their character has gone mad.

Spec Ops: The Line is, at its core, a shooter. The essential gameplay we encounter is grounded in fighting ourselves in or out of situations where we encounter enemies. However, the game does, at certain instances, confront us with moral dilemmas, such as having to decide whether to rescue civilian survivors or our Delta Squad. Most of these dilemmas confront consequentialism with deontology. So, the game constructs dilemmas always as a choice between acting in terms of outcome (Bentham) or by higher principles (Kant). These dilemmas have been highly praised by the press and players in how they provoke moral thinking (Smethurst, 2017); nonetheless the game does not allow non-violent progress, neither in nor outside of these dilemmas.

In addition to the alternatives offered, the games' whole narrative is profoundly based on the idea of violence being a path that leads to dehumanisation. The game does this through monologues and dialogues reflecting on our actions in the game. In addition, the more we proceed in the game, the more the game signals us distress by confronting us with our victims in horrific flashbacks, while visually transforming our environment into a purgatory-like fever dream.

High Moral Complexity

A game possesses high moral complexity if players are always, or most of the time, offered alternatives to violence and deceit in addition to commentary that critically frames these aspects. A game of high moral complexity has moral choices and commentary at its core. These games would probably feel pointless without their alternatives to violence and deceit and the commentary they provide.

Case: Detroit Become Human

The game *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018) is an adventure game with interactive-movie mechanics. The game takes place in a near-future where androids are used as servants and labourers to the human race. Following a common trope among sci-fi and cyberpunk fiction, androids start to question their servant status and disobey humans to gain freedom for themselves. Now, the overall thematic

concept of the game is in itself already of high ethical interest (Khamassi, 2021), but the game also manages to implement a high degree of moral complexity into its game design.

In the game, we play as Connor, Markus and Kara. In all storylines, we encounter the emergence of deviants or become deviant ourselves. Being deviant means becoming dysfunctional as an android in the sense that we become conscious of ourselves and begin to refuse our role as servants. The main story in which all characters are more or less involved entails a revolution led by Marcus to claim (human) rights for androids. In all storylines, we frequently encounter situations where we have to decide between violent/deceitful and peaceful/honest solutions. Encountering these situations is essential for the gameplay experience. In addition, the games' narrative constantly feedbacks commentary to (potentially) harmful actions through dialogue with characters in cut scenes and interactive discussions or thoughtful monologues. Also, our actions determine the state of our relationships we have with other characters. The game in general exhibits a strong design in regards of consequence. Almost all of our actions lead to different outcomes throughout the game. These aspects highlight Pallavicini's claim that *Detroit: Become Human* has been "constructed on a graphic and narrative level to induce intense emotions and empathic concern in the player" (2020, p. 219). Here we encounter high moral complexity par excellence because the whole game can be played with rarely engaging in violence (except for direct self-defence) while constantly being critically reminded of the harm inflicted by violence, deceit and discrimination.

In these three cases, three distinct levels of moral complexity were presented, depending on the alternatives and commentary offered within the games' design. How violence and deceit are framed from a mechanical and narrative perspective is fundamental for how players are engaged in and by moral reflection. While *GTA V* does exclusively rely on the mechanical aestheticization of violence to engage players, the phenomenon of morality is fully operationalised in *Detroit: Become Human* as moral complexity to engage players. It is also in the latter game where we can clearly identify how the game caters to our strive for happiness by doing the morally right thing (Aristotle), while setting players into flow by presenting moral encounters as a difficult but manageable challenge (Csikszentmihalyi) and allowing us to solve moral conflicts by trying to reach an understanding among conflicting views (Habermas). Lastly, in situations that do not allow moral actions, the game provides critical commentary through its narrative.

Discussion

The concept of moral complexity exhibits at this stage clear imperfections. Its own definition concludes that there can be only moral complexity if violence/deceit is presented at all. Has *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984) no moral complexity because it exposes the player to no violence/deceit? Must the experience of morality in the context of videogames be grounded in morally wrong actions? Moreover, *violence* within its definition seems to refer only to physical violence. Verbal violence is universally considered morally wrong, as it can cause mental harm and even trauma. Verbal violence appears frequently in the forms of insults or discrimination in various videogames.

However, this aspect has clearly escaped the scope of this paper and will have to be revisited in the future to refine the concept and its applicability. Also, the question of self-defence is not solved through moral complexity. If players are put into positions where they are forced to commit violence and deceit to protect themselves and others, are we facing im/moral acts? How about slaughtering monsters or demons in videogames that are themselves representation of pure evil? (cf. Grimwood, 2018)

The concept does also not account for the difference between scripted moral encounters and emergent ones. Moral encounters that are scripted communicate a dilemma explicitly to players like in *Spec Ops: The Line* or *Detroit: Become Human*. Levels in these games are scripted and streamline players' progress to distinct events in which they are urged to make decisions. On the other hand, an emergent moral encounter may appear based on players' own individual perception of an unscripted event (Jenkins, 2004, p. 128; Sharp, 2016, p. 97). These events are more likely to happen in open-world games such as *GTA*. For example, an AI attacks another AI on the street. This event is not scripted. Still, we could intervene to defend the victim.

Another point is that moral complexity remains very conservative in reducing the implementation of moral triggers in games to violent and deceitful situations. Contemporary ethics, however, consider acts such as discrimination against other human beings, animal abuse and environmental pollution already as immoral (MacKinnon & Fiala, 2014). In that sense, moral complexity is at this stage not able to reckon the diverse set of moral encounters humanity faces in the 21st century.

Also, from a game design perspective moral complexity remains limited to the evaluation of moral phenomena in single-player games with streamlined level design and narrative. Multiplayer games, which arguably contain mostly emergent moral encounters, are excluded from this definition.

Despite these aspects, I argue that moral complexity has the potential to be a powerful device to detect, discuss and design moral encounters for videogames. One reason in support of this concept is it being applicable across genres, which means that it reveals a crucial dimension in games in disregard of their aesthetic components (i.e., perspective, graphics, gameplay, etc). Another aspect exhibiting the strength of this construct are its simplicity and also flexibility. The moral complexity scale is easy to understand and effortless to apply. However, at the same time it allows discussion that challenges its own components. What violence, deceit, commentary, low, medium and high moral complexity are, invites critical reflection and interrogation. Here, a system is introduced that allows not just the assessment and criticism of in-game content but also its creation and refinement. Ultimately, moral complexity's biggest strength is that it is the result of a bottom-up investigation of moral phenomena in videogames. Moral complexity is not an ethical framework applied on a virtual space, but based on the question of how and under which principles moral encounters appear in videogames. And the answer in regards to contemporary videogames is: by being exposed to violence and deceit.

Conclusion

In this paper, I introduced the reader to the development of videogame ethics as a subfield of game studies that researches (a) the implementation of moral encounters by designers, (b) the perception of moral phenomena by players in videogames, and (c) working conditions in the industry. I argued that (a) had received the least attention though arguably being the most efficient approach to detecting, discussing, and designing moral content in videogames. Moreover, moral complexity was introduced as a device to categorise simulated moral encounters within games. Moral complexity regards the degree to which game design offers alternatives and/or commentary to players as the source of encountering moral phenomena in videogames. Based on this notion, the moral complexity scale was presented to pragmatically assess the degree of moral complexity within games. Further, a number of issues and imperfections of this notion were presented to exhibit aspects that have to be worked on in the future in order to make the concept of moral complexity, ideally, universal and sustainable.

I argue that moral complexity holds the potential to allow researchers (even with no background in game studies) to detect and analyse moral encounters in videogames. By narrowing down the phenomenon of morality to actual game design choices that evoke moral experiences, moral complexity allows for a straightforward and less abstract discussion of morality in how it actually appears in videogames. Also, discussions based on moral complexity might improve game design as a practice by informing developers on components and functionalities of moral experiences in player/game interaction. The scalability of moral complexity allows us to consider adjustable moral complexity, similar to how difficulty selection functions in many games. This might enable games to attract a more diverse audience; imagine a *Grand Theft Auto* permitting you to play the whole game violently or non-violently. Moral complexity could also inform rating systems that remain extremely conservative in setting up age restrictions based on superficial parameters that rarely consider the context in which violence appears in videogames. A more hands-on understanding of moral complexity may even lead to educational frameworks deploying games on the basis of their moral content (Hanussek, 2021). Despite that, to fulfil any of these prospects, much more work needs to go into the refinement of the concept of moral complexity, both theoretically and practically.

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