

# From High Heroism to Abject Abyss: Ethical Aspects of Highly Aestheticised and Critical Videogames

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## Abstract

Videogames have become the leading medium in our globalised cultural industries following the postmodern ludic turn and shift towards simulation as the central mode of meaning-making. Subject to public controversies and media panics, like all new media before them, questions of morality and ethics inevitably become pertinent in any attempt to define videogames, their effects on and place in our societies. This paper provides a survey of the dimensions of production-, player-, designer-, and game ethics applied to the medium of videogames, offering a multitude of jumping-off points for further debates. The roles of both players and designers in the realisation of various system dynamics and play experiences are critically considered, and a practical framework for the analysis of morality systems in (video-)games estab-

lished. Finally, four pertinent games, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), *Dishonored* (2012), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), and *Firewatch* (2016), are introduced as examples for a deconstructive approach to individual heroism, a systemic ethical perspective, a discussion of personal and collective responsibility, as well as the acknowledgment of the limits of human agency respectively. Resulting from these deliberations, an argument is finally made for a necessary increase in affective game design strategies and practices to realise the unparalleled potential of (video-)games as virtual learning spaces for ethical reflection and moral action.

Keywords: *videogames, morality, ethics, production ethics, player ethics, designer ethics, game ethics, morality systems*

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## 1 Introduction: Plus Ça Change ...

Over recent decades, videogames have emerged as *the* leading medium of the globalised cultural industries and the ideal commodity of our post-Fordist economies (c.f. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & Peuter 2003), following a pervasive shift towards dynamic simulation as the central mode of meaning-making. As with other new media before, this transition has not always been a smooth one. Videogames and their makers have seen their share both of exploitative industry practices on the one hand, leading to market bubbles such as the infamous videogame crash of the 1980s and more recently significant labour conflicts, as well as hostility from the general public on the other, peaking in recurring media panics – driven by the fervour of self-proclaimed political and religious guardians of morality – for the supposedly detrimental effects on children and young adults due to violent and/or sexual content.

Questions of morality and ethics are deeply interwoven with the medium, even more so than with other media that have come before. While videogames share many aspects in the logic of their production and reception with (earlier) linear media, such as books, film, or TV, it is their very unique structural and formal logic, quintessentially defined by notions of interactivity and configuration, that opens up entirely new dimensions both of ethical responsibility but at the same time also ethical exploration. When combined with the affective impact of carefully curated and synergistically effective aesthetics, videogames can therefore develop a critical potential as experiential and learning spaces for ethical behaviour unlike any other medium humanity created before. In contrast to the anxieties frequently expressed in conservative discourses, videogames should therefore be seen not as detrimental to the development of our youth (and our societies in general), but as unprecedented vectors for an effective moral and ethical education of individuals, as well as collectives.

## 2 Morality, Ethics, and Videogames

Before we can focus on the medium of videogames as such, it is important to clearly differentiate between morality and ethics. Frequently, these two terms are used to refer interchangeably to the same or similar concepts in everyday language, but this is not very helpful in an academic context. Dieter Birnbacher's (2007) differentiation seems to be a simple but at the same time effective way to provide us with more clarity and precise analytical tools. While he clearly states that morality and ethics are connected to each other inseparably, he suggests “‘ethics’ is seen as the philosophical theory of morality, while ‘morality’ is the complex and multi-layered system of rules, norms, and values that constitutes the subject of ethics” (2007, 2; my translation).

Based on this distinction, ‘morality’ would then not only designate a specific, *concrete* system of rules, norms, and values, it is also necessarily about the *application* of such a system in decision- and meaning-making processes in everyday life. In opposition, ethics is a set of *abstract*, philosophical theories of morality, dedicated to the reflection on and (re-)definition of lived norms and values. Traditionally, it is further separated into the subcategories of Applied Ethics, reconnecting the philosophical deliberations of ethics back into concrete applications such as medical or research ethics, Metaethics, the reflection on ethical systems themselves, and Normative Ethics, theoretical systems to differentiate between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ action. The latter category is then further divided into Virtue Ethics approaches, based on the idea that ‘good’ agents take inherently ‘good’ actions, Consequentialism, where the end justifies the means, and Deontology, where predefined rules systems and the universal duty/obligation to uphold them are seen as the only ways to achieve ‘right’ action. The present text champions a deontological approach, based on how all ludic media are necessarily defined by rules themselves.

Besides these very fundamental, theoretical perspectives, videogames also offer us several ethical dimensions based on the core elements of the medium and the experiences it generates: the creation/production of games, the rules-based systems and artefacts that constitute the games proper, and finally the players playing them.

The production ethics of videogames are defined by several parameters that all need to be carefully considered in order to come to a comprehensive understanding. Videogames as a medium coalesced in a very specific historical moment and cultural context, defined by “particular formations of identity and power” Dovey and Kennedy use the term ‘technicity’ for (2006, 16). And they elaborate: “technicity comes to stand for identities that are formed around and through [...] *technological differentiation*” (ibid.; original emphasis). So, when young, white, upper middle-class students of technology at prestigious US universities ‘invent’ a medium, that medium will also exhibit an ethical structure based on their very specific technicity.

Additionally, videogames have increasingly become commercialised in recent decades. While they started out as an expression of hacking culture, after the bubble of the 1980s the videogame industry recovered quickly until it overtook both the film as well as music industry as the biggest cultural industry in western nations early in the new millennium. The ethics of the mainstreamed industrial products churned out by major publishers, aimed only at maximising market reach and thus profits, are significantly different from the more radical or fringe ethics frequently expressed in smaller indie games, i.e., independently created and funded ones that usually target more niche audiences. The question we, as critics, need to ask here is: What was the motivation behind a given design? Finally, the videogame industry also suffers from a plethora of other issues that affect production

ethics. There is a marked lack of diversity in the workforce of almost all major studios that produce for the mainstream, or AAA market. Adrienne Shaw has repeatedly (cf. 2012, 2014) argued for a diversification not only of employees, but also of what she sees as a constructed “gamer audience as both heterosexual and homophobic” (2012, 235). More recently, the production ethics of the industry have also been harshly criticised for a culture of unsanctioned (sexual) harassment (cf. Spiggle 2021) as well as ‘crunch’ (cf. Schreier 2018), that is an extraordinary amount of overtime imposed on employees, especially close to release dates. Both of these phenomena have reached a systemic level, tarnishing the reputation of major studios such as ActivisionBlizzard, Rockstar Games, or CD Projekt RED.

But not only the producers and publishers of videogames are embedded in societal norms and values, the same is also true for players. Besides this collective level, there is then the personal ethical positioning individuals (and individual companies) define for themselves. Here politics, religious and non-religious ethical systems, tradition, history, education, and previous experiences, all have their impact. Usually, these then coalesce into longer-lasting ethical structures and positions that define the specific worldview of a player, which in turn frames the expectations they bring into every specific play experience they have. So, players choose certain games and game genres over others based on all of these factors, which in turn also reinforces the ethical structures that determined a player’s choice in the first place. A positive feedback loop is established that can lead to the creation of partisan bubbles in videogame culture, a phenomenon that resulted in the violent outbreaks of GamerGate (cf. Romano 2021) that still reverberate threateningly not only in US culture today.

While this political aspect of player ethics is not only defined by its inertia and resistance to change but also its effects beyond the individual proper and their immediate environment into society itself, there is also another, more private and ephemeral aspect that is frequently overlooked both in academic criticism, as well as scientific studies. Players are not the same, and that is not only a fact between individuals and groups, this is also the case when we observe a single individual over time. There is the aforementioned potential – against all inertia – to adapt one’s ethical and political framework through education and experience, which is usually a slow process (and not inherently one following an Enlightenment notion of progress towards an ‘ideal’). Yet, there is also a much more fleeting, situational change in player behaviour, a playful flexibility to player ethics that manifests in the intriguing tendency for players of high moral competence to choose less moral options more frequently (Tuček 2022, 67). Momentary motivation must therefore not be dismissed, even (or maybe especially) when it seems to be in direct opposition to more permanent player ethics. Miguel Sicart has even made the respect for (not evalu-

ation of) players as free moral agents the core of his specific take on videogame (virtue) ethics, arguing that the player “has to perceive the game as an experience where she can exert her moral judgment [...], where she can create the values that will guide her gameplay, and where her ethical virtues are respected” (2009, 213).

The third perspective besides production and player ethics that must be considered in a full appreciation of the ethical structure of the medium are game ethics, the ethics that implicitly or even explicitly determine a given design and the experiences it most likely facilitates. Explicit player agency is at the core of the medium, and it is what differentiates (video-)games from all other media that came before. When the Klagenfurt Critical Game Lab was constituted, the basic framework introduced for the analysis of videogames, the NAME system, puts equal weight and emphasis on the narrative, aesthetic, mechanical, as well as *ethical* dimensions of a design, hence the acronym. All of these must be carefully considered, when students and teachers take a critical look at a given game, asking themselves: “What is the NAME of the game?” Zimmerman’s ‘explicit interactivity’ of (video-)games (cf. 2004), when expanded into Moulthrop’s notion of ‘configuration’ (cf. 2004) based on the cascading, systemic effects such interaction must have, necessarily put the focus on the responsibility of the player. The simulational nature of ludic media gives us the unique opportunity to witness the consequences of our choices first-hand, so the designers and players of a game enter into a dialogue through the systems of the game. This constant, mediated oscillation between designer ethics on the one hand and player ethics on the other, is at the heart of all academic engagement with videogame ethics. Some authors, like Bartle (2004) and Schell (2008) put the ethical onus almost exclusively on the shoulders of the designers (designer ethics), giving them full responsibility for the virtual worlds they create, while on the other end of the spectrum, the aforementioned libertarian Sicart (2009) advocates utter freedom for players as ethical agents (player ethics). Somewhere along the spectrum between these extremes are situated critics such as Zagal (2012) and myself who prefer more of a both/and-approach that also considers the ethical structures designed into a given game as meaningful (game ethics).

### 3 Videogame Ethics

When we engage with videogame ethics, we have to be clear about the fact that designer ethics are *per se* normative ethics. The rules implemented in a given game shape the virtual world and determine intended player behaviour. There is something like a preferred performance that is always implicitly, sometimes even explicitly communicated in a game design. Players are guided towards this performance, or even trained to achieve it, through

positive and negative feedback loops, i.e., the formal and narrative structure of a game and its aesthetic interface reinforce desired behaviour (positive feedback) and disincentivise or even prevent undesired behaviour (negative feedback). It is thus that rules and feedback conspire to shape player behaviour, which means that they might also create friction or even conflict with player expectations.

José Zagal looks into how videogames can support ethical reflection and decision-making by effectively utilising guilt and shame to motivate players (2011, 22), but he also clearly differentiates on what level of the play experience explicitly presented moral dilemmas in game designs can be situated and how this affects impact: “I call this the distinction between the character’s dilemma and the player’s dilemma. The dilemma faced by the character is, by definition, one step removed and thus potentially less powerful or effective for eliciting ethical reflection” (2011, 23). This means that ethical designs should reach beyond the diegesis and directly involve the player as such to maximise impact.

Marshall Brown’s understanding of ethics is also a very dialogical one, as a discipline and perspective that is necessarily relational, “the irreducible terrain where self meets Other” (2008, 52). Ethical reflection and action are furthermore structured along three major axes. There is what he calls transcendental ethics, the most abstract, “more-than-total, infinite, and metaphysical” level (*ibid.*), inquiring about the ontology of what is good and right. Taking this perspective, critics reflect on the authority of a given position. Secondly, horizontal ethics are active, excursive, and discursive in nature. They tap into the logic of spatial storytelling inherited from the epic tradition, based on the notion that “[c]ommunication is the premise on which mutuality can be built” (2008, 56). This is the societal, the political level of ethics. Finally, Brown then closes off his triad with vertical ethics, the immediately interpersonal level. This is about close, social relationships rather than the distance at the origin of horizontal ethics, “the practices needed to live in harmony with those who live exactly where you live, those who differ from you ever so slightly, yet in a world where diacritics can be critical” (2008, 59). Between authority, society, and the person, Brown’s structure helps us understand how we negotiate between freedom and constraints in cultural and social settings and make for an excellent tool in both ethical game design as well as game criticism.

Another dimension to keep in mind is what I call system dynamics, “the quality of a system (or sub-system) created by the designers in so far as to how it negotiates between player freedom and designed constraints that together define play and games” (Schalleger 2016, 43). Rigid designs are linear or highly restricted, where the designers use the structures of a game to impose their vision and their ethical perspective onto the player. Accordingly, “player responsibility is minimal, or even denied completely” (*ibid.*, 44),

justifying the arguments about ultimate responsibility resting with the designers made by Bartle and Schell. At the other end of the spectrum are plastic designs where “the designers abdicate all responsibility” (ibid.). These are usually open worlds that act merely as virtual playgrounds, allowing players to realise their actions without or only with minimal constraints in the apparent absence of designer ethics. Sicart would see these as the ideal form of system dynamics fostering ethical gameplay (according to his definition). Elastic designs engage players and designers in an ethical dialogue, providing “feedback that ‘pushes back’ (thus ‘elasticity’) against player interactions” when they violate the implicit or explicit designer ethics of a game (ibid.). Not surprisingly, such non-restrictive but relational and evaluating systems best support ethical gameplay according to Zagal and my own understanding of the term.

In addition to these fundamental approaches, designers also need to carefully choose what intended play experiences they want to elicit in a given moment. Immersion is achieved with the almost bodily merging of the experiential horizon of the player and their avatar, the instance used to represent the player in the game world but also the channel for all information and intention that flows between it and the actual world inhabited by the player. The clear intradiegetic focus of the experience makes for very instinctual reactions to game events (Schalleger 2016, 46). Involvement<sup>1</sup> is created by affective design elements that actualise affective traces of past experiences in the player and thus establish relationships between the player and elements of the game world (ibid.). This experience oscillates between an intra- and extradiegetic focus, also extending the relational aspect to the two worlds the player co-inhabits during gameplay. Engagement, finally, is the intellectual experience of taking a critical step out of immediate gameplay and evaluating it. It is “mediated and caused by disruption” (ibid.), meaning that the focus is purely extradiegetic, with the player ‘looking onto’ their game experience to actively make meaning of it. The AAA industry usually pursues a design philosophy based on maximising immersion, because this also maximises revenue and profit by keeping players ‘hooked’ and spending their money. Indie designers most of the time go into the design process with a clear intellectual and/or aesthetic vision that frequently also intentionally disrupts the experiential habits of mainstream gaming. This makes engagement the driving force in this sector of (video-)game culture. Affective design strategies that prioritise involvement above all else are still rare and underdeveloped, which goes against Kant’s insight that as *embodied* beings we are best motivated to ethical reflection by affective, not purely rational or intellectual impulses (Allison 1995, 39-40). Among more

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<sup>1</sup> In the original text, this is called ‘incitement’, but I have in the meantime replaced that term with ‘involvement’ because it better expresses the focus on the *player’s* (not the designer’s) experience.

widely known studios, especially the French Don't Nod (formerly Dontnod) have made themselves a name with such intriguing designs as *Tell Me Why* (2020).

Unlike the academic theories presented so far, Eddy Webb comes from a *practitioner's* side of the argument when he differentiates between fundamental design approaches for morality systems in games. There are cumulative systems where players collect points according to their behaviour in the game world, defining their avatar and giving them access to content or taking it away when certain thresholds are crossed (Webb 2021). These follow a logic of reward and punishment, with motivation being extrinsic, the role of the player rather passive, and the relation between designer and player very monological. With game series such as SuckerPunch's *InFamous* (2009-2014) and BioWare's *Mass Effect* (2007-2017), we saw a wave of such ethical designs shortly after the turn of the millennium, which has in the meantime subsided. Contradictive morality systems force the player to negotiate between multiple, often even opposite ideas of morality, making for a more experiential logic. Motivation here is intrinsic, the player is active and enters a dialogical relationship with the designers. Dontnod's games or CD Projekt RED's *Witcher* series (2007-2021) are good examples. Finally, restrictive morality systems are about following prescriptive codes, which gives them a didactic quality telling the player how their avatar is supposed to behave. Here the motivation is extrinsic, again the player is passive, and the relation between designer and player is very monological. Games that implement *Dungeons&Dragons's* morality matrix (good/neutral/evil and lawful/neutral/chaotic) usually follow this approach. Another axis that could be looked at in addition to the cumulative, contradictive, or restrictive ethical design is the basic complexity of the morality system, which can reach from simplistic binaries (hero vs. villain in *InFamous*; paragon vs. renegade in *Mass Effect*) to a vague fuzziness challenging the player (which *The Witcher 3* is known for).

#### 4 Four Exemplary Cases

After the largely theoretical deliberations up to this point, it is certainly also helpful to mention several notable examples of videogames (at least in passing) that break with the mainstream of videogame ethics found in AAA designs, either by going for a deconstructive experience of established tropes, creating systemic awareness in the player, thematising the complexities of responsibility, or pitting player expectations against the limits of human agency.

With *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), Eidos Montréal created a philosophically complex game, which is rather surprising for a first-person shooter and action role-playing game that superficially seems to fulfil mainstream expectations. Notions of human agency



and free will, collective and individual responsibility are, however, deeply inscribed in the narrative and ethics of the design. When the player avatar, corporate security agent Adam Jensen, is turned into a cyborg without his consent after an incident that leaves him close to death, he is soon embroiled in a complex web of conspiracies trying to control the moment of technological singularity. For most of the game, the conventional rugged individualism of the hero seems unquestioned. Yet, libertarian transhumanist power fantasies are shattered when it is revealed at the end that cybernetic augmentations reduce augmented individuals to mere weapons in larger ideological conflicts. When the player is asked to decide the fate of humanity by shaping the public perception of augmentation, the easy options of supporting, controlling, or even flat-out refusing humanity this technology are all deconstructed by a more hidden ending that is nevertheless marked by the designers as *their* favourite: The player can have Jensen commit suicide, since (as it is explained in a final cut-scene) it is not up to him or indeed any individual to make such fundamental decisions and they should rather be made *collectively* by all of humanity. Individual heroism is thus depicted as unethical in the face of collective needs.

A similar ideological and ethical framework infuses Arkane Studio's *Dishonored* (2012). While *Human Revolution* primarily uses the narrative level of its design to communicate a deconstructivist message, *Dishonored* adds to this the mechanical level as well. In a Neo-Edwardian, dark fantasy setting, the player avatar Corvo Attano is the bodyguard-turned-assassin of the Empress of Kirkwall, a thinly disguised version of the British Empire. When the Empress is killed and Corvo blamed for the murder, it is up to him to find and rescue their daughter Emily from the hands of the conspirators. What is so extraordinary about the game is that the individual actions of the player avatar affect the entire game world. The more the player resorts to violence and creates chaos, the more chaotic Kirkwall itself becomes: the plague that affects the city increases in effect, there is more violence in the streets, and even the conspirators engage in more violent actions. Should the player opt for a less violent path to Emily, not only is the Empire in a much better state at the end of the game, but the conspirators also acknowledge Corvo's ethical superiority and give up. This chaos system translates individual action into collective, systemic consequences. At the same time, it also supports and shapes the narrative development: If Corvo ruthlessly murders his way across Kirkwall to Emily, plunging the Empire into chaos, in the final scene the player will encounter an Empress-to-be who has learned from her father (and the player) that violence is the only way to rule. Individual action has influenced collective systems, but also the individual transmission of ethics between generations.

Bringing together the individual and the collective, the personal and the political in similar ways but in a much more encompassing design and on a much larger level, *Dragon*

*Age: Inquisition* (2014) by BioWare can still be considered the gold standard in ethically engaging videogames. Putting the notion of agency at the centre of the design, the player avatar is the Inquisitor, an individual charged with reordering the dark fantasy world of Thedas after a major cataclysm that threatens to disrupt reality itself. Yet, breaking with the fantasy trope, here the Inquisitor insists: “I am not chosen. I have chosen”, putting personal agency and personal responsibility in a collective and political framework. BioWare elegantly manages to address all of Brown’s ethical levels, by writing a plot that ponders questions of just authority and what its sources can, or must be (transcendental ethics), forcing the player to commit to the creation and use of political structures (horizontal ethics), while at the same time involving themselves in complex and deep interpersonal relationships (vertical ethics). As one of the Inquisitor’s companions asks the player avatar: “What guides you?” becomes the core question of this critical and ethical reflection on individual agency and responsibility in a collective framework.

And as the sequence of example games seems to suggest an ever wider and larger focus, Campo Santo’s small and very personal game *Firewatch* (2016) is the perfect point to end on. On the one hand this is the private story of Henry, a middle-aged man who after his wife is diagnosed with early onset dementia and he feels overwhelmed by the loss and the obligation to care for her this creates takes off to work as a fireguard in a national park. On the other hand, the game is also a finely crafted experience of the limits of human agency, thus addressing not only a collective, but even a universal level of human experience. The player takes over Henry as their avatar in the game world, and intradiegetically they spend most of their time exploring and navigating the virtually recreated park while developing Henry’s relationship with his supervisor Delilah through the audio-only channel of their simulated walkie-talkies. On an extradiegetic level, more and more the player notices how the game reveals the limits of their agency to them, not only in giving or withholding access to parts of the game space, but most crucially also in how the relationship with Delilah turns out. At the end of the game, while a wildfire rages uncontrollably in the park as a thinly disguised metaphor for the omnipotence of nature and its complex systems in opposition to the illusion of human agency, Hank can reach out to Delilah and ask her to start a new life with him. Conditioned by mainstream games and the libertarian culture of individual mastery they are embedded in, the player expects that this is their choice to make. But irrespective of any actions up to this point as well as the final dialogue choices made, Delilah will always leave Henry. *Firewatch* humbles the player and involves them in an ethics that recognises the limits of individual agency and emphasises the irreducibility of individual responsibility at the same time. What counts is not the result of a choice we make, but how we get there, that we choose, and what motivates our choice in the first place. The rest is frequently out of our hands.

## 5 Conclusions: Why Videogame Ethics?

For a long time, videogames were either not taken seriously and reduced to a pastime for children, or they were the object of moral panics triggered by a lack of understanding in the general public, misinterpretations of what was glimpsed on screens, as well as an undue focus on certain games or certain aspects in the design of mainstream games. Yet, it has to be stated that especially mainstream videogame culture has also for a long time also suffered from a problematic narrowing, both in *what* was designed but also in *how* games communicated.

Structurally, as well as institutionally, the medium has been dominated for decades by the very specific technicities of a privileged group of relatively young, straight, white, male, middle-class designers, whose designs were supposedly geared towards fulfilling the expectations of exactly this – according to Shaw by now really only constructed – audience of players. Based on the privilege and social as well as economic power of designers and targeted players, mainstream games have been infused with a logic of conflict and mastery. Agency was reduced to and equated with control, while alternative possibilities of configuration or relational strategies were absent, or at last underdeveloped.

However, with the increasing diversification of player demographics and to a lesser extent the designer population, we also see remarkable shifts in the dominant philosophies of design, not least of which their ethical dimensions. Affective elements become increasingly used and noticeable, moving beyond the financially motivated almost exclusive focus on spectacle and immersion in AAA games, as well as the more intellectual and critical motivation we already find well established in the indie sector. (Video-)games are inherently a medium based on the active negotiation between freedom and constraint driven by player agency. This is why videogame ethics should open the medium up to turn videogames into virtual learning spaces for ethical reflection and moral action. No other medium created by human ingenuity was better suited to this purpose by its formal and structural logic alone. It is our responsibility as players, designers, and critics to make full use of it. ble.

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