Ethics as a Game Mechanism

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As the computer game matures and grows as an art form, the question of how game designers can use ethics as a means of game motivation and thus also as a means of game mechanics becomes increasingly important. The times when designers could hide behind phrases like “It’s just a game” are a thing of the past. For an art form that wants to be taken seriously, it is intellectually pathetic anyway.

When I started to approach the question, I quickly found out that we still know far too little about whom the player is. Furthermore, it proved to be essential to define a clear dividing line between ethics and morality in order to raise conflict potential (each art form treats conflict as a main subject). Only then could I turn to the core question: How does ethics work in the context of a game at all - and which levers can be used for the creation of gameplay mechanics?

This article started as a three-piece on my blog *Der Blindband*, then was printed in the German *Making Games* magazine, was then translated into English for the *makinggames.biz* website before I revisited and edited it for publication in this book. This gave me the chance to clarify some weaker points, lift around some of the emphasis and fix some typos. In very few instances I fixed some logical missteps, and one little detour into Ryans “Possible worlds-theory” was cut. I also had to erase any reference to the three-parts of the series. And I needed to sew these three parts together at the edges to make it a one-piece.

My thanks go out to Bettina Wilding for the initial translation. All mistakes that remain in the text are mine.

WHO'S PLAYING?

In fall 2014, I was invited by the Mediadesign Hochschule (MD.H) in Munich to give a lecture on "Ethical and social aspects". I still don't know to this day if my interpretation of the topic was what the MD.H had in mind, but at least I took the opportunity to deal with a series of questions on a more or less scientific basis:

- What does ethics have to do with games at all?
- What's happening there?
- And if it can't possibly be avoided – is there a chance to take advantage of it maybe?

To say it directly: The answers I found added a completely new angle and in part significant changes to the way I look at game design – and in this case especially the design of the story within a game – which I will try to explain in the following.

The underlying scientific discourse isn't easy and delves deeply into the toolboxes of psychology and hermeneutics, among others. I will try to reproduce it as far as required to understand the topic, keeping it straightforward enough, so that as many people as possible can finish reading it to the end without suffering major brain damage. May psychologists and philosophers throw up their hands in horror about inadmissible simplifications – for me it is all about the bigger picture: to make better games – in order to make a better world.

My seriously simplified main thesis is: Unlike any other form of art, games are predestined to act as an ethical fitness center; and if they take that opportunity, they usually become even better games – more challenging, interesting, in brief: more fun.

In this context, it is necessary to clear up a few misunderstandings and set up a few axioms from the start:

- An ethical game is usually not the kind of game that lets us replay a dichotomy of good and evil and, in worst case, denies us to judge between right and wrong. An ethical game design takes the player seriously as an individual with an ethical reasoning developed appropriate to their age, leaving it up to them to make a decision.
- For this reason, an ethical game is also in no way a game that treats its players as "moral infants". It presents the player with ethical challenges just as it poses motoric, exploratory, strategic or logical challenges.

- Purely abstract game mechanics can't create an ethical aspect. Ethical challenges can only be generated through portraying them in the game world (and particularly through the narrative context: rules and laws, morals and ethics of the game world and its inhabitants) – and through the medial interaction of the player with it.
- Conversely, however, an ethical challenge can create game mechanics, which are never presented in their abstract form, but result from the conflict in the player's mind as a very specific challenge in the concrete representation of the game world.

So when we talk about ethics in games, it isn't about raising a warning finger, but about an additional way to present the player with interesting challenges. Of course, this topic also touches the discussions on violence in computer games, which was "enriched" by the distinctive allegation stating that first-person shooters were at least partly responsible for modern-day terrorism. (Paoli 2015) The scientific approach, however, kicks the self-proclaimed moralizers from the press, radio and television right in the behind:

It is a commonly accepted fact that game challenges adjusted to the skills of the players actually boost the respective skills of the players. For example, people who play a lot were found to become better surgeons faster. (Rosser JC. Jr et al. 2007) Only if the player is faced with ethical challenges, a part of the public still acts on the assumption of a general defenselessness, even though the thesis that gamers are moral "zombies" (Sicart 2009) may be regarded as extremely questionable to clearly disproven based on various studies. (Ferguson 2014; Markey et al, 2013; Gitter et al. 2013) If anything, players show increased aggressions for a very short time only and – depending on the game objective – in part even a reduced aggressive potential. The reasons for this will become clearer a bit further on.

This is why I would like to emphasis again that ethical challenges in game design nurture the player's ethics, at least as long as the player isn't overwhelmed by these challenges as it is probably the case if a game like *GTA 5* (2013) is being played by an eight-year old.

Obviously, it would be nonsense to act now as if the concept of ethical challenge in games was something completely new. Such mechanics have existed for a long time, and the results are usually monitored with goodwill by the public, be it *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), *This War of Mine* (2014), *Papers, Please* (2013), *GTA 5* (2013) or *BioShock* (2007), just to name a few of the most popular examples. Everyone has played games before where they were faced with ethical dilemmas. Dilemmas that couldn't be resolved in a satisfying way (otherwise they

wouldn't be dilemmas); dilemmas that you had to live with; or dilemmas that even made you stop playing the game. I will try to explain why these games still don't become unethical – and why they may be outstanding games just because of that.

But first, of course, we need to clarify one question:

Ethics – what is that exactly? And what does it have to do with games?

Ethics, says Wikipedia, "is the branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. (…) Ethics seeks to resolve questions of human morality, by defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime."

So when we talk about ethics in a game, it is clear that ethics in the game world doesn't need to be justifiable in our real world. It must be rational in the virtual counter-world that is built by us designers, and justify moral actions there, not in our world.

And since it is a counter-world, moral actions in that world can obviously completely differ from our world. Just as sometimes the laws of physics in games are different from those in our world (Lightsabers? Seriously?), the laws of human coexistence may differ. And yet that doesn't make them unethical. It might be said rather that the complete, uncritical acceptance of ethics from this world by a counter-world may result in an unethical game design since in the course of the design process it needs to be at least tested if rational reasons from this world don't become irrational in the counter-world.

We game designers are used to adjusting clothes, everyday items, weapons, technology, flora and fauna as well as the interface and dozens of other things to the circumstances of the counter-world. There is not one good reason not to do the same with the basic rules of all things, which govern society there – at least not if we have acting characters. Tetris has no ethics because it keeps its game mechanics almost completely abstract and doesn't really have a narratized representation of its game world. After all, what else is supposed to justify the actions of the characters, if not their own, mostly faulty ethics? (The ethics of each individual is faulty due to irrational breaches resulting from the id of the character, even if it is a god – especially if it is a god!)

What else is supposed to justify an action, a story, if not the conflicts between the id, ego and super-ego, the conflicts between one's own and society's interests, the conflict between reason and religion, inhabiting every ethics? And

what is supposed to justify an ethical challenge for the player, if not the conflict between ethics from this world and the counter-world?

When considering these questions, it is essential to understand the relationship between player and computer game a bit better. How does it originate? To what extent could this relationship differ from our relationship to the real world? Why can we engage ourselves in ethical systems in a counter-world, which are to a degree diametrically opposed to ours, without being traumatized by these conflicts? The answer is surprisingly simple:

The player isn't the player!

A person doesn't enter the counter-world of a computer game physically. At least the body stays in the here and now, and also a part of the brain's synapses remains occupied with problems from this world: Various body functions need to be controlled; the auditory and other senses remain at least partly active and stay focused on reality. So it's not exactly the players themselves who are confronted with the game. It's a subset of us. But it's a subset that follows its own agenda.

In Miguel Sicart's most interesting, if not always 100 percent consequential work *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009), this subset of the player is called the "player subject": "Becoming a player is the act of creating a balance between fidelity to the game situation and the fact that the player as subject is only a subset of a cultural and moral being who voluntarily plays, bringing to the game a presence of culture and values that also affect the experience." (Sicart 2009). I have adopted the term in this definition for this article.

For us game designers it's important to keep in mind that both the cultural background and the moral judgments of the individual players can be as different from each other as are the players in a global market. While one player has no problem torturing an NPC in *GTA 5* (2013), another player would turn off the game at that point. Not every game is for every player. Neither does this make one player a better person, nor does it make *GTA 5* (2013) an unethical game, but as game designers we have a natural interest in keeping the player's attention (there are exceptions which I will address a bit further on). So this fact is something designers should be aware of.

However, there are other reasons, too, why this fact is interesting for this topic: That moment when the player stops playing, the player subject, too, ceases to exist. The subject who possibly took actions in the counter-world, which would have put them immediately behind bars in the real world, fades away within just a few minutes. And potential effects on the player's aggressive potential, no mat-

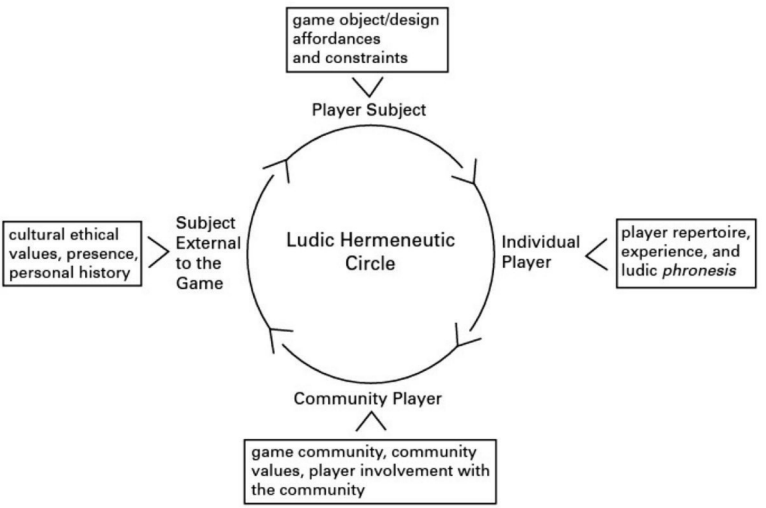
ter in what way, fade away with them if current results in scientific research can be believed. What remains is the memory of this subject within the player, and in the event that the ethical conflicts were quite disturbing (and the player was mature enough to face them), a mental dispute with the actions of the "player subjects". Affect turns into reflection: an ethical training effect.

And (I promise this will be my last discourse about the discussion on violence) only very sick people will upon reflection come to the conclusion that it is also okay in this world to run around with a gun and randomly shoot at people. However, it takes no computer game to get to this pathologic conclusion, like the fact that there have been mass shootings even before the invention of first-person shooters shows.

The most important conclusion for us game designers though is that the actual ethical conflict arises in the "player subject" which is different from the player. Ethical challenges in the game are therefore instantiated for the player and experienced and endured by proxy – granting us a bit more freedom about what we expose the players to.

The ludic hermeneutic circle

Fig. 1: The ludic hermeneutic circle according to Miguel Sicart



Source: Sicart (2009)

There are more elements adding to this reflection: The community of the game, consisting of press, forums, friends and all sorts of public reception of a game, takes up a considerable part in Sicart's definition of the ludic hermeneutic circle – and rightfully so.

This circle describes how a game is received and dealt with. It is, of course, actually a spiral since the reception of a game doesn't stop after having reflected upon it once. The reception of the game has just moved to a higher level.

What's interesting is the term "ludic phronesis" used by Sicart. In Aristotelian ethics, phronesis is a type of common sense or wisdom, specifically the virtue of practical thought.

Of course, there is a difference whether it evolves (for the "player subject") from game rules or whether it evolves from the real world, for which other rules apply. Accordingly, the ludic phronesis differs from the phronesis in the real world. In brief: Something that may be completely logical, reasonable and ethically correct in the game world, can be completely different in the real world.

And yet, of course, the ordinary phronesis is always present in the player, and it can never be switched off completely. Therefore, as soon as the ludic phronesis comes into conflict with our ordinary phronesis, it's a challenge for us. A person with moral integrity in the game world will be interested in this challenge. To avoid confusion: A person with no moral integrity in the game world may still be of utmost moral integrity in the real world – and vice versa. Hence, the result is an interesting challenge – and that's exactly what us game designers aim to create (and I regard story designers as specialized game designers since they are most affected by this conclusion).

This ménage-à-trois between player, player subject and game may therefore result in challenges which us game designers can use to make the game experience even more interesting. In the way that these elements are constructed, they differ greatly from the usual familiar game mechanics logic, strategy and motor skills. At the end of the day, however, they can be just as effective.

ETHICS AND MORAL AS CONFLICT PARTIES

After explaining *why* it may be useful and *why* it should be possible to understand ethical conflicts as exceptional cases of game mechanics (and consequently use them as such), obviously the question arises how to generate these ethical conflicts and – in a third step – how to ultimately turn them into game mechanics.

To that end it is necessary to understand the nature of these ethical conflicts, to thoroughly look at the underlying psychology and then map it to its means of transport that is the narration (as noted above: purely abstract game worlds cannot carry ethical questions). It is only when the ethical conflicts can be successfully integrated into the narration of the game (of which the story is only a part) that they can get the necessary precision, presence and priority which the player subject has to experience in order to see them as a part of the game experience and the game challenge.

The difference between ethics and morality

In order to manage the next steps in this procedure without struggling, I first have to define a pair of concepts that I would absolutely like to be understood as contradictory in this context, even though they are often used synonymously in everyday life. For the following, however, I would like to note that *ethics* and *morality* don't mean the same thing.

In this context, ethics is defined as I had quoted from Wikipedia above. It is "the branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. Ethics seeks to resolve questions of human morality*, especially with regard to its justification and reflection*" (ibid., emphasis by author). Ethics usually and principally finds its ratio in the socio-economic conditions of a society, hence it is never universally valid.

In this context, *moral* means the rules that a society or an individual has given itself *without* necessarily having considered them rationally. The moral rules *can* withstand rational justifications, but can also derive from obsolete traditions or the power-political interests of a ruling group and may immediately fall victim to a serious ethical investigation.

When following this discussion, one will hardly find a society where ethics and morality are in agreement. This applies to the real world - and should apply to fictional worlds worth their money. Power-political interests, economic interests, religion and other things can and will have a non-ethical influence on the moral system. And the same goes for most individuals: Hardly anybody is able to meet their moral demands. So think about how much less they will be able to comply with rationally justified ethics in face of their own personal interests.

That is why there are only a few reasons to create a counter-world in the game where ethics and morality are one and the same. From a narrative point of view this would actually be awful since on the one hand, it would close a huge narratively useful area of conflict, and on the other hand, it would completely undermine the counter-world's credibility.

Room for Conflicts

One of the first targets of my definition has therefore been met: By separating ethics and morality, we have created room for conflicts (or, in other words, not destroyed it from the start). Conflicts between the morality of a society or one of their individuals on the one hand and the ethically right conduct on the other hand are and have always been one of the most important resources for major narrative works. These conflicts can occur among different characters within a narration – or they can just happen to a single character: The expectations of the family interfere with the longings of an individual, which are also contrary to what the individual understands to be ethically right.

Applied to the counter-world of the game and my results so far, it amounts to a whole number of potential areas of conflict:

- Between the personal interests and/or the morality of an individual and the ethics of the counter-world as a rationally justifiable regulatory system
- Between the personal interests and/or the morality or ethics of an individual and the morality of the counter-world as a social regulatory system which is – at least partly – not rationally justifiable
- Between the ethics and the morality of the counter-world
- Between the ethics of individual characters within this counter-world (again in the context of the socio-economic conditions) and their own morality

All of these conflicts lie within the counter-world of the game. But there is another one for which this doesn't apply. This conflict exists between the players and their representation in the game:

- Between the ethics and/or morality of the player, the ethics and/or morality of the player subject as well as the ethics and/or morality of the player character (and yes: these are three different people!)

Obviously, any combination is possible, too. The only important thing is that the conflicts we create are both credible and at the same time not solvable in a trivial way – and that they are considered and not ignored in the narratization of the game. Additionally, we should remind ourselves that in this area of tension conflicts can be understood by the player not only as an ethical, but also as a playful challenge. Obviously, for this to work the designer also needs to find a playful expression for the ethical conflict.

Constructing ethical dilemmas

Yet it's a safe bet to assume that most players will try to push their own personal morality within the counter-world as much as possible. For us game designers this is consequently another reason needing to know which player type we develop the game for.

Hence, if I know both my players and the counter-world and if I cared for not just visual consistency in the latter one, but also achieved cultural and intellectual consistency, narrative conflict potentials automatically occur between different entities within my game world as well as between player, player subject, player character and the game world. As a game and narrative designer I can obviously strategically build and support this potential in order to create an ethical dilemma for the player. A true game designer needs to be a sadist at heart after all.

According to Sellmaier there are three aspects that constitute an ethical dilemma:

- The lack of clear instructions on how to act: The players aren't told which decision they are expected to make. (This aspect will play an important role later.)
- The next decision will inevitably lead to ethical failure: No matter what decision the players make, they will violate an ethical principle. (Lind 2003) No matter what decision the players make, it will always result in guilt and regret about what they have done. (Railton 1996)
- Third, the decision-making process needs to be pressed for time: Not making a decision at all will have even worse consequences than the available options for action.

"Kill either your lover or your son, otherwise the thermo-nuclear apocalypse will begin in 60 seconds" would be an example for an ethical dilemma (albeit an extremely dramatic one). There is no positive way out, and doing nothing at all would be the worst option.

Of course, however, a narrative element like this alone doesn't feature any game mechanics. Also the ethical dilemma of the computer game as a form of art is hardly unknown. One can't even claim that it is a precious flower which can only blossom on the fertile soil of the indie scene. Mainstream titles such as *GTA 5* (2013), *Mass Effect* (2007) and even *Call of Duty* (2003) (remember the controversial airport scene) have worked successfully with ethical dilemmas.

Heuristics as a key

Before I set out to explain how exactly game mechanics can be generated from ethical conflicts, I would like to highlight and explain another concept which can almost be regarded as a basic prerequisite of good narration: heuristics.

Humans practice heuristics wherever they go. This means they try to make assumptions about reality based on incomplete information and within limited time. Ever since Oedipus this has been an important means of narration: Decisions which seem rational and ethical at first can later become irrational and thus unethical in light of complete information and lead to disastrous consequences. Heuristics obviously are an important means of narration in basically all art forms: think of the empty space between comic panels. It simply exploits the natural human instinct to fill information gaps through extrapolation. Without this instinct the human species would probably have not survived. Humans are actually very good at heuristics, which in fact is the pleasant element of surprise when there is a good plot twist.

And it gets even better: Since us humans are natural heuristics, we assume other people (or intelligent aliens) think the same way. So when we realize while reading, watching or playing a story that our hero is lacking some decisive information that we have, it creates suspense. If we could, we would warn our heroes of the trap they're about to walk into.

This concept also works the other way round: The hero has additional information and therefore acts in a way incomprehensible to us, which confuses us and makes us even doubt his ethical integrity. Or it works like the power of knowledge that is held back by the author from the players and their character while at the same time they are already required to make a momentous decision that would actually require this knowledge as a decision-making basis.

So when constructing ethical conflicts we can also put up with the cognitive discrepancy between counter-world, individual characters in this world, our hero and the player/player subject (both have the same level of knowledge, but can evaluate it very differently): While playing *BioShock* (2007) I had a feeling that Atlas didn't mean me well, but I followed him since I didn't really have a choice, letting myself be blinded by the circumstance that, for example, the decision concerning the life of the Little Sisters was left entirely to me. This little freedom I had seemed to ratify the hope that I would also have the big one – until I realized that all that time my character was under external control without my knowledge. I had the assumption from the get-go, while my player subject with the same knowledge level didn't want to be aware of it – and the player character seemed to have been completely naive. My experience-based player

knowledge was ahead of the player character's knowledge – but my player subject managed to succumb to deception and suppress the player knowledge to an extent that it could not prevail during the game.

Consequences for Designers

The next step would therefore be to develop a feedback loop from the narrative illustration of the ethical dilemmas in the game and the effect generated within the player, which then actually interferes with the game mechanics. This isn't so much about purely formal game mechanics generally developed in the rules of the code, but about game mechanics which have strictly narrative causes, meaning the power of the narration pushes players to make game-based (as opposed to narration-based) decisions; decisions which, in case of doubt, may actually run contrary to their own interests with regard to the game objective.

Therefore we try to push the players to a point where, based on ethical considerations, they won't opt for the most effective way or decisions which get them the most advantage from a game mechanics point of view, but rather for whatever they personally regard as the ethically right thing to do, even if this means a much harder road to winning the game. I will provide more details about this approach in the third part of the series.

ETHICS AS A GAME MECHANISM: THE NORMATIVE POWER OF ETHICS

But before I will provide more details about this approach, I have to make sure there's not a widespread misconception in our way of thinking: that an ethical game design necessarily requires ethically high-grade content and messages. In fact, the opposite is more likely: The content of a game may indeed be unethical, even to a great extent, and thus generate an ethical game design. It's not even necessary to reward the players with a narrative happy-end or something similar in return for their ethically correct behavior. Ethical game design is based on completely different structures. There are two prerequisites:

- Through the way it is presented and embedded into the game design, the ethical/unethical content allows for a free, age-appropriate reflection.
- It also allows for an ethically significant decision by the players themselves, a decision that isn't tainted or corrupted by advantages in the game.

If those two prerequisites are met, the game design becomes ethical, even if the game is about a mass murder, unpreventable by any decisions made by the player and to be executed by the player subject itself. This seems to be contradictory to the second prerequisite, but it isn't. The player subject still has the option to quit the game as a last means to keep its ethical integrity. And refusing the reception of a piece of art is a legitimate part of the reception – and it is legitimate for the artist to provoke the refusal. What these two prerequisites actually mean and how to fulfill them is what the following is about.

I explained have that, on the one hand, it can be reasonable and interesting in terms of gameplay to make ethical questions a tool of the game mechanics and that, on the other hand, there is a lot of conflict potential in the trade-off between ethics and morality in order to seize this gameplay treasure.

Now I would like to explain how game designers can use this potential for conflict to create an ethical game mechanism – and what mistakes they need to avoid. My task is of analytical nature since these techniques have already been used in numerous published games. When they were applied, they worked and have long proven efficient. My contribution is merely to classify those largely unsorted and undeclared gameplay phenomena into the category "ethical game mechanics" and, last but not least, to add a "how to" tag, which hasn't been done before as far as I know.

In the previous paragraphs we focused on the role of the player and the player subject, described the ludic hermeneutical circle and illustrated the area of conflict between ethics and morality of both the counter-world and its characters and, last but not least, also the player. It is this area of conflict where ethical conflicts can originate and work on a narrative basis.

Avoid clear instructions on how to act

We also came to the conclusion that one of the continuous elements of an ethical dilemma is the lack of clear instructions to act: The players aren't told which decision is expected of them. Sometimes they don't even know *that* they are expected to make a decision at all. Also, based on the second prerequisite, the action is pressured for time. A third prerequisite for an ethical dilemma is that no ethically acceptable way out is given, causing every decision by the player to result in an ethical failure.

You don't have to be a genius to realize instantly that the first two elements – instructions to act and time pressure – also belong to game design categories. But what happens if there is a *lack* of instructions to act?

According to the western game design philosophy, a lack of such instructions is considered to be problematic, and the general design doctrine advises to use caution in such case. We have learned not to leave players in the dark. They should know what to do and be able to assess the consequences of their actions, and it is the game's obligation to instruct them accordingly. However, you just need to step outside the Anglo-American box (or check out our own game history) in order to understand that this design rule can't be applied universally, couldn't always be applied – and has successfully been broken numerous times.

In 2006, for example, *Pathologic* (2005) was a big hit in Russia and Eastern Europe. The player takes on the role of a doctor in a remote town after the outbreak of a deadly epidemic. In the game the player constantly faces ethical decisions whose consequences are unpredictable. Do I use my medication in order to treat a victim? Or do I trade it for food since, otherwise, I would probably be starving and not be able to help anymore at all? Or do I take it myself in order not to get killed by the epidemic as well? Food and medication are scarce and I have a lot of missions to carry out while time is running out. Which missions should I take on, if I can't complete them all? How do the other people in the game world react? What does the common morality demand? What about the morality of those who are affected? And what would be the ethically correct thing to do in a rationally verifiable way?

Pathologic (2005) even managed to provide answers or at least hints to a lot of these questions. But this is where the second parameter comes into play: You don't have enough time to search and assess all these answers since the player is constantly pressured for time. But what's most interesting here is *how* this time pressure is applied – something I will go into more detail about later.

How to make time pressure your friend

But in order not to leave the objection unanswered that time pressure exists in western game design just as well, and in various forms, too: Of course that's correct, be it for time-limited missions, speed-based jump&run episodes or quicktime events. In *The Witcher 3* (2015) I am constantly confronted with dialogue options I have to choose between under time pressure. However, in this role-playing game the time pressure is mostly a simple gameplay decision, often not justifiable from inside the world. There, we'd prefer to spend more time thinking about an answer – and the counterpart would often happily grant us that time. Consequently, this mechanism often gets negative attention within the otherwise mostly brilliant narratization of the game.

But in any case, none of the time-pressure mechanics mentioned in the last paragraph seems to be very suitable for treating an ethical decision convincingly as a matter of urgency. In order to explain the reason for that, I need to go a bit deeper.

Time pressure as a game mechanism is directed almost straight at the player. One may even discuss the question whether time pressure eclipses the player subject or at least considerably deprives them of their power. The stress that the player is confronted with often overshadows every personal dissociation by a player subject: This means via time pressure, the player's morality can directly, and often without much reflection, make its way into the decision-making process of the player subject, often suspending its insubstantiality: The decision by the player becomes authentic. However, it's hard to imagine suspending an ethically ambitious situation via a quicktime event or a running stopwatch – without corrupting it. The necessary non-diegetic interface elements (Stonehouse 2014) – those that don't belong to the game world – take away any psychological and in-game credibility from the situation, like in *The Witcher 3* (2015).

This means the time pressure will appear artificial, coming from the game designer – an entity that isn't part of the counter-world ethics and has nothing to do with the problem to be solved. Also the respective interface is only a tool for providing necessary information. Furthermore, the players receive (via interface) an instruction to act. Even though they may not be told *what* to do, they still know that they need to do *something*. The result is inevitably the alienation from the game world, a movement that is obviously contrary to the ethical and moral integration of the player subject into said game world.

So that's not really the way to do it. But how can time pressure be integrated into a game, so that the player can understand it without being pointed to it via a non-diegetic interface element?

Wanted: Diegetic Interface

Pathologic solves this problem in a very simple and elegant way since just like in real life the other characters in the town have their own agenda – they're not waiting for the player. In most of the western game designs, the player triggers pretty much everything: Opponents patiently wait wherever they are for the player character to come by and trigger their actions. At most, the NPCs have their own daily routine that the player has to adapt to. But it rarely happens that NPCs take actions themselves in their own interest; they usually wait for the player to arrive. Game- and narration-related events are triggered locally.

In *Pathologic*, however, there's a time-based trigger at work basically all the time: All citizens have their own agenda – and more often than not these agendas are not in the player's interests, but focusing on the interests of the respective character. The longer the player hesitates (or is being held up otherwise), the more difficult the situation becomes: In this game, a sick person who doesn't get any medication from the player will die the next day; and a missing food delivery has similar fatal consequences. A mission that has been taken on but not completed causes a bad atmosphere among the affected NPCs (as well as not taking the mission on at all). Therefore, the players need to make a decision otherwise the counter-world of the game will do it for them. The time pressure originates from a lively, self-acting world, which makes it appear not artificial, but natural, and is understood through "phronesis" – by following the common sense. There's no need for the non-diegetic interface since the system is obvious. Once the player has understood the principle, the time pressure itself acts as a diegetic interface, just like the submission deadline for this article does in real life.

This "phronesis" seems to be a basic prerequisite for ethical conflicts to successfully become a part of the game mechanics. Or at least it makes it a lot easier: The players need to understand the necessity and urgency of their actions from both an ethical point of view and the narrative, inner-worldly situation – and not from the game mechanics' point of view. But the peculiarity of the ethical game mechanics doesn't end here since the ideal ethical conflict doesn't just originate from the narration – consequently, it should at first only impact the narratization again and only then make its way into the game mechanics.

The bad counter-example: A system used in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) where the player's actions are immediately rated on a good/evil scale, avoids/circumvents the ethical impulse of the player, forcing the primacy of the game mechanics onto them since the game rewards consistency by giving the consistently evil or good player subject an advantage over players acting inconsistently. At some point the players decide to take the good or evil path – and then engage primarily in resource optimization, while being able to track their progress directly on a scale. The system appears to be similar to the class system of a role-playing game where I also engage in optimization once I have made a decision – without making any fundamental ethical decisions or even ethically questioning this decision down the road.

Resource optimization corrupts ethical game design

Thus, ethics no longer play a role in the decision-making process for the player: The evil act isn't evil since the players, of course, see through their player subject's masquerade and don't take their decision seriously themselves: The game has long become a play itself. The player takes on a role and merely provides the Star Wars universe with another one of the badly required villains without whom the whole system wouldn't work. Sicart therefore describes this kind of game design as "unethical". I don't think you need to go that far. I would rather say that the ethical category in *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) has no effectiveness and should therefore not be used for an evaluation of the game design. What I will leave out now is that this pseudo-ethical decision "freedom" of the player was the subject of intensive marketing efforts. Maybe there is no unethical game design, but there surely is something like unethical marketing campaigns.

The solution of an ethical challenge should therefore not be easily predictable and expectable for the players, plus significantly rewarding or punishing them in terms of game mechanics because in that case the players would most probably make an opportune decision from the game mechanics' point of view, possibly not even regarding it as ethical. Although players are indeed prepared to accept a reasonable punishment if it allows them to get to an ethically correct solution:

In *BioShock* (2007) the players were punished (which they could foresee) for letting the Little Sisters live: They only received half of the ADAM they would have received if they had killed the girls instead of healing them. Hence there was a foreseeable punishment. And yet, according to my (obviously anecdotal) findings, around 90 percent of the players decided to let the girls live and heal them. They accepted a disadvantage in the game (be it a temporary one, not much affecting the balancing) when making a decision that was ethically correct from our world's perspective. The ethical decision was real, but wasn't exclusively made considering ethical parameters, but more regarded as a deal between ethics and the game mechanics. It can be assumed that the higher the price, the more players would have killed the girls instead of healing them. The ethical game mechanism was indeed corrupted; however, the price just wasn't high enough for most players to make them breaking the game world.

Also, it remained pretty much unclear during the whole gaming time how the game world itself would judge the decision, and this is where the game certainly has given away some of its potential. It should be pointed out though that in *BioShock* it was an ethical problem rather than an ethical dilemma. Unlike ethical dilemmas, ethical problems offer an ethically correct solution, even though it

may not always be evident. As explained above, an ethical dilemma offers no ethically correct solution.

I also mentioned the human propensity to heuristics that we designers can purposely take advantage of in this respect: We don't have to provide the players with all information about their decision-making. We can try to mislead them. We can hide relevant information from them or put them in remote and hard-to-reach places, so that the players who are focused on fast results won't get to see them. There are numerous possibilities (and we realize how the preparation of an ethical challenge immediately affects areas of the game mechanics, conjuring a risk of corruption). That way, we can make an ethical problem look like an ethical dilemma and vice versa. We can also work with the prospect of a reward and thus trap the player. We punish the corruptible player and reward exactly the kind of integrity we threatened to punish before. Or vice versa. Both are possible and both can be an ethical game design.

Ethical game design thrives on the confrontation with the morality of the counter-world

A game design of that kind doesn't just lose its attribute "ethical" simply by trying to corrupt the "player subject" in an ethical way. It only gets non-ethical (and in an extreme case possibly even unethical) if the corruptibility itself has no consequences and the game lets the player subject proceed affirmatively and without safety net, even though the counter-world, too, should hardly approve of this lacking integrity. Hence, the error is not necessarily a reward in the game, but a possible inconsistency between the attack on the morality of the counter-world and the lacking reaction of said counter-world to this attack.

This means a world needs to enforce its morality, not its ethics. That's what all great stories are based on. The Greek mythology charged the Moirai with observance of the rules – three goddesses of destiny who killed everybody who broke the rules of the world. Those who have read Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (1988) know that the three ladies showed no mercy whatsoever. By the way, their legacy can also be found in the three ladies of the wood in *The Witcher 3* (2015). This morality to be enforced may be unethical itself, but it will be enforced. Even towards the player and even if this world has not anthropomorphisized the observance of the rules. Otherwise the story will be useless. A player character that stands above the basic laws of the counter-world and isn't called to account by them, may perhaps appeal to adolescent visions of omnipotence, but won't be able to create a viable ethical game design - or any narrative depth for that matter.

At the end of the day though it can't be excluded that this reaction by the game world can be subversive and consequently reward the attack or punish the observance of morality. Nevertheless a good narration accomplishes that the players (even though not the player subject) recognize the consistency of this reaction and can understand it as a part of the ethical challenge – provided they have a certain personal maturity and self-reflection. But in this world, too, most of us would love to be a good person a lot more often – unfortunately, life often deals us the short draw in such cases.

That's why caution should be exercised when letting the solution of ethical problems immediately interfere with the game mechanics since first of all, sooner or later the damage and benefits quickly spread within the game community which is a significant part of the ludic hermeneutic circle, so that they become expectable and may therefore contaminate the ethical challenge from the get-go. And secondly, the actual addressee of an ethical decision is always the game world whose rules I either break or obey. This is what makes the ethical dilemma so rich in terms of narration since it always entails a violation of the rules of the counter-world – and that's why there always has to be a revenge to remedy the world again: The seed for tragedy is sown, and it will grow inevitably.

In ethical game design, the designer becomes the executor

In ethical game design it should therefore be the world to decide between reward and punishment, rather than the game mechanics. The game designer usually in charge of the legislation of a game world now becomes the executor whose deed is to obey, enforce and execute the existing laws. Needless to say that this decision originating from this world can interfere with the game mechanics in an either rewarding or punishing way. The players can be given (or taken away) divine skills as a result of the narration; the people in this world can support or waylay them. All of this is consistent within the ethical system, and that's why it's an ethical game mechanism.

Or to be more precise: What's not consistent is receiving twice as many experience points in the future because you saved an orc baby, even though orcs are your enemies. It would be consistent if there were a way to make peace with the orcs – which the players would benefit from in the game, for example, by getting access to orcish weapons. In the first mechanism the designer becomes visible, in the latter the world is working on its own.

It wouldn't be consistent if the players lost three charisma points because they slayed an innocent woman. It would be consistent though if the woman's husband tracked down the players, trying to kill them. It may be consistent if this

man belonged to a group of saints who are in no way to be killed, not even in self-defense. It would then be consistent if the player, after having killed the holy man after all, was hunted down in all parts of the world, constantly being threatened to get arrested and executed.

What we learn from this is that ethical decisions made by the player should have indirect consequences from the game mechanics: A phronetically comprehensible reaction of the game world to the player's actions. This phronetic reaction should possibly be shown from within the narration and not only (and especially not immediately) be reflected by some parameters of the game mechanics.

This is because the world will sometimes take a little while to realize the violation of its rules and to react accordingly: Oedipus was king for several years before the world identified him as the killer of his father and the husband of his own mother – which he was without being aware of it. This delay in time, too, is contradictory to our western game design rules. And it's right that mistakes in the game should result in a quick and possibly immediate punishment within the game mechanics. However, if the player's mistake is an ethical one, affecting the narration, the punishment may be delayed. Sometimes the phronesis allows – and even requires it.

Through time pressure and ethical challenges, *Pathologic* (2005) that otherwise bears all signatures of an open-world horror action-adventure in terms of gameplay requires a completely different way to play than other western games of that genre. There is no "comfort zone", no time and place for the players to take a breath. In order to do so, they need to press the pause button or quit the game. Additionally, the time pressure is nowhere to be found (or is very hidden) in the non-diegetic interface. You're not told how much time you have left for a certain task. There is no countdown timer. Only the changing times of day may serve as hints on how much time may be left – and you can also choose to have the time of day displayed.

The potentially ideal solution for ethical game design

It seems there is indeed an ideal solution to make ethics become a part of the game mechanics. This solution includes four steps leading through the narration:

- **Step 1:** The game creates an ethical problem or even an ethical dilemma for the player *from within the narration*. This ethical problem/dilemma needs to be one for the counter-world of the game, so world design is key here.
- **Step 2:** The player is forced under time pressure to offer a solution to this problem. The time pressure itself also needs to come from within the narration

and be built up plausibly, but of course it will be managed through the game mechanics. Also, using the game mechanics, the counter-world can make it harder to access information the player would need in order to make an ethically valid decision.

- **Step 3:** The game system implements the consequences from this decision into the narrative game world. It may also take some time to do so if it benefits the credibility. The parameter for the narrative implementation is the morality of the counter-world, which will do everything in its power to punish violations and restore itself. It needs to be pointed out though that the ethically correct decision by the player may indeed violate the morality of the game's counter-world. And of course, there may indeed be different opinions about the adopted solution within the counter-world.
- **Step 4:** The efforts of the counter-world to restore its moral integrity not only interfere with the progress of the narration, but also with the game mechanics – wherever it is logical.

It should be added though that the process isn't completed by step 4. Often, the curse of the good (or evil) deed is that an ethical decision leads to further decisions. It's not necessarily about just a few decisions within a story. Without a doubt, you can picture this system as a fast-spinning spiral of decisions that lead to literally hundreds of further decisions, like in *Pathologic* (2005) or also in *This War of Mine* (2014). Obviously, it's therefore quite significant for the entire production whether I manage the further process via a rather heavy branching of the story like in *The Witcher 3* (2015) or via a system which generates its narrative decisions from the state of resource management and - after the decision has been made - also returns them after a detour into the narratives into the mechanical game system like in *This War of Mine* (2014).

Ethical game design is target-group specific

One thing is certain though: Not every player will enjoy this form of gameplay. Many don't want to have to make tough decisions in the gaming world, too. But not everyone can warm up to the simple gameplay challenges of a shooter or the strategic challenges of an RTS. Personally, I love sports and hate sports games. At the end of the day it all depends on the target group. But the older the group of gamers gets, the higher the demand for games which require more from the players than to just handle hand-eye coordination and their motor skills. The commercial attention games like *This War of Mine* (2014) have received too, speak for a growing demand for ethical gameplay.

Last but not least I would like to add that my analysis shows *only one* way to make ethics become a part of the game mechanics. There may be others, so I won't claim that my analysis is exhaustive. I simply wanted to show *that* it is possible and *what* approach game designers can take. It was also important for me to point out that ethical gameplay always requires the narratization as a mediator for the gameplay and thus consistency with the game world. Besides, I wanted to establish some common rules and justify them, and I do hope that I succeeded.

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