How Multiplayer Interactions Can Improve Single Player Ethical Systems

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Moral choice systems have become an important part of games that include interactive narratives. However, there are a number of issues that single-player games face when implementing these choices. These issues are not as prevalent in multiplayer games, where a player is able to interact with and have an effect on real people. This paper will analyze the moral choices in single player games, the effort it takes from the developers to create these systems, and how developers can use multiplayer games to improve their single player systems.

First, I would like to define the terms "ethical system" and "moral choice" as they will be used throughout, as it is important to establish the difference between the two. Ethics is generally considered the study of morality, while morality deals with what is right and wrong (Oqvist, 2007, p. 2). Therefore an ethical system is how a player's morals can be expressed in the game world through moral choices.

The Weakness of Single-Player Ethics. Before analyzing how single-player ethical systems can be improved, I will outline what parts of the systems already work and what parts do not. Morality systems have been a staple in games in recent years, with *Dishonored*, *inFamous* and the *Mass Effect* series being great examples of games that rely on player choices. However, these games also highlight many of the issues that stem from pre-programmed morality.

In *inFamous*, there are two paths the player can take: Hero or Infamous (also referred to as Good Karma or Evil Karma). It becomes clear early on that there is no "neutral" third option. The narrative of the story simply does not allow for the player to *not* pick one side or the other, and these sides are distinctly good or evil. As the player progresses through the story, their alignment to one side increases to the point where they are locked out of missions and abilities.

Dishonored provides a similar black and white system, only now referred to as "low-chaos" or "high-chaos". The narrative of *Dishonored* offers a somewhat unique ethical situation to the player by qualifying all killing as high-chaos. There is also nothing distinguishing an act of vengeance from an act of self-defense or even arguable acts of mercy. Every time the player kills someone, no matter the reason behind it, it leads the narrative one step closer to the high-chaos, negative ending. Killing is certainly *immoral*, but often times I was presented with moments in *Dishonored* where it was not necessarily *unethical*. One mission in particular involves choosing to either kill a target, or kidnap her and give her to a stalker, never to be heard from again (Arkane Studios, 2012). However, the game rules did not account for ethics. My choices in *Dishonored* became less about what I felt was right or wrong, and more about avoiding the high-chaos ending. This leads me to the second issue that prevails in these morality-based games: the narrative.

An ethical system in a game is often used in service of an interactive narrative. While this is not a critique of divergent stories on their own, it is important to mention how they affect ethical systems. *Dishonored, inFamous* and *Mass Effect* all contain branching plotlines that are in some way tied to a player's choice. While this can affect the narrative in some ways, there are many moments where the choice a player makes feels hollow. For example, in the first *inFamous*, there is a moment where the player, as the character Cole McGrath, has to choose between saving the love of his life, Trish Dailey, or several doctors. However, no matter which choice the player makes, the narrative will change to ensure that Trish is never the one you save (Sucker Punch Productions, 2009). It can be argued that the choice itself – being willing to sacrifice the life of one person for the lives of many – is more important than any narrative

consequence (or lack thereof), but the inability to affect the story in any significant way makes choices like these ring false.

The first action a player takes in the first *Mass Effect*, after creating their own version of Commander Shepherd, is choose how Shepherd responds to two characters. However, the dialogue options the player chooses from do not correspond with the actual words that Shepherd speaks. Choosing the option "You're overreacting" leads to Shepherd saying, "You always expect the worst" (BioWare, 2007). This is a small distinction on paper, but when voiced it can make an enormous difference to how the player perceives their relationship to the character. Later on these dialogue choices begin to affect the game's ethical system of "Paragon" or "Renegade", and the divide between what players tell Shepherd to say and what Shepherd actually says becomes more prevalent.

Jesse Schell states in his book, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* that "time travel makes tragedy obsolete" (2014, p. 269). Saving is an important part of modern games. It can also function as a form of time travel for the player: if they make a mistake, they can simply reload from a previous save and undo that choice. This also allows them to undo any narrative decision they might not agree with. Playing becomes less about the player making choices, and more about avoiding mistakes on a predetermined path as they strive for the ending they want.

This can not only undo the emotional weight of an action, it can also reveal the moments in a game that actually hinge on false choice, like the death of Trish Dailey outlined above. Interactive narratives do lend themselves to replayability, but if no effort is put into making these divergent paths unique and meaningful, then players can be left wondering why they were given the choice at all. In analyzing the choices in the game *Disney Epic Mickey,* Jeffrey Matulef makes note of the lack of influence his choices have on the game's narrative: "Your decisions

hardly make a difference, rendering them moot…. In one playthrough I was extremely nice to everyone and an NPC criticized me for being too soft. In my next playthrough I was a selfish, mean-spirited bastard and she said the same thing" (Matulef, 2010).

When discussing *Disney Epic Mickey*, the game's designer Warren Spector claimed, "There is absolutely no good Mickey and bad Mickey… There is 'what kind of hero am I?', 'who do I want to be?'… If anybody sees a judgement in this game, it is an absolute failure on my part" (Matulef, 2010). He wanted to create a game that felt like a true ethical experience for the player, where their choices were their own and held weight. The labels of good and evil not only leave little room for neutral ground, but also make the player feel like they are being judged by the designers for doing something they were told they could do.

Within the opening moments of the game, Matulef found a moment that he felt broke Spector's mandate of a judgement-free game: "The very first choice in the game is based around saving a gremlin strapped to a catapult or collecting the treasure weighing it down. Clearly the former is the right thing to do and while Spector may not judge you for your selfish action, Mickey's sidekick Gus the Gremlin will" (Matulef, 2010).

In reality, people are often judged for their actions, so it is fair to believe that non-player characters can judge players for their actions within the world of the game. However, real people can think, reason and change their opinions based on evidence and context. Non-player characters (NPCs) are all preprogrammed by a team of people, and as a result their opinions are limited to what is included by the developers. Including the amount of choices required to simulate more complex thought in an NPC would take countless computations and resources.

Does It Matter? It is one thing to critique moral systems as they currently are in single-player games, but it is also important to understand why those limitations are chosen. When

playing a game, we acknowledge that we must follow the rules of the virtual world. In an analysis of interactive story, Ernest Adams states, "However the role is defined, when the player chooses to play, he enters into a contract with the designer…. The designer promises to provide a credible, coherent story if and only if the player promises to behave in credible, coherent ways" (Adams, 2013). Except, the more choices the player is given, the more difficult it can be for a developer to anticipate every move they will make.

Every game that features any kind of choice requires time and effort in crafting those divergent paths. In order to make these choices have weight, they need to lead to different outcomes. Developers do this to add worth and replayability to their game, but how often is all of that content actually seen? Is it actually worth it to put in the effort to present these choices to the player? According to Peter Molyneux, creator of the *Fable* series, players are "just gonna be nice…. And it makes me sick, because you know, in a game like Fable… we spent months, months and years crafting the evil side of Fable, and only ten percent of people actually did the evil side" (Lange, 2014).

Amanda Lange conducted a survey to try and discover how many people actually experienced both sides of a moral system, using an unspecified game for her study. "Within that subset of players, 59 percent of participants played the game as a good character. 39 percent of those who played the game only once did not expressly play good or evil, but claimed to make decisions 'on a choice by choice basis'" (Lange, 2014).

Players that only make it through a game once may only see one path outlined by the developers. However, that should not be seen as a sign that developers should not try to create engaging ethical and moral choices for the player. It should be seen as a challenge. As mentioned above, one of the issues of moral choice systems in games is the tendency to be black

and white when it comes to the paths a player can take. This does not challenge players to think critically about their decisions.

Studies have been conducted that suggest players can and do see video game characters as social beings, in spite of them being fictional. In real life people normally act in dependent of a moral code, so it is reasonable to believe that players react to moral situations in video games in a similar way (Shafer, 2012). Games, as an interactive medium, can therefore present a number of situations and choices that are simply not possible or viable in reality. "As players we reflect critically on what we do in a game world during a game experience, and it is this capacity that can turn ethical concerns… into interesting, meaningful tools for creative expression" (Sicart, 2011, p. 63).

Having an ethical viewpoint is not the same as acting on them when the time comes. Creating a place where players can not only practice their ethical views, but also repeat or change them, can help players outside of the game world as well (Schulzke, 2009). Developers can and should create these places for their players, while hopefully avoiding the pitfalls outlined above.

How Multiplayer Can Help. Social interactions are affected by ethics, and ethics can also be affected by the people we interact with. This is what makes multiplayer games important when dealing with ethics in the virtual world, because individual acts can affect other people. By design, single player games cannot do this. However, there are other aspects of multiplayer games that they can adapt for more successful ethical systems.

In *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), the game is divided into two factions: Alliance and Horde. While players are required to choose a faction, neither is explicitly assigned the role of "good" or "evil". Removing labels does not need to change how non-player characters can perceive the

actions of the player, but doing so can remove the feeling that the player is being judged by the developers for decisions they are allowed to make.

In *WoW*, the only people that judge the actions of players are other real people, and the players themselves. Presenting a player with only the facts of a situation, instead of telling them whether they *should* see something as morally good or bad, allows them to decide their own ethical stance on their choices. *WoW* excels at this by not painting either faction in a wholly positive or wholly negative light. It also includes a system of honorable kills, which a player earns by killing players of the opposite faction that are not of a significantly lower level than them. This discourages players from attacking weaker characters, but does not forbid it. Rather than offering negative feedback and punishing (or judging) this kind of behavior, the developers simply encourage positive behavior and fair play (Blizzard, 2004).

Both the Horde and the Alliance are populated with NPCs and players that perform questionable acts against one another and an individual player can decide who they agree with and who they will fight for. A similar tactic is utilized quite successfully in the single-player game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. *Skyrim* also contains factions – fifteen that the player can join, like the werewolf Companions or the feared Dark Brotherhood, and additional non-joinable factions. Joining a faction in *Skyrim* is entirely optional, but does provide benefits, much like joining a guild in a multiplayer game. Factions will issue quests for the player, which might include something that the player does not agree with, like killing a character the player might have grown close to (Bethesda Softworks, 2011). This gives the player an opportunity to express their ethical views within the game without penalty or judgement: the player can accept the quest and complete it, or simply ignore it. While these factions are not run by real people, and instead

are preprogrammed with regulations and populated with NPCs, they still simulate a virtual community that the player can connect with.

If the first lesson single player games can learn from multiplayer is to allow players to decide the ethical implications of their choices for themselves, the second lesson would be to provide a way of sharing those implications with others. "Games that foster community give the players a steady stream of things to talk about. This can come from the depth of strategy inherent in the game… or rule changes that are introduced over time" (Schell, 2014, p. 360). It can also come from discussing how players reacted differently to the options presented to them.

Guilds are a good way to foster relationships in multiplayer games. Created and managed by players, guilds play an important part of the massively-multiplayer online (MMO) experience, both in *WoW* and various other MMOs such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *Ultima Online*. These player-run communities can contribute to keeping a player interested in a game due to its social aspect, and over 66% of *WoW* players are a part of a guild (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006).

In early 2006, a group of *WoW* players in the guild Serenity Now (SN), launched an ambush on opposing players gathered at a memorial for one of their guild mates who had passed away. This garnered a lot of attention for the guild and *WoW* in general, with many people split on the topic of whether or not what SN had done was morally or ethically wrong. Some blamed the targeted guild for broadcasting their intentions, and saw this as baiting other people into attacking them, while others were adamant that SN was wrong (Goguen, 2009, p. 1).

Whether SN was right or wrong is ultimately not important. What is important is that the game allowed these types of situations to arise and these conversations to take place both inside the game and out. "In online computer games there are often bans for those who use software or

hardware designed to obtain unfair advantages" (Sicart, 2011, p. 65). Multiplayer games are especially equipped to allow players to communicate and even police one another's behaviors, and issue judgements. However, social pressure does not only exist when players play together anymore, especially with the emergence of streaming sites like Twitch.TV and the PlayStation 4's Share feature. Just because a game is built for a single player, does not mean that player has to have an isolated experience.

In his essay on ethics in multiplayer games, Gustav Oqvist says, "The game mechanics encourage players to seek help from each other, but since these are real persons, it is up to them to value the help they get. The feedback they give also fosters other players to play better" (2007, p. 12). Along with factions, *Skyrim* goes a step further to simulate a team for the player in the form of "followers". A player finds followers all throughout the world of *Skyrim*, much like a *WoW* player might stumble across another, and can travel with and complete quests together. While the followers are not as versatile as a real person, the idea of artificial partners that players can connect with allows for a wide variety of situations, including ones where a player can be challenged in a moral way. It is simply up to the developer to provide those situations, and for the player to decide how to act.

The important aspects to remember when providing a player with moral choices are to make them feel as though those choices have weight, and that they are truly their own choices to make. That does not mean that all games that deal with ethical situations should offer moral choices to the player. If a developer feels they have something important to say, it is their right to say it. However, if the purpose of a game is to provide a player with the ability to express themselves and their ethical decision, then it is best to simply provide them the tools to play with.

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