**Open Your Eyes: A proposal for moral choice frameworks in gaming**

Moral Choice Systems (MCSs) are by no means a new concept in gaming. A staple especially of role-playing games, MCSs serve to immerse the player in the game world, to add depth to characters, to add replay value, and to facilitate multiple endings. But like all game mechanics, MCSs can be implemented well, or badly. The purpose of this essay is to explore what separates a good MCS from a poor one, and proposes a game with an ideal MCS in place.

Where there is interaction with NPCs, there is an opportunity to bring a MCS into a game. Commonly, moral choices are presented as dialogue options. Alternatively, moral choices may be presented as voluntary actions for the player to perform or choose not to perform. The player might have more than one way to solve a quest. Or, the moral choice may be a factor in how the player behaves in the game world. MCSs seek to add depth and characterisation to NPCs, to add an element of realism, and to trigger emotional investment in a game.

**What makes a good or bad MCS?**

Rather than adding depth, a poorly-implemented MCS can make a game feel shallow. This commonly occurs when the MCS ultimately leads the player towards only one of two options: "good" and "evil". This black and white approach renders any morally grey choices, or inconsistent behaviour from the player, effectively meaningless: the player will either be rewarded as the great saviour, or maligned as an incarnation of evil, despite any actions or choices they made during the game contrary to the end result.

Worse still, this black and white approach can be taken to an even more shallow extreme when, of the moral choices presented, one is obviously preferred over another. Typically, this leads to the player being punished for freely choosing the "wrong" (evil) option over the "right" (virtuous) one. Another common problem with poorly-implemented MCS is where the choices a player makes during the game carry little to no weight on the game’s ending. What appears to be branching paths and depth of characters is revealed to be an illusion in the final act, and the game’s endings are restricted to choices which are made in the final moments.

A poorly-designed MCS detracts from the game experience, and in many cases games with poor examples such as those mentioned above would mostly likely have been better off with cutscenes rather than token attempts at player choice.

A good MCS should affect the outcome of the game in such a way that the player feels like the choices they made during the game carried weight: choices should make the player feel conflicted; there should be no 'obviously correct' path to take to fulfil the game designer's vision of the plot. Alternatively, the player could be confronted with decisions which do not seem to alter the plot significantly, but which add incremental changes to the game experience of the unaware player. In either case, it is generally ideal for the results of the player's actions not to be immediately obvious.

It could be thought that the less intrusive the moral choices are, the stronger the overall effect. An amalgamation of player choices throughout the game, creating subtle changes in the way NPCs react and respond to the player, is far more effective in immersing the player in the game world than an NPC reacting, predictably, badly to an obviously "wrong" dialogue option.

**Good MCSs and bad MCSs: some examples**

Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* series are notable examples of games where moral choices affect the outcome of certain situations. However, in many cases these fall victim to the flaw of player choices being rendered meaningless in the interest of plot continuity: where there are sequels in production, there is limited variety in endings so as to avoid a long episodic series becoming fractally complicated. Instead, players may be faced with options which produce little to no difference to the scene but provide an illusion of player control, such as the infamous "[NPC] will remember that" subtext which often appears on screen but rarely seems to carry any strong influence on the plot.

On the other hand, *The Walking Dead* series also features some good examples of moral choice dilemmas: in one scene, the player must choose between saving an NPC from zombies and sacrificing supplies, or sacrificing an NPC and saving supplies. If the player chooses to sacrifice the NPC, the player then hears that character screaming and dying in the background[[1]](#endnote-1). It is a good example of a decision carrying weight, and the player being forced to confront the result of their decision. Here, the immediate result of their decision is used in a purposeful way: it is designed to trigger an emotional response of regret and guilt from the player, but also produces invisible results as that NPC can no longer interact with the player for the rest of the game.

The controversy around the ending of *Mass Effect 3* is remembered as a particularly egregious example of player choices throughout the game being rendered meaningless in the last scene. The *Mass Effect* series had established itself as games which incorporated a lot of player freedom of choice and multiple endings. In *Mass Effect 3* however, the fate of the entire universe is decided by a dialogue tree in the final scene. All choices the player made up to this point in the game were suddenly revealed to have had no impact on the plot, to the chagrin of the game's fanbase[[2]](#endnote-2).

An example of a game with a well-executed MCS is the 1999 game *Planescape: Torment*[[3]](#endnote-3). An isometric role-playing game, *Planescape: Torment*'s plot is primarily dialogue-driven, and the player develops the main character’s alignment (good, chaotic, lawful, neutral and other variations), and develops the plot primarily through dialogue, although the weight of these choices is rarely apparent. The results of player choices may not become apparent until much later in the game. In many cases, branching paths are not clearly delineated, and the player may be unaware that the plot path they are following is not predetermined.

In this way, the personality of the main character is malleable, and therefore the reactions and interactions with NPCs also differs with each playthrough. It also means that seeking alternative endings requires more than saving the game in the last room: alternative paths are created by playing the entire game differently, thus the game retains a lot of replay value.

Another example of a good MCS is *Spec Ops: The Line* which, on first appearance, is a typical first-person war shooter. Nevertheless, it implements moral choices and branching paths where the results are not immediately obvious to the player. The player typically will play the game as one would with any typical first-person shooter, but later in the game the player is confronted with the consequences of their earlier actions, thus subverting the player’s expectations about the nature of the genre[[4]](#endnote-4).

Before it became a AAA title, early entries in the *Fallout* franchise, particularly *Fallout 2*, were notable examples of games which encouraged player choice with few restrictions[[5]](#endnote-5). In *Fallout 2*, the player could play the game in virtually any manner they desired. The player could role play as a purely virtuous character, or a genocidal maniac; *Fallout 3* and further sequels were noted for the inability to kill child NPCs, but no such restrictions exist in the early games. Furthermore, the player could become a slaver, or a pimp, or a variety of other morally questionable occupations in line with the principle of player freedom of choice. These choices, however, all impacted permanently on how NPCs would interact with the player.

In *Grand Theft Auto V*, by contrast, the player can act morally questionably towards NPCs but the results are not long-lasting: they expire when the player dies, is arrested, or successfully evades police contact for an arbitrary amount of time. Although fun and cathartic, the temporary nature of the MCS in *Grand Theft Auto V* is tokenistic, and does not impact on, or develop, the plot or the characters[[6]](#endnote-6).

Based on the above examples and others, some criteria elevate a moral choice above others, in terms of player immersion and replay value. These criteria include:

* Distinct endings require distinct playthroughs:

Alternative endings should not, for example, be simple variations on one “main” ending with variations of flavour text. A player ought to develop their character differently throughout the course of the game in order to discover significant variations in the plot;

* Avoid "good/evil" dichotomies:

NPCs should be written with pathos, and stereotypes of virtue and evil should be strictly avoided. Immersion develops when players feel connected to multifaceted character who possess depth and complexity, as people connect to and sympathise with other people;

* All decisions should carry weight:

All decisions and actions the player makes should impact the game in some way: whether it adjusts a background statistic or alters the entire course of the plot, every interaction should carry some weight. The consequences of actions should carry short-term and long-term effects, and these effects may (and often should) conflict with each other: for example, a player may make a pragmatic decision for the short-term benefit but create a long-term detriment. To this end, immediate consequences should be obvious, whereas long-term effects should be subtle. The player should not necessarily be aware that any particular decision has definitively altered the game;

* The player must care about consequences:

Moral choices should make the player feel a moral conflict: the player should feel that there are no “correct” options, but rather “actions with consequences”;

* Saving the game state should be limited:

By restricting the ability to save in the middle of a scene, the player is forced to commit to, and confront, the consequences of their decisions. An alternative option would be to skip to beginning of game chapters (as they are unlocked), and also to maintain a persistent state of autosave (in the style of GTA V). In this way, the player can skip to specific points in the story to investigate branching paths without returning to the very start of the game, while still maintaining the emphasis on living with decision made within these phases on the game. As long as the player is not forced into an unwinnable state (i.e. "dead man walking"), this should produce a suitable balance of player control, and gravitas on player decisions;

With this in mind, we would like to propose a game concept which aims to encompass all of the above points.

**The Batavia Mutiny**

The 1629 mutiny of the VOC vessel Batavia has been overshadowed by numerous other extraordinary events of the Age of Sail: while it lacks to familiarity of the 1789 mutiny of HMS Bounty, it lacks none of the drama and intrigue and in fact dwarfs it in many terms of historical significance, and in bloodiness[[7]](#endnote-7).

In designing a game around a true historical event, the shortcomings of artificial MCSs become immediately apparent. Convincing depictions of NPC personalities demand complexity to mirror that of the people they represent. Even the main antagonist, Jeronimus Cornelisz, had a deep and complex history which saw him develop from a privileged childhood into a man who enthusiastically ordered the deaths of around 100 people. Even for a man like that, depicting him as a stereotypical evil character would be a grave mistake; purely evil personalities repel, yet Cornelisz could attract people irresistibly to follow his commands.

It is precisely this paradoxical quality of a person which leave so much potential for exploration in a MCS, if it extends beyond the good/evil dichotomy.

Therefore, we propose the following features of a MCS in our game based on the Batavia mutiny:

* Two distinct Acts. The first Act takes place on board Batavia during the outward journey and ends with the ship running aground. The second Act takes place in the Houtman Abrolhos, primarily on Batavia’s Graveyard (today knows as Beacon Island), but also on Traitor’s Island, Long Island, and East & West Wallabi Islands depending on player choices;
* Multiple Stages within the two Acts, each with multiple branching paths which directly impact on the next Stage. Autosaving at the beginning of every Stage and Act; no saving within a Stage. The player may replay a stage but may not save within a Stage with the aim of immediately backtracking to see the alternative option. In this way, the player is given the change to retrace their steps but must still commit to any choices they make within the game.
* With this save policy, it is vital to limit or remove any “dead man walking” scenarios where the player becomes trapped in an unwinnable situation. There should always be at least one branching path which can lead the player to the end of the game, and not to a death scene regardless of choice. Although they may not reach the end scene they wanted, it should always, at least in theory, be possible to “escape the room”;
* NPCs must be relatable: as all the NPCs are based on real people it should become easier to empathise with them. Based on historical records, we can make good estimations as to the temperament of most of the significant characters in the game, and they should be programmed accordingly. By taking this approach, all NPCs should seem more realistic, leading the player to become concerned for their well-being and feel moral conflicts about the impact of their choices.
* Decisions the player makes must impact the course of the game on the micro and macro level; as the game is split into two distinct Acts, decisions the player makes in the first Act, i.e. on board Batavia, performing tasks and generating relationships with various NPCs, will directly impact the second Act when the player is stranded on the island. For example, if the player performs routine tasks for the Overmerchant in the first Act, the player may begin the second Act with a reduced standing among the mutineers, possibly putting him or her in danger. However, not performing routine tasks as ordered may place the player in reduced standing with the Overmerchant, and they may miss opportunities to gather important information about mutineers (and opportunities to form bonds with them) which may increase their prospects of survival in the second Act.
* NPCs should possess some AI which leads them to interact organically with the player and other NPCs. Ideally, this will be based on something similar to the Big Five personality traits, with individual characteristics increasing or decreasing in strength throughout the course of the game as they are influenced by game events and player actions.
* Multiple distinct endings, including:
  + The player is murdered (although this must be signposted);
  + The player survives without joining any faction;
  + The player joins the mutineers and is ultimately hanged on the island after the rescue ship arrives (as the most serious offenders historically were);
  + The player joins the mutineers but avoids punishment (as, historically, some did);
  + The player joins a faction of marooned soldiers on another island and defeats the mutineers after the rescue ship arrives;
  + The player joins the marooned soldiers but is defeated by the mutineers;
  + Finally, as an alternate-history 'Easter egg ending': the player joins the mutineers, defeats the soldiers, commandeers the rescue ship on arrival, and survives to become a pirate. This ending, however, should be extremely difficult to achieve as indeed it would be, fighting off two larger factions simultaneously.

It is our belief that, with the right story, characters and setting, a MCS can elevate a game dramatically. In basing a game on a historical event, natural humanity comes into the game as one surely wants to treat the memory of those involved in such a traumatic event with respect.

With the knowledge that real, ordinary people experienced this event, it brings the event to life once more through the game: placed in the same situation, would you do everything it takes to survive?

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6. GTA Wiki. (2019). *Wasted*. [online] Available at: https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/Wasted [Accessed 10 Apr. 2019]. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. En.wikipedia.org. (2019). *Batavia (ship)*. [online] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Batavia\_(ship) [Accessed 10 Apr. 2019]. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)