Flanagan, Mary, and Helen Nissenbaum. Values at Play in Digital Games. MIT Press, 2014. Print.

1 Groundwork for Values in Games

All games express and embody human values. From notions of fairness to deep-seated ideas about the human condition, games provide a compelling arena where humans play out their beliefs and ideas. To anthropologists, games are paradigmatic among human practices and rituals. From the misty origins of the classic Go game in Asia to the more recent evolution of chess and online games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), games can serve as cultural snapshots: they capture beliefs from a particular time and place and offer ways to understand what a given group of people believes and values. These beliefs may be made visible on the surface (through game characters or other visual features), and they may be expressed through a game's many elements (such as point of view, actions, and hardware). A player's available choices can express a particular understanding of the world, such as the extent to which fate either is in the hands of individuals or societies or is subject to the uncontrollable forces of nature and serendipity. Many elements of games reveal the underlying beliefs and values of their designers and players. Further, because games are engrossing and reach deep parts of the human psyche, they may not only reflect and express but also activate these beliefs and values in powerful ways.

We propose three key reasons why it's important to study values in games. First, the study of games enriches our understanding of how deep-seated sociocultural patterns are reflected in norms of participation, play, and communication. Second, the growth in digital media and expanding cultural significance of games constitutes both an opportunity and responsibility for the design community to reflect on the values that are expressed in games. Third, games have emerged as the media paradigm of the twenty-first century, surpassing film and television in popularity; they have the power to shape work, learning, health care, and more.

Why are there so many games being produced and sold *right now*? Technology has advanced to the point where digital games can flourish in

myriad forms and give players true agency in complex digital playspaces. The large number of games emerging from independent makers and big game design companies demonstrates that there is room for new kinds of game experiences to be created and to find audiences. We pay attention to games because we are players and designers and also because games tell stories and allow players to engage with systems that help them understand the complexities of contemporary life.

Why Games Are Different

Games have become a central way that we tell stories embedded in larger systems of belief and interaction across cultures, and their recurring conventions, themes, player rituals and actions, and music may function as a means of mythmaking. Theories borrowed from literature, television, and film studies do not fully address the psychological, social, and mythic power of games. The emerging generation of game theorists recognizes the role that digital games play as a distinctive cultural artifact and have begun to theorize about player agency, identity, and rules within a community of play.[1]

We do not wish to overstate individual player agency. Neither do we wish to understate the debt that digital games owe to the vast contemporary cultural landscape, including science and other art forms. The interactive and iterative nature of digital media is similar to that of analog games, choose-your-own adventure books, and participatory television (such as *American Idol*).[2] Contemporary computer games offer a range of interactive experiences, from predetermined choose-your-own-adventure stories like *Fable* (Lionhead Studios 2004) to dynamic, unpredictable systems that use physics models, multiplayer interaction, and emergence, such as *World of Goo* (2D Boy 2008) or *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011).

The distinctive effect that games have also may be due to their immersive character: players actively control and identify with playable characters, and their actions typically shape situations within the game experience.[3] Whether or not experiences of agency within games transfer out into real-world contexts, at the very least such agency distinguishes the experience of game playing from film or television viewing. Beyond role playing and perspective taking, digital games offer players a dynamic engagement with content through cycles of effort, attention, and feedback. Unlike traditional forms of other media, which do not respond to players' journeys or to their readings and interpretations, digital games are particularly compelling environments in which players explore and act based on at least a

partial understanding of a system's relational dynamics. As Janet Murray has observed, games give us "a chance to enact our most basic relationship to the world—our desire to prevail over adversity, to survive our inevitable defeats, to shape our environment, to master complexity, and to make our lives fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle."[4] Beyond merely telling stories as traditional narratives do, digital games allow for enactment and provide a systems-level rule set for the story's logic.

What Values? Whose Values?

When we discuss Values at Play, people often ask, "What values? Whose values? And what are values, anyway?" These are entirely reasonable questions given the many meanings of *values* and *value* as they are used both colloquially and in academic scholarship. Values also provoke controversy within and across societies, among individuals, and even within a single person. As Isaiah Berlin notes, "Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual; and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false."[5] Full answers to these general questions lie beyond the scope of this book, but enough must be said about values to convey the basic terms of our theory of Values at Play.

Simply put, values are properties of things and states of affairs that we care about and strive to attain. They are similar to goals, purposes, and ends, but usually they possess a higher degree of gravitas and permanence, and they tend to be more abstract and general. Thus, while you might set a goal to exercise and lose three pounds, it would be odd to cite this as a *value*. Instead, the relevant value might be good health. As a value, however, good health takes on a general importance—that is, if I cite good health as one of my values, then I care about good health for not only for myself but also about good health for others. Values may take a variety of forms—qualities of the environment (such as species diversity), personal traits (such as honesty), and political states (such as justice and democracy). Values may be specific to individuals or shared by groups, and they may bind communities, cultures, religions, or nations. We acknowledge these differences by speaking of personal values, cultural values, religious values, human values, and so forth. We may further differentiate among types of values by talking of ethical, political, and aesthetic values and more. Finally, values are often ideals: we promote them even as we accept that we may never achieve them. World peace, tolerance, kindness, and justice are instances of such ideals.

People express their value commitments in a variety of ways. Some reduce values to an economic proposition: how much are people willing to pay to save a species from extinction, promote the health of a population, or ensure territorial security? Although this approach may be useful for practical public policy decisions,[6] we adopt a more pluralistic approach. In addition to expressing their commitments through economic decisions, people also express them through symbolic gestures, artworks, words, companions, work, and—as we assert throughout this book—their designs for things they build.

Although the range of values is virtually boundless, here we are interested primarily in ethical and political values. Typical examples of ethical values include kindness, honesty, generosity, fidelity, integrity, respect, safety, autonomy, creativity, peace, pleasure, well-being, friendship, collaboration, health, responsibility, happiness, and contentment. All of these contribute to the moral dimension of our lives—how we treat others and how they treat us. Political values include those that define relationships within and between societies, such as justice, equality, security, stability, cooperation, tolerance, privacy, accountability, democracy, voice, property, liberty, liberation, autonomy, equal opportunity, and government transparency. As the scholar Langdon Winner notes, political values are "arrangements of power and authority."[7]

Narrowing our attention to ethically and politically significant values still leaves plenty of room for controversy over what values and whose values count. Noting differences in values between people and societies, some have asked, "My personal values may be different from yours, and our societal, religious, and cultural values may be different. How can you presume to select particular values and particular versions of those values?"

Such questions emerged in Western philosophical traditions as far back as the ancient Greeks, and to this day they continue to play important roles in debates over the existence of basic human values, moral and cultural relativism, the politics of recognition,[8] and critical theory. Plato considered goodness, justice, and beauty to be objective, universal human values. In contrast, the twentieth-century anthropologist Ruth Benedict argues, on the basis of her ethnographic research, that values in human societies are infinitely elastic and that none rises to the status of universal.[9] Benjamin Franklin's list of eleven values to guide his life include cleanliness, frugality, industry, moderation, silence, temperance, and sincerity. But why single out these, and should Franklin's values serve as a guide for others? Social psychologists have conducted research to try to discover which values might be universal across diverse nations and cultures. Milton Rokeach

suggests a core of common values, which he divides into two categories—terminal values (such as a comfortable life and freedom) and instrumental values (such as honesty and cooperation).[10] Although doubts persist about the list's comprehensiveness, there has been general scholarly agreement that the values "cover a broad spectrum."[11] Shalom Schwartz and Wolfgang Bilsky posit three classes of universal values that are based on three distinct needs—biological needs, interactional needs for interpersonal coordination, and societal needs serving group survival and welfare.[12]

Although these theories of universal human values drawn from biological, individual, and social needs are of compelling interest, a theory of Values at Play does not depend on them. Our approach does not require universal values, but it does presume the existence of socially recognized moral and political values—that is, the positive ends that a society strives to enshrine in its institutional, political, and social structures and that it encourages individuals to adopt as a guide. Political philosophers, ethicists, religious and secular leaders, teachers, parents, and peers all engage in the study, deliberation, definition, propagation, and communication of these values, sometimes explicitly in words and decrees and other times through actions and reactions. Although deploying the theory presumes a stance on values, it does not presume any particular stance, instead allowing for divergence of worldviews. One system of values might emphasize freedom, and another might favor responsibility, but both provide a sound platform for the Values at Play model.

Here is the stance that we have adopted throughout the book: as citizens of a liberal, egalitarian democracy, we hold a bias in favor of values such as respect for human rights, the rule of law, individual freedom, justice, and the basic equality of all human beings. We are inspired by foundational political documents, including the U.S. Constitution, the Charter of the United Nations, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We also depend on literatures in ethics and political philosophy as well as ideals embodied in religious documents. From the high-minded to the vernacular, these sources reveal a resilient core. Values that we encounter in these explorations include justice, equality, freedom, autonomy, security, happiness, privacy, tolerance, cooperation, creativity, generosity, trust, equity, diversity, fidelity, integrity, environmentalism, liberation, self-determination, democracy, and tradition. These commonly encountered, socially recognized values are points of departure for Values at Play.

We are aware that there are differences in values across societies and individuals. Gender equity, for example, is explicitly recognized in the United States but not in Saudi Arabia. With even the most commonly encountered

values, differences emerge in the ways that they are interpreted and applied. Plato, for example, favors equality in general but not for slaves or women. A theory of Values at Play is not going to resolve issues that have united and divided people and societies for centuries. There is little choice but to take a stand where a stand is needed. Those who build social institutions and who institute social practices make these determinations all the time: we pass laws, strike treaties, and develop educational systems. We return to our thinkers and writers, and we turn to the people who are served by—or must suffer under—these systems and institutions. These people, in turn, express their values in the ways that they vote, respond to surveys, and make financial and commercial choices.

Values in Technology

Values at Play adds one further dimension to the values landscape. It asserts that digital games—like other technologies and like social practices, systems, and institutions—have values embedded in them. In so saying, we place ourselves within the larger discussion about values in technology. As Langdon Winner argues in his landmark article "Do Artifacts Have Politics?," the creators of technical systems and devices should consider functional and material properties and also recognize the ethical and political properties of these technologies. The crucial insight of Winner's article, which has been refined and elaborated many different ways by the author and others,[13] is that the values expressed in technical systems are a function of their uses as well as their features and design.[14] Privacy is one such value. For example, early versions of the Unix operating system that include the "finger" command to ascertain if a colleague was online might be judged hostile to privacy, and a discussion board that allows anonymous posts might be deemed privacy friendly (more such examples are woven throughout this book). In such ways, we might consider privacy or other values to be embedded in the design of the technology. But reading values into and out of technical systems is not simple as even our two quick examples reveal. "Finger" may seem intrusive to present day users of the Internet but in the early days of Unix, the users of a given system would more than likely be colleagues, even friends or members of a common community and the "finger" command more likely the inquiry of colleague to colleague rather than a problematic intrusion. The expansion to a global environment that many digital systems have attained—both large-scale systems (such as the Internet) and relatively modest sized ones (such as games themselves)—this embedding of values further complicates pressing issues worthy of our attention.

The notion that values are embedded in technology motivates a practical turn in the work on values in design. We can do more than simply demonstrate systematic relationships between technology and values; we can do something about it. If we accept that technology can embody values, the practical turn allows designers and producers to consider ethical and political concerns alongside more typical engineering ideals. System design is typically guided by goals such as reliability, efficiency, resilience, modularity, performance, safety, and cost. We suggest adding items like fairness, equality, and sustainability to the list. Because conscientious designers have the opportunity to integrate values into their everyday practice, they can have a hand in determining which values are expressed.

The idea that values should be considered in the design of technical systems has spurred initiatives such as values-conscious design and values-sensitive design.[15] Values at Play offers an alternative approach for guiding technical design for digital games, which are challenging because of their hybridity: they are games, expressive art forms, and technological engines. The first two aspects—game and art form—are generally visible to users as well as critics and theorists. They include storylines, plots, settings, narratives, characters, colors, shapes, landscapes, sound, music, and interface as well as game goals, rules, challenges, representational systems, competitive constructs, and reward systems. These elements have garnered most of the attention in discussions of the social significance of digital games. This is partly because such elements are immediately experienced and therefore obvious but also because highly developed, time-honored theoretical frameworks—borrowed from media, art, sound, cinema, and literary criticism—are able to address them. In other words, there is a rich vocabulary for exploring the plot, character, and rules of digital games.

The same cannot be said for the technological architecture of games. Scholars of values in technology still push against the received view of technology as neutral, and even though this area of study remains active, controversial, and unsettled, it provokes questions and generates approaches that are explored in this book.[16] Yet just as narrative and game rules carry values, so do lines of code, game engines, mechanics, and hardware. The Values at Play approach is interested in all three of the hybrid layers—expressive, ludic, and technological. Our aim is to contribute to a critical language for technology that is as rich as those that exist for expressive art.[17]

Values at and in Play

It is impossible to do justice to the range and depth of inquiry into values in technology, design, and games in the few paragraphs that we have devoted

to these topics in this chapter. We aim primarily to give a sense of the rich heritage that inspires our decidedly pragmatic focus. With concrete cases throughout the book, the text illustrates systematic relationships between values and particular design elements. (Readers interested in plumbing greater depths may find further direction in our bibliographic references.) For example, the bestselling PC game of all time, *The Sims* (Maxis 2000), has been said to inculcate materialist values that define the home as a space that primarily is devoted to consumption. Players are encouraged to earn money and spend it on acquiring goods, especially household goods (such as furniture and televisions) and eventually larger homes.[18] *Saints Row* (Volition, Inc. 2006) is a game series in which crime pays. It portrays the world as a violent place that rewards criminal behavior (such as insurance fraud) and reinforces racial and gender stereotypes. The "Whored" mode in *Saints Row: The Third* (Volition, Inc. 2011) features waves of attacking prostitutes, and "The Penetrator" weapon (a deadly purple dildo baseball bat) is used against them.[19] In a gentler vein, the player in *Okami* (Clover Studio 2006) takes on the role of the animal/goddess Amaterasu, whose job is to make plants and animals happy in the environment. We may say that this game fosters empathy, nurturing, sharing, and care-giving.

Claims such as these, however, deserve close scrutiny if we wish to avoid a similar, simplistic determinism that would have bound the "finger" command to a violation of privacy. The tongue-in-cheek tone of *The Sims*, for example, and its presentation of consumerism as monotonous resist facile interpretations and evoke more complicated responses from players. Although our perspective supports the need for this more nuanced interpretation of values in games, we recognize that there are no simple lines that connect characteristics of a game's elements (such as content, architecture, and actions) with the attainment (or suppression) of certain values and valued states. Just as the connection between "finger" and privacy required an understanding of subtle dynamics introduced by shifting contexts of use, so the features of a game as bearers of values emerge in the act of play, dynamically, depending on the context of play and who is playing. Designers' intentions matter but are not fully determinative; unintended values may be served in spite of these intentions, and intended values may fall flat.[20]

Inspired by games, we chose the phrase *Values at Play* as the label for our framework to acknowledge the multidimensional flux of these complexities in the design domain. The term *play* has many meanings, including "perform a role"; "occupy oneself in amusement, sport, or fantasy"; "play along with and accept the rules in a given situation"; and "allow a space

for movement, as in the free play of gears." Values at Play shares roots with recent important work in ethics in games, focusing on ethical choices and the ways that ethical and unethical actions are structured within games. Values at Play incorporates a perspective on ethical actions, valued ends, and direct and indirect ways that game elements involve values.[21] Recognizing these important shared roots, we have included a short contribution by Karen Schrier, one of the leading contributors to the study of ethics in games.

Yet complexity does not mean anarchy. Admitting that the interdependencies along the pathway from design to values (and back again) are complex and diverse does not warrant nihilism and resignation any more here than in the myriad other circumstances in which thoughtful action is required despite uncertainties. Questioning one's own worldview is a good start. A conscientious designer might proceed by holding fixed certain variables while manipulating others, learning about who is likely to play (and their worldviews), and exploring the likely context of play. These considerations are all part of the toolkit of a designer who is aiming for a holistic approach to making design choices with values in mind. Although the philosophical rubrics associated with values in technology and values in design are the context for this book, the concrete and the nitty-gritty are our dominant vernacular. We examine the ways that values have been and may be enacted, denied, confronted, and manipulated—the ways that values are "at play" in games and design.

Introducing the Conscientious Designer

These are our core premises: (1) there are common (not necessarily universal) values; (2) artifacts may embody ethical and political values; and (3) steps taken in design and development have the power to affect the nature of these values.

Professionals may discover core values while they are working in their respective fields. Donald Schön has related this type of discovery to notions of reflective practice. His work helped us forge thinking about design professions and brought to light ways that design practitioners might be more reflective or, in our terms, conscientious.[22] His foundational work takes on the challenges of problem setting (asking the right question) over problem solving, noting that many professionals learn about these challenges the hard way by asking the wrong question and trying to solve for the wrong goal. If problems are not well defined initially, then poor results

emerge. This thinking is relevant to game design processes, especially when designers think that they are instilling one set of values but actually may be embedding another.

Our goal is to help designers seek an active role in shaping the social, ethical, and political values that may be embedded in games. When those values inevitably veer off course during the process of iteration, designers need to be confident enough to bring them back on track even when it is difficult to do so.

Conscientious designers consider values when they design and build systems. They often have a passion for learning, a deep curiosity about the world, and a fascination with human behavior. This passion is expressed in well-thought-through design. Our book does not try to persuade skeptics in the design community to accept these premises but instead invites conscientious designers to try the Values at Play heuristic. If you are interested in taking values seriously in design, you are a conscientious designer. To you, we offer Values at Play.

This book is intended as a resource that is grounded in theory but essentially practical. Values at Play is a theory insofar as it constitutes a structured way to understand values in games. As a theoretical framework, it provides a lens through which designers can appreciate values in a game, just as other theoretical approaches guide people to appreciate other dimensions, such as aesthetics, technological efficacy, or narrative. But the purpose of Values at Play is primarily pragmatic. It is a companion for designers who seek to make new and better games by considering values, who accept relationships between design and values, and who ask how we might convert these insights into practices in the world.

Innumerable decisions fall within the scope of our project, because values may be at play at all levels of a design initiative. From overarching architectural principles to decisions at the finest grain, designers and software engineers can influence the shape of an initiative through choices and problem-solving strategies. Although our book reveals philosophical implications of human values that are at play in digital games, its central claims are asserted in terms of concrete examples—many of them—demonstrating connections between abstract ideas about values and games to moment-by-moment decisions in the design process.

Drawing on theory-based principles and practical insights from scholarship and design practice, this book develops a method for integrating values in the conception and design of games that can serve as a guide for games designers and developers. Conscientious designers are ethical (they are truthful, factual, and alert and have the player's best interests at heart)

and also strive to make a difference through their work. The number of conscientious designers is steadily increasing, and as they work, they will find that values appear in a range of games and their constitutive elements. It is essential to identify the issues and address those moment-to-moment decisions about values in game development. The conscientious designer needs backup—prior evidence, support materials, and methods—and we provide such backup in this book.

In the relatively short history of information technologies, stories of its moral and political significance abound in the informal lore and in carefully researched cases. They discuss the Internet's democratizing potential, the Web's free and equitable access to knowledge, the diminishing privacy brought about by databases and cookies, and so on. Such stories raise questions about whether these social and political outcomes are accidental or whether they can be integrated into the day-to-day goals and practices of technology design, thereby giving rise to better technologies. Can conscientious designers change society for the better with their work? Our commitment to positive answers to these questions motivates the Values at Play project. Although our ideals are tempered with a good dose of realism, we continue to work toward change by putting social and political values on the design agenda so that it can lead to better games and better technology.

2 Uncovering Values at Play

The twentieth-century media scholar Marshall McLuhan—who coined the expression "the medium is the message"—once argued that "all media exist to invest our lives with artificial perceptions and arbitrary values."[1] The goal of Values at Play is to make the values in one medium—digital games—slightly less arbitrary. Before designers can take control of the values in their games, however, they must analyze and discover exactly where values crop up in the first place. In this chapter, we analyze existing games from a values perspective.

Every game expresses a set of values, but it's often difficult to understand the many ways in which those values come to be embodied in the game. To untangle these many factors, it's useful to group them into two broad categories—designer understandings and player perceptions. Designer understandings encompass the broad range of values that emerge in the creation of a game. The company or organization that is building the game faces economic and commercial constraints, creates business and marketing plans, and makes educated guesses about consumers' preferences, and each of these actions brings values into play. Public policy, industry regulations that govern games, and the general cultures in which the games are created also play roles. Values emerge in the definition of a project and in the specifications of instrumental design features. Designers bring preexisting value commitments to their work and make assumptions about the values of their target audiences. Finally, the expectations of various stakeholders (investors, executives, and more) also shape a game's values.

And the story is far from over when the game is created and released because player perceptions also contribute to a game's values. People playing the same game may not have identical values experiences because personal, cultural, and situational factors all influence players' experience of values in a game each time they play the same game.

Uncovering Values in Nondigital Games

For some people, American football promotes values of violence, antagonism, and territoriality. Others, however, see cooperation and teamwork at the game's core. Both interpretations can be rooted in people's real experiences of the game, and these views should not necessarily be understood as conflicting with each other. A person might view football in both ways at once—that is, she could experience "the values of football" as a complex interrelationship of violence, antagonism, territoriality, cooperation, and teamwork.[2] All of these values emerge from the rules of the game, and any combination of them might contribute to a player's experience of the game's values. Precisely how players or spectators experience the values of football depends on the unique combination of personal, cultural, and situational factors that they bring to the game.

Player perceptions, of course, do not operate in a vacuum. Game mechanics and narrative elements create constraints that preclude some interpretations and steer players toward others. It would be difficult, for example, to interpret football as an affirmation of nonviolence. Since violence is clearly sanctioned by the rules (that is, it's OK to tackle other players), such an interpretation would be implausible. Likewise, it would be difficult for players to experience football as an affirmation or a violation of the value of privacy because privacy is simply not a focus of the game. The point is, we can rule out or minimize some interpretations while also describing a range of plausible and relevant interpretations.

The goal of Values at Play is to draw attention to that range of plausible interpretations and to ensure that the values embedded in games are not "arbitrary" (to use McLuhan's term) but rather a matter for careful consideration. For conscientious designers, a game's values are a core focus of the design of the game, because they understand that each of the myriad decisions that go into the design of a game create constraints that define the range of plausible interpretations within a game.

A good way to shed light on these issues is to take an already existing game, add or subtract a mechanic or key game feature, and investigate how such modifications change the range of plausible interpretations. Consider an alteration to the rules of American football in which players begin the game with their jersey numbers obscured by a patch, and any player whose number is still obscured cannot be called for penalties. In addition to running, passing, and tackling, players on both sides also would attempt to tear away the patches on their opponents' jerseys. Players with concealed numbers might resort to underhanded or even dangerous plays because the rule would allow them to do so.

This one rule change has a ripple effect, altering the experience of playing the game; it also changes the range of possible value interpretations. Under the new rules, the values of privacy and secrecy are "activated" and brought to the forefront. These values are minor features of football under its standard rules, where huddles remain private, and communication between players and coaches is often conducted in a secret language of hand signals and coded play calls. Under the new rules, however, privacy and secrecy become key elements of the game and govern how players interact. In the game as normally played, we wouldn't expect every player to experience privacy, but under the new rules, privacy is a value that is very much at play.

Now consider another non-digital game: an ancient game called mancala that can be traced back to some of the world's earliest civilizations. A group of games known as the mancala family of games emerged in northern Africa as early as 6900 BC;[3] ancient mancala boards made with cupping marks (depressions in the earth or a stone) have been discovered at both ordinary and grand archeological sites. The game involves distributing, capturing, and redistributing tokens (beads, stones, or seeds) on a game board with two to four rows of indentions. A player removes all the stones from a cup and distributes them one by one into the other cups across the board, with the goal of capturing the stones from the board (figure 2.1). The rules

Figure 2.1
Children playing mancala.

vary considerably across various versions, but in all of them, the process of playing is much like sowing seeds in a field. In some societies today, the game remains a popular pastime that also happens to be relevant to a dominant economic activity, farming.

What values are at play in such an ancient, seemingly simple game? Game play in mancala is usually symmetric, meaning that players use the same strategy, identical resources, and the same rules. Also apparent is the quality of perfect information. All information is available to all players: all the pieces are available to players at the start of the game, and there are no hidden elements or rules. No player holds any particular advantage, and therefore anyone can possibly win the game. We could therefore say that the game embodies the values of fairness and equality. As in nearly all games, a player needs to trust that the opposing player will play by the rules and not, for example, slip a stone into the wrong bin in violation of the rules. Because mancala focuses on the act of distributing and gathering, it engages, by way of a harvesting metaphor, the notions of nature and sustenance. For many groups, the game represents a cultural tradition that can be shared with another player of similar background or taught to an outsider. When it is played in public, a game may also foster community. So playing a casual game of mancala might engage the values of fairness, equality, trust, nature, sustenance, tradition, and community. It is worth noting that values such as tradition and community are not enshrined in the game's rules. Instead, they are embedded in the materials used in the boards, the presentation of the game, and the context created by the community where it is played.

Now, consider how mancala could be modified to introduce new values. Certain stones, for example, could take on special powers that allow a player to clear an entire spot on the opponent's side of the board, which would play on the tension between competition and cooperation. Or if the stones in a cup appeared in a particular color combination (such as all blue), that collection could be removed from the board and distributed between the players, introducing the value of sharing.

Through these examples, we've seen that values crop up across game formats and types, regardless of technology. Although digital games may afford certain values over others, physical games, such as football and mancala, demonstrate that digital media are not unique in allowing values to be manipulated through design choices. When game designers recognize how a small rule change or representation can affect values, they can weave particular values into the fabric of a game.

Uncovering Values in Digital Games

Any game can be unpacked for its values. Using the same critical tools that we used with football and mancala, we can discover values in digital games and examine how these values are revealed and enacted through play.

Ico

Ico (Sony Computer Entertainment 2001) is an award-winning game from the first years of the release of Sony's PlayStation 2 video game console. In *Ico*, the player takes on the role of the title character in a dark, fictionalized world. Ico is an ostracized boy who is abandoned in an isolated castle as a village sacrifice. In the castle, he encounters a girl named Yorda, a bright, shimmering teenager who also finds herself locked in the castle (figure 2.2). The player's goal in controlling Ico is to keep Yorda safe from the demons that pursue her and to help her escape the treacherous location, which is surrounded by dangerous cliffs and crevasses. The black spirits attempt to drag Yorda down into their portals, and battles ensue. Although Yorda is less agile than Ico, she can perform certain tasks in the castle (such as open idol doors) that Ico cannot. Yorda seldom speaks, but when she does, the player cannot understand her language. Fumito Ueda, a game designer for Sony, reveals himself to be a conscientious designer when he posed this question in his keynote address at the 2002 Game Developers Conference: "What kind of 'reality' can generate emotional involvement, or 'empathy'"?[4] Ueda takes up this challenge, creating a reality in which empathy lies front and center.

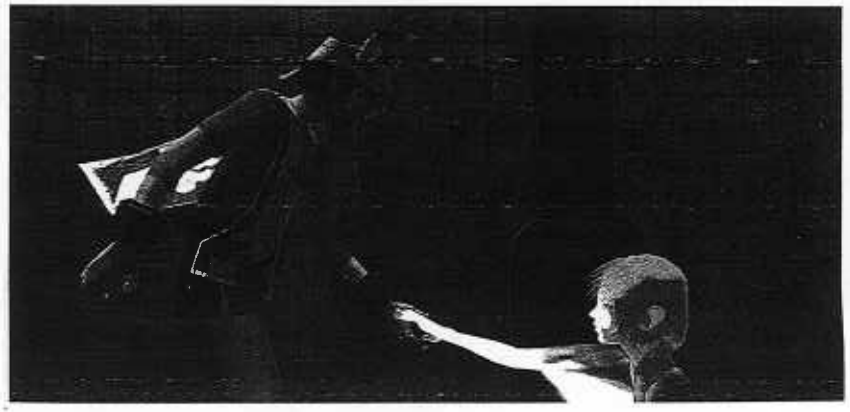

Figure 2.2
Yorda and Ico, from *Ico* (Sony Computer Entertainment 2001).

Ueda's vision for the game was fulfilled. On blogs, game reviews, and game-play walkthroughs, many players have described their experiences with *Ico* as deeply moving. The game's narrative fosters strong empathy for Yorda, and the same value is built into the game's mechanics, so that the game player's actions foster empathy.[5] The environment of the castle heightens the emotion. The haunting environmental audio design features the crash of waves on the cliffs below, footsteps that echo cavernously in the castle, gulls that cry, and gears that groan as doors move. This sonic environment evokes loneliness and fear.[6] Because Yorda is not as mobile as Ico, players must create safe passage by lowering bridges, climbing ropes, and the like. Often Yorda can do more than she seems to think she can: she can climb ladders and run quickly if Ico encourages her. Ico catches Yorda's hand to help her cross wide gaps, often lifting her to safety. The relationship between the two struggling young people is captured in romantic and touching ways, such as showing them at game-save points holding hands and falling asleep on couches throughout the castle. These in-play depictions, the game's expressive environments, and game mechanics generate a protective, empathetic relationship between the player and Yorda.

Flower

Flower (thatgamecompany 2009) allows players to invade the dreams of urban houseplants, opening up in imaginative space as the flower dream moves into the open plains outside the city (figure 2.3). Players begin the game by playing as the wind, with a single flower petal used to mark the breeze. The petal lets players know which way they are traveling, and it also allows a minimalist approach to the game controls: the player merely tips the game controller one way or the other to guide the petal (and its subsequent chain) through the sky. The player finds that breezing over flowers in the landscape causes them to burst into bloom with a beautiful sound, and each flower that opens also offers one petal to what can become a long kite-tail of flower petals. Players work to help the flowers bloom, gathering petals while moving across the landscape. The action in this level of the game is simple, hypnotic, and beautiful.

Later, however, the game world turns dark. As the player advances through levels, the landscape shifts from vast, healthy fields to postapocalyptic ruins. As the game progresses, a dichotomy emerges between natural elements and human-made objects. Midway through the game, technological objects created by humans begin to appear to be menacing and dangerous. Players who move through these dangerous levels come to understand that antiquated technologies can threaten the flowers that they are helping

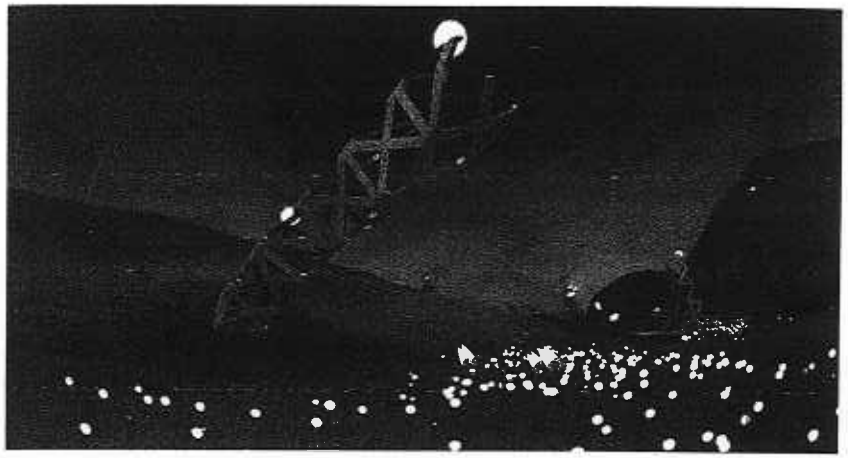

Figure 2.3
The beautiful world of *Flower* (thatgamecompany 2009).

to bring to life. The player begins to heal this rift through play, weaving a relationship of balance between vegetation and sustainable technologies, nature and culture. The game retains its state between play times, so players can reenter its realm by simply choosing to begin.

In his 1955 book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, the historian Johan Huizinga explains that any type of space that is used for play—whether an arena, a card table, or a screen—creates a "temporary world within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."[7] Through its load screens, fantasy landscape, music, responsive feedback, and mechanics, *Flower*, like so many other great games, frames a cohesive world apart. *Flower* is an interesting hybrid of an easy-to-play casual game and a console game that requires many hours of dedicated play.

The intuitive, gradually revealed rules of the game (what to collect, what to avoid) reinforce the power of the magic circle. In such exploratory play, players simultaneously submit to and discover the rules that govern the game. As they advance through the levels, they begin to understand that natural elements can be nurtured (producing positive outcomes) or mistreated (leading to destruction). By navigating, players pass repeatedly over land, aim up to the sky to see the length of the "tail" of petals gathered like a kite, and sometimes rush through the grasses to hear and "feel" the grass. There is a nuanced kind of pleasure in exploring the landscape in and of itself, and in experiencing the game's responsive aesthetics. *Flower* favors a contemplative type of play.

The game designer intended this effect. "If you want to touch the player through your game, you have to be successful at letting them *get* some portion of what you are trying to say in the game," Jenova Chen, lead designer for thatgamecompany, has explained. "And if you want the player to really appreciate what you are saying, the message has to be relevant to them. I think it is quite hard today to make a relevant message in video games because the majority of the games happen in a very fake world. It's not just the graphics I'm talking about. I think *feeling* real is very different from *looking* real."[8] If there is realism in *Flower*, it is made manifest partly through the technology of the physics engine and, more importantly, through the path of the wind, which mirrors a kind of thoughtfulness in that the controls create a wide berth for navigation.

How are the values in *Flower* put into play? The interaction of player and game is one of minimal intrusion. Players tilt their game controllers and press only one button to increase the wind velocity. Thus, players have imprecise control in the world. They cannot plant flowers, dig them up, or otherwise manipulate the world in direct ways. Rather, they gently guide or influence the game world. This interaction is a consistent translation of the game's values, which focus on encouraging players to work in partnership with the environment. The meaning in *Flower* is not that wind will fix the world but that working with the whole system is the path to success. "In general, at thatgamecompany, we tend to pick universal themes from everyday life and from the world around us," Chen has noted. "I was lucky to have experienced quite a diversified culture between the West and the East. When I think, I tend to avoid thoughts that are too American or Chinese. I like to feel it from a more open perspective as a genuine human being."[9] Chen's goal—to ground the core ideas and actions of the game in genuine human concerns—reveals the advantages of conscientious design. In this game, the values of balance, sustainability, cooperation, and influence are infused into gameplay.

Beyond Good & Evil

Unlike *Flower*, most video games depict a clear enemy. As its name suggests, the action-adventure game *Beyond Good & Evil* (Ubisoft 2003) brings to the forefront questions of friends and enemies, self and other. Friedrich Nietzsche begins his famous philosophical work *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) with the question, "SUPPOSING that Truth is a woman—what then?"[10] Nietzsche's statement playfully implies that his fellow philosophers might be vexed by searching for truth in the elusive, mysterious package that a nineteenth-century woman was assumed to be. Readers today might find

this suggestion mildly offensive or merely quaint, but game designers at Ubisoft took up the question in their futuristic game. In this game, players act as the character Jade, a female hero who is a martial arts expert. She also is the caretaker of orphans who are animal and human hybrids whose parents were attacked by aliens known as DomZ (figure 2.4). But if truth is a woman (that is, the character Jade), what sort of truth is she?

The game experience is an attractive mix of adventure, action, and puzzle. Living comfortably in a lighthouse on a pretty island on the planet Hillys, the hybrid children and their benefactor come under attack by the DomZ aliens. Unable to pay her electric bill and thus unable to use her home-shield defense, Jade takes a job as a photographer to document the species that have thus far survived the war with the DomZ. Players help Jade document the animals, earn funds, and investigate hidden conspiracies in the war. Unlike most action games, *Beyond Good & Evil* rewards players for evidence that is gathered through photography and not for the number of bodies killed or weapons gathered. The task of documenting species might suggest that the game is supporting the value of biodiversity and warning against mass extinction. This may be true, but it soon becomes clear that something more complicated is at work as well.

As the central role played by the hybrid orphans suggests, the question of natural categories—including racial categories—is central to the game. But are these natural categories posited as good, evil, or somehow beyond? The

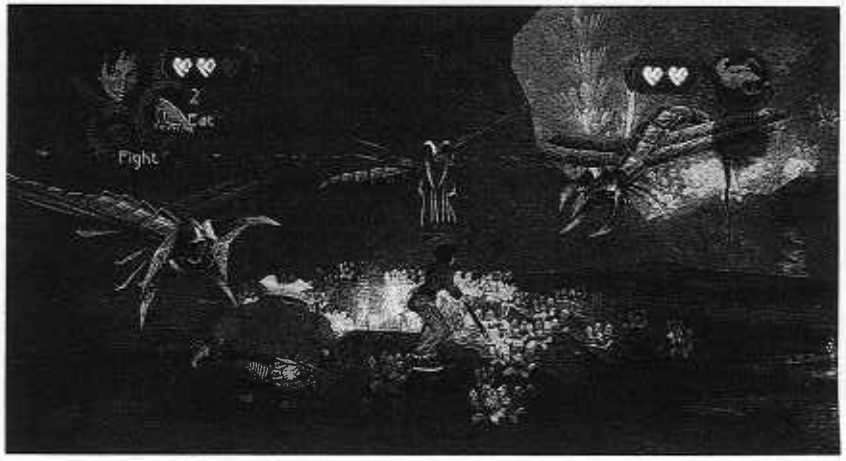

Figure 2.4
Jade, from *Beyond Good & Evil* (Ubisoft 2003).

title suggests that the game design transcends this dichotomy, but the game play does not necessarily enable the player to do so. The strange relationship of alien species to Hillys species often leaves the player feeling uneasy about the possibility of transcending a good and evil dichotomy. Jade's job, taking pictures of animals in exchange for credit, exposes the uncertainty of natural categories. Her networked camera lens is linked to a database and can identify creatures in its viewfinder. Although the animal/human orphans at the beginning of the game appear to be identified as *Homo sapiens*, the rhinoceros/human mechanics who run the Mammago garage shop appear in the photographic database as "rhino-sapiens," and they have Jamaican accents and dreadlocks and listen to reggae music. By contrast, the planetary authority called the Alpha Section is depicted, *Terminator*-style, as cyborg humanoids modeled after highly muscled white men. A subtle but pervasive cultural system that is based on race and species emerges in the game, and the animal/human hybrid minority characters are clearly oppressed. *Wired* magazine editor Chris Kohler, who examines a trend toward racial ambiguity in recent games, notes such ambiguity among the "good guys" in *Beyond Good & Evil*. Kohler describes Jade as racially ambiguous but most likely African American. Noting that Ubisoft intended Jade to reflect a diverse range of possible players, Kohler argues that the game's racial ambiguity could allow for better player identification.[11]

What is at stake in the game involves more than player identification. The diverse characters engage in activities at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, such as selling on the black-market, fixing vehicles, bartending, selling newspapers, or, at Jade's house, simply "being orphaned." Another "raced" example is Ming Tzu, a Chinese walrus who sells upgrades. In his scenes, game music shifts to Chinese stringed instruments, gongs, and Australian didgeridoos. These characters function outside the power structure of Alpha Section society and, in the case of Ming Tzu, are overtly stereotyped and depicted as human and animal hybrids. The Mammago brothers are Rhino humanoid (that is, less than human), and the muscled white "bad guys" remain *Homo sapiens*, separated through a legacy of racial and species discrimination dating back to the enlightenment. Thus, minority characters (like animals and hybrids) are identified with the natural world and with oppression (colonized by the DomZ).

Ubisoft's Michel Ancel has said that he intended the game to give the player "a promise of discovery" while playing.[12] The depictions of the characters, narrative, game interactions, and game spaces compel players to consider the values of equality, autonomy, and fairness. To Ancel, the design decisions that were made in the creation of *Beyond Good & Evil* "had

kind of a political dimension. So for me, it has this serious aspect, it has this kind of depth, and it's very cool to see that people are sensitive to the fact that there could be a game with a message."[13]

Angry Birds

The bird soars through the air toward the structure. Will it hit and topple all of it (or most of it), or will it miss the mark? The smash casual game *Angry Birds* (Rovio 2009) posits a tropical island in which cartoon bird characters are angry at pigs for taking the birds' eggs. The pigs, presumably full, have taken refuge on unstable, collapsible structures, looking like pigeons sitting blissfully on structural framing. Players aim and fling the bird characters at the pigs using a slingshot styled catapult. The goal is to destroy the structures to gain points, wreak revenge, and advance to higher levels (figure 2.5). *Angry Birds* has gained international attention for its simplicity and popularity. The game and its expansions have been downloaded millions of times, and the game rapidly became a popular app for the iPad and other mobile devices. According to *Wired*, "Every day, users spend 200 million minutes—16 years every hour—playing the mobile game."[14]

Like all games, *Angry Birds* has values at play. Values that might be expressed by the game in its current state are interspecies differences, action, vengeance, destruction, humor, and violence. What if the game were modified to support the value of creativity instead of destruction?

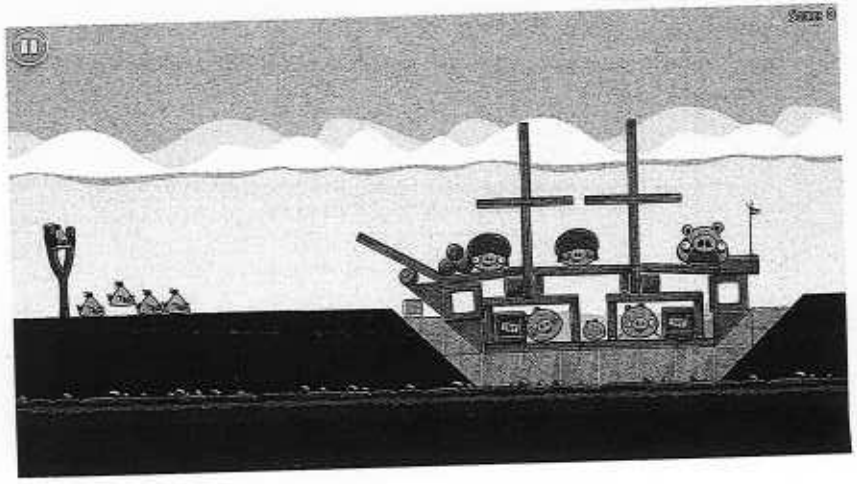

Figure 2.5
Birds against pigs, from *Angry Birds* (Rovio 2009).

Perhaps after destroying the structure, the player would instead use the pieces to rebuild a new structure or build something that is higher or more decorative than other players. Even simple games like *Angry Birds* can be modified to include elements that promote the values to which designers, and their surrounding societies and cultures subscribe.

FarmVille

Now let's take a look at the popular social game, *FarmVille* (Zynga 2009a), a farming simulation game tied to existing social networks. Released in 2009 for Facebook and smartphones, *FarmVille* players manage their own virtual farm by planting, growing, and harvesting foods and trees (figure 2.6). In 2009, during *FarmVille*'s peak, over 80 million active users played the game every month.[15] *FarmVille* became so popular that many fan groups formed, including, for example, http://farmvilleart.com, started by one enthusiastic player, to gather player artworks created from the pixel-art-like layout of crops in fields (FarmVille Art 2009).

Players of *FarmVille* start off as a "field hand," receive a small plot of land, and build a farm on the plot. They are allowed to choose, plant, and harvest some simple crops, and eventually they may raise pigs and cows. Competitive players calculate comparative profits from the lists of available crops for purchase and determine which seeds create the highest earnings. Players who are not interested in winning might choose plants and flowers

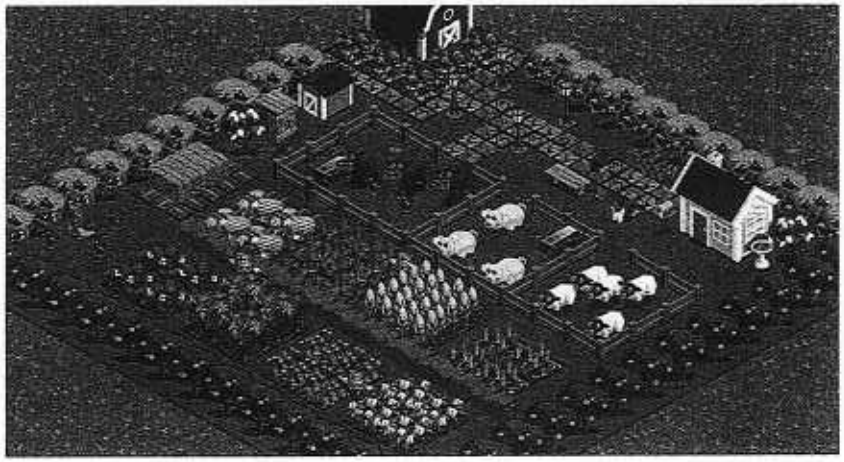

Figure 2.6
A farm with a tidy arrangement of animals and crops, from *FarmVille* (Zynga 2009).

that they like. Players are permitted to purchase crops, trees, and farm animals and eventually to build structures on their expanding property. Harvesting crops or milking cows earns points, which are convertible to one of the game's currencies. As players advance, they are able to access more and more items with which to build or grow. As they gain experience, they may aspire to become Professors of Agriculture (level 15), Cream of the Crop (24), Sultan of Soil (26), Lord of the Plow (30), and so on, up to the original maximum level of 70. A year later, levels up to 120 were created, and some players hacked their way to levels in the tens of thousands.[16]

FarmVille includes two currencies: one is earned through completing tasks, and another augmented with real-world currencies. The game relies on repeat (perhaps obsessive) visits, and it rewards time-management skills. In one of the rare links to real-world behavior, certain digital crops ripen at different rates, and they must be harvested before they rot on the vine. Time is of the essence, and the game clock is ticking even when a player is offline. *FarmVille* champions the value of efficiency and time management. It does so by connecting to and amplifying habits such as the repetitive checking of Facebook. By encouraging repeated access to social networks, *FarmVille* promotes information sharing that allows companies to conduct data mining and click-tracking, and it increases their revenue from advertisements. Corporate values, in other words, lurk behind the other, more positive values the game depicts.[17]

FarmVille's game goals and reward structures are telling sources of its values. To begin with, nature must be commoditized: it has to have exchange value to matter in the game. Moreover, the values of community and friendship are highlighted by the way in which players are asked to gift items to other players. Negative values have a role as well. For example, the game constantly suggests that players get involved with their communities, constituting a sort of peer pressure. This pressure exacerbates the tensions that lie at the heart of the game—tensions that surround inclusivity and exclusivity. Gifts, notices, and the bonuses given to players who help each other both affirm friendship and commodify that friendship in the currency of the game. These values are not there by accident. "It's only about exploiting the players, and, yes, people report having fun with that kind of game," game designer Jonathan Blow has explained, criticizing the game. "Certain kinds of hardcore game players don't find much interest in *FarmVille*, but a certain large segment of the population does. But then when you look at the design process in that game, it's not about designing a fun game. It's not about designing something that's going to be interesting or a positive experience in any way—it's actually about designing something that's a negative experience."[18]

FarmVille is related to several other casual game phenomena in which user-created content and social interactions are the underlying focus of play. At least on the surface, its values appear to involve community, generosity, responsibility, good will, trust, friendship, and gender equity. Under the surface, however, two quandaries emerge. First, *FarmVille* relies on community, trust, and friendship, but the game also involves the exploitation of these values, and this exploitation often negates the positive values. Second, the values in *FarmVille* have little to do with the theme and graphics that are portrayed in the game. The game, in other words, does not reflect the values that players might expect to encounter in actual farming, such as sustainability, biological knowledge, land stewardship, tradition, and empathy. Indeed, the game actively undermines some of these values.

How can players balance or at least navigate values that conflict with each other? The designers of *FarmVille* have posited such conflicts to keep players engaged, and social interaction is fostered through direct encouragement of helping, assisting, gifting, and sharing. The game contains a tension between supporting these values and enforcing them. There is a difference. The legal scholar Ian Kerr has described "digital locks" that guard content (offering copyright protection, for instance) and extends this idea into digital content, where limits are put on the player or participant's actions.[19] Kerr might see places in digital games (like *FarmVille*) where players are deprived of personal growth as a real problem, because they do not permit players to act immorally. Kerr refers to this as "the automation of virtue": if we are forced to be moral, we might miss an opportunity to develop our own morality and make ethically meaningful choices. A contrary argument is offered by economists Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, authors of the 2008 book *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. They suggest that designers need to create a "choice architecture" to "nudge" players in beneficial directions without restricting freedom of choice.

Players in *FarmVille* are given frequent prompts to share data with friends or give a gift (say, free fuel) to a friend in need. Players also might be asked to help a friend who is not online to scare off foxes from their land to protect the harvest. Sharing or generosity is not enforced; players may decide not to share or gift. Yet the game also functions in a way that allows players to feel good about such acts of generosity. In *FarmVille*, players might experience less of a sense of empathy toward nature and more of a sense of empathy for their linked friends than they experience in *Flower*.

A player's reading of a text often departs from the game (its actions, narrative, representation, premise, and goals) in surprising ways. A key

example of this in *FarmVille* is something fundamental: animals and crops are not nurtured in the way that they are in nondigital representation. In *FarmVille*, crops are planted and then harvested shortly thereafter, eradicating the need for good weather, sunshine, proper irrigation, weeding, and pest control. There are no daily care-giving tasks beyond the game level's requirements. There are no horrific farm accidents, no blights, and no cleaning of horse hooves. Players occasionally face crop ruin from neglect and understand that timing and attention affects both the farm and the context of play. These elements are more closely allied to the social ramifications of the game. What remains important is the player's virtual proximity to friends and the bonds that are woven through the game by that social interaction. The overhead perspective and grid-based design for the farm reflects a containable, controllable, and comprehensible space, an abstraction that lets players visualize where friends are cultivated as easily as the corn. The natural aspects of the game ultimately function as a mere skin, a geographical metaphor on a social network.

Call of Duty

Given that the *Call of Duty* (Activision 2003) games have sold more than 100 million copies, they can be considered a significant presence in the general media landscape. The first three *Call of Duty* games are played from the perspectives of Allied soldiers in World War II, and they convey a deep reverence for military heroism and sacrifice. Although all versions of the game are military shooters with similar core mechanics, the newer games typically tell warfare stories that are set in fictional near-future conflicts and occasionally portray the tactics of American and British military forces as self-defeating and morally questionable (figure 2.7).

It has been argued that the entertainment industry's reverential depictions of the Allied forces in World War II promote a pro-military consensus, especially at times when the moral authority of Western military actions is more ambiguous than it was in earlier times. For example, from the 1950s through the early 1970s, Americans were inundated with affirmations of the military's heroism through movies and television series about World War II. According to some media critics, this created a climate in which people were reluctant to criticize American involvement in the Vietnam War. The same critique can reasonably be applied to the first three *Call of Duty* games. They were released during the first three years of the second Iraq war, and they provided positive depictions of the American military at a time when many Americans viewed its deployment in the Middle East as both morally and strategically murky. Therefore, when we look at the

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Figure 2.7
U.S. forces involved in a street conflict, from *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Activision 2007), featuring conflicts in the Middle East and Russia in 2011.

values at play in these games, it is appropriate to focus on patriotic and militaristic values.

Analysis becomes more complicated, however, when the variability in players' interpretations of the games is considered. In interviews with *Call of Duty* players, one researcher found that American players who identified as politically conservative interpreted the games as an affirmation of "strong defense" values, which Joel Penney defines as "support of aggressive foreign policy as well a high regard for the military as an institution"(2010, 199).[20] On the other hand, players who were either politically liberal or not American ascribed different meanings to the games. For some, the reverential depiction of the Allied forces in the first three games suggests a contrast between good wars and bad wars: the moral clarity of the Allied mission in World War II made America's role in the Iraq war seem less noble by comparison. These players also suggested that the first three games affirm the value of multilateralism by immersing players in the roles of American, British, Soviet, Canadian, and Polish soldiers, thus carrying an implicit critique of America's relative unilateralism in the second Iraq war. This research on *Call of Duty* reveals that game design does not rigidly determine player experience. Rather, the game offers a range of plausible meanings. How a player is situated—personally, politically, and culturally—will influence the meanings (within the range of plausibility) that are absorbed.

Conclusion

The examples in this chapter provide a brief overview of the ways that values can be built into video games through their design features. The game *Ico* provides expressive environments and game mechanics and also promotes a sense of empathy and protection between players and Yorda by reinforcing the characters' dependence on and kindness toward each other at save states and in game scenarios. In *Angry Birds*, difference, action, vengeance, destruction, humor, and violence come into play. In *Flower*, players experience a nuanced kind of pleasure in exploring the landscape and the game's responsive aesthetics, and this generates contemplative play that highlights values of balance, sustainability, cooperation, and influence. *Beyond Good & Evil* offers rewards for nonviolence in the form of photographs, and the depictions of the characters, narrative, game interactions, and game spaces compel players to consider the values of equality, autonomy, and fairness. Economic imperatives can shape game values, as they do in *FarmVille*'s emphasis on sharing and commodifying one's experience, which fuel commercial social networking. *Call of Duty* seems to foster patriotic and militaristic values, but research reveals that conservative American players are likely to interpret the games differently from players with diverse political and social affiliations. Therefore, how a player is situated—personally, politically, and culturally—will influence which meanings (within the range of plausibility) are absorbed.

In this chapter, we show different ways values can emerge in games—sometimes evidently and obviously, at other times in ways subtly and less apparent. Players, too, introduce variations in their dissimilar ways of interpreting these values. Awareness that values—both positive and negative—are at play in games is an important first step for conscientious designers, but it's not enough. Our research suggests that those who wish to apply the principles of values-conscious design to their work have one critical need: a *systematic* way of approaching values in the design process. In this chapter, we swept through a range of examples to show the great variation in games where values manifest. Now, it is time to address the questions of where and how this happens with a deeper and more systematic approach. In the next chapter, we develop a framework of core game elements to serve as a scaffold for exploring these questions throughout the rest of the book.