

Ethics and Morality in Videogames

by

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Introduction

Videogames are one of the most, if not the most, effective mediums to immerse a player into a reality where our universal rules do not apply. In the freedom of a digital world, players can do whatever they desire without restriction or fear of real-life accountability and experience stories that reflect who we are as humans. Due to their limitless narrative potential, videogames act as moral laboratories. They create immersive environments where players experiment with ethical decision-making in a safe, controlled space. However, because of the great narrative power that such a laboratory contains, it is essential to consider the extent to which creators of videogames should design such ethical gameplay with due regard to its effects on a player and society. Games like *Red Dead Redemption 2* and *The Witcher 3* are intentionally designed to force the player into intense moral dilemmas, some of which reward the player for making an unethical or even outright pragmatic choice that one typically would not act upon in real life. When players make these choices, do these narratives affect the players' own morality, or does their morality affect the narratives? Should game designers carry the responsibility of incorporating moral dilemmas into their games in compliance with societal ethics, or is it the free choice of the players to decide if they choose to engage with such themes? This paper will cover how ethics and morals are portrayed in interactive gameplay and the ethical considerations in designing videogame stories and gameplay, analyzing examples from several popular video games.

Ethics and morality

The terms ethics and morality are often used interchangeably. However, it is important to understand the distinct differences between the two definitions. Ethics can be described as "the standards of 'good and bad' distinguished by a certain community or social setting" (Grannan,

2023). For instance, in a representative democratic society like the United States, the homicide of an innocent person is considered bad by both ethical and legal codes. On the contrary, an ancient civilization may consider sacrificial homicide for a religious ritual acceptable within their own established ethics. The discussion of ethics includes “fundamental issues of practical decision making … and the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong” (Singer, 2025). Despite practicality being the most pragmatic solution for most problems, ethics in a community serve as a constraint by determining if an act is allowed or disallowed, right or wrong, and good or bad. On the other hand, morality is less universal and cultural. It is more catered to one’s own personal beliefs, standards, and self-regulation. Because moralities vary significantly among all peoples and communities, it is highly debatable if moral values are “rooted in human nature and whether their commonality or naturalness renders them objectively valid in some sense” and if “the validity of a moral rule is relative to the society in which it is recognized” (“Morality,” 2025). The subjectiveness of morality and whether any one person’s moral values are appropriate to the ethics of the community the individual resides is an evolving discussion.

The origin of ethics and morality has evolved and branched out throughout history. They have suppressed the monsters that evolution turned us into. Many cultures have myths explaining morality’s origins, such as Hammurabi’s Code, Christianity’s biblical Ten Commandments, or Plato’s account of Zeus bestowing a moral sense on humans (Singer, 2025). Thus, ethics likely began when humans started critically reflecting on the best way to live, building on pre-developed customs of morality, leading to the creation of the first moral codes.

Pragmatism

In great contrast to ethics and morality, there also exists pragmatism, which is based on the principle that practicality are the criterion of their merit (Thayer, 2025). While those accustomed to modern ethics and self-developed morals will likely articulate pragmatism as acting selfishly while causing harm to others, they would indeed be correct, but not in the manner of comparing morality versus pragmatism against good versus evil. Objectively, pragmatism is an evolutionary instinct to endure survival of the fittest. The brain, as an organ made of neurons and cells, of all organisms, not just humans, was not designed by biology to exercise fairness or comply with ethics, but to act in the interest of survival. Since the Stone Age, when the concept of pragmatism did not exist yet, Homosapiens evolved and survived natural selection thanks to our Paleolithic ancestors rightfully committing violent acts – murder, cannibalism, warfare – because it was part of physiological survival. In harsh realities, such as the Paleolithic era and videogame worlds, one can only afford to care for oneself. Without the constraints of ethical code, our ancestors simply acted out of survival instincts, choosing the most pragmatic solution to every problem. Survival of the fittest rewarded those who prioritized pragmatism over ethics by preserving their pragmatic instincts for generations, hardwiring our animalistic instincts as human survivalists and kings of the food chain. These instincts still remain in our psychology to this day, shaping our behaviors toward each other and the choices we make, such as the questionable design choices in video games in terms of ethics.

A character surviving on pragmatism

The Last of Us is set in a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by a Cordyceps fungus that turns people into zombie-like creatures, causing a global pandemic. All societal structures have collapsed as people begin fending for themselves, abandoning legal and ethical codes. Ellie

Williams, a lone fourteen-year-old girl and the only known person immune to infection, is humanity's last hope to develop a cure. Joel Miller, the protagonist, is tasked with delivering Ellie to the Firefly hospital. The two develop a father-daughter bond during the deadly journey. Upon finally arriving at the hospital, Joel learns that the surgery required to reverse engineer a cure will cost Ellie's life. To protect the only family he has left, Joel massacres the Fireflies to prevent the surgery, dooming humanity to the Cordyceps. Due to the game's linear story progression, the players are unable to change Joel's course of action, even if our morals suppress our desire to tackle this dilemma in the way he did.

Joel's actions make him a hero to himself and Ellie, but a villain to humanity and the morals we stand by. Our world, much like Joel's, is inherently cruel, as shaped by human evolution. Everywhere there is injustice, labor exploitation, greed, and homicide. By killing the Fireflies, he acted on pragmatic instinct — he consciously defied morality for personal survival. The only ways to survive a cruel world are to either reshape it with morality or outmatch it with greater cruelty. So, for survivalists like Joel in an anarchic post-apocalyptic world, morality is an illusion blinding those who ignore the reality of self-interest. That is what makes humans human: the ability to think beyond instinct, even if it means choosing pragmatism. The moral grey of videogame dilemmas like in *The Last of Us*, reflects who we are as humans.

Fortunately, we live in a modern day and age where ethics and morals suppress our pragmatic instincts preserved by our ancestors. Nobody will ever have to choose between saving humanity or saving their surrogate daughter. However, if the time ever comes, the Joels of society who ignore hungry panhandlers, purchase cheaper child labor-produced products, tip nothing to waitstaff, and underpay their employees out of corporate greed will be the first to thrive in a post-apocalyptic world.

Game designer accountability

Do the ethical dilemmas faced by characters in videogames affect the player's own moral values, or do the player's moral values affect the outcome of the characters' ethical dilemma? It is important to discuss the burden of responsibility on game designers who wish to incorporate unethical themes into their narratives. As Murphy and Zagal point out, "Designers are ethically responsible for both the intended and emergent moral lessons embedded in their mechanics" (2011, p. 220). This perspective highlights how a developer's design choices, such as offering monetary rewards for violent acts, can subtly encourage unethical behavior among players. Furthermore, Sicart cautions that "ethical gameplay requires designers to consider how repeated exposure to violence may desensitize players" (2013a, p. 78), highlighting the potential long-term impacts that in-game brutality can have on a player's moral perception.

The *Red Dead Redemption* series serves as an example of game designs that reward players who choose unethical paths. Killing innocent NPCs and looting their bodies allow the player to accumulate cash faster than lawful methods, with little to no drawbacks other than an increased bounty on the player. Maintaining low honor reduces fence prices and increases payouts for completing bounty missions. The player will find themselves progressing through the game much easier by choosing violence and are essentially punished if they act ethically. Sicart Miguel argues that videogames, as narrative devices and design artifacts, have the ability to "shape player reasoning" (Sicart, 2013b, p. 29). This suggests that ethical dilemmas players are challenged by in virtual environments have some degree of effect on the players' real-life moral reasoning. While these mechanics certainly emphasize player autonomy, they also reveal the subtle ways in which designers, through their narratives and level progression systems, can guide or even nudge players toward morally questionable actions.

Player's morals in gameplay

Although a progression system that encourages pragmatism can impact the player who chooses the unethical path, it can be argued that a greater percentage of players have the willpower to suppress their hardwired pragmatism and prioritize morality for their videogame companions. Klimenko et al. points to a study in which “68% of players chose altruistic over selfish options when confronted with in-game moral dilemmas” (2023, p. 7). This greatly supports the idea that altruism – the moral belief in selfless concern for the well-being of others – is more prevalent among the gaming community than pragmatic self-interest. Because of this, it is possible that players are equally, if not more likely, to let their own moral values affect the protagonist character’s decision, rather than letting the opposite happen.

Moral theories in interactive media

The way players make their controlled protagonist characters solve moral dilemmas provides insight into the players as real-life people and their moral values. The range of the gaming community’s moral standards vary widely based on each individual player, with some willing to unapologetically sacrifice an entire galaxy’s innocent population to reach the next level, and some breaking into hysterical tears over the death of their *Minecraft* dog they tamed two minutes ago. Videogames foster relationships between players and characters, promoting ethical decision-making based on emotional connection, responsibility, and social bonds. Interactive stories create ethical experiences by encouraging players to engage with moral frameworks (Murphy & Zagal, 2011, p. 71). Traditional moral theories in games often focus on Utilitarianism, the doctrine that actions are right if they are useful or for the benefit of a majority, and Kantianism, the emphasis on moral principles and reason over personal desires. Ethics of

care prioritizes relationships, emotional connection, and responsibility over impersonal moral rules. This perspective is overlooked in videogame ethics but offers valuable insights.

For instance, the plot of *Little King's Story* puts the player in the role of a king, responsible for the well-being of citizens. Players develop attachments to NPCs, encouraging ethical reflection on governance and power dynamics. The imbalance of power raises questions about responsibility and the consequences of actions on the kingdom (p. 72). This raises another rhetorical question for the players: Should I care to build positive relationships with the people of my kingdom? Additionally, in *Animal Crossing: City Folk*, the game develops relationships between players and their NPC neighbors. In a simulated environment, players develop caring relationships with these NPCs. Game mechanics can foster ethical engagement in a safe environment. The authors argue that games naturally present moral dilemmas and can reinforce real-world ethical ideals. Virtual scenarios can act as practice for real-world scenarios. However, when players immerse themselves too much into a game's relationships and emotional attachments, players risk “valuing those experiences more than is appropriate or constructive. The value of these in-game relationships is lost when players care too much” (p. 78). Due to NPCs' ability to exhibit independence and emotional responses and their role as temporary neighbors, it prompts the player to decide how to treat their relationship with them, be it a short-term client or a long-term friend. In such cases, relationships can either be valued for their own sake for the player's emotional satisfaction or merely as a means to progress in the game. All of these create a sense of responsibility and ethical engagement (p. 76).

The burden of responsibility of both parties

Although videogame designers should be expected to carry a degree of accountability in how they implement ethical or unethical themes, players ultimately hold the power to determine

how deeply these themes shape their experience and morality. As highlighted by examples in *The Last of Us*, *Little King's Story*, and *Red Dead Redemption*, games can present uncompromising moral dilemmas that either reward unethical choices or act as a viewing lens into the psychology of human pragmatism. Whether a player chooses to rob stagecoaches in *Red Dead Redemption 2* for an easy cash grab or act with compassion toward their NPC neighbors in *Little King's Story* ultimately resides on their own real-life morality, not the other way around. The beauty of videogames as an interactive storytelling medium is its ability to push the boundaries of ethical exploration as “robust laboratories for ethical education” (Schrier, 2015, p. 345), leaving players free to interact with videogame dilemmas based on their personal morality.

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