Serious Ethical Games, with Serious Fun

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the nineties video gaming became one of the main topics in the entertainment industry. The early games primarily consisted of solving puzzles, shooting spaceships or performing sports. Later, creators of games like Final Fantasy and Zelda were aiming primarily at the story, and the puzzles degraded to secondary tasks. These interactive storytelling games exceeded all expectations. One of the drivers behind this evolution may be the fact that the user had the feeling that he or she literally was part of the story. In other words, playing an interactive storytelling game or Role Playing Game (RPG) opened a door to a new world, a world other than the dull real world, a world where you can play the hero (with infinite lives).

A gamer could suddenly do things that would never be possible in the real world, and this offered the game industry a large amount of opportunities. Games became more violent, games became more inhuman. Therefore, many games became controversial. Some games were banned, such as a game about an old lady with alzheimer's disease living in her fantasy world, or games with excessive unnecessary violence like Manhunt 2 and Postal 2. In the late nineties, two senior students, that played a lot of violent video games, opened an attack in an American school in Columbine, resulting in the killing of many students. This reinitiated the discussion about violent and controversial games and the role they play in the real world.

The rise of the World Wide Web once more triggered a revolution in the game industry. Before the Internet existed an RPG only consisted of the gamer and the game world with its artificial game characters. Now, the Internet provided a way to add an extra dimension to the game: game characters controlled by real humans. Suddenly, the artificial game world became much more real than before. People playing World of Warcraft or Second Life spend hours in the digital world, some of them spend more hours in a game world than in the real world. A remarkable shift arose for some of the gamers: the game world became their real world.

This "game world / real world" mix may become a real problem, since the rules in a game world can differ from the rules in the real world. For example, a Dutch boy decided to hang himself, because his friends betrayed him in an online RPG called Runescape. In my opinion the focus on ethics and morality in video games should be much more represented. Is the lack of ethics in games influencing the real world? And will a serious ethical game integration in existing games, that proposes ethical questions and reveal their consequences, make the world, real and digital, a better place?

Background

The topic of ethics refers to the understanding of what is good and what is wrong. Moral dilemma's play an important role in defining your ethical viewpoint.

Ethics in video games

Through the years many video games proposed moral dilemmas in their interactive story, and based on the moral choices, the video game character will be defined. For example, in the game Fallout 3 [10] the player can decide to blow up a nearby town, since a guy offers you a large amount of money for this criminal act. The downside is that people will treat you differently, since they know you are a criminal, which results in (hopefully) a bad feeling for the player.

In the game Zelda: Link's awakening [8] the player can decide to let the main character steal a bow from a shop. Doing so results in a change of your name into THIEF, which will refer the player to its criminal activities every time he talks to another character in the game.

Link's awakening for the Nintendo Gameboy

Ethical guidelines for video games

Adam Thompson proposes some ethical guidelines to make a game more realistic, with respect to the entertainment factor [1]. He mentions the following aspects:
- consistency of the ethical system in the game;
- logical consequences of a decision made in a moral dilemma;
- the other characters in the game should follow the same ethical system;
- reactions on the other characters in the game based on the moral decisions you made;
- let the player care about the other characters in the game;
- and introduce moral conflicts.

He argues that the use of these guidelines brings the player a step closer to the real world, while the amount of entertainment is still largely represented.

Serious ethical games

The last couple of years serious games [6] vastly grew in popularity. A serious game tries to achieve goals besides providing entertainment, for example, educational goals, commercial goals or artistic goals.

Teaching people ethics through using a video game relates to the educational serious gaming category. PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) created a game called "Cooking mama: mama kills animals" [4] right before thanksgiving. The main task in the game is to prepare a turkey in a quite unorthodox way. Eventually, the goal of the game is to raise awareness about the bad treatment of turkeys and, in a broader perspective, animals.

[left]: Cooking mama: mama kills animals   [right]: Global Conflicts: Palestine

"Global Conflicts: Palestine" [2][3] is another example of a serious game that focusses on the Israel/Palestine conflict and tries to apply ethics and understanding for both parties. Although this game is known of one of the most popular serious games, it is still miles away from video games like Grand Theft Auto or World of Warcraft.

Hodhod et al. [9] propose a model that can be implemented in serious games, with the Socratic Method used as pedagogy. The article describes an implementation of an adaptive educational interactive narrative system that helps students between 8 and eleven years old to deal with moral dilemmas. This is an example of applying proven educational methods into serious games, which can help combining entertainment and education. Hopefully, this eventually results in better learning scores in the area of ethics and moves the society to a higher level.

Discussion

Without a doubt a large amount of people is worried about the current development of video games. The reality factor in video games grow explosively, which may lead to situations where people forget that games are a form of art and entertainment and therefore consists of other constraints than the real world. Previous paragraphs show examples where this led to serious problems.

A serious gap

On the other hand, serious games are developed to address the ethics problem. Although some ethical games achieved a high play rate, it is still considered a "serious game" and therefore cannot compete to the success of normal video games.

The solution may be found somewhere in between. Serious games are too serious to be fun and video games are too much fun to be serious. This big difference likely results different behaviour, which may result in two separate understanding of ethics: a "computer world ethics profile" and a "real world ethics profile".

A hybrid ethical profile

In the future societies may benefit from an evolution from these two ethical profiles into one hybrid profile, where ethics of both world exists and the gap is much smaller. This does not mean both worlds have the same rules and constraints, but this does mean that the dangerous outlier situations (for example, killing people randomly in a horrific way, without follow-up consequences) should be made more neutral.
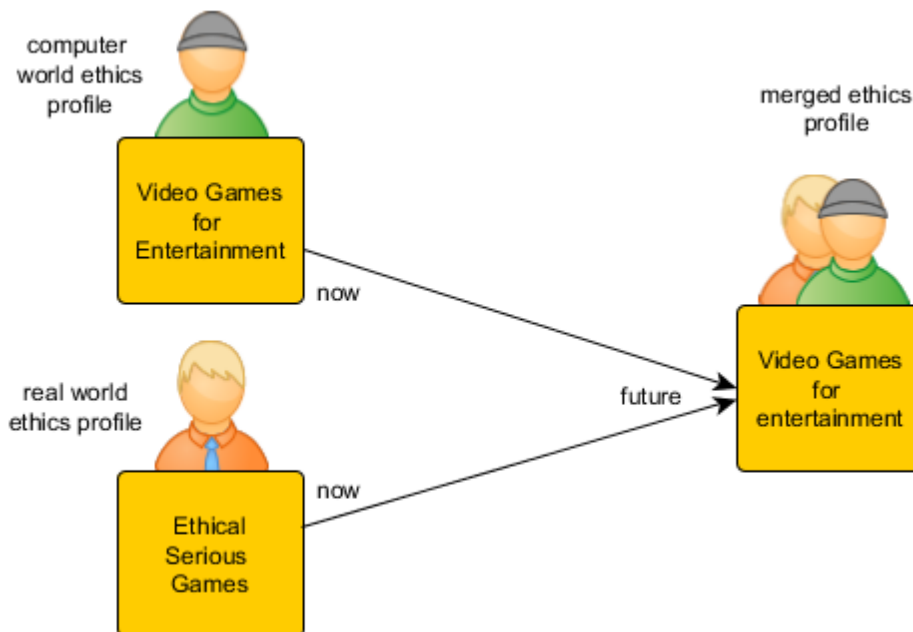

Diagram showing the possible merge of computer and real world ethical profiles

Practically speaking this means making a player more aware of the consequences of an ethically wrong decision. Nevertheless, it should still be possible to make such a decision, so the player can learn from his mistakes.

Video game development and serious game development collaboration play a key role to reduce the gap between serious and fun. Since video game development is the largest industry of the two at the moment, they should take initiative. A first good step is to apply the guidelines of Adam Thompson [1] or the model of Hodhod et al. [9] in video games. Hopefully, in the nearby future both parties find a way to work together.

Online ethical profile

Once the "merged ethics" are realized, it is assumed that not only the real world benefits from this development, but also the online social world. Nowadays, it is still possible to play "God" in the online social world, but with merged ethical profiles people are more aware of consequences of people trying to play "God". Just as in the real world, it is assumed that the "social control" will be tighter in the online world, which probably results in a more balanced online social society.

Link to Duckountancy

Duckountancy [11] is a serious game aiming at teaching the player the skills of bookkeeping. One role that can be played is a student that wants to get grip on his monthly expenses. The game can, for instance, show the consequences of failing your bookkeeping for the month by showing a movie of the student isolated in his room, because he does not have money to party with his friends. This scenario likely makes the student aware of the consequences of making the wrong decisions in his financial management, and the consequences for other people because of these mistakes.

References

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