

Virtual good and evil: The moral complexity of video games

by [Scott R. Paeth](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue



Isabella had abandoned me. I was in shock. She was my ally, drinking buddy, even lover. She knew the stakes: if we did not return the Tome of Kuslun to the Qunari, the entire city of Kirkwall would be razed to the ground. She had agreed to aid me, to give up the tome and help defend the city, and yet here I was, left high and dry, with little chance of saving my adopted home and every chance of dying while trying.

I pushed myself back from the computer and let out a deep breath. Dragon Age II was taking a toll on me.

Over the past two decades, video games have reached a level of technological sophistication that enables them to immerse players in complex stories and relationships. The games require players to draw not only on their hand-eye coordination skills and puzzle-solving prowess but also on their moral imagination as they navigate complex relationships and their consequences. Today's video games

are light years away from Pong and Asteroids, and they have the potential not only to offer richly textured narratives and fantastically realistic-seeming worlds but to aid in forming us as moral beings, for better and for worse.

Video games have long had a bad reputation among Christians. Whether their concern is about brain rot from too many hours staring at a video screen or the damaging effects of simulated violence, Christians have worried about the influence of video games on young people, particularly young men.

To be sure, the video game industry offers ammunition for that critique. The Grand Theft Auto series in particular raised alarms with "open world" games that allow players to roam through a virtual world, randomly shooting policemen and passersby. Players could follow plot threads that involve them in murder for hire, drug dealing and even graphic sex. A more recent example is Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, which features a level called "No Russian," in which the player takes on the role of an undercover U.S. agent who participates in a terrorist attack on an airport full of civilians in order to preserve his cover.

But even these egregious examples have some complexity. Grand Theft Auto does not simply allow players to participate in a seamy side of American life; it offers an implicit critique of American society, portraying organized crime as the dark side of laissez-faire capitalism run amok. The "No Russian" level (which can be bypassed if the player desires) is part of a plot thread in which the terrorist attack precipitates a larger conflict that ultimately allows the player to enact the role of hero.

But the underlying moral question remains. If it is true, as virtue theorists often maintain, that we are what we repeatedly do, then what kind of people do we become by playing video games? The answer depends in large measure on the games we play.

In an essay titled "Sim Evil: Avatars and the Ethical Game Mechanic," Kelly Kelleway distinguishes between several video game designs. Deterministic games propel the player from one event to the next, allowing very little choice about what happens. If the game is to proceed, the action must advance from event A to B to C. Players have little say in the plot, in the characters they play or in characters' decisions. This approach to game play is a feature of first-person shooter games such as Modern Warfare or Call of Duty: Black Ops. The role of the player in these games is often limited simply to moving a persona, or avatar, from one point to the next, aiming a

weapon and firing. The player is very much a spectator to the action, though at times also an agent, enacting what is often a very violent narrative.

Binary games constitute another category. These games give the player more control over the story and the nature of one's character. The outcome of the narrative often changes depending on decisions made by the character throughout the game—usually with clearly delineated good and evil outcomes possible. The player can choose to take the "light" path or the "dark" path, and it is generally clear from the outset what kinds of actions will lead to what result. The Knights of the Old Republic games, based on the Star Wars franchise, are examples.

A recent addition to the genre raises interesting questions about the moral possibilities inherent in video games. BioShock appears at first to be an ordinary first-person shooter game. The player observes the world directly through the eyes of the character. And what a world it is! Trapped thousands of feet beneath the ocean floor in an underwater city named Rapture, the player has to fight through the city in order to rescue a potential ally and ultimately escape the city.

The city of Rapture represents an attempt to create a libertarian paradise where scientists and entrepreneurs pursue self-interest free from government oversight or intrusion. By the time the player encounters this world, it's falling apart. Genetically engineered maniacs rove the streets looking to score a fix of ADAM, a material that enhances their powers. The player can choose to go this route as well, but the only source of ADAM comes from the Little Sisters. The player has a choice: enhance his or her powers (and thus the likelihood of survival) by killing the Little Sisters and harvesting their ADAM, or protect the Little Sisters and survive by one's wits and ingenuity. Killing the Little Sisters initially makes the game much easier, and thus the player has to choose between a presumed set of moral standards and what will serve his or her (in-game) self-interest.

BioShock is intended to be a parody and critique of the Objectivist philosophy of Ayn Rand. Many aspects of the game—the vainglorious speechifying of Andrew Ryan, the art deco graphic design, the name of the game's chief antagonist, Atlas (from Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*)—spring from the ethos of her fiction. In this sense, the game encourages another level of moral reflection: players are not only caught in a conflict between a sense of responsibility to the weak and vulnerable (embodied by the Little Sisters) and their own self-interest, but also invited to think about Objectivism, a popular contemporary brand of moral philosophy.

In the end, though, morality is a very black and white affair in binary games. The good and evil of a situation are clearly delineated—if occasionally subverted—and the player self-consciously chooses to play the game as an evil person or a good one. Complexity is not these games' stock in trade.

The same cannot be said of Kelleway's third category of game, which she calls embodied games. In embodied games, players exercise considerable freedom to order their character's actions, relationships and even physical appearance. Depending on the game and genre, players can customize their play experience in any number of different ways, which creates a greater degree of identification with the protagonist. While these games have a main narrative thread that the player is expected to follow, their open world design allows the characters to explore the virtual world, acquire skills and powers, attract companions and build relationships. The main plot is the scaffolding on which all the action is hung, but the richness of the game lies in the way the player experiences these other dimensions.

This brings us back to Dragon Age II. Like other forms of embodied video game, the Dragon Age games are immersive experiences, drawing the player into the role of a hero in the mythical world of Ferelden, where he or she must defend the realm against dragons, darkspawn and archdemons. What marks the Dragon Age games as different from binary games like Knights of the Old Republic is the way they handle moral questions. A character's choices do not boil down to an easy distinction between good and evil. In many cases, the character is forced to make hard decisions about who will live and who will die.

For example, in the first game in the series, Dragon Age: Origins, the character must decide what to do with a demon-possessed child. He can kill the child, thus banishing the demon, or allow the child's mother to die on the child's behalf, or choose a risky mission into the Fade, the dream realm from which the demon came. In the context of the story, none of these is obviously the morally good option, and all may fall short of the goal. While the mission into the Fade might be the best available choice, depending on the player's earlier in-game choices, it may not be possible or ultimately successful, in which case the player must decide: does the child die or the mother?

The player's decisions affect not only the plot of the game but also the character's relationships with his companions. Team members register their approval or disapproval of the player's actions along the way, and they can be definitively

alienated from the player and even leave the player's company if the character offends their moral sensibilities too deeply. Thus the player has to make choices based not only on what outcomes are best for the plot or for one's personal power, but also on what kinds of relationships one wants with team members.

Thus my sense of betrayal and shock at being abandoned by Isabella. Having spent the bulk of the game building a relationship with her, I had expected her to back my character up in the conflict with the Qunari. In fact, I had expected her to engage in an uncharacteristic act of heroic self-sacrifice on my character's behalf.

But the story wasn't over yet. While I was tempted to reload the game and play things Isabella's way, I decided instead to carry on till the bitter end without her. I was surprised to discover that my character's "good guy" persona had rubbed off on her, as she showed up to save me at the last moment—though not without some cost.

The Mass Effect series of games treads much the same territory. The player is given a specific identity, that of an intergalactic agent named Shepard (a significant name given the game's messianic overtones). Like other open world games, the player navigates Shepard through a series of missions in order to gather companions and resources to aid him (or her—the player is able to choose the protagonist's gender) in overcoming an invasion by a mysterious alien race called the Reapers. As with Dragon Age, the player decides where Shepard goes, how he acts and what relationships he establishes. He can be played as a "Paragon," a "Renegade" or a mix of both. As the game progresses, the player can even determine Shepard's religious sensibilities and taste in literature.

These factors contribute to a very strong sense of identification between the player and the character. Some players enjoy the experience of playing against their own personality types—perhaps playing the bad guy instead of the good guy.

Others—and here I would include myself—find "playing evil" somewhat distasteful, requiring as it does that one make decisions on behalf of one's character that are offensive. This makes games like Grand Theft Auto difficult for me to play, since there isn't a good guy option available. As a player, I identify strongly with my character's actions and take seriously the choices imposed on me by the game. As a result, I tend to play games in which there is, if not a clear line between good and evil modes of play, at least a recognizable range of moral options available.

In any case, the more deeply a player is encouraged by the game to make the character one's own rather than just being a spectator to the character's story, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish one's decisions as the player from the decisions of the virtual character.

This sense of identification between player and character is where moral possibilities—and the risks—of gaming lie. While concerns have been raised about first-person shooter games such as Doom and Medal of Honor, for most players these games seldom rise above the level of a harmless romp, because so little of the player's self is involved in the game. But open world games such as Mass Effect rely heavily on the deep investment made by the player in his or her character and the character's actions and relationships, so it may be possible to draw moral lessons from the game playing experience. If players are given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and consider the implications of the narrative in which they are involved, they may come to distinguish between morally better and worse outcomes.

Reflection is the key component. That happens when the game asks you to make a hard choice and then shows you the consequences of your actions. In this sense, a well-constructed video game offers the players the same moral opportunities to reflect on action and its consequences that a good novel or movie does. Like a good novel or a movie, a good video game tells a great story without being overly didactic. Video games are at their best when they raise moral issues without providing ready-made answers.

As a Christian ethicist, I enter the moral worlds of video games with some resources for reflection. Part of my distaste with playing evil comes from my sense that acting callously in the fictional setting of the game world might transfer over to my real-world persona. By the same token, if virtue is indeed a reflection of that which we repeatedly do, then the cultivation of "virtual virtue" may have a positive effect on my real-world behavior.

However, the lessons I've taken from Christian realists such as Reinhold Niebuhr also affect my reflection on virtual morality. Embodied games that require difficult moral decisions, that recognize no obvious hard and fast distinction between right and wrong, are far more intellectually rewarding for me than those in which the white hats are easily distinguishable from the black hats. Such games are more reflective of actual moral decision-making and provide fodder for deeper reflection than binary

games allow.

The need for deeper ethical reflection is especially apparent in the way games approach sex and violence. Most embodied games offer at least some possibilities for romance. As relationships develop between the player's avatar and his or her companions, it is possible to move these relationships in the direction of increasing intimacy. Depending on how the player decides to act, this can lead to more or less explicit sex scenes. While these scenes are in some sense the payoff for properly handling the dialogue options, it is possible in some cases for the player to seek a more emotionally intimate relationship before moving things to the (virtual) bedroom.

For example, in *Mass Effect 2*, the player's video character can establish a relationship with an emotionally damaged psychic woman named Jack. While it's comparatively easy to get Jack into bed early in the game, afterward she will shut out one's character and refuse to take the romance any further. It is only by deferring sex until late in the game that it becomes possible to establish an emotionally deeper relationship with Jack. The sex scene is still the payoff, but it becomes the reward for successfully establishing a genuine relationship between the digital personas.

As for violence: most popular games encourage the player to hack, slash, shoot and slay his or her way from one level to the next. On the rare occasions when the game offers the player the option of avoiding violence, it's usually a temporary respite, as there is always another, bigger bad guy in the next cavern who won't be nearly as interested in negotiating.

This is by no means true of all games. "Sim games," such as *SimCity*, rely for the most part not on combat but on the player's ability to manage scarce resources for the sake of building a world, city or family. The challenge of these games comes not in participating in a preestablished narrative but in creating a world in which the player's own narratives can take place. What these games offer is the possibility of enacting a different version of a life, imagining a (perhaps) more ideal world in which to dwell.

Video games have the potential to create provocative and transformative stories through which players might come to a deeper level of moral self-understanding. At this stage of their evolution, however, they are a long way from offering the tools of moral reflection necessary for understanding the implications of in-game actions for

life in the real world. Only a community of moral reflection such as the church can illumine the relationship between ourselves as avatars and ourselves as moral agents.