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State of Play: Videogames and Moral Engagement

Abstract: In this article we examine three recent examples of ‘ethically notable games’ (Zagal, 2010) and highlight unusual or innovative design features for facilitating moral engagement. Drawing on Sicart (2010, 2013) to frame our analysis, our goal is to highlight current trends in ENG design and show how commercial games are moving beyond reductive “morality meters” and treating moral choice with greater nuance, resulting – for the most part – in a more morally engaging experience.

Keywords: Morality, videogames, virtue ethics, Firewatch, Deus Ex, Darkest Dungeon

Morality is a fundamental component of human experience, and art – from Greek drama through to Saturday morning cartoons – is a powerful, pervasive means of disseminating and interrogating moral principles and points-of-view (Carr, 2005, 2006). Videogames are no exception to this rule and the history of ‘ethically notable games’ (Zagal, 2010) or ENGs is almost as long as the history of gaming itself, with formative examples like Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar (Origin Systems, 1985) and Balance of Power (Crawford, 1985) appearing in the early 1980s. Following the success of Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (Bioware, 2003), it became something of a trend for videogames to feature ‘morality meter’ systems in which the player’s moral decisions contribute to an overall ‘morality score’ for their character. Subject to criticism from academics (Melenson, 2010), critics (Birch, 2014), and fans (Aristov, 2012), morality meters have mostly fallen out of favour and there is now a ‘growing corpus’ of ENGs that treat morality with greater care and nuance (Heron & Belford, 2014a). In this article we will examine three such ENGs from 2016, focusing in each case on unusual or innovative design features for facilitating moral engagement.

Literature Review and Theory
In their paper coining the phrase, Zagal (2010, pp. 1-2) identifies four key perspectives for understanding ethically notable games. First, there is the ethical significance of the object: should certain morally repugnant games (e.g. rape simulators) exist at all, and is it (un)ethical to own and/or distribute these titles? Second, what does it mean to create games ethically – what moral and professional standards should developers, publishers, and distributors abide by and how should these be instituted across the industry? A third perspective concerns the ethics of play and interrogates the meaning and application of concepts like rules, norms, and cheating. Finally, there the ‘ethics of actions in games as defined by the games themselves’ (ibid.) – what Zagal calls the game’s ethical or ideological framework. In this paper we are exclusively concerned with this latter perspective, looking at how game design facilitates ethically significant gameplay – defined here to mean in-game actions that provoke moral reflection. (For more on what we mean by ‘moral reflection’ in this context, see the discussion of Sicart below.)

In recent years interest in ENGs has exploded and there are now multiple frameworks for classifying, analysing, and designing ENGs. These include Flanagan et al.’s (2007) Values at Play project, which explores how developers embed moral, social, and political values in their games; Stevenson’s (2010) three-tiered scheme for categorizing ENGs; Schrier’s (2015) EPIC framework for using videogames in ethics education; and Ryan et al.’s (2016) ‘four lenses’ for ENG design. In addition to these, there is a growing corpus of empirical studies on ENGs. In one such study, Weaver and Lewis (2012) examine ‘how players make moral choices in videogames and what effects these choices have on emotional responses to games’ and find that players of ENGs make in-game moral choices that are largely in keeping with their real-world moral intuitions. This is consistent with Consalvo et al.’s (2016) qualitative study of player attitudes, which finds that ‘rehearsing [an] ethos’ – playing a better version of their own moral selves, basically – is essential to many gamers’ enjoyment of ENGs. This theme is reinforced by a similar study (Lange, 2014) in which players overwhelmingly express a preference for playing ‘good’ characters in ethically notable role-playing games (RPGs).

A leader in this field is games scholar Miguel Sicart (2010, 2011, 2013), who outlines a model of ENG design based on the ‘Levels of Abstraction’ concept within information ethics. The model posits that players interact with videogames at two levels of abstraction: as procedural/mechanical systems to be mastered, and as semantic objects with cultural and ethical meaning. For example: from a purely mechanical perspective, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II’s
(Infinity Ward, 2009) infamous ‘No Russian’ level is not terribly different from any other level in the game. The goal, as always, is to shoot people: the difference is that in this level the people are unarmed civilians at an airport. This makes us uncomfortable: there’s dissonance between the game’s procedural goals (shoot everyone) and their broader ethical and cultural implications, resulting in what Sicart calls ethical cognitive friction – a ‘contradiction between what to do in terms of gameplay, and the meaning and impact of those actions, both within the gameworld and in a larger cultural setting’ (2010, pp. 6-7). The key to designing ENGs, Sicart argues, is to focus on this dissonance, to provoke and exploit it and thereby compel the player to consider the moral significance of the game’s procedural and semantic layers.

Crucially, Sicart recognises that ethical cognitive friction is contingent on a player motivated to think about the moral significance of their in-game choices. Even the most morally sophisticated ENG can be played instrumentally, as a series of ludic challenges devoid of ethical resonance. Sicart calls this kind of play ‘reactive’ and contrasts it with the ‘reflective’ play of someone who actively thinks about their choices and perceives dissonance when it appears (Sicart, 2010, pp. 6–8). One of the defining goals of ENG design is to encourage players to adopt a reflective stance – to promote what we refer to in this article as ‘moral reflection’ or ‘moral engagement’. A morally engaged player is one who considers the moral significance of their in-game choices, who does not approach gameplay from a purely instrumental perspective but attempts to understand the rules and assumptions that constitute a game’s ethical framework and considers same in light of the real world ethical frameworks to which we are all, to some degree, subject. To this end, Sicart recommends an approach that emphasises and exploits moral uncertainty, restricting the player’s access to information and systems that disincentivise reflection. Later we will see how design elements intended to support this approach – most notably the concept of ‘aggregate of choices’ (2010, p. 10) – have surfaced in recent ENGs to positive effect.

We highlight Sicart’s work particularly because it informs much of the analysis in this article. The games we examine – *Firewatch, Deus Ex: Mankind Divided, and Darkest Dungeon* – have been selected because they exhibit design features identified as either conducive or detrimental to moral engagement: i.e. reflective, ethical play. All released in 2016, these games provide an illuminating glimpse of current trends in ENG design while giving us an opportunity to demonstrate the utility of Sicart’s approach for analysis and critique of moral content.
Additionally, because Sicart’s work is broadly compatible with the insights of other scholars working in the field, we will draw on this work – most notably Nay and Zagal (2017) – to supplement our analysis. This constitutes the secondary goal of our article, which is to highlight concepts from the ENG literature that facilitate fruitful analysis and further discussion.

Of course, many old and new games could be productively analysed in this way and we acknowledge that the titles featured here are not necessarily the best or most popular examples of ethically notable game design. While it’s true that titles like *Papers, Please, The Walking Dead,* and *Spec Ops: The Line* feature highly sophisticated ethical gameplay, these games have already received a great deal of academic analysis (e.g. Formosa, Ryan, & Staines, 2016; Smelthurt & Craps, 2015; Heron & Belford, 2014b) that we are not interested in recapitulating here. For this paper we were particularly interested in spotlighting titles that were a) recently released, thereby indicating emerging trends in ENG design, b) popular and widely-reviewed, and c) heretofore absent in the ENG literature.

The analyses in this paper were conducted in three stages. First, three authors (Samia, Adam, and Mia) played one game each while noting ethically significant scenarios and design features warranting in-depth analysis. These notes were then handed to our project convenor (Dan) who played all three games, paying particular attention to noteworthy commonalities and discrepancies between the three in terms of their ethical design. In the second stage, the authors convened and categorised the games in terms of applicable analytic frameworks, producing three draft papers that were gradually refined and amalgamated by the project convenor. Finally, the authors canvassed YouTube, Reddit, and other major internet forums, supplementing our own experiences with insights from developers, reviewers, streamers, and ‘regular’ gamers. In so doing our goal was to broaden the scope of our analyses, showing how the design features discussed facilitate ethical engagement for players that aren’t academics writing a research paper.

**Micromorality and Virtue in Firewatch**

*Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016) is a first-person adventure game developed by Campo Santo, published by Panic, and released in February 2016 for PC, Linux, and Mac OS, with PS4 and Xbox One versions following in September. Likened to so-called ‘walking simulators’ like
Gone Home (The Fullbright Company, 2013) and The Stanley Parable (Galactic Cafe, 2013) the game was reviewed positively by critics and players, receiving particular praise for its well-structured, engaging narrative.

Firewatch begins with a short interactive text adventure that guides players through the shared history of protagonist Henry and his wife, Julia. Beyond choosing between superficial alternatives, such as what to name the couple’s dog, the player’s agency during this section is limited, and the same basic story – boy meets girl, boy marries girl, girl is stricken with early onset dementia, boy has existential crisis – is told no matter what the player chooses. The prologue serves another purpose, however, in that it immediately confronts players with the almost aggressive ordinariness of its protagonist. Henry is a chubby, balding, everyman facing a painful, uncertain future. Like all of us, he is flawed – a fact that informs much of Firewatch’s subsequent narrative and moral content.

Firewatch features a branching narrative driven by choices the player makes during dialogue. In keeping with its everyman protagonist and slice-of-life fiction, the moral scenarios depicted in the game are parochial, even mundane, compared to the world-ending dilemmas featured in other games. To its credit, Firewatch does not deal with big ‘life and death’ or ‘save the world’ choices, focusing instead on the ‘micromoral’ issues (Rest, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999) that permeate everyday life. This approach has multiple benefits, two of which are especially relevant here. First, micromoral scenarios are by definition more relatable and familiar than big picture, macromoral scenarios, making it easier for the player to identify with the protagonist. Second, micromoral scenarios facilitate the aggregation of choices: an approach to ENG design where one-off moral scenarios with immediate, profound consequences are replaced with many smaller scenarios that accumulate significance as the game progresses (2013). For Sicart,

‘[t]he aggregation of choices is a better fit for designing ethical gameplay because it places the players in a narrative or world context in which many choices are offered all the time, and the consequence of each is not readily traceable to a particular choice’ (p. 105).

One of the chief virtues of the aggregate approach is that it shifts the player’s focus from outcomes to decisions, representing morality as more than big problems waiting for optimal
solutions, but as an expression of one’s identity – as something that one does, day-to-day, in a multitude of tiny but important ways. In this sense, Firewatch embodies an Aristotelian, virtue-oriented approach to ENG design. Virtue ethics ‘evaluates actors based on the habits of their actions, and the temperament motivating them rather than the outcomes of those actions’ (Nay & Zagal, 2017, p. 2). For virtue ethicists, choices matter chiefly because of how they shape our character, and that is also true of Firewatch.

When Firewatch begins, Henry has taken a new job as a fire warden in a national park while Julia, stricken with dementia, is relocated to a care facility in Australia. Soon after starting his first day Henry finds a walkie-talkie and is contacted by Delilah, his supervisor, who asks him to discover the source of the fireworks going off illegally above a nearby lake. Following a trail of clues, the player eventually discovers that two skinny-dipping young women are the culprits. Drunk and belligerent, these women, who can be seen only as distant silhouettes, berate and abuse Henry for disturbing them. How Henry responds is left up to the player. Should he be a professional – turn off the nearby stereo, pick up the beer cans, let the insults roll of his back? Or is Henry the kind of guy who takes it personal, the kind of guy who might abuse his authority a little and ‘accidentally’ drop some little snot’s stereo in the lake? Both choices are recognized by the game as legitimate, but – significantly – neither impacts the way the rest of the narrative plays out. Consequences aren’t the point; the choice itself speaks volumes.

Another illuminating example of Firewatch’s virtue-oriented micromoral scenarios occurs about half-way through the game when Henry decides, without the player’s input, to take off his wedding ring and leave it on his desk, a deliberate and significant action in the context of his evolving relationship with Delilah. From talking to her over the radio, it’s clear Delilah’s a friendly, expansive, and funny woman, and it’s therefore natural that Henry (and the player) may begin to develop feelings for her. At times Delilah, whose Biblically symbolic name is surely not accidental, seems to flirt with Henry, hinting strongly at the possibility that something more could develop between them. So when Henry takes off his wedding band, a physical manifestation of his moral obligation to his dying wife, the significance is obvious. However, what’s particularly compelling about this situation is that the player may, without prompting, have Henry pick up the ring and put it back on his finger.
In addition to setting up a subtle and profound micromoral choice, Henry removing his wedding ring is a compelling example of what Sicart refers to as a ‘slow technology’ approach to ethical game design (Sicart, 2013, p. 73). This approach advocates limiting the player’s agency in ways that promote a ‘slower’ more contemplative mode of engagement. In this mode, the player’s attention can be drawn to questions that arise from frictions within and between the game’s semantic and procedural layers (ibid., p.76). In the present example, the player’s agency is temporarily restricted when Henry independently removes his wedding band, prompting the player to consider the significance of this act – and what it says about Henry’s character – in the context of the evolving story. Having drawn the player’s attention to the ‘question’ in this way, the game then gives the player agency to ‘answer’ it by either putting the ring back on or ignoring it. Notably, the game does not explicitly indicate that Henry can put the ring back on, and it’s entirely possible that less attentive players may miss the opportunity altogether. When a developer refrains from drawing attention to a choice in this fashion, it often indicates the choice is insignificant or unnecessary. But in this case, the opposite is true: by not drawing attention to the possibility of replacing Henry’s wedding band, Campo Santo emphasises that this is not a
ludic or narrative choice, but a personal one that reflects the nature of Henry’s character. It is significant, in other words, partly because it can be overlooked and because the game does not change as a result of making it. Indeed, the only thing that changes is Henry – and the player’s view of him.

Delilah, meanwhile, is noteworthy in part because she is resistant to change, and because she exercises an unusual (for videogame NPCs) degree of independent moral agency. When it emerges later in the game that the young women from the lake have vanished, Delilah asks Henry if she ought to tell the police about the fireworks. Irrespective of how the player responds, Delilah decides to keep the information to herself, later telling Henry that she wanted to ‘save [them] the trouble’ of dealing with the cops. This is consistent with what we know about her character, a woman who has worked the job for nearly a decade and been seemingly unchanged by her experience. She's not growing, and the fact that Henry and the player are still not enough to change her mind in many situations is refreshing in a medium where you can often achieve impossible persuasion simply by having high enough stats. (White, 2016)

Compare to a game like Mass Effect (Bioware, 2007), where feats of ‘impossible persuasion’ are commonplace and achieved by investing points into the appropriate stats – in this case, Charm and Intimidate. As Commander Shepard, the trilogy’s protagonist, the player becomes a kind of galactic moral arbiter whose proclamations are as good as law for the NPCs they encounter. In the first game this is taken to an absurd extreme when Shepard overhears a bereaved wife and brother arguing passionately about whether to perform invasive surgery on the unborn child of their deceased husband/sibling. At the player’s discretion, Shepard may intervene in the discussion and offer trite advice that is taken at face value and presumably acted upon by the volitionless duo. The net effect of this interaction is that these NPCs don’t feel like ‘Cs’ at all, but automatons waiting in stasis for the player to arrive and resolve whatever deeply personal issue is troubling them.

In drawing this comparison, we recognize that Firewatch is a very different sort of game to Mass Effect and that feats of impossible persuasion, like feats of impossible physical prowess, are part of what make Bioware’s grand space opera fun to play. What we wish to highlight is that
meaningful moral scenarios are not contingent on player-determined outcomes, and that letting players exercise absolute moral authority may in fact negatively impact moral engagement, robbing NPCs of their agency and virtual personhood. Conversely, Delilah’s stubbornness regarding the police is potentially frustrating, but it’s in that moment of frustration that the player is permitted to slow down and consider what Delilah’s decision says about her as a person.

That said, it’s important to acknowledge that designers who stymie player agency in this fashion walk a fine line and that a frustrated player can easily feel cheated or misled, which may negatively impact their capacity or willingness to reflect on the ethical dimensions of a given scenario. Looking at negative user reviews for the game on Steam, one of the more common refrains is that the game’s overall value is diminished by ‘railroading’ and a lack of ‘replayability’ – a direct consequence of the approach to agency outlined above. ‘Crap game. No replayability. Storyline railroads you through worse than a "choose your own adventure" book,’ gripes review author Krellian. ‘The ending lacks a twist and it's the same ending no matter what you do’ (2017). This is a problem admitting no easy solution and, as far as we can see, will always be a danger associated with implementing the ‘slow technology’ approach advocated by Sicart. All a developer can realistically do is tamper player frustration by contextualising their lack of agency in the broader narrative and themes of the game. In the case of Firewatch, this is achieved by positioning Delilah as stubborn, capable, and fiercely independent – the kind of person who wouldn’t hesitate to say ‘no’ if she felt it was in her best interest to do so.

From a production perspective, one of the major advantages of leaving the player to determine the moral significance of their choices is that it frees designers and writers from the responsibility of authoring outcomes for those choices. As an indie studio with fewer than five full-time employees, this was surely an important consideration for Campo Santo during the development of Firewatch. Practical considerations of this sort are an important, but oft overlooked, element of ENG design.

‘Social Battles’ in Deus Ex: Mankind Divided

There are currently four major titles in the Deus Ex franchise of first-person stealth/action RPGs, with the latest released in 2016 for PC and console. The series is set in a 21st century dystopia where multiple factions compete for control of world-changing technology, particularly human augmentations. Originally developed by Ion Storm and published by Eidos, the series has
since passed into the hands of Eidos Montreal, who – with new publisher Square Enix – has released two prequels: *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011) and *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* (Eidos Montreal, 2016). For the purposes of this analysis, we will focus on *Mankind Divided* with some reflection on *Human Revolution*. These two games play very similarly and have a great number of mechanical and narrative commonalities that are notable from an ethical perspective.

In keeping with the ‘immersive reality simulator’ design philosophy pioneered by its predecessors, *Mankind Divided* can be played in a variety of styles, from pacifistic stealth all the way through to explosive lethality. As an ‘aug’ or bio-mechanically augmented human, protagonist Adam Jensen is designed to encourage the player to take a stance on the social and moral issues built into the game’s ‘new bad’ dystopian fiction. A walking confluence of flesh and tech, Jensen is distinguished from other augs by the fact that he does not suffer from ‘rejection syndrome’ (the biological body rejecting mechanical augments) and is therefore not dependent on Neuropozyne, the drug used to suppress it. Jensen is special, in other words, and this specialness is reflected in his almost absolute moral agency. Unlike *Firewatch*’s Henry, Jensen is not limited to merely sharing his opinion, but has the power to effectively impose it on recalcitrant NPCs via the game’s ‘social battle’ dialogue mechanic.

In these battles, the player must convince an NPC to cooperate by selecting dialogue responses at each juncture in a branching conversation. Different choices provoke different reactions from NPCs, positive and negative, with each juncture featuring at least one ‘optimal’ response. Failing a social battle does not lead to a game over or otherwise preclude further progress, but succeeding is always associated with a reward of some sort – usually experience points, but sometimes money, items, and information. Unlike *Firewatch*, the ethical significance of social battles is intrinsically connected to their immediate narrative consequences, with success typically facilitating non-violent resolutions to the conflicts embedded in the game’s many quests and side-quests. Successfully ‘winning’ the social battle against the unhinged cultist Allison Staněk, for example, facilitates her surrender and arrest; losing the battle, on the other hand, results not only in her death, but the deaths of her fellow cult members as well. In this sense, social battles are the ‘moral option’ for the diplomatically-minded concerned with minimising violence and needless of life.
Among the many augmentations – super powers, essentially – available to Jensen, there is one specifically designed to assist in social battles: a so-called ‘social enhancer’ named the Computer Assisted Social Intelligence Enhancer or C.A.S.I.E. for short. C.A.S.I.E. surreptitiously analyses the mental state of targeted individuals and includes a ‘dialectic enhancer’ which allows Jensen to dominate conversation through chemical-pheromone manipulation. In effect, Jensen releases a cocktail of pheromones into the air around his target to render them psychologically malleable and cooperative.¹

When the implant is unlocked, it provides a HUD overlay displaying key information during social battles. Alignment analysis identifies NPCs as alpha-, beta- and omega- personality types, their major personality traits are listed, and a pithy psychological profile is provided for the player to review. When the NPC speaks, alphabetic symbols in the HUD light up to indicate the optimal dialogue response. Animated graphics also pop up where C.A.S.I.E. makes special notes about NPC mood indicators, such as increased heart-rate or dilated pupils. Finally, the HUD displays a response level meter which will fluctuate during the conversation, based on choices made and in such a way that optimal choices will see the meter fill up to its maximum, visually confirming for the player the success of their strategy.

¹ The ethics of using neurochemical coercion to get your own way remains sadly underexplored in both Mankind Divided and its prequel.
Mankind Divided is replete with social battles but we will look at just one: a pivotal encounter that takes place about half way through the game involving one of its major NPCs, Augmented Rights Coalition (ARC) boss Talos Rucker. The goal of the battle is to convince the charismatic but unstable militant to surrender without a fuss, avoiding further bloodshed, and for players without C.A.S.I.E. this presents a serious challenge. With three dialogue choices available at each of the four conversational junctures, there are dozens of unique paths through the battle, many ending disastrously. Identifying optimal responses implies paying close attention to Rucker’s rhetoric and pointing out its inconsistencies by drawing on the game’s broader fiction, including Rucker’s own history. Small visual cues – the way he fiddles with his glass, a shift in posture – provide insight to Rucker’s emotional state, but these are easy to miss and even easier to misinterpret.

With C.A.S.I.E. activated, optimally resolving the Rucker battle is trivial. Reading between the lines of Rucker’s rhetoric before making a considered response is no longer required: the HUD, with its blinking glyphs and readouts, tells players everything they need to
Some simple text and graphics – the see-sawing of a meter, keywords to reductively characterize Rucker, some flashing lights over basic symbols – capture the player’s attention as the three-dimensional vividness of face-to-face conversation is reduced to a simple game of Simon Says. As Reddit user Some_Guy_87 remarks, ‘Instead of really listening to the conversations, I just watch a spot on the screen and count pings’ (2016).

In Sicart’s (2010) terms, C.A.S.I.E. explicitly draws the player’s attention to the procedural layer of the social battle, to the nuts and bolts of its underlying systems, and away from its semiotic layer. The result is a system that encourages the player to treat social battles instrumentally, as trivial ludic challenges devoid of moral significance, underlining the possibility of ethical cognitive dissonance while simultaneously reducing NPCs like Rucker to treasure chests requiring the right sequence of commands to yield their goodies. Here again we see how affording the player godlike moral agency undermines moral engagement: Jensen is not talking to these people, he is commanding them, rendering their point-of-view, their objections, their status as moral agents completely moot. C.A.S.I.E. affords the player the opportunity for an immaculate playthrough, leaving them with nothing to reflect on ethically (Sicart a, 171). The player need not interpret consequences and readjust in moments of limited agency because C.A.S.I.E. always provides the optimal solution.

Mankind Divided’s prequel, Human Revolution, also features the C.A.S.I.E. augmentation, but implements it in a slightly different way. In this game, C.A.S.I.E. displays the personality type of the targeted NPC, but does not label responses with corresponding glyphs, motivating the player to – as Reddit user revanchisto puts it in the previously quoted thread – ‘actually think about [their] response based on the psychological profile [of the NPC]’ (2016). In this regard, Human Revolution’s implementation of C.A.S.I.E. is – from the perspective of moral engagement – arguably superior to the system featured in Mankind Divided, giving players just enough information to make an informed choice without reducing the decision-making process to pure pattern matching. This maintains a rough balance between the game’s procedural and semiotic layers, placing players in a position where they can contrast the system’s ludic imperatives – select this to win the conversation – with the semantic content of what Jensen and the NPC are saying to each other, creating the possibility of ethical cognitive friction. However, because the optimal responses in Human Revolution tend to also be the most ethical and in keeping with Jensen’s character, this possibility is sadly underexploited.
Systemic Cruelty in Darkest Dungeon

*Darkest Dungeon* is a cross between a dungeon crawler and RPG created by British-Columbia based Red Hook Studios, released for the PC and Mac on January 19, 2016. Prior to its release the game appeared on Steam Early Access, first for Kickstarter backers and then for a general audience. The game has also been released for Sony’s PlayStation 4 and Vita platforms, as well as for Linux and iOS tablets. The game has received largely positive critical attention, and has sold more than one million copies (Sigman, 2016).

*Darkest Dungeon* builds on a familiar premise – the player must assemble parties of four heroes to descend into dungeons, in order to slay monsters and gain loot. Dungeons are procedurally generated, and players can level up their heroes over time to take and deal more damage. The four dungeon areas feature gradually more difficult quests and bosses to defeat, culminating in a final boss battle. Complicating an already difficult game with tough enemies and little margin for error is permadeath. If a hero (or several heroes) dies on an adventure, they are gone for good. It’s possible – and actually entirely likely – to experience full party wipes of veteran-level heroes, which (ironically) the game will award you an achievement for. To manage the flow of new and old heroes required for the game’s larger campaign, the player controls a town where she can recruit novice heroes of various classes. There are multiple types of heroes, but most offer some combination of direct combat, ranged attacks, area-of-effect spells, and healing abilities. The town also features facilities where players can upgrade heroes’ weapons, armour and abilities, as well a Tavern, an Abbey, and a Sanitarium for heroes to recover in after tough adventures.

Many similar fantasy-themed role-playing games offer players various ethical or moral dilemmas, usually built into the game through mechanics such as morality meters or various types of karma systems. In contrast, *Darkest Dungeon* does away with alignment and karma systems, instead opting to focus on the mental health of the heroes in the players’ care. As the game’s creators explain ‘what really matters is how the heroes feel, not how the player feels’ (Sigman & Bourassa, 2015). Perhaps because of that shift in focus, there are no obviously sign-posted moral or ethical decisions for the player to make in the game’s storyline. One is not asked to save one character instead of another or whether or not to activate a nuclear device and wipe a
small city off the map like in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2007; Staines, 2010). The story remains the same no matter how players approach the tasks set to them. The system is again reminiscent of Nay and Zagal’s discussion of virtue ethics in games, where ‘even when choices are inconsequential, they can be morally meaningful to their players when they are used to gain insight (or develop insight) into the moral fibre of those characters players control’ (Nay & Zagal, 2017). Similarly to *Firewatch*, choices and their consequences play out through the small decisions that accrete over time concerning how players want to treat all, some or none of their heroes.

Managing and monitoring mental health is one of the core mechanics built into *Darkest Dungeon*. In addition to each hero’s hit points and various gear and weapon related stats, the game displays a stress meter that slowly – or rapidly – climbs as heroes make their way through a dungeon. Stress can be accumulated from participating in combat, and especially from the attacks of certain classes of enemies who specialize in dealing stress rather than physical damage. One such creature is the Madman, whose two main abilities are ‘Doomsday’ and ‘Accusation,’ which cause only 0 and 1 hit point of damage respectively, but instead add varying levels of stress to their targeted victim, who is usually the hero with the highest stress level in the party.

However, a hero’s stress also accumulates when torches lighting the way in a dungeon burn lower, from lack of food, from seeing other heroes taking damage or being killed, as well as through backtracking during exploration and in response to certain quirks a hero may have. A hero’s stress meter slowly fills from such events, and eventually triggers the game’s Affliction System. At the moment of triggering, the game will inform the player that the hero’s ‘resolve’ is being tested, and things can go one of two ways – most commonly the hero develops an affliction such as Fearful, Selfish or Paranoid. Occasionally the hero will instead gain a Virtue such as Stalwart, Courageous or Powerful. Either way, Afflictions cause heroes to act out during battles in ways that players cannot control, such as cowering and refusing to fight, or doing extra damage in their attacks or self-healing. And stress keeps rising for Afflicted heroes until it hits 200 points, at which time the hero suffers a heart attack, and can be permanently killed with a

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2 There is only one instance of such a choice in the game (that we know of). In the final boss battle, the final form of the boss is Heart of Darkness and it has a particular attack called Come Unto Your Maker, which deals an instant killing blow to one of your party’s heroes. However, the player must make the choice of which hero will be sacrificed.
single blow. The stress and affliction system and how players choose to engage with it forms the core of what makes *Darkest Dungeon* so interesting from an ethical standpoint. Players can choose to engage with the system in ways that keep all their heroes healthy, or drive them to the brink of madness and then dispose of them, or even nurture a particular set of heroes throughout the game, while using other heroes as means toward that end. The game doesn’t reward or punish any of those approaches — it instead is up to the player to decide what kind of overseer they wish to be.

Indeed, as the town’s overseer, the player is never asked or directed by the game to be particularly altruistic or ruthless in their handling of heroes, and heroes themselves are never portrayed as inherently good or bad. Instead, similarly to *Firewatch*, players make multiple seemingly mundane choices about how to treat their heroes — as potentially valuable assets to be nurtured, or as cannon fodder to be disposed of when most convenient.

Case in point: when provisioning a group for a dungeon crawl, the player can purchase as much or as little food and torches as they deem necessary to complete the event. Provisioning many or few torches (which are fairly cheap) may seem ethically neutral, but it can have a powerful impact on the mental health of one’s heroes — both positively and negatively. At full light levels heroes have better chances of scouting ahead for traps or enemies, but as light levels decrease, it’s more probable that the party will be taken by surprise by enemies, that heroes will suffer more stress damage, and that enemies make stronger attacks. For some players then, keeping the lights on becomes a priority, no matter the potential cost involved. However, in lower light levels heroes can also gain greater loot and increase their chances of striking critical hits, possibly pushing players in the other direction, of keeping their heroes in the (literal) dark. And individual heroes may also have afflictions that greatly increase their stress levels in low light, or even react poorly to full light conditions, exacerbating those original decisions. Players must take all such conditions into account when deciding how many torches to purchase, potentially confronting ethical cognitive dissonance as the ludic imperatives of optimally managing available resources (including the human variety) conflicts with the cultural significance of intentionally torturing people for profit.
Another series of micro-choices that the player must confront involve how to deal with afflictions that heroes accumulate during adventures. While stress can be reduced or eliminated by trips to the Abbey or Tavern (with treatments that cost varying amounts), certain afflictions can only be removed through a visit to the Sanitarium’s Medical and Treatment Wards. Some afflictions aren’t cheap to remove. For example, a hero in one of our games (Bose, a level 5 Leper) currently suffers from Necromania (fascination with corpses), Cove Phobe (+20% stress in the Cove dungeon), Resolution (won’t drink while in town), Enlightened (will only meditate while in town) and Fear of Eldritch (+15% stress versus Eldritch type enemies; -10 Accuracy versus Eldritch). It would cost 30,100 gold to remove all those afflictions. Similarly, Watteau, a level 5 Man-at-Arms suffers from several similar afflictions, but also has three Diseases: Bulimic (-20% healing in Camp), The Red Plague (-75% Bleed resist) and The Runs (-20 Dodge and -10% maximum HP). His diseases are a relative bargain – only 1,138 gold to remove each one. As a point of reference, missions pay out various amounts for successful completion – ranging from around 3,000 to more than 12,000 gold coins, and heroes will often find more gold and
vals while exploring. However, it costs several thousand gold to provision a party for a mission, and if they fail there is no reward given – only an increase in their stress levels.

In their game design discussions, the developers have repeatedly made the point that they wanted to ‘toy with player agency’ and also to ‘capture the human response to stress’ (Sigman & Bourassa, 2015). In our analysis, Darkest Dungeon succeeds in capturing the ‘human response’ to (and by extension: moral significance of) stress partly because it toys with player agency, systemically limiting the player’s ability to resolve the game’s implicit ‘wicked problems’ (Sicart, 2013) with Mankind Divided-style optimal solutions. Adventurers cannot avoid trauma, and as harm accumulates over the game’s slow grind this trauma becomes harder and harder to ignore, giving the player plenty of time to appreciate it from an ethical perspective.

We believe the system could be even more successful in this regard if the game’s semiotic layer did more to humanize the adventurers under your control, exacerbating the friction that results from treating them poorly. Sicart’s (2011) extended discussion of the Sorrow sequence in Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater (Konami, 2004) points to a way this might be achieved. In this sequence, the player must negotiate a river swarming with the restless spirits of fallen foes. If the player has been liberal dispensing lead, the river will be dense with ghosts that hold back the avatar, hindering progress and providing space for the player to reflect. Sicart writes, ‘this gameplay sequence is one of the most accomplished translations of the ethical possibilities of games into actual game design.’ (Sicart, 2011, p.107). Perhaps if, as reviewer Joseph Anderson suggests (2016), Darkest Dungeon did something similar, confronting the player with all their dead heroes at the game’s conclusion, a similar effect could be achieved. The game’s graveyard, where players can go to view tombstones of fallen heroes, is along the same lines, but the effect is muted by the identical headstones and procedural descriptions.

By drawing on the familiar rhetoric of mental health to frame stress and ailments, Darkest Dungeon already makes an implicit plea for the player to sympathize with their suffering heroes, but perhaps this plea would be more persuasive in a game with a more serious, less jokey tone. While most of us can sympathize to some degree with mental health issues like depression and paranoia, afflictions like Necromania and Fear of the Eldritch are, we hope, far less relatable. As an example of how tone might reframe the systemic logic of the stress/ailment system, imagine a similar system implemented in a game about managing staff in an emergency ward or a platoon of soldiers in Afghanistan, where ailments like ‘PTSD’ are not inflicted by giant
spiders but by the loss of a patient or an encounter with a roadside IED. While far easier said than done, recontextualizing gameplay systems in this fashion may be a sensible, efficient approach to ENG design for academics, indies, and other resource-limited developers.

Conclusion

In this article we have examined three recent, popular examples of ethically notable games (ENGs): *Firewatch*, *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, and *Darkest Dungeon*. Perhaps more than anything else, what our analysis indicates is that commercial game designers are exploring more diverse, sophisticated approaches to representing morality and moral choice in their games. Where ‘big choices with big consequences’ once dominated ENGs, we now find a multitude of games – particularly within the indie sphere – exploring micromoral scenarios, refocusing on the small everyday decisions that, in aggregate, paint a picture of our moral character. Where ‘morality meters’ once proliferated we now see games like *Darkest Dungeon* and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), featuring core gameplay loops that are intentionally problematised at the semiotic level (Formosa, Ryan, & Staines, 2016) provoking ethical cognitive dissonance and compelling the player to reflect on choices they’ve made and must continue to make if they wish to keep playing. In stark contrast to heroic epics like *Mass Effect*, these games indicate that selectively restricting the player’s moral agency is an effective means of ‘slowing down’ gameplay and providing space for a reactive, instrumental player to focus on the broader significance of their actions. Conversely, absolute moral agency may have the opposite effect, diminishing the humanity of NPCs and reducing dialogue to a series of diktats delivered by the godlike player.

Of the three games we’ve analysed, *Firewatch* stands out for its consistent and accomplished implementation of the design techniques discussed. Nevertheless, it’s worth remarking that, on our viewing of numerous playthrough videos on YouTube, we found players still eager to fulfill what they perceived to be the game’s ‘traditional’ ludic goals. Many players, for example, had Henry put all collectible items in his pack, irrespective of who they belonged to or what the implications of taking them might be. This isn’t surprising: the imperative underpinning many videogames – particularly of the adventure/RPG variety – is to be a packrat and collect absolutely everything and anything in the off chance it may come in useful down the track. Disabusing players of these long-ingrained habits and encouraging them to view gameworlds as more than purely instrumental is no mean feat, and as we can see even games that
do a superior job of facilitating ethical play falter in the face of someone determined to play unreflectively. This is both a drawback of ENGs generally and a necessary, crucial component of their design. The player must choose to be reflective because free choice is the fundamental basis of ethical responsibility: it isn’t enough to simply tell players when their choices are morally significant, or to force ethical reflectiveness with reductive metrics like morality meters and karma points. In short, if we want players to play reflectively, we must convince them to play reflectively. Design features described in this article go some way toward achieving this goal, but there is still ample room for improvement and we look forward to seeing how ENG design continues to evolve in the future.

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