

crafted systems and worlds of games to the creative and destructive forces of play. Designers will have to sit back and see how players (mis)interpret, appropriate, discuss, and perhaps even modify what they have created. The challenge is to open up for ambiguity, for value-driven gameplay, and for many things that cannot be formalized but are at the core of the rich activity of play, including politics, morals, values, vices, and virtues. The main challenge for ethical gameplay designers is to make play personal again and to acknowledge that with ethics, what matters is not a game but people's play.

5 The Design of Ethical Gameplay

It was a cloudy October afternoon in Pittsburgh, and as I browsed among the shelves of a hipster store, I found rack after rack of unusual plush toys. There were stuffed animals called Ebola, the Black Death, even the Flu—soft and big-eyed, waiting for someone to pick them up and play.

These toys by Giantmicrobes, Inc. are designed to look like diseases, bacteria, and viruses. For someone with an interest in play, they are a must-have, and so I left with a wide selection of diseases.

Later that day, I met an old friend whom I had not seen in a long time. While we were heading for dinner, I gave him one of the plush toys. He unwrapped it, stared at the toy, and said, "After all this time, and all you have for me is gonorrhea?"

Then I understood something. Unknowingly, my friend had given me a clue about how to design ethical gameplay.

The Anatomy of Toys

I keep some of those stuffed animals from Giantmicrobes on the shelves in my office, mostly as a reminder of how to think about ethics, design, and players. I sometimes take one to my game-design lectures, and when I ask students to play with my gonorrhea toy, they laugh uncomfortably. Students pass it to each other, but only a few play with it. Something about that toy is deeply unsettling. Playing with gonorrhea, even when it is designed for play, feels fundamentally wrong. Understanding how these Giantmicrobes toys work and why they create unsettling play experiences is key to the design of ethical gameplay.

Toys are tools for play and generally have no formal rules. If we look at them with a designer's eye, we can analyze how they create play and why.

In toys, we cannot easily infer goals, player satisfaction, gameplay progression, and similar game-related complexities. In their purity, toys neatly disclose relationships between design choices and play behaviors. They are the optimal starting point for understanding how experiences like ethical gameplay can be designed.

Consider the design of the gonorrhea plush toy. The object is about 10 centimeters long. It has an hourglass shape and is around 5 centimeters at its broadest. It has short, gray-blue hair, and two big blue eyes. It cannot stand up on its own. It feels light and soft. It can easily be held in an adult's hand but is a bit too large for a child's. An adult will likely use one hand to manipulate it, and children may use both. A label on its right side says that the object represents the gonorrhea bacteria.

Now consider a conventional teddy bear. It is about 10 centimeters high and 7.5 centimeters at its widest point. It has short, light hair and two medium-size eyes. It has a head, arms, and legs. None of the limbs are

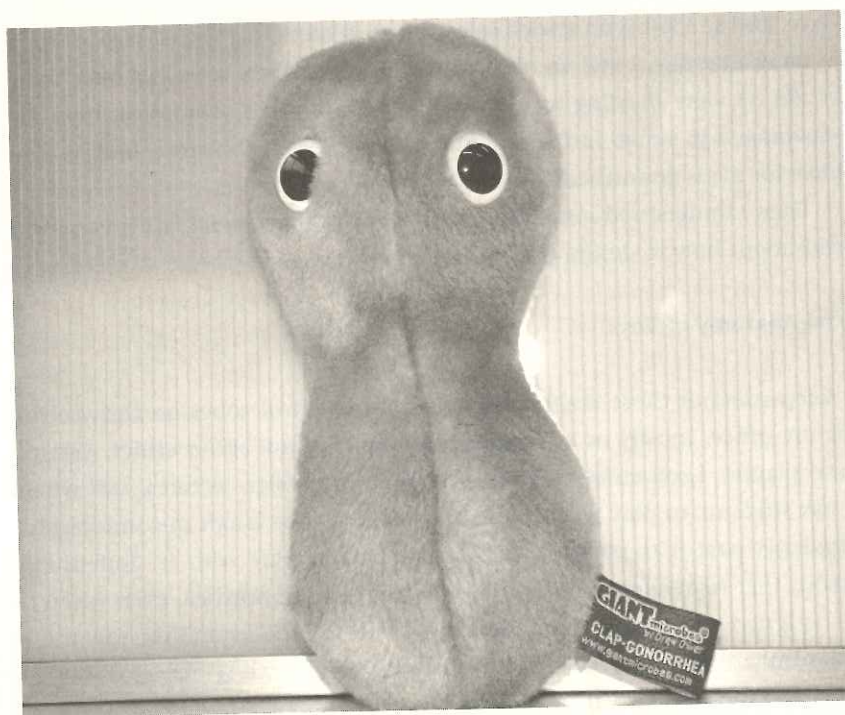


Figure 5.1
Gonorrhea, a stuffed toy



Figure 5.2
Miguelito, a teddy bear

represented with detail, and they all have limited movement capacities, vertically and horizontally. The bear can remain upright while seated. It is light and soft. An adult can manipulate it with one hand, while a child will use both. The object resembles an idealized teddy bear and does not have a label.

Both objects are plush toys that were designed for play. But how are people supposed to play with them? Let's return to the concepts of perceived affordances and constraints (Gibson 1986; Norman 2002, 2004, 2010). In *The Design of Everyday Things*, Norman (2002, 82) states that "affordances can signal how an object can be moved, what it will support, and whether anything will fit into its crevices, over it, or under it. . . . affordances suggest the range of possibilities, constraints limit the number of alternatives." Norman argues that well-designed objects help their users by suggesting possible interactions—encouraging certain behaviors and making others impossible. Objects can do this by design, with no need for instruction manuals. Signifiers, affordances, and constraints relate to our cultural and emotional values, too. In *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday*

Things, Norman (2004) suggests that design can create emotional experiences, sometimes by sacrificing optimal, usability-correct design elements. In Norman's view, designed objects are not necessarily merely functional. An emotional domain explains why we like some objects more than others, even if they are not as functional as they could be. In the case of toys, emotional design explains why we have objects that generate the pleasures of play.

Toys use affordances to create play, which is, among other things, an emotional experience. The teddy bear, for example, is an object that is designed for hugging. Its arms are pointed forward and slightly upward, like the arms of a small child who is asking to be picked up. The bear can sit, participate in the child's games with other toys, and be left alone. It will wait in its sitting position as though it is expecting to be picked up when the player returns.

The teddy bear is also designed to cue other emotional responses that contribute to the play experience. Its big head and eyes appeal to people's protection and care instincts. A teddy bear wants to be loved and hugged, so the elements of its design afford these behaviors.

The anatomy of toys shows us how design cues certain behaviors and experiences by means of perceived affordances. As users of things, we are always subject to the ways that a well-designed object suggests how we should use it, why we should use it, and how we should feel when using it.

A Shocking Toy

So how does the gonorrhea toy make us feel, by design? Its design shares many affordances with the teddy bear. It is soft and rewarding to hug and manipulate. It has big blue eyes that anthropomorphize the bacteria, invoking instincts of care that are similar to those of the teddy bear. The gonorrhea toy is designed to be hugged and cared for.

Yet it represents gonorrhea, not a baby mammal, and the interactions that it affords generate a hilarious, unsettling play experience. Players are asked to interact with the gonorrhea toy as if it is a conventional teddy bear. But there is a contradiction between the modes of usage of the object and its cultural meaning. Playing with the gonorrhea toy is playing with a taboo. This toy manipulates the meaning of toys and play, and it does so by conflicting design affordances and cultural meanings.

This tension between the meaning of the object and its designed uses can also be found in computer games that generate ethical experiences. In chapter 3, I describe the two dominant gradients of abstraction that constitute the formal structure of a game: a procedural level contains the rules, mechanics, and other systems, and a semiotic level communicates, contextualizes, and makes users empathize with this system.

Game-design wisdom suggests that players need accurate information about their state in the game and will make choices based on that information. The semiotic level of the game is used as a transcription of the procedural level. Metaphors are used to eliminate ambiguities and to create conventions that can be learned and applied to other similar games. What Jesper Juul (2005) has called the player repertoire is a translation of this operative principle to game-design theory: players learn how to interact with game genres by playing. Metaphors translate systems and create emotional behaviors in play.

Interesting things happen when games do not follow semiotic conventions. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007) offers a good example of how traditions can be manipulated to create an ethical gameplay experience. In the eleventh mission of the game, "Aftermath," players, who are controlling US Marine sergeant Paul Jackson, are commissioned to retrieve a nuclear device from a Middle Eastern city. Despite the players' efforts, the situation escalates, forcing the soldiers to retreat and be extracted from the area. While they are escaping, a nuclear device detonates, and the blast catches the fleeing helicopters.

At this point when I was playing the game, I saw the helicopter go down and the screen fade to black. I waited for an explanatory cinematic sequence (a cutscene) that honored the dead heroes.

Then a miracle happened. The game returned me to my first-person perspective. I was able to move. I was in the wreck of the helicopter, surrounded by the dead bodies of my comrades. I crawled outside, looked around, saw the remains of a schoolyard and broken toys, and heard the faint voices of children. I could not walk properly, but I was alive. Soon, I thought, I will be rescued. There will be time for vengeance.

Then I stumble. The world fades to white, and I die.

The gameplay plot device in the "Aftermath" sequence is simple: players are given agency, but it is limited by a narrative purpose. This authorial affordance creates an experience of powerlessness that contradicts the

conventional metaphors of the player as hero. But how and why does this powerful technique work?

The gonorrhea toy reminds us that play is the activity that actively reconnects, by a process of appropriation, the processes and the semiotics of a game. The toy is shocking because it creates friction between what it means and how it tells us to use it. Similarly, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* creates a tension between agency and meaning, behavior and content. That tension is at the heart of ethical gameplay design.

Play, Design, and Experiences

Sometimes, the best games are those that require observation, not action. Those who love spectator sports know that the experience of a game goes beyond those who play. But sometimes computer games succeed at giving meaning to not playing. In my most memorable moment while playing *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), I could not do anything at all—except look at the screen and wait.

Heavy Rain is a narrative game that tells the interwoven stories of four characters who are related to each other through the crimes of a serial murderer. The first character that players control is Ethan Mars. They first play a glimpse of his life as a successful father and professional until one of his sons is killed in an accident. Ethan feels guilty for the death, and players are taken to the near future where his life is falling apart.

Ethan's relationship with his surviving son is troubled. They are unable to connect and are suffering from the loss of their sibling and son. Players are given control over Ethan one evening as he is picking up his son from school. The situation is awkward. As a player, I felt emotionally attached to this young boy who wanted to be left alone to watch TV. I wanted him to know that he was not alone, so I made dinner for him and for me, commanded my avatar to sit with his son and have dinner, but could not say anything sensible or tender. I had to either sit or stand up and leave, explore the house, or make the game progress. Because I felt that I owed the kid a family dinner, even a silent one, I kept my avatar sitting down while I stared at the screen for several long minutes. The game was engaging me emotionally. Not playing had become an emotional game mechanic.

As I have argued before, making systems, rules, and challenges are elements of the practice of game design, but game designers should care about

the creation of interesting play experiences. Game design is the application of design to the purpose of allowing people to play. And in the case of ethical gameplay, how play is designed becomes a relevant issue. The goal of design is to create engaging systems that allow players to feel emotionally attached to the experience of the game. Game designers should craft an interesting and innovative game system, but they also should be able to communicate it in unambiguous ways that are emotionally resonant for their target audience.

Game-design common sense suggests that metaphors and conventions are required to ease the players' task of interpreting the game system. Good game design provides players with sufficient information to make informed choices. Players always need to know what their state in the game is, why should they care, and what strategies apply to that state.

In the case of action and adventure games, for example, narratives, characters, and game worlds are aligned to certain moral and cultural frames so that players can easily understand how and why to progress. The Grand Theft Auto saga is a good example: it appropriates a set of cultural common places and uses them to let players start their epic adventures without much explanation. Metaphors in this series borrow liberally from computer game traditions, film, media, and pop culture, making a rather conventional game into something exciting.

In games with morality-based gameplay, keeping players informed about their status in the game is often accomplished via an ethical system. In *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008), a user-interface element explains the "moral state" of the player in the gameworld. This evaluation is based on calculations done by the game system according to a predetermined table of ethical settings with hardcoded values. These calculations are communicated to players by means of "karma points." These kinds of ethical systems quantize the values of the choices taken by players and inform them of the moral meaning of their actions as interpreted by the game system.

All these design choices are intended to ease the experience of the game. Players need to understand what actions are desirable and possible and what the state of the game is. Games provide detailed feedback about all these elements to the player, so that the choices offered can be made with sufficient information.

In summary, game designers create a playful activity by creating a system and communicating it to the player so that the game is playable and

emotionally relevant. But is providing information about ammunition the same as providing relevant knowledge about ethical dilemmas? Intuitively, the answer is no. But why?

I have defined *ethical gameplay* as the experience of a game by players who make choices that are based on morality considerations that are derived from their understanding of the game system. So to design ethical gameplay, we need to understand how information about the game is communicated to players and how they relate to the gameplay experience in a moral way.

In the "Aftermath" mission in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, the player is the victim of a nuclear blast and lives long enough to see the consequences of the explosion. This moment is ethically and emotionally powerful because it deals with mortality and the consequences of atomic warfare and also because players are encouraged to experience it in a moral way.

The design elements of this videogame cued my own ethical interpretation of it. When the helicopter crashed, I expected my character to be dead, so I waited for a computer-generated cinematic sequence to appear. Then agency was restored to my character. This surprised me, challenged my expectations, and required me to readjust. Because I was suddenly alive and could control my avatar, I expected a rescue party to arrive so that I could play again.

But this limited agency was a trick played on my expectations. When I have control over my avatar in any game, I can interact with the world in meaningful ways. In this case, the game did not lie to me but toyed with the usual game conventions (that agency leads to manipulation of the environment, which leads to gameplay). I regained agency only to die, and no heroic narrative sequence followed. I died an anonymous, nonheroic death in a desolate war zone.

This experience was created by means of game-design techniques. When the designers granted limited agency, they knew that players would feel surprised by the restoration of their agency and would begin to hope for survival. When the actual outcome is death, the designers once again shatter players' expectations. Emotions are created by rapidly contradicting player expectations.

This is a designed ethical experience that manipulates the communication of the procedural level by means of gameplay conventions. Players expect the game to be over because they think that their character is dead,

and then when the character suddenly comes alive again, they expect the game to continue. These mismatches between information and agency provide space for an ethical experience to occur.

Three designed elements are at play here:

- The procedurally determined time and agency constraints,
- The semiotic domain that communicates a situation by using the metaphor of a survivor of a helicopter crash, and
- The conceptual tension between a player's expectations and the system's behavior.

The design of ethical gameplay needs to be framed in the context of these relations. What I am proposing here is a systematization of concepts that will allow designers to formalize their gameplay design goals and processes in terms of creating potential ethical gameplay experiences. Games have already proven that they can create them, so a robust conceptual framework will allow the issue of ethical gameplay to be approached in a systematic way.

Not all games and not all players will experience a moral gameplay situation, even if the game is designed with that intention. Play is a complex phenomenon, and game design can only aspire to cue play activities and experiences. Some players, in some situations, will experience the kind of deep moral challenge that ethical gameplay generates. However, understanding how this experience is created provides a deeper understanding of the potential of game design for the exploration of complex emotions.

On Methods and Friction

Looking back at the history of computer games, from *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Origin Systems and Garriott 1985) to *Call of Duty IV: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007), and even the history of board games, from *Monopoly* (Magie 1903) to *War on Terror: The Board Game* (Sheerin and Tompkins 2006), we can find successful ethical experiences. The nuanced moral system in *Ultima IV* precedes that of *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios 2008), and *War on Terror's* multiplayer dynamics invokes the value-ridden systems of the board game *Diplomacy* (Calhamer 1959) or the folk game *Mafia* (also called *Werewolf*). So if games have been able to generate ethical experiences, why does this book exist? Could we just look, learn, and imitate?

The problem with learning from past achievements is a lack of method. Methodologies are created to systematize knowledge and practices, making them repeatable and subject to innovation. Therefore, a method for understanding ethical gameplay will allow us to analyze what different objects have in common and then formulate a design problem in a delimited problem space to create a solution that responds to our needs.

A method invokes processes that are repeatable and that validate the results of particular hypotheses, experiments, or claims. Determining methods and formalized approaches to problem solving has been a fundamental issue in the discipline of design. One tradition of works has focused on understanding how designers think, how they solve problems, and how that knowledge can be systematized. Design methods are practices derived from different approaches to design problem solving that allow designers to identify the various elements at stake in a concrete task and make the best possible decisions according to the given constraints.

In the context of this book, I define *method* as a “designerly way of knowing.” Design is not art, and therefore it can be systematized. Design is not an exact science, and therefore formal methods have only a certain applicability, usually within the context of a practice. That is, brainstorming and focus groups are methodological approaches to solving design problems, but the formulation and solution of those problems cannot be formalized in positivist methods.

However, designers approach problems in particular, “designerly” ways by using tools that allow them to situate a problem, its possible solutions, the stakeholders, and the tools needed to approach them in a particular context. This way of thinking is what I refer to as *method*, and my approach to method is a way to make game designers think designerly about the problem of ethical gameplay. The goal in this chapter is to help designers formalize the essence of ethical gameplay while maintaining the freedom to address the problem in particular ways.

Which conceptual framework explains how ethical gameplay works, and how can it be used to structure the design problem? The key to these questions was alluded to earlier in this chapter in the discussion of the gonorrhea plush toy and the way that its design illuminates our understanding of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007).

I described the stuffed toy’s affordances within the conventions of plush toy design: the object compels the user to hug it and to appreciate its

softness. These affordances collide with the toy’s representation of a venereal disease. Interacting with the toy results in a shock that comes from the tension between the designed instructions to play and its meaning: what it tells us to do contradicts what it represents.

With this in mind, consider again the “Aftermath” mission in the videogame *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. It follows certain game-design conventions for player agency, but “Aftermath” uses these conventions to turn typical genre expectations upside down. Instead of ending as a hero, the player becomes a victim who is barely capable of acting before death comes from external, uncontrollable sources. The empowering promise of many computer games is shattered in favor of a powerful message about the human condition in modern warfare.

Understanding the design of ethical gameplay requires examining the ways that procedural and semiotic elements interrelate and translate systems. The challenge of communicating how a system operates is not new for designers. Researchers in usability and human-computer interaction have focused on these questions for a long time. What can game designers learn from these fields, and how can it be applied to the design of ethical gameplay?

A basic assumption must be that good design communicates how a system works in a clear and unambiguous way so that the user expends only a minimum effort to interact with an object.

Donald Norman and Alan Cooper have established a set of concepts that formalize the optimal and emotional design of objects and services. A concept that is particularly relevant for ethical gameplay design is introduced in Cooper’s *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum: Why High Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity* (2004)—cognitive friction.

Cognitive friction is “the resistance encountered by a human intellect when it engages with a complex system of rules that change as the problem changes” (Cooper 2004, 19). When you interact with a particularly horrid user interface, you do not know where menus are, how to perform the simplest of tasks, and what the status of the task at hand is. Think about the first time that you opened a software application like Adobe Photoshop. Where are things located? What do I do to get what I want? Where am I? All of these reactions are symptoms of cognitive friction.

Cooper understands that designers should create objects that ease tasks for their users and also ease the relations between objects and users.

Designers should use their skills to decrease cognitive friction. Donald Norman (2002, 188) states that design should

- Make it easy to determine what actions are possible at any moment (make use of constraints).
- Make things visible, including the conceptual model of the system, the alternative actions, and the results of actions.
- Make it easy to evaluate the current state of the system.
- Follow natural mappings between intentions and the required actions; between actions and the resulting effect; and between the information that is visible and the interpretation of the system state.

In other words, make sure that (1) the user can figure out what to do and (2) the user can tell what is going on.

Nevertheless, designers are not always interested in reducing cognitive friction. Sometimes it is important to create objects that generate moderate cognitive friction, such as aesthetic objects or extravagant designs. Users of these objects experience something beyond just the functionality of the object. Norman justifies some nonoptimal design decisions if they enforce emotional design. For example, Philippe Starck's famous 1990 Juicy Salif is not the best tool for extracting juice and requires some work from the user to make it perform optimally. However, it is a beautiful object whose design is at the service not of purpose but of emotion. Or perhaps emotion is the purpose.

Games are emotional objects. Some aspects of games—such as menus, user-interface elements, and gameplay information like health status or timers—need good usability. However, games also demand emotional attachment. The pleasure of uncertainty in some strategy games may come from the use of fog of war, a design that increases cognitive friction to enhance a particular type of experience. A similar effect is caused in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008) after the avatar consumes alcohol and does not respond to the controller input in a precise way, making the act of moving a gameplay challenge. The feeling and behaviors of being drunk are communicated by a design with a limited amount of controlled cognitive friction.

Design choices can generate emotional experiences in the user by increasing cognitive friction. By extension, in the context of ethical gameplay design, cognitive friction can be used as a tool to create these kinds of experiences. Cognitive friction explains why some objects are better experienced emotionally rather than rationally, and because ethical gameplay

is a type of emotional design, it can be created by consciously applying cognitive friction.¹

Cognitive friction is the effect of a design approach to a particular problem. If the problem is the design of ethical gameplay, then ethical cognitive friction can be a solution that introduces tension between the procedural and the semiotic levels and potentially generates moral reflection. Ethical cognitive friction is a pause in instrumentality that allows creative play to take over.

Friction can also be understood as a type of dissonance, and conventional game design requires a harmonic approach to the design of the elements that connect the game system to the semiotic system. In other words, conventional game design bridges the gap between systems and players by translating as clearly as possible the inner workings of the system. The mana (resource that regulates magic) and health user-interaction elements in *Diablo II* (Blizzard Entertainment 2000) are represented onscreen by two spherical containers that lose a blue and red liquid-like substance as players use more magic or lose more health. Recovering magic or health requires players to “drink” potions, so the “liquid” metaphor makes it easy for players to understand how to use the system. But in case the graphic representation is too ambiguous, there is also a numeric user-interface element that states the current health or mana and the maximum. At a glance, players can see what their state is, but they can also read the numbers to maximize strategies and resources. Casual play and instrumental play are both afforded by this interface.

Players can pursue elaborate strategies based on a deep understanding of the system, and they also develop an emotional attachment to the outcome of those strategies. Similarly, in conventional game design, there is nothing worse than a level that is plagued with invisible walls, a challenge with random or unpredictable changes that affect the players' fate, or an inconsistent user interface that does not communicate the state of the game.

These are design and usability principles that need to be respected. However, sometimes it is useful to break conventions to create other kinds of engaging experiences. These can be the consequence of the thoughtful manipulation of the procedural and semiotic levels. The harmonic communication between both levels helps players understand and engage with the game but can turn gameplay into a rational rather than emotional entertainment. From play, we should demand not only entertainment but also something that moves us and leaves us changed.

By applying the idea of ethical cognitive friction to the design of the game system and the metaphors that communicate it, designers can create emotional experiences that might encourage a thoughtful kind of play. This type of experience falls within the reflective, emotional domain of the player experience. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007) translates the complexities of modern warfare not to the procedural domain of the game or to the semiotic but to the experience of both. The message is not in the mechanic or the fiction but in how both are put together—in the dissonance between action and meaning. The mechanic is not the message. The gameworld is not the message. Play is the message.

Back to the Wasteland: An Example

The goal of the designer of ethical gameplay is to identify where to apply ethical cognitive friction. Reverse engineering a game design can show how this might work.

The videogame *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008) takes place in an area known as the Capital Wasteland, one of the most interesting ethical geographies ever designed. The player is given a rudimentary in-game moral evaluation system called the karma score. Many actions in the game, from stealing to freeing slaves, are awarded with karma points, which are not always clear indicators of anything because *Fallout 3* is a world of gray moral zones.

Fallout 3 takes a systematic approach to ethical cognitive friction. Players are barely informed of the notions of good or evil in the Wasteland, so they are left on their own to discover the consequences of their actions. A choice might be rewarded with positive karma but also might have unwanted ethical outcomes. More than in many other open-world games, players of *Fallout 3* have to develop a set of values that guide their actions and see those values challenged by the game's narrative. Perhaps the best example in terms of how ethical cognitive friction is applied in *Fallout 3* is the "Tenpenny Tower" quest.

Besides being a desolate, postnuclear territory, the Wasteland is also land of opportunities. Many gullible souls would give the little that they own for a glimpse of a golden past and the promise of security. Allistair Tenpenny saw opportunities in the rubble and built a tower that became a safe haven from the present by being an approximation of a bygone time. In Tenpenny

Tower, lost souls live the dream of their memories and hide from their own insanity. Tenpenny discourages rebellion by creating an imagined enemy in the ghouls that roam outside the tower.

However, the ghouls do not appear to be unreasonable monsters and claim that all they want is a share of the Tenpenny Tower dream. They once were humans too and now are asking for hope. Tenpenny's aggressive policy against them forces the ghoul leaders to plot more devious approaches to reaching the promised dreams that are guarded in the tower.

When I first arrived at Tenpenny Tower, I met one of the ghouls' leaders, who was politely asking to enter the tower. A casual conversation with him revealed that he was unhappy with Tenpenny's policies and that he had plans for solving the ghouls' problems. After I entered the Tower, I discovered that its world was built as an illusion and ruled by fear. After meeting the tower leaders, I was given a task: I could exterminate the ghouls and thereby earn the trust of the inhabitants of the tower and a place in this haven. After leaving the tower and meeting the ghoul leader again, I was presented with a similar request: the ghouls asked me to help them eliminate the humans.

Because I fancied myself as an Aristotelian roamer of the wasteland, I chose the golden mean. I made a deal that allowed ghouls and humans to live together in the tower without bloodshed. The thought was that they might start a community that would serve as example for the Wasteland. After a careful and delicate negotiation, I left the tower satisfied with the humanitarian resolution to the conflict I had achieved.

But I was wrong. When I returned to the tower, I learned that the ghouls had exterminated all humans. In the Wasteland, my morality and the values I wanted to live by were worthless. In the months after my Tenpenny Tower experience, everything about the world seemed suspicious. Right and wrong seemed unclear. I felt that I was morally lost.

In the "Tenpenny Tower" quest, ethical cognitive friction is used to manipulate the conventions between cause and consequence. Players are deprived of information regarding the possible outcomes of their actions and the moral status of their choices. When reviewing the initial "Tenpenny Tower" quest, few ethicists would claim that my solution was immoral. It involved peace, dialogue, openness, and hope. Even so, the outcome of these ethical actions was unethical.

There is no dominant ethical system in the world of *Fallout 3*. Players are engaged with a world that lacks moral compasses, and they must determine

who they want to be. In retrospect, I should have known that even the most ethical solution is not appropriate in a world where there is no “most ethical solution.”

Ethical cognitive friction in the “Tenpenny Tower” quest operates on two domains. First, the player lacks a moral compass that is rooted in the gameworld, and second, there is no information about what the outcome of the choices taken will be. In fact, the ultimate ethical friction in this setting is the unethical result of an ethical action, which can lead players to be suspicious of their own moral standpoint. By applying ethical cognitive friction to both the gameworld and the particular outcome of a concrete situation, *Fallout 3* succeeds in creating a deeply moral experience. In words of Manveer Heir (personal communication, 2010):

Fallout 3's Tenpenny Tower quest was a huge moment for me as a player and something I will remember forever. The way the “right” solution still ended with a bad outcome and the effect it had on me, making me extremely angry at virtual characters and wanting revenge on them, are emotions I've never felt towards non-humans before. That the game could incite such emotion within me by defying expectation is an amazing example of the power of the medium and something I'm fully interested in exploring further. The fact that *Fallout 3* supported killing anyone in the game world at any time, something I would describe as an “ethical system” (vs. an ethical choice, which is more binary and often overtly presented) gave me an avenue to explore my emotions and get the justice I felt needed.

Playing with Wicked Problems

When I encountered the “Tenpenny Tower” quest in the Wasteland in *Fallout 3*, I gathered all the information that I could and had an idea of my possible options. They all required some degree of ethical thinking. The decision that I made was based on the values that I had developed by playing the game and inhabiting the gameworld. I aspired to create general good for a simulated society, and I believed that all other options were morally less appropriate.

The “Tenpenny Tower” quest is a classic ethical dilemma. Some digital games have used ethical dilemmas extensively when designing their ethical systems. *Fallout 3* succeeds in creating a compelling dilemma because of the way that ethical cognitive friction has been applied to the design of the quest. In *Fallout 3*, the “Tenpenny Tower” quest was designed to be a wicked problem.

Wicked problems have a long history in design studies. They have been used in a variety of subject areas, including planning theory, morality, and ethical decision making in engineering. Wicked problems originated as a concept in social planning where they were used to formulate the nature of the problems that the planner is facing. In the paper that coined the term, Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber (1973) oppose wicked problems to the “tame” and “benign” problems that scientists and engineers face. For them, planning problems are wicked because they have ten characteristics that make them both highly complicated to solve and fundamentally different from problems in other disciplines. These characteristics are summarized by Rittel and Webber (1973, 161–167):

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are good or bad.
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a one-shot operation.
6. Wicked problems do not have an innumerable (or exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.
10. The planner has no right to be wrong.

These characteristics define a type of problem and illustrate the way that planners should approach them. In other words, being aware of the fact that planning is dealing with a wicked problem informs planners about their choices, methods, and the consequences of their actions. The notion of wicked problems can be interpreted as an operational tool for urban planning.

The field of design studies quickly adopted the concept of wicked problems and adapted it to many different domains because as Richard Coyne (2005, 5) has observed, “problems of importance . . . are invariably ‘wicked.’” For designers and design researchers, using the concept of wicked problems allows them to adopt a “designerly way of knowing” as they approach design issues. Designers act on these problems in ways that reflect their knowledge, skills, values, cultural and political backgrounds, and intentions. The concept of wicked problems provides one specific way

of allowing the reflective practitioner (Schön 2007) to take responsibility and ownership over the methods used to approach the problem space (Dorst and Cross 2001) of a particular design.

Wicked problems have unclear boundaries and no clear solutions. They require the designer to work with the certainty that there is no optimal solution, just good-enough solutions. Ibo Van de Poel (2001, 431) argues that wicked problems have at least two characteristics: "it is not possible to make a complete or definite list of all possible alternatives (or, more precisely, the problem space cannot be fully specified)," and "it is not possible to formulate a criterion or set of criteria with which all alternatives can be ordered on a scale from 'good' or 'satisfactory' to 'bad' or 'unsatisfactory.'"

So what the difference is between a wicked problem and a puzzle? Richard Coyne (2005, 8–9) provides an answer: "puzzles are diminished versions of 'wickedness': applicable to highly constrained contexts in which we sometimes choose to make up a formulation in terms of goals, constraints, rules and structures." Hence, all ethical dilemmas in games could be said to be ethical wicked problems.

The situation that players face in the "Tenpenny Tower" quest is complicated, and they have no guides. There is a universal karma system, but unless the player uses external sources of information, there are no clear indications as to what decisions are deemed to be good. The karma system does not always react to a situation, and although it guides the player toward understanding what good and evil are, it does not determine the nature of the dilemmas. Players have four possible responses to the "Tenpenny Tower" dilemma: kill all humans, kill all ghouls, make a deal, or leave the Tower and let the status quo remain unchanged. If players try to solve the moral dilemma, no overarching values guide their choices, other than the vague karma system. Their only points of reference are the statements of the stakeholders in the dilemma and their own values. Solving the dilemma of the "Tenpenny Tower" quest is attempting to solve a wicked problem.

If we revisit the "Tenpenny Tower" quest and apply the ten points that were originally used to define wicked problems, the player who is immersed in the gameplay situation receives no definitive formulation of the dilemma. There is no information regarding the background for making a decision or hints about the outcome. The solution of the problem will be defined as good or bad according both to the external karma system evaluation and

the values of the player. The solution of the dilemma will have limited repercussions in the game. Depending on each solution, alliances will be forged, and in one case, the good initial choice will be revealed as the worst possible decision for one of the parties involved. This dilemma is presented as a symptom of the lack of moral guides in the Wasteland. Finally, the players' values should guide the decision, and these values determine "the nature of the problem's resolution."

Not all characteristics of wicked problems can be applied to the "Tenpenny Tower" quest or to many computer games. Single-player computer games' ethical dilemmas are, like puzzles, reduced versions of wickedness. For instance, the possibility of saving and reloading eliminates the uniqueness of the problem because players can revisit it at any time. Reloading a saved game state makes it challenging to translate what we know about wicked problems to computer games.

However, when reflecting on an ethical dilemma in a computer game, players are similar to planners who are trying to solve a wicked problem. Furthermore, most of the players' actions are based on heuristics that are derived from a complex intertwining of players' goals and experiences, their values, and other social and cultural factors that constitute play. Successful examples of ethical gameplay appeal to a player who enjoys letting values determine choices and seeing that the game respects and encourages that play approach. In words of Thor Frølich (personal communication, 2010), former game designer at IO Interactive:

On irreversibility and lack of information about consequence, I feel there is also an idea in attempting to obscure the point of branching. This might lead to a more thorough evaluation of all choices the player is presented with, since you're never really sure whether this particular choice is one with far-reaching consequence.

Design literature has suggested that designers approach a wicked problem and humans deal with moral issues in an analog fashion. On occasion, design thinking can resemble moral thinking. In *Ethics in Engineering Practice and Research*, Caroline Whitbeck (1998, 54) writes: "the need for a response is what makes ethical problems practical problems. The similarities between ethical problems and another class of practical problems, design problems, are instructive for thinking about the resolution of ethical problems."

Whitbeck (1998, 57) looks at those approaches to ethical problems that seek "unique correct solutions . . . since that would make ethical problems

a type of multiple-choice problem.” In the conventional design of ethical dilemmas in games, there are many of these kinds of multiple-choice tests, from *Fable* (Lionhead Studios 2004) to *Infamous* (Sucker Punch Productions 2009). These problems are interesting and can be dramatic, but they are still formulated as multiple-choice tests in which players have close to perfect information. Ethical thinking is suggested as a way of approaching the problem but is not required, so these designs often fail to create compelling ethical gameplay. Players, designers, and researchers need ethical dilemmas that require them to think morally. Ethical gameplay design implies engaging the player beyond choices through wicked problems and dissonant challenges.

If designers can use ill-defined (wicked) problems to create ethical dilemmas, then players will struggle to solve them using ethical thinking. Players might try to overcome the ethical cognitive friction by applying moral thinking to try to solve the wicked problem.

Ethical dilemmas in games should complicate matters for players. They should obscure information and require players to consider the cultural domain of the game as well as their own in-game and out-of-game values when making choices and reflecting about the nature of their gameplay experience.

No More Safety

I believe that ethical dilemmas in games can be made more complex and ambiguous (more wicked) to create deeper gameplay experiences based on moral reasoning. But some intrinsic obstacles to these experiences are built into the way that games have been traditionally designed. How can a consequence be important if players can reload and return to the state where decisions are still possible? If ethical gameplay is personal, then play is not safe, and we cannot explore through play with no consequences. For play to matter personally, safety needs to be reduced, and emotional openings for interpretation need to be increased.

Exploration tools such as reloading and quick saving are useful and should not be eliminated. But the design of any ethical dilemma as a wicked problem—one that is difficult or impossible to resolve—has to include the irreversibility of actions taken by players. If backtracking and reloading after any dilemma can be eliminated, then this irreversible situation can

encourage players to explore the game in a deeper way than just through instrumental gameplay. In our conversation on the topic, Manveer Heir (personal communication, 2010) hesitatingly agreed and proposed an alternative solution:

I think save/reload can certainly hurt the ability to make ethical choices or at least the impact of negative choices. One way to handle it is to defer the consequence until way later, so the player who wants to change their mind would have to play a lot of content to get back to where they are and decide if that's worth it. I'm not against removing the ability to redo those sorts of decisions without starting a new game, but that would need to be more explicitly clear to the player since this goes against years of training they've received from video games.

Most players would probably criticize any design that eliminates or limits the possibility of exploring different gameplay paths. Some players may claim that the nature of games is to allow exploration, regret, and restart. That is because we still believe in a *Homo ludens* for whom play is always safe. But for players who engage in play to express, create, and better explain the world and themselves, safety is just one ingredient of playing games.

In multiplayer games, reloading is not possible, which leads to the development of interesting wicked problems, such as high treason in *Eve Online* (CCP Games 2003) and the value of camaraderie versus the will for survival in *Left 4 Dead 2* (Valve Corporation 2009). In multiplayer games, users cannot deny the presence of others. They constitute a complex network of agents, needs, and experiences that are affected by choices, attitudes, and actions. In words of Frank Lantz (personal communication, 2011):

Social games give us an opportunity to play with a stylized version of these networks, to explore toy versions of the consensus dynamics and flocking and differentiation behavior within them, basically to play with the mathematical substructures of things that feel entirely and inherently nonmathematical, things that feel ineffable, intuitive, emotional, transcendental.

Single-player games should aspire to create this complexity by encouraging players to engage with both the semiotic and procedural domains of the game.

Ethical dilemmas as wicked problems work in games like *Fallout 3*, in which the sense of place and the experience of belonging to a world are as important as the main narrative or the possibility of reloading and exploring alternative paths. Ethical gameplay can be designed for games of fixed narratives and for open-ended worlds with no overarching dominant

narrative. Choices are present but will not articulate the evolution of the game experience and therefore will not be related to ethical gameplay. Paolo Pedercini (personal communication, 2012) reflects:

Here's a little secret: if you want to give the players an illusion of choice, you should just provide them with an avatar and a space to explore. As long as the players feel in control of movements in space, even the most linear narrative and the most constrained level design will provide enough agency. In a way, that's what we came to expect from mainstream video games. If you take out the act of moving from point A to point B (with the obstacle dodging and combat that it implies) from, say, *God of War*, *Bioshock*, *Call of Duty*, *Heavy Rain*, you end up with less meaningful choices than *Unmanned*. Even independent art games such the critically acclaimed *Dear Esther* or *Passage* boil down to movement in space that becomes a narrative in the first and metaphorical in the latter.

One of the main formal solutions I wanted to test with *Unmanned* was precisely to get rid of this component because, you know, only a fairly small and irrelevant part of my existence is about dragging this body around.

In summary, ethical gameplay happens beyond choices.

Wicked Problems for Game Design

In ethical gameplay, players need to face situations in which their choices matter or face worlds and narratives in which their presence invokes moral dilemmas. Even though I am advocating for thinking about ethical gameplay beyond choices, presenting players with dilemmas is still a practical way of including moral thinking into a particular design. If we want to include dilemmas, these need to be presented to players as difficult or impossible wicked problems.

Ethical dilemmas are interesting tools for creating ethical gameplay if the dilemma is presented as a wicked problem. Players will have to use their moral thinking, and solving the dilemma will be a moral act. This act will not need to be evaluated by the system, as players will be aware that any solution to a wicked problem involves evaluation based on their own values. In other words, players need to think about the meaning of their actions. The game reacts to the decisions taken but will not quantify the player's ethics.

The main obstacle is an informational one. Players have grown used to a design style that gave them a great deal of information about the state of the game. Even in games of imperfect information, players always have

enough information to make an informed choice. Here I am advocating for a model of design in which the network of choices and consequences is obscured.

The two dominant techniques in ethical dilemma design in computer games are branching narratives and aggregation of choices. Branching narratives are often retraceable and clearly point at the origins of a bifurcation. The aggregation of choices is a better fit for designing ethical gameplay because it places players in a narrative or world context in which many choices are offered all the time, and the consequence of each is not easily traceable to a particular choice. It is more interesting, then, to design aggregated choices rather than branching narratives, especially since branching narratives can be designed within aggregated choices designs.

The main issue that ethical gameplay designers should avoid is the creation of superficial "trolley problems"—tame problems that involve a decision that looks moral but is only a consequentialist calculation of outcomes. To create ethical gameplay, designers need to tease the ethical minds of players, not their statistical skills. They need to involve them and need their complicity. This is what wicked problems do.

The following adaptation of Rittel and Webber's 1973 formulation of the elements of wicked problems proposes some characteristics for an optimal wicked problem:

1. There is no definitive formulation of the dilemma. The player's knowledge of possible outcomes will be limited by ethical cognitive friction between the semiotic and procedural domains. The player does not have perfect information about the potential outcome of a dilemma. The *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008) quests "Tenpenny Tower" and "Oasis" present these characteristics.
2. Ethical gameplay dilemmas have consequences that cannot be predicted by understanding only the procedural level of the game. Knowing how the system works should not be enough to make a decision because some aspects of the system that affect the outcome are unknown to the player. This can be achieved, for example, by embedding the dilemma in a highly emergent system in which the outcome is the consequence of the interplay of rules that cannot be easily predicted by the player.
3. Solutions to ethical dilemmas are good or bad, not correct or false. Hence, the evaluation of the outcome by the game system will not be communicated to the player in quantized terms.

4. There is no testing of solutions for ethical dilemmas. After players make a choice, they cannot reload to a state that is prior to that choice. Death is an option.
5. Every solution to an ethical gameplay dilemma locks players in a new state of the game. They are not able to return to prior states. All decisions matter.
6. Ethical gameplay dilemmas have some solutions that make the procedural and semantic levels collide, suggesting nonoptimal strategies that have emotional, cultural, and contextual value.
7. Ethical gameplay dilemmas tend to be unique. A dilemma's structure should not be repeated throughout one game.
8. Ethical gameplay dilemmas reveal the moral nature of the semiotic and procedural domains of the game. Dilemmas represent the values that designers want to communicate with the game.
9. There is no correct solution to an ethical gameplay dilemma. Players have to evaluate the morality of their choices.
10. Players have no right to replay. Decisions made by players bind them to their chosen path, and the game, in the state determined by the choice taken, is playable only once.

Wicked problems are formulations of conceptual frameworks that can be used to generate situations in which players are teased into playing using their ethical imaginations, stepping outside of the pleasures of instrumental play through a moment of pause. The response to wicked problems is player complicity. Wicked problems make players complicit in the experience of the game.

This account of the characteristics of wicked problems should not be read as normative or prescriptive. These are the conditions for an optimal wicked problem for ethical gameplay design. In fact, this list should be read as a way for game designers to train their designerly way of knowing and develop a vocabulary for sharpening their design instincts. This list is part of an open dialogue with game designers and scholars who also want to create the experience of ethical gameplay.

Beyond Choices

This chapter began with a discussion of a stuffed toy that challenged good taste by playfully manipulating design affordances and cultural meanings.

Similarly, computer games can create ethical gameplay by designing cognitive friction between the meaning and desirability of actions and between the semiotic and procedural domains.

Designing ethical gameplay consists of understanding how games operate and how players interact, engage, and learn these systems. It consists of communicating these operations using metaphors that encourage players to challenge their own assumptions regarding the desirability of their actions. In other words, designing ethical gameplay creates a tension between actions and their meaning in a game.

A number of questions arise from this assumption. The first one concerns my focus on single-player games. I believe that single-player games are the most interesting domains for ethical gameplay since the nature of social interactions in multiplayer games calls for ethical reasoning in play.

However, much of what I have written about single-player games can be used in the design of multiplayer games. Ethical cognitive friction can be applied to two different aspects of multiplayer design—player-to-player relations and winning conditions. The principles at play are similar: there is a tension between the procedural and semiotic levels of the game, only in this case there are multiple cultural agents operating in a shared semiotic domain. Many people, with competing goals or cooperative needs, play the same game. Manipulating goals and needs will modify the way that players perceive others and act on their gameplay choices. In these kinds of experiences, players are at the core of ethical gameplay.

Some of the arguments against this position are predictable. Players use guides and walkthroughs. Players do not care about the values of the game or the narrative. Players care about completing the game and moving to a new title. Players play, and play is devoid of moral depth. Players do not care and know that a game is just a game. Players will not remember.

In the face of all these arguments, I challenge designers to think about players in a different way. We all can recall memorable instances of play that even after many years we discuss and use as examples of a great game-playing experience. My own sentimental memory of games still resonates with *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen 1981) sessions and *Gauntlet* (Gremlin Graphics 1986), and single-player games like *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm 2000), *Diablo II* (Blizzard North 2000), and *Leisure Suit Larry* (Sierra Entertainment 1987) shaped my personal landscape and made me a player.

Designers, analysts, and players are aware of the powerful emotional footprint that games can leave. Tapping into these unexplored possibilities can harness the potential of games by appealing to our universal moral nature. Players care if they are challenged to care and if play becomes more about questioning a system than interacting with that system.

Ethical gameplay vindicates play as a critical activity by making players aware of values and able to use those values to interact with a game. Ethical gameplay allows players to leave the game session challenged, thrilled, shaken, and illuminated.

Designing ethical gameplay applies friction to the harmonic nature of a game that employs coherent metaphors to explain the procedural structure of the game. The tools and concepts that I have suggested are just two approaches based on the same principles: players are capable of experiencing play from a moral perspective, but to do so, they need to be partially estranged from the game by its design. It is not a game of being aware of play: it is making play an act of value awareness, understanding, and accepting.

These tools and concepts are also critical of the commodification of game design. Ethical gameplay is the consequence of almost broken gameplay design—of a system and metaphors that are in need of a player who can make sense of them. Ethical gameplay demands a player who is more creator and participant and less consumer and gamer. The tools and techniques I have suggested have the potential to develop players who can think about play as being part of their moral nature.

When I write about designing ethical gameplay, I write about daring designs that go beyond choices. Players engage with games emotionally, rationally, and culturally. The task of the designer who wants to create ethical gameplay is to understand how all these elements can be challenged. The design of ethical experiences is a provocation to players to dare to be moral and to play beyond conventions.

Asking the Right Questions

These concepts and ideas are intended to systematize the understanding of ethical gameplay as an experience that can be designed for. However, designers need more than just a simple description of these phenomena. They need tools that can help them create these experiences.

Ethical gameplay is complicated and depends on many factors, such as gameworld design, narrative, publisher needs, and artistic wills, and it probably will affect only a limited number of players. Instead of suggesting a number of processes that designers can follow to develop and validate a particular set of experiences, I instead present a set of questions that developers can ask themselves when creating a game. These three main questions and their subquestions are intended to guide the creating process without determining it, and designers will undoubtedly be able to add to them.

The first main question is, How is this gameplay situation a moral wicked problem for the player? Players need to perceive the problems that lay ahead of them as wicked—as difficult and possibly impossible to solve to the satisfaction of all parties—and they need to do so in a way that their values are the source for trying to solve the problem.

After this question is answered, then others can be asked that will shape the results:

- What does this gameplay situation challenge (for example, the rules, the gameworld, or the context of play)?
- Can players act or react?
- How much can players change the situation with the actions that will follow?
- How much can players change the situation with saving and reloading?
- How much do players know? How much could they know?

The second question is, How can designers trigger player complicity (why should players care about this situation)? For ethical gameplay to take place, developers need player complicity so that ethical thinking, rather than instrumentally driven play, motivates players to engage with the game.

After player complicity is established, other questions follow:

- Are players ethically complicit because of actions taken before or after the ethical gameplay sequence?
- Are players ethically complicit because of narratives that are open or already explored or that will be explored?
- Can players express themselves? And if not, why?

The third question is, In what domain will the ethical cognitive friction create the wicked problem? That is, of all the elements that constitute a

game, which one is prevalent when creating dissonance? In which element do designers anchor the dissonance? The broad answer is the procedural or the semiotic, but in fact more questions can make the answers more granular. What is the source of the ethical cognitive friction—the narrative or the characters, the gameworld, the rules and systems, or the play settings and presence of other players?

These three main questions will not guarantee that a game can create ethical experience. But they can help designers think about how a particular sequence or system can be the source for ethical gameplay. All of these questions should be seen from the perspective of the first because the main concern should be how the game is played ethically.

This chapter has covered a lot of ground, from the gonorrhea plush toy to the complexities of *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008), design affordances, humor, ethical dilemmas, and wicked problems. I have argued that ethical gameplay needs to be both inspiring for designers and attractive to those who want to understand why some games are more likely to create ethical experiences than others.

Designing ethical gameplay is a challenge, and the current game culture often demands the structured play and instrumentally rational experiences that are found in the many derivative games that flood the market. Some games, like *Fable* (Lionhead Studios 2004) and *BioShock* (Irrational Games 2007), use morality as a unique selling point and, in my opinion, have failed while being interesting and important. Some games use ethical gameplay as part of the ludic offer to players, and they succeed in creating, for some players, these kinds of experiences.

Not all games need to have a moral domain. Ethical gameplay should happen within a game experience that is not exclusively designed to create ethical gameplay. Ethical gameplay is one way of articulating a level, a segment, and a passage within a game. Morality challenges are powerful tools for engaging the player and for creating potentially memorable gameplay sequences. But ethical gameplay design must also acknowledge the needs of play as an activity—fun, challenge, engagement. Only in that context and by referring to the different domains of play will ethical gameplay be a relevant part of how computer games can successfully address the human condition.

6 Into Play

It is now time to bring theory into play. The following analysis of ethical gameplay and game design is based on my own limited experiences. Play is a deeply personal thing, and building ethical game experiences requires player accounts of the role played by games in their moral lives. This chapter is such an account.

The chapter is a reverse-engineering application of chapter 5. Here I focus on the four domains in which ethical gameplay can be designed—narrative and characters, gameworld, rules, and context. Each game is introduced, and the sequences that I focus on are described. I then answer four questions:

- Why is this sequence a wicked problem (one that requires not only logical thinking, but also moral and/or political engagement) for players?
- What complicity does this sequence demand from players?
- What is the source of ethical cognitive friction?
- What designed elements create the ethical experience?

I close the chapter by explaining the ways that I applied these ideas to my own ill-fated attempts at game design and the lessons that I have learned.

Narrative and Characters

Some games use narrative and character design as the source of ethical gameplay. The third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012) is a bold computer game. Even though it is a classic high-budget console shooter that was designed on the same engine and with similar mechanics as *Gears of War* (Epic Games 2006), *Spec Ops: The Line* attempts to make a mature computer game that addresses players as reflective beings whose views on war and interactive violence matter.

Spec Ops: The Line is an oddity in its ethical gameplay design. Instead of articulating its ethical discourse in particular sequences, *Spec Ops* presents a constant challenge for players to take a stance toward their actions. *Spec Ops* is a moral tale, and its design presents players with a progressively challenging ethical experience.

Spec Ops: The Line is a third-person shooter game in which combat sequences are interwoven with the story of a military rescue mission that has gone wrong. The game mechanics are fairly simple and use the conventions of cover-system games. Players must navigate levels that are designed with a number of choke points at which they must take cover and eliminate enemies before proceeding. There are multiple solutions to each combat situation, and they always involve some form of violence. The game does not have any remarkable puzzles or any other form of gameplay. It is a purely violence-driven narrative shooter.

Spec Ops: The Line tells the story of a descent into hell by a trio of special operations soldiers who must find a missing battalion in the city-state of Dubai, which has been ravaged by sand storms for months. Players control Captain Walker in his search for a war hero, Colonel Konrad, who deserted his battalion to help Dubai and its residents. Walker soon discovers two factions—the US Central Intelligence Agency and the Dubai refugees—that are working against the lost battalion, which has mutinied against Colonel Konrad and now seems to run the city. Walker and his search team discover how messy a war zone can become and how abstract notions of innocence, justice, and honor can be lost in battle.

Spec Ops: The Line creates ethical gameplay by presenting itself as a wicked problem. It is unique because it is a game designed to create an ethical experience. The narrative, gameplay, and visual effects are all geared toward an emotional experience that invokes the players' morality. In *Spec Ops*, playing is ultimately failing because players guide a traumatized soldier to commit more and more hideous acts until he faces his own madness and chooses how to end it. In words of one of the writers of the game, Richard Pearsey (personal communication, 2012): "Choice was always part of the game as was the emphasis on ethical decision making. In this case we referred to it as choosing between 'bad and worse' options."

In *Spec Ops: The Line*, the wicked problem is revealed as the plot unfolds. The game questions players' willingness to participate in the massacres that they perpetrate. In fact, *Spec Ops* questions itself as a shooter and involves

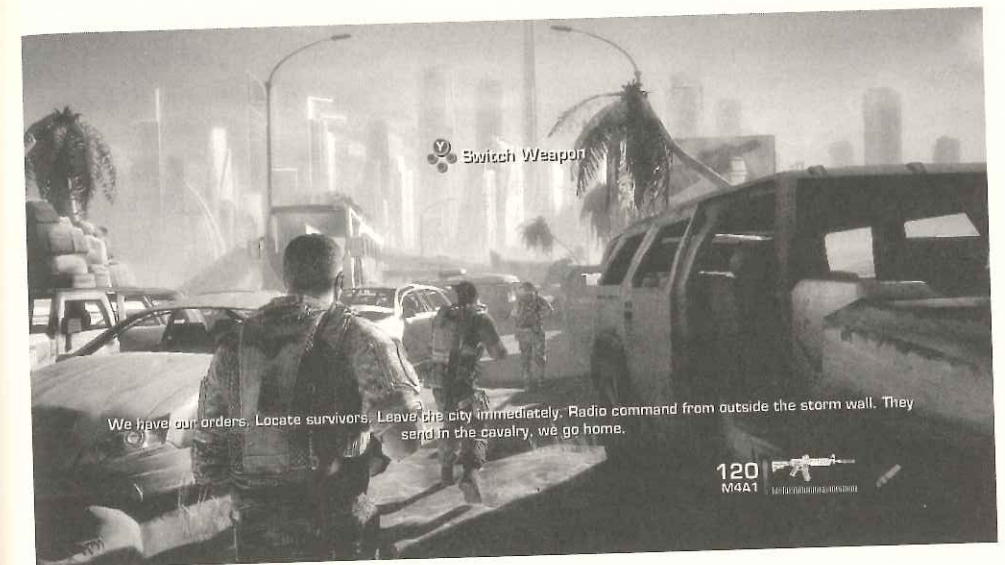


Figure 6.1
Entering Dubai: *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012)

players in that self-reflection. Playing the game is the wicked problem. The more that users play, the more entangled they become in the narrative of the soldiers' madness and in their own willingness to be complicit with these actions so that they can continue to play.

The game is a wicked problem because of the type of complicity that it demands from players. For example, in the middle of the game, players are faced with the dilemma of whether to use white phosphorous to burn alive the troops from the missing battalion that stop Captain Walker's progression. This is a false choice, which is acknowledged by the dialogue of the game. If players choose not to burn the troops alive, then they cannot continue playing the game. It is impossible to defeat them in any other way. To continue playing, the player needs to burn these troops alive. It is a moment of revelation: because players want to play to fulfill the promised narrative of heroicity, they must commit this atrocity. In words of Richard Pearsey (personal communication, 2012): "The clinical top-down view came much later, but the idea of forcing the player to deal with the pain he is inflicting was there from the beginning."

Spec Ops: The Line has a wicked sense of choice: many of the decisions that players have to make are not choices but stress points designed to



Figure 6.2

The results of the white phosphorous attack: *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012)

remind them that when they choose to play, they have already chosen to participate in the madness. Playing is being complicit. This complicity might lead to interesting results, as Richard Pearsey has pointed out (personal communication, 2012): “Early testers [of the white phosphorous sequence] reacted in much the same way as did end users and reviewers. Many felt the need to stop for a while.”

This message is strengthened by the designers’ decision to break the fourth wall between the gameplay and the players. During the loading screens, the game reminds players of the nature of their actions in the game and posts messages that are intended to question their complicity. The game demands complicity but questions it too, creating the types of dissonance that lead to ethical gameplay.

In a game like *Spec Ops: The Line*, ethical cognitive friction can be found in many domains, but two are particularly important for the overall experience of the game. First, the rules, the fiction, and the play setting are dissonantly united. Although the rules state that the game is a shooter, which traditionally encourages players to excel at using violence, the fiction questions the meaning of violence. Even the loading screens, after the fourth wall is broken, question players’ willingness to continue playing the game.

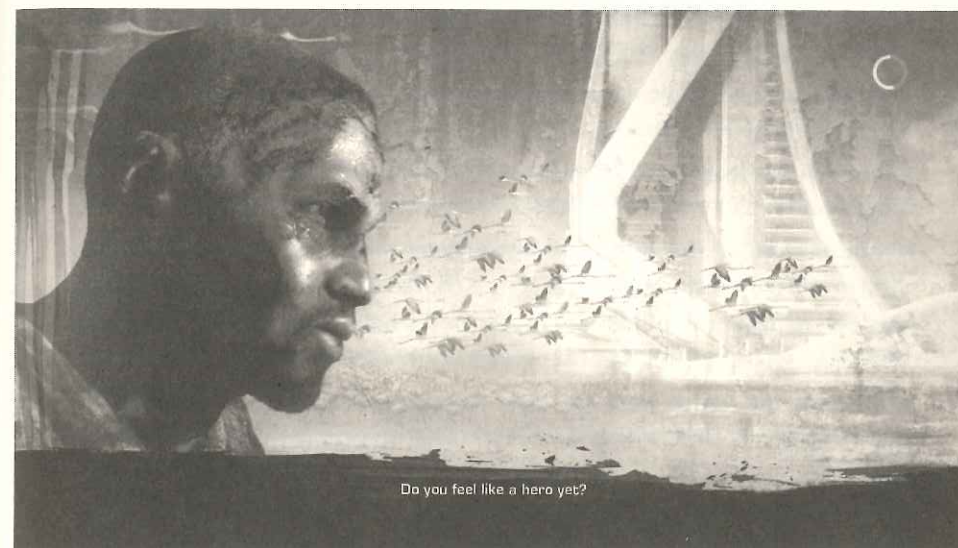


Figure 6.3

Breaking the fourth wall: *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012)

Spec Ops is built around the dissonances between actions that are encouraged by the rules and interpretations of those actions that are encouraged by the game.

A second domain where ethical cognitive friction can be found is the systematic deception of the player by the game. As players progress, they realize more and more that instead of being in a gameworld, they are inhabiting a world that has been created through the mind of Captain Walker. His paranoia and obsessions are embodied in the world. Traditionally, players are encouraged to have faith in the consistency of the gameworld. But in *Spec Ops: The Line*, players slowly realize that the world that they are seeing is actually projected from the psyche of the main character. In a process that mirrors the descent into madness that Walker experiences, players question what they see and do in the game.

Spec Ops: The Line is designed to create an emotional experience in which morality plays a fundamental role. Four important design elements carry the weight of that experience:

- World design: The world is channeled through the eyes of Captain Walker, although players initially are not aware of this. Players experience an unstable world, just like the one that is experienced in Walker’s mind.

- Animations and in-game feedback: Some of the animations that are triggered during play change throughout the game. The delight in the gory animations, particularly exploding heads, is meant to symbolize the extreme cruelty of this war, and the executions that players can perform on wounded foes become more gruesome the more they play (again, players are given the choice not to do them and not to be complicit).
- Choice design: The game presents players with some false choices as a kind of trick of the narrative design. The character never has a choice except to stop participating, much as players never have a real choice except to stop playing.
- Breaking the fourth wall: *Spec Ops: The Line* uses the convention of adding messages to the loading screen to break the fourth wall and directly address the player. It is not a subtle trick, but it allows players to revise their experience of the game by encouraging a revision of the narrative of the game with a critical perspective. In words of Richard Pearsey (personal communication, 2012),

Spec Ops was not designed to tell the player what to think about what was happening to them or what they were doing, but we very much wanted players to think. The fourth-wall material raises questions and needles players, hopefully prodding them to contemplate their actions."

Spec Ops: The Line is a rarity—a commercial game that challenges, confuses, and enrages players. And because of its bold spirit, it succeeds in creating a powerful ethical experience. Its unique integration of narrative, characters, world, and gameplay design allow it to become a moralist tale that questions the very act of playing the game. *Spec Ops* takes the necessary complicity that all games require to play and turns it around, challenging players to think about their motives to play.

The independent game *Beautiful Escape: Dungeoneer* (Chaud 2010) is a different type of rarity—a game that explores disgusting topics and thereby forces players to explore their own values and not to surrender to the thrills of sensationalism.

BE:D is a role-playing game that gives players control over the life and actions of a dungeoneer, a sadist who kidnaps and tortures victims as a form of creative expression. Dungeoneers tape their sessions, post them onto the Internet, and rate each other's performances. In *BE:D*, we accompany Verge, a mediocre dungeoneer who is in love with another sadist, the accomplished Daily. Throughout the game, players seduce, capture, and

torture a number of victims while in search of recognition from their peers. Recognition never comes, but Verge eventually kills Daily, which frees him from that need. When his love is dead, Verge is liberated from the obsession with others' opinion and is free to become a true dungeoneer.

BE:D is divided into two minigames. A seduction game adapts dating sims, in which players read a description of a character and choose different answers that lead to successful seduction. A torture game is an adaptation of tower-defense games, in which a character moves on a predicted path, and players set traps to prevent the character's exit. The traps in this case are different tortures, which must be located so that the prisoner will never escape.

Beautiful Escape: Dungeoneer creates wicked problems by proposing a tension between the empathy that players tend to feel toward the main character of a game and the actions that they need to perform to satisfy Verge's desires and needs. Players are driven by their empathy toward the main characters, and they root for the underdogs, and Verge is all of these. However, Verge is also a sadist, a torturer, and a killer. When playing *BE:D*,

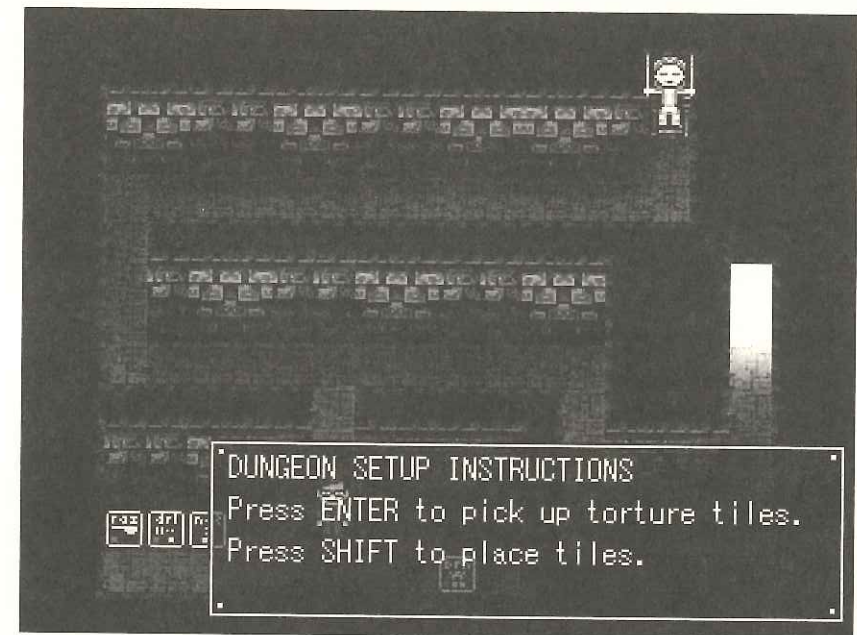


Figure 6.4

Setting up the torture chamber: *Beautiful Escape: Dungeoneer* (Chaud 2010)

players have chosen to be in Verge's company, and that company determines the space of possibilities ahead of them.

To play and to fulfill this empathetic relationship, players plan their tortures so that they are more effective: they torture to try to win the game. They perform terrible acts without excuses. The game presents no moral or ethical problem. Verge is a disgusting being, players root for him, and they perform his actions. Players are the servants, and Verge is the master: this is the twisted relation of keeping company with the main character in *BE:D*. Much like the relationship of the dungeoneer to the victims, players are in control, but that control is possible only because they are complicit with Verge.

Complicity in *BE:D* is somewhat paradoxical. To play *BE:D* is ethically challenging not only because the game simulates torture but because it does so by making players complicit with a morally corrupt, flawed character that they end up liking.

The ethical cognitive dissonance can be traced to the framing of the actions that players perform. Players know that torturing is wrong and that *BE:D*, by making them responsible for those actions, is setting itself up for moral scrutiny. However, in this game, these actions are encapsulated in a narrative in a way that makes them more terrifying. Verge tortures in a search for peer validation, which is the same validation that players seek when they try to complete the puzzles. Players seek success, so when that is negated and their films receive mediocre reviews, they empathize with Verge. Players become the monster in *BE:D* because they eventually discover that they are Verge.

This effect is created by four design elements that introduce ethical cognitive dissonance in the interlocking of mechanics between the seduction game and the torturing game:

- *Simulating seduction* The dating-sim seduction mechanic leads players to know the stories of their victims to reach the torture sequence, enhancing character empathy.
- *Dialogue trees* The story of Verge is presented in dialogue trees that affect how much players know about the game and how well they can perform. They need to get to know Verge, and they do so because they need that information to progress in the game.
- *Graphic style* There is a dissonance between the pixelated graphics and the topics that are addressed in the game. The graphic style lets

imagination turn players into accomplices when they mentally reconstruct the gameworld.

- *Abstraction of victims* The tower-defense gameplay mechanics for torturing help players to abstract the victims. Much as Verge does, players need to know the victims while they are persons in the normal world, but after they are inside the dungeon, they are just pawns in a game. Players play the dehumanizing logic of dungeoneers.

BE:D is a game about misplaced empathy and about engaging with a character to become it. By participating in the game, players learn to be Verge, and the space of possibility that they are given is carefully crafted to resemble the experience, emotions, and pains of a sadist.

Gameworlds

When writing about ethical gameplay and narrative, there is always the temptation to focus on branching narratives and on the choices that players can make to alter the way that a story develops. Similarly, when writing

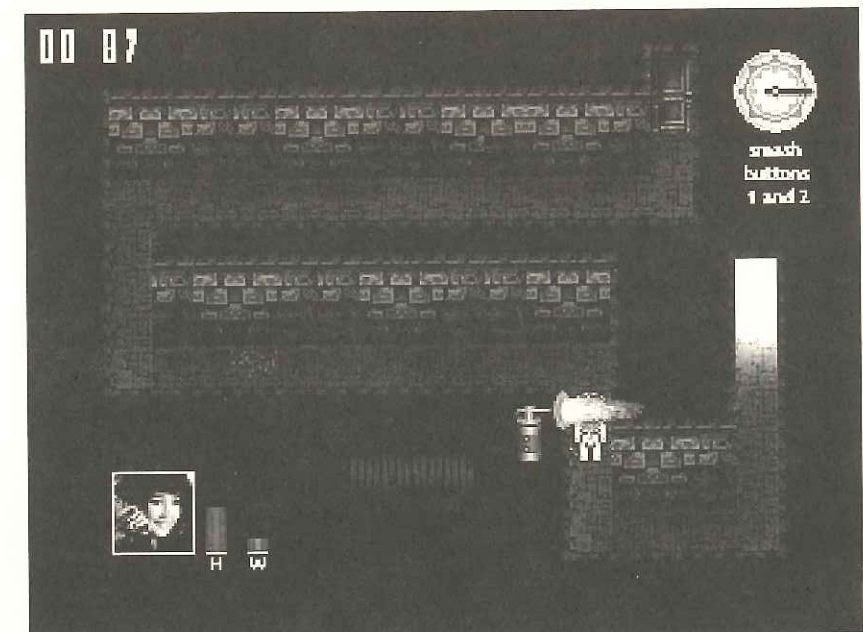


Figure 6.5

Torture: *Beautiful Escape: Dungeoneer* (Chaud 2010)

about gameworlds and ethical gameplay, there is the temptation to write about open worlds that are designed so that player choices affect locations, characters, and other elements of the fictional environment.

I partially succumb to that temptation by analyzing the open world of *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010) and the limited gameworld of *Unmanned* (Pedercini 2011). I am interested not in how choices affect a gameworld but in how some games invite players to live morally in a world. I am interested in games that create worlds that require players to play in them morally. This means that the notions of gameworld and fiction are closely intertwined—as they should be because both are part of the semiotic domain of the game. However, in these two games, the worldliness of their fiction makes them ethically interesting, and that is what we should focus on.

In *Unmanned*, the gameworld is not an environment to explore but a context that situates actions. This game provides a portrait of the mundane existence of a war drone pilot. Structured around minigames that illustrate the daily life of this modern soldier—dreaming, shaving, smoking, and killing alleged terrorists—*Unmanned* makes a world out of the mundanity in which extraordinary actions take place. In the words of its designer, Paolo Pedercini (personal communication, 2012): “I wanted to portray the blurring of frontline and homefront that happens with robotic warfare, the bimodal status of a contemporary warrior who is constantly switching between the supposedly exceptional state of war and normality. It’s the banality of evil.”

Unmanned is a political game, a commentary on the moral impact of technologies in how people wage war, but it is also interested in addressing the mundanity of the life of the modern soldier. *Unmanned* refers to the vehicles that players control as well as the dehumanized, emptied world of these soldiers.

In *Unmanned*, players explore locations and habits. The gameworld is the context of the mundanity, and in exploring it, players experience the game as a source of political action and moral reflection. Playing *Unmanned* as an ethics piece means playing the game through the context of the gameworld. As Pedercini (personal communication, 2012) explains:

Regarding *Unmanned*, I just read a comment from a blog (<http://playthisthing.com/unmanned>) that puts into words what I was trying to do in respect to mainstream gaming, better than I could:

It seems the meta-gaming is the game’s message. It’s a multiple-choice test, and there are answers that your “judges” (the coworker, the wife, the self) consider correct. You can pick your answer, and it doesn’t actually make you win or lose; instead, it makes you feel more or less in tune with others. Ultimately, what it says is that the attitude toward fighting the Taliban is just one of many social conventions that we conform with on a daily basis. By extension, it does point out that this is a convention—i.e., an artificial social construct, something people do to themselves. In other words, people go on a war not because they feel it’s necessary or correct or something, but because that’s what they feel they’re supposed to be doing. It’s just what everybody does. This game doesn’t say “war is right” or “war is wrong” but “we no longer think about what war is.” I like that.

The most interesting wicked problem presented in *Unmanned* takes place in the middle of the game. After players have helped the main character reach his workplace, a military barracks on US ground from where he remotely controls war drones, they are given the task of controlling a drone while deciding whether to flirt with the copilot. The choice is maddening: should we pay attention to the morality of a man’s personal life or the morality of a soldier’s life? And how does piloting a drone become a mundane activity, something akin to shaving or driving a car?

Before this point, players’ interactions were focused on performing mundane activities. Eventually, even piloting is framed as yet another element of normal daily life. Drone piloting becomes just another task to perform. However, players are also aware that they are piloting a drone in a war theater. In between the two minigames in which players pilot a drone, they have to smoke a cigarette.

That pause in the gameplay in which players can decide how long to smoke a cigarette also acts as the triggering of player complicity. It is a break before making decisions about how they want to engage with the rest of the game. They have time to strategize the potential flirting and combining it with performing well in the war game. Without this slow sequence, player complicity would not be triggered. It is a moment for reflection and for contextualization of actions in a world. Like everything in *Unmanned*, the performance of mundanity becomes a reflective tool in the context of a gameworld.

In terms of ethical cognitive dissonance, *Unmanned* explores that dissonance in the mundanity of the practice of modern war, and it does so by two means—the performance of mundane actions while players wage remote war and the split-screen mechanic that requires players to perform

two actions concurrently. The purpose of the game is to critique a particular understanding of modern warfare, in which the exceptionality of war is carefully packaged in the mundanity of our lives.

Unmanned refers to the drones but also to a (game)world that is devoid of life. There is a fundamental disconnect between the actions that players have to perform—what they mean and what they imply. *Unmanned* introduces ethical cognitive dissonance by reflecting on the dislocated presence of war in our mundane lives. Players realize that this drone operator has to perform many trivial actions daily, and piloting a war machine to remotely eliminate terrorists is one of them. This realization makes the game have an emotional and ethical impact on players.

The following three design elements help create ethical gameplay through gameworld design:

- *Vignettes* The vignette structure cinematically contributes to the presentation of a world through actions without resorting to the creation of an open world.
- *Dual mechanics* The dual mechanics in most vignettes further enforce the gameplay dissonance because the action on one side of the screen is

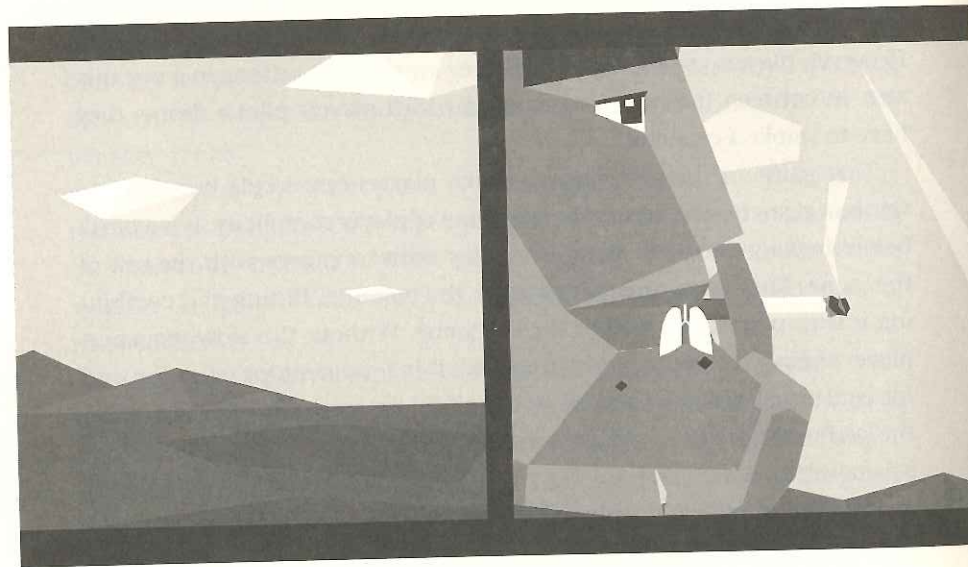


Figure 6.6
A quick break: *Unmanned* (Pedercini 2011)

often matched with a simple point-and-click interaction model on the other side, further enforcing the gameplay dissonance.

- *Rewards* The ironic use of medals as reward structures parodies the achievements of many online games yet encourages players to explore different choices.

Unmanned is the rare case of a political game that is both overtly ideological and creatively subtle. Although there are few doubts about the politics of its creator and the message that the game wants to put forth, the use of game rhetoric and technology enhances the experience of the game. Mundanity prevents players from thinking deeply or even realizing that modern warfare is a fight between remote armies and images on a screen. Images on a screen do not bleed, do not complain, and do not suffer any harm, and they do no harm. They are just pictures in a box.

The postapocalyptic Mojave desert of *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010) is a different sort of gameworld. *New Vegas* is a fascinating addition to the *Fallout* series, in which decisions and choices structure the experience of the game and the way that they inhabit the world. As in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008), a karma system evaluates player actions from a moral perspective, and the narrative depends on choices that are made by players.

But this book is not about choices or branching narratives. It is about how the experience of ethical gameplay emerges from a number of design decisions that allow players to engage with a game using their morality. *Fallout: New Vegas* succeeds at creating interesting ethical gameplay because of how the world is structured and how players can inhabit it. It is interesting because the gameworld is populated by a large number of factions with conflicting goals. The game portrays the social and moral divide of a land after an atomic apocalypse. Siding with one of the surviving political factions might be a necessary evil that players are forced to accept. The factions in *Fallout: New Vegas* are flawed political organizations with which players can never completely agree, yet they are the only form of order and collective identity that can be found in the wasteland.

There is a long and convoluted story line in *Fallout: New Vegas*, but here I focus on the factions. The Mojave Desert and the city of New Vegas are the playing field of a power struggle because the Hoover Dam can still provide clean water and electricity. Securing the dam means securing New Vegas and therefore controlling an important economic and population center in

the game's fictional world. Two of the dominant forces in wasteland America are fighting for these resources. The Caesar's Legion is a slaver culture in which women have no rights and order is kept strictly and with force, and the New California Republic is a version of contemporary American government that promotes good law and civilization but is outstretched and excessively bureaucratized.

These two factions are opposing the threat of Mr. House, a cyborg who runs the New Vegas strip and aspires to control the area via his army of robots. The fourth and final faction that determines the fate of the narrative is the player, who can decide not to support any of these other factions and thereby can become the paradoxical savior of New Vegas.

Given the complexity of the narratives and choices that articulate the game, it is impossible to summarize all the possible endings that players might meet depending on which faction they decide to support. However, the two issues that are relevant for ethical gameplay are how these factions are presented and how players' relations with them are critical to their own moral presence in that world.

The wicked problem of *Fallout: New Vegas* is twofold—how players align themselves with a given faction and what consequences their alliance will have. None of the factions is perfect; they all promise to save civilization but do so by sacrificing ethical values. The Caesar's Legion is orderly and will build a society, but it will be based on slavery and diminished rights for minorities. The New California Republic aspires to become a modern state but has a bent toward authoritarian bureaucracy. Mr. House is a deranged egomaniac who trusts in technology to control the Strip and never thinks about establishing a productive and flourishing society. However, he keeps things going. And finally, nonalignment suggests that eliminating the influence of the three established organizations and letting the Strip try to proceed on its own might have consequences that players could never imagine.

This wicked problem is fascinating because players know that their choices are relevant to reaching the narrative ending of the game. However, this means pledging alliances whose consequences are unforeseeable. In the design of its faction system, *Fallout: New Vegas* is a classic wicked problem: players do not have enough information about the consequences of their choices, so their decisions need to be made based on morality, emotion, or logic. The game is open to the values that the player brings into the experience.



Figure 6.7

The Caesar, head of the Legion faction: *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010)

This is also a good example of player complicity. For players to progress in the game, they need to engage with different elements of the fiction in a way that requires their value-based engagement with one of the factions. In fact, *Fallout: New Vegas* incorporates the idea of complicity as part of the gameplay: choosing an alliance means being complicit with that factions' ideas and therefore being in agreement with the values of that faction.

Being complicit with a faction is the only way in which players can inhabit this world. The gameworld is designed around the various factions, so characters will respond to players' presence depending on their alliances. The world is aware of the presence and importance of these factions and of the possible futures that their success might bring. This gives great importance to the decisions of players.

The ethical cognitive friction is located in the surrender of players' values to accommodate one of the factions' demands. If players believe that order is the most important value, even at the expense of freedom, then they will join the Caesar's Legion. If they trust the New California Republic to steer away from its totalitarian bent, then they will help the Republic. Or they might be convinced that the Strip can survive on its own with no

need to pledge allegiance to any faction. Any choice that is made will be based on imperfect information. Players cannot optimize the results that they want to achieve, and this friction allows them to engage with the game with a certain pause as they try to understand and reflect about their choices and the implications that they might have.

The design elements that allow the faction system to deliver meaningful ethical experiences are complicated to unangle. *Fallout: New Vegas* is a massively complex game in which systems and subsystems feed on each other to simulate the life on the Mojave Desert wasteland. However, these two elements are worth considering:

- *Varying feedback loops* The feedback loops on allegiances range from short-term to long-term consequences, making it impossible to try to optimize results without having access to resources that are external to the game.
- *Large narrative* The gameworld does not seem to be designed around the players' actions, but the actions are elements within a larger narrative. Players are actors within a larger sequence of events, which relativizes the choices made by players and their consequences.

Fallout: New Vegas creates a sense of place, an experience in which players are dropped into a coherent world where they are one more element in the constellation of factions that make history. Unlike many other computer games, *Fallout: New Vegas* does not necessarily make players feel as though they are part of the wheel of history. Instead, it allows them to be just a tiny element in a larger narrative on which they have some influence, but they are never totally aware of the results of their interventions.

Gameworld design is a fundamental element for creating ethical gameplay design because games can be worlds that players enter to lose themselves and inhabit as moral beings. In the case of games, players' morality is affected by the particularities of the activity of play and its exploratory, creative, and self-expressive nature. The gameworlds that players inhabit can lead them to inhabit those worlds morally. This does not sacrifice the experience of a game but acknowledges that morality matters when players are in a gameworld.

Rules

Because all games have a procedural core of rules and systems that articulate possible actions, players engage with a game within that procedural

core, using its tools in ways that they find engaging. Playing a game is playing not only by the rules but also with the rules.

Ethical gameplay seems to be located in this procedural core because rules both afford actions to players and also constitute the game (in the sense that rules open a space of possibility and meaningfully constrain actions). That is true to a certain extent, but the procedural core needs to be seen in context as it is communicated to players and as players find meaning when they engage with a game's space of possibility.

In two gameplay sequences that I analyze below, the procedural core of the game is at the center of the creation of ethical experiences. I analyze the procedural core as it is presented to the player, which means that the systems and rules are not totally disentangled from the fictions that are used to present them. These rules exist, but my access to them is limited by a production and consumption model of computing that does not grant easy access to them.

Braid (Blow 2008a) is an experimental game that updates many classic game tropes to modern aesthetics. Its creator, the sometimes controversial Jonathan Blow, has famously refused to explain the meaning behind the metaphorical narrative of the game, making the process of interpretation and analysis challenging. The following is a reading of how one of the game's best-known sequences creates ethical gameplay experiences through the ethical cognitive friction between rules and fiction.

Braid is an artistic reading of the classic platform game, and it tells the story of Tim, a man whose search for knowledge brings devastation. Tim is searching for a princess throughout six worlds that are populated by monsters and bizarre threats. Time and physics behave differently in each world, so playing *Braid* requires understanding worlds and unraveling their meaning by exploring their coherent yet fascinatingly alien nature.

Tim's search for a princess throughout those worlds is an echo of Mario's goals in the Nintendo games. But the princess is always in another castle, far away. The game is an exploration of a fragmented narrative that interacts with the different logics of various worlds as its main character searches for the principle that makes sense of them all.

Braid becomes ethically interesting when Tim finally meets the princess. Narrating that game sequence is not particularly easy because it is based on mechanics and interactions. The interesting ethical experience can occur when players interact with a set of rules and mechanics in a way

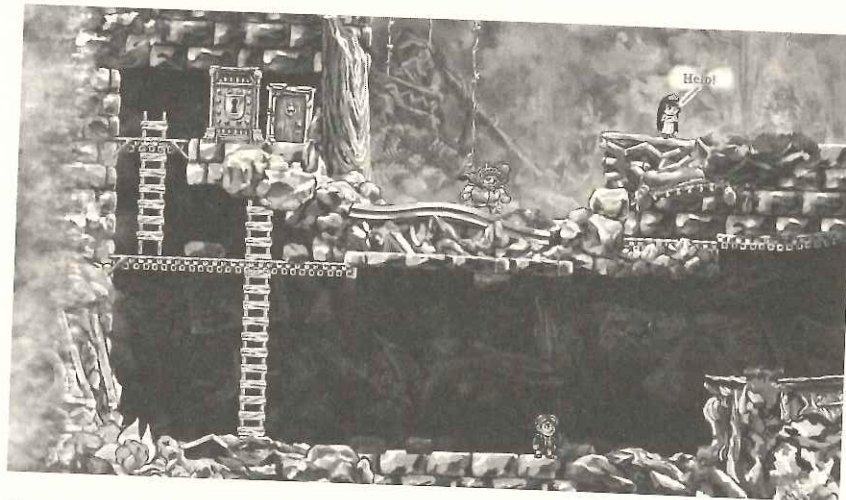


Figure 6.8
Escape from the giant: *Braid* (Blow 2008a)

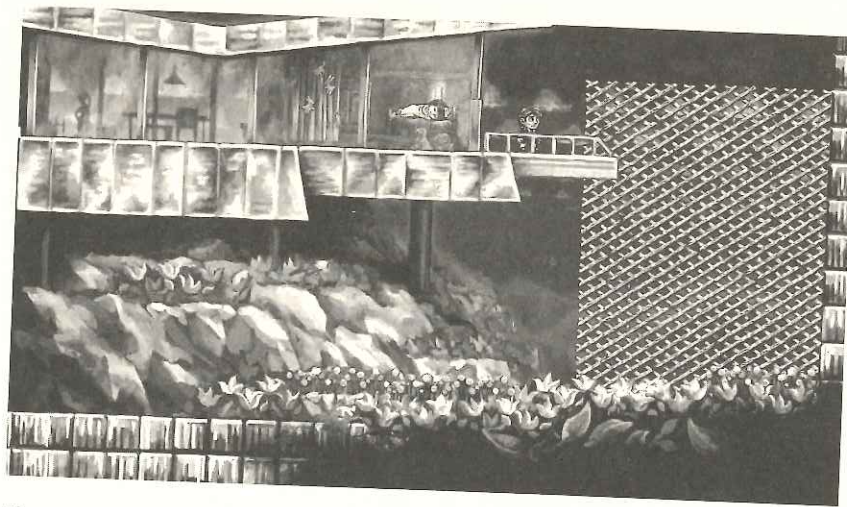


Figure 6.9
The princess: *Braid*

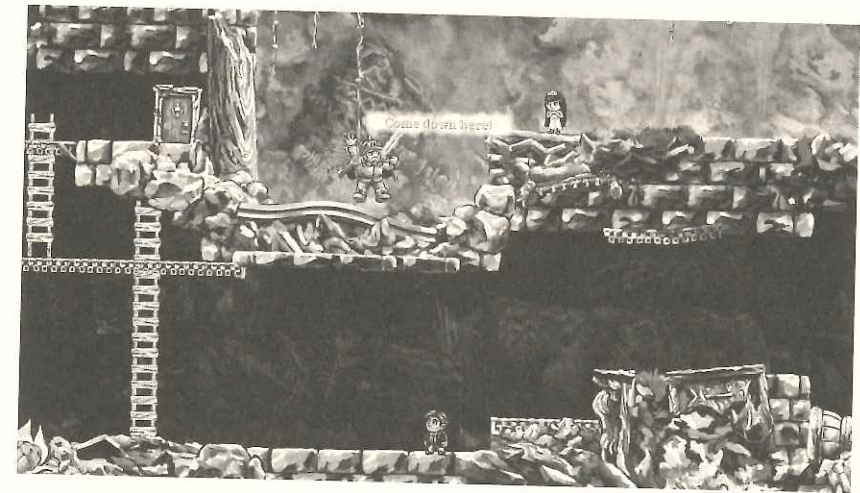


Figure 6.10
The meaning of escaping: *Braid*

that redefines their prior interactions with the game. Telling the story only marginally explains the effects of this sequence.

Finally, Tim meets the princess. She is close, and the search seems to be almost over. Some obstacles remain between them, but the princess helps Tim as he runs from the left to the right side of the screen to reach her. As she escapes from an armored knight, she also helps free the way for players. Players reach her bedroom and are about to touch her, when the sequence becomes dreamy, and they are required to replay the sequence from the right to the left of the screen. And this time, they have a totally different experience of the sequence: the princess actually was not helping players but was trying to stop them. She was running away and setting traps. The knight in armor was not a threat to the princess but was there to save her—from us.

Braid makes players rethink the game up to that moment by manipulating the rules of movement and direction on the screen. As happens in much of the rest of the game, a change in direction (whether of the arrow of time or the character on screen) means a change in meaning and an invitation to reinterpret the game and the choices that players have made to this point. At that late moment in the game, all of the players' actions are up for review. The manipulation of one rule creates an opening for moral thinking.

This reversing sequence is a wicked problem not in itself but in the way that it alters the narrative and experience of the game. The narrative asks players to interpret actions, and players feel secure when playing the game. They might not know what the story is, but they know that *Braid* requires them to understand the rules of the game to progress and reach the princess.

This sequence turns this feeling of security upside down. What players experience does not mean what they initially expected, and the game mechanics become a source of uncertainty. Interacting with, learning, and mastering the game becomes a wicked problem. Players are encouraged to go back in time, the game's main mechanic, so that they can reflect and relearn what they thought they knew. It is a revelation through rules, an epiphany in actions.

This sudden turn of action challenges player complicity. First, players learn the rules of different worlds to progress through the sequences, with the promise that a princess eventually will make sense of the narrative. Next, however, players reach the princess sequence and are made aware that their complicity did not help rescue the princess but instead that they are pursuing her. She was not taken from us: she ran away. This realization demands a new type of complicity that forces players to reflect about the meanings of their actions. It is retroactive complicity that affects the way that players played the game in the past, not the way that players will play the game in the future. The experience becomes even more evocative after the game is played and players reflect back on playing.

Ethical cognitive friction happens through the application of the classic rhetorical trope of *anagnorisis*—the moment of reveal in which the deeds of a character are shown to be morally wrong, causing the audience to reflect on the actions of that character and on their own actions, feelings, and values. A classic example of this trope is the moment in which Oedipus realizes that he has been sleeping with his mother.

Similarly, when players realize that their actions in *Braid* are not driving them to what they had expected, a pause for reflection is created that is based on the dissonance among actions, rules, and meanings. This careful reversal is situated close to the ending of the game but is not the last sequence, and its moment of pause allows players to think about their commitment to following rules and deciphering them at any cost.


A carefully designed game like *Braid* uses design elements to create this unsettling experience with game rules. Three design elements in *Braid* are most relevant for creating ethical gameplay in that reversing sequence:

- *Playing a sequence twice* The player is required to play the same level twice and sees that following a different direction of movement changes the meaning of those puzzles.
- *Required stopping points* The timing in the level requires players to stop on certain spots through the use of environmental enemies to allow the narrative sequence to be presented as a consequence of gameplay.
- *Time reversal* The mechanics that are present throughout the game are reinterpreted in a way that turns the structure of the game upside down. The capacity to “go back” in time or to alter the nature of each world yields in this case a very different result than solving a puzzle.

There is another reason that *Braid* is a game design masterpiece. If players collect the stars that the game gives as rewards for solving particularly hard puzzles (or if players perform a “perfect run” of the level), Tim is able to use the rewinding time mechanic to reach the princess. That leads to one of the alternative endings of the game in which the princess might be interpreted as a metaphor for something else (such as a reckless desire for knowledge or an atomic bomb). This ending leaves all doors open to player interpretation and is triggered through the modification of mechanics and their use in a way that allows for player creativity and expression (to figure out the solution).

If players engage with *Braid* without first pursuing the stars, they will experience a sequence that might lead to an ethical experience. If players choose to replay the game after they have understood its secrets, they might trigger a different sequence that suggests yet another reinterpretation of their actions. *Braid's* game design implements gameplay experiences that involve complex topics and require player complicity with their interpretation. That interpretation is triggered through mechanics, rules, and system design—through the procedural materiality of the game.

A somewhat different game that successfully explores the domain of ethical gameplay design through the manipulation of rules and mechanics is *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012a). Anna Anthropy is an outspoken independent game designer and a leader in a movement to turn games into forms of expression for everyone. Her games explore questions of sexuality and embodiment, queer culture, game culture, flirtation, and emotions and are not exclusively narrative games. Unlike many other artistic independent games, Anthropy is a master of the vocabulary of game design, including its rules, mechanics, and craft. Her games are invaluable from a cultural point



THIS IS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
GAME ABOUT MY EXPERIENCES
WITH HORMONE REPLACEMENT
THERAPY. MY EXPERIENCE ISN'T
ANYONE'S ELSE'S AND IS NOT
MEANT TO BE REPRESENTATIVE
OF EVERY TRANS PERSON.




Figure 6.11
Biographical games: *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012a)

of view and also are fascinating appropriations of a medium and its conventions for expressive purposes.

Dys4ia is an autobiographical game that was developed in Flash and published for free in the Newgrounds portal. It uses games rhetoric to convey a personal narrative—the different stages that were involved in Anthropy's hormone treatment for sex change. By stringing together different small games and following the aesthetic convention of the WarioWare series (Nintendo 2003–2013), Anthropy uses a minimal amount of game mechanics to convey this intimate narrative—and most of these mechanics are used in ways that require players to reflect about their experience.

Dys4ia is not a game about morality but tries to establish an empathetic relation with players. The game explains, illustrates, and simulates the stages of Anthropy's hormone treatment and presents them as an emotional journey that invokes a player's capacity to understand the intimate problems and dilemmas expressed with the game. Although it does not appeal directly to players' ethics, *Dys4ia* requires the practice of their values,

especially their empathy for other people. This type of ethical gameplay experience helps players develop their values. *Dys4ia* is a game for practicing virtues.

Like *Unmanned*, *Dys4ia* is a collection of minigames that are divided into four chapters on four stages of hormone treatment. The minigames vary in complexity: some require skill, and others require basic player input to display an explanatory message. These are not complicated games, but they are designed to be slightly frustrating to play.

Here I focus on two minigames to show how *Dys4ia* uses game mechanics to engage the player's virtues. One minigame is a modification of the classic *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1986), with some mechanical variations: players are given control over a figure that needs to pass through an opening in a wall. Although the figure and the opening are similar, they are not identical, so the figure cannot pass through the opening.

The second minigame uses the conventions of stealth games to explore how the perceptions of others can alter our behavior. Stealth games are

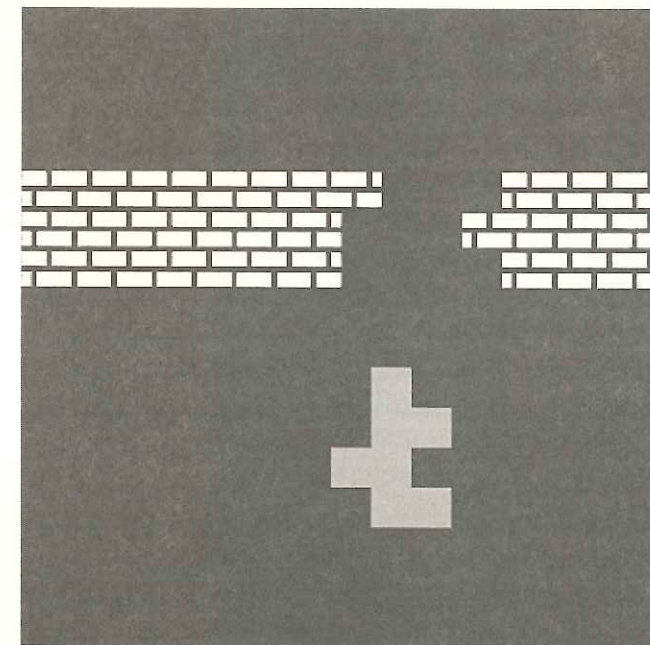


Figure 6.12
An odd fit: *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012a)

articulated around the mechanics of hiding and path finding, so players navigate a space as they try to find an optimal route for exploring it without being seen. Similarly, the stealth minigame in *Dys4ia* focuses on avoiding others' gaze for purposes that invoke players' virtues and moral thinking.

Both minigames are reflections on the difficulties that are experienced by transgendered people when they perceive their own bodies and when their bodies are perceived by others. The *Tetris*-style minigame explores the frustrations of experiencing a mismatch between thinking about having one kind of body and actually having another kind of body. The game translates that feeling to the frustrating puzzle of a piece that almost matches the wall opening but does not quite fit. The puzzle is designed to frustrate, and after a short time, it reveals a textual comment: "I feel weird about my body."

The stealth game is presented with the text "I feel like a spy whenever I use the women's bathroom," and it challenges the player to navigate a relatively easy puzzle by avoiding contact with the "illuminated" zones.

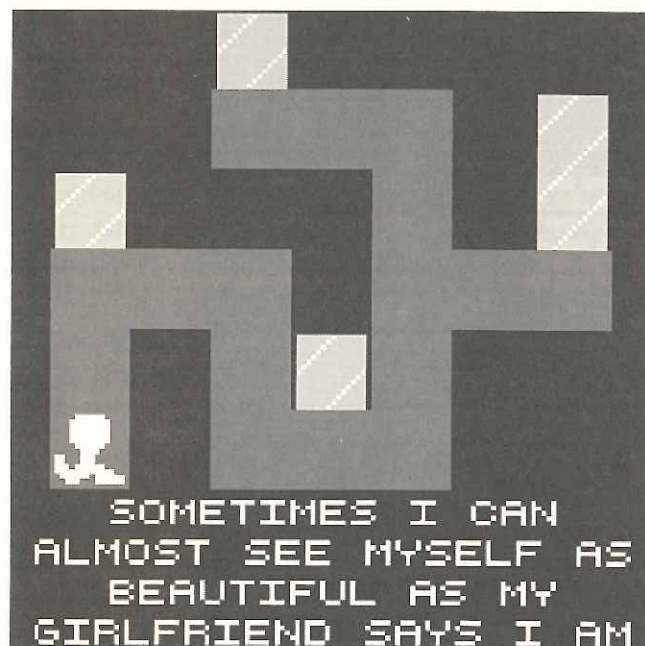


Figure 6.13
Realizations: *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012a)

This means not being discovered by women who use the bathroom. In this case, the game itself is not challenging, except for its use of a losing condition (not present in the previous minigames). However, by including it as a reflection about identity and presence in public spaces, the game appropriates the rhetorics and devices of stealth games and recontextualizes them to make a point about social norms and players' own biases.

The wicked problem in both these sequences is not a dilemma that players face while playing but is a provocation to their virtues as a consequence of playing. Instead of being a game that encapsulates a world in which players try out moral paths, *Dys4ia* challenges players' empathy and engages them in an expression of intimate thoughts and an opportunity to practice their virtues. The problem is to engage with this game in its earnest attempt to express intimate experiences.

Dys4ia demands a type of player complicity that is also somewhat different from previous examples. Complicity comes from the explicit request to read *Dys4ia* as an autobiographical game. The game asks players to exercise their virtues, play the game earnestly, and engage with its mechanics as an autobiographical game. Players are complicit with the authorial voice as it is experienced through the game rules.

Dys4ia is an example of how ethical cognitive friction can be invoked to allow players to practice virtues. The friction in this case comes from the tension between the game's classic mechanics and the ways in which they are manipulated to create frustration and reflection. These experiences are illustrated by classic game tropes with modified mechanics that create ethical cognitive friction: their slight modifications invoke players' moral judgment, from the impossibility of the *Tetris* game to the reinterpretation of the context of the stealth mechanics.

Most of the design elements that trigger this ethical interpretation are based on the design principle behind *Dys4ia*—an accumulation of minigames that illustrate an autobiographical account of the stages of hormone treatment for gender-identity disorder. The design elements that are used in these two minigames are also found in the other minigames in *Dys4ia*. The game has four relevant design elements for the creation of ethical engagement:

- *Designing for frustration* The *Tetris*-style game is designed to be unsolvable, and although the figure and opening appear to be a mismatch at first sight, players probably try to solve it to be totally sure. The fact that the

puzzle seems solvable and yet is not suggests that players should reflect about the meaning of this paradox.

- *Challenges through nonchallenges* The stealth level is simple and focuses on applying quickly the basics of the genre. These basics illustrate a point that the author makes in the explanatory text. The minigame itself is not a challenge, but the action of playing it in the context of the text makes it a point of revelation.
- *Autobiographical tone* The autobiographical tone of the texts helps contextualizing the actions of the players and some of the design choices. Even though the experience of the game as an ethical device is derived from the design of the rules, the text helps situate these rules so that the game cannot be misinterpreted.
- *A do-it-yourself aesthetic* The do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetic of the graphic style and sound consolidates the tone of the game's texts. A DIY aesthetic aligns with the autobiographical tone of the game.

Dys4ia is unlike the other games mentioned in this chapter for two reasons: it is a moral game that invokes and nurtures players' values, and it does so by creating a type of ethical cognitive friction that comes from the use of well-known game tropes that are recontextualized for autobiographical purposes. In an era when players demand that games teach and entertain, *Dys4ia* achieves these goals by using the medium as a form of self-expression, letting a voice communicate through the game and challenging players to listen to that voice.

Ethical gameplay through rules design can take many forms. From the complexities of *Braid* to the earnest design of *Dys4ia*, games can use their essential, procedural core to encourage a gameplay performance that communicates interesting ethical challenges. These rules are the starting point for actions that allow players to open up the game experience and interpret it as moral beings.

Context

Games as narratives and systems can be designed to create ethical gameplay, but games also can use the context of play to create moral experiences. Some games create an opening that players can use to interpret the game and its experience from a moral perspective. These games are not

necessarily serious games about moral exploration. The party game *Mafia* (also called *Werewolf*) is a social game that can be played in many different contexts by many different people, and the results of the game are often more performatively exhilarating than morally interesting. Even so, the relations established while playing can be understood as having moral weight and as being an exercise in virtues and vices. On the other hand, *War on Terror: The Board Game* (Sheerin and Tompkins 2006) is a "broken" board game that deals with a serious topic in an unserious way, and its designed openness to player creativity and interpretation can be more illuminating about its topic than more serious, complex, and ultimately boring games.

Allegedly designed by a psychiatry professor, *Mafia* is a prodigy of design simplicity and gameplay complexity. To begin the game, players form a circle. One player is called the game master, and the other players close their eyes while the game master distributes roles. Most players will be citizens, and some will be Mafia members. Mafia players know the identity of the other Mafia players. Then the game starts. At each turn, players discuss whether to let the day pass or vote to lynch a player they suspect is a member of the Mafia. When the turn ends, all players close their eyes, and Mafia players open theirs and silently decide whether to kill one other player (either Mafia or non-Mafia). And so the cycle goes until Mafia members cannot be eliminated (because they would block the vote) or the citizens eliminate all Mafia members.

This is a game about bluffing, performance, acting, and deception. It is a game about exploring the social reality that is created by the game. Players are within a social reality where they accuse, are accused, rebuke, backstab, and ultimately try to win by using fear, domination, and paranoia. The game *Mafia* excels at exploring players' survival instincts without ever becoming an exhilarating and cohesive group experience.

The game *Mafia* is interesting because its simple design allows players to explore ethical topics and interpersonal behaviors that often cannot be explored outside the context of games. *Mafia's* design allows creative paranoia and extreme behaviors to arise within a group of fellow players. Paranoia is not necessarily interpreted or experienced morally, but it is a psychological situation that leads to actions that might be based on moral intuitions. Here I explore how *Mafia* can be played morally through its appropriation and modification of the context of play.

Mafia creates wicked problems—problems that have no one correct answer and that require the moral and/or political involvement of whomever attempts to solve them—in the articulation of the group dynamics. By dividing players into two informationally asymmetrical classes and by hiding the information about the identities of these groups, *Mafia* turns the establishing of any relationship and the making any choice into wicked problems. In my experiences with playing this game, the wicked problem is more acute for players who have perfect information (typically, the Mafia members) because they sometimes have to make complicated decisions about other Mafia players. For instance, they might have to side with citizens to lynch a fellow Mafia player so that they can maintain their secret identity.

These wicked problems are at the essence of what games can do by manipulating the context of play. A simple game can be used to modify and appropriate the social interactions between players that are created in play. Extreme game experiences such as Nordic live-action role-playing games (LARPs) and jeepen role-playing games are structured around the ability of games to generate social fictions that create new social structures for play (Stenros and Waern 2011).

The player complicity in *Mafia* is derived from this wicked problem because the game requires players to accept this social fiction and play with it. They are complicit with the ways that the game wants them to treat others but also with the social fiction that players have created for a particular play session. With *Mafia*, players are complicit with the game's structure, which requires a willingness to play together and to betray, lynch, and assassinate. This player complicity is an outcome of the social fiction.

Ethical cognitive friction typically happens when the social fiction and the actual relationships between players overlap uncomfortably. The friction comes from the conflict between the actions that is required by the game and the social fiction that is created: players might need to eliminate friends, comrades, lovers, or enemies, and in that tension, the game "bleeds" into real life.¹ In fact, bleed in the game context is closely related to the ethical cognitive friction that these games can create. By their overlapping social fictions, *Mafia* and other role-playing games can challenge the tensions between performing play and maintaining social cohesion. *Mafia* is interesting because the game is designed to make performance and social cohesion appear to be at odds with each other.

The design elements that make *Mafia* an intriguing example of games that use the context of play to create ethical gameplay tend to appropriate the context of play to enhance the paranoia-infused gameplay. It has three interesting design elements:

- *Hidden information* *Mafia* gives players imperfect information about the state of the game, especially about the roles that are being played by other players. The core loop of the game is figuring out who is a member of the Mafia, a task that requires observation, theatrical performance, and a capacity for persuasion and interrogation.
- *Voting mechanics* The game's outcomes are based on voting, and players often discuss and agree on the voting process before they start playing. This procedure makes players responsible, accountable, and complicit in the results of the game. By voting, players have decided how the game ends.
- *Player-enforced rules* *Mafia* belongs to the players, who together decide the rules and enforce them. This gives them a sense of responsibility toward the ways in which that experience is upheld. Letting players decide and monitor the rules strengthens the community of players, but the core game loop is based on breaking that communitarian feel.

Mafia exemplifies how ethical gameplay can be derived from the social context of a game and from the conscious manipulation of the social fiction that it creates. Although *Mafia* is not a classic game about ethics, it is difficult to play *Mafia* and not be tempted to explore the seams and the limits of the cohesion of all of the players. *Mafia* excels at appropriating the context of play to create an experience that is open to players' values, virtues, and vices.

A different approach to utilizing the context of play as a source for ethical gameplay comes from the board game *War on Terror: The Board Game* (Sheerin and Tompkins 2006). This satirical game addresses a serious topic in an ironic way. Although its system design could be considered a failure, it makes up for this in the way that it cues for interesting multiplayer experiences.

One question to ask about this game is whether *War on Terror: The Board Game* is a political game about the events that followed the hijacking and crashing of four US planes on September 11, 2001. Is it a serious game that was designed to illustrate the consequences and effects of modern wars? Can players learn anything by playing it? In fact, *War on Terror* takes a more complicated and satisfying route than that of the moralist tale or



Figure 6.15
A mark of evil: *War on Terror: The Board Game* (Sheerin and Tompkins 2006)

War on Terror: The Board Game does not create a classic type of wicked problem. Players can make several decisions that, in the context of the gameplay session, can be considered answers to wicked problems. But here I am more interested in explaining how performativity can be seen as a wicked problem. Deciding whether to become a terrorist is a wicked problem because it implies that players have almost lost the game and also lost the will to keep playing. Similarly, when players become an evil empire,

the wicked problem is how to play. Should they take this role seriously and therefore act in an evil fashion, or should they engage in a performance of evil by playing a kind of evil that might lead to a game loss but also joyful entertainment?

The wicked problem in *War on Terror* is how to play the game—whether to play to win or instead to share a laugh with and at the war on terror by embracing the serious silliness of the balaclava of evil and the hopelessness of terrorism. In Sheerin's words (personal communication, 2012),

this is a game where there are no goodies and baddies; everyone is a bad guy, really. I had one game where someone played very virtuously. They got rich, and they basically bought everyone's friendship. They went on to win simply by paying everyone off. I thought that was really well done. I didn't realize the game could be won without compromising your morals. That player had the benefit of sitting on a massive oil reserve. Would they have been as virtuous if they weren't rich? I don't know. Is virtue or moral something that is awarded to you only once you have the power and the capability to be moral?

In this sense, the player complicity that *War on Terror: The Board Game* demands is different from most of the games discussed in this book. *War on Terror* asks that players have a capacity for laughter and irony through play that will complete the experience of the game. This is complicity with a way of playing the game and with a sense of collective performativity. Taking the game seriously and playing it to win will lead players to miss the point. What matters is the way in which the game is played. For *War on Terror* to have convincing political and ethical meanings, it needs to be played with and not just played. Players will extract a political or an ethical outcome from the experience of the game, but they will take it from the performance of actions in the context of the group of people playing and not from the actions needed to win the game. This is a game that requires complicit performance. As Sheerin (personal communication, 2012) explains:

I also believe that this challenge to people's thought is not always conscious. They'll play the game and they'll enjoy it, and they'll laugh, and they'll come away maybe not thinking it's political at all. I just have this feeling that something goes on there. Maybe they might reflect on it, or they might view a news item later which has an eerie echo of this strange board game they played a few nights ago. I am only theorizing. I rely a lot on my instincts, is what I'm saying. I look at people's reactions, how they play it, and how people report on the game. It just feels right. That's not a very satisfactory answer, I'm afraid.

The ethical cognitive friction will arise if players are playing the game to win rather than to have an opportunity to perform and act. If played as a conventional game, *War on Terror: The Board Game* is broken and uninteresting—a brokenness that leads players to reflect about the act of playing it. Ethical cognitive friction comes from considering the game as a game rather than as a collective experience about the war on terror and its absurdities.

Four important design elements encourage players to have a theatrical, performative experience with this game:

- *The balaclava prop* Adding an element that is external to the board—the requirement to wear a balaclava—takes players' attention away from the table and into the context in which the game is played, focusing on the community of players and the shared action of play.
- *A shared experience* Playing as terrorists means playing together, which makes this otherwise nonoptimal choice attractive. Sharing the experience of being terrorists can be more fulfilling than playing alone. And it also helps physically isolate players who want their empires to win.
- *The secret message prop* The possibility of sending messages using the secret message pad incorporates another prop into gameplay. Secret messages are not necessary to play or win. However, any session of *War on Terror: The Board Game* that does not have secret messages will not be complete because this prop creates humor through paranoia.
- *World peace rule* The world peace rule states that the game can be won if all players decide to declare world peace and let a round pass without any aggression. This rule makes an ironic comment on playing games to win. The game can always be won if players agree on this, but players also wonder whether this is really the purpose of (the) *War on Terror*.

War on Terror: The Board Game is an interesting take on the paradoxes of playing a game with other people. This game is better played as an excuse for acting outrageously than as a competitive game. Disguised as a relatively simple war game, *War on Terror* is an excuse for acting on a stage that lets players ironically interpret the seriousness of geopolitics. The game does not take its topic lightly, but its message comes not through the game itself but through players who play with it, take themselves less than seriously, and critique the politics of the world. It gives players an excuse to act roles. Playing the game to win would mean not understanding what *War on Terror* is about.

Failing

Although I am not a game designer, I have made games all my life, alone and with people, digital and analog. But I lack the will to push a concept to completion and create worthwhile game experiences. Instead, I have become a design researcher. I talk to game designers, read their work, interview them, observe them at work, and approach their work with respect and a critical eye.

Despite my limitations, I tried once again in 2009 to implement my ideas about ethical gameplay design. The result was an interesting failure that put my ideas into practice, showed me some of their limitations, and helped me improve my theories about game design. This section examines some of the consequences of my failure as a cautionary tale and a reflection on the ambitions of this book.

In the fall of 2009, inspired by Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (2006) and Victor Klemperer's *LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii: Notizbuch einens Philologen* (Language of the Third Reich: LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii) (2006), I started working on a multiplayer game that simulates the economy and society in concentration camps. The game is a resource-management game in which players, divided into three classes, struggle for power and self-preservation. At the beginning of the game, players are randomly assigned to classes, which are one of the points of the game. A majority of workers produce items and buy expensive yet trivial gadgets, a small number of managers (kapos) are promoted from the ranks of workers and deal with resource production, and a few top managers (bureaucrats) control all of the resources of the economy. The game is called *Banality*.

Gameplay is designed to be complex. The game system issues a request for resource production and provides the bureaucrats with a lump sum of money to pay for that production. Bureaucrats circulate money to managers while issuing a request for production of resources (which might not match the request from the system). Managers repeat that process with workers, who exchange labor for money and produce resources. Production bubbles up through managers to bureaucrats, who then meet the quotas of the system. This process is repeated in turns until the economy collapses and the system closes down the game.

The game interface needed to be designed so that players would not need to look at the implications of their actions in the community: it would

be possible but not required. The idea was to create a game interaction that was based on Arendt's idea of the banality of evil—how political systems can be designed to obscure information so that hideous acts can be hidden from plain view and noncurious, noncommitted agents do not care enough to know the truth.

To create that same experience for players, a core gameplay loop has to engage players but obscure the effects of their actions on the community. For instance, managers who require excessive production to please bureaucrats would damage workers, and bureaucrats who embezzle money from the system would harm managers and workers. Players would not need to know these outcomes to play. They could choose to learn them but do not need to. The user interface would provide feedback only about individual actions. To gain more information about the state of the game, players would have to make multiple clicks on nested menus—which I felt would pit usability against the optimization of play.

In late 2009, I recruited four talented students to help me create the game for Facebook. The failure of the game has nothing to do with these students and everything to do with my decisions. I did not realistically scope the project, chose the wrong platform, and did not correct production issues on time. We ended with a broken-system prototype that worked but did not fulfill my aspirations for the game. This game is now preserved in a hard drive somewhere.

The design for this game is an ethical experience because the whole game is structured around a series of wicked problems that articulate player interaction. The main problem is whether players choose to learn more about their economic system and the ways that their actions affect others. I designed other problems that would support these primary problems—whether to save resources and money, whether to act selfishly or to try to keep the economy and the game going, and whether to act as a group or as individuals.

In this sense, this game views solo versus multiplayer gameplay as a wicked problem. Although acknowledging the existence of others requires player effort, it also leads to longer play sessions and therefore helps to delay the collapse of the economy. However, playing solo should also be possible and more individually rewarding because trying to keep the game flowing leads to sacrifices of optimal strategies for individual players. Various choices—playing together or playing alone, playing to achieve goals or to keep on playing—are at the core of the gameplay of this game, and they

all can be presented as wicked problems (problems that demand moral and/or political involvement from those who attempt to solve them).

The type of player complicity that I wanted to create was essentially tied to the choices that players make to solve the wicked problem: collaborative players need to be accomplices in the sacrifices required to keep playing the game, and selfish players have to live with the consequences that their actions have for all other players and for the whole experience of the game.

These types of complicities lead to ethical cognitive friction because players find themselves thinking about the reasons behind their choices. The friction happens when they face a decision and do not try to figure out the consequences of that action for other players and the game economy. A small action could have enormous implications, but players could choose not to acknowledge it. That temptation would be essential to the gameplay experience of the game.

I decided to develop this game, then, with three design elements that would help achieve this kind of experience:

- *An obscured user interface* An obscured user interface provides information about all the basic interactions and their results for each class but obscures the consequences for other players.
- *Selfishness* The economy has space for selfishness but is balanced to punish an excess of selfishness.
- *Competing goals* Different classes have different goals, which allow players to aspire to improve either their own situation or the economy in general by means of playing the game.

One of the main risks in designing ethical gameplay is that making the game too serious and too focused on wicked problems will interfere in the way that players engage with the game. My game has a problem in the possibility space: because players did not find my options interesting and therefore would not engage creatively with the wicked problems, ethical gameplay could not take place.

Although ethical gameplay experiences do not need to be fun, they are still games, and their design cannot turn away from the activity of play. Whatever we create needs to be playful, engaging, creative, challenging, mysterious, and meaningful.

The main problem with my game is that players did not care about the core action loop. In interviews, the testers said that they found the ideas

behind the interaction attractive and considered some of their actions to be morally relevant. However, they never felt in any way attached to the activity of playing: they did not care about the game or the other players. Because players did not want to play the game, my experiment with socially driven ethical gameplay ended in failure.

Before even asking about the wicked problem that players will engage with, designers need to think carefully about why people will play a game and how ethical thinking will have a place in their play activity. In other words, we need to understand why players will care about playing ethically before we create those experiences. Otherwise, moral design will be just an ornament in the game experience, and the immense emotional possibilities opened by giving players the possibility of playing with their values will be lost. To play ethically, players first need to care about the game and the activity of play. Players need a reason to engage with their values and a playful purpose to become ethically engaged. Preaching, dictating, and moralizing do not stimulate the creative capacity for play. When people play with their values, they are expressing themselves and the way that they live in the world.