*Fable III*

Developer: Lionhead Studios

Year: 2010

Part of the Fable series

Platform: Xbox 360/PC

Console/PC game

Single player with limited multiplayer options

Fantasy Role-playing game (RPG)

Curricular connections: Ethics; civics

Possible skills: Ethical decision-making; argumentation; empathy; identity exploration; analyzing moral dilemmas

Audience: 18+; college students; young adults

Length of time: At least 10 hours; likely played outside the classroom

Cost: $$ (Once was $60 when it first came out, and is now discounted heavily)

Premise/Summary of the Game

*Fable III* is a role-playing video game developed by Lionhead Studios and published by Microsoft/ Xbox. It is the third in the Fable series of games, where a player inhabits the imaginary world of Albion, a medieval-flavored game set in 1800s London. In *Fable III*, players take on the role of a prince or princess, who must go on quests to save Albion from a coming darkness. Along the way, players need to approach ethical choices, such as whether to sacrifice their friend or a number of villagers; or make decisions for Albion, such as whether to build a brothel or orphanage in a town. The choices have consequences for the game player and the game world, as well as financial implications. For example, if a player builds the orphanage, s/he can go visit the orphanage later in the game. If a player builds the brothel instead, s/he may see homeless non-playing character (NPC) kids and the surrounding town may look darker and more economically depressed. Building a brothel, however, earns the player more money and helps the Queen or King save more villagers from a “coming darkness,” which arrives at the end of the game.

How to Use the Game – Examples & Research

*Fable III* includes a number of compelling ethical and policy decisions, and would be potentially useful for teaching skills related to ethical thinking, such as reflection, empathy development, reasoning, and information gathering. For instance, players need to decide whether to raise or lower taxes or save a friend or three villages. Students in a class could play through different scenarios and discuss what they would do in each scenario and why. Or, the teacher could play the game with the students and the students could choose what to do as a class (via a voting mechanism) and deliberate each choice and its consequences. Schrier used Fable III in a college “Ethics and Games” classroom to help students consider how to design ethical choices in games, and the difficulty of creating “black and white” versus more “gray” and nuanced decisions in video games. The students also explored how character development, story, gameplay, avatar gender, relationship with NPCs (non-playing characters) and the presence of other characters affected how a player makes ethical decisions in games, and how this might relate to how people make decisions outside of games.

Because of the mature themes, role-playing elements, and fantasy violence, the game is much more appropriate for college students and young adults. The game also takes a significant amount of time to play (at least 10 hours), and costs money ($20 for the PC version), making it not particularly useful for an in-class exercise or short module. One possible way to include the game in the classroom is to show clips from the game, pause just before choices are made, and use them to explore what decisions they would make, what types of consequences they would expect from each decision, and whether their expectations were met.

Research has suggested that enabling students to play the game at home or in an afterschool setting might be beneficial for the practice of ethical thinking and empathy. Schrier (2011) investigated the skills and thought processes players used when working through the ethical scenarios in Fable III. Based on this, she found that game players did practice many ethical thinking skills in Fable III, such as interpreting evidence, weighing pros and cons, and reflecting on past decisions. One interesting finding is that participants were more able to dynamically imagine consequences, what ifs and possibilities beyond the ethical scenario, whereas participants who had the same ethical question in a written format were thinking of cause and effect relationships that came directly from the scenario itself. Also, game participants seemed to empathize with other’s perspectives more frequently than those who were just looking at a written version of an ethical scenario. These findings suggest that educators can use the game to help students think through ethical scenarios, consider other’s perspectives, and walk through potential consequences and what ifs.

Tips and Best Practices

1.    Play the game beforehand to understand the different decisions that are possible in the game. This could take 10+ hours!

2.    Set the expectations for your students that this is a lengthy game that takes patience.

3.    Have students keep a “journal” of their decisions in the game, and jot down ideas of why they decided to make their decision. This could also include stating what the different perspectives on the decision may include. For instance, in Fable III, a character will often give the “pros” to a decision, and another will give the “cons.”

4.    Have students explain their most difficult decision in the game, and why it was so difficult.

5.    Encourage your students not to “cheat” to make extra money in the game, but to think through the decisions and their financial impact.

6.    After the students play the game, have them share with the rest of the class their decisions, and communicate to each other their reasons for making them.

Related Games/Media:

Fable; Fable II; Black & White; Knights of the Old Republic; Dragon Age

Related Research:

Schrier, K. (2016) Ethical thinking in Role Playing Video Games.