

Workshop: Ethics in Videogames

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SUMMARY

This workshop will highlight the experiences of researchers and practitioners who are investigating and designing games in the growing field of ethics and games. In the first half of the workshop, we will lead a discussion of best practices for designing and studying games that enable the practice of ethical thinking and reasoning skills. We will also evaluate possible methodologies and challenges for assessing ethics in games. Finally, we will discuss ethical considerations surrounding the development of games and gamer communities. In the second half of the workshop, participants will engage in a series of hands-on activities designed to put into practice many of the issues discussed earlier. These activities will include exercises in game design as well as game analysis.

Author Keywords

Ethics, videogames, ethical reasoning, workshop

INTRODUCTION

What are the challenges of ethical game design and the potentials of expressing values through play? Ethics is the practice of enacting choices and moral judgment to achieve the life of a good human being [1]. Games and simulations can be rich, authentic playgrounds for the practice of these ethical choices, as they offer the ability to iterate and reflect on multiple possibilities and consequences, and to reflect on decisions and their outcomes [2]. As such, educators, researchers and developers are beginning to consider the efficacy of using games to support ethical reasoning and character development, to inspire social action, and to re-evaluate what games can do. This workshop will address the issues and challenges in this burgeoning field of research and development, which can be broadly defined as the study of using games to support ethical thinking, reasoning, and reflection, as well as the ethical implications of game development choices, design possibilities, and distribution methods.

Henry Jenkins, in the MacArthur Foundation Whitepaper, "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture," cites ethics and ethics education as a top challenge for today's youth. He argues that there is a "breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young people for their increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants" [3]. Although young people are becoming media creators as well as

consumers, they are not acquiring the appropriate ethical norms and professional practices, nor do they understand how to apply ethics, make decisions or reflect on their own ethical behavior [3]. Mastering this type of thinking is essential for full participation in "public, community, creative, and economic life" (New London Group, cited in [3]).

Further, games are a particularly compelling media for the study and practice of ethics because of the very nature of their design. They provide an authentic content within which to practice and experience ethical dilemmas and critical thinking and decision making. Moreover, games themselves are the site of ethical controversy, questioning, and confusion, particularly because of their status as new media. In particular, they have been the center of a lot of media attention as a causal factor of a lot of society's ills, including youth violence, child obesity, and social alienation [for an overview of recent media coverage refer to 4]. While many are worried about the "effects" of this new medium, for good or for bad, the truth is, we need to develop a deeper understanding of the ethics of videogames, and through this, begin to explore the relationships between games, the activity of playing games, and the affordances of this medium for expressing and communicating ideas.

Playing games also frequently involves social and interpersonal experiences which can have ethical ramifications. According to the Pew Report, "63% of teens who play games report seeing or hearing 'people being mean or overly aggressive while playing,' and 49% report seeing or hearing 'people being hateful, racist, or sexist' while playing" [5]. On the other hand, Pew reports that "85% of teens who report seeing these behaviors also report seeing other players being generous or helpful while playing" [5]. By situating games in the ethics discourse and posing them as space for the practice of ethics and ethical thinking, games can be both a versatile site of study and unique window into culture and humanity. In fact, when used as a transformative tool, videogames can empower people to learn what it means to live ethically and how to go about doing so.

GOALS

In the first part of the workshop, we will discuss and share case studies and stories from experiences in designing and

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studying games that enable the practice of ethical thinking and reasoning skills. We will also evaluate possible methodologies and challenges in assessing ethics in games. We will discuss ethical considerations surrounding the development and promotion of games, as well as the representation of race, culture, gender and ethnicity in games. Further, we will highlight the experience and primary challenges of researchers and developers who are expressing values through games and engaging in ethical game design.

In the second half of the workshop, participants will engage in a series of hands-on activities designed to put into practice many of the issues discussed earlier as well as increase participants' ethical, empathy and reflective abilities. These activities will include exercises in game design as well as game analysis and will be based on relevant findings and research in the field [e.g. 1, 2, 6]. At the end of the workshop participants will be able to:

1. Understand better the emerging field of ethics and games from multidisciplinary perspectives.
2. Gain an appreciation for the potentials and challenges of using games to express and experiment with ethics and ethical systems.
3. Consider how personal, corporate, societal and community ethics intersect in both game development and game player communities.

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José P. Zagal is an Assistant Professor in the College of Computing and Digital Media at DePaul University. His research interests include the use of online communities for collaborative learning and the development of frameworks for describing, analyzing, and understanding games. José received his PhD in computer science from Georgia Institute of Technology in 2008, his MSc in engineering sciences and a BS in industrial engineering from Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in 1999 and 1997. In his free time he loves to design and play games.

Karen Schrier

Karen Schrier is a media producer, educator, researcher, and writer. She is currently an executive producer at Scholastic, where she spearheads research and digital media projects. She is also a doctoral student at Columbia University and an adjunct professor at Parsons. Karen is also developing and editing a two-volume collection, "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play," to be published in 2010 by IGI Global. She has a master's degree from MIT and a bachelor's degree from Amherst College.

Miguel Sicart

Miguel Sicart is Assistant Professor at the IT University of Copenhagen, where he teaches game design. He received his Ph.D. in game studies 2006; taking a multidisciplinary approach to ethics and computer games, he studied issues of game design, violence and videogames and the role of age-regulation codes. His book, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, which is based on his doctoral work, comes out on MIT Press in the spring of 2009. He is currently working on developing a design framework for implementing ethical gameplay in digital games.