# Videogames and Moral Pedagogy: A Neo-Kohlbergian Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The Four Component Model of Moral Functioning is a framework for understanding moral competence originally developed by James Rest and subsequently revised with Darcia Narvaez. It posits that moral competence can be broken up into four distinct components: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral action. The purpose of the present chapter is to demonstrate, via an examination of three commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) videogames (*Ultima IV*, *Fallout 3*, and *Mass Effect),* how this model can function as a blueprint for the design of moral content in games intended for pedagogy and entertainment.

## KEYWORDS

Moral psychology, moral pedagogy, Four Component Model of Moral Functioning, moral judgment, moral sensitivity, moral action, moral motivation

## MORAL PSYCHOLOGY: KOHLBERGIAN AND NEO-KOHLBERGIAN APPROACHES

Research into the psychology of moral development has experienced something of a renaissance over the last two decades. Where the field was once defined by the views of Lawrence Kohlberg and the cognitive-developmental paradigm, new perspectives informed by recent research in the cognitive sciences now predominate. Chief among these is the so-called "Neo-Kohlbergian" program championed by psychologist James Rest and colleagues (1999).

To understand the neo-Kohlbergian approach to moral psychology, it is first necessary to appreciate the work of Kohlberg himself and the cognitive-developmental tradition in general. Developed by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget in the first half of the 20th Century, the cognitive-developmental approach to moral psychology is rooted in two key claims: 1) that moral competence "stems from structures of moral reasoning" (Krebs and Denton, 2005, p.631) and 2) that these structures develop over time in a sequence of stages or phases, with each stage representing a "better cognitive organization than the one before it" (Kohlberg, 1981, p.26).

In 'The Moral Development of the Child' (1932), Piaget argued that moral stage development is characterized by two distinct developmental phases: Heteronymous and Autonomous. During the Heteronymous stage, which starts in infancy and ends in the early teens, children think of morality in terms of obedience, and the validity of moral rules as a function of authority. But as children grow older and interact regularly with peer groups, they develop an appreciation for the motives behind moral behavior, for the utility of reciprocity, and for the status of morals as entities separate from the authorities that enforce them (Krebs & Denton, 2005, p.629).

In his 1958 doctoral dissertation, Kohlberg—seeking to expand upon Piaget's work—developed a series of nine hypothetical moral dilemmas and read them to a sample of 81 boys, recording their responses and probing extensively to determine the rationale for their judgments (Krebs & Denton,

2005, p.629). Over the next twenty years, Kohlberg followed up with more than half of his original respondents, re-interviewing them and refining his moral dilemmas as well as the methodology used to obtain response data. On the basis of these longitudinal studies, Kohlberg developed a six-stage model of moral judgment maturity (see Table 2.) representing an "invariant sequence" of moral development (Kohlberg., 1987, p.20). Each moral stage entails "a new logical structure" – an organized *way* of thinking.

Kohlberg insists that cognitive development must always precede its moral counterpart (ibid. p.138), although he does allow that in many cases a person's cognitive maturity can outstrip their moral competence. Although moral stage development is universal to humans, most of us (as the cynical reader might expect) do not make the most of our potential in this regard, with the majority of adults tested by Kohlberg and colleagues classified as "conventional" – i.e., in Stage 3 or 4.

*Table 1. Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Development.*

| Level One: Preconventional Morality | Stage 1: Punishment and Obedience: the physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. |
| --- | --- |
| | Stage 2: Instrumental Relativism: right actions consist of that which instrumentally satisfies one's needs and occasionally the needs of others. |
| Level Two: Conventional Morality | Stage 3: Interpersonal Concordance: good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. |
| | Stage 4: Law and Order: right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake. |
| Level Three: Postconventional Morality | Stage 5: Social Contract: right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and in terms of standards that have been critically examined and agreed on by the whole society. |
| | Stage 6: Universal Ethics: right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. |

(Source: Kohlberg, 1981, pp.17-19)

Insofar as it places deliberative reason at the core of moral cognition, Kohlberg's approach to moral psychology is typically classified as rationalist or Kantian (Hauser, 2006, p.16). On this view, the most reliable measure of a person's moral competence is the sophistication of their moral reasoning. This emphasis, or perhaps over-emphasis, on rationality constitutes the main point of difference between the Kohlbergian and Neo-Kohlbergian models of moral development. Where Kohlberg saw the capacity to make rational moral judgments as the basis of moral maturity, Neo-Kohlbergians contend that it is merely *part* of a much larger and more complex cognitive apparatus. According to James Rest and colleagues (1999), there are in fact four key psychological components that comprise the complete moral agent: *Moral Sensitivity* (the ability to recognize and respond to moral phenomena), *Moral Judgment* (the capacity to engage in moral reasoning and make moral choices), *Moral Motivation* (the desire to act on moral decisions and focus on them to the exclusion of other concerns), and *Moral Action* (the ability to act on moral decisions and see them through). Taken together, these form **The Four Component Model of Moral Functioning (see Table 2)**.

*Table 2. The Four Components of Moral Functioning and Related Skills/Sub-skills.*

| Moral Judgment | Moral Sensitivity |
|---|---|
| *Understanding Ethical Problems* <br> • Gathering information <br> • Categorizing problems <br> • Analyzing ethical problems | *Understand Emotional Expression* <br> • Identify and express emotions <br> • Fine tune your emotions <br> • Manage anger and aggression |
| *Using codes and Identifying Judgment Criteria* <br> • Characterizing codes <br> • Discerning code application <br> • Judging code validity | *Take the Perspectives of Others* <br> • Take an alternative perspective <br> • Take a cultural perspective <br> • Take a justice perspective |
| *Reasoning Generally* <br> • Reasoning objectively <br> • Using sound reasoning <br> • Avoiding reasoning pitfalls | *Connecting to Others* <br> • Relate to others <br> • Show care <br> • Be a friend |
| *Reasoning Ethically* <br> • Judging perspectives <br> • Reason about standards and ideals <br> • Reason about actions and outcomes | *Responding to Diversity* <br> • Work with group and individual differences <br> • Perceive diversity <br> • Become multicultural |
| *Understand Consequences* <br> • Analyzing consequences <br> • Predicting consequences <br> • Responding to consequences | *Controlling Social Bias* <br> • Diagnose bias <br> • Overcome bias <br> • Nurture tolerance |
| *Reflect on Process and Outcome* <br> • Reasoning about means and ends <br> • Making right choices <br> • Monitoring one's reasoning | *Interpreting Situations* <br> • Determine what is happening <br> • Perceive morally <br> • Respond creatively |
| *Coping* <br> • Apply positive reasoning <br> • Managing disappointment and failure <br> • Developing resilience | *Communicate Well* <br> • Speak and listen <br> • Communicate nonverbally and alternatively <br> • Monitor communication |

| Moral Action | Moral Motivation |
|---|---|
| *Resolving Conflicts and Problems* <br> • Solve Interpersonal Problems <br> • Negotiate <br> • Make amends | *Respecting Others* <br> • Be civil and courteous <br> • Be non-violent <br> • Show reverence |
| *Assert Respectfully* <br> • Attend to human needs <br> • Build assertiveness skills <br> • Use rhetoric respectfully | *Cultivate Conscience* <br> • Self command <br> • Manage influence and power <br> • Be honorable |
| *Taking Initiative as a Leader* <br> • Be a leader <br> • Take initiative for and with others <br> • Mentor others | *Act Responsibly* <br> • Meet obligations <br> • Be a good steward <br> • Use rhetoric respectfully |
| *Planning to Implement Decisions* <br> • Thinking strategically | *Help Other Cooperate* <br> • Act thoughtfully |

| | |
|---|---|
| • Implement successfully<br>• Determine resource use | • Share resources |
| *Cultivate Courage*<br>• Manage fear<br>• Stand up under pressure<br>• Managing change and uncertainty | *Finding meaning in life*<br>• Centre yourself<br>• Cultivate commitment<br>• Cultivate wonder |
| *Persevering*<br>• Be steadfast<br>• Overcome obstacles<br>• Build competence | *Valuing Traditions and Institutions*<br>• Identify and value traditions<br>• Understand social structures<br>• Practice democracy |
| *Work Hard*<br>• Set reachable goals<br>• Manage time<br>• Take charge of your life | *Develop Ethical Identity and Integrity*<br>• Choose good values<br>• Build your identity<br>• Reach for your potential |

(Source: Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005)


## THE FOUR COMPONENT MODEL AS A FRAMEWORK FOR DESIGN AND CRITIQUE


In this section, I will employ The Four Component Model as a tool to critique the moral content in three Commercial Off The Shelf (COTS) videogames: *Ultima IV, Fallout 3,* and *Mass Effect*. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate how the model can inform the design of moral content in videogames more generally.

Supported by empirical research in psychology and neuroscience (e.g., Narvaez and Vaydich, 2008), the Four Component Model functions as a blueprint for the development of moral expertise. As Darcia Narvaez (2006) explains:

*Moral experts demonstrate holistic orientations in one or more of the four processes. Experts in [Moral Sensitivity] are better at quickly and accurately 'reading' a moral situation and determining what role they might play. They role take and control personal bias in an effort to be morally responsive to others. Experts in [Moral Judgment] have many tools for solving complex moral problems. They use reason about duty and consequences, responsibility and religious codes. Experts in [Moral Motivation] cultivate ethical self-regulation that leads them to prioritize ethical goals. They foster an ethical identity that leads them to revere life and deepen commitment. Experts in [Moral Action] know how to keep their "eye on the prize," enabling them to stay on task and take the necessary steps to get the ethical job done. They are able to intervene courageously and take initiative for others. Experts in a particular excellence have more and better organized knowledge about it, have highly tuned perceptual skills for it, have deep moral desire for it, and have highly automatized, effortless responses (p.716).*

It is my contention that videogames, by virtue of their interactivity and capacity to simulate personal, social, and emotional contexts, are particularly suited to cultivating expertise in each of the above listed ethical skills.

Though the purpose of this critique is primarily to inform the design of videogames for moral pedagogy, in my view it is also relevant to the design of moral content for games intended solely for entertainment. If games are to be effective as moral educators, they must (among other things) present moral content—dilemmas, temptations and so forth—in a manner that engages student focus and

encourages them to reflect on their in-game behavior. In short, they must be *entertaining* as well as instructive; they must be good videogames *as well as* effective teaching tools. As such, it seems reasonable to assume that effective moral content in an educational videogame could, with appropriate tweaking, be just as effective in a game designed solely for fun.

## Moral Judgment: The Case of *Ultima IV*

Originally released in 1989 for the Apple II and then later ported to a wide variety of platforms, including the PC and Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* is a role-playing game designed by Richard "Lord British" Garriott remarkable for its strong focus on moral development. Where the majority of its RPG contemporaries focused on epic conflicts between good evil, *Ultima IV* had players undertake a spiritual journey of sorts (the titular Quest of the Avatar) in which the ultimate goal is the cultivation of eight virtues: Honesty, Compassion, Valor, Justice, Honor, Spirituality, Sacrifice, and Humility. By performing certain actions, such as giving money to the poor or donating blood to healers, players develop these traits over the course of the game until they are sufficiently virtuous to obtain the Tome of Wisdom and become the ultimate moral exemplar that is the Avatar.

Compared to modern RPGs such as the *Fable* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* series, *Ultima IV's* capacity for engaging Moral Judgment skills is surprisingly high. Consider the character generation system, for instance. Eschewing the standard *Dungeons & Dragons*-inspired attribute chart, *Ultima IV* has the player answer a series of moral dilemmas, delivered via tarot cards dealt by an aging fortune teller.  Here is a sample of the sort of dilemmas posed in the NES version of the game:

*Entrusted to deliver an uncounted purse of gold, thou dost meet a poor beggar. Dost thou a) deliver the gold knowing the Trust in thee was well placed, or b) show Compassion, giving the beggar a coin, knowing it won't be missed?*

This is an effective moral dilemma for a few reasons. First of all, it's a *genuine* dilemma, rather than merely a moral temptation. The difference is crucial, and unfortunately ignored by many games with moral content. A genuine moral dilemma involves conflict between two or more morally compelling claims (Kidder, 2003, p.17). The abortion, euthanasia, and stem-cell research debates are all examples of this kind because all sides have legitimate moral arguments. Moral temptations, on the other hand, are simply instances in which one may feel justified in doing something obviously immoral (ibid.), like downloading pirated music or cheating on a spouse.

According to Narvaez and her colleagues, engaging in ethical reasoning of the sort associated with moral dilemmas is just one of *seven* essential skills related to the development of Moral Judgment (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005, p.156). Others include:

- Understanding ethical problems
- Using codes and identifying judgment criteria
- Reasoning critically
- Understanding consequences
- Reflecting on process and outcome
- Coping and resiliency

As well as being a valuable guide for educators, these seven skills provide a comprehensive blueprint for the design of videogame content intended to promote or engage Moral Judgment skills. View it as a checklist of sorts: the more boxes a given piece of content ticks, the more likely it is to activate cognitive faculties related to Moral Judgment. How do you design content to expand the ways in which judgment is piqued? Well, let's  go back to the moral dilemmas in *Ultima IV*, and see to what extent they could be improved—pedagogically speaking—by the application of this method.

By their nature, the dilemmas in question have already (to a certain extent) ticked off four of the seven boxes: namely, reasoning ethically, reasoning critically, understanding ethical problems and using codes/identifying judgment criteria.

The first two we've already discussed: although distinct cognitively, ethical and critical reason are mutually dependent – to the point where some philosophers (notably Kant) see them as virtually identical. Related to these two, the ability to understand ethical problems develops in the context of repeated *exposure* to them (Churchland, 1998, p.107).The fourth skill, using codes and identifying judgment criteria, is implied by the specific *kinds* of dilemmas presented in *Ultima IV*. For example, consider again the following excerpt:

***Entrusted** to deliver an **uncounted** purse of gold, thou dost meet a **poor** beggar. Dost thou a) deliver the gold knowing the **Trust in thee** was well placed, or b) **show Compassion**, giving the beggar a coin, knowing **it won't be missed**?*

The terms in bold are the ones I consider morally salient. **Entrusted** and **Trust in thee** (with a capital) both imply duty and responsibility. They encourage one to think of the problem in relation to their *role* as the delivery person of the gold. Framed in this way, the issue is considered to be one of Honor (one of the Eight Virtues mentioned above): honor of one's duty, honor of one's superiors, and honor of one's honesty. Conversely, **poor**, **show Compassion** (again capitalized), **uncounted** and **it won't be missed** frame the problem as one of empathy and charity. Pulling for the Virtue of Compassion, these words encourage the player to empathize with the beggar while simultaneously diminishing the negative impact their well-meaning theft will have on their hypothetical employer. In this way, it is necessary to consider both codes of conduct *and* other judgment criteria when approaching this dilemma.

With the other three skills, the dilemmas do not fare as well in supporting their practice. For starters, since the dilemmas are pure hypotheticals with no effect on the game other than determining the player's class and starting position, they're unlikely to spark much reflection on the *consequences* of Moral Judgment. There are a number of ways the dilemmas could be made more pedagogically effective in this respect. For example, one could simply have the player's answers act as modifiers for their in-game virtues: compassionate answers enhance Compassion, honorable answers enhance Honor, and so on.

This leaves two more skills. *Reflecting on process and outcome* entails reasoning about the structure of moral decision making and involves thinking about means and ends, making choices, and monitoring one's own reasoning for implicit and explicit biases (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, p.156). The dilemmas in *Ultima IV* engage this skill to a certain extent in that a number of them—like the one about the beggar—are means-versus-ends type problems. However, once solved, there is very little opportunity or incentive for the player to engage in deeper reflection about their choices. A tried and tested away of achieving this in moral philosophy is to give the same dilemma multiple times with various little tweaks each time (as in the variations of Philippa Foot's (1978) famous "trolley dilemma"). So, for example, the beggar dilemma could be followed by another dilemma in which the player has to decide whether to steal food from a wealthy merchant for the purpose of feeding their sickly child. The situations aren't entirely analogous, but the point is that they're similar enough to be comparable, and are thus capable of triggering ethical reflection in players who recognize their similarity, but answer each differently.

*Coping and resiliency*, in a nutshell, refers to the capacity to make solid Moral Judgments in the face of adversity and disappointment (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, p.156). It is a difficult faculty to engage with hypothetical moral dilemmas because they exist in a contextual vacuum. In responding to the dilemmas in *Ultima IV*, for example, one does not feel challenged or otherwise under pressure because said dilemmas don't exist in a context in which those feelings make any sense.  A player who

decides to give the beggar a coin does not feel anxiety over betraying their employer because said employer only exists as a word. They might consider it questionable intellectually, but there are no *external* pressures that one must resist. There's no possible guilt or social approbation to contend with, as it's an entirely self-contained problem.

To break *the Ultima IV* dilemmas of their contextual isolation, one would need to connect them to the rest of the game and its world in a meaningful way. One possible way to do this would be to have some of the dilemmas repeat a number of times during the game, but under circumstances that might cause the player to waver from their original choice. For example, one could design a modified version of the beggar dilemma such that giving to the beggar may cause other characters (such as certain shopkeepers) to stop responding to the player. Morally, this version of the dilemma is identical to the original – the only difference is that the modified version is embedded in a context that challenges the charitably inclined player's resolve and capacity to reason clearly in a muddy situation.

It's worth noting at this point that I'm *not* arguing that videogame content designed to promote Moral Judgment needs to engage *all* of the above skills all the time to succeed in that respect. My goal—and this applies to all the games discussed in this chapter—is simply to illustrate how the scope of moral content can be broadened by an application of the Four Component Model to the process of game design. The extent to which one *should* broaden the scope of their content in this way depends entirely on what their goals are as game designers, educators, or both.

## Moral Sensitivity and Megaton in *Fallout 3*

*Fallout 3* is an action-heavy RPG released by Bethesda Softworks in 2008. Like the previous *Fallout* games, this one takes place in a retro-futurist post-apocalyptic wasteland littered with the remains of Cold War Americana. The player takes the role of a citizen of Vault 101 – one of several hundred underground shelters designed to protect pockets of society from the nuclear fallout ravaging the rest of the planet. Following an incident early in the game, the player must leave the vault and venture into the blackened ruins of Washington, D.C. to search for their missing father, thus initiating a sprawling adventure punctuated by frequent moments of moral temptation.

I use the term "moral temptation" deliberately because that is exactly the form in which most of the moral content in *Fallout 3* is presented. Unlike *Ultima IV*'s dilemmas, moral problems in *Fallout 3* generally involve choosing between an **obvious good** and an **obvious wrong**. For example, early on in the game, the player discovers the town of Megaton: a shanty settlement constructed around an undetonated nuclear bomb. Upon talking to the local sheriff, Simms, the player learns that the bomb, although undetonated, is still live and may yet explode, destroying the town and everyone in it. At this point, the player can choose to disarm the bomb (provided they have the requisite tools and knowledge), or continue to explore the rest of Megaton, eventually happening across an individual by the name of Mister Burke.

Mister Burke is a bad person. He talks in an insidious purr, wears an expensive business suit, and carries a silenced pistol (although only a sticky-fingered player would know that). He also wants to detonate the aforementioned nuclear bomb, and what's more, he wants to pay the player to do it:

*I represent certain … interests, and those interests view this town—this 'Megaton'—as a blight on a burgeoning urban landscape. You have no connections here, no interest in this cesspool's affairs or fate. You can assist us in erasing this little 'accident' off the map.*

In contrast to Sheriff Simms' fatherly affability, Mister Burke is depicted as cartoonishly evil, deriving profit and pleasure from wanton destruction. And so, the choice confronting the player could not be any more black and white: either side with the hard-working Good Guy and save a town of (mostly) innocent people, or succumb to temptation and side with the Bad Guy, dooming the town and its citizens for the sake of money and material goods.

So far as moral temptations go, this particular temptation is not a very compelling example of its kind. A good moral temptation entails apologetics: one must be able to justify, however weakly, their immoral behavior. Once again, downloading music from the internet is a good example of a moral temptation because it's easy to rationalize. For example:

- I wasn't going to buy it anyway
- I only want to see if I like it
- Record companies are greedy and deserve to be ripped-off
- I still buy concert tickets and merchandise

But with the Megaton quest in *Fallout 3*, there is no coherent rationalization available – the only plausible reason a morally engaged player would want to take Mister Burke up on his offer is if they're *trying* to be psychotic.

Considered in the context of the game's Karma system, which awards good and bad karma points to the player based on their behavior, what Mister Burke is really offering here is a chance for the player to manipulate their moral identity as though it were any other character attribute. In the same way that one chooses their hair color or gender in *Fallout 3*, one also chooses whether to be Hero or Villain in a situation obviously designed for that purpose. The setup and options are obvious because they need to be, lest the player miss or mess up an opportunity to develop their character's stats.

This might be fine in terms of a simple game design (or in this case, as a means of designing your avatar), but unsuccessful for the purposes of moral pedagogy. After all, real moral temptations and dilemmas are seldom as obvious as deciding whether to murder people or save them. In the real world, moral situations are deeply embedded in the context of everyday life, such that it is often difficult to identify them as moral in the first place. Indeed, the capacity to identify moral problems *as* moral problems is fundamental to the development of Moral Sensitivity – which, like the other components of the Four Component Model, can be divided into seven sub-skills (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, p.156):

- Understanding emotional expression
- Taking the perspectives of others
- Connecting to others
- Responding to diversity
- Controlling social bias
- Interpreting situations
- Communicating well

Of these, *understanding emotional expression*, *taking the perspectives of others*, *connecting to others*, and *interpreting situations* are the most relevant to the Megaton temptation since they are the skills most likely to be activated by the temptation in its present form. They are the key to making it more effective from a psychological/pedagogic standpoint.

One of the essential components of *understanding emotional expression* is the ability to identify and express particular emotions (Lapsley and Narvaez, 2005, p.156). The extent to which one can practice this skill in a game like *Fallout 3* depends largely on the emotional complexity of the characters the player encounters. A character possessed of complex emotions invites scrutiny and empathy, encouraging the player to recognize the role emotional states play in motivating their behavior. In the Megaton temptation, the chief personalities—the Sheriff and Mister Burke—do not invite emotional scrutiny because they don't have any emotions *worthy* of scrutiny. Despite the nature of the situation in which they're involved, neither expresses any sentiment beyond what is necessary to establish their role as the unwavering avatar of their respective moral code. (Mister Burke, for example, angrily scolds the player if asked whether it would be permissible to warn the inhabitants of Megaton before

blowing it up.)

What Simms and Burke need is emotional depth. For the former, this implies deepening the connection he has to Megaton: to the town itself, to the people, and to their way of life. Basically, the sheriff needs to *care* about the thing he asks the player to save. Note that this does *not* mean that he has to be a gushing font of heartfelt speeches and tear-stained entreaties. Establishing his emotional connection to Megaton could be as simple as having him talk about his young son (who lives with him) or about his relationship with the town's various inhabitants. The player doesn't need to see Simms pour his heart out – they only need to see that he *has* a heart, and that it's invested in the situation at hand.

As for Mister Burke, there are a number of ways one might enhance his ability to engage the player emotionally. One thing worth noting in this respect is that even if Burke is meant to be evil, that does not excuse him from expressing emotions, and more importantly, from soliciting emotional responses from the player. Perhaps, instead of simply *asking* the player to blow up Megaton, he could instead manipulate them into it. Perhaps he could attempt to make the player see the town and its inhabitants in a negative light by appealing to certain emotional/psychological propensities, such as prejudice (Simms is black), self-righteousness (the town is populated by derelicts, including prostitutes and drug dealers), or vindictiveness (some of the townsfolk are unnecessarily rude and hostile – maybe they *deserve* a bit of nuclear comeuppance). In behaving in this way, Burke would provide the attentive player (or the player assisted by an attentive instructor) ample opportunity to not only to express their emotions (either with or against him), but also to appreciate how emotions can be manipulated in the process of moral deliberation.

Closely related to one's faculty for understanding emotional expression is the capacity to *take the perspective of others*. The cornerstone of many traditional and modern approaches to moral education, including both the Kohlbergian (Kohlberg, 1978, p.45) and neo-Kohlbergian models, this particular skill is, in my view, more easily engaged with videogames than any other media. While books, movies, plays, and television shows can provide exposure to a variety of moral perspectives, only games provide the means for *interacting* with them. With games, one cannot only observe moral agents, but talk with them, interrogate them, and argue with them. Better, one can even adopt and *act out* different moral perspectives in a safe "semiotic domain" (Gee, 2004, p.26) free of messy real-world consequences (Dickey, 2007, p.258). Admittedly, the extent to which one can actually do this in most games, commercial or otherwise, is limited, but the *potential* is most definitely there, waiting to be exploited.

Of the characters living in Megaton, only three advance perspectives relevant to the temptation: Simms, Burke, and Confessor Cromwell. As we've already seen, the first two are simply manifestations of diametrically opposed moral dispositions: save the town because it's good or blow it up because it's evil. The third, that of Confessor Cromwell, is a little more interesting, though sadly underdeveloped. In essence, Cromwell is a local cult leader. As the head of the Church of the Children of Atom, he preaches that the bomb (i.e., the same bomb the player has been asked to deal with) is a holy relic and that nuclear detonation is in fact a kind of explosive rapture in which "each of us shall know peace, shall know an end to pain, and shall know Atom in his glory."

But while Cromwell's dialogue suggests he ought to *want* the player to detonate the bomb, he neither comments on nor attempts to influence the player's in this respect. This is a missed opportunity. It's obvious that the Confessor is meant to be a kooky sort of character—a parody of real-life street-corner evangelists—but the strangeness of his beliefs does not render them any less interesting from a moral perspective. Indeed, the oddness of Cromwell's perspective arguably makes it *more* valuable inasmuch as considering it might compel the player to articulate, either to themselves or by selecting certain dialogue options in-game, what makes *their* particular view preferable.

Of course, Cromwell is just one of many characters in Megaton whose perspective could potentially inform the player's moral behavior. In saying this, I don't mean to suggest that everybody in town

should have an opinion on whether the player should detonate the bomb or not. All that is required is that they provide the player with an opportunity to broaden their view of how certain choices can affect other people and the world in which they live. One could, for example, encounter a character who enthuses on the role Megaton has played in the social landscape of the wasteland – how its continued existence guarantees the growth of trade and so forth. On the flipside, one might also uncover documents detailing a dark undercurrent of violent bigotry running through the town's short history. These simple examples would serve to enrich the player's understanding of the situation at hand – to provide perspectives from which to make an informed moral choice.

Moving on now to the third skill, the extent to which one is capable of taking another's perspective can often depend on the extent to which one feels *connected* to them. One finds it easier to empathize with people with whom one already shares a bond, such as family and friends. Consequently, if one's morality is to be more than strictly parochial, it is necessary to learn how to connect with others beyond one's immediate circle. According to Lapsley and Narvaez, this can be achieved by cultivating three interrelated skills: relating to others, showing care, and being a friend (2005, p.156). Sadly, there is little opportunity to practice any of these skills within the context of the Megaton temptation, and *Fallout 3* in general.

Though the characters that populate Megaton are generally personable, in a very artificial sort of way, it's difficult to relate to them as such simply because there's very little there to which one *can* relate. In talking to them, one gets the sense that they are not so much people as automated service kiosks, designed to dispense crucial information and services to the player as efficiently as possible. When the player is permitted to engage them on a personal level—to discuss with them their views, vices, aspirations, likes, dislikes, and so on—it is only to the extent that it serves some obvious function in the game world. So, when the player finds out that one of the residents (a man named Leo Stahl) is addicted to drugs, they are encouraged to *use* that information like a token in exchange for karma points, drugs, money, or experience. One doesn't find out *why* Leo uses drugs, or *how* he became addicted, or indeed *anything* that might help the player relate to him and his situation. He is simply the town junkie, end of story.

Given this, it is naturally unsurprising that caring for characters like Leo is next to impossible. Again, there simply isn't enough there to care about. And even if there were, any chance the player has to express care—say, in the form of a goodwill gesture—is inevitably tied to a reward of some kind, which shifts the emphasis away from the act itself onto its immediate benefits, be they in the form of money, experience points, karma points, or material goods. I don't pretend that a caring act has to be entirely selfless, but it's reasonable to say that acts for which there could be no selfish motivation whatsoever are generally *stronger* expressions of goodwill than those to which obvious benefits are attached.

If the player is to relate to these characters, if they are to care for them and be a friend to them, then said characters require extensive development, preferably over the course of repeated interactions with the player in a variety of different contexts. In the case of the aforementioned Mister Stahl, this could be achieved using his drug problem as the focus. Rather than simply exploiting Stahl or commanding him to stop shooting up, the player could perhaps assist him in an extended quest to break his addiction, periodically checking on his progress and helping him rebuild different aspects of his life. This would give the player a chance to establish a relationship with Leo – to get to know him on a personal level. The key thing to remember is that one can't expect this sort of attachment to spring up instantaneously, over the course of one or two brief conversations designed to establish a quest or convey practical information. Just as in real life, videogame relationships, if they are to be meaningful, need to be *built*.

What is the reward for doing all this? Nothing other than the satisfaction of helping somebody become a better human being. Although doling out goodies of the sort discussed above is an easy way to sustain player motivation, I don't think it is necessarily the most effective, especially insofar as moral content is concerned. In the real world, moral behavior is not typically motivated by the desire

for tangible rewards, but rather by the feeling of satisfaction one gets from doing the right thing (e.g., Narvaez & Vaydich, 2008, p.297). The same applies to moral content in videogames. Oftentimes, when the player adopts a role in the game world, be it hero or villain, simply acting in ways consistent with that role is reward enough (Gee, 2004, p.98).

Indeed, some players will even forgo tangible rewards for the sake of maintaining their avatar's moral identity. For example, certain dedicated players of Looking Glass Studio's *Thief* games participate in "ghosting" – a way of playing the game whereby the goal is to stick to a kind of thieves code in which violence of any sort is completely forbidden. This is partly to make the game more challenging, and partly because ghosters find it satisfying to stay in character, morally speaking.

As previously mentioned, the ability to *interpret situations*—to perceive and respond to morality as it occurs in everyday life—is at the core of Moral Sensitivity, and of morality in general. On the view of moral functioning here advanced, moral competence consists of a suite of interrelated cognitive skills (largely unconscious and automatic) that are activated in response to certain physical, psychological, and social stimuli. It follows from this that the extent to which one is capable of *recognizing* said stimuli has a tremendous impact on the extent to which one is moral at all. After all, a person can't respond to moral cues if they can't identify them. Consider again music piracy. While some downloaders may feel the need to justify their morally dubious behavior, for others it simply doesn't register as morally salient. To younger people particularly, downloading is an ordinary activity, like watching television or reading a book. It isn't moral and it isn't immoral. It's just something one *does*.

The Megaton temptation, on the other hand, is unmistakably moral. It is in fact *too* moral. Stripped of emotional and social context, it is morality in stark black and white, as pure and abstract as an algebraic equation. And it is for that reason above all else that it fails to engage. In confronting this temptation, the player is not challenged to discover its nuance – to identify morally relevant information and piece it together to form a coherent picture of what ought to be done. Indeed, all the morally relevant information is presented in the plainest terms possible. In this way, one is not allowed to *see* what the situation is, but rather one is *told* what it is. With robotic clarity and candor, Simms and Burke give the player a clear moral choice, leaving no room for ambiguity of any sort. The only way it could be a more obvious moral temptation is if Simms were dressed as an angel and Burke sported horns and goatee.

Insofar as they would make it *less* obvious—which is to say, more emotionally and socially complex—the changes suggested in this section would, I believe, make the Megaton temptation significantly more compelling. With regard to games more generally, be they for pedagogy or entertainment, the key take-away point from all this is that moral dilemmas and temptations *need* to be firmly embedded in the contexts from which they arise, because it is only in those contexts that they are rendered morally meaningful.

## Moral Action in Oasis from *Fallout 3*

As another case study, let's take a look at another quest from *Fallout 3*. This quest is available in an unusual settlement named Oasis. Isolated from the rest of the wasteland by a natural barricade of steep cliffs, Oasis is unique in the world of *Fallout 3* in that it is a lush natural paradise, not unlike a post-apocalyptic Garden of Eden. The reason for this miraculous fertility is Harold: a sentient tree whose seeds spread vegetation wherever they land. Worshipped by the locals as a god, Harold is in fact a mutant, in other words, a regular person who gradually *turned into* a tree following exposure to an experimental mutagen. Rooted to the same spot for thirty years, he has come to despise the tedium of his immobile existence, and bluntly asks the player to end it for him. It wouldn't be murder, he explains. It would be a favor. It would be euthanasia.

Now, this is already a notoriously difficult moral dilemma – but that's only half of it. Once the player leaves Harold, they are immediately confronted with an argument in progress between the leaders of Oasis, Treefather Birch and Leaf Mother Laurel. The issue at hand is the spread of Harold's seeds.

Repulsed by the wasteland and afraid of its inhabitants, Birch would like to suppress Harold's fertility, thus limiting the town's growth. Laurel, on the other hand, is of the opposite view, advocating accelerated expansion. Which one gets their wish depends entirely on the player, who is asked to resolve the matter by doing one of two things: a) apply a suppressive sap to Harold's heart to slow his growth, or b) apply an accelerative liniment to speed it up. For either of these options to succeed, Harold obviously needs to be kept alive, which of course conflicts with his request for euthanasia. Thus the player is left with three choices in total:

1) Maintain the integrity and sanctity of Oasis by applying the sap.
2) Spread Harold's fertility into the wasteland by applying the liniment.
3) Put an end to Harold's suffering painlessly by piercing his heart – or sadistically by burning him to death.

In stark contrast to the Megaton temptation, this is a remarkably subtle and engaging piece of moral content. Like the beggar's dilemma from *Ultima IV*, it embodies the classic conflict between deontological and utilitarian meta-ethics, encouraging the player to confront questions that have troubled philosophers for centuries. Questions like: Is it permissible to kill to prevent suffering? To what extent does the good of the many outweigh individual liberty? It is it ever right to use a rational being as a means to an end, or do all rational beings (including mutants) count as ends in themselves? Of course, because these questions are implicit in the situation and aren't explicitly formulated for the player's consideration, it's possible—even probable—that many players will fail to register their relevance to the dilemma. From the perspective of moral pedagogy, this is not only acceptable, but *desirable*. As we've already discussed, real moral dilemmas are seldom simple, and that is precisely why they are interesting. The same applies, or at least *ought* to apply, to hypothetical dilemmas: a certain level of complexity is necessary, not only to stimulate growth, but to capture and maintain interest.

As a multi-faceted moral dilemma deeply embedded in a complex socio-emotional landscape, the Oasis quest is capable of engaging at least two of the four components of moral functioning – those being Moral Judgment and Moral Sensitivity. That leaves Moral Motivation and Moral Action. For now, let's concentrate on the latter.

Put simply, Moral Action is the ability to turn moral *cognition* into moral *behavior*. Like the other three components of moral functioning, it is divided into seven interrelated sub-skills (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, p.157):

- Resolving conflicts and problems
- Asserting respectfully
- Taking initiative
- Planning to implement decisions
- Cultivating courage
- Persevering
- Working hard

Insofar as the player's role in Oasis is to adjudicate the dispute between Harold, Birch, and Laurel, the significance of the first skill—*resolving conflicts and problems*—is more or less self-evident. I use the term "adjudicate" in a very loose sense here: the player is really more an enforcer rather than an arbiter. Whereas real adjudication generally involves negotiation and compromise, in Oasis it is merely a matter of choosing one side to the total exclusion of two others. There is no allowance for conciliation even though the dilemma provides considerable scope for it. For example, perhaps Birch and Laurel could be persuaded to reach a middle ground with regard to Harold, combining the liniment and sap to encourage moderate growth over an extended period of time. Or for a more straightforward compromise, why not have it so that Harold can be dissuaded from suicide, either for the good of Oasis or the good of the entire wasteland? Even if a mutually beneficial resolution isn't

possible (and sometimes it isn't), the player should at least be given the opportunity to bring the parties together and have them discuss the issue face-to-face. Indeed, given how much Harold, Birch, and Laurel have invested in the outcome of this dilemma, it's odd that they are not permitted to play a more active role in resolving it.

That said, *Fallout 3* is still a videogame, and in videogames it is usually the player's job to take the initiative. Although, in the case of Oasis, initiative isn't so much *taken* by the player is it is *thrust* upon them. After all, one can't even enter the village without agreeing to speak with Harold, and one can't speak to Harold without being asked to euthanize him. Similarly, Birch and Laurel don't *ask* for the player's assistance – they assume it. In this way, the player is effectively denied the chance to 'step-up' to the problem, but fortunately, that isn't the only opportunity they have to take the moral initiative in Oasis. After talking to Harold, Laurel, and Birch, one is free to roam the village, talk with the inhabitants, and solicit their opinions on their neighbors and the issue at hand. This allows the player to *take the initiative* for making an informed choice – it lets them assume responsibility for discovering the facts and perspectives relevant to the dilemma. In sum, it's provides the player with an opportunity to exercise leadership, and to actively take responsibility for doing the right thing for everyone involved (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, p.157).

There is one more of the above-listed skills that is particularly relevant to Oasis, and that is *perseverance*. With regard to Moral Action, this refers to one's capacity to be steadfast, to have the competence required to overcome obstacles and transform one's moral convictions into moral (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, p.157). So far as the present dilemma goes, there are a couple of reasons this skill is especially pertinent. The most obvious is the fact that—as we've already seen—it's impossible to please everyone, regardless of which choice the player makes. Moreover, each of the available solutions could have potentially disastrous consequences, not only for Oasis, but for the entire wasteland. Thus, the player must possess the resolve to do what they think is right in the face of uncertainty and opposition. Introducing some level of negotiation between the parties (as I suggested above) would weaken this to an extent, but even in that case, one must still possess the determination and skill necessary to see and implement a compromise.

In addition to this, the Oasis dilemma also challenges the player's *emotional* resolve, particularly where Harold is concerned. If one chooses to euthanize the mutant tree, one is faced with the prospect of killing what is for all intents and purposes an intelligent and likeable person. What makes this even more challenging is that Harold is not isolated: the inhabitants of Oasis are clearly attached to him, either as a savior, a friend, or both. This is particularly affecting in the case of Sapling Yew, a young girl who describes Harold as her best and only friend. In talking to her, the player is encouraged to consider to the emotional ramifications of the proposed assisted suicide. If the player feels that killing Harold is the right thing to do, and is intent on doing exactly that, then they must do so despite the pain it will cause an innocent child. One could hardly ask for a better test of moral resolve in a videogame.

## Moral Motivation and *Mass Effect*

In discussing the last of the four components of moral competence, I'd like to shift focus and explore some practical ways to combine games with traditional pedagogy to facilitate the growth of Moral Motivation. But before we get into specifics, I will discuss general theories about using games in a formal moral education setting.

As is the case with educational games generally (Sanford et al., 2006, p.4), the educational effectiveness of moral games is inextricably tied to the context in which they are deployed. As James Paul Gee notes:

*In terms of human learning, information is a vexed thing. On one hand, humans are quite poor at learning from lots of overt information given to them outside the sorts of contexts in which this*

*information can be used … On the other hand, humans don't learn well when they are just left to their own devices to operate within complex contexts about which they know very little (2004, p.113).*

This is especially true of moral learning. According to Narvaez, effective moral education—what she calls Integrative Ethical Education or IEE—aims to enhance moral competence by cultivating four distinct but interconnected levels of knowledge: Identification Knowledge, Declarative Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, and Execution Knowledge (Narvaez, 2006, p.721). The type of situated learning environments games provide excel at addressing the first, third, and fourth of these, but falter somewhat when it comes to the second (Randel et al., 1992, p.269). It follows from this that a successful application of games to moral pedagogy ought to involve a significant component of "real" classroom activities, such as teacher-guided discussion, written assignments, and readings in moral philosophy. Not only would this help frame and contextualize what students experience in-game, but it would also allow them an opportunity to analyze their own commitments and engage in genuine moral discourse with their peers.

To investigate what this might look like in practice, let's turn now to one of the seven sub-skills associated with Moral Motivation: *cultivating conscience*. An essential component of complete moral personhood, educating for this capacity entails providing students with opportunities to exercise self-command, wield power and influence, and behave honorably (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, p.156). By themselves, videogames are more than capable of simulating situations in which these skills may be practiced, but the way and extent to which said practice contributes to development depends largely on how it is contextualized in the classroom.

For the sake of illustration, let's say we're using science-fiction RPG *Mass Effect* as part of a lesson designed to help students cultivate conscience. More particularly, let's say we're using the part from *Mass Effect* where the player—an intergalactic secret agent named Shepard—is confronted with the opportunity to spare or execute a defeated foe. Said foe is an alien commando, and a former ally of your nemesis, by whom she claims to have been brainwashed into compliance. I say "claims" there because there is in fact no way to know whether she's telling the truth or not. And even if she is, that does not necessarily imply that she deserves leniency.

In considering these issues and coming to a decision, the player may exercise all three of the sub-skills related to conscience cultivation. In exercising restraint, the player honors their role as an agent of in-game justice, demonstrating self-command by resisting the temptation to abuse their authority. Conversely, in shooting the prisoner, they wield that same authority to the fullest extent possible, exercising their power over life and death for the sake of caution (of the "you're too dangerous to live" type) or revenge. Admittedly, someone playing the game for entertainment might make the decision based on the desire to acquire "Paragon" or "Renegade" points (which act much the same way as Karma points do in *Fallout 3*), but I suspect their appeal might be mitigated somewhat by limiting students to this one portion of the game, meaning they could not acquire enough points of either sort to have any interesting impact on their character.

However, even if students make the choice on moral rather than mechanical grounds, that doesn't mean they necessarily understand the motivations and reasons behind said choice. For this reason, subsequent classroom activities would focus on bringing both into the open and analyzing their merit. One could, for example, collect the students into groups based on what choice they made and then guide them through a debate on the perceived value of each approach. Debate has often been praised for its capacity to stimulate thought in the classroom (e.g., Shaffer, 2006, p.21), and has is a staple of modern approaches to moral education. In the process of debate, students are exposed – with the help of a teacher – to more sophisticated or "higher levels" of moral reasoning, which they may then adopt (Kohlberg, 1981, p.27). Obviously, one could have students debate the death penalty without the game and many of the points raised would be identical. The purpose of the game is to provide a context through which these ideas can be understood: to root moral abstraction in concrete experience, enhancing the impact of both.

# DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This is only one analysis of how games and traditional pedagogy might be wed for the purpose moral development. Indeed, it is my contention that games are capable of addressing the entire moral-pedagogic spectrum as defined by the Model of moral functioning. By analyzing three COTS videogames on the basis of that model, I also hope to have demonstrated its potential for informing the design of moral content for entertainment as well as education. That said, although I believe there is good reason to think that games can have considerable impact on moral development, there are still a number of areas that require further research before any practical applications of this approach could be made. For example, some areas include:

1) There is the possibility that the moral power of games may be a double-edged sword – that perhaps the medium's potential for moral pedagogy correlates with its potential for moral perversion. If games can "make people good" in certain circumstances, then perhaps they can also "make people bad" in others. The question then becomes: what are the characteristics of these circumstances?

2) Although the IEE approach goes some way to clarifying what can be done in the classroom to encourage moral development generally, there are still questions regarding the implementation of games within that framework that are yet to be resolved. These include questions about the organization of players (1 player to a computer? Groups?), the structure of lessons (How should time be organized?), and the measurement of learning outcomes (How is progress assessed?).

3) The effect that game genre and type have on learning in this context is yet to be determined. Which genres work best for stimulating specific moral skills? How do things like graphics and interface design affect ethical engagement?

Before closing, I would like to briefly address the issue of purpose: why is moral education important? As Samuels and Casebeer argue, in order to develop virtue, "one must be given a chance to practice being virtuous" (Samuels & Casebeer, 2005, p.77). Obviously there'll always be people who act immorally, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to encourage the opposite. To do otherwise seems almost unjust – like we're punishing people for failing to utilize skills they were never given a chance to cultivate in the first place.

In addition to the social benefits of moral education, there's also the fact that using a game to teach morality could only mean good things for gaming's public image. Videogames have been accused of various degrees of moral bankruptcy for over two decades now, and despite a paucity of supporting evidence, these accusations have gained considerable political mileage with policy-makers and the general public. But if it can be shown that games are not totems to moral destitution, that they can in fact play a valuable role in the development of moral character, then maybe that can be leveraged for the benefit of the medium as a whole.

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