

GDD 396, Quinnipiac University

# Morality

How Video Games Tackle Philosophical Problems

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this literature review is to explore how games implement moral choice and morality systems into their games and how morality is measured and reacted to. This also seeks to present how my game will attempt to use what works and respond to what doesn't to create an improved product overall. The goal is to analyze how morality is incorporated into games and the outcomes of different games' attempts.

Of all the philosophical ideas that drive daily life, morality may be the most prominent of them all. Morality plays a hand in everything we do. From our dietary choices, our legal systems, all the way to our religious choices and everything in between, morality and moral elements can be seen at work. Moral, the root word of morality, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, can be defined as *“of or relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior”*. The idea of right and wrong are the very root of our humanity. Without these concepts at the root of everything we do, humanity ceases to exist.

Games as an artistic medium may be the best equipped for exploring the concept of morality. Books, movies, and shows do an excellent job of presenting moral quandaries and exploring their character’s approach to them. Where games stand alone is in their interactivity. However compelling a character’s exploration of morality may be, it cannot match having the audience make those decisions themselves. By putting the culpability of the choice in the audience’s hands, morality has the potential to be much rawer and more impactful. Despite this inherent benefit to the medium, games often struggle in their exploration of morality. Here, I seek to explore how games have created and implemented morality systems into their games, and why those systems create good or bad designs, as well as how morality is assessed. I also seek to examine how I will use the successful elements of previous games’ systems in my design and fix the unsuccessful ones to create a game that furthers the use and design of morality systems in the future.

## Review of Literature

### Why Include Morality?

To understand how games include moral decision making, it's necessary to first understand why they include morality. Games are traditionally perceived as fun, lighthearted escapes from the difficulties of daily life. The concept of morality often revolves around difficult choices that have the potential to harm yourself or others. These two worlds seem in conflict with one another. In reality, however, the inclusion of moral themes or situations can in fact complement the escapism found in games and enhance the chief principle behind them, fun. Emil Pagliarulo, lead designer of *Fallout 3*, said that moral choice creates new angles of thought. "When morality's involved, the simple act of shooting a bad guy isn't so simple anymore. You've got to ask yourself, 'Well, is he really the bad guy? Was he maybe just trying to defend himself? Should I really be doing this?'" (Pagliarulo). This new angle creates a deeper sense of player engagement and allows them to experience the world in a richer way. To Pagliarulo, this deeper experience "makes it different, and more interesting, and therefore, in a lot of cases, more fun." Having to make choices is fun because it allows us to experience things we wouldn't otherwise and provides excitement not found elsewhere/

In line with what Pagliarulo said about thinking about what you are doing, the internal dilemmas sparked by a player's choices creates a new and interesting way to approach games from a player's perspective. If you know your actions will have consequence, how will you do it differently? Players become occupied with thoughts of the effects their actions may have and will engage differently than if there were no rules. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, encourages moral play by tying lethality into your recruitment. The more people you kill, the less recruits there are to build your forces. So, an opportunity that can simply be resolved by killing

an opponent becomes a question of whether the extra work is worth it to find a more peaceful solution.

Replayability is another enticing argument for the inclusion of moral choices in games. The results of choices are typically exclusive of one another, so a player would have to replay the game to see all the content. 2015's *Undertale*, for example, has 3 routes: a pacifist route, a neutral route, and a no-mercy route depending on the player's decisions. All of these stories play out differently from one another, however, so to see it all players will need to replay the game, giving the game a longer lifespan.

The inclusion of moral choice is not something that should be considered lightly, however. Pagliarulo has said that moral elements should be included "if that's something central to a game's themes or gameplay, and it makes the game a more enjoyable experience overall". Not every game needs that choice. *Fallout 3* did, as a key element of role-playing games is determining the moral standing of your character. Without it, a player's role-playing abilities would be hampered as morality is a key pillar of any character. Something like *Saints Row*, which is about zany sandbox destruction, does not need moral elements. Making a player think about the mayhem they cause goes against the core philosophies behind that game and only weigh the player down.

Moral inclusion can add a lot of agency to a video game and enhance the fun factor through that, but it shouldn't be used haphazardly. Much like moral decision in real life, the decision to include moral elements in your game will have consequences in the rest of your design that can limit you or harm your vision if not handled properly by checking to see if you need it.

## How do we Measure Moral Choices in Games?

One of the most challenging parts of designing morality systems in games is determining how to measure the choices made by the player. How do we keep track of the behaviors of players? One of the most common systems is the old-fashioned Karma Bar. Karma Bars are a numerical representation of the moral alignment of the choices a player has made. Good actions earn points, negative actions lose them. It is arguably the most gamified representation of morality. They are an umbrella term for any moral system that calculates a numeric score of a player's moral choices and are the system behind most games' moral designs. The *Fallout* series uses these to determine a player's moral standing. In his article, *Moral Decision Making in Fallout*, Marcus Schulzke explores how the use of Karma Bars affect the moral design behind the fallout games. "The result is a world governed by something akin to the hedonistic calculus in which the player receives immediate feedback about the effects of their actions based on the karma system." (Schulzke). This system allows for designers to categorize behaviors into categories of good and bad and keep track using a numeric system. The problem with this kind of moral management is that it's not doing much with morality. There may be some reaction at certain thresholds, but individual behaviors no longer have value, only repeated behaviors. Even high crimes such as murder won't knock you down severely as they have to account for letting you bounce back. So, if a player knows they can quite literally get away with murder, what happens? Schulzke says that the Karma Bar system results in "a quantifiable morality allows the game to apply a consistent standard for moral actions that the player can adjust to and use to inform their decisions." Players begin to game the system. Morality becomes almost a currency. One bad action fixed by two good ones. YouTuber Adam Millard, in his video *Are Morality Systems Making us Less Moral?*, says this "turns a moral decision, into a strategic one." No

longer are players concerned with the consequences of their action, only the effects of seeing their number go up or down.

Games like 2017's *Prey* handle this issue a bit more elegantly. There, morality is not handled as a measured number, but as an outcome based on choices you did or did not make. Your interactions with characters throughout the game, both prompted and unprompted, will determine what your moral standing is. It can be argued that this is a veiled Karma Bar system, as you may not have a numeric record of your choices, but the moral standing still ultimately depends on how many you made. I'd agree with that statement. In many ways it is similar to the numerical systems, but it's refusal to disclose your standing or notify you of a good or bad action helps to avoid the artificiality caused by the visible measurement since you are no longer measuring up your choices as a player.

A far better way to handle measuring morality is in changes to the game world. Mark Brown, of *Game Maker's Toolkit*, talks about this in his video essay, *Morality in the Mechanics*. Here he provides the example of *Darkest Dungeon*. In *Darkest Dungeon*, you must lead a pack of adventurer's through dangerous ruins in search of valuable artifacts to fight off Lovecraftian nightmares. As you repeat this cycle, however, the mental and physical state of your adventurer's diminish. They will begin to lose their mind or fight with each other. The moral choice players are tasked with making is how to deal with the problems that arise in your group due to this wear and tear. You can send them to bars or sanitariums, fixing some damage but causing other, or you can kick them to the curb to fend for themselves. Your decision of how to treat them will have knock-on effects towards the game world and outcome. The reason this kind of moral measurement works so well is because it isn't measuring, it's just letting your decisions play out. It's measurement is how the world changes around you. The *InFamous* games also have this

affect. While those games do use the Karma Bar as their primary form of moral measurement, a secondary measurement is how the world changes. The more good actions the player does, the cleaner the world becomes, and the world becomes more civil. The opposite is also true. If a player causes chaos, then the world will reflect that chaos. This results in a morality system that isn't rated, or very much there at all. There are choices and there are consequences to those choices, some good and others bad. These stack over time to create a game world that is made entirely by your own doing and thus feels most natural.

### **Motivation and Rewards**

To get a player to really think about a moral choice, and struggle to determine which option is best, it's important for designers to provide incentives and rewards for certain choices. There are two types of motivations for players, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is the motivation from within the player to play without reward, the joy of play is motivation enough. Extrinsic motivation is the rewards given to the player for playing. In a game such as Minecraft, diamonds and other rare materials are extrinsic motivations given for continued play. As designers, we are responsible for both. We create a satisfying and fun experience that sparks intrinsic motivation and provides rewards to satisfy extrinsic motivation. Moral choices may deal with intrinsic motivation, someone wanting to do good or bad for the sake of doing good or bad, but oftentimes something must be offered to the player for either choice.

The most natural idea of this reward mechanism is material reward for a moral decision. To give a tangible in-game item in response to a decision. This is a cheap and inefficient way of evoking a moral response since it essentially bribes the player to make a choice for gameplay purposes. Following Millard's logic, this reward system also turns a moral choice into a strategic one. When there are direct rewards tied to a decision, players will naturally lean towards the



option with the best rewards. 2007's *Bioshock*, a game lauded for its exploration of the moral issues found in maintaining a utopia, suffers from lackluster mechanical exploration of the same subject matter. Throughout the game you come across characters known as little sisters, small children corrupted by the society to collect a valuable power source called ADAM. When you find one, you are given the choice to heal them and free them from their programming, or to harvest them for extra ADAM. So, your choice to harvest the child or not becomes an inventory check if you need more ADAM. This worsened with the consideration of the game's ADAM economy. If ADAM was scarce and only found on these children, this dilemma could pose some problems since by not killing them, you are at greater risk to be killed yourself. But in reality ADAM is practically coming out of the walls, so your choice to kill the child becomes obsolete and you'd only ever do it if you were trying to be evil which negates any actual response to the moral dilemma since no contemplation or thought was involved. Any incentive to harvest the little sisters has been nullified by the game itself.

A less tangible reward that games often give is narrative rewards. *Undertale*, as previously discussed, has 3 different story paths. These, in a way, are rewards for a certain playstyle, whether good or bad. Your relationships and story beats change, sometimes dramatically, the farther you venture into each branch. The kinder you are, the better friends you become with the characters around you and the more evil you become, the more those same characters will cower and fear you. According to Brown's video, using this reward, the game is motivating players with a change to the story. This reward is not without issue, however. A common foible of this style of moral motivation is that the story representing good moral decisions is almost always more satisfying than the evil variant. A simple example of this is a different ending. Most games make morality matter by having a player's decision influence the

ending, typically resulting in a “good” and “bad” ending. Based on this naming, it’s not hard to deduce that the “good” ending is the more satisfying conclusion. An example of this is 2012’s *Dishonored*, where the pacifistic playstyle results in an ending where the world is calm and all is right, whereas the lethal playstyle (which is rewarded with far more satisfying gameplay) is given an ending where everything is plunged into chaos and worse off than before. This leaves immoral players feeling empty and incomplete as no feeling of resolution is to be found. Even the simple labelling of good and bad shows how assigning a value will influence which path players will prioritize, as everyone will want to be with the better story. A designer’s job when creating a moral action is to incentivize action, not to incentivize a particular action.

The question becomes, do player’s require motivation to act good or bad? Millard and Brown provide arguments for yes, as a payoff for a moral action gives the semblance that choices do matter. There is something to show for your decisions. Steven Santana, however, thinks differently. In his article, *Prey (2017) as a Teacher and Tester of Player Empathy*, he asks whether players are inherently drawn to certain choices. He says, “this line of thinking is addressed by the finale, as one of the Operators will speculate as to whether your choices were selfish in origin or not, though another states it matters little given that it is impossible to determine. Though, is it important to determine whether or not decisions were truly altruistic?” (Santana). He argues that players are naturally drawn to good choices. He cites *Mass Effect* player data that “64.5% of players chose Paragon over Renegade” (Santana) with Paragon representing good and Renegade not being evil, but less good. This is backed by Amanda Lange, a Microsoft technical evangelist, who at GDC revealed that, “in narrative games where “good” and “evil” were clearly defined as story paths, only 5 percent of players opted for “evil” on a first play-through”. So there does seem to be data showing that altruistic playstyles are preferred by

players. Whether this says that players truly are good is indeterminate, however, since good paths typically lead to better stories in games.

Nevertheless, even if motivation is inherent to a player's real-life mentality, designers must provide more balanced incentives to both act good and bad. An excellent example of this is 2013's *Paper's Please*. Here players must balance processing travelers into the country correctly while processing as many people as possible to make enough money to support a family. As each day progresses, however, new regulations and documents are introduced to make the process slower, at the cost of your family. If you make too many mistakes, you fail but if you don't make enough money you also fail. So as Brown says, "you are forced into becoming corrupt, but the choice to the player becomes how corrupt you become." As a result of *Paper's Please* forcing you to play both sides, the player avoids becoming a purely good or purely bad character and ends up being something far more human.

### **How is Moral Choice Presented?**

In addition to just having moral choices present, an equally important part of morality system design is how those choices are presented to players. This includes things like moral identification, multiple layers to a choice, and establishing the stakes. Moral identification refers to the way that choices tell players whether they are good or evil. In *Weighing Morality in Gaming*, Joshua Wise explores how games communicate potential outcomes to players. He says that in the Mass Effect franchise, "players can choose between morally good (blue) and morally questionable/renegade (the choice between playing as Luke Skywalker or Malcom Reynolds) with a neutral choice in between" (Wise). Not mentioned in the quote is that renegade is represented by the color red. Jacob Olesen, writer of site Color Meanings, says that in color theory, the color blue represents that of a happy helper. "Blue takes nothing, but it gives

everything. Its selflessness makes it an excellent adviser” (Olesen). By contrast, he says about red: “Striking a vengeful chord is made possible with the use of red. This is the more negative side of this multifaceted shade. What’s more, some people tend to see the color red when anger is on the precipice. As these emotions intensify, the color red may consume them” (Olesen). This is a simple split but effective in communicating a clear divide between choices. But morality is rarely clear. The Merriam Webster definition says it best, morality deals with both good and bad, so a more nuanced indication is also used.

Many games, in response to the use of color-coded options, leave choices unmarked. Typically, players are instead given context to the potential ramifications of choices beforehand. Wise says that this system allows you “to make moral decisions which affect the world in real pragmatic ways.” This references to the idea that moral measurement can be done through changes to the world. Typically, these two ideas go together and create more interesting moral systems than those more direct about their responses. An example of this is 2015’s *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. Here, choices are all given the same appearance, so their affects are initially unknown to the player. As a result, players are more engaged as they try to sniff out which options are the morally right or wrong ones.

Building on the idea of context, the best moral decisions are layered. The idea is that a single decision will have knock-on effects throughout the rest of the game. In *Video Games and Morality: The Question of Choice*, author Daonso says that “every potential choice you make in life has both positive and negative effects, for you and for everyone the decision affects. It is your decision and responsibility which choice to ultimately make.” Your actions will have both good and bad effects on different, which makes for a far more interesting problem to solve than if your choice does exclusively good or bad. A good example of this is in 2016’s *This War of*

*Mine*. As you scavenge for food, you may encounter tough decisions, such as robbing an old couple for food or harming someone for supplies. Depending on your actions, you may get your food and your survivor's will be better off, but the mental state of those forced to steal will go down, causing them to leave the group or require attention to heal. If a player were to steal the food and be immediately punished with death or no reward, then the choice is not an interesting one to make and will likely be ignored. It's important to provide consequence for action, but not to punish. Let the effects of a decision play out, but by punishing immediate action only works to funnel players into a single path.

The stakes of a decision are also crucial to accurately depict. If there is no urgency or necessity to make a decision, then what is the point of having one? By establishing the importance to the player, they will be called to action. Using *This War of Mine* as an example, the stakes are set through the wellbeing of your survivors and camp. Without proper supplies, they will fall ill or die. Everything is on a timer, metaphorically speaking. The longer you go without necessities, the worse things will be, prompting the player to act and giving those choices, good or bad, more meaning and context. This is also an excellent example of presenting consequences to actions, since it causes there to be a consequence for inaction and not just action. The choice to do nothing is still a choice that must be explored by a morality system. A poor example of establishing stakes was the original iteration of 2016's *No Man's Sky*. All language was presented in an alien tongue, so you never got a clear idea of why you needed to make a decision. As a result, all choices made by the player were random or misguided so no real moral choice was made. To make a moral choice requires knowledge of good and evil. The consequences a player may face because of their "choice" in this instance ends up making the

experience feel cheap as the player's influence was negated by the game's confusing presentation of the stakes and choice itself.

### **The Importance of Realism and Believability**

An extension of the idea of presentation of a game's moral choices, the realism and believability of the given situation is necessary to elicit any kind of meaningful response. If players are unable to ground themselves within the game world and its rules, then they won't be invested enough to make informed moral decisions. One of the biggest flaws in believability is the establishment of the world. Games often take place in impossible or distorted realities. The impossible is commonplace. This doesn't mean, however, that the capacity for moral decision making does not exist. *Fallout*, a world focused on a nuclear blasted hellscape, poses meaningful moral dilemmas. This works because of the way the world is established. In Schulzke's exploration of *Fallout*'s moral systems, he highlights the detail that goes into making a world of decisions. Healing abilities are common items that one might think hold no moral value, but as Schulzke reveals, even these forgettable items hold moral weight. "Med-X, was even called 'morphine' before censors forced a change. They are also suggestive for having numerous positive and negative side-effects as well as the possibility of addiction" (Schulzke). Even these little items have enough detail given to make a player pause before using one. The threat of addiction makes the idea of the healing item feel new and exotic again over the usual improvement to health found in most games. And this same level of detail spreads throughout the game. Factions are established and given enough complexity to warrant considerations into siding with or against them. The *Mass Effect* games also do an excellent job of fleshing out their world. Natalie Ward's article, *Mass(ively) Effect(ive): Emotional Connections, Choice, and Humanity*, states that "In *Mass Effect*, game story elements are interwoven with politics,

intolerance, and complex economic systems. These combine with multiple languages, species, religious elements, and a long and complicated history to form a rich story-driven world.” Each piece of the world feels believable and grounded in a way that the player can feel immersed in it. This allows them to really care when parts of that world are threatened, and they are asked to make a difficult choice.

The believability of the characters in that world is also necessary since it goes hand in hand with the world. If characters don’t act or speak like a real person would, the illusion falls apart and no emotions can be derived from moral choices. Ward goes on to say that “the BioWare team has made identification with these characters more realistic by employing careful motion capture of both bodily movements and facial expression.” This level of care and projection of emotion into the character’s produces a more lifelike imitation of people and makes moral choice more meaningful as we empathize with those the choice affects. *Mass Effect* also features alien characters that are very different to humans and have taken measures to ensure those characters remain just as convincing. Ward says, “the more human the species, the more expression they employ. Human faces are much more believable than ever with visible pores, wrinkles, and scars and the Asari, a distinctly human-like alien, is capable of embodying all ranges of 'human' facial expression. This is in stark contrast with the Volus and Quarian species that may be more difficult to identify with because they wear masks. In these instances, their vocal inflections and speech that illuminate their true sentiments, while their stories offer enough back context to make them likeable.”

While both world and characters alone can make moral choices more convincing and meaningful, it’s only when these two combine that their true potential can be met. Both *Fallout* and *Mass Effect* do this elegantly to create not just an engine for making moral decisions, but a

living, breathing world for players to become a part of. Only with these two elements can player's make the most convincing moral judgements in a game because only then will those judgements be comparable to those made in their actual lives.

### **External Factors that Affect Moral Choice**

No matter how well designed a game's morality system may be, designers cannot control everything. The two biggest things that are mostly outside of a designer's control when creating and implementing moral choice are player experimentation and the ambiguous nature of morality. These oftentimes pose the biggest hurdles when designing morality systems since their uncontrollable nature makes them hard to build around. The bigger issue of the two is the ambiguous nature of morality. While we may have a general understanding that morality consists of things that are right and wrong, what constitutes right and wrong varies between individuals. What may seem morally unthinkable to some may be perfectly acceptable to others. This divide can make it challenging to determine whether an action was moral or immoral. It may be this disconnect between developer and player values that perpetuates the use of color coding and Karma Bars, as these provide clear communication of what is considered right and wrong within the context of the game. YouTuber, The Game Overanalyser, in his video *Morality Systems in Game Design*, states that "there are no easy answers, and we see how easily manipulated we are by our own instincts." His point being that morality-based games can struggle to get us to comprehend a moral situation, but to understand it from the desired perspective. Without even thinking, we have already interpreted a situation in our own way without considering developer intentions. Referring back to Marcus Schulzke's work on morality within the Fallout franchise, he says that "it might be argued that introducing morality into games could be misguided because the developers will always be judging players by the developers' personal values." If



players are being judged on an understanding of morality that they themselves may not abide by, then how can a decision be viewed as moral or immoral? He counters this argument by saying that “this is one of the strengths of moral choice engines. Individuals can make autonomous decisions, but these are subject to consequences outside of their control. In the real world, murder is punished as a crime regardless of whether or not the murderer thinks the act is justified. The murderer's own feelings about the crime are irrelevant if the legal code and other people consider it wrong” (Schulzke). In essence, Schulzke believes that our differences in moral understanding is what makes moral decisions interesting as it reflects the way morality occurs in everyday life. We as individuals may not abide by a certain set of morals, but we do agree to one as members of a society. Regardless of our own beliefs of right or wrong, we must abide by a collective idea of morality that drives our society. He is advocating that games present consequences reactive of a player's actions that imply a moral value able to be discerned by the player. Consequences to actions remain unbiased and may reach deeper than an immediate reward/punishment response to a moral choice.

The issue of player experimentation is different from the previously discussed moral advantage of replayability. Replayability allows players to experience the same content but from a new perspective, whereas experimentation refers to the replaying of a section to see the different outcomes of a moral choice. This is bad because it breaks the cycle of choice and outcome by looping it without progression. Daonso's previously discussed article on game choice says that “a player could feel no level of immersion or attachment to the game and its world. She recognizes the game's artificiality and realizes her choices do not matter. As a result, she may experiment with in-game choices out of curiosity rather than moral conviction.” At this point the game's moral system fails not because of a fault of its own but because the player

doesn't feel connected to the game. This could be because of a fault on behalf of the game's design, but outside factors such as tastes and lack of an understanding of the game may also cause this lack of engagement. Daonso says that "this result is universally undesirable for developers who wish to have the player think over her choices in a meaningful way." Some games, such as 2017's *The Long Dark*, have attempted to block this by automatically saving as soon as a decision has been made. This way players can only select once. This will have the byproduct of potentially driving engagement up since player's are aware that there are no second chances.

### **My Takeaways and Plan for My Game**

After reading through upwards of 30 articles and watching various videos on the ways that morality and moral choices are used within games, I have a clearer image of what I, as a designer, need to do to create a compelling morality game. I will adhere to the principle of not establishing any ideas of good and bad within player choices. Without any uniform understanding of what constitutes these concepts, they are too loose and variable to pose any benefit to me using them. Instead, morality will be measured by the state of the game's world and characters. Actions taken by the player will either enhance or harm their existence in the world. There will simply be a consequence to an action rather than a concrete measurement of player standing. With regards to motivation and rewarding, I plan to use the *Undertale* style of narrative and character development rewards. As my game is being built in Twine, the writing of characters and the story is key so rewarding player choice with changes to that seems like a more natural and understandable reward than an in-game item. I also will write all endings to be equally as satisfying and complete regardless of whether it arrived from moral decisions, immoral decisions, or a mix of the two. No one will feel superior to the other. The presentation

of these decisions will be rich and deeper than first look. Context will be given prior to decisions being made that will allow players to still make informed decisions regarding a choice. Since notions of good and bad are being ignored, all choices will be identified in a uniform fashion, hoping to further enhance the ambiguous nature of the moral choices presented and force players to pay attention to everything going on. Any options to go back to a previous point in the game will be removed to prevent player experimentation during a single playthrough. All choices presented by the game will also be presented in detail and in a grounded fashion to elicit a more rational response by the player and thus a better informed one. Since my game is meant to be self-reflective, an entry and exit test will consist of a moral question being asked and an evaluation post-game of whether or not a player's behaviors were in line with their answer or not. I want to highlight that this evaluation is not judging a player's behaviors, but comparing them to their idea of themselves stated prior to the game I hope that these measures combined will allow for my game to further the use of moral choices and their assessment by creating a dynamic and nuanced system of moral dilemmas that elicits real emotions without telling an audience how they should feel. I also hope that my game will further the realism of morality driven, choice-based games and help teach about what truly can happen in similar real-life scenarios.

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