

Sicart Ethical Gaming Heuristic

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ENG 225

Santos et al

Ethical Gameplay

What is ethical gameplay? What isn't ethical gameplay?

Sammi "These discussions lead to the introduction of two key concepts (1) player complicity as an attitude towards play, and (2) ethical gameplay as a type of experience that is created when games are played in a particular circumstance and that is conditioned by specific design strategies." (pg. 6)

Reflecting on this quote, I believe that Sicart is primarily outlining the fundamentals of ethical gameplay and the two key components found in it. First Sicart discusses the players attitude and devotion to the game. If the player is fully invested in the game, it is likely they will receive the best experience and invest in their ethical thinking. They will reflect on their moral choices and how that will affect their game play. Secondly Sicart focuses on the perspective of designers. Designers have to be fully invested in creating an ethical condition where players aren't given the obvious choice, or nudged to play instrumentally.

Enrique: "Begin by looking at what ethics and morality are and how they relate to each other." "Ethical Gameplay is a type of experience that is created when games are played in particular circumstances and that is conditioned by specific design strategies." Pg. 6

Darius: For a player to take pause moments and think about the choices they are being asked and think about what is taking place in the game. What isn't ethical gameplay is when a player is quick to make a decision no matter what the cost or benefits of there decisions that they have made they don't stop to be strategic

Alex: "Ethical gameplay is a consequence of the tension between the suspension of disbelief and what Frank Lantz calls the "ludic contract " Pg. 1 of Beyond Choices

When players play a game there are conflicting sides taking place, the side that tells them to pretend that the game they're playing is a real thing happening around them and the side that tells them that they should care about achieving goals in the game. This conflict between the two sides is what triggers emotions that players feel in game.

Nicholas: "In ethical theory, the principles from which are derived justify notions of right and wrong" (Sicart, 7)

Santos: (Why is ethical gameplay important? Not merely wasted time?)

Yahya: In *Moral Dilemma in Computer Games*, Sicart states that, “Gameplay is defined by the goals stated by the game system but is actualized by players *when playing*. Thus, gameplay should be understood *from* the rules, but *as* a player experience—a creatively engaging activity(Sicart 30)”.

-This ties to moral choices that are being questioned in the game.

Sicart anticipates the argument that he places too much faith in games, which many see as mere wastes of time. He notes that games “ games are a part of [players’] sentimental education and one of the ways they make sense of the world.” Drawing upon a long list of scholarship noting the value of play, a list that traces back to Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis* and learning, Sicart argues that we learn how to navigate the world by imitation and experimentation, and some games--especially those designed with his key concepts of complicity, meaningful choices, and forced reflection in mind--can do this extremely well.

Hanna: In *Beyond Choices*, Sicart seeks to help readers understand ethical gameplay deeper by saying, “To understand ethical gameplay, I propose that ethics be considered in two different ways-- how the design of a game can create experiences in which the use of moral rules is meaningful and how and how players potentially interact with those designs”(9).

In order to understand ethical gameplay we must first understand ethics, specifically in the way that Sicart needs us to in order to understand the points he will make in the future text.

Player Complicity

What is player complicity? Why is player complicity important to ethical gameplay?

Sammi:

“Players’ complicity implies accepting the logic of the ethical systems that structure the gameworld. (Pg 12)

Player complicity essentially gives players a sense of purpose for each of their ethical choices knowing it will affect the outcome of the story. Having player complicity allows gamers to stop for a second and think about their choices being made usually in a contradicting way, similar to a wicked problem. It binds the players up with confusion forcing them to make a hard decision even if it means going against their morals.

Alex: “Player complicity means surrendering to the fact that actions in a game have a moral dimension.” Pg 12 in Sicart 5-29

When players opt to play a game they are acknowledging that they will be presented with decisions during its duration, by playing the game they are choosing to continue even though they may not always make the ‘right’ decision while they do play.

What must/should developers do to promote/sustain player complicity? What are some ways developers can short circuit or diminish complicity?

Joe Peters: "To build game audiences like the film audiences of the 1970s will require fostering a kind of demanding literacy that is part of our duty as scholars" (Sicart 2)

Sicart is placing the onus to push video game audiences forward on games scholars. Scholars often talk and write about how games can be avenues for ethical reflection, but they must make the case for designers to treat their games as such and they must foster a culture that asks players to expect more from what they play.

What must/should players do to develop/sustain player complicity?

Johnson:

"These works address values, good and evil, and choices and incorporate these issues as an integral part of their aesthetics." (Sicart 10)

After providing examples of games that bridge ethical gameplay and also nurture player complicity, Sicart reveals that values, good and evil, and choices make up part of the games aesthetic. By combining aesthetics and ethics, players can sustain and develop complicity after every choice. When playing and making these decisions, players must think about all of the very little information provided with wicked problems. With nothing externally guiding players, they must refer to what they personally follow ethically and morally. Approach the problem with heavy reliance on who you are as a person.

Sanchez:

"By becoming complicit with the kind of experience that the game wants players to enjoy, they are also critically open to whatever values they are going to enact." (Sicart 23)

While promoting player complicity ultimately lies as the burden of the developers, players ultimately must, well, comply with the ethical world of the game. The developers ultimately want to create a set of rules that establish a game's message and goal. Players in turn must not only play within the design and rules of play set out by the developers, they must be aware of the problems set out by the narrative, meeting the creators halfway between those problems set before them and their own values they will in turn apply to the game.

Meaningful Choices & Wicked Problems

What are meaningful choices? What/how can meaningful choices affect?

Mario:

In *Moral Dilemmas in Computer Games*, Sicart states that one of the definitions of a wicked problem is as stated, "wicked problem is "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision-makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing"

Ainsley: "the object should provide a space for interpretations but not a solution...how is it possible to make games that are open to interpretation rather than to the achievement of goals?" (pg. 75).

Max:

Meaningful choices, according to Sicart, are all about awareness of self and others. You put other systems into account before making a decision. Meaningful choices affect everyone, so thought must be put into said choices with morals and ethics involved.

Kilgore:

"According to formalist thinking, games have meanings that exist prior to the act of playing the game and that somewhat determine the meaning of the game. This perspective says that the essence of any game is found in the rules." (Sicart; beyond-choices-excerpt Pg 67)

What sicart is saying here, is that any meaningful choices are sometimes embedded within the very rules of the games. The rules are what decide what is significant and what is not, while allowing the player to come to their own conclusion about what is a *meaningful choice*.

What must/should developers do to make choices feel meaningful? What are some ways developers can diminish the meaningfulness of choices?

Mike

"Meier argued that for players to be engaged in the game, they have to be presented with choices to which they feel emotionally attached, and these choices must not be equally good. The player also should have enough information to make an informed choice, and no single choice should be best."

Sam

"In ethical theory, the principles from which are derived justify notions of right and wrong" (Sicart 7)

Sicart talked about how if you don't save the games and make players think in the thought of the moment, it's not ethical gameplay

Johnson:

"Because morality is an informal system, reinforcement structures, such as punishment and reward, may actually make the experience too obvious and end up harming the creative, appropriative act of playing ethically." (Sicart 9)

When approaching gaming ethically, problems must have consequences that are equally as negative/positive. With certain choices leading to a clear reward or consequence, players are more likely to make the choice based on those results. This diminishes the meaningfulness of making the player stop and think about what aligns more with their creative and moral compass. Players will have more predictable gameplay and often lean more into instrumental gameplay.

Hein:

Sicart writes in *Beyond Choices*, "If the problem is the design of ethical gameplay, then ethical cognitive friction can be a solution that introduces tension between the procedural and semiotic levels and potentially generates moral reflection. **Ethical cognitive friction is a pause in instrumentality that allows creative play to take over.**" (12) While it is the developer's responsibility to provoke discomfort from the player, this does not always prove easy. The best way to accomplish this task is to remove the ability to play according to strategy, forcing the player to acknowledge the tension between simply following the steps (procedural) and looking into the symbolic meaning of their actions (semiotic). This then forces the player to make decisions based on their own moral compass.

What must/should players do to make choices feel meaningful? What are some ways players can diminish the meaningfulness of choices?

Kilgore:

"It can be dangerous to assume that the meaning of games is contained within the formal system of the game. Play consists of reconfiguration of the meanings that are embedded in the rules created by the designers." (Sicart; beyond-choices-excerpts)

While it is up to the player to decide what choices are significant or not, it is also part of the game designer's duties to guide the player in the right direction. If every single choice meant the meaning between life and death, the player needs to have some kind of information giving them that impression.

What are wicked problems?

Max:

Wicked problems are complex problems that don't give you the answer right away and are intentionally confusing and hard to decipher to make the player think. A good example of this would be the Trolley Problem, in which one action could lead to one death or a few deaths.

Yahya:

A wicked problem is a problem that is impossible to solve, either because there isn't enough information for it to be understood or there are too many variables involved.

Mike

"A wicked problem is "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision-makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing."

Peters: "Wicked problems are structured around imperfect information and a network of outcomes that make the consequences of decisions difficult to predict"

Wicked problems deliberately conceal information from the player. This serves to make the consequences of a decision more vague, which forces the player to look inward to their own values in order to come to a decision. Games often fall short of this when they provide the player with reward and punishment systems that make the consequences of what would

otherwise be a wicked problem too obvious.

Darius:

Wicked problems are problems that the game puts you in where you have to make a choice but these types of problems are very intense game changing questions where you have to sit down and think about it before you make a decision

Developers and Wicked Problems?

Mya- Sicart mentions that in order for games to have wicked problems that force the player to act ethically the designers have to prompt the players to do so. He states that, "Gamedesign needs to address players as moral agents, providing them with choices that require more than procedural thinking and that are not easily translatable into strategies" (Sicart Moral Design, 34). The idea that game designers need to allow players to be "moral agents" means that the designers also need to give the players room to make choices that are not for strategic gain but instead challenge the player to think morally and act ethically.

Hanna: In Sicart's *Moral Dilemmas and Computer Games*, he suggests how game designers may want to use wicked problems in order to have players partake in an ethical gameplay:

Game designers seeking to make their players engage their moral values should create wicked problems in their approach to narrative and gameworld design. In addition, because ill-defined problems invoke a type of thinking that is close to moral reflection, game designers could take advantage of that similarity to create dilemmas based on imperfect information and unpredictable outcomes, lacking a telegraphed or easily perceived moral compass" (35).

Here Sicart is offering advice to gaming developers on how to have their players engage in ethical gameplay. Wicked problems and ill-defined problems encourage players to make choices in the game that reflect their moral values. By creating dilemmas in the game that have unknown outcomes, players cannot make decisions based on the best outcome but can only make a moral decision or a guess. An example of a game where players are put in moral dilemmas without knowing the outcome(s) is *Life Is Strange*. You are given two options that will most likely reflect a moral debate. The player may know the immediate outcome (someone gets shot etc.), but they will not know the future parts of the game that will have also have impacted their decision. Ultimately the end of the game will change with their decisions but they will not know how it is changing. Players are put in a position that will require more thinking and moral reflection, like Sicart suggests.

Jillyan:

In Sicart's excerpt of *Beyond Choices*, he explains how there are issues with wicked problems and the game developers. He exclaims "Players have grown used to a design style that gave them a great deal of information about the state of the game." This means that the people playing these ethical games have gotten comfortable being able to figure out what each decision will possibly lead up to, while with wicked problems, that is no longer an option. Developers have a hard time coming up with these wicked problems because in order for them

to be done right, there should be no obvious answer to these situations, and it shouldn't be easy to determine what different answers would cause throughout the storyline of the game.

Players and Wicked Problems?

Jillyan:

In Sicart's *Moral Dilemmas and Computer Games*, he expresses how wicked problems can be frustrating and anxiety ridden for players by saying "[w]icked problems are structured around imperfect information and a network of outcomes that make the consequences of decisions difficult to predict," (pg. 32-33). This statement shows that many players struggle with wicked problems, especially because of the well known fact that a player will only have one shot at making the swift decision at hand because there are no save options to test out other options in the gameplay. I personally can relate to these wicked problems being an issue because of a popular game I enjoy, *Life Is Strange*, the character being played has the power to travel back in time, so wicked problems usually are not an issue in the plot. Although, if the time traveling power is used too much, the player runs out of juice temporarily, and when that happens, the player cannot go back in time to test out different options. Thus, creating a panic for the player because of these wicked problems. So basically, if the wrong decision is made, it cannot be undone.

Mya- Sicart argues that ethical gameplay is a meeting point between designers and players; he explains that designers must give room for ethical decision making and players must choose to play ethically. He uses Manveer Heir's definition of ethical game play to propel this idea. Heir says that "I would define ethical gameplay as gameplay which allows the player to explore their ethical self within the game world" (Beyond choices 25). The player must be able to reflect on their ethical game play. They need to be given the space to explore these ethical decisions, however the player must also be willing to do so. In order for gameplay to be considered ethical players must let go of instrumental play and the designers must have player complicity in order for the game to allow the player to "explore their ethical self".

Forced Reflection (Building Time into a Game)

Santos:

Sicart argues that one particularly important thing developers can do to increase the ethical efficacy of a game is to force players to reflect on not only the consequences of, but also the reasons behind, their choices.

Ainsley: One thing that Sicart stresses is how vital to ethical gameplay it is to leave time, gaps, for players to reflect on the choices they have made. Giving them time to reflect on morality rather than what's best to win. He contemplates this by using Pippin Barr's 'interactive trolley problem'.

“Barr’s trolley problem presents ethical gameplay not in choices but in how these choices are interpreted. It does not provide any explanation on a macro level that justifies what players did. They are left alone with their choices to make sense of them and of what they say about them.” (pg. 7)

Here Sicart is praising Barr, in his trolley problem game players are not given any information on what they have done. Instead they are only left with the choices they have made rather than the consequences, they must contemplate what they have done, and why they did it. I agree with Sicart here, if players always immediately know what the exact consequences of their actions (on a bigger level) are then they will know what the ‘right’ choice is. They won’t consider the morality of what they’ve done but only be upset that they picked ‘wrong’.

Question: How can a designer show realistic consequences for morally bad actions while still allowing for the player to contemplate morality rather than what is more rewarding?

Other Important Ideas, Things to Think about

Santos:

In *Beyond Choices*, Sicart suggests that ethical games are more effective when we play as characters who are “empty shells.” Citing *Far Cry 2*, he writes:

We are not given a character, but an empty space--a set of open determinacies that we can fulfill through playing. Who we are and what the ethos of *Far Cry 2* is depends on how we close those determinacies through play--guided by “authorial” design choices or by our values but always in a constant process of playful close of an openness of character. *Far Cry 2* opens a world for us and we have to complete it through playing with our actions but also our values. (p. 14)

Hmm. I’m not entirely sure I agree with Sicart here. For instance, if the goal of ethical gaming is to push us outside of ourselves (empathy as imaginative action, to try to step into the others’ shoes), then perhaps there is value in a more twisted relationship to our protagonist?

Questions:

Are we playing an empty shell? Or are we inhabiting a flushed out character (we are asked to play as someone else)? As a player, did you find you were making choices based on what you believe, or were you influenced by what the character might believe? Explain.

Nicholas: “The Walking Dead succeeds because it is interesting to engage with the world through the character that players are given and to give him a personality as they go deeper in the story” (Sicart, 14)

Sicart is saying that when we play as someone in a game we have to think about what we'll say if anyone in the game asks us a question. We might learn about what the person thinks about and any ideas that they have but we have to listen to people that the person talks to and we have to make all the decisions. When we play the game for a long time we know all of the places that he went to and what the people he talked to are like. In the Walking Dead the person picks where they want to go and what they want to do. When it's time for them to make any decisions you have to think about how you feel about it. The person in the game will have the same opinions as you if you have to choose what the best decision will be.

Grace Pfeifer:

In *Defining Ethical Gameplay* Sicart suggests that aesthetics do play a role in the ethical gaming experience, however, when it comes to more violent games, gamemakers must be cautious because they do not want violent games to act as propaganda.

Sicart writes: "violent or morally challenging games allow us to explore within relatively safe grounds what we would otherwise never do. The attraction of these experiences lose meaning and become something other than an aesthetic and moral experience" (p,19). A few lines later Sicart goes on to say that "we need to be cautious. Games can act as propaganda for violent and unethical discourse" (pg,20).

Here Sicart is discussing the fine line between aesthetics being a tool to express ethics vs. aesthetics romanticizing violence. I think using art to express a difficult message can be empowering and impactful, but done the wrong way, it can move into a territory of romanticizing something that is dark and should not be romanticized. Sicart specifically mentions this being a concern in high-budget games that sell millions of copies, because those games influence mass amounts of people of all ages. I do agree with what Sicart is saying here because we as a society do not want to romanticize violence, shooting, rape, etc, but there is a way to show these things, like Sicart says, in an "aesthetic and impactful" way that makes gamers think about it ethically.

Questions:

How do game makers find the happy medium between aesthetics and romanticism? What is the key difference between the two? How do we avoid romanticizing dark situations in games?

Grace Pfeifer

In *The Player, the Player* Sicart defines play and all the elements that goes into play. He writes: "We chose to play, and by that choice, we give seriousness to play. Playing is a paradoxical experience that means both seriously committing to playing by the rules and also playfully engaging in them. This creates a dynamic movement between the seriousness of the game and the natural tendency to be free within those boundaries" (pg, 64)

Here Sicart is talking about how play is something that we do to explore our surroundings and have fun, however, there is a seriousness to it because in order to play, you have to make the

choice to play, which means committing to engaging in whatever play it is. I thought this was an interesting point, because while play is fun, there is a commitment aspect to it, because if you don't fully engage yourself in play, is it still just as fun? When you sit down to game, you are committing to sitting there and giving your full attention to the game and the choices you are making.

Questions:

Do you have to be completely engaged to get the full play experience? How can you maximize play?

Sanchez:

What is cognitive friction? How does it relate to ethical gaming?

"Cognitive friction explains why some objects are better experienced emotionally rather than rationally, and because ethical gameplay is a type of emotional design, it can be created by consciously applying cognitive friction. (Sicart 94-95)