

Running Head: BEYOND CHOICES

**Beyond Choices:**  
**A Typology of Ethical Computer Game Designs**

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**Abstract**

This essay presents a typology for classifying computer games designed to create ethical gameplay. Ethical gameplay is the outcome of playing a (computer) game in which the players' moral values are of relevance for the game experience. This essay explores the different types of designs that create these types of experiences, and how they are characterized. This essay provides an analytical framework for classifying games according to the experience they create and how they create it. This essay is informed by both game design theory and postphenomenological philosophy, and it is intended to provide a theoretical framework for the study of the design of ethical computer game experiences.

**Keywords**

Game design, ethics, game research, game ontology, phenomenology, postphenomenology

## Introduction

In his Game Developers Conference talk “Exploration: From Systems to Spaces to Self” (Hocking, 2007), game developer Clint Hocking argued that computer games can be experienced not only as explorations of systems of rules and game world spaces, but also of the players’ subjectivities, that is, the construction of our self, who we are and how that is expressed in a series of ethical values with which we relate with others and the world. Hocking’s central example was *Ultima IV* (Origin Systems, 1985), a game that encouraged players to explore the values they were playing by.

The main question developers like Hocking pose are: how do games explore the ethics of their players? How are computer games designed to create this type of ethical exploration? In this essay I will present a typology that can be used to classify games according to how they appeal to their players’ ethics. This typology will argue that there is such a thing as ethical gameplay, and that there are sufficient recurring design elements in computer games to justify a typology of ethical gameplay designs. Computer games can create deep ethical experiences, which, as this essay will argue, can be categorized according to abstract game design concepts.

Though this is essay may be of interest to game designers, the intended audience is academics with an interest in the formal analysis of computer games as designed objects and how they engage players in ethical experiences. Nevertheless, the typology I am presenting here can be used in specific design practices as a reference framework, or even as an inspirational tool. I will expand these possible uses and expansions of the typology in the closing section of the essay.

The conceptual model of how ethical gameplay is created by means of general design choices can help elucidate the role of computer games in our ethical landscape, further arguing for the recognition of computer games as not only a form of entertainment, but also a medium capable of contributing with its expressive capacities to the shaping of contemporary culture. This being said, I will not directly address the ubiquitous issue of violence and computer games. Directly addressing this issue is a side path from the essence of this essay.

My goal is to introduce the concept of ethical gameplay, understood as the morally relevant outcome of the experience of a game system by an ethical agent. This concept will be used to argue for a typology of ethical design principles based on the analysis of a number of computer games.

These games were chosen for their relevance in terms of ethical discourses created by means of their procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), not necessarily by the ethical motives of their theme, or game world. The games used as illustrations of this typology create ethical experiences primarily by means of game design, that is, by the way the game system, its rules and mechanics, its affordances and constraints (Norman: 2002) affect the player experience of the fictional world (Juul, 2005). This typology is inspired by the work of Järvinen (2008) and Bjork and Holopainen (2005), even though my scope is narrower, since the intention is to present a typology of game designs that can potentially cue ethical gameplay.

Ethical gameplay is a concept inspired by the works on gameplay by Bateman and Boon (2006), Salen and Zimmerman (2003), and Juul (2005). This tradition will be put in the perspective of phenomenology (Gadamer, 2004) and postphenomenology (Ihde, 1990, 1995; Verbeek, 2005), and so ethical gameplay will consider both player and game system ethics as an integral part of the ludic activity.

Computer games that appeal and challenge our ethical values are a step towards the expressive maturity of the medium. Computer games challenge what we think and who we are and by understanding how they do so, we can imagine new ways of describing, developing, and playing computer games, incorporating ethics as a gameplay challenge.

### **Defining Ethical Gameplay**

Ethical gameplay is the ludic experience in which regulation, mediation, and/or goals require from the player moral reflection beyond the calculation of statistics and possibilities. This type of gameplay requires the understanding of games as objects with values embedded in their design (Winner, 1986; Latour, 1992), that establish a mode of relation with the player, limiting their agency in the game world with a pre-determined, designed purpose; it also requires the understanding of players as moral agents, capable of using ethical reflection to act upon choices in game experience. The implications of this perspective for the analysis of games as cultural objects are significant: not only game design is ethically relevant, but also play is a moral action.

The player I will invoke here is an implied, model player (Eco, 1978), one that has experience playing games, and that has the ethical maturity to understand games not only as means for entertainment, but also as expressive medium (Bogost, 2007). This implied player engages in the ludic experience with the intention of exploring the game system, but also her own values. An ethical player is a condition for ethical gameplay, but it is the game system that will determine the relevance of her values for the game experience.

One approach to describing the values of a game design, according to Nissenbaum (2001), would be to “study the complex interplay between the system or device, those who built it, what they had in mind, its conditions of use, and the natural, cultural, social, and political context in which it is embedded, for all these factors may feature in an account of the values embodied in it” (p. 120). Science and Technology Studies (Akrich and Latour, 1992) used this methodology to describe the importance of values in the way technologies shape our interaction with the world (Flanagan, Belman, Nissenbaum and Diamond, 2007). Nevertheless, from a philosophical perspective, it is necessary to establish an ontology of the object before we can talk about values. That is, we need to understand what games are before we can assign values to it, and project them to the player experience.

Don Ihde’s postphenomenology provides arguments for understanding ethical gameplay as related to the game object projected to the player experience. In Ihde’s perspective, “there are no neutral technologies, or, positively put, all technologies are *non-neutral* (...) they are transformational in that they change the quality, field and possibility range of human experience, thus they are non-neutral” (Ihde, 1995, p. 33). Since technologies, in this case computer games, are intended to create human experiences, such as gameplay, then games are non-neutral, and as such we can analyze their values as intended experiences.

This analysis needs to be in form of the experience of the game, since “technologies have to be understood *phenomenologically*, i.e. as belonging in different ways to our experience and use of technologies, as a human-technology relation (...)” (*ibid*, p. 34). It is in this perspective where design becomes moral, and we can think about ethical gameplay as the experience of a moral system: “Design ethics requires that artifacts be treated as members of the moral community, conceived as the community in which morality assumes a shape. Things carry morality because they shape the way in

which people experience their world (...)” (Verbeek, 2005, p. 217). Within this postphenomenological perspective, then, games should be understood as objects that create experiences by limiting the agency of an ethical being, and because they do so, they ought to be ethically analyzed.

The elements that are present in the experience of ethical gameplay are three: the game world, the game rules, and the game mechanics. The game world should be understood as the semantic wrapper of the game system, the combination of fiction and simulation (Aarseth, 2005). I am using the term “semantic” in its classic, semiotic meaning, that is, “the general study of the interpretation of signs” (Honderich, 1995, p. 820). Game rules are the formal structure of the game, the boundaries in which play takes place, freely accepted by players and unbreakable (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 120 - 125). Game mechanics are the actions afforded by the system to the player so she can interact with the game state and with other players (Järvinen, 2008, pp. 250 - 274). Players experience a game world constrained by rules, and interact with(in) it by means of game mechanics (see also Juul, 2005, pp. 55-121). Since that world is designed to create a number of behaviors, we can describe the game as an ethical technology, and the act of playing, a moral action.

For example: in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar North, 2002), players can drive a car, pick up a prostitute, have “sex” with her to increase the maximum health from 100 to 125 units, and then kill her to recover the money. From a formal perspective, a number of rules create that gameplay experience: players have a maximum of 125 health units, but only 100 in normal conditions; if players are in a specific location, inside a car, close to a character of a specific type, a sequence will trigger granting them 125 health units in exchange for some game tokens; if computer-controlled agents lose their hit points, they die, leaving a certain amount of money. In the semantic level, this flowchart of actions is represented, as I have previously described, with cars, prostitutes, sex, money and murder simulations (Frasca, 2003). The player that experiences ethical gameplay will interact with this system, and relate to it by means of its semantic layer, but will take all of the elements into consideration in the process. In this sense, ethical gameplay is a process of ethical interpretation of the game, a hermeneutics of play (Aarseth, 2003).

Hermeneutical phenomenology (Gadamer, 2004) connects the player as moral agent and the experience of ethical gameplay. Gadamer's reflections on the work of art illustrate how experiencing ethical gameplay occurs: "in the experience of art we see a genuine experience (Erfahrung) induced by the work which does not leave him who has it unchanged (...)" (p. 86). Players engage with the game system mediated by the semantic layers of the game, but this mediation is not absolute: players are not blinded by the semantics - they understand the procedural aspects of their experience, the ergodic (Aarseth, 1997, p. 179) requirements of the system. The semantic layer should be understood as a facilitator for player interaction with the game system, a method of reducing the cognitive friction of interacting with such a complex system (Cooper, 2004, p. 19).

Playing is inserting the self in a structure experienced as a world: "The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him (...) this is all the more the case where the game is itself 'intended' as such a reality" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 109). But play is also to interpret the conditions for play (Gadamer, 2004, p. 106) by means of the semantic layer of the game. Semantics, as stated before, is understood as the "interpretation of signs", and in this case is the interpretation of the game system and the afforded mechanics by means of the game world as fiction and simulation.

Players create the game in play by interacting with a game system which state is communicated by means of a simulational system (Retaux and Rouchier, 2002). This creation is a co-creation: players are also created by the game system as subjects to that game. Since this process involves an ethical being in the experience of understanding, then ethics becomes a principle at play.

Ethical gameplay, then, has to be seen not only in light of the game system, nor as exclusively dependent of the game world; ethical gameplay is a process of decision-making constrained by morally relevant technologies, and mediated by a game world that translates the principles of those technologies into behavioral patterns that can be understood by players. But, since the game world is a means for conveying information to the player, we cannot analyze ethical gameplay exclusively in terms of the game world, but in the ways the game world is interactive. In this sense, ethical gameplay is an experience of a system mediated by a game world; in postphenomenological fashion (Ihde: 1990), it would be schematized as follows:

player → (game world - game system)

In classic postphenomenology, hermeneutical relations, those in which “we are involved with the world via an artifact, but the artifact is not transparent (...) the artifact (...) provides a representation of the world” (Verbeek: 2005, p. 126), are schematized as

“I → (technology-world)” (*ibid*).

In computer games, it is the game world which acts as a representation of the game system. Simulation is informational mediation of an abstract system towards the player. Ethical gameplay is then the hermeneutical experience of that combination, (world-system), by a reflective being. The modalities of design for ethical gameplay should then be understood as the modes in which the (game world - game system) mediation is constructed, with the intention of being experienced by an ethical agent.

In this section I have presented the basics for understanding ethical gameplay. In the next section I will present a typological categorization of ethical gameplay in computer games.

### **A Typology of Designs for Ethical Gameplay**

The goal of game design is to create interesting gameplay. The comparative analysis of different game designs can result in typologies of game designs (Aarseth and Elverdam, 2007). For example, Björk and Holopainen (2004) apply the concept of design patterns to the analysis of games, with the intention of influencing the ways games are designed. By invoking design patterns, the authors provide us with a formal tool for describing games. There is a crucial difference between these typologies, though: game design patterns can be used to solve specific design problems, while Aarseth and Elverdam’s are a descriptive tool for existing games. The typology I am presenting here is closer to the latter.

In this section I will present a typology that categorizes computer games depending on how they create ethical gameplay. This typology is a descriptive, analytical tool, meant to facilitate game research, and perhaps even inspire game designers. They are meant to provide clear, overarching types for classifying design for ethical gameplay.

The two dominant modalities of design for ethical gameplay are open games and closed games. This terminology is inspired by Eco’s (Eco, 1989) theories on the open and the closed work.



The metaphor of the open/closed in game studies has a long tradition in different fields: Suits (1978) writes about open and closed games depending on the properties of the game when played, while Juul (2005) uses the terminology to explain the differences between games of emergence and games of progression.

In this case, open design refers to that in which the player can bring her own values to the game experience, and the game system will react accordingly to those values. Open design allows players to let their ethical values modify the game experience. On the opposite side, closed design limits ethical player agency, but focuses on creating a strong ethical experience: players cannot affect the world with her values, but they are affected by the game's designed values. These types are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they can appear in the same game, with the goal of creating an intended ethical experience at a given time in the game. Any game can apply any of these methods at any given time, to explore different possibilities in the ethical experience of the player.

According to this typology, some games will tend to be open, while some others will tend to be closed. Nevertheless, we will find instances of closed ethical gameplay design in open games, and vice versa. This typology, then, can be used both as a general description of the dominant type of ethical gameplay design present in a game, and as a categorization tool of the different gameplay sequences, or moments, that constitute a game system as a whole.

Open ethical design is dominant in those games that encourage players to elaborate their own ethical systems, and apply them to the experience. Open ethical design encourages players to play by and with their own values.

Multiplayer games tend to be predominantly open ethical designs, since they require players that create codes of conduct and behaviors for playing with others according to interpretations of the rules. For example, *Eve Online* (CCP Games, 2003) does not force any value system on players. The forums and online communities in *Eve* thrive with stories of heists, coups, and piracy - tales of survival and corporate loyalty illustrate the open ethics of the game, where players are given a world to live by their own values.

An extreme case of open ethical multiplayer game is *A Tale in the Desert*, where players could vote their own laws, which would then be implemented by the developers as rules and

mechanics. Effectively, players of *A Tale in the Desert* created a world where they lived by their values, and the world adapted to their ethics.

Open ethical design is also present in other types of multiplayer games, like *Wario Ware: Smooth Moves* (Intelligent Systems, 2007), or *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami, 1999) series. In these games, the social experience is often more important than the gameplay. These games are mediators for the simultaneous presence of different individuals enjoying a shared ludic experience. In this sense, these games do not punish poor performances beyond the systemic losing condition, and they encourage, by means of design, the presence of a collective ethical decision of playing by the rules and enjoying the experience.

As a comparison, *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) is very punishing: once the player is killed, she has to wait in spectator mode, watching others play, until the level is over. Most team-based competitive multiplayer first person shooters present similar handicaps. Competition is driven by the game design. On the other hand, the multiplayer version of *Dance Dance Revolution* encourages simultaneous competition: regardless of player performance, songs will be played until the end, when the scores will reflect the difference in performance quality. In the single player version, bad performance is punished with the abrupt end of the song. These multiplayer social games are designed to encourage the creation of a communitarian ethics in which players care not only for winning, but also for maintaining the good spirits and flow of the game experience (Smith, 2006).

Open ethical multiplayer design, then, is focused on encouraging players to create the values they play by with other agents, values that are then respected and encouraged by the game system, in terms of influence in the world, or specific game rules tailored for that type of values.

Open ethical design is also possible in single player games. In *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2005), for example, player's actions and their values are acknowledged by the game system, and reflected upon in the game world: non player characters will modify their behaviors depending on the values the player has lived by. Essentially, open ethical designs in single player games allows players to explore variations of moral positions, and reflects them in the way the world, or the narrative, are experienced. Of course, the game is designed with a number of embedded values that do not allow total freedom. In fact, there is never such thing as total ethical freedom for players: a game will

always encourage modalities of play and interactions it considers morally good. Games are always ethically relevant systems, since they constraint the agency of an ethical being.

Single player games with open ethical structures, then, focus the ethical experience in the player agency within the world. For example, *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000) is a game built around ethical player agency: the player can explore both a game world and a story, and both are deeply intertwined with her ethical agency. *Deus Ex*, like any game that presents dominant open ethical design, makes players play by their own values, giving choices not only strategic, but also moral meaning.

Open ethical design can present different subtypes. Open ethical design can affect the game system or the game world, or both. If the values the player affords to the game affect the game system, we will have open ethical system design. In *Knights of the Old Republic* (Bioware, 2003), depending on the values the player adopts, different powers will be available. These powers imply different modes of agency in the game world, which implies a different system design. Similarly, in *Bioshock* the amount of resources a player has at her disposal depends on how she interacts with the game world, and those resources modify the space of possibility of the player.

Open ethical design can also relate to the game world, understood loosely as the fictional element of the game (Juul, 2005). Open ethical world design defines the modes in which the game world is affected by the player values. In *Fable*, non-player characters will react differently to the player depending on her actions, which will provide constant feedback to the player on her moral status. Furthermore, in that game the avatar changes appearance also depending on her moral decisions, providing even more ethical feedback to the player on her values. In *Deus Ex*, on the other hand, it is the way the story unfolds that shows the world reaction to the player actions: depending on the choices of the player, she will explore a dominant branch of the narrative, and on occasions will experience another branch of the narrative. The way the player relates to the characters and to these narratives will show this modality of open ethical design.

Open ethical design is the general design type that allows players to afford their values, to a certain extent, to the game world or to the game experience. Most computer games that have

attempted to create ethical gameplay inspired by open design characteristics, yet it is not the only type of design available for creating ethical gameplay.

Closed ethical designs restrict ethical agency in the game world, yet encourage players to reflect about the values of their gameplay experience. In closed ethical designs, the game world and the game experience are moral in nature, yet the player cannot do anything to alter the values of the game. The game is morally static, and the player has to accept its values in order to experience the game. This acceptance does not mean a passive position of the player towards the game system. As a matter of fact, it requires from players to be active ethical agents: closed ethical design requires ethical players, and creates a ludic experience specifically tailored for them.

Closed ethical design is based on the assumption that the player, as a moral being, will relate to the game system by means of her own ethical values, yet she will accept the values of the game world or the game fiction in order to enjoy the ludic experience. This means a tension between the player as an ethical agent in the game system, and the values the game system is designed to enforce. This tension builds the game as a designed ethical experience.

For example, a game like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004) has a rather unlikable main character, which has to commit all kinds of gruesome crimes in order to proceed in the game. Players cannot change the characters' ethics, nor influence the world. Players are tied to the values of the game system. Parts of the enjoyment of the game is the system exploration, but also the process of letting go on moral restraints and build this character inside the game, experiencing what cannot be accepted by a moral agent outside the game. It is in this tension between the ethical agent outside of the game and the ethical being in the game where the interest of closed ethical design shows.

There are two types of closed ethical designs: substracting and mirroring, each referring to a particular combination of design choices and intended or interpretable player experience. Substracting closed design is a category based on Fumitu Ueda's thoughts on the design process behind *Ico* (Ueda and Kaido, 2002). This approach implies substracting from the game design all those elements that do not directly support the core gameplay, enhancing those elements crucial to the game experience. In my appropriation of the term "substracting", I use it to define those game designs in which the game system expects a moral agent that will play the game as an ethical experience, yet that system is not

designed to reinforce the ethics of the player. Substracting closed design forces players to experience their morals in a world that does not react to these values. The player is left alone to understand and evaluate the ethics of the experience. Substracting means relieving the game from openly addressing ethical discourses, while encouraging the player to morally reflect about the meaning and consequences of her actions.

*Shadow of the Colossus* is an example of substracting closed design: in this game, players are asked to slay 16 colossi to revive a dead girl. The game does not build any type of moral argumentation around the actions the player has to take. In a strict sense, the game consists of 16 boss fights that act as connecting threads of a story told, by allusion, through non-interactive cut scenes. Players are devoid of any backstory, meaning, or sense of consequence of their actions towards the game world. Yet the game is designed to become an ethical experience.

Central to the experience of the game are the colossi. These beasts places are symbols of the space they inhabit. The colossi are not necessarily aggressive - there are no cues given to the player as to their ethical alignment, nor there is any information on the morals of the player character's motivations: there is no sense of good and evil, of the morally good or bad. Everything moral is substracted from the game. Why is it then, an ethical design?

There are elements in the design of the game that can be interpreted as signs towards a moral agent, as hints towards a reflection on the ethics of the gameplay. When the player finally slays a colossus, a non-interactive sequence triggers: the colossus dies, the player falls to the ground, a shadow stems from the dead colossus, the shadow penetrates the player's body, almost killing him. The player then wakes up to an improved stamina, but the looks of the avatar degrade, as if reflecting some kind of illness. These two apparently contradictory elements, the enhanced systemic agency and the visual feedback through the avatar, send contradictory messages to the player. On one hand, she is progressing in the game; on the other, her avatar is showing symptoms of suffering. These contradictory messages can be interpreted as cues that appeal to the player's repertoire (Juul, 2005), her capacity to understand both the rules of the system, to create strategies, and the semantics of the game world as means for informing the player about the game state and its progression.

As a subtractive closed design, *Shadow of the Colossus* detaches itself from any moral reasoning, yet it induces moral thinking in the player. In other words, it requires a moral agent that can interpret the game world from an ethical perspective, in order for some elements of the game to make sense. Subtractive designs require and appeal to a moral player to complete the ethical meaning of the game, beyond the basic gameplay requirements.

Mirroring design is the opposite of subtracting: these type of games place the ethical meaning of the game at the center of the experience, forcing players to actions of intense moral nature. Closed mirroring design projects the ethical experience from the game to the player, who is forced to accept a set of values more or less explicitly described by the game. Mirroring closed design forces players to adapt to the values of the game, but provoking them as reflective ethical beings, making the adoption of that external set of values a core part of the ethical gameplay experience.

*Manhunt* (Rockstar North, 2003) is an example of closed mirroring design. In this game, players have to commit gruesome acts of violence in order to survive. As a matter of fact, players are rewarded on their violence: the bloodier the execution, the more points are awarded. The game is encouraging players to commit these murders by rewarding players with a high score, a classic method to get players attached to game strategies. Incidentally, the game is much harder to play if not committing these vile acts. The game is balanced so that the player has to commit those acts in order to survive, as any other type of violence will likely end up in the death of the. This design choice reinforces the need of the player to focus on strategies based on executions, further insisting on *Manhunt* as a game of tactical gore.

In *Manhunt*, the mirroring structure is designed to create a disgust effect in the player. There is nothing attractive in the executions: they are brutal, unpleasant, crude. But it is in these executions where the gist of *Manhunt* can be found: the game is about experiencing disgust, about enacting the extreme opposite ethical values as any sane human would enforce. And doing so by interacting with a system designed to reach an end state if the user does not follow those values. *Manhunt* is a game that explores our commitment to a game we are encouraged to despise, mirroring the values acted in the game to our actions needed to play the game.

Another mirroring closed design is *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* (Ledone, 2006). In this independent title, players control the two perpetrators of the Columbine murders. The game is an old school role-playing game, in which combat takes place in turns, and the violence is abstracted to the tactical choice of the right weapons at the right time. As opposed to *Manhunt*, *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* is not a realistic game, so its mirror structure is not reinforced directly by aural feedback. The fact that the graphics are cartoonish, for such a serious topic, brings forth a substantial element for reflection in players. But it is precisely in the mental connection between players' cultural knowledge and the mechanics and aesthetics of the game where it becomes a mirror ethical experience. Players know about the Columbine events, yet they play this game where they have to control the murderers. The ethical tension in this case is between players as cultural beings, and their in game actions. This game, following all gaming conventions, encourages the player to reflect about the Columbine events. In *Super Columbine Massacre RPG*, players have to experience Columbine through the eyes of the killers. By manipulating the general emotional attachment that players have to avatars and characters, this game forces players to think about the meaning of the actions; actions that are resonant of the actual Columbine murders. In that gameplay, the game becomes an ethical experience.

Mirroring structures are rather problematic – they are very effective in games with focused gameplay, or in gameplay sequences in which affecting and challenging the players' values is a fundamental design goal. However, it could be argued that it can lead to numbing or a certain habituation to unethical actions. Even though it is beyond the scope of this essay, I would like to briefly address this issue.

Mirroring designs demand a mature player that has developed a set of ethical values that apply to her experience of computer games. This mature player will understand that the unethical actions she has to perform in order to progress in the game are designed and intended to create a specific effect. This awareness is fundamental for a successful, ethically sound mirroring design. Closed mirroring designs can be used sparingly to create strong ethical engagement in players. But their continuous use may be too demanding on the players' values, hence making the ethical

arguments of the game weak. Players, as ethical agents, will reflect and react at the values of the game, and that reaction will make ethical gameplay become a meaningful experience.

A typology of ethical gameplay design is then constituted by two arch-types: open ethical design, in which player agency influences to some extent elements of the game world, or the game system; and closed design, where the player's ethical position does not influence the game world, or the game system. Each of these has two different types: open system design, open gameworld design, closed ethical subtracting design, and closed mirroring design. All these design types create ethical gameplay, understood as the ethical experience of a morally relevant system by an agent, on different degrees. Any game that creates ethical gameplay will have a dominant type, yet it is possible to have gameplay sequences where other ethical design types are present.

In a postphenomenological sense, open ethical system designs make the game system adapt to players choices, relating the values the agent plays by with the extent of her agency in the system:

$$(\text{ethical player}) \Leftrightarrow (\text{game system} \Rightarrow \text{game world})$$

Open ethical world designs adapt the game world to the values of the player, providing feedback to the players values by means of world adaptation to her agency.

$$(\text{ethical player}) \Leftrightarrow (\text{game world} - \text{game system})$$

Subtracting designs require ethical agents that bring their values as a part of the gameplay experience, yet neither the game world, nor the game system reacts to those values. This implies that, on occasions, players can be oblivious to the ethical message of the game, if they don't understand their interaction as ethically relevant. The game will nevertheless cue them to interpret the game as an ethical system. But the game nevertheless projects certain need for interpretation that players need to decode in an ethical fashion.

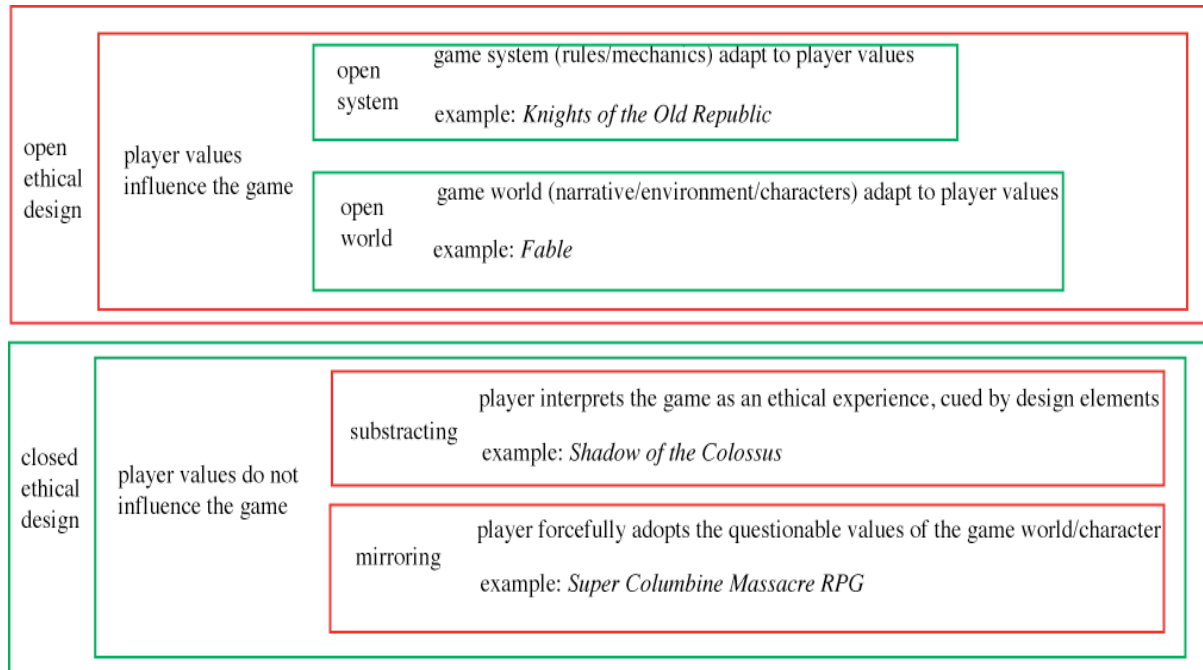
$$(\text{ethical player}) \Rightarrow (\text{ethical game world/system})$$

Mirroring designs force players into a system of values at the core of the ethical gameplay. Reflection is only possible as a reaction, or consequence, of the values imposed by the system. On occasions, the reflection appeals to the ethical agent as a human being, and not only an ethical player:



(ethical being)  $\Leftrightarrow$  (ethical player)  $\Leftarrow$  (ethical game world/system)

This typology can be modeled as follows:



## Conclusions

I decided to entitle this essay “beyond choices” to break one of the assumed conventions in ethical gameplay design, as evidenced by those games which insist on being called “moral experiences”, like *Fable* or *Knights of the Old Republic*: to create experiences about morals, players have to have choices. While taking choices is a good vehicle to explore morals, ethics is a greater topic, which is concerned with how we interpret good and evil, who we are, and who do we want to become. In this essay I have presented a typology for classifying games depending on how they are designed to provoke these reflections. Some games offer choices as a tool for exploring values, like open ethical designs, while others rely more on taunting the ethical agent that is playing the game, forcing them to reflect about what is actually happening in the game, the meaning of her ludic actions.

This essay is an introduction to the topic of designing ethical gameplay. With this typology, I provide an initial framework to categorize the variety of approaches to ethical gameplay experiences that computer games can take. Used as an inspirational tool, this typology allows the comparison

between different types of ethical gameplay and their implications. A designer has now a conceptual framework where her work, as well as others, can be classified and compared.

This typology is also systematizing implicit knowledge. Game designers like Koster (2005) or Rollings and Adams (2003) have introduced the importance of ethics for game design, and its possible potential. This essay intended to pick up that challenge and provide a coherent, systematic categorization of games based on their design for ethical gameplay.

Yet, there is more work to be done, especially in two domains: for ethical gameplay to take place, we need to understand the ethical player. Ethical player should be understood here as a philosophical anthropology: who is an ethical player, and how is she characterized? There has been interesting works on both the deviant ethical players, like cheaters (Consalvo, 2007), and a general perspective on players as ethical agents (Sicart, 2006). But we don't know who the ethical player is, and worse, how to effectively communicate with her. Discovering and describing an ethical player model is an urgent task in the research of ethical gameplay, and once it is completed, it will allow the introduction of ethical parameters in the design, evaluation, and research on computer games.

Closely related to the understanding of the ethical player would be a mapping of the ethical significance of multiplayer play, both online and co-present. Moral intuition dictates that there is difference between playing with others we know are human, playing with others in the same physical space, and playing with computer-controlled bots populating the world. However, this is knowledge that players import to the game – we know that *World of Warcraft* is populated by humans. Yet the design of artificial agents is intended to create emotional, and ethical responses in players. The question of multiplayer gameplay can add a complexity layer both to the notion of ethical gameplay, and to the typology of designs I have presented in this article, and it deserves more detailed research.

The second domain that needs further work is related with specific design methods. As I have mentioned, Järvinen, Holopainen, Björk, and other game designers that have developed methods for designing games inspire this essay. The next step in the process initiated by this typology is to complement it with a design methodology: what are the patterns, procedures, methods and techniques that can be used to create these games.

This method will have to draw not only on the formal aspects of games, but also on their relation with the aesthetic aspect. Järvinen's RAM (2008), LeBlanc, Hunicke and Zubeck's MDA (2005), or the Values at Play project ([www.valuesatplay.org](http://www.valuesatplay.org)) should be inspirational projects. The goal is to develop a set of practices and methods that allow the creation of games that incorporate ethical gameplay as one of their core characteristics. For instance, subtractive design games require providing subtle information to the player regarding the ethical nature of the gameplay experience. *Shadow of the Colossus* does so by conflicting messages: the avatar looks ill, but the gameplay relevant characteristics, like stamina, improve. A player invested in understanding the ethical dimension of the game can pick up on that tension between the mechanics/dynamics and the aesthetics, and explain it by means of ethical thinking. Thus, the player becomes empowered to explore the moral meaning of the game and her being in that experience.

Any game is the experience of play by an agent, mediated by a system. This mediation determines the values of the game and of the game experience. In this essay I have proposed a model to systematize the analysis of the design techniques that can be used to create ethical experiences by means of gameplay. The essay shows that it is possible to categorize different ethical gameplay designs. Ethical gameplay is the consequence of a system that acknowledges the values of the agents that interact with it, and of a game world that forces players to think morally. Beyond challenging skills, or intellect, computer games have the possibility of making players experience ethical dilemmas, and make their game exploration a process of self-understanding. Beyond choices, ethical gameplay holds the promise of what computer games can express.

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