

18

Papers, Please

Ethics

MIGUEL SICART

Abstract: Can a video game make a moral argument? In this chapter, Miguel Sicart examines how *Papers, Please* illustrates the expressive capacities of video games to explore complex moral topics, playfully engaging players not just as consumers but also, and more critically, as reflective ethical beings.

Ever since *Ultima IV* (Origin Systems, 1985) proposed a morality system to evaluate players' actions, game critics have examined the relationship between gameplay and morals, and designers have utilized game structures and mechanics to explore ethical topics. From *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004) to *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), numerous titles offer players moral choices. But what do we mean by moral choices? Do these choices engage players in ethical thinking? And how might games be designed to encourage thoughtful reflection? I engage these concerns by examining the independent game *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2013) in light of the following three key questions: First, what do we mean by ethics and morality? Second, how do video games engage ethical thinking? and finally, What role do games play in our moral life?

It may be a commonsense notion to dismiss morality when we play video games, the “it’s just a game” argument. Classic theories of play, such as Johan Huizinga’s “magic circle” (see the chapter by Steven Conway in this collection), present play as spatially and temporally demarcated from regular life during which society’s rules are briefly suspended. As such, it is thought, we need not apply the ethical rules by which we live to our actions undertaken during play. Yet we make many difficult choices when we play games—quickly evaluating situations, calculating potential gains and consequences. Narrative game worlds frequently present us with ethical dilemmas that we don’t encounter in our everyday lives: to kill



FIGURE 18.1
The user interface of
Papers, Please.

or not kill an enemy, to hoard personal resources, or to share them with someone. However, although our gameplay choices may not have immediate or direct consequences on our nongaming lives (although this point is debatable), video games nevertheless inform our morality *while we are playing* and potentially affect our moral fiber once we're done. *Papers, Please* offers a great example of how video games can have those ethical effects.

Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* turns players into border bureaucrats in the fictional Eastern-bloc country of Astorzska, which has just established a fragile truce after many years of warring with neighboring countries. Players are tasked with controlling the flow of people into the country, meeting quotas that influence the amount of money they earn (see figure 18.1). Players decide whether migrants are permitted entry into the country based on a migrant's documentation and other information via computer news. *Papers, Please* is a bleak simulation of border control protocols, the rhetoric of isolationism, and the fear of terrorism.

Before evaluating *Papers, Please*, we need to define a few basic terms. Ethics is the analytical examination of the principles from which we derive and evaluate moral rules. For example, ethics can propose a system that states that to make decisions, we should look at the consequences of our actions. If the consequences of our actions harm somebody, then that action is immoral. We call that system consequentialism. A similar system looks at who would benefit from a particular decision and the utility of that decision. If our choices have a positive effect on many, these choices are deemed to be morally good. We call that system utilitarianism.

Morality is a system of rules for guiding and evaluating individual and collective conduct. In simpler terms, morality is ethics *in practice*. Any time we make a decision or ponder a difficult situation, we are performing moral work; we are assessing how best to solve a moral conflict. Furthermore, moral systems have two main purposes: they exist to prevent harm and they exist to encourage the ethical development of individuals and collectives. Moral systems have four defining characteristics: they are public, rational, impartial, and informal. We can understand these elements in the world of games as follows. First, to play a game, everybody needs to know the rules of the game. For example, to play a pickup game of basketball you need to know the rules of basketball, plus the social rules of the neighborhood court where the game takes place. Everybody should know those rules, and everybody should agree on what constitutes breaking the rules. These shared rules governing this activity makes it a public system. Morality systems are *public* so that cultures can share agreed-on notions of what is right and wrong—actions that both prevent harm and those that encourage human flourishing. A public system is any system in which everybody that is affected by the workings of the system has an understanding of the basic guidelines behind that system. Law, for example, should be a public system to ensure that everybody knows what is legal and illegal in a particular society.

One of the great design insights of *Papers, Please* is that it makes players feel as if they are living in an unjust society by keeping the operating morality system hidden from view. Players never know whether an action is “good” or “evil” or what long-term consequences their choices might have. A player might commiserate with an innocent-looking man who begs to enter the country to visit a dying mother, only to learn afterward that the man was a murderer. Or worse, sometimes players will let through a person they have suspicions about but will never learn whether their decision was right or wrong. It is through these choices that *Papers, Please* is an exploration of totalitarian bureaucratic systems and the banality of evil. Totalitarian bureaucracies can be designed to alienate decision makers from the consequences of their choices and, in doing so, allow participants to feel ethically detached from their decisions. The dull routine of these choices, such as the daily work of a border control guard, is bound up in rules

and procedures, which can further remove the participant from feeling culpable. The emotional impact of *Papers, Please* is largely a result of this design.

In addition to being public, moral systems are *rational*—in that their principles can be argued using reason rather than emotion or faith—and they are *impartial*—seeking to treat people evenhandedly. (There are moral systems derived from faith, but these are developed under the domain of religious belief and structures and are outside of the scope of this chapter.) If we create a moral system in which some parts of the population are evaluated more harshly than others, then we are creating a biased system that will engender an inequitable and irrational society. For a moral system to work, everybody should be treated both fairly and consistently.

Returning to our analog and video game examples, ideally all players on both teams are treated equally by the rules and by the referees so as to create equity among players. We celebrate sporting competitions, in part, because we appreciate how athletes overcome the challenges of the game and their opponents on an even playing field. When a basketball referee applies game rules unevenly, favoring foul calls against one team more than the other, players, coaches, and fans may decry the game as unfair and protest the outcome. In contrast, *Papers, Please* explores what it feels like to live and work in a biased morality system. Some of the choices players need to take are clearly biased, harming people just because of their origin or because of biased suspicion. *Papers, Please* is also an exploration of what it takes to be a moral citizen in a morally failing state. In the game, players are told what to do, but the reasons behind the laws, the border rules they have to apply to let people in or out, are left in the dark. There are rules and laws in the state, but those are of obscure origins, brutally enforced, and subject to random changes. This is how authoritarian power operates.

Finally, moral systems are *informal*. This means that actions are open to interpretation and adaptation as the situational context demands. By having informal systems, we can negotiate the ways rules are evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Consider the informal aspects of pickup basketball games: there are rules to govern action, but there are typically no referees in attendance. Thus, players must police themselves and engage in ongoing negotiations to ensure everybody is playing under the same rules.

This is another aspect that *Papers, Please* engages creatively: players are not permitted to negotiate the moral impact of their actions. The game system rewards morally wrong choices and players cannot refuse to make a decision. The ethical system in *Papers, Please* is *private, partial, and rigid*, presenting a simulation of moral life under a totalitarian regime (see figure 18.2).

As the examples from basketball and *Papers, Please* demonstrate, games and ethics share some common traits. Games are informal public systems with rules



FIGURE 18.2
Choices and consequences in *Papers, Please*.

that indicate how to behave. In games, those rules of play tell us what to do in order to succeed. Similarly, morality uses rules as heuristics for leading a good life, avoiding harm, and developing our potential as human beings. There are games where the rules of play and its morality system are profoundly intertwined—games such as *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012), or the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007–2017). However, *Papers, Please* offers a different take on how video games can design ethical experiences.

Let's look more closely at *Papers, Please* to assess its novelty. This game engages players in a number of ethical dilemmas in the face of imperfect and incomplete information. How does one balance the risk of barring innocent migrants against the threat of terrorism? Do players place their personal, financial well-being above that of their fellow citizens, their state, or those seeking asylum? Most of the time, players are given insufficient information, contradictory goals, and little power beyond fulfilling their bureaucratic role as a border agent. Unlike other

choice-based games, *Papers, Please* does not quantify the player's actions according to predetermined values; rather, it is the task of the player to assign values to the exploration of the choices that are presented. In other words, the only moral guide one has in *Papers, Please* is the player's personal code. For example, players could evaluate the game's challenges by looking at the potential outcome of their decisions, therefore embracing a consequentialist ethics. Meanwhile, a utilitarian would weigh the pros and cons of a particular decision looking at both individual and collective outcomes, deciding whether to sacrifice one's self for the sake of the fictional country or to act selfishly to protect only those they care about.

The game does have up to 20 endings that conclude the scripted narrative arc. However, this large number of endings makes it very difficult for (casual) players to "play for the plot," that is, to try to achieve results by deliberately making choices based on their intention to complete a narrative. Most casual *Papers, Please* players will not know about the multiple endings or how to reach them, and thus, they are encouraged to make choices by following their moral compass. Dedicated players who want to see the different endings are playing "for the plot," but given how they must carefully make choices to reach a different end for each playthrough, it is likely that they have reflected about the meaning of those choices, resulting in a process of moral reflection.

Papers, Please is a brilliant example of ethical gameplay design because it allows for the application of different ethical theories to how it is played. This is *precisely* what computer and video games can do: create safe spaces for the exploration of different ethical choices and their resulting consequences. In fact, player agency is a key characteristic that makes games useful for posing ethical questions and for testing possible outcomes. In their influential *Rules of Play*,¹ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman describe games as systems that create a possibility space for players to explore. In games, this space of possibility determines the choices available to players who, in turn, develop strategies and tactics for negotiating and traversing that space.

The idea of gaming offering a "possibility space" is what allows us to think about them as potential vehicles for moral experiences that allow for the exploration of different ethical theories. In many cases, gamers traverse these game spaces simply by trying to optimize their chances of winning. However, games such as *Papers, Please* illustrate how games can model a ludic possibility space as an invitation for exploring personal and social values. In this way, gameplay is not necessarily about fulfilling a win condition, but the actions are directed back at players as a form of moral reflection. *Papers, Please* encourages players to interrogate the values and the logic behind their choices, as well as the philosophical systems that support those rules and behaviors.

Papers, Please demonstrates how ethical dilemmas in games should complicate players' choices, encouraging them to use their own inner moral compass as an instrument for decision making. In particular, the game deploys incomplete information and insufficient time as complementary gameplay mechanics. In contrast, many games present complete worlds where everything is clear to users, giving them enough information to act with confidence. But if the goal is to have players explore their unquestioned or underexamined values, there must be gaps in information and time constraints that generate difficult decisions, like the timed decision-making sequences in Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead*, that force players to take grave choices without having time to ponder about the nature and consequences of their actions. In that way, gameplay becomes an ethical practice as the possibility space becomes one of moral possibility. Ethical gameplay is not the act of choosing between options but of traversing the possibility space of a game with moral thinking.

Playing games is an act of leisure, a pleasurable activity pursued for escaping daily routines. Is it fair, then, to expect games to have ethical content? Should they encourage us to engage ethical thinking? Are these fair questions? Escapism from the burden of being a moral creature is a perfectly valid design and cultural goal for games. The moral role games play in society might be that of letting us be more relaxed moral animals. Games therefore needn't be under any imperative to morally engage us with ethically provocative content.

However, if *Papers, Please* teaches us anything, it is that the rhetoric of games and game design can create engaging moral experiences. Why not, then, use this medium to explore different ethical theories: different ways of acting, different ways of understanding why something might be a moral dilemma, and what makes a decision a moral or an immoral one? Also, we should forge beyond single-player narrative games to consider how ethical multiplayer games might be designed. What would the moral possibility space of an abstract or experimental game look like?² Such games might be difficult or impossible to bring to fruition. Yet that very impossibility would tell us something about games as a medium—about their limits and their affordances.

Games are exercises in ethical thinking, play instruments to train and sharpen our moral instincts. Like literature and the movies, games can help us formulate, explore, understand or reject ethical rules. The uniqueness of games is that this process takes place in a computational space of possibility that each player traverses in a particular way—players get to *practice* ethical theories and see their effects, both in the game and in their reflection on their gaming experiences.

Aristotle understood ethics as a practical science. Discussing the rules of morality was interesting if and only if we also lived morally and engaged practically

with the complications of making choices. Games offer us the possibility of engaging directly with that practical science. This is not to say that because we have *Papers, Please*, the medium of the video game is mature. Rather, it is to say that playing can be a moral act, one that can help us better understand what we value personally, as well as what we value for the societies in which we live. If ethics is a practical science, then video games can be an ideal laboratory for moral research.

NOTES

- 1 Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
- 2 See, for example, Joseph DeLappe and Biome Collective, *Killbox*, <https://www.killbox.info>.

FURTHER READING

- Flanagan, Mary. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.
- Sicart, Miguel. *The Ethics of Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.
- Zagal, Jose. *The Videogame Ethics Reader*. San Diego, CA: Cognella, 2012.
- Flanagan, Mary, and Helen Nissenbaum. *Values at Play in Digital Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.