

Digital games are now part of the fabric of daily life in western societies such as Canada. Although we usually think of children as the primary audience for games, the Entertainment Software Association reported that in 2015, “women age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (33%) than boys 18 or younger (15%) (Entertainment Software Association, 2015). The average age of a game player is 35 years old, and 42% of Americans play videogames for three or more hours every week (2015). In addition to taking up more of our leisure time, videogames also power our economies - cities such as Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver are global hubs for game development, employing more than 16,000 skilled workers and contributing \$2.3 billion to Canada’s GDP annually (Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2014).

More such games now feature increasingly interesting and complex ethical dilemmas beyond questions of whether or not to use violence. For example, Brendan Keogh writes that Yager Development’s first-person shooter game *Spec Ops: The Line* takes an unusual moral stance for a big budget videogame, forcing the player to question why violence is such a normal part of most games: “the violence he [Walker, the central character] causes actually affects him. He spends the entire game in denial, to be sure, but the acts themselves get beneath his skin and his consciousness to affect him on a fundamental level. ... As Walker is forced to commit increasingly terrible acts, who he is changes. ... Perhaps what is most disturbing about Walker is that the more damaged he becomes, the more like a normal playable character he appears” (Keogh, 2012). Such examples demonstrate that games can be a way to think about – and play through - complex societal and cultural quandaries that rely on moral reasoning. Games are assumed to be a good place to explore such issues, because many developers and game scholars see games as encompassed by a ‘magic circle’ where the normal rules of life do not apply and players are free to experiment with actions they would not take in daily life - either simply to play at being a different person, or to see what the consequences of such actions might be like (Huizinga, 1938; Salen & Zimmerman, 2003).

But most games that succeed in having players explore such moral complexities force the player to inhabit a particular subject/character position – games that offer players the chance or option to walk dark paths often fail in enticing players to do so. This research-creation project therefore intervenes in the design process of games, to experiment with game design techniques and mechanics that could better persuade individual players to fully explore morally ambiguous situations through play, pushing individuals to see how such actions are often the result of choices, rather than rules to obey or uncomfortable situations in which to exist. That will lead to better knowledge of how to create videogames that allow for players to understand complex societal issues as well as individual actions that seem morally suspect. It does this through the development of a digital game – *Ambiguity* – that situates players as police officers in multiple real-life situations, and encourages them to explore how concepts such as justice, freedom, honor, duty, obedience, and lawfulness can be differentially expressed via gameplay. I am currently experimenting with paper prototypes loosely based on these ideas, and this project would allow me research assistants to develop the idea through to completion.

The central objective of this research-creation project is therefore to explore and innovate in the design space of games that feature ethical or moral dilemmas. It will determine how best to create scenarios that encourage players to experiment with ambiguous moral situations, in order to push individuals to confront how such situations and people exist in daily life. In doing so it responds to current challenges that game developers are facing not in how to create such content, but rather how to persuade players to experiment with that content in their play. In that way it will create new methods for game designers to use when creating future games; it will also provide scholars in game studies with better understandings of the situations in which players are more likely to experiment with morally ambiguous acts in videogames.

## 5. QUALITÉ DU PROJET DE RECHERCHE-CRÉATION

Consalvo, Mia 198497

Many game designers are already experimenting with creating believable scenarios for players to engage in (and therefore learn about) evil acts and how they come to be. Designers have created several different kinds of systems and methods for implementing ethical dilemmas in games that I would categorize as: (1) morality meters (2) gotcha games (3) corrupt systems and (4) karma systems.

1) One of the most basic ways to give players choices is to create what can be termed *morality meters* that explicitly or implicitly rate the player's actions on a scale from good to evil, or altruistic to selfish acts. One of the best known contemporary series featuring that mechanic is the Mass Effect series from Bioware. The games feature a "Paragon/Renegade" scale that assigns various player choices points toward one end of the spectrum or another. Players can choose whether to be more kindhearted or ruthless in *how* they save the universe, but they still end up saving it. Likewise the game *Infamous* from Sucker Punch Productions pushes players to choose one particular path with their newly developed super powers (to become either a super-hero or super-villain) by rewarding those who are the most consistent with their choices with advanced abilities. However many players report feeling manipulated by such systems, and end up making at least some choices not based on what they want to do in the moment, but in a way that pushes them further toward the path they feel is most powerful in the game (Consalvo, 2014).

2) *Gotcha games* (not termed as such by developers) usually feature a major twist in the game (either at midpoint, or at the close of the game) where the player discovers that s/he is not the hero s/he supposes, but is actually a villain, or engaged in heinous acts. One of the best-known examples is *Shadow of the Colossus* from Team Ico, which asks the player to kill many large, non-aggressive beasts in a kingdom in order to save a girl. At the end of the game the beasts are revealed to be innocent, and the player's character has been duped into the acts in order to bring an evil character back to life. Similarly in the board game *Train*, players are asked to move unidentified people from one point to another on a board by placing as many of them as possible in a train boxcar. Only when the boxcar is moving toward its destination do the players find out where the car is heading—the concentration camps of Auschwitz. *Train's* creator, Brenda Romero, has explained that the function of the game is to have players understand complicity in evil acts (Sharp, 2015). While such games can be moving and push players to see how ostensibly 'good' actions or people can still lead to morally questionable results, they can generally only be played once before their intention is revealed, and they do not let players understand those intentions until the very end of the game.

3) Games that feature *corrupt systems* usually place the player in a situation where winning is either not an option or would be extremely undesirable. For example in the game *Sweatshop* from Littleloud, the player is asked to run a literal sweatshop where s/he can hire workers (including children) and manage a production line to assemble various items of clothing. The line gradually speeds up and the player must try to meet production targets by limiting worker breaks and not hiring too much help, or s/he will lose her job. Another recent example of a game with a corrupt system is *Papers, Please* from Lucas Pope. The game puts the player in the role of border agent in a fictional eastern European country, where the rules for entry and required documentation change every day. The player again is put into an impossible situation, forced to either deny people entry due to seemingly trivial reasons, invade their privacy to ascertain their identity, or risk sympathizing and helping them and being fired for doing so. Such systems can definitely help players understand the evils behind systems and the dehumanization of workers that they engender, but such games only operate from the premise that the player is doomed to fail- either through 'winning' at a corrupt game, or being unable to complete it – little actual player choice is involved.

4) Finally, many games are now employing increasingly complex *karma systems* that respond in varied ways to player choices. The player is not rewarded or punished for actions undertaken, but instead the system responds to those choices – either immediately or later in the game. A classic example of a karma system is in the *Fallout* game series from Bethesda Studios. Players can steal from non-player characters in the game,

## 5. QUALITÉ DU PROJET DE RECHERCHE-CRÉATION

Consalvo, Mia 198497

but will receive negative karma points for doing so. Alternately if the player helps non-player characters, good karma points result. Karma scores can then influence which companions can be recruited (who can also be lawful or unlawful), which quests are unlocked, and it can also influence game storylines. One particularly innovative karma system is found in *The Walking Dead* episodic series from the studio Telltale Games. Individuals play as the main character “Lee” and are offered a variety of choices of actions to take (or not take). Significantly, the game tells players that the system has noted their choices via the appearance of text messages that appear on the screen such as “Clementine will remember that you told her the truth” after the player (as Lee) has answered a question in a particular way. Whether or not such choices actually alter later gameplay or not, players become more invested in how they play, and feel that the choices they are making could have major implications and so should be carefully considered. However, scholars have found through in-depth interviews that the majority of players still often try to make ‘good’ choices in such games, even if punishment is not given, or the ramifications of actions are not immediately presented (Consalvo, 2014).

Clearly game designers have created – and continue to create – games that push the boundaries for moral and ethical dilemmas. But research has overwhelmingly found that most players default to morally good choices, or remain determined to ‘play the hero’ and do not explore ambiguity and moral uncertainty in their gameplay (Collins, 2015; Weaver & Lewis, 2012). Practically speaking this means a significant part of a game’s content may remain unexplored. Conceptually it raises questions about how and why we are uncomfortable stepping outside of our normative moral structures to explore different ethical systems. Design-wise, it means we are failing to design systems that encourage players to take such chances. Even if developers are creating games that are more nuanced in their approach to morality, the majority of players remain firm in their stances not to engage in morally reprehensible acts. This suggests that players do not see games as bounded by a magic circle where they can leave behind their everyday ethical frameworks. In response this research-creation project explores design as a way to push players into those actions, asking what game design techniques can be developed to better persuade individuals to play with moral ambiguity, in order to learn from or better understand such experiences. This research-creation project seeks to construct a ‘magic circle’ for games in order for players to explore contentious issues, through new game mechanics.

### OBJECTIVE 1

This research-creation project will innovate in current game design methods, which are not fulfilling the goals of contemporary game designers interested in morally ambiguous situations. To do so, this project will create the digital game *Ambiguity* as a proof of concept of new design techniques, which will be designed to encourage players to experiment with ambiguous moral situations, in order to better understand how such situations and people exist in daily life. As a guiding focus, this project will use Nagler’s approach to designing morally difficult characters responsibly, originally created for live action role play and here applied experimentally to digital game creation (2015).

Nagler’s approach encompasses five steps: 1) creating a safe space, 2) building complex factions with complex morals, 3) linking character motives to game goals, remembering that 4) everyone’s human and 5) letting players choose their path but creating a way to have them reflect afterward. These steps will guide the game’s design process, which will occur in tandem with player testing and continued iterations of the game’s design.

#### *Game design for Ambiguity*

Nagler argues the first step to creating a game where players feel comfortable taking risks is to remind them it is a game, the player is a different person than their character, and no one is judging them for the character’s actions. We (myself and the research assistants) will experiment with the best way to accomplish this through existing and experimental game mechanics, possibly through early narrative framing devices, and continual reminders that the game and its characters are a work of fiction.

A second step is to determine factions that would make sense within the game's storyline, that characters can either choose from or be assigned to. Nagler argues that such factions need to be complex, and various faction members (such as NPCs with which the player interacts) should have a range of different beliefs. Likewise, all factions that are created should have some blind spots, and be sympathetic in some way. I will experiment with ways to have characters join or affiliate with factions, as well as methods for showing their agreement or disagreement with faction beliefs and practices.

Third, the design process will avoid creating stereotypical heroes and villains that are devoid of any interests outside the larger goals of the game. Instead the game will give the player's character motives, and link those motives to game goals through either quests, visual signifiers like clothing or collectible items, or some combination of elements. Those motives must be linked to each character's own subjective goals, such as what they think they want to accomplish in the game. This could happen through achievements to complete. Further, to make each character believable, each character designed will have goals/actions unrelated to the central goal of the game, to make them more than one-note stereotype villains.

Fourth, the design will give every playable character personality markers that have nothing to do with their stated motivations. Those markers will flesh out the characters, so they more closely resemble actual people. That will include giving the player's character hobbies, relationships, and interests. We will also work to create a diverse cast of characters in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, ability, and sexuality. These elements also potentially allow players to distract themselves from the more unsavoury elements of their character.

Finally, players will retain the ability to choose their own path through the game, and reflect on their choices at the game's conclusion. The game should not condemn or condone the character's actions. But by providing context and ramifications for their actions, we hope to invite players to judge the morality of the game through their own ethical frameworks.

The process of game design will occur in several stages. The first stage will be paper prototyping, as the research assistants and I explore different themes, mechanics, and fictions for the game. Prototypes will be iterated upon rapidly, with promising options play-tested for player reactions. The research assistants and I will seek to integrate as many of Nagler's components as possible, and will experiment with making games that allow for either player-created avatars, a choice of characters for players to use, or an assigned character for the player to control. We will focus on making this a single player game, to avoid ramifications of players feeling judged by other players for their actions.

Upon completion of successful paper prototypes, the research assistants and I will then design one or two digital prototypes, using game design tools such as Unity, Twine, RPG Maker MV, Stencyl, GameMaker, Construct 2, or Ren'Py, depending on the type of game we ultimately create. More testing to determine if the mechanics and fiction of the game achieve our objectives will occur. Critical to the steps to this point is continued player testing, where we can see if and how players are encouraged to experiment more freely with the options available, and how various elements of the game's design affect their actions. Seeing how players relate to those changes and design decisions will form a key element of this project. After we are satisfied that such experimentation is happening, we will proceed to full production of the game, which will be a single-player game, freely available online.

## **5. QUALITÉ DU PROJET DE RECHERCHE-CRÉATION OBJECTIVE 2**

Consalvo, Mia 198497

To showcase the game and the design elements it utilizes, we will create a website for the game *Ambiguity* that situates it in conversation with other similar games, as well as developer discourses on how to successfully create game mechanics to explore such issues. The site will link to a variety of supplementary materials that situate the game both within game design practices and within ethical theories and philosophy. The website will contain detailed documentation of the game's design, including early prototypes, design notes, screenshots of the game through its evolution, and notes from the game's creators on how play testers have responded to various iterations. The website will also link to other free games that explore morality and ethical issues in important ways, such as *Papers, Please, Sweatshop, The McDonald's Game, Layoff,* and *Train*. It will include links to developer writing on the subject, such as the 2009 group report from the game design think tank Project Horseshoe, "Choosing Between Right and Right: Creating Meaningful Ethical Dilemmas in Games." The website will also contain a variety of online readings exploring major ethical theories and writing on the topic that is accessible for a wide audience. The website and game will be regularly promoted via social media and will remain affiliated with (and maintained by) the Technoculture, Art and Games Centre at Concordia.

### **ORIGINALITY**

Although game designers have made great progress in creating games with increasingly complex moral dilemmas and ethical quandaries, their impact has been limited because so many players have difficulty in stepping out of the 'hero' role and exploring those options. This project will create new methods and design strategies that will encourage players to take those risks and play in a way different from their everyday morality. By applying Nagler's techniques for live action games to digital games, I will be creating new mechanics for digital games that other designers can borrow and adapt. This work will determine which game elements lead to more player experimentation – such as the creation of a safer space for players to take risks; building more complex and interesting morally ambiguous characters; pushing players to play a certain role or letting them choose; or some combination of these approaches.

### **PROCESS AND STAGES OF THE PROJECT**

**YEAR 1:** The research assistants and I will identify and play commercial and noncommercial games that feature moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas as a central feature of their gameplay. We will review existing design theory and developer discussions and debate over game creation in this domain. Paper prototyping and then digital prototyping will begin on games that innovate in the creation of play related to this topic. User testing will be scheduled at least twice during this year to determine how players are responding to the proposed mechanics and narratives and if they are choosing a variety of paths or character actions through the game(s). By the end of the year a prototype for the final version of the game will be selected.

**YEAR 2:** Production commences on the digital game, with one research assistant working on coding and overall game design and the other research assistant focused on the visual design of the game as well as its writing. User testing will be employed at various milestones in development (at least twice again) to gain further feedback on how players are responding to the game and its mechanics and storytelling. Production is scheduled for 18 months.

**YEAR 3:** Midway through year 3 the game will launch and the research assistants and I will shift to promotion and the creation of post-mortems and analyses of the game and its design decisions. Commensurate with this a website will be created to feature the game, along with social media to promote it. The game will be entered in competitions for independent games and demonstrated at local venues.

### **IMPACT ON DEVELOPMENT AND RENEWAL OF ARTISTIC DOMAIN**

The project will have a significant impact on the field of game design. The game will demonstrate – and the

## 5. QUALITÉ DU PROJET DE RECHERCHE-CRÉATION

Consalvo, Mia 198497

website will systematically explain - concrete methods for game designers to take that invite players to explore and understand morally ambiguous actions and beliefs. Game players will gain a safe space for such explorations, which they have previously avoided. This will allow more game creators, and in particular designers who have serious messages to share, with more successful tools for encouraging their players to engage with all of their game's content – not simply the portion that lets them play the unreflective hero.

### DISSEMINATION PLAN

*Ambiguity* will be designed to address teens, adults, casual, and core game players and a social media campaign will be launched to promote the game to the general public. All design documents and production processes including a game post-mortem will be made publicly available on the project website. The game will be available for free on the website, and playable on both Mac and PC platforms. The game will be entered into various festivals and competitions in order to demonstrate its achievements. Potential sites include IndieCade and IndieCade East, the Boston Festival of Indie Games, the International Game Festival, and Games4Change to help promote it. The game will also be submitted to conferences that have game showcases, including Meaningful Play, the Digital Games Research Association, Foundations of Digital Games and the Canadian Game Studies Association. Regional sites for the game to be displayed and discussed include the Hand Eye Society in Toronto and in Montreal at venues such as the International Game Developer's Montreal chapter meetings and the Mount Royal Game Society's meet ups for indie designers.

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Play testing of the game will be conducted according to accepted ethical standards for human subjects. This includes reviewing the rights of testers before, during and after each play session. This includes securely storing and then later destroying all observation notes and exit interviews (digital files and transcripts) in complete accordance with Concordia's protocols, which follow Tri-Council Policy.

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