

Heavy Rain: Morality the Quotidian, in Inaction, and the Ambiguous ¹

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Ethics and videogames are essentially about choice. For the former, we talk about the challenges of identifying and making the correct choice, while for the latter we are often concerned with having enough interesting choices to make. It thus seems obvious that ethics and games should overlap and intersect in interesting ways. We know that videogames can encourage ethical reflection (Pohl, 2008; Zagal, 2009), they can enact ethical frameworks with which players interact (Rauch, 2007; Sicart, 2009), and they can be engineered to reinforce ethical ideals (e.g. Brown, 2008; Peng, Lee, & Heeter, 2010). For many players, games provide a context in which they can wrestle with moral dilemmas (Zagal, 2009), enact scenarios they could potentially experience in real life but would rather not do (Stevens, Satwicz, & McCarthy, 2007), and perhaps also learn something about themselves and their personal values.

However, what is the moral meaning of choices in games? We may all agree that a game is a series of interesting choices, but how are those choices ethically interesting? Can we claim that games can portray complex moral situations as other forms of art have done? In this chapter I

¹ Final draft, later published as: Zagal, J.P. (2011) "Heavy Rain: Morality in Inaction, the Quotidian, and the Ambiguous", Poels, K. and Malliet, S. (Eds.), *Vice City Virtue: Moral Issues in Digital Game Play*, pp 267-286, Acco Academic, Belgium.

will explore these and other questions by analyzing *Heavy Rain*, a videogame released for Sony's Playstation3 platform that was developed by Quantic Dream and directed by David Cage. I will examine how this game characterizes and contextualizes moral and ethical situations, how it supports us in understanding the ethical player and the moral responsibility that players have in the actions and decisions they make inside the game.

More generally, I will argue that *Heavy Rain* is an ethically notable game (Zagal, 2009) because it does three things particularly well. First, it highlights the ethical choices and decisions we make in our everyday activities allowing players to practice and reflect on the ethics of everyday life (morality in the quotidian). Second, it deftly creates a tension between a player's desire to respond to on-screen prompts for action and the situations depicted in the game in circumstances in which inaction, or non-action, is the appropriate ethical choice (morality in inaction). Third, through the use of a unique user interface, among other things, *Heavy Rain* is able to create player experiences that recreate the immediacy, emotional tension, and ambiguity present in many real-world ethical situations (morality in the ambiguous). I discuss each of these aspects in depth through the use of extended examples from the game as well as supporting materials including designer interviews and statements, game reviews, and relevant moral theories and findings from psychology and social psychology. I conclude by discussing how each of the aspects analyzed contribute to making *Heavy Rain* an exemplar for the portrayal of complex moral situations that provide players with ethically interesting choices and situations.

Background

Recent work in moral psychology has shown that emotions (e.g. Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001) and rules play a critical role in moral judgment (e.g. Nichols & Mallon, 2005). We also know that videogames have affordances that can persuade (Bogost, 2007), provide valuable opportunities for learning (Gee, 2003), and also shape attitude and behavior (Delwiche, 2007). This would suggest that we can also use games to make moral demands of players, helping them reflect on ethical issues, learn ethics, and even shape their ethical behavior. Most work on ethics and games has focused on the affordances of the videogame medium and how, in principle, it can be used to foster ethical reasoning. There is also scant empirical work testing their effectiveness. This means that how we can best design effective ethically notable games remains an open question. This may be due, in part, to the relative novelty of the notion of using videogames for ethical purposes. Also, little work has been done to establish connections between those affordances that have been identified in games and general theories and concepts from other disciplines such as psychology or education that can help explain in greater depth how and why they should work.² Although this chapter does not tackle the issue of the lack of empirical evaluation of ethically notable games, I will at least attempt to provide a sense of the connections that exist with broader theories and concepts.

Empathy, Role-taking, and Moral Development

The development of moral judgment, how it happens, and why it differs between individuals has long been the subject of study and speculation (e.g. Piaget, 1932). More recently, researchers have begun approaching moral development from a cognitive perspective (Blasi, 1999; Colby &

² Schrier and Gibson's edited volume is a notable counter-example, containing examples of games developed for ethics education purposes (Schrier & Gibson, 2010).

Kohlberg, 1987; Nucci, 2002). Kohlberg (1984), for example, used hypothetical moral dilemmas to assess varying degrees of sophistication in moral judgment and proposed a sequence of hierarchical stages in the development of moral judgment. The key to the development of moral judgment along these stages lies primarily in two things: cognitive development and adequate social role-taking opportunities.

Role-taking is generally understood as a cognitive process by which an individual imagines or pretends, temporarily, that they are another person in order to gain insight into the other person's attitudes, behaviors, intentions, and thoughts regarding a given situation (Enright & Lapsley, 1980; Feffer, 1959; Kelley, Osborne, & Hendrick, 1975). It is more than simply a reaction to another's behavior, since it requires looking at, or anticipating, another individual's (or a generalized social group's) behavior from a point of view different to their own. As a cognitive process, role-taking can manifest in a variety of ways including perceptually, cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively (Davis, 1994). An individual may take on a role by imagining what another can see when they are in a different physical location (perceptual); infer another's thoughts or intentions (cognitive); engage in behaviors that are compatible with the role they take (behavioral); or try to feel the emotional reaction experienced by another (affective).

Identification has been used to describe a special case of role-taking in which individuals take the role of media characters. Identification is usually discussed in the context of media, or mediated experiences (novels, television, cinema, etc.). It is "an imaginary process invoked as a response to characters represented within a mediated text" (Cohen, 2001). Identification occurs

when a viewer (or player) temporarily replaces their real-life identities and roles with the characters they are viewing (or playing). Similarly to role-taking, identification includes perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and motivational outcomes (Cohen, 2001). The viewer is absorbed into the environment where the character exists (perceptual), may imagine they understand the thoughts of the character (cognitive), have empathy with or share the feelings of the character (emotional), and/or assume and share the goals of the character (motivational).

These concepts are relevant to videogames because playing a game often requires players to pretend they are someone else in order to act and fulfill the social expectations of this other person in a make-believe situation. For instance, player's often see and hear things through the eyes and ears of the characters they control (e.g. games played from a first-person camera perspective can encourage perceptual role-taking). Successful gameplay often requires thinking from the perspective of another person and behaving in accordance with the role expectations for that other person. Paper and pencil role-playing games³ are perhaps the most obvious type of game in which this occurs, but they aren't the only ones. Arguably, players of games such as *Grand Theft Auto IV*, *Formula One Championship Edition*, and *Tomb Raider*, are pretending and imagining they are someone else; criminals, race car drivers, and adventuring archeologists, respectively. Depending on the game, players may be taking actions through player-controlled avatars in a mediated environment (possibly identifying with the characters as portrayed in the game, e.g. Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*), or they may take on roles that are defined implicitly, such as when there is no explicitly defined character (e.g. the career mode of *Formula One Championship Edition*). Since videogames, through their interactivity and active participation,

³ Role-playing, in the psychological sense, is a concept that is similar to, but not the same as role-taking. It is different to role-taking in that it only refers to a behavioral adjustment toward a set of expectations attached to a certain role (Kelley, et al., 1975).

engage players perceptually, cognitively, emotionally, and motivationally, there are compelling reasons to believe they can facilitate role-taking (Peng, et al., 2010).

This brings us back to the importance of role-taking for moral development. Role-taking is a mechanism that can produce empathy and has been studied extensively in this context (Davis, 1994; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). There is also substantial empirical evidence to support the notion that empathy leads to helping (i.e. ethical) behaviors (e.g. Batson, 1991; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). It is important to distinguish between different types of empathy: cognitive empathy and emotional empathy (Davis, 1994; Duan & Hill, 1996). Cognitive empathy refers primarily to taking the perspective of another person. Emotional empathy refers mainly to emotional responses to another person that are either similar to those the other person is experiencing (parallel empathy), or are a reaction to the emotional experiences of the other person (reactive empathy) (Davis, 1994; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). While there are different modes by which empathy takes place (e.g. motor mimicry or classical conditioning), role-taking is the most advanced mode. Role-taking demands deliberate effort by the observer to imagine how he or she would feel in the same circumstances and it is more powerful than other modes in eliciting all kinds of empathy. Needless to say, it does not occur automatically.

Thus, when considering a particular videogame, we should ask in what ways does it encourage role-taking, how is empathy being elicited, and what kind of empathy is it?⁴ In the following

⁴ See Belman and Flanagan (2010) for a set principles for the design of games to foster empathy.

section I provide an overview of *Heavy Rain* before continuing with a detailed analysis of the game that connects role-taking, empathy, and morality with the game's design.

Heavy Rain

Heavy Rain is a videogame developed by Quantic Dream and originally released for the Playstation 3 platform in 2010. The game, described in promotional materials as an interactive drama, features four main playable characters who are all involved, in some way or another, in the mystery of the Origami killer. The Origami Killer is a serial killer whose modus operandi is to kidnap a child during the rainy season and trap them such that they'll drown due to the continued rainfall. The children are later found in a remote location with an origami figure in their hands and an orchid on their chest.

The game begins with a prologue that introduces Ethan Mars, a happily married man with two sons: Jason and Shaun. Unfortunately, things take a turn for the worse when Jason is killed in a car accident. The main story begins two years after the prologue with Ethan now depressed, estranged from his wife, and emotionally distanced from his surviving son Shaun. During an afternoon in the park, Shaun goes missing and Ethan soon discovers that he's been abducted by the Origami Killer who, via a collection of origami figures with instructions, tasks him with a series of trials that must be completed in order to obtain portions of the address where Shaun is being held. During this process, Mars meets Madison Page, a photojournalist who also begins to investigate the Origami Killer. At the same time both Scott Shelby, a middle-aged retired police officer currently working as a private investigator, and Norman Jayden, an FBI agent who is supporting the local police, also become involved in case. Depending on the player's choices

during the game as well as her abilities to pass the challenges, the game's narrative develops in different ways. For instance, any of the main characters can die at different moments on the game, and there are a wide variety of different endings.

The game features a variety of technological breakthroughs, such as highly realistic facial animation and modeling, that are used to provide an "adult emotional thriller" told "not through cutscenes but directly through the character's actions: you don't watch the story, you actually play it" (David Cage as quoted in Edge, 2008). According to Cage, in *Heavy Rain* you play "with a story almost in the physical sense, changing it, twisting it, discovering it, making it unique, making it yours" (David Cage as quoted in Chester, 2009). The idea of a fully realized interactive storyworld represents a sort of holy grail of gaming (e.g. Murray 1997; Crawford 2004) and it is something that David Cage, the game's director, has arguably been interested in for some time. *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream, 2005), Cage's earlier game, was noted "for its inventive storytelling and immersive techniques" (Sheffield, 2008), and was an attempt to push the boundaries of the medium of videogames by "remaining true to its still-young traditions and sometimes by breaking away from them" (Cage, 2006). *Fahrenheit* experimented with new directions for the integration of narratives and interaction previously explored in the now-infamous game genre referred to as interactive movies (Lessard, 2009). *Fahrenheit* was a bold experiment hampered, in part, due to the immature implementation of its action sequences and poor story (Cage, 2006). It did, however, serve as a template for what can be considered its spiritual successor, *Heavy Rain*. As Cage notes in an interview with Adam Sessler from G4TV, "We always saw Indigo Prophecy [Fahrenheit] a little bit like the prototype to *Heavy Rain*" (Cage, at 2:08 during Sessler, 2009) in that it allowed them to better understand the technologies

they considered crucial to its development and, more importantly, test their ideas and vision regarding what interactivity can mean for games. The actions sequences and interface for handling them are but one example of an improvement in *Heavy Rain* that can be traced back to *Fahrenheit* (Edge, 2010; Orca, 2010).

Ethics of the Quotidian

Ethan Mars is arguably *Heavy Rain*'s protagonist. He is perhaps the character the player spends the longest amount of time controlling and is also the most fully developed in terms of his background and personality. As the game unfolds, it turns out that the Origami Killer has singled out Ethan and tasked him with completing a series of tests in order to save his kidnapped son. In a nutshell, Ethan is the character who faces what are perhaps the most dramatic ethical situations in the game. For instance, in the chapter "The Shark", Ethan travels to a stranger's apartment tasked with killing him in order to obtain the next clue. As he stands outside the door, with a gun in his hand, he thinks "Kill a man. I'm going to kill a man to save my son. What kind of choice is that!?" (Quantic Dream, 2010) The stranger, who as far as we know, is unrelated to the Origami Killer, is a drug dealer. Initially, it seems like a relatively straightforward choice; kill a "bad guy" to save an innocent child. However, after a brief firefight that ends in the children's bedroom, including bunk bed and crayon pictures on the wall, the man stands before Ethan, hands raised and begging for mercy. "Please... Please don't kill me man..." he pleads, "I've got children..." He then pulls out a photograph of two young girls and points at it. "These my girls, see? This one's Sarah... and the little one, that's Cindy... Please man" he begs, "I wanna see them again. Please..." (Quantic Dream, 2010) The dilemma is clear, would you kill a man, and potentially destroy another family in the process, just to save your son? Later on, in a chapter called "The Rat", Ethan faces a different dilemma. This time he enters a room with a table. On

the table are a touch screen and a small vial. The table is also surrounded by cameras and computer screens on the floor that show what the cameras are recording. Upon activating the touch screen, a robotic female voice states “The last trial. The last question. Are you prepared to give your life to save your son’s? There is a deadly poison in this vial. It will kill you in exactly sixty minutes. If you drink it you will get the last letters of the address. You will have enough time to save your son and say goodbye to him, but then you will die. You can drink the vial or decide to leave. The choice is yours.” (Quantic Dream, 2010) Again, a clear dilemma, one in which the stakes are more personal. Would you kill yourself if it meant saving a loved one’s life?

The scenes I described are in many ways typical “ethical situations”; extreme situations we hope we never find ourselves in which we must make difficult choices. Perhaps we must choose between two evils, doing evil for a greater good, doing good despite negative consequences, or maybe we have to choose between two good actions, because we can’t do both. These situations are tense, dramatic, emotionally charged, and often require making a narrow, oftentimes binary, choice. In the case of *Heavy Rain*, the player decides whether to kill the man, or not. Drink the poison, or not, and so on. The scenes are also well-crafted because not only do they elicit an emotional reaction in the player: empathize with the drug dealer, he has a family just like you; but they also encourage a rational analysis that casts doubt on the nature of the choice. Why am I doing this? If I shoot the man, how do I know the police won’t lock me up and prevent me from saving my son? What if the poison kills me instantly rather than in 60 minutes? Do I have to succeed at this trial in order to make it to the next, or will I lose the game? Is there a trick or cheat code to solve this?

These scenes also work well both as player dilemmas and character dilemmas (Zagal, 2009). The player is provided insight of Ethan's state of mind, what he feels and thinks about the situation. Since Ethan experiences the trials as dilemmas, he is also torn about how to proceed. This allows the player agency resulting in an outcome that is hopefully consistent with the player's wishes and also makes sense in the fictive and narrative context of the game. It is an interesting way of encouraging role-taking as well as parallel empathy while allowing the player to enact a form of behavioral role-taking (by controlling the character) rather than consider it simply as an intellectual exercise.

However, even as the situations I described are designed to encourage behavioral, affective, cognitive and perceptual role-taking, they are desperately contrived and extreme. I have argued earlier that these kinds of dilemmas can encourage players to reflect on ethical issues (Zagal, 2009), however there are other ways to provide morally demanding experiences.

Aristotle considered ethics as inherently practical. His virtue ethics approach is concerned with the character of a moral agent who practices virtues and lives the proper human life. A person's moral character should thus be in evidence at all times, in all circumstances and moments, regardless of the stakes. For most of us, this means we should focus on the ethics of our everyday lives and activities. It is here where *Heavy Rain* shines.

Heavy Rain's prologue, "The Birthday", is a good example of this. The chapter serves as an introduction to the game, helping the player understand the interface and how to control a

character. It also sets the scene for the tragedies that follow later in the game. The prologue begins with Ethan waking up, showering, and getting dressed. A note on the floor from his wife explains that she's gone shopping and will pick up the kids from school before arriving home to get things ready for their oldest son's birthday party. The note ends "Don't work too hard, I love you".

The house is empty, and there are lots of things Ethan can do. For instance, he can juggle his son's toys, play with a remote-controlled car, watch some television, wander around the yard, or simply stare out the window. He can also make his way to his office and do some work. It's a small choice, really, procrastinate or work. But it's a legitimate and authentic choice. If Ethan is a responsible adult, spouse, and father, what should he do? If he is distracted for too long, his wife and kids arrive, and he won't have finished his work. Later on, once his family arrives, the player can choose to help his wife carry the grocery shopping and carefully set the table. Again, these are minor choices, largely irrelevant in the grand scheme of things, but they encourage the player to reflect on what kind of a man Ethan is, as well as what kind of a man the player wants him to be. They are encouraging cognitive and behavioral role-taking, as the player wonders what Ethan should be doing and how he goes about doing things.

In an ethics of everyday life, it's the details that matter. If Ethan is a good and loving father, the player can demonstrate his affection in simple ways: playing with his children, asking them about their day, talking to them, enjoying their company, or simply by paying attention to them. Am I a good father if I let my son watch a little more television before he does his homework? How about if I buy him some candy when he asks? Moments after the end the chapter "The

Park”, Ethan is distraught as he walks into a police station to report that Shaun has gone missing. The detective who takes his statement asks him about the time of the incident as well as details of Shaun’s clothing. What color are his coat and pants? They’re the kind of details that a responsible and caring parent would know, right? The detective, towards the end of the scene, is perhaps more blunt when he asks Ethan “How could Shaun have disappeared without you even noticing? Weren’t you right by the carousel?” (Quantic Dream, 2010) The question is clearly aimed more at the player than Ethan. Perversely, it seems like a recrimination to the player for having failed to properly take on the role of the character.

In addition to the emotionally charged morally situations I described earlier, *Heavy Rain* also includes a wide variety of what I call quotidian situations that are morally meaningful, even when they may not be critical to the game’s narrative. These are choices that offer glimpses into Ethan’s moral character as a professional, husband, and father. Not all these glimpses are about parenting, and not all of them are about Ethan. For example, FBI investigator Norman Jayden can decide whether he wants to contribute towards a retiring police officer’s retirement gift or if he should be rude and aggressive when speaking to a colleague. Scott Shelby, an ex-cop, must often decide if he should intervene to help others, even as the player understands that he’s old and he’d be placing himself at risk of personal harm. For instance, in the chapter “Sleazy Place”, while recovering from an asthma attack, Scott can choose to intervene when a woman’s foul-mouthed ex- shows up at her door. Most of these choices don’t have significant outcomes on the game’s narrative, but they are meaningful, when taken together, because they accomplish two things. First, they allow the player to project (or reveal) moral virtues on to the game’s characters

(take the moral perspective of the characters), and second, they are situations players can easily relate to. They're not exotic, extreme, or fantastical circumstances, they're mundane.

Cage himself describes how he relies on role-taking to create meaning from simple actions that are part of the experiences of the character's daily lives. "By asking players to look after their son when he came home from school, my idea was to make the players into fathers, to make them responsible, to build up the relationship with the character and between the character and his son, not by means of a cut scene but directly via the interactivity. The player plays the role of the father, he becomes the father, the one he chooses to be, exhausted but trying to re-establish bonds with his son and face up to the situation, or a father who is prostrate with grief and guilt and self-absorbed." (Cage, 2010)

Alasdair MacIntyre noted that virtues are grounded in practices and can only be comprehended through an understanding of the community in which they come from (MacIntyre, 1981). In a games-related context, this highlights the importance of providing the player with the opportunity to experience the "community" in which the game's characters exist. It also explains the realistic setting. Cage notes how the realistic graphics and setting (the game's grim setting was inspired by what the game's creators saw during a visit to Philadelphia) were designed to help players "relate to something that looks real, as opposed to something that's totally out there." Also, as Samuels and Casebeer point out (2005), developing virtue requires being given the opportunity to practice being virtuous. This means that it's important to ensure that ethical moments, no matter how small, are always present. *Heavy Rain* provides players with multiple opportunities to take on the roles of the characters they control at various levels. It also

encourages them to reflect on their behavior in quotidian settings that may be recognizable, and perhaps even similar to their lives, thus encouraging ethical reflection and introspection and perhaps even the chance to practice those same virtues.

Ethics of Inaction

As I mentioned earlier, videogames and ethics have “choice” at their center. Ethical choices are also often framed in the rhetoric of action: What is the right thing to do? Videogames are similar, with definitions of the medium framed in terms of what the player can do and what actions are available at a given time. As Crawford has noted, verbs are the vehicle of choice in games. “Whenever we make a choice, we are choosing between verbs. We don’t choose between Door #1, Door #2, and Door #3; we choose between *going through* Door #1, *going through* Door #2, and *going through* Door #3” (Crawford, 2003). Crawford argues that videogames (and interactive storytelling more specifically) are hamstrung by the limited diversity of verbs (actions) used. *Heavy Rain*’s director notes how “when you look at most of the games you see today, they are based on patterns, on loops; you always do the same things, whether you shoot, drive, or jump on platforms. They’ve been based on the same rules for 25 years” (David Cage as quoted in MacDonald, 2010). *Heavy Rain* is unusual because, although at any given moment there may be only three or four possible actions available, over the course of the entire game the player can perform hundreds of different actions. Players can “toss a boomerang, rock a baby or stove in heads with a wide selection of electrical appliances. *Heavy Rain* is a point and-click adventure with a massive verb sheet; new actions are as much a twist as the narrative reveals they prompt.” (Edge, 2010) “Rather than making large choices every hour or so, the game has you constantly choosing every minute detail of these people’s lives. Every action, every step is

entirely up to you. Of course, there has to be a finite number of options, but the way Quantic Dream presents them, they can often feel limitless.” (Orca, 2010)

In the previous section I argued that many of these mundane activities (and choices) can provide ethical significance to the player’s gameplay experience. *Heavy Rain* also provides opportunities where ethical reflection can (or should) result in the opposite of action. In other words, *Heavy Rain* also features moments when inaction or passivity, perhaps the antithesis of gameplay, is the ethical choice. For example, towards the end of the prologue, Ethan can play with his kids out in the yard. One of the activities is a mock fight with toy swords. Success at this fight requires that the player match a series of timed-button presses to prompts that appear on-screen. Doing so correctly results in Ethan either gently hitting his son or successfully blocking his son’s attack. The question is, should the player succeed at these timed-button prompts? Sicart, in his description of the virtuous player, describes *achieving* as a virtue “present in those players who compete fairly against the challenges of the game and against other players, respecting social norms and rules, and for whom victory is a desirable state in the game but not the most desirable- for that would be enjoying the game, alone or with others” (Sicart, 2009). In this case, should the virtuous player try to do her best and not miss any of the cues, yet soundly defeat the child or, should she purposefully miss some of the cues in order to let Ethan’s son win? By Sicart’s definition, the virtuous player (and father) should let the son win. However, in order to do so the player must resist the temptation to follow the game’s on-screen’s directions. The player must decide not to act instead of reacting. These situations create moral tension in a player who, accustomed to responding rapidly and efficiently to the demands a game makes, realizes that the prompts for action are often at odds with “the right thing to do”.

The ethical meaning of these non-actions aren't necessarily acknowledged by the game. Rather, they result from the player's interpretation and understanding of who the characters are, and what they should be doing. The third chapter of the game, "Father and Son", takes place two years after the prologue. Jason, Ethan's eldest son, died in a car accident (played earlier). The tragedy has had serious consequences on Ethan's life. Ethan no longer lives in a beautiful house, his marriage has apparently disintegrated, and Ethan, now shabby and unkempt, has failed to deal with his role in his oldest son's death. As its title implies, this chapter focuses on Ethan's current relationship with his surviving son, Shaun. After picking up Shaun at school, Ethan takes him home. A detailed schedule posted on the wall provides a framework for what Ethan should do next: snack, homework, dinner, and bed. Although there is no need to rush through each of the tasks, there really isn't enough time to look around or explore. Bogost describes the sequence in which Ethan makes dinner for Shaun, "Ethan sits as Shaun eats, his pallid face staring at nothing. Time seems to pass, but the player must end the task by pressing up on the controller to raise Ethan from his chair. The silent time between sitting and standing offers one of the only emotionally powerful moments in the entire game." (Bogost, 2010) This moment of silent contemplation only occurs because the player chooses not to act, to ignore the prompt that appears on the screen. It is a powerful and meaningful moment because of all that is left unsaid. Sticking to Shaun's schedule is simply going through the motions, what the player wants is for Ethan to somehow repair their relationship. To at least try something. Shaun's relationship with Ethan is so awkward and strained that the player desperately seeks a father-and-son moment that provides some hope for the future. "The game would clearly like the player to believe that this chapter will allow the player to alter the game's narrative based on decisions made on behalf of

Ethan.” (Bogost, 2010) Perhaps Shaun will warm up to Ethan if he simply accompanies him? Maybe if they both sit on the couch together watching TV? Perhaps if Ethan cuts Shaun some slack with the strict schedule letting him stay up later than usual? All of these moments are examples of consciously choosing to ignore the prompts and instructions on the screen, in order to create and explore ethical meaning in the character’s circumstances. What would a good parent do? Efficiently shuffle his child through a schedule, or try to spend some quality time together hoping to recover a relationship that was once close and loving? The ethics of inaction in *Heavy Rain* shift the player’s responsibility from simply choosing the right action from a pre-determined set to one in which the player must additionally contemplate whether or not the set of actions makes ethical sense.

Ambiguity

The elegance of a moral dilemma lies in how its clarity and simplicity in presenting a problem or situation conceals the subtleties, nuances, and complexities of its analysis. You could describe a dilemma in a single paragraph, yet write hundreds of books explaining why a certain solution is ethically correct. In practice, ethical dilemmas are not simple to understand or analyze. We never have certainty of the outcomes of the decisions we may make and, when we begin to examine them, we invariably find ourselves heading down a rabbit-hole of other factors, agents, and interdependencies with other issues that confound and complicate our understanding of the dilemma itself. In some sense, moral dilemmas are like wicked problems, they are each essentially unique. The more novel the domain of the problem the more the problem solving process involves learning about the problem domain. Understanding the problem doesn’t really happen until we formulate a solution, and the solutions we may find tend to be neither right nor wrong (Conklin, 2005). Additionally, we can never, in practice, truly engage with moral

dilemmas in an emotionally-detached way. In fact, because moral situations are deeply embedded in the context of everyday life, it is often challenging to identify them as moral situations in the first place (Staines, 2010). From this perspective, moral dilemmas in the real world are more ambiguous than they are clear.

Many games fail to address this inherent messiness and ambiguity in moral situations by presenting moral dilemmas as the means for systematically exploring an ethical system. For instance, *Fallout 3* treats morality as a basic character attribute called karma that “measures how pleasant or unpleasant you’re being, based on previous actions.” (Hodgson, 2009) While the player’s current karma score is never explicitly communicated, it can be deduced from their character title. For example, a level 1 character with evil karma is described as a “Vault Delinquent” while one having good karma is known as a “Vault Guardian”⁵ Since the game’s system rewards the player with good or bad karma points based on their behavior, most moral situations in the game are designed as a means for the player to manipulate their moral identity. Staines (2010) notes how “moral problems in *Fallout 3* generally involve choosing between an obvious good and an obvious wrong”. One such problem involves the player deciding whether to detonate (or defuse) an unexploded nuclear bomb that lies in the center of a town called Megaton. In this example, “the choice confronting the player could not be any more black and white: either side with the hard-working Good Guy and save a town of (mostly) innocent people, or succumb to temptation and side with the Bad Guy, dooming the town for the sake of money and material goods.” (Staines, 2010). Not only is the player aware of the morality of the outcomes of his choices and their effects, but there is also a guaranteed certainty that they will

⁵ A level 1 character with karma that is neither good nor evil, is called a “Vault Dweller”.

occur. There isn't really any room for player interpretation. In fact, a player character's current karma has a predetermined effect on how other characters react, what dialogue options are available, whether or not the player can gain access to certain locations, and the type of ending the player receives upon completing the game (Hodgson, 2009).

In other games, the consequences of a seemingly important decision may not matter that much. In the first-person shooter game *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II* (Jedi Knight) (LucasArts, 1997), the player controls Kyle Katarn. The game follows Katarn as he journeys to confront his father's murderers, while simultaneously discovering (and developing) his latent abilities in The Force (a metaphysical power in the *Star Wars* universe). Once the player is approximately two-thirds of the way through the game, "Kyle finally decides on the light or dark side of the Force, and acts accordingly. (This decision is determined both by the powers you've taken, and how you've treated civilians throughout the first parts of the game)" (Thomas, 2004). The decision to embrace evil (or not) is arguably one that should not be taken lightly. However, there are no real consequences to the decision. As Dulin noted in a review, "many [players] will also be disappointed to learn that the distinction between the Light and Dark sides, once the choice has been made, is not as striking as one would hope" (Dulin, 1997). Dulin continues, noting that "The Light Side is obviously the path you are supposed to take—you get more cut-scenes and more narration throughout the last few levels. But apart from this and the different Force powers at your disposal, choosing the Dark Side only leads to one really shocking plot element, a slightly altered level, and a completely different ending (which is, in many ways, far more satisfying)." (Dulin, 1997) When faced with what is perhaps the game's key moral dilemma, the player must choose between light and dark side based on what content they want to

experience and what force powers they would like to use for the rest of the game rather than the ethical meaning of the different sides of the Force. The issue in both *Fallout 3* and *Jedi Knight* is that evil and good are understood by the player at a procedural level, a state in the machine, rather than at a semantic one (Sicart, 2008, 2009). Additionally, there is little emotional investment from the part of the player in terms of the outcomes and how the decision is made.

Purposeful ambiguity as a means of encouraging ethical reflection has been explored in games.

When describing the design of her boardgame *Train* (Brathwaite, 2009), Brenda Brathwaite explains how “the game needed to allow for multiple interpretations and those interpretations all needed to work together simultaneously. To allow participants this ability, it was necessary to construct a degree of ambiguity wherever it was possible” (Brathwaite & Sharp, 2010). The player’s stated goal in *Train* “is to get a collection of people from Point A to Point B by placing them in a boxcar and sending them on their merry way. Played among a group of three people, players draw cards from a pile that can impede other players or free them from existing obstacles. The first player to reach the end of the line wins.” (Deam, 2009) The game’s “punchline”, for lack of a better term (Brathwaite & Sharp, 2010), is that the final destination is the infamous nazi extermination camp Auschwitz. Once players realize this, things change. Brathwaite illustrates by describing a game action called *Derail*. Performing this action “causes the train to go off the tracks and returns half the passengers to the starting location. The other half refuse to re-board. [...]” (Brathwaite & Sharp, 2010). The action offers no explanation of what happens to the passengers that refused to re-board. Should they be removed from play? Left on the side of the tracks? Are they dead or did they escape? Braithwaite’s design goal was to produce complicity amongst the players as they negotiate the rules. “They reach for the rules

looking for way through and around- a way to save people. And they can, and they often do.”

(Brathwaite & Sharp, 2010) The gap in the rules is purposefully created to allow players to collectively assume ownership over their gameplay experience through the ethical interpretation of their actions and the game’s rules.

Shadow of the Colossus (Team Ico, 2005) exhibits a different form of ambiguity that also encourages ethical reflection. In the game, the player controls Wander, a warrior tasked with destroying 16 colossi in order to bring back a dead woman’s soul (presumably Wander’s lover). From the start, Wander “displays a kind of fatalism and almost apathy that is atypical in a hero.” (Fortugno, 2009) As the player makes progress in the game, hunting down and destroying the colossi, she begins wonder about the ethics of her actions. “This creates a troubling feeling that if the player had just left the colossi alone, nothing bad would have happened. Despite the size and destructive power of the colossi, it’s hard to shake the feeling that Wander is the aggressor, and that the player is the monster, ruthlessly hunting down and killing innocent beasts in the barren wilderness.” (Fortugno, 2009) In *Shadow of the Colossus*, the designers intentionally created an ambiguity in Wander’s character. Is he a “good guy” or a “bad guy”? It is a question that isn’t truly resolved until the end of the game; “Wander is a tragic hero, motivated by single-minded dedication, recklessness, and grief to try to resurrect his dead love. [...] He clings desperately to the unholy and unlikely possibility of bringing her back, which leads him through a series of destructive actions: stealing the sword, trespassing on forbidden lands, killing sixteen mostly harmless and occasionally truly innocent giants, sacrificing his truest friend and companion Agro, and allowing himself to be corrupted and sickened until death” (Fortugno, 2009). In this

case, the player's moral journey is one that is prompted by the self-reflection that comes from questioning the lack of clarity with respect to the character the player controls.

Heavy Rain also presents its players with moral situations that are ambiguous. However, it does so through its novel interface system. In terms of gameplay, the player can interact with the game in several ways⁶. These include:

- moving the main character around the environment;
- pressing a button to select different camera viewing angles;
- responding to onscreen cues. Some cues appear suddenly, while others are triggered contextually based on the character's location or current situation. Responding to these cues usually involves pressing buttons, moving the Dualshock controller's right analog stick in a specific manner, or moving the entire motion-sensitive controller in a certain way, or;
- pressing a button to see what thoughts the character is currently having on certain topics or issues (these constantly change throughout the game). Pressing an additional button (depending on the thought selected) allows the player to hear an internal monologue on that thought.

Additionally, some actions may lead to additional actions that also need to be completed. These additional cues are "chained"; they must all be accomplished in order to fully complete the action. The additional onscreen cues appear alongside the earlier ones in the chain. Also, some actions must be executed slowly while others must be completed in a certain time limit. The cues

⁶ This analysis considers the Playstation 3 version of the game that does not have Playstation Move support.

for which buttons must be pressed, which controller actions must be taken, and what thoughts the character currently has, all appear in different places onscreen (e.g. floating around the characters' head or alongside an item in the scene).

Heavy Rain's interface helps create ambiguity in the moral situations players encounter. The interface also provides insight on, and takes account of, the character's emotional state. Having access to the character's thoughts allows the player to better understand what the character is going through, as well as understand what potential options are available. For example, towards the end of the chapter called "Jayden Blues"⁷, FBI agent Norman Jayden has a panic attack. He mumbles, "Triptocaine... The tube is on the bedside table... All I need is... to take some... and the pain will go away." He continues, "I should resist. This is going to kill me. I know I can resist. I just need to stay in control and do something until it goes away." Four icons float around his head: *Tripto*, *Withdrawal*, *Temptation*, and *Calm down*. From the player's perspective, it is not entirely clear what Jayden will do (or think) if *Temptation* is selected. Will Jayden give in and consume the drug on the bedside table? Will he think something about how hard it is to resist the temptation? The options provide enough context so as not to seem entirely arbitrary, yet still leave room for ambiguity. Similarly with the environment cues, "the cues make clear what can be interacted with, but not necessarily how". (Edge, 2010) If you were an addled drug addict experiencing withdrawal symptoms, are you sure you'd be able to control your impulses and not give in to the temptation? Furthermore, there is additional pressure on the player because he's not sure what happens if no action is selected, does Jayden break down and consume the drug? Is

⁷ The scene I will describe may or may not occur depending on earlier events in the game.

this something that will happen if the player does not intervene? If so, how much time is there before that happens?

There is an additional complication, when a character is stressed or emotionally affected in some way (e.g. angry, scared, etc.), the floating icons shake, shift, and move around. The effect is unsettling because it makes the icons hard to read and figure out. The challenge the character faces (I can't think clearly, what should I do?) is passed on to the player who can't easily figure out what the available options are, making it more likely that she will make a mistake or do something she'll later regret. It effectively simulates the idea that in the heat of the moment, things oftentimes can, and do, go wrong. It also facilitates role-taking by literally forcing the player to suffer as the character is suffering. There is a scene where Norman Jayden and a detective are interrogating a suspect. Things quickly get out of hand and the suspect draws a gun on the detective who in turn yells at Norman to shoot the suspect. Almost immediately, multiple icons appear and begin rapidly circling Norman's head. All of them, except for the one labeled R1 (with no accompanying text) flit in and out of view. This last one simply wobbles next to Jayden's head. It is hard to read what the icons circling Jayden's head say. While this happens, the detective continues yelling and insisting that Jayden shoot the suspect. Under this pressure, it is easy to simply press R1 (e.g. Short, 2010). Dawdling while trying to figure out the other options might take too long and the suspect, clearly unstable, might shoot the detective. Pressing R1 results in Jayden firing his weapon, instantly killing the suspect. It is obviously the unethical choice, but it's understandable, perhaps even forgivable, given the dramatic tension of the moment.

Not all the scenes in the game rely on the pressures of time and interface obfuscation and ambiguity to create an experience of tension for the player. “During some of the more strenuous tasks, [the player] may need to hold down four or five [buttons] at once, twisting [their] fingers into a knot. It is hard to describe how much more immersive this technique is than a flashing icon in the middle of the screen, or a black bar at the top of the frame listing all your possible choices.” (Orca, 2010) In this case, an extended action consisting of multiple button presses is chained together in such a way as to physically strain the player who must maintain an awkward and uncomfortable hand position that in some way reflects the discomfort the character is experiencing on the screen.

The idea that a game’s designer might choose to intentionally abuse its players has been explored as a way of spotlighting the relation between the player and designer (Wilson & Sicart, 2010). In the case of *Heavy Rain*, however, I argue that it is done to encourage ethical reflection. By presenting the player with situations that are ambiguous, ill-defined, and in which the choices are obfuscated or physically uncomfortable to accomplish, the game helps the player enter a similar state of mind as that experienced by the characters in the game. This can result in greater empathy, and a greater sense of personal investment that results in a more authentic ethical experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that *Heavy Rain* is an ethically notable game designed to afford its players with opportunities to reflect upon, exercise, and develop their moral understanding. It would be presumptuous to assume that simply because the opportunities are there, they are

capitalized by everyone. In their analysis of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, DeVane and Squire illustrate some of the ways that players use their own experiences and knowledge to interpret and make sense of a game (DeVane & Squire, 2008). They are not passive receptors of the game's images and content and the meaning they make is situated in their local practices (including play practices), identities, and discourse models. In the case of *Heavy Rain*, it is conceivable (perhaps even likely) that player's choices throughout the game may be based on, or influenced by, issues unrelated to morality or ethics. For instance, a player may be concerned about meeting certain in-game goals to satisfy a meta-game need or desire (e.g. unlock trophies or find out how the story develops in different ways). Another player might concern herself with trying to create a narrative experience that meets her expectations. Short's describes how she "replayed the sinking-car scene until [Scott Shelby] succeeded in rescuing Lauren [...] because it seemed inconceivable to me that this character, the character I'd developed in tandem with the game's authors, would ever leave a woman to drown (Short, 2010). The opportunities for moral reflection are thus dependent on a certain degree of complicity from the player. In the case of this game, I argue not only that the opportunities for ethical reflection are there, but that the game's design encourages, or provides a wide variety of opportunities and instances for this complicity to develop.

In my analysis of *Heavy Rain* I have shown how it highlights the ethical choices and decisions we make in our everyday activities allowing players to practice and reflect on the ethics of everyday life. I also described how it creates tension between a player's desire to respond to on-screen prompts for action and situations in which inaction, or non-action, is the appropriate ethical choice. Finally, I explored how through its unique user interface, among other things,

Heavy Rain is able to create player experiences that recreate the immediacy, emotional tension, and ambiguity present in many real-world ethical situations. Each of these aspects, contribute towards creating a play experience that is extraordinarily effective at encouraging the kind of role-taking that engenders empathy (and thus, ethical reflection).

The fact that the game has four central characters, each with their own story, strengthens this idea as well. When asked about the reasons for having multiple characters, Cage noted how “On Fahrenheit, someone told me, ‘People won't be interested in playing a lot of characters; they want to play the hero--they won't feel empathy for them.’ And I thought that was so wrong! When you go to watch a movie you can feel empathy for any character on screen, whether it's the hero, or the girlfriend of the hero, or the best friend, or whoever. TV series have grown through the last few years and made big use of narratives with several characters at the same time, whether you think of *Lost* or *Desperate Housewives*. It demonstrates that the audience can feel empathy with many characters and not just with one. So with *Heavy Rain*, the idea was to continue to explore this direction. I wanted to have four full stories that would be interlaced, that could collide at some point, that paths can cross” (Cage in Ohannessian, 2010).

It is perhaps *Heavy Rain's* greatest accomplishment that rather than feature “ethics” as something that “happens” occasionally during a game, or that is only relevant at certain times, it is woven into the fabric of the game in all its layers ranging from the intensity of the action sequences, the mundanity of the day to day, from small favors to life-changing moments, even extending beyond the television screen into how we physically play the game. This chapter began by asking whether we can claim that games can portray complex moral situations as other

forms of art have done. By now it should hopefully be clear that not only can they do so successfully, but they can do it in novel and interesting ways for which this medium of the videogame is particularly well suited.

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