Video Games and Moral Education

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As the world slips deeper and deeper into a dependence on Information Technology, the future of online learning and digital technology seem inevitable. Computers are no longer restricted to computer technology classes. They have made their way into every learning environment. Within the next ten years, initiatives such as “One Laptop per Child” promise global access to the internet for all children regardless of their infrastructure and level of poverty. If so, demand for computer-based learning concepts that are adaptable and accessible will likely skyrocket. With children representing such a significant segment of the user demographic, let us examine the advantages and drawbacks of video-game technology. Countless renowned scholars embrace the future of video games as learning tools, but there remains a social stigma that inhibits progress on moral grounds. This blog entry intends to examine the highly popular video games of today for their enormous educative potential. In the process, a series of popular beliefs and misconceptions will be discussed and hopefully clarified.

Games, just like any learning exercises, come with a set of values that ultimately teach a moral lesson. These values, explicit or implicit, may even differ from the intended pedagogical lesson. Below are some simple games that, when applied to a classroom, teach various moral lessons.

Nobel Prize winning mathematician, John Nash (1951) developed a series of games that he applied to mathematical analysis of the patterns of human behaviour known as Game Theory. One of his best known challenges is a game aptly named “Fuck-You, Buddy”, then changed to the more appropriate “So Long, Sucker” (Although most scholars still lovingly refer to it by its original name). The game involves three or more players sitting in a circle. Each player has a set of seven uniquely coloured chips. The fun begins when each player in turn places a chip on the table in a stack. When two chips of the same colour are placed in a row, the corresponding player may collect the stack. When a player has no more chips he or she is eliminated. Players may hold each other’s chips hostage, and any deal may be made or broken at any time as long as it is made at the table. The last player at the table wins.

This game, on a pedagogical level, is effective in teaching strategy, negotiation skills, and cooperation while applying mathematical equations to real life. This basic game structure is used in many mainstream board games such as Monopoly, Risk and Diplomacy to name a few. But, what are the moral values that players take away from this game?

Moral Games

Nash calculated that in order for the game to progress, players would have to make deals. He also calculated that in order to win a player would have to make deals and break them, thus betraying his fellow players. The player most successful at betraying others would win every time. One of the possible morals of the story is: always act in your own interest, always mistrust others, and you will always win.

But the intention here is not to assess the value of such a moral lesson. Several of Nash’s Game Theory models have been effectively applied to countless company management systems as well as government bureaucracies and debatably

promote a reasonable approach to life. It is quite clear that in the context of a learning activity, the student leaves with an experience where the pedagogical lesson does not cover the same ground as the moral lesson.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a game-based teaching method that shares similar pedagogical goals, presents a vastly different set of moral values. UDL was originally developed by designers to meet standards of access for individuals with disabilities and a wide range of special needs. Many existing facilities and devices in our society have been created with an “ableist” design code. Ableism, according to Dr. Gregor Wolbring of the University of Calgary International Center for Bioethics, Culture and Disability, is:

…a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self, body and abilities which are projected as perfect and essential, while at the same time labelling deviation (real or perceived) from this essential self, body and abilities as a diminished state.

The goal of UDL is to eliminate barriers to learning that students may encounter . Using the prescribed principals of preparedness, adaptation, accomodation and inovation, teachers create a learning environment that overcomes their ableist origines and promotes a policy of inclusion. In a classroom environment where students have a wide range of physical, mental and cultural specifications, certain games and activities would not be inclusive in their original ableist form.

In a game of floor-hockey, a well-prepared teacher can assess the specific abilities of each student and give them a role in the game that suits their individual strengths. Instead of adapting the game to special needs as an afterthought, the activities are custom-made to everyone’s needs. A student who has reduced mobility is given the role of goal-keeper. Student with visual impairment use a beeping ball. These accomodations facilitate the participation of all, while emphasising the skills that they have, without infringing needlessly on the enjoyment of others. This system requires a fair bit of preparedness on the part of the instructor and innovation on the part of the students who all participate in the design of the activity.

Creating an Environment

Universal design requires instructional materials and activities that allow learning goals to be reached by individuals with a wide variety of abilities to see, hear, speak, move, read, write, understand English, attend, organize, engage, and remember. Such a flexible, yet challenging, curriculum gives teachers the ability to provide access to physical education to each student without having to repeatedly adapt the curriculum in order to meet individual students' needs.

The students in this environment can have an enriching experience that is reduced as little as possible by their disability, and enhanced as much as possible by the cooperation of the group. Success in the challenge is its own reward.

Like Nash’s game, this is an effective pedagogical tool. It teaches cooperation, adaptation, strategy and encourages students to engage in a competitive environment. The intended moral lesson of this game is quite different, however. Instead of cultivating healthy mistrust and cunning, students take away a sense of community, compassion and value in cooperation. Critics of this system could argue that it promotes mediocrity by discouraging competition and settling for the lowest common denominator.

Getting to the Point

The intention of this blog entry is not to assess game-based teaching techniques to their full extent. This has simply been a demonstration of how games with similar instructional objectives can yeild a widely contrasting moral lesson whether overt, hidden or intended.

Let us turn our attention, then, to video games. This current generation of games is a far cry from the Atari generation. The 80s and early 90s produced predominately ”reaction-based” action games. Success relied heavily on hand-eye

coordination, dexterity and perseverence, but there was little in the way of intellectual stimulation. Most importantly, the player had almost no input in the progress of the story. Levels were predetermined and repititious.

Today's video games have taken a new direction in sophistication. The graphics are high-resolution and achieve astoundingly detailed 3-D virtual environments. The interactivity of these games allows the user to make an almost infinite number of decisions and the game provides an equally infinite set of fates. Some of these games also provide the opportunity for users to create their own environments as well as their own challenges. The experience is so stimulating that players easily become engrossed in the game.

One of the possible objections to video games and mass media in general is their proclivities towards violent and perverse storylines. As a society, it is difficult for us not to place some ownership on violence and perversity in the media when it comes to violent crimes. Matt McCormick, Professor of Philosophy at CSUS looks closely at this debate and draws a proverbial line in the sand:

If it is true that violent movies, television and video games are risk increasing acts, the defenders of television, movies and games have not lost the debate (at least from a utilitarian perspective). Risk increase is just one factor that goes into the calculation of overall benefit or harm. If the advantages overall still justify that increase in risk, the activities can be defended on utilitarian grounds.

He challenges society's suspicion of violence in the media while other deeply rooted social traditions such as sports, firearm and vehicle use are justified by their utilitarian value. Ultimately, the absence of solid evidence linking violent media and violence neither makes a strong case for nor against video game use in our society. It can be said that in some instances the delight that designers and gamers seem to share for detailed graphic portrayal of brutality is extreme by any standards. This motivation for increasingly accurate bloodshed often verges on fetishism. In some rare cases video games have even had a noticeable role in the events leading up to some well-documented firearm rampages. Yet, if these games were intended as a means to rouse violent behaviour in its users, they have been categorically unsuccessful. As shocking as these incidents are, they are rare.

Its How you Play the Game

From a utilitarian point of view, as long as the benefits outweigh the harm, there is no reason why video games aren't good to go. Since video games provide so much pleasure to so many people, maintain a multi-billion dollar industry and contribute so much to the advancement of Information technology, they make a good case for themselves. Yet there are other factors to take into consideration besides solid evidence linking violence to violent video game use. McCormick gives the example of John Stuart Mill's distinction between higher and lower capacities for pleasure and pain. Exposure to cruelty and suffering while playing a particularly violent video game could affect the user mentally. Even if this does not lead to any measurable harm, it still has an undesirable effect. As McCormick puts it:

We can anticipate, therefore, that the utilitarian might take up Mill's distinction and argue that video games, because of the wanton destruction, lawlessness, and violence appeal to our lesser, base impulses, could cause a persons capacities for higher pleasures and goods to atrophy.

McCormick is quick to point out however that this is a shaky position at best; certainly not the basis for any kind of policy. Not to mention, if our society was to embrace a "blanket condemnation of the so-called lesser pleasures, video games are just one of a long list of activities that we would be forced to avoid". McCormick claims that it is all in the way we play the game:

When we play video games with other people, we can not do any real physical harm to them, despite the heavy plasma blaster firepower we might bring down on their character. But we can be bad sports against them.

Ultimately what is called for here is moderation. Teaching good sportsmanship is the job of teachers and parents. It is bad sportsmanship that leads to violent behaviour in video game users. Teachers and parents also have the responsibility of monitoring media content in their homes and classrooms. But, there is no accounting for taste. When it comes to applying them as educational tools, certain standards of decency still need to be met. A gratuitous portrayal of violence is simply inappropriate material for some environments. A parent or teacher need not explain why they find content objectionable when it is at their discretion.

What is the Game Really Teaching?

While critics and defenders of video games debate how morally objectionable simulated violence may be, a deeper question needs to be addressed: What is the underlying moral lesson of the game? We have seen how games can have different pedagogical lessons than moral lessons. But be careful! In games where the theme is overtly offensive and violent, the fundamental goals and values being promoted in the game may actually be considered educationally viable.

Plato and Aristotle's protective and well-directed education would immediately find offence with the perverse content of many contemporary video games. In their world, the themes of such devices intended specifically for young consumers would best be filtered by a legislator. They would not necessarily object to the technology itself, but rather to the use of technology for such brutish pursuits. "What sort of man is being made?" As Professor E.B. Castle puts it, in his comparison of ancient and modern educational practices:

It is the use of a gadget that determines its goodness and badness; and its value for good depends on the wisdom that gives it proper employment. If the formative power of environment, then, is to act beneficially we must learn to control the neutral machine with our spiritual values.

Indeed, the classical philosophers, too, had little faith in the youth's sense of judgement. They worried about exposing the youth to evil as well as mob hysteria. Plato tells us even Socrates faced the uncertainty:

In such a scene, what do you suppose would be a young man's state of mind? What sort of private instruction would give him the strength to hold out against such a torrent, or will save him from being swept down the stream, until he accepts all their notions of right and wrong, does as they do, and comes to be such a man as they are.

It would not be fair to put words in the mouth of the Ancients, for even Castle was speaking from a modern perspective in reference to pre-computer mass media. They cannot address the interactive nature of video games. For them content was received in a passive form. Today's video games rely heavily on the interaction of the player.

As we know from Dewey, far more is learned from what the player experiences than what the player simply witnesses. The video games of today have a built-in experiential continuity. Through practice and repetition, they develop habits in the player that lead to the reward of advancement in the storyline. While primitive video games reward the refinement of a player's habits with point accumulation, more sophisticated games reward the same refinement through progress and the increasing difficulty level of challenges. Dewey tells us that this is where growth occurs:

The basic characteristic of habit is that every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while the modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences. For it is a somewhat different person who enters into them.

Video Games are Not Television

Video game users are not just deliberately being bombarded with violence, they are working hard at overcoming a challenge. The story line has inferior pedagogical value compared to the overall value of the player's experience. To find the real moral lesson of the game we have to dig deeper than the graphic backdrop. As the player progresses through the stages of the game, the rewards represent the values of the game. In the case of most video games, rewards are given for

abilities such as coordination, intuition, problem solving skills and perseverance to name a few. These challenges also provide all of the positive mental training of sports like reflexes, teamwork, and dexterity without the negative aspects of physical injury and aggression. Compared to the passive experience of traditional classroom activities, video games can create a highly stimulating learning environment. Both Dewey and the Ancients would agree that the morality of the game is indicated by how the player changes during the experience.

Graphically violent content is not the only objectionable aspect of video games. Some parents and teachers might insist that playing video games in general, whether they have inappropriate content or not, is an unconstructive waste of time. Parents lament the hours their children spend in digital pursuit, putting off their homework duties and even foregoing real pleasures in favour of virtual ones. A critic of the growing influence of video games could argue that even if the games are not harmful, children dedicate too many hours of the day to them. Are parents doing the right thing by taking away the games and making their kids do something more constructive?

These are Not the Games Your Papa Played

David Deutsch, Oxford University Professor and member of a libertarian education movement called Taking Chidren Seriously, sees some inconsistency in this attitude. He suspects that parents object to video game playing not because it's a bad idea, but rather because it isn't their idea:

If your children were playing chess for several hours a day, you would boast about what geniuses they are. There is no intrinsic difference between chess and a video game, or indeed, even between things like playing the piano and playing video games, except that playing the piano has this enormous initial cost. They are similar kinds of activity. One of them is culturally sanctioned and the other is still culturally stigmatised.

He claims that since video game play is not a state-sanctioned activity, it is unfairly devalued by society. Parents are frustrated by video games trumping the activities more suitable to their own set of values. Yet, what seem like more appropriate activities may actually be less fruitful in comparison. Playing sports, for example, has physical advantages, but as we have seen before it presents countless opportunities for injury and aggressive conduct. Any kind of homework or study that requires too much coercing and sitzfleisch risks becoming punitive rather than productive. Deutsch believes that children are naturally drawn to intellectually stimulating experiences and that they "play video games because they instinctively recognise their educational value". If children spend too much time on video games, it is because their parents do not provide a sufficiently stimulating alternative. E. B. Castle would agree that we should trust our children to explore at their leisure, but that we as parents and teachers have the responsibility to provide responsible choices:

It matters little whether a boy or girl can say why they like a good thing as long as they feel they like it. Aristotle, we remember, says that it is the point of desire that the good life begins. We should aim at a situation where post-school attitudes are informed by in-school emotional experience.

Another misconception possibly held by critics is that video games are as torpid a pursuit as watching television. The proverbial "boob-tube" that has notoriously robbed so many people of their leisure time bears a striking similarity to the video game. To the untrained eye, there may be little difference between the passive experience of television and the spellbinding charm of video games. Lawrence Lessing, Stanford Law Professor and expert on electronic media describes the fundamental difference as a generation gap borne of technology. Traditional media such as television, films and even literature are categorized as "Read-Only" (R/O) media in that they are produced and broadcast by a creative media elite that requires little of the consumer but their attention. New media such as internet blogging, YouTube and the new generation of sophisticated multi-player video games are part of the "Read/Write" (R/W) media in that they are interactive and participatory. In a November, 2007 lecture called "How Creativity is Being Strangled by the Law", he explains how these new technologies are not to be misunderstood.

These tools of creativity have become tools of speech. It is a literacy (sic) for this generation. This is how our kids speak. It is how our kids think. It is what your kids are. They increasingly understand digital technology and its relationship to themselves.

There is far more than just passive participation in today's video games. Kids live in a world that has only known this technology, whereas their "elders" have coped in a world without it. The parent/teacher generation certainly has its doubts as to the actual merits of this technology and wonders if their kids are spending too much time with their new imaginary friend. The fact of the matter is that kids do not share the anxieties of their parents. In their world there is a great deal of educational value in video games. In fact, the educational potential of video gaming has not yet fully been exploited. When video game design is in the hands of teachers rather than just entertainers, content will likely move away from flashy violent graphics and into more appropriate content. The nature of the technology will allow teachers to collaborate with each other, their students and the world around them to create curriculum that is more in keeping with the "Paradigm for Liberal Education" described by J. R. Martin:

One that does not ignore the forms of knowledge, but reveals their proper place in the scheme of things as but one part of a persons education; one that integrates thought and action, reason and emotion, education and life; one that does not divorce persons from their social and natural contexts; one that embraces individual autonomy as but one of many values.

If only teachers could muster the enthusiasm kids have for video games in their classes. If only teachers had access to technology that children longed to use in their spare time, in endless pursuit of educational opportunities. If only students had homework that required them to spend hours playing stimulating and challenging video games.

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