Marta Błaszkowska-Nawrocka

ORCID: 0000-0002-7678-5399

CHAPTER 4

https://doi.org/10.59862/7R9X2p5L

Permitted/prohibited – moral choices in digital games

The concept of 'moral choices' frequently arises in discussions about digital gaming in various contexts. It is commonly used by researchers who study ethics in gaming and game development, such as Miguel Sicart (2009) and José P. Zagal (2009), as well as by gamers. According to Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric (2007), moral choices in games can refer to decisions that impact the game's storyline, elements that contribute to the player's character development, and mechanics that encourage players to take actions with symbolic or ideological implications. Choices, including moral ones, are fundamental to many games with complex storylines, such as decisions to kill or spare an enemy, loot a corpse, or initiate or cease hostilities.

This definition is quite broad and not particularly practical, as Sicart notes. It is essential to differentiate between ethical gameplay and seemingly meaningful choices that have no real impact on the gaming experience (Sicart 2009, pp. 208–210). Nevertheless, including difficult moral choices in games is a popular solution among players, as evidenced by their prevalence in major productions and indie titles. While some game genres necessitate certain gameplay mechanics, such as killing non-playable characters in first-person shooters, many games explore ethical and moral issues and challenge players to deviate from intuitive solutions. For instance, in *Bioshock* 2, players must decide whether to attack or ally with the Little Sisters, young girls who have undergone body and psyche modifications, to gain resources or identify additional enemies. Both options have rewards and consequences, offering players two equally beneficial yet morally distinct choices. While this is an extreme example, many games

introduce similar moral dilemmas, forcing players to make decisions that carry specific outcomes.

This text aims to look at a selection of games that contain complex moral choices and see what options they offer the player. The critical point for me will be that many games provoke players to experiment and test the consequences of a given decision, push aside internalised rules of conduct, and apply what can be called a 'moral prosthesis'. What is meant here is a situation in which the game proposes rules valid within its world, which allows one to remain within the bounds of ethical norms. For example: in many games of the cRPG genre, theft is considered an immanent element of the world and committing it does not immediately mean that the protagonist is considered a criminal or punished. He may experience negative consequences when caught in the act (as in games of the *Gothic* or *Elder Scrolls* series). However, the act of stealing itself does not become the basis for viewing the protagonist as evil or immoral. Such examples could be multiplied – games take different approaches to the treatment of dead bodies (for example, in *Call of Juarez,* you cannot shoot them, while in many other titles, there is no such restriction) or the killing of various creatures (in *Skyrim* killing a chicken causes a reaction from the guards, in *The Witcher 3* you can slaughter fowl without any consequences). Essentially, games induce the player to accept the rules of conduct in force within their storyworld – or to act against them, but at the risk of punishment.

The use of the aforementioned 'moral prostheses' and the player's relationship with the game, which forces him or her to confront ethical issues, can, I believe, be well analysed using categories drawn from the philosophy of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. This perspective seems all the more interesting to me, as psychoanalysis has so far been used mainly in the context of examining the category of desire (Rehak, 2003) and the limited agency of the player as a weak subject (Matthews, 2011). Lacan, meanwhile, devotes a great deal of space in his reflections to man's relationship with the law (or rather, with the Law – the hypothetical instance that orders human life), which is also transferable to the relationship between the player and the game. In order to carry out such an analysis, however, it is first necessary to point out several categories that require a broader discussion; the main ones are alienation, separation, the Law, as mentioned earlier, and the Name of the Father, *nom du père*.

According to Lacan's philosophy, the subject's life is marked by a sense of unquenchable lack, the source of which the French psychoanalyst sees in the processes of alienation and separation accompanying the formation of subjectivity. At the very beginning of life, the child identifies with their mother – understood not necessarily literally, but as a figure of the closest person – who is perceived by them as the Other: all-powerful and almost impersonal, not subject to earthly

laws and remaining above the rules. The child's own separateness begins to be seen through alienation, which occurs when they realise that their mother cannot give them all her attention and spend all her time with them. Thus, they begin to see no longer a safe, delightful unity but two persons – themselves and the Other-mother (mOther), who is judging, observing, and refusing. At some point, however, the subject notices a certain inconsistency. Thanks to the words directed to them, they realise that the mother cannot devote time to them because she must fulfil her other desires and needs: get money, satisfy her hunger, and experience entertainment. If, on the other hand, she has such desires and needs at all, she cannot be recognised as an all-powerful and weakness-free Other. So instead of remaining in fearful suspense, the subject begins to search and ask: *che vuoi?*, 'what do you want?', deluding themselves that if the mother's desire is satisfied, she can entirely focus on the bond with her child. However, this, of course, is a pipe dream – the mother's desire represents a challenge that cannot be met (Lacan, 1991, p. 112). Lacan refers to the process of seeking and the ensuing disillusionment, from which the loss of the belief in the omnipotence of the supposed Other-mother comes as separation. The paternal figure is its inalienable element – who 'is more of a prohibition for the child than a flesh-and-blood figure' (Polak, 2016, p. 148). The father thus becomes the exponent and symbol of prohibition and the law itself.

The full meaning of the term 'Father's Name' (*nom du père*) is based on the sound similarity of the French words *nom* ('name') and *non* ('no'). Thus, it is not only about the name but also about the paternal prohibition (Magnone, 2011, p. 56): according to the interpretation of the French psychoanalyst, the metaphorical Father shows the child that the sphere of the mother's desire is beyond his reach. It is worth noting here that Lacan is inclined to attribute the function to any third element separating the subject from the mother, the original source of satisfaction. The collision with it marks the forming subject the first contact with both language and the Law – it involves a verbally expressed prohibition, but also the naming of the child and the designation of its place in the lineage, and thus indirectly in the world.

The process of alienation and separation thus has significant consequences for the subject. The first, resulting from alienation, is the breaking of the original unity with the Mother figure and the exit from the Real to the Imaginary order. At this stage, the parent is seen as ideal and flawless, the symbolic Other, setting the rules to be followed. In the course of separation, on the other hand, the subject perceives that the Other, however, is not the ideal and begins to strengthen his own identity, but at the expense of the belief in the infallibility of the instance that constitutes the Law. How does this relate to games, and what kind of relationship can a player enter into with them?

Lacanian Father's Name can manifest itself in games in many ways. The most easily discernible of these, of course, is the set of rules governing the game – this is primarily about rules understood as what 'makes the game a game' (Juul, 2005, p. 13), that is those constraints that determine what the player can and cannot do, and what will result from his specific actions. Interestingly, the player's relationship to the game's rules can also be described in a psychoanalytic key, as Katarzyna Prajzner argues, after Jesper Juul. The user is aware of the rules, which are usually associated with something negative and limiting. They can also lead to the development of strategies to circumvent them (Prajzner, 2011, p. 181). Looking at this relationship, one can see a relationship similar to the one between the subject and the Other: although the Other (the game) imposes rules on the subject (the player) that are part of the Law (the rules of the game), the subject, after the process of separation, derives more pleasure from finding defects and imperfections in these rules and trying to get around them – like a player, for whom the source of satisfaction is overcoming the challenge posed by the strict rules of the game (Juul, 2005, p. 56).

An interesting example of a game that provokes players to enter into a subject-other relationship with it is *the Sims* series, whose primary goal is to create their own characters, the Sims, and play out their daily lives. The series uses the so-called ergodic narrative (Aarseth, 2014, p. 12), i.e., created virtually entirely by the player, who arranges his own stories from the elements offered by the game. The assumptions and rules are explicit: the player's task is to guide the Sims through life in such a way that they achieve maximum satisfaction, live happy years, achieve personal goals and, above all, fulfil their current needs (both physiological and higher ones, related, for example, to the search for intimacy and companionship). Many players, however, choose to consciously ignore these rules and pursue their own goals, sometimes opposite to those set by the game, or to supplement what they perceive to be shortcomings of the original gameplay, for example, by using codes or fan-made modifications; this is due to their perception of the non-ideality and incompleteness of the game-Other. Going against the rules of the game sometimes takes on a drastic dimension: players share dozens of ways to – sometimes with great finesse – murder Sims, as well as to break other rules or even violate taboos, such as in the case of methods that allow a Sim-infant to be roasted on a grill. The law that the game-other shows as binding, the detached, conscious player-subject can therefore undermine and transgress, or at least attempt to do so, recognising the subject, marking it as intrinsically flawed and negating its position of authority. This is an act that Alan F. Meades calls counterplay: exploiting shortcomings or bending the rules to gain an advantage over the game (Meades, 2015). Some game scholars sometimes analyse phenomena of this kind as practices that liberate and allow people to resist those norms that the game points to as objectionable ideo-

logical schemes for the player (Taylor, 2007, pp. 112–130). It is hard to see ways to kill Sims in the most interesting ways, but already game modding practices seem susceptible to such readings (Wysocki, 2015, pp. 195–199). As a curiosity, it is worth mentioning that mods created by fan communities are often erotic – they introduce themes of nudity or sex into games, which in the original production version were censored, little developed, or omitted altogether – which also steers towards a psychoanalytic interpretation. This is because it draws attention to the tension created in the player-subject by the game-Other: on the one hand, many titles do not shy away from signalling erotic themes or the sexualisation of characters, but on the other hand, these elements are often pretextual, introduced more based on curiosity, and the player has access only to those of them, which often carry a rather conservative message (Majkowski, 2019, p. 110).

Back to the Name of the Father: another place where its action can be indicated in games are the parts of gameplay based on following the directions of a non-player character – a guide, helper, or master. Of course, such a procedure is a conventional element of many games, often serving, for example, as a plot framework for tutorials. In some titles, this relationship between the guide and the player character who follows him is problematised. It becomes an integral part of the gameplay experience, also related to making difficult ethical decisions. This includes situations in which the aforementioned 'moral prostheses' appear, i.e., when rules other than the generally accepted moral rules in the real world apply in the game world. However, it also happens that the player is confronted with a situation in which he perceives the actions imposed on him as controversial or when he realises that there are intentions other than those declared behind the guide's instructions. Blindly following directions – which seems to be the default and legitimate mode of action for the player – can result in the fact that, although the immediate goal of the gameplay is achieved (for example, advancing to the next stage or earning an achievement), the player feels frustration or dissatisfaction with the ethical consequences in the game world. In the opening passage of his book on the ethics of digital games, Miguel Sicart writes about these feelings as follows:

> I am not quite sure how it happened, but I felt guilty. No, no, I *was* guilty.
>
> It started like so many other times: my weapons of choice, banal words, and action-good action. I was formidable, unstoppable, the master of my surroundings, a lethal instrument with one goal, vaguely heard while I was enjoying my newly acquired arsenal. And then it all stopped.
>
> […]
>
> What if I am wrong? What if they lied to me? What if the goal is a lie? (Sicart, 2009, p. 1)

In some productions, this problem is pointed out directly and even placed at the centre of the gameplay. This is the case, for example, in the first part of the *Bioshock* series, in which the protagonist, Jack Ryan, finds himself after a plane crash in the underwater city of Rapture, already at the beginning of the game, gains an ally – Atlas, who contacts him via walkie-talkie. The two men have a conversation from which it is clear that their goals are aligned, and Atlas will help Jack elude their common enemy and escape the city. In the course of the gameplay, however, it turns out that the information provided to the player's character – and therefore to the player himself – is utterly inconsistent with the truth: Jack Ryan is in Rapture not by accident, and his mind has been modified so that he obeys commands that begin with the words 'Would you kindly…', which Atlas obliquely exploited. Such a plot device can be read on many levels: as a simple criticism of the mindless execution of orders and submission to authority, as a meta-commentary on the player's seemingly high, while in reality severely limited, causality, and thus also as a reflection of the player-subject relationship with the game-another. In such a view, the unreflective following of the guide's directions is due to the subordination of the player, who – knowing the convention of reward for following instructions – recognises this path as the right one. Only when confronted with the non-ideal, previously concealed motivations of the Other, as in the process of separation, is there an understanding that however performing these actions was necessary to push the game further, their rightness in ethical terms can be questioned.

The take on this issue in the game *Portal* is even more explicit, which also uses a guiding theme. In this case, the plot frame for the logic-platform game is the participation of the playable protagonist, Chell, in a series of tests of new technology, through which she is to be guided by GLaDOS, an artificial intelligence, commenting on the protagonist's actions and issuing subsequent orders: at first specific and neutral, and gradually more and more firm, irritated, outright malicious and even contradictory. The tasks also become increasingly strange. One of the game's highlights is the test room, where Chell is given a *companion cube* identical to those previously used in other rooms for climbing, for example, but decorated with a heart. GLaDOS presents it as an indispensable aid, a companion, and something to be taken care of – although, simultaneously, it reminds us that it is an inanimate object. After completing a series of tasks for which the *companion cube* is necessary, the protagonist is told that she must 'euthanise' the cube. The AI evidently plays on the protagonist's emotions. When the *companion cube* is thrown into the oven, the comment reads, 'You euthanised your faithful Companion Cube more quickly than any other test subject on record. Congratulations.' *Portal* uses this type of treatment frequently, suggesting, for example, the ambiguous ontic status of machines and manipulating the feelings of the playable character and the

player. For example: although GLaDOS consistently orders the heroine to destroy enemy turrets, the dialogue lines of the latter sound mostly friendly, are spoken in a high, almost childlike voice and are strongly emotionally saturated: 'Ow!', 'It burns', 'Please stop', 'Can't breathe…', 'I don't blame you', 'Oh, my', etc. The sincerity of GLaDOS's intentions is also undermined by notes hidden in the test rooms about its lies (hence, among other things, the oft-quoted phrase 'The cake is a lie' referring to the cake that the artificial intelligence promises as a reward for completing the tests).

As in *Bioshock*, *Portal's* linearly guided narrative forces the player to follow GLaDOS's commands until Chell realises that the end of her efforts is the same 'euthanasia' that befell the *companion cube*. She then begins her escape through the deserted building, which ends with a final confrontation with the corrupted artificial intelligence. Of course, all these actions are also planned by the game's developers and linearly lead to the finale, so there is no question of real player agency and the possibility of actual rebellion. There is no doubt, however, that the player's relationship with the game can again be framed as that of a separating subject with anOther who proves to be untrustworthy, insincere and forcing the player to abide by rules that are restrictive and harmful to the subject. Interestingly, players thirsty for true causality found the moment of subjecting the *companion cub*e to 'euthanasia' to be crucial – it turns out that it is possible to cheat the game and find a way to pass a stage without throwing the heart-decorated cube into the oven.

While linear games such as those discussed above may raise critical ethical issues, they seem to relegate the player's decisiveness and their sense of morality to the background, since the only way to complete the game is to follow the rules, which allows even decisions that are cruel or immoral from the player's point of view to be justified. However, in light of the above analyses, there are also interesting games that give the player much more freedom and that put moral choices at the centre of attention. For example, we can point to the independent production *Papers, Please*, created in 2013, in which the player directs the actions of a border official deciding on the right of entry to an authoritarian state. Each day the protagonist gets a list of current rules and permits, and later also warnings against subversive or terrorist organisations. On a mechanical level, the gameplay is relatively easy throughout: you have to review the documentation of each person wishing to cross the border, check whether they meet the requirements, and issue a positive or negative decision. The seemingly black-and-white choices get complicated, however, when the protagonist's window is reached, for example, by the spouse of a legal immigrant wishing to join his wife but lacking a set of documents, a girl asking for an adverse decision so as not to be forced

into prostitution, or a man going for surgery whose visa expired the previous day. The player can choose to go against the rules, but this makes the gameplay more difficult – any poorly spent decision can result in financial penalties, which can leave the protagonist unable to afford to buy medicine for his child, for example. The fundamental narrative tension is thus in *Papers, Please*, as Piotr Sterczewski writes, 'a dialectic of obedience and resistance (and – on a different level – of egoism and altruism)' (Sterczewski, 2014, p. 108), a choice between the protagonist's happiness and his – and the player's – sense of moral comfort.

Like many games that do not put ethical choices firmly in the spotlight, *Papers, Please* also offers the player a 'moral prosthesis': following top-down imposed rules. There is no specific person behind the formulation of these rules with whom they can be discussed or opposed; they are written down and non-negotiable. By making moral choices the game's central theme, productions such as *Papers, Please* do not allow the player, thanks to this 'moral prosthesis,' to achieve peace of mind – on the contrary, they inspire guilt. The nonlinearity of the gameplay and the relatively high level of the player's dexterity do not allow justification of the game's actions with the need to push the gameplay forward – after all, the ending can be reached in many ways. It is possible, then, to read this kind of game in relation to the question which, according to Lacan and Žižek (2012), is one of the central dilemmas of philosophy: 'If there is no God, then everything is…', that is, what happens to the human subject when he or she loses the sense that there is some higher, objective, and unchanging instance standing over him or her. The options for ending this sentence are two. 'Permitted' implies that the subject's internal beliefs serve as binding laws and sufficiently order his actions. 'Prohibited', on the other hand, indicates that such a subject is weakened and lost because he finds no external reference point. The reactions and impressions of users of games such as *Papers, Please* seem to point toward the latter response. The rules imposed are easy to circumvent and impossible to internalise, so theoretically, the player can choose whatever solutions he wants; however, he is ultimately left with a sense of discomfort because ethically questionable decisions are difficult to justify, creating a sense of confusion and guilt.

The games discussed above are not the only examples of productions that put the player in an uncomfortable situation and force him to think about ethical issues. In addition to titles of an entertainment nature, such treatments are used by games belonging to the genre of so-called *serious games*, i.e., those intended to serve educational or persuasive purposes. There is no doubt that such themes appear – and will continue to appear – in many productions because games, thanks to the aspect of interactivity and giving the player agency (even if it is sometimes only apparent), make it possible to problematise moral choices and force the player

to confront them more efficiently than traditional media. By teaching the player specific behaviours, rewarding them for some actions and punishing them for others, and forcing them to cooperate, games can become a voice in the discussion of submission to authority, the relationship of obedience and resistance, or mindless following of rules (Sterczewski, 2014, p. 108). Analysing these contents using concepts from Lacan's philosophy, on the other hand, makes it possible to look at them from a broader perspective: as commentaries on the subject's relationship with the Other and on man's position in a world that forces him constantly to decide on sometimes challenging issues.

Bibliography:

Aarseth, E. (2014). *Cybertekst. Spojrzenia na literaturę ergodyczną*, D. Sikora, M. Pisarski, P. Schreiber, & M. Tabaczyński (Trans.), Korporacja Ha!art, Krakow.

Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive Games. The Expressive Power of Videogames*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Juul, J. (2005). *Half-real. Video Games between Real Rules and. Fictional Worlds*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Lacan, J. (1991). *L'envers de la psychanalyse. 1969–1970*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

Lacan, J. (1988). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I*, J. Miller (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Magnone, L. (2011). *Maria Konopnicka. Lustra i symptomy*, słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdansk.

Majkowski, T. Z. (2019). 'Erotyka w fanowskich modyfikacjach gier cyfrowych. Przypadek SexLab', *Teksty Drugie*, no. 5.

Matthews, G. (2011). 'Desire, Enjoyment and Lack: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Computer Games' (paper presented at Philosophy of Computer Games Conference 2011), https://www.gamephilosophy.org/wp-content/uploads/confmanuscripts/pcg2011/Matthews%202011-%20Desire%20Enjoyment%20and%20Lack%20-%20A%20Psychoanalytic%20Approach%20to%20Computer%20Games.pdf, 2011.

Meades, A. F. (2015). *Understanding Counterplay in Video Games*, Routledge, London.

Polak, M. (2016). *Trauma bezkresu. Nietzsche, Lacan, Bernhard i inni*, Universitas, Krakow.

Prajzner, K. (2011). 'Fikcja i reguły w grach komputerowych.' *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy*, no. 1 (9).

Rehak, B. (2003). 'Playing at Being Psychoanalysis and the Avatar', in M. J. P. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Routledge, London.

Sicart, M. (2009). *The Ethics of Computer Games*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, London.

Sterczewski, P. (2014). 'The joys of obedience. Papers, please', *Visegrad Insight*, no. 1 (5).

Taylor, T. L. (2007). 'Pushing the borders: Player participation and game culture', in: *Structures of participation in digital culture*, J. Karaganis (Ed.), Social Science Research Council, New York.

Wysocki, M. (2015). 'It's Not Just the Coffee That's Hot: Modding Sexual Content in Video Games', in: *Rated M for mature: sex and sexuality in video games*, M. Wysocki & E. W. Lauteria, Bloomsbury Publishing (Eds.), London, New York.

Zagal, J. P. (2009). 'Ethically Notable Videogames: Moral Dilemmas and Gameplay', *Proceedings of the Digital Interactive Games Research Association Conference (DiGRA 2009)*.

Žižek, S. (2012). 'If there is a God, then anything is permitted', *ABC*, https://www.abc.net.au/religion/if-there-is-a-god-then-anything-is-permitted/10100616.