

Chapter 13

Moral Development through Social Narratives and Game Design

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ABSTRACT

Morality originates in dispositions and attitudes formed in childhood and early adolescence. Fantasy play and both the perspective taking and interpersonal negotiation of conflicts that it affords, have been causally linked to the development of moral reasoning and a theory of mind. A closer examination of the self-regulated processes involved implicates a number of contributing factors that video games and virtual worlds are well suited to encourage. The authors present recommendations suggesting the ways in which such technology can facilitate moral development by supporting and simulating diverse social interaction in ways leading to the promotion of self-efficacy, critical thinking, and consequential decision making.

INTRODUCTION

Life revolves around play, or at least it did. As children, our imagination set the stage for making sense of a world around us through inventive play and exploration (Vygotsky, 1933/1966). While play can focus on inanimate places and things, it is within the type of play focused on social narratives where we learn how and why to compassionately

interact with others (Paley, 2004). In the process we develop our own moral compass of what is right and of what is wrong.

Advanced technology makes it possible to simulate imaginary worlds where we can play starring roles, as is done in the fantasy play of childhood. For better or worse, video games have the power to immerse individuals firsthand in otherwise out of reach social experiences. Historically, concerns about the adverse influence of newly introduced media on society have accompanied the release

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of novels, music genres, television, and more recently, video games. However, such criticism often fails to account for the active nature of media consumption.

Far from a blank slate, individuals bring with them a wealth and depth of experiences shaped by their personal cares, concerns, and dispositions. Each of these elements then affect how receptive individuals are to external influence. The active and experienced media consumer is the protagonist of this story. It is a story about how everyone is actively involved in their own moral development through the stories that they tell, if only in their minds. It will be argued that technology can be better designed to promote moral growth through a consideration of how fantasy play incubates learning. This chapter will consider where morality comes from, what influences its development, and how video games might play a supporting role.

BACKGROUND

Morality Defined

A moral is widely considered to be a principle of right and wrong conduct. By comparison, an ethic is a set of morals particular to a given culture or group; and finally morality is a process of conforming to a set of rules of right conduct (Dictionary.com, 2009). In this sense, ethics are externally mandated and may or may not be adopted into an individual's internally constructed set of morals.

Moral development and transformations of consciousness continue throughout life. At younger ages, cognitive and social predispositions are first formed that enable or impair one's social relationships (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989), and by extension, ultimately direct one's moral trajectory. The origins of morality have been attributed to social factors in early childhood, beginning at around two years of age, coinciding with the emergence

of both fantasy play and language acquisition (Singer, J., & Singer, D., 2006). Its development continues into adulthood, mostly as predicted by Kohlberg's (1981) model of staged development (see Figure 1). Along the path from childhood to adulthood, various stages of moral transformation occur that redefine one's world view and affect the nature of one's interaction with others (Bandura, 1991; Vygotsky, 1933/1966).

While still in need of further research, there is support for the impressionable years hypothesis that individuals are most receptive to changing their beliefs prior to adulthood (Alwin & McCammon, 2003). For this reason, childhood and early adolescence will be the focus here as moral development is traced from its early beginnings in the social and narrative fantasy play of early childhood to its more adult manifestations in activities such as role play and interpersonal conflict negotiation.

Mechanisms of Moral Development

Robust evidence confirms that moral judgment does indeed progress across cultures in the stages observed and predicted by Kohlberg (1981), up until stage four (Snarey, 1985; Gibbs, Basinger, Grime, & Snarey, 2007). After stage four Kohlberg's model becomes inconsistent with findings. Individuals are found to consistently advance in their use of higher levels of reasoning to situate their beliefs, but have not been found to necessarily follow the order nor the philosophical alignments of stages 5 and 6 as predicted.

The mechanisms underlying the development of moral reasoning seem to shift with age from natural proclivities to more environmentally mediated factors. At first, instinctual, affective responses to social interaction seem to precede and influence the onset of behaviors associated with stage one morality (Bridges, 1933). Later in life, after stage four, morality is found to progress at variable rates toward more abstract and principled alignment of personal identity with socio-cultural

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