

Is Rape Wrong on Azeroth?

By Bruce Sterling Woodcock

Like many gamers who grew up in the '70s and '80s, my formative gaming experiences came not on the computer or the console, but on pen & paper, in the basement of a friend's house playing whatever RPG we happened to be into at the time. It was during one such session when my brother, who was the Game Master, confronted my character with a very carefully crafted encounter. Below in a small valley lay a group of centaurs who were preparing to burn a small halfling at the stake. Now, I had no notion of this person's guilt or innocence, and I had no idea if the centaurs were administering justice or just being cruel. But instead of riding down into the valley on horseback and yelling out to them to stop, and demanding an explanation as my brother had expected, my character instead quietly dismounted his steed, carefully got into a protected position in the hills above, and began to rain down missile attacks on the unsuspecting centaurs.

I thought nothing of the moral implications of such a decision: I had the tactical high ground! Charging down into a pack of potentially hostile centaurs would not only have meant giving up the combat advantages of both height and surprise, but could also very well have been suicide! I had already learned by the tender age of 10 that the background story of what was happening down below mattered little; the GM had presented me with an obstacle to overcome, and my skill lay in accomplishing that task in the most efficient manner possible. Why risk a long parlay that could result in close combat? Better to simply deal with the centaurs in the safest and most expedient manner possible.

Obviously he didn't intend for me to just let the poor halfling burn, guilty or not, or else he wouldn't have created this situation in the first place. (It later turned out that the Halfling was actually a goblin, disguised by a spell, and my character **hated** goblins... but that is another story for another time.)

The point is this: the issue of morality in games has been with us for a long time, and will be with us for a long time to come. Of course, it wasn't always thus when it came to **video** games. In 1978, no one really questioned the fact that one of the neatest ways to shoot aliens in *Space Invaders* was to shoot through your own cities, presumably killing thousands of innocent civilians. I did not ask myself if the UFO shooting at me in *Asteroids* was really a bad guy or just trying to protect his planet from all the rogue space debris I was generating. The ecological impact of aviary extermination in *Duck Hunt* was not discussed. And **computer** games were no exception either: most of them expected you to kill just about anything that moved, and/or pick up everything you could find that wasn't nailed down. If the plot featured a bad guy like *Mondain* or *Mangar the Dark*, there was no question that he was **pure evil**, and must be destroyed at all costs.

All of that changed in 1985 with the arrival of *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*. Still hailed today as a landmark event in computer gaming, *Ultima IV* introduced the player to a system of morality that was an essential element to the game. At the very start of the game, the player was required to answer a series of questions that posed various ethical dilemmas, which in turn determined their character's starting class. In order to win the game, the player was required not simply to overcome digital obstacles, but to conduct

his character in a manner consistent with eight virtues: Honesty, Compassion, Valor, Justice, Sacrifice, Honor, Spirituality, and Humility. While the true moral value of such a system has been debated frequently over the years, the virtues and the principles they were founded on continued to play important roles in the rest of the *Ultima* series right on up through to the present day.

Since then, many games have featured not only a sense of morality, but actual moral choices that arise during the course of play. However, such games have often brought mixed reactions from players. While most of us enjoy dealing with moral and ethical situations presented within the context of a good story, there seem to be two distinct camps as to how those situations should be integrated into the game: moral choices with consequences gameplay, and moral choices without gameplay consequences.

Those who advocate moral choices with gameplay consequences often see games as useful in teaching or advocating a certain set of behaviors. In the simplest cases, the decision presented is bimodal: make the right choice by trying to talk your way out of trouble with a cop, and you're rewarded with more gameplay; make the wrong choice by opting to try to run away, and your character gets arrested and you lose. In games with more elaborate stories, the choices are multimodal, allowing the player to experience a variety of different but equally "successful" endings.

For example, in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, the player is faced with a variety of decisions that lead their character down either the Light Side or the Dark Side,

culminating in an ultimate decision at the end of the game to either become the Hero and defeat evil, or embrace the darkness and seize the throne of Sith for yourself. In *Deus Ex*, a player may choose from three different endings: merge with Helios, join the Illuminati, or bring about a new Dark Age. The subsequent and often stark consequences are vividly illustrated for the player to ponder.

But those who advocate moral choices without gameplay consequences would counter that many of the situations presented above are not **really** moral choices in any meaningful sense. Because the gameplay is so tightly coupled with the choice made, the result is simply an exercise in pushing the right button to get the result you want. In the bimodal case, the choice is often no choice at all; one must make the “correct” decision in order to continue playing the game and “win”. And games that feature multiple paths are really no better – players simply choose whichever ending they feel like enjoying, or even save the game and go back again and again to access all the endings. Much like my story from my pen & paper days, players aren’t really engaging in moral consideration at all; they’re just following whatever path is available to them that achieves their goal.

Instead of such contrivances, consider a game like *Doom 3*. At one point during the game, you’ll come across a man stuck in a reactor room. A simple press of a button on the brightly lit computer screen can either free him, or subject him to a most terrifying and graphically gruesome death. Whichever you choose actually makes no functional difference: the game continues on and events unfold the same either way. Some gamers

would argue that this is actually more of a **true** moral choice, because the consequences of your actions take place entirely within your own sense of self.

More recently, while I was playing *The Godfather* and battling with the game's rather imprecise targeting system, I found myself accidentally strangling an innocent woman who was passing by, instead of the well-dressed gangster I had intended. As I dragged her lifeless body into the nearby alleyway, I felt a growing unease in the pit of my stomach. Had I just turned the game into a Serial Murder Simulator? I explored this possibility further, finding out just how many innocent women I could murder without raising too much heat from the police. Within minutes I became quite disgusted with myself, and couldn't even stand to play the game again for a day or two. There were no real long-term consequences for killing multiple innocent civilians in the game; indeed, some about of "collateral damage" was expected, and built-in to the mechanics of the game so the player wasn't unduly punished for a few stray bullets. But the resulting freedom of choice actually had a much more profound effect on me than any cutscene of being arrested and hauled off to jail would have.

Regardless of which camp you belong to, it seems that having morality in games, in one form or another, usually enhances the experience. Many of us yearn for **more** moral choices in games, to evoke deeper, more emotional, and more meaningful player experiences. Why then do so many of us bristle when others seek to do that very thing? Be it publishers, religious groups, lawyers, lawmakers, or even Jack Thompson, they all want to impose some set of moral standards, to prevent what they see as "bad" values

from being lauded within a game, both for the “good” of society as a whole, and society’s youth in particular. So why do we find this prospect so objectionable? Many of us wouldn’t disagree with many of their core values: shooting innocent people in the head is wrong, be they prostitutes or not, so why do we tolerate such actions in *Grand Theft Auto III*?

In 1985, noted philosopher Michael Ruse wrote an article entitled *Is rape wrong on Andromeda?*, in which he postulated that if intelligent alien species existed on other planets in the universe, they might have different notions of morality than our own. Taking his cue from the growing field of what is now known as evolutionary psychology, Ruse argued that much of what we consider moral is shaped by hundreds of thousands of years of evolution and natural selection. Indeed, many biologists today believe that a variety of beliefs and behaviors like justice, fairness, mutual cooperation, reciprocal altruism, proportionality, inclusive fitness, kin favoritism, and even the instinct to protect children all evolved from basic biological behaviors that made those who followed such principles more likely to survive and pass those values on to their offspring.

So it stands to reason that extraterrestrial morality would be shaped by a set of different environmental pressures, and that an alien’s resulting moral code may be quite different as a result. In a society where simple biology dictated that females only came in heat one day a year and were responsible for all the child rearing, the males may have no choice but to engage in what we would consider rape simply to ensure the survival of their species. As their species became sentient, a whole complex system of morality may arise

to justify such behavior in a way that most of us cannot fully fathom. This is not to say that such behavior is either right or wrong in an objective moral sense (assuming you even accept that such a thing exists), but simply that it is, for lack of a better word, “appropriate” behavior in that particular context.

How does this relate to games? To put it simply, the environments we experience inside games **are** other worlds, and many of the avatars we play in them are essentially alien creatures, who may seem human from time to time but are not entirely so. Their actions may not always map one-to-one with our sense of reality, and something that is not acceptable in our world may be entirely appropriate within theirs. Of course, by this I do not mean to justify or endorse in any way the harassment or “griefing” by one player of another in a multiplayer game; those are actions with real life intent, directed at another real life person, with real life consequences. But within the context of reality of the game itself, it may be entirely acceptable for a warrior to attack a seemingly unsuspecting centaur, or for a hoodlum to shoot a hooker.

Back in March at the annual Game Developer’s Conference, I sat in on a roundtable discussion of the issue of Sex in Games. One of the participants was a woman who worked for a media watchdog group whose primary concern was ensuring that sex, when portrayed in television or movies, was dealt with realistically and responsibly. While not trying to impose a morality in the sense of advocating either “Yes, unrestrained sexuality is great!” or “No, sex outside of marriage is wrong!” they were interested in making sure that the consequences of having unprotected sex, like pregnancy and STDs, were

appropriately shown. At first blush, such a goal may seem quite reasonable, even admirable, to most of us. In recent years, the organization had set its sights set on video and computer games, and wanted to advocate these same principles to game developers.

Now, while I do appreciate the societal value and importance of the work her organization does, as soon as I heard her proposal I had an immediate sense that it simply wasn't right for the game industry. In movies and television, most of what you see is intended to be a representation of real life; even if it involves characters in fantastic situations, they are usually humans who would be subject to the same sorts of moral dilemmas and consequences as the rest of us in the real world. But when it comes to video and computer games, much of what they portray is distinctly **not** real life; indeed, one of the powers of the medium is that it lends itself more easily to conjuring up such worlds. Games are often, dare I say it, **escapist fantasies**, where much of the appeal lies in is the very fact that you can do things that you couldn't or wouldn't do in reality. So while a realistic portrayal of the consequences of sexual acts may be appropriate for *Beverly Hills, 90210*, it's not necessarily appropriate for, say, a fantasy-themed RPG. Did Aragorn really have to worry about catching an ancient elven STD from Arwen? Is the societal prohibition against interspecies sex really applicable when it involves, say, orcs and taurens?

In the end, I believe the true objection many of us gamers have is **not** that there shouldn't be any morality in games at all; in fact, moral choices, be they with gameplay consequences or without, can actually make playing a game a much more compelling and

enjoyable experience. Nor is it because most of us object to the moral guidelines that other non-gamers seek to implement; while some of us may disagree on certain particulars, you will probably find widespread agreement on most general moral principles. The problem we have is when someone presumes to impose an **external** morality, not just onto one particular game, but across **all** games as a whole. There is simply no one morality – at least, no one **human** morality – that applies to all the varied and fantastic landscapes and creatures that comprise virtual realities, be they bits trapped in an electronic computer or flights of fancy confined to the realm of our own imagination.

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