

## Videogames and the Ethics of Care

## Abstract

Videogames have the potential to create ethical experiences and encourage ethical reflection. Usually, discussions of this potential are understood in the context of the dominant moral theories: utilitarianism and Kantianism. It has been argued by feminist moral philosophers that a complete moral theory needs to include the concept of an ethics of care. We utilize the ethics of care as an alternative lens through which to examine the ethical frameworks and experiences offered by videogames. We illustrate how this sort of analysis can provide insights by examining the videogames *Little King's Story* and *Animal Crossing: City Folk* from the perspective of care ethics. We show how *Little King's Story's* fictive context, gameplay, and asymmetrical power relationships encourage the player to care for the citizens of his kingdom. In *Animal Crossing: City Folk* the player is a member of a small social network that encourages her to care for her neighbors as part of a larger interconnected social ecosystem. Both games result in the player feeling an emotional attachment to the game's characters, and the value placed in these relationships becomes the motivation for further ethical player behavior. We conclude by discussing some of the challenges and limitations of a care ethics perspective and outline a series of future research questions that should be explored.

### Videogames and the Ethics of Care

Videogames have been shown to encourage ethical reflection in players (Pohl, 2008). As described by Sicart, games can enact ethical frameworks with which players interact (Sicart, 2009). They do this by encouraging players to engage in some behaviors while discouraging others. Placing a framework of what is correct and incorrect in a narrative context can connect the ethics of the game system to a player's understanding of the ethical rules and values in the world outside of the game (Rauch, 2007). In doing so, the player is encouraged to reflect upon the ethical values of the system and how they relate to the player's own values. Videogames can create these ethical experiences in several ways. The game's ethics can be engineered to reinforce real-world ethical ideals (Brown, 2008). They can also present the player with moral dilemmas (Zagal, 2009). Games can allow players to enact scenarios that they could potentially experience in real life, but would rather not because they know that the ethical consequences would be severe (Stevens, Satwicz, & McCarthy, 2007). In this way, players reflect on their personal identity and relationship to the world outside of the game by comparing and contrasting their in-game behavior with that in the real world. In general, games allow for ethical experiences by allowing the player to learn something about themselves and their personal values through their assessment of the meaning of their interactions with an ethical framework.

In videogames, some actions are rewarded and encouraged while others are not. In the context of the game, those actions that are encouraged are good, those that are not are bad. When contextualized by a narrative framework, this evaluation of in-game actions can enact an ethical framework (Zagal, 2009). The ethical frameworks of videogames and player's

interactions with them are often discussed in terms of traditional moral philosophies. These analyses examine games using utilitarian or Kantian moral philosophy, or some combination thereof. For example, Rauch used theoretical alterations of the moral choice system of *Fable* to highlight how the ethical framework of a game could be altered to represent utilitarian or Kantian philosophies (Rauch, 2007). In a utilitarian system, the costs and benefits of each option can be weighed and the outcome of a player choice reflects all of those positive and negative effects. In a Kantian system, a decision that violates an absolute moral rule might not have negative repercussions in the game world, but the game would need to represent some sort of afterlife at which point the player would face consequences for his immoral actions. Rauch goes on to describe a game design that he feels would allow for an exploration of a specific real world situation, combining elements of these two philosophies in order to discuss the issue of torture. Many games that create ethical situations by giving the player ethical choices are more specifically creating situations where the pros and cons of various options are weighed, compared, and calculated. This encourages ethical reflection from the perspective of utilitarian moral philosophy. Alternatively, games can present players with abstract moral rules to which they are encouraged to adhere, encouraging reflection from a Kantian perspective. Videogames can encourage ethical reflection based on either of these philosophies or from those combining elements of both philosophies, but these are not the only perspectives that can, or should be considered.

It has been argued that a complete model of ethical reasoning must include an ethics of care (Held, 2010). Consequently, we believe that an understanding of ethics in videogames will be more robust if the perspective of care ethics is taken into account. In this article, we briefly describe the ethics of care and discuss how it can be a valuable tool for understanding ethical

experience and reasoning in videogames. Despite the potential for alternative perspectives like care ethics to provide insight into ethics in videogames, analysis from such perspectives is scant. We illustrate the application of this perspective by analyzing two games using the ethics of care as a lens. For each, we discuss how their game design, fictive context, and gameplay can encourage players to build caring relationships, thus creating opportunities for moral reflection from the perspective of care ethics. In particular, we examine the question of how a videogame can implement an ethic of care and what it means for it do so. More generally, we ask how we can look at videogames from the perspective of care ethics and what consequences follow from taking this perspective.

### **The Ethics of Care**

Utilitarian and Kantian moral models represent the traditional and dominant moral philosophy points of view (Held, 2010). It has also been argued that they are distinctively masculine concepts of morality (Noddings, 2008). Feminist moral philosophers have criticized these traditional models as not taking into account a female point of view (Noddings, 2008; Held, 2010). When moral philosophers developed the currently dominant models of morality, men dominated the public sphere. Models of moral philosophy came to emphasize aspects of public life, such as duty, bargaining, contractual obligations, and calculations of costs and benefits. There was also an emphasis on impersonal relationships, rational thought, and decision making that had to take into account the needs of large numbers of people. As a result, it is argued, moral theory reflects this rational, impersonal point of view (Held, 2010).

Feminist moral philosophers have proposed alternative moral models which include an ethic of care (Noddings, 2008). Noddings argues that we all have fond, early memories of

experiencing care, both in being cared for and caring for others. This creates a natural need to care for and be cared for. As a result of this natural urge for care, people feel a need to care ethically. This ethical care is said to require more effort than natural caring. In some cases, the urge to care ethically is not strong enough to cause initial action, but in cases like these, according to Noddings, we are obliged to act out of the value that we place in the relatedness between people. As such, this relatedness is at the core of an ethic of care. From this perspective, building and maintaining relationships is the motivator of ethical behavior instead of the optimization of pain and pleasure or the adherence to abstract moral rules. The focus on specific relationships also means that an ethic of care lends itself to a focus on specific, concrete situations rather than on formulating a more general set of principles. The focus of ethical reasoning from a care ethics perspective is on the individual's reflection upon the goodness inherent in concrete caring situations.

Some have agreed with Noddings on the necessity of an ethic of care in moral philosophy, but have disagreed with some aspects of the way that she has conceptualized it (Held, 2010). Though Noddings asserts that the possibility of relation rather than concrete relation is all that is necessary to apply an ethic of care, she also argues that an ethic of care does not apply in situations where there is no potential for dynamic, reciprocal growth in relation. This is a problematic formulation of care ethics because it allows a feminist ethic of care to be turned on itself (Held, 2010). According to Noddings, an individual is not obligated to care for people who that individual will never meet, regardless of their suffering. Noddings' view on care ethics also indicates that one is not obligated to care for animals or nature because neither can reciprocate in a caring relationship. Curtin rejects this assertion and adds that an ethic of care must be politicized to avoid these problems (Curtin, 1991). She argues that one should care *for*

individual people, animals, or plants, but that one must also think of these specific situations in a political context that allows them to care *about* larger-scale issues, thereby allowing them to care for other specific people, plants, or animals with which they may never relate. Held also insists that, due to the lack of a universal moral theory, a feminist ethic of care should be but one tool that should be reconciled with other moral models and that different moral models ought to be applied to different domains (Held, 2010).

The ethics of care differ from traditional moral theory in that there is a greater focus on personal, partial, and emotional experience. At the heart of the ethics of care is the assertion that rational thought and decision-making is not the only valid moral motivation. Subjective factors, especially the value placed in specific interpersonal relationships, are considered to be valid motivators for moral decisions and behavior.

Moral theory centered on an ethic of care has been applied to many domains. As mentioned previously, Curtin used a politicized ethic of care to apply the ethics of care to animals and the environment (Curtin, 1991). Held extended Noddings' perspective on the ethics of care to allow for the care of other people on the level of a global society (Held, 2010). Caring relationships with artificial intelligence and relational objects has been a subject of interest (Turkle et al., 2006). The work of Turkle et al. can be expanded to consider relationships with virtual relational objects such as videogame characters. Work on improving our understanding of human reasoning about relationships with such objects (Kahn et al., 2004) can be extended similarly. The interest in caring relationships with relational objects and the ethical consequences of such relationships have also been addressed (Kim & Petrina, 2006). This work, if extended to virtual relational objects, indicates a potential for ethical reasoning motivated by relationships

between videogame players and games. Despite current interest in ethical gameplay, little work has been done to examine how care ethics could apply to videogames. Care ethics have recently been applied to videogames in the context of prosocial learning (Koo & Seider, 2010). Koo and Seider examined frameworks for approaching moral education through videogames. They considered care ethics among the potential frameworks for thinking about prosocial teaching through videogames. However, their discussion focused on the educational methods preferred by advocates of various schools of thought, so their discussion of care ethics was limited to care ethicists' emphasis on accomplishing prosocial learning through the examination of literature (Koo & Seider, 2010). There has been little discussion of the relationship between videogames and the philosophical underpinnings of care ethics.

If there is some value in examining ethical issues through the lens of an ethics of care, which we believe there is, then there is also value in an examination of what this perspective might mean for videogames. Just as it has been argued that a complete model of ethical reasoning must include an ethics of care (Held, 2010), so must our understanding of ethical experience and reasoning in videogames. What does it mean for a videogame to have a care ethic? How can we look at videogames from this perspective, and what are the consequences of taking this perspective? In this article, we explore these questions by analyzing the videogames *Little King's Story* and *Animal Crossing: City Folk* from the perspective of care ethics. For each, we discuss how they can encourage players to build caring relationships, thus creating opportunities for moral reflection from the perspective of care ethics.

### **Responsibility and Reciprocity in *Little King's Story***

In *Little King's Story*, the player assumes the role of a timid little boy who finds himself transported to a fantasy world where he is a king (Xseed Games, 2009). The gameplay of *Little*



*King's Story* includes a combination of role-playing, real time strategy, life simulation, and adventure game elements. In the game, the boy possesses a crown that gives him the ability to charm people and make them follow his orders. The player uses his power of persuasion to enlist and command his subjects. Through adventuring with a party of citizens, collecting treasure and defeating enemies, the player is able to improve and expand his kingdom with the ultimate goal of achieving world domination. The game's presentation is colorful, lighthearted, humorous, and cartoony. However, the game contains many instances of political and social commentary as well as sardonic humor. Through its narrative, symbols, and rules, *Little King's Story* encourages consideration of an ethics of care. In particular, one that focuses on issues of governance and asymmetries in power relations.

*Little King's Story* encourages the player to recognize, relate to, and ultimately care about the citizens of his kingdom. For instance, citizens will greet the player's avatar warmly if he walks past them in town. Also, each citizen is not only named, but also has his or her own identity. If the player takes the time to interact with the citizens, he will discover that each of these non-player characters has his own personality and story. The act of choosing specific citizens from the general population to form the player's adventuring party further encourages attachment to particular citizens. As citizens travel in a group together, some will grow to love each other, at which point the player can send a pair into a church to get married and have children. In this way, the player becomes an important part of his citizen's lives, having an impact that goes beyond their martial responsibilities, but also extending into their private and personal lives. Over the course of the game, the player becomes familiar with the citizens that he spends more time with, observing them interact with each other and with the player's avatar. All

of these things serve to encourage the player to care about the well-being of the citizenry of his kingdom.

Much of *Little King's Story's* narrative and gameplay serve to highlight the relationship between a ruler and his citizenry, focusing on the ethical considerations of the asymmetrical power relation between them, such as the potential to abuse that power and the greater ethical responsibilities of the ruler. For example, with a push of a button, the player's avatar is able to recruit citizens into a party of adventures. Citizens can then be ordered to enter job training facilities, dig holes, or attack enemies. The ease with which citizens are commanded is interesting. It raises ethical questions for the player because it becomes clear that his followers will blindly follow any order. The fealty of the citizens is also reinforced at the narrative level. A soldier who has nearly died in battle, if prompted, will tell the king that had he died in the service of his king it would have been the best way to go. Witnessing the self-sacrifice of the citizens as they engage in behavior that will certainly lead to their death can create an ethical experience for a player who has grown fond of his citizens. Citizens will often also offer themselves as recruits for the king's royal guard that accompanies him on his adventures. When prompted to interact with the player, one citizen says, "I enthusiastically volunteer for any campaign you plan on waging!" (Xseed Games, 2009). The loyalty and trust of the characters in the player's abilities can prompt the player to reflect upon his greater responsibility to succeed in the game while keeping his citizens safe.

The loyalty of the king's subjects gives the player a strong sense of responsibility for their well-being. As described, this is apparent in the narrative, but also in the gameplay and interface. Commanding a citizen to carry out an order involves pointing the player avatar in a direction and pressing a button. The player avatar then physically throws the next NPC in his entourage in that

direction. The NPC then travels in a straight line until it encounters an object with which it can interact. If this leads them into the kingdom's farm, the NPC emerges as a farmer. If it leads them to an enemy, they will attack it until the player orders them to retreat, and so on with other buildings and areas. In this way, the player's role in his citizens' lives is reinforced at the level of the mechanics of the game. The direct manipulation of the citizens' behavior reinforces the player's sense of responsibility to use his power carefully.

*Little King's Story* also fosters an experience of ethical responsibility towards the NPC population through various rewards and punishments. When counting the spoils after returning from battle, for each citizen that has died, some of the player's earnings are subtracted in the form of death benefits to the family of the deceased as noted on a ledger. Even in death, a player is still responsible for his townsfolk. Other feedback is also provided. In most cases, citizens that died in battle the previous day wash up on a nearby shore and wander back into the town. Although in most cases the lost NPCs can be recovered, there is a chance that, upon exiting his castle in the morning, the player will discover a town in mourning with citizens wearing black and a funeral including the friends and family of the now permanently deceased NPC. Citizens in mourning will share their feelings with the king. They will sob and bemoan the death of their friend. They sometimes mention disappointment at being "too late" finding the body on the beach. This serves to highlight that, rather than the loss of a valuable resource (deceased citizens are eventually replaced by new ones), it is the loss of a specific character to which the player has grown attached produces the need to care for his citizens. This results in an ethical experience for the player, who feels guilty for being reckless with his subjects rather than reckless with his resources.

Interestingly, there is little evidence that the citizens blame the king for the death of a friend or family member. They do not criticize directly. The only evidence is in the kingdom status report available from one of the NPC advisers. The report includes the number of citizens that love, hate, and have a neutral opinion of the king. The number of citizens that hate or are neutral toward the king increases if many citizens are consistently dying, but their behavior is largely unchanged. The emotional reaction of the citizens to death, paired with their continuing loyalty despite their disapproval, enhances the player's feeling that he must care for his subjects even as they are powerless to disobey. By fostering a caring relationship between player and kingdom, the game encourages the player to be motivated to care for his population based on an ethic of care rather than relying on standard cost-benefit feedback or absolute moral rules outlined by the game.

Because *Little King's Story* encourages the player to care about the well-being of the NPCs under his influence, the player feels a need to engage in ethical gameplay that takes into account his own ethical values when making gameplay decisions. The game often presents the player with scenarios where more care and time is required in order to ensure the safety of their citizenry. Combat consists mainly of repeatedly attacking and retreating with the player's entourage of citizen adventurers. The player can send members of their party at an enemy and allow them to take damage while attacking continuously, or they can repeatedly pull the party members out of the fray to recover before sending them back in so as to minimize the risk of injury and death. In many cases, the safer strategy takes longer, requires more attention, and demands tedious, repetitive action on the part of the player. Nevertheless, the player feels compelled to take this extra time and care, not because it will harm their chances of succeeding in the game, but because they feel the need to take care of their citizens.

The ethical framework of the game also encourages reflection on the consequences of adopting care ethics. The enemies are usually presented as cute and non-threatening, resulting in a hesitation to kill them on the part of the player. The narrative and visual aesthetics of each kingdom give the impression that each has its own culture. However, the game requires the player subjugate all the cultures and kingdoms that he encounters, with his citizens blindly following in his quest to take over the world. The player might feel as though the only reason he is willing to attack these other kingdoms is that he has not had the opportunity to develop attachments to individuals, and that he is experiencing something like Noddings' lack of obligation to starving Africans (Noddings, 2008). While the player's care for his citizens indicates an ethics of care, his impression of the other kingdoms serves to highlight the result of a lack of caring. When the player conquers a civilization, he reflects upon the legitimacy of his actions. After a civilization is conquered, his citizens participate in morbid celebrations in the town square, dressed as members of the conquered kingdom while applauding the expansion of their own. These celebrations serve as a rest period in the progression of the game, where the player is able to reflect on his actions until he is ready to proceed and orders the celebrations come to a halt. From Noddings' perspective, an ethic of care only applies to relationships that have the potential to be mutually caring (Noddings, 2008). For example, some argue that an ethic of care does not make obligatory the caring for starving children on the other side of the world as it does caring for one's own child. The different ways in which the player is expected to behave towards the citizens of other kingdoms and those of his own kingdom encourage reflection on whether or not this is a valid point of view. On the other hand, one can use the perspective of a politicized ethic of care (Curtin, 1991) to examine this relationship between the

player's kingdom and the other civilizations represented in the game. In this case, the development of emotional attachments to citizens of the player's kingdom may lead the player to reflect on concepts of loyalty and responsibility on a larger scale. This could lead the player to apply these ideas to the other civilizations with which they interact, resulting in a more interesting and profound experience when it becomes necessary for him to destroy these other civilizations with which he may come to understand and identify with.

The unique ethical experience of the game is in part a result of the point of view of the player's avatar. On one hand, the player is able to see large sections of the world at once from a third person perspective that overlooks the landscape. The player is put in a godlike position that encourages him to take risks with his citizens. For example, this perspective encourages the player to see citizens as expendable units that can be thrown into dangerous battles with little thought for their well-being. This is the way that most real time strategy war games are played. However, *Little King's Story* puts a twist on this design standard by putting the player's avatar on the field of play, which is something that most real time strategy games don't do. The result is a tension between the dispassionate overseer point of view and the personalizing point of view of the avatar that lives amongst the game's other characters.

*Little King's Story* allows the player to interact with a strong ethical framework in order to explore the particular ethical experience of ruling a kingdom. The pairing of power inequality with the player's care for his citizens serves to motivate the player's ethical behavior. The player's relationships with his citizens, and lack thereof with the citizens of other kingdoms, further serve to create ethical experiences. Unlike most games that challenge the player to interact with an ethical system that focuses on calculations of costs and benefits, duty, and

justice, *Little King's Story's* ethical gameplay is built upon and motivated by the relationships between the player and the game's characters.

### **Communities and Personalization in *Animal Crossing: City Folk***

*Animal Crossing: City Folk* is a life simulation game (Nintendo EAD, 2008) in which the player controls a cartoon avatar that has recently moved to a small town. The gameplay revolves around improving the town and getting to know the humanoid cartoon animals that are the player's neighbors. The player can complete various tasks around town such as pulling weeds, harvesting fruit, fishing, and planting trees. These activities either influence the player's neighbors' opinion of the town or provide the opportunity to acquire in-game currency by selling items at the neighborhood store. Currency can then be used to make improvements to the player's house, donate to the town-improvement fund, or buy items to customize the player's appearance or to give to the neighbors as gifts.

In addition to collecting, selling and buying, the player spends most of his time interacting with his neighbors. Each of the six to ten neighbors that live in the town at any given time have their own unique name, personality, and home. The game provides opportunities to develop relationships with these characters in a self-directed fashion. The player can initiate conversations in which some text will be provided concerning topics including that neighbor's life, rumors about the relationships between other neighbors, or recent happenings around town. Occasionally the neighbor will ask the player's opinion on something or request that the player do a favor for them. A player can also communicate with their neighbors by sending them letters, the text of which is provided through keyboard input by the player.

Where *Little King's Story* creates ethical experiences by highlighting asymmetrical power relations and encouraging caring for the less powerful, the ethical experiences in *Animal Crossing* stem from its focus on social networks between independently acting characters. The game's ability to represent NPCs as entities with their own lives is due largely to the real-time game world. Time passes according to the Wii console's system clock. If the player has not played the game for several days, upon starting the game, the town will have changed. The other characters will also often inform the player of events that have occurred while they were away. Some of the characters may have redecorated their homes. Even if these events are randomly generated when the game is restarted, in the player's mind the other residents of their town have been going about their lives while the player was away. This illusion of independent action, or liveliness (Gingold, 2003), encourages emotional attachment and creates a desire to maintain relationships. In most games, the other characters are in some way there to serve the player, but in *Animal Crossing* they are depicted, and in many ways act, as equals. Because neighbors are perceived as being equals and having wills of their own, they are more likely to produce player behavior similar to how they would react if they were controlled by a human player.

The fact that neighbors are not permanent further encourages players to think of their neighbors as independent and autonomous. In fact, as the game progresses, characters move in and out of the neighborhood. Occasionally, the player will return after an absence from the game to find that one of their neighbors has moved out and left them a letter indicating their disappointment in not having had the chance to better get to know the player. In other cases, a neighbor might refer to their life as distinct from the player's in a way that gives an impression of their independence. For example, one neighbor points out in conversation that she and the player ought to make the most of their time as neighbors because at some point they may need to go



their separate ways. Bogost, referring to an earlier version of the game available for Nintendo's Game Cube platform, notes the sense of loss a player experiences when an NPC neighbor moves away, and the ability of the persistent world to stimulate the player's imagination to think of the NPCs as having lives of their own (Bogost, 2007). This reinforces the notion that the neighbors act independently and reminds the player that the point of the game is building and maintaining relationships.

Bogost's analysis examines the relationships between the multiple players that can asynchronously play in the same town (Bogost, 2007). He does not devote much discussion to the relationships between players and their NPC neighbors. The significance and potential for caring relationships with NPCs in games is more apparent when the lens of care ethics is applied. More specifically, this lens can provide insight into that which drives players to participate in a play experience like that of *Animal Crossing* and what design choices and elements help to foster that desire.

Consider, for example, that relationships with the other characters in *Animal Crossing* are not a means to an end. There are games that encourage the development of relationships, but usually the relationship is a means of gaining something that the character possesses and the player needs to progress in the game. For example, in the role-playing game *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4*, the player seeks to improve relationships with other high school students in order to acquire and improve his abilities (Atlus, 2008). In *Animal Crossing*, building and maintaining relationships is an end in itself. The value of a relationship comes from the emotional connection to the characters and the investment that has been put into them. The game is designed to be played over a long period of time, with the player experiencing changing

seasons, holidays, and other events while developing relationships with their neighbors. Sending a letter to a neighbor is usually appreciated. The player writes the content of letters, which requires an investment of time in building a relationship. This results in the player being more emotionally attached to his neighbors. The act of thinking of what to write in a letter is also a form of self-expression that personalizes the experience for the player.

Direct interactions with neighbors also promote the strengthening of relationships. The player is rewarded for repeatedly initiating conversation with a neighbor. A player who cares about his neighbors receives more information about them, their thoughts on the town, and their views on life in general. This extra investment does not aid the player in accomplishing any concrete goals, but it indicates the game's focus on investing in relationships. Sometimes a neighbor will comment on the relationship between two others, giving the impression that the characters interact with each other in addition to interacting with the player. This further indicates to the player that he is not at the center of the neighborhood but only another individual in a social network, thereby encouraging him to put effort into doing his part in maintaining that network. Conversations with neighbors also include a significant amount of positive feedback, and insisting that they and the player are going to be great friends, or later, that they can always count on the player when they need help. Doing favors for other characters results in them expressing their gratitude. The positive feedback, along with the investment in solving the character's problem, help establish the player's emotional connection to that particular neighbor. Often doing a favor for a character involves finding them a new piece of furniture or clothing item. The character will wear or display the item proudly, and this visual representation of the player's impact also aids in the development of relationships with the town's other residents.

The relationships that the player develops while playing *Animal Crossing: City folk* also come with obligations and responsibilities. The obligations and responsibilities will not have an effect on the player's ability to complete objectives in the game, but the relationships with the neighbors have gained value in the ways previously described. A neighbor will occasionally make plans to have the player over for a visit sometime within twenty-four hours. The player will not lose currency or fail a mission if he breaks the plans, but the neighbor will express disappointment the next time the two meet. Sometimes a neighbor will ask the player's opinion. For example, a neighbor might ask whether or not he or she uses a given phrase too often. If the player indicates that he does think that the character says the phrase too often, the character will express sadness and self-consciousness, but will also appreciate the player's honest opinion.

The establishment of relationships with the player's neighbors provides the potential for ethical experiences. When the player is asked his opinion by one of his neighbors, he may become concerned about hurting the character's feelings. When making plans to visit a neighbor, the player may experience the sense of responsibility inherent in any relationship in which one is relied upon by others. Even when the focus is not on ethical dilemmas, the process of investing in a community and putting forth effort to develop relationships can encourage reflection on the value placed in relationships. This can contribute to the player's understanding of their own ethical priorities. A game with a social component like that of *Animal Crossing* could be structured so as to explore more serious ethical issues than whether or not the player likes a cartoon animal-person's shirt. However, even in as benign and safe a context as is presented in this game, exploring a player's ethical priorities regarding the value placed in interpersonal relationships can be valuable and enlightening.

## Discussion

We have shown how videogames can be designed in such a way as to encourage ethical play and reflection with a focus on the ethics of care. *Little King's Story* encourages the development of relationships between the player and his citizens by directly involving the player in the lives and behavior of individual citizens. The game then proceeds to encourage ethical reflection by allowing the player to use his power over his citizens in situations that allow for him to take into account, or to ignore, the relationships he has established. *Animal Crossing: City Folk* creates an ethical experience for the player by placing her in a social network where she builds and maintains relationships with her neighbors. In both cases, the ability to develop relationships with the other characters derives in part from the fact that the relationships are an end in themselves. In *Animal Crossing*, there are no predetermined goals, so maintaining relationships is done for its own sake. The same is true of *Little King's Story*. The citizens' opinions of the king are monitored, but this has no impact on the ability of the player to complete game objectives.

The examples that we have provided could have been examined from the perspective of other moral philosophies. However, we think that for games whose focus is on relationships, an ethical perspective that is centered on relationships can be particularly productive for analysis. It has been argued by Held that the ethics of care should be part of an eventual universal moral theory (Held, 2010). Correspondingly, a complete understanding of ethical play and experience ought to include care ethics and examine relationships, issues of reciprocity, emotional connections, and so on. Held also argues that different moral philosophies are perhaps more applicable to different domains. We wonder if this may also be true for the application of an ethics of care to videogames.

People often make moral decisions based on their relationships and emotional connections rather than on utilitarian calculations or Kantian moral rules. While they may not play a dominant role, these emotional and relationship-based influences are at least a factor in ethical thinking and decision-making (Greene et al., 2001). Analyses of ethical play should take these factors into account. Also, in order for videogames to create opportunities for meaningful ethical experiences, they must be designed in such a way as to allow the player's own potential for ethical caring to be explored.

We have examined games that focus on the relationship between a single player and non-player characters. In addition to further study in this area, future work should include an examination of multiplayer games from an ethics of care perspective. This could include both games in which multiple players simultaneously interact with NPCs and games in which players primarily interact with each other. Because the relationships that develop between people in multiplayer games are more varied and complex than those between player and NPC, we believe that care ethics is particularly useful in understanding the ethical experiences and behavior of players in these types of games. From an examination of more traditional multiplayer games, the application of care ethics can be extended to social games. For example, from this perspective, what are the ethical implications of a *Farmville* player sending annoying requests to their friends? Similarly, what can a care ethics perspective add to the discussion of in-game social networks like guilds in games such as *Everquest* or *World of Warcraft* (Taylor, 2006; Williams et al., 2006)? Care ethics may prove productive in helping us better understand in-game activities such as griefing or helping of other players. Learning in MMOs has been examined (Steinkuehler, 2004), as has social interaction in these online worlds (Ducheneaut & Moore,

2004), but care ethics could lead to a more complete understanding of ethical behavior in such environments.

Montola describes extreme role-playing games designed to create intense emotional experiences in their players (e.g. tragedy, horror, powerlessness, etc.) . He describes the designers' intention to achieve "bleed", a moment in which the thoughts and feelings of the player are influenced by the characters they play, and vice versa (Montola, 2010). The techniques used in the design and enactment of these games could be examined under this lens. In fact, the "bleeding" of players' emotions with those of their in-game characters is sometimes apparent in their conversations about their experiences playing alone (Waern, 2010). A care ethics perspective could provide insights into the conditions that lead to bleed, the kinds of bleed effects that are ethically desirable, and the development of relationships between players as a result of experiencing bleed in their shared gameplay experiences.

There are also potential pitfalls in relying on an ethics of care to create or attempt to design ethical experiences in games. Because games are usually goal-oriented, it is easy to entangle the goals of a game with the desire to build relationships. Other factors, such as investment of time, attachment to a character, or fandom can be confused with caring. In order to accurately model caring-focused ethical experiences, the value in the relationships established must be as intrinsic as it is in real life. There may also be ethical concerns inherent in any game that is too successful at making the player care. Ethical play is in some sense practice for real-world experience, and when these play experiences are based on relationships and emotional attachment, there is a danger of players valuing those experiences more than is appropriate or constructive. The value of these in-game relationships is lost when players care too much. As Turkle discusses, there is a concern that the eschewing of relationships with others in favor of

pleasant virtual companionship will become a reality (Turkle, 2007). In this sense, designing for caring relationships in games has the same potential problems as does designing appealing companion robots (Whitby, 2008).

We have mentioned that games should be designed to include an ethics of care if they seek to more accurately model real-world ethical experiences, but more work needs to be done toward understanding how to accomplish this. Might it help if game characters were more dynamic and autonomous? Would more reciprocity in relationships between players and NPCs aid in the development of relationships? Future work should include examination of the mechanisms of the growth of relationships between people and of games and technology that successfully foster this growth. Laboratory observation and experiments of players engaging in caring play would also be helpful in adding to our understanding.

To conclude, we feel that ethics of care can be a productive lens for examining not only games but also how play activities are negotiated and shaped. We look forward to further examination of many of the questions and issues we have discussed.

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