

In Defence of Alignment Systems

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INTRODUCTION

Alignment systems have slowly lost popularity, in both tabletop and computer roleplaying games there has been a slow shift away from systematised ways of tracking player morality. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the slow decline of alignment in *D&D*'s subsequent editions and associated computer roleplaying games (CRPG). At one point alignment – with moral categories like ‘Chaotic Good’ and ‘Lawful Neutral – were integrated into the gameplay of both the tabletop games as well as CRPG titles such as *Planescape: Torment* and the early entries of the *Baldurs Gate* series. Yet 5th edition has consciously removed any gameplay functionality to alignment, and the recently released *Baldurs Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023) consciously excludes any form of alignment-based tracking.

There are very good reasons for this. In both academia and games media, there have been repeated criticisms of quantified player morality. The arguments made by Sicart (2009, 2013), Heron and Belford (2014) and Nay and Zagal (2017) are almost identical. Their arguments are that 1) any morality system adds a ‘disciplinary’ or ‘didactic’ element to every choice; 2) that the absence of explicit feedback and multiple endings allows games to gain their meaning through a ‘reflective’ process, or what Heron and Belford term ‘water cooler’ (2014, 5) discussions external to the game itself; 3) That this process can elicit self-reflection in the player, helping them to develop what virtue-ethics terms *phronesis* – or practical and intuitive wisdom. Bosman (2019) refers to this as an academic consensus on the topic (ibid, 547-548). In summary, the criticism here is that quantified morality turns moral choices into a cynical numbers game. You are not deeply reflecting on the right choice, but rather you are trying to figure out which choice the developer considers ‘good’ or ‘evil’ before choosing the choice that enables you to better pursue whichever specific numbers you are trying to maximise.

Some scholars have defended quantified player morality. Christiansen (2017) argues that much of the issue with quantified morality systems emerges when choices make the underlying numbers too obvious. He instead proposes writing ethical choices in games in a way that does not make the resultant statistical changes obvious – with the player’s alignment shift acting as a surprise afterwards. Schulzke (2020) argues that the mere presence of an alignment system can encourage players to approach the game morally, and to consider the ethical consequences of their actions. He suggests embedding quantified morality in choices where the ‘good’ choice is obvious, before removing it from more ethically ambiguous choices. He argues that this keeps the

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benefits of quantified player morality, while removing its main drawback (ibid, 123-126). At least one qualitative study (Formosa, et al 2020) has observed how players interact with a good/evil alignment system in an ethical game – revealing different and complex modes of engagement based on how reliable players found the alignment system to be.

While the criticisms of quantified morality systems are valid, it nonetheless is still worth using in ethical games. One way they can be used is to present the player's morality not as a binary 'good/evil' scale, but as a contradictory set of diegetic in-world viewpoints. For example, in *Tyranny* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2016) the player's choices are tracked as a contradictory set of faction and non-player character opinions. No one faction or character is presented as unambiguously 'good'. This empowers players to creatively interpret their own data and form their own conclusions about how ethical their behaviour was.

In a similar vein, quantified morality systems can be used to set up 'bittersweet endings', endings where the player wins, but at a moral cost that is made very obvious to them. This is particularly obvious in games like *Papers Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013) and *Silicone Dreams* (Clockwork Bird, 2021). In both games there are endings that the player can achieve where – even as they succeed, the immoral actions needed to unlock that ending are made clear to the player. This is the case even if those immoral actions were instrumental to a greater good.

Finally, quantified morality systems can be used to equate the player's behaviour with that of a morally dubious protagonist. This occurs in the videogame adaptation of *The Blair Witch Project* (Bloober Team, 2019). In this game the player takes on the role of role of Ellis – an embodiment of the 'Capital G' Gamer (Butt, 2022; Vossen, 2018) who approaches problems using violence, control, and domination. Players who engage in conventionally ludic behaviour – such as killing monsters, destroying totems or gathering collectibles – get an ending where it is made clear that they no better than Ellis. Here quantified morality is used to surprise the player with a meta-commentary of the hegemonic masculinity they have internalised through playing games.

BIO

Antranig Sarian is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. His research focuses on how interactive narratives operate as a way for players to engage in 'self-discovery' through data. He has published his research in *Games and Culture*, *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* and *The Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*.

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