

Industry Perspective on Systems-Driven Moral Game Design

Keywords

Ethical Gameplay, Systems-driven Play, Game Design, Morality

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the discourse between academia and the games industry on the topic of moral engagement in video games. While academia often promotes systems-driven designs for their capacity to generate emergent moral dilemmas, the industry frequently favours scripted designs, citing concerns about practical challenges. This study examines how these two approaches influence moral gameplay, exploring the design trade-offs and the feasibility of integrating the strengths of both systems. Through developer interviews, we uncover the challenges faced by professionals in creating morally engaging games and explore possible solutions, such as incorporating scripted scaffolding within systems-driven designs.

In recent years, moral engagement in games has become a focal point in academic research and industry practice. Systems-driven games such as *Rimworld* (Ludeon Studio 2013) allow for emergent moral dilemmas to arise organically from the interplay of game mechanics, giving players a higher degree of agency in shaping their ethical experiences. This emergent structure enables a more personalized moral journey, with each player's decisions contributing to a unique narrative.

Academics like Sicart (2009) and Bogost (2007) argue that systems-driven designs promote deeper ethical reflection by embedding moral dilemmas within the game's mechanics, allowing players to grapple dynamically with the consequences of their choices. This design approach can potentially allow for much deeper investment from the player as the moral gameplay system is designed to generate outcomes influenced by multiple different factors (Formosa, Ryan, and Staines 2016; Staines et al. 2019).

In contrast, the industry gravitates toward scripted designs in games such as *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare 2012) and *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012). These games offer tightly controlled, branching narratives that present players with predefined moral dilemmas and outcomes. Scripted designs allow developers to craft specific ethical scenarios with high fidelity, ensuring players are guided toward meaningful narrative beats. However, this approach often limits player agency, as choices are constrained by pre-authored pathways (Formosa, Ryan, and Staines 2016; Sweetser and Wiles 2005).

Despite the potential of systems-driven designs, industry professionals face significant hurdles in implementing them. Challenges include the complexity of creating interconnected systems that consistently generate meaningful moral dilemmas, the unpredictability of emergent gameplay, and the difficulty of maintaining narrative coherence while offering player freedom. As a result, many in the industry prefer scripted designs, where moral content is tightly controlled, even if it comes at the expense of player agency.

To investigate the gap between academic theory and industry practice, we conducted semi-structured interviews with game designers from various studios, including independent developers and AAA companies. These professionals were selected for

their experience working on morally relevant games. The interviews focused on understanding their perspectives on the challenges of implementing systems-driven and scripted moral gameplay, and how these design paradigms impact player moral engagement.

Participants were asked to categorize specific games as either “scripted” or “systems-driven” and to describe the mechanics that define each paradigm. The interviews further explored how developers balance narrative control with offering players freedom in shaping their moral decisions. Through these discussions, we aimed to identify the design factors influencing moral engagement and the practical constraints developers face in both design approaches.

The interviews revealed a tension between the ethical depth promised by systems-driven designs and the practical challenges of implementing them. While developers acknowledged the theoretical potential of systems-driven designs, they frequently expressed concerns about the unpredictability of emergent gameplay and ensuring that players fully grasp the moral implications of their actions. Many developers noted that in systems-driven games, players may focus more on gameplay optimization than ethical reflection, potentially undermining moral engagement.

Scripted games, offering more narrative control, were seen as a safer and more manageable way to present moral dilemmas. However, developers noted that overly scripted experiences can lead to disengagement, as players may feel constrained by predefined choices. This lack of flexibility can reduce the emotional impact of moral decisions, especially when the available options do not align with the player’s personal values.

A recurring theme was the difficulty of maintaining moral engagement without overwhelming the player. In systems-driven designs, the abundance of choices and complexity of interrelated systems can lead to decision fatigue, where players struggle to fully consider the ethical dimensions of their actions. Scripted designs, on the other hand, often fail to offer sufficient moral complexity, reducing player engagement by simplifying ethical dilemmas into binary choices.

This research highlights the need for balancing the depth of systems-driven moral gameplay with the control of scripted designs. While systems-driven approaches offer greater player agency and emergent ethical dilemmas, they present challenges in maintaining narrative coherence and consistent moral engagement. Conversely, scripted designs provide clarity but often restrict player freedom. The findings suggest that systemic gameplay supported by scripted scaffolding can offer the best of both worlds, allowing designers to create richer, more engaging moral experiences while managing practical constraints.

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