Introduction: Analyzing games from a values perspective

Players' perceptions and experiences of values in games are inevitably mediated by personal, cultural and situational factors and we would not expect two people to have identical "values experiences" while playing the same game. Nor would we expect the same player to have the same values experience each time he or she plays the same game. To take an example from a non-digital game, some people feel that the values of violence, antagonism, and territoriality are embedded in football. To others, playing football is an experience of the values of cooperation and teamwork. Both interpretations can be rooted in peoples' real experiences with the game and they shouldn't necessarily be understood as conflicting with each other. Indeed, it is certainly possible for a person to interpret the game in both ways at once, that is, to experience the "values of football" as a complex interrelationship of violence, antagonism, territoriality, cooperation, and teamwork. All of those values emerge from features or rules of the game, and any combination of them might contribute to a player's experience of the game's values. The exact make-up of a particular player's values experience is likely to depend on the idiosyncratic combination of personal, cultural and situational factors that he or she brings to the game.

Nevertheless, we still believe that game mechanics and narrative elements create constraints that preclude certain values interpretations while steering players towards others. For example, given the rules of football, it would be difficult for players to interpret the game as an affirmation of non-violence. Since violence is clearly sanctioned by the rules, this interpretation can be considered contrary to the game itself. Likewise, it would be difficult for players to experience football as either the affirmation or violation of the value of privacy. By any reasonable interpretation, that value is simply not present in the game. If we can rule out some interpretations as not being plausible, we can also speak of a corresponding range of plausible interpretations. The Values at Play project is concerned with exploring the range of plausible interpretations. **Or, more specifically, we're concerned with how specific design decisions create constraints that define the range of plausible interpretations.**

An interesting exercise is to take an already existing game, add or subtract a mechanic, and investigate how that changes the range of plausible values interpretations. Consider a simple alteration to the rules of football. Players begin the game with their jersey numbers obscured by a patch, and while a player's number is obscured s/he cannot be called for penalties. Therefore, along with scoring touchdowns and tackling and so forth, players on both sides are now trying to tear away the patches on their opponents' jerseys. Not only does this alteration change the experience of playing the game, it also changes the range of plausible values interpretations in a predictable way. Under our altered set of rules, the value of privacy is suddenly very relevant to football. We wouldn't expect every player to "experience" privacy in the game, but we would consider an interpretation of the new rules that references privacy to be plausible. Similarly, if we altered the rules to prohibit tackling (as in "touch football"), it would be implausible to interpret this design decision as

an endorsement of violence. Rather, we would expect a greater occurrence of more plausible interpretations that reference principles of non-violence.

Again, we do not think it useful or realistic to endorse a single values interpretation of a game or design decision as "correct." However, we do believe that design decisions affect the range of plausible values interpretations for a game in a roughly systematic way. Below, we offer our own values interpretations of three games, recognizing that others may offer different, but equally plausible, interpretations, while recognizing that interpretation of values in games isn't a purely subjective exercise in which all interpretations can be legitimately considered as plausible.

1. Left Behind: Eternal Forces

Left Behind: Eternal Forces (LBEF) is based on the *Left Behind* series by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. Like the books, the game is set in a post-rapture world where Christian believers have ascended to heaven, while on earth the newly repentant born-again fight the hordes of stubbornly unrepentant evil folk. LBEF is more or less a traditional real-time strategy game, but what makes it interesting is that the designers have clearly tried to integrate their values into nearly every aspect of the game's narrative and mechanics.

In the single-player campaign, the player controls the "Tribulation Force" as it fights the "Antichrist's Global Community Peacekeepers" for the souls of the people of Manhattan. Like most real-time strategy games, players probably don't identify with a single player-character (PC), but in non-game play screens the leader of the Tribulation Force is depicted as an example of the American working-class, white male (see screenshot below). The head of the Antichrist's group is the effeminate, European (and in the game, vaguely S&M-looking) arch-villain of the *Left Behind* books, NIcolae Carpathia. Carpathia, conceived through genetically engineered artificial insemination, takes control of the United Nations and repurposes the organization for a final confrontation with the remaining Christians. This is the battle the player fights in the game and to succeed the player has to convert enough New Yorkers to stand against Carpathia.

Players begin the game with a single "recruiter" and progress by converting non-believers and leveling them up into an army of holy warriors. Players can train converts as different classes, but the game forces them to conform to old-fashioned gender norms: Only men can become disciples (i.e. priests) and builders and only women can become nurses.

The game shifts the focus from violence in an interesting way. Unlike virtually every other RTS, the main game play mechanic is converting the enemy, not killing them. Players can train their units as gospel singers or missionaries to bring unbelievers over to their side, while the Antichrist has rock musicians and college-trained secularists to turn the player's units. Players still have to kill plenty of non-believers to succeed, but killing causes a slight dip in character's "spirit level." A high spirit level keeps a character on the side of the Tribulation Force, while a low spirit level sends him/ her over to the side of the Antichrist. So, if the player does too much killing, Tribulation Force units will eventually turn against him or her. However, the depletion of spirit caused by killing a non-believer can easily be replenished by making characters pray. Either this is just poorly balanced game play, or it does suggest something about the relative values of prayer and the lives of non-believers in the designers' ethos.

2. Crackdown

In *Crackdown*, the PC is a superhuman police "Agent" tasked with defeating the gangs of crime-ridden Pacific City. Player characters (PCs) fight through the city's three areas, each of which is controlled by a violent gang. Once a gang has been exterminated, the area of the city they controlled becomes peaceful.

From a values-conscious perspective, it is problematic that enemy non-player characters, or NPCs (i.e. gang members), are represented exclusively as ethnic minorities. Every enemy NPC is identifiable through signifiers of ethnicity (e.g. dress, heavily accented speech) as a member of the Latin American Los Muertos, Eastern European Volk, or East Asian Shai-Gen. These stereotypes give a xenophobic slant to the game's narrative, where the Agent solves Pacific City's (immigrant) crime problem through indiscriminate violence.


Another point of interest is the game's portrayal of gender. At the beginning of the game, players choose between African-American, Asian or Caucasian "skins" for their PC, each of which represent outrageously

muscularized caricatures of American manhood. Female skins are not provided, and women play no significant part in the narrative until the PC meets the game's only female NPC, Latino gang member Violetta Sanchez (pictured above). She is described in a cutscene as "hot" and "dirty" and appears in the game as a highly sexualized, hyperfeminine antagonist to the hypermasculine Agent. The thematic framework of their confrontation, i.e. of the feminine subdued by the masculine for the greater good, has been identified by feminist scholars as a persistent conceit in film and television. Its recurring presence in games like *Crackdown* is an interesting area of consideration for values-conscious designers and players.

While *Crackdown* seems to violate several socially important values, it also subverts the familiar and troubling motif of "light heroes" vs. "dark villains." Digital video games typically portray heroes as Caucasian, while people of color are more frequently portrayed as villains. By allowing players to choose an African-American skin for their PCs, *Crackdown* unconventionally places people of color on the side of law and order (or, more accurately, law and random destruction), which might be considered an affirmation of the values of tolerance, diversity and inclusion. So, while *Crackdown* can be regarded an intolerant game regarding issues of ethnic origin and gender, it might also be considered tolerant, diverse and inclusive regarding issues of race.

3. Ico
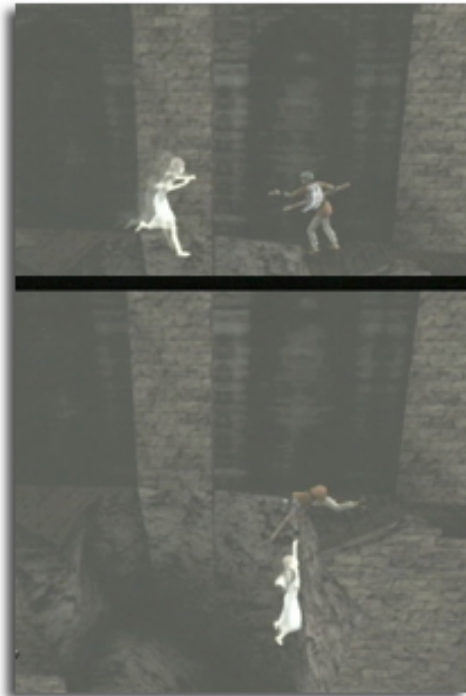
In Ico, one of the most critically acclaimed games of the last console generation, the PC is a boy who must escort the Princess Yorda safely out of a castle, protecting her from shadowy monsters and helping her navigate the castle's environmental hazards. Many players describe their experiences with the game as deeply affecting, primarily because, unlike other games in the "save-the-princess genre," Ico elicits empathy towards

the princess. One of the reasons Ico does this so well is that empathy is built into the game's mechanics, and not just its narrative. Yorda, who looks very frail, is not nearly as mobile as the PC. In order to escape with her he must create safe paths through dangerous environments, such as lowering platforms for her to hop onto and creating bridges for her to cross. When Yorda has to jump a wide gap (as pictured above), the PC must wait for her on the other side with an arm outstretched to help her across. If she can't quite reach the other side, a beautifully rendered animation shows the PC catching her hand and gently lifting her to safety. Other animations develop the tender relationship between the PC and Yorda. For example, when they reach a save point (depicted as a couch), they sit and fall asleep hand-in-hand leaning against each other. In this way, the game mechanics and the representational aspects work together to make the player feel protective of, and empathetic towards, Yorda.

In other "save-the-princess" games, the princess is often hardly more than an afterthought and these games almost exclusively focus on a male PC's (often violent) exploits, whether it's jumping on anthropomorphic mushrooms and defeating Bowser (as in Mario), or recapturing pieces of the Triforce from fearsome monsters (as in Zelda). The designers of Ico challenge this paradigm, shifting the focus from violent rescue to caring and protective in-game behaviors.