Background to the curriculum

What is VAP?

Values at Play (VAP) is a project funded by the National Science Foundation to explore issues related to values in digital games. Our multidisciplinary team of investigators includes game designers (both commercial and "activist"), artists, philosophers, educators, and social scientists. The team is pursuing several goals, including:

- Engaging game designers and design students in thinking about the role of values in game design.

- Providing resources and community for activist or values-conscious game designers.

- Developing a systematic methodology for integrating values in the design process.

- Developing and assessing curricular materials and instructional methods for engaging design students in issues related to values in game design.

What are the Goals of the VAP curriculum?

In brief, we'd like to help students and faculty begin the discussion on values in games. Although the particulars of values are unfamiliar terrain for many designers, this is a topic that seems to have broad appeal in the games world. In classes where we have already implemented the VAP curriculum, students have been overwhelmingly enthusiastic about expressing values like environmentalism, justice, and privacy in their games. When we have presented our work at conferences, industry events, or hosted our own events, game designers, scholars, and educators have been eager to further explore these issues as they relate to their own work. We think that a greater understanding of values in game design will inspire games that are deeper, more sophisticated, and better at tackling a broad array of topics and themes. The curriculum is our attempt to kindle the

discussion on values in games amongst students, knowing that the work they do will shape the future of our medium.

Another goal of the curriculum is to introduce students to VAP's systematic methodology for integrating values into the design process. Just as there are methodologies for considering usability, safety, and reliability in the design of systems, we believe there is much to be gained by taking a similar approach with values. For an overview of the methodology, please see our Quick Reference Guide, which is enclosed in this packet.

Do the VAP Curriculum & Methodology Promote Particular Values, such as "Family Values"?

We should note here that many of the people who work with VAP have done strongly values-oriented work in the past. In prior work, members of our team have focused on issues of gender equity, social justice, privacy, and universal access to education. Certainly, these values continue to be important to us, and our work with VAP is exciting partly because it gives us the opportunity to consider how they might be expressed through games.

However, the VAP design methodology is not built to accommodate only those "good" values. For example, it might be as useful to designers making a game expressing negative values as it would for designers of games that affirm equity, diversity and tolerance. However, we'd like to note that the students we've worked with have expressed enthusiasm for creating games about values like environmentalism, sustainability, justice, and freedom of expression. We think their work is groundbreaking and important, and were thrilled to be able to assist them through VAP.

Another point we'd like to raise relates to our use if the word "values" in the name of our project and in its literature. We are aware that the word has acquired a particular connotation through association with conservative political advocacy groups. Many people hear values discussed primarily in the context of social issues like women's reproductive rights, and gay rights. Groups who take a conservative position on these issues often champion themselves as defenders of "family

values". To further complicate matters, many politically-motivated and spurious attacks on the video games industry have been made under the mantle of family values. So, it's unsurprising that values may be an unpopular word amongst aspiring game designers.

We state strongly that our project is not an endorsement of conservative "family values", and in no way is it a vehicle to bring those values into the game design process or community. Rather, when we use the word values we borrow the term from philosophical discourse to refer to the moral, political and social dimensions of games. Our position is that designers who master these dimensions will be able to express themselves and their ideas through games in a way that others cannot.

Is the VAP Curriculum Really About Making Boring, Preachy Games that Nobody Would Ever Play for Fun?

There is a perception that "values games" are preachy, ineffective, and, worst of all, boring. We strongly reject this idea. In fact, we think that values conscious games tend to be fresher and less clichéd than typical commercial games. Under the pressures of industry, deadlines, or financial constraints, game designers, just like creative workers in other media, are often forced to fall back on standard clichés. So, time and again, we get the damsel in distress, the light-skinned hero vs. dark villain, problem solving through violence, as well as other clichés that are more subtly value laden. When designers have the opportunity and the tools for values conscious design, these clichés can be deconstructed, and every aspect of how they function and what they "mean" in a game can be systematically considered. This puts designers in a better position to consider radical design alternatives, and to do work that reflects their own creative vision.

The benefits of radically departing from cliché are evident in some of the most innovative games in recent memory, like Valve's brilliant *Portal* which reimagines the first person shooter as a largely non-violent puzzle game, or Ubisoft's *Beyond Good & Evil*, which gives us the female action hero as a maternal truth-seeker (as opposed to the Lara Croft cliché of female action hero as hyper-sexualized warrior).

VAP Quick Reference

Integrating Values into Design: A Quick Guide to the VAP Methodology

The VAP methodology presents designers with a systematic process for considering values in game design. Just as there are established methodologies for considering usability and (in the case of online games) security in the design process, we feel there is much to be gained by similarly addressing issues relating to values. The three steps of the VAP methodology, discovery, translation, and verification, will be discussed in the following sections.

However, we should note here that the steps are not meant to be followed in strict sequence. For example, a designer may *discover* that certain values are relevant to his or her game (step 1), then s/he may *translate* those values into design features (step 2), and in the process of translation s/he may discover new values relevant to the game (step 1 again). After designing these new values into the game (step 2 again), the methodology would recommend that s/he systematically *verify* whether the values content of the game is as intended (step 3). In short, the methodology describes a looping iterative process in which designers may return to previous steps, skip ahead, or repeat steps as needed.

Discovery

How can designers discover what values are relevant to their projects? The VAP methodology recommends that they look to several sources of values, including:

Values determined by the nature or purpose of a game

If you're designing "an educational game that can be played by kids, no matter what their level of reading ability," then the value of "access to education" or "access to basic services" is implicated in the design by the nature and purpose of the game. Likewise, if you're building "an adventure game that upends sexist stereotypes," then the value of "gender equity" is relevant by virtue of how you've

conceived of the game. This is the most obvious source of values, in that they are determined by the most basic part of the design process, i.e. the definition of your project.

Values that emerge through the specification of design features

Even when values are not determined by the nature or purpose of a game, they tend to emerge out of the design process as the decisions are made regarding the game's mechanics and narrative aspects. For example, in building the reward or scoring system for a game, a designer might find that one approach encourages cooperative behavior, and another promotes independent problem solving. The decision regarding which scoring system to use might be influenced by what values the designer wants to embed in his or her game.

Stakeholders' Values

Sometimes particular people or groups may have a stake in a projects' outcome. The VAP methodology recommends considering their goals, priorities, preferences and expectations as a potential source of values. Typically, the list of stakeholders includes the designers, users or consumers, and affiliated enterprises. Designers may let their own values inform the design process. They can also assume or research the values of whoever will play or purchase the game. Finally, they can consider the values of enterprises – institutions, companies, and government agencies, for example – who are involved in the sponsorship, distribution, implementation, or use of their games.

Translation

In the translation stage, designers take values discovered in the previous stage and translate them into design features. In the VAP methodology, there are three activities associated with translation. These are operationalization, implementation, and resolution of conflict.

Operationalization involves rendering values concretely in the context of a design project. For example, I may decide that the value of privacy is important to the design of a MMORPG that I am creating. Does that mean that the game will allow players to converse privately with each other, or that a log of players' activities in

the game will not be readily available to other players, or that players' real world identities will be hidden from each other, or that the narrative will deal with themes related to privacy? Does it mean all or some or none of the above? In this stage, designers decide how relevant values will be expressed in the game world.

Implementation refers to designing features in a game that embody the operational definitions of relevant values. For example, how exactly do I design my MMORPG conversation system to best embody the value of privacy (without sacrificing other important considerations, like ease-of-use)? Do I design a system in which only people directly involved in a conversation can "hear" what is being said? If so, who decides whether a person is allowed to become directly involved in a conversation? Does it take a consensus of all participants in the conversation to include a new player? Or perhaps just a majority of the participants will suffice? Should moderators or administrators be able to find out what is said in private conversations? Designers often find that the greatest challenges are here, in the gritty details of implementation.

Resolution of Conflict becomes a factor when designers commit to certain values in the discovery process, but find they are unable to embody all of them in their game. Consider our example of an MMORPG conversation system that embodies the value of privacy. What if we decide that the value of "freedom from harm" is also important to our design, and we consider hate speech to be a source of harm? Potentially, the values of privacy and freedom from harm, as operationalized in our design, could come into conflict with each other. For example, if hate speech occurs within a guild, some members might feel victimized, but they might also feel uncomfortable approaching an administrator for fear of losing status amongst their peers. If the conversation system allows players to keep what is said private from administrators, it could be difficult to eliminate hate speech in the game. The VAP methodology proposes three strategies for dealing with these types of conflicts, which are described here:

Resolving conflict through trade-offs: We may resolve a conflict of values in design by prioritizing one value over the other(s). For example, we may decide that protecting the privacy of players' conversations is more important than freedom

from harm. Using this strategy, we would sacrifice the value of freedom from harm so that the value of privacy can be fully realized in our design.

Resolving conflict through compromise: In this strategy, we would retain both privacy and freedom from harm in the design, but one or both of those values would have to be embedded in a weaker or "compromised" form to assuage the conflict. For example, imagine that our MMORPG conversation system was designed to flag conversations in which people were using words typically associated with hate speech, such as racial slurs. Moderators might only be allowed to read flagged conversations, and, if they found hate speech, they would be authorized to take action against the perpetrators. In this system, the value of privacy is embedded in a less than absolute form, as moderators can sometimes read conversations that participants have marked as private. However, if we decide that freedom from harm is important to our design, this approach might represent a reasonable compromise.

Dissolving conflict through redesign: In some cases, it may be that a values conflict does not arise because the relevant values are fundamentally incompatible. Rather, certain elements of the design are bringing those values into conflict with each other. If those elements are malleable, then the conflict may be resolved without sacrificing or compromising any of the relevant values. Can you think of a redesign that might allow us to retain privacy and freedom from harm, both fully realized, in our MMORPG conversation system?

Verification

In this stage, designers verify that they have successfully implemented relevant values as intended. Significant questions in this stage might include: Do game mechanics support activities that affirm relevant values as appropriate? Does the overall game design represent the values in question?

Designers may draw from a many empirical and non-empirical assessment and evaluation techniques to support verification, e.g. internal play-testing amongst the design team, structured and unstructured interviews, surveys, field observations, case studies, and many more. The VAP approach encourages that designers use

verification techniques throughout the design process, so that they can provide guidance at every stage.

Further Reading

This document only provides a quick overview of the VAP methodology. For interested readers, we recommend the following article, available at www.valuesatplay.org:

M. Flanagan, D. Howe, and H. Nissenbaum, Values in Design: Theory and Practice (pdf). In *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy,* Jeroen van den Hoven and John Weckert (eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.