

Making Moral Choices in Video Games

BY J. CAMERON MOORE

Video games can provide immersive experiences in fantasy stories of good and evil. As players become agents in their complex narrative arcs, they develop skills of moral perception and decision-making. More importantly, they may experience what J. R. R. Tolkien calls “eucatastrophe.”

Should we treat video games—at least some of them—as objects of art worthy of serious study? We tend to dismiss all of them as silly and commercialized entertainments, as colossal wastes of their players’ time. Yet, despite these common dismissive attitudes, there is a growing trend to take some of them seriously. They may provide not only new artistic possibilities as a form, but also a medium for exploring important ideas. In “Philosophical Game Design,” Lars Konzack suggests the most interesting games are those that not only present “immersive experiences” but also express a “consequential philosophical system, a coherent cosmology.”¹ Such video games, he thinks, can be platforms for thoughtful exploration of theories about the human self, the universe, and God.

Following Konzack, I take many video games seriously as works of art that express and explore philosophical ideas. Some games create elaborately imagined other worlds in which characters pursue intricate plot-paths that require important moral choices. I have in mind titles such as the *Fable* series and the *Mass Effect* series—role-playing games in which narrative progression by characters through a created world is a crucial element of the play.² These are an obvious place to begin in taking video gaming seriously, because among video games they are closest in structure and content to traditional literary fantasy.

Christian theories about the fantastic imagination can help us both appreciate and evaluate these video games. These theories were most fully developed by George McDonald (1824-1905) and G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), the so-called “proto-Inklings,” and more recently among the Inklings themselves, especially C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) and J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973).³ They offer a perspective from which we can articulate these video games’ potential as an art form and critique particular examples and trends.

PRINCIPLES OF FANTASTIC IMAGINATION

These four writers, despite some important differences among them, agree on three fundamental principles of fantastic imagination. First, fantasy as an artistic endeavor allows us to participate in an act of secondary creation, which Tolkien calls “sub-creation.” This art is so enjoyable precisely because sub-creation is proper to us as human beings. Second, as we enjoy fantastic sub-creation, our powers of perception and experience are broadened beyond normal reality. The best fantasy allows us to experience “eucatastrophe,” the good ending drawn out of the midst of evil. This widened experience should lead us to greater appreciation of the actual world we inhabit. Finally, these writers agree, the same moral law holds in all worlds, created or sub-created. After briefly examining these defining principles of the fantastic imagination, I will consider how some role-playing video games take up these categories.

The construction of other worlds in imagination is not primary creation, it is sub-creation. Acts of fantastic imagination, which are appropriate to us as creatures made in the image of the creator God, are always grounded in and mirror God’s own creative act. “We make still by the law in which we’re made,” Tolkien explains in a poem he addressed to Lewis in defense of myth-making.⁴ Fantastic artists do not create *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing; rather they take up what Tolkien terms the “primary world,” the actual world created by God, and refashion its materials to make coherent secondary worlds. Even though we have abused the privilege of sub-creation—as we have all the other privileges God has granted to us—“Fantasy remains a human right.”

The creative act of fantastic imagination is not only for the world-maker; when secondary worlds have been well crafted, others can imaginatively enter into them in a consistent and believable fashion.⁵ Importantly for Tolkien, participation in these secondary worlds allows us to experience eucatastrophe—the unexpected, final defeat of evil and victory of the good, which is an echo of the gospel.⁶

Fantasy involves creatures and events beyond the normal ken of our experience. It draws us into alien times and places that are inaccessible through any medium other than the imagination. Ancient writers could imagine their inaccessible lands were located at the Earth’s antipodes—the opposite points on the globe from where humans lived—but since we have explored the entire planet, we must travel further afield to the distant stars

to locate our secondary worlds in places beyond our experience. This is why moderns developed the literary genres of science fiction and science fantasy, Lewis suggests.⁷

Because fantastic worlds can be structured much differently than the real world—for example, they need not share its natural physical laws—they can help us distinguish between what is necessary and what is merely contingent. “Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense,” Chesterton writes, by which he means that fantastic worlds must obey necessary rational relationships even when they surprise us by violating our merely habituated certainties based on repeated perception.⁸ Two and two always equal four in Fairyland (just like everywhere else), but the water may run uphill and the horses may fly. By calling attention in this way to the difference between the necessary and contingent elements in its secondary worlds, fantasy redirects our attention to what is contingent and wonderfully strange in the primary world.

Our sojourn in strange and fantastic secondary worlds should lead us back to engage the primary world with renewed appreciation. “[Fairy] tales say that apples were golden,” Chesterton claims, “only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green.”⁹ We return from our travels in secondary worlds with renewed wonder and interest in the primary things of the world around us: stones, fields, and streams. As Tolkien puts it, “we should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves.”¹⁰ Likewise, Lewis observes that Kenneth Grahame’s classic story *The Wind in the Willows*, far from hindering our interaction with the real world, actually enables the simple pleasures of eating and companionship: “this excursion into the preposterous sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual.”¹¹

Christian theories of fantastic imagination—most fully developed by George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, and the Inklings—help us articulate video games’ potential as a fantasy art form and critique particular examples and trends.

Finally, exploration of the other worlds of fantasy helps us recognize the moral fabric of the universe that holds everywhere. Moral truths are true, whether one is in Texas or the Shire. Fantasy stories need not be about moral truths (the best ones are not moralistic at all), but they must be faithful to those truths. MacDonald insists on this point in a brief essay “The

Fantastic Imagination.” Artists may tinker with the laws of the natural world, provided they stick with the new ones they have imagined, but

In the moral world it is different: there a man may clothe in new forms, and for this employ his imagination freely, but he must invent nothing. He may not, for any purpose, turn its laws upside down. He must not meddle with the relations of live souls. The laws of the spirit of man must hold, alike in this world and in any world he may invent.¹²

While the fantastic imagination legitimately imagines cities floating in mid-air and populated with rational creatures quite different from humans and angels, it must not imagine that the good is evil or an injustice is just. In this way sub-creation remains a free exercise of the creator’s art, though it mirrors the moral aspects of the divine creation. Since we make by the moral “law” in which we are made, our creations ought to accord with the law that governs our own beings.¹³

ENTERING THE FANTASTIC IN VIDEO GAMES

MacDonald, Chesterton, Tolkien, and Lewis develop their theories of fantastic imagination in regard to literature. Indeed, Tolkien specifically argues that literature as opposed to visual art or drama is the best form for fantasy. Nevertheless, we can draw insights from their theories to evaluate fantasy in those video games that develop what Tolkien calls a secondary world—a whole system of fantastic creatures and events into which “both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside.”¹⁴ Many video games create secondary worlds that give players, in the language of game advertising, an “immersive experience.”

Tolkien believes fantasy is better realized in literature than in visual art forms because stories require much more imaginative participation from the audience. Literary authors create only the skeletons of secondary worlds and their readers must flesh out these landscapes in their minds. Each reader’s imagination cooperates with the author’s to create a final vision, which becomes, insofar as the reader has participated in it, incredibly personal. Thus, Tolkien claims that literary fantasy is both “more universal and more poignantly particular” than visual fantasy.¹⁵

Video games, insofar as they are forms of visual art, are susceptible to Tolkien’s critique. Yet they make possible a different mode of participation, by offering players the opportunity to manipulate elements of secondary worlds that are already fully represented on the screen. Let me explain. When we read “tree” in a fantasy story, we must imaginatively construct a tree in our minds, drawing not only on the author’s descriptions, but also on our experiences of trees. The tree you imagine and the one I imagine may be quite different—each is “poignantly particular.” This is an incredibly rich mode of participation in a story, but it is generally the limit of our determi-

native role. Other than fleshing out fantastic landscapes, characters, and events in this way (or, by contrast, refusing to imagine them more richly than their author has sketched them), we have little agency over the development of the secondary world. We can cooperate (or not) with the author in imagining the secondary world and its narratives, but we cannot direct them. In a video game, on the other hand, we encounter a fully imagined tree on the screen. We do not co-imagine the tree, but we must choose whether to cut it down. This requires a fundamentally different sort of participation.¹⁶ Rather than employing our imagination to help create secondary worlds by fleshing out their details, we are called on to make choices within those worlds.

Many games require players to make significant choices about pursuing good and avoiding evil, about self-sacrifice and loyalty. Players must choose whom they will follow, whom they will help, and how they will help them. Some of the most interesting new video games allow players a greater role in developing the moral traits of the characters they inhabit within the fantasy narratives.

A good example is the “alignment” rubric used by many role-playing games. As players navigate through the secondary world, they must make choices which in turn impact their characters’ relative alignment to a set of binaries: good or evil, just or merciful, cunning or honest, and so on. Players’ status according to these binaries usually has an impact on their interaction with the game world. For instance, villagers might flee a character aligned with “feared” while they would circle round a character that is “loved.” In this way, players are able to participate in the construction of their game characters.

Beyond character construction, many role-playing games allow players to determine which narrative sequences they participate in. In the *Elder Scrolls* series of games, for example, players are placed in a free roam universe: that is, they can wander at will through a complex secondary world

brimming with choices, possibilities, and narratives.¹⁷ Players can choose to participate in the central story line, or ignore it altogether and spend hours engaging in hundreds of other stories and quests. The associations they form and the sorts of quests they choose are entirely self-directed. These choices allow players to significantly determine their narrative experience of the secondary world.

While the fantastic imagination legitimately imagines cities floating in mid-air and populated with rational creatures quite different from humans and angels, MacDonald insists, it must not imagine that the good is evil.

This opportunity for player-directed character and narrative development in fantastic worlds is, to my mind, one of the more interesting aspects of role-playing video games, as it presents a new mode of engagement with fantasy. In worlds quite different from our own, free from the requirements of “observed fact,” players are required to exercise their intellect and will to make significant choices between goods to be sought. Now how are these moral choices made in video games related to our choices in the primary world? Of course, there are significant differences in many outcomes – for example, the majestic trees we cut down in a video fantasy world may be easily replaced, while in real life they would really die – and corresponding differences in moral culpability for our actions. But for other important effects (and our resultant culpability), the differences may not be so great. Consider how each of our choices, in a secondary world of fantasy or in the primary world, shapes our intellect and will to some degree. Each choice disposes the will towards that which it chooses because, as Thomas Aquinas notes, the “will is a subject of habit.”¹⁸ The choices we make in video games can influence our patterns of perceiving situations, evaluating options, and choosing to act in the primary world.

EXPERIENCING EUCATASTROPHE IN VIDEO GAMES

Video games, then, have a great potential to provide immersive experiences in fantasy stories of good and evil. As we become agents within their complex narrative arcs, we can develop skills of moral perception and decision-making. More importantly, they can lead us to experience and appreciate eucatastrophe.

Yet many role-playing video games blow it! They do not fulfill this potential because the choices they require of players are not morally significant: either these choices have little effect on the narrative development in the game or they occur within an amoral secondary world. Ironically, *Fable 2*, the award-winning 2008 game by famed designer Peter Molyneux which is all about making choices, is a prime example of this final disregard for players’ choosing.

Players of *Fable 2* engage a stunning array of choices ranging from what house to buy (all of them are for sale for the right price) and whom to marry (most adult non-player characters, or NPCs, in the game are potential spouses) to whether to become good or evil (characters grow dramatically more angelic or demonic in appearance according to the choices they make). Indeed, players must often choose between self-preservation and self-sacrifice. For instance, when one is captured by an evil magician and forced to work as a prison guard in his fortress, tormented prisoners beg one to bring them food or water. Just attempting to help the prisoners requires sacrifice (one loses precious “experience points”). Or later, after one has been tricked by a cunning ally, one must choose to offer oneself or another innocent victim as a sacrifice to a malignant spirit (in terms of the game, one loses “youth”).

While these choices may seem to be significant to players, the game's ultimate narrative progression does not depend on them at all! Whether one feeds the prisoners makes no difference; whether one chooses to act uprightly (and look angelic) or to act abominably (and look demonic), the final result is the same. Regardless of players' choices for self or for others, evil is ultimately defeated and peace returned to the world. *Fable 2* is like a choose-your-own-adventure novel in which all choices lead to exactly the same final chapter.

We can praise this fantastic role-playing game for depicting eucatastrophe, the ultimate triumph of good over evil which comes as an unexpected victory at the hour of apparent defeat. That the eucatastrophe will occur despite our evil actions is a key tenet of the Christian story. The problem in games like *Fable 2* lies not in the fact that they culminate in eucatastrophe, but that they are unfaithful to players' participation in it. One who has consistently chosen the good ought to have a significantly different experience of eucatastrophe than a player who has consistently chosen evil. The "sheep" and "goats" should be clearly divided in the final reckoning — the former welcoming with joy the final triumph of the good, and the latter recognizing the ultimate folly of their ways. This is not the case in *Fable 2*, where players' choices for good or evil in no way affect their participation in the final victory. As a result, every choice is morally insignificant or, worse, amoral. It does not matter in the end whether one chooses to murder the innocent villagers or save them. All that matters is the exercise of one's will.

This narrative disregard for the choices a player makes is not exclusive to *Fable 2*. In many games, the final alignment of character that players choose and the actions they commit do not influence their participation in the final outcome. This violates George MacDonald's rule that fantasy must obey the laws of the moral world: it must not re-imagine truth, declaring evil to

be good or good to be evil. Yet this is exactly what *Fable 2* does. When evil choices lead to the good ending in exactly the same manner that good choices do, evil is not distinguishable from good in any traditional sense. Rather than offering players competing choices between good and evil, such games, though concerned with eucatastrophe, destabilize the distinction between good and evil.

Many fantasy role-playing video games blow it! The choices they require of players are not morally significant: they have little effect on the narrative development in the game or they occur within an amoral secondary world.

RETURNING TO THE PRIMARY WORLD

Do fantastic video games ultimately lead players back to an appreciation of the primary world, as a Christian view of the fantastic imagination claims they must? Some of them may help players enjoy the physical beauty of this world. Certainly, the best role-playing video games can direct players toward a fuller understanding and appreciation of deep-seated moral truths that hold in any world. Having chosen self-sacrifice in an immersive experience of a video game's secondary world, players may gain new insights and greater sympathy toward such choices in the primary world. (Ask most 20- or 30-something males about *Final Fantasy VII* and they are likely to bring up Aeris's sacrificial death as one of their most artistic experiences.) This carry-over effect is possible because the secondary world of the video game exemplifies the moral law that holds in the primary world.

In deciding which fantastic video games to play and which to leave alone, we should examine their presentation of good and evil. Does the game offer choices between good and evil? Do these choices affect both the play experience and the narrative progression of the game? What view of good and evil does the game proffer as a guide for making these choices? This approach allows us to evaluate the moral ordering of the game.

The best way to discern a game's presentation of good and evil is to play at least some of the game for yourself. If you are evaluating the game for children, try taking some evil actions, insofar as the game allows them, and see what happens in the secondary world. For example, when you attack other innocent characters, is your character fined and jailed, ignored, or rewarded? Are moral choices significant? Do good and evil choices lead to the same end, or do they differently shape not only game play but also narrative progression and resolution?

Video games offer us a new mode of involvement in fantastic secondary worlds that is significantly different from literary fantasy. As players become decision makers in the narrative structure of a game, they are less engaged in fleshing out the imaginative world and more involved in creating their own moral characters. Rather than simply dismissing video games, we should carefully consider both the potential of the form and the actual content of individual games. The right sorts of games provide opportunities for significant artistic expression and meaningful engagement of the intellect and will.

NOTES

1 Lars Konzack, "Philosophical Game Design," *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, edited by Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2009), 33-44, here citing 33.

2 *Fable* was produced by Lionhead Studios in 2004. The game website (<http://lionhead.com>) describes it as "a ground-breaking role-playing adventure game...in which your every action determines your skills, appearance, and reputation. Create your life story from childhood to death. Grow from an inexperienced adolescent into the most powerful being in the world. Choose the path of righteousness or dedicate your life to evil.... *Fable*:"

Who will you be?" The original *Mass Effect* science-fiction role-playing game was produced by BioWare in 2007. The popularity of these games has led to numerous installments and versions.

3 The literary discussion group known as "The Inklings" met during the 1930s and 40s in Oxford, England. See Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997). For more articles that interpret and apply their Christian ideas on fantastic imagination, see *Inklings of Glory*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 11 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2004), available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

4 J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 31-99, here citing 74.

5 *Ibid.*, 73.

6 *Ibid.*, 86.

7 C. S. Lewis, "On Science Fiction," in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1966), 59-73, here citing 68.

8 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995; original edition, John Lane Company, 1908), 54.

9 *Ibid.*, 59.

10 Tolkien, 77.

11 C. S. Lewis, "On Stories," in *Of Other Worlds*, 3-21, here citing 15.

12 George MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination" in *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Tales* (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen Printing and Publishing, 1997), 5-8, here citing 6.

13 John Milbank, in "Fictioning Things: Gift and Narrative," *The Chesterton Review* 31.3-4 (1974), 146-149, emphasizes that the Christian fantastic imagination allows for secondary worlds with different physical laws (leading us to appreciate the contingent nature of our world), but the same moral laws that hold in all worlds.

14 Tolkien, 73.

15 *Ibid.*, 95.

16 Admittedly, our choices within video games are always constrained (e.g., we cannot do with video-game trees all that we could do with real ones) and sometimes insignificant (e.g., when the game narrative discloses, in the end, the overall irrelevance of our choices). Fantastic video games guide us to appreciate the primary world only to the extent that their secondary worlds require us to make wide-ranging and significant choices according to the moral law that governs all worlds.

17 The *Elder Scrolls* game series by Bethesda Softworks began in 1994 (www.elderscrolls.com).

18 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II.I, Q 50, A 5, translated by the English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates, and Washburne, 1912-1936; New York: Benziger, 1947-1948).



J. CAMERON MOORE

is a Ph.D. candidate in religion and literature at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.