

# A Method For Discovering Values in Digital Games

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, our research team demonstrates how groups of game designers can open the discussion on human principles in game design by using a tool we call “Values Cards.” Drawing on prior play experiences, participants identify examples of games or game segments that express the value represented on one of the values cards. This sparks deep analysis of how values are expressed through particular game mechanics and representational elements. The analysis can be posted to a collective wiki and shared amongst other designers who are interested in examining game mechanics and representational elements from a values perspective. These exercises can be considered first steps in a broader attempt to produce and implement a systematic methodology to better integrate human principles into the design process.

### Author Keywords

values, games, digital games, computer games, video games

### INTRODUCTION

Digital games are more popular and widely disseminated than ever before, and their popularity is extending across a broad range of social, economic, age and other demographic categories. Indeed, from casual games on mobile devices to high budget PC and console titles, the growth of the games market represents a revolution of considerable financial, social and cultural impact. As games become a larger part of the media landscape, more scholars are investigating the mechanisms through which they transmit their cultural impact.

Our work is built on the premise that, as with other media, games carry values and beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics. The idea that ethical ideas—or *human values*—may be embodied in technical systems,

devices, artifacts, and processes has taken root in a variety of disciplinary approaches to the study of technology, society, and humanity. Prominent social critics, artists, philosophers, social scientists, computer scientists, and legal theorists have deepened our understanding of the complex relationship between technology and human values [e.g. 2, 4, 6, 12, 13, 21, 23, 30]. Our research builds on the premise that, like other media, games carry values and beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics.

Through the design process, values and beliefs become embedded in games *whether designers intend them to or not*. For example, *The Sims* has been said to inculcate materialist values: players are encouraged to earn money, and spend it on acquiring goods. The *Grand Theft Auto* series was not created with the intention of propagating a particular worldview, but nonetheless, it portrays the world as a violent place, rewards criminal behavior, and reinforces racial and gender stereotypes. In *Okami*, the player takes on the role of the animal/goddess Amaterasu, and her job is to make plants and animals happy in the environment; the game fosters the values of empathy, nurturing, sharing, and caregiving.

In our work we build on prior research incorporating the study of ethics, science and technology studies, and design disciplines. It is not enough to stop at the point of recognizing that human principles (negative and positive) could be embodied in design, but to set forth particular principles as design aspirations. There is a will, not only among concerned observers but also those who play and create games, that existing games should be enhanced and diversified, or rather, that games should at least be developed in a way that they could include human values. Accordingly, our work urges designers and producers to include values as the set of criteria by which the quality of a

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given technology is judged, to strive actively for a world whose technologies are not only effective, efficient, safe, attractive, easy to use, and so forth, but that promote the values to which the surrounding societies and cultures subscribe. These values might include liberty, justice, inclusion, equality, privacy, security, creativity, trust, and personal autonomy<sup>1</sup>.

The Values at Play (VAP) project is concerned with the practical incorporation of these ideas into existing games; VAP researchers are developing various methods through which designers can most effectively embed positive values in the games they create. In our inquiry into human values and games, the goal is not to denigrate existing games, as our team recognizes that censorship and scapegoating are problematic and ineffective methods through which to promote positive social change. Rather, we seek to study existing work, learn from these examples, and provide tools so designers may help offer alternatives that challenge the dominant paradigms of game design. In this, we are inspired by the significant contributions of other initiatives that share deep connections and commonality of purpose with ours. These include Participatory Design [e.g. 8, 11, 19]; Value Sensitive Design [e.g. 5, 18]; Reflective Practice [e.g. 27]; and Critical Technical Practice [e.g. 1, 10, 24], and Brenda Laurel’s pioneering work on developing games for specific underprivileged groups [22], which has set the stage for projects such as ours.

VAP’s principals and affiliates include game designers, educators, philosophers, artists, and social scientists collectively working towards a systematic methodology for embedding positive social values in games. The VAP methodology consists of three stages: discovery, translation and verification. First, designers *discover* the values relevant to their project, and decide which values should be integrated into the design. Then, they *translate* those values into concrete design features. Finally, they systematically *verify* that those values have indeed been embedded in the game. In order to use the methodology effectively, it is beneficial if designers are already alert to the values embedded in various existing games. In this paper, we demonstrate how groups of designers can begin the discussion on values using a tool we call “Values Cards.”

The bulk of this paper is devoted to two case studies of Values Card exercises, one of which was run for veteran designers, and the other in which design students were the participants. In Values Card exercises, designers draw on prior play experiences to identify games and game segments that demonstrate the embodiment of particular values in design features. Our experience has been that these exercises are an effective catalyst for deep analysis of game mechanics and representation systems from a values-conscious perspective. First, however, we discuss why we’ve chosen particular values to include in the deck of values cards, and provide some brief notes on how participants engage with the values in the exercises.

## THE VALUES CARD DECK

One of the most important tasks a designer might undertake in learning about values in computer games is by analysing the values embedded in already existing computer games. The Values Card exercise is a useful way to do this before a designer attempts to create a new game, wherein a value may be intrinsically tied to the mechanic or core of game interaction. At the outset of our project, the VAP team, including students and professionals in a wide variety of disciplines, prepared a deck of fourteen Values Cards, with each card representing a particular value such as equality, tolerance or diversity. The values included in this deck are represented in Table 1.<sup>2</sup> In deciding which values to select, we focused on those which emerged from the body of ethics and philosophy literature, as well as those which tend to be common among liberal, egalitarian democracies. As a result, many of the values represented in the cards are reflected in foundational documents such as the United States Constitution, and declarations of rights such as the Charter of the United Nations, or the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In addition, other values, such as environmentalism, were included because we have encountered a great deal of interest in promoting those values through games. Further, the frequent appearance of these values in media and policy deliberation suggests that these values are tied to significant issues in the populations we hope to reach.

Diversity	Security/ Safety
Justice	Creativity
Inclusion	Cooperation
Equality	Sharing
Privacy	Trust
Gender Equity	Authorship
Environmentalism	Liberty

**Figure 1:** The first deck of value cards

### Using the Values Cards

In Values Card exercises, participants draw a card from the deck, and discuss the value it represents in the context of their prior play experiences. For example, if the *environmentalism* card is drawn, participants would think of examples they might recall involving the value. A participant could describe, as an example, the computer game *Command & Conquer*. In many real-time strategy games like *Command & Conquer*, players continually deplete the game world’s natural resources, but are provided no mechanisms through which to replenish those resources. As the Values Card exercise progresses, participants collectively explore how the value under discussion is expressed, promoted or violated in particular games and through particular game mechanics. Comparing

interpretations of a particular value is especially useful in helping designers and students of design understand differing points of view on how game interaction can be culturally or socially interpreted. Even for those skeptical of the relevance of values, the exercise can spark lively discourse.

When these exercises are run as part of a game design class, student participants are often asked to record game sequences in which their chosen value from the card selected is embodied. Their analyses, along with the accompanying game sequence, are uploaded to a collective wiki. The wiki then becomes a shared resource for students and designers who are interested in the fine points of how values are embodied through particular game mechanics.



Figure 2: The Values Cards

## EXAMPLES OF VALUES CARD EXERCISES

### Example 1: Using Values Cards

At an early workshop with our project advisory board, we used the concept of Values Cards to spark discussion on values in existing, mainstream games. There was great debate on several values, including fairness and tolerance, but perhaps the liveliest discussion was prompted by the *generosity* card. Dr. Celia Pearce, an interactive media designer and game design educator, used the value of generosity to describe an emergent behavior in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft (WoW)* and other MMORPGs called ‘twinking’<sup>3</sup>. As players in *WoW* increase in level, they are continually acquiring new, more powerful items, equipment and other resources in their inventories. With such a high rate of ‘upgrading,’ advanced players are typically left with an inventory full of obsolete resources. For example, a level 50 Hunter may still possess a bow that was useful at level 40, but has since been replaced by a more powerful bow. Instead of keeping obsolete items, she may gift, or twink, lower-level players for whom the items still have considerable value. In this case, the level 50 Hunter might freely give her level 40 bow to a level 30

character, who normally wouldn’t have access to such powerful equipment.

In most MMORPG’s, there is no explicit reward for twinkling a less experienced player, so it may be considered an act of pure generosity. However, as in the real world, there are social rewards for generosity, for example, by twinkling a ‘newbie,’ a more experienced player may earn the new player’s loyalty in the gameworld. As game researchers have noted, players highly value such social rewards for generosity, and thus twinkling becomes a common activity in nearly all MMORPG’s (the gift economy and the monetary economy of game worlds has been of special interest to scholars such as Castronova [7], Dibbell [9], Taylor [29], and others). But, interestingly, not all manifestations of generosity are rewarded. Dr. Pearce related a *Warcraft* experience in which she, playing as an Alliance priest, cast a protective spell on a member of the Alliance’s rival group, the Horde. Her fellow Alliance players reacted with consternation and displeasure. Generosity proffered to a member of the Horde was seen as a violation of her loyalty to her Alliance companions.

As the discussion progressed, Dr. Pearce noted that some MMORPG’s do provide material rewards for acting as a mentor or benefactor towards less experienced players. In *Asheron’s Call*, for example, a mentor keeps a percentage of the experience points earned by his or her mentee. This raises an interesting question: By providing rewards for twinkling, does *Asheron’s Call* eliminate the possibility of pure generosity in the gameworld?

### Example 2: Using Values Cards in an Oppositional Fashion

Participants using the method are not limited to exploring how the deck’s values are positively expressed in the games under discussion. In many cases, participants find it easier to identify game segments in which those values are violated. For example, most people would find it difficult to discuss *Grand Theft Auto* in terms of the positive expression of justice, equality or security. However, participants can achieve a deep level of analysis by pinpointing how those values are violated through various narrative and gameplay elements.

In one Values Cards workshop, Jonathan Belman, a student affiliate of VAP, discussed various *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* games as examples of how the value of intolerance can be violated through gameplay mechanics. In these games, player characters interact with non-player characters (NPC’s) of various races, nationalities, and moral alignments. Unless there is a clear and unavoidable reason for immediate hostility, players are given the option to talk to NPC’s, persuade them of their views, sometimes barter with them, and also attack them. However, in the case of some NPC races, the game engine narrows the field of options. Move the cursor over a Dark Elf, for example, and the cursor turns into a sword, precluding negotiation, barter, or other non-violent interactions. From a values perspective,

what is problematic here is not the representation of violence, but the fact that violence is the default interaction with an entire racial category. Building tolerance into these games by allowing for a broader set of interactions with Dark Elves might make the play experience richer, more challenging and ultimately, more immersive.

Again, we want to stress that the purpose of these exercises is not to malign games like *Grand Theft Auto* or those based in the *D&D* world. Rather, we believe that designers who explore the mechanisms through which certain values are expressed (and violated) in such games will be better prepared to consciously control the expression of particular values in their own games.

### Example 3: Using Values Cards in the Classroom

One of the project's designers led a five-week unit in a class focusing on video games as an expressive medium at a large southern university. Five graduate students (3 female and 2 male, average age 26) with academic and professional backgrounds in digital media were introduced to the concept of embedding values in video games through the Values at Play methodology<sup>4</sup>. In order to begin to think about values in games, they began the course by using the Values Cards to choose self-esteem and sharing as values to be investigated in commercial, off-the-shelf video games. Each student was instructed to choose a game that he or she believed to possess features that demonstrated one of those values and to document them in a short film clip. Additionally, they were required to post their reflections on the experience to a class wiki so that they could review one another's writing.

In the following section we briefly analyze two students' experiences from the class.

#### Isaiah

Isaiah, a 25 year old Masters degree student specializing in human computer interaction, expressed mild trepidation about taking the class in his first wiki posting: "This is a very different class from any that I have ever taken. I guess that makes me a little nervous about figuring out how it works, but at the same time, I'm excited to have the chance." The instructor who led the class characterized him as "open minded" in his curiosity and eagerness to explore new areas. Isaiah summed up his feelings about the first day's activities, which included a game of hopscotch in order to explore how assumptions about gender roles influenced game rules, with one word in his posting: "Wow." But he indicated that he would remain "cautiously optimistic" and that "this may also be one of the most interesting and enjoyable classes I've had."

In the Discovery phase of the methodology that we are discussing in this paper, the objective is for the designer to identify a set of values (which may evolve through various production iterations) that are to be represented in the game. Designers might also choose to analyze an existing game (or game proposal) in order to define values already

manifest through its features and content. Regardless of the tactic, the critical question to be addressed during the exercise is, "What larger human themes emerge in the creation of this project?"

Isaiah chose *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (OOT)* as an example of an existing game with which he would investigate the value of sharing for the class Values Card exercise. In a post to the wiki, he suggested that his experiences with single-player games did not always include examples of sharing:

*"...[S]ince I'm not much of a fan of multiplayer games, I did have a hard time figuring out exactly what sharing in a game might look like. There are many instances of 'giving' when a player is given a new tool or must give something to another in-game character. Sharing, though, is somewhat more difficult. I finally chose my favorite game, Zelda: Ocarina of Time...*

*... When he is given the ocarina, Link is able to play it, but he does not initially 'know' any of the songs for it. Simply playing the correct notes is not sufficient; instead, he must journey through the world and learn songs as other characters are willing to teach him. This was what I chose to represent sharing within OOT. In the simplest sense, these points are instances of sharing, as the correct sequence of notes is taught without the teacher losing the ability to play them. I considered this to be a technically sufficient representation of sharing. However, I wanted to address another concern as well: I wanted the sharing to be of something valuable to all parties.*

*Link learns songs that enable him to gain various powers and abilities within the game; clearly, these songs are important to him within the game world. However, most are not idle tunes taught by casual observers; instead, they are important treasures and memories to those who offer their notes. I chose the teaching of these songs as a representation of sharing because of the importance to both parties willing to share in the knowledge of them. I believe that this bears strong resemblance to the sort of sharing that we consider virtuous within the real world. Sharing that which is dear to oneself is considered to be a good act, while sharing that which is unimportant or trivial is rarely noted."*

In his reflections on the features of *Ocarina of Time* that represent sharing, Isaiah drew a distinction between *giving* and *sharing*. He characterized *giving* as commonplace ("There are many instances of 'giving'"), while *sharing* was "somewhat more difficult," in part "because of the importance to both parties willing to share in the knowledge of [the songs]. I believe that this bears strong resemblance to the sort of sharing that we consider virtuous within the real world." The contrast that Isaiah drew between the two is characteristic of the kind of deep analysis on values for which we are advocating in the Discovery exercise initiated with the Values Cards. We are not suggesting that one definition is 'better' or more significant than the other.









