

Moral Ambiguity in Playdead games

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how moral ambiguity (Wylie & Gantman, 2022) is expressed in Playdead's games, *Limbo* and *Inside*. Both games are characterized by narrative voids, silent storytelling, constrained agency and subtle gameplay mechanics. If what is left unsaid often speaks louder than what is explicitly stated (Chatman, 1978), these games surely speak through silence and, by not giving any explicit explanation or understanding of the broader context, both *Limbo* and *Inside* use uncertainty to compel the player to make interpretative and uninformed ethically significant choices.

This study contributes to a growing body of research on how games can evoke complex emotional and ethical experiences (Pohl, 2008; Sicart, 2009; Holl & Melzer, 2021; Ryan et. Al., 2023; Wright & Denisova, 2024) leveraging on storytelling, mechanics and design to demonstrate the potential of video games in challenging players' moral assumptions and pushing them towards critical reflection on agency, control, and complicity (Jameson, 2005).

Generally speaking, we agree on the idea that video games give players a unique platform to navigate morally challenging decisions and dilemmas, providing them with a safe environment to explore and experiment with various scenarios (Wright & Denisova 2024), still, dealing with Playdead games, we contend that enabling the players to exercise their own morality, widening their agency (Ryan et al., 2019),

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despite being the most popular option is not the only way to encourage moral reflection.

Moral ambiguity and the protagonist bias

Narrative traditions usually frame the protagonist as being inherently “good” from the outset, putting players (or audiences) in a state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) that forces them to empathize with the protagonist, by instinctively viewing his or her perspective as morally justified, even when actions can’t be fully assessed due to limited information, context or perspective.

Despite the growing interest in narrative complexity and ethics in video games (Sicart, 2009; Eden, Grizzard, Lewis, 2011) limited research has focused on the interplay of minimal or silent storytelling and moral ambiguity, especially in the light of protagonist bias.

Here we sketch a general definition of moral ambiguity, occurring when the players are forced to take specific morally relevant actions leading to unforeseeable consequences, and without having a complete knowledge of the character’s motivations. To do so, we rely on an interdisciplinary approach drawing on game studies, literary theory, philosophy and psychological perspectives. We then assess our definition by applying it to notable video games, such as *Papers, please*, *Bioshock*, *Vampyr*.

“Inside” moral ambiguity

We interpret *Limbo* and *Inside* as two interconnected highly philosophical stories, going from grim existential tones to socio-political commentary, and we underline, by analysing key in-game objects, mechanics and events, Playdead’s unique take on moral ambiguity.

In *Inside* and *Limbo*, moral ambiguity is resulting from several concurring elements, such as silent narrative and constrained agency. Players are called to construct meaning, relying on one or several uninformed ethical interpretation(s) of the action. Constrained agency conspires with the minimal and metaphoric world representation to cast a tragic sense of ineluctability (if not complicity) on players.

In *Limbo*, players are introduced to a shadowy, almost monochromatic world where a nameless boy embarks on a journey that lacks explicit motivation or context. The game’s stark black-and-white aesthetic and oppressive atmosphere create a sense of isolation and dread, reinforcing its existential underpinnings. Here, the need to survive often brings the boy to harm others or exploit his environment, prompting questions about the tension between necessity and morality. Additionally, the lack of narrative context leaves the player unsure about the purpose or ethical implications of the protagonist’s actions, reinforcing a sense of existential uncertainty.

In *Inside*, Playdead expands on this approach to moral ambiguity, by shifting the focus from individual to society. Set within a dystopian world, the game’s imagery of systemic control and oppression invites socio-political interpretation. One significant

game element which might be taken as an example of how the game blurs ethical lines is the manipulation of mind-controlled workers: players are in fact forced to use enslaved drones to solve puzzles, a (no)choice that may either be interpreted as a means towards liberation, or continued subjugation.

The protagonist's final transformation into a grotesque mass of bodies evokes themes of rebellion, autonomy, and collective resistance, while raising unsettling questions about identity and agency. Moreover, the game's laboratory-like settings and oppressive machinery suggest a critique of industrial and authoritarian systems, challenging players to reflect on the nature of control and complicity (James, 2009).

Typical of Playdead games is the fact that, even at the end, the widespread ambiguity is not clearly resolved: there are no easy answers or simple revelations, therefore players are forced to build their own narrative and compelled to reflect on their choices and actions.

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of *Limbo* and *Inside*, this paper demonstrates how a coordinated use of silent storytelling, constrained agency, and gameworld design might be used to craft experiences which compel players to confront moral ambiguity, creating a rich interpretative space for reflection on existential and socio-political themes. By situating Playdead's work and their specific take on ambiguity within a broader discourse on morality in video games, we highlight how specific design choices can evoke profound emotional and ethical engagement, paving the way for future studies on the potential use and effects of these games in an educational or self-educational context.

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