CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY IN VIDEOGAMES

Edvard Didukh

This article devoted the theme of the conceptual bases of morality in video games, the main problems faced by developers in the implementation of moral systems and suggested methods for their solution. The concepts of deontological and utilitarian ethics were used, as well as the studies of I. Kant, H. Arendt and S. Milgram on ethics and behavioral features of people as moral agents. As a result of the study, a conclusion was made about the use of the deontological and utilitarian model of ethics in video games, identified the main problems of introducing a morale system into a virtual environment, and proposed methods for their solution.

Keywords: morality, ethics, online games

Due to the technological advancements in the last two decades, particularly in informatics, borders both between countries and ideologies become ever more blurred. Nowadays the majority of information is available to the public through media spaces such as the Internet. This environment highly encourages sharing ideas and thoughts through various means made possible by modern advancements and thusly the concept of normative morality has become a popular topic for discussion. Due to this fact the question of identifying conceptual basics of moral behavioral conditioning gains relevancy: is the existence of objective moral standards feasible or will morality remain a vague concept. In this thesis, I will describe the concept of morality as given by traditional ethics and go over issues that are encountered while trying to convey the concepts of morality in the media space, particularly in video games. The topic in question will be addressed primarily from a developer/player point of view and tackle both philosophical and technical questions. Lastly, I will provide ideas and existing examples of possible solutions to these issues.

As of yet, there aren't many studies regarding this particular topic done by professional researchers, but with the development of gaming, augmented and virtual reality as well as the rapid growth of gamers as a subculture the relevancy of the presented topic increases substantially. The concepts researched in this study follow the general principles of ethics presented by Immanuel Kant and more modern ideas of Hannah Arendt. The study also relies on some concepts of psychology, particularly Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Stanley Milgram's experiments[11].

The purpose of research is to pinpoint the prominent problems that videogame developers face when trying to implement a morality system into the game and provide solutions to the problems in question.

Ethics, the branch of philosophy dedicated to studying the concept of morality, gives two definitions to morality: descriptive and normative. Descriptive morality refers to personal or cultural values, codes of conduct or social mores from a society that provides these codes of conduct in which it applies and is accepted by an individual. It does not connote objective claims of right or wrong, but only refers to that which is considered right or wrong, while normative morality is the differentiation of intentions, decisions and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper.[2]

There are several basic explaining the conceptual foundations of ethics: the idea of universal moral grounds (deontological morality) and the relativistic idea of variability of ethical norms depending on the utility (benefit) for the majority.

To date, Kant's description of the idea of universality of moral grounds has become most famous. Kantian ethics refers to an ethical theory ascribed to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. The theory, developed as a result of Enlightenment rationalism, is based on the view that the only intrinsically good thing is a good will; an action can only be good if its maxim – the principle behind it – is duty to the moral law.[1] This concept was thoroughly researched by Kant and led him to formulate his principles of Categorical Imperative and Universalizability:

"Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[2]

The Categorical Imperative is the corner stone of Kant's ethics, from which every other formulation is derived. A categorical imperative binds us regardless of our desires. These imperatives are morally binding because they are based on reason, rather than contingent facts about an agent. We owe a duty to rationality by virtue of being rational agents; therefore, rational moral principles apply to all rational agents at all times.[3]

While Kantian ethics remain relevant to this day, more modern takes on ethics and the concept of right and wrong depicted in videogames are generally related to the idea of relative moral values, the most famous representative of which is utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that states that the best action is the one that maximizes utility. "Utility" is defined in various ways, usually in terms of the well-being of sentient entities.[4] Per utilitarianism it is sometimes unavoidable to sacrifice the well-being of the few in favor of the many, while per Kant it would've been unacceptable. Both ethical philosophies, however, don't explore the concept of evil thoroughly enough.

One of the most prominent figures in researching conceptual foundations of morality was Hannah Arendt. While utilitarianism postulates the fragility of moral grounds based on situational cost/benefit ratio, the research of H. Arendt demonstrates, that modern concepts of absolute evil are vital for our culture. Criminal actions against humanity taken by totalitarian regimes in the name of "utility" prove the existence of absolute evil: evil, that has to be combated under all circumstances. In the words of H. Arendt herself: "Totalitarian regimes, without acknowledging it, demonstrated the existence of crimes, which people can neither punish nor forgive. When the impossible became possible, it became an unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil that could no longer be understood and explained by the bad motives of self-interest, greed, envy and avarice, vindictiveness, lust for power and insidiousness"[1]

So what percentage of people understood the importance of Hannah Arendt's research? According to expreiments conducted by Stanley Milgram in 1961 – only 40% of people would aknowledge the existence of deeds, completely unacceptable for themselves, while 60% of people who took part in the experiment would go against their moral compass as long as they were given a permission to do so by an authority figure.[11]

The research of 2015-2018 demonstrates, that the percent of pure utilitarians or supporters of the deontological interpretation of morality is relatively low. The majority prefers the middle ground. On the infographics figures from 1-3 show the number of supporters of deontological understanding of morality. Figures 6-7 are

utilitarian.

Explore the graphs below to see how your score compares to other participants.

Whole Population | By Gender | By Religion

Population Distribution of Morality
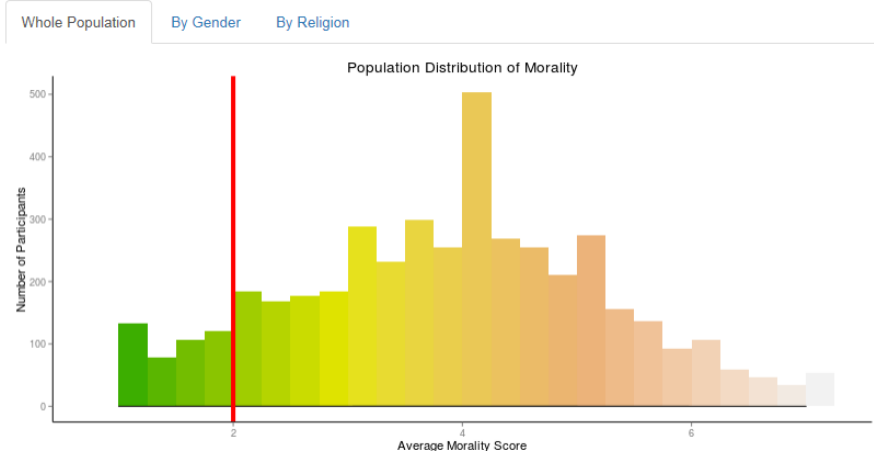
People usually say that it's morally permissible to divert a trolley on to a different track such that it kills one person instead of five. This is characteristically utilitarian response. On the other hand, they also say that it is NOT permissible to push someone on to the tracks in front of the trolley, such that the one person is killed but the five are saved-- here, they take a deontological perspective. Clearly, moral judgments are inconsistent. Why? This puzzle is known as the trolley problem. In both cases, they are considering saving five lives at the expense of one. Scientists have suggested that these conflicting responses reflect two competing cognitive processes. The first response (the one we almost always have) is the controlled, reasoned utilitarian judgment which dictates that it is better to save more lives. The second, which arises only in some cases, is a negative emotional response that rings internal alarm bells. Think about how bad it would feel to actually push someone off a bridge to their death! Much research has indicated that these two psychological pathways, which are distinct in the brain, are constantly playing tug-of-war when it comes to dictating your moral judgments. For more information, you can find academic papers on this topic here, here, and here.

http://www.moralsensetest.com/experiment/originaldilemmas.html[7]

To further explore the implications of the researched problem, I will be referring to general human psychology, particularly the following concepts: motivation, cognitive dissonance, Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Kantian ethics, while providing working concepts for morality implementation in video games, often overlook motivation as a driving force behind human behavior.

Universal morality, per Kant, should provide general moral guidelines that any rational person would be able to relate to, and while this is usually applicable, occasionally it can be beneficial for a rational and logical person to engage in morally questionable activities. The implied meaning of this statement is: while the majority of the population can be considered rational agents, and thusly, would be able to relate to moral guidelines provided by society, without explicit laws regarding moral/immoral actions Kantian ethics would crumble. Such occurrences are common enough, especially nowadays, to question the concept of Kantian ethics. This, however, comes down to human motivation and behavioral science.

Explicit laws, encouraging actions that are considered appropriate in society, and discouraging inappropriate behavior, are to be viewed differently than government-approved laws. While even they, when boiled down, generally encourage morally good behavior and otherwise, these are not the same as moral laws. People are generally

motivated to follow their own moral compass at all times by society. Being social creatures, humans rely on each other to survive, though the meaning of it has changed over the centuries, and consequently, value social approval of their actions highly. It goes without saying, that nowadays it is exceedingly common to encounter people being socially pressured for morally questionable actions.

As an aside, it should be mentioned that there are many cultures and, thusly, many value systems with their own moral guidelines. While it used to be true that morality is highly subjective, especially when comparing different ethnicities, nationalities or even subcultures, in our Informational society, due to rapid advancements in informational technology and easily accessible communication the borders between cultures and ethnicities are blurred ever more. Consequently, relative morality is no longer applicable to the modern society.

As an intermediate conclusion, it can be established that people need explicit guidelines and motivation to behave in a certain way of their own volition. Drawing from this conclusion, we can state, with decent certainty, that players in video games should also be motivated to obey the universal moral compass introduced by the developer. However, while in the real world we only have a limited amount of time to live and not a lot of options to fix our mistakes, we tend to restrict ourselves from deviating from the socially appropriate actions, because otherwise, there will be consequences, especially if we are talking about universally evil deeds. Now, in the media space, and in virtual worlds in particular, we do not normally face consequences of our actions. This gives people a lot of freedom to deviate a little bit from the majority, cementing their personality, but it also leaves the media space dwellers that they are able to get away with anything.

This issue often results in debates, scandals or even real life confrontation if the person goes one step too far on the forums, leaving a comment on social media etc. In video games the aforementioned problem is generally even greater, due to most modern titles featuring some kind of save system. It is a vital part of games in general, because they are not meant to perfectly simulate the real world, but rather introduce their own and, most important of all, entertain. And for them to entertain people effectively they generally need to be expansive and offer a variety of options, letting the player choose their path and conveying the feeling that their actions mean something. It opens up a large margin of experimentation for players, who can play through the game again, but making different choices and, consequently, getting different experiences. The flipside of this is that players feel that no consequences arise from their actions, seeing how they can always go back to the beginning and start over. So, as soon as a player gets a good grasp on the morality system and how their actions influence their immediate environment, it is only a question of time when they decide to try killing everyone they can to see what happens.

This urge arises from two factors: natural human curiosity and the completion principle. Curiosity is pretty self-explanatory so I will assume that I don't have to go over it. The completion principle, however, needs some more thorough explanation. The human brain is structured in a way, that it can only really focus on one task at a time, and when we leave that task unfinished, our mind keeps coming back to it, we keep thinking about it and considering our options and this can distract us from other, possibly more important tasks at hand. The aforementioned phenomenon is called "The Zeigarnik Effect", the urge to see things finished completely.[7] It comes up relatively often in day to day life and is one of

the reasons, why it's so hard for most people to organize their schedule when they have a few different tasks to work on simultaneously. When we apply this principle to video games, we can conclude that as long as there are undiscovered options in a given virtual world, the player will have the urge to explore it and having no consequences to worry about whatsoever, they most likely will.

Having explored that, it should also be mentioned, that most games strictly follow the concept of absolute evil presented by Hannah Arendt and further expanded upon throughout the 20th century. While this gives a streamline and simple moral compass to the player, it also often introduces excessive duality into the game world. The difference between appropriate and inappropriate is very stark in most video games with little to no grey area. So, while the concept of absolute evil is to be kept intact, absolute good and absolute evil being the only two options out there is not representative of the real world in the slightest. Morality or karma systems are in general utilized in roleplaying games, where the player gets to create and lead their own character through the game world, and it takes away from the experience when the options you are given don't resonate with you. Only being able to be Jesus incarnate or Satan himself is not what most people can relate to. While, as we established earlier, the majority of the population can relate to good or morally appropriate deeds, not everyone will always choose to act righteously. Furthermore, having acted morally inappropriately, people aren't generally given a lot of options to recover and almost never can they immediately learn from their mistake and regain their social status and image. This is not an issue in most videogames, as they often implement morality in a really fluid manner, which means that you can recover from evil deeds at almost no cost whatsoever, time- or otherwise.

As an intermediate conclusion, we have now gone over the glaring problems in trying to introduce a morality system into a virtual world, them being:
- Lack of consequences to player's actions
- Excessive moral duality
- Fluid morality

Now that we've defined the issues in need to be addressed, let us proceed to possible solutions to these problems. Each point will feature two examples of the concept implemented: a good one and the contrary.

The easiest one to solve is moral duality. Fixing this issue is as simple as providing players with alternate routes, or more specifically, more of them. If the players are given more possibilities to explore, not only does the virtual world feel more realistic, but it also fulfills the main purpose of the video game – entertainment. Giving the players extra content extends the time they will put into the game, thusly prolonging its life cycle. That being said, these alternate routes need to be unique enough for them to feel separate and present players with choices of varying social appropriateness and/or personal gains. People by nature tend to choose the option that is the most rewarding. Granted, for some players the feeling of making the right choice and witnessing its implications is a reward in of itself.

A good example of a large amount of possible routes would be a game like The Elder Scrolls, that often keeps people playing for hundreds of hours thanks to its expansive and living world.

The Elder Scrolls games offer the players a non-linear progression, which implies that they are given an opportunity to reach a singular goal, but follow one of the many differentpaths. The problem arises when trying to make the choices meaningful.

Img. 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim cover art

A large world provides a lot of possibilities for experimentation, but it also makes the consequences of the player's actions barely noticeable. Another example of dual morality being suppressed is The Witcher series.

It also has a large open world with many possibilities to explore, however, unlike The Elder Scrolls, it approaches morality differently, which lets it both make the options provided relatable and their results – noticeable. In most instances when a moral dilemma arises, players are given two to three different options, none of which can be boiled down to good or evil. Every option has both implications and it depends solely on player-specific preference to pick one. This approach also lets developers introduce major consequences for the game world, caused by the player's actions, which makes moral choices feel impactful.

An example of moral duality, otherwise, can be seen in Infamous.

The game is centered around player choices and how they influence the world around them, yet there are usually only two options available: good or evil. The consequences of these choices are more noticeable because of that, as less effort is needed to think every option through. The problem with the approach chosen by infamous is that engaging in moral or immoral actions has gameplay implications in a sense that some skills or mechanics can only be accessed by having good or bad morality. This essentially turns an ethical decision into a logical one based on benefit analysis rather than morality.

Fluid morality is a way to implement a morality system in a virtual world, that dynamically changes the player's alignment depending on actions taken. While the concept itself presents a realistic and true idea that morality slightly changes throughout a person's

life, the way it does in most video games that suffer the fluid morality issue is simply not feasible in the real world primarily in how rapidly the player can turn from good to evil and vice-versa. Again, most players do that to experiment and get as much out of the game as they can, so it all comes down to motivation.

This issue is prevalent in most videogames and it is rather difficult to pin point any that suffer from it the most. Prominent examples would be The Fallout 3/4, The Elder Scrolls etc. The possible fix to this problem is hard to implement without drastically altering the core game mechanics, which, while can be done, is usually not worth the risk of doing so.
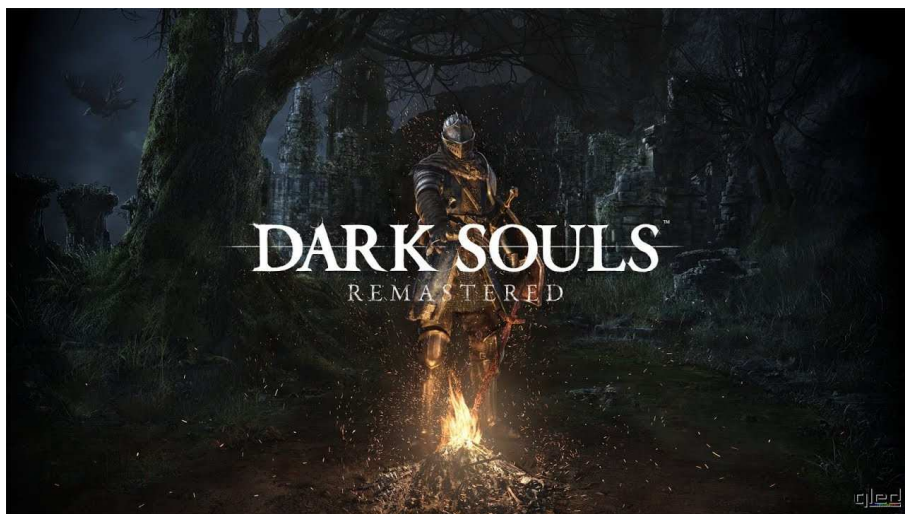
Img. 4 Dark Souls Remastered cover art

"An example of permanent morality would be a game like Dark Souls, that doesn't utilize a save system, but rather a respawn and checkpoint mechanic, that doesn't involve time travel" and offers no ability for the player to undo their mistakes. It really goes to show how much the fluid morality issue can influence the game in a negative way, due to Dark Souls not even featuring a prominent morality system.

The hardest videogame morality problem to fix by far is lack of proper player motivation and consequences to one's actions. To explain why, we should look at the concept of videogames themselves in a somewhat unconventional way.

We can present any videogame as 2 interconnected layers. The bottom layer will be referred to as in-game mechanics. This layer encompasses the rules of the in-game world: ranging from mundane and usual things like physics and time to interpersonal relationships between characters. The top layer, also referred to as the META layer, describes the player-game interactions. All of the mechanics, contained within this layer are out-of-game mechanics, meaning that they are not an integral part of the in-game world. Examples would be: gaining experience points, leveling up and, of course, saving

and loading. This is where the problem of non-existent consequences for morally questionable actions rears its head. The two layers mentioned are separate from one another, which creates detachment between in-game and out-of-game mechanics. Thusly, we arrive at the core problem.

Any morality system implemented in the game would occupy the bottom, in-game layer, because it needs to feel like an integral part of the world, otherwise it wouldn't be believable. Players, however, can only really feel any repercussions for their actions if they take place out-of-game to a certain extent. The solution to this issue would be to make major moral decisions made by the player influence the way the story is told or how in-game characters relate to the player character. All of the aforementioned solutions come down to better writing on author's part, but there is another way to accomplish the same goal by different means.

The two game layers can, to some extent, be brought together, and doing this drastically changes the way players view the game. Introducing seemingly out-of-game mechanics as game world concepts is a bold choice, but one that can bring great pay-off in both short and long run. This approach to creating a videogame produces what is commonly referred to as a META-game. These are relatively scarce, but, contradictory to established tropes, they often receive praise for how they approach complicated real-world concepts including morality.

An example of such a game, that has solved two out of three in-game morality issues presented in this research will be Undertale, developed in 2016 by an independent developer Toby Fox. Undertale handles common gaming tropes, particularly saving and loading your progress, very differently from most other games. The aforementioned mechanics are recognized as a vital part of the game world, and are known to exist by some of the game characters. This fact changes the player's perception of the game severely. Now the player is no longer above consequences, as whatever they have done has already happened, even after they decide to load an earlier save file and act differently, and no longer can the player switch between acting morally or immorally on a whim, due to in-game elements such as characters and mechanics reminding them of their past actions.

The core story of Undertale is not to be mentioned here, except when it is relevant to the argument, but in a nutshell, the player needs to lead their character out of the Underground, inhabited by sentient monsters of varying levels of malevolence. The game presents an abundance of opportunities to make decisions, that will influence the game in a major way, but the main choice that will yield the most prominent changes is whether to fight or spare the monsters that hinder the player's progress. It is explicitly stated in game that not all monsters are dangerous or wish to harm the player, so the choice is sometimes fairly difficult. Here arises one problem, that this game chose not to address, dual morality. The world of Undertale is painted in explicit black and white because of the aforementioned reasoning. The "proper" and most likely canon way to progress through the game is not to kill any monster, regardless of their intent to kill you. This can be a morally questionable decision to make, because it can have further harmful implications.

How the game handles evil, and particularly, absolute evil defined by Hannah Arendt, deserves a brief yet thorough overview. The game does not discourage the player from evil acts by giving them in-game punishments, but rather invoking what is called "cognitive dissonance" in the player.

Cognitive dissonance is a term in psychology used to describe a state of mind, that occurs whenever your actions don't match up with your beliefs.[8] A few examples of it would be the feeling you get while cheating on a test, to which you had all the opportunities to prepare or breaking your diet on some kind of occasion. The main phenomenon of cognitive dissonance that will be explored here is how our brain handles it. This state of mind is inherently harmful to us, as it invokes stress, that can negatively influence our health, both mental and physical, and our brain recognizes it. The immediate response of our brain is to try and silence its cognitive dissonance, what is commonly referred to as finding an excuse for your actions. The most common way of doing so, as Stanley Milgram's experiments have shown, is to push the blame onto someone else, who technically gave you permission to commit this action. When we can't do it, however, the unease caused by it stays with us and only grows stronger as we continue to engage in actions that led us into this state of mind to begin with.

The brilliance of Undertale's handling of immoral deeds lies in this concept. The game is set up in such a way, that there is no one you could reasonably push the blame for your actions onto, and if the player so chooses to continuously engage in universally immoral actions, they will be constantly reminded that they are the only ones responsible for their choices.

As it stands now, the majority of videogames opt to implement a utilitarian morality model, judging actions as right or wrong based on subjective perception of benefit to the player and/or the game world. This approach, while it works in some situations, especially extreme ones, is not universal and can lead to questionable actions being justified as "beneficial to the majority", therefore morally acceptable.

The common feature of all examples of good ways to implement morality into a video game is that the system isn't prominent and has no statistical and numerical gameplay implications. This approach eliminates the concept of benefit or utility to the player that certain more rewarding moral choices bring to the table, thusly allowing the player to use their inherent moral compass to decide what seems right and wrong to them. Counter-intuitive as it may be, this approach lets a morality system feel real and integral to the game world.

Finding better and more believable ways of implementing real-world concepts such as, but not limited to morality, into virtual environments was and stays a tricky question to tackle, due to the need of balancing realism with player enjoyment. The main goal of this research is to outline in broader strokes how ethical concepts and behavioral psychology can be used to improve player experience in an out-of-game fashion. Particularly, when tackling morality, the majority of game developers create a morality system as an afterthought, which in turn leads to it feeling hollow and forced. In conclusion, having taken everything mentioned in this thesis into consideration, an answer to better morality implementation in video games would be to integrate it into the core mechanics of the game to make it feel integral to the game world. While it may not seem significant at the moment, such things as augmented and virtual reality are developing at alarming speeds and the closer the virtual worlds that we create will be to the real one in every way, the more benefit it will bring both to the industry and to the consumers(players).

References

1. Arendt H. The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951). Revised ed.; New York: Schocken, 2004.
2. Bayles, M. D., ed. (1968) Contemporary Utilitarianism, Anchor Books, Doubleday
3. *Einstein, Gilles O.; McDaniel, Mark A.; Williford, Carrie L.; Pagan, Jason L.; Dismukes, R. Key (2003).* Forgetting of
4. intentions in demanding situations is rapid. Journal of Experimental Psychology: *Applied.*
5. Elon, Amos. Introduction. Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. By Hannah Arendt. New York: Penguin, (2006).
6. Festinger, L., Carlsmith, J. (1959). Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance. California: Stanford University Press
7. Harvard moral test, available at http://www.moralsensetest.com/experiment/originaldilemmas.html
8. Johnson, Robert (2008). Kant's Moral Philosophy. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
9. Kant, Immanuel (1785). Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, available at https://groundlaying.appspot.com/
10. Long, A. A.; Sedley, D. N. (1987). The Hellenistic Philosophers: Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 366–67.
11. Milgram, Stanley (1964). Behavioral Study of Obedience, available at https://www.birdvilleschools.net/cms/lib/TX01000797/Centricity/Domain/1013/AP%20Psychology/milgram.pdf

Едвард Дідух

КОНЦЕПТУАЛЬНІ ЗАСАДИ МОРАЛЬНОСТІ У КОМП'ЮТЕРНИХ ІГРАХ

У даній статті була досліджена тема концептуальних основ моралі у відеоіграх, розглянуті основні проблеми, з якими стикаються розробники при реалізації систем моралі та запропоновані методи їх вирішення. Були використані концепти деонтологічної та утилітарної етики, а також дослідження І. Канта, Х. Арендт та С. Мілгрема на тему етики та особливостей поведінки людей як моральних агентів. В результаті дослідження був зроблений висновок щодо використання деонтологічної та утилітарної моделі етики у відеоіграх, виявлені основні проблеми впровадження системи моралі у віртуальне оточення та запропоновані методи їх вирішення.

Ключові слова*: мораль, етика, комп'ютерні ігри*

Эдвард Дидух

КОНЦЕПТУАЛЬНЫЕ ОСНОВАНИЯ МОРАЛЬНОСТИ В КОМПЬЮТЕРНЫХ ИГРАХ

В данной статье была исследована тема концептуальных основ морали в видеоиграх, рассмотрены основные проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются разработчики при реализации систем морали и предложены методы их решения. Были использованы концепты деонтологической и утилитарной этики, а также исследования И. Канта, Х. Арендт и С. Милгрэма на тему этики и особенностей поведения людей как моральных агентов. В результате исследования был сделан вывод об использовании деонтологической и утилитарной модели этики в видеоиграх, выявлены основные проблемы внедрения системы морали в виртуальное окружение и предложены методы их решения.

Ключевые слова*: мораль, этика, компьютерные игры*