Scientific Research

Philosophical Themes in *Mass Effect*

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Abstract

In this paper we will analyze some decisions a player has to make as Shepard, the main character from the popular video game *Mass Effect*. We will view those decisions through the lenses of two philosophical positions, utilitarianism and Nietzsche's "will to power", and connect those and other dilemmas to our own world today. We will also discuss ways how *Mass Effect* could be integrated into and be a useful aid for an introductory philosophy class.

Keywords

Video Games; Utilitarianism; Will to Power; Nietzsche; Argument

1. Introduction

As video games continue to evolve, they are becoming vehicles of philosophical ideologies (Günzel, 2007). Today there are many video games that allow the players to exercise their philosophies and experience their consequences. Games such as *Fallout* 3 give players complete freedom for how their character evolves based on their actions (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008). *Façade* puts players in the shoes of a friend of a couple whose marriage can be saved or broken by the players' decisions (Mateas, 2006). People often refer to their game characters in the first person, suggesting that people actually inject themselves into the game world (Cogburn, 2009).

Mass Effect is another video game that gives its players the freedom to choose how conflicts are solved, and so lends itself well as a medium for teaching philosophy. In *Mass Effect*, players create and name a male or female human known as Commander Shepard and control this character throughout the game. Shepard is in control of a human space frigate and is given the responsibility of tracking down Saren, a terrorist alien who threatens to start a war between the organic alien races and a cybernetic race known as the Geth. Eventually Shepard's task escalates to the point where she is making decisions that ultimately save the galaxy (BioWare Corporation, 2007). Throughout *Mass Effect* Shepard has to deal with ethical situations similar to those that have come up in

human history primarily through conversation. Shepard can make decisions, especially in politics, which include or exclude the other alien races, which is analogous to racism in human history. Shepard can mitigate or promote a character's will to commit suicide. These ethical decisions, and a plethora more, are all up to the player controlling Commander Shepard, and the consequences are often severe and irreversible once they are made.

In this paper we will discuss several pivotal philosophical decisions at the end of the *Mass Effect* storyline that the player can control under the contexts of utilitarianism and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Der Wille zur Macht* (The Will to Power). These analyses can be used to ignite discussion in a classroom setting, and many variations can be spun out of them. In order to appreciate the video game as a medium for teaching philosophy, one has to take advantage of the fact that consequences are not permanent as they are in real life or in a novel, as they can be replayed to achieve a different result.

2. Philosophical Dilemmas the Player Must Solve

As the player controls Commander Shepard throughout the events of *Mass* Effect she must continuously make decisions that affect anything from a couple deciding to perform gene therapy on their ill child to deciding whether an entire species should be eradicated. Many of these decisions are philosophical in nature or affect the apparent philosophy of other characters in the plot. This is especially true towards the end of the game.

In the last major event in the *Mass Effect* plot the Citadel, a giant city housing the interracial government of the galaxy, falls under attack by a giant sentient ship known as Sovereign and a fleet of ships controlled by the Geth. Shepard manages to make her way to the Citadel tower, where Saren and Sovereign are attempting to call the rest of Sovereign's race to war. Ultimately it is up to the player, via the main character Shepard, to stop Saren and Sovereign from annihilating all organic life from the galaxy[1]. In doing so Shepard must make several choices, which we will use as topics for discussion. Because Saren is under Sovereign's mind control, should Shepard convince Saren to commit suicide so he can be free of Sovereign's influence, and so Shepard can deal with Sovereign quickly and directly? Should she give the order to save the multiracial council governing the galaxy that is about to be destroyed, or should she tell the human fleet to hold back to minimize human losses? If Shepard does not save the Council, should she allow the reconstruction of a multiracial council or create an all-human one? Finally, should Shepard stop Saren in the first place?

When Shepard first finds Saren in the tower they begin to argue over why Saren is helping Sovereign eliminate all life from the galaxy. Saren is at this point in the game being influenced so severely by Sovereign that he can barely think for himself. Saren believes so much in Sovereign that he is completely loyal to it, especially after Sovereign had promised Saren great power to come after their assault succeeds. Through conversation Shepard can draw out Saren's true self for a brief amount of time, and she will have the option to convince Saren to commit suicide.

3. The Utilitarian Perspective

We will first examine the suicide dilemma under the utilitarian point of view (Mill, 1979)[2], particularly Jeremy Bentham's view where "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" is the right thing to do (Titus, 2005; Soccio, 2001; Bentham, 1823). Consider the following argument from Saren's perspective:

1) The more people one makes happy, the more 'good' one's acting [Utilitarianism].
2) Preserving the life of a person that is threatened against its will makes that person happy.
3) Saren has the power to take his own life.
4) If Saren takes his own life, then he will be helping the rest of the galaxy survive.
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5) Saren taking his own life is "good" (i.e., he should take his own life).

In 1) we are implying that we are following a utilitarian point of view. After all, if more people are alive, more people can be happy. If Saren takes his own life, then he is facilitating Shepard's mission to stop Sovereign from annihilating all life in the galaxy, allowing countless lives to be saved. Saren's killing himself entails one alien's death, but one death does not compare to the number of aliens he is saving. Through the utilitarian

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[1]Although the player can choose to do different things in the game that affect the storyline, the player-character's objective is always to stop Saren.

[2]J. S. Mill states the "Principle of Utility" as follows: "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness pain and the privation of pleasure."

point of view, Saren's decision should be straightforward.

Of course, from the player's perspective as seen through Shepard, the decision should be the same. Although Shepard and Saren are on different sides of the underlying argument, under utilitarianism it is still apparent that more lives would be saved if Shepard convinces Saren to take his own life than not. This example can show how utilitarianism can be resilient to changes in perspective[3].

Let us now examine whether Shepard should save the Council or save human lives by not coming to the Council's aid. Utilitarianism would dictate that we should find the solution that would yield the greatest happiness for the most people. If we were to compare just the lives at stake, we are deciding whether three aliens plus their ship's crew should die so countless humans may live, or many human lives should be sacrificed to save that one council ship. At this level, it would be better to allow the Council to be overtaken since there would be more living people to be happy. From this we can construct the following argument:

1) The more people one makes happy, the more "good" one's acting [Utilitarianism].
2) Preserving the life of a person that is threatened against its will makes that person happy.
3) Preserving the Council's ship requires sacrificing far more human lives.
4) Sacrificing the Council's ship preserves far more human lives.
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5) The human fleet should not rescue the Council's ship.

From a political standpoint, however, things are slightly more complicated. People can often assume that philosophies of right and wrong are constrained to only humans. What then if other organisms exhibit humanoid traits? It is analogous to our current issues involving racism or sexism. The current Council is multiracial because it represents the three most prominent races in the galaxy. Preserving their lives maintains this representation, and these three races would in general continue to be happy. Surely then, Shepard should sacrifice the many human lives so everyone else can be happy. After all, humans are not a council race, so they are not regarded as highly as the others. Remember, though, that if Shepard decides not to save the Council, she decides how the new governing body will be reformed. Shepard may choose to recreate the multiracial council and add one human member, or she may choose to create an all-human government. In this scenario utilitarianism would favor the former. More races would be represented, making many more living beings happy and content with the government. The argument then takes the following form:

1) The more people one makes happy, the more "good" one's acting [Utilitarianism].
2) Preserving the life of a person that is threatened against its will makes that person happy.
3) Preserving the Council's ship requires sacrificing far more human lives.
4) Sacrificing the Council's ship preserves far more human lives.
5) Shepard can decide how the Council will be rebuilt if the current Council falls.
6) For each race that is represented on the Council, more members of that race will be happy than not.
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7) The human fleet should not rescue the Council's ship, and Shepard should rebuild a multiracial Council.

So what should Shepard choose in the end? When all is said and done, Shepard should sacrifice the Council and rebuild it in such a way that not only humans are represented, but the alien races are as well. Many human lives would be saved by not attempting to save the Council's ship, but at the same time the other races would be kept happy because they remain represented under the new government. As with many other dilemmas, however, this utilitarian approach would only be feasible if Shepard knew all of the outcomes of the different decisions, and the long-term results, and this is something she does not have. Knowing only what Shepard would know when she has to decide the current Council's fate, Shepard would only know that there are lives that have to be saved, and perhaps the ruling body would have to be replaced. Shepard does not know that she will be making such a large decision. In short, Shepard may be right in choosing to save the human lives anyways regardless of how the government is remade since more lives are preserved. Also, pertaining to the utilitarian approach, there is always the central question: How many is too many? However, the beauty of video games is that they can be played again to reach different outcomes, so eventually the player will have the omniscience to make a more proper utilitarian decision.

4. The Nietzschean Perspective

Nietzsche's *Der Wille zur Macht*, or "will to power" (Kaufmann, 1974: p. 178), serves as a suitable counterpoint

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[3]Not in changes of ethical systems though, as in some religions suicide is always considered wrong.

for the dilemmas against utilitarianism. In video games, antagonists are typically characterized as entities that want absolute power—a purist, literal view of will to power. This contrasts the typical protagonist, who usually tries to save the world in the safest way possible—utilitarianism, in its happiest sense[4].

Consider the dilemmas under the will to power. First, let us observe the dilemma between Shepard and Saren on the issue of suicide. Consider the next argument:

1) If one has access to power, one should seize that power [Will to Power].

2) Sovereign is offering Saren great power under his rule.

3) Saren must be alive to take advantage of this power.

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4) Saren should not take his own life.

This argument interprets Nietzsche's will to power literally. If a person has the opportunity to seize power, they should take it. If Sovereign succeeds in its invasion, it will have absolute power over the galaxy. Sovereign is offering to give Saren a taste of absolute power by allowing him to take command over the extermination of life in the galaxy. What better opportunity is there for him? Since this power can only be exerted in the living world, then it is clear that Saren should survive the conflict, and he should not take his own life.

Some philosophers do not interpret will to power literally. According to some Nietzschean scholars, it is an oversimplification to interpreted Nietzsche's will to power as such. For example, the will to power is the psychological drive and "desire for mastery—of its environment, of its social group, of its own drives and instincts", to excel, to overcome, and "at the very least […], the expression for whatever it is that human beings fundamentally want" (Solomon, 2000; Kaufmann, 2005; Novack, 1996).

In philosophy textbooks, though, the student should have no problems coming across either interpretation of will to power. M. Velasquez, in explaining Nietzsche through his book, supports the traditional interpretation of will to power: "Life itself is essential assimilation, injury, violation of the foreign and the weaker, suppression, hardness, the forcing of one's own forms upon something else, ingestion and—at least in its mildest form—exploitation" (Velasquez, 2002; Nietzsche, trsl. by Cowan, 2005; Pojman, 1996).

Indeed, Nietzsche himself used it to "explain behavior he happened to dislike". In his *Nachlass*, Nietzsche claims: "I have found strength where one does not look for it: in simple, mild, and pleasant people, without the least desire to rule—and, conversely, the desire to rule has often appeared to me a sign of inward weakness: they fear their own slave soul and shroud it in a royal cloak" (Kaufmann, 1974).

This changes the entire argument. Sovereign is giving Saren the opportunity to rule over his armies, which under the literal interpretation of will to power is as good as Saren can get, short of overthrowing Sovereign himself. However, Nietzsche suggests that the desire to rule is a "sign of inward weakness", and weakness is the lack of power. We must also consider what happens if Saren lives but declines Sovereign's offer for power. Sovereign seeks to destroy all organic life, and Saren is organic life. If Saren does not swear allegiance to Sovereign, then Sovereign will kill him. If Saren still swears his allegiance to Sovereign, then Sovereign will have complete control over him. Saren would have no power over even himself under either circumstance. We can now reconstruct the argument:

1) If one has access to power, one should seize that power [Will to Power].

2) Weakness is the inverse of power.

3) The desire to rule is a "sign of inward weakness" [*Nachlass*].

4) Sovereign is offering Saren great power under his rule.

5) If Saren denies his rule under Sovereign, he will have no power even over himself.

6) Saren has the power to take his own life.

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7) Saren should take his own life.

At this point it seems there is nowhere for Saren to go to seek more power. His mind has been severely altered from Sovereign's influence, and he rarely has control (i.e. power) over himself. Shepard, for a brief moment, gave Saren the power to choose what he wanted to do with himself. Sovereign is offering him power through ruling armies, but in truth he has no real power because Sovereign is controlling him anyways. On the other hand, Saren is unable to completely break Sovereign's control over his mind, so he cannot escape his situation or even change sides. It is in this moment that Saren is able to exert the last of his power, and after this he will

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[4]Considering the extreme of certain positions has sometimes, pedagogically speaking, certain advantages. It helps clarifying what an intricate position is not, and see its consequences at the extreme.

never have the opportunity to have any power over himself or anyone else. His remaining gesture of power is to take his own life so that no one else, especially Sovereign, can have power over him. Because it is the most power he will have for the remainder of his life, he may as well take advantage of it.

Now let us analyze the dilemma concerning the Council. Under Nietzsche's will to power, it is quite clear what Shepard should choose:

1) If one has access to power, one should seize that power [Will to Power].

2) The multiracial council currently holds the greatest stake at power over the alien races.

3) If the Council falls, it will lose its power.

4) Shepard can defeat Sovereign and sacrifice the Council's ship, displaying her power.

5) Shepard can rebuild the Council to be purely human, giving humans complete power over the alien races.

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6) The human fleet should not rescue the Council, and Shepard should rebuild an all-human Council.

Shepard has the opportunity to usurp power from the current holder of power, and she should exercise it. Shepard should sacrifice the current council and build an all-human government, making the humans the most powerful race in the galaxy. After all, it is the humans who vanquish Sovereign, the being who had all the power, so it would be fitting for the superior humans to rule over the other, now weaker, races.

Let us now examine the overarching dilemma: is it right for Shepard to stop Sovereign from taking over the galaxy? Let us assume Shepard's point of view influenced by will to power:

1) If one has access to power, one should seize that power [Will to Power].

2) Sovereign is attempting to usurp all power in the galaxy.

3) Shepard has the power to stop Sovereign.

4) If Shepard stops Sovereign, she will have the power to create the galaxy's future.

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5) Shepard should stop Sovereign.

From this argument it should be clear that Shepard should defeat Sovereign. Sovereign has the power to overthrow the alien government and Shepard has the power to stop Sovereign. If Shepard is successful, she will have the ability to decide the fate of the alien government and, by extension, the fate of all associated aliens of those races. If morality is judged by the power gained as will to power suggests, then surely Shepard should stop Sovereign.

This interesting dilemma seems circular: if one has the ability to take over, do they have the right to take over? This situation has come up countless times in human history. Suppose Sovereign takes the power from the Council. By will to power, Sovereign would be right in doing so. Shepard in turn takes the power from Sovereign by defeating it. But only Sovereign do we designate to be "evil". Is Sovereign evil because it has all of the power at one point? But then, the Council was evil for most of the game because it held power throughout the game, and Shepard is evil at the end of the game. Is Sovereign evil because it pursued power over the galaxy? But will to power is just that: take power if at all possible. Is Sovereign evil because it killed many people to achieve its power? Shepard did as well. Why then is Shepard "good"? In other words, Shepard achieves what he actually opposes to.

Compound this with Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative: "Act according to a maxim which can at the same time make itself a universal law" (Kant, 1785). Consider now the following argument:

1) If one has access to power, one should seize that power [Will to Power].

2) Act such that 1) is a universal law [Categorical Imperative].

3) If one should seize power, everyone else should seize power.

4) Shepard (everyone) has the power to stop Sovereign.

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5) Shepard (everyone) should stop Sovereign.

It appears to be a valid argument. If one feels it is right for them to do something, surely it is right for everyone else to do so. After all, many people live by the ethic of reciprocity, or the Golden Rule ("do unto others as you would have them do unto you") (Titus, 1995). So it should be right for anyone to seize power, so long as we would let anyone else seize our own power. Of course, no one in their 'right' mind would allow anyone else to have power over them; is that not why people fight for their freedom in the first place? Because of this, the argument is unsound. If everyone believed that they had the power to seize control of the galaxy, then by this logic

they should try to do it. It would not even be a war anymore. There would be so many factions fighting over themselves that there would be little, if anything, left to rule in the end. They would end up fighting for power over nothing.

5. Classroom Discussions about *Mass Effect*

The study of *Mass Effect*, in relation to topics covered in class, was first suggested to some students as a final project in an introductory philosophy course in 2008. Then, in 2009, we implemented topics from the game in class, such as the ones discussed in this paper, to help the students understand more issues related to utilitarianism, Nietzschean and, to a lesser degree, Kantian ethics. According to a student questionnaire given to evaluate this implementation, the idea was well-received. Students used a hands-on approach to understand challenging concepts such as "the utility principle", the "will to power" and the "categorical imperative". The students could see in praxis the problems associated to those otherwise theoretical concepts. The specific types of concrete arguments coming out of the game not only helped them understand the grounds behind each philosophical position but also allowed them to test those arguments in the game and examine their consequences. Furthermore, it helped them construct counterexamples and counterarguments to each position.

Beyond the discussions in class, a comprehensive homework assignment was given to the students for further analysis and reflection of the related concepts, in which themes from the game were part of the questions. The homework was analogous (similar in structure and level) to homework the students received on other sections, such as the Self, Mind-Body Problem, Knowledge, and Religion. The assignment could also serve as a model for similar types of homework, in which themes from games, books, or movies are part of the questions.

The instructor does *not* necessarily have to be a gamer (as the first author is not) in order to use the game in a class. A general knowledge of the game and presenting the relevant episodes from the game in a related lecture could be sufficient. The same could be said for the students, even though for them playing the game would prove more pedagogical. It would allow them to experiment with different choices of action and examine their consequences, always in the safety of the virtual world.

6. Philosophical Exercises Using *Mass Effect*

Several exercises can be suggested to promote the understanding of philosophical concepts within *Mass Effect*. Besides the few dilemmas we have covered thus far, there are many others that can be used to reinforce teaching chapters in ethics in an introductory philosophy course. Many of these tasks expose dilemmas that can be applied to either utilitarianism or will to power as above. The following are some exercises that can supplement an introductory ethics class:

1) Play through *Mass Effect* as a female, and engage in a relationship with Liara. Liara is an alien that exhibits only one gender, though the character is depicted as having feminine traits. Thus, the task is to analyze the philosophy behind homosexual relationships. Note that male-male relationships are impossible in the game. For example, it is impossible for a male Shepard to engage in a relationship with Kaidan, who is one of the main male crew members on Shepard's ship. Why was this not considered in the making of the game? Is homosexuality more disturbing to the audiences than bestiality?

2) Find the couple in the game who are arguing about the woman's unborn baby, and observe both outcomes of the argument. Relate this argument to stem cell research. Is it acceptable to deter a potential disease for the fetus by operating on the fetus *in vivo* where it may endanger either the mother or the fetus? What justifies trying to improve one's life at the cost of another?

3) Play through *Mass Effect* as a female in a relationship with Kaidan and favoring Ashley in your party, or play as a male in a relationship with Ashley and favoring Kaidan in your party. In the Virmire plot, decide which one will live. The point is to generate a 'boy/girlfriend or best friend' scenario. Who would you rescue? Justify your decision with a valid argument[5].

7. Issues in Using *Mass Effect* as a Classroom Topic

There are some issues for using a video game such as *Mass Effect* as a case study. The first is economical: there is a very high initial cost to non-gamers compared to other media such as books. In the case of *Mass Effect*, one

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[5]It is important for this task that it actually be done instead of simply thinking about it, as it is very easy to think about in our minds until we are faced with the decision. Sometimes what we think does not always match what we do.

needs a suitable computer to play on, as well as a copy of the game. This was not an issue at the college we created the homework assignment, as nearly everyone who attends is a gamer and likely owns *Mass Effect*.

Another issue is the target demographic. Similarly to how certain people will read books, certain other people will play video games. Newer games try to appeal to broader audiences. *Mass Effect* attempts to break the ice by allowing a great deal of customization in Shepard's appearance, including gender. Also, *Mass Effect* is action-oriented and may deter the faint of heart. In these cases it is recommended that these students play under the "casual" setting since gameplay is not the focus of the discussions. Under extreme cases the lecturer should provide a lab machine with save states relating to the different discussions, although this would hinder discussion of character development-related philosophies such as why students developed their characters the way they did.

8. Conclusion

Although video games require a very significant time commitment exceeding that of a single book, they allow both teacher and student to apply their own moral codes into their styles of play and by extension to everyday life while not significantly disrupting their actual lives. In addition, people can try to exercise decisions they would not normally make in real life since their in-game decisions do not have real-world consequences (aside from the time spent playing), and games give these people the opportunity to see multiple sides of the same dilemma.

BioWare's *Mass Effect* gives the player the opportunity to decide the fate of the galaxy in its diegetic world. The player may use their own morals to control the flow of the plot, or they can experiment with other decisions to see their consequences. The dilemmas the player faces throughout his experience playing the game show themselves in everyday life. These connections from a safe virtual world to a consequential real world make the philosophical dilemmas apply more to those who pay attention to them. Just as Shepard's actions are reflected by changes in the storyline, changes in the American or other (state or local) governments are meant to reflect the overall standing of American or other wants as a whole.

For example, the player controlling Shepard is ultimately giving Saren the option to kill himself for his own reasons, and Saren knows that his own time to live as himself is limited. This type of dilemma has surfaced in our own world. In 1997 the state of Oregon enacted its Death with Dignity Act, where terminally ill patients can end their lives legally pending approval of their doctors (Oregon State Government, 2007)[6]. In 2008 the state of Washington passed Initiative 1000, an initiative with similar ramifications (Death with Dignity National Center, 2008). While Shepard (or the player controlling Shepard for that matter) is no doctor, giving Saren the power to choose his own fate is very similar as giving terminally ill patients the power to choose theirs[7].

While the story of *Mass Effect* is ultimately linear, it shows the potential of video games to come as philosophical media. Graphics and the immersion of a player in games continue to be the leading factors of video game evolution, but they are also becoming vehicles of personal enrichment and change, for better or for worse. *Mass Effect* can exercise a player's moral decisions. Other newer games such as *Fallout* 3 give the player even more control over the development of their character, and in doing so the player experiences the philosophical ramifications of those decisions as well. In the future video games will have the potential to simulate worlds that are even more philosophically charged.

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[6]The statute defines the conditions of which terminally ill patients may elect to have their caretakers take their lives as an act of mercy.

[7]Another analogy, related to racism, comes from the issue on deciding the fate of the multiracial Council. A point can be made that if we cannot view our own people objectively, how do we expect to do the same with alien races, should we ever come across them?

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