HE WAS THE MOST...HUMAN: ETHICAL PLAY IN DOKI DOKI UNIVERSE

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Abstract

Doki Doki Universe is an adventure game in which players control QT3, a robot charged with the task of better understanding human nature. The narrative context of this game utilizes the modeling principle to teach players about prosocial behavior. Gameplay consists primarily of two systems: object-oriented, fetch-quest puzzles and personality quizzes. Players' ethical agency is limited to dialogue choices and answers to personality questions that do not affect the overall story, but the game aggregates data from player choices in both systems to craft a personality profile which can be reviewed and modified. In this way, the game teaches reflection on empathy, logic, and personality traits. Though the game does not afford players a strong degree of moral agency, the game rules and world are still ethically relevant because they foster reflective practice of prosocial behavior.

Overview of Gameplay

Doki Doki Universe (HumaNature Studios, 2013) is an adventure game in which the player controls QT3, a robot on a quest to understand humanity and become more "human." The player

is tasked with traveling between different planets in order to acquire objects and deliver them to people in need. Each planet suffers from one particular human flaw, like pride, bullying, or pollution. The game's narrative explicitly frames the play experience as a quest for benevolent self-exploration, and the procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) of the explore-interact-resolve systems is congruent with this story. The game positions the player as a helpful-yet-naïve individual, a perfect role from which to perform identity work (Gee, 2007) concerning interpersonal communication—and the game world is characterized by a series of discrete environments that act as caricatures of important ethical failings in modern society. As the innocent outsider, players are asked to observe, help, and assess the denizens of these flawed planets.

Object-Oriented Interaction

As a genre, adventure games are videogames in which players guide an avatar through a virtual environment with the objective of interacting with non-player characters (NPCs) to obtain items and information about how those items can interact with the player, NPCs, and the environment. Typically, players are forced to obtain these items in predetermined succession, with a sort of bait-and-switch progression. Objects that can facilitate progression to the next environment are withheld by an NPC until their goal is satisfied, that goal usually being the acquisition of an item possessed by another NPC—which, in turn, wants something that can only be obtained by speaking with yet another NPC. In this way, players are forced to speak with all NPCs and use logical induction to understand the correct order of interaction and item acquisition; only then can players assist all NPCs and obtain the items and information necessary to complete progress in a given environment. *Doki Doki Universe* is an adventure game that faithfully adheres to this formula. The only exception is that, unlike most adventure games, the planets

(levels) are discrete gameplay segments which is the player is able to visit and exit at any time.

Most adventure games feature multiple-choice dialogue options alongside object-oriented interaction, as a method of communication with NPCs. Though *Doki Doki Universe* has a few instances of player-driven dialogue, the primary mode of interaction is conducted with Summonables, collectable objects that are stored in a menu-like repository, which are used to ask NPCs about their likes and dislikes, and to fulfill their requests (see Figure 1). Many objects have overlapping attributes with other objects, so many Summonables —a rainbow, flower, or peacock—could be used to satisfy an NPC's request for "something pretty," for example. The game's lead designer Greg Johnson notes that most characters' desires are for objects that have two attributes, such as "scary and disgusting," to make the matching "a bit more interesting" for players (personal communication, September 8, 2015).

This object-oriented mode of interpersonal interaction keeps the game accessible to a broad audience and fosters an embodied perspective in learning problem-solving skills, where players map solutions directly onto objects in the world. Since the game requires players to choose objects which will help people in practice, problem-based thinking is situated in the context of each mission, but can eventually be abstracted as players discover general categories of objects which satisfy similar requests. After completing all of the primary goals of a planet-based level, the player is congratulated and reminded of the lesson—that is, the prominent "human" trait which was keeping the denizens from being happy. The player is then asked to identify which characters exemplify that trait. Answering this question, as with the other dialogue choices, results in a pop-up notification with personality assessment based on the player's choice.

Figure 1: Summonables.

Gestural Greetings, Character Profiles, and Dialogue Choices

Players are directed to speak to all NPCs in every level. Each NPC offers a greeting, followed by some information about themselves or another NPC. Players are afforded three gestural greetings—bowing, waving, and blowing a kiss—with which to address characters. These gestures are performed by moving the right joystick in different directions. Each NPC has their own greeting preference and offering the correct greeting increases the NPC's satisfaction rating, while performing the wrong gesture decreases their satisfaction. Once learned, usually by obtaining the information from another NPC, this preference information is available in that NPC's character profile, which is a repository of character-specific information that can be accessed by pressing a button while selecting that character. These character profiles also include likes, dislikes, and other information relevant to satisfying everyone's needs and desires (see Figure 2). Sometimes, dialogue choices are available to the player, but they do not appear every time QQT3 approaches an NPC. When they do appear, there are also always icons next to choice, indicating their intention, like a smiley face, question mark, devil-like face, heart, sun, bunny face, or jester face. The circle with a star inside represents honesty. In one situation, the symbol sits next to the dialogue option, "Not a chance. Sorry, but he's dead."

Personality Quizzes

In addition to the mission-driven planets, the world map also features asteroids, each of which represents one of several dozen five-question personality quizzes. Each question is simple and indirect. Instead of asking whether you consider yourself extroverted or introverted, the game might ask which planet you want to visit or which alien you would most like to encounter. The choices are all crafted to represent distinct personality differences in relation to the underlying psychological concept. After completing each quiz, the game interprets the answers and tells the player about his or her personality in general terms. The next several pages of the results screen provide a question-by-question breakdown of the player's answers, elaborating on the issue at hand in each question and explaining more specifically what the player's choice reveals about himself or herself (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Character profile.

The game saves the results of each quiz, but players are free to revisit completed asteroids at any time to review and change their answers. There is no penalty for changing answers, so players have the option to explore alternate answers to read the game's explanations for each choice. This is useful, since the "answers" to each question are in fact cartoonish drawings that represent abstract concepts, with varying degrees of success—so,

if the player misinterprets the intention of the designers' application of a given drawing, players can go back and select the choice which represents the true intent of their answer. The ability to revise one's answers is also fruitful from the perspective of Gee's practice principle (2007), which states that a good game gives players multiple opportunities to rehearse the same actions to reinforce a lesson. Practice is also reinforced through the conceptual overlap between quizzes. Even if a player never returns to a quiz, completing all the quizzes affords practice at interpreting the picture-based choices, as well as practice at self-reflection in order to answer honestly. The results from players' answers are aggregated into a personality profile. This system is the most direct form of teaching in the game.

Expression and Reflection, Not Decision-Making

This game serves as an example of one way in which game designers can craft an experience that fosters empathy and self-reflection, as well as exploration of personality traits and moral issues. Most videogames featuring morality components tend to integrate them into the conversation mechanics. In *Doki Doki Universe*, the morality components are built into the characters and environment, while the player acts as an observer with little moral agency. Where a game like *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007) asks players to enact their moral code, *Doki Doki Universe* asks players to express their innate preferences and tendencies in an attempt to show the player more about themselves. The flawed planets are not meant to be compelling as moral dilemmas, but as exemplars of moral issues. Instead of showing consequences through consequentialist, cause-and-effect branching narratives, the game's personality quizzes use players' intuitive responses to create a detailed personality profile to promote self-reflection.

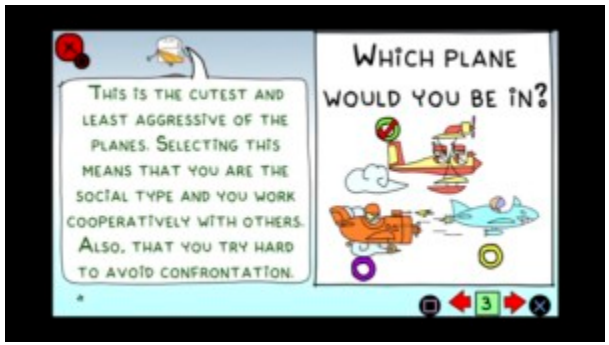

Figure 3: Analysis of personality quiz question.

Affording Ethical Play, But Not Moral Agency

Though the narrative context of *Doki Doki Universe* is ethical in nature, the game's rules do not afford any significant moral agency to players. They might choose the "naughty" response to a question, but while this results in some pop-up feedback about the personality trait revealed in such a choice, the significant actions in the main game, the only means of progression and achievement, are completing the item-driven fetch quests—that is, delivering the correct Summonables to the appropriate NPCs and helping them with their problems. Players can actually "pick up any character and repeatedly pound them into the ground, or fling them in the air or knock them over with an earthquake… [but] the only way to advance in the game was via positive ethical behaviors" (G. Johnson, personal communication, September 8, 2015). In order to make any progress on the planet-based levels, players have no choice but to fulfill the requirements of the narrative: to guide QT3 on his one-way journey to being a prosocial robot who learns to better understand humanity.

However, some item-matching solutions are open-ended enough that they "posed interesting ethical questions—for example, you were free to give the Eskimo woman or the African man a partner of the same gender and they accepted that" (G. Johnson, personal communication, September 8, 2015). But,

while this allows the player to create a pairing of their choosing, it simply opens up more options for players and expresses a particular ethical design framework, rather than posing a moral dilemma to the player. Zagal (2012) states that videogames can best encourage reflection on ethics and moral reasoning by creating dilemmas which force players to experience emotional tension, such as guilt or shame, and consider tough practical decisions, ideally in a sandbox environment which allows players to make a range of choices which are presented with ambiguity until the consequences are revealed. In this game, there are no tough decisions, nor are the levels constructed to be anything more than a superficial sandbox in which the player can manipulate only objects, not the ethical behavior of QT3—at least, not to a degree which encourages players to "consider the ramifications of alternative actions" (Zagal, 2012, p. 67). Still, even without moral agency, the game's content is ethically relevant because the narrative context and systems of play are designed to convey a message of prosocial behavior, and can be used by players to reflect on their own ethical viewpoints. When the little snowman is afraid to tell his father that he hates the cold, the player will likely identify with the NPC about the more general issue of being true to oneself while also respecting family tradition.

Procedural Rhetoric: Helping Virtual People

"The representational aspect of a computer game–its visual and narrative elements—is of secondary importance when analyzing the ethics of computer games. Games force behaviors by rules: the meaning of those behaviors, as communicated through the game world to the player, constitutes the ethics of computer games as designed objects" (Sicart, 2009, p. 23). The mechanics of *Doki Doki Universe* afford ethical play in context of the narrative but, stripped of its aesthetic shell, the abstraction of this game's rules and play are simply item acquisition and matching. Through the lens of Koster (2004), which defines a game's lessons

by its rules and systems, the game could be viewed as amoral. However, this perspective is overly reductionist and fails to account for the principles of interpersonal communication—the "meaning of those behaviors"—which bind the otherwise disparate abstract elements of objects and characters. When looking at the rules, behaviors, and emergent narrative through the lens of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), it becomes apparent that the social nature of the item-matching is inextricably linked to the abstract mechanics of the game. The procedural aspect of play might be described in terms of abstract relationships between objects, but the rhetorical aspect necessitates an understanding and appreciation of the NPCs as pseudo-social agents. Because it is impossible to effectively gain and match items without reading the dialogue and interpreting the needs and desires of the NPCs, the game's ethical framing cannot be ignored.

Players are embodied agents, bringing their perception of reality to bear on their conceptualization of virtual game environments. Sicart (2009) uses the example of falling in videogames, which we tend to consider a bad idea, unless the game (or genre) indicates otherwise. "This comparison [to the real world] implies that there are actually connections made between the real world and the game world in the mind of the player" (Sicart, 2009, p. 34), which he argues are on a deeper level than simply connecting the physics of reality to those in a virtual environment. Players also consider themselves embodied beings in the game world, having social agency–and responsibility–in the context of the game narrative. This is consistent with a communication theory known as the "media equation," which states that people naturally personify inanimate objects and that mediated stimuli are treated—on a subconscious level—the same as non-mediated stimuli (Reeves & Nass, 1996). Therefore, there is still prosocial behavior embedded in the rules of the game, even if there is not any strong affordance of moral agency. And, since prosocial behavior is the narrative and procedural focus of

the game, the play in *Doki Doki Universe* should be considered ethically relevant.

Ethically Relevant Play

According to Sicart (2009), it is essential in analyzing the ethics of videogames that scholars consider players not as passive audiences, but as empowered users of media who engage with the ethics of the game rules and world. Despite the lack of in-game agency afforded to the player, people are competent, reflexive, naturally ethically-minded beings who are able to interpret the subtext of a game just as well as its explicit narrative—and decoding play is part of the player experience. "Games can have ethical affordances because they are designed *and experienced* by moral agents immersed in specific cultural situations and times" (Sicart, 2009, p. 41). The player, explicates Sicart, is the missing piece to defining the ethical gameplay of a computer game. It is not enough to analyze the rules of a game to understand its ethical design; the researcher must also account for the ways in which players will interpret the rules, react to them, create new rules, and psychologically process the experience. In other words, it is not only the writers and readers of Well Played papers who are capable of analyzing *Doki Doki Universe* as a game with a prosocial ethical nature. Even the average player is acutely aware of the one-sided moral message in the game and is able to understand that message, while also negotiating the in-game identity with his or her real-world ethical framework.

Players are tasked with learning what NPCs like and do not like, and the basic ethical value of prosocial behavior is directly connected to gameplay progression. However, there is a light failure state in that players are free to pick up, toss around, and pound NPCs—or even create a small earthquake that leaves them dazed. So, the game allows for a degree of moral agency, but within a tightly constrained moral space that affords immorality only as far as is necessary to foster prosocial behavior. The

primary form of ethical play has little to do with exploring a full moral spectrum as an agent in the world. The ethical nature of play arises from how the game is designed and how players interpret and reflect on that design. Players are meant to enact a specific type of ethical behavior, then reflect on this behavior: how it mirrors their real-world behavior, what it means to perform such behavior within the game, and why the designers would encourage this specific type of ethical play. And, in this respect, the game succeeds in raising questions that foster reflection. Why does Samantha (the girl pictured above in Figure 2) prefer bowing but not being thrown around? Perhaps it has something to do with her love of "evil" things and a desire to be dominant in social interactions. Likewise, the NPC made of rock enjoys earthquakes; this more obvious connection makes it apparent that the game is designed to signal social cues that require interpretation. More significantly, the game itself is based on ethical belief that it is an essential part of being "more human" to know how to learn about the personalities and intentionality of others. As designer Greg Johnson noted, "learning what characters liked and didn't like was part of the game, and I suppose you could say there was a bit of a philosophical statement about the relative nature of morality behind that as well (personal communication, March 10, 2016).

What makes a videogame ethically relevant "is not about how we inhabit a world, but how that world allows us to inhabit it" (Sicart, 2009, p. 36).The world of *Doki Doki Universe* is as straightforward as its rules, focused entirely on a universe filled with planets of fallible people who would benefit from the good deeds of a helpful robot. Aside from minor transgressions—like choosing to wave in greeting when you know an NPC prefers a bow—the game world and the actions presented to the player do not afford any exploration of strongly antisocial behavior. It is not in spite of this rigidity of rules and the simplicity of the world, but precisely because of such rigidity and seeming unidimensionality, that this game is interesting from an ethical

perspective. "Ethically interesting games are those in which the existence of the rules predicts a game world in which ethical values can be deduced from the actual gameplay" (Sicart, 2009, p. 37). The ethical values of *Doki Doki Universe* are very easily deduced and, within the boundaries of such values, players are encouraged to explore and reflect.

Identity Work and Reflective Practice

The negotiation of the tripartite identity—the player, the character, and the player-as-character—is what makes *Doki Doki Universe* a tool for identity work (Gee, 2007) and transformational play (Barab. Gresalfi, & Ingram-Goble, 2010). Again, the game presents an overtly prosocial narrative, and players must read NPC dialogue and respond to their needs and desires by earning and presenting the correct Summonables to each NPC. In role-playing as a character who listens, empathizes, and helps, the game teaches players how to operate as a purely benevolent social agent. This is a departure from the real world, where even the most prosocial personalities must confront the dilemma of not having enough time or resources to help people as much as they would like—and, unfortunately, these and other extreme circumstances place "good apples" in "bad barrels" and force people to compromise on the ideal of perpetual and universal prosocial morality (Zimbardo, 2007). This is also a unique opportunity in terms of videogame worlds, since most games involve aggressive mechanics—like shooting—or at least selfish goals, like collecting every item in a game world. So, at least in the colorful and simple world of *Doki Doki Universe*, players can experience this morally-pure identity, incorporating it into their repertoire of experience while also comparing and contrasting it with their own real-world views and experiences.

There is a tremendous amount of feedback in *Doki Doki Universe*, from the "thank you" of an NPC when delivering the correct Summonable, to the results of the personality quizzes. Each NPC has a satisfaction meter which can be affected

positively by listening and helping, or negatively, by offering the incorrect greeting or by throwing objects at them. Not only is the constant stream of multilayered feedback a good example of the practice principle, one of the principles of good learning in good game design (Gee, 2007), it affords the player opportunities to learn in the moment and reflect before and after each gameplay session. This game fosters reflective practice (Schön, 1987)—not of moral agency, like in *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012; Rosenberg, 2014)—but, simply, of empathy and logical problem-solving skills. Feedback systems have been designed to alert the player to how NPCs interpret various choices and actions, and to analyze the player's behavior and provide meaningful personality assessments.

Potential Applications for Education

Through each of its systems, *Doki Doki Universe* addresses empathy and reflection on many levels. The personality quizzes foster self-reflection, while the primary gameplay—problem-solving on planets—has players learning to listen and help others, while still being cognizant of their faults. The environments, the planets themselves, each suffer from one particular flaw in human nature, which is demonstrated by its name, design, and the NPC denizens who personify these flaws. The game's design addresses individual, interpersonal, and societal ethics—through quizzes, quests, and environments, respectively. As a console game designed for entertainment, prosocial learning is a secondary goal and does not fit neatly into any existent context of formal education. However, teachers might consider using this game in an informal learning session, perhaps in an after-school gaming group, where it could be used as an interactive text in a practicum-type setting, to teach children about empathy, logic, and prosocial behavior. In fact, the game's designers have "heard from quite a few parents that they've found it useful as a jumping off point for discussions with their kids" (G. Johnson, personal communication, September 8, 2015). For older players, *Doki Doki*

Universe is an opportunity to be reminded of those lessons and to practice them in a stress-free, winnable context.

Conclusion

Games are inherently ethical because players bring their ethical frameworks to bear on all experiences (Sicart, 2009), but this game explicitly integrates prosocial behavior into its narrative and gameplay, which means that the game isn't just ethical, it is *about* prosocial behavior (Bogost, 2007). The game is blatantly moralistic and this is both helpful and limiting when designing a game for ethical play. Since completion of the game is dependent on acting in a prosocial manner, players are not afforded moral agency and the game is therefore not optimally ethical in the way that Zagal (2012) claims games should be ethically compelling. The game presents opportunities for reflection, but player agency is limited to just one type of ethical behavior. However, for this reason, its potential as a tool for self-reflection and reflective practice is greatly enhanced. It has been shown that play in a virtual environment as a prosocial agent increases the likelihood of prosocial behavior in subsequent, real-world tasks (Rosenberg, Baughman, & Bailenson, 2013). The role-play in this game fosters identity work and aligns with the principles of transformational play and *Doki Doki Universe* should be considered an informal learning context in which players can learn to be more… well, human!

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