

# The Power of Choice

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The fundamental strength of computer games resides in choice. The player's ability to make decisions, to direct a course of action and effect a narrative or simulation is a remarkable and distinct quality of digital games that highlights the medium's future potential.

Power of Choice offers a theoretical framework for computer game design. Each section covers the role of choice within a specific aspect of gaming. Currently in its infancy, it will be expanded progressively.

## Statistics

A game whose primary attribute involves statistical advancement actually deprives the player of choice. This may seem oxymoronic as role-playing games provide an ever-increasing plethora of statistical attributes that seemingly offer more choice.

In actuality quests are padded with otherwise pointless unavoidable errands and dull repetitive combat that primarily exist to allow statistical gains and serve marketing hyperbole with taglines proclaiming, "one hundred plus hours of gameplay".

Without statistical advancement, would a sane individual engage in boring dungeon camping to kill X number of forgettable beasts or go through other masochistic grinds? Evercrack indeed.

Jeff Vogel, founder of RPG developer Spiderweb Software, highlighted the issue in his IGN.com column, [View from the Bottom](#).

"I just played Final Fantasy XII, for the PlayStation 2 - an entirely worthy role-playing game. And, by turning the combat speed to maximum and skipping all optional quests, I managed to win it in only 47 hours. There was one quest in it that finally broke my spirit.

You have to find this secret door into this castle. Fair enough. And you find out how from this guy in the sewers who sounds like Apu from the Simpsons, but a grumpy old man.

He knows how to open the hidden door into the castle. But does he give you a key? Or just, Heaven forbid, open it for you? No. He says, "To get into the castle, you must first get a darkened sunstone. Then you need to fill it with sun energy. By wandering the lands to the south, and searching for the four shadestones. Then you fill the crystal with sun energy. Then you..."

SHUT UP! I don't want to spend hours wandering and killing wolves and for the shadestones, whatever those are, to open a door. It doesn't make any sense! Just open the door for me, you creepy old Apu-sounding FREAK!

Finding the shadestones and charging the sunstone took 90 minutes. I could have watched a good movie in that time. It was a completely nonsensical activity, but I fully understand the point of it. It was to get me to spend time wandering around and killing the same wolf 500 times so I could get experience and get stronger."

Statistical advancement in RPG's was once a means to an end, now it's the point. They have become a crutch for game designers that render many choices moot, while players are merely driven onward by borderline pathological addiction.

## **Morality**

Restricting choices to black and white, good and evil, is ill conceived as the player often predetermines their moral route. When faced with a choice, they have long ago decided how to act. Taking such a predefined moral route is the player's prerogative, but in following this route, they should be faced with choices that don't neatly fit into either alignment. This subsequently makes choices more meaningful.

Moral possibilities offer the potential for emotive choice and more nuanced experiences. However games serve a cathartic function and characters commonly exist as limited caricatures that can restrict the player from projecting their own sense of morality into the game universe.

Stronger character development, improved body language and artificial intelligence will gradually solve this dilemma when desired. Depicting moral consequence within the game context rather than only appealing to the player's own sense of morality, offers a currently pragmatic answer.

A scenario in Deus Ex involves a weeping mother in a Parisian café. Striking up a conversation one discovers that she worries about her son in the UNATCO service. This brief experience reminds the player of the moral quandary over using lethal weapons or choosing a riskier approach with non-lethal weapons.

It's interesting to note that a moral dimension was the centerpiece of the classic Ultima IV, arguably the first true CRPG. This quality allowed it to evolve from the series hack 'n slash roots.

## **Behaviorism**

Unabated freedom of choice is prone to repetitive interaction.

When offered numerous choices, players will prod for an ideal approach, often the simplest, and upon success, repeat. This is essentially Operant Conditioning, where the specific behavior becomes more frequent based on situational success and other rewards. This repetitious behavior can easily result in monotonous gameplay, yet the player won't necessarily instigate change.

Player centric impediments can limit overuse of repeated tactics. Limiting the ammunition of a specific weapon for example. Varied situational options can avoid the issue entirely. Deus Ex II: Invisible War might have benefited from less buildings containing human size air ducts, thus forcing the player to vary their choices. More reactive gameworlds could prod the player toward adapting their choices.