

The Seventh Annual Game Design Think Tank

Project Horseshoe 2012



Group Report: Crux

Can we make a game about the crucifixion without offending everyone?

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1. Abstract

Our workgroup formed around a question: "Could we make a game about the crucifixion? One that didn't offend either believers or unbelievers, but would provide some value to both?"

In attempting to answer this question, we stumbled upon some insights that may be generalized and applied to other games, genres, and the social responsibility of game design.

Applying these insights to the design of a second prototype pitch, called "The Procedure," and based around a day in the life of an abortion clinic staff, helped us to validate the usefulness of the prospective methodology.

We feel that, for a certain type of game, this approach allows designers to broach sensitive contexts in a way that will both respect and edify players, regardless of political or ideological leanings.

2. The Pitch

Crux

Crux is an experimental new educational/art game for the Xbox Kinect, Playstation Move and other modern motion-controlled platforms.

The target audience is mature players who are interested in exploring for themselves the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Whatever players believe about who Jesus was, the game should provide them with an interesting interactive experience that will challenge the way they think about the necessity of the suffering and death of Jesus, as well as broader issues such as capital punishment and the social utility of justice.

Over the course of the game, players will inhabit the many individuals who directly interacted with Jesus during the unfolding of his Passion. Each role will have a specific function to perform, which will allow the player to proceed to the next gameplay vignette. The basic game flow is as follows:

- Players begin the game as Judas, accompanied by a crowd of soldiers and Jewish authorities. Bearing torches, they enter the garden of Gethsemane and encounter Jesus.
 - After Jesus announces himself, players deliver the kiss of betrayal, at which point chaos ensues and the mob arrests Jesus.
- Players travel, as Judas, to Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, where they then assume the role of one of the officers during the trial.
 - Players begin in a passive role as the Sanhedrin questions Jesus and he continues to answer evasively.
 - The Sanhedrin becomes more exasperated, at which point players must slap and/or spit on Jesus in order to try to elicit a response.
 - As morning breaks and the room begins to brighten, the high priest asks Jesus if he is the son of God. Jesus answers, "You have said it," and the others in the room burst into a frenzied uproar. The player grabs Jesus and shoves him out the door.
- The player, accompanied by the Jewish authorities, hurriedly bustles Jesus off to the court of Pontius Pilate, the local Roman governor. Players then take the role of Pilate.
 - As Pilate, the player questions Jesus, trying to validate the Jewish leaders' charge of sedition. Ever evasive, Jesus answers cryptically and unsatisfactorily.
 - Players leave the court to speak to the crowd gathered outside; Jesus and another prisoner stand with Pilate.
 - Pilate says he finds Jesus to be innocent, then suggests he be released. The crowd shouts they want Pilate to release Barabbas, the other prisoner. Players unbind Barabbas and he goes free.
 - Players, as Pilate, reassert Jesus' innocence but the crowd grows riotous and demands his crucifixion.
- Pilate hands Jesus over to his guards to be humiliated. The player assumes the role of a soldier at this point.
 - Players are ordered to scourge Jesus.
 - They then twist together thorny branches to make a crown and force it onto Jesus' head.
 - Players, along with other nearby soldiers, kneel before Jesus to mock him, then spit on and beat him, before handing him over to Pilate.
- The player, as Pilate, brings Jesus back before the Jews, trying one last time to release him, now that he has been humiliated and does not seem to represent a legitimate threat, at least to Roman rule.
 - The crowd demands the crucifixion of Jesus again, impugning Pilate's loyalty to Rome and on the verge of full-blown riot.
 - Players wash their hands, asserting Pilate's innocence in the execution of Jesus.
- Jesus is led away to be crucified, and the player assumes the viewpoint of one of the crowd

members.

- Suddenly he is grabbed by a Roman soldier and forced to bear the cross on which Jesus will be crucified.
- Reaching Golgotha, the execution site, the player takes on the role of the executioner.
 - Players must bind Jesus to the cross, then nail his wrists and feet to the wood, before helping to hoist the gibbet upright.
- Jesus slowly dies on the cross; the crowd continues to mock and jeer him.
 - Players, as a soldier, cast dice for Jesus' tunic.
 - Hearing Jesus remark on his thirst, the player lifts a sponge of vinegar to his mouth.
- Jesus drinks the vinegar and cries out loudly. Then his head droops. The screen fades to black and the game ends.

The motion-controlled aspect of the game and a high graphical and input fidelity should draw them into the simulation, allowing them to feel as though they are part of the action. This should help them to become invested in playing out the entire procedure, even as they are asked to complete procedures that become increasingly morally or viscerally repugnant. Players will be unable to intentionally fail the objectives; input acceptability should be very generous to allow players with low manual skill or patience to proceed as easily as more highly skilled players.

In order to better represent the agency of the player, as well as the loose and generous input accuracy, the game will switch between closer and more removed perspectives of the audience participating in the current scene. For instance, in the scene where Pilate and Jesus face each other, should the player not act with the best accuracy of "gestures" for Pilate - within an acceptable time frame - the player's perspective will switch to that of the audience, thus allowing them to "boo," chant, spit, or yell (input that has already been practiced in other scenes), performing at a pace that allows them to readapt to the scene at play.

This is a pervading dynamic throughout the game, as it allows the players engagement to select the level of focus and comfort level to the topic, while still allowing play to move forward.

Many parts of the game might be troubling for players, whether because of their religious beliefs or their feelings about human rights, torture, and the fact that the game is forcing them to be complicit, at least virtually, in acts they might find unjustifiable. However, there are moments during the game where these players may also express their compassion, such as carrying the cross or offering a drink to Jesus. Furthermore, players may use the breadth of the acceptable interactive inputs in order to express their own desires about how the events proceed. For example, someone who desires to lessen the suffering of Jesus may try to carry out his execution as efficiently and painlessly as possible.

Simply following the historical (as fact of the Bible's existence, not necessarily of Jesus' factual existence) account results in a gameplay flow that continually increases in terms of callous brutality and intentional degradation. While some players might be inured to this sort of behavior due to its inclusion in other games, the fidelity and simulatory realism of this game should be such that, for it to be effective, nearly all players should find it difficult to proceed. In order to mitigate the desire to disengage, it might be necessary to implement some sort of progression-tracking mechanic; if the game determines that players are hesitant or disengaged, perhaps an in-game prompt could suggest that they take a short break or return to complete the game at another time. This is contradictory to many game design mantras; this design seeks to implement a disengagement mechanic as a purposeful one, unlike most games where player(s) seek play continuance.

The development of the game seems very open to A/B testing with focus groups in order to determine what elements might best bring about the sort of visceral engagement necessary to create an aesthetic of discomfort and confusion. One example of this that arose during our pitch discussion was the appropriate use of sound effects. Despite the level of graphical fidelity necessary for the game to succeed, sound effects might best be rendered by creating space in background noise (roaring crowd) and allowing the

infinitely superior capacity of the players' imagination to fill in the spaces left by designers. The design might work better if individual, intelligible, and accurate sound effects are minimal; timed silences, ambient noise, and aural spaces might be a better sound aesthetic than, for example, the exact sound of a whip as it cracks in air or against Jesus. Furthermore, avoiding any voice effects, especially regarding Jesus' sounds of pain, will avoid any characterization and personality that a voice naturally extends to any human character.

In order to capture players' impressions of the events they have witnessed and participated in within the game, it might be useful to tightly integrate the game with existing social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Not only would this generate word-of-mouth advertising for the game experience, it would also directly facilitate the stated goal of the underlying design methodology, which is to spur debate and introspection within the gaming community.

In creating the game as a straightforward simulation of the account of the crucifixion, the designers strive to deliver as unbiased a presentation of the context as possible. Anything that would seem to corroborate the the veracity or falsity of Jesus' claim to be the son of God and savior of humanity is, therefore, unsuitable for inclusion in the game. In order to be inoffensive, as well as useful to both believers and unbelievers, the game must be as editorially silent as possible. Unbelievers should be able to say, "This doesn't change my mind at all about who or what Jesus was, but I'm not so sure anymore about where I stand regarding the justice of scapegoating an innocent man to prevent a riot." Likewise, the believer should be able to say, after playing, "I still believe that Jesus was who he said he was, but after really examining this account I can see that there really isn't anything here that is inherently mystical or spiritual. And maybe I need to rethink my views about capital punishment, since it's clearly open to corruption and scapegoating."

Having played through *Crux*, players on both sides of the issue will at least have to agree that, whoever he was, Jesus' death seems remarkably unjust and mercenary.

3. The Value of the Game: Individual Perspectives

The Atheist Perspective - While it's difficult to present what an **atheist** or (to avoid too much the pejorative connotation with the use of the word) "**unbeliever**" "believes" on the subject, the most accurate and factual base from which one such unbeliever can approach the subject is simply to base it on the *story* that is presented in the Bible.

It is a fact of modern culture that many lessons, philosophies, and moral stances come from experience AND fictional tales. Aesop's fables have been used for as long as the Bible itself to convey a lesson; to convince someone of a particular moral that is expected to be understood as a participant of this social environment. Thus, the non-believer can look at the bible as the same type of parable where a lesson or a story with some morality is captured.

Some famous skeptics and social founders have done this in the past. Jefferson's bible has done this very successfully, excluding from his edition any account of a supernatural nature of Jesus' story. This allows for the reader to study how the behavior of that society interacted with one such case of a person's encounter with a body of law and religious doctrine.

Non-believers are thought to be amoral by many believers in the popular zeitgeist, for many of the moral underpinnings of this society are based on theological teachings as found in religious books. Some polls conducted in the United States suggest that atheists are worse than some well understood negative behaviors in society (<http://digitaljournal.com/article/315425>). There's no argument that many of the laws and beliefs about ethics and morality comes from a strong religious foundation. However, increasingly so, today's philosophers are presenting ways of explaining how human morality is found in many areas of our common understanding, and in fact, can be constructed without relying on the theological perspective to

lend its foundations. Writers like Sam Harris have presented a strong case for divorcing theology from social mores. More and more, psychologists and behavioral professionals are finding ways to explain how and why we behave the way we do, to our betterment, and to our detriment. All the while, religion touts itself (and in some ways has implemented some practices) how it can be better than worse for humanity; many non-believers disagree though.

Based on this, the bible, as a book that has undoubtedly lent a lot of our sayings, mores, stories, language, etc to our culture is of, at least, historical importance to anyone in western culture especially, and to the non believer, ignoring its influence can be an act of ignorance of the worst kind, given that they not only are bound by laws and social norms that guide their reception with others, but also they encounter others that openly use these religious foundations to make decisions about their world and interactions.

The typical non-believer considers him/herself as a skeptic in some manner. This skepticism, usually based on the rejection of religion and supernatural explanations for how and why existence works the way it does, usually means that the bible and its influence have reached their awareness in second hand fashion, especially about behavioral constructs. It's therefore a commonality they share with believers: their awareness of the passages found in the "Good Book" are not through first person experience with its pages, but by hearsay, especially populist views.

Wherever the ideas of morality and ethics, namely those that guide society's justice systems, interfere with the non-believer's world view, a mature evaluation of these can bring a number of stories, plays, art, etc. into the observer's purview. Adding to this "already-baked-in" context of how religion may have influenced their moral filter, the non-believer may have some ideas of how to bridge the world of those that adhere to morals as prescribed by the supernatural, faith based belief, with those that can be constructed from observable human behavioral data. Still, this creates a problem, how much of the other side must s/he immerse into in order to create a useful balance of acceptance with those that would naturally reject their non-theistic based moral stance?

The story of Jesus Christ, story referred to (in this case) as that which is not based on accurate evidence, but in the moral teachings (a la Aesop's Fables, or Jesus' own parables) of the words, can be dissected and forward engineered into the constructs of the current systems of law and social engineering that are present, understood, and perhaps agreed to for said non-believer's dictum.

The atheist can contrast, and often does (even if subconsciously) compare, reject, opine, about a current case, problem, divisive issue, etc. in society as some religious institutions weigh in on the very case that creeps up in the atheists day to day news cycle. As such, a quick reference to the ideas of "What Would Jesus Do?" can be either *simple* in delivering judgement on the matter (usually if that person is inclined to think in the empathic, sympathetic) with a caricature like "love and peace" Jesus reaction; or annoyingly, namely because it's such a knee jerk style thought that too many people react with without given time and consideration as to what the root of the matter can be.

Objectivity in morals is a quest that sometimes can lean away from the teachings of Moral leaders. If one is to think about any point of controversy in an objective sense, then surely the consideration that an automatic behavior of offering sympathy before any other is not. Objectivity can be considered as starting from the center, evaluating the data as it applies to all parties and perhaps, in the desire to do good, choosing to serve the most good; i.e. to make an omelette you have to break a few eggs. Or in the case of the crucifixion, a non-believer could (more easily than a Christian) opine that Jesus' punishment, even if fictional AND known to be unfair, serves as a lesson to show how when society acts irrationally can be set at-ease by punishing an innocent person under the guise of "justice being served fairly".

So lets suppose that a non-believer encounters a game that forces them to punish Jesus. First, the story tells the reader that Jesus (in its portrayal) IS an innocent victim undeserving of the punishment given. Given the facts, and the way that we behave (or aspire to) in modern society, these two accounts align.

However, the game forces the non-believer to distribute punishment to a known innocent person. If the atheist (that “militant” atheist who claims to enjoy discrediting and doing anything possible to put down the idea of Jesus) means to play as a cathartic expression of their perhaps repressed personal opinion of the topic would then engage on a dynamic of play that is effortful and a test of will and stamina. The more realistic this exchange becomes, the more that their personal morals about punishment will resemble their actual behavior with others. Even if they claim to enjoy tarnishing the idea of Jesus by distributing pain to a “fictional” character, they’re forced to endure the analogue of being a torturer; no matter who it is, we posit that each exchange and verb set in motion of that punishment is a question of the unfairness a person like Jesus, or any other in today’s society was forced to endure. This may lead to empathy, or an “I get it... that’s not right!”.

Let’s, conversely, suggest that the non-believer, that one who accepts that the teachings of Jesus, whether fictional or historical, are a part of this social foundation, given their ignorance of the topic or awareness of it, would impart to the player a new experiential study of how that type of society, or that type of punishment was commonly practiced. An experience to be shared with others; a positive conversation.

There may be the extreme case that enjoys the realistic nature of the game, and uses it subsequently to promote that type of lashing out. However, this may be a very immature perspective/use of the medium for that individual; and while we don’t judge that behavior as unhealthy, every effort need to be made to prevent this from being the first approach to the way the game is presented.

Humans will congregate regardless of “congregation services”. Humans are social, we learn; we benefit, when together. This is not a behavior that is exclusive to religious rituals as other activities like sports (to draw from a game’s perspective) require little faith to engage an audience. The non-believer can understand how the ritual, the camaraderie, the benefit to participating in an understanding of a higher sense of purpose than the bottom steps in Maslow’s Hierarchy. This game, as well as other games made with this methodology, aspires to vouch for the reason why it’s important to convey the unbiased perspectives at the center of the controversy. The atheist is invited to understand how they already think and agree (with perhaps well founded reasons) in the way that believers feel through their faith.

The Reformed Protestant Perspective - Each year before Easter, many churches hold one or a series of services called *tenebrae*. The purpose of these services is to represent the suffering and death of Jesus during his Passion; this is done by gradually extinguishing all light within the church to represent the approaching darkness of the post-crucifixion eclipse and slamming shut a Bible to represent the earthquake which also followed Jesus’ death. The mood of this service is somber, each participant solemnly reflecting on the cost of their own salvation. Though Christ offers salvation freely, it is impossible to ignore that his suffering and death are the result of humanity’s sinful nature. In this regard, I am as guilty as Judas, who betrayed him, Pilate, who condemned him, and the Roman centurions who executed his sentence. Ray Boltz, in his song “The Hammer” sings the following (abridged) verses:

I was in the crowd
The day that Jesus died
And as He hung upon the cross
His mother cried

I am just a Roman soldier
An ordinary man
I love my wife and children
I do the best I can

I saw the crown of thorns He wore
The stripes upon His back
...
And suddenly I found myself
Standing to my feet

How could I have killed Him?
It must be someone else
There’s got to be an answer
I just can’t blame myself

...

And I cried, “Who nailed Him there?
This Child of peace and mercy

I nailed Him there
The child of peace and mercy

Who nailed Him there?	I nailed Him there
Come and face me like a man	I am the guilty man
Who nailed Him there?"	
	I nailed Him there
And the crowd began to mock me	With my sins and my transgressions
I cried, "Oh my God, I do not understand"	I cried, "Oh my God, now I understand"
Then I turned and saw the hammer	When I turned and saw the hammer in my hand"
In my hand	

Credit: Ray Boltz, "The Hammer"

I'll be honest and admit that this song was instrumental in my initial approach to contributing to the design of the *Crux* pitch. The song itself is practically a pitch for the game, as well as a statement of its value to a Christian: a game like *Crux* is, like a *tenebrae* service, a powerful tool for introspection and reflection. Though these experiences might be unpleasant, they are not unwelcome. Too often I find myself distracted or overburdened by the mundane and insistent vicissitudes of life to take the time for serious reflection on these issues. This is doubly shameful, as I am neglecting the eternal in favor of the ephemeral. The opportunity to engage in such a powerful and essential discipline while gaming is one I think would be welcome, even for unbelievers.

In terms of gameplay, the assiduous avoidance of meaning-making in the game design allows me to "fill in the gaps" with my faith and thereby use the game as a tool to better understand my own beliefs. This does not prevent me, however, from critically analyzing the validity of a non-Christian, non-mystical interpretation of the same events. By forcing me to fill in the gaps in meaning, the game makes me cognizant of the fact that I am engaging in this act. I am choosing what to believe based on a particular set of events; in the same way that an unbeliever chooses to believe something completely different despite participating in the same events. The "game" itself doesn't offer a judgment, or even a scale by which to evaluate which approach is more "correct;" it simply exists in the way any toy does: it facilitates a certain type of play, in this case an important and educational variety.

Conclusions - Have we shown that, in the absence of externally or mechanically imposed meaning, two people will derive different meanings for the same interactions, based on what they bring to the experience? Will this spur debate? Will it merely be another cultural artifact that factions will use to drive a wedge between themselves? Or does the mere fact that we have proven that the differences are subjective (in opposition to the objective) force players to confront their own ideological world views? Only further inquiry will tell. Does something like *Train* conflate widespread cultural agreement with objective reality? Is the player who tries to make the trains run efficiently, out of sympathy for her avatar, playing the game more "rationally" than everyone else?

4. The Methodology

In creating our pitch for the "Crux" prototype, the group came to the conclusion that the design challenges we faced were likely not specific to the treatment of the crucifixion alone, but were more generally applicable to a specific genre and range of contexts. When we attempted to map our game design choices onto other "controversial topics," we found that they generally fit quite well, provided the context fit within some narrow constraints.

The constraints that seem to best define the games that this design methodology is useful in creating are as follows: the context must involve an act performed on one human being by another; the player must assume the role of the agent in this situation; the context must be divisive, as the treatment of a topic which is no longer the topic of cultural disagreement will result in greatly diminished discomfort and confusion on the part of the player (necessary for reasons explained below); and finally the context is generally one

where personal culpability might be at odds with social acceptability, e.g. a topic where the agent must participate in something unpleasant for the greater good of society. H.J. McCloskey gives an example of this aspect in his parable of a Sheriff who, in order to prevent a race riot, chooses to frame an innocent black man for a murder the Sheriff knows he didn't commit. In the crucifixion narrative, Pontius Pilate and Jesus play the roles of Sheriff and innocent with uncanny similarity. In this regard, casting the player as Pontius Pilate allows him to explore where he falls on the spectrum of justice vs. utility.



A convenient lens through which to view these common design choices is the Mechanics/Dynamics /Aesthetics framework, as the three guiding principles in our design methodology map neatly onto the three pillars of this framework. Our mechanics are crafted with objectivity in mind; the dynamics are oriented toward realism and fidelity, and the aesthetics should be primarily of discomfort and confusion, especially hesitance and curiosity.

In creating our pitch for Crux, we decided that the best way to avoid presenting any sort of authorial bias would be to strip away any implied meaning in our mechanics and instead hew to whatever objective truths we could agree were extant within the context. This proved particularly challenging given the inherently biased nature of the only existing account of the crucifixion of Jesus. Given the objective reality of crucifixion as a documented form of Roman capital punishment, we felt that by focusing on the act of the crucifixion, and not on the particular distinctives, we could create a game that believers and unbelievers could both play without feeling like their viewpoint was not represented. Every game mechanic was discussed in terms of whether it might introduce some ludo-narrative dissonance or might encourage the player to take some action because they felt that, in terms of the game, it was the "right choice." In the end, we concluded that this game design methodology must result in a more simulatory experience; one that approaches the ritualistic.

A key differentiator between this method of creating games is its complete disregard for players' expectation of a high level of agency, while maintaining a keen focus on preserving a high level of feedback to promote authenticity in the games' interactivity. The only true agency offered in this methodological approach is akin to a "page turn" mechanic; the only choice offered to the player is whether or not they will continue to play out the role they have been thrust into. Some may question whether this interactive experience deserves to be called a "game" at all; indeed in some ways the "game" here is played inside the player's mind, as they must weigh the consequences of continuing to play or choosing to disengage from the experience. The game, however, is extremely aware of the moment in time in which the player stops playing, pauses, slows interaction, and especially, "quits" the game; subsequently interpreting it as the player being affected by the proceedings, changing the minutia of the following moment of play. One could say that the game is evaluating the player as a psychologist study might interpret the player's actions, without moral judgment. While this might be a point of conjecture for many designers, it is the intent of this game to help the player reflect on the subjects of the theme, and in this way, one of the better design mechanics would be similar to treating negative input, or space between interactions, as input itself. In summation, the mechanics of these games exist only in service of helping the player to get to a point where they have greater understanding of the shared objective underpinnings of their divergent philosophical conclusions. Developers must take into consideration whether offering less-prescribed interaction provides tangible benefits in comparison to the ahistoricity or inauthenticity thus added, which may reduce the extent to which players are moved toward a fuller understanding of the context. Any ancillary mechanics may impose a meaning on the game that the player should be left to discover for themselves.

Furthermore, the ludic depth of the mechanics should be as simple and non-punitive as possible; avoiding game systems that show players how they're being tracked (save for how explained in the above paragraph); e.g. point systems, fail-repeat, save points, etc. By allowing the games to progress inevitably with every interaction, players without traditional gaming skills or tacit knowledge will still be able to participate fully in the experience. These games have only two true player actions--the same regardless of

the player verb being used to trigger them--which are “continue” or “quit.”

The dynamics created by the minimalistic mechanics should be, above all, realistic. The player should never feel like what they are doing is in any way “gamey”; instead they should feel as though they are playing, for example, a “crucifixion simulator.” The more realistic the dynamics, the more the player verbs can be mapped to player actions in a 1-to-1 fashion; for instance, the more the player will be able to focus on the actions they are performing within the context. By stripping away the ludic elements that they often rely on to provide them with meaning and guidance, we can force players to reflect on their own experience and give them space to create or discover meaning therein. Since these games are restricted to the elements of the context which cannot be construed by players to have intrinsic meaning or value, the mechanics must not editorialize the players’ manipulation of the system, and in fact, should allow for players’ expression without explicit evaluation of their interactions. E.g. players do not receive a score for how thoroughly they scourge Jesus. All of these dynamics allow for player expression (players may whip the scourge vigorously or gently), but the game does not attach any value to interactions other than a binary “pass/fail.”

It would be unrealistic to imagine that game designers could be the final arbiter of what represents an objective presentation of most of the contexts suitable for this design approach. To that end, expert consultants would be a necessity in developing this type of game. These experts are the very people who perform the gameplay activity as professionals in their day-to-day lives. Designers must rely on these experts to ensure that both the mechanics and dynamics align to produce an accurate depiction of their life experience. They are the individuals who, as a matter of professional necessity, must truly confront their own rationale for why their actions are or are not justifiable. If designers can allow the players to “walk a mile in their shoes,” these experts can help others to experience the ideologically grey area within which they exist.

Finally, the aesthetic necessary for this type of game experience is one of overwhelming discomfort and confusion. The humiliation and execution of an innocent man should not be a pleasant experience in which to participate. Likewise, the other contexts that are best explored using this game methodology should result in a game that is uncomfortably realistic at best and unplayably offensive at worst. This design methodology is a way for game designers to treat topics that most people hold at arm’s length, intellectually. By crafting an experience that forces players to inhabit the role of the agent of an act they may find unpleasant or distasteful, designers make the player feel complicit in the act itself, forcing them to confront their own justifications for their professed feelings toward that act. The aesthetic discomfort should arise not only from the sometimes visceral or inhuman nature of the act being performed, but also from the inability of the player to distance himself from the act in order to maintain any ideological falsehoods he may prefer to believe. By taking part, players must confront objective reality in a way that may allow them to better perceive why others might interpret the act differently.

To summarize, this methodology uses **objectivity** in mechanics in order to strip away everything but the **fidelity** and **realism** in dynamics, in hopes of creating an aesthetic of **discomfort** and **confusion**. These games present nothing but the bare reality from which we construct our ideological justifications; by presenting the objectifiable, we force players on different sides of an issue to admit the existence of a common framework underlying their different interpretations. In a way, we suspect that games of this nature are an interactive historical representation of a topic which, at the time and era of its production, represented a society’s tolerance and debate on the matter. We can think of no higher purpose for games than to bring about this sort of **communication** and **understanding**.



So here we have the beginnings of a design methodology by which we can create games that make players uncomfortable; games that ask them to reconsider whether their ideological interpretation of particular events are rational or are justified solely by their willful ignorance of a more nuanced reality. So

why bother? If games were merely an entertainment medium, this sort of prescriptive game design would be worthless, as it's very unlikely to produce commercially successful games. Clearly, though, games serve a purpose beyond mere entertainment. The primary use of this methodology might indeed be to create educational games, which encourage the exploration of ideologically divisive issues. However, it also points to some troubling trends in the mainstream game industry, such as the gradual decline of the "hardcore simulator," the potential (if unintentional) indoctrinatory nature of most game design, and the lost potential for true education through gameplay. The method, though, begins with the careful selection of which topic to produce, since we readily admit that not all topics benefit from this exploration; in fact, few would.

Johan Huizinga hinted at the potential for games as a lens for understanding the world when he said, "Let my learning be my playing and my playing be my learning." Play (and, necessarily, games as a form of play) is used by animals as well as humans as a way of learning about the world and testing hypotheses about dangerous situations in a safe environment. Given the relative comfort and safety of modern first-world citizens (the primary consumers of mainstream video games), we have little need to simulate the sort of life-and-death struggles that once constituted daily life for our ancient ancestors. That doesn't mean there aren't any problems left for us to understand via the medium of play, though. One could argue that the problems we face today are more abstract and global in nature; often they are ideological or cultural problems that stem from fundamentally different weltanschauungen. It seems, then, that the problem of the age is one of understanding one another. Why not turn to games, then, to address this problem? The previously described methodology, with its focus on stripping away the sort of ideological frameworks implicit in a player's world view, seems well-suited to the sort of play experience capable of bridging these intercultural and intracultural divides. Playing these games forces players to reflect on their own moral assumptions as they become complicit in the act most representative of a particular context. Whether or not the player's opinion is changed by playing the game is not the metric of the design's success; any level of engagement with the game, even disengagement, necessarily moves the player toward reflection and/or understanding.

One of the distinctive elements of the game design methodology presented herein is that it produces games that are, in Caillois' terminology, pure mimicry. These are "hardcore simulators;" players are playing a role in the same way they would take part in a ritual or in a stage play. They are given agency in the way they perform an action, but the actions they perform are strictly prescribed in the same way a flight simulator might enforce an aircraft startup sequence. This type of game design seems particularly well-suited educational experimentation. Players can try on the protagonist's role in the same way a child might play "dress up" as a way to explore the world of adulthood. If a player learns from the game, it is a knowledge they have **earned** as a result of their own introspection and synthesis. This "earned knowledge" is the primary currency of constructivist educational doctrine -- embodied by Piaget's work in which he emphasizes the essentiality of play in education. "The kind of learning from which true knowledge follows isn't a matter of passively absorbing and storing skills and information. Rather it is an active construction process, the building blocks of which are the kinds of discoveries that emerge from real play, whether it be with objects, ideas, or other people." (<http://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2009/03/the-three-ps-an-education-system-where-play-is-its-own-reward.html>) A constructivist-inspired mimetic tool such as this is one players can use for education without fear of indoctrination.

This indoctrination may be inextricable from a more traditional "rule-based/goal-oriented" game design. It has been said that games are a series of interesting choices. This is doubly true for game design, as the designer is responsible for setting the constraints on the choices players can make in the game. In the design of a diegetic or narrative-driven game, designers reveal an explicit or implicit agenda. In choosing how to limit player response, designers are using mechanics to construct meaning for the player. Players are free to layer their own constructed meaning atop that which has already been created by the designers, but it becomes very unlikely that the player's meaning will be the inverse of the designer's. The more proscriptive the set of player actions, the more meaning is implicit in the game design, to say nothing of the meaning conveyed by the narrative itself. Additionally, for most narrative games a certain subset of choices are reinforced as "correct" by the game design. For instance, the *Call of Duty* franchise harshly penalizes

players who may attempt to avoid wholesale slaughter in the name of national self-interest. Rather than giving players a tool with which to understand their world, narrative game design presents them with a cultural artifact that embodies the particular world view of its designers -- while players may compare and contrast this with their own world view, it does little to point to the shared foundations, which transcend the respective weltanschauungen.

Josh Jones has this to say regarding the limited meaning of education in contrast to indoctrination:

E + ducere: "To lead or draw out." The etymological Latin roots of "education." According to a former Jesuit professor of mine, the fundamental sense of the word is to draw others out of "darkness," into a "more magnanimous view" (he'd say, his arms spread wide). As inspirational as this speech was to a seminar group of budding higher educators, it failed to specify the means by which this might be done, or the reason. Lacking a Jesuit sense of mission, I had to figure out for myself what the "darkness" was, what to lead people towards, and why. It turned out to be simpler than I thought, in some respects, since I concluded that it wasn't my job to decide these things, but rather to present points of view, a collection of methods—an intellectual toolkit, so to speak—and an enthusiastic model. Then get out of the way. That's all an educator can, and should do, in my humble opinion. Anything more is not education, it's indoctrination.

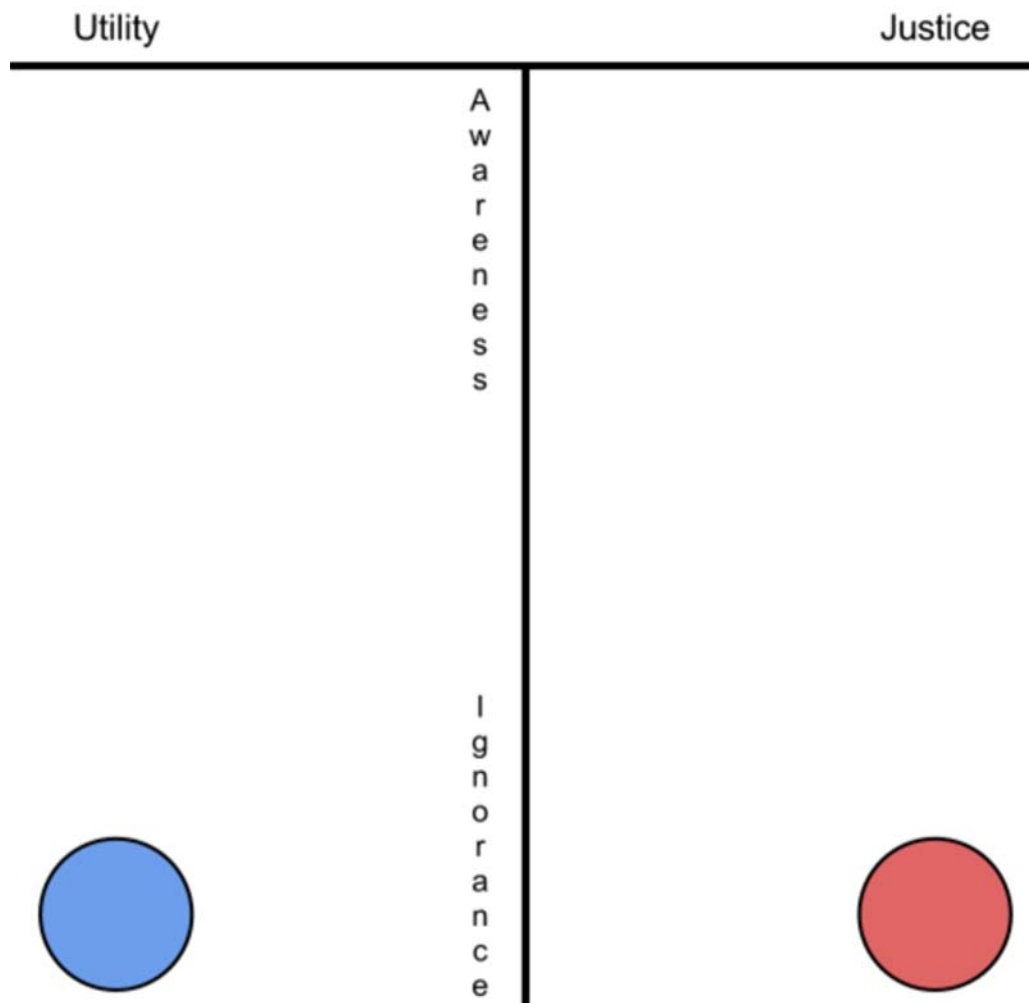
http://www.openculture.com/2012/11/noam_chomsky_spells_out_the_purpose_of_education.html

This contrast between education and indoctrination seems analogous to that between mimesis and diegesis with regard to games. The sort of mimetic game described in this paper performs a very limited function: it allows a player to inhabit a faithful depiction of an individual whose actions and beliefs may be very different than his own. The meaning of the actions performed and their defensibility are left entirely up to the player to discover or construct for themselves. The gameplay mechanics are not arbitrary or subject to an agenda by virtue of their simulacrum nature. In *A New Culture of Learning*, Brown and Thomas state, "All systems of play are, at base, learning systems. They are ways of engaging in complicated negotiations of meaning, interaction, and competition, not only for entertainment, but also for creating meaning."

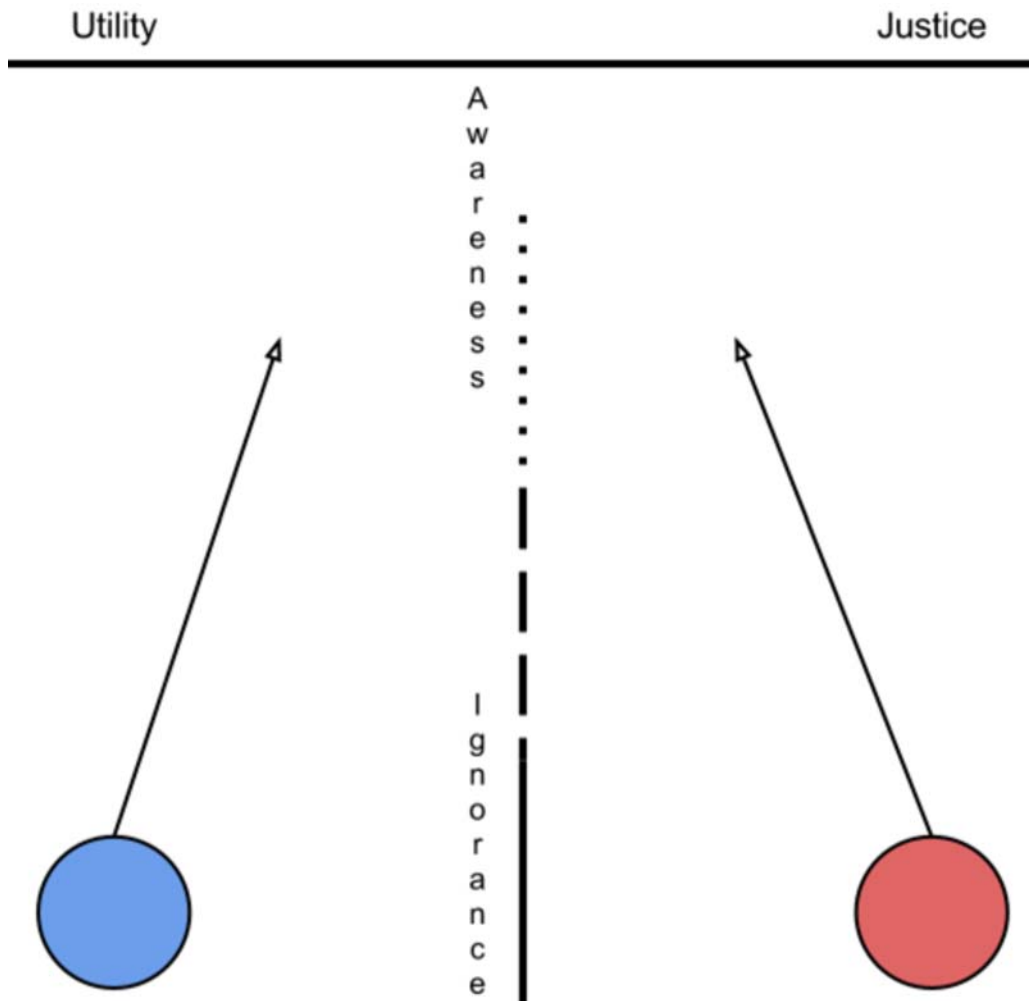
http://blog.learncenter.org/2011/01/play_and_learning.html

Is it a betrayal of the proper function of a game, then, for designers to limit the meaning that players can create by creating a proscriptive framework? In this way, diegetic games are de facto indoctrination tools, as they rely on a system of mechanics that reinforce an arbitrarily "correct" style of play within a subjective narrative framework -- imagine, for instance, playing any recent military shooter as a member of an Islamic fundamentalist group: the entire subjective framework the player operates within would be instantly inverted and the only rational thing for the player to do would be to ensure the death of his virtual alter-ego. It is the subjective nature of such a narrative experience combined with a normative gameplay model that definitively grades player choices that makes these games at once dangerous, cross-culturally inapplicable, and of very little value for the sort of education that requires introspection and grappling with current ideological dialectic. The conflict between these two uses of gameplay-as-education can be traced as far back as Plato's *Republic*. Arthur Krentz summarizes it thusly: "This conflict between two approaches to education — learning by force/coercion (*bia*) versus learning by free-play — is manifest in the conflict between tyrannical force and philosophical persuasion, sophistry and philosophy, and between private advantage and the public good." (<http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducKren.htm>)

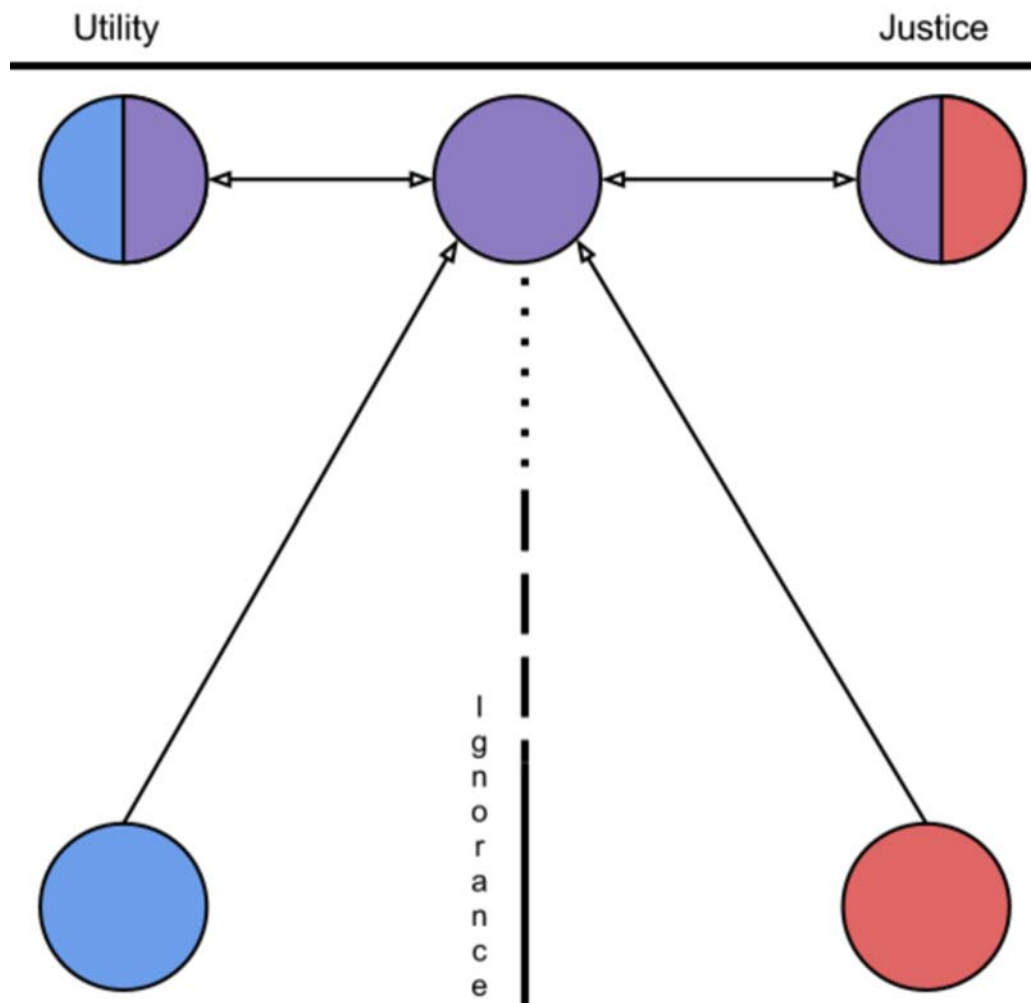
This model, then, is primarily useful for creating games that facilitate better communication and understanding between ideologically opposed groups. In the image below, we see the axes along which Crux (and McCloskey's parable of the Sheriff) are oriented. Ideologically, there is a seemingly unresolvable tension between maximal utility and justice. The other axis is the axis on which the player (or student of philosophy) is oriented. Many come to this, and other philosophical investigations, with a wholly intuitive and, therefore, ignorant ideological viewpoint. These attitudes are represented by the red and blue circles in the image below.



In dialectical terms, it is useful to imagine the vertical axis here as a high wall. People on opposite sides of the wall cannot see one another, and therefore cannot empathize with or have meaningful dialogue with the opposing ideologue. As the ideologues move toward awareness, though, the wall becomes increasingly permeable until, at the point of maximal awareness, it vanishes completely. In the absence of the wall, former ideologues finally have common ground on which to begin to understand one another. This is represented in the image below.



Having reached this common ground (the objective reality, which underpins whatever ideology one may subscribe to), players are free to adopt a new, integrated ideology or to use their newfound understanding to better comprehend the basis of their former ideology. They will not, however, be able to blithely reject the existence of a common experience that underlies both their own philosophy and that of their diametrical opposition without being guilty of base hypocrisy.



5. The State of the Art

So far, the only good example of a game that comes close to creating games in keeping with the spirit of this design rubric is *SPENT*, a game about the harsh reality of managing a family budget under the burden of crushing poverty. It is available to play at playspent.org.

The only downfall in the design of this game is that the meaning is overtly stated in a very heavy-handed way. In making this choice, the designers alienate the very people who most need to play a game like this: namely, those who have the least compassion for the impoverished. By overtly attacking their cynicism, *SPENT* sets itself up as hostile to their interests and, in a world where people increasingly seek out viewpoints that reinforce their existing beliefs, destroys any chance of capturing them as players in order to increase their awareness of the issue.

6. Applying the Methodology

The Procedure

The Procedure is a new educational/art game for the Xbox Kinect, Playstation Move and other modern motion-controlled platforms.

The target audience is mature players who are looking for more than just entertainment in their games,

curious gamers who are interested in investigating something they might know very little about, and even ideologues who are interested in the game only insofar as they can find something they feel is inaccurate or biased therein.

The game is essentially a procedurally generated abortion clinic staff simulator:

- The player begins play from the perspective of the clerical assistant, sees a new patient approach the front desk, and collects the patient's personal information.
 - Patients might be crying, nervous, confident, bored, etc.
 - Outside the clinic there might be protesters shouting death threats, a pleasant neighborhood, or anything in between.
- Players are then given control of the nurse and anesthesiologist and asked to sedate the patient.
 - Players must use the motion controls to simulate performing all of the necessary medical procedures, such as inserting an IV, taking patient blood pressure, etc.
 - Patients might be talkative, withdrawn, nervous, etc.
- Once the patient has been sedated, the player perspective shifts to that of the attending physician.
 - The type of abortion performed will be randomly selected from all possible procedures including MVA, EVA, D&C, D&E, Hysterectomy, and even the IDX or "partial birth" abortion.
 - Each procedure should be medically accurate and player verbs should be very similar to the in-game actions thanks to the motion control platform of the game.
- Following the procedure, players will reassume the role of the nurse, helping the patient in the recovery room.
 - Patient reactions to the procedure will vary from regret to relief.
- When the player-as-nurse discharges the patient, the game is over, and the player is given the option to return to the intake desk to process a new patient.

The motion-controlled aspect of the game and a high graphical and input fidelity should create an intense sense of immersion in players. This should help them to become invested in playing out the entire procedure, even as they are asked to complete procedures that become increasingly morally or viscerally repugnant. Players will be unable to intentionally fail the objectives; input acceptability should be very generous to allow players with low manual skill or patience to proceed as easily as more highly skilled players.

Because the game is procedurally generated, no two patients or procedures will ever be the same. The game has great replay value, as players can progress through many patients, experiencing the different aspects of the patient's relationship to the experience, as well as the variations inherent within the medical procedure itself.

In order to further elucidate this in-game depth and variety, it might be useful to tightly integrate the game with existing social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Not only would this generate word-of-mouth advertising for the game experience; it would also directly facilitate the stated goal of the underlying design methodology, which is to spur debate and introspection within the gaming community.

Players who have made themselves virtually complicit in the act of abortion will either have had to abandon their previously ideologically based viewpoint for a more nuanced understanding, or they will have had to more fully develop the rationale for their ideology in light of the moral complexity of the context. Either way, the community of players should be better able to discuss the issue rationally by acknowledging the objectivity of their shared experience, regardless of their subjective interpretation of the events. The game will provide a common, neutral ground on which opposed ideologies can engage in dialectic without the willful ignorance of shared objective truths typical of such exchanges.

7. Further Exploration

How might the presentation and characterization of other people within the games affect the players' reactions? Given the proven beauty biases, how could game designers harness these seemingly inbuilt response systems to further undermine players' assumptions? Is randomization the answer here? Objectivity might be obfuscated by the relatability of the in-game actors. Resistance to identifying certain characters invariably creates some form of meaning or bias.

8. Topics for Further Discussion

- How is interactivity fundamentally different than documentary film?
- What is the unique value of ritual/mimesis vs. diegesis, especially with regard to meaning-making?
- Is there any value in a “dead” ritual? Is ritual really only ritual when it deals w/ the sacrosanct? If so, are we trying to create an “anti-ritual”?
- Does the “fake it ‘til you make it” idea harness latent psychological constructs? Are humans (and therefore players) “pre-wired” for a sort of self-programming through ritual action?
- Does this methodology work for Olivier Lejade’s counter-example of a “9/11 Terrorist Pilot Simulator”? Would this only work in a cross-cultural context? Is the methodology applicable at the cross-cultural level at all?
- What are the other issues that could be mapped onto the horizontal axis?
- Project Horseshoe is a heuristic process for game developers. This is a methodology for creating heuristic games.
- Is the model too general to be useful? Probably “yes” for now.
- Are we creating an “anti-ritual” insofar as the function of ritual is to rationalize our current beliefs? Are we trying to make “anti-propaganda”? Is that an oxymoronic term?
- It seems that, in this case, abstraction removes ambiguity; removing ambiguity removes authenticity. Ergo, abstraction is a way of imposing meaning, even unintentionally.
- Brathwaite’s “Gaming for Understanding”. How does this relate? How do her games hold up in light of the Milgram experiment?
- Is having a “heuristic goal” a way of imposing meaning as a designer? It should be equally valid for players to disengage the heuristic element. By doing so, they are still learning about themselves. Is this subversive? Disingenuous? Does this open the whole methodology to attack?
- Justifying the utility of this method: If we only change one mind, it will have been worth it.
- What we take with us when we leave the magic circle is as important as what we leave outside it.
- If “actions speak louder than words”, is content (interaction) more important than context? Can it be meaningful even in the absence of context?
- Compare Canabalt vs. Punch Quest in terms of agency, expressivity, etc. Is player expression doubly important in the absence of player agency?
- Ritual Performance aspect and the Demon’s Souls/Dark Souls series. Progress only ever happens only when the ritual is performed correctly. Exacting standards. Is there a place for punitive mechanics in this methodology? Can this ritual be failed?
- Topics deemed suitable for exploration using this method (SO FAR) share a common thread in that they examine an act or acts performed on another human being. The transitive interpersonal nature of the interactions may be an essential factor in correctly determining the scope of the project’s applicability.
- Veracity induces confusion. Confusion forces questioning. Many games editorialize away confusion because it’s uncomfortable. The designers make the meaning for the player instead of allowing them to decide. Is this socially irresponsible? (especially considering the credentials of most of us in the development community)
- The topic is a meta-commentary on itself. Just bringing it up causes confusion and forces people to confront the issue.
- Example of how to do this in another genre: SPENT -- playspent.org

- The bible itself is a heuristic tool. The meaning isn't really there without the process. Is it a game? There are rules. There is a goal. Examine this in relation to Huizinga's definition of games.

Arguments from a conversation between Andy and Keyvan

As a non believer, the crucifixion is used as evidence and propaganda about the proof of Jesus/god's greatest achievement, though it's historical record from the bible is questionable because of many reasons. The fact is that if you tell the story of the crucifixion, you could treat it as story, and ignore it without feeling impact. If you could play, you could get to the behaviors that tell the impact of the event, and possibly skip the skepticism that non believers have when hearing Jesus's arc, and continue to evaluate the humanity, not the divinity, of the event. The controversy is that atheists are forced, through curiosity, to acknowledge the impact that that story has to others, while perhaps understanding it themselves.

On the other hand, for a Christian, it might be controversial to act out some punishment onto something they live by; making them participant is powerful! However, also seeing the reasons human or divine, as a form of agency can perhaps offer a practical, not faith based understanding of the events, which is something that I don't think enough believers do; that is to converse with the concept that "even if it were fiction... " to hear a believer think along those lines is (to me) controversial.

In other words, bringing the non believer to the believers table and getting both to think about what is observable, not from a pillars perspective, matters.

About the procedure, I've suggested that the game would need a way to capture what the player concludes from the experience; I.e. why they did it or carried it out in the first place, done post fact, in a tweet or less. That conclusion is what makes it NOT a job, which is something Olivier has brought up and deserving of thought. The difference with crux and the procedure is that crux has already some conclusions that are connected, like an epilogue or prologue to the subject. In contrast, rebrand it as "pro" doesn't have a conclusion to bring to lead the discussion unless we allow the players to bring it to the table or leave with having made a statement. actually, "pro" already brings the prologue of the controversy with its ambiguity and applicability.