How does the study of ethics assist in the development of video games ?

"Computer games are complex cultural objects : they have rules guiding behaviour, they create game worlds with values at play, and they relate to players who like to explore morals and actions forbidden in society." (the Ethics of Computer Games Miguel Sicart)

According to the above statement, we play video games to do things we can't do in real life. If this is true, it is only the tip of the ice berg and merely one aspect of many that make video games attractive to so many people.

If we consider ethics as a study of what is morally right or wrong, there are many types of video games that can be considered both from play within the game itself, and from an external developers point of view, and from that of society.

Typically video games are cited for promoting violence, due to the violent nature of the game play. Typically the bloodier an act , the more the moral indignation and media hysteria, and typically this where 'society' has issues with video games.

But society has always been a bit slow, in adapting its view. Society was sure 'video nasties' that became prevalent in the 1980, would rot the minds of young people to utter corruption, and lead to the break down of 'society" as we knew it.
This as we know, never happened.. , unless , it was these same young people who went on to be come corporate leaders and bankers, and even at that, some riots in Greece, hardly amounts to the break down of society.

If it *was* true, that video nasties of the 80s, did desensitise a generation of future bankers, and there is no evidence to link the two what so ever, but if it was true, could it be that were are looking for the repercussions of questionable moral activities (ie playing violent video games) in the wrong place.

For example, I learned from playing 'Age of Empires" (a real time strategy game) , that in the early stages of the game, if you could get just enough troops, to invade neighbouring villages to kill all the villagers, then, the knock on effect, was that they could never get enough resources to grow their own societies and could then easily be wiped out.

Age of Empires did not get a mention in the media, for encouraging the disrespect and genocide of neighbouring societies. Although it was clearly a successful aspect of the game play.

If it had, countless historical references to societies at the time would have shown the tactic to be accurate.

In the Renaissance period , in Machiavelli's book the Prince, he discusses the merits and demerits of a victorious invading monarch, killing all the civil service, to assist in completely taking over the country, by removing a group of people that are a potential threat.

He does not have little video soldiers bashing a villager on the head with an axe to assist him with portraying his message, but to the astute the message is the same.

While Machiavelli's book caused some controversy at the time, I am not aware of it continuing to do so. In fact it is of course on most college reading lists.

Opinions change.

Which of course brings up the issue of who decides what is right and wrong, which turn introduces the concept of 'freedom of speech'.

So given that it can sometimes be hard to know what is really 'right and wrong' and assuming we are 'not' using the hysterical mass media as a guide, then let us assume the video game developers do know the difference between right and wrong, how then can this knowledge be used to 'advance' the development of video games.

Typically (excluding video games like 'Tetris' that, and I am making a judgement call here, have 'NO" ethical issues in their game play) video games have a fixed path.
The protagonist must complete certain tasks, usually to kill or avoid enemies up to a big boss, that must then be killed.
In these video games, there is no other way to proceed, other than to follow the one available path set down by the game developers.

 So if a developer wants to add an additional element to the game, they consider adding moral choices. This does mean that the game must have multiple play paths, and more than one possible ending, so it would mean that adding 'choice' to a video game would add time and expense to a product release.

It also introduce an issue for the developer in deciding which course of action, has which particular consequences, and which of those consequence have a better or preferred outcome.

An alternative variation on this idea, is in Bioshock, where there is an option to 'harvest' (kill) or rescue an enemy little girl. Your decision to do one or the other will affect an award you can achieve at the end of the game, but the decisions do not affect the path of the game player will take.

So for developers to introduce issue of ethics or choice, it can add an interesting dimension to a game, but real game changing choices, require much more 'development' , and if everybody who plays the game has a different outcome, it may have as less than satisfactory effect.