

Conditioning Morality: Infamous Second Son

Operant conditioning evaluates how “consequences of a response determine the probability of it being repeated” (McLeod, 2018). The consequences can be controlled through the strengthening of behaviour, called reinforcement, or the weakening of behaviour, called punishment. Both methods have positive and negative variations and can be executed either via addition or confiscation of a pleasant or unpleasant stimulus (McLeod, 2018). Games inherently condition, as all consequences in the game either help or prevent players from achieving the overarching aim of progression. This creates a binary form of conditioning— players are rewarded when progressing, and punished when not progressing— and raises ethical concerns, especially in games with morality systems.

Infamous Second Son's morality system is represented by a scale that ranges from “True Hero” to “Infamous” (Sucker Punch Productions, 2014). Players are rewarded with new powers as they progress down either side of the scale and are thus conditioned through positive reinforcement to pursue extremes. “Choosing to be a good guy or a bad guy, that’s the simple choice. The harder thing to do is, are you capable of walking the walk?” (Fox, 2013), asks the creative director of the game, implying players must commit to good or bad.

“There was a period of time in gaming where doing an evil or bad path in a game would clearly lead to unfavorable outcomes – failures, game over, etc.” (2019), game writer Avellone remarked. Recent games like *Infamous* refrain from judging players for being bad to reflect reality’s ambiguity, but still constrain them to black-and-white, polarising systems. Players are rarely encouraged to morally sway, nor to pursue moral balance and moderation. Gamification of morals is thereby controversial, because conditioning means removing the ability and will to make choices independently of rewards, while morality and judgment thereof is just that.

(Word Count: 298)

Citations:

Avellone, C. (2019) “Morality in Games: Are Players Prone to Good Or Evil Choices?” Interview with Chris Avellone. Interviewed by Patrick Shanley for *The Hollywood Reporter*, 22 February 2019. Available at : <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/morality-games-are-players-prone-good-evil-choices-1181699>> (Accessed April 2021)

McLeod, S. (2018) *What Is Operant Conditioning and How Does It Work?* Available at : <<https://www.simplypsychology.org/operant-conditioning.html#positive>> (Accessed May 2021)

Shaw-Williams, H. (2013) “ ‘inFAMOUS: Second Son’ Karma Explained: Welcome Back the Binary Moral Choice System”. Available at : <<https://gamerant.com/infamous-second-son-moral-choices/>> (Accessed April 2021)

Sucker Punch Productions (2014) *Infamous Second Son* [Video Game]. Sony Computer Entertainment