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## The Impartial Player: Adam Smith's Moral Theory as Displayed in Modern Video Games

As artistic forms, video games are able to participate in ongoing conversations on the modern world and its morality through their unique engagement with their audience. This discussion of the ways morality functions in society fulfills the same purpose as Adam Smith's 1759 work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith's work outlined an absolute moral framework that humans operate within, using sympathy to ensure individual happiness and societal harmony. One of Smith's central arguments was that sympathy allowed people to achieve the best outcome for all by behaving in a way that an impartial spectator would approve of. This same conversation concerning the role of sympathy in morality is still occurring in modern mediums, demonstrating both the utility of Smith's arguments, as well as reflecting on the differing ways morality functions in the world today.

I observed this modern medium's comments on this theory by conducting four case studies of enacted narrative games, or games in which the central game mechanic pertains directly to the plot. Enacted narrative video games such as those produced by Telltale Games and Dontnod Entertainment centre around social relationship management and moral decision-making mechanics. In the games, the consequences of the actions or dialogue options can be felt immediately, as the game signals how the non-player characters reacted. This generates feelings of happiness in the player or can dissuade them from acting in a way that harms others. At the end of each chapter of these games, statistics displaying the choices of every player around the world are displayed. This compares the individual player's choices to that of the entire world, and conditions the player to consider what others might have done as they play. This metric, and the dichotomy it creates between the player and the character they are playing, exemplifies Smith's Impartial Spectator Procedure. However, as the two options of certain decisions begin to be chosen equally by players, the presentation of right versus wrong choices via the Impartial Spectator Procedure is found lacking. In this way, video games as a modern art form comment on Smith's idea of the absolute utility of sympathy by presenting a clear limit to that in modern morality.

Moreover, certain games' linear plot progression regardless of moral decisions seems to suggest that in the modern world there are often no right choices. The final case study suggests that sympathy is not always useful in morality, as it punishes the player for making the clear sympathetic choice. In research it can clearly be seen that Smith's same arguments on sympathy and its important role in morality continue to be discussed today, however the games clearly argue that sympathy is useful in a more limited capacity than Smith first suggested. Though the games occasionally reward the use of sympathy, the inconsistency in its position suggests that the modern world employs more gray morality than Smith advocated for. In this way, the modern iteration of this conversation ends with a warning, conditioning players to be wary of an absolute utility of sympathy in the modern world.