

Ethics in Videogames

GAMES 3020-003/PHIL 3011-003

Spring 2025

MoWe/ 11:50AM-01:10PM

BU C 107



Instructor

TJ Perkins

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Office hours: Tu 10:30-11:30 CTIHB 405

Also by appointment; send me an email to schedule.

Course Description

Videogames are an ever-increasing feature of the human experience. How do videogames impact society? What special responsibilities do we have as players and consumers? How can we use ethical theories in our daily practice? In this class we will interrogate these questions and more with the aim to learn and discuss the role videogames can play in helping us reason about ethical problems. Students will also play and analyze games and discuss their embedded values and politics. During this class, we will alternate between lectures and discussions. Minimum expectations include being present in class, playing the assigned videogames, and participating in class discussions.

Learning Outcomes

- ▲ Students will be able to identify and recognize the moral dimensions of problems in videogames, games culture, and the games industry
- ▲ Students will be able to apply traditional moral theories to the analysis of issues in games, game culture, and the game industry
- ▲ Students will understand how games can be used to explore and examine moral problems

Required Materials

There is no required text. All readings are available for download from Canvas in the Files section. However, you may need to purchase a game for the Game Analysis Paper (see below).

GRADING

Attendance (25%)

Given the nature of this course, attendance is required and adjustments will only be permitted as required by Policy 6-100(III)(O). Each student will begin the course with 25 points of attendance. Each absence costs 1 point. So, by the end of term, if you have 3 absences, you will be awarded 22 attendance points. 25 absences nets 0 attendance points. If you need to seek an ADA accommodation to request an exception to this attendance policy due to a disability, please contact the Center for Disability and Access (CDA). CDA will work with us to determine what, if any, ADA accommodations are reasonable and appropriate.

Assignments (75%)

▲ Media Hunts (3x) (10%)

At a few points during the semester, I will ask you to hunt for case studies of how the ideas/problems we are covering in class are being discussed on a broader scale. These hunts will involve you finding cases from current events (~within 1 year) and news where the class topics are being discussed. You will identify the clip/article (providing a URL) and give a short write-up (~300 words) identifying the connection. Each media hunt will be submitted via Canvas by the dates identified in the Canvas 'assignments' page.

▲ Current Event Presentation (10%)

In groups of one to two, find a current event or recent problem related to games and ethics and present the problem and defend a position to the class (10-15 mins). This can be a presentation of one of your Media Hunts. All presentations will occur in weeks 14 and 15. Sometime soon after Spring Break I will circulate a sign-up sheet to

▲ Normative Theories Paper (Top-Down) (15%)

750-1000-word paper describing and then applying one of the three main normative theories discussed in the class to a game ethics case. See files or assignment sections of canvas.

▲ Applied Ethics Paper (Bottom-Up) (15%)

750-1000-word paper applying one of the three applied ethics techniques learned in class to a game ethics case of your choosing. You will not apply the normative theories to this assignment. You are expected to defend a position using an applied ethics technique discussed in class. See files or assignment sections of canvas.

▲ Weekly Discussions Responses (10%)

Ten times during the semester (one time per week), I will post a question during class that you will post your answer to in a public discussion board. Discussion posts are due the proceeding Sunday by 11:59pm. You may engage with your classmates in these discussion boards but need not. The points are awarded for an engaged answer to the in-class prompt.

▲ Game analysis paper (15%)

Select a game from the following list, play it, and write a three to four paragraph paper that analyzes some ethical issue present in the game. The first paragraph will efficiently introduce the game to the reader, the second paragraph describes an issue or feature of the game that has some moral component to it, and the final paragraph or two analyzes it and defends a position:

This War of Mine

Papers, Please

The Forgotten City

Undertale (long, play to end)

Due Dates

Media Hunt 1	February 2
Normative Theories Paper	February 23
Media Hunt 2	March 9
Applied Ethics Paper	April 6
Media Hunt 3	April 6
Game Analysis Paper	April 25

A = 93 or higher, A- = 92-90, B+ = 89-88, B = 87-83, B- = 82-80, C+ = 79-78, C = 77-73, C- = 72-70, D+ = 69-68, D = 67-63, D- = 62-60, F = 59-0. A indicates excellence, B indicates good work, C indicates satisfactory work, D work is unsatisfactory in some respect, F is substantially unsatisfactory work.

All assignments are to be submitted as either pdf or doc, 12-point font, and double-spaced

Schedule of Topics

Sort of Module 0: Introduction

Week 1

Jan 6: Syllabus and Introductions

Jan 8: Introduction to Philosophy, Ethics, and Games

Readings: Tannsjo – “Practical and Normative Ethics,” Zagal - “Ethical Reasoning and Reflection as...”

Week 2

Jan 13: Media Effects

Read: Melzer & Holl – “Players’ Moral Decisions in Virtual Worlds...”, and Potter, “Media Effects” Chapter 3

Jan 15: Cheating

Read: Consalvo – “Gaining Advantage”

Sort of Topic Module 1: Normative Theories

Week 3

Jan 20: Holiday MLK Day (No Classes)

Jan 22: Cultural Relativism

Read: Rachels and Rachels "Challenges of Cultural Relativism"

Week 4

Jan 27: Utilitarianism/Consequentialism

Read: Mill 1861

Jan 29: Violence in Videogames/Moral Panics

Read: Gunter – "Overall state of..."

Week 5

Feb 3: Kantian Deontology

Read: Kant 1785

Feb 5: Competition

Read: Nguyen and Zagal – "Ethics of Competitiveness"

Week 6

Feb 10: Virtue Theory

Read: Nussbaum 1988

Feb 12: Moral Roleplay

Read: Consalvo, Busch & Jong – "Playing a Better Me," and Aesthetics for birds:

Christopher Bartel: <https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2020/10/27/why-video-game-violence-isnt-innocent/>

Week 7

Feb 17 Holiday Presidents Day (No Classes)

Feb 19: Normative Theories Day and How to Apply Them.

Sort of Topic Module 2: Applied Ethics

Week 8

Feb 24: Applied Ethics Techniques 1

Feb 26: Applied Ethics Techniques 2

Read: Thomson 1971

Week 9

Mar 3: Games Preservation

Read: Nylund, "Walkthrough and Let's Play"

Mar 5: MicroTransactions, Lootboxes, and Gambling

Read: Xiao and Newall - "Probability disclosures..."

~~Week 10 Spring Break (No Classes)~~

~~Mar 10~~

~~Mar 12~~

Week 11

Mar 17 GTFO <https://www.kanopy.com/en/utah/video/243151>

Mar 19 GTFO Discussion

Read: Steele and Aronson

Week 12

Mar 24: Dark Patterns

Read: Zagal, Bjork & Lewis "Dark Patterns. . . "

Mar 26: Abusive Game Design

Read: Wilson & Sicart "On Abusive Game..."

Week 13

Mar 31 Value Capture and Gamification?

Read: Nguyen – "How Twitter gamifies communication"

Apr 2 Sustainability

Read: Milburn – "Green Gaming..."

Sort of Module 3: Student Led Portion

Week 14

Apr 7 Current Event Presentations

Apr 9 Current Event Presentations

Week 15 Presentations

Apr 14 Current Event Presentations

Apr 16 Current Event Presentations

Week 16

Apr 21 Final Day Wrap-up (Student Presentations if any remain)