

# Playing with Our Values: Using Digital Games to Undertake Ethical Examinations in the Classroom

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Matthew Kelly is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas at Tyler. His research focuses on the pedagogical dimensions of digital games and using game-based learning activities to help students engage in critical ethical inquiry. He also directs the Interactive Storytelling and Narrative Design program at his university, which is an interdisciplinary concentration that connects literature, creative writing, visual rhetoric, and computer science through the use of digital game design. He has published articles in journals such as *Simulation and Gaming*, *Games and Culture*, *Composition Forum*, and *College English*.

Scholars have praised digital games for their educational potential, noting games' ability to teach players multivalent problem-solving skills in a variety of disciplines.<sup>1</sup> Such research emphasizes the dynamic elements of gameplay experiences. For example, games can gradually increase levels of difficulty for players, which encourages them to progressively refine their gameplay strategies.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the satisfaction of solving increasingly-complex problems provides intrinsic motivation to players, thereby inciting them to continue revising how they navigate in-game obstacles.<sup>3</sup> Experimenting with different ways to solve problems also shapes players' relationships to learning, allowing them to see failures as opportunities for exploring new ideas rather than seeing failures as indications of one's intellectual shortcomings.<sup>4</sup>

This research rests upon games' ability to habituate players into acting and thinking in deliberate ways.<sup>5</sup> In short, games create rules that prioritize certain actions and outcomes over others. Games then use feedback mechanisms to reinforce these rules and guide players towards ideal outcomes.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, games condition players to view gameplay scenarios through the perspective of a particular value system. Put differently, learning a game means learning to interpret situations through the values prioritized by a game's rules and, furthermore, learning which actions move one closer to the optimal results dictated by said values.<sup>7</sup> Scholars use a discourse of 'ethics' to unpack the significance of internalizing the values embedded within a game's rules.<sup>8</sup> In this work, 'ethics' denotes an interpretive framework that examines how individuals' lived experiences shape their worldview and inform the logic they use to rationalize their actions as personally beneficial and/or socially appropriate.<sup>9</sup> In applying this notion of ethics to games, we can say that analyzing the ethics of digital games means analyzing the ways in which games foster experiences that encourage players to uphold specific value systems (systems which govern the logic informing one's gameplay decisions) and inhabit unique perspectives within a virtual arena.<sup>10</sup>

Educators can design learning activities around games' ethical dimensions to help students explore the process through which individuals arrive at their respective worldviews and, furthermore, engage in productive forms of critical self-reflection.<sup>11</sup> For example,

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- 1 SQUIRE, K.: *Video Games and Learning: Teaching Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*. New York, NY : Teachers College Press, 2011, p. 15.
  - 2 HAMARI, J. et al.: Challenging Games Help Students Learn: An Empirical Study on Engagement, Flow and Immersion in Game-Based Learning. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2016, Vol. 54, No. 1, p. 172.
  - 3 ERHEL, S., JAMET, E.: Improving Instructions in Educational Computer Games: Exploring the Relations Between Goal Specificity, Flow Experience and Learning Outcomes. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2019, Vol. 91, No. 1, p. 108.; MARTI-PARRENO, J. et al.: Students' Attitude Towards the Use of Educational Video Games to Develop Competencies. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2018, Vol. 81, No. 1, p. 372.
  - 4 GEE, J.: *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. New York, NY : Palgrave MacMillan, 2004, p. 59.
  - 5 HOLMES, S.: *The Rhetoric of Video Games as Embodied Practice: Procedural Habits*. Philadelphia, PA : Routledge, 2017, p. 66.
  - 6 BOGOST, I.: *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2010, p. 47.
  - 7 KIRKPATRICK, G.: *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary*. Malden, MA : Polity Press, 2013, p. 28.
  - 8 SICART, M.: *The Ethics of Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2009, p. 4.; See also: COLBY, R., JOHNSON, M. S. S., COLBY, R. S. (eds.): *The Ethics of Playing, Researching, and Teaching Games in the Writing Classroom*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
  - 9 SCHRIER, K.: Designing Role-Playing Video Games for Ethical Thinking. In *Education Technology Research and Development*, 2017, Vol. 65, No. 4, p. 832.; DECHERING, A., BAKKES, S.: Moral Engagement in Interactive Narrative Games: An Exploratory Study on Ethical Agency in the Walking Dead and Life Is Strange. In DAHLKOG, S. (ed.): *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. New York, NY : ACM, 2018, p. 3.
  - 10 SCHRIER, K.: Designing Games for Moral Learning and Knowledge-Building. In *Games and Culture*, 2019, Vol. 14, No. 4, p. 313.
  - 11 RYAN, M. et al.: Focus, Sensitivity, Judgement, Action: Four Lenses for Designing Morally Engaging Games. In *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 2017, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 145.

students can play role-playing games and explain the rationale used when navigating morally-complex gameplay scenarios.<sup>12</sup> Students can then examine the overlap or fissures between their in-game reasoning and the logic they use when engaging with moral issues in the real world.<sup>13</sup> Such activities accomplish two goals: first, students can consider how personal experiences and external circumstances lead individuals to uphold value systems that may differ from their own.<sup>14</sup> Second, students can use their participation in alternative value systems to reflect upon and refine the logic underlying their real-world ethical obligations.<sup>15</sup> That is to say, engaging in a comparative analysis between one's in-game and real-world values provides an opportunity to identify latent priorities or biases in students' daily undertakings that may otherwise go unnoticed. Ultimately, game-based learning activities should encourage students to contemplate the experiences and circumstances that shape their personal value systems in hopes of refining the ethical logic they deploy when responding to difficult issues in their everyday lives.

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