

Applied ethics techniques for video game ethics

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

From classic debates over violence in video games to more recent discussions over monetization, crunch, and sustainability, video games generate interesting moral problems and many positions associated with them. Accordingly, video game ethics has become a core area within games research and academic programs, accompanied by growing scholarly interest (e.g. Bartel 2012, 2020; Consalvo 2007; Gunter 2016; Luck 2009; Melzer & Holl 2020; Milburn 2014; Patridge 2013; Sicart 2009, 2013; Wilson & Sicart 2010; Zagal 2009; among many others) and the development of game ethics courses (e.g. Schrier 2021a, Schrier 2021b, Zagal 2021). With this new growth, two related challenges arise. The first is pedagogical: how do we guide students to have more effective debates about moral issues, especially when students are deeply invested as players and fans? The second is research-based: given the methodological pluralism that characterizes games scholarship and practice, how can we foster productive conversation and collaboration when the assumptions, aims, and evaluative standards of our disciplines are so diverse?

This paper introduces two classes of techniques familiar from analytic philosophy---*constructing cases* and *engaging perspectives*---to supplement the empirical and theoretical work commonly taught in game ethics classrooms and used in game ethics research. These techniques are well-established in philosophy (Rosen et al., 2018), but especially in the subarea of applied ethics, which includes fields like bioethics and business ethics, where they help structure discussion between researchers and practitioners who bring different expertise and values. Because these areas offer well-developed examples of how these techniques can bridge disciplinary divides, I use cases from bioethics and show how these methods can be adapted for game-ethics contexts. I argue that incorporating these techniques into game ethics can improve classroom debate, support interdisciplinary collaboration, and add to the conceptual toolkit for both scholars and practitioners.

First, I articulate two families of techniques broadly under the heading of case construction. The first, *analogies*, involves comparing a target case to cases that are structurally similar. Analogies can create intellectual distance from an emotionally

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charged topic or uncover preconceived notions or rigid judgments. I offer two versions. Version 1 compares a single case with a more intuitively stable one and asks what if anything is meaningfully different about the original. I discuss an example from the philosophy of games, where Bartel (2020) compares virtual violence with damaging a loved one's photograph to put pressure on the view that virtual violence is innocent. Version 2 begins with two contrasting structurally similar cases and asks which the original is more like. I discuss comparing monetization in games to opportunistic but fair exploits in games (e.g. exploiting an opposite's weakness in a game of Go) and morally problematic exploitation (e.g. selling an EpiPen to someone undergoing anaphylaxis in a remote area) (Wertheimer 1996). In both versions, the analogy functions like recycling design assets; it repurposes familiar moral judgments to interrogate new contexts. In a slogan: consider the ethical assets you already have.

The second family of techniques, *simplifying examples*, removes complicating features from real-world cases to isolate which elements matter morally. It allows disputants to identify common ground and articulate justifications for their positions. As with analogies, I offer two versions. Version 1 strips the complex case down to identify which components drive moral evaluation in the original. I illustrate this with the euthanasia debate (Rosen et al. 2018, ch 14). Version 2 removes features to expose underlying, generalizable concerns. I discuss this with the example of sexualized female characters, where removing components reveals a deeper issue about reductive representational patterns. Both methods are like when software developers make a minimum viable product (MVP). In a slogan: pinpoint the MVP of an ethical issue, keep it or build out.

There are other forms of case construction, including impossible or idealized scenarios (e.g. Battin 2024) and series-based cases like the trolley problem (Foot 1967; Thomson 1976). The method of constructing cases can deepen our understanding of game ethics both as game ethics scholars and educators in ways that they've shown useful for other applied fields. It allows us to structure our debates in manageable ways, identify what we have in common with one another, and pinpoint our justifications and the crux of our disagreements.

The second broader technique is called *engaging perspectives*. This technique centers on considering and defending views in opposition to our own. The first version is a *steelman argument*, the strongest possible version of an opposite's view. Steelmans contrast with the more familiar strawman argument, a weak or misrepresentative argument presented in defense of your opposite's view. A strawman creates a false target which is easier to take down to give the illusion of winning. By contrast, a steelman cultivates intellectual humility by focusing debate on genuine disagreement rather than caricatures. To illustrate, I use the example of Bartel's (2020) steelman which centers on two premises: (i) that virtual actions are morally neutral because they target only fictional entities and (ii) that the average player recognizes that their play is largely fictional and so doesn't export negative lessons. He then presents his maimed photograph analogy to show that the steelman argument isn't sound.

The second subtechnique is *granting for the sake of*, a technique used to temporarily adopt a premise or condition one does not endorse to examine its implications or refocus the discussion on more central or tractable issues. I consider an example from the bioethics literature (Thomson 1971) as a model for how we might use this in a discussion about loot boxes and gambling.

This material has been a favorite among students, but more importantly it prioritizes the insights game players and makers have. Once students are given more tools to articulate what they believe and how to justify their positions, they more effectively present those insights, understand one another's views, and challenge their own. I hope this talk will supplement the syllabi of existing game ethics classes and provide argumentative tools for anyone, whether from industry or education, interested in thinking and talking about morality in games.

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