

Philosophy of Games



Screen grab from *Super Mario Bros.* | Source: [Insider](#)

Philosophy 245
Winter 2023

Professor: Dr. Brandon Polite
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Office Hours
MWF 2:40–3:30
Old Main 304

Time & Location
MWF 1:20–2:30 p.m.
Borzello Hall 116

Course Description

This course examines the nature of games and their significance.

The questions we will address fall into three broad categories. **(1) Metaphysical:** What makes video games, board games, role-playing games, sports, etc., all games? What is it to play a game? Must one follow the rules to count as genuinely playing a game? **(2) Aesthetic:** Can games be works of art? How does our engagement in a game compare to our engagement in other forms of art? **(3) Social/Moral:** What is the value of playing games? Can games help us better understand ourselves? Can playing games transform our lives in positive ways?



Screen grab from *Space Invaders* | Source: [The Fact Site](#)

By the end of the term, you should be able to

- **Articulate** some important philosophical positions on games.
- **Articulate** salient objections to some important philosophical positions on games.
- **Defend** your own positions on significant issues in the philosophy of games.

course details

Website: Accessible via <https://classroom.google.com>

Masks: Masks are required in class at all times. Your mask should be at least surgical quality: e.g., KN95, KF94, & N95. Cloth and paper masks are ineffective at preventing the spread of Covid-19.

Book: C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency As Art* (Oxford University Press, 2020) | [link](#)

Other Readings: All other readings are available as pdfs or web links on Google Classroom.

Interviews: I have interviewed some philosophers about work of theirs that relates to our class topics as part of my YouTube series, [Polite Conversations: Philosophers Discuss the Arts](#). These videos are assigned throughout the term (see the schedule below). Watch them at normal speed.

Honor Code: This course operates within the parameters set by the Honor Code. Students are encouraged to talk through all course material with one another and to function as interlocutors for one another. This extends to preparing to write your prompts and essays. However, each student is required to write their own work, to cite all sources fully, and to give explicit credit where particular formulations of claims, arguments, and examples are the product of cooperative work.

Accommodations: If you have academic accommodations of any sort and need particular allowances, such as a notetaker or more flexible deadlines, please let me know early on in the term so that we can make a plan to help you succeed in the course.

Course Requirements

Weekly Writing Prompts | 30 pts

Each week you will have the opportunity to select **one** significant passage from **one** of that week's readings or a significant quote from one of that week's videos, and write a **250–300 word** response to it. A passage or quote may be chosen because it rings true or seems wrong, it is illuminating or confusing, it resonates or conflicts with another author's view, etc. Whatever the nature of your response, it must reflect your familiarity with the reading/video as a whole. You will post your response on Google Classroom as that week's **"Writing Prompt"** assignment. There will be **nine opportunities** to submit prompts over the course of the term.

Grading: Prompts will each have two parts (explanation & response), each of which will be graded as either **Satisfactory (1)** or **Needs Work (0)**; Each prompt can thus earn 2, 1, or 0 pts. The number of points needed to earn a particular grade out of 30 pts are: **10=100%, 9=90%, 8=80%, 7=70%**, etc. Hence, you only need to submit the equivalent of 5 entirely satisfactory prompts to earn all 30 pts; however, **no more than 6 pts** can be earned for each half of the term. See the instructions here: [link](#).

Engagement | 20 pts

Engagement comes in many forms, not just attendance. It includes (but is not limited to) the following:

- Preparation:** reviewing readings & materials before class
- Focus:** avoiding distractions during in-class activities
- Presence:** engaged and responsive during in-class activities
- Asking Questions:** in class, out of class, online, offline
- Listening:** hearing what others say, & also what they're not saying
- Specificity:** referring to specific ideas from readings & discussions
- Synthesizing:** making connections between readings & discussions

Schedule

Week 1: Agency As Art		
1/4	W	Introductions
1/6	F	C. Thi Nguyen, <i>Games: Agency As Art</i> , Ch. 1
Week 2: Games & Agency		
1/9	M	C. Thi Nguyen, <i>Games: Agency As Art</i> , Ch. 2
1/11	W	C. Thi Nguyen, <i>Games: Agency As Art</i> , Ch. 3
1/13	F	C. Thi Nguyen, <i>Games: Agency As Art</i> , Ch. 4
Week 3: Agency & Art		
1/16	M	C. Thi Nguyen, <i>Games: Agency As Art</i> , Ch. 5
1/18	W	C. Thi Nguyen, <i>Games: Agency As Art</i> , Ch. 6
1/20	F	Paper 1 Thesis Discussion Paper Proposal due by class time

Paper 1 | 30 pts

You will write a paper of roughly **1500–1800 words** (5–6 pages) in which you will develop a thesis in response to some aspect of C. Thi Nguyen's book. This paper will follow the traditional philosophical format of interpreting one or more philosophical positions & developing your own argument in response to them.

Paper 2 | 20 pts

You will write a paper of roughly **1000–1200 words** (3–4 pages) in which you respond to your first paper in light of one or more readings since Nguyen's book. You can add further support to your original thesis, support a revised version of it, or argue against it.

Note: Failure to submit a proposal or attend a conference for either paper will result in its grade being reduced by 5% each.

Grading Scale

A+	100 – 97.7	C+	79.9 – 77.7
A	97.6 – 93.4	C	77.6 – 73.4
A-	93.3 – 90	C-	73.3 – 70
B+	89.9 – 87.7	D+	69.9 – 67.7
B	87.6 – 83.4	D	67.6 – 63.4
B-	83.3 – 80	D-	63.3 – 60

Weekly Writing Prompts

Due Fridays by 11:59 p.m.

Week 4: Social & Moral Transformations

1/23 M C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency As Art*, Ch. 8
1/25 W **No Class | Paper Conferences**
1/27 F **No Class | Paper Conferences**

Week 5: Social & Moral Transformations

1/30 M C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency As Art*, Ch. 9
2/1 W C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency As Art*, Ch. 10
2/3 F **No Class | Work on Paper**

Week 6: Games & Exploitation

2/6 M **No Class | Paper 1 Due**
2/8 W **No Class | Day of Dialogue**
2/10 F Eliya Cohen, "How Microtransactions Exploit Video Game Players" | [link](#)
Interview w/ Eliya Cohen

Week 7: Difficulty & Voyeurism

2/13 M Aderemi Artis, "The Argument from Extreme Difficulty in Video Games"
2/15 W Interview: "Watching Others Play Games" w/ Nathan Wildman | [link](#)
2/17 F *Aesthetics for Birds*, Roundtable: Voyeur Gaming | [link](#)

Week 8: Emotions & Morality

2/20 M Interview w/ Nele van de Mosselaer (?)
2/22 W Nele van de Mosselaer, "Player Misery Across Game Boundaries"
2/24 F Morgan Luck, "The Gamer's Dilemma"

Week 9: (Im)moral Gameplay

2/27 M Amanda Lange, "How Players Engage with Moral Choice Systems"
3/1 W Christopher Bartel, "Free Will, Motivation, & the Limits of Moral Criticism"
3/3 F Interview w/ Christopher Bartel | **Paper Proposal Due**

Week 10: Paper 2

3/6 M **No Class | Paper Conferences**
3/8 W **No Class | Paper Conferences**
3/12 Su Term Paper due by 10 p.m.

Late Assignments

There is enough flexibility built into the assignments & structure of the course that you shouldn't find it too difficult to turn the work in on time. But if you feel like you need additional time & would like to negotiate reasonable, extended deadlines for any assignment for any reason, get in touch with me prior to the deadline. **Communication is essential.** Late work turned in without my approval **will not be accepted** for credit.



Settlers of Catan game board
Source: [Board Game Halv](#)

Further information on all assignments can be found on Google Classroom.