Tabletop Philosophy

HSem 2074, Sp23
3 cr.

Instructor Info —

Professor Cat Saint-Croix

Office Hrs: Fri, 11:15-12:15pm and by appointment

umn.zoom.us/my/chatwithcat (pw: 5ie+jH)

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Course Info ——

Prereq: None! :D

Type: In-Person

Meeting: Monday & Wednesday

4:00-5:15pm

Blegen Hall 235

Digital Tools ——

Our Canvas site

UMN Zoom (via Canvas)

Overview

Role-playing games are strange: Like a play, they ask you to inhabit the mind and spirit of another person. But, like a game, they also set goals and tasks for you. And, they are centered around the *co*-creation of a world and its story, like, well.. like nothing else. In this class, we'll study role-playing games, not only as games, but also as ways of learning about ourselves and the world we (in fact!) inhabit. Along the way, we will *play* these games, with an eye toward answering our many questions.

We will begin by studying role-playing games as they are presented: as games! What is a game, anyway? Is competition essential? Must you play to win in order to play? Or can you play just for the simple joy and beauty of the game? In this unit, we will play *Honey Heist* and *The Witch is Dead*, two silly and light-hearted role-playing games that nevertheless challenge common views of what counts as a game.

Next, we focus on joy, beauty, and goodness. Under these topics, we will consider questions like, are games art? What about role-playing games, in particular? What is play? Is play an important part of a flourishing life? What are the ethics of play?

Along the way, we will devote time to actually playing a selection of games. As we do, we'll find ourselves inhabiting lives of our characters: We will find ourselves in extraordinary circumstances, making difficult, courageous, and life-changing choices. These experiences will help us as we consider questions like these: Can games contribute to moral learning? Can we learn how to be better people through the lives we imagine in fantasy?

Finally, we'll consider the worlds we co-create, and what that co creation means for theories of fiction. What is a story? How much control do authors have over the worlds of their stories? For that matter, what *is* authorship?

Game Nights: In addition to our regular class meeting, we'll also have a **game night** every other week. The game night is optional, and will extend our Wednesday class period to 6:30pm. Game nights will be an opportunity to play together; I'll introduce different games and help you get started with them. But, you should feel free to keep these games going beyond the class!

Materials

- C. Thi Ngyuen (2020) *Games: Agency as Art*
- Cavalry Games (2020) *Ten Candles*
- Ben Robbins (2011) *Microscope*
- Gaming dice (details forthcoming)!
- All other readings will be available on Canvas.

Assessment

Here are the main components of the class:

% of Grade	Component
15%	Participation
15%	(Meta-)Stories
20%	Five-Sentence Papers
30%	Short Papers (2)
20%	Final Project

Participation – 15%

Games are the soul of this course. Over the course of the semester, we'll play Microscope, Dungeons & Dragons, Ten Candles, and more. These games and your experience with them will be a core part of the class. Active, friendly participation in the games will constitute half of your participation grade. The other half will come from participation in class.

(Meta-)Stories (x4) – 15%

(Meta-)Stories will be the creative output of your gaming sessions. These can be fiction or non-fiction, and they take *many* forms. On the fiction side, you might write a letter from your character's perspective to someone they know, recounting the events of your adventure. On the non-fiction side, you might discuss the difference between how *you* felt about a decision and how *your character* felt about it. With respect to media, these might be traditional written formats or something new – are you playing a bard? You could write a song. You could make a podcast episode.

What's important about these is that they demonstrate your thinking about and engaging with the session you played. These will be graded as check minus, check, and check plus. You must turn in four over the course of the semester.

Five-Sentence Papers (x5) – 20%

Over the course of the semester, you'll have five five-sentence papers due. These can be on readings of your choice, and should be turned in the Sunday *before* the reading they discuss. These will be graded as check minus (room to improve), check (good), and check plus (awesome). See *Five-Sentence Papers* on our Canvas site for details!

Papers (x2) – 30%

Over the semester, we'll have two papers of 1500–2000 words each. You should draw liberally on your experience in the RPGs you've played as you write these papers. Don't worry if you've never written a philosophy paper before! We'll workshop them along the way.

Final Project – 20%

For the final project, you can choose one of a few different options, or propose your own! First, you can write a **traditional philosophical paper**. That is, you can offer a defense of some thesis. If you choose this option, you may develop one of your short papers or begin a new one. Papers should be 2500-3000 words. Second, you could take a more unconventional approach. Here, you might **create *your own* short RPG** (much like Honey Heist or The Witch is Dead), that looks to explore one of the questions (or maybe answers?) you found interesting over the semester. Another option would be to write a substantive review of a game, with respect to various themes from class. Alternatively, you can pursue your own idea along these lines – pitch me!

Class Policies

There are a few important policies that apply to everyone in the class:

- **Late work:** Late work will not be accepted except under the guidance of Disability Services, in accord with University policy, or with the use of Grace Days.

- **Grace Days:** Each student has three Grace Days that they may use to extend the due date for any assignment by 24 hours. You may use multiple Grace Days for any assignment. (These will be tracked on Canvas and automatically applied when grading.) It is your responsibility to keep track of Grace Days.

- **Extra Credit:** There are no extra credit assignments in this course.

- **Coursework Grades:** All grades will be considered final 72 hours after they have been returned to you. If you have questions or concerns about your grades, please reach out as soon as possible.

- **Final Grades:** Any final grade within .25% of a cutoff will be rounded up to that grade. No other rounding will occur.

- **Communication:** When emailing about this course, please include the course number (HSEM2074) in your subject line! Otherwise, I might miss your message. I will always try to reply within one business day, **but please note that I try not to check email after 6pm or on the weekend.** (I'll try to minimize weekend work for you, too!) In an emergency, remember that there are no philosophy class emergencies. If personal emergencies arise that affect your coursework at odd hours, please don't worry that you need to get in touch with me immediately. Nothing about this class is so urgent that it can't be addressed the next morning; focus on yourself.

Diversity and Inclusivity

In this classroom, you will be treated with respect. No matter your age, background, beliefs, ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or any other visible or non-visible difference, you will be welcome. All members of this class are expected to contribute to a respectful, welcoming, and inclusive environment for every other member of the class. Anyone intentionally disrupting that environment will be asked to leave. Please talk to me after class, during office hours, or via email if you have any issues or concerns related to this.

Accommodations

Your ability to succeed in this class is important to me! Accommodations will be made for students with disabilities; please contact me or the Disability Resource Center during the first two weeks of class. If you have conflicts due to religious observation, please email me as soon as possible, but at least one week prior.

Academic Integrity

The Student Conduct Code is central to the ideals our scholarly community. Students are expected to be independently familiar with the Code.

Students who violate the academic integrity will receive a grade of 'F' in the course and will be reported to the Office for Community Standards. For reference, violations of academic integrity include but are not limited to:

- Sharing assignments or coursework on sites like Chegg or CourseHero.
- Misrepresenting work that you did not create as your own. (Including the use of AI assistants.)
- Using another student's work as the basis for your own.
- Using notes or communicating with other students during exams.

Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated. But! Please do work together to prepare for exams, develop paper ideas, and so on, if you like.

Class Schedule

Week	Topic	Readings & Tasks
Week 1	**What are games?** This week, we also address consent and care in tabletop gaming, addressing the question of harm in shared imaginary spaces.	**Wednesday, 01/18:** None
	Game Night (01/18):	**Honey Heist:** It's HoneyCon 2022, and you're about to pull the greatest heist in history. Two things: 1. You have an intricate plan that requires precise timing. 2. You're a bear.
Week 2	**What are we doing when we play games?** How does this description relate to tabletop games? Where does it fall short?	**Monday, 01/23:** Nguyen (2020) *Games: Agency As Art*, Ch. 1 **Wednesday, 01/25:** Nguyen (2020) *Games*, Ch. 2
Week 3	**You, as a gamer.** What does our capacity to play games tell us about our own agency? About what kinds of creatures we are? What do they teach us about our autonomy and how it is gained?	**Monday, 01/30:** Nguyen (2020) *Games*, Ch. 3 & Ch. 4 **Wednesday, 02/01:** Read rules for Sign
	Game Night (02/01):	**Sign**: How do you learn to speak when you cannot?
Week 4	**What is art, anyway?** What do we mean when we call something a "work of art"? Is this just a mark of adoration? Achievement? Aesthetic mastery? Something else?	**Monday, 02/06:** Tavinor (2009) *The Art of Videogames*, Ch. 9, and (skim →) Adajian (2018) "The Definition of Art" **Wednesday, 02/08:** Outline workshop for Paper #1!
		Bring a HARD COPY of your outline Wednesday!
Week 5	**The Aesthetics of Role-Playing Games** What are the aesthetics of role-playing games? Is an aesthetic of games even possible?	**Monday, 02/13:** Nguyen (2020) *Games*, Ch. 5 **Wednesday, 02/15:** Read rules for Ten Candles.
	Game Night (02/15):	**Ten Candles**: These things are true: the world is dark, and you are alive.
Week 6	**Art new and old** Supposing that games *are* art, how do they line up with traditional art forms? What's unique about them?	**Monday, 02/20:** Nguyen (2020) *Games*, Ch. 6 & Ch. 7 **Wednesday, 02/22:** *No meeting! Prof is away.*
		Paper #1 due Friday, 02/24 at 8pm

Week 7	**Games and the Good Life**	**Monday, 02/27:** Hurka & Tasioulas (2006) "Games and the Good" and Ridge (2021) "Games and the Good Life"
		Wednesday, 03/01: Review D&D 5e Basic Rules, read the Tabletop Philosophy Adventure Guide, and create your character! (**DMs:** Read your DM's Adventure Guide)
	Game Night (03/01):	**Dungeons & Dragons:** From the deep, cold winters of Wisconsin, the classic tabletop role-playing game!
Week 8	**Spring Break!**	*Do something irresponsible.*
Week 9	**Moral Learning: How do we become better people? (Part 1)** How do we learn to be good people? What is the role of empathy? What's the difference between thinking about a scenario and simulating it?	**Monday, 03/13:** Gallagher (2012) "Empathy, Simulation, and Narrative"
		Wednesday, 03/15: Review your D&D materials from 03/01.
	Game Night (03/22):	**Dungeons & Dragons II:** From the deep, cold winters of Wisconsin, the classic tabletop role-playing game!
Week 10	**Moral Learning: How do we become better people? (Part 2)** Can role-playing games provide a special kind of moral learning? What is the role of play in moral learning?	**Monday, 03/20:** Cushman, Kumar, & Railton (2017) "Moral learning: Psychological and philosophical perspectives"
		Wednesday, 03/22: Nguyen (2020) *Games*, Ch. 8 and Lugones (1987) Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perception
Week 11	**Perhaps this is all a bit too easy...** Are we letting ourselves be led down the garden path? Does the seduction of simplicity undercut our ability to learn from role-playing games? Does it seep out into our experience of everyday life? Is it pernicious?	**Monday, 03/27:** Outline workshop for Paper #2!
		Wednesday, 03/29: Nguyen (2020) *Games*, Ch. 9 & Ch. 10
		Bring a HARD COPY of your outline Monday!
Week 12	**Paper draft workshop!**	**Monday, 04/03:** Paper #2 draft workshop!
		Wednesday, 04/05: *No meeting! Prof is away.*
		Bring a HARD COPY of your draft Monday!
Week 13	**What is fiction? What's true in fiction? ...Who decides?** In roleplaying games, we work together to create a fiction. What's true in that fiction? How do we know? Does this challenge traditional views about truth in fiction?	**Monday, 04/10:** Woodward (2016) "Truth in Fiction"
		Wednesday, 04/12: D'Alessandro (2016) "Explicitism about Truth in Fiction"
		Paper #2 due Friday, 04/14 at 8pm

Week 14	**Fair play...?** We consider the topic of fairness and fair play. What are they? Do they apply to role-playing games?	**Monday, 04/17:** Read Microscope rules. **Wednesday, 04/19:** TBD
	Game Night (04/17):	**Microscope:** Build worlds and destroy them. Defying the limits of time and space, Microscope allows players to build a world by jumping backward or forward to explore the parts of the history that interest them.
Week 15	**Oh, calm down.** ...Have we been a bit too high-minded about all of this? A bit too quick? We explore some criticism of the views we've been focusing on throughout the semester. (Alternatively: Issues yet uncovered! Are there topics YOU want to see? Let me know!)	**Monday, 04/24:** Noë (2021) "Strange Games, Puppy Play and Exhaustive Intelligibility" Hurka (2021) "How Much Are Games Like Art?" **Wednesday, 04/26:** Kukla (2021) "Sculpted Agency and the Messiness of the Landscape"
Week 16	Final Project Workshop	**Monday, 05/01:** Bring a draft of your final project.
		Bring a HARD COPY of your project draft.
	FINAL PROJECTS DUE **TBA**.	