

## An after school course on the psychology of aesthetics

Academic year 2020–2021

### A Philosophy of Play and a Narrative of Games

SCHF001 – Fall – 12 ECTS

#### Course Description

Video game worlds, I think, offer what is possibly a more expanded type of representation wherein the playing character does not merely need to follow the reasoning of the creator of the artwork, but can exercise even more human agency perhaps exemplifying her own character even more. The open world, MMO, sandbox nature of the developing video game, space sim Star Citizen is a great example of this. Whereas games like the GTA series make it obvious and explicit that success in the game can only be had by exercising what are typically called vices, Star Citizen lets the player define success and methods of success. Here, the game's developer relinquishes a modicum of agency so that the player can develop her own.

#### PROFESSOR

Montaque Reynolds

[montaque.reynolds@gmail.com](mailto:montaque.reynolds@gmail.com)

Office hours:

Zoom 206-234-3477,

**Fridays, 17–19**

---

#### ASSISTANT

TBD

TBD

Office hours:

By appointment

## Syllabus

### Course Aims

Philosophers often defend their points through the use of thought experiments. These are stripped down stories that are intended to test the audiences' intuition on some subject by having them imagine being faced with some decision germane to that subject. This course rests on the premise that thought experiments are ultimately virtual and as such, virtual worlds like Star Citizen are perfect places to test our philosophical intuitions. I.e., is it better to pursue a humble career such as transport and hauling, or one that promises fast and easy money such as space piracy? At the end of this course, the student will be able to critically analyse and engage with literature by key philosophers in aesthetics. Be able to present arguments clearly and concisely both within a classroom context and in a written essay. Gain transferrable skills in research, analysis and argumentation. Acquire knowledge regarding several major issues in metaphysics (e.g. the existence and nature of fictional characters, conceptual analysis, and truth in fiction), aesthetics (e.g. the nature of art, and emotional responses to art) and computer ethics. Engage closely & critically with cutting-edge literature in these areas. Develop their ability to think & write philosophically. 1. Achieve a basic understanding of some of the ethical dimensions of meaning and purpose that are foundational to the philosophical tradition as it relates to ethical questions, including Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, Aquinas' Teleological Theories 2. Be able to think independently and creatively about some of the perennial questions of the human condition, including simulating how to live well. 3. Be able to develop and evaluate clear and precise arguments (either in speech or in writing) for your own philosophical positions, once again using examples. 4. Be able to develop and evaluate clear and precise arguments (either in speech or in writing) for the philosophical positions of others, in examples. 5. Achieve a greater awareness of the nature and importance of moral virtues, intellectual virtues, and the complexities of ethical issues, as represented

in game theory.

## **Course Structure**

This course will be conducted solely in the virtual universe of Star Citizen. This includes lectures, discussions, and activities/projects. These will be group exercises and all students will need to attend each virtual class session in Star Citizen to earn full credit. There will also be a discord chat and voice where the readings will be posted and conversations hosted.

## **Course Materials**

The student will need to purchase a “game pass”. This game pass is \$45. All the readings will be posted by the instructor on Discord. Also, the student will need to purchase the book “Philosophy Through Video Games” by John Cogburn and Mark Silcox. The instructor will provide a link. 1. Purchase a set of game packages (10, Five Aurora, Five Mustang Alpha Starter Packages) 2. Use code STAR-BVYF-6QBJ to receive 5,000 UEC (United Earth Credits/ in game currency) 3. Software will be installed in Esports Club Game lab in the BSC Lower Level

## **Course Evaluation**

Evaluation is by a combination of participation, term papers, and exam.

**Participation (10%):** This is about participation.

**Papers (40%):** This is about the term papers.

**Exam (50%):** This is about the exam.

## **Course Policies**

*Auditing* is possible. Please contact me.

*Grading* is according to the US scale.

*Plagiarism* is not tolerated at the Graduate Institute. If you are unsure, please contact the TA. This includes chatgpt or other machine learning/ai software. This is for your own benefit. It is okay to use such methods to find materials, but you must do the reading and writing yourself if you are to learn anything. *Reading* must be done outside of class time. It is best for all participants that this is the case, otherwise you will get nothing from the course and will only be wasting yours and our time.

## Import Bibliography

Are you using a bibliography manager like Zotero or Mendeley to manage your PDFs? [Click here](#) to get the .bib file of this course to import it into your software of choice!

## Course Schedule

### Week 1 (14 Sep): Aesthetics and Video Games, concepts of being

Or What's it like to be a bat?

#### *Required readings*

Tavinor, Grant (2010). "Videogames and Aesthetics". *Philosophy Compass*, 5(8), 624–634.; Gualeni, Stefano (2014). "Augmented Ontologies or How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer". *Philosophy & Technology*, 27(2), 177–199.

#### **Activity**

##### *First Meeting Preparation and Course Introduction*

Read and follow directions from CIG, Star Citizen (2024, August 29). *Getting Started in the 'Verse*. Roberts Space Industries Knowledge Base. article.

Use the instructor referral code as doing so will give you slight bonus items.

Set your spawn point to New Babbage. You'll wake in your habitation unit. You will likely be wearing whatever you wore previously.

If this is your first time logging into SC, then it will likely be a white flight suit and generic helmet.

Follow signs to the elevator, box with "F" floating above it. Take this down to the main floor, we will meet right outside the elevator doors and walk as a group to the transportation platform where we'll take a maglift to the space port.

### Week 2 (21 Sep): Personal Identity in Video Games

#### *Required readings*

Cogburn, Jon, & Silcox, Mark (2009). *Philosophy through video games* (1. publ). Routledge., selections from ch. 1

#### **Activity**

For today's activity, we will be picking up virtual items discarded by other players and discarding them. This helps the servers.

#### **Watch**

## Cleaning Up the Garbage In Star Citizen PES

### Week 3 (28 Sep): The Art of Agency

#### Required Readings

Nguyen, C. Thi (2019). "Games and the Art of Agency". *The Philosophical Review*, 128(4), 423–462.

#### Activity

Looking at careers. Today we will try our hand at performing a mission. This mission will be fairly easy as we will only select a hauling contract, rent a ship large enough for all of us, and then work to complete the contract.

For this, set your spawn location to Area18. As before, we will meet in the lobby outside the elevators and collectively walk to the transportation platform, take the maglift to Riker's Memorial Space Port etc.

### Week 4 (5 Oct): Games and God's Goodness.

Cogburn, Jon, & Silcox, Mark (2009). *Philosophy through video games* (1. publ). Routledge., ch. 4

#### Activity

Spawn location will stay the same. This time we will choose a slightly more difficult mission in our own aurora starter ships. We are going to attempt to bring about some Godly justice to a wrong-doer. Each person will take an elevator to their own hanger and spawn their own aurora (Re-read CIG, Star Citizen (2024, August 29). *Getting Started in the 'Verse*. Roberts Space Industries Knowledge Base. if you do not remember how to do this). I will share the mission information and we will all quantum leap at the same time to the mission location.

### Week 5 (12 Oct): Piracy and Betrayal.

Butler, Judith (2004). "Betrayal's Felicity". *Diacritics*, 34(1), 82–87.

#### Activity

#### Reverse Piracy

We probably won't be able to pull this off.

You see the C2, first on radar, and then growing in the cockpit glass as you close the distance. You fire up your weapons, (a full complement of distortions) and proceed to disable the C2. You board the ship and subdue the captain - no permanent harm. You secure him while he 'naps' and proceed to ... FILL THE EMPTY CARGO SLOTS IN HIS HOLD WITH HIGH VALUE CARGO. Once the hold is fully stocked, you hop into your Mobi and wire the captain enough funds to top off his fuel, repair any damage you may have done, and include a nice tip in the amount.

## Week 6 (19 Oct): The Art of Idleness and the Nature of Work

Russell, Bertrand (1932). *In Praise of Idleness*, by Bertrand Russell. Harper's Magazine.

### Activity

We are going to take another tour of the verse. This time we will focus on finding the more aesthetic features of the game. For instance the sovietesque artwork in the subways of Lorreville, and look for the themes by Pedro Macedo Camacho. These will typically be found orbiting various planetary bodies throughout the verse.

## Week 7 (26 Oct): Work, Activity, and Meaning

At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that the objective good of a meaningful life is one that is wholly independent of the subject's experiences or preferences, as it could be good for a person to live a meaningful life whether or not it makes her happy or satisfies her preferences.<sup>1</sup>

Consider the following occupations in Star Citizen. Some may or may not be the result of choices in the real world:

1. Orienteering/ Not yet relevant, but becoming, involves finding materials, resources, etc.
2. Training / This mostly depends on people who play, if you join an org for instance, some offer or require training by individuals that are knowledgeable/skilled
3. Banking / Same as above, charge fees, disseminate them among members etc.
4. Competition / SC has regular race events, for instance the yearly Daymar rally
5. Engineering / Not yet a thing, in process
6. Mining / Mine materials and sell at kiosks around the universe. Hopefully this will soon factor into a user economy ala Eve Online
7. Salvaging / Same as above but with derelict ship components, can be other player ships
8. Trading/Hauling / Take missions, transfer cargo
9. Navy / Player organized, our org commissions pilots to protect sites where miners are mining, or protect ships from other players.
10. Marines / Same but on the ground
11. Research and Development / Some individuals are really good at sources information about the game and sharing this with other players, for instance, some ships are better at one patch, but loose their advantage due to changes in the game's development.

Recall:

- How do we rank activity independent of the feelings they produce?
- How do we deal with the vulnerability and instability of individual human pursuits?

Reading:

Wolf, Susan (1997). "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life". *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 14(1), 207–225.

---

<sup>1</sup>Wolf, Susan (1997). "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life". *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 14(1), 207–225., 209

Recommended:

Nussbaum, Martha C. (2001). *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press., Chapter 11, Section 1.

### Activity

#### Hauling Missions

We will meet in the lobby just outside the elevators. We will then collectively take the shuttle to the Spaceport where we will find the Hangers. We will rent a cargo ship large enough to fit all of us, to take to complete a hauling mission. These can be time consuming but many hands make light work.

#### **8. Trading/Hauling / Take missions, transfer cargo**

Of the 11 choices, we will pursue choice number 8. The object is to think about ways in which such an occupation, as opposed to being a world renowned scientist, author, politician, or artist, can be meaningful.

Will help us to think about the pursuit of meaning and value.

### **Week 8 (26 Oct): The Era of Artistic Excellence**

Danto, Arthur Coleman, & Goehr, Lydia (2014). "INTRODUCTION: Modern, Postmodern, and Contemporary". In *After the end of art: Contemporary art and the pale of history* (First Princeton classics edition). Princeton University Press.

### Activity

#### **Guest Speaker: Steve Snyder**

This time we will show Steven Snyder around the verse while he talks to us about the end of art, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Danto.

– This syllabus is subject to change –