Game based learning

The Walking Dead in school – moral philosophy after the apocalypse
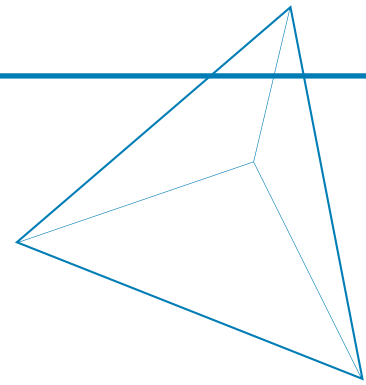
Can a computer game be used to engage students in discussing ethical dilemmas? This teacher guide will give you tips about how the The Walking Dead can be used in teaching religion, ethics and philosophy in upper secondary education.

The Walking Dead in school – moral philosophy after the apocalypse

By Tobias Staaby, teacher and special advisor on games in learning at Nordahl Grieg upper secondary school, Norway

The objective of using the game in class is to give the students a different context for discussing ethical dilemmas and practice in using moral-philosophical models as a basis for their own arguments.

About the game and educational possibilities

The Walking Dead is an adventure game set in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic world in which humans have to fight to survive in a world where the dead return as zombies.

The main character in the game is Lee Everett, a teacher with a criminal conviction who rapidly becomes involved in dramatic events. The principle mechanism in the game is a long series of complex, difficult ethical dilemmas that the player has to address. The choices of the player shape the narrative of the game.

There is little difference between objective good and objective evil in The Walking Dead, and the player often have to make choices in various ethically grey areas. The player encounters many situations where different ethics will produce very different solutions to a given dilemma.

This guide is based on the whole class playing together, where the game functions as training in ethical debate and thinking. The Internet-based quiz tool Kahoot can be used for the students to vote (the quiz is produced at getkahoot.com). Every student submits their vote in the discussions through Kahoot, and the choice made in the game is therefore based on the option that received most votes. Alternatively a show of hands or other digital tools such as letsgeddit.com can be used.

The Walking Dead is available on almost all platforms and consoles. The game stretches across several seasons divided into episodes, but if you wish to restrict the project to three to four weeks' duration then gaming should be restricted to one ep-

isode. Episode 1 is available free for iOS and Android mobiles and tablets.

Age limit/level
The game has a PEGI-rating of 18. Visually, its design is close to cartoons, but the game is sometimes violent. No teacher should use the game in the classroom without informing the schools management about the content and goals of the project.

The Walking Dead raises subjects that many people may find unpleasant – existential nihilism, the law and justice after the end of civilisation, and assisted suicide, but these are also subjects that trigger great engagement and great moral-philosophical energy among students.

Degree of difficulty, teacher:
In purely technical terms it is easy to get started with The Walking Dead. The game has simple and intuitive controls, and the objects that can be interacted with and what can be done with them are both clearly identified. The solutions to the mysteries of the game are usually reasonably simple and easy to understand.

Degree of difficulty, student:
The students should perform most of the actual gaming. However, to save time, it is beneficial if the teacher has played the game previously and has knowledge of what has to be done in order to progress. For this reason it may be necessary for teachers to make contributions and give advice about what the students should do. Students who have not played the game before may need a little time to familiarise themselves with the controls, but the mechanics of the game are in any case not essential for the learning outcome.

The most important interaction between the game and the students comes through the use of votes, and therefore all students are involved in deciding what is to be done next in the game. It is therefore not necessary that all students play.

Learning principles

Embodied, situated learning:
In his book "What Video Games have to teach us about Learning and Literacy" James Paul Gee makes a point about how you never have to wait long to practice what you have learned in games. When you have learned a new term or concept, a new skill or game mechanism it is rarely far from theory to practice. According to Gee this is a common denominator for all good computer games.

In a teaching context we can utilise this principle in how games can form a context in which the

student can quickly do what he or she has learned in practice. The principle also applies to media other than games, but as games form a feedback-loop of action and reaction through interactivity, subject knowledge can help to create motivation and give the actions performed in the game a purpose.

Scaffolding for emptiness:
According to Jordan Shapiro, games can be very functional learning tools because they form a scaffold, which the students can use as support when new knowledge has to be acquired and learned. The dilemmas in The Walking Dead can for example be used as mental pegs for knowledge. As stated above, the same thing can be done with texts or films, but the context for learning with games is different and encourages active learning rather than passive learning.

Prepare yourself

Play through all the parts you plan to use. Remember to put all practical aspects in place before the class begins, ensure that the game has been installed.

Using games in school can be demanding for a teacher, and you may meet a few obstacles. Many of the students will have good expertise in this area and will very probably be able to help. Always remember that you are first and foremost a schoolteacher - it is not that dangerous if you encounter a "game over" or two. You should also embrace the fact that games are interactive - do not be afraid to take a break when an opportunity presents itself or the situation requires it. Let "what shall we do now?" be a mantra in your classes.

Suggested assignments and ethical dilemmas

This is a brief review of the game, an outline of the greatest dilemmas in the first episode and a suggestion regarding how you can approach them in an educational context.

When you start up the game, the game will on some platforms ask you which "display style" you prefer. Here you should choose "standard": the game will then indicate which objects and elements you can interact with, making gaming a little easier. When dialogue options come up students may shout out what the student playing the game should do, but when important choices come up, for instance when there is a dilemma, you have to pause the game (by pressing either ESC or the start button, depending on which platform you are playing).
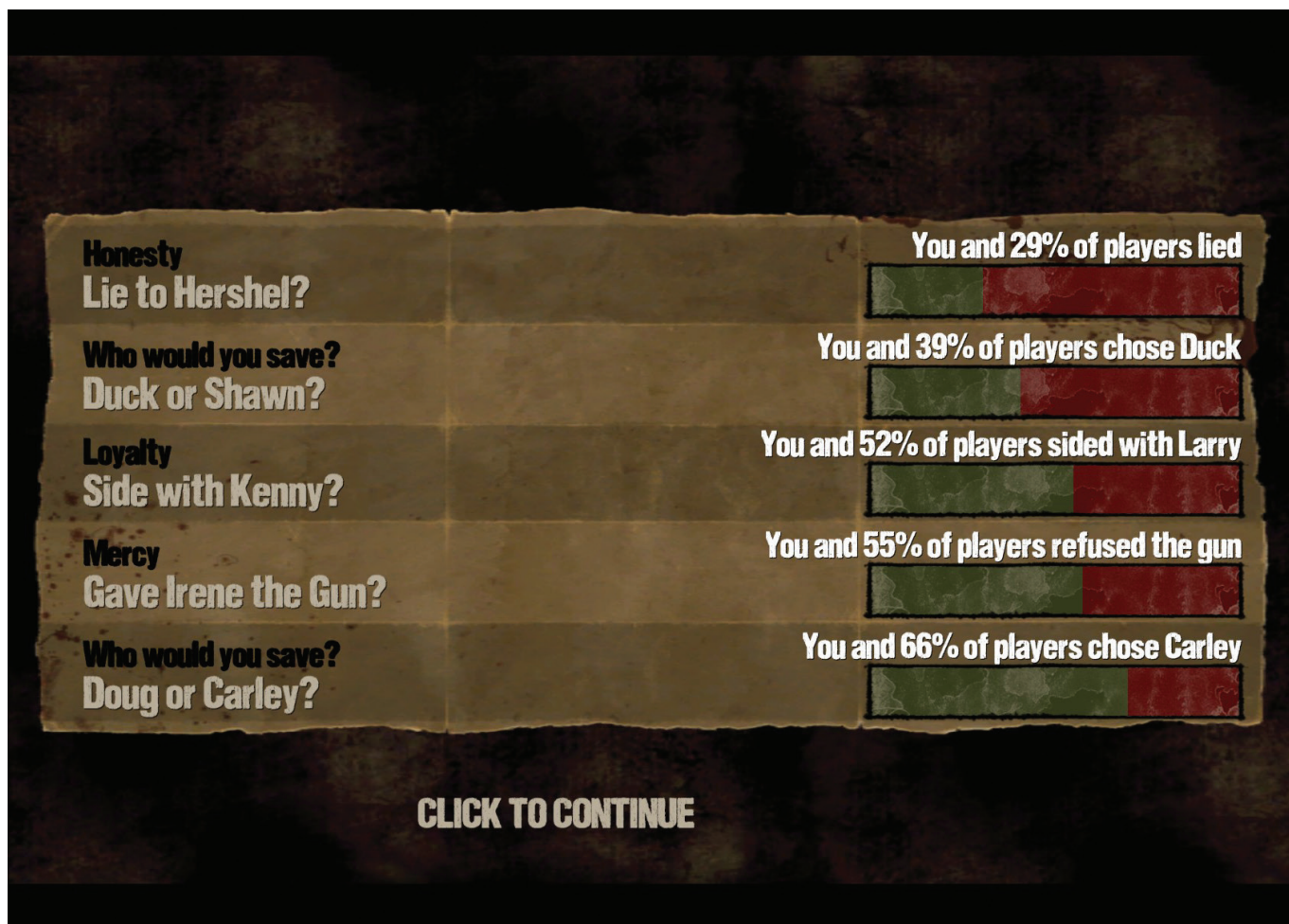
The project is based on introducing the students to one ethical theory at a time, preferably right after encountering a dilemma but before deciding on a solution. Once the students have been given a brief introduction you ask them to discuss in groups in which they have to work out the best solution according to the given ethical theory. When the students have finished their discussion (give them approx. 3-5 minutes) you hold a vote. The option that receives most votes is the one you must choose in the game. When all the theories have been reviewed the students can use all of them in discussions.

It takes a few minutes before the first dilemma comes up, and in terms of tempo some students may feel the game is slow. However, this need not be a hindrance: on the contrary, it is important that the students (and you as a teacher) familiarise yourself with Lee and Clementine, the child he is responsible for. When you have to be concerned about the characters in the game the ethics of proximity come into their own. It also gives the students a little time to familiarise themselves with the mechanics of the game.

Dilemma 1: To lie or not to lie – episode 1

The first major dilemma comes in the form of Lee having to assess whether he should be honest about his background and how he has injured himself. There is a choice between speaking truthfully (answer "car accident") or holding back information in order to protect yourself. The students should be introduced to an ethical theory before each dilemma. The students then use their knowledge of this theory to make a choice. In this dilemma you can for example consider Aristotle's virtue ethics, in which the virtues and vices, which will develop if you choose to lie or tell the truth, are discussed. Here you can spend time on making the students aware of the relationship between them.

Honesty Lie to Hershel?	You and 29% of players lied
Who would you save? Duck or Shawn?	You and 39% of players chose Duck
Loyalty Side with Kenny?	You and 52% of players sided with Larry
Mercy Gave Irene the Gun?	You and 55% of players refused the gun
Who would you save? Doug or Carley?	You and 66% of players chose Carley

CLICK TO CONTINUE

Dilemma 2: Who should be saved? – episode 1

The other major dilemma arises when you have to choose which of two people to save from danger – a young man who can look after himself and be a resource for the group, or an innocent young child. The dilemma can be used to introduce the students to general consequentialist ethics. As you can only save one person the students must account for the consequences this will have. You can also introduce the difference between general consequentialist ethics and utilitarianism: how much pleasure or pain each action will produce in total in this precarious situation?

Dilemma 3: A child has been bitten! – episode 1

In the third dilemma you have to decide whether to throw out a child who has been bitten by a zombie. Note that this does not have any decisive effect on the story. The child survives in this situation regardless, but a valuable discussion can still take place. Here you can demonstrate what implications the ethics of proximity will have: we have a responsibility to the child and his family, at least in comparison to the strangers who are also to be found on the site. You can also use the dilemma for further training in consequentialist ethics or duty-based ethics and Kant's categorical imperative.
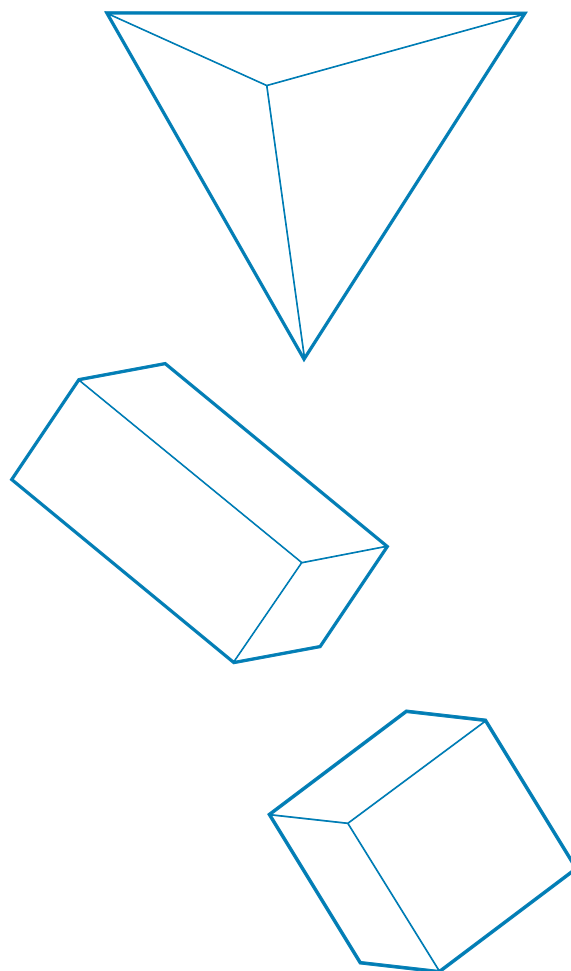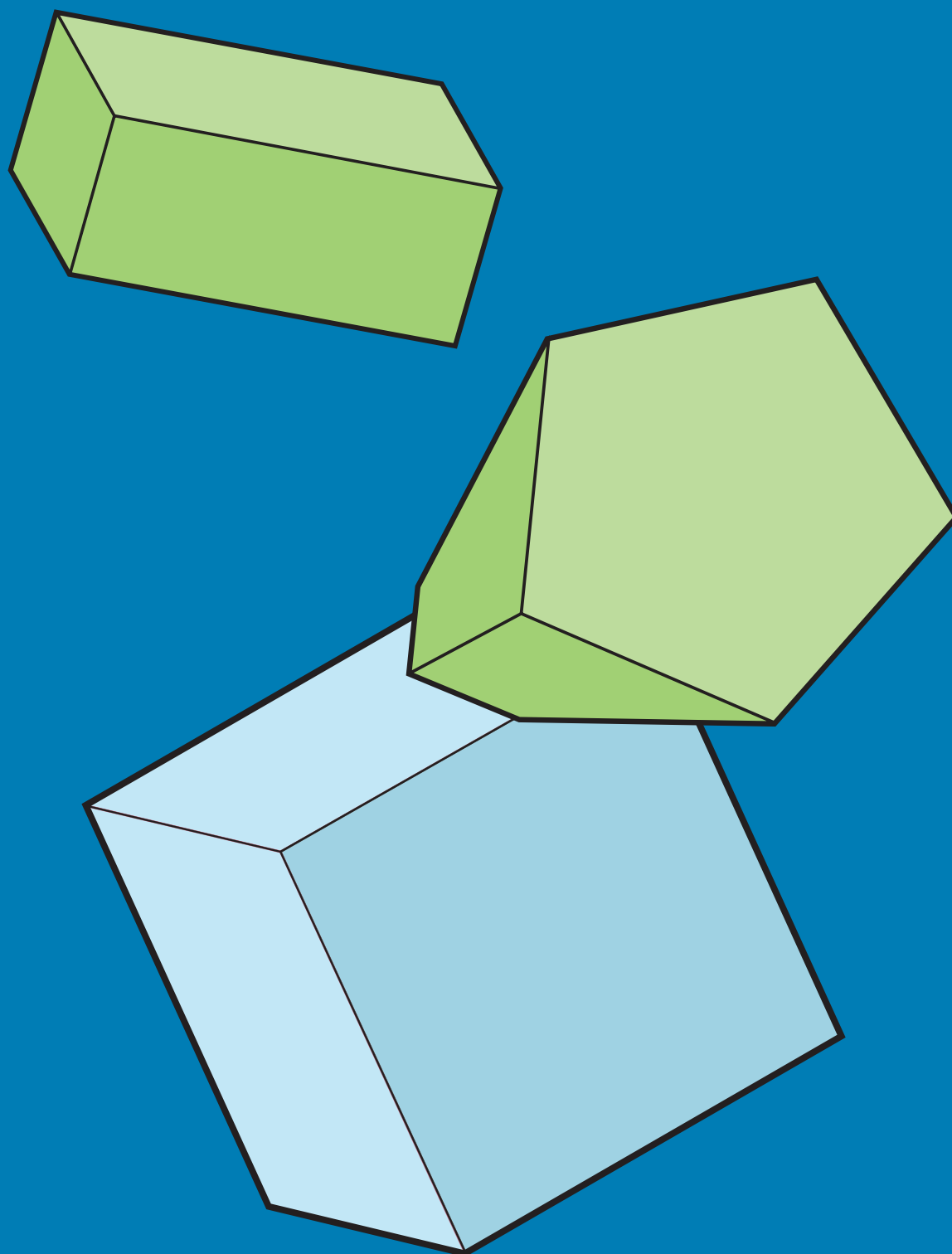
Equipment

As the gaming itself in this project takes place in the same classroom you do not need a lot of technical equipment. The minimum requirement is a projector or a smart board plus a tablet or PC/games console from which you can run the game. One or more of the students will probably have a copy of the game and suitable equipment for playing on, so asking the students for help is a possibility. If you use a tablet then Apple TV or Chromecast can be used to send

the image to the projector. You need an Internet browser to perform the Kahoot part of the learning resource. It is recommended that you run the game on the same machine as the voting so you do not have to swap the video input to the projector all the time. If you use Kahoot all the students also need to have an Internet browser on their computer, tablet or mobile phone. You can find Kahoot at getkahoot. com.

Assessment

Preparing group discussions can be an effective way of measuring the students understanding and integration of the ethical theories. The students can be divided into groups of two or three and discuss a number of issues (two dilemmas works well) in the light of the ethical theories. The dilemmas may be generated by the students themselves, be taken from the game or be formulated by the teacher, for example using issues from the real world (abortion, the right of refusal, euthanasia, etc.) as a starting point. Achieving the objective will then be measured on the basis of the extent to which the students manage to abstract what they discussed while they were playing and to apply this to new and unfamiliar dilemmas in a precise way. If they manage to view well-known dilemmas (for example the death penalty or right of refusal) in a new light and avoid going with their gut feeling this will be a good sign of a high degree of achievement of the objective.

Game Based Learning is a series of learning guides for using computer games in school. The guides are written by teachers for teachers and published by The Norwegian Centre for ICT in Education.

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