# "It's About Fate, Among Other Things" - Digital Games, Dialogical Teaching, And Ethics

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital games have the potential to be valuable tools for facilitating classroom dialogue (Hanghøj 2008; Silseth 2012). However, there are still relatively few empirical studies exploring this way of using games in education (Arnseth et al. 2019). This paper aims to provide more empirical insight into teachers' use of games as tools for dialogical teaching and learning, by reporting preliminary findings from a study exploring authentic (i.e. non-interventional) *in situ* use of a digital game for dialogic teaching of ethics. The study pays special attention to the teachers and their expressed experiences, as they are an under-represented group in the research on games and learning (Foster et al. 2016). The study also explores which elements of the game serve as resources dialogical resources by examining the interactions between the teachers, the students and the game.

## DIGITAL GAMES AND DIALOGICAL TEACHING

Playing a digital game does not necessarily lead to new skills and/or new knowledge being gained (Frank 2014; Linderoth 2012). Therefore, if one wants to use digital games for teaching and learning, it is necessary for students' gameplay experiences to be "talked onto being" and put in a curricular context (Arnseth et al. 2019). This allows for the students to be able to reflect on each other's experiences and thoughts, and for the teacher to get a clearer idea of how the students are doing in relation to the intended learning outcomes.

Mercer et al. (2009, 3) define dialogical teaching as "an approach to teaching that is predicated om the active, extended involvement of students as well as teachers in the spoken interaction of the classroom, so that teaching and becomes a collective endeavor in which knowledge and understanding are jointly constructed". In this perspective, meaning is not objective, global or universal, but is generated in realized contexts by conversational partners from a repertoire of semiotic and contextual resources (Linell 2009). A key component in dialogical teaching is the concept of *multivoicedness* (Silseth 2012), where different voices express different perspectives. Though dialogue, teachers and students not only interact but inter*think* (Mercer 2000), pooling their intellectual resources in the socially situated generation of knowledge (Mercer 2007).

## THE STUDY

This paper draws on the preliminary findings from a study exploring how teachers are using a digital game, *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012)*,* as a tool for dialogical teaching of ethical theories. The game's narrative is interspersed with ethical dilemmas which the teachers use as a catalyst for discussion, thereby teaching the students to use ethical theories as a basis for their arguments. The game is displayed on a projector in a classroom or auditorium, with a handful of students taking turns playing the game. The teacher pauses the game at key moments, instructing the students to consider various ethical theories as possible solutions to the dilemmas. The class then engages in dialogue discussing different solutions.

The study consists of two qualitative case studies, including the observation of a total of seven teachers and their classes and semi-structured retrospective qualitative interviews exploring the teacher's expressed experiences of their classes. Some teachers are observed and interviewed in both case studies, while others only once, as several of the classes at hand were being taught in parallel. Most of the teachers had already used the game for several years when the studies were conducted, while others were using it for the first time.

The data for this study is analyzed though the lens of sociocultural discourse analysis (Mercer 2004; Mercer et al. 2009) and discussed using the GTDT-model (Games as Tools for Dialogic Teaching) presented by Arnseth et al. (2019). This allows for a clear presentation of the study's findings by highlighting and delineating the different constitutive elements of the game-oriented dialogical classroom and how they interact and interrelate.

## THE FINDINGS SO FAR

A preliminary analysis of the teacher interviews and the observed classes reports three key findings. First, the moral ambiguity of the game's dilemmas seems to play a key role in the classroom's *multivoicedness*. As the dilemmas often had no obvious correct or "good" answers, the students tended to take diverging perspectives and positions in their suggested solutions. This in turn made the differences between the various ethical theories stand out more clearly. For example, answers based on consequential ethics provided quite different solutions than those based on ethics of duty or virtue.

This carries over into the second finding: the game's dilemmas served much of the same function as classical thought experiments like the trolley problem, which in turn might explain why most of the interviewed teachers reported that the game was relatively easy to use as a tool for teaching. Most of the teachers found it relatively easy to base discussion, dialogue and teaching on the game's dilemmas; the challenges involved mostly external factors like technical difficulties, being short on time, or students falling prone to regarding the game as a gameplay-challenge to be beaten rather than a source of ethical problems.

Third, the game's narrative played several crucial roles: it stitched the dilemmas into a coherent whole, where they not only served as a catalyst for momentary discussion, but also a contextual foundation for future discussion. Player choice in *The Walking Dead* often has repercussions in how future events in the game play out. This allowed the teacher and the students to illuminate current dilemmas though retrospective reflection on previous decisions. The narrative and its characters also served as important mental and contextual resources for dialogue and discussion, as the students often vicariously positioned themselves in the shoes of the different characters. According to the teachers,

these positionings made it safer for students to utter solutions and statements that would otherwise be regarded as insensitive or politically incorrect, thus allowing for a deeper exploration and analysis of the ethical theories and their nuances.

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