

The Philosophy of Games

Umeå Universitet

Teacher: Bram Vaassen

Course Description

Games are fun way to pass the time, but they hardly seem like a serious or important endeavour. We are ready to mock people for wasting too much time playing online shooters or table-top role playing games. There is an obvious explanation why games are little more than an indulgence we afford ourselves: the outcomes rarely matter. In his *Games, agency as art*, C. Thi Nguyen puts it as follows:

Games can seem like an utterly silly way to spend one's time. We struggle and strain and sweat — and for what? [...] Game players burn energy and effort, not on curing cancer or saving the environment, but on trying to beat each other at some unnecessary, invented activity. Why not spend that time on something real?

In a cynical mood, one could conclude that the wide popularity of games, from chess and Settlers of Catan to (fantasy) American football and Dungeons and Dragons, as evidence that we are easily distracted from the things that actually matter: cleaning up the ocean and brokering peace.

Nguyen provides a more optimistic take. In games, the goals do not matter, but the striving for the goals *does*. This 'motivational inversion' of games allows us to practice our agency in well-defined environments with obstacles designed to be overcome (but not easily). Nguyen's proposal provides an intriguing new theory of what games are, why agency is important, and what exactly is dangerous about wasting too much time on online shooters or chess.

This course will introduce the students to Nguyen's theory of games as an art form with agency as its medium. We will critically engage with Nguyen's proposal and the response it received in the philosophical literature from, among others Thomas Hurka, Quill Kukla, and Antonia Peacocke.

Course Literature

Primary Source

- Nguyen, C. Thi (2020). *Games: Agency as Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.

For ease of use, I recommend buying the book.

A digital copy is available via [the university library website](#).

Secondary literature

- Hurka, Thomas (2021). How Much Are Games Like Art? *Analysis* 81 (2):287-296.
- Kukla, Quill Rebecca (2021). Sculpted Agency and the Messiness of the Landscape. *Analysis* 81 (2):296-306.
- Nguyen, C. Thi & Williams, Bekka (2020). Moral outrage porn. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 18 (2):147-72.
- Nguyen, C. Thi (2021). Defending Games: Reply to Hurka, Kukla and Noë. *Analysis* 81 (2):317-337.
- Nguyen, C. Thi (2021). How Twitter gamifies communication. In Jennifer Lackey (ed.), *Applied Epistemology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. pp. 410-436.
- Peacocke, Antonia (2021). Phenomenal experience and the aesthetics of agency. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 48 (3):380-391.
- [QuineCraft: virtual crops and real world laundry](#)

Note: Available via Canvas

Online resources

- [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [PhilPapers](#)

Course Organization

This structure is intended to reflect standard practice in philosophical research with a strong focus on writing and revising papers.

The course consists of three 'cycles' built around the three central parts of Thi Nguyen's book *Games: Agency as Art*: Games and Agency (Ch. 1 – 4), Agency and Art (Ch. 5 – 7), and Social and Moral Transformations (Ch. 8 – 10). Each cycle lasts three weeks and consists of four steps:

1. **Information intake:** reading the course literature and listening to the online lectures
2. **Writing:** draft paper (2–3000 words)
3. **Feedback:** giving and receiving comments on draft papers
4. **Re-writing:** revise your draft in light of student and teacher comments

The lectures will be provided via Canvas and are meant to serve as a reading guide and support for the students. The teacher is accessible via e-mail or through the Canvas discussion forum for further questions or support.

All written assignments will be submitted through the Canvas 'assignments' module. The short written assignments are to be e-mailed to your assigned feedback partner as well.

A more precise timing schedule is provided in the 'schedule' section of this syllabus.

Examination

The examination consists of two main elements: participation and written assignments. A passing grade (G) for the whole course requires a passing grade on both elements. A passing grade with distinction (VG) requires a passing grade with distinction for the written assignments, and a passing grade for the participation elements.

1. Active Participation 0,5 hp (U–G)

Active participation consists of three parts:

- (a) taking the brief 'I've read the course description' quiz on Canvas, by September 10th
- (b) submitting a brief personal introduction on canvas before September 10th
- (c) providing timely feedback on your peer's paper draft for each of the three cycles.

There are no specific requirements on the personal introduction. The feedback must demonstrate active engagement with the paper draft and the course material. The feedback should focus on helping your fellow student improve their paper.

2. Writing Assignments 7 hp (U–VG)

Students will hand in one short written assignment per cycle (2–3000 words), for a total of three short writing assignments. Students will also submit two longer assignments at the end of the course (3–4000 words). These longer assignments are expected to be revised and expanded versions of whichever two of the three shorter assignments that the student considers most promising upon considering the feedback received from their feedback partner and the teacher.

The requirements on the short and long assignments differ as follows:

Short Assignments Should exhibit active engagement with the course content as well as an adequate and clear writing style.

Long Assignments Should meet the same standard as the short assignments *as well as* demonstrating

- active engagement with the received feedback
- understanding of the course content
- an independent line of argument concerning the course content

The writing-heavy focus of the course will be borne in mind when grading the assignments.

The important thing is getting the assignments done in time. To receive a passing grade (G) all required assignments must meet the above requirements adequately. To receive a pass with distinction (VG), the requirements for (G) must be met *and* one of the long assignments must be of very good overall quality.

More precise guidelines for the writing assignments will be posted in a separate document on Canvas.

Time Schedule

The course consists of three cycles of three weeks. The relevant lectures will be made available by Wednesday at the latest.

The guidelines on the readings focus on when you should have *finished* them, I recommend starting well ahead of time.

Cycle 1: Games and Agency

WEEK 36 (SEPT. 2 – 8)

Finish chapters 1–3 & listen to lectures

WEEK 37 (SEPT. 9 – 15)

Finish Ch. 4 and Kukla & listen to lectures

Submit short written assignment 1, latest Sunday sept 15th, 23.55

WEEK 38 (SEPT. 16 – 22)

Provide feedback on fellow student draft, latest Wednesday sept 18th, 23.55

Work to integrate received feedback, prepare for next week

Cycle 2: Agency and Art

WEEK 39 (SEPT. 23 – 29)

Finish Ch. 5 – 7 & listen to lectures

WEEK 40 (SEPT. 30 – OCT. 6)

Finish Peacocke and Hurka & listen to lectures

Submit short written assignment 2, latest Sunday Oct 6th, 23.55

WEEK 41 (OCT. 7 – OCT. 13)

Provide feedback on fellow student draft, latest Wednesday Oct 9th, 23.55

Work to integrate received feedback, prepare for next week

Cycle 3: Social and Moral Transformations

WEEK 42 (OCT. 14 – OCT. 20)

Finish Ch. 8 – 10 & listen to lectures

WEEK 43 (OCT. 21 – OCT. 27)

Submit short written assignment 3, latest Sunday Oct 27th, 23.55

WEEK 44 (OCT. 28 – OCT. 31)

Provide feedback on fellow student draft, latest Wednesday Oct 30th, 23.55

Work to integrate received feedback, prepare for next week

The Grand Finale

Deadline for your two long writing assignments: **Nov. 3rd, 23.55**

Important Dates

Registration deadlines: brief introduction & brief quiz

- **Sept. 10th, 23.55**

Short writing assignment deadlines

- **Sept. 15th, 23.55**
- **Oct. 6th, 23.55**
- **Oct. 27th, 23.55**

Feedback deadlines

- **Sept. 18th, 23.55**
- **Oct. 9th, 23.55**
- **Oct. 30th, 23.55**

Long writing assignments deadline

- **Nov. 3rd, 23.55**

Academic Policy

- *Doing Philosophy Together*

The aim of the course is to get better at philosophy together. This requires us to commend others when they are doing well and when they deliver solid work, but it also requires us to criticize other people's views and arguments where we consider them to be lacking. This must be done in a respectful and kind manner at all times. I borrow the following passage from Sarah Bernstein's syllabus *Metaphysics of the Social World* (of which I am only moderately jealous):

Academic philosophy has a reputation as a blood sport. It need not be so. We're all in the Truth Trenches together. Philosophical interaction can be friendly and collaborative while still being constructive and rigorous. Please contribute to class in ways that aim at discovering the truth rather than establishing intellectual dominance.

- *Academic Integrity:*

Cheating and plagiarism are reported immediately. The university's policy on cheating and plagiarism can be found here: <https://www.umu.se/en/student/we-can-assist-you/if-something-happens/cheating-and-plagiarism/>

- *Late Essays or Posts:*

I do not accept late submissions. There are re-exams and make-up exams for those who do not finish on time. Exceptions are made, of course, for those with valid reasons for the delay.

- *Accessibility:*

All relevant information should be available on the Canvas page. If, for any reason, the information or course literature is not accessible to you, you can contact the responsible teacher and/or the subject's study counselor for assistance.

- *The Ceiling and the Threshold:*

The course covers a large amount of material, some of which is quite difficult. It also has many and extensive examination requirements. This means that the ceiling for what can be achieved in this course is high. This does not necessarily mean that the threshold for what must be achieved to pass the course is equally high. When assessing the quality of submitted work, I will take into account that the course requires a relatively large amount of work.

Contact Information

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