

## Kat Schrier: Using Games to Teach Ethics

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**Christiane Wisehart, host and producer:** I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

**[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Loopy]**

**Christiane:** With us today is games designer and professor Kat Schrier. She's here to discuss the many ways that ethics education can benefit from a dose of play.

**Kat Schrier:** Games can also just help us to grow. It helps us to understand ourselves, it helps us to express ourselves, our true selves. I want everybody to feel like they belong in this world, I want everyone to feel like they matter, I want everybody to be part of deciding the kind of world that we live in. And I believe that games can help us to do that.

**Christiane:** Stay tuned for our discussion on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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**Christiane:** If you don't know much about gaming, it can be easy to dismiss video games as violent wastes of time or to think of board games as something you pull out when there's nothing else to do on Thanksgiving. My guest today, the games designer Kat Schrier, believes that there's something much more to gaming. In her book, *We the Gamers*, she explores the many ways that civics and ethics educators can use games to build deeply immersive and rewarding learning experiences. And full disclosure before I play the interview: Kat and I are collaborating on a game design experience for the Prindle Institute's ethics education resource collection.

**[interview begins]**

**Christiane:** You claim early in your book, *We The Gamers*, that gamers are already engaged in civics and in ethics. And even as somebody who plays a lot of board games and video games, that sort of surprised me. In what ways do games encourage this type of engagement?

**Kat Schrier:** So a lot of times, we think of games as being the antithesis of engaging in ethics or engaging in civics. And that could be true. Certainly, there's some antisocial behavior happening in games. People are calling each other names or harassing each other. In addition to the cruelty, there's also the compassion and there's also the learning and there's also the care.

Even in a game like *Fortnite*, it's a violent game, you're trying to be the last person standing on this island and you have to compete with other people to do that. But you're also having to

manage resources, you're having to think about how do you gather resources and use them in strategic ways so that you can be surviving?

Those are exactly the kinds of things that, for example, take any small town, when they know there's a big storm coming, they have to think about: we have to stockpile water, they need to secure schools or sites where people can be safe during a storm. That's exactly the kinds of teamwork and kinds of communication that people in *Fortnite* are doing.

And then if you also take a game like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, in this game, you're developing your own island and you're designing it how you want it to be. You're running after bugs, you're trying to catch fish, you're building a museum and you're actually shaping a world, you're shaping a town. This is exactly what civics is. It's exactly what ethics is too. You're trying to understand how you are in the world, what your values are and how you want to express it.

**Christiane:** A lot of what you're writing about in the book is not only about the connections between ethics and gaming but how educators can use games in a classroom to teach ethics. You write about all kinds of exciting possibilities but first, I want to get the bad stuff out of the way and talk about what are some of the limits of using games to teach ethics?

**Kat Schrier:** There's everything from logistical challenges, to equity challenges, to all kinds of accessibility challenges and then there's of course, financial challenges. Logistically, you need to have some kind of internet access. Sometimes, to play some of these games, you need enough computers and enough ability to even access them on a browser on this computer to be able to even play some of these games. Even if you're playing a board game, you need a table; sometimes big enough for everybody to play on.

In terms of accessibility and equity, there's first of all, representation in games. There's not always different races represented, different gender identities, different sexual identities. Even if there are, for example, some customization available, it doesn't mean that they have all the hair textures and all the skin tones that are necessary for everybody to feel included when they are designing their avatars in a game.

And then, there's accessibility challenges. Does your game have the language that people speak, the ability to... for visually impaired people, can they have alternative ways of interacting with the game. Does it have closed captioning, does it have all different kinds of the controllers that you use.

And then there's financial. Some of the games are free and available online but do you even have money to pay for the internet to be able to access these games? Do you have to use mobile devices? You have to pay for enough mobile devices. Or VR headsets, these are really expensive equipment I don't necessarily even have access to. And then, do you have enough computers? Do you have money to buy enough computers for everybody in your classroom or enough tablets.

That said, I don't want anybody to be scared now because there's a lot of ways around this. That's where the creativity comes in. A game does not need to cost money. It does not even need to be played on a computer. It could be designed for the constraints and limitations and challenges of your classroom or of your educational space. For example, I will play a game with my students that, they take pieces of paper, they rip them up and using those pieces of paper and drawing Xs and Os on them, we can play a really compelling game about ethics.

So there's a lot of constraints. But whenever there's constraints, you design for those constraints. You find games or you design games that can work within the challenges that you might have in your classroom.

**Christiane:** A lot of people perceive gamers to be disconnected from the real world. But you argue that games can actually facilitate the connection to real world problems, especially in the classroom. How might that happen?

**Kat Schrier:** The stigma around games, that limitation of how we might frame games as being, "Oh, they're just leisure," or "Oh, they're just for fun." That is a real stigma. That's a real issue that teachers face but also parents but also the public faces because they're not seeing games for all the ways that they can support learning and they can support growth and they can support connection.

For example, I was just talking to some of my colleagues at the World Health Organization and we are designing a game to support doctors and clinical staff in how they might approach a mass casualty issue. You have lots and lots of patients coming into your hospital and you need to design a system, even within a hospital, of how to actually handle all of these patients coming in with all different kinds of injuries.

We're making a mixed reality game that is based on reality. It's based on what would a nurse do, what would a doctor do, what would clinical lead do, what would the incident commander do in this situation. They all have to work together to help the patients and to support all of those different factors coming together. We're having real people, real people from the hospital, play this game so that they can learn how to actually work together if this really did happen in real life, if there was a mass-casualty event.

These games are teaching, directly, real-world skills, helping people to solve the most important problems which is saving lives. Maybe you're not playing a game like that in the classroom, maybe you're not directly playing that, but whatever game you're playing, you are practicing skills. And whether it's communication skills, whether it's resource management skills, whether it's working together as a team, collaboration, those are all the skills that we're teaching also in the game that we're making for the mass casualty event.

Those are the kinds of skills that you're always working on in all different kinds of games. They're practicing skills like communication, they're working together to create strategies,

they're trying to understand the big picture, they're all thinking about how other people might be thinking about the problem and they're solving that problem. And all of those are real world skills that are applicable to all different kinds of areas.

**Christiane:** What are some of the specific values that games can help cultivate in students?

**Kat Schrier:** I would say, I never want to say that people should have certain values because there's such a diversity of humanity and there's also cultural differences and I think that's great. And what's also nice is that there's a diversity of games. And some games might motivate achievement, plenty of games like that. Anything from a game like *Fortnite* to other games like *Overwatch* and even the *LEGO* series.

But there's also games, depending on how they're designed, that might show and reward, things like collaboration, things like cooperation, teamwork and you get scored based on your team, you get scored on how well you work together. There are games, for example, *Pandemic* is a great example of that. It's a board game where you are all playing as different roles and you're trying to mitigate a pandemic. I know it sounds so relevant to today but this game actually came out many, many years ago, at least 10, maybe even 15 years ago. It's a really good game where you're really cooperating together and you either win all together or you lose all together. And that is really cultivating those values of cooperation and collaboration.

Now, I'm also really interested in how games can directly reduce biases and can actually help us to understand each other a little better. You can never fully understand someone. Let's face it. Even if you're in a relationship with someone, they're a different person. You're never going to fully totally understand them.

But could we get a little taste of what it's like to be someone else and could games help us get there? Right now, I'm working on a project. It's a virtual reality project with colleagues in Nigeria and I'm the only person on the project that's not in Nigeria. Everyone else is in Nigeria. And in Nigeria, there are over 250 different ethnic groups. There's over 500 different languages and 200 million different people there. They also had, very recently, a civil war and there's still tensions among the different ethnic groups. Our goal is to see if we can, through VR, through playing a game, can we help people understand a person from another ethnic group.

For example, if you're Hausa and you're playing the game, you would play as someone who's Yoruba and you would see the kinds of discrimination that they face. And maybe through the game, you might have a little bit more of an understanding and might be able to empathize a little more with what it would be like to be someone who's Yoruba. Or if you're someone who's Igbo, could you play a game with someone who's Hausa and really embody them, understand their actions by actually performing actions in this VR game and face some kind of discrimination and through that experience, could you maybe reduce your biases, reduce stigma and enhance compassion for other people?

**Christiane:** What are some steps that an educator could take if they wanted to incorporate games into their classroom work?

**Kat Schrier:** First of all if they're not sure even where to begin, they can definitely reach out to me. I would love to hear from all teachers that are interested in incorporating games into their classroom. Obviously, I wrote a book about it, *We The Gamers* and I give all sorts of tips and hints and techniques about how to use games in the classroom, as well as lists of games to actually use.

But I would say start playing games, start thinking about how they might fit into your particular curriculum. There's also a book that I edited called *100 Games to Use in your Classroom and Beyond*. These are games that might help with English learning, to learning math skills, to learning other kinds of STEM skills, to more social and emotional skills like ethics and civics and other kinds of understanding.

For each of the cases of games, we explain the ways that it might be used in an actual classroom. We give tips and hints and practical ideas about using it in all different ways, and as well as what the challenges might be, what the practical and logistical challenges might be for using those games.

**Christiane:** On the flip side of that, what would you say to an educator who had an idea about games and the gaming community that it's full of misogyny and homophobia and "it's so far removed from any of my values. I don't want games in my classroom." What would you say to that educator, and also, just how do you avoid some of the pitfalls of the gaming community in the classroom?

**Kat Schrier:** Yes, you're right. There is misogyny, there's hate, there's all different kinds of problematic behavior. There was a ADL study last year, 2020, that said that, I think something like 80%--a great majority of people--who play online multiplayer games, so online gamers had faced some kind of harassment or hate when they were playing. On the other hand, 90% of those same players also experienced friendship and mentorship and pro-social behaviors. I would say that they're right. Just like any community, just like anything. You take the locker room, you take the playground, you take the classroom, there's going to be cruelty, there's going to be bullying, there's going to be exclusion, there's going to be harassment. But, just like that, there will also be learning, there'll be compassion, there'll be care, and there'll be all those wonderful things about humanity as well, so there's a full spectrum. That said, the design of the game does matter and there are communities that are moderated and managed and designed in ways to support greater care and compassion for each other.

And so, I would have them look at games like *That Dragon, Cancer*. That is a game about a family, a real family who lost their son to cancer and it was made by the family. It was really made by these people who both lost their son in this awful horrible way, a very young son. It talks about their journey in having their son go through different treatments, finding out that the treatments weren't working and that the cancer was back. The game is as human as it gets. It is

really about sharing that very personal story of loss that many of us, especially right now can appreciate and can empathize with.

Games are not just about hate. They're also about connection, they're also about expression.

**Christiane:** What are some of the values that games have outside of a learning environment? If you're a grown adult outside of the classroom but you still want to explore ethics through games, what are some of the ways that you can think through that?

**Kat Schrier:** When I talk about learning, I don't mean just K through 12. I'm thinking like, I'm still learning. When I play that game, *That Dragon, Cancer*, it helps me understand myself better. I lost a son and I had another son who was in the hospital for three months and I understand more of myself by playing that game and I feel less alone. I feel more connected to other people because I understand that other people have gone through something similar, and the fact that I can then play that game with my students in the classroom helps me be able to express what I went through with others. That, to me is learning. I am continuing to learn about how I can, not only process my own grief, but how I can help other people process it too. So that's definitely again, lifelong learning.

Games don't need to be so personal and so intensely sad. You could learn a lot from, for example, playing a very simple puzzle game on your computer, like Solitaire. Even my grandmother, when she was still alive, she was almost in her 90s but she was still playing games on computers and she would play trivia games with other people in her nursing home and she would feel so good because she was always winning because she was just a brilliant person. But also, that was a way of her being able to connect with other people when you're in that stage where it's hard to find ways to connect. Because playing together is understanding each other and is understanding perspectives and is understanding how we think through the world and our ethical perspective on the world.

**Christiane:** Why do you care about this? Why is this a focus in your work?

**Kat Schrier:** Yeah, well, I'm sure that if you've gotten this far in the podcast, you've probably felt some of my passion and some of my very great enthusiasm for gaming. I do absolutely acknowledge all of the potentials for cruelty and negativity in games and all communities. But I personally, am so thrilled and excited about the pro-social opportunities. The ways that we can actually use games to solve some of the biggest problems that we're facing in this lifetime. I wrote this book *Knowledge Games*, which is all about how we can actually, through a game, solve real-world problems. There's a classic game called *Foldit* where people actually are manipulating these proteins and you're thinking, "Why is that important?" Well, guess what? Computers can't do that. They can't just naturally fold proteins. But humans are actually really good at that because we have those kinds of spatial and manipulation skills that computers don't.

Now, computers are also really good at remembering things and processing algorithms really quickly. The computers coupled with the humans together are able to solve real problems. The

human beings were able to work with this computer through a game to solve a protein related to HIV. And that helps us actually understand more about HIV and create medicines to help people with this. This is a real-world problem being solved through a game.

Now, this is continuing. There are games right now being used to directly solve issues related to COVID-19, *through the game*. Game playing is actually directly solving issues and developing new medications, helping us understand RNA configurations better through a game called *EteRNA* which is E-T-E-R-N-A. This gets me excited. But even beyond that, games can also just help us to grow. It helps us to understand ourselves, it helps us to express ourselves, our true selves. I want everybody to feel like they belong in this world, I want everyone to feel like they matter, I want everybody to be part of deciding the kind of world that we live in. And I believe that games can help us to do that because it helps us to understand our identities, it helps us to understand who we are and it helps us to really, to think about how we might design the world, the new world; to break down the systems, to break down systemic racism, to understand climate change, to understand pandemics, to break down all of these big problems and to really think about how we design the new systems. And games, I think are one way, one way, one really strong way where we can design a better world.

**[Interview ends]**

**[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Loopy Reprise]**

**Christiane:** If you want to know more about Kat Schrier's work, or some of the things we mentioned in today's episode, check out our show notes page at [examiningethics.org](http://examiningethics.org).

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