

Is There a Case for Gamification in Business Ethics Education? An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT: This study compares two uniquely developed tools for engaging undergraduate business ethics students in case discussions: paper-based (static) cases and interactive digital games. The cases we developed address borderline instances of sexual harassment and racism in the workplace and were used to facilitate students' affective appreciation of the content of course lectures and readings. The purpose of the study was to assess the relative effectiveness of these two tools as teaching aids in increasing affective learning. Pre- and post-test surveys thus focused on affective learning outcomes. These included change in student perceptions of the importance of the topics, feelings of agency, perceptions of improved self-reliance, and confidence. Results showed that digital cases are at least as effective as static cases in terms of their affective learning efficacy, and that digital serious games spur students to reflect on themselves and others more effectively than static cases.

Introduction

THIS STUDY CONTRIBUTES to the evolving conversation regarding the importance of ethics in business education, especially in the face of skepticism regarding that topic (Von Kriegstein 2019). At least since the global financial crisis of 2008, calls for increased and improved business ethics education have been growing (Nastase and Gligor-Cimpoieru 2013). Today, a business ethics curriculum is required for a business school to receive accreditation by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), which aims to “emphasize and model the following values: Quality, Inclusion and Diversity, a Global Mindset, Ethics, Social Responsibility, and Community” (www.aacsb.edu). Thus, improving business ethics education is not only morally good, but also prudent.

There are, of course, a number of ways to teach business ethics. But business schools often make use of a tool not found as frequently in other disciplines: case studies. Indeed, case learning is nearly ubiquitous in post-secondary business education. Business cases provide students with complex, real, and realistic

situations containing a central problem or small set of problems needing to be solved. As ethics education in business has increased, so too has the use of business ethics cases (Falkenberg and Woiceshyn 2008). In business ethics cases, the problems to be solved revolve around doing the right thing in the face of conflicting pressures. Beyond mere cognitive learning, many business ethics cases also attempt to allow students to take an active role in decision-making during historical and/or hypothetical scenarios, which goes some way to immersing them within the activity and facilitating their experiential learning.

Experiential learning is developed through activities, wherein “[t]he learner moves from the passive stance found in most traditional classrooms to more active engagement on the emotional and behavioral as well as conceptual levels” (Bradford 2019). Bradford, citing Kolb (1984), describes experiential learning as a “four-part circular model [wherein] *Concrete Experiences* can lead into *Reflective Observation*. Such observations can serve as the basis for *Abstract Conceptualization*. However, these three areas have most value when applied to related situations in *Active Experimentation*” (Bradford 2019: 9; emphasis in original).

As education in North America continues to move toward increasing emphasis on experiential learning, the tools to facilitate that learning modality also continue to be developed, with one prominent tool being “serious games” (Kili 2005). Although games have been used in management education since the 1950s, starting with Stanley Vance’s management decision simulation (see Vance 1960), today’s digital environment allows for a plethora of new opportunities for game development both within and outside of management education (Abdul Jabbar and Felicia 2015; Lamb et al. 2018; Boyle et al. 2016). Michael and Chen (2005: 21) have characterised serious games as “games that do not have entertainment, enjoyment or fun as their primary purpose.” In the currently digitally focused era, serious games often manifest as video games, designed to capture player attention for educational and other purposes (such as training) that go beyond pure entertainment (Djaouti, Alvarez, and Jessel 2011).

In our study, we developed two paper-based business cases and transformed them into two serious games using the Twine platform. These games and cases were then implemented into an undergraduate business ethics course. The games were hosted on the internet and allowed users to follow a branching narrative from the second-person perspective. Branching narratives are written so as to allow the user to make consequential choices, ensuring that each decision she or he makes offers a unique path, in our case, through an ethical workplace difficulty. Although the total number of endings/outcomes will be finite in any branching narrative, the user has control over the course of the action (Reeve 2009), similar to what are sometimes called “choose your own adventure” stories.

The two cases we developed resulted in the production of what Argasiński and Węgrzy (2019: 527) have called “Affective Serious Games” (AFGs), which combine emotion, games, and learning. We developed both a static, paper-based case and corresponding digital AFG, for two different ethical workplace

scenarios: one involving racism, entitled “Their People,” and one involving sexual harassment, entitled “Missing the Message” (available at www.interactives.ca). As explained further below, these topics were chosen because they were indicated as more likely to be faced by early career employees. It should be noted, however, that even though our cases focused on situations pertinent for early career employees, other business ethics perspectives are equally valid, but not within the purview of this particular study, such as organizational culture, professional ethics, and business and society.

Two years ago you graduated from TRSM at Ryerson University in Toronto, with a B. Comm in Marketing Management. During your degree you worked at Synergy Marketing as a co-op student, which is when you first met Tanya Simard, a **Haudenosaunee** woman who recently graduated from Schulich with the same degree you were in the process of earning. Tanya had just been hired on full time and a year later -- after you graduated and the company and demand for services continued to grow -- you were hired on in the same position.

Now that you share the same job title, you have to choose how to approach your relationship. Do you

treat her as a competitor
work with her as a collaborator
keep to yourself

Figure 1

For illustrative purposes, Figure 1 shows the opening choice-point in the game “Their People.” In the classroom, students read the narrative then make a series of decisions about what to do by selecting one of the options at the bottom. As you can see in this figure, in some cases students can also click links within the narrative to find out more information. In this example, the link associated with the word “Haudenosaunee” points to an explanation of who the Haudenosaunee are as described on the Haudenosaunee Confederacy webpage (<https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/who-we-are/>). The combination of all choices made throughout the game can be thought of as demarcating the “path” taken along the differing branches of the narrative.

Beyond the creative output of game production, we were also interested in the differences between static text-based games and digital serious games on existing case-study teaching approaches common in business schools, especially regarding affective learning. Bloom (1956) famously divided learning into three main domains: Cognitive, Affective, and Motor Skills. Whereas the cognitive domain is focused on comprehension and the eventual evaluation of given information, the affective domain is concerned with the internalization of interests, attitudes, and values, leading to an eventual change in character. We agree with

Reeves (1990) that although the achievement of a change in students' character is not possible within the duration of a single post-secondary term, focusing on the affective domain still contributes to this larger goal and may have the immediate effect of increasing students' interest in and commitment to business ethics. Moreover, as Bratton (2004) and Bowen (2014) have shown, emotion plays an important role in ethical deliberation and decision-making in business, which suggests that increasing students' affective learning can help them make better decisions, even in the short term.¹

Research Questions

In line with our focus on developing affective learning using AFGs, we developed a series of exploratory research questions for investigation. The first question was aimed at determining whether digital games have a greater impact on (or even increase) students' confidence in discussing racism/harassment than do static cases featuring the same themes and much of the same content. Our second question was whether engaging students in digital games had an impact on their perceptions of the importance of racism and sexual harassment. We then focused on three specific affective attributes, including whether students changed their attitudes toward the subject matter, changed their perceptions of self-reliance, and changed their perceptions regarding the sophistication of their own thinking.

Fourth, within the cognitive domain, we wanted to see if there was an impact on learning retention. To do so we collected answers to specific final exam questions to help determine if there was a significant difference in retention between those using the static and digital cases, with the assumption being that increased grades indicated higher cognitive learning retention.

Finally, in addition to the impact of affective learning and retention, we also wanted to know if students found digital games more engaging than static cases, since increased engagement has been proven to be associated with cognitive and affective learning (Abdul Jabbar and Felicia 2015).

Methodology

This study made use of three distinct methodologies. The first was the methodology used to create the static cases, turn them into digital games, and teach them. The second was the methodology used to analyze the quantitative data, and the third was the methodology to analyze the qualitative data.

Development and Teaching

The research was conducted through the Ted Rogers Leadership Centre (TRLC) at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. The inspiration for the case topics came from the general research focus of the TRLC on ethical issues facing early career employees. Whereas many business ethics courses focus on executive decisions and behaviour, we believe that ethical issues are present all the way down

and that much value comes from researching the underdeveloped topic of entry-level ethical issues. In line with this focus, we set up a meeting with the Ryerson Director of Human Rights, who informed us that racism and sexual harassment are by far the two most pressing issues faced by current students and recent graduates as they enter the workforce.

For each topic, we first devised a scenario and then drafted a one-page fictional narrative with the future gamification of the case in mind. For instance, we decided that each case should be written from the second-person perspective so that as a game, the wording would work most naturally. The wording works more naturally because it is more immersive and allows students to start from their own knowledge and value set rather than have to guess at the background of an additional character. For example, the case “Missing the Message” opens with the line, “You and Riley have worked together at an ad agency for nearly three years.” We chose this approach over something like “Blake and Riley have worked together . . .” so that students do not have to guess at “Blake’s” background and value set and so that the decision is now one they have to ‘own.’ We also focused on keeping the narrative realistic and without an overly obvious conflict or solution. Our focus on keeping the narratives realistic was informed in part by the worry that non-realistic narratives may “break” the eventual game. In this context, to “break” a game means to include within it some aspect that jolts the player out of the game and causes them to reflect upon, rather than be engaged in, the process they are undertaking. Our focus on creating ‘grey area’ cases with subtle conflicts and non-obvious solutions was motivated by the desire for students to have to work through ill-defined problems (as opposed to linear, or clearly defined problems like simple calculations). Such problems have been shown to make arriving at a solution more meaningful (Steinkuehler 2006), thereby increasing affective learning.

The first case we devised is called “Missing the Message” and is focused on sexual harassment. This case was inspired by a public service announcement created by and starring TV star David Schwimmer, entitled “The Boss” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5owCNvik0E). In our case the two central characters “You” and Riley, are long-time colleagues and friends. When Riley breaks up with his most recent girlfriend, he suddenly takes an interest in you and pushes the boundaries of acceptable behaviour both inside and outside of the workplace. The second case is called “Their People” and focuses on racism. This case is purely a product of the team’s imagination, though it was motivated by the team’s appreciation of our institution’s general aim to increase the indigenization of the university’s curriculum. In this case, you and a First Nations colleague are competing for the same promotion when you overhear the boss on a phone call indicate that “their people” don’t make good managers. You then have to decide what to do with the information you have accidentally acquired.

Once the first drafts of the static cases were written, they were shared with all members of the research project as well as with other members of the TRLC

(such as the director and executives in residence), for feedback especially concerning the case's realism and its ability to address each issue seriously without crossing the line into the traumatic.

After that feedback was accounted for and the static cases were finished, we worked with a professional writer, creator, and producer to turn them into digital games using the Twine platform (<https://twinery.org/>). This process involved two major components. First, multiple endings were needed for each case. While the static cases end by asking "What do you do?", the digital games needed to present options for the players to choose from. With the help of our professional colleague, the research team brainstormed ideas and wrote corresponding dialogue and narrative for the multiple branches needed in each case.

Once the first drafts of the games were complete, they were also sent to all members of the team and others within the TRLC for feedback. When the feedback was accounted for, the static cases and digital games were then sent to the university's Director of Human Rights, who agreed that their facilitated use in the classroom would likely be educational and, in her professional opinion, not too emotionally jarring.

The cases were then taught in two sections of the course "Ethics in Commerce" offered in the Fall 2018 term, with both sections presented by the same male instructor to ensure similar content and delivery to all students. Each class was three hours in length and was comprised of a mixture of lectures and participatory activities. Students in Section One were assigned to the static case condition, whereas students in Section Two were assigned to the digital games condition. The two cases under study were used during weeks five and seven of the twelve-week term.² The racism case was discussed during week five, when the topic of the lecture was "Corporate Culture" and the sexual harassment cases was discussed during week seven, when the topic of the lecture was "Employer Responsibilities and Employee Rights." Each class lasted three hours and the use of the case was preceded by a 1.25 hour lecture on course content followed by a 0.25 hour break, leaving the second half of the course dedicated to the study and discussion of the case.

At this point, it is important to note that the games were also purposefully designed so as not to include all possible options, and some paths purposefully led to controversial outcomes. This was done so that these points could be raised during the class discussion (see Appendix 1). Accordingly, these games are not designed to be stand-alone training tools. They are tools to help an instructor facilitate discussion, rather than tools to replace an instructor.

After returning from the break, students first completed a pre-study survey. For Section One, participants were asked to read the case and in Section Two, participants were provided with a link and asked to play the game. After reading the case or playing the game, students formed small groups of two to four to discuss the case and/or their experience playing the game by focusing on completing a short questionnaire that asked students to identify key stakeholders and

issues. After students completed this, the instructor facilitated a class discussion regarding those questions by asking students what they had come up with and comparing and contrasting those results with other groups in the class. After the discussion, students completed the post survey and were dismissed from class.

Quantitative Analysis

At the beginning of the term, students in both sections were given the choice to participate in the study. Participants completed both the pre-test and post-test for the racism ($N=63$) and sexual harassment ($N=68$) cases, completing both Likert scale questions, which were used for quantitative analysis, as well as open-ended questions, one of which was used for a qualitative thematic analysis discussed below. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 32 years, $M=20.97$, $SD=2.11$, and 68.1% of the participants identified as being female ($N=47$). The largest cultural identification was Asian ($N=28$; 40.6%) and most participants were in their third ($N=44$; 63.8%) or fourth ($N=15$; 21.7%) year of undergraduate studies (see Table 1 for participants' demographic information).

To answer the research questions, we created composite scores for participants' levels of confidence, perceptions of importance, and engagement, based on the survey items. Participants' levels of confidence were assessed by computing a variable that included item #1 (*"How confident do you feel in identifying an instance of racism/sexual harassment in the workplace?"*), item #4 (*"How confident would you feel in obtaining help and resources to address an issue of racism/sexual harassment in the workplace?"*), and item #5 (*"How comfortable do you feel when talking about racism/sexual harassment in the workplace?"*).

Participants' perceptions of the importance of the issue were assessed by computing a variable that included item #2 (*"How much do you care about racism/sexual harassment in the workplace?"*) and item #3 (*"How important of an issue do you think racism/sexual harassment is in the workplace?"*).

Thematic Analysis

Based on the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; see also Maguire and Delahunt 2017), we also conducted an inductive or 'bottom up' thematic analysis of the answers participants gave to the question "How do you feel your thinking has changed between when you started working with the case to right now?" The thematic analysis took place over six steps. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data and independently generated an initial set of codes. Second, we discussed in order to generate a combined set of codes. Third, we searched for themes within the codes. We then, fourth, reviewed the themes before, fifth, finalizing and defining them. Finally, sixth, we produced a thematic map of the themes and codes and made final adjustments to their organization.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Demographics	Racism	Sexual Harassment
Mean age	21 years	21 years
Educational level	11% in 2 nd year 56% in 3 rd year 30% in 4 th year 3% in 5 th year	9% in 2 nd year 65% in 3 rd year 22% in 4 th year 4% in 5 th year
Ethnicity	38% White 6% Black/African 41% Asian 8% Middle Eastern 6% Other 2% Prefer not to say	38% White 7.2% Black/African 41% Asian 9% Middle Eastern 4% Other 1% Prefer not to say
Gender	34% Male 66% Female	32% Male 68% Female
Currently employed	67% employed 33% not employed	70% employed 30% not employed
Level of work experience	34% <2 years 38% 2-5 years 28% >5 years	30% <2 years 36% 2-5 years 33% >5 years
Frequency of game playing	20% never 34% seldom 27% occasionally 14% often 4.7% all of the time	20% never 35% seldom 23% occasionally 13% often 9% all of the time

Results

Quantitative

Research Question 1: To determine whether engaging in digital games had an impact on students' perceptions of the importance of racism and sexual harassment, we conducted a 2 (Condition: digital game vs. static case) x 2 (Time: pre-test vs. post-test) mixed design ANOVA on participants' scores. No significant effects of time or condition were found for either the racism case, $F(1, 60) = 1.912$, $p = .172$, $F(1, 60) = 1.912$, $p = .172$, or the sexual harassment case, $F(1, 65) = .907$, $p = .344$, $F(1, 60) = 1.912$, $p = .172$.

Research Question 2: To determine whether playing digital games had an impact on students' confidence in discussing the selected topics we conducted a 2 (Condition: digital game vs. static case) x 2 (Time: pre-test vs. post-test) mixed design ANOVA on participants' confidence scores. For both the racism case, $F(1, 59) = 6.298$, $p = .015$, as well as the sexual harassment case, $F(1, 65) = 20.092$, $p < .001$, a significant main effect of time was obtained. This indicated that from pre-test to post-test participants' levels of confidence increased. No significant group differences (e.g., between sexes, ethnicities, etc.) were found, however, for

either the racism case, $F(1, 59) = 6.298, p = .015$, or the sexual harassment case, $F(1, 59) = 6.298, p = .015$.

Research Question 3: Single survey items were also used to determine whether participants reported changes in their attitudes (“*I have changed my attitudes about the subject matter as a result of the case*”), felt more self-reliant (“*I feel more self-reliant as a result of the content learned in this case*”), and felt that they were a more sophisticated thinker from pre-to-post test (“*I feel I am a more sophisticated thinker as a result of this case*”). An independent samples t-test was conducted on each item to compare scores at post-test between participants in the digital games and static condition for both the racism and sexual harassment cases. For the racism case, a significant change in attitudes was identified, where participants in the digital games section reported a greater change in attitudes than those in the paper-based section, $t(61) = -1.313, p = .027$. No significant results were obtained for participants’ self-reported scores on being more self-reliant, $t(61) = -1.313, p = .027$, or being a more sophisticated thinker, $t(61) = -1.313, p = .027$. No significant results were obtained on any of these items for the sexual harassment case.

Research Question 4: We also investigated whether there were significant differences in final exam marks between the digital games and static case condition, for questions corresponding to the racism and sexual harassment cases. Two multiple choice questions focused on factual details of the case and a single short answer question asking for a plausible solution were developed for each of the two cases. We conducted a one-way ANOVA to compare exam scores between participants who completed the paper cases, and those who completed the digital games. We did this separately for the racism and sexual harassment questions. For questions about the racism case, there was a significant difference in participants’ total correct responses on the final exam between these two groups, where participants in the paper case section ($N = 29$) answered more questions correctly than those in the digital games section ($N = 33$), $F(1, 60) = 5.79, p = .02$. For the sexual harassment questions, there was no significant difference in scores on exam questions between participants who completed the paper cases and those who completed the digital games cases.

Research Question 5: To assess whether participants in the digital games condition perceived the case as more engaging than participants in the static case condition, we conducted a 2 (Condition: digital game vs. static case) x 2 (Time: pre-test vs. post-test) mixed design ANOVA. For the racism case, there was no significant effect of time, $F = .524, p = .472$, nor condition, $F = .524, p = .472$. For the sexual harassment, again no significant effect of time, $F = .524, p = .472$, nor condition, $F = 1.065, p = .306$, was obtained.

Qualitative

The thematic analysis (Figure 2) of the responses to the question, “How do you feel your thinking has changed between when you started working with

the case to right now?” resulted in the identification of 7 themes as illustrated in Figure 1.

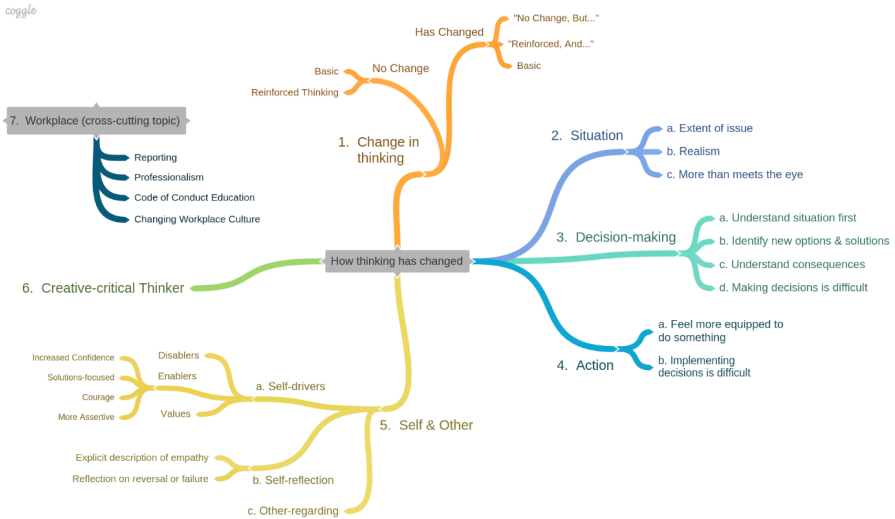


Figure 2. Thematic Analysis

Themes 1 and 7 (“Change in thinking” and “Workplace”) are cross-cutting in that they appear throughout instances of the other 5 themes in varying places. For example, students who identified a change or reinforcement in their thinking may have specified that change as an (increased) understanding of the situation (theme 2) or (an increase) in their ability to critically or creatively think (theme 6). The “workplace” theme is cross-cutting in that all of the subthemes also appeared throughout other 6 themes. For example, a student may feel more equipped to take action (theme 4) or more equipped to identify new options and solutions (sub-theme 3) because they recognize the role of a changing workplace culture.

Discussion

Quantitative

While the fact that there was no significant difference found between the digital games and static cases on students’ perception of the importance of the issues, being more self-reliant, or becoming a more sophisticated thinker may seem unremarkable, we think it is important to stress that these results also show digital games are at least as good as static cases at influencing these variables and that, importantly, they do not have a negative impact. In fact, no conditions concerned with affective learning were found to be better facilitated via static cases. Digital games did, however, have a significant impact on increasing student confidence, and for the racism case, a significant impact on changing

student attitudes, which may make them better suited for use depending on the instructor's learning objectives. This may be especially relevant when also taking into account the qualitative results discussed below.

We should also note that, to our surprise, one variable did demonstrate an advantage for the paper-based case, namely, learning retention for the racism case as measured via questions on the final exam. Since the questions on the exam were of a factual nature (asking students about the content of the narrative and to recall an appropriate solution), they are best aligned with the cognitive domain and we do not consider the results indicative of the retention of the affective learning, though we do acknowledge the need to develop a separate method to test for affective learning retention.

As a possible explanation for the significant difference, we suspect that better performance of case recall by the students using the paper-based cases may have been influenced by the comparative ease with which those were accessible to students as study aids in the period prior to the exam. For both sections, the paper cases that were used throughout the course were placed into a file on the course website. To access the digital cases, however, students had to revisit the lecture slides for that day, click on a link, and replay the game. In a future study, we would like to re-assess learning retention while ensuring the same ease of access to all cases as well as the impact of repetitive playing of the games on the same recall-based learning retention.

Qualitative

The most important takeaway from our qualitative analysis is that the digital games were much more effective at spurring participants to empathize and to consider the importance of others (theme 5b). When describing how their thinking had changed, four times as many students reported other-regarding considerations after playing digital games (20/62)³ than did students using the paper-based cases (5/62).

This result is especially significant in light of our aim to design games that improve affective learning. Given that empathy and self-reflection are best identified within the affective domain of learning, the tendency for the digital games to spur students in this direction is a strong indicator of their efficacy. This is not to say that only digital games can create this effect. It is just to say that the digital games seem to have spurred a more regular or prominent acknowledgement of the student's increased awareness of others than the static cases in this study.

Conclusion

The most fundamental conclusion to be drawn from our results is that the use of digital games is at least as effective as the use of static, paper-based cases. At minimum, this provides educators with an alternative teaching tool. However, given the significant differences noted above, in conjunction with the results of

the thematic analysis, the digital cases may be preferable for meeting instructor's educational goals.

Beyond this established conclusion, however, it should also be noted that observations from the classroom showed much higher levels of engagement and enjoyment with the digital games. This observation cannot be statistically quantified within our study because the tools were restricted to individual course sections, in other words, we do not have the opinions of students who have used both and can choose which one they prefer. We hypothesize that a future study comparing the differing tools on same group would demonstrate a higher enjoyment of the digital game. For present purposes, our study confirms the literature on case-based and experiential learning by showing the value of case-based learning generally, and by showing that a switch to digital games does not hinder that enjoyment.

Demonstrating the efficacy of digital learning is also valuable in the context of ever-increasing tech-enabled learning. Given that most current University age students were born after the year 2000, they have grown up immersed within a never before seen technological society. Moving case learning to this format helps instructors meet students in the tech-enabled world they have grown up in and which will undoubtedly continue to gain prominence in educational practice.

Finally, future games and studies may also shed more light on how "situation" impacts decision making and intertwines with character or values (see Bazerman and Trunsel 2011). Similarly, there is a natural fit between AFGs and the program of "Giving Voice to Values" developed by Mary Gentile (2010) that could be developed more explicitly.

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Appendix 1: Group Worksheet

Group members:

Section: _____

Family Name	Given Name(s)	Student number

1. Who are the stakeholders?
2. What are the main concerns of each stakeholder?
3. What were some key decisions from the first-person point of view? Why?
4. What other options could those points have included?

Options	Alternate

5. What alternate endings are possible?

Notes

1. We do not mean to commit ourselves as meta-ethical emotivists here, with all that entails. For present purposes, we merely acknowledge the fact humans have emotions and that those emotions impact ethical decision making and student interest in the topic.
2. The traditionally used static cases were used in the other weeks.
3. While 68 participants completed at least part of the survey, only 62 completed this particular question.

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