VIDEO GAMES & THE MEANING OF LIFE

FALL 2026 music 46 colt 40.07 film 50.04

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FINAL REFLECTION ESSAY (100XP)

INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN: Thursday, November 5, 2026 (end of class)

SUBMISSIONS DUE: Tuesday, November 17, 2026 (beginning of class)



I. AN IMPOSSIBLE SCENARIO

(read this first)

It is the first week of November 2026. Which means only one thing: the release of *Grand Theft Auto VI* is right around the corner! *Finally.* Fans are bursting with anticipation.

But last week, a new game exploded onto the global scene. Its sudden launch took everyone by surprise. People all over – streamers, academics, lawmakers, celebrities, world leaders, your grandparents – cannot stop talking about it. It's an RPG (well, sort of, since it defies genre). One game news site is saying it's "the game of the century, hands down," whereas a U.S. senator yesterday called the game "an atrocious piece of shit." The Internet is . . . well, obviously divided, to say the least. The game has touched off a tornado of debates around more hot-button issues than anyone could have imagined.

Protests – and counter-protests – are growing daily outside the game developer's headquarters.

(Against impossible odds, by the way, this game has forced Rockstar to delay GTA VI's release until Q2 2027, because no company wants to launch their game in this "moment." An aura vacuum. A ludic black hole.)



"I've realized how important video games are, and my dream now is to go into game design," Beyoncé told *Washington Post*. "I'm rethinking every decision I've ever made," Vladimir Putin announced. "So *this* is the sort of nonsense you're dealing with in V-M-G-L? *This* is what we're paying all that tuition for?!" your mom exclaimed to you over the phone.

II. THIS MEGA-CONTROVERSIAL GAME IS CALLED . . .

(choose only 1 of the 3 options below)

1. SUPER CORNELL RAPE RPG!



Re: specifically – Jane Doe & "Cornell (5)7" rape allegations (resurfaced in 2026) . . .

but far more broadly – Greek Life, hazing, peer pressure, friendship, sociality, inclusion, exclusion, gender, race, community, violence, surveillance, institutional responsibility, mental health, etc.

2. SUPER DARTMOUTH AI ETHICS RPG!



Re: specifically – the debates around the former provost's undisclosed use of AI in recent publications . . .

but far more broadly – AI, LLMs, labor, humanity, artifice, authenticity, authorship, climate, equity, algorithms, copyright, privacy, technocracy, surveillance, institutional responsibility, mental health, etc.

3. SUPER BROWN SHOOTING RPG!



Re: specifically – the tragic, fatal Brown shooting on December 13, 2025 . . .

but far more broadly – school shootings, gun violence, grief, safety, securitization, survival, liability, shame, trauma, surveillance, institutional responsibility, mental health, etc.

III. YOUR PREPARATION

(what you should do before you start writing)

STEP 1. Conduct *thorough, smart, responsible, multiply-fact-checked* research into the real-world case study specifically related to your chosen game. In other words, you should perform a *deep dive*. You should know what many different people have said about many different aspects of the case in particular – and about disparate issues surrounding the case much more broadly.

STEP 2. Take a few moments to contemplate – with searing honesty – your own positions, biases, uncertainties, and discomforts etc. about the heavy topics at hand.

STEP 3. Read *at least 10 examples* of video game reviews (can be 10 reviews of the same game; 10 reviews of 10 different games; or anything in between). Discern how game reviewers tend to write. What parameters do they consider (graphics, sound, story, gameplay, difficulty, accessibility, originality, etc.)? With what criteria do they make aesthetic and ludic judgments? How do reviewers stand out from one another? How do they showcase a distinctive and compelling voice? Do they use jargon? Whom do they presume their readers to be (hardcore gamers, casual players, etc.)? What prejudices or preconceptions show up in their assessments? Visit www.metacritic.com for convenient access to catalogues of game reviews. Consider reading reviews of games with which you are familiar, such as *Undertale*, *The Stanley Parable*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, etc.

IV. YOUR NEW JOB

(some more background . . .)





Congratulations! You have just been hired as the new Chief Editor of Game Reviews at *The New York Times*. You are honored. You were chosen out of 451 applicants. It's a prestigious, challenging, trailblazing, super-high-paying job.

Your appointment coincides with the release of the mega-controversial game that everyone's talking about. Your boss expects – no, *demands* – a review of the game on his desk by *10:10am on Thursday, November 17, 2026*. Of course, there are a hundred other game sites on the verge of publishing reviews for this game as well. "But *our* review," your boss sternly instructs via email, "had better be the most polished, brilliant, and popular review. We are the *Times*, after all."

You've got your work cut out for you. This review could make or break your new career.

You spend 120 hours playing the mega-controversial game. You conduct research into its real-world case inspiration. The game tears you up. Rips your soul – your ethics! – in half. Half of you

admires it and wants to give it 10/10. The other half is repulsed, shaken, and put off . . . and wants to give it 0/10.

So you write *two* reviews. One arrives at 10/10, the other at 0/10. Somehow, you stand fully behind *both* reviews. Both are spectacularly eloquent, wise, and considerate of alternate viewpoints.

Before you know it, it's the morning of November 17. Your assignment is due. You are panicked – not because you haven't written a review, but rather because you have written two . . . and you still cannot, for the life of you, choose between them. Which one should you submit?

You knock on your boss's door. Without saying a word, you nervously hand him both reviews. He peers at you curiously over the rims of his glasses. Then he proceeds to read both reviews. Carefully. Slowly. After what feels like an eternity, he looks up at you. He smiles. "We will print both," he tells you. "Your work is done. Fantastic job."

V. LASTLY, YOUR ASSIGNMENT

(what you will ultimately hand in)



You will submit two reviews of your chosen game – one rating the game 10/10; the rating the game 0/10.

REQUIREMENTS

1. Each review should be between 900–1200 words in length. The reviews should be typed, use 12-point font (one that's easy to read), be single-spaced, and leave at least 1-inch margins.
2. Each review should teach the reader profound things about the game and related social issues.
3. Each review should provide clear and compelling rationales for the assigned score.
4. Each review should feature an eye-catching title; a powerful tagline (~20 words); and, at the end, a summary of (non)recommendation.
5. Each review should include 2 hand-drawn images of footage from the game. Your 4 total images (across both reviews) should illuminate different salient mechanics/moments in the game. We are not judging your drawing technique, but we *are* judging creativity and effort.
6. The 2 reviews should include short quotations from a total of 6 readings from VGML 2026, including at least 1 reading from Week 9. (Doesn't need to be 3 readings per review – can be 4+2, 5+1, or 6+0.) Cite authors by their full names and book/article title. No need to specify page numbers, and no need to include footnotes/endnotes/bibliography.

7. The 2 reviews should reference, as comparands, a total of 3 games from the following 7: *Undertale* / *The Stanley Parable* / *What Remains of Edith Finch* / *Journey* / *That Dragon, Cancer* / *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* / *September 12: A Toy World*. (Either 3+0 or 2+1 split.)
8. Submit your reviews physically (as one stapled document) on the last day of class AND digitally (as single file) on Canvas.
9. AI use is neither needed nor permitted.

GRADING RUBRIC

Your submission will be graded by **three** people: the professor, your section TA, and one other TA (assigned at random). The professor's grade will be weighted at 50%; each TA's grade will be weighted at 25%. So if the professor gives 80/100, one TA gives 90/100, and one TA gives 95/100, the student's final score will be 80+80+90+95 divided by 4 = 86.25. Appropriately, as this is your final assignment, we will be grading with exceptionally high standards.

POLISH	/ 20 XP
Essays are free of speling/grammer misteaks	
ORGANIZATION	/ 20 XP
Essays are organized and within word count; sentences and paragraphs flow comprehensibly	
ARGUMENT	/ 20 XP
Essays make purposeful and varied claims	
EVIDENCE	/ 20 XP
Essays support claims with examples (referencing required number of specific readings and games)	
IMAGINATION	/ 20 XP
Essays take some intellectual and/or rhetorical risks (up to you to define)	
	/ 100 XP