Ethical Issues in Video Games: Insights from Reddit Discussions

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, the video game industry has seen exponential growth, evolving from basic entertainment into a sophisticated medium featuring immersive graphics, intricate storytelling, and highly interactive experiences. This rapid expansion has brought a host of ethical concerns to the forefront, including issues related to violence, gender representation, race, addictive game mechanics, and monetization fairness. These concerns have sparked ongoing debates on social media, yet public discussions on these matters remain largely unresearched. To address this gap, we conducted an exploratory study of ethical issues in video games by analyzing Reddit discussions through both manual analysis and machine learning techniques.

Keywords

video games, ethics, reddit

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1 Introduction

Video games have become a defining part of contemporary culture, reaching a global market value exceeding $200 billion[11]. This rapid growth has introduced a wide spectrum of ethical concerns—from the effects of violent content to systemic bias in character representation, the exploitation of addictive behaviors, and predatory monetization practices. These concerns affect not only players but also developers, families, and regulators. While regulatory bodies like PEGI and ESRB provide age ratings[4], they often fail to address deeper ethical implications in game content and mechanics[5].

Reddit, as a platform with over 100,000 active communities, offers a rich landscape for public discourse[1]. Its anonymity, topical subreddits, and long-form discussions make it ideal for capturing authentic user opinions.

[1]https://www.statista.com/topics/5672/reddit/

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2 Scope and Research Questions

We scope ethical issues in video games as moral dilemmas within the games such as violence, monetization, sexualization of female characters, stereotyping, racism and more. We do not consider ethical issues happening on the workfloor in the game industry, for instance, unrealistic workload, harassment, discrimination, bias and abuse of power etc.

The following research questions are our main focus:

(RQ1) What types of ethical issues related to video games are discussed in Reddit posts?

(RQ2) How are ethical issues in video games (discovered in RQ1) are discussed on Reddit?

(RQ3) What is the potential of machine learning algorithms to automate the classification to classify ethical issues in video games on Reddit?

3 Research Method

We selected 15 subreddits spanning general gaming, game development, and underrepresented gamer communities. Ethical issues were scoped as those related to in-game content (e.g., violence, exclusion), excluding workplace ethics.

We identified an initial list of keywords related to ethical issues in video games based on the existing literature. We particularly inspired our selection from the notable work on violence and moral dilemmas in gaming [10][1], moral decision making in gaming[13], stereotyping and racial bias in game design, relation between gaming obsession and addiction [8], and gambling mechanisms in games [3]. To refine this selection, we randomly sampled and analyzed 1,000 posts from gaming-focused subreddits, reviewed the findings in discussion sessions among authors and cross-referenced the findings with our initial keyword set. Using keywords grounded in literature, we extracted 19,843 posts and annotated a representative sample of 2,249. Manual labeling identified 366 posts explicitly discussing ethical concerns. Seven issue categories were established: violence, prejudice, monetization, gambling, exclusion, addictive design, and other.

Qualitative analysis employed open coding to extract themes [9][2]. For machine learning, we cleaned and windowed text, used TF-IDF and embeddings [7] for vectorization, and balanced the dataset via SMOTE[6]. Classifiers tested included Naive Bayes, SVM, Random Forest, CNN, and Bi-LSTM.

See the supplementary material for additional details[2].

4 Results

4.1 RQ1: Types of Ethical Issues in Video Games

Of the annotated posts, 366 (16.3%) explicitly addressed ethical issues. Violence was the most common topic, comprising 44.5% of

[2]https:doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28873892

Table 1: Results of Binary Classification for the Presence of Ethical Issues

Model	Precision	Recall	F1-Score	Accuracy
SVM	0.845	0.862	0.849	0.862
Random Forest	0.849	0.851	0.794	0.851
Gaussian NB	0.762	0.799	0.777	0.799
Multinomial NB	0.777	0.811	0.790	0.811
Bernoulli NB	0.809	0.756	0.777	0.756
Complement NB	0.810	0.754	0.775	0.754

Table 2: Results of Multi-Class Classification for the Ethical Issues

Model	Precision	Recall	F1-Score	Accuracy
Bi-LSTM	0.509	0.378	0.427	0.378
CNN	0.624	0.473	0.515	0.473
GRU	0.416	0.297	0.331	0.297
SVM	0.686	0.703	0.644	0.704
Random Forest	0.587	0.568	0.480	0.568
Gaussian NB	0.450	0.481	0.396	0.481
Multinomial NB	0.450	0.481	0.396	0.481
Bernoulli NB	0.558	0.470	0.488	0.470
Complement NB	0.705	0.721	0.711	0.721

these posts. Other issues included monetization (12.3%), prejudice (11.5%), gambling (10.4%), exclusion (5.2%), and addictive design (3%). The "other" category (13.1%) included posts discussing broader moral dilemmas.

4.2 RQ2: Discussion on Reddit

Violence discussions focused on desensitization, especially among children, and on the failure of rating systems to capture content severity. Prejudice posts criticized stereotypical depictions of women, LGBTQ+, and minority characters. In terms of monetization, users expressed concern over exploitative tactics like loot boxes, microtransactions, and pay-to-win mechanics. Gambling mechanics were linked to broader concerns about legality and regulation. Exclusion discussions emphasized the lack of representation and heteronormative design of romance options. Addictive design posts focused on mechanics that encouraged compulsive gameplay, particularly in rogue-like and mobile games [12]. Across all categories, users highlighted a perceived lack of accountability from game developers.

5 RQ3:Automation Potential

We applied traditional and deep learning models to classify ethical concerns. The best binary classifier (SVM) achieved an accuracy of 86.2% and an F1-score of 0.849. The best multi-class classifier (Complement Naive Bayes) achieved 72.1% accuracy and an F1-score of 0.711. Despite dataset imbalance, machine learning showed strong potential for automating ethical issue detection in large-scale Reddit data. See results in Table 1 and 2.

6 Discussions

Our study reveals that Reddit is an active space for ethical discourse on video games. The prominence of violence, monetization, and prejudice indicates that players and developers are not only aware of these issues but also expect accountability. Concerns about rating systems align with existing literature on their limitations. Monetization and gambling mechanics reflect growing international regulatory tension. Calls for greater inclusivity reflect recent trends in game design toward broader representation.

The successful automation of classification supports the potential for monitoring ethical issues in real time. However, dataset limitations and Reddit's demographic skew must be considered. The ethical gaming landscape is evolving, and tools for analysis must keep pace with shifts in public discourse, technology, and regulation.

7 Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Reddit can be used to explore and categorize public perceptions of ethical issues in video games. It identifies prevalent concerns and provides insights into how these issues are articulated by various stakeholders. Additionally, our machine learning models offer a scalable method for tracking such concerns over time. Future work will include interviews with game developers to further understand how ethical considerations are managed in practice.

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