

Designing an Ethical Framework for Using Gamification In Designing Educational Games Based on Analysis of Several Selected Management Games

Mohammad Dehghan Terezhani*

moh.dehghan@isu.ac.ir

M.A. Student in Management, Faculty of Management, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran.

Mohammad Noruzi

Faculty of Islamic thought and Management, University of imam sadiq Tehran, Iran.

Abstract

Gamification has emerged as a innovative pedagogical tool, increasingly recognized for its potential to advance educational objectives. However, like all tools, it may entail ethical considerations or unintended dysfunctional outcomes. This study aims to develop an ethical framework for applying gamification in the design of managerial educational games. Through the analysis of selected management games and expert insights, we propose a three-layered framework. This model evaluates games across three design dimensions (form, rules, and content) and categorizes them into three ethical states: ethics-promoting, ethically neutral, or unethical-promoting. Five managerial games—Monopoly, Risk, Catan, Jaliz, and Twilight Struggle—were analyzed using this framework to delineate their ethical standing. Findings indicate that these games comply with legal and religious principles, rendering them suitable for educational settings. However, certain aspects related to social values and player interactions require targeted supervision to prevent behaviors misaligned with cultural norms. Collectively, these results underscore the necessity of integrating ethical considerations into gamification processes. The proposed framework serves as a valuable tool for future educational game design, guiding developers to embed ethical principles in a game’s form, rules, and content. By doing so, it fosters greater alignment between gamified learning tools and societal ethical-cultural values.

Keywords: Gamification, Management Education, Ethics, Instructional Design

* Corresponding Author

Introduction

Gamification refers to the use of game elements and game thinking in non-game contexts. In recent years, this approach has emerged as an innovative strategy to enhance engagement and motivation in educational settings. Systematic reviews indicate that incorporating game mechanics (such as point systems, badges, and leaderboards) generally has positive effects on student participation, learning satisfaction, and even academic performance. In other words, empirical evidence suggests that adding game-like features to the learning process can foster intrinsic motivation and sustained interest in learning. However, gamification is not merely a neutral tool for entertainment; it functions as a persuasive technology designed to influence user behavior and attitudes.

As with other persuasive technologies, the application of gamification must be critically examined through an ethical lens to ensure that learners' rights and freedoms are not compromised. In theoretical terms, ethics provides a framework of guiding principles to distinguish right from wrong. In the context of designing gamified educational tools, adherence to ethical principles is crucial for safeguarding human dignity, promoting educational equity, and respecting cultural values. With the growing implementation of gamification in education, discussions around its ethical implications have become inevitable. Critics (both domestic and international) have warned about potential negative consequences, even characterizing gamification as a new form of exploitative instrument. For example, local studies have shown that when ethical principles are neglected, gamification can lead to the manipulation of users (endangering their personal rights). When an educational system uses game mechanics to nudge learners toward desirable behaviors, several issues must be carefully monitored (such as student consent and autonomy, privacy protection, fairness in competition, and the avoidance of harmful comparisons or discrimination).

For instance, publicly displaying scores and rankings may lead to undesirable social comparisons and undermine some learners' self-esteem. Similarly, an excessive focus on extrinsic rewards may weaken intrinsic motivation for learning. Furthermore, in different cultural contexts, game elements may carry unforeseen interpretations and impacts. For example, extreme competitiveness or the narrative content of certain games may conflict with the educational and cultural values of a given society. Therefore, indiscriminate integration of game mechanics into teaching and learning processes (without adherence to ethical frameworks) may

introduce educational and cultural challenges that call the legitimacy of the program into question.

1. Problem Statement

Despite the growing importance of the topic, there is still no clearly defined and widely accepted ethical framework for the design of gamified educational games. Many educational game designers (particularly in the fields of management and pedagogy) proceed based on experience and trial-and-error in the absence of clear ethical guidelines and frameworks. This increases the risk that ethical considerations may be overlooked.

A review of the research literature shows that although some studies have addressed the identification of ethical challenges in educational gamification and even proposed preliminary guidelines and frameworks (for example, frameworks for evaluating intentions, methods, and ethical consequences in gamification projects, and integrating ethical assessments into instructional design phases), a practical and comprehensive model (specifically developed for the design of educational games) is still lacking. This gap has resulted in the failure to systematically address ethical aspects in the design of many gamified management education games, which may unintentionally lead to negative consequences. The qualitative content analysis of selected management games in this study also confirms that the lack of a formal ethical framework can result in various shortcomings in game design (such as a mismatch between certain game mechanics and pedagogical goals, insufficient attention to users' cultural contexts, or the absence of oversight mechanisms to prevent misuse and learning decline).

To confront this challenge, it is necessary to provide a three-layered ethical framework to guide designers in the ethical design of gamified educational games. In other words, the present study seeks to propose a three-tiered ethical framework (by clearly articulating the ethical dimensions involved at the individual, pedagogical, and cultural levels), which will be detailed in the following sections. This framework acts as a roadmap to ensure that gamification elements not only promote participation and learning enjoyment, but also remain consistent with ethical principles and the educational values of the society. In this way, game designers and educational professionals can make use of gamification's benefits with greater awareness and confidence (while avoiding its ethical and cultural pitfalls).

2. Literature Review

Islamic ethics, as a comprehensive system of values, principles, and human virtues, places central emphasis on the dignity of human beings. According to Qur'anic teachings, humans possess intrinsic worth and divine honor, which must be respected in all spheres of life, including education and technology (Salimi Zare & Ghazizadeh, 2007). Justice, as a cornerstone of Islamic ethics, emphasizes fairness in rights and the equitable distribution of opportunities. These principles are also applicable in educational game design, where fairness may refer to balanced access to content and equal learning opportunities (Atrk, 2013). Truthfulness, another key virtue, forms the foundation of trust and ethical interaction; in the context of game-based learning, it is a critical factor in fostering a credible and supportive learning environment (Azizpour et al., 2024). Moreover, Islamic ethics strongly emphasizes individual responsibility before God, oneself, society, and nature. This emphasis can inspire mechanisms within educational games that encourage users to be accountable for their choices and behaviors within the game environment (Dadashi, Safarheidari, & Sharifzadeh, 2018). Another essential pillar of Islamic ethics is respect for privacy. With the growing presence of digital technologies and user data collection, protecting personal information has become more significant than ever. Islamic ethical principles mandate safeguarding individuals' privacy and confidential information, except in very limited and justified cases (Dargahzadeh, Nemati, & Sajjadi, 2018). Attention to these principles can significantly inform the development of ethical frameworks in educational game design rooted in Islamic values. Despite growing interest in ethical gamification, a comprehensive, structured framework (particularly one tailored to management education) remains absent. The present study addresses this gap by proposing a multilayered ethical framework grounded in Islamic values and informed by a content analysis of selected management games (Hosseini & Soltani, 2018; Ghodrätzadeh, 2024).

Reyes-de-Cózar et al. (2022) conducted a mixed-methods analysis of 75 commercial video games and found that many convey implicit moral and social themes. Games like *Papers, Please*, *Life is Strange*, and *Assassin's Creed* were shown to foster ethical discourse and critical reflection when used pedagogically. Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of ethical awareness in gamified learning. While gamification can promote motivation and engagement, it can also lead to manipulation, inequity, or psychological harm if implemented carelessly.

Gamification has emerged in recent decades as a novel and technology-driven approach to enhancing engagement, motivation, and learning within educational contexts. This method, which draws on game design elements applied in non-game environments such as classrooms, e-learning platforms, and instructional software, has attracted increasing attention from researchers in education, psychology, and cognitive science (Nah et al., 2014). By incorporating components such as points, competition, rewards, levels, challenges, storytelling, and immediate feedback, gamification transforms learning spaces into more engaging, interactive, and motivation-driven environments. This approach has been particularly welcomed in online learning, adult education, and interdisciplinary fields like management.

In their literature review, Nah et al. (2014) identified eight key gamification elements frequently used in educational contexts: point scoring, leveling, badges, leaderboards, external rewards, progress bars, narratives, and real-time feedback. These elements can enhance learner participation and reduce dropout by reinforcing motivation, mastery, and competition. However, many implementations are overly superficial, lacking sensitivity to cultural context, intrinsic motivation, or pedagogical nuance, which may result in reduced effectiveness or even unintended negative consequences.

A critical systematic review by Dichev and Dicheva (2017) analyzed 63 studies and found an overemphasis on surface-level elements such as points and badges, with limited attention to deeper game mechanics such as meaningful challenges, safe failure, and narrative engagement. Furthermore, many studies lacked robust experimental designs, control groups, or valid data analysis. They concluded that gamification only succeeds when based on solid psychological theory, particularly Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and designed in an ethical, learner-centered, and context-sensitive manner. Similarly, a quasi-experimental study by Bagheri and Shahsavon (2022) revealed that gamified instruction in a Photoshop training course had no significant effect on students' academic engagement. They attributed this to repetitive design, lack of dynamic feedback, and insufficient alignment between challenge level and learner readiness—highlighting the need for personalized and adaptive gamification strategies.

Beyond technical design, ethical considerations in gamification are increasingly emphasized in literature. Kim and Werbach (2016) identified four major ethical concerns: user exploitation, loss of autonomy, psychological or social harm, and the undermining of moral development.

They argue that gamification must align with justice, transparency, and human dignity, otherwise it risks becoming manipulative or coercive. O'Sullivan et al. (2021), using the ADDIE instructional design model, proposed embedding ethical checkpoints throughout the process. Their questions—drawn from deontological, utilitarian, and virtue ethics—include: "Does this design exclude certain learners unfairly?", "Do users give informed consent?", and "Does the competition induce stress or anxiety?" Klock et al. (2023) also emphasized key ethical principles such as informed consent, privacy, non-addictive design, and user well-being in their umbrella review of gamified education studies.

Razizadeh (2024), taking a philosophical stance, compared two approaches to ethical game design. The first uses pre-defined moral characters (e.g., religious or cultural), while the second exposes players to open-ended moral dilemmas. The latter was deemed more effective, as it fosters ethical reflection through player agency and experiential learning.

Digital management games, in particular, offer a valuable lens for ethical inquiry. Czauderna and Budke (2020) analyzed 17 such games (e.g., SimCity, Democracy, Tropico, Cities: Skylines) and showed that they prompt players to manage complex ethical trade-offs like economic growth vs. environmental sustainability, thus enhancing critical thinking and moral reasoning. In a follow-up study, Czauderna and Budke (2022) interviewed 19 young players and identified three attitudes: educational, dismissive, and balanced. These attitudes were strongly linked to the players' media literacy, the role of facilitators, and how the games were integrated into learning contexts.

3. Methodology

This qualitative, exploratory research aims to develop an ethical framework for integrating gamification into managerial educational game design. In the first phase, data were collected via a focus group consisting of gamification and management education experts, who identified core components and drafted the initial framework. Next, selected games—Risk, Jaliz, Monopoly, Catan, Silk Road, and Twilight Struggle—were analyzed to evaluate the framework's applicability. The games were chosen for their diversity in popularity, pedagogical relevance, and ethical dimensions. Findings from this analysis informed subsequent refinements, resulting in a finalized ethical framework.

4. Analysis framework

reviewing the focus group sessions, the following framework was developed. The components of the ethical framework for analyzing educational games can be described as follows. In this study, to analyze ethics in educational games designed using gamification, the overall relationship of each game with the concept of ethics is first identified. Based on this, three main categories are considered:

1. The game promotes ethics: In this category, the game directly or implicitly reinforces ethical values such as honesty, benevolence, justice, or responsibility. This promotion may manifest through the game's narrative, the design of its mechanics, or its graphical form. Games in this category can serve as complementary tools for teaching ethics within learning environments.
2. The game lacks ethical consideration: These games neither explicitly promote nor violate ethical values. They are typically designed for entertainment or to teach specific skills and occupy a neutral ethical stance. However, even in such games, neglecting ethical aspects can have educational consequences.
3. The game promotes unethical behavior: In this case, the game actively or implicitly undermines or disregards ethical values, for example, by encouraging violence, deception, discrimination, or disrespect for cultural beliefs. Such games may conflict with ethical principles in terms of content, structure, or visuals and can have negative effects on players, especially in educational settings.

After determining the game's relationship with ethics, the degree or level of this relationship is specified. In other words, it becomes clear how and to what extent the game engages with ethical or unethical aspects. These levels are analyzed across three independent yet complementary dimensions:

1. Appearance: This dimension refers to the game's visual aspects, including graphics, visual design, art style, and the overall graphical environment. The form can convey ethical (or unethical) messages and meanings or influence the audience's perception of values.
2. Rules: This dimension examines the game's mechanics and internal rules, such as scoring methods, rewards and penalties, decision-making structures, and interaction algorithms. The rules play a crucial role in instilling ethical or unethical behaviors in players.
3. Content: This dimension focuses on the narrative, dialogues, characters, story situations, and the implicit values within the game.

Content often contains direct or implicit messages about human, social, cultural, or ethical values

For a more detailed analysis, each of the three general categories of the game's relationship with ethics can be further subdivided into deeper levels. This second-level classification represents the intensity or quality of the game's engagement with ethical issues. In games that promote ethics, three levels are identified:

- Valuing the ethical act: The game merely presents ethical concepts as values without necessarily compelling the player to act upon them.
- Encouraging the player to perform ethical acts: Through mechanisms such as points, progression, or narrative, the game motivates the player to engage in ethical behavior.
- Creating a mindset shift toward ethical acts: The game aims to foster an ethical transformation in the player's attitudes or values.

In games that promote unethical behavior, three distinguishable levels are identified:

- Opposition to religious law: The game conflicts with religious principles and beliefs.
- Opposition to social norms: Behaviors or messages in the game promote actions that are inconsistent with accepted societal norms.
- Opposition to cultural values: The game disseminates attitudes that weaken or undermine cultural values and traditions.

These levels, when combined with the three dimensions of "form," "rules," and "content," create a multilayered framework for the ethical analysis of educational games. This framework is presented in Table 1 and has been used as the basis for the qualitative analysis of the selected management games.

Table 1 Ethical Framework for the Application of Gamification and Game Design

Ethics		Category	Form	Rules	Content
Promote ethical values		Values ethical action			
		Encourages ethical behavior			
		Creates a mindset shift toward ethical action			
Ethically Neutral Game		No ethical consideration			
Promotes Unethical Behavior		Opposes religious principles			
		Opposes social norms			
		Opposes social etiquette and cultural values			

5. Discussion

Designing an ethical framework for educational games requires a thorough understanding of the intrinsic features of games, the nature of player interactions, and the behavioral outcomes they produce. Designing an ethical framework for educational games requires a thorough understanding of the intrinsic features of games, the nature of player interactions, and the behavioral outcomes they produce. In this section, with the aim of providing an objective and comparable assessment of the selected management games, each game is analyzed based on key gamification components, the structure of competition or collaboration, the transparency of rules, and potential psychological and cultural implications. These analyses serve as a foundation for evaluating the extent to which each game aligns with ethical values and considerations in educational contexts, and represent a critical step toward validating the proposed ethical framework.

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cultural implications. These analyses serve as a foundation for evaluating the extent to which each game aligns with ethical values and considerations in educational contexts, and represent a critical step toward validating the proposed ethical framework.

6-1. Analysis of Monopoly

The game Monopoly centers on real estate trading, wealth accumulation, and eliminating opponents through economic monopolization. According to the ethical framework proposed in this study, the game falls into the category of "ethically neutral"; however, it implicitly reinforces attitudes such as aggressive competition, individualism, and success defined by the elimination of others. In terms of form, the game employs a classic visual design filled with capitalist symbols, portraying a narrative of financial advancement and economic rivalry. At the level of rules, its core mechanic is based on asset accumulation and opponent elimination, leaving no room for cooperation or generosity. From a content perspective, values such as social justice or empathy are absent, with financial independence and individual dominance taking center stage. Despite these characteristics, Monopoly possesses significant educational potential for teaching economic principles and financial decision-making. However, its use in educational settings should be accompanied by ethical facilitation and critical discussion to ensure that its cultural and social implications are appropriately addressed.

6-2. Analysis of Risk

The game Risk is a strategic, turn-based war game that challenges players to engage in smart planning and decision-making. Each player assumes the role of a global military commander who enters the battlefield with the aim of world domination. Players must use calculated strategies and long-term planning to conquer various territories and defeat competing players. This involves deciding when to attack other territories, how many troops to allocate to each region, and when to defend. Overall, Risk is considered one of the most popular strategic board games due to its simple rules yet deep tactical complexity.

6-3. Analysis of Catan

The game Catan is a strategic and management-oriented game that focuses on resource development, construction, and social interaction. According to the three-layered ethical framework of this study, Catan is classified as a "promoter of ethics" because it reinforces values such as cooperation, negotiation, collective planning, and gradual development, thereby fostering ethical attitudes among players. At the second level of analysis,

the game falls under the category of "encouraging ethical behavior," as success in the game is achieved not merely through competition, but through constructive interaction, fair resource exchange, and participatory decision-making. In terms of form, the game's calm visual design, soft color palette, and natural setting convey a sense of balance and creativity. At the level of rules, the structure based on resource exchange, fairness in development, and mutually beneficial interactions enables competition within a cooperative framework. From a content perspective, the game lacks a specific narrative storyline, yet values such as coexistence, collective growth, and conflict management are implicitly reinforced through gameplay. Overall, Catan can be considered a successful example of a management game that, by fostering an interactive and ethically grounded environment, holds strong potential for educational use in social development and ethical skill-building.

6-4. Analysis of Jaliz

The game Jaliz is a competitive card game centered on planting, harvesting, and trading agricultural products. According to the ethical framework of this study, the game is classified as "ethically neutral" since it does not explicitly aim to teach or promote ethical concepts. However, certain structural features of the game may encourage the emergence of either positive or negative ethical behaviors. At the second level of analysis, the game has the potential to reinforce values such as cooperation, honesty in trade, and social interaction—values that, when guided through appropriate educational facilitation, can align with principles like mutual support and collective fairness. Therefore, this game can be analyzed as occupying a borderline position between "ethically neutral" and "promoter of ethics." In terms of form, its simple design and cartoon-style graphics convey a sense of balance and liveliness. At the rules level, the game focuses on bargaining and free trade, allowing players to choose between cooperation and deception. In terms of content, although there is no explicit ethical narrative, the game provides opportunities for developing social skills, honesty in interaction, and awareness of the ethical consequences of one's choices. Overall, Jaliz has the potential to serve as an educational tool in behavioral and social skill development, particularly when accompanied by instructor intervention and emphasis on ethical conduct.

6-5. Analysis of Twilight

The game Twilight is a two-player card game based on the foreign game Hierarchy, in which players compete for the throne. According to the

three-layered ethical framework of this study, the game is categorized as "ethically neutral," as it does not explicitly aim to teach or promote ethical concepts. However, certain structural features may facilitate the development of either positive or negative ethical behaviors. At the second level of analysis, the game has the potential to strengthen concepts such as fair competition, strategic thinking, and logical decision-making—values that, when appropriately guided through educational facilitation, can align with principles such as cooperation and collective justice. Thus, the game may be positioned at the intersection between "ethically neutral" and "promoter of ethics." In terms of form, the game's simple design and cartoon-style graphics convey a sense of balance and dynamism. At the level of rules, the gameplay focuses on the strategic arrangement of cards and the use of unique card abilities, encouraging players to engage in logical thinking and planning. From a content perspective, although the game lacks a defined ethical narrative, it offers opportunities for developing decision-making skills, anticipating opponent moves, and understanding the consequences of choices. Overall, *Twilight* has the potential to serve as an educational tool for strategic and behavioral skills development, particularly when accompanied by instructor guidance and emphasis on ethical interaction.

7. Conclusion

The present study aimed to develop an ethical framework for the application of gamification in the design of educational management games. To this end, a three-layered framework was constructed based on analysis of selected management games and expert consultation. In this framework, games are evaluated across three design dimensions (form, rules, and content) and classified into one of three general ethical categories: "promoter of ethics," "ethically neutral," or "promoter of unethical behavior." Using this framework, five selected management games (*Monopoly*, *Risk*, *Catan*, *Jaliz*, and *Twilight*) were analyzed, and the ethical status of each was identified. The analysis revealed that most of these games do not present issues in terms of religious or legal principles and can be appropriately used in educational contexts. However, certain aspects related to social values and player interaction require supervision and intentional guidance to prevent behaviors misaligned with cultural norms. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of ethical considerations in the gamification process. The proposed ethical framework of this study can serve as a valuable tool for the future design of educational games, guiding designers to incorporate ethical principles into the form, rules, and content of their games, thereby

enhancing the alignment of such games with the moral and cultural values of society.

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