In this course we will seek an understanding of morality as it applies to media entertainment. To move toward that goal, we will explore debates about morality within philosophy and psychology and we will examine research on media entertainment that speaks to this issue. Our approach will largely be social scientific, with a grounding in moral psychology, although we will also examine humanistic and cultural approaches to moral philosophy. We will weave through these debates with a focus on argumentation, developing sound conclusions based on solid evidence. We will attempt to answer questions that people have been trying to answer (largely unsuccessfully) for centuries. We may not completely resolve these mysteries in one semester, but we will all learn a great deal in the process.

Why this topic? Why now? Consideration of morality has long been a crucial part of entertainment. The core struggle between “good” and “evil” has been the basis of nearly every major dramatic work since entertainment came into being. Recent media offerings have put a twist on this relationship, however. The rise in popularity of morally ambiguous protagonists (Dexter, Walter White, Don Draper, etc.), and video games with explicit moral choice (Fallout 3, Bioshock, Mass Effect, Dishonored, etc.) have caused scholars and popular critics alike to question the role of morality in our entertainment experiences. This has resulted in revisiting popular theories of morality, not just in an entertainment context, but in a human context. This area of research has grown dramatically in the last few years, leading to intriguing new evidence and inspiring several interesting debates. We will be able to dive deeply into these arguments during the course of the seminar, hopefully leading to not only a much greater understanding of morality, but also to a new set of unanswered questions to consider.

*Obtain permission from TEL department honors advisor.*