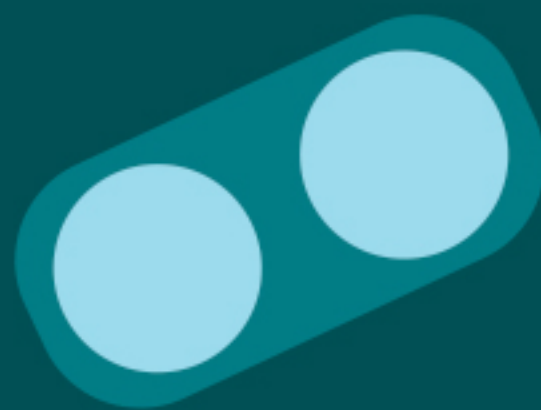


VOLUME 1

# TEACHING THE GAME

A COLLECTION OF SYLLABI FOR GAME DESIGN,  
DEVELOPMENT, AND IMPLEMENTATION



EDITED BY

*Richard E. Ferdig, Emily Baumgartner, & Enrico Gandolfi*

## Teaching the Game



# TEACHING THE GAME

*A collection of syllabi for game design, development, and implementation, Vol.  
1*

RICHARD E. FERDIG, EMILY BAUMGARTNER, & ENRICO GANDOLFI

**Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press**

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“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

*(Philippians 2:3-4; NIV)*



## FOREWORD

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This collection represents a maturing discipline and the culture that brought post-secondary games education from the backrooms and basements of academic institutions to the frontispiece of internationally recognized programs. Collections such as these are a reminder of the strength of the collaborative, earnest, and cooperative character of game academics. It is this history in game-focused education that helped establish the legitimacy of such work in sometimes adversarial and skeptical environments.

The work enclosed here is evidence of a community that aims to support quality education by fostering an open and transparent community of pedagogic discourse. These syllabi not only reflect the instructional goals of their authors, but they are also informed by the perpetual post-mortem of being an effective educator. They are the product of successful and unsuccessful experiments in improving student outcomes, addressing learning objectives, and working within the set of constraints common to all education. They are outlines of lessons learned to meet the common goal of providing a game-focused education.

They also demonstrate the many foci of a complete ludic education. What is shown here is variety. A variety of disciplinary practices, a variety of institutions, and a variety of ways to help students examine the characteristics that makes games engaging, meaningful, and socially relevant media. From assessment tools to rubrics, and timelines to philosophies, the diversity here is evidence of a thriving community strengthened by entangling disciplines.

For those who helped create the first generation of games degree programs, this is the collection we needed. Before such a collection, administrators, lead faculty, and committees effectively scrounged for such resources, tapping their network to understand what had been done. This collection simplifies that task by offering a single resource, much wider and more inclusive than those supported by traditional peer networks and organic web searches. It is a much-needed resource for any kind of starting – a new course, a new program, or a new take on a topic that educators know well.

It is also a reminder that there is no one right way to teach games. Instead, like all interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work, there are a variety of solutions to help move the entire practice forward. It is a collection not unlike what those of us who have created game programs start with – a collection of syllabi from a wide-ranging faculty. This treasure trove is collected in a way that reduces redundancy and supports a wide view.

This collection is also important as educators consider the evolving space of media literacy and global engagement. There are countless ways to interpret the study of games. When educators move

away from the practice of teaching it the way they were taught, they often have an opportunity to improve the instructional value of their course. Having access to other syllabi facilitates a wider view of pedagogic solutions, references, assignments, resources, and teaching philosophies. While many early-generation faculty teaching games did not have this resource, its contents support both experienced and inexperienced faculty. It provides heuristics from the field. In this case, the field is the classroom.

In these pages, foci vary from recognizing games as media artifacts or as technical experiments to commercial, artistic, or pragmatic products. There is study of the economics, history, operations, and more in the context of games. The breadth of study in itself serves as heuristic on how games act as both case study for a variety of disciplines and how the ludic pervades so much of life. Unsurprisingly, there are faculty using the canon of commercial games, while others aim for global, independent, and artistic intersections. Some focus on the technological, others on media or aesthetics. Ultimately, the mere aggregation of this knowledge lends perspective to the many approaches to teaching games.

While this collection offers obvious practical resource in demonstrating how people educate others on games, it also serves as a snapshot of a time and space for games pedagogy. While in the short term it is useful to consider how such syllabi might support educator needs, it is also a tool for understanding what needed to be taught in the contemporary. For this reason, it remains a long-term resource. It provides evidence of that which needed to be taught when it was taught. That evidence is useful in capturing the shifts apparent in wider education. Where once there were collegiate courses to introduce the web, eventually the Internet's pervasiveness and technological simplicity rendered different needs for such courses. There is a chance that some of what is listed here will become so fundamental to the experience of all learners, it will not warrant a college level course. What will be left instead is an archive like this, that helps map how education itself changed over time.

Ultimately the health of any environment, whether academic or natural, is in its ability to thrive. Where those less informed about games education might perceive a monoculture, the syllabi collected here offer evidence of a much healthier community. Resting in these pages is humanist pedagogy among technology, media studies mingled with education, narrative alongside ethics. It is evidence of a community that is thriving in its diversity of subject and resources. As academic environments shift, this diversity of focus helps insulate games education from the disruption that could prove detrimental to less diverse topics.

Readers are invited to not only review the contents of this book as an encyclopedic reference, but also as an artifact. As a way of seeing more globally the ways in which games, broadly, are taught. In so doing, readers' pedagogical approaches may broaden or even be inspired in entirely new directions. At the least, reading through the resources presented here gives an opportunity to peek into another instructor's classroom, learn what they are doing, and help the community grow through a kind of informal, asynchronous class visit.

Reading such a collection comes with a responsibility. Readers are encouraged to continue to contribute to the practice in an equally generous way. Just as this collection provides evidence of a collaborative, earnest, and cooperative character in game academics, it also calls forth the reader to continue that tradition.

Games, for all their social pervasiveness and potential, are not always educationally accessible to many communities. The momentum of games education has been its hallmark for decades. As educators examine this collection and use it in their own planning it seems a self-evident responsibility to continue that commitment. The practice and strength of the community grows not from the darkness of obscuring our work behind closed doors, but instead by generously sharing it widely, freely, and with the light available to all.

Just as the contributors and editors have given you this valuable resource to support the strength of games education, you are invited to continue contributing, collaborating, and working to make the opaque more transparent. Give light to academic rhizomes as they rise and leave space for them to grow in full support of our shared strength.

Lindsay D. Grace  
Knight Chair in Interactive Media, University of Miami  
Vice President, Higher Education Video Game Alliance

## PREFACE

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### INTRODUCTION

Academics are taught about the importance of standing on the shoulders of giants (Merton, 1993). We are trained to ground our efforts in the theoretical and empirical work of others. However, we are not always shown how to play nice with others. For instance, we are not always taught to share, nor are we necessarily taught how to share.

We are not just referring to college or university rivalries. This can even happen within programs. A good example is our teaching materials. Universities often own course numbers, course titles, and the *basic data sheets*—the forms that go through curriculum committees listing basic objectives and outcomes. But faculty are given the freedom to meet those objectives—and to develop their syllabus—in whatever way they choose. As such, faculty might be assigned to a course and given nothing to begin with—or simply given a very basic syllabus to develop a course and teach from.

There are several challenges in such an approach, particularly as it relates to games and gaming. First, even if faculty do share syllabi, the (normally) basic documents do not act as rich and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of actual practice. Faculty are not necessarily given examples of best products or practices from previous iterations. They are not always instructed in successes in engaging students or course ideas that could have succeeded with more work.

We are not suggesting sharing never happens. As a matter of fact, most of us have been part of teaching assignments where other faculty gave us pointers and even product materials to teach from. Rather, we are suggesting that this is not always the norm, particularly when it comes to course materials.

A second problem is that the field of gaming and game studies is naturally interdisciplinary. A student could often take one of several gaming courses at a college or university just by looking across departments in communication, education, health, business, computer science, etc. However, conversations about gaming within those courses are not necessarily interdisciplinary. Yet students graduate and go into fields where they are expected to engage with those who share different perspectives on—and experiences with—gaming. Faculty may not know how to connect across disciplines to help prepare their students for such endeavors.

The good news from academia is that collaborative and interdisciplinary practices and processes are changing. For instance, many colleges and universities are now freely and openly sharing their syllabi and their course materials online (e.g., <https://ocw.mit.edu/>). Learners around the world can

take classes for free through massive open online courses (MOOCs; Nigh, Pytash, Ferdig, & Merchant, 2015). And open access journals have grown in popularity (Solomon, Laakso, & Björk, 2013). There is even an open access journal dedicated to the sharing of syllabi called *Syllabus* (<http://www.syllabusjournal.org/>).

Collaboration continues to grow in gaming, too. This refers, for instance, to collaborative play in the form of massive multiplayer online (MMO) games like *Guild Wars 2* (<https://www.guildwars2.com/>), *Fortnite* (<https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/home>), and *Genshin Impact* (<https://genshin.mihoyo.com/>). This collaboration can be for fun or for competition through K-12 or postsecondary eSports in games like *League of Legends* (<https://www.leagueoflegends.com/>) and *Rocket League* (<https://www.rocketleague.com/>).

It also refers to collaboration through open access tools for creating gaming experiences like *Unity* (<https://unity.com/>), *Unreal Engine* (<https://www.unrealengine.com/>), *Ogre* (<https://www.ogre3d.org/>), and *Scratch* (<https://scratch.mit.edu/>). Collaboration can refer to how we share our games through social avenues like streaming on *Twitch* (<https://twitch.tv>) and chat and audio channels on *Discor* (<https://discord.com/>). Through game streaming or game podcasts, thousands of people interact as professionals and novices play or/or talk about their play.

Finally, collaboration and open access refers to how we talk and write about games and gaming. We collaborate through mailing lists (e.g., *Gamesnetwork*; <https://lists.tuni.fi/mailman/listinfo/gamesnetwork>). We collaborate with and through open access journals (e.g., *Well Played*; <http://press.etc.cmu.edu/index.php/publication-tag/well-played/>). For instance, Jennifer deWinter and Carly A. Kocurek guest edited a special issue of *Syllabus* on teaching with games (deWinter & Kocurek, 2015). And there are open access books that showcase research and information about games such as Kat Schrier's (2014; 2016; 2019) series on *Learning, Education & Games*. In short, gaming is collaborative. This book is an effort to honor that collaboration by supporting academic efforts to strengthen teaching in our collective and collaborative fields.

## WHY THIS BOOK?

We wrote this book to help game instructors prepare better and more comprehensive courses. There were several other intended goals. First, we believed that creating this book would provide an opportunity to see the current state of gaming instruction at various places throughout the world. Second, we hoped it would strengthen all of us individually as instructors, and in doing so, would strengthen the field. A third proposed outcome was that we would be able to improve the interdisciplinary nature of game instruction. In doing so, we would be able to help students look across what researchers, teachers, and developers do in other fields.

Last, but not least, in these chapters you will see examples of what students are being asked to reflect on and create. Many of these chapters include links to templates or exemplar student materials. It is one thing to read about what a course entails but another to see what the students can produce from the instruction. While not all chapters have included student work, there are some fantastic examples throughout the book.

## THE GENERAL OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Ask to see syllabi from 20 different instructors, and you will typically see 20 different formats. They will, for the most part, contain similar themes or headers; however, they will often look incredibly different. We as individual instructors even have different formats and templates for different audiences or different formats of instruction (e.g., medium or time). The challenge for us as editors was to improve readability, so that someone could easily compare and contrast across courses. As such, we gave authors a template to follow, ensuring readability and encouraging everyone to include comparable content.

It is worth clearly stating that there are certain components of syllabi that are either required or encouraged by every institution. These include, but are not limited to sections on academic integrity, plagiarism, Title IX information, and support for students with disabilities. **We need to state clearly that these are important pieces of information that should be required for every syllabus.** (We would even add additional sections related to students seeking counseling or needing extra support.) However, we did not ask authors to include this information in their individual chapters for space reasons. While critical to student success, many statements like these are standardized and read similarly between colleges and universities. We asked authors to focus instead on the gaming aspects of their curriculum and syllabi.

We added some additional conversational sections such as the Course Best Practices and Future Course Plans sections. These sections are important as the authors can communicate what they have learned from teaching their course and how you could potentially implement some of their ideas into your own course. Many of the chapters also include direct links to online materials that instructors use in their course. Some have even included links to *Google Drive* materials they have created for their courses.

We asked authors to use the following template:

- **Front Material**

- Author Information – Authors were asked to include their names, emails, affiliations, and a brief bio to support collaboration and communication.
- Chapter Title – The title includes the name of the course the author teaches including their course number. Note that course numbers vary across different universities.
- Course University; College/School; Department/Program – This section includes information about where this course is taught and what department and school it is part of.
- Course Level – The level will signify if the course is intended for graduate, undergraduate, or both.
- Course Length – This section indicates the length of time this course is taught such as one semester, full-year, module, or others. Note that this book includes chapters from across the world, so a typical semester may be different in other countries.
- Course Medium – The course medium indicates whether the course is taught face-to-face, online, or a hybrid of both. We also told authors they can talk about what they did

during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many in-person courses transitioned fully online.

- **Course Keywords** – We told authors to include 7-10 keywords that describe their course of their choosing.
- **Catalog Description** (~125-250 words). This section is the catalog description that the students see in their university course catalog. While some courses in this book may be in the process of redesign, some of these may not be official.
- **Course Purpose and Objectives** (~250-750 words). This section includes the overall mission or purpose of the course. We told authors to include their large course goals in this section, and the individual weekly goals later in the course outline below.
- **Course Context** (~100-500 words). This section is for the authors to explain what the course is for, meaning, if it is included as part of a program, as an elective, for a certificate, or many other possibilities. We also told authors to include what types of students typically the course and what experience with gaming they have prior to attending, as these variabilities can impact how the course is taught.
- **Course Pedagogy** (~250-500 words). Authors were given the opportunity to describe their own pedagogical beliefs that set the stage for creating and teaching this course. The authors were able to describe the techniques they use and some insight to what format they teach their courses in. Some opted to include how their pedagogy changed during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, as many had to rapidly adapt their course for teaching online.
- **Course Texts, Games, Software, and Hardware** (~200-500 words). This section included any required textbooks, software, and hardware that students are required to obtain for their course. Many authors included links to the games they utilize, many of which are free.
- **Course Assignments** (~500-1500 words). This section included the course's major assignments. This section was to generalize the major assignments during the course, not necessarily each week's individual readings and activities. Instead, those are found below in the Expanded Course Outline section.
- **Course Assessment** (potential bulleted list) – We told authors to list their assessment types, grades, and weights with a final total. This will not include the grading scale, but rather how the instructors calculate a student's final grade.
- **Expanded Course Outline** – This section is the bulk of each chapter. Authors were told to include weekly activities, assignments, readings, and topics. There are also many links to outside materials that you may utilize in your own course.
- **Course Best Practices** – (~250-1000 words). We asked the authors to list their tips and tricks that they recommend based on their experiences teaching the course. Some chapters discuss what worked and what did not in the past. Additionally, we suggested to authors to include examples of products that students have created in the course.
- **Future Course Plans** (~250-1000 words). This section allowed the authors to discuss what their future ideas were for their course. Some chapters included what technologies they are interested in trying in the future, while others discussed what they are hoping to improve based upon student feedback.

- **References** – We encouraged authors to include any materials that would allow readers to immediately implement the author’s work into their own courses. This section also includes readings that were required for students.

## THE SECTIONS OF THE BOOK

When preliminarily discussing the focus of this book, we wanted to look specifically at courses about video games. While gamification of teaching methods is important and effective, we instead wanted to focus on courses that are about video games, about designing video games, and include video games in their curriculum. You will see many disciplines through the book, and they are categorized into these five sections:

1. **Business, Health, and Humanities.** This section encompasses courses in the business disciplines that focus on the business side of the video game industry. Additionally, this includes history, music, and ethics of video games.
2. **Communication and Media Studies.** The Communication and Media Studies section includes chapters from communications, storytelling, writing, and theory.
3. **Computer Science.** This section encompasses courses where students are programming games
4. **Education.** The Education section includes courses regarding game-based learning and games for learning
5. **Game Design and Development.** The Game Design and Development section includes both intro-level courses and advanced for game design.

## ITEMS TO CONSIDER

Readers who scan across chapters will be able to see themes emerging. We encourage this cross-chapter examination to continue to push our thinking in the field. To support such an exploration, we would recommend several items for readers to consider. Listed below are topics and then questions to consider.

- While the disciplines covered in this book vary, many courses implemented free games into their curriculum. What are the advantages of using free vs. commercial games? How do instructors best support students without knowing what consoles or playing devices they have access to?
- Some instructors chose to gamify their gaming course. This included points, scores, and levels. Is this a best practice that should be considered for all gaming courses?
- This book is a collection of syllabi across disciplines and content areas. That does not mean, however, that the chapters themselves contain interdisciplinary content. There were examples of domain specificity within the courses. What do we need to do in order to facilitate more interdisciplinary engagement within courses?
- There were some great examples of cutting-edge gaming interests within the book. Other areas, however, were not addressed. For instance, there was very little discussion about eSports; there were no syllabi related to eSports classes. There were no classes on gaming accessibility. There were very few classes describing the role of *eXtended Reality (XR)*, *Virtual*



*Reality* (VR), or *Augmented Reality* (AR) in gaming. The likely answer is that those courses exist, but no authors of such content contributed to this book. However, what do we all need to do as a field to make sure certain topics like accessibility are addressed in all courses? How do we ensure that all courses are updated to reflect new practices in our fields?

- Innovative technologies used for pedagogical purposes often focus on the consumption of that product. In other words, classes about gaming often show games being played. There are obvious exceptions in this book where the focus of the class is game development. But what is the balance between teaching students to consume vs. produce games, particularly in non-game-development courses?
- One of the biggest trends in gaming recently has been the role of gaming communities through platforms like *Twitch* (<https://www.twitch.tv/>) and *Discord* (<https://discord.com/>). What is the role of coursework in introducing these tools as well as using these tools as part of pedagogical practice?

These are just some of the questions we hope readers will consider.

## CONCLUSION AND GETTING INVOLVED

We hope this book continues great conversations about gaming across many fields. We also hope that the content provided by so many great authors improves course instruction around the world. On behalf of the authors, we would like to request three things.

1. If you use materials from a chapter, please reference the chapter. The authors have provided this work in an open access format to help us all. Please give credit where credit is due.
2. Consider starting a conversation with the author, letting them know what you have used and how it worked. This will benefit the reader and author.
3. We hope this is just one of many iterations of the book. If you are reading this and have a chapter to propose, please contact us so that this syllabi work can be a living and breathing project.

Respectfully,

**Richard E. Ferdig**, *Summit Professor of Learning Technologies, Research Center for Educational Technology, Kent State University, USA*

**Emily Baumgartner**, *Assistant Professor of Technology, Ohio Northern University, USA*

**Enrico Gandolfi**, *Assistant Professor of Educational Technology, Kent State University, USA*

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We would like to thank the authors for being willing to be a part of this book. Their excitement for being able to share their course materials, their enthusiasm for the end product, and their suggestions for various components to strengthen book all contributed to our joy in being able to put this book together.

As you read these pages and focus on their teaching, we hope that you are encouraged in two ways. First, we hope that you are inspired to be reflective of your own practice. Second, we hope that you are inspired to make your classes even better given the great resources provided by the authors.

We also want to thank ETC Press for their willingness to partner on this work. Drew Davidson and Brad King always seem to be on the forefront of innovation in publishing. We appreciate their trust in putting this volume together and for connecting us with both potential authors and our foreword contributor, Lindsay Grace. We share our gratitude to Lindsay for taking time to write the foreword.

In closing, we wish to thank our families for their encouragement of our professional efforts and the time they gave up with us so that we could finish this book.

PART I.

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**BUSINESS, HEALTH, AND HUMANITIES**

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## CHAPTER 1.

### PLAY AND SOCIETY (CTK 359/460.1)

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SERCAN ŞENGÜN<sup>1</sup>  
ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

**Course Title:** Creative Technologies (CTK) 359/460.1: Play and Society

**Course University:** Illinois State University

**Course College/School:** Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts / Wonsook Kim School of Art

**Course Department/Program:** Creative Technologies Program

**Course Level:** The course is offered both on undergraduate (359) and graduate (460.1) levels

**Course Credits:** 3

**Course Length:** 16-weeks

**Course Medium:** The course has been taught both in face-to-face and blended/hybrid formats

**Course Keywords:** play, culture, gender, identity, simulation, history, media, expression, social, learning

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

*Play and Society* provides an historical and cultural perspective on play, playfulness, lusory attitude, games, and other forms of mediated playful cultures. The course examines the present state and future directions of paper, card, and board games; physical games; simulations and interactive art; performative, public, and expressive playfulness; and video games and esports. Students imagine playful artifacts, products, and games for the purposes of cultural communication, art, activism, learning, and societal impact, as well as creating text- or video-based analyses and critique to disseminate through publications, communities, or social media channels.

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

*Play and Society* builds on 13 themes (play as culture, play as values, play as spectacle, play as gender, play as identity, play as a simulation of history, play as a historical artifact, play as media, play as art,

1. Sercan Şengün, Ph.D. (ssengun@ilstu.edu) is a researcher, teacher, and game designer, exploring phenomena at the intersections of video game studies, gamer communities, cultural informatics, virtual identities, and interactive narratives. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Creative Technologies (Game Design) at Illinois State University. In the past, he conducted research as a part of MIT CSAIL (Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory), MIT ICE Lab (Imagination, Computation, and Expression Laboratory), and Hamad Bin Khalifa University's QCRI (Qatar Computing Research Institute), and taught graduate and undergraduate game design courses at Northeastern University, Bahcesehir University, and Istanbul Bilgi University.

play as expression, play as serious impact, play as a social construct, and play as learning) discussed around three main goals:

- Defining playfulness, lusus attitude, playing, gaming, and game design as a form of cultural activity and production
- Mapping the relationship of play and games to communities, cultures, and societies
- Understanding playful design affordances and media conventions, their histories and origins, as well as a future imagining of play and games in art, technology, activism, and social impact

This course approaches games as phenomena informed by the social, cultural, and political milieu of their time. Accordingly, apart from analyzing the medium itself, equal weight of discussion is reserved to developers and designers who produce them, the players who play them, and the fanbases that create products around them. As outcomes of this course, the students are expected to:

- Identify, describe, and analyze a broad array of games and playful experiences, as well as artifacts and cultures around them across times and media
- Understand the contemporary issues around games and gaming, and identify the origins of such issues through conventions and traditions
- Apply social, cultural, political, and philosophical theories and perspectives to many forms of playful productions

## COURSE CONTEXT

*Play and Society* is a 3-credits elective course offered as a part of the Creative Technologies' Interdisciplinary Technologies and Game Design majors (B.A. or B.S. degrees), Game Design minor, as well as the Creative Technologies Masters (M.S. degree) program. Creative Technologies programs attract students who are interested in careers in digital and interactive media production including: game design and development; web development; video production; sound design for live performance, broadcast, and multimedia; digital music composition and production; VR and XR; and emerging, computational, and interdisciplinary arts. Within the Game Design major and minor, this class is typically taken by sophomores or juniors. The undergrad version hosts a maximum of 20 students and the graduate version hosts a maximum of 10 students. The class content stays essentially the same between undergrad and graduate versions, however, the undergrad version might seek less rigor in the research assignment component. The graduate version also accepts larger scale research articles as final projects. Since graduate students typically bring more technical skills with them to the class, video essay assignments can end up being post-produced better. In contrast, for undergrad students, screencasts of screen presentations (e.g., PowerPoint) become acceptable. Although this is designed as a face-to-face course, it was taught online during the COVID-pandemic without any major overhauls. The online version included some additional virtual class activities to include all students in the discussions which is less of a problem in a physical class. Some of these activities included breakout sessions during which smaller student groups discuss a specific material (e.g., reading, game, etc.) and then present it to the class when the breakout sessions are joined. The online version also relies more heavily on Discord for completing discussions that are kicked off during virtual sessions.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

*Play and Society* is designed around student- and instructor-led in- and out-of-class discussions. The content is divided into 13 comprehensible themes with each theme focusing on 2-3 discussion questions and/or talking points (Conner-Greene, 2005). Providing these questions upfront helps the students to experience the materials (readings, videos, and games) with the discussions in mind and acts as anticipation guides (Readance *et al.*, 1989). Each week is divided into two sittings: an experiential kickoff and a formative feedback session (Shute, 2007). In the experiential kickoff session, the lecture begins with the facilitator student(s) introducing the theme by summarizing the materials and defining the highlights within them. The students discuss the materials among themselves, hold a “mind dump” session (Nilson, 2010), may make time to collaboratively read/watch some of the materials in-class, and use the rest of the time to cooperatively play a selected game from the suggestions. Between the two sessions, the students continue their discussions online and play rest of the selected games. The out-of-class (online) discussions are also facilitated by selected students for each theme. Finally, in the formative feedback session, the instructor leads the in-class discussions around the weekly questions/talking points while giving feedback on the answers and reflections provided by the students throughout the week.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

The course is based on a selection of individual readings and videos, which are shared with students weekly. The course schedule describes when each material must be read or watched.

### Required:

- **Technology:** The class uses Discord for day-to-day questions and communication. Discord is available as a mobile, computer, or browser app.
- **Technology:** Some class activities (such as game play) are hands-on and may occasionally need a laptop. It is always recommended for students to bring their laptop to the class. When/if they are working on a digital project, it is the team’s responsibility to provide its own computer hardware to develop and present their project.

### Suggested:

- Students should check the school’s library to learn more about how to access articles, databases, books, eBooks, and for a list of recommended publications. They can reach out to the librarian to ask for help on their research activities.
- **Reading:** “Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture” by J. Huizinga
- **Reading:** “Birth of the Chess Queen” by Marilyn Yalom
- **Reading:** “The Video Game Theory Reader” by Mia Consalvo
- **Reading:** “The Video Game Theory Reader 2” by Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf

### Game play:

- The course requires physical and digital games to be played in- and out-of-class. The physical games (board, card, dice, etc.) should be available in-class or to borrow. The digital games are



chosen from free games or demos when possible. However, in case of them not being free, in the interest of keeping the required monetary resources acceptable, students can choose to just watch multiple playthroughs of the digital games instead of a purchase or arrange to drop by the office hours to play them.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

There are 4 assignments for this course, as well as an expectancy to join the forum/Discord discussions for each theme.

- **Theme Facilitation (Individual Assignment):** Each student (or a small team of students depending on the class population) will select one of the weekly themes to facilitate. Facilitations will be done through the class forums and during the lectures. As the facilitator of the week, the student(s) will start a post on the forums for the weekly theme. The post will include: some important bullet points from the readings of the week, an additional reading and/or video essay about the theme, a selected short list of games about the theme, and some additional cues/questions for discussion. It will also be the job of the facilitators to follow the discussions on the forums and post responses. The facilitators will also be given time during the lecture to provide a verbal introduction to weekly materials.
- **Research Project (Individual Assignment):** This class will have research assignments that run throughout the semester with multiple deliverables. The details of the assignment are determined depending on the current grants and projects of the instructor. Participation in the research projects might entail data gathering, data analysis, writing results, background research, etc. depending on the student's interests and skills.
- **Video Essay Project (Group Assignment):** In this assignment, the students are expected to work alone or in groups to create a video essay to be uploaded to ISU Creative Technologies' YouTube channel. The final videos should be between 5-15 minutes. Before starting any post-production, the teams need to submit their script to be approved by the instructor. The students need to be mindful of intellectual properties while choosing visuals, recording game play footage, selecting sounds & music, etc. Although YouTube can auto-caption the videos, supplying proper subtitles is encouraged. The references can be included at the end of the video or inside the video text description.
- **Design & Production Project (Group Assignment):** As the final assignment of the class, the students are going to bring their work and learnings together to create ideas and projects about how playfulness, games, and lusory attitude can be mobilized for the purposes of cultural communication, art, activism, and/or societal impact. Then, they will collaborate on planning, executing, and working toward creating a (group of) work that is large and interdisciplinary enough to be presented/performed/published/exhibited in some sort of public venue. Creative Technologies' annual Games Showcase is a natural fit for some of these projects. The graduate version of the class also accepts larger scale research articles as final projects.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

- **Theme Facilitation (10%):** This is an individual assignment and the themes are distributed

during the first week.

- **Participation (15%):** This is an individual assessment and includes your participation in weekly forums and Discord discussions.
- **Research Project (25%):** This is an individual assignment and its distributed as small deliverables throughout the semester.
- **Video Essay Project (25%):** This is a group assignment and will be completed between weeks 3 and 8.
- **Design & Production Project (25%):** This is a group assignment and will be completed between weeks 10 and 16.
- **Total (100%)**

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

Each week is taught in two sessions of 75 minutes, typically on separate days. However, the syllabus can also work with longer class times by allocating the time into two slots. Except the first and final two weeks, each week/theme is assigned to a single student or a group of students for facilitation. The facilitator(s) kick off the week by introducing the discussion questions and materials such as readings, videos, and games for the week. In the first part of the class, students discuss the research questions and materials in one large group (see the Course Pedagogy section). In the second part of the class, the instructor brings the discussed points together and adds a lecture/presentation covering the points that were already highlighted by students or that were not brought up at all. The students use the Discord app to continue communication between the two sessions and may share additional materials with each other such as games, web articles, videos, etc. Depending on the depth of discussions each week, the instructor can choose to facilitate gameplay either in the first or the second part of the class. For busy weeks, the gameplay might be assigned for out-of-class time. If a given game is not free, instead of a purchase, the student can watch a playthrough from YouTube, Twitch, etc. or visit the office hours to borrow a copy.

### Week 1: Course Introduction

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Introduction to the syllabus
- Class introductions
- **Discussion questions:**
  - What is play? What does “play predates culture” mean?
  - Why do we play?
  - What is a game? What is the difference between “playing” and “playing a game”?

#### *Assignments*

- **Interact:** Students meet each other in class, but use Discord outside of class to further introduce themselves

- **Read:** The first 7 paragraphs of (pp. 1-4) “Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture” by J. Huizinga
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week’s discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 2: Play as Culture

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - Can we preserve and/or remember a culture through gaming?
  - Which cultures have the power to produce games?
  - Why does it matter that different cultures create games based on their cultural identities, stories, aesthetics, etc.?
- **Game play:**
  - *Never Alone* (Upper One Games), <http://neveralonegame.com/>
  - *The Great Palermo* (We Are Muesli), <https://www.weare muesli.it/palermo>
  - *The Cat and The Coup* (Kurosh ValaNejad), <https://www.thecatandthecoup.com/>

### Assignments

- **Read:** “The Game Industry of Iran” by Yara Elmjouie, Polygon.com
- **Read:** “African video game makers are breaking into the global industry with their own stories” by Abdi Latif Dahir, QZ.com
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week’s discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 3: Play as Values

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - How can games have values?
  - Are (video) games better at changing people’s values than other media (such as books, movies, music, etc.)?
  - When designers are making games, how conscious are they about their design choices constructing values?
- **Game play:**
  - *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope), <https://dukope.com/>
  - *Break the Glass Ceiling* (Flynn Geraghty), <https://isuctkgame.itch.io/break-the-glass-ceiling>

## Assignments

- **Read:** “The Video Games That Made People Question Their Beliefs” by Gita Jackson, Kotaku.com
- **Read:** “How RimWorld’s Code Defines Strict Gender Roles” by Claudia Lo, Rockpapershotgun.com
- **Watch:** “The Last Guardian and the Language of Games” by Game Maker’s Toolkit, YouTube
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week’s discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 4: Play as Spectacle

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - Do games need to be visual, aural, or action-based spectacles? Spectacles are made to be watched, admired, felt wonder toward, and got excited about. Is that still pervasive in the way we understand games?
  - Why do we like watching games rather than playing them? This is more understandable for, say, sports and historic gladiator games. But, how about e-sports, Twitch, YouTube, etc.?
  - Is there a bias against games that are not perceived as spectacles; where does that come from? Does that affect the way the industry is making games?
- **Game play:**
  - *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company), <https://gonehome.game/>
  - *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo* (Michael Lutz), <https://ztul.itch.io/the-uncle-who-works-for-nintendo>
  - *Fall Guys* (Mediatonic), <https://www.mediatonicgames.com/game/fall-guys>

## Assignments

- **Read:** “Ludic Voyeurism and Passive Spectatorship in *Gone Home* and Other ‘Walking Simulators’” by Sercan Şengün, VGA Gallery, [videogameartgallery.com](http://videogameartgallery.com)
- **Read:** “Let’s NOT Play: why do we watch others play games?” by Andy Hartup, [Gamesradar.com](http://Gamesradar.com)
- **Read:** “The pandemic will change how we watch sports” by Will Douglas Heaven, MIT Technology Review
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week’s discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 5: Play as Gender

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**

- Is play gendered? Do boys really prefer to play with soldiers and trucks while girls like to play with dolls and model houses? Or is that a learned taste that the society and toy/play industry constructed? Following this logic do female gamers inherently like games with less action and violence (as opposed to male gamers)?
- Are the representations of female avatars, heroes, characters, etc. poorer than their male counterparts in games?
- Is the game industry dominantly male? Do the developers' views on gender roles affect their games?

- **Game play:** (for this week's games: play to the extent that you feel comfortable with)

- *One Night, Hot Springs* (NPCKC), <https://npckc.itch.io/one-night-hot-springs>
- *Radiator 2* (Robert Yang), <https://radiatoryang.itch.io/radiator2>
- *Luxuria Superbia* (Tale of Tales), <http://luxuria-superbia.com/>

### Assignments

- **Watch:** "Tropes vs Women in Video Games" Season One by Feminist Frequency, YouTube
- **Read:** "Inside the Culture of Sexism at Riot Games" by Cecilia D'Anastasio, Kotaku.com
- **Read:** "Why do they fight?" by Sercan Şengün et al., [sercansengun.com/whydotheyfight](http://sercansengun.com/whydotheyfight)
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week's discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 6: Play as Identity

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**

- Is the game industry dominantly white and Asian? (This comes from a concept called "the hegemony of play" by Fron et al. 2007, which will be a reading this week.)
- Are certain ethnicities/groups misrepresented in games (much like in other media...)?
- Do you identify as a gamer? Does that matter?

- **Game play:** *Who's She* (Zuzia Kozerska-Girard, Playeress, watch on Kickstarter and YouTube), <https://playeress.com/>

### Assignments

- **Read:** Fron, Janine, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce. "The Hegemony of Play." In *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*. 2007.

- **Read:** “Confronting racial bias in video games” by Eric Peckham, Techcrunch.com
- **Read:** “Hispanic (Mis)Representation (or lack thereof) in Gaming History” by Jaime Pineda, Medium.com
- **Read:** “Shooting the Arabs: How video games perpetuate Muslim stereotypes” by Nicole Lee, Engadget.com
- **Read:** “Fear, Anxiety and Hope: What It Means to Be a Minority in Gaming” by NYTimes.com
- **Read:** “Do you identify as a gamer?” by Adrienne Shaw, New Media & Society, 14(1), 28-44.
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week’s discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 7: Play as a Simulation of History

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - Is history biased? Is it a science or is it a narrative written by the victors? (Although this is not a history class, this discussion creates a transition into the next questions.)
  - Are games a good medium for simulating, teaching, or learning about history?
  - Can games help us preserve historical events, artifacts, viewpoints, etc.?
  - Do the game designers perform the necessary historical research before they make their games?
- **Game play:**
  - *Notre-Dame de Paris: Journey Back in Time* (Ubisoft)
  - Any *Assassin’s Creed* game

### Assignments

- **Read:** “Portraying Historical Landmarks and Events in the Digital Game Series *Assassin’s Creed*” by Jana Radošinská, Actaludologica.com
- **Watch:** “Paradox Interactive: History and Game Design” 2016 GDC talk from Paradox’s Chris King, YouTube
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week’s discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 8: Play as a Historical Artifact

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - Is the history of gaming (especially video gaming) documented well?
  - How can we document the history/narrative of gaming, gaming communities, development, etc.? Why does this matter?

- Sometimes we may think that games are created in a historical vacuum. How are games affected by the social, political, and historical events around them? Discuss in relation with this week's reading by Marilyn Yalom.
- **Game play:** *Evoland 1* and *Evoland 2* (Shiro Games), <https://evoland.shirogames.com/>

#### Assignments

- **Read:** The first 3 chapters of (pp. 3-36) "Birth of the Chess Queen" by Marilyn Yalom.
- **Watch:** Any video(s) from Gaming Historian channel on YouTube
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week's discussion questions, materials, and games

### Week 9: Play as Media

#### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - Read this quote from Michael Samyn: "Video games that are not media are better games. Video games that are not games are better media." What does this mean?
  - Are games a form of media? How do video games decode/encode their messages?
  - Compared to other forms of media, how effective do you think video games are in communicating the intended message? Do you think video game players are always aware of the messages they receive through their games?
- **Game play:** *Lone Survivor* (Jasper Byrne), <http://www.lonesurvivor.co.uk/>

#### Assignments

- **Read:** The first chapter of (pp. 1-18) "Medium is the Message" by Marshall McLuhan
- **Watch:** "How the Medium Shapes the Message" by MIT Media Lab, YouTube
- **Watch:** "The Medium is the Message" by BBC Radio 4, YouTube
- **Read:** "Video Games as Media" by Michael Samyn, Gamasutra.com

### Week 10: Play as Art

#### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:** Below is a list of video games that are considered "artistic," artworks that uses (video) games, or artists that work with (video) games. Research and experience a few while answering these questions:
  - How did they inspire you? What does it mean that they were created with/in games?
- **List:**
  - *Samorost* series, Amanita Design
  - *Super Mario Sleeping*, Miltos Manetas

- *Expositur*, Eckermann & Fuchs
- *Max Payne Cheats*, JODI
- *Suicide Solution*, Brody Condon
- *Other Places*, Andy Kelley
- *Backlash 1998*, Richard Pierre-Davis
- *Façade*, Mateas and Stern
- *JFK Reloaded*, Traffic Software
- Works of Feng Mengbo
- Works of Mark Essen
- Student's own selection

#### Assignments

- **Read:** “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” by Walter Benjamin
- **Read:** “10 Artists Who Use Video Games as Their Medium” by Flavorwire.com
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week's discussion questions, materials, and games

#### Week 11: Play as Expression

##### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - Who owns the materials that come out of a fandom? Are players justified in freely using materials from games as their creative output? Are companies justified in (trying to) regulating them?
  - Do fandoms create pressure on game developers and their artistic freedom? Do they act as gatekeepers?
  - What do you think of the comparison between games that are made as artistic expression (or with an authorial vision) vs. games that are made to be modded, modified, skinned, etc. (so that they put the labor on players' shoulders)?
- **Game play:** Check some game mods! Here is a good place to start: “10 Games with The Best Mods Available, Ranked” by Mark Carpenter, GameRant.com

#### Assignments

- **Read:** “Art within the machine: how machinima turns the camera on videogames” by Matt Turner, BFI.org.uk
- **Read:** “Still Unsatisfied with Mass Effect 3? Read One Fan's 539 Page Rewrite” by Paul Tassi, Forbes.com
- **Read:** Postigo, Hector. “Of mods and modders: Chasing down the value of fan-based digital



game modifications.” *Games and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2007): 300-313.

- **Watch:** “Are Fandoms Bad? | A Video Essay” by Saberspark, YouTube
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week’s discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 12: Play as Serious Impact

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - Can games create serious social and political impacts?
  - Who has the power to create such games?
  - Should gaming elements be involved in our daily lives (gamification)?
- **Game play:**
  - *Bury Me, My Love* (ARTE France), <https://burymemylove.artefr.com/>
  - *3rd World Farmer* (Frederik Hermund), <https://3rdworldfarmer.org/>
  - *Darfur is Dying* (interFUEL), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darfur\\_is\\_Dying](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darfur_is_Dying)
  - *PeaceMaker* (ImpactGames), <http://www.peacemakergame.com/>

### Assignments

- **Read:** Sercan Şengün (2016), *Video Oyunlarının Toplumsal ve Politik Değişim Potansiyellerini Okumak Amacı ile Farklı Bir Sınıflandırma Önerisi* (Turkish, title trans.: A Classification Proposal to Understanding the Potential of Videogames in Social and Political Change). *Yeni Medya Çalışmaları II*. Ulusal Kongre Kitabı, pp. 459-471. (*Translated text will be provided.*)
- **Read:** “Gamification is Bullshit” by Ian Bogost, [TheAtlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com)
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week’s discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 13: Play as Social Construct

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - How do social interactions happen between players in the game worlds? How do game developers affect these interactions through game design?
  - How do virtual characters simulate social interactions? How to create “better” social virtual characters?
  - **Game play:** *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo), <https://www.animal-crossing.com/new-horizons/>

## Assignments

- **Read:** El-Nasr, Magy Seif, Bardia Aghabeigi, David Milam, Mona Erfani, Beth Lameman, Hamid Maygoli, and Sang Mah. "Understanding and evaluating cooperative games." In CHI, vol. 10, pp. 252-262. 2010.
- **Watch:** "More Science Behind Shaping Player Behavior in Online Game" 2015 GDC talk from Riot Games' Jeffrey Lin, YouTube
- **Watch:** "Better Game Characters by Design" 2007 lecture by Katherine Isbister, Stanford, YouTube (only between timecodes 7:40 – 45:40)
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week's discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 14: Play as Learning

### Class Topics/Activities

- **Discussion questions:**
  - Are games better at teaching than traditional methods? Is this the case for all topics, games, genres, and audience combinations?
  - What are the components of an effective educational game?
- **Game play:**
  - *The Oregon Trail* versions (various), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Oregon\\_Trail\\_\(series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Oregon_Trail_(series))
  - *Type:Rider* (ARTE France), <https://www.arte.tv/sites/webproductions/en/typerider/>

## Assignments

- **Read:** Garris, Rosemary, Robert Ahlers, and James E. Driskell. "Games, motivation, and learning: A research and practice model." *Simulation & gaming* 33, no. 4 (2002): 441-467.
- **Read:** Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon. "Overview of research on the educational use of video games." *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy* 1, no. 03 (2006): 184-214.
- **Watch:** "Games and Education Scholar James Paul Gee on Video Games, Learning, and Literacy" by Connected Learning Alliance, YouTube
- **Interact:** Post a reflection on the forum/Discord about the week's discussion questions, materials, and games

## Week 15-16: Final Project

Students work on their final projects in- and out-of-class and present them in the final meeting of the class to their peers and the instructor.

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

*Play and Society* works best when it is divided into two sessions with a couple of days apart. The time in

between gives the students a chance to discuss materials online and play the recommended games. If the class is going to be taught as a longer block session, the instructor can use the time between classes more effectively by moving gameplay out-of-the-class. In either case, out-of-class communication channels would be required. If the class is being taught face-to-face, an instant messaging system (e.g., Discord, Slack, etc.) should be generally enough. If the class is being taught online, a learning management system (LMS) forum should also be employed. Forums encourage the students to outline their ideas in a more formal and structured way. Instead of each student starting a separate forum thread, creating a forum thread per each question/talking point of the week may help focus the discussions. The students can additionally use instant messaging systems to discuss game play or materials in an informal way.

Using peer-review for teamwork can be its own learning experience. The students should be aware that professional life includes working with a diverse range of people who may or may not perform well in a group. Additionally, peer-review assessments are already in place in many companies and academia.

Past outcomes from this class have been (1) published as video essays on YouTube and other video streaming services; (2) disseminated as academic publications or as articles on reputable gaming websites; and (3) released on gaming platforms such as Itch.io or The Game Crafter ([www.thegamecrafter.com](http://www.thegamecrafter.com)).

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

Although the themes of the course are selected to stand the test of time, their fine-grained content (e.g., readings, videos, games, etc.) will require revisions through up-to-date materials and discussions. The student facilitations wherein the students propose additional readings, videos, and games can be included in the future iterations of the class to support the timeliness of the materials. The course is also suitable for inviting guest lecturers either from the industry or academia to expand more on the weekly themes. The students can benefit from interacting with and hearing from the designers of the assigned games or authors of the assigned pieces. *Play and Society* has been a very productive class in terms of encouraging student work such as video essays, analog and digital games, essays, data, and other research that can be disseminated through multiple channels. Interested instructors can highlight the production aspects and assignments of the class as they see fit.

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## CHAPTER 2.

### ETHICS AND GAMING (MDIA 316)

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KAREN (KAT) SCHRIER<sup>1</sup>  
MARIST COLLEGE

**Course Title:** MDIA 316: Ethics and Gaming

**Course College/School:** Marist College School of Communication & the Arts

**Course Department/Program:** Film, Television, Games & Interactive Media

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 3

**Course Length:** 15 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face or online (remote) synchronous

**Course Keywords:** Undergraduate, Video Games, Ethics, Values, Games, Hedonism, Virtue Ethics, Utilitarianism, Kantian Ethics, Justice, Feminist Ethics, Ethics of Care

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

This course introduces students to the intersection of ethics and gaming, an emerging field of study that is both innovative and as old as humankind. Human beings have always played games to experiment with different identities, explore choices and consequences and to try on new moral perspectives. This class will provide students with a foundation in relevant ethics theory, as well as game design and game studies. Students will be exposed to different case studies of both digital and non-digital games, and through this, will understand how games are ethical systems, how games help us understand our own ethics and cultural norms, and how games may help us reflect on and practice ethical thinking skills. Students will learn how to apply major ethical frameworks to current issues in ethics and games. They will also better understand controversies and concerns related to gaming and the development of games, and how this may reflect cultural norms, as well as relate to issues of gender, race, sex, and violence.

1. Dr. Karen (Kat) Schrier is an Associate Professor and Director of Games and Emerging Media at Marist College. Her latest book is *We the Gamers: How Games Teach Ethics and Civics* (Oxford University Press).



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## COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Games are communities and games are part of our public, our society, and our culture – and as such, the play and creation of them have ethical implications. I have three main goals with this course. First, the goal is to help foster the practice of ethical thinking by using the popular, relevant medium of games. Two, many of the students who take this course want to be game developers or designers and I want to help them cultivate an interest in and habit of also asking ethical questions when making and distributing games, in addition to asking design, technical, artistic, and business questions. Three, I also hope that students develop a greater understanding for the cultural and social implications of games, and how ethical questions around games pervade and influence our everyday lives. In other



words: as grapple with the ethical ramifications of our creation and play of games, we may start to also disentangle broader questions about humanity and how we should all live together.

These are the eight course objectives:

- Demonstrate an understanding of, and compare, at least four ethical theories and the ability to use it to explain and justify moral judgments in related to games.
- Apply at least two ethical frameworks to games and other playable media.
- Engage in research on at least one primary ethical issue in games.
- Demonstrate well-grounded ethical argumentation related to games in written and oral communication formats.
- Gain knowledge and facility with a breadth of issues related to ethics and games, such as ones related to design, marketing, and social aspects of gaming.
- Show the ability to critically examine the often unspoken and unarticulated assumptions and values that underlie our interactions with and design of games.
- Design and prototype a non-digital game related to an ethical issue.
- Work collaboratively in teams.

## COURSE CONTEXT

The course is an upper-level (junior/senior) undergraduate course in the Games and Emerging Media degree program and the Media Studies and Production degree/Interactive Media concentration. The course counts as an Applied Ethics course, which counts for the Ethics and Justice core requirement, one of the core requirements at Marist College, like Social Science, Literature, and History. The course needed to be approved by the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies and the Core Committee. is currently one of only two courses that count as an Applied Ethics course, and one of only two non-philosophy department courses that count for this particular core requirement. According to the requirements for this type of course at Marist College, it must include a minimum of three different ethical theories (utilitarian, Kantian and virtue ethics) and “include explicit critical evaluation of ethical issues in a particular discipline or field, recognizing the complexity of the decision-making process and providing guidance for making moral decisions.” Mainly games majors and minors take the course, but some additional students take the course to fulfill their ethics and justice requirement.

The class is typically taught face-to-face in a laboratory classroom with 24 computers and stations, that are formed into six different “pods.” However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the class was also taught in a remote synchronous format through Discord. The basic outline and content of the course was the same, with students still working in groups to design games (though meeting in Discord voice channels rather than in person). However, one change between the two formats is that I had them create games to played over Discord, rather than to be played in person. The games were also playtested through Discord as well. Some of the in-person games (board games, card games, sport games) that we typically play in person needed to be substituted with digital versions or other

games. Otherwise, what I would typically do in person was shared with students through the remote synchronous format.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

I am guided by five principles as I teach:

### **Learning Should Combine Theory with Practice**

All of my courses integrate theory with practice and show students how theory and research can inform design, how practice can drive theory, and how theory can be applied in the real world. I believe it is essential to play with knowledge and experiment with ideas through both abstract investigation and hands-on interactions. Through full-class discussions and interactive lessons, we collaboratively build a theoretical foundation on the topic. Then, students work in small groups to immediately apply their new knowledge and solve a design problem related to the topic of the day. I encourage them to search for creative solutions, to cultivate their individuality, and to iterate their designs using alternate perspectives. My students engage in design as a way of playfully interrogating new concepts.

### **Learning Should Involve Critical Thought**

I strongly value the cultivation of critical thinking skills, such as interpretation, deliberation, evaluation, and the consideration of multiple perspectives. When teaching in the classroom, I do not simply express a litany of facts, but I provide multiple ways of viewing concepts, and invite students to express their unique opinions and perspectives. I question students' assumptions and critique their work constructively, so that they can develop further beyond even their own expectations. By doing so, I hope to encourage students to reflect on and potentially reevaluate their own beliefs.

### **Learning is Social**

I believe we are continually learning from and teaching each other, through our behavior, by sharing our perspectives, and by expressing our values and beliefs. My class functions as a learning community, where students work together to solve problems, test hypotheses, and constructively critique each other's ideas and solutions. I strongly encourage empathy, compassion, and perspective-taking. My students work in groups to rapidly prototype, create stories, and write design documents, as well as to critique each other's approaches. This happens formally through the classroom, but we also spend time playing games together over Discord, connecting with industry speakers and guest lecturers, or working on projects and events together, like game jams. I want my students to interact, play, learn and grow.

### **Learning is Empowering**

I am passionate about helping each student develop their unique talents and abilities. While I believe learning with others is beneficial, I also encourage my students to develop and pursue their individual creativity and interests and I give them an appropriate amount of freedom to explore. I want students to feel empowered and to actively experiment with what interests them. Enabling students to write and present on their favorite games also helps them to overcome personal barriers and gain comfort in public speaking and writing.

## Learning is Iterative

Design, redesign, and revision are built into the course. As part of this, we approach all design, writing, and presentation work as iterative and engage in the process of critique and revision continually. Students work on projects iteratively and reshape their work continually based on feedback from peers, clients, professors, and users. Just as I encourage students to listen and invite feedback, I also ask students for feedback so that I can grow as a teacher, and to help to redesign our curriculum, classroom activities, topics, and exercises. I like to experiment with new learning methods and tools—even if they may fail—and I am transparent with my students about my purpose and goals. This also helps students reflect not only on what they are learning, but how they learn, and how they can better learn in the future.

## Class Structure

I typically teach this class in the evening in a 2.5-hour block, or in two hour-fifteen class periods.

### *First 30-45 minutes: Playing and Connecting*

The first part of my class we typically spend playing and connecting. We also review what we did the previous week and what we will do in the session. We first discuss any concerns, fears, or hopes. Students share any games they have been playing, ask questions, and any issues they are having with exercises or just life in general. We also share our thoughts on the issue of the week (a weekly ethics and games issue in the news that we discuss on forums prior to the class). And we play a short game or do a small activity. For instance, students take turns bringing in a short game to play that relates to ethics, like the games *Loneliness*, *We Become What We Behold*, *Werewolf*, or *Coming Out Simulator*. Or I present to them an activity, like doing identity icebreakers (<https://www.adl.org/media/13011/download>), or a game motivations survey (<https://quanticfoundry.com/>). One activity I use, which I created, is called *Trade Off*. I have students take out a piece of paper and write an X or O on it. I have them line up in three lines (in non-pandemic times). I tell them they need to be the first line to get all Xs or Os and need to trade their paper with people in front or behind, or next to them. They trade and one of the lines wins, with either Xs or Os. In the next round I say that the winning X or O is now verboten, they need to get rid of that paper by trading with others before the time runs out. They have to keep their paper for only a few seconds and must keep trading with others. Whomever ends up with the X or O is the loser. After the two rounds we discuss the difference in how people interacted and the communities that were formed—one was more collaborative and one was more competitive and selfish. Which behaviors were the players now doing under those new rules? This helps them to see how games are systems and how different values and ethical behaviors may emerge from the system. We then co-design additional rounds to see what types of values emerge.

### *Second 45-60 minutes: Discussing and Applying*

After the playing and connecting time, I introduce the topic or lesson for the session. I may share the new ethical framework by reviewing the main components, contextualizing it, and comparing it to ones we have already discussed (like introducing utilitarianism or Feminist ethics). Then, as a class, we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the framework. After this period of discussion, we then play another game as a class, and/or break into small groups and discuss a game that we had already played for homework. We also take the ethical framework of the day and apply it to the game or gaming

issue, such as in how the game was designed or to the choices in the game that the students made. For instance, in one activity, students break up into small groups to each discuss one segment of the game *That Dragon, Cancer*. The small group talks about that specific segment, how it was designed to evoke particular emotions, and which design techniques were used. They also apply the Ethics of Care framework to the game, and how the game expressed care and emotions for other characters, and/or for the player. We then come back as a full class to share our thoughts together. Besides playing and analyzing games, other activities may also be used, such as full-class debates or watching videos of opposing opinions on game issues like loot boxes or game violence and comparing and discussing them as a full class.

*Final 30-45 minutes: Designing and Reflecting*

Finally, we typically end each class with a design or reflective activity of some kind—like creating a Twine game, or working with a group of people to design, playtest, or document a board game. Mixing theory with practice and applying creativity and problem-solving skills to ethical questions is a key component of the class. For instance, students need to design a game that relays a news or current event of some kind, like the COVID-19 pandemic, fires in California, school shooting, or severe weather issue like a hurricane or tsunami. Or students need to make a Twine game that uses choices and choice-making based on either the Kantian approach or utilitarianism.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

The one required text for this course is *Fundamentals of Ethics* (5th Edition). Russ Shafer-Landau, Oxford University Press (2020). Other materials are provided on a weekly basis. For other exercises and interactions in the class, we also use Twine 2 and Discord. For connecting with the class during a Remote Synchronous session, we use Discord. Here is how I set up the Discord server for Remote Synchronous needs.

- We had a few different text channels, like Class Discussion, Issue of the Week, Introductions, and Water Cooler for casual conversation.
- We had a voice chat for the main class, and another for more individual conversations.
- We also had small group text and voice channels, such as for the small group activities. We had ones named after colors, classic games, and named after the students' game projects.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS AND COURSE ASSESSMENT

### **Participation, Exercises, & Other Weekly Challenges – 25% of final grade**

25% of the total grade is based on participating in our regularly scheduled events, design activities, posts, exercises, and discussions. This includes a number of creative exercises, like making a short game in Twine, designing memes, or creating a concept for a game that uses a utilitarian approach to ethics, as well as responses to the “Topic of the Week” article or podcast, shared through our Discord server.

For instance, for one of the weekly challenges, students needed to do the following:

Write a 1-page, short analysis of a game. Pick one game that you think relays emotion, empathy,

compassion, and/or inclusiveness in some way. How does it express or show care? How does it not express care? What would you change about the game? Write a 1-page review and analysis of the game, with only a few sentences of it actually summarizing the game.

#### **Group game creation and analysis – 25% of final grade**

25% of the grade involves creating a non-digital game with a team. The theme varies each year and for Fall 2020 it was to create a game that could be played over a Discord server, which related to a current event. The game is collaboratively created, written, and presented. In addition, students need to share their game at our big games event with other games major students.

#### **Ethics Paper and Presentation – 25% of final grade**

Students need to discuss one game or gaming issue. They need to devise a question and construct an argument related to the game or issue. They also need to use and apply at least one framework (hedonism, utilitarianism, Kantian, virtue ethics) to discuss the issue. For instance, students might discuss how the ethics of care relates to caring for a character in a game, or how a choice in *Fallout* could be responded to with either a Kantian or utilitarian approach. Students also need to present the paper publicly at the annual games event we host. The paper component is around 5 to 6 pages long and requires students to use at least three citations from scholarly literature to support their argument. Some example paper topics are listed later in this document and include things like the moral choices in *Bioshock*, the ethics of evoking fear in a horror game, and cheating in esports.

#### **Final “Take Home” Exercises – 25% of final grade**

This is a series of essay and exercise prompts that are provided to students a few weeks before the end of the semester. The students need to complete two short essays and one design exercise, which includes creating a concept for a game based on one of two themes (which change each year).

An example of a question for the essay prompt is as follows:

“We have discussed the ethics of the responsibility of game creators toward how gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, and/or race is represented in games and in the gaming industry. For example, how should game developers respond to issues like harassment or toxicity in their games or in the games industry? Furthermore, games can help us understand issues of representation better. For instance: What role do games such as *Women Goes to a Private Games Industry Party* play in understanding different perspectives on women in the games industry? What role do games such as *Triad* play in understanding different sexualities or sexual identities? Pick at least one game and/or issue and explore 1-2 specific ways it provides a glimpse into gender identity, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, or disability. Use at least 2 scholarly readings to support your argument, and at least one ethical framework (e.g., Ethics of Care, Kantian, Hedonism, Virtue Ethics, Feminist Ethics, Utilitarianism).”

An example of an exercise prompt is as follows:

“The US has had quite a bit of news lately about elections and the presidency more generally. There are different games that approach issues related to politics, such as *The Voter Suppression Trail* game. These types of games are journalistic in nature and make an argument, similar to an Op-Ed but in games format. Create your own type of “Op-Ed” game where you take a current event

related to politics and mount an argument using that game. Come up with a game that seeks to share a perspective on anything related to politics and ethics, such as election tampering, voter suppression, presidential pardons, or disinformation. Regardless of where you are with respect to these political processes, design a game that seeks to find ways to share your perspectives and makes an argument that you support. Using the outline, describe your design in detail. Feel free to use images or screenshots to support your concept, and be specific about how the game supports the goals described above. If you want, you can also show sketches, cards, boards, or other materials that support your design.”

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

### Week 1: Course Introduction

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Introduction to the class
- Class introductions and icebreakers
- Hardware/technology needs
- Save the date for our semester games event.
- Example in Action: Moral Machine (<https://www.moralmachine.net/>)

#### *Assignments Due Today*

- Fill out first-day survey
- Engage in first-day activities and games.

### Week 2: What Are Games? What are Ethics and Values?

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- What are the elements of a game?
- What are our values? Students fill out a values worksheet and start to reflect on their own values.
- Example in Action: *Trade Off* in-person game (written about in <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/values-play-digital-games>)
- Example in Action: *Buffalo* (<https://tiltfactor.org/game/buffalo/>)

#### *Assignments Due Today*

- Readings: M. Flanagan, J. Belman, H. Nissenbaum, & J. Diamond, A Method for Discovering Values in Digital Games; K. Salen & E. Zimmerman What is a Game?; The Game Design Process, What is Play? The Classification of Games, *Rules of Play*, or another reading that provides an overview of games / game design.
- Two games that push boundaries of game design and propriety, express values through play, and are also free and quick to play, such as: games by Mollendustria

(<https://www.molleindustria.org/>) *every day the same dream* or *Unmanned; Sweatshop* (<https://www.crazygames.com/game/sweatshop>); or *The Girl with the Gray Hair Awakens* (<https://heiden.itch.io/the-girl-with-the-gray-hair-awakens>)

### Week 3: Introduction to Ethics Frameworks

#### Class Topics/Activities

- What are some major ethical frameworks?
- How do we formulate an ethical argument?
- What is playtesting and prototyping?
- What are Newsgames? How do we represent real-world events and issues using games?
- Handout first assignment: Group game project
- Example in Action: *Factitious* (<http://factitious-pandemic.augamestudio.com/#/>)
- Example in Action: *Voter Suppression Trail* (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/01/opinion/voting-suppression-videogame.html>)
- Example in Action: *Thoughts and Prayers the Game* (<https://www.thoughtsandprayersthegame.com/>)

#### Assignments Due Today

- Readings: Introduction, *Fundamentals of Ethics*; Chapter 1, I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, & B. Schweizer, *Newsgames*
- Play *Bad News* (<https://www.getbadnews.com/#intro>) and *Fake It to Make It* (<https://www.fakeittomakeitgame.com/>)
- An alternate game to play is *Harmony Square*, <https://harmonysquare.game/books/default/> or *Troll Factory*, <https://trollfactory.yle.fi/>

### Week 4: What is Hedonism?

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Overview of Hedonism: Strengths and Weaknesses
- Discussion of pleasure and engagement in games.
- Discussion of *Fall Guys* (<https://fallguys.com/>), *Candy Crush* or other match-3 puzzle games
- If in person: board games like *Pandemic: Legacy* or *The Captain is Dead*
- Playtesting and working on game projects.

#### Assignments Due Today

- Readings: Chapters 1 and 2, *Fundamentals of Ethics*; R. Greenfield, *The Ethics of the Candy Crush Pusher*, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/07/ethics-candy-crush-pusher/312851/>

- Play one free-to-play game, such as a *Candy Crush* or *Farm Heroes* type of puzzle or match-3 game
- Play *Fall Guys* (<https://fallguys.com/>)

### **Week 5: What is Consequentialism/Utilitarianism?**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Overview of Consequentialism and Utilitarianism: Strengths and Weaknesses
- Making choices in games; reflecting on consequences in games.
- Discussion of *Papers, Please* and *SweetxHeart*
- Choice and consequences vs. systemic effects
- Example in Action: *Spent*
- Example in Action: *Parable of the Polygons*
- Playtesting and working on game projects.

#### *Assignments Due Today*

- Readings: Chapters 1 and 2, *Fundamentals of Ethics*.
- Play *Papers, Please*
- Play *SweetxHeart*
- Or play another game with choices and consequences, such as *Depression Quest*, *Mass Effect*, *Gamer Mom*, or *Dragon Age*.
- Read additional articles on moral choices in games, such as M. Sicart, *Papers, Please*, in *How to Play Video Games*; a selection from one of M. Sicart's books on ethics and games; M. Schulzke, *Moral Decision Making in Fallout*, *Game Studies*; and/or E. Neely, *The Ethics of Choice in Single-Player Games*.

### **Week 6: Beta Playtests**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Review and comparison of frameworks so far.
- Beta playtesting for all game projects.
- Handout Game Analysis Paper and Presentation Assignment.

#### *Assignments Due Today*

- Continue working on game projects
- Catch up on Readings and Games



## Week 7: What is the Kantian Approach?

### Class Topics/Activities

- Overview of the Kantian approach: Strengths and Weaknesses
- Review and discuss *Life is Strange*, *Howling Dogs*, *Offline*
- Narrative and storytelling in games
- Start Twine exercise—creating a game with choices.
- Example in Action: *Queers at the End of the World* (<https://w.itch.io/end-of-the-world>)
- Consider sharing other Twine game examples

### Assignments Due Today

- Readings: Chapters 11 and 12, *Fundamentals of Ethics*.
- Play *Life is Strange*, Episode one (at minimum). ([https://store.steampowered.com/app/319630/Life\\_is\\_Strange\\_\\_Episode\\_1/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/319630/Life_is_Strange__Episode_1/))
- Play *Howling Dogs* (<http://slimedaughter.com/games/twine/howlingdogs/>)
- Play *Offline* (<https://finngeergames.itch.io/offline>)
- Other story-based games possibilities that may be useful are *Gone Home*, *Telling Lies*, or *Undertale*
- Read additional articles like: K. Smalley, <https://www.popmatters.com/undertale-immanuel-kant-ethics-video-games-2495432738.html> or M. Butt & D. Dunne, Rebel Girls and Consequence in *Life is Strange* and the *Walking Dead*, *Games and Culture*.

## Week 8: What are Virtue Ethics?

### Class Topics/Activities

- Overview of Virtue Ethics: Strengths and Weaknesses
- Teaching ethics through games
- Analysis of ethics games such as *Quandary* and *When Rivers Were Trails*.
- Example in Action: *Spent* (<http://playspent.org/>) and critique
- Example in Action: Depending on equipment or logistical needs, VR or Board Game like *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes* or *Max*.
- A recent educational game
- Playtest Twine Games in Pairs

### Assignments Due Today

- Readings: Chapter 17, *Fundamentals of Ethics*.
- Play *Quandary* (<https://www.quandarygame.org/>)

- Play *When Rivers Were Trails* (<https://indianlandtenure.itch.io/when-rivers-were-trails>)
- Read Introduction / Chapter 1 of K. Schrier, *Knowledge Games* (<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47461>); and/or K. Schrier, Introduction, *Learning Education and Games, Vol 3* (<http://press.etc.cmu.edu/index.php/product/learning-education-games-volume-3/>)
- Twine draft due

## Week 9: What is the Feminist Ethics Approach?

### Class Topics/Activities

- Overview of Feminist Ethics: Strengths and Weaknesses
- Discuss games like *A Woman Goes to a Private Games Industry Party*; *And the Robot Horse You Rode On*; *Triad*; and/or *Dear Gregorie, Dear Accordio*; previous games like *Life is Strange* and *Offline* would work too.
- In-class debate about timely issue related to gender, race, and ethnicity.
- Examples in Action: Critique board games like *Suffragetto*; *Ms. Monopoly*; *Black Card Revoked*; *Inequality-opoly*; or *Play the Patriarchy*.

### Assignments Due Today

- Readings: Chapter 18, *Fundamentals of Ethics*; S. Chess & A. Shaw, *A Conspiracy of Fishes or How We Learned to Stop Worrying about #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity*; selections from K. Gray, *Intersectional Tech*; K. Gray & D. Leonard, *Woke Gaming*; or/or K. Gray, G. Voorhees & E. Vossen, *Feminism in Play*; selection from R. Benjamin, *Race After Technology* or *Captivating Technology*; videos or work by Feminist Frequency.
- Play: *A Woman Goes to a Private Games Industry Party* (<https://moreelen.itch.io/a-woman-goes-to-a-private-games-industry-party>); *And the Robot Horse You Rode On* (<https://w.itch.io/robot-horse>); *Triad* (<https://w.itch.io/triad>); and *Dear Gregorie, Dear Accordio* (<https://mystrophe.itch.io/dear-gregorie-dear-accordio>); *Hair Nah* (<http://hairnah.com/>). Other game possibilities include *Florence*, *Celeste*, *Walking Dead* (Telltale), or *Grand Theft Auto V*.
- Final twine game due.

## Week 10: Game Event

### Class Topics/Activities

- Community-wide games event, which is free and open to the public (typically this is an in-person event, except during the pandemic, when it was held through Discord and Zoom).
- We show our group game projects and present our papers.
- Each student gives a presentation on an ethics-related topic
- We also host industry speakers.

### Assignments Due Today

- Show off games, present papers.

- Papers are due.

## Week 11: Compassion, Empathy, and the Ethics of Care

### Class Topics/Activities

- Overview of the Ethics of Care: Strengths and Weaknesses
- How do we make games that connect us, and cultivate care and compassion?
- Class discussion: *That Dragon, Cancer*; *Kind Words*
- Example in Action: *Way* (<https://makeourway.com/>); *End of Us* (<http://the-end-of-us.com/>)
- Work on creative exercise: concept of a game on care, compassion, empathy, and/or inclusion.

### Assignments Due Today

- Readings: *Caring* by Nel Noddings excerpt; K. Schrier, *Designing Ourselves*, <https://www.adl.org/designing-ourselves>; K. Schrier, <https://www.adl.org/blog/how-we-can-use-games-to-understand-others-better>; J. Murphy & J. Zagal, Videogames and the Ethic of Care; L. Grace, Introduction & K. Schrier, Would You Kindly Parent? In L. Grace, *Love and Electronic Affection*.
- Play: *That Dragon, Cancer*; *Kind Words*. Other possibilities: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*; *What Remains of Edith Finch*; *The Sims*; *Walden*.

## Week 12: Violence and Moral Panics

### Class Topics/Activities

- Overview of topic
- Full class discussion
- Watch a video, such as this one from the New York Times (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Eo3La0nA54>)
- Example in Action: *Sandy Hook Shooting* ([https://www.y8.com/games/the\\_slaying\\_of\\_sandy\\_hook](https://www.y8.com/games/the_slaying_of_sandy_hook))
- Kowert, R. (2020). State of the Research: Toxicity in Games and Gaming Culturators, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiS\\_akCFk\\_4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiS_akCFk_4&feature=youtu.be)
- Hand out take-home final exam

### Assignments Due Today

- Recent readings on violence and games and moral panics, such as websites like:
  - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/wicked-deeds/201507/moral-panic-who-benefits-public-fear>;
  - <https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2019/08/09/carly-kocurek-why-we/>;
  - <https://www.stetson.edu/today/2013/10/letter-to-apa-on-policy-statement-on->

violent-media/;

- <https://theconversation.com/its-time-to-end-the-debate-about-video-games-and-violence-91607>
- Research articles like
  - A. Przybylski & N. Weinstein, Violent video game engagement is not associated with adolescents' aggressive behavior: evidence from a registered report, Royal Society Open Science, <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.171474>;
  - A. Prescott, J. Sargent, J. Hull, Metaanalysis of the relationship between violent video game play and physical aggression over time, PNAS, <https://www.pnas.org/content/115/40/9882>
- Optional, Play: One recent violent game like *Call of Duty*, *Overwatch*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *PoND*

### **Week 13: Business, Marketing, and Ethics**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Topic rotates depending on recent news and events
- This past semester we discussed loot boxes, the ethics of business models, gambling, and addiction.

#### *Assignments Due Today*

- Readings: Two readings that share different perspectives, such as D. King & P. Delfabbro, Video Game Monetization (e.g., 'Loot Boxes'): a Blueprint for Practical Social Responsibility Measures, *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* and L. Xiao & L. Henderson, Towards an Ethical Game Design Solution to Loot Boxes: a Commentary on King and Delfabbro, *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*
- Optional, Play: Any game with a loot box, such as *Fortnite*, *Overwatch*, or *FIFA*.

### **Week 14: Additional Timely Topic in Ethics and Gaming**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Topic rotates depending on recent news and events
- This semester we discussed using games to connect during the 2020 pandemic.
- Play and discuss the games: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Among Us*
- Example in Action: Choice of the students

#### *Assignments Due Today*

- Play *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Among Us* (students' choice)
- Excerpt from K. Schrier, *How Games Teach Ethics & Civics*, Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Articles, like that of I. Bogost, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/04/animal-crossing-isnt-escapist-its-political/610012/> or S. Needleman, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/>

from-fall-guys-to-among-us-how-america-turned-to-videogames-under-lockdown-11604116815; Videos or podcasts, like that from N. Clark & F. Lantz, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8k7JA8lhSM>.

## Week 15: Final Day and Celebration

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Hand in take-home final exam
- Play games together and have a final day celebration.

### *Assignments Due Today*

- Hand in final exam paper and project

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

The following are some of the recommendations I have for teaching this course, based on my previous experiences in teaching it:

- **Balancing ethics with games.** One of the challenges is to know the ethics content of the course as well as the gaming side. People who teach this course need a strong background in both ethics and design and games—just playing games regularly is not enough. This takes some patience and I recommend connecting with the ethics and games experts at your university or other universities for tips and advice (something I wish I do more!).
- **Comparing and applying frameworks.** An important consideration to share with the students is that each framework has strengths and weaknesses, and no framework is necessarily right or wrong, but just different. Questions to ask are: what are the differences? What do we gain in comparison? How did the frameworks arise and what do they each help to tell us about humanity and how we should live together?
- **Engaging all students.** Some students take this course because of an intrinsic interest in the topic, but many are taking it just to fulfill their ethics requirement (why not take a course on gaming rather than the standard ethics fare?). The trick is to continue to find ways to make the ethics content relevant to the students and using games can be a meaningful way for this to happen. One way I do this is to invite students to continually share the games and gaming issues they are interested in, to write about the topics they care about, and to read articles or listen to podcasts on ethics and games topics and then share this with the class. Creating a community where these types of student-driven efforts are encouraged helps to foster this type of engagement.
- **Practicing Ethical Argumentation.** Some students struggle with how to formulate an ethics-relevant paper (building an argument and applying a framework). Some students are strong designers, creative artists, and/or technical developers, but may need some additional help with analytical or writing skills practice. One tip is to continually give students lower-stakes exercises each week to help them in describing and applying the frameworks. What I started to do was to give a weekly survey, which was optional but earned bonus points, that invited them to step-by-step describe and apply the framework of the session to a game we discussed

in class or played for homework. Then, by the time they were ready to write their papers, the students had practiced writing the main components of the paper. I also reviewed with the students an outline of the papers, a rubric, and tips on what to do (and how to do it). One thing I emphasized was not just reviewing the game or gaming issue, but analyzing and critiquing it according to the framework they chose. You may want to consider not just playtesting the games but “playtesting” the papers and presentations, too.

- **Caring for Student Needs.** The games and topics in this course will affect students in different ways, and ways you may not expect. For instance, students who have a family member suffering with cancer may be too emotionally overwhelmed by the game *That Dragon, Cancer*. Students who have experienced sexual assault or harassment may be affected by games that approach these topics. Some students cannot afford some of the games, or they may feel put off by the violence or relationship dynamics in a game. Some of the timely topics that we discuss may be too jarring or uncomfortable for some students, such as discussing suicide, gender bias, racism, or transphobia, gamergate, or an election. Instructors should be really critical about which games and issues to include—what goals do they serve? Are they just included to shock or disturb? Or, do they have productive educational value? Don’t include games that propagate biases and/or racist systems unless there is a valid pedagogical purpose, and be reflective of those biases with the students. Be mindful of changing cultural and ethical norms of playing certain games, and consider how games may work with some students or age groups but not others. Regardless of the games used, also consider letting students choose if they cannot play a game or engage with a topic, and do not penalize them if they can’t play it. Let students know up front what to expect and explain that the topics in the class are sensitive and possibly offensive, problematic, or disturbing in some way. You can offer an alternative game or just allow them to skip it. This also includes letting students leave class during discussions of games, or to engage as they wish. I have had students cry in class from games, which can be very enriching for the class and for the student, but can also lead to students feeling too vulnerable and disengaged. The professor needs to find a balance between pushing students to be uncomfortable enough to grow and learn, but still comfortable enough to feel safe and cared for.
- **Caring for Our Own Needs.** On a similar note, some students may feel very resistant to the games and the topics. For instance, students have expressed their concern or disgust for my teaching of Feminist Ethics, or their disdain for topics related to sexism, racism, and other forms of systemic bias. Some students will be angry or frustrated with these topics, particularly if the person presenting them is from a marginalized background. Faculty teaching the course need to ensure their own safety and wellbeing, while understanding that these topics are provocative and can cause discomfort. What is our responsibility to our students and to ourselves when teaching these topics?
- **Celebrating Student Work.** Consider holding an event or some other type of celebration of student work. Each semester I teach this class, I also hold an event that is open to all, where students can share their games and papers. The event makes the course more memorable and helps the students to think beyond the classroom. Consider also how to incorporate social or civic engagement in the course if this is possible, such as by doing some type of work in or for the community. Can you make games for an organization or educational institution? Is there a

prosocial aspect to your course? When we host the event, which is open to the community, we also have each student take on a different role, whether it is setting up or cleaning up, greeting guests, doing PR for the event, or handing out welcome packets and programs. This reinforces the community-aspect of the course and gives students a chance to volunteer and connect with others beyond the course.

- **Creating an Inclusive Community of Learners and Gamers.** Finally, I try to start and return to a place of empathy and compassion for my students. This course's content can be very personal and intimate, and oftentimes students are feeling vulnerable. My role is to help support and shape an inclusive community of care where students feel comfortable expressing this, or deciding not to express without fear of penalties. Approach the class in a way that helps to lift the fears and clear away the obstacles that students may have with the material, whether it is in handling difficult ethical frameworks or approaching video games when they are worried they aren't a "good enough gamer." Give students agency and authority over their emotions and respect their boundaries. Check in with students regularly and make sure they feel good. This has been especially important during the pandemic, but it is a practice that should continue in non-pandemic times too.

The following are some student work examples. Game concepts:

- *News or Noise*: A card game about identifying fake news
- *Hurricane Rescue*: A board game where players need to help those dealing with hurricanes
- *Imitator Artist*: A guessing game about finding the imposter artist.
- *The Friendship Game*: A card game about helping citizens after a natural disaster.
- *Today is the Day*: A twine game reflecting different endings for a character, based on utilitarian ethics
- *Zombieball*: An in-person dodgeball game between zombies and human beings.
- *Fire Force*: A Discord game where the fire starters and fire fighters play against each other.
- *18 Rooms*: A dungeon-crawler Twine game where players decide whom to trust, using a virtue ethics framework
- *Doodle Disaster*: A card game that gives the artist different fun constraints or bonuses, depending on their ethical choices.

Paper topics:

- The ethics of race and avatar customization in *Animal Crossing: City Folk*
- The ethics of lootboxes in *Fortnite*
- Toxicity in the eSports community through a Utilitarian lens
- Kantian ethics and the villains' plan in *Fossil Fighters*
- The ethics of care and duty in *Sims 4*
- LGBTQ representation in games

- The good life and *SOMA*
- The categorical imperative and *Bioshock*
- The ethics of boot camps and hot takes in games journalism

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

**Adding Up-to-Date Content.** Like anyone who is teaching games courses, I change the course every year based on the new games that come out and student interests and needs. For instance, I added in *Among Us* due to student interest and relevance, and games like *SweetXHeart*, after hearing about it at conferences in 2020. I also adapt the course based on the medium of delivery, such as whether the course is being offered in person or live face-to-face. This semester, I changed the group games exercise to involve making a game that could be played through Discord, as we were hosting the class this way. Typically, the group games exercise involves making a non-digital game like a card or board game, when we are in class face-to-face. In addition, I change the content of the course during the course itself, often based on ethical issues that arise during the semester. This semester, I included topics and discussions related to connecting during the pandemic of 2020, and on the U.S. election and civic engagement in games.

**Including Diverse Perspectives.** My goal each year is to incorporate more and more readings, games, and topics, by and about people of color, women, people with disabilities, and people who are LGBTQAA++. I do not want to just include individual sessions on race, gender identity, and sexual identity, but to design the course in a way that it is always approaching and reflecting on identity, values, and systematic bias. I aim to continually include my students and teach with more of an anti-racist approach to ethics, and to keep reflecting on and revising my approach. My goal is also to expand the course, or split it into two different courses, with focus on both the ethical frameworks and games, equity, diversity, care, and inclusion.

**Ensuring an Inclusive Environment.** Finally, I am always looking for ways to make my class community more inclusive and caring, such as by including more perspectives, voices, and vulnerabilities. I have integrated the use of Discord this semester rather than Zoom for remote synchronous teaching, because it helps to build community where the students already are, and I will aim to keep using this even when my classes are live and in-person. I also have been using more regularly feedback mechanisms to gain feedback from students, whether through direct message or a weekly optional survey, and this has helped me to be more adaptive and responsive, whether students have interpersonal issues in their group, pandemic-related health needs, or just want to share comments about class content or games they recommend that we play.

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## CHAPTER 3.

### ETHICS IN VIDEOGAMES (EAE 3020)

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**Course Title:** EAE 3020: Ethics in Videogames

**Course University:** University of Utah

**Course College/School:** College of Engineering

**Course Department/Program:** Entertainment Arts & Engineering (EAE)

**Course Level:** *Undergraduate*

**Course Credits:** 3

**Course Length:** Semester, Meets twice a week.

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face and Online

**Course Keywords:** philosophy, games, ethics, professional ethics, videogames

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

How do videogames impact society? What special responsibilities do we have as players, consumers, creators, and how can we use ethical theories in our daily practice? In this class we will learn and discuss various ethical theories and examine the role games can play in helping us reason about ethical problems. We will also play and analyze games and discuss their embedded values and politics.

During this class we will alternate between lectures and discussions. Minimum expectations include reading the assigned material before class, playing the assigned videogames, watching the assigned movies, and participating in class discussions.

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE

Professional “lapses” in ethical behavior often occur when people fail to identify specific and relevant ethical principles in moments of stress or crisis. These moments, and their lapses, are often particular to the industry or context in which people work. The game industry is, of course, no different. Furthermore, there are also occasions where, due to the implicit biases that naturally arise from working with like-minded people on a shared goal (e.g. create incredible videogame experiences for

1. Dr. José P. Zagal's (jose.zagal@utah.edu) research explores the development of frameworks for describing, analyzing, and understanding games from a critical perspective to help inform the design of better games. He was honored as a Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) Distinguished Scholar and a Fellow of the Higher-Education Videogame Alliance (HEVGA) for his contributions to games research.

people to purchase and play), things might not even be perceived or understood as having ethical significance or ramifications.

The broad goal for this course is to help students reflect on and familiarize themselves with the idea that, as working professionals in a global industry, they may often find themselves in situations where their ethical judgement may be tested. This course is designed as an entry point into learning what it means to be an ethical professional in the game industry. Its two main learning goals include helping students:

- Identify, analyze, and think critically about ethical issues related to videogames, their role in culture and society, and the game industry writ large.
- Apply different moral philosophies to arrive at reasoned conclusions to ethical dilemmas and problems related to videogames, their role in culture and society, and the game industry writ large.

## COURSE CONTEXT

This course is currently required for students enrolled in the University of Utah's Bachelor of Science in Games. It is also offered as an optional elective for students interested in the Minor in Games. Furthermore, the course is cross-listed with the Department of Philosophy whose students often take it as an elective. Students from the Department of Philosophy are a welcome addition to the class because they often provide insights and commentary (in class discussions and by asking questions) that challenge many of the assumptions and presumed notions that students who have a passion and interest in games can be blind to.

That being said, most of the students in the class have experience playing games and an interest in creating them (i.e. working on the game industry). However, they have varying backgrounds and skills that correlate with the different interest areas of specialization, within games, that the University of Utah's program covers – e.g. programmers, artists, designers, etc. Thus, students exhibit a variety of preferences including (and often overlapping) creative, artistic, technical, and humanistic inclinations.

While the course is “introductory” to ethics and moral philosophy, it is not an introductory course in the program. As a 3000-level course, students are expected to be in the final years of their undergraduate degree when they take it. At this point game students already have experience creating and developing their own games, making many of the course topics and discussions less “abstract” and more practical or guided towards their own experience developing games.

Recently I have started to teach this class online as a livestream using Twitch.tv's streaming service. During the stream I share my screen (with the presentation view of my slides), my face in the bottom right side, and above that a record of the conversation happening in the chat channel. The class is conducted synchronously, with students encouraged to “come” to class on Twitch, watch the stream and interact directly with myself and each other. The reason for embedding the chat into the stream directly is because I then export the video to a Youtube channel for students to watch later (Twitch deletes videos automatically after two weeks). Thus, the chat conversations are preserved for future sessions which students also find useful for later studying. My use of Twitch's platform means that I cannot know (or guarantee) that people watching are only students enrolled in class, but this also

guarantees a certain level of anonymity to students who often feel more comfortable participating and sharing their opinions. Teaching in public – anyone can watch and participate – creates a slightly different environment from the regular classroom, I might have to be more careful about things I say and the context in which they could be used or misused. On the other hand, it has been a positive experience for many students who have informed me that they often watch class with a parent, friend or roommate, and this has led to positive and valuable discussions in their homes or residence.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

Due to the size of the University of Utah's game program, the course is primarily taught as a combination lecture and discussion class since class sections often have enrollments in excess of 100 hundred students. Most class sessions include a required reading (that should be read before the day's class) that sets the context of the day's lecture and discussion. The course is designed to inter-weave classical philosophy with big-picture issues and concerns related to the game industry as well as a practical view on examining what is currently happening in the industry. While the general topic and content of a particular class session may remain the same from one semester to the next – it is often recent game industry news stories and controversies that help set the context and seed the relevance and connections that exist between, say, the challenges of developing, marketing, and selling a modern videogame and philosophical inquiry from hundreds of years past.

The schedule below shows the topics, assigned reading for that day's class, as well as what assignments may be due. What is missing is a sense of how each class is usually "run". As mentioned above, the class is a combination of lecture and discussion (within the same session). At the beginning of each class session I spend a few minutes (usually not more than ten) addressing any questions or concerns students may have from the previous class. Often these come directly from student's class participation questions (see below). Prior to class I'll read them all and then select a few to discuss. Once this is done we begin talking directly about the day's topic. For this I have a Powerpoint slide deck. I rarely comment or discuss any of the readings directly in class, rather the slides complement the reading, provide additional context, or explain things from a perspective not covered or seen in the reading. I consider the slides as "principal content" with the readings in a secondary and complementary position. Depending on the topic, there might be as few as five or six slides or as many as 70. Those class sessions with fewer slides will be ones that have more time spent on discussion. For class discussions I make ample use of the whiteboards in the room generally synthesizing what students are commenting on from prompts provided in the slides. When teaching online, I'll read what students are typing in the chat and again synthesize their comments in an open text file that I'm editing/writing into in real time.

Over the years, the ratio of discussion to lecture has changed in favor of lecture. This is mostly due to the increase in class size (originally class sections have no more than 30 students). Intimate and engaged discussions in which all students can meaningfully participate are only feasible with smaller class sizes. That being said, I often try to encourage student participation via asking questions that all students can answer by, say, raising their hand, and then commenting on the results of everyone's participation.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

### Texts

This course has often used two required texts, one each for games and moral philosophy. The two required texts generally constitute most of the required readings, with additional ones provided electronically to the students.

1. The Videogames Ethics Reader by Jose Zagal (Ed), Cognella: San Diego (<https://titles.cognella.com/the-videogame-ethics-reader-9781609276355.html>)
2. The Elements of Moral Philosophy (Paperback, 6th Edition) by James Rachels and Stuart Rachels, McGraw Hill

Note that the Rachels & Rachels is a much older edition than the current one. This syllabus purposefully uses an older edition because, for this class, the newer editions' improvements are marginal while the increase in cost is most definitely not. Alternative titles for the Rachels & Rachels are easily found. Any "intro to moral philosophy" textbook that covers utilitarianism, deontological ethics/Kant, social contract theory, virtue ethics, relativism, and ethics of care will do.

However, for those instructors who would rather not have any assigned textbooks, I've provided a detailed schedule below that includes the assigned readings from the most recent version of the course. Here the readings are all either academic papers or individual chapters from different books. The information for each of the readings is detailed at the end of this chapter.

### Games

Students are required to play three games for an in-class assignment detailed below. Rather than require specific titles, it is usually best to provide a list of options and let the students choose the ones they would like to or have the means to play. The list changes every semester based on new releases that seem relevant as well as removing titles that have become "stale" (for the instructor, who gets tired of reading so many papers about the same game). The overall goal for the list of games is to provide a variety across genres and platforms (more is better). For each individual title, the overall criteria for selection is how easy it is to come up with four or five different topics about which the students can write their papers (details below). The list below represents some of the titles that have been on the selected list over the past few years. Each semester the list of games has 5-6 titles.

- 1979 Revolution: Black Friday
- 2064: Read Only Memories
- A Way Out
- Astrologaster
- Battlefield 1
- Detroit Become Human
- Disco Elysium
- Firewatch



- Four Last Things
- Here they Lie
- Ladykiller in a Bind
- Max Gentleman: Sexy Business!
- Not for Broadcast
- Not Tonight
- Prison Architect
- Telling Lies
- Tharsis
- The Red Strings Club
- Thief (2014 version)
- This is the Police
- Until Dawn
- Weedcraft Inc.
- Yakuza 0
- Zero Escape: Zero Time Dilemma

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

### Personal Reflections

Students identify a news story related to games and ethics that they've read or heard about in the last two months and write a 2-3 page paper (single-spaced, 12pt font). Their papers should:

1. Briefly describe what the story was about, making sure to refer to at least two different sources they have used to inform themselves on the story. If the source is online, they should include a link. If not, provide a citation.
2. Describe, in a few sentences, what the ethical concern/situation is (i.e. what is the "problem" that people seem to be concerned with and WHY is that a problem?)
3. Describe their personal opinions and feelings on the matter. They should describe what they think should happen or how the situation should be resolved and why.
4. Analyze the news story situation through the lens of one of the moral frameworks discussed in class (utilitarianism, Kantianism, ethics of care, social contract theory, or virtue ethics) (depending on the due date, this last part may have fewer options if the moral frameworks have not yet been covered)

Student's personal reflection papers should be longer than two pages but shorter than three. Single-spaced, 12-point font. Sample news stories that students have written about in the past include:

- Football (soccer) agents try to bribe developers of "Football Manager" game into giving better

scores to those player's they represent.

- Commercially released game has goals a player can only achieve if they return to the game over a year since the date in which you first played.
- Game publisher advertises its games with ads that purposefully misrepresent the game's actual gameplay and mechanics.
- Game publisher releases 6 different versions of a game where each version has different content that is exclusive to a specific retailer. There is no way to purchase a version of the game with all the exclusive content.

### **One-Page Ethical Analysis Paper (OPA)**

For the OPA students pick a game from a pre-approved list, play the game and write about playing it on a class online discussion board, and then write a one-page paper discussing something that is interesting about the game that has to do with ethics/morality. This assignment has 3 deliverables: three discussion board posts, a draft, and then a final paper. Students are not expected to finish/complete the game, simply to play it for at least 90 minutes (in total) over three different play sessions.

#### *Part 1: GameLog*

Students post a GameLog, or journal, of their gameplaying experience with the game they chose. They are required to play the game on three different calendar days for at least 30 minutes each time. For each play session, they post an entry describing the experience they had while playing the game including thoughts on the characters in the game, the narrative, and the gameplay (thus, this assignment requires writing 3 different entries each posted on a different day!). How does the game relate to the topics discussed in class? What ethical choices is the player presented with? How are these resolved? What values might be represented in the game? Students aren't required to write about the questions above, but they may help focus the reflection on their experience.

#### *Parts 2 and 3: Draft and Final of OPA*

In their OPA paper students describe and analyze an interesting moral issue or question related to the game they played. These papers are single spaced, use a 12 point font, and should not exceed one standard printed page. The brevity of the papers is a forcing function – students need to argue a point, and do so succinctly and with supporting evidence (from the game). I've experimented with different lengths, and the one-page has always resulted in the best papers. Below are the guidelines provided to students.

*Your paper must have a point. Talk about something that's interesting. If you can't say why someone should care to read your paper, you're in trouble.*

*"Say something interesting" is not exactly an objective measure. But, there are a few heuristics you can use to see if you're on a good track with your idea for your paper:*

1. *Are you interested in what you want to write about. If you're not, odds are that no one else will be. Find something that you're interested in writing about!*
2. *Talk to other people about your idea – are they interested in it? If they are, that's a good sign.*

3. *Have other people written about what you'll be writing about? If they have, that's a bad sign – your idea is less interesting because it's been "done".*
4. *Talk to me (the instructor) about your idea.*
5. *Finally, can you tell me what the point of your paper is? What are you trying to argue for? If you can't say this – you need to work on your idea more!*

*In order to make your point you need to provide detailed examples that support it. You should not describe the entire game and all of its features, only those things that are relevant to your point and that provide enough context for the reader to understand the point you're trying to make. If your examples are factually incorrect, you will get an "F"!*

*The paper should probably have these 4 sections:*

1. *Introduction (briefly identify and describe the game you're analyzing)*
2. *Describe your argument. For example:*
  1. *What is the moral issue you will discuss/analyze in the game?*
  2. *What moral question or issue are the game creators raising? What are they trying to express through the game they've made?*
  3. *Why is the thing you will talk about interesting?*
  4. *Support your argument*
  5. *Provide evidence (examples) and reasoning (logic) that supports your argument!*
3. *Conclusion (restate your argument)*

*Things that are RARELY Interesting in Past Student Papers*

- *This game is unethical because something unethical happens in the game.*
- *This unethical thing happens/appears in the game and it is interesting just because.*
- *This game has an ethical system. This is interesting.*
  - *Is there anything interesting/different/special/unusual about the ethical system? Talking about THAT could be interesting.*
- *This game has a tough choice, but the tough choice doesn't have anything to do with ethics/morality.*
- *I'm going to write a review of this game and tell you why it's good/bad.*

### **Midterm and Exam**

The Midterm and Exam are written tests with multiple questions whose answers, depending on the question, can be of varying length from a few sentences to a couple of paragraphs. Both tests feature questions about the assigned readings. The midterm exam always includes an ethical dilemma question that students are asked to examine through the lens of ethical frameworks covered in class. Commonly, due to the timing in the semester, students choose two frameworks to use from a selection: act utilitarianism, Kant, and social contract theory. For each framework used students must

answer the question at the end based on what their analysis using the framework suggests (rather than their own thoughts on the matter)

Two sample ethical dilemma questions from past exams:

1. You're the CEO of HotDampAir, a company that owns and manages an online storefront for digital games. As a company, you've been committed to supporting the creative expression of your clients who sell games using your platform and you have a strong reputation for supporting freedom of expression. Game creators support your willingness to stick up for (and publish) games whose subject matter is seen as problematic by the public. Your content policy allows for anything so long as it's legal – you want your consumers to choose what they want to purchase and there are plenty of games you currently sell that you have no interest in because of their subject matter. However, a new game appeared on your store yesterday called DailyRape. The game's "about" page says:

"Control a menacing serial killer rapist during an alien invasion. Verbally harass, kill, and rape women to progress the story. It's a dangerous lawless world! The aliens enjoy eating and raping humans but you're the deadliest rapist around."

In an update, the game's developer states:

"It's a niche game for a selective audience. Don't play if it's not your type of game. I've made a game I'd enjoy playing and there are others like me. 4% of the people are sociopaths. Also, you can enjoy the story even if you're not a pure sociopath."

The game has a mature rating and plenty of warnings regarding its content. Your platform also has reasonable age controls, so while not impossible, it is not easy for minors to find, purchase, and play the game. So far, sales figures for the game are really good – about 4% of your customers have either purchased the game or put it on their wishlist. While there has not been any press about the game you are worried that there might be a backlash against your company for allowing the game to be sold in the first place. This could negatively affect your company reputation as well as future sales. For example, it's likely that other publishers might choose to no longer sell their games on your platform and go to your competitors instead. Your lawyers have informed you that they do not think the game has any legal problems and is thus not in violation of your content policy. This is currently the only game of its kind on your platform.

### **Should you pull the game from the store?**

2. You're the CEO of Snowstorm, a company that owns and sells the game CardFighting. You also manage a successful professional worldwide tournament league for the game that is also a significant source of revenue. You've enjoyed huge commercial success with CardFighting and you've been expanding to other countries. Yesterday, during a livestream of a regional championship a player made a brief statement in support of a political movement occurring in HickHock, the region the player is from. While the HickHock political movement is not related to your game or company, it involves a lot of youth in the region who are fans of your game. It has also received a lot of supportive international media attention. The political movement, however, is viewed very negatively by Sina's government. You've

spent the last few years negotiating to allow your games to be sold and distributed in Sina. Sina's population represents an area for huge growth and incredible financial returns. You're worried that this player's statement may hurt or otherwise hinder your relationship with Sina's government. This could even result in your company being banned from doing business in Sina altogether.

You think this could be avoided by publicly, quickly, and decisively sanctioning the player. However, this could result in negative media attention followed by boycotts from your (now former) fans and players. This would also impact your bottom line and jeopardize the future of CardFighting's professional tournament. Furthermore, your company has a publicly available mission statement with 8 core values. The most relevant ones for this situation are:

- all voices MATTER: SnowStorm is successful because of the voices of our players. We respect our players and employees.
- think GLOBALLY: Everywhere on the planet there are people who play SnowStorm games. While respecting diversity, we work to grow and support our global gaming community.
- lead RESPONSIBLY: As a global leader in games, we're committed to making ethical decisions and always keeping our players in mind.

You're worried that sanctioning the player could be perceived by fans and employees as a betrayal of these values. This would also have negative impacts on your bottom line and harm your reputation in the industry.

### **Should you sanction the player?**

#### **Class Participation**

Class participation simply attempts to assess the amount of student's participation in class discussions. Asking questions in class is also considered favorably for class participation. Students are not required to participate in every class session. When this class is taught online, participation points are earned by students for answering questions or following specific prompts for posts on a class discussion board. While the prompts are often specific to that day's class and topic of discussion, the following prompts are often used (not all at the same time):

For today's class:

- Post a question you had but didn't get to ask.
- Ask for clarification about something you still don't understand.

For today's assigned reading answer two of the following questions:

- What is the main idea/concept the author(s) is trying to get across?
- What did you learn that you didn't expect, and why?
- What was confusing and why?

The first prompt above has proven to be quite helpful since I often pick the most common questions and answer them at the beginning of the next class.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

- 6 pts : Three (3) Personal Reflections
- 33 pts: Three (3) One-Page Ethical Analysis Papers (11 pts each)
  - Part 1: GameLog (3 pts each)
  - Part 2: Draft (3 pts each)
  - Part 3: Final (5 pts each)
- 20 pts: Midterm
- 21 pts: Exam
- 20 pts: Class Participation

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

The outline below is for a regular 16 week semester-long class in the United States. Although the schedule below has 27 class sessions, there are often “missed” days due to holidays, mid-semester-breaks and such. Also, I sometimes dedicate a class session or two to do a “review” for the midterm and/or final exam. The calendar is quite flexible (many sessions can be shuffled around as needed) and it is easy to add additional class sessions (or remove some if there is less time available). The order below is what I’ve found works best in terms of general continuity of topics (e.g. covering violence in games after utilitarianism because most popular discourse about violence in games focuses on the perceived negative effects violent games may have on their players – a consequentialist argument!).

### **Class 1: Introduction**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Introduction to the course, overview of the syllabus
- Examination of ethical claims about videogames found online (twitter, reddit, etc.)

### **Class 2: Morality and Games**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- What is morality? What is ethics?
- Different types of arguments
- Common bad arguments (logical fallacies)
- Detailed analysis of a moral argument seen in a tweet (class activity)

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned readings are (Tännsjö, 2008) and (Zagal, 2011)

- Personal Reflection #1

### **Class 3: Consequentialism**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Act and rule utilitarianism including strengths and common critiques of both.
- Problem of moral luck.
- How to analyze a problem from a utilitarian perspective
- Utilitarian analysis of a moral dilemma in game development

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Gensler, 2011)

### **Class 4: Power of Media**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Overview: What are the “consequences” (effects) of media?
- Discussion of “Does media have any power over us?”
- Evolution of advertising for the game Evony
- Cultural/societal effects – cultural pollution
- Examples of bad moral media effects arguments

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Melzer & Holl, 2020)
- OPA #1, Part 1 (GameLog)

### **Class 5: Playing Columbine**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- In class screening/viewing of documentary Playing Columbine (<http://www.playingcolumbine.com/>), a film made by the creator of Super Columbine Massacre RPG! (SCMRPG) about his experiences surrounding the release and impact of the game

### **Class 6: Discussion of Super Columbine Massacre RPG!**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Overview of the different “causes” attributed to the Columbine massacre in 1999
- Class discussion of both the documentary and the game itself. Discussion questions include:
  - Is it ok to make a game about the Columbine massacre in which you play as the shooters?

- Did SCMRPG play a significant role in the Dawson College shooting?
- What role do violent games have in real world violence?
- Are games lesser/worse/incapable/not as good as other media when it comes to certain subject matter? (e.g. school shootings)
- Are there certain topics/subject matter that should be off-limits for games?

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Sci & Ott, 2017)
- OPA#1, Part 2 (Draft)

### **Class 7: Violence in Games**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Discussion of the current state of knowledge in media effects about games and violence
- Discussion of the moral and methodological challenges of doing this kind of research

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Gunter, 2016)

### **Class 8: Kant**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Kantianism
- Categorical Imperative (including 2nd formulation)
- How to analyze a problem from a Kantian perspective
- Kantian analysis of a moral dilemma in game development

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Graham, 2011)

### **Class 9: Cheating**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- History of “cheating” in videogames (e.g. easter eggs, strategy guides, codes)
- Differences in social definitions of cheating in videogames

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Consalvo, 2007)



## **Class 10: Relativism**

### *Topics/Activities*

- Cultural Relativism as a moral framework
- Cultural differences across different moral questions (Pew Global Research study)
- Problems as a moral framework for moral reasoning
- Value of challenging assumptions/biases about questions that may not be moral in nature, but rather the result of cultural preferences

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Rachels & Rachels, 2015)
- OPA #1, Part 3 (Final)

## **Class 11: Social Contract**

### *Topics/Activities*

- Hobbes and social contract theory
- Rights and duties
- Collaboration
- How to analyze a problem from a social contract theory perspective
- Analysis of a game development moral dilemma

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Lawhead, 2013)

## **Class 12: Intellectual Property and Fair Use**

### *Topics/Activities*

- Origins and rationale for the existence of Intellectual Property laws
- Piracy
- Copyright (in the US)
- Fair Use
- Overview of variety of IP-related legal questions and controversies about videogames (patents, cloning, reverse engineering, etc.)

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Quinn, 2009), until page 191.
- OPA#2, Part 1 (GameLog)

### **Class 13: Prosumers / User-Generated Content**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Definition of prosumer
- Different ways that prosumers have been integral to videogame development and culture (e.g. mods, modding culture, new genres from mods)
- Ownership and moral rights over creations

### **Class 14: Censorship and Moral Panics**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Brief history of game-related moral panics (e.g. D&D, Pac-Man)
- Differences between regulation, market regulation, censorship, self-censorship
- Ratings and regulation in videogames (US, Europe, Japan)

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (O'Holleran, 2010)
- OPA#2, Part (Draft)

### **Class 15: Virtue Ethics**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Virtue theories (as a concept)
- Virtues, Eudaimonia
- Discussion of violent videogame play as potentially virtue-less (harmful to character)

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Thiroux & Krasemann, 2012)
- Midterm

### **Class 16: Ethical Player**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Playing "well".
- Meaningful choices that are inconsequential
- Defining and practicing moral character in games

#### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Consalvo et al., 2019)

## **Class 17: Ethics of Competition**

### *Topics/Activities*

- Selfishness of competition
- Discussion of competition at highest levels (Olympics, esports, etc.)
- Transformative competition as driving force to bring out best of people

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Nguyen & Zagal, 2016)
- Personal reflection #2

## **Class 18: Ethical Frameworks in Games**

### *Topics/Activities*

- Games as systems that encourage/discourage certain kinds of behaviors
- Examples and discussion of explicit moral systems in games (e.g. Red Dead Redemption, Fable series, etc.)

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Casas-Roma & Arnedo-Moreno, 2019)
- OPA#3, Part 3 (Final)

## **Class 19: Ethics of Care**

### *Topics/Activities*

- Brief overview of feminism
- Ethics of Care
- Premises of ethics of care in videogames
  - Caring for virtual characters
  - Caring for other players

### *Assignments*

- Assigned readings are (Slote, 2007) and (Murphy & Zagal, 2011)

## **Class 20: GTFO**

### *Topics/Activities*

- In-class screening of GTFO documentary (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3891970/>) about sexism and women in videogames from casual players, to developers and e-sports athletes

### *Assignments*

- OPA#3, Part 1 (GameLog)

### **Class 21: Representation and Discussion of GTFO**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Overview of sample reviews of GTFO found online
- Discussion reviews common discussion questions include
  - Why do these negative reviewers seem to take it so personally?
  - Is there a difference between “trash talk” and “harassment” and how can you tell?
  - What do you think has changed in games since the documentary was released?
  - What responsibility do we have (as players)?

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Tang et al., 2020)

### **Class 22: Professional Ethics**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Definitions of professional ethics
- Importance of professional ethics
- Discussion of various examples from headlines. Common questions include:
  - What would have been an ethical response to this situation?
  - Was this behavior ethical or not?

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Kade, 2016)
- OPA#3, Part 2 (Draft)

### **Class 23: Author Abuse**

#### *Topics/Activities*

- Relationship between designer and player(s)
- Different types of potentially abusive game design (e.g. embarrassment, frustration, pain, anger, lying to the player)

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Wilson & Sicart, 2010)

## **Class 24: Dark Patterns**

### *Topics/Activities*

- Introduction to game design patterns
- Ethical/unethical commonly used game design choices
- Different types of dark patterns in game design
- Discussion of potential examples of dark patterns in games

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Zagal et al., 2013)
- Personal Reflection #3

## **Class 25: Business Models**

### *Topics/Activities*

- History of salient business models in games industry
- Detailed analysis of recent implementation of lootboxes in AAA game (including press and fan reactions) and current situation

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Alha et al., 2014)

## **Class 26: Environmental Ethics and Sustainability**

### *Topics/Activities*

- Moral responsibility for environment
- Sustainability
- Representations of sustainability in videogames
  - Sustainability as content/theme
  - Sustainability as system/process
- Salient environmental impacts of videogame industry (e.g. e-waste, energy consumption, rare earth minerals)

### *Assignments*

- Assigned reading is (Milburn, 2014)
- OPA#3, Part 3 (Final)

## Class 27: War Ethics

### Topics/Activities

- Ethics of war (history of)
- Just war theory
- Different perspectives for analyzing ethics of videogames with representations of war

### Assignments

- Assigned reading is (Zagal, 2017)

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

- It helps to follow a few game industry news sites for stories and events that you can tie into the course content. I also often use these (after tweaking the details) as dilemma questions for the midterm.
- When choosing games to use for the OPA assignments try to make sure the games are not shorter than five or six hours. While some students will play the game for the minimum amount of time, others will go above and beyond. While I've never required or expected students finish or complete a game for class, if the game is too short they'll finish it on their first play session which can then cause them trouble if they don't want to play the game again.
- It pays to "stay on top" of the class participation assignment – read what students write or post since it will help you quickly identify problems in students understanding that you can then address at the beginning of the next class.
- I make all of the old midterms and exams available to students so they can see the kinds of questions I ask. I'll always re-use old questions to reward those students that read them and/or otherwise used them to study.
- Same as above, but with example OPA papers from previous semesters. Obviously this means I can no longer use that game.
- I try really, really, hard not to confuse what my personal thoughts or opinions might be on a certain issue or topic but rather to emphasize how we can use the different moral frameworks to examine these questions and issues. This is not a course about convincing students that certain things are right or wrong, but rather about giving them tools for figuring that out for themselves. I've found that this approach is helpful for students who come from different backgrounds (cultural, social, religious) and who might otherwise be wary of being "brainwashed" in or by class.
- I tried a Two-Page Analysis paper once (instead of the OPA). It did not work. The main problem was that students' papers saw a huge increase in "fluff" and much weaker arguments and reasoning. They "reverted" to writing about their opinions of the games they played and describing them, rather than writing about a single interesting ethical thing in the game.
- The OPAs do get better over the course of the semester. The iteration (draft and final) as well as the doing the same assignment really helps.

- I encourage having frank, open, meta-discussions with the students about the assignments. For example, about the things they will find challenging about the OPA assignments (finding something interesting to write about, writing about it succinctly in only one page).
- I have a document that I use to collect news stories and information on games for using in class. I also grab screencaps of things I see on twitter and other social media. This has proven invaluable when it comes to updating slides, looking for ideas for midterm questions and deciding on games to use in class. I end up collecting way more resources than I can use in class – but I get to use them during the semester as resources students enjoy engaging with (“hey, look what I found!”)

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

I have been teaching this course for more than a dozen years. While the examples used in the class have changed significantly, the core content and topics have remained largely unchanged. Sadly, headlines and articles from specialized gaming press (and mainstream too) continue to provide a rich variety of examples from which to ground class discussions. I don’t foresee that changing significantly over time. Mostly this is because things have not changed (in the class) despite rapturous changes in the game industry – I’ve been teaching this class over the rise (and fall?) of social gaming (e.g. Facebook games), the rise of indiegames, the VR and AR hype(?) bubble, and the widescale adoption of mobile gaming. All of these have provided ample things to talk about and discuss in class over the years as student interest has waxed and waned. Discussions regarding the annoyances of game “spam” clogging people’s Facebook feeds has given way to discussions about the annoyances of lootboxes. While I cannot claim to know what the next big “annoyance” will be – I’m confident that the same ethical frameworks and tools will prove productive in their analysis.

The same is also true for the games students choose to play for the papers – many of the games I had students play in the past are now “classics” that students may have heard about. Fortunately, it is much easier nowadays to find new and exciting titles for students to analyze. I don’t expect this to get harder – in fact over the years I’ve increasingly used fewer AAA titles and more independent ones, simply because they’re cheaper and more accessible to most students.

That being said, this is not a class that can remain static for long. The game industry is ever changing and evolving so it requires continuous updates and “freshening up” in terms of readings and examples. Students have also often asked for a followup class that would allow the exploration of additional moral frameworks (e.g. non-Western moral philosophy) and allow greater depth for some of the topics already covered in class.

Finally, since I’ve now had the experience of teaching the course online a few times, I have realized that the format I use for teaching online – livestreamed on Twitch with students participating pseudonymously in the chat – has led to a different flavor of interaction. I find that students are much more likely to engage in discussions with each other, often from points of disagreement, than has been the case in the face-to-face version of the class. There are clearly social inhibition/disinhibition factors at play here that I think work in favor of the class – more reasoned discussion is good. I’d rather students engage in engaged discussions with each other than simply sit in class grumbling about how someone else believes something that is “obviously wrong” from their perspective. This

experience has led me to consider how to incorporate other avenues for participation in class that allow students to participate and converse while maintaining a certain amount of anonymity.

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## CHAPTER 4.

### GAMING AND HISTORY (HIST 381)

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GRAND VIEW UNIVERSITY

**Course Title:** HIST 381: Gaming and History

**Course College/School:** Grand View University

**Course Department/Program:** History

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 3

**Course Length:** 15 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face; Hyflex

**Course Keywords:** History; Game Studies; Public History; Cultural Studies; Nostalgia

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

This course will examine the popular perception of the past as told through video games. As the video game industry continues to expand its reach, it increasingly becomes one of the vectors for how people envision the world in the past. This class will use an in-depth study of a single video game, combined with literary, historical and archaeological data from the time period in question, to look at how the past is constructed, populated, and distorted through games. Core Outcome Met: Written Communication, Oral Communication, Vocation.

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Every fall semester this course engages with a single video game and uses it as a focus to study a period of history—both the actual time period, and the pop culture mythohistory that surrounds it. The primary purpose is to engage with the presentation of the past in pop culture and how that presentation reflects present political, social, and cultural concerns, while also learning about the actual history it is presenting. For example, in Fall 2020, the class was on *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*, and this was the description of the mission:

#### **Wolfenstein**

World War II remains a turning point in American history, the aftermath of which began this

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country's time as a superpower, the Cold War, and the development of a mythos of the United States, the Greatest Generation, etc. It also marked the beginning of a mythohistorical period in US history, which we look back on as some type of "Golden Age" in the 1950s, when returning servicemen found jobs, built houses, went to college, had families, and created a Leave It To Beaver-esque reality. All of that, of course, is myth and nostalgia, not history. The 1950s were a time of covert war around the world, a time of intense racism and violence at home, and a time of intense paranoia in the form of the "Red Scare" that led to violence and discrimination against people of color, LGBTQA communities, communists (or any suspected leftist), and other. The American myth has, like all myths, always been a mix of nostalgia and propaganda. *Wolfenstein II* plays around with this mythos by building an alternate vision of the 1960s and World War II, where the Nazis win and America is filled with both rebels—predominantly groups oppressed in the United States in the post-war period—and collaborators. We will use this fictional Americana to talk about American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the history we don't like to tell because it ruins our mythology, and the way video games manipulate, teach, and use history.

*Wolfenstein*, while set in an alternate 1960s, is still grounded in a historical set of events that can be discussed—World War II, the Nazis, and, despite the alternate history, America in World War II. This becomes slightly trickier when engaging in more fantastic scenarios. In Fall 2018, the class was on *Skyrim*, and used this description:

### **Skyrim**

A vast, open world of Nordic beauty—mist-enshrouded peaks, frozen swamps, wildflower covered plains, rich and vibrant cities... dragons? Trolls? Witches? Giants? Video games like *Skyrim* allow players to put themselves in the role of a nameless hero, fight great evil, slay monsters, explore ruins, and alter the course of history. They are, of course, fictional stories, set in worlds designed to entertain and coax players to purchase, play, and return to again and again. But these rich worlds do not spring out of the ether. The designers of the game dig into the richness of the literary, historical, and mythical past to create not only the storylines but to flesh out the world they are building. In the case of *Skyrim*, that world is one defined by pseudo-Vikings, an Empire built on pseudo-Roman aesthetics, and a plot that pulls from a variety of northern European medieval legends and sagas. Video games are one window into the way we perceive the past—though this is a fantasy game, not a history one, it is based on both the reality of the Middle Ages and what is called "medievalism," the perception and recasting of the past in the modern day. This course will involve the dualities of playing a fantasy video game while discussing the medieval aesthetics from art, literature, and history that permeate the world.

Both versions follow the same core mission—examine the pop culture depiction of a time period, as remediated through a video game, and then problematize both that depiction and the version taught in K-12 (or ignored in K-12) education by studying in-depth primary and secondary historical sources. At my university, there are three main course objectives. Here are the descriptions from the *Wolfenstein* course:

- **Written Communication:** Two of the assignments are written papers, research-driven formal essays that you will turn in and will be assessed, commented on, and returned to you FOR CORRECTION. You will then revise the papers, turn them back in, and only then receive a grade. The reason for this is two-fold—whatever your career, you will have to be able to write,

be it reports or memos or arguments or emails or whatever. Being able to do research, condense that into written text, and have that research make an argument is a universal skill. The second reason is that writing is a skill, a craft, that NO ONE does perfectly. It is work, and we work at it. You will edit, because all texts need to be sent through multiple drafts, mine included. We will practice this together.

- Oral Communication: Two of assignments for the class are oral presentations with visual aides, research-driven reports that will be presented before the class with a question-and-answer session to follow. In terms of actual structuring and assignment, this assessment is one of the cores of the class, for the purpose of teaching students how to incorporate historical knowledge into an argument, use it effectively, and defend their positions using factual knowledge.
- Vocation: The final reflection, and a good deal of the in-class discussion, will center around the role of both historians and game designers, their interaction, and the role of a historian as a public persona. The goal is to showcase history as a utilitarian discipline that prepares its practitioners to go out into the world with critical thinking, reading, writing, and speaking skills, and to use their ability to analyze complex data and come to conclusions outside of the confines of a scholarly paper. It can be applied to popular culture artifacts, as done here, but in any realm. This will largely relate to vocational pathways as public historians writ large, but also to those interested in game design as a field.

## COURSE CONTEXT

The course was originally conceived of as the full-length version of a project I'd used in a 200-level course—the idea was to examine a video game and how it represented the Middle Ages via fantasy, and then expand that. The first run of the class was a 300-level course designed for history majors and other interested in it, using a fantasy video game to talk about the Middle Ages (I am the only pre-modernist at my school). The course was even more successful than I expected, and the feedback for the class was that using the medium to explore a historical period was something they would like to see for more time periods. As a result, the course now switches between the two tracks in our department—American history and World history—every semester, and is going from once every two years to every fall. It is designed for history majors, though it also serves some of the general education requirements—this encourages students to choose to take it if they want to, but does not bring in many students just for general education purposes.

The current student load is approximately a third history majors, a third game design majors, and a third other students interested in the course idea. By and large they are familiar with video games, though with a wide range of backgrounds; the game design students especially, but video games are so mainstream that almost everyone has played games before, and usually the third that are taking it just out of interest do so because they like video games. Because of the topic and course level, most of the students are in their third or fourth year of college—in fall 2020, for example, of the 18 students in the class, two were second years, the rest were fourth years or above. This means, in practical terms, that more demanding reading and writing loads work substantially better.

As a result of having predominantly students in their final year, this was the course that was easiest to switch from face to face to hybrid. By and large, students participating via Zoom did a good job

communicating both with me and their classmates, and the combination of in-class discussion and at-home work went relatively smoothly. With a different group of students this would likely be more work—break out rooms on Zoom, more VoiceThread or discussion board use in the LMS, etc.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

When I designed this course, I wanted to build a space of discussion and reflection on how much of our understanding of the past is mediated through popular culture artifacts rather than history. I was anticipating 8-10 history majors in a seminar-style format. I teach at a small private college, so our courses are capped at twenty; this semester, even with the class full, the seminar format still more or less works. There is usually a short lecture and an audio-visual presentation—film, music, game play—before it becomes conversation about the readings and game level and their connections. Given the varying levels of historical background or game experience of the students, running through the basics of the level and also the background readings is a must at the start of class; it tends to run better on a Tuesday/Thursday format as a result. This semester, as a result of the pandemic, the class is being taught in Hyflex—so there is both an in-person and Zoom component every day, which could allow for scaling up, and a fully online asynchronous component, that has been working relatively well and could also scale up to a larger class. The problem with these models is that they require more work to allow discussion to function—break out rooms on Zoom, functional chatroom—using Slack or Discord or some equivalent—for the fully online.

The fundamental goal of the course has always been to show students that video games are a text worth interrogating, like any other, and that popular culture is also a historical and historiographical artifact. As a result, the discussion, especially when it wanders off topic, is incredibly valuable. The assignments matter less in terms of skill building, other than research, than they do in terms of possibilities and research ideas. The hope is that they can see how history interacts with media and how popular culture uses and abuses history and historical tropes in building worlds and ideologies; if the class accomplishes that, then it has been successful.

In concrete terms, my pedagogical focus on teaching has two aims: contextualization and instructional conversation (<https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/five-standards-of-effective-pedagogy>). My goal is to provide structure around the video games to give context to both the historical period the game is set in and some context for the sociopolitical circumstances the game was made in—but since interpretation and reader response are individualized, in-class discussion is meant to be lightly guided and to allow students to develop ideas in conversation with each other and the professor. While there is skills training—especially in written and oral communication—I also use Jesse Stommel’s idea of “ungrading” in the way I assess (<https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>). The hope is to encourage more difficult and challenging—and therefore rewarding—projects, and it has so far worked very well.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

Every semester, there is a required video game—I play them on the PC, but the students are encouraged to get it for whatever system they have access to and are most comfortable with. This is a required text, but because the video game component also requires hardware, I have been flexible in the past with students who have marginal computing ability or lack access to consoles; especially in

the midst of the pandemic, where playing it at a friend's is not safe. Those students have watched approved walkthrough videos, and have to include in their assignments notes about the experiential difference of watching versus playing. Alongside this there are usually 3 required books. For *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* ([https://store.bethesda.net/store/bethesda/en\\_US/pd/ThemeID.39243600/productID.5117331400](https://store.bethesda.net/store/bethesda/en_US/pd/ThemeID.39243600/productID.5117331400)) in Fall 2020, alongside the video game, they were assigned Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (<http://www.kellyjbaker.com/writing/gospel-according-to-the-klan/>); David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (<https://www.davidgrann.com/book/killers-of-the-flower-moon/>); and China Miéville, *The Last Days of New Paris* (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/225107/the-last-days-of-new-paris-by-china-mieville/>). For *Skyrim* ([https://store.bethesda.net/store?Action=pd&Env=BASE&Locale=en\\_US&SiteID=bethesda&productID=5072631000](https://store.bethesda.net/store?Action=pd&Env=BASE&Locale=en_US&SiteID=bethesda&productID=5072631000)) in Fall 2018, they were assigned *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* by J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien (<https://www.amazon.com/Beowulf-Translation-Commentary-J-R-R-Tolkien/dp/0544570308>), *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness*, ed. and tr. By Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/310572/ibn-fadlan-and-the-land-of-darkness-by-ibn-fadlan/>), and *The Penguin Book of the Undead* by Scott G. Bruce (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/318729/the-penguin-book-of-the-undead-by-edited-by-scott-g-bruce/>). Future iterations will follow the same pattern—a video game at the core, a trio of required books, and then weekly readings posted on Blackboard. At a school with a larger e-book collection at the library, more required texts, available without extra cost to the students, would be advisable.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Depending on the semester, there have been some modular major projects. All of them require an engagement with both the video game and the historical context of the time period they are portraying.

On a day-to-day basis, depending on the format, the expectation varies. In a normal face-to-face semester, they turn in three comments and three questions from the day's reading as both a check-in and as a conversation starter. They are small stakes, freebie points, usually around 20% of the total grade as a way of allowing participation for students who are may or may not like speaking in front of the class. In a hy-flex or asynchronous format, every week has a number of available assignments, each worth ten points, with large possibilities of extra credit depending on how many they do. In both formats, there are also weekly assignments, basically short reflections—an audio log or a written reflection, either five minutes of audio or a page or two linking the week's readings together. In the sample syllabus below, those would be in the modules—3 to 5 separate assignments, each with a folder of starting points for research, usually videos, online articles, and links from the university databases/

There have always been a pair of earlier assignments, again lower stakes, on how to write about video games and history. These combine a short research paper on the first parts of the assigned video games, either the first main quest section in a long video game or, in a shorter one, somewhere around the first third of the game. The paper can focus on a plot point, on part of the setting, on enemies or allies in game, it can be about a conversation you they overhear in game, anything at all. They write and then present a short research paper focused on that aspect and the bits of history, literature,

culture, archaeology, etc. that inform it. The paper should be 3-5 pages long, double-spaced, with citations. They then present it—in hy-flex or asynchronous, via a pre-recorded video presentation on Zoom or uploaded to YouTube, 5-8 minutes long with visual aids. In person, I have had them do a poster presentation of that work, also presenting it for 5-10 minutes and then keeping them up so people in the class could circulate and look at them after the presentations.

The main research project for this class is a recorded research commentary on the video game at the core of the class. Students choose some aspect of the game, record a play-through, and then overlay a twenty minute research presentation mixing history with the video game. For Wolfenstein, topics could include (but were certainly not limited to) a discussions of white nationalist narratives of the KKK and other collaborators, the depiction of post-nuclear New York and the way that feels like other 1950s nuclear apocalyptic fictions, or researching specific resistance groups and their models. For Skyrim, topics could include a discussions of white nationalist narratives of the medieval past intermixed with the introduction to the Stormcloak movement, a narrative of “monsters” like Grendel in medieval Germanic cultures while fighting their way through a troll cave, a deep research presentation of the problems of medieval archives while looking through a book collection in the Wizard’s Guild of Winterfell, a half-spoken, half-performed presentation comparing troubadour culture in medieval France with the Bard’s College in Solitude, or a wide variety of other topics. Students met with the professor in advance to discuss topics and sources for the presentation, and present their ideas to the class for discussion in advance. These recorded research presentations were uploaded to a private YouTube channel and the class watched them together at the end of the semester, followed by a question and answer session.

The final assignment is a reflection that all students turn in, in the form of a personal narrative. Throughout the course of the class, we explore the intersection between history and popular culture, and the role of a historian and/or game designer in recreating, exploring, challenging, and interpreting the past for the public. The final assignment is a reflective paper, examining not only the students’ personal experience in this class, the engagement with video games and gaming culture, but the relationship between history and the modern world: what is the role of a historian, and, specifically, you as a historian, in the public sphere? Many of our class discussions will have built towards this. The final product should be 5 pages in length of personal narrative OR 15 minutes of audio-visual reflection, examining the nature of public discourse, your own research interests in history (or otherwise, if you are not a history major), and the relationship between the contemporary world and the past. We will be discussing this project throughout the semester. This reflection, and the class discussion that lead into it throughout the semester, are meant to participate in the vocational aspect of this course and Grand View University’s mission—how does one identify their calling(s)? How do they connect their interest in history and video games to the world around them? So much of the way we engage with the past and present comes through our consumption of media, but by being casual consumers or producers we are passively accepting and perpetuating viewpoints that may or may not be reflective of reality. If the student is coming from Game Studies, there are ethical obligations to represent the past “accurately,” or at least not repeating dualistic worldviews, jingoistic rhetoric, or violent stereotypes (see the pro-colonialism narrative of Mass Effect: Andromeda as one example). If they are coming from History, the cold dualism of good-versus-evil of a Wolfenstein, or, worse, the murky historicity of any of the Assassin’s Creed games, divorcing historical reality from its presentation—rendering stark, counterfactual ideas of the past as the best known narrative. This

final reflection, and the in-class discussions, will pull apart these two layers, how history and media interact and relate and what your role, as a historian, game designer, game critic, or, simply, college-educated individual, is in the interpretation, production, and consumption of these materials.

Depending on the course level and the expectations, a ten page research paper has also been assigned, linked to the game presentation. When the course objectives switched in 2019, I added a long-form research paper in. It was connected to the game presentation in the same way that the shorter first assignments linked their paper and presentations, just in a larger form for both.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

### Fall 2020, Wolfenstein II:

- Weekly Assignments: 20 x 10 points=200
- Level Paper: 1 essay x 100 points=100
- Level Presentation: 1 presentation x 100 points=100
- Americana in Video Games: 1 essay x 200 points=200
- Game Presentation: 1 video x 200 points=200
- Final Reflection: 1 project x 200 points=200

### Fall 2018, Skyrim:

- Participation: 0.7 x 28 days =20
- Weekly Write-Ups: 2 x 10=20
- First Quest Presentation: 10 x 1=10
- Poster Presentation: 10 x 1=10
- Game Presentation: 30 x 1=30
- Final Reflection: 10 x 1=10

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

Example: Wolfenstein II

### Week 1: Introductions: Why Video Games and History?

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Introduction to the syllabus
- Class introductions—large group discussion
- Introductory conversation about games—brief lecture on use of pop culture for historical analysis, examples from literature and film, then discussion about games they've played, portrayal of the past, artifacts of the time they were made



### Assignments

- Module 1: Introduction

### **Week 2: World War II, Nostalgia, and Memory**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Watch beach sections from *The Longest Day* and *Saving Private Ryan*—talk about depictions of World War II, how it's primarily Europe, primarily D-Day onwards, and if less glamorous now than in the 60s, still heroic
- Discuss myth of the Good War and the concept that goes into the "Greatest Generation"—small group into large group discussion
- List what they actually know about America in the first half of the 20th c. and then discuss the gaps in that experience—make a list of groups, topics, regions left untaught

### Assignments

- Module 2: The 'Good War' and the 'Greatest Generation'

Play: *The Reunion*

### **Week 3: Lindbergh and the Des Moines Speech**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Listen to Lindbergh's 1941 Des Moines Speech (<http://www.charleslindbergh.com/americanfirst/speech.asp>)
- Discuss anti-Semitism in America pre-World War II and the America First Movement—use Lindbergh as a focal point, see what they know about him, and then point out the widespread nature of anti-Semitism in American and European society

### Assignments

- Module 3: America First Movement

Read: *Gospel According to the Klan*, Introduction-Ch. 2

- Play: *Manhattan*

### **Week 4: Homosexuality in early 20th c America**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Read and discuss "How WWI Sparked the Gay Rights Movement," <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/forgotten-origins-modern-gay-rights-movement-wwi-180963283/>
- Discuss excerpts from Allan Bérubé's *Coming Out Under Fire*—especially the sections of creating medical and psychological structures to penalize and condemn homosexuality—in

the context of the treatment of the LGBTQIA community in America from World War 1 to the Stonewall Riot

#### *Assignments*

- Module 4: Discrimination against LGBTQIA Americans
- Read: Gospel According to the Klan, Ch. 3-5
- Play: Old Secrets

#### **Week 5: The Ghosts of Reconstruction**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Discuss the First Klan and Reconstruction briefly—use text and pictures of specific encounters like the White League in New Orleans and end with the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871
- Seminar-style discussion of The Gospel According to the Klan
- Discuss the conversations and world building in the “Roswell” level—go through walkthrough videos of specific details, like the café conversation that includes detail of slavery brought back to America

#### *Assignments*

- Module 5: The Klan
- Read: Gospel According to the Klan, Ch. 6-end
- Play: Roswell
- DUE: Level Paper

#### **Week 6: Reservations and Death Camps**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Look through maps of Native lands from 1492 through 1945 and maps of reservations as a class and give brief lecture on treatment of Native Americans by Euro-American settlers
- Discuss the “Western genre” in the US and in Germany—use examples of Karl May’s work
- Go through details of link between US system of reservations and Nazi ideas of ethnic homelands—reference John Toland’s biography of Hitler on this
- Seminar discussion of the first part of Killers of the Flower Moon

#### *Assignments*

- Module 6: Native American Genocides
- Read: Killers of the Flower Moon Chronicle 1
- Play: Monster
- Due: Level Presentation

## **Week 7: Eugenics**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Look at examples of eugenicists in America from your region
- Discuss the Eugenics Record Office, Galton, Kellogg—and discuss the implications of the quest for eugenics, namely the forced sterilizations in the US and link that explicitly to the Nazi vision of eugenics and the death camps

### *Assignments*

- Module 7: Eugenics
- Read: Killers of the Flower Moon Chronicle 2
- Play: A New Suit

## **Week 8: Political Oppression**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Lecture on anarchist violence in late 19th/early 20th century US—the Wall Street cart bombing among others—with pictures and specific figures. Then lecture on socialist and communist parties in the US in the first half of the 20th century.
- Discuss Horton Boone’s “communist” cell and lack of detail, before getting into post-World War II leftist organization
- Watch part of The Weather Underground (<http://www.theweatherunderground.info/main.html>) and discuss

### *Assignments*

- Module 8: Communists and Anarchists
- Read: Killers of the Flower Moon Chronicle 3
- Play: New Orleans

## **Week 9: Racism in the West**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Lecture on the Chinese Exclusion Act and its origins and impact, leading into a discussion about contemporary anti-Chinese rhetoric and racism in America. We connected this explicitly to Covid-19 and the rhetoric about China as a rival/enemy of the US
- Talk about the groups and regions left out of Wolfenstein (entire West Coast, among others)

### *Assignments*

- Module 9: Chinese Exclusion Act
- Play: Venus

## **Week 10: Japanese Internment**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Watch December 7th: The Movie (full version, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrkIM5CObC0>) and discuss in class
- Discuss Japanese Internment camps, way they are taught, what they say about America then AND now—use images of facilities

### *Assignments*

- Module 10: American Concentration Camps
- Play: Lost at Sea

## **Week 11: Zoot Suit Riots**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Watch Zoot Suit Riots: Los Angeles Erupts in Violence (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/zoot/>) and discuss
- Look at and discuss other episodes of anti-Hispanic violence, including the Porvenir Massacre in 1918

### *Assignments*

- Module 11: Anti-Hispanic Racism
- Play: The Ausmerzer

## **Week 12: Resistances**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Discuss the French Resistance and what resistance means
- Look at different branches of the Resistance and at Vichy—what ideologies, tactics, activities they engaged in. Discuss what something like this would look like in the United States
- Seminar discussion of The Last Days of New Paris
- What was the Resistance like in Wolfenstein compared to real resistance movements?—Small group discussion leading into large group

### *Assignments*

- Module 12: French Resistance
- Read: The Last Days of New Paris Ch. 1-3
- Play: Epilogue

## **Week 13: Alternative World War IIs**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Discuss use of alternative histories, look at examples of “what if Nazis won” books, comics, movies, etc.
- Show examples from previous Wolfenstein games
- Wrap up discussion on why we focus on the Nazis in video games

### *Assignments*

- Module 13: Fiction and History
- Read: The Last Days of New Paris, Ch. 4-end
- Due: Research Paper

## **Week 14: Work Week**

## **Week 15: Presentation Week**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Watch presentations, Q&A live or via Zoom after each one•

### *Assignments*

- Due: Game Presentations AND Final Reflection

## **COURSE BEST PRACTICES:**

The first time I taught this class, the game was the core of the course—the class was about the video game, and everything was scaffolded around it. It was certainly a fun way to teach—but now, I am much more likely to pick a core theme that the game represents, and make that theme, rather than the game, the core. The video game is a hook; pick a good one, one that will entice students to take the course, but more importantly one that allows for complex discussions of major themes within a specific slice of history. The core of the class is the theme and the time period—figuring out games that allow you to teach those things is the key, but then focusing on the themes and time period is the class. This also helps in teaching students how to read a video game as a text, something that in the first couple of weeks need a lot of explanation. How to critically “read” video games requires an initial workload—this is the same mechanism as teaching pop culture in literature or film studies, reaching graphic novels, etc., but it is important to do the work. I am still figuring out the best ways to do it, and some of that depends on your interests, backgrounds, and style of teaching.

When preparing for the course, I’ve found that you really need to know the basics of both the storyline—in its most expanded form—and the mechanics of the game. Play the game at least twice before the semester starts—once, just to get a feel for it, to enjoy, and a second time looking for details that will be relevant to the class. Students will be playing on both levels, and it’s important to both have the sense of play and the sense of research as you are teaching. I also recommend replaying the game as the semester goes, week by week, along with the students.

The poster project I did the first time around seemed like a good idea at the time—visual presentation, common in the sciences—but did not really fit with the technological and utilitarian purposes of the class. The changing population of the class—game design and history—also lends itself to more video-based presentations. The transition from face-to-face to hybrid made this even more imperative—assignments needed to be possible remotely, so video presentations, uploaded either to the LMS or a private YouTube channel, replaced the project. So far all of the projects have been individual projects; that will need to change—again, changing course population makes it useful. In the future, pairing history majors with game design majors for collaborative work may be a better use of time and assignments, and also aid in connecting asynchronous and synchronous students together.

#### FUTURE COURSE PLANS:

The course changes every time I teach it, because I do not intend to teach the same game twice. It switches every year between American and World history (our program has synced our two tracks with the state's teacher certifications), and so the variety depends on very broad parameters. I also use the course as a springboard for writing projects, so the variety also depends on games I'm interested in doing research on. That being said, I tend to go for first person shooter and roleplaying games primarily, story driven ones, as they are frameworks for analysis that I feel most comfortable with. The course makes a useful vessel for tackling big themes through video games that undergraduates might have limited exposure to—capitalism (*The Outer Worlds*), settler colonialism (*Greedfall*), apocalypticism (*Oblivion*), the Black Death (*A Plague Tale: Innocence*), industrialization (*Dishonored*), even the mythos of the American West (*Fallout: New Vegas*) or the mythos of American military might (*Fallout 4*). These are all games I am considering teaching in the next couple of rotations. The games need to be recent enough or popular enough that students are interested, but not so recent that they are unlikely to have sufficient technology to play them. This is why I have not gone for a VR game, though if your school has the right kind of labs, that would be excellent. Over the next four years, I hope to nail down specific pathways for sandbox RPGs and first person action adventure games—I've done one of each—and then expand to other styles of games, with strategy games like *Crusader Kings* or *Total War* particularly coming to mind.

One of the ever-present challenges and opportunities is the change in technology, both gaming and presentation. I have primarily used computer games—I am personally primarily a PC gamer, having not had a new console system since the original Xbox. This is still a fertile area for gaming, and with changing technology means there is always a new game—or interesting games getting old enough to not strain even five or six year old computers—but it also means some important ones are out of bounds. *The Last of Us*, for example, is only a console game, or the *Kingdom Hearts* series. This is something I will need to grapple with, in addition to the differences in playing games on the PC—as I do—and consoles, as I tell my students they should feel free to. The change in performance and medium almost certainly impacts interpretation, and I have not yet fully grappled with that.

The other aspect I want to explore is having students do Twitch streams as part of the class—both because it already fits in with the course assignments, and because it is an extremely popular way of sharing video game commentary. As esports grows as a field, as gaming continues to become more and more prominent in pop culture, sports, commentary, streaming video, etc., learning about and

teaching some of the more prominent tools used to present streaming gameplay is an area I would like to develop some familiarity with.

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## CHAPTER 5.

### PERSPECTIVES ON GAMES (900251HUM)

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AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

**Course Title:** 900251HUM: Perspectives on Games

**Course College/School:** Amsterdam University College

**Course Program:** Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 6 ECT

**Course Length:** 16 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face / Online for Spring 2021

**Course Keywords:** Undergraduate, Liberal Arts, Survey Course, Game Studies, Games and Society

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

Over the course of a few decades, video games have grown from technical novelties to pieces of mainstream entertainment with financial stakes rivaling blockbuster films. Their audience, once imagined by mainstream perception to be comprised of specific age and social groups, now cover the entirety of the demographic spectrum. On the public eye, some have held video games responsible for the most reprehensible acts of violence and crime while others hailed them as demonstrators of the very mechanics through which we can organize our lives and goals in the most fulfilling manner. To an ever-increasing extent, play on digital devices is how we entertain ourselves and socialize with others. In this course, we will look at video games through all of these perspectives and more, and aim to cultivate a multifaceted and interdisciplinary understanding of this youngest and most impactful of media.

Starting with the very idea of games and play, we will start by looking at the role of games and playful acts in personal development and social interaction. We will discuss approaches to defining what comprises a game and ways to categorize playful behavior. Building on this understanding, we will then evaluate key concepts in approaching video games and how they came into prominence and how do they relate to each other. Some of the keywords we will discuss are agency, narrative and immersion. Alongside these fundamental concepts, we will look at games as fictional spaces and rule

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systems, and discuss the phenomenon of cheating alongside other social and individual behaviors associated with gameplay.

After establishing these conceptual frameworks, we will turn our attention to broader issues that emanate from the interaction of games with wider culture. We will investigate how games intersect with notions of gender, violence, addiction and online community formation. We will discuss the emergence and subsequent dispersal of a distinct games culture and consider the potential of games in larger contexts through serious games.

As a burgeoning discipline, video game studies is an inherently interdisciplinary field and the course reflects this eclectic approach. Methodologies and theoretical foundations will draw from multiple disciplines. Throughout the course, we will look at various examples as demonstrations and personal interaction with games will be a core component of the course experience.

## COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

At the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Articulate their grasp on the breadth of theoretical approaches in defining video games.
2. Apply their understanding of core concepts in analyzing digital games to specific objects.
3. Demonstrate their knowledge of the history of video games and the interaction of this history with wider cultural trends.
4. Effectively analyse video games through the ways in which they engage with society and culture.

Beyond these formally stated course objectives, *Perspectives on Games* primarily aims to offer a welcoming introduction to the discipline of Game Studies. For students who have any affinity with video games, the course aims to introduce them to approaching this medium through a scholarly, analytical lens. For students who have no affinity with games, the course aims to reward their curiosity in an affirming and welcoming manner. Despite the broadening of demographics in people who engage with video games, and the growth of Game Studies as a discipline, video games still bear a significant social stigma and are associated with insular, aggressive communities. This course not only aims to introduce to all students the rich and rewarding ways games can be engaged academically from a multitude of disciplinary outlooks and methodologies, but that video games themselves contain multitudes that might escape attention at first sight.

## COURSE CONTEXT

*Perspectives on Games* is a second-year course within the Media track of the Humanities major, part of the Bachelors degree in Liberal Arts and Sciences at Amsterdam University College. It is the only course our College offers that is exclusively dedicated to Game Studies. In terms of prerequisites, as a second-year course, *Perspectives on Games* is open to all students at AUC who have completed their first year of studies, which translates into a great diversity among students, in terms of background and prior academic experience.

For students who are completing their degrees as a Humanities major, it can be assumed that they

have taken either one or both of the mandatory methods courses of the Humanities degree, *Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* and *Introduction to Visual Methods*, meaning they have a foundational understanding of analysis and interpretation, and have experience working with objects and theory. In addition, most Humanities students come to *Perspectives on Games* having taken *Introduction to Media Studies*, *Introduction to Cultural Analysis*, or *Introduction to Film Studies*, giving them further background and disciplinary affinity.

However, *Perspectives on Games* is also a perennially popular course among students who complete their degrees at AUC as Social Science or Science majors. One of the graduation requirements at AUC is that every student needs to take at least one course from a major outside their discipline. This means that *Perspectives on Games* can, and often is, the only Humanities course taken by a student whose courses are otherwise focused on Sciences or Social Sciences. While this diversity of experience is encouraged and very welcome, it also creates challenges in terms of pedagogy and assumed background knowledge and experience. For example, while all our students are required to take a class on *Academic Writing Skills*, for some students, *Perspectives on Games* might be the only moment in their academic lives that they encounter theoretical approaches from cultural analysis, or grapple with concepts from queer theory.

An additional layer of complexity is introduced by student's prior knowledge of games, which often works counterproductively. Students who have a strong affinity for (mainstream) video games often get distracted by the objects and might have a tendency to dominate classroom conversation if left unchecked, whereas students who might be strongest analytically might have a tendency to be shy due to a self-perceived lack of "credibility" due to their prior inexperience with games.

In my teaching and design of the course, I openly and explicitly acknowledge this diversity and situate the course as a welcoming and open space for all, the specifics of which will be discussed in the next section.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

The principal goal in designing this course was to actively work against the enduring stigmas around video games and intervene in the hostility and exclusive attitude that can be observed in many mainstream communities that define themselves around their shared interest in video games. I have initially designed this course in 2013 and have been teaching it since, and this aim to broaden the appeal of games in general and Game Studies in particular has been built-in to the course since the start. However, this conviction only became strengthened in the intervening years. I was teaching this course during the Fall semester of 2014, when #Gamergate erupted and all the toxicity that has been roiling round communities that self-identify around their devotion to games boiled over to the rest of the world's attention.

As a scholar and educator, I am deeply committed to social justice and equity. I believe in the value of critical theory and the overall mission of a liberal arts and sciences education. My guiding principle in orienting this course is to encourage curiosity in my students and help them exercise their skills in critical reading and analysis.

In practice, my classes usually orient themselves around the assigned reading where we cover key

concepts and ideas for the day. I try to be mindful of my choice in examples and language in discussing these and try my best to avoid (unintentionally) reinforcing any hegemonic discourses. In our class discussions, I emphasize the importance of coherent, rigorous analysis and the necessity for critical distance from one's object. This overall sensitivity and openness has, over the year, consistently created a safe environment for students, even though we often have to go through difficult conversations. As these things always are, this is a process and I am always trying to be better about modeling better behavior and attitude for my students.

## COURSE MATERIAL

Readings for the course orient around two main sources, a textbook and a reader consisting of a collection of supplementary texts. The catalogue from the Rainbow Arcade exhibition is provided as an additional resource for groups who present on the history of video games with the expectation that they will incorporate the perspectives offered in this book into their presentations. In the digital learning environment of the course, I also make available various additional sources, such as links to YouTube channels on game design and we have a running google drive document that compiles a list of "recommended games for beginners" that each year's cohort draws from and contributes to. During teaching, we make frequent use of YouTube playthroughs of various games as examples since setting up and demonstrating relevant sections of all games mentioned in class is not always viable, or efficient.

- *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca. Routledge, 2016.
- *Course Reader*: Collection of additional articles that supplement the textbook. Individual articles listed in the Expanded Course Outline and Bibliography.
- *Rainbow Arcade: Over 30 Years of Queer Video Game History*. Adrienne Shaw, Sarah Rudolph, and Jan Schnorrenberg. Schwules Museum, 2019.

## COURSE ASSESSMENTS

Courses at AUC are required to incorporate continuous assessment, as defined by the Academic Standards & Procedures, whereby no individual assignment can contribute more than 35% of the final grade. Additionally, 55% of the final grade needs to be constituted by individual assignments. For *Perspectives on Games*, students are expected to hand in three essays of equal length and weight throughout the semester that focus on constituent components of the course and prepare a group presentation on the history of video games.

Detailed descriptions are provided below:

### **Response Paper #1 – Unwritten Rules (1500 words, 25% of final grade)**

This essay<sup>2</sup> is a reflection on how we play video games, and how digital media change the way we learn to play games. It is also an exercise to make you aware of the conventions that can become an obstacle for new players to learn, and which may be invisible to seasoned players. (L.O. 2&4)

2. This assignment is adopted from: Clara Fernandez-Vara. *CMS.300 Introduction to Videogame Studies*. Fall 2011. Massachusetts Institute of Technology: MIT OpenCourseWare, <https://ocw.mit.edu>. License: Creative Commons BY-NC-SA.

This assignment offers two possible approaches:

*If you consider yourself a gamer*

Find someone (in the class or outside) who does not play games or does not consider themselves a gamer. Teach them how to play your favorite “hardcore” game, preferably first-person shooters, real-time strategy games, role-playing games. If you’re not sure if the game you would like to teach them counts, please ask the instructor. Take 4 to 5 hours working with the person you’re teaching. They don’t have to master the game; the focus is studying the process of first learning the game.

The report of your experience should address these issues:

- The videogame playing experience of your subject (be brief)
- The game you were teaching (if it was a specific mode of the game, please include that)
- What were the most difficult parts of the game to learn? Why?
- What was the easiest thing to pick up? Why?
- What did your subject do that was surprising to you?

*If you don't play videogames regularly or at all*

Find someone (in the class or outside) who does consider themselves a gamer. Ask them to teach you how to play their favorite “hardcore” game, preferably first-person shooters, real-time strategy games, role-playing games. If you’re not sure if the game they are going to teach you counts, please ask the instructor. Take at least 4 to 5 hours working with the person teaching you. You don’t have to master the game, just see how much you can learn in that time.

- The report of your experience should address these issues:
- Your videogame playing experience (be brief)
- The game you learned to play (if it was a specific mode of the game, please include that)
- What were the most difficult parts of the game to learn? Why?
- What was the easiest thing to pick up? Why?
- What did the person teaching you take for granted that you didn’t know how to do?

### **Response Paper #2 – Working with Core Concepts (1500 words, 25% of final grade)**

This third essay asks you to perform a formal analysis of your chosen game through one of the concepts we covered in the second and third sections of the course. You are expected to demonstrate that you have grasped the concept you have chosen and are able to put it in a productive relationship with the game you have picked. You may choose to focus on one of the games you have worked on for the first or second response papers or focus on another one. (L.O. 1&2)

### **Response Paper #3 – Games and Culture (1500 words, 25% of final grade)**

This final essay asks you to consider your chosen game from a wider, cultural and societal context.

This essay is expected to deliver an analysis of your chosen game by building on the topics covered in the final section of the course. (L.O. 4)

### **Response Paper Assessment and Feedback**

All response papers will be assessed on demonstrated comprehension of the theories/concepts, capacity to construct an overarching argument, a coherent structure throughout your essay and clarity of writing, both in form and presentation.

For all assignments, you are expected to draw from the course materials extensively to define the formal qualities of your objects, define your terms and substantiate your arguments. References to course literature need to be properly referenced, with in-text citations and accompanying bibliography, according to MLA or APA styles. "Presentation" is a formal part of the grading rubric.

The detailed rubric explaining these criteria can be found on Canvas. Submitted assignments will be returned with allocated scores on the rubric as well as substantive comments.

### **History of Games Presentations (25% of final grade)**

Video games as a distinct medium has a history that spans over five decades with roots going back much further. This assignment will dedicate five sessions of the course to this history and assign groups to covering roughly a decade. Organized in groups of 4, students will be responsible for organizing an entire session of the class to provide historical background of games in their chosen period. Given the length of the presentations, groups are encouraged to be creative and incorporate interactive elements and hands-on sessions with the rest of the class without hindering depth and rigor. (L.O. 3)

### **Presentation Assessment and Feedback**

Presentations will be evaluated on Organization & Timing, Content, Discussion & Class Management, Tone & Language, and Visuality. A detailed rubric explaining these criteria can be found on Canvas. Submitted assignments will be returned with allocated scores on the rubric as well as substantive comments.

## **EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE**

### **Week 1**

*Session 1: Introduction*

*Session 2: Getting to Know Video Games*

- Key Topics:
  - Who Studies Video Games?
  - How Do You Study Video Games?
  - Types of Analysis/Schools of Thought?
  - What is the Hegemony of Play?
- Assigned Readings:

- UVG Ch.1 “Studying Video Games”
- Fron et al. “The Hegemony of Play”
- *Optional: UVG Ch. 2 “The Game Industry”*

## **Week 2**

### *Session 1: Understanding Games I*

- Key Topics:
  - General Models for Understanding Games
- Assigned Readings:
  - UVG Ch.3 “What is a Game?” (pg. 31-39)

### *Session 2: Understanding Games II*

- Key Topics:
  - General Models for Understanding Games
- Assigned Readings:
  - UVG Ch.3 “What is a Game?” (pg. 40-52)

## **Week 3**

### *Session 1: Games as Digital Media*

- Key Topics:
  - Additive vs. Expressive Media
  - Interactivity & Immersion
- Assigned Readings:
  - Murray, “From Additive to Expressive Form”

### *Session 2: History of Games Presentation #1*

## **Week 4**

### *Session 1: Gamic Action & Issue of Genre*

- Key Topics:
  - Diegetic vs. Nondiegetic & Operator vs. Machine actions
- Assigned Readings:
  - Galloway, Gamic Action, Four Moments
  - UVG Ch.3 “What is a Game” (pg. 52-59)

### *Session 2: Rules*

- Key Topics:
  - Relationship between games and rules
  - Definition and Types of Rules
- Assigned Readings:
  - UVG Ch.5 “Video Game Aesthetics” (122-129)

### **Week 5**

#### *Session 1: Geography & Representation*

- Key Topics:
  - Perspective/Dimensions/Space Type/Off-Screen Space/Scroll/Exploration
  - Function of Sound and Music in Games
- Assigned Readings:
  - UVG Ch.5 “Video Game Aesthetics” (pg. 129-151)

#### *Session 2: Fictional Worlds*

- Key Topics:
  - Tension between Fiction vs. Rules
  - Coherent vs. Incoherent Game worlds
- Assigned Readings:
  - Juul, “*Fiction*”

### **Week 6**

#### *Session 1: The Social Contract of Games & Cheating*

- Key Topics:
  - Written vs. Unwritten Rules
  - Cheating as a socially constructed concept
- Assigned Readings:
  - Sniderman, “Unwritten Rules.”
  - Consalvo, “Gaining Advantage: How Videogame Players Define and Negotiate Cheating”



*Session 2: History of Games Presentation #2*

**Week 7**

*Session 1: (Dark) Flow*

- Key Topics:
  - What is cognitive flow?
  - How can games lead to a flow state?
  - Are all flow states desirable?
- Assigned Readings:
  - Baron, *Cognitive Flow: The Psychology of Great Game Design*
  - Schüll, “Mapping the Machine Zone”

*Session 2: No Class - Assignment Prep*

**Week 8**

*Session 1: Procedural Rhetoric*

- Key Topics:
  - How can games communicate ideas through their mechanics?
- Assigned Readings:
  - Bogost, “Procedural Rhetoric”

*Session 2: History of Games Presentation #3*

**Week 9: No Class**

**Week 10**

*Session 1: No Class*

*Session 2: Game(r?) Culture*

- Key Topics:
  - What is video game culture?
  - What does it mean to have a culture defined by the consumption of a particular medium?
  - Moreover, what are the implications of defining this culture in a particular way?
- Assigned Readings:
  - Shaw, “What is Video Game Culture?”

## Week 11

### Session 1: Communities

- Key Topics:
  - What is a play community?
  - How are they formed and sustained, how do their emergent behavior and the design of the global playgrounds they inhabit intersect?
  - Who is attracted to different types of digital playgrounds, and therefore what initial preferences and play patterns do they bring?
  - What are the methodologies with which we can analyze play communities?
  - How can game designers foster certain community formations?
- Assigned Readings:
  - Pearce, *Communities of Play and the Global Playground*
  - Bartle, “Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades”
  - Yee, “Motivations of Play in Online Games”

### Session 2: Gender at Play

- Key Topics:
  - What are the consequences of the white-male default avatar in game design?
  - How are common gendered practices in mainstream game design reflect in gaming communities and related discourses?
  - How can we understand and intervene in these systemic patterns of exclusion?
- Assigned Readings
  - Salter & Blodgett, “Come Get Some: Damsels in Distress and the Male Default Avatar in Video Games”
  - Salter & Blodgett, “Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public”

## Week 12

### Session 1: Queer Game Studies

#### Key Topics:

- What does it mean to queer games / Game Studies?
- What lies at the intersection of queerness and games, and what has the bursting, proliferating dialogue centered around?

#### Assigned Readings:

- Clark, “What is Queerness in Games Anyway?”

*Session 2: History of Games Presentation #4*

### **Week 13**

*Session 1: No Class*

*Session 2: Disability Studies & Games*

Key Topics:

- What are the connections between disability studies and game studies?
- How the two fields might inform each other more?

Assigned Readings:

- Gibbons, “Disability, Neurological Diversity, and Inclusive Play”

### **Week 14**

*Session 1: Post-Colonial Game Studies*

Key Topics:

- What is postcolonial game studies, and what is its purpose, within the context of larger issues of inclusion, representation, diversity, and the challenging of hegemonic power structures?

Assigned Readings:

- Murray, “Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies”
- Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism”

*Session 2: No Class*

### **Week 15**

*Session 1: Streaming: Beyond Play in Games*

Key Topics:

- How does the emergent practice of streaming situate games, players, and audiences?
- How does streaming intersect video games with wider cultural trends and norms?

Assigned Readings:

- Anderson, “Watching People Is Not a Game: Interactive Online Corporeality, Twitch.tv and Videogame Streams”

## Week 16

Session 1: Wrap-up and Conclusion

Session 2: No Class

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

Beyond any individual choice of text or any other design element that makes up this course, I am positive that what defines it is its *attitude* and approach, which I try to embody and model.

I am moved by the potential of games and all the different ways they can appeal to all kinds of people, and bring them together. I have no preconceived notions of who or what games are *for* and I very explicitly and repeatedly affirm to my students that I see my role as a catalyst to their curiosity. I, again very explicitly and repeatedly, reiterate that I will be present to hear them and support them in any way they need. While these are overarching principles to all my teaching, especially in a course centered around a potentially alienating topic as video games, I believe they become even more urgent. While it is difficult to discuss these unquantifiable, affective aspects of teaching, six years of student evaluations has been very consistent on their effectiveness. While I am aware that these attitudes are never perfected, that one merely works on them to get better, these are my north stars in approaching this, or any other, course.

As a more practical note, in the past years I have tried in multiple occasions to organize sessions (both within and outside our scheduled meeting times) to play games with the class, however, I have found these sessions to be of limited use. While students always enjoy the experience, when done in big groups, they often don't have the opportunity to engage in productive analytical work while playing. While smaller groups and more dedicated time investment might address these issues, in the past I have not been able to invest in the logistics to make this happen.

Beyond these overall points, the sessions outlined above usually revolve around me summarizing and highlighting some of the key points from the assigned readings by engaging students in a productive conversation. I try to pay attention to inviting as many students as possible to join the conversation and encourage a welcoming and productive dialogue. This academic year, I will be teaching the course online, and I am planning to implement break-out rooms with dedicated discussion questions, as in my experience this works better in online teaching.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

In terms of material, I have just completed a comprehensive update of materials for the course. While I kept the textbook consistent with the previous iteration of the course, the entire rest of the reading list is refreshed. I have been following with great interest the vibrant and burgeoning field of Queer Game Studies, as well as publications that can be considered in its orbit and I have oriented the second half of the course more towards the ideas and sensibilities explored in this literature, such as Games and Disability Studies and Postcolonial Game Studies. I have refreshed the assignments recently and in the last iteration of the course they have worked quite well, so I am hoping to keep them as they are for a while.

Potentially the most promising path to change might come from larger institutional trends. Game Studies has a very strong potential to benefit from being offered within the context of a liberal arts and sciences college, however this would require collaboration and strategic investment beyond the scope of this chapter.

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## CHAPTER 6.

### INTRO TO VIDEO GAME MUSIC (MUSIC2254; MI291; MAAD12360; PAT305; MUSPERF300; HLM218)

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AND RYAN THOMPSON<sup>5</sup>  
VARIOUS UNIVERSITIES

**Course Titles:** Music 2254: Video Game Music, Media and Information (MI) 291: Introduction to Video Game Audio, Media Arts and Design (MAAD) 12360: Introduction to Video Game Music Studies, PAT 305/MusPerf 300: Video Game Music, and History and Literature of Music (HLM) 218: Hey! Listen! Introduction to Video Game Music

**Course Universities:** The University of Hartford, The University of Chicago, The Ohio State University, The University of Michigan, Michigan State University

**Course College/School:** The Hartt School, The College at the University of Chicago, The SchoThe University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance, College of Communications Arts and Sciences

**Course Department/Program:** Music, Media Arts and Design, Music History, Media & Information

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 2.0, 3.0

**Course Length:** Semester

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face

**Course Keywords:** Video games, music, sound, play, ludomusicology, media, design, acoustics

1. Dr. Karen M. Cook is associate professor of music history at the Hartt School, University of Hartford. Her work in video games primarily investigates musical representations of medievalism and the medieval past.
2. Dr. Julianne Grasso (jgrasso@utexas.edu) is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Music Theory in the Butler School of Music at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work is focused on musical meaning in video games and accessible approaches to music theory pedagogy.
3. Dr. Dana Plank (DanaMPlank@gmail.com) is an independent scholar who writes on intersections of music, video games, and identity. She remains active as a violinist and chamber musician, and streams on Twitch with her ludomusicology colleagues every Thursday examining the soundscapes of the games they play in real time.
4. Matthew Thompson - DMA (matthom@umich.edu 3 t's) is Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance and Associate Faculty with the U-M Center for Japanese Studies. Dr. Thompson is active as both a pianist and a vocal coach and has pioneered pedagogy using video game music both in large classroom and one-on-one studio settings.
5. Dr. Ryan Thompson (Thompson.RyanC@gmail.com) is a musicologist teaching in the game development program at Michigan State University, housed in the College of Communication Arts and Sciences. His current research explores how game audio is utilized to communicate information about both gameplay and narrative to players of modern video games.

## CATALOG DESCRIPTION

This course charts the evolution of video game music from the first synthesized *bleeps* and *bloops* of early games, through the rise and fall of the video arcade, to the nearly ubiquitous games/consoles found in most households, and the latest craze-causing games on mobile devices. Themes to iconic titles such as *Super Mario Bros.* and *Tetris* are as widely known as any pop hit of the past four decades, entering our cultural imagination and becoming a new kind of music for the digital age. Students will be encouraged to think critically about video games and the sounds that bring virtual worlds to life. Students will also practice listening skills and develop a vocabulary for the discussion of music and sound effects in video games throughout their history. Course readings will draw from the academic study of sound and music in games (which some call *ludomusicology*) along with the work of practitioners in the industry. Parts of the class are organized in loose chronological fashion, whereas other parts of the class are designed around various themes and topics drawn from game and play theory, composition, orchestration, technology, music theory, and cultural studies. In the spirit of an open exploration game, course assignments are varied to allow for students to *choose their own adventure* through the course. This course is designed for students of any major; no prior music or gaming knowledge is required.

## COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the wealth of literature in and theories of video game music studies. In this course, students will learn the history of video game consoles and technology, and how those constraints and capabilities have affected the incorporation and use of sound in games. They will be introduced to an array of ways one might design, implement, and experience sound in games, as presented in both scholarly literature and more industry-oriented or public-facing materials, and be asked to apply these theories in order to identify game audio's various functions and analyze its potential meanings. As the students become more deeply acquainted with the depth and breadth of ludomusicology, they will be better equipped to work on larger and more detailed analytical case studies of games of their own choosing, with the option to compose some of their own game audio. By the end of the semester, students will have critically re-evaluated their own preconceived notions of audio in games and their own relationships to sound and play writ broadly.

In this course, students will:

- identify and define game audio functions, techniques, and terminology;
- become familiar with the history of game audio technology and with a general chronology of game audio development,
- read, assess, interpret, and apply a variety of theories of game audio and approaches to studying music in games;
- apply these terms, techniques, and theories to their engagement with games, whether via active play or more passive observation;
- produce critical analyses of music in video games through processes of play, writing, and discussion;
- explore their own relationships to music, sound, games, and play; and



- Think critically about video game music's relationship with other kinds of musical traditions, both *popular* and *classical*, especially with regard to its massive presence outside of the games themselves.

## COURSE CONTEXT

The five authors met at the North American Conference on Video Game Music. Matthew Thompson first presented his approach to teaching the subject, and we began sharing ideas. As a result of close contact and collaborative pooling of resources, we have created a similar approach to the course at each of our respective institutions, making adjustments to the course as appropriate for our institutions and students. Some of us have taught this course face-to-face, while others have only taught it online; we find that the structure of the course varies very little between these two formats. The syllabus presented here is applicable and adaptable to any medium of instruction.

Courses on video game music are becoming increasingly popular for undergraduates, and many institutions are approaching faculty to develop these kinds of courses. Even if we were not asked specifically by our departments to build these classes, all of the authors have some research interests in video game music, prompting us to propose and create such courses around our areas of interest. Because of the broad appeal of this kind of class, none of us has taught this course solely to music majors—some students enter the course with many years of music experience, while others might have no formal training in music. Similarly, not every student has regularly or actively played video games, and many students arrive to the class with quite varied backgrounds in and knowledge of video games. Students report taking the course to engage with a medium that is often an intrinsic part of their everyday lives, and to learn how to critically evaluate and approach video games and their music in new ways.

Although we have taught this course for a variety of contexts, for the purposes of this volume we will present a version of the course for undergraduate students that could fulfill an elective arts credit, open to any undergraduate on campus. All students get specific training in musical listening, concepts, and terminology, and are expected to learn aspects of game technology, design, and history. Students are not expected to possess any prior gaming or musical knowledge or take any prerequisite courses, and successful students have had a wide variety of backgrounds and majors of study. This variety invites a broad range of pedagogical strategies adaptable to institutional and individual circumstances.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

The end goal for this class is for students to improve their critical thinking and communication about music and sound. We aid our students in listening from a wider variety of perspectives, including audio function within games, cultural and musical tropes, mood- and scenario-setting, production and technology, marketing, and accessibility. Along with a deep engagement with the sonic materials of games, the course helps students more deeply read, analyze, and discuss a variety of scholarly and popular texts, apply different methodologies to the study of music, and communicate their critical thoughts about music and its contexts. One of our larger goals of the course is to draw students from many backgrounds, with the belief that this encounter with the music department serves the university community as a whole by fostering interdisciplinary connections and helping students to carry forward what they learn into a variety of contexts. Our pedagogical approach focuses

on differentiation, developmental feedback, and individual attention no matter the enrollment. For larger offerings of this type of course, we often break into small discussion groups to foster a seminar-like atmosphere. We strive to meet students where they are, since their experience with video games and with music vary widely. We streamline grading for simpler assignments so that we can offer more detailed responses to student writing and analysis. We aim to make ourselves accessible resources to students to help them pursue their own learning and growth beyond the extrinsic motivation of a grade in a course.

We do not center performance or composition in this course, but we do allow students in this class to leverage those talents as part of creative output that benefits their broader academic goals. This includes composition majors who create a portfolio of works, and it also includes engineering and game development students who need to score a student-created video game. Many of us are experienced advisors for student composition and design projects, but this course does not specifically emphasize or require those types of creative activities.

#### COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

Most of us have found that this course works well without reliance on a single text. In partnering with our respective university libraries, most or all of the articles and chapters for course readings have been available physically and/or digitally for enrolled students. However, should an institution require a standard text, there are a few that we have utilized in the past that work well:

- Summers, T. (2016). *Understanding video game music*. Cambridge University Press.
- Collins, K. (2008). *Game sound: An introduction to the history, theory, and practice of video game music and sound design*. MIT Press.
- Collins, K. (2013). *Playing with sound: A theory of interacting with sound and music in video games*. MIT Press.

This course has worked well without requiring students to purchase particular consoles or games. Students are also provided a lengthy list of legal and reputable places to obtain free or heavily discounted games (although those are optional), including: Steam, Epic, GOG, the Apple Store, and Google Play. Students are encouraged to draw upon their own gaming collections and specific gaming interests. We have found that the richest, most participatory discussions in the course often center around gameplay in some form; this can take place on the student's own time, or in live gameplay during course meetings. YouTube and Twitch are also excellent sites on which to find and store gameplay footage for demonstration purposes, and these are accessible both in and outside of the classroom.

These courses have tended to privilege the aesthetic, functional, and cultural implications of game sound over game music composition or the specific technologies employed in game audio implementation. However, some students have opted to complete composition projects. Additional software such students have employed include Ableton, FL Studio, Reaper, notation software (Noteflight, MuseScore, Sibelius, Finale), Garageband, and Audacity, many of which are free (or which have free demos), or for which an institutional license might be available to students.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

The following list broadly details major course assignments that can be useful for this course. Adaptations should be made for variations in class size, student goals, departmental context, virtual learning, and other circumstances. For suggested ways to structure and weight the assessment of these assignments, see the following Course Assessment section.

### Reading

Students are given articles or book chapters to read from a variety of fields that may be relevant to understanding video game music and sound. Such topics could include: history and technological development of game sound, compositional techniques, musicological case studies, news articles, game reviews, and readings from the broader fields of media studies. Reading assignments bolster students' content knowledge and more generally offer models of professional writing in a variety of genres.

### Short Response

Students may also be assigned to write responses or reviews of the reading. Such assignments could include:

- writing 300-500 words in agreement or disagreement with an argument/debate,
- applying the author's analytical framework to a different game or composition, or
- summarizing the author's argument, typically in preparation for class discussion.

### Participation in an Online Discussion Board

Students are assigned to write responses to a topic on an online discussion board and asked to read and respond to their classmates' comments. Such topics for discussion could mimic the kinds of prompts written for a reading response as described above. Depending on class size, students may be involved in smaller online group discussions, trading the role of discussion leader amongst themselves. Responses are typically more casual than an essay, bearing closer resemblance to social media interactions—in this way, students might find that sharing their ideas comes more easily.

### Audio Analysis

An audio analysis can take several forms, from basic descriptions of musical events to in-depth music theory-based analysis, but the primary learning goals are the same: to gain facility in communicating about music and sound. Examples of types of audio analysis include items from the list below. Any of these kinds of analysis can occur as part of another sort of assignment, such as a listening journal or critical essay:

- descriptions of sound events (musical cues, sound effects, silences) that occur in a given scene of gameplay, linked with visual features and gameplay interaction;
- transcribing music from a game into Western music notation to complete a traditional music theory analysis of harmony, melody, meter, rhythm, etc.;
- broadly mapping parts of a game's soundtrack for large-scale musical structure, potentially

relating these musical beats with story beats or other structures;

- a prose analysis that describes how similar musical themes occur and recur across several games, documenting the possible effects of that connection; or
- a comparative analysis of music and sound from different games or different genres of games.

### **Listening Journal**

Students submit entries to a reflection journal in which they document their experiences with music and sound in video games of their own choice. These are typically low-stakes assignments that allow the student to write in less formal language than the typical prose required of essay writing, where students can apply course knowledge and gained skills to familiar games.

### **Gameplay Reflection**

Students are assigned to play a particular game and reflect upon the specific elements of gameplay in relation to sound. Such an assignment can illuminate aspects of music-play interaction that could be obfuscated when only viewing gameplay. For instance, personal feelings of joy, frustration, focus, or distraction during gameplay can be channeled through (or exacerbated by) music. Sharing reflections amongst the class can be useful to demonstrate the many different experiences a single game—and its music—can offer.

### **Music Composition**

Students are assigned to create part of a musical soundtrack for a game. This could be a single musical cue or an entire soundtrack and can be created in many ways depending on student familiarity with compositional techniques and software (see list above). In any case, this type of assignment allows students to create something perhaps more tangible than an analytical essay, stepping into the shoes of a video game composer to think through musical constraints and possibilities rather directly. Some options for this assignment could include:

- creating two minutes of musical material for a particular genre (RPG battle, racing game track, simulator build-mode, platformer water level, etc.);
- recomposing music to an existing game, or
- collaborating with students (perhaps those in other courses, such as computer science and design) to create the music for a student-designed game.

### **Critical Essay**

A critical essay takes the form of a several-page (ranges of 3-5, 6-8, 8-10 double-spaced pages) persuasive argument in which students write formal prose that reflects sophisticated thinking about video game music, usually in the form of answering some sort of question. Where music composition allows students to step into the role of a video game composer, the critical essay allows students to step into the role of a video game scholar. Such arguments will vary widely, so it is useful to embed a proposal process into such an assignment, fielding questions and possible topics from students before they commit to writing. Here is a small sample of questions that could be answered in such an essay:

- How does the music function in [X] game in [Y] scene/section? Do you think it is effective or

ineffective for this function?

- How are sound and music used to represent [culture, person, event, place, etc.] in a game or multiple games, and what does this tell us about music and representation more generally?
- How does music in [X] game potentially affect gameplay, and how might that change if various circumstances within the game were different?

### Quizzes and Exams

Students are quizzed on game audio terminology (FM synthesis, stems, 8-bit, adaptive audio, etc.) and/or music fundamentals (rhythm, harmony, melody, etc.). These are particularly useful early to middle in the term for getting all students on the same page with a core shared vocabulary for discussion and analysis.

### COURSE ASSESSMENT

Depending on the goals and outcomes of a course, and the students that are enrolled, any combination of the above assignments can be used at the discretion of the individual instructor with weighting that is appropriate for the course. We present a gamified assessment and one possible organization of some assignments below.

Because the topic of the course is gaming, the grading is also presented in a gamified manner. Students begin the semester at Level 1 as a *noob* with 0 experience points and level up throughout the course. Your work in the course is worth 100,000 XP points and a ranking of Level 5. Legends speak of an elusive Level 6 possible for those who push themselves, do superior work, and earn trophies.

The current high score holder in the class (the person or persons with the most XP points) holds the title of High Score Holder. This title bestows certain privileges, including the ability to select certain games or topics that will be discussed during class sessions.

### Trophies

Trophies carry the possibility of bonus points. These trophies represent extra work outside of the course requirements and are meant to be difficult to achieve. There are announced and hidden trophies. In other words, there are trophies you may decide to work toward at the beginning of the semester and there are trophies you may earn without knowing how and why you did. If enough students are motivated to earn these trophies, the entire class grade may be raised. Announced trophies include:

- Online Addict: awarded for posting double the required comments in online discussions during the semester ( 1500).
- Locutus of Canvas: awarded for a student whose posts attract the most comments or likes two weeks during the semester ( 1000).
- Next Yoko Shimomura: awarded for students who team with Engineering students in the game design course to create sounds and music for their games ( 5000).

Hidden trophies include:

- **To Boldly Go:** awarded for students who are the first to share their composition projects with the class or students who are first to ask questions in Zoom discussions with industry/academic experts ( 500).
- **True Concert Goer:** awarded for students who attend a video game concert during semesters and submit a copy of the program and short write up reaction to the event, when a concert comes to the local area ( 1000).
- **Perfectly Present:** awarded for students who are present and on time for all class sessions ( 500).

### **Challenges**

- If 10% of the class earns at least four trophies, everyone in the class gets 1000 bonus points!
- If anyone in the class earns all six trophies, everyone in class gets 1500 bonus points!

### **Attendance/Lecture Engagement: 25% (25,000 Points)**

Classes can take attendance or perhaps submit a short written reaction to points of discussion or submit notes that they took during the lecture. Being present does not simply mean physically in the room: it means actively participating in class activities.

### **Quizzes (Mini-Bosses): 10% (10,000 Points)**

Quizzes may be short-answer where students respond to prompts after watching videos of gameplay, similar to in-class discussions and analyses of game sound. Multiple choice quizzes are also possible where students are asked about material presented in a video. Listening quizzes may also challenge students' abilities for aural recognition: for example, asking which of four audio files is a musical theme that was presented in a quiz video. Quizzes are milestones in the course but are not heavily weighted and should be seen as chances for the instructor to determine how student learning is progressing.

### **Weekly Assignments: 40% (40,000 Points)**

Weekly assignments may consist of online discussions, listening journals, gameplay responses, reflections about readings, and any of the other possible assignments above. These varying weekly assignments help students to gain mastery of the material and progress through the course. These points should show that students are regularly and deeply engaging with course material outside of class time.

### **Final Project (Big Boss or Composition Quest!): 25% (25,000 points)**

This could be a choice of a composition project or a critical essay. In the case of a composition project, the main goal of the project is for students to experiment with the creative process involved in making music. For many students, it may be their first time making music and one of the only assignments in their academic career that is creatively based. Almost all credit is given for the entirety of the project, the connection between the written explanation of the track, cited inspirations, and the final result. A small amount of credit will be awarded for projects that are musically superior, but this subjective point of grading is minimal.

For a critical essay, students should imagine that the entire semester of smaller projects and discussions has built to a more formal and fleshed-out assessment.

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

Anyone adapting this syllabus should view these assignments as one representative sample of choices and select ones from our sample list in the Course Assignments section, or ones of their own design, that work best for their class.

### Week 1: Course Introduction

#### Topics

- Introduction to the syllabus
- Class introductions
- Introductory conversation about games
- From this point forward, active discussion of any/all listed readings or viewings is implied.

#### Activity

- Play through a familiar or unfamiliar game and ask students to begin observing how many different kinds of sounds and music they can observe.

#### Games

- Sample games might include *Faxanadu* (1987) or *Aquaria* (2007).

#### Readings

(Note: All readings listed are suggestions; no more than two of these per class meeting or week would normally be assigned)

- Introduction and Appendix, Summers (2016)
- Chapter 1 and 7, Collins (2008b)

### Week 2: Games vs. Films

#### Topics

- How are video games similar to and different from film?
- How might those similarities and differences play out in music and audio?
- What kinds of musical functions do games borrow or maintain from film?

#### Activity

- Compare the audio in a short film or cartoon clip to that in a short segment of a familiar game, preferably an in-class demo.
- A Mickey Mouse cartoon and *Super Mario Bros.*(1985) work well here

### Games

- *Uncharted* (2007)

### Readings

- Lerner (2014a)
- Chapters 1 and 6, Summers (2016)

### Assignments

- The game vs. film comparison activity would also work well as a listening journal or audio analysis

## **Week 3: Early Game Audio & History**

### Topics

- Learn and review early game consoles and their development
- Learn and review basic elements of early video game audio technology

### Activity

- If possible, use an emulator to play through an NES 8-bit game and show how the soundtrack is constructed using just the four to five channels available, muting them in turn and demonstrating how sound effects replace portions of the soundtrack.

### Games

- *Donkey Kong* (1981)
- *Frogger* (1981)
- *Burger Time* (1982)
- *Super Mario Bros.* (1985)
- *The Legend of Zelda* (1986)
- *Metroid* (1986)
- *Sonic the Hedgehog* (1991)
- *Super Mario World* (1991)
- *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (1991)

### Readings

- Chapters 2 and 3, Collins (2008b).
- Collins (2007)
- Lerner (2014b)
- Dwyer & Neill (2014-)



### Assignments

- Listening journal—write a musical description of a short segment of early video game music.

### Week 4: Recent Game Audio & History

#### Topic

- Learn and review post-16-bit video game console developments, including audio technology advancements

#### Activity

- Compare and contrast soundtracks from 8- and 16-bit games with much later remakes or remasters

#### Games

- *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (2002)
- *Proteus* (2013)
- *Flower* (2009)
- *Red Dead Redemption* (2010)
- *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* (2011)

#### Readings

- Chapters 4 and 5, Collins (2008b)
- Dwyer & Neill (2014-)

#### Assignment

- Listening journal for *Proteus* (2013)

### Week 5: Musical Tropes & Themes

#### Topics

- Learn and review what a trope in music is
- Learn and review what a musical theme is

#### Activities

- Show students several contrasting clips of a movie or game, muted, and ask them to brainstorm a list of sounds they would expect to hear; discuss where those expectations stem from
- Play through or watch walkthroughs of games exhibiting some of the tropes students named and discuss how successful they are in conveying a particular mood or idea

### Games

- *Undertale* (2015)
- *Celeste* (2018)
- *Halo* (2001)
- *Final Fantasy Series*,(1987-present)
- *Legend of Zelda series* (1986-present)

### Readings

- Chapter 4, Phillips (2014)
- VGMusicologist (2015), with particular emphasis on DrumUltima's post
- Plank-Blasko (2015)
- Atkinson (2019)
- Cook (2018)

### Assignments

- The listed activities would work well as a listening journal or audio analysis
- Article summary

### **Week 6: Gender, Sexuality, Race/Ethnicity, Disability**

Note: Please note that matters of representation factor in to virtually every class meeting, but many of us also take at least one week to focus on important literature more deeply or to examine particular case studies.

### Topic

- Review issues of representation in games as discussed to date

### Activity

- Demo some unfamiliar games and have students work through how various characters are constructed and portrayed through sound

### Games

- *Street Fighter II* (1991)
- *Gone Home* (2013)
- *Night in the Woods* (2017)
- *Baldur's Gate* (1998)
- *Metroid* (1986)
- *Timespinner* (2018)

- *Grand Theft Auto* (1997)
- *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017)

#### Readings

- Excerpts, Cheng (2014)
- Chapters 4 and 5, Plank (2018)
- Collins & Taillon (2012)
- Sherman (1997)
- Knorr (2018)

#### Assignments

- Audio analysis, listening journal, article summary

### **Week 7: Pre-Existing Music**

#### Topics

- Why might video game composers or programmers decide to use pre-existing music, regardless of style, geographical origin, or age?
- What might such borrowed music symbolize or represent to the game player? Does the player need to recognize the music in order to fully understand the game?
- What are advantages and disadvantages of using pre-existing music in games?

#### Activity

- Demonstrate how Baroque counterpoint can be easily arranged or programmed for 8-bit consoles
- Have students select a piece of pre-existing music of their choice and brainstorm two different scenarios in which that piece would be effective

#### Games

- *Wizards & Warriors* (1987)
- *Dragon Warrior* (1986)
- *NBA2K* (1999)

#### Readings

- Chapter 6, Collins (2008b)
- Gibbons (2009)
- Gibbons (2011)
- Gibbons (2018)

- Plank (2019)
- Cook (2017)
- Miller (2007)
- Fritsch (2016)

#### *Assignments*

Audio analysis, listening journal, article summary

#### **Week 8: Questions of Silence**

#### *Topics*

- Why might a game composer or designer choose to eliminate some or all sounds?
- What kinds of functions can silence serve?
- Why might a player choose to mute sounds in a game?
- How does playing a game with no sound affect how a player plays?
- How can games create visual cues or markers to replace sonic cues for hearing-impaired gamers?

#### *Activities*

- Have students demo an unfamiliar game in class. Then, without warning, mute the sound and ask them to continue playing. Have them discuss how that affected how they played.
- Have students explore the CanIPlayThat.com database for games that are rated high and low on the accessibility scale for hearing-impaired gamers, then demo or watch walkthroughs of some of those games; discuss their findings.

#### *Games*

- *Wizards & Warriors* (1987)
- *Assassin's Creed* (2007)
- *Assassin's Creed II* (2009)
- *Layers of Fear* (2016)
- *Chicken Scream* (2017)

#### *Readings*

- Kulezic-Wilson (2009)
- Stockburger (2010)
- Jørgensen (2008)
- Gibbons (2014)
- Raposo (2015)

### Assignments

- Audio analysis, listening journal, article summary

### Week 9: Genres 1: RPGs, Metroidvania, Action-Adventure

#### Topics

- Learn and review some of these main, popular game genres: what sets them apart from other game genres, and what are their individual histories?
- What kinds of sound effects, sonic cues, and musical elements would be useful in games of this nature? What kinds would be frustrating or unhelpful?

#### Activities

- Comparison of audio in battles for *Zelda 64* (crossfades) and *Skyward Sword* (layering)
- Assign small groups of students one of four sets of music tracks: forest themes, town themes, water themes, world map themes. What is common in each set?

#### Games

- *Final Fantasy* franchise (1987-present)
- *The Legend of Zelda* franchise (1986-present)
- *Golden Sun* (2001)

#### Readings

- Gibbons (2019)
- Grasso (2019)
- Thompson (2019)
- 8-bit Music Theory (2017)
- Excerpts, Schartmann (2015)
- “Music Genres and Game Genres,” Phillips (2014)

### Assignments

- Audio analysis, listening journal, article summary

### Week 10: Narrative and Game Play

#### Topics

- Learn and review the differences between game narrative and game play
- How might sound and music work to support a game’s narrative? A game’s play?
- Can sound or music support one and subvert the other?

### Activity

- Live demonstration of *Diablo III*, Act IV (covered in the Kamp reading)

### Games

- *Diablo III*
- *Final Fantasy* franchise (1987–present)
- *The Legend of Zelda* franchise (1986–present)
- *Assassin's Creed III* (2012)
- *Journey* (2012)

### Readings

- Kamp (2019)
- Juul (2001)

### Assignments

- Audio analysis, listening journal, article summary

## **Week 11: Genres 2: Mobile, Sports, & E-Sports**

### Topics

- As before, learn and review main characteristics of these genres
- What kinds of sound effects, sonic cues, and musical elements would be useful in games of this nature? What kinds would be frustrating or unhelpful?

### Activity

- Watch and discuss *League of Legends Worlds 2019 Opening Ceremony*

### Games

- *League of Legends* (2009)
- *Forza* franchise (2005–present)
- *Mario Kart* franchise (1992–present)

### Readings

- Collins & Dockwray (2017)
- Donnelly (2014)
- Thompson (2016)

### Assignments

- Audio analysis, listening journal, article summary

### Week 12: Immersion and Incorporation

#### Topics

- Discuss the ideas of flow and immersion
- Discuss the concept of incorporation in a game: how are bodies represented or not?
- How do games affect the gamer's physical body?

#### Activities

- Have students list at least five different times that they have found themselves immersed in an activity and discuss what factors might be shared
- Have students demo or watch playthroughs of games featuring different kinds of avatars, distinguished visually and aurally, and discuss various senses of connection or disconnect

#### Games

- *Tetris* (1984)
- *Amnesia* (2010)
- *Loneliness* (2010)
- *Journey* (2012)
- *Stardew Valley* (2016)
- *Papa Sangre* (2010)
- *Layers of Fear* (2016)

#### Readings

- Excerpts, Csikszentmihalyi (2009)
- Lumumba-Kasongo (2013)
- Galloway (2019)
- van Elferen (2016)
- van Elferen (2011)
- Serafin (2014)
- Nordahl & Nilsson, (2014)

### Assignments

- Audio analysis, listening journal, article summary

## Week 13: Music Games

### Topics

- How do we talk about games whose sole or primary aspect is music?
- What functions do sound and music play in such games?
- How can we analyze such games using methodologies learned to date, or do such theories fall short?

### Activity

- Play *Guitar Hero* in-class, discuss how the controllers are modified for gameplay, and how time, pitch, and duration are represented within the game.

### Games

- *Dance Dance Revolution* franchise (1999–2016)
- *Rhythm Heaven* franchise (2008–)
- *SoundShapes* (2012)
- *Just Dance* (2009–)
- *Dance Central* (2010–2014)
- *Rock Band* (2007–2017)
- *Guitar Hero* (2005–2015)
- *Crypt of the NecroDancer* (2015)

### Readings

- Chapter 4, Cheng (2014)
- Chapter 3, Miller (2012)
- Dozal (2016)
- Knoblauch (2016)

### Assignments

- Audio analysis, listening journal, article summary

## Week 14: Fandom Studies

### Topic

- What do we do with video game music once it leaves the video game itself?

### Activities

- Students should be prepared to present their final projects in class, if such applies



- Watch portions of online performances of video game music, perhaps Video Games Live! Excerpts and/or examples of remixes/arrangements from YouTube: SmoothMcGroove, 8-bit Big Band, OverClocked ReMix

#### Games

- *osu!* (2007)
- *Touhou* (1997)

#### Readings

- Chapter 4, Collins (2013)
- Austin (2018)
- Excerpts, Gibbons (2018)
- Excerpts, Jenkins (2006)
- Thompson (2018)

#### Assignments

- Audio analysis, listening journal, article summary
- In-class presentations of final projects

### COURSE BEST PRACTICES

Most importantly, allow students to play to their strengths. Many students will arrive at a video game audio course knowing something about either video games or audio. Let composers compose, let experts in game analysis apply their knowledge of gaming, and allow students to work on the assignments and topics they are most passionate about.

Allowing students to make choices about which assignments they take on lines up neatly with a gamified syllabus as described previously. A *choose your own adventure* model empowers students to branch out for low-stakes assignments while taking on bigger projects about which they feel confident and capable.

Successful students in this course have composed pieces of music for games in collaboration with engineering and game development students; others have done in-depth analyses of composer styles, and others still have performed a close reading of an individual game score. There is a lot of potential for varied large-scale projects, allowing students with differing skill sets to complete the course feeling accomplished.

As a result of student knowledge varying so much across the two fields spanning the course, inclusivity becomes paramount. If students come through in discussion with technical terms or jargon, make them explain it to the rest of the class. Encourage students getting to know one another through low-stakes small group discussions that allow for safe *failure*. This will lead students to expand beyond their individual strengths and try alternative approaches.

Creating a safe environment for students to experiment outside their comfort zone also facilitates inviting students to play through relevant portions of gameplay as often as possible. Students are more invested in the play of fellow students than they are the professor demonstrating. YouTube videos should be used as an addendum to course readings, not as a replacement for student interactivity and engagement.

Lastly, it bears mentioning that some extremely popular game composers have problematic and abusive histories that makes discussing them and the soundtracks they have composed difficult. It falls to the professor to be knowledgeable and proactive with respect to these and other issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in ways that address the desire of students to examine their favorite topics while maintaining a safe, welcoming environment for everyone. In some cases, soundtracks to fan-created expansions can be used as a substitute for problematic scores.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

This course shifts as new research is generated in a rapidly developing subfield of musicology. Anyone teaching this course would do well to keep abreast of current research, including (but not limited to) the *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*, and the two major annual conferences: the North American Conference on Video Game Music (NACVGM) and the European Conference on Video Game Music and Sound.

There is a lot of room for creative projects in this class involving online media such as podcasts and livestreams. This works particularly well in an online format, allowing students to make engaging presentations in formats with which they want to gain experience. Many of us plan to shift more towards creative projects (and away from written papers) moving forward. Similarly, if possible, there is great potential for interdisciplinary partnership with these creative assignments that some of us have explored: having students in this course compose music to be implemented by a student team as part of a video game development course, for instance.

There are a number of specific subjects not covered by this course syllabus due to constraints of time and lack of research in the area: sports games (including esports), casual/mobile gaming, educational games primarily for children, etc. Other areas are difficult to pin down because of how broad the topic can become, such as how various media properties (television shows, animated features, video games, live concert events, social media) all interact to form a larger entity for discussion, as in the *Pokémon* or *League of Legends* franchises. Some of us account for these genres as needed by dedicating a class day towards student requests of topics and inviting discussion among the class. We envision these sorts of cross-media relations growing more important as livestreaming in particular becomes more mainstream.

Students have also asked about issues of music outside the scope of this course and its teaching objectives: this is particularly true of music theory and creative assignments. Students with a background in composing music, whether as a hobby or having formal training often have more success and more refined final projects than those making a first attempt. Similarly, questions of technical implementation and interactions with computer code quickly move outside what is easily grasped by non-specialist students encountering these subjects for the first time. Examining these details of implementation (using Wwise or FMOD in conjunction with a game engine such as Unity

or Unreal) beyond a surface level is best left to a separate course rather than attempting to shoehorn every possible game audio topic into a general interest course designed for broad accessibility.

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## CHAPTER 7.

### TRENDS IN LITERARY, CULTURAL, AND TEXTUAL STUDIES: VIDEO GAMES AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS (ENG 3612)

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UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

**Course Title:** ENG 3612: Trends in Literary, Cultural, and Textual Studies: Video Games and Cultural Analysis

**Course University:** University of Central Florida

**Course College/School:** College of Arts and Humanities

**Course Department/Program:** English

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 3 Credit Hours

**Course Length:** 3 Hours

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face with Online Discussion

**Course Keywords:** Humanities, In-Class Discussion, Game Theory, Cultural Theory, Philosophy, Theory, Conference Presentation, Writing/Composition, Let's Play

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

Literary analysis of textual production within contemporary social trends and new technologies. May be used in the degree program a maximum of 2 times only when course content is different. This iteration of the class is meant to mimic film and/or literature survey classes by introducing students to game theory, philosophy, and cultural theory in conjunction with several short games and one longer game. Students are then asked to critique a game of their choice in a final presentation.

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

My initial goal when designing this course was to set up a video game analysis class similar to an undergraduate literature or film survey class. I started with a model of one or two media texts assigned per week with related analytical or theory readings. Assignments were geared toward teaching students how to use the theoretical and philosophical texts as lenses to dissect and analyze video games. Since the original class would be taught to students in the humanities, extra emphasis

1. Concetta Bommarito is an independent scholar returning to academic writing after a brief hiatus due to personal issues. Their research focuses on the core changes interactivity makes to narrative and storytelling and how analysis in online spaces influences both writing and rhetorics on writing.

was placed on analyzing the gameplay as the main narrative drive in order to prevent students from only looking at the game's story elements and thus failing to see the video game as a medium unique from traditional linear storytelling.

By using philosophy and theory texts in conjunction with game theory, I also hoped to show students that video game analysis is part of a larger tradition of media analysis and that critically dissecting their favorite games was just as worthy an academic pursuit as studying film or literature. Though video games are relatively new, academic interpretation of popular culture, media, and storytelling is not. Students were encouraged to see game theory as another link in a chain of disciplines and not something wholly alien to academic discussion. This goal became even more important when I began teaching the course; students were often timid about talking about their favorite games and often asked if these games were 'academic enough' to bring up in class. Framing game theory as part of a bigger network of interweaving media theories helped students feel confident that critiquing games was worth respecting at an academic level. It also helped students to understand that the writing in the course would be held to the same academic standards as any other class; this was not a 'throw away' elective that they could just breeze through by writing their personal opinions out the night before a paper was due.

To further reinforce the academic validity of analyzing video games, the final project was set up like an academic conference. Each student picked a game they had a personal connection with and/or a game-centric community they were a part of and present to the class in a mockup of a real conference. These papers were preceded by an abstract students wrote as if in answer to a Call for Papers. If the abstract was satisfactory, students were then 'accepted' to the conference, grouped based on topic, and put into panels that then presented to the class. Their classmates then asked questions during a subsequent question and answer period. I am happy to say that not only were these conferences successful in the classroom, but that several students went on to present their papers at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts (ICFA) held locally in Orlando by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts (IAFA).

## COURSE CONTEXT

English (ENG) 3612 Trends in Literary, Cultural, and Textual Studies is a class often taught by PhD candidates and focusing on their area of expertise. It is offered as an elective for undergraduates in the English Department. I knew I wanted a more diverse collection of students, so I advertised the class to game design students, film students, and on flyers at key recreational spots on campus, including the on-campus GameStop. This resulted in a range of students from different disciplines and age groups taking the class, which overall made for much more productive in-class discussion.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

My goal with this class stems from my overall pedagogy when teaching composition or rhetoric classes: giving students the tools that they need to navigate unfamiliar discourses empowers them in the 'real world' outside the classroom. I do not teach formulas or procedures, instead focusing on heuristics that can be transferred to whatever professional field that students inevitably join. I focused on conference presentations as a final assignment for this very reason; if a student is seeking a career that stems from a college education, they likely will have to present their research at some



point. Hopefully, having practiced in this class will make their first real conference experience less intimidating.

I also find it much more beneficial for students to write about what they are passionate about rather than forcing them to pick from a pre-selected list of 'safe' topics. When teaching introductory composition classes where students are taught to write a research paper, I do not suggest topics nor do I restrict them. I do not ban politics or religion from class discussion, as is often the case in such classes, instead opting to empower students to examine their beliefs using research and academic theory and critique. Every so often, this resulted in controversial or unorthodox arguments in student papers, but the benefits of seeing students reexamine the world around them with a new set of tools far outweigh any frustrations.

I found this pedagogy of empowerment extremely useful when teaching the class. I taught this class in 2012-13 when video game theory was still new to many academics. As a PhD student I had colleagues and professors alike question the value of my research, some politely, some rudely, some very dismissively, all reactions I never had as a literary scholar. As such, I am often hesitant to outright call myself a games theorist in front of people I do not know very well, and eventually I left academia altogether. I can only imagine that my students felt their own trepidation, especially when during the first few weeks the most common question asked was whether or not a specific game was 'academic' enough to write about.

The timidity of my students was partially solved when we had class discussions in which I asked them to tell me their planned game of study and commented on ways in which they could go about doing their research, suggesting specific scholars and disciplines that they could research to support their claims. Eventually, other students would join in such discussions, giving each other advice, encouraging each other, and reassuring each other that their papers did indeed sound 'professional' and not 'nerdy' or ridiculous. In fact, students would often meet after class with me at the on campus coffee shop to continue class discussions, excited to talk about the games they grew up with in an environment that encouraged them rather than dismissed these works as 'just games.'

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

An ideal iteration of this class would have a custom textbook and a lab that students could access to play relevant video games. The diversity of text for the class ranges from canonical philosophy to modern game theory, and a curated collection of texts would be difficult to find or would require students buy multiple books, a solution I find unacceptable given the ever-increasing cost of textbooks. Instead, I used pdfs ordered through the school library and uploaded to the University of Central Florida's online Canvas system.

Most schools will not have an arcade dedicated to academic study, so games picked for the class should be playable on the most basic hardware a student is reasonably expected to have access to. My standard test was to run a game on an old notebook computer, and if it lagged too much, the game did not make the cut. At the time, this led to many Flash games being assigned for the class, which has become problematic since the end of support for Adobe Flash Player in December, 2020. As I write this in February of 2021, Flash preservation communities are having to work around yet

another Windows update that automatically kills any instance of Flash running in browser, rendering many fan-made plugins obsolete.

When designing your own version of this course, it is imperative that you test each game for yourself for playability. I also highly recommend that instead of sending students to download links, you download any free software and games yourself and provide the files directly to students via shared online space so as to avoid links that may become broken or stop working in future.

As for content that you cannot legally download and distribute, sites like Itch.io, store.steampowered.com, and GoG.com should be familiar to students and have several suitable substitutes for and/or updated versions of older games. Newgrounds.com, a historically important collection of Flash games, now has a 'Newgrounds Player' that will run any Flash-based media hosted on the site, and are actively updating their player to work around Flash usability issues.

Finally we come to the issue of time. Because students pick what game will be the focus of their final project, they may find themselves picking a game that they love but simply will not have time to play during the semester. One valuable resource to help students plan their projects more efficiently is [howlongtobeat.com](http://howlongtobeat.com). This community takes the average playtime of its members and divides it up by main quest line, side missions, speedruns, and others to determine how long a game should take to beat depending on the goals of the player. Students should be encouraged to look up their game of choice on the site and make sure that they can fit playing the game into their schedule.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

### **Class Participation and Attendance**

Students are responsible for keeping up with the games and readings and contributing to class discussion. Points are earned for meaningful participation in class; points are deducted for disruptive behavior.

- Included in this grade are quizzes that serve to make sure that students are reading/playing on schedule and can double as attendance for the day
- Students are expected to come to class on a regular basis. After one week's worth of unexplained absences, grades may be penalized.

### **Initial Responses**

For each reading assignment, students turn in a one page response to the games, texts, and/or videos. This response amounts to about one per week until the Conference Presentations start (see below).

Note: Failure to turn in this response indicates that the student did not do the readings and therefore is not prepared to meaningfully contribute to class discussion. A lack of a response paper therefore counts as an absence for the day it was due.

### **Readings**

This class is presented similar to a literature survey or a film appreciation class. Each module consists of one or several video games and theoretical texts that reflect themes in those games. Since this

class was originally meant for students in the humanities, the inclusion of a range of literary and philosophical methodologies for analysis of video games helped strengthen the analytical skills that were expected of them in other classes. The choice of philosophical texts also added a sense of 'seriousness' to the class; we were not just sitting around talking about video games but critically analyzing them on an academic level.

Note that in the humanities, the nouns 'reading' and 'text' do not necessarily reference letters on a page. They are instead catch-all terms for the work being analyzed; a film, documentary, online video, etc. may all be considered 'texts,' and 'reading' those texts simply means having proficient enough media literacy to understand those texts.

### **Games**

Assigning games for the class to play each week proved to be the most difficult part in designing the class. When deciding which games to assign, I ran across several concerns that fell into three main categories:

**Issue of Skill:** Not all players are at the same skill level and beating games might boil down to familiarity rather than ability.

**Issue of Finance and Availability:** Gaming can be an expensive hobby and while the average new game is cheaper than most text books, certain games that are important to gaming history are harder to come by and carry a high price tag. Some sort of gaming lab with machines set up to run these games for students would be ideal, but for institutions that cannot afford such a facility, students would have to eat this cost.

**Issue of Time:** Students may have the skills and resources to play all of the games that you assign, but with some games taking anywhere from 60-80 hours to play they simply might not have the time to finish them all. When assigning games, it is important to keep in mind that your class is not the only class they have. Students need the time to finish your work and their other classes if they are to perform well on assignments.

I decided that for most of the semester I would assign short indie/Flash games that were more focused in their intent and/or message and couple them with readings that explored similar themes. Towards the end of the semester, I assigned one longer but still relatively short game which served as an example of how to dissect a longer game academically. I made sure that all the games I assigned were free and available online and that even a notebook computer could run them so that no student was restricted from access.

### **Conference Presentation**

By the end of the semester students create a conference-level paper that can be submitted to academic conferences. This final project is meant to simulate a real conference and is submitted in three parts:

**Abstract:** Students are taught the general protocols when submitting to a conference starting with a discussion of a Call for Papers. The final project rubric is then presented to them midway through the semester in the form of a CFP. They then write an abstract to that CFP including a bibliography of 5-10 works. They are not allowed to give their in class presentation without completing the abstract.

**Conference Presentation:** The last few weeks of class are dedicated to a mock conference in which students present a 10 minute rough draft of their final conference paper. Each day after the 3 or 4 students give their presentations, students in the audience are given the chance to ask questions that the presenters must answer intelligently.

**Conference Participation:** When a student is not presenting, they are tasked with taking notes and asking intelligent questions at the end of the presentation. Each day, they turn in a worksheet with the day's notes for participation credit.

### **Final Paper**

The final paper is a 20 minute (8-10 page) conference-level paper analyzing a game or games and/or community of the student's choice that incorporates at least one class reading and 5-10 outside sources. Students were welcome to record their conference papers to video or audio, submit presentation slides, and/or include any other presentation material they wished, but only the paper itself was required.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

**Classwork:** 40%

Class Participation and Attendance (10% of Total Grade)

Initial Response (30% of Total Grade)

**Conference Presentation:** 30%

Abstract (10% of Total Grade)

Conference Presentation (10% of Total Grade)

Conference Participation (10% of Total Grade)

**Final Paper:** (30% of Total Grade)

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

The following is a combination of the four times this class was taught with several options for assignments for each module. I highly advise that instructors wishing to use this outline find substitutes for texts and games that are unfamiliar to them but keep to the general themes of each module.

Note that when assigning a reading with a game, try to balance the complexity of the two texts. Do not assign, for example, a dense game like Yume Nikki and a dense reading like a chapter from Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams. Give students one heavy text at a time with a supporting text will allow them to focus their energy more efficiently without needlessly frustrating them.

Note: All files and links below can be found backed up at <https://mega.nz/folder/4TxyAAIS#-2KFIdivCGP4zTB0l5haKVQ> or [tinyurl.com/t9ma2b30](https://tinyurl.com/t9ma2b30).

## Introductions

This first week should be kept casual but on task. Students should understand that the assignments will be held to a professional standard, but that they should feel safe and confident discussing their favorite games in this environment.

### *Assignments*

- Read through the syllabus, schedule, and descriptions of the assignments.
- Come in with any questions or concerns with the class.
- Make sure you have access to online materials.

### *Class Discussion*

Along with the usual syllabus breakdown and student introductions, ask each student to give a game or game series that has genuinely impacted their life, a game that they might want to spend a semester dissecting and sharing with the class. Make note of the games they list, and make an effort to incorporate that game into class lectures and examples. If, for example, several students bring up Dark Souls, and you are teaching the module on lore analysis in online gaming, discuss how the lore in the Souls games is presented in item descriptions and how the fan community interprets story fragments.

## **Module 1: How Interactivity Fundamentally Distinguishes Video Games**

When I first taught this class, I was mostly teaching undergraduate Literature majors. I was therefore concerned that students might focus on the narratives in the games we discuss rather than looking at the gameplay and narrative as a whole. This module was designed to show the basics of how interactivity can fundamentally change the ways in which a story can be told.

I strongly contend that a direct analysis of these two versions of ‘Before the Law’ is a fantastic way to start the class as it shows students how important interactivity is in understanding how games tell their stories. This comparison and subsequent in class discussion also gives the instructor a chance to reinforce how important it is to look at the game as a whole rather than focus on just the plot or characters. Therefore, I would try not to substitute other texts in this module.

If you are struggling to run Before the Law, you could substitute the short story and the game “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.” Because the game is a point and click game, many modern players might find it difficult to finish, so direct them to the playthrough at Longplays.org but encourage them to play the game first.

### *Assignments*

- Read Franz Kafka’s “Before the Law”: <http://www.kafka-online.info/before-the-law.html>
- Play the game adaptation of “Before the Law” by Brandon Brizzi. The game is available at Newgrounds: <https://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/565135>. Be sure to get both endings. Note: At time of writing, this is one of the games that the Newgrounds player is having trouble playing. If the game still does not work, the swf can be downloaded at: [www.theoddmanout.net/games/beforeTheLaw.swf](http://www.theoddmanout.net/games/beforeTheLaw.swf) and the last official stable version of

Adobe Flash player can be downloaded from: <http://www.joycot.com/downloads/flash/flashplayer32.exe>.

#### *Alternate Assignment*

- Read “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” by Harlan Ellison: <https://wjccschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/01/I-Have-No-Mouth-But-I-Must-Scream-by-Harlan-Ellison.pdf>
- Play “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream”: [https://www.gog.com/game/i\\_have\\_no\\_mouth\\_and\\_i\\_must\\_scream](https://www.gog.com/game/i_have_no_mouth_and_i_must_scream)
- Watch “PC Longplay [006] I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream” only after you have played the game. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NhtCxrmaEw>
- Watch “Harlan Ellison “I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream” interview”: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dBap0UfQ\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dBap0UfQ_U)

#### *Discussion Questions*

How do the endings of the game relate to the core message of the original text. What does adding an interactive element do to the story? Is it a gimmick or does it meaningfully impact the themes of Kafka’s/Ellison’s story?

#### **Module 2: How to Analyze Interactivity**

The purpose of this module is to provide students with specific tools to analyze games. Not all of these need to be assigned in the same week. This is merely a short list of several methods that my students have found useful for framing their arguments.

It might be helpful to assign a response during this module where the student needs to use one of these methods to analyze either their own game of choice or one of the games that the class has played so far. You might also consider dividing the class up into groups, each of which would explain one methodology to the class. This would give you an opportunity to see the overall presentations skills of each student and what the class as a whole needs to work on.

#### *Assignments*

- Read Chapter 1 of Ian Bogost’s Unit Operations
- Read “Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology” by Gonzalo Frasca located here: [http://www.ludology.org/articles/VGT\\_final.pdf](http://www.ludology.org/articles/VGT_final.pdf)
- Read “The Game Narrative Triangle” by Fraser Allison located here: <https://kotaku.com/the-game-narrative-triangle-5594540>
- Read “MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research” by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek located here: <https://users.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf>
- Read “Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games” by Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton located here: <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/>

### *Discussion Questions*

The various methods we have looked at in this module have their strengths and weaknesses. Which one do you find compelling and why? Can you use these to analyze a game? What would be the limits of, say, using a purely ludological approach to analyzing a cut-scene-heavy game like Metal Gear Solid or the various Final Fantasy games? Can you use one or two of these methods to analyze one of your favorite games?

### **Module 3: Authorship and Gaming**

Any works that deal with authorship can be used here, but I find Foucault to be especially helpful when combined with The Stanley Parable as the direct link is easy to explain to student.

You might consider including the promotional material located on the Steam page at [store.steampowered.com/app/221910/The\\_St Stanley\\_Parable](http://store.steampowered.com/app/221910/The_St Stanley_Parable) or the game's YouTube Page at <https://www.youtube.com/user/thisisthestoryofofof> as the narrator from the game responds in character to player reviews and critiques.

### *Assignments*

- Read "Panopticism" from Michel Foucault's "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison"
- Play through The Stanley Parable, either the free, original mod at [moddb.com/mods/the-stanley-parable](http://moddb.com/mods/the-stanley-parable) or the HD Steam rerelease.
- Response: how can Foucault be used to aid in a reading The Stanley Parable and "Before the Law"? Link Foucault to The Stanley Parable and interpret/analyze the game.

### *Discussion Questions*

Think about the ways in which Foucault and Kafka/Ellison can inform your analysis of The Stanley Parable. What does the mod say about the nature of games and the relationship between the gamer, the developer(s) and the game itself? What other games have you played that explore this dynamic?

Does a video game have an 'author' in the traditional sense? What is authorship in games and what criteria does a game's staff has to meet for there to be an 'author' or a group of 'authors'? What game developer (person or group) would you consider an 'author'? Can an author exist in a AAA company where the staff consists of hundreds?

### **Module 4: Authorship in Games and a Survey of a Developer**

Whereas the last module dealt with the relationship between the developer and the player, this module looks at the relationship between the author and the game. Ask students to consider how much of the author/developer's 'voice' is important in analyzing a game. Below are two modules based on two different indie developers, and both start with a reading of "Death of the Author" by Roland Barthes. I taught this class before "Undertale" or "Five Nights at Freddy's" were released, but I can imagine a module on authorship focused on Toby Fox or Scott Cawthon would be relatively successful.

Barthes' work is meant to show students that the question of authorship and analysis is not just problematic in video game analysis and to reinforce the message that much of video game analysis is part of an ongoing history of media analysis.

#### *Assignments*

- Read "Death of the Author" by Roland Barthes: [tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death\\_authorbarthes.pdf](http://tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf)

#### *Discussion Questions*

Does a video game have an 'author'? Discuss authorship in games and what criteria a game's staff has to meet for there to be an 'author' or a group of 'authors'. If you can, discuss a game developer (person or group) that you would consider an 'author.'

Developer 1: Edmund McMillen

- Play Edmund McMillen's Time Fcuk found in The Basement Collection: [https://store.steampowered.com/app/214790/The\\_Basement\\_Collection/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/214790/The_Basement_Collection/)
- Or, if it works, the Newgrounds upload located at: <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/511754>
- A Longplay of Time Fcuk can be located here if you get stuck: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_loO1-3wEsI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_loO1-3wEsI)
- Listen to Edmund McMillen's interview on Time Fcuk from "The Basement Collection"
- Play McMillen's "The Binding of Isaac": [https://store.steampowered.com/app/113200/The\\_Binding\\_of\\_Isaac/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/113200/The_Binding_of_Isaac/)

#### *Discussion Questions*

What are the connections you see between The Binding of Isaac and Time Fcuk? Do you think it is fair/acceptable/reasonable/etc for McMillen to not want to explicitly state the link? Why do you think he refuses to state this link?

Developer 2: La MollenIndustria

- Play La MollenIndustria's Oiligarchy located here: <http://www.molleindustria.org/en/oiligarchy>
- Write your initial reaction to the game (not an official Initial Response Paper, just an informal set of notes).
- Read the 'PostMortem' on Oiligarchy located here: <http://www.molleindustria.org/oiligarchy-postmortem>
- Revise your notes to include how your reaction changed while reading the PostMortem. Note any quotes, passages, research that you found interesting in La MollenIndustria's documentation.



#### **Module 4: Queer Identity in Video Games**

In the interest of fairness, for our gender studies readings I had a queer reading, a masculine reading and a feminist reading. So that the readings are not overwhelming, I spaced them out over three modules.

In a post GamerGate world, the next three modules may be harder to teach. This is why I strongly recommend starting with chapters from Yoshino's "Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights." The concept of 'covering' – having to disguise who you really are in order to function in society – will be a familiar one for undergraduates growing up in the digital age. Yoshino makes for a great starting point to make the more complex texts relatable and keep the conversation empathetic rather than hostile.

For the next few modules, I had students read chapters from a few books. It would be a good idea to request pdfs from your institution's library and distribute them to students rather than have students buy several books that they will only partially read.

As for the accompanying game, originally I assigned Anna Anthropy's "Dys4ia." Unfortunately, due to harassment, the game is no longer available online. A playthrough of the game is still available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpU6jZUq06A> and you may want to assign the video to student to open a discussion on how online culture treats marginalized groups.

#### *Assignments*

- Read the preface from *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* by Kenji Yoshino.
- Read the chapter "The New Civil Rights" from Yoshino
- Play "Coming Out Simulator" by Nicky Case: <https://ncase.itch.io/coming-out-simulator-2014>

#### *Discussion Questions*

How many gay video game characters can you list? Now, how many of those characters do you know are gay simply because romancing them is an option (i.e. Leliana from *Dragon Age: Origins*). How about transsexual characters? Transsexual characters that do not exist solely for comedic effect?

How about in media other than video games? TV? Film? How are these characters treated? What does this say for LGBT+ issues as a whole?

#### **Module 5: Masculinity and Video Games**

Make sure that you have zero tolerance for anyone that tries to derail the conversation. Be sure to keep students focused and stress that any argument in this class must be professional and respectful. "Tough Guise" is readily available in many University libraries here in the US, so you may wish to reserve a copy for students to view rather than make them purchase it.

#### *Assignments*

- Read the chapter "Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body" from "The Male Body: A New Look at

Men in Public and Private” by Susan Bordo.

- Watch the first part of the documentary “Tough Guise,” a documentary by Jackson Katz. You are welcome to watch the whole thing, but be advised that it is an hour and a half long.

#### *Discussion Questions*

Think about the biases that Bordo discusses in her work: gender roles, presentation of gender in the media, race, etc. What is the definition of ‘masculinity’ for modern Western cultures? Is it biological and/or cultural? How has the definition changed over time? How has the internet changed gender? Do the readings reflect masculinity in games? Can you, as Bordo does, note cultural differences in masculinity as expressed through games?

#### **Module 6: Women in Video Games**

If I were to teach this class again, this would be the module that would receive the most revision. Originally, this was meant to be a light-hearted introduction to basic feminist theory; after #GamerGate, light-hearted may not be the correct approach. I leave this assignment presented in its original state and hope that it serves as a starting point for anyone wishing to address these far more complex issues.

This module as is revolves around the controversial portrayal of Samus Aran in “Metroid: Other M” (Nintendo 2010). Most avid gamers should be familiar with Samus, but you may wish to give a brief description of her and her importance to gaming history before assigning this module.

For this module, I decided to assign a ‘let’s play’ instead of a longplay of “Metroid: Other M” to both add levity to the topic and to link this module to the next few discussions on gaming culture. If you wish to have a more serious discussion of the game, a longplay without commentary can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-9avJI3SpU>. This longplay is just the cutscenes without gameplay.

#### *Assignments*

- Read Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”: <https://www.asu.edu/courses/fms504/total-readings/mulvey-visualpleasure.pdf>
- Watch “Character Assassination: Authorized – Long,” a playthrough and commentary of Metroid Other M by Retsupurae, a team consisting of former Something Awful forum moderator ‘Slowbeef’ and member ‘Diabetes’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMI1-DDklqE> (Time: 2:14:21)
- Read “Metroid: Other M – The Elephant in the Room” by Tuvia Dulin and MenTaLguY archived here: <http://web.archive.org/web/20101027081610/http://moonbase.rydia.net:80/mental/blog/gaming/metroid-other-m-the-elephant/article.html>

#### *Discussion Questions*

“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is a landmark article on how cinema views females. Do you see similar trends in games? Why or why not? What of the case of Samus Aran and her portrayal in

Other M? Is this a case of sexism? Bad writing? Both? Something else entirely? Could you see “Max Pain or Kratos” acting the way she does as ‘Slowbeef’ asks?

Also consider how these non-academic sources analyze a work versus the mostly academic articles we have been reading. Were you convinced by the ‘Retsupurae’ treatment? By the blog article? Why or why not?

### **Module 7: Gaming Culture and Online Analysis**

The purpose of this module is to show students how gaming culture can contextualize gameplay and vice versa. They would have already seen this in the previous three modules, so this gives them a chance to expand their analysis of the cultural impact online gaming spaces have on how we perceive games. The module focuses on the ‘creepypasta’ character ‘Slenderman’ and how online communities shaped the mythos surrounding the character. A more contemporary example of community lore creation and analysis would be “Five Nights at Freddy’s” and developer Scott Cawthon’s playful, often ‘trolling’ interactions with his audience both in the game and in supplementary materials like his websites and spin off books. Another example would be the various fan made alternate universes (au) created in the Undertale fandom.

#### *Assignments*

- Read “Cats and Portals” by James Paul Gee: <https://www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/1-2-article-cats-and-portals.pdf>
- Read chapter 3 of Henry Jenkin’s “Convergence Culture,” “Searching for the Origami Unicorn: The Matrix and Transmedia Storytelling”
- Read up on the origins of Slenderman – Victor Surge’s post on the Something Awful forums – and the spread of the legend here: [http://theslenderman.wikia.com/wiki/Slender\\_Man](http://theslenderman.wikia.com/wiki/Slender_Man)
- Watch (at least) the first 20 episodes of the Marble Hornets series, i.e. the Introduction and Entry #1-19, located here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOOHh8A-4-AY8Mxjp4fHE5p3oOP9evCsW> Note: You are not required to watch the responses by YouTube user totheark but you may if you like as totheark becomes a recurring character in the series
- Play Slender: The 8 Pages (not to be confused with Slender: The Arival, the commercially sold reimaging of this free indie game): <https://www.techspot.com/downloads/5911-slender-the-eight-pages.html>

#### *Discussion Questions*

Describe your reactions while playing Slender and how the mythos does or does not affect the gameplay in relation to the chapter in Jenkin’s Convergence Culture. How does the mythos surrounding Slenderman alter/affect/otherwise influence your feelings while being chased by him/it? How does the difficulty of the game also affect the tension? Would you genuinely consider this game scary? Tense?

## **Module 8: Drafting an Abstract for Submission to a Conference**

At the start of this module, students should bring an outline of their project.

Classwork should focus on group revision with the instructor going from group to group to offer assistance and answer questions.

### *Assignments*

- Bring to class a printout or file on your computer/mobile device a copy of Swales CARS Model.
- Bring your rough ideas on your class project. Ideally you should have an outline of your abstract that includes the parts of the CARS model.
- Bring copies of your abstract in for group revisions.
- Abstract Due at the end of the module.

### *Class Discussion*

Each day this week, groups will focus on student abstracts from one member of the group. Groups will focus on making sure that the abstracts:

- meet the requirements of the assignment
- are of academic quality
- promote an interesting and relevant thesis

Student notes on a peer's abstract should count towards classwork. They will not have to turn in notes on the day that their own abstract is the topic of group discussion.

## **Module 9: Japanese and Otaku Culture and the Nature of (Consuming) Games**

Many video games come from Japan, including several classic and influential games that students grew up playing, so it is only fitting that a module specifically address Japanese culture.

### *Assignments*

- Read "Earth at my Window," a chapter from Takashi Murikami's "Little Boy"
- Read chapter 2, 'Database Animals' from "Otaku: Japan's Database Animals" by Hiroki Azuma
- Watch Murikami's "Superflat Monogram", a video he did for Louis Vuitton, located here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4C84FLwm3DA>

### *Discussion Questions*

How does this week's reading inform your understanding of Japanese video games? Can you see Superflat and/or animalization becoming a trend in Western cultures? Can you come up with examples of the Superflat in the West?

## Module 10: Analysis of a Longer Game

This module is meant to be an example of how students might approach their analysis in their final paper. It is also meant to be a way of demonstrating how various readings from the semester can be combined to analyze one work. Because the focus is on testing their analysis skills and using their research to back up their claims, only the game and supplementary materials are assigned. Their reader responses should incorporate works of their choosing from throughout the semester.

### *Version 1: Yume Nikki*

This game may be too dense to unpack in a single class period. You may want to directly tell students where to go in the game world or direct them to read up on some of the events in Yume Nikki in the wiki located at [yumenikki.wikia.com/wiki/Events](http://yumenikki.wikia.com/wiki/Events) and try and trigger the event(s) of their choice.

### Assignments

- Explore the world of Yume Nikki. [https://store.steampowered.com/app/650700/Yume\\_Nikki/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/650700/Yume_Nikki/)
- Play around with the game and familiarize yourself with the (minimalist) premise and take notes of the things that happen to you.
- Read “Hikikomori: Why are so many Japanese men refusing to leave their rooms?” located here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23182523>
- Once you have played the game for yourself, Watch “Yume Nikki Clips” located here: <https://youtu.be/HupvNlghblk>

### Discussion Questions

Discuss reactions to individual playthroughs and to the shared clips.

This discussion should be less directed than the others, but emphasize that students should use the readings from throughout the semester to frame their arguments.

### *Version 2: Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden*

Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden juggles several tropes and gaming conventions in over-the-top parody. This option is for those that want to end the class on a lighter game.

### Assignments

- Play Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden: [https://www.talesofgames.com/related\\_game/barkley-shut-up-jam-gaiden](https://www.talesofgames.com/related_game/barkley-shut-up-jam-gaiden)

### Class Discussion

This discussion should be less directed than the others, but emphasize that students should use the readings from throughout the semester to frame their arguments. Remind them that despite the work itself being ridiculous, the goal is to analyze what tropes that the game is using and how effective it is at parodying them.

## **Module 11: Conference Paper Drafting**

These revision days are easier to facilitate if done in a computer classroom where students can comment directly on digital copies of each other's work. If you do not teach in a computer classroom, consider contacting your institution's library to see if they rent out media rooms for this week's classes.

### *Assignments*

Bring a polished rough draft of your presentation for your conference presentation.

### *Class Discussion*

Same as the abstract drafting in Module 8 above, students will get into their groups and review each other's work. Each individual student will turn in notes for revision for their classmates, and final presentation papers are due the day they present. Final papers are due on final exam day.

## **Module 12: Practice Conference**

By now, students should be able to hold a professional discussion on video games on their own, so ease control of the class as much as reasonably possible.

Note that some students will have much more time to prepare their presentations simply due to scheduling. Make grading concessions for those that go first so that they do not feel unfairly put on the spot.

### *Assignments*

The class will be divided into two main parts: the presentation and a Q and A segment where, just like at a real conference, the audience will ask questions of the presenters. Students will be graded on both these parts:

- The Presentation – students should be graded on the quality of the presentation paper, how well they present it, and how well they address student questions.
- Active Audience Participation – Students should get a worksheet to fill in with feedback on the presenters and should be graded on the questions they ask during the Q and A section.

### *Class Discussion*

The instructor should act as moderator for the conference. Again, this is a test of how well the class can carry an academic discussion on their own, so only intervene when discussion stops or becomes unprofessional. Also make sure that each presenter is asked at least one question and/or participates in the Q and A section.

## **Module 13: Final Paper**

If your institution insists that you hold a final exam, have students take a basic multiple choice test based on the readings throughout the semester and collect their final papers. The focus should be on the quality of the work they produce, not on memorizing developer names or article titles.

## Assignment

Turn your final paper during in during exam period.

### COURSE BEST PRACTICES:

- Let students get excited by their projects and the games being discussed, but remind them that this is a professional academic setting and that their arguments need to adhere to the standards of an academic paper. Memes are ok. Joking around is ok. Using memes and jokes instead of actual arguments is not ok.
- Keep the assignments simple, but leave room for students to invest more if they wish. The first semester that I taught this, I assigned a 'let's play' style analysis of the game they chose to write on as part of their final project. This was meant to be a low stakes activity where they simply played the game and took notes, but students became too invested in learning how to capture video/audio from their games and their commentary and did not focus enough on the content of that commentary. I therefore cut the let's play from the assignments and instead opted to look at let's plays in the 'Video Games and Culture' section.
- Putting emphasis on class discussion and conference-style presentations was a tremendous success when those discussions stayed professional and respectful. This statement can be made about any class, but is especially true with young people who grew up discussing games in online forums rather than classrooms. Put heavy emphasis on professionalism and do not let students cut each other off or take over class discussion. Keep them focused without crushing their enthusiasm.
- Be personable with students. A class like this can easily become an example of the "creepy treehouse effect," a term for the disingenuous and often unsettling presence a person of authority can give off when entering online spaces that they are clearly not familiar with in order to connect with a younger audience. Lifelong game players that have grown up in the digital age will have seen several examples of this effect, including the "how do you do, fellow kids?" meme and the entirety of Hillary Clinton's Vine account during her failed presidential run. It is important to let them know that you are teaching this class because you, like them, love and respect video games and want to share that passion. Talk about your favorite games, how they helped shape who you are, and use academic rhetoric to demonstrate how you are able to communicate these experiences better through professional lenses.

### FUTURE COURSE PLANS:

I feel fortunate to have taught this class when I did: before GamerGate. Any future version of this class would have to genuinely discuss this incident from its roots to its lasting effects. To ignore it would be disingenuous. The modules on gaming culture and gender studies would probably have to come before a module on GamerGate or be combined into one longer module. In fact, an entire class could be made just analyzing the cultural, social, and historic factors that led up to and came from GamerGate.

To those who wish to teach a version of this class that includes GamerGate, you will have to make sure that students understand that their arguments must maintain academic decorum. Emphasis

how important evidence is with a topic this volatile, and remind them of your institutions Code of Conduct.

Though a discussion of GamerGate may make adherence to the rules more important, it is equally important that you do not take complete control of the discussion unless absolutely necessary. Students will respond better if they are lead to a conclusion rather than being told what conclusion is 'acceptable' in your class. Ask probing questions, ask students to be self-reflective, and give them the tools necessary to understand GamerGate and the impact it had on the greater gaming community.

As for assignments associated with a module on GamerGate, I would recommend some historic documentation on the tension between gaming and mainstream media, firsthand, verifiable accounts of what happened, and a variety of reactions to the controversy. "Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chic" by Brad King and "Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture" by David Kushner both offer concise chapters on the tensions between mainstream American Christian groups and Dungeons and Dragons and the backlash against violent video games in the wake of the Columbine Massacre. Zoe Quinn, a central target for the GamerGate harassment campaign, has written a book on the experience called, "Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate." Lastly, the effects of vitriolic online rhetoric in today's political climate cannot be understated. You will have to decide if you wish to discuss politics in more broad terms or try to keep the discussion focused on video games alone, and make that decision known to your students before class discussion begins.

#### REFERENCES:

For more information on this class, including a full postmortem on the first semester and sample assignments from the first three semester I taught this class, visit

- <http://vgcultureucf.blogspot.com>
- <http://vgculturefall2012.blogspot.com>
- <http://vgcultureucfspring2013.blogspot.com>

Sadly, many of the links are now dead, but what remains is an in-depth record of the classes including student feedback surveys, syllabi, and suggestions for future versions of the class. For more on the "creepy treehouse effect", see <https://markcarrigan.net/2015/07/25/the-creepy-treehouse-problem>



## CHAPTER 8.

### INTRODUCTION TO VIDEO GAMING (SOCSCI 189)

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**Course Title:** SocSci 189: Introduction to Video Gaming

**Course College/School:** University of California, Irvine

**Course Department/Program:** Social Sciences

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 4

**Course Length:** 10 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face, Online

**Course Keywords:** research, history, design, esports, spectating, culture, narrative, user experience

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

This is a special topics course in the School of Social Sciences that considers video games from a broad perspective. As an introduction, the course takes a foundational approach to understanding a broad range of ideas, theories, and research as they relate to video games. Students will be introduced to concepts surrounding video games and their place in society that relate to the historical, social, and design elements of video games. This includes perspectives on the video game industry, esports, and more minute details on video game design.

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This class is aimed at a broad student audience and considers general understandings of video games both as an industry and a cultural object. This course will cover the basics of video games, from video game history to the industry to aspects of design. This is an introductory look at video games and their place in society as a form of entertainment, but also as a means of better understanding broader aspects and elements of culture. While not every student taking this course will consider a career in developing video games, much of the information is set up to address the role of video games in social contexts and user experience. From how watching someone else play video games affects us to which

1. Dr. Christine Tomlinson (ctomlins@uci.edu) is a lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at the University of California, Irvine. As an instructor, the author focuses on bringing together elements of design and experience to give students from a wide range of majors, interests, and skillsets a broader understanding of video games as an area of academic inquiry, a hobby, an artform, and an industry.

elements of design provoke particular responses, the course emphasizes impact, influence, and the best approaches to making games with audiences in mind.

There are several expected course outcomes, which students will demonstrate through a variety of assignments. First, they will be able to identify different forms of games, historical changes in games, and elements of the industry. Second, they will also be able to discuss video games as a social and cultural phenomenon, including the social aspects of esports and spectating. Third, they will be able to identify aspects and attributes of video game design and aesthetics. This includes mechanical details, like controls, as well as the interactions between visual and audio design to create a specific experience. Fourth, they will be able to apply concepts of categorization to player and spectator behaviors. Finally, they will be able to trace the trajectories of video games both historically and looking ahead to future developments.

## COURSE CONTEXT

This course is an elective special topics class designed for students both inside and outside of the Social Sciences to explore the application of social science theory to a particular area – in this case video games. Although the course was not originally planned to be online, circumstances surrounding the pandemic events of 2020-2021 led to a transition to a digital delivery format. Rather than a remote class emphasizing live sessions, I took the approach of adapting the course to an online format that could be used later if necessary or desired to continue as a fully online course. This meant adjusting content to be interactive in new ways. Part of this was accomplished through providing shorter and more pointed videos on specific elements of the lecture (Brame & Perez, 2017) and organizing the class around online discussion, engagement, and activities. This also meant new ways of incorporating live interaction as a supplement to lecture content. As a couple of examples, organizing group play sessions of multiplayer games and inviting students to join discussions during online streams of relevant video games.

The course is set up to address the needs, goals, interests, and skillsets of a variety of students. The students who take this course come from an array of backgrounds, including different majors and schools on campus, educational levels, and even experience with video games. While most of these students are majors in Social Science departments, the course attracts regular players, students interested in pursuing a career in game design or marketing, and even students who have no direct experience with video games. Often, parents of young players and people whose partners play video games will enroll in the course to have a better understanding of a loved one's hobby, even if they themselves do not play. These students often report that the class has helped them better understand and connect with people in their lives who enjoy video games. Keeping these factors in mind, the course starts with some taken-for-granted basics to make sure everyone is on the same page. To keep things interesting and engaging for those with more experience, however, I include some information that is less likely to be assumed by general gaming audiences. For example, the material can be kept interesting for all students by introducing debates around how to define action games (and whether or not that should include "Pac-Man"), information on the nuances of Rogue-likes, and considerations of whether or not genre is even a helpful way to define games.

I also developed this course in conjunction with two other classes on different elements of video games in social contexts. Each of these courses builds on this foundational introductory class to

better understand video games in cultural and social contexts. The course itself complements classes on design offered in other departments at the university and, for students majoring in computer science or informatics fields, provides an additional angle on human-computer interaction. Students interested in designing games have explained that this has given them new perspectives to consider in their planned career. Many students also take the full three-course series, which includes classes more focused on societal impact and influences linked to games and game elements related to gender and sexuality. Each course offers information on different areas of design, interaction, engagement, and influence related to the position of video games in society. Students who take the full set of classes have sometimes explained that they have been inspired to develop games or will approach design differently than they would have had they not taken these courses.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

This class is taught with three guiding intentions. First, the goal is to help students understand the broad gaming landscape. This involves historical, social, and cultural contexts as well as the spread of gaming as an interest beyond just being a hobby, including esports and experiences outside of games. Second, although many of these students will not go on to design video games, I want to give them an opportunity to understand effective and better game design, particularly from a user experience standpoint. Based on student feedback, this has been useful for students who hope to pursue a career in video games, but has also provided students with tools to enjoy their hobby on a deeper level. Third, I aim to give students up-to-date and relevant examples from everyday experience. This means showing and discussing new games, keeping them current on major gaming-related events and news, and integrating direct examples of theory into our discussions. Examples will be discussed further below.

The course tends to be smaller in terms of enrollment and is lecture-based. This facilitates active learning approaches in face-to-face models of the class that emphasize group discussions to apply and disentangle concepts (Smith et al., 2009). Within this approach, I encourage students to apply concepts directly. Over the span of the course, in both formats, students assess materials in group discussions, reflect on concepts on their own, tie materials presented in class to their own experience, and apply understandings of design in a review of a video game. I also make sure to frame these pedagogical decisions, explaining why discussions are happening, which improves student perspectives and outcomes (Clinton & Kelly, 2020; Lumpkin, Achen, & Dodd, 2015). When taught online, discussions shift toward self-reflections and opinions on concepts, drawing on both course materials and students' own experiences. Students comment on one another's posts to allow them to consider the opinions and perspectives of their classmates. Maintaining the discussion aspect of the course online facilitates better outcomes in terms of deeply engaging with course materials (Afify, 2019). Students also tend to enjoy learning when they can provide their own input and interact with other students (Lumpkin, Achen, & Dodd, 2015).

In both class formats, and as one example of relating course concepts to their own experience, students consider player "types" and motivations (Tuunanen & Hamari, 2012; Vahlo, Kaakinen, Holm, & Koponen, 2017), connect these to our discussions of genre, and consider their own interests and proclivities in play. This also links to an optional exercise where students take part in the Quantic Foundry survey (found here: <https://apps.quantificfoundry.com/surveys/start/gamerprofile/>) and apply course concepts to both the survey design and their gaming experiences.

Both formats also make use of external videos, particularly from YouTube, to enhance student learning and understanding (Clifton & Mann, 2011; Jackman & Roberts, 2014). This is part of a larger learning process (Brame & Perez, 2017) where students integrate pieces of information from different elements of lecture, readings, and assigned videos in class discussions. Various readings and videos are selected to present students with different perspectives and angles of understanding. This includes academic, critic, and designer voices to round out our discussions of the purposes, benefits, problems, and considerations involved with video games. In the online course, students are also able to apply concepts while watching online streams. This includes sessions to watch regular streamers, larger streamed events like Games Done Quick (<https://www.twitch.tv/gamesdonequick>), or to watch me stream new and relevant games while we talk through course concepts.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

Because this course appeals to students across diverse majors and at different points in their educational careers, there is limited software and hardware involved in the course. In terms of what students read, the class includes a combination of textbook and academic article readings. In part, it is designed to mesh the worlds of industry and academia together to foster a full understanding of video games from different perspectives. The primary text for the course is “Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2019). This text offers a great deal of information across topics of video game design, gaming culture, and the position of video games in society more extensively.

Readings assigned from the text reflect the ideas presented in that week’s lecture and complement the other course material. These readings are often paired with academic articles that also fit with the lecture themes, but extend and expand the discussion to specific contexts, examples, and samples. These readings give much more specific case study examples or offer analyses that show evidence for the relationships and theories that we consider in lecture. Occasionally, perspectives are not covered by the text or in academic work. For example, when recent or current events that are relevant to the discussion come up, I often have students read Reddit threads, Twitter exchanges, and news articles.

When students consider examples of community discourse in their discussions – whether online or in a physical classroom – this provides another way for students to actively interrogate the course materials for that week. For example, because of events that were unfolding during the course, we discussed additional information regarding the industry and workers when there was news of crunch time happening during the development of *Cyberpunk 2077*. Students were also asked to consider a Twitter exchange arguing about whether more payment should go to companies through streamers. These additional examples taken from outside of the usual class contexts work not only in conjunction with lecture, but also with videos assigned from YouTube which aim to reinforce, supplement, or even challenge some of the concepts that we cover.

Students are also given a broad range of examples directly applied to and from video games, including big budget AAA titles and indie games. The list of games that are covered changes slightly each year that the course is offered. When discussing genre, we take closer looks at games including *Monster Hunter*, *Myst*, *Okami*, the *Civilization* series, *Goat Simulator* (as part of a debate about what makes a simulator), *Faster Than Light*, the *Fallout* series, *Doom*, and the *Final Fantasy* series. Discussions of different user interface (UI) approaches include examples from *Dragon Age*, *World of Warcraft*, *Splinter*

*Cell: Conviction*, and *Call of Duty*. Conversations about graphical style, aesthetics, and visual and audio design incorporate examples from games including *Uncharted 4*, *Hollow Knight*, *Night in the Woods*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Skyrim*, *Overwatch*, and *Until Dawn*. Although it is not required, students are often inspired to play these games if they have not already done so and return to class with new ideas to share.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

The major assignments for this course can be understood as falling under the following categories: tests, readings, discussions, papers, and supplemental contextual materials. The assignments in the course differ slightly, based on whether it is being taught face-to-face or online. First, assessments in the form of tests punctuate both formats of the course, but are applied in different ways. In the face-to-face class, larger exams are used, with a midterm and final assessment. In the online course, there are instead smaller quizzes dispersed across the quarter. These quizzes may be implemented in the face-to-face version of the class as well based on student performance in the online course. Online quizzes have also been noted as effective for encouraging both student engagement and more preparatory work for class (Cook & Babon, 2017). The exams and quizzes are both set up to allow students to balance their talents with partial multiple choice and partial free response formatting.

Second, students in both the online and face-to-face version of the course have weekly assigned readings, which follow and align with the lecture content. Portions of the readings are integrated in lectures to give students framing and context, but the lectures and readings are meant to build upon one another, rather than completely overlap. While the number of readings may change as the course is updated for each new year that the course is taught, the number is generally between 10 to 20 readings in total.

Third, discussions are also an important assignment area for students and provide an essential area of reinforcement and exploration of course concepts. This is a fantastic way for students to express their ideas, show their knowledge, and interact with one another to understand class information from various angles. This is also potentially the most enjoyable assignment type for the students, based on student participation, feedback, and reactions. The formatting of the discussions differs slightly whether the class is face-to-face or online. Face-to-face discussions happen in small groups of about five students and have a check-in with the entire class at the end and online discussions take place asynchronously in groups of about ten to fifteen using forums on the course website.

Fourth, students are also required to write two papers in both versions of the class. The first paper gives them a bit of creative freedom, in that they can select one topic from the first portion of class to explore and expand upon. The goal of this paper is for students to showcase their knowledge on one topic covered prior to about the midway point of the class. This is, essentially, the midterm assessment in cases where there is no midterm exam. Students can include their own observations and experiences as part of their discussion. I find that connecting course material to one's own experience can make the information more grounded and accessible for students and it also seems to make assignments more enjoyable. In the second paper, there is still an opportunity to apply their own experiences, but the focus of the paper is much more streamlined. I select a free-to-play game that has most of the elements of aesthetics and design that we discuss. It needs to exhibit character design, narrative, music, sound design, a particular visual style, and a clear user interface. It is helpful if the

game exhibits some of what one might deem 'bad' design or inhibitors to user experience. Game selection may also include emotional influences outside of design, such as time limits to induce a sense of urgency. This could easily be adapted to allow students to select their own game, but having the same comparison point is useful for facilitating student conversations.

Finally, students may be assigned additional reading, reviewing, or viewing depending on current relevant news and events. This may include news articles, YouTube videos from critics, widescale events in the gaming community, or viral opinions on Twitter. Most often, these are folded into students' discussions to allow them to consider these materials in the context of the course.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

- Introductions: 2 points (~1.5%)
- Discussions: 50 points (~38%)
- Quizzes (or Exams): 50 points (~38%)
- Short Papers: 30 points (~23%)
- Total Possible: 132 points

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

### **Week 1: Course Introduction**

#### *Class Topics and Activities*

- We complete an overview of the syllabus and introduce ourselves.
- Lecture also covers what research on video games looks like.
- The goal is to get students familiarized with each other, the course, and also how research on video games is done.

#### *Assignments*

- Students meet each other in class or online and briefly introduce themselves (2 points).
- Read Chapter 1 of textbook and articles from Esposito (2005) and Humphreys (2017).
- General discussion (physical classroom groups of five or online discussions in groups of 10-15) about their thoughts on video game research (5 points).

### **Week 2: Definitions and Foundations for Understanding**

#### *Class Topics and Activities*

- Lecture focuses on the complexities of how games are defined, what play looks like, and how we understand video games in both of these contexts.
- We also tackle video game genre as a concept and complicate the topic in an interactive lecture.
- The goal is to get students thinking about video games more critically and through a lens of

analysis.

#### *Assignments*

- Read Chapter 3 of textbook.
- Think-pair-share (individual writing and then one-on-one comparison) or online group discussion of students' interpretations of genre and the complications associated with defining games this way (5 points).
- Quiz on week 1 and week 2 concepts (10 points).

### **Week 3: Industry**

#### *Class Topics and Activities*

- Lecture covers the evolution of the industry over time and the increasingly blurry lines between indie and AAA companies/titles.
- The lecture also includes external videos and an interactive look at (or online discussion of) some of the problems increasingly experienced by those in the industry, with particular attention given to crunch.
- The goal for these lectures is to illuminate elements of the industry that players are often unfamiliar with or not exposed to.

#### *Assignments*

- Read Chapter 2 of textbook and any relevant current supplemental materials (e.g., news articles or selected Tweets).
- Small group or online discussions of major elements of the industry that students may have found surprising (5 points).

### **Week 4: History**

#### *Class Topics and Activities*

- Lecture and external videos review the history of video games and video game consoles from the very early stages to what we see today.
- The goal is in part to familiarize students with the overall history of games, but also to prepare students for later discussions of design, including the ways that technology can limit or facilitate various options.

#### *Assignments*

- Read Chapter 4 of textbook.
- Small group or online discussion of major aspects of games historically that stand out to the students, including changes in technology and how these relate to previous materials on genre (5 points).

## **Week 5: Genre, Style, and Purpose of Play; Cheating**

### *Class Topics and Activities*

- This week's lecture focuses on player "types" and the different motivations that people have to play video games.
- There is also an interactive lecture or online discussion element centered on the complications involved with understanding cheating in a broad gaming landscape (e.g., multiplayer vs. single player cheating) and how players perceive these activities.
- The goal here is to deepen students' understandings of player behaviors, how we study and recognize them, and what this all means in the context of previous class content.

### *Assignments*

- Read Chakraborty (2017) and Vorderer, Hartmann, & Klimmt (2003).
- Small group or online discussions linking students' personal experiences with video games to these concepts, including their understandings of their own play habits (5 points).
- Quiz on week 3, 4, and 5 materials (10 points).

## **Week 6: Video Games Beyond the Game**

### *Class Topics and Activities*

- The lecture this week broadens the scope of the discussion of video games to include a variety of video game elements outside of and adjacent to hobby play.
- Lecture discusses community, sharing, and paratexts, with interactive opportunities to consider how paratexts might influence experiences with the "text" (or video game) itself.
- There is also lecture content on concepts of deep play and flow, which allow students to share their own experiences of losing time while playing and how play interacts with skill.
- Lecture also presents ideas about the use and increasing applications of serious games.
- The goal is to give students information on elements of video games outside of the game itself and beyond hobby-based gaming experiences.

### *Assignments*

- Read Chapter 8 of textbook, Condis (2015), and Gee (2003).
- Small group or online discussion of the application of serious games in different circumstances and the ways that framing some games as "serious" may not be entirely helpful (5 points).
- Short paper on a previously discussed topic of the student's choice to showcase their knowledge and understanding (10 points).



## **Week 7: Effects and Influences of Games; eSports and Spectating**

### *Class Topics and Activities*

- The lecture considers what video games do for and to us as individuals. This includes attempts to link video games to violent behavior as well as more recent research uncovering some of the biological and social side effects of video games.
- There is also a lecture on both esports and spectating. Spectating covers a spectrum of behaviors, including watching professional video game play or more relaxed streams and Let's Play formats.
- The goal this week is for students to consider other motivations that relate to video games. We have some understanding of why people play video games, but now we consider why people would want to watch others play or stream their own play for an audience.

### *Assignments*

- Read Chapter 9 of textbook.
- Small group or online discussion of both video game effects and experiences of spectating where students discuss the concepts in more depth and connect ideas (5 points).
- In the online format, this week begins optional streams of newer game titles that will facilitate discussion of concepts. In this case – what might be enticing about spectating. Students have the option of coming to watch an established streamer together and have a conversation about what might draw viewers to this stream and its content.

## **Week 8: Design (Part 1)**

### *Class Topics and Activities*

- The lecture this week is the start of a relatively deep dive into video game design. All of the design conversations include how design is implemented, but are framed around users and their experiences. This week considers mechanics, UI, usability, testing, and accessibility in terms of both things that are done well and things that could be better.
- We also briefly revisit history to discuss changes in technology as they relate to the design styles that we see.
- The goal with this week is to call students' attention to the details involved in video game design, their effectiveness, and how players engage with these elements of games.

### *Assignments*

- Read Chapter 5 in textbook and Zehnder & Lipscomb (2006).
- Small group or online discussion in which students identify the importance of different elements of design and give examples of UI they have seen and how it affected their experience (5 points).
- In the online format, this week includes an optional relevant stream to actively apply these aspects of design knowledge and assess the game.

## **Week 9: Design (Part 2)**

### *Class Topics and Activities*

- This week's lecture continues our discussion of design, turning to other aspects of the gaming experience. We explore game rules and geography, graphical design, audio design, narrative and characters, and mobile design.
- The goal is to further expand student understandings of how varied elements of design come together to make a specific experience for players, what is done well, and what bad design means for experience.

### *Assignments*

- Read Chapter 7 in textbook.
- Think-pair-share discussion or online group discussion considering elements of audio and visual design in terms of the influence they have on the play experience (5 points).
- In the online format, this week includes a relevant stream to begin applying design knowledge in terms of characters, narrative, audio design, etc.

## **Week 10: Culture, Current Trends, and Future Directions**

### *Class Topics and Activities*

- This week's lecture engages with basic understandings of culture and gaming culture to highlight unique facets of the gaming community.
- There is also an interactive discussion or online engagement with current events in gaming where students consider directions gaming might take in the near future based on current trajectories.
- The goal this week is to wrap up the course, link a variety of concepts together, and allow students to speculate based on their understandings.

### *Assignments*

- Read Chapter 6 in textbook.
- Quiz on the last few weeks of content (20 points).
- We wrap the course up with a small group or online discussion of what students are expecting and excited about (5 points).
- In the online format, this week includes a relevant stream of an indie game with stylistic design attributes and students discuss the overall design elements, from more mechanical to experiential aspects.

## **Finals Week**

### *Assignments*

- Final paper: write a game review which applies the array of design elements we have discussed

as well as an assessment of how these elements affected their gaming experience (20 points).

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

A major tip that I have for developing and teaching a class like this is to never assume anything. This can be difficult if you are relatively embedded in gaming as a researcher and member of the community because many things are taken for granted. One of the things that caught me most off guard about teaching this course was the level of interest from non-players. This created the challenge of ensuring that everyone is on the same page with terminology and understandings, but that the foundational information is still interesting to those who feel more deeply connected to video games. This is helpful regardless because all students will have different levels of experience and exposure, but it is one of the more challenging aspects of the course.

Many of the mistakes in the early development of this course were related to making too many assumptions and not starting on a foundational enough level, but another learning curve was based on what students wanted in terms of assessment. Taking student feedback into account is essential, so I like to take an inventory at the end of the class for what was effective for them or not. This led to the development of the paper assignments because so many students requested having the opportunity to write about course materials outside of the short free-response questions in the exams. In implementing the paper assignments, students are generally much happier with the course in terms of their options to apply their knowledge.

Another hurdle was illuminated by student engagement with the course materials and led to the challenge of finding the right balance between lecture and external sources of information. This requires some adjustment throughout the course to find the right mix and may not always be predictable for every group of students. One effective way of bringing in other angles for students to consider and evaluate, however, has been including current events in the news, on Reddit, and on Twitter. Although they are not always backed up by sources, news articles and outside discussions can help students see some real examples of people's reactions to different concepts covered in class. For instance, I might have them read a personal take on UI to address our discussions in a slightly different way. An example could be an article like this: <https://medium.com/@nschaden/fallout-4-when-a-bad-ui-distracts-from-strong-gameplay-bbed07f504ef>. This takes the theoretical and general discussions about design and UI and gives students another way to think about it. While the lecture talks about UI types, what they look like, and what they can do, this gives students an idea of how design is actually perceived and experienced by players. This helps them identify some of the things that people might be looking for in the context of our lecture material and how/why the implementation of this approach falls short – at least for some players. Where possible, I also include videos that highlight some of the concepts we discuss in different ways. This includes covering the perils of analyzing player data to guide video game design, as seen in an Extra Credits video titled, “Metrics – The Danger of Data-Driven Game Design”: <https://youtu.be/nqGcXOksFGg>.

Alongside the use of external materials and examples, I try to give students opportunities to build knowledge both collaboratively and individually. The collaborative elements of the class are relatively limited in that they give students opportunities to build understanding, but do not put students' grades at risk based on each other's performance. Students practice their concept application and work out ideas in groups, but the big projects remain individual. In a face-to-face format, the class

emphasizes group discussion on a variety of topics related to what we have been discussing in lecture. This not only helps to break up the lecture time in the face-to-face format, but also gives students some new ways of looking at topics and problems. In an online format, this takes the form of group forum-based discussions, which have to be adapted to fit the online model. This means that discussions are asynchronous. These discussions actually allow students to articulate their ideas much more in depth, so while the face-to-face discussions are more energizing for the group, the online discussions produce very detailed assessments of course material through which students engage with one another.

As an introductory course with students from a variety of majors, backgrounds, skillsets, interests, and ultimate educational and career goals, there is little that is produced in terms of products for the course. Students, instead, illustrate their knowledge and apply this in evaluations of ideas and in a video game review. Understanding, rather than production, is the primary focus of the course. While this is currently the case, I do see the potential for some level of production in the future.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

Students have seemed happy with the course in its current general format and with the changes made each quarter it is taught. It is always important to keep up with current discussions in and around the industry, which does mean regularly updating readings and the everyday examples that students can apply their understandings to. One element that I would like to do more work with is using Discord as a space for students to talk to one another, share ideas, and collaborate. While the course website for both face-to-face and online teaching is great, I think that using an external program – particularly one we can discuss in the context of gaming – could add useful dynamics for students. This could introduce a more casual space for interacting and getting to know one another, creating study groups, and generally maintaining more consistent contact.

Additionally, despite the fact that the students in this class are generally not acquainted with video game development directly, I am interested in adding an experiential design component. Although students see examples of all points of game development, including the character design process (see, for instance, here: <https://youtu.be/9UWt6LdS4Z4>), it would be useful for them to more directly experience some of the steps of the design process and the programs used to make video games.

Regardless of the format – whether online or face-to-face – I plan on making hands-on adjustments that may make many of the design elements and challenges that we discuss easier to grasp. This will be useful for students who hope to design games and for players who wish to understand their hobby on a deeper level. This would also involve reformatting the course slightly to encourage direct experience with design while we cover specific concepts in lectures, readings, and discussions. For example, it would require moving some of the design lectures to earlier points in the course schedule. Rules and systems would need to be discussed earlier than in the second half of the course, narrative would be introduced at about the middle point of the course, and we would finish with visual and aesthetic design.

This restructuring would allow students to set up small group or team projects in which they develop an idea and plan for a game that reflects design concepts as we discuss them. Design itself is often less linear than this would need to be in the classroom, but it would be a good exercise in considering the

actual experience of putting these ideas into motion. Later, students would use Unity to put assets to their planned rules, environments, characters, and narrative. Unity would be a good option because it is free-to-use and relatively intuitive.

This would also involve adding more lecture content. First, I would include a lecture showing students the basics of the program so that they could test out more of the design process. Second, I would present examples of Unity's versatility in terms of designing games. From games like *Dream Daddy* to *Hearthstone* to *Ori and the Blind Forest*, the program offers a wide range of possibilities. With this in mind, students would not be expected to develop a full game, but only explore the program and place basic assets. This exercise would show students how these programs work and also how many steps are involved in producing video games from the conceptual phase to the end product.

Beyond this, the format is likely to remain somewhat the same, while keeping up with new, exciting, or interesting occurrences in gaming spaces. The ways that players connect and communicate with one another, the games that are popular and why, the formats of streaming, and the changes that we see in design and platforms will all be important to keep integrating into the course discussion.

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## CHAPTER 9.

### THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BUSINESS OF MAKING MONEY WITH PLAY (PAH 330)

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**Course Title:** PAH 330: The Video Game Industry: An Introduction to the Business of Making Money with Play

**Course College/School:** College of Humanities/University of Arizona

**Course Department/Program:** Department of Public and Applied Humanities

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 3

**Course Length:** 15 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face, Online, Blended/Hybrid

**Course Keywords:** Business; History; Culture; Industry; Production; Undergraduate; Face-to-face; Online

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

This course introduces students to the structures, practices, and study of the video game industry. Over the course of the semester we will: (1) survey the origins of the video game industry, paying particular attention to its connection to the broadcasting and film industries; (2) examine the video game industry in terms of its major spheres (development, publishing, distribution/sales, paratexts, consumption, and regulation); and (3) explore tools and techniques for theorizing video game business and conducting market analyses for academic and commercial purposes.

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3. Judd Ruggill (jruggill@email.arizona.edu) is Professor and Head of the Department of Public and Applied Humanities at the University of Arizona. He primarily researches play and the technologies, industries, and sociocultural phenomena that enable it.

## COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the course is to acquaint students with the game industry as an object of study and a potential career destination. The course is designed to function in a stand alone capacity (for students in any major who may be interested in learning about the business side of the game medium) and as part of a dedicated game studies curriculum leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree (see Course Context below). Additionally, the course fulfills a specific requirement in the university's General Education curriculum, and is thus meant to help students "attain the fundamental skills that all college-educated adults must have, whatever their specific areas of concentration (i.e., the major and minor)" (University of Arizona).

There are five primary course objectives:

1. Introduce the fundamental structures and practices of the video game industry;
2. Ensure that students understand and can articulate in their own words how the game industry works and why the study of it is important;
3. Convey a working knowledge of how the principles of media political economy can be effectively deployed in the study and making of games;
4. Describe the major present and future challenges to commercial game production, distribution, and consumption;
5. Acquaint students with notable industry case studies, as well as critical techniques for assessing such studies.

Because the course also serves a General Education function, two additional objectives are worth mentioning:

1. Solidify the foundation for upper-division coursework (regardless of major) and aid the student in learning analytical and critical thinking skills that can be used and assessed in writing, speaking, and collaborative work;
2. Help students develop essential workplace skills (e.g., effective analytical and social communication, the ability to research and problem solve) that will aid in their employment-seeking upon graduation.

## COURSE CONTEXT

The course is required for the College of Humanities' Bachelor of Arts in Applied Humanities–Game Studies degree, the first of three game-related degrees developed at the University; the other two degrees are the Bachelor of Science in Game Design and Development and the Bachelor of Arts in Games and Behavior, both of which are housed in the University's College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The Bachelor of Arts in Applied Humanities–Game Studies degree was created in response to student and faculty interest in games, the inveterate growth of the game industry, and the lack of a games-focused major at the University. The degree takes a humanities perspective on what is widely known as "Game Studies," that is, the study of games as distinct from the technical context of designing and making them. Typically, the field of Game Studies includes areas such as:



- Critical approaches to understanding games and the game industry (e.g., techniques for exploring the relationship between a game’s technical design and the socio-cultural milieu out of which it arose);
- Studies of the cultures and practices surrounding games (e.g., cosplay, pro-gaming, fan crafts) in both local and global contexts (e.g., 1980s Russian bootleg game culture);
- Studies of the industry itself (e.g., corporate trajectories, mergers, and collapses; shifting monetization structures);
- Cultural studies of game content (e.g., analyses of gender, race, and age representation in games);
- Studies of game narratives (e.g., how games tell stories);
- Studies of design histories (e.g., changing form factors of game cartridges, consoles, and arcade cabinets);
- Game reviewing for online and print venues, as well as for fan and trade audiences (e.g., publishing critical evaluations of games for independent gaming websites);
- Studies of changing play styles, aesthetics, and interfaces (e.g., gaming in the arcade vs. at home).

While the field of Game Studies historically has not included the technical work of designing and developing games, the Bachelor of Arts in Applied Humanities–Game Studies degree does include introductory courses in design and development in order to acquaint students with the development side of the game medium. The inclusion of this technical coursework came at the recommendation of Vice President of Narrative at Jam City, Ryan Kaufman, who suggested that graduates from a game studies degree would likely edge out competitors in the job market if they had a passing familiarity with one or more of the industry’s key technical skills. Thus, while the Bachelor of Arts in Applied Humanities–Game Studies degree is not focused on the technical procedures involved in game design/development, it does integrate a basic introduction to these skill sets so that students acquire (1) a deeper understanding of the products and cultures that flow from those labors, and (2) a competitive advantage on the job market. In this way, the Bachelor of Arts in Applied Humanities–Game Studies degree approaches the study of games in much the same fashion that many institutions organize the study of film: students need not develop deep technical expertise in order to understand the medium, nor are they obligated to be interested in making media for a living. Some grounding in the production process, however, opens up and enhances students’ abilities to see and do innovative critical/cultural work, and boosts their ability to find work in the media production sphere should they so choose.

In terms of modality (in-person, online, hybrid), the course holds distinct options for each. For instance, the in-person version of the course enables experiences tied to material culture. Passing around objects on-loan from the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive (<http://lgira.mesmernet.org/>), conducting side-by-side analyses of game companies’ annual reports, and collaborating on “shoulder surfing” analyses of vintage console-based game play are among the pedagogical techniques ideally suited for in-person courses. Apart from the advantages that the online modality generally offers—remote access, replay of class sessions, and so forth—the online version of the course is also perfect for streaming pre-recorded and real-time game play. Watching Twitch

streams of games that illustrate topics covered in the course, for example, presents a particularly engaged opportunity by allowing students to see games played in real time, ask questions, suggest strategies, and share theories through Twitch's built-in chat function. The hybrid modality offers the best of worlds, but as with all hybrid courses, it also introduces the worst of them as well.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

Teaching this course has required us to consider how our students will not only synthesize the content in the syllabus, but what skills and attitudes they take past the last day of class. This concern for future applicability is two-fold. First, this course is housed in the Department of Public and Applied Humanities and one of the primary goals of the department is that our students are able to apply their new knowledge and skills beyond the classroom. Second, the video game industry changes so quickly that we know the class will always lag the market. As such, the analytical skills and tools we supply are likely just as important (if not more so) than the content of any particular reading or game. Our goal, then, is to teach students "how to eventually go on [their] own and choose [their] own companions on [their] path to understanding and intervention in the world" (Gee X).

We instantiate this approach by providing students with foundational concepts, vocabularies, and theories that are then applied to examples. In short, we follow a pattern of lecture (teach the new material), example (show how that new material can be used), and application (have students try out the material themselves in a low stakes way). In particular, the Discussion Post assignment is a low point value, swiftly returned set of application opportunities that permit students to experiment without the fear of poor performance ruining their grade in the class.

Importantly, this approach only deals with how we believe students best learn the material. Managing and structuring that material, in contrast, is its own pedagogical challenge because the object of study is so large, diverse, and changeable. This reality requires us as instructors to hold two somewhat contradictory positions at once:

1. There is no way to discuss the entire video game industry. The industry ranges from one-person outfits to multinational corporations. It encompasses the people directly involved in making a game (designers, programmers, artists), as well as marketers, distributors, merchandisers, and even the diversity of workers in ancillary industries such as convention and tournament organization. As a result, we are obliged to constantly re-evaluate how best to provide students with a reliable framework with which to analyze the video game industry even as it shifts;
2. The course must be responsive to changes in the industry and capable of accommodating and accounting for the video game industry from global to individual levels.

These dueling drives are reflected in the course structure. The course begins by providing students with a foundational education in the history of the video game industry. It is important to note this is not intended to be a history of *video games*. While the genesis of video game hardware and software is obviously important to the industry, the course explores how video games moved from being a technological novelty to becoming an industry, i.e., an interconnected series of organizations, individuals, and economies. The texts and topics in this section of the course are relatively

stable—though new perspectives continue to emerge—and serve as a base from which to examine the fluid conditions of the marketplace.

From here, the course shifts to the conditions of design, production, and distribution in the industry. As disciplines within the industry, these categories are relatively stable at the macro level. However, this section of the course needs to remain flexible to respond to more granular changes within the conditions of employment and development in the industry. The shift from full-time employees to a greater reliance on contractors, for instance, is an increasing focus.

The final section of the course requires the greatest flexibility. Paratexts, consumption, and regulation are all areas of the industry in a state of near constant flux due to changes in the console market (e.g., the rise of cross-platform play), regulatory shifts arising from innovations in monetization strategies (e.g., EU regulation of “loot boxes”), and the increasing push towards “Games as a Service” and cloud-gaming. As such, the course content associated with these phenomena is the most likely to be updated between semesters.

This general approach to the course is intended to help us maintain consistency across semesters while also remaining flexible to shifts in the industry. It is a delicate balancing act, but one essential to teaching a course such as this.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

The following texts are required:

- Havens, T., & Lotz, A. (2016). *Understanding Media Industries* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Herman, L. (2016). *Phoenix IV: The History of the Videogame Industry*. Rolenta.
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## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

The major course assignments consist of an industrial analysis, a small group project, midterm and final exams, discussion posts to the course management system, and a suite of quizzes.

## **Industrial Analysis**

Students are required to keep a research journal for the first 6 weeks of the course. Each journal entry (1 per week) should analyze a different game company and be 2-3 pages (500-750 words) long, for a total of 10-15 pages (2500-3750 words) by the time the journal is submitted in week 7. Entries should describe the respective company's history, structure, and notable elements in the context of the course readings, lectures, and discussion. Students may choose any companies they like (except for those covered by the course's Case Studies), and they need to do a fair bit of independent research as part of the assignment—each entry must include 5 distinct sources in its bibliography. No quotations are allowed—the entries must be written in the students' own words—though in-text/bibliographic citations are required.

## **Small Group Project**

Groups of five classmates select one of the major spheres of the game industry—development, publishing, distribution/sales, paratexts, consumption, regulation—and create a 10 minute presentation in which they make research-based projections about that sphere for both the near (2 years) and long (10 years) terms. These groups present their work to the class during the second-to-the-last-week of the semester (week 14), and the presentation is graded on clarity and analytical rigor. In addition, each group submits a research packet containing a 750 word written presentation summary, a list of research sources, and a summary of who did what in the group.

## **Midterm Exam and Final Exam**

These are timed exams consisting of multiple choice, fill in the blank, and short answer questions based on the readings, lectures, discussion, and other course materials. The Midterm Exam covers the first half of the course, and the Final Exam covers the second half.

## **Discussion Posts**

Students are required to participate in a minimum of four discussion sections through the course management system. This participation includes responses to the instructor's questions (150 words per response minimum) and to a fellow student's answers (75 words per response minimum). It is at the student's discretion to decide in which discussions to participate.

## **Quizzes**

There are 10 quizzes (total) based on the course readings, each worth 1% of the overall course grade. The quizzes are not designed to trick or penalize students, but rather reward them for keeping up with the reading and maintaining regular review habits. The quizzes are also intended to be good preparation for the Midterm and Final Exams, as some of the exam questions draw from the quiz pool.

## **COURSE ASSESSMENT**

Assignment, exam, and final grades are calculated according to this schema:

- Quizzes (10%)
- Discussion Posts/Participation (10%)

- Industrial Analysis (20%)
- Midterm Exam (20%)
- Small Group Project (20%)
- Final Exam (20%)

The Quizzes and Exams are evaluated according to an answer key. The Industrial Analysis and the written component of the Small Group Project assignments are evaluated according to the following grading rubric.<sup>4</sup>

### **Thesis**

*Exceeds Expectations (85-100%)*

Easily identifiable, plausible, novel, sophisticated, insightful, clear. Connects well with themes studied in class and in the assigned course materials.

*Acceptable (70-84%)*

Promising, but may be slightly unclear, or lacking in insight or originality. Title does not connect as well with the thesis or is not as interesting.

*Unacceptable (0-69%)*

Difficult to identify at all, or may be a bland restatement of an obvious point. Does not connect to themes studied in class and in the assigned course materials.

### **Structure**

*Exceeds Expectations (85-100%)*

Evident, understandable, appropriate for thesis. Excellent transitions from point to point. Paragraphs support solid topic sentences.

*Acceptable (70-84%)*

Generally clear and appropriate, though may wander occasionally. May have a few unclear transitions, or a few paragraphs without strong topic sentences.

*Unacceptable (0-69%)*

Unclear, often because the thesis is weak or non-existent. Transitions are confusing and unclear. Few or no topic sentences.

### **Use of Evidence**

*Exceeds Expectations (85-100%)*

Examples support mini-thesis and fit within their respective paragraphs. Demonstrates an in-depth

4. We are grateful to our colleague Bonnie Wasserman for sharing this rubric with us, as well as the one that follows. We suspect that she may have been gifted the rubrics also, and thus we thank whoever first assembled them in whatever form they were first assembled. Importantly, we use these rubrics as a shared base but individual instructors make changes as they see fit.

understanding of the ideas in and structure of the course materials and critically evaluates/responds to those ideas in an analytical, persuasive manner.

*Acceptable (70-84%)*

Examples used to support most points. Some evidence does not support a point, or may be inappropriate. Demonstrates a basic understanding of the ideas in and structure of the course materials and critically evaluates/responds to those ideas in an analytical, persuasive manner.

*Unacceptable (0-69%)*

Very few or very weak examples. General failure to support statements, or evidence seems to support no clear statement. Demonstrates little understanding of (or misreads) the ideas in and structure of the course materials and does not critically evaluate/respond to those ideas in an analytical, persuasive manner.

### **Analysis**

*Exceeds Expectations (85-100%)*

Author clearly relates evidence to mini-thesis; analysis is fresh and exciting, posing new ways to think of the course material. Work displays critical thinking and avoids simplistic description or summary of information.

*Acceptable (70-84%)*

Author's evidence often relates to mini-thesis, though the connections are not always very clear. Some description, but less critical thinking than is warranted.

*Unacceptable (0-69%)*

Very little or no attempt to relate evidence to argument; there may be no identifiable argument, or no evidence to relate it to. More description than critical thinking.

### **Logic and Argumentation**

*Exceeds Expectations (85-100%)*

All ideas flow logically; the argument is identifiable, reasonable, and sound. The author anticipates and successfully refutes counter-arguments, and makes connections to outside material (from other parts of the class, or other classes), which illuminate the thesis. Creates appropriate college-level academic tone.

*Acceptable (70-84%)*

Main argument of critique is clear, usually flows logically and makes sense. Some evidence that counter-arguments exist are acknowledged, though perhaps not addressed. Occasional insightful connections to outside material are made. Mostly creates appropriate college-level academic tone.

*Unacceptable (0-69%)*

Ideas do not flow at all, usually because there is no argument to support. Simplistic view of topic; no

effort to grasp possible alternative views. Does not create appropriate college-level academic tone, and has informal language or inappropriate slang.

## **Form**

### *Exceeds Expectations (85-100%)*

Sentence structure, grammar, and diction are excellent; correct use of punctuation and citation style; minimal or no spelling errors; absolutely no run-on sentences or sentence fragments. Conforms in every way to format requirements.

### *Acceptable (70-84%)*

Sentence structure, grammar, and diction strong despite occasional lapses; punctuation and citation style often used correctly. Some (minor) spelling errors; may have a couple of run-on sentences or sentence fragments. Conforms in every way to format requirements.

### *Unacceptable (0-69%)*

Multiple problems in sentence structure, grammar, and diction. Frequent major errors in citation style, punctuation, and spelling. Has many run-on sentences and/or sentence fragments. Does not conform to format requirements.

Discussion posts are evaluated according to the following grading rubric.

### *Exceeds Expectations (90-100%)*

- All questions are answered appropriately, thoroughly, and include specific examples from the readings, games, lectures, and discussions to sustain argumentation;
- All responses are connected to the overall themes addressed in the class;
- All responses make it clear that the authors researched, used, and quoted the assigned readings, games, lectures, and discussions as opposed to responding off-handedly or using the results of cursory internet searches;
- All paragraphs are well-written and organized, and spelling and grammar are impeccable;
- Required length is respected or extended;
- Assignment is turned in by the deadline and in the required format and organization (group number, names, etc.).

### *Above Expectations (80-89%)*

- Most questions are answered appropriately and thoroughly, and most of them include specific examples from the readings, games, lectures, and discussions to sustain argumentation;
- Most responses are connected to the overall themes addressed in class;
- Most responses make it clear that the authors researched and used the assigned readings, games, lectures, and discussions as opposed to responding off-handedly or using the results of cursory internet searches;

- Most Paragraphs are well-written and organized, spelling and grammar are acceptable;
- Required length is respected;
- Assignment is turned in by the deadline and in the required format and organization (group number, names, etc.).

*Meets Expectations (70-79%)*

- More than half of questions are answered appropriately and thoroughly, and a majority of the answers include specific examples from the readings, games, lectures, and discussions to sustain argumentation;
- Some responses are connected to the overall themes addressed in the class;
- More than half of the responses make it clear that the authors researched and used the assigned readings, games, lectures, and discussions as opposed to responding off-handedly or using the results of cursory internet searches;
- Paragraphs are somewhat well-written and organized, spelling and grammar are barely acceptable;
- Required length is respected;
- Assignment is turned in by the deadline and in the required format and organization (group number, names, etc.).

*Below Expectations (60-69%)*

- Most questions are not answered appropriately and thoroughly, and most or all answers do not include specific examples from the readings, games, lectures, and discussions to sustain argumentation;
- Most or all responses are not connected to the overall themes addressed in the class;
- Most or all of the responses do not show that author researched and used the assigned readings, games, lectures, and discussions;
- Paragraphs are poorly written and organized, spelling and grammar are not or most of the time not acceptable;
- Required length is not always respected;
- Assignment is turned in by the deadline and in the required format and organization (group number, names, etc.).

*Failing: 59% and below*

- Below Expectations and/some/or all of the following:
  - Incomplete;
  - Incomprehensible;
  - Too repetitive;
  - Not turned in or not turned in on time.



## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

### Week 1: Introduction

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Introduction to the Course [Lecture]

### Week 2: Our Critical Lens

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Why analyze the video game industry? [Lecture]
- How do we analyze global culture? [Lecture/Discussion]

#### Assignments

- Mosco, Vincent. "What is Political Economy? Definitions and Characteristics" and "What is Political Economy? Schools of Thought." *The Political Economy of Communication*. 2nd Edition. Sage, 2009.

### Week 3: What is a Media Industry?

#### Class Topics/Activities

- What is a medium and what do media mediate? [Lecture/Discussion]
- Case Study: Sony [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

#### Assignments

- Havens, Timothy, and Amanda Lotz. "Understanding Media Industries" and "The Industrialization of Culture Framework and Key Economic Concepts." *Understanding Media Industries*. 2nd Edition. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Kerr, Aphra. "Digital Games as Cultural Industry." *The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework/Gameplay*. Sage, 2006.

### Week 4: Researching Media Industries Tools and Techniques

#### Class Topics/Activities

- The myth of the discrete media industry [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

#### Assignments

- The Media Landscape: A Visualization of Media Companies Based On Their Market Cap

### Week 5: Prehistory

#### Class Topics/Activities

- When was the video game *really* invented? [Lecture]

- Case Study: Nintendo [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

#### Assignments

- Herman, Leonard. “1951-1970,” “1971-1972,” “1973,” and “1974-1976.” *Phoenix IV: The History of the Videogame Industry*. Rolenta, 2016.
- Ruggill, Judd Ethan. “Convergence: Always Already, Already.” *Cinema Journal* 48.3, 2009.

#### Week 6: History

##### Class Topics/Activities

- Even garage games were always global [Lecture]
- Case Study: Microsoft [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

##### Assignments

- Nichols, Randy. “An Industrial History of Video Games.” *The Video Game Business*. BFI, 2014.
- Kerr, Aphra. “Going Global? The Value, Structure, and Geography of the Digital Games Industry.” *Global Games: Production, Circulation, and Policy in the Networked Era*. Routledge, 2017.

#### Week 7: Midterm Exam

##### Assignments

- Industrial Analysis assignment due in class

#### Week 8: Structure, Part 1: Development

##### Class Topics/Activities

- The work of play [Lecture/Discussion]
- Case Study: Jam City [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

##### Assignments

- Nichols, Randy. “Market Structure, Audiences, and Software Production.” *The Video Game Business*. BFI, 2014.
- Kerr, Aphra. “Production: Changing Production Logics, Organisations, and Work/ers.” *Global Games: Production, Circulation, and Policy in the Networked Era*. Routledge, 2017.

#### Week 9: Structure, Part 2: Publishing

##### Class Topics/Activities

- Best-selling bad games [Lecture/Discussion]
- Case Study: EA [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

### Assignments

- Zackariasson, Peter, and Timothy L. Wilson. "Marketing of Video Games." *The Video Game Industry: Formation, Present State, and Future*. Ed. Peter Zackariasson and Timothy L. Wilson. Routledge, 2012.
- Zackariasson, Peter, and Timothy L. Wilson. "Publisher Value in the Video Game Industry." NFF Conference. Turku, Finland, 2009.

### Week 10: Structure, Part 3: Distribution and Sales

#### Class Topics/Activities

- What's a game worth? [Lecture/Discussion/Guest Visit by Professional Appraiser]
- Case Study: Valve [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

#### Assignments

- Nichols, Randy. "Video Game Hardware, Distribution, and Retail." *The Video Game Business*. BFI, 2014.
- Kerr, Aphra. "Circulation: Monitoring, Measuring, and Adapting to Transnational Markets." *Global Games: Production, Circulation, and Policy in the Networked Era*. Routledge, 2017.

### Week 11: Structure, Part 4: Paratexts

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Video Games: The Brand! [Lecture/Discussion]
- Case Study: J!NX [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

#### Assignments

- Nichols, Randy. "Video Games and Other Related Industries." *The Video Game Business*. BFI, 2014.
- Burk, Dan L. "Copyright and Paratext in Computer Gaming." *Emerging Ethical Issues of Life in Virtual Worlds*. Ed. Charles Wankel and Shaun Malleck. Information Age Publishing, 2010.

### Week 12: Structure, Part 5: Consumption

#### Class Topics/Activities

- What happens to the world when we play? [Lecture/Discussion]
- Case Study: Tencent [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

#### Assignments

- Kerr, Aphra. "Digital Game Players, Game Pleasures, and Play Contexts." *The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework/Gameplay*. Sage, 2006.
- Maxwell, Richard, and Toby Miller. "'Warm and Stuffy?': The Ecological Impact of Electronic

Games.” *The Video Game Industry: Formation, Present State, and Future*. Ed. Peter Zackariasson and Timothy L. Wilson. Routledge, 2012.

### **Week 13: Regulation**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- That’s disgusting...isn’t it? [Lecture/Discussion]
- Case Study: Rockstar Games [Lecture/Discussion/Small Group Work]

#### *Assignments*

- Havens, Timothy, and Amanda Lotz. “Regulation of the Media Industries.” *Understanding Media Industries*. 2nd Edition. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Kerr, Aphra. “Going Local: Space, Place, and Policy for Global Games Production.” *Global Games: Production, Circulation, and Policy in the Networked Era*. Routledge, 2017.

### **Week 14: Small Group Project Presentations**

### **Week 15: Conclusion and Final Exam**

## **COURSE BEST PRACTICES**

There are three best practices arenas for this course: responsiveness to students’ interest, limitation of assignment scope, and the engagement and disengagement with emerging topics.

The first best practice—responsiveness to students’ interests—asks the instructor to be responsive to students’ reactions and responses (in class and through discussion posts), and to provide students with latitude in exactly how they go about researching and presenting their small-group projects. In both cases, we believe it is vitally important that students be allowed (even encouraged) to pursue their particular interests—exploring issues of distribution by focusing on a particular platform (e.g., Steam), for instance—instead of attempting to create a universal framework through which all students will complete the same basic assignment. This approach inevitably requires that instructors revise and reconsider how they approach project feedback and assignment grading. We believe, however, that the extra effort this requires is justified by the increased engagement and enthusiasm of students working on projects they are excited about.

The second best practice—limitation of assignment scope—serves as a counterbalance to the first. We have observed that students are sometimes so excited to take on projects that they can find themselves overwhelmed and paralyzed by the scope of the work. This can be particularly true in the industrial analysis of companies such as Nintendo. We believe it is incumbent upon instructors to stress that students can and should focus on particular *elements* of the industry and its constituent organizations rather than attempting to be comprehensive. For example, we would encourage a student struggling to complete an analysis of Nintendo to begin with a basic history, but then to narrow the project’s focus to the launch of a particular console. The small-group project can also benefit from this scope limitation. In particular, we recommend that students explore more general concepts through the use of specific examples so that they can avoid becoming swamped by too many possibilities.

Our third recommended best practice—the engagement and disengagement with emerging topics—is perhaps the most challenging to incorporate into daily practice. In short, we advise setting aside a small amount of time during class—perhaps every class, perhaps only once a week—to share interesting breaking news about the video game industry. We also think that students should be encouraged to take part in this exercise, but recommend establishing early on that only one or two topics will ever be discussed in this set aside time. Further, while this exercise would seem to be a prime candidate for offering extra credit, we have found that this can result in a torrent of news every week. This can create a large amount of work for instructors and it can cause stress for students who may become concerned that they are not earning sufficient extra credit. We encourage instructors to position this exercise as a practice of intellectual curiosity and scholarly rigor that works to support the work of the class, not as an additional assignment.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

We foresee the development of this course following three parallel tracks, two of them being changes in course content and one of them being in the modes and methods of delivery.

First, in terms of course content, we expect that the history section of the course will become richer and more complex as new scholarship more fully documents the diverse actors, stakeholders, and creators that have helped shape the industry’s foundations. In particular, we foresee the need to chart the connections between the history of the video game industry and its current shape becoming an increasingly complex, but vital, task for us as teachers. Resources such as Bloomsbury’s “Influential Video Game Designers” book series provide a particularly interesting avenue for this development path, with titles that provide in-depth yet accessible examinations of key figures in industry such as Brenda Laurel (Kocurek 2017), Shigeru Miyamoto (deWinter 2015), and Jane Jensen (Salter 2017).

Second, we expect that we will revise the later sections of the course as the video game industry moves more definitively into the “Games as a Service” and cloud-gaming economic models. While there will undoubtedly be single-player, buy-and-play games for the foreseeable future, we anticipate an even greater focus (in the next several years) on microtransactions, player-created (and possibly sold) content, and platform specific subscription services, such as the Xbox Game Pass. The growing prominence of these monetization models require that we reconsider how pre-launch community building and post-launch content deployment and game maintenance alter understanding and analyses of the development cycle. Unlike the sections of the course that deal with the historical industry, these other sections are likely to see an increasing amount of contemporaneous supporting materials, such as industry analysis and commentary from game industry journalism outlets (e.g., Polygon, Gamasutra, etc.).

Third, in terms of modes and methods of teaching the course, we are in a unique position. The course has, so far, principally been taught online. This creates the obvious opportunity to more fully probe the opportunities of the in-person offering. That does not mean, however, that we are done evolving our online methods of presentation and engagement. One change we are particularly interested in is using game play as a way to encourage discussion. For instance, Josh has begun planning Twitch streams of games that illustrate topics covered in the course. These games may be single player, in which case the primary method of student engagement is a chance to see the games played and to ask questions, suggest strategies, or share theories through Twitch text chat. In the case of cooperative

or competitive online games, Josh intends to encourage students to log in and to play along with him. When discussing the rising importance of microtransactions, Josh plans to play rounds of the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game *Smite* with students so that they can see how the game's various currencies and content gating systems shape the experience of play, the development of the game, and the mechanics that underlie its success.

## REFERENCES

- deWinter, J. (2015). *Shigeru Miyamoto: Super Mario Bros., Donkey Kong, The Legend of Zelda*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gee, J. (2011). *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*. Routledge.
- Havens, T., & Lotz, A. (2016). *Understanding Media Industries* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
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- Kerr, A. (2006). *The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework/Gameplay*. Sage.
- Kerr, A. (2017). *Global Games: Production, Circulation, and Policy in the Networked Era*. Routledge.
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## CHAPTER 10.

# ECONOMICS, PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP FOR GAMES

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ODILE LIMPACH <sup>1</sup>  
COLOGNE GAME LAB

**Course Title:** Economics, Project Management and Entrepreneurship for Games

**Course University:** TH Köln – University of Applied Science

**Course College/School:** Cologne Game Lab

**Course Department/Program:** Economics and Entrepreneurship

**Course Level:** Graduate Bachelor of Arts

**Course Credits:** 5.5 credits

**Course Length:** 5 semesters

**Course Medium:** Hybrid course – Face to face, online content, in-person and online seminars, practical exercises. Requires a platform where both students and professors can upload and comment on content.

**Course Keywords:** Micro and macroeconomics basics, introduction to marketing and sales, project management theories and practical application, business planning, publishing, marketing plan and communication, target group, presentation techniques, management, project planning, agile, production, community management, entrepreneurship.

## CATALOG DESCRIPTION

This course is distributed throughout the entire bachelor curriculum and is mandatory for all three specializations, which are Game Design, Game Art, and Game Programming. It is part of the Media Studies module and is spread equally over all semesters, excluding the fifth one. During this semester, students are either doing an internship, an exchange semester abroad, or a self-initiated project. The following information outlines the learning outcomes described in the module handbook distributed to students at the beginning of their studies.

Semester 1: Students analyze the video game market and its current evolution from an economic viewpoint. To do this, they study the recent history of the games market as well as apply basic marketing concepts like SWOT and market segmentation analysis to recognize both market

1. Professor Odile Limpach teaches Economics and Entrepreneurship at the Cologne Game Lab and is managing the Incubator of the CGL. She also is co-founder of the accelerator SpielFabrique and works as Strategic Consultant for serious games and cross-media projects.

developments and risks. These actions enable students to research and build informed opinions on economic opportunities regarding their future game projects or company.

Semester 2: Students create a marketing plan for a game project by applying the traditional pillars of the marketing mix and identifying their target group. They also define their marketing objectives and strategies as well as planning marketing actions and identifying the relevant macro-economic factors of the video game market. These actions enable students to create, apply, and further develop sales and marketing strategies for their future game projects, as well as recognize early market opportunities and risks for game development.

Semester 3: Students examine current market economic changes and elaborate their hypotheses on future market developments. They do this by studying the work of various market research institutes and distinguishing between factors that influence buyer behavior. Finally, they propose relevant factors for different markets to assess the market potential of their game projects and accordingly choose the correct platforms and business models.

Semester 4: Students develop a market research strategy for a game project by reviewing relevant research methods and selecting the most appropriate tools. They also identify and dissect the brand pillars of known video games, examine the different components of a communication strategy, and practice writing a press release document. These steps enable them to formulate, apply, and maintain an accurate market positioning for their future video game projects, as well as contribute to new intellectual property development.

Semester 6: Students investigate online community management methods, form a team, plan for a live game, and evaluate publishing strategies. They do this by examining the managerial and operational requirements of running Games as a Service (GaaS), studying the structure of a business plan, as well as practicing reading and writing a profit and loss calculation. These steps enable them to successfully animate a community of gamers, operate GaaS, and judge the potential commercial value of their future projects.

## COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The class “Economics and Entrepreneurship for Games” is designed to introduce basic knowledge of macro and microeconomics as well as some theories of media management, human resource management, and project management. Although the class can be considered an introduction into these fields, it also delves deeper into the theory of specific subjects. By providing this extra information, I aspire to spark curiosity among students to research and develop further within these fields. As a matter of fact, the planned timeframe is structured to not only peek at the theories of economics while offering some practical exercises but also to foster self-reflection on management and organization. This course enables students to develop and market their future game projects according to professional standards. The class contains development, production, marketing, and financial modules; all the topics that impact the successful development, production, and distribution of a game. The students will also improve and strengthen their presentation skills through practice and peer review.

I designed the BA course to be spread over five semesters, starting from general knowledge with



basic understanding and interpretation while moving towards in-depth analysis and planning by the end of the program. In general, I aim at awakening the interest of students in observing market trends/evolution and understanding the interdependencies between the production and commercialization of video games. The key objectives of this course are enabling the ability to understand market structures, study their evolution, and understand the communication and distribution of video games. To do this, for example, they learn to apply simple methods of analysis like SWOT or project risk analysis, assimilate tools to define branding strengths, write marketing and communication plans, define target groups, and practice simple market research. Also, understanding the spirit of agile project management and its basic tenets, as well as knowing fundamental legal constraints within the markets like copyrights and distribution rights, constitute some of the objectives.

In a nutshell as the end of their bachelor, the students should be able to draft and implement a communication, marketing and sale strategy for their game project, including an analysis of the market with threats and opportunities from an economic point of view. Also, they should be able to draft and implement a project plan for a game development, as well as demonstrate basic knowledge of people and company organization and management, for example how to organize a game development studio or how to set goals within a project team.

Concerning entrepreneurship, there are many definitions. I decided to follow the equation below as a means to structure the class:

Entrepreneurship = opportunity + risk + ambition + innovation + business + team

Entrepreneurship is more than a mindset. By triggering analytical behavior, we can provide a fertile ground for futures entrepreneurs. For example, instructors can achieve this by introducing innovation management methods, teaching strategic planning analyses, and developing business analytical skills. As the students mature along the semesters, their entrepreneurial spirit can be nurtured and developed. Another important aspect of entrepreneurship is the capacity of business planning and pitching to investors and financial institutions. These topics are covered through predominantly practice-oriented seminars and test cases. Also addressed are the necessary skills to manage and develop a newly created company.

Finally, I collaborate extensively with the video game industry, which is a rather young industry, having developed and grown very fast for the last 25 years. It is important to regularly invite senior executives to share their vision of a particular subject like brand development, communication strategy, or market evolution. Also, I work closely with lawyers to demystify the legal aspects of video game development, entrepreneurship, and investment strategies.

Whether students want to start their own company or work at an existing video game company, the mission of this class is to trigger an understanding of economic forces that influence at various stages the development of a video game. The goal is to give students the possibility to successfully market or at least understand the marketing of the games they work on.

## COURSE CONTEXT

### **Why integrate economics and project management in a bachelor of arts program?**

In the field of video game development, the borders between production and commercialization are becoming increasingly blurred. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that game developers understand the ins and outs of commercialization and economic channels. The development of games requires a deep understanding of how the market is structured and continually evolves. From the very beginning, the decision of how to commercialize a game influences your project. Teams working on game development in studios of any size are always confronted with a myriad of external publishing requirements. Nowadays, the role of communities has taken center stage within video game creation. Successful game development requires the capability to be highly innovative coupled with detailed market knowledge. Moreover, games are often developed following the “Agile” methodology. This requires an approach of hands-on human resource management and coordination, as well as flexible leadership qualities.

At the beginning of the course, I start by explaining the numerous connections between video game development and commercialization, highlighting the necessity of cooperation and understanding between the two fields of expertise. For example, the artistic direction of a game influences the brand value of the final product, as well as the market potential in particular countries; color schemes are sometimes understood very differently across cultures. Additionally, current online distribution channels have very sophisticated requirements on code structure and demand specific reporting formats to be integrated early on in the game architecture. Many more such interdependencies exist. Consequently, developers and marketers are required to collaborate closely from conception until post-release of the game.

Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that many economic and management theories can influence game design decisions. For example, the genre of a game automatically impacts the targeted group selection. Similarly, behavioral economics can be quite useful in designing a Free-To-Play game.

### **The importance of entrepreneurship**

The video game market is a very fast-paced one with technical cycles that decrease in length and thus, nurture a favorable environment for startups and innovative, disruptive business models. As young creators, our students often wish to start up a company and realize their game ideas. Therefore, these entrepreneurship classes are devised to give students the necessary skills and provide a framework for how to create a company, as well as allow them to develop their managerial skills and strategical capabilities.

Our students come from various backgrounds. Some have recently finished their high school studies, others have already graduated with a BA in programming or graphic design. Some have even studied a couple of semesters in various, and sometimes unexpected fields, such as architecture, history, or medicine. Unfortunately, it is extremely rare for them to have a background in economics! This diversity is our chance to create a truly innovative environment within the course of their bachelor’s degree. The economics and entrepreneurship class builds from scratch along with the program the basic knowledge needed to organize a project, a team, and market a game.

### **Graduate Profile**

Graduates of BA Digital Games should have acquired artistic, academic, methodological, historical, and technical knowledge and skills for the conception, planning, development, and production of digital games and other non-linear interactive audiovisual media. This acquisition involves both general “game literacy” – which is indispensable for interdisciplinary collaboration in the games industry – and a specialization in one of the following domains: Game Arts, Game Design, or Game Programming. This game literacy includes general knowledge and skills in game arts, game design, game programming, sound design, project management, economics and entrepreneurship, game studies, player research, and game analysis. At the end of their studies, graduates are specialists in either game arts, game design, or game programming while also having a solid understanding of the other domains. Furthermore, they should be capable of interdisciplinary collaboration and have acquired a range of necessary soft skills in areas such as communication, presentation, and time management. An individual student’s specialization can further include a more in-depth focus on a certain subdomain, which is attainable through taking over specialized tasks in collaborative projects (e.g. as a 3D animator in Game Arts, a narrative designer in Game Design, or an interaction programmer in Game Programming).

Additionally, graduates should attain theoretical and historical perspectives as well as artistic and ethical orientations. They should be familiarized with current academic thought on the production, use, and impact of non-linear audiovisual media, and be able to analyze games as a form of culture in their historical, societal, and economic contexts. All in all, students should be able to participate in the interdisciplinary discourse on games, players, and the surrounding culture. Thus, graduates should gain a broad base of reference knowledge as well as analytical and critical thinking skills useful for game development. Graduates should also be able to critically judge the cultural and social effects emanating from their own work. Their ethical competencies should embody an engaged attitude towards their own artistic-academic actions. Last but not least, graduates should be prepared to work in international contexts and intercultural teams.<sup>2</sup>

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

I consider the students as my target group and align the class content to be constructive and supportive. Having a games industry background and with a master’s degree in business administration, I strongly believe that theoretical knowledge should always be accompanied by examples that set to serve as a basis for further development. I provide students with the relevant theoretical background to understand the reasoning behind industry practices, while also enabling them to apply these practices by themselves. I am following the constructive alignment by John Biggs<sup>3</sup> to obtain learning successes.

It is of utmost importance to engage the students during this process. Following the Bloom’s Taxonomy<sup>4</sup> in designing the syllabi has proven to be efficient and well adapted to the subject. At Cologne Game Lab, the relatively small class sizes allow me to be close to the students and foster personal exchange. We welcome 35 to 40 students per year, enabling manageable discussion and feedback during the class. To foster the development of these students, it is crucial to ask for

2. TH Köln - Faculty of Cultural Sciences (2016). *Prüfungsordnung Digital Games*. [https://www.th-koeln.de/mam/downloads/deutsch/studium/studiengaenge/f02/ordnungen\\_plaene/f02\\_bpo\\_digital\\_games\\_22022016pdf](https://www.th-koeln.de/mam/downloads/deutsch/studium/studiengaenge/f02/ordnungen_plaene/f02_bpo_digital_games_22022016pdf)

3. Biggs, J. (n.d.). *Constructive Alignment | John Biggs*. <https://www.johnbiggs.com.au/academic/constructive-alignment/>

4. Bloom Taxonomy. (n.d.). *Blooms Taxonomy :: Resource for Educators*. <https://www.bloomstaxonomy.net/>

reflection and elaboration of the theoretical knowledge they have gained. For example, I regularly organize discussions on current market figures and key economic events (mergers, the emergence of new technologies, innovative business models, etc.). Naturally, I work a lot with examples from the industry and organize workgroups to think about and discuss these various topics. I also regularly invite industry professionals to share their experiences and elaborate on practical implementation cases. The diverse background of the Cologne Game Lab students makes it very attractive to work in groups and promote interdisciplinary learning; some students are directly from high school, others have already finished their undergraduate studies or have worked a couple of years in different industries like programming, event management, or web design) This diversity also acts as a challenge in molding the content of classes to address every student and spark their interest at all levels, from basic concepts of economics to more advanced applications, analysis, and evaluations. Therefore, I design the classes to be flexible enough to adapt their difficulty level to the reactions and level of participation of my students. For all topics within the course, the theoretical content is always followed by a workshop or various assignments to immediately enable the students to apply these newly learned theories by themselves. Following the idea of “learning by doing”, I believe that we can achieve a sustained and deeper understanding when we bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and concrete, practical applications.

My goal is to nurture growth in knowledge while supporting and encouraging the students in their development. Here, mentoring plays a significant role in developing an economic view of creative work and thinking out of the box. Personal contact with students is paramount for me to adapt my teaching and support them individually. I find it engaging to discuss the current market evolution with students and hear their reactions and analyses to new technologies or trends. As the video game market is evolving rapidly and its growth is punctuated with important technological breakthroughs, I find it extremely enriching to discuss and evaluate these advancements with the tools presented in class and perform a thorough analysis of the market’s situation.

I appreciate this exchange with my students and encourage them to explain and defend their points of view on market changes as well as management and project practices. Their discussions and arguments assist me in keeping my understanding of the digitalization of society up to date. I position myself as their facilitator to foster, structure, and guide their reflective engagement in class. I find it equally important to act as a coach/mentor and prepare the students for their professional lives, educating them to be responsible and organized in order to manage and control teams or businesses. I focus on explaining theory with a high participatory element (short question & answer sessions) in class or online and then dedicate time to creating, analyzing, and evaluating cases specific to students and their teams. To practice presenting in front of a class (online or in-person), giving feedback to peers, and listening to received feedback are also core elements of my seminars. Developing these skills is necessary for students in their future work environment.

Project work is the ideal setting for students to reflect on the necessary soft and hard skills they have acquired in order to become the managers of tomorrow. Group coaching allows students to continuously think about their own progress and is an effective method to train them in giving feedback. In the gaming industry, project work and Agile development methods are widely adopted. Therefore, it is important to start early with working in groups and facilitating an exchange between peers to channel the diversity of their teams into a shared strength.

## My practical approach

The classes include theoretical explanations followed by a practical seminar that deepens the knowledge acquired and helps familiarize the learned concepts. We first go through the theory and then apply this theory in small workgroups or projects. Next, these learning outcomes used and applied in class are tested in written assignments. In Corona times, I deliver numerous materials to be self-studied, and in the following online seminars, I show examples and moderate a discussion with questions and remarks. Also, during every semester of the bachelor of arts program at the Cologne Game Lab, a game project is produced by groups of students. During these project phases, I offer a review of project management processes and individual coaching to the students. These one-on-one sessions have proven to be a very efficient means to give valuable feedback, adapt what I teach to meet different student needs, accompany them in the development of their organizational skills, and allow for self-reflection. It is the best way to learn multi-disciplinary work and also emphasizes the cross-fertilization of ideas between faculties. Coaching these projects enables me to work together with the students on conflict management and problem-solving, as well as risk mitigation in a complex development process. Additionally, I encourage the students to regularly write a postmortem of their project and share it with their peers. This rather simple tool is well proven to foster self-development and induce behavioral change.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

For each semester, I provide students with a required reading list of books/chapters that are noted in the Expanded Course Outline section further on. To prepare my classes and teach basic concepts, I rely, among others, on the following literature:

- Kotler, P., & Armstrong, G., & Harris, L., & Piercy, N. (2019). *Principles of Marketing*. Pearson Education.
- Irish, D. (2005). *The Game Producer's Handbook*. Course Technology Press.
- Hight, J. & Novak, J. (2008). *Game Development Essentials: Game Project Management*. Delmar Cengage Learning.
- Clinton, K. (2015). *Agile Game Development with Scrum*. Addison-Wesley Professional.
- Zackariasson, P. & Wilson, T. (2014). *The Video Game Industry: Formation, Present State, and Future*. Taylor and Francis Group.
- Spaulding, S. (2009). *Team Leadership in the Game Industry*. Cengage Learning.
- Reynolds, G. (2012). *Presentation Zen*. New Riders.
- Osterwalder, A. & Pigneur, Y. (2010). *Business Model Generation: A Handbook for Visionaries, Game Changers, and Challengers*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Van Dreunen, J. (2020). *One Up*. Columbia Business School.

And much more.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

This course is divided into three main subjects: theories of economics, theories of project

management, and values of entrepreneurship. I have composed the course in a classical sense, starting with the introduction of theoretical concepts, followed by their explanations and a reflection on discussed topics. Afterward, I organize workshops or seminars and offer practical exercises to bridge the gap between an educational environment and the daily requirements of the video game market. Therefore, along with practical and project-based modules, the students acquire theoretical knowledge necessary for the critical examination of video games and their market. Each semester the students have a mandatory book reading that focuses on one of the covered topics. The books cover very different topics like oral presentation techniques, project management for games or marketing and management theories.

Accelerated by the Corona pandemic, I put a greater focus on assignments before online seminars and discussions. These assignments are communicated well in advance and are mainly reading books/articles and watching videos on different topics. I also ask students to each prepare one question on the topic to start the conversation. In the expanded course outline, I listed the mandatory reading and give examples of the videos. These materials vary a bit each year as I always research new information and sources to document the evolution of the market.

Following the Blooms pyramid, the graded assignments in the first semesters ask to apply and analyze notions that we discover during the seminars. For example, at the end of the second semester the students need to define marketing objectives and strategies for a game, or at the end of the third semester, they have to evaluate brand pillars of a game and apply market research methods to a game project. Nowadays these assignments have to be delivered as a video presentation but they can also be in form a written examination when this will be possible again. Going forward in the program, the students are asked to evaluate certain aspects of the market from an economic point of view and/or write an essay on a current topic. For example, in 2020 the sixth semester were asked to reflect on the various monetization methods for videogames, discuss the current trends and propose an analysis for future developments from an economic point of view.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

The course assessments are also logically a practical application of the learned methodologies and analysis techniques. During the Corona pandemic, I finally transformed all assessments from written exams with test cases into either delivering videos on practical cases or written analytical papers. I regularly review the assessment methods and subjects and adapt them to the current teaching situation as well as significant market changes like the introduction of new technology or the emergence of a new business model. Also, I mix individual and group assignments based on the semester situation. In the grade, I integrate the understanding of the notions, the ability to apply it and the depth of the analysis. In 2020, I gave my students the following assessments:

Semester 1:

- Deliver a three-minute video with the following content:
- A SWOT analysis of your current preferred game.
- A market segmentation for Couch Co-Op games.

Semester 2:

- Deliver a four-minute online video group presentation of a marketing plan. Your project group should also provide a written extract of the marketing plan for your game/prototype from this semester:
- The precise target group of the game/prototype developed during this semester project.
- Your marketing objectives.
- Your marketing strategy for this game to be launched on the market.
- The positioning and messaging for the campaign.

#### Semester 3:

- Deliver a four-minute online video group presentation of a market research strategy and the brand pillars of your recently developed game/prototype from the collaborative project phase:
- Design a market research strategy for your game project: define one market research question for your project, describe your target group, chose a methodology and explain your implementation strategy.
- Describe the brand pillars (not the features!) and promises of your game/prototype.

#### Semester 4:

- In a group of maximum four people, prepare a five-minute video on the following:
- From an economic point of view, present your analysis on the launch of the PS5 and Xbox Series X/S. Describe the effects of the launch on the video game market.
- Choose Sony or Microsoft as a case study to explore their market introduction business strategy for launching a new console (For example, look at positioning, targeting, messaging, buyer behavior, value proposition, distribution channels, etc.).

#### Semester 6:

- Written paper (approx. 800 words) with following subject: Reflect on the various monetization methods for video games. Discuss the current trends and propose an analysis for future developments from an economic point of view.

For each assessment, I create a grading grid using the main points that should be covered and the degree of understanding I expect. The components of the grade are derived from the detailed content of the classes and measure students' comprehension of various concepts/methodologies and their ability to apply them to case studies.

### EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

My classes gather in average thirty to forty students. During a three hours presential slot, I used to lecture first for approximately 45 minutes, then we would do one or two practical implementations of one the covered subject in groups of 4 to 5 students. The groups would present their results/works and we would discuss them altogether to ensure comprehension. Finally, a Q&A session on readings and assignments would take place. Moving to fully online teaching the last semesters, I

adapted the format to still allow interactive communication and avoid three hours on monolog from my side! Nowadays I provide more reading and watching materials upfront as assignments to prepare the class. During the synchronous online time, I start with a short webinar on the subjects, concentrating on examples and applications of the theories that are explained in the materials sent ahead. Afterward, I do breakout sessions with fifteen minutes workshops of four to five students when the subject allows it. Finally, the students present their findings and we discuss them online. I found it very important to have such assignments during the online sessions to keep the attention and involvement high.

#### **Module 1 – Class 1: Course and market introduction. Presentation and brainstorming methods.**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Introduction to the syllabus.
- Students introduction.
- Discussion about economic market evolution.
- Basic presentation techniques.

##### *Assignments*

- Read:
  - Reynolds, G. (2012). *Presentation Zen*. New Riders.
  - Peckham, M. (2015). *Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto on Gaming Innovation*. Time. <https://time.com/3747708/nintendo-shigeru-miyamoto/>

#### **Module 1 – Class 2: Definition of marketing and strategic marketing.**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- SWOT analysis.
- Boston Group Matrix.
- Market segmentation and positioning.
- Blue and Red Ocean strategy.

##### *Assignments*

- Read:
  - Schreier, J. (2017). *Blood, Sweat and Pixels – The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made*. Harper Collins Publishing.
  - OpenStax. (n.d). *The Marketing Concept – Introduction to Business*. <https://opentextbc.ca/businessopenstax/chapter/the-marketing-concept/>
- Watch relevant videos, for example:
  - 365 Careers. (2017). *Starbucks SWOT Analysis*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR9eICQJLXA>



- Harvard Business Review. (2019). *The Explainer: Blue Ocean Strategy*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYdaa02CS5E>

### **Module 1 – Class 3: Introduction to basic legal concepts.**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Copyrights.
- Patents.
- Intellectual property.

### **Module 2 – Class 1: Contents of a marketing plan.**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Marketing plan template.
- Target group definition.

#### *Assignments*

- Read:
  - Moore, G. (2014). *Crossing the Chasm, 3rd Edition: Marketing and Selling Disruptive Products to Mainstream Customers (Collins Business Essentials)*. Harper Business.
  - Zukowski, C. (2018). *How to learn who your audience is*. Gamasutra.  
[https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/ChrisZukowski/20180306/315227/How\\_to\\_learn\\_who\\_your\\_audience\\_is.php](https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/ChrisZukowski/20180306/315227/How_to_learn_who_your_audience_is.php)

### **Module 2 – Class 2: Intro to macroeconomics and project planning.**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Notions of macroeconomics.
- The role of a producer.

#### *Assignments*

- Read: OpenStax. (n.d). *Macroeconomics: The Big Picture – Introduction to Business*.  
<https://opentextbc.ca/businessopenstax/chapter/macro-economics-the-big-picture/>
- Watch relevant videos, for example: CrashCourse. (2015). *Macroeconomics: Crash Course Economics #5*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8uTB5XorBw>

### **Module 3 – Class 1: Definition of publishing. Intro to project management. Risk assessment and post-mortem methods.**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Market and business models of video games.
- Agile and waterfall methods of project management.

### Assignments

- Read: Sutherland, J. (2014). Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time. Currency.
- Watch relevant videos, for example: Harvard Business Review. (2016). A Quick Introduction to Agile Management. <https://hbr.org/video/4846148015001/a-quick-introduction-to-agile-management>

### Module 3 – Class 2: Communication management and buyer behavior.

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Management of multicultural teams.
- Buyer behavior theories.
- Problem solving.

#### Assignments

- Read:
  - Takahashi, D. (2016). Game execs recommend 32 practices for fostering creativity and diversity. Venturebeat. <https://venturebeat.com/2016/08/20/game-execs-recommend-32-practices-for-fostering-creativity-and-diversity/>
  - OpenStax. (n.d.). Buyer Behavior – Introduction to Business. <https://opentextbc.ca/businessopenstax/chapter/buyer-behavior/>
- Watch relevant videos, for example: Harvard Business Review. (2017). How Cultures Across the World Approach Leadership. <https://hbr.org/video/5476393165001/how-cultures-across-the-world-approach-leadership>

### Module 4 – Class 1: Knowing your market and organizational theories.

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Market research methods.
- Organization of a video game studio.
- Goal setting and leadership.

#### Assignments

- Read:
  - Johnson, E. (2017). Missing the Mark: The Importance of Market Fit. Gamasutra. [https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/ErikJohnson/20170718/301540/Missing\\_the\\_Mark\\_The\\_Importance\\_of\\_Market\\_Fit.php](https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/ErikJohnson/20170718/301540/Missing_the_Mark_The_Importance_of_Market_Fit.php)
  - OpenStax. (n.d.). Building Organizational Structures – Introduction to Business. <https://opentextbc.ca/businessopenstax/chapter/building-organizational-structures/>
- Watch relevant videos, for example: Liu, B. (2018). Studio Organization from 2 to 250:

Lessons Learned Scaling Pocket Gems. GDCVault. <https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1025248/Studio-Organization-from-2-to>

#### **Module 4 – Class 2: Brand management and PR communication.**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Brand pillars.
- Writing a Presse release.

##### *Assignments*

- Read: Rumley, L. (2020). What's the secret to great PR? Gamesindustry. <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2020-03-30-whats-the-secret-to-great-pr>
- Watch relevant videos, for example: London Business Forum. (2020). Philip Kotler – The Importance of Branding. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ala1XYmWp3g>

#### **Module 4 – Class 3: Distribution**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Legal aspects of distribution and negotiation techniques.

#### **Module 4 – Class 4: Organizational and motivation theories.**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Leadership.
- Giving feedback.

##### *Assignments*

- Read:
  - Sinek, S. (2011). Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action. Portfolio.
  - OpenStax. (n.d.) Leading, Guiding, and Motivating Others – Introduction to Business. <https://opentextbc.ca/businessopenstax/chapter/leading-guiding-and-motivating-others/>
- Watch relevant videos, for example: TEDx Talks. (2012). Predictably Irration – basic human motivations: Dan Ariely at TEDxMidwest. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfcro5iM5vw>

#### **Module 5 – Class 1: Publishing definition and agile project management.**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Choosing a publishing strategy.
- Scrum for games.

### *Assignments*

- Read:
  - Limpach, O. (2020). *The Publishing Challenge for Independent Video Game Developers. A Practical Guide*. CRC Press.
  - Clinton, K. (2010). *Agile Game Development with Scrum*. Addison-Wesley Professional.

### **Module 5 – Class 2: Behavioral economics and the theories behind communities.**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Behavioral economics and computer games.
- Community management.

#### *Assignments*

- Read:
  - Melnick, L. (2020). *Alchemy: When psychology outmanoeuvres rationality*. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/alchemy-when-psychology-outmaneuvers-rationality-lloyd-melnick/>
  - Li, C. & Bernoff, J. (2008). *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Watch relevant videos, for example: Yale School of Management. (2020). *What is Behavioral Economics?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qG4of5UAj4>

### **COURSE BEST PRACTICES**

I have been running this course for five years now and during that time, it has undergone a few iterations. Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic also forced me to move to 100% online classes, where I prefer to have a mix of online seminars and presentation workshops. It is necessary to repeatedly explain the connection between any economics concept and video game development. Indeed, all concepts included in the course have a larger or smaller effect on the game development and it is crucial to create an awareness among students for that. This awareness-building takes up a large portion of the first semester and I regularly revisit these connections throughout the classes by reacting to some industry events or linking the theoretical content to clear practical examples. For instance, behavioral economics is a useful tool for game designers of any kind. Similarly, defining target groups helps students form a more thorough understanding of the motivation of gamers that play different games. Also, creating a visual brand bible improves the coherence of overall communication. Finally, working on your positioning will probably inspire you to develop certain features. Many other such connections exist and I elaborate on them throughout the course.

Over the five semesters, this curriculum leads to a basic understanding of economic forces and market structures. It gives students the means to organize their development and market their

projects. Starting with general notions and gradually going into the detailed applications of methods and tools, we follow a natural learning curve and open the mind of most participants.

In general, I found that theories were best understood when you showed their application and examples within the video game ecosystem. Indeed, students related less to generic examples from other domains and I needed to bridge the gap between general notions and their video game knowledge. For instance, looking together for Red and Blue Ocean strategies in the recent history of the video game industry makes the concept clear and obvious.

Bringing my personal experiences from the industry also helps tremendously in illustrating, among other concepts, the ideas of management, project organization, and marketing. Moreover, I always find it very rewarding to discuss market changes and economic trends, as students often bring the point of view of the customer/gamer to the table. For example, we often argue on business model evolutions like Free to Play or streaming offers and their perspectives as gamers always bring new aspects to the table and give depth to the discussion. Indeed, the games industry business models also show great innovation potential.

Another important aspect is to offer the possibility of practicing the proposed methodologies, like SWOT analysis or market segmentation, at least once, to make sure they are understood and assimilated.

For assignments, I believe that alternatively asking for individual and group tasks enables the best learning curve. We work with a sharing platform where students upload their work and get feedback and comments from both professors and fellow students. This is a very effective means of sharing and fostering the spirit of giving feedback. These assignments are also closely linked to current market situations and/or to student projects so that their motivation stays high!

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

In the future, I am looking to further develop the interactive elements in my course and foster more discussions and analyses as a community. Using the online tools and sharing platforms, I intend to foster more critical discussions on current market trends and evolutions like streaming offers, hyper-casual games, or VR distribution business models. My first attempt this year to use a Discord server as a discussion node for economics did not show the desired results, as it is difficult to motivate our students to wear their economics goggles to look at video games. I would like to try and initiate more controversial discussions on dramatic market changes and moderate a forum focusing on more business aspects.

Also, one of the difficulties I am encountering is getting current examples of course material (marketing plans, communication plans, market analysis, target group definition, studio organigram) for released games. The big players of the industry are not keen on sharing their documents and only a few independent developers work with such documentation. This is why I would like to work on reverse-engineering some of the marketing strategies of big franchises and games.

During the last two semesters I improved my moderation of online classes and realized the limitation and new opportunities of online teaching. Following up, I intend to move to a hybrid form of teaching: sending more materials upfront with clear assignments and dedicating the presential

part to interactive discussion on examples, workshops and case studies. I appreciate the assignments as videos instead of written exams as it reflects more the industry work practices and give the students the chance to go deeper into the materials.

Finally, I will keep on inviting professionals to the class to trigger engaging discussions and reflections on the market and the strategies of the actors within it.

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## CHAPTER 11.

### BIOFEEDBACK AND NEUROFEEDBACK IN GAME MECHANICS

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NOROFF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

**Course Title:** Biofeedback and Neurofeedback in Game Mechanics

**Course University:** Noroff University College

**Course Department/Program:** Interactive Media

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 10 ECTS

**Course Length:** 7 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face

**Course Keywords:** Biofeedback, Neurofeedback, Brain Computer Interface, Interactive Media, Game Design, Game Mechanics, Games for Health, Neuroethics.

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

The course provides candidates with an introduction to experimental mechanics and design processes involved in the development of games and gameplay using biofeedback and neurofeedback technologies.

The aim is to enable the candidate to engage with mechanics, ludology, interaction design, and ethics as a precursor to developing research and comparative studies in digital game innovation, through the application of theory and practice in common with the fields of biotechnology, cognitive neuroscience, bioethics and neuroethics. The candidate is provided with knowledge and essential training in using alternative inputs from the player, learning how to implement biofeedback and neurofeedback technologies.

In a practical sense, the candidate creates both traditional and more contemporary forms associated with a professional practice. The course utilizes previous course content produced by candidates to

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create a concept prototype. Candidates participate in concise group feedback during screenings that support individual work.

## COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The course aims to explore the potential of biofeedback and neurofeedback technology in gaming, to train students in the use and troubleshooting of wearable peripherals for videogames, and to engage them in discussion about the latest developments in neurogames' experimental applications.

### Knowledge objectives

- Awareness of contemporary expectations for biofeedback technologies, brain-computer interfaces and brain-to-brain interfaces.
- Awareness of the use of bio- and neurofeedback technologies from a historical perspective.
- Acquisition of technical vocabulary regarding biometry, biofeedback and neuromodulation.
- Understanding of the inner workings and potential limitations of bio- and neurofeedback peripherals.
- Awareness of games used for mental and physical health.
- Awareness of the latest developments in bio- and neurofeedback technology and their experimental implementation for wider commercial use.
- Awareness and understanding of biofeedback ethics and neuroethics applied to game design.

### Skill objectives

- Usage and implementation of wearable biofeedback sensors in Unity.
- Usage and implementation of neurofeedback sensors in Unity.
- Troubleshooting wearable devices and cleanup signal noise.
- Development of a game design in compliance with contemporary best practices.
- Integration of novel game mechanics into a cohesive narrative.
- Design of game interfaces in concordance with a novel playing setup.
- Design of game levels tailored to novel game affordances.
- Build adapted user experience evaluation methods.

### Competence objectives

- Planning and developing an engaging game concept that uses biofeedback as a core game mechanic.
- Experimenting with new platforms to develop new mechanics, aesthetics and genres.
- Exchanging and analyzing points of view with teammates.

- Contributing to peer feedback and constructive criticism.
- Identifying and assessing the ethical pitfalls in the game project.
- Implementing qualitative methods to analyse and improve players' experience.
- Allocating and assuming workload in a team of peers to realize a minimum viable product.
- Showcasing their work in a professional and engaging manner.

## COURSE CONTEXT

This course is conceived for Noroff University College's students conducting their Bachelor's studies in Game Environment Design and Game Character Design. The course can be taken as an elective addition to their study plan, ideally as an extension to their Emerging Platforms course, which is part of their core course plans in their fifth semester. Indeed, the Emerging Platforms course aims to provide students with an understanding of platform trends that affect game content creation, as well as knowledge of commercial and ethical situations that can present themselves to a game content producer in today's media environment.

Prospective students must have taken basic core courses before taking part in this one. Specifically, students must already be skilled in game design, game prototyping, basic game programming, computer logic and user experience principles. Students would ideally also foster an interest in gaming, new platforms, developing technologies, health, anatomy and ethics.

These same criteria would apply for any other program or school who wishes to incorporate this course into their curriculum. Programs which could also benefit from this course may include Cybersecurity, Information Technologies, Computer Science, and Biomechatronics. Students from other disciplines such as Ethics, Philosophy, Electronic Engineering, Digital Design, Interaction Design, Medicine and others may find common ground in some classes in the course, even if it is designed with Game Design students in mind. This course offers theoretical content in the areas of bioethics, neuroethics, user experience design, history and development of brain-computer interfaces, medical applications of videogames and development of neuromodulating devices.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

The course was designed following Noroff's classical on-campus method of delivery, wherein every class is roughly divided between a one-hour lecture and a two-hour workshop, for a total of nine hours of instruction per week, for six weeks; plus one week of self-guided work and research. This method is based on a student-centered andragogical model (Knowles, 1988) wherein the lecturer serves as a facilitator and curator of information, promoting student-led initiatives to foster learning in adult minds.

Thus, the lecturing period aims to not only impart theoretical knowledge to be used in the subsequent lab, but also to inspire students to further explore the field through self-directed research and analysis of existing industry projects and cases related to Human-Computer Interfaces, User Experience Design, Game Design, Computer Sciences, Neurosciences, Biotechnology and others.

The lab itself is used to give time and space to apply technical knowledge to allow the student

to develop their own course-based projects, with intermittent guidance from the lecturer. The lab is conceived as a place for experimentation, discovery, brainstorming, methodological testing, fast prototyping and analysis of user experience. The lab observations are to be recorded and analyzed following Moon's (2006) methods of reflective practice.

In addition to this method of delivery, the course is also designed to impart hands-on knowledge when using hardware that is not conventionally used in game design. The first few weeks, the lecturer will be leading students step by step on the usage and theory of the devices at hand. As the course progresses, students will be given more liberty in practice, while being informed of, and hopefully inspired by, the latest developments in the field. This progression follows the Hebbian theory of associative learning (Del Giudice et al., 2009). At this point students should be involved in a process of learning-by-doing, or experiential learning. During this phase they are free to experiment, engage with practice and learn by reflecting back on their actions and results obtained. (Ord, 2012)

At Noroff, usually the end of the course is marked by an entire week where students are to work in absolute independence, with little to no input from the lecturers. The aim is to give students time and space to not only polish their final deliveries, but to also foster their independent research and development skills. This self-directed study period is in line with socio-constructivist model theories (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

Overall, the course design was highly inspired by pre-existing Interactive Media's pedagogical structure where theory, practice, experimentation and reflection are highly intertwined. The different key phases, their duration and goals reflect a set of best practices that have been successfully used in other courses of the same programme. But ultimately, they have been articulated and adapted according to the nature of the theoretical materials, the complexity of the software and hardware and the need to find a good balance between the acquisition of technical skills and the need to create a space for critical and ethical analysis and reflection.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

This course will be supported by essential texts, videos and games that aim to create a solid knowledge base in key topics such as the aesthetics of biofeedback and neurogames, data protection and neuroethics. At a technical level, the course will rely on different software and hardware which allow students to get acquainted with said technologies and techniques, in order to learn how to prototype games using basic biofeedback and neurofeedback.

### Required Texts

- Gonfalonieri (2020)
- Greenberg (2018)
- Neuralink (2020)

### Suggested Texts

- Agarwal et al. (2019)
- Facebook Reality Lab (2020)

- Hildt (2019)
- Naufel & Klein (2020)
- Ramos et al. (2019)
- Yuste et al. (2017)

#### Required Videos

- Al Jazeera America (2016)
- CNBC (2018)
- Hub Culture. (2020)
- Pelley (2018)
- SimyBall by SimyLife (2017)
- Technically Games (2020)
- World Science Festival (2016)

#### Suggested Videos

- Eagleman (2015)
- Reardon (2019)

#### Required Games

- *Mindball Play* by Interactive Productline IP AB (2018)
- *Nevermind* by Reynolds (2015)

#### Suggested Games

- *EEG based Brain Computer Interface to play Pong* by Giraldo (2020)
- *Mindflex* by Neurosky (2009)
- *FlappyMind* by Younger (2014)

#### Required Software

- Unity 3D (Latest LTS version): Game development tool.
- EMOTIV Cortex API: Development tool to interface with neurofeedback hardware.
- CTRL-Kit API: Development tool to interface with neurofeedback hardware.
- Fitbit SDK: Development tool to interface with biofeedback hardware.

#### Suggested Software

- Unreal Engine: Game development tool.
- Brain Computer Interface Plugin by Thaurus-Development: Interface between various

EEG headsets and Unreal Engine.

- Xcode 12 paired with SwiftUI: Development tools for Apple Watch.

#### **Required Hardware**

- Computer: Needs to be powerful enough to handle 3D modelling, rendering and industry standard game development engines.
- Fitbit Sense: Heart rate and body temperature monitor.
- EMOTIV headset: Electroencephalographic (EEG) sensor to monitor brainwave activity in user.

#### **Suggested Hardware**

- Xbox Controller: Gaming peripheral with quick integration to the Windows OS.
- Apple Watch: Heart rate and body temperature monitor.
- CTRL-Kit: Electric impulse sensor to monitor motor intentions in user.
- EMOTIV MN8: Earphones with EEG sensor to monitor brainwave activity in user.

## **COURSE ASSIGNMENTS**

This course has three major kinds of assignments that will count towards students' grades, to be turned in at the end of the course, namely: a lab report, a game pitch and a prototype presentation. The course also includes two other kinds of assignments, to be shared during class proceedings, specifically: reading discussions and case analyses.

#### **Lab Report**

It includes the cumulative notes, observations and experiments conducted by students during the weekly laboratory sessions. Students choose a research question at the beginning of the course to direct their experiments for the following weeks. Students use the report to exercise their observation and documentation skills. The format can be modified to be closer to a Game Design Document, a Developers Blog, a Reflective Journal, or any other format that best suits instructors' pedagogic goals. The lab report is taken into account for the Research and Experimentation assessment criterion, as well as the Technical Competence, and Presentation and Participation assessment criteria.

#### **Game Pitch**

It presents students' initial game design ideas based on the device they want to practice with and the ethical design principle they wish to illustrate using neurofeedback and biofeedback. The game pitch lays out the framework to be used to answer students' research question of choice, as well as clearly spelling out which device, software and gaming platform to be used for the duration of the course. The pitch can be delivered either as a video or a live presentation. The game pitch is graded using mainly the Presentation and Participation assessment criterion.

#### **Game Prototype**

It is the final proof of student development, as they demonstrate how they are able to answer the

research question and apply the tools, techniques and theory taught in class. Students deliver a fully exported game for their gaming platform of choice, which should cover their game design plans as laid out in their game pitch. The game product presented by the students is graded using mostly the Game Prototype assessment criterion, while the Technical Competence assessment criterion can be scaffolded, taking in account the group's varying technical skills, specializations and career backgrounds.

### **Reading Discussions**

They require students to read select sources stating opinions and recommendations on biotechnological innovations, neuroethics and neurorights. Students are to read these sources before class. Their content is discussed, compared and analysed in class to develop students' critical thinking skills. Instructors can prepare a questionnaire to direct students' analytical processes, which can also be included as part of the lab report. Student engagement counts towards the Presentation and Participation assessment criterion.

### **Case Analyses**

They present students with games and technological innovations related to the fields of biofeedback, neurofeedback and neuromodulation. Students are encouraged to break down these innovations into their basic principles, so as to find common ground with their current game development process. Students ultimately adapt the aforementioned principles into their own work. Student engagement in these exercises, as well as evidence of their thinking process on their game design, is taken into account for the Technical Competence, and Presentation and Participation assessment criteria.

## **COURSE ASSESSMENT**

### **Research and Experimentation (15%)**

Students demonstrate and document their engagement with the course materials and techniques explored during labs. Students develop new ideas from the information acquired during the workshops and gathered from self-directed research. Students show willingness to learn, as well as problem solving skills and independence.

### **Technical Competence (15%)**

Students demonstrate technical merit expected of someone engaging with the practical element of the labs. Their final product showcases techniques seen and experimented in class, as well as techniques independently researched in preparation for reading discussions.

### **Game Prototype (50%)**

Students turn in a fully playable game, along with used game assets, editable files and game design documentation. Students also give a live demonstration of their developed product in an elegant, professional and clear manner, within the allotted time and content constraints (which varies according to class size). Games present exemplary quality in their design and playability, with no important bugs and glitches. More specifically, games successfully implement the latest developments in the industry regarding aesthetics and mechanics. Also, the gameplay successfully bridges the meaning of player action and coherence between game world feedback and biofeedback

peripheral inputs. Game design takes in account not only technical innovation, but ethical considerations stemming from the use of bio- and neurofeedback devices.

### **Presentation and Participation (20%)**

Students effectively communicate in oral, visual and written form their design intentions, research conclusions, as well as their development process; as a group and as individuals. Grammar, spelling, visual aesthetics and clarity are paramount. The presentations should include documentation of development, pitching of the game and a brief video demonstration of the product, if live demonstrations are not feasible. All team members should be present and actively participating in the presentation, as well as during case analyses and reading discussions.

## **EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE**

### **Week 1: Course Introduction**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Introduction to the syllabus and course project
- Lecture on the evolution of biofeedback as an input device in interaction design
- Lecture on the cultural and ludological aesthetics of biofeedback
- Workshop on the setup and Unity implementation of heat sensing wearables
- Workshop on the setup and Unity implementation of heartbeat sensing wearables

#### *Assignments*

- Students review syllabus structure
- Students elaborate a game design pitch which they could work on during the project. They have about ten days to make changes before presenting the pitch to the class and forming development teams
- Students use biofeedback sensors like Fitbit Sense and Apple Watch to experiment with integration with Unity
- Watch SimyBall by SimyLife (2017)
- Watch Hub Culture (2020)
- Watch CNBC (2018)
- Watch Pelley (2018)

### **Week 2: Brain Computer Interfaces**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Lecture on Brain Computer Interfaces (BCI)
- Lecture on neurofeedback devices
- Lecture on Non-Invasive Brain Stimulation (NIBS)



- Workshop on implementing Electroencephalographic (EEG) input in Unity
- Workshop on dealing with EEG noise
- Workshop on designing a game with biofeedback as a game mechanic

#### *Assignments*

- Students use neurofeedback sensors such as EMOTIV to experiment with integration with Unity
- Students present their game design pitches to the class to form development teams which will present their minimum viable product in a month for peer review
- Read Gonfalonieri (2020)
- Play and write observations on Mindball Play game by Interactive Productline IP AB (2018)

### **Week 3: Biofeedback in Games for Health**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Lecture on Biofeedback for physical health games
- Lecture on Biofeedback for psychological health games
- Game prototyping workshops (3)

#### *Assignments*

- Students develop their games in teams under the supervision of the lecturer
- Students show their advances to the lecturer for feedback
- Play and make a case study analysis of Nevermind game by Reynolds (2015)

### **Week 4: Neurofeedback, Neuromodulation and User Privacy**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Lecture on Neurofeedback and Neuromodulation for health games
- Lecture on privacy regarding biometric data
- Lecture on the history of neurorights
- Game prototyping workshops (3)

#### *Assignments*

- Students develop their games in teams under the supervision of the lecturer
- Students show their advances to the lecturer for feedback
- Watch Technically Games (2020)
- Adapt recommendations from Yuste et al. (2017) into own game design

- Compare own conclusions on neuroprivacy from Greenberg (2018)

### **Week 5: The Future of Biofeedback in Gaming**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Lecture on the evolution of Brain-to-Brain Interfaces
- Lecture on neuroethics and the state of the art of brain implants
- Lecture on collecting user experiences using qualitative methods to evaluate bio- and neurofeedback experiences.
- Game prototyping workshops (3)

#### *Assignments*

- Students develop their games in teams under the supervision of the lecturer.
- Students show their advances to the lecturer for feedback.
- Watch Al Jazeera America (2016)
- Watch World Science Festival (2016)
- Discuss consumer-friendly applications of Neuralink (2020)

### **Week 6: Last Steps of Game Prototyping**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Game prototyping workshops (2)
- Game showcase and peer feedback session

#### *Assignments*

- Students develop their games in teams under the supervision of the lecturer
- Students show their advances to the lecturer for feedback
- Students showcase their games to the group for feedback from their peers

### **Week 7: Game Prototype Polishing**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Self-Study Period

#### *Assignments*

- Students polish their games taking in account feedback from the previous week with little to no guidance from the lecturer

## **COURSE BEST PRACTICES**

This course is heavily reliant on specialized hardware. The basic idea is to teach students tools that

they can immediately apply to their professional life, so devices used in class should be of commercial grade standard. Preferably, the class should have access to devices and softwares used by a majority of users (e.g. Android devices, Apple devices, Unity and Unreal Engine).

To ensure a harmonious environment, there should be enough devices to provide each student with equipment to work with during lessons. Equipment used in class must be tested and updated before the start of the course and students should be instructed on how to keep the equipment in good condition, as well as to ensure that devices are charging when not in use. Students and faculty should be engaged in the sustainable maintenance of devices to ensure upcoming labs and subsequent student generations continue to enjoy and learn from them.

Indeed, novel hardware can be a particularly hefty investment, which is why these devices should be catalogued into an equipment library to keep track of equipment in use, in store, defective or lost. It is also a good idea to insure said devices in case of loss, damage or theft. Ideally, the campus equipment manager should have a working connection with support technicians and repair shops. It is highly recommended to have backup devices in stock. Equipment malfunction should be taken for granted, not as an exception.

From the very beginning of the course, students should be taught and encouraged to follow industry best practices regarding user privacy and safety, even if they are only producing a prototype. As the course advances, it will be more readily evident that bio- and neurofeedback devices have direct access to the user's intimate sphere. To further sensitize students to the subject, they should actively engage with specific case studies on ethical controversies with other products using these technologies.

Now, it is possible that a sizable amount of students will arrive with interest in the course's overall concept but may feel intimidated by the novelty and unfamiliarity of the field, the devices, softwares or processes. Provide them with examples of minimum viable products that they can use as a benchmark to set realistic expectations of what they can hope to learn and what they are expected to produce. You should also stimulate their imagination by showcasing commercial applications that use bio- and neurofeedback technologies. These stimuli should allow them to see how well-known products successfully use these technologies, as well as how they can take a first step into this emerging market.

Overall, the class should be structured so that student creativity is fostered with clear directions, handy examples and challenges that trigger parallel thinking. As a concrete starting exercise, you may introduce simple forms of play and games with basic mechanics exemplifying possible applications of biofeedback and neurofeedback technologies.

Since this field is still very new, students lacking in creative ideas for new uses should be allowed to emulate successful cases presented in class, while still being encouraged to add their own personal flair to the final product. However, not all students will be content to just copy the classics. Some students may try to push beyond the scope of the course itself. In these exceptional cases, be sure to encourage their ambition, but clarify the limits of supported devices and software as framed within the course's scope.

If you'll pardon the expression, students should learn to walk before they can fly. The inner workings of bio- and neurofeedback devices can be complex, so it is recommended that students get further insight and intuition via practice. The theoretical aspects should also be explored, with a close and intertwined relationship with the aforementioned demonstrations and hands-on practice. To reiterate, ethical considerations should be present in students' designs from the very beginning and should shine at the very end.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

This course could later be expanded as new technologies are introduced into the market, or as new research is published on other technologies which could be viable as alternative gaming peripherals or accessibility devices. Some examples of possible additions could include lightweight EEG devices (EMOTIV, 2020), functional near-infrared spectroscopy (House, 2020), virtual retinal displays (RETISSA, 2020), devices that read speech from neuromotor impulses arriving to maxillofacial muscles (Kapur et al., 2018), or directly from a brain implant (Herff et al., 2019), as well as devices that read neuromotor impulses arriving into the wrist (Reardon, 2019). Some other long-term technological additions could include Transcranial Direct Current Stimulation, Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, or Transcranial Focused Ultrasound Stimulation for demonstrational purposes; as soon as such technologies become accessible outside of laboratory and medical settings. Consideration should be given to student requests for new materials or innovative peripherals.

Readings and introductory material should be updated with new developments, reviews, papers and opinions on available commercial applications, privacy law and bioethics. Best practices should be reviewed every year to comply with the latest neuroethics and consumer privacy standards in the industry of games, as well as biotechnology, neurology and science.

It may be altogether possible to adapt the delivery so that it may also be available online, where lectures may be uploaded to introduce online students to core concepts and their historical context, along with recorded demonstrations and commentary on relevant biogames and neurogames. Students may also participate in online forums regarding ethical case analyses. Now, due to the geographically extensive, multinational nature of our online student cohorts, Noroff's policy is to relay the responsibility of hardware and software acquisition and maintenance to online students themselves. Other institutions with different policies for online studies may envision to emulate Scalpel 2.0 (Erickson, 2020) and lend a development kit to their online students for the duration of the course.

As for the context of the course itself, it could later be expanded to be a semester-long module to allow for in-depth theoretical analysis and a more fleshed-out prototype. The course could also be adapted for students enrolled in a Master's Degree in Game Design. The course could be further adapted for adjacent areas of study such as Cybersecurity, Information Technologies, Computer Science, and Biomechatronics, to name a few. If biotechnology and neurotechnology devices develop significantly so as to require more class time to explain and explore them, the course could be split in two: biofeedback for game design and neurofeedback for game design.

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PART II.

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**COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES**

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## CHAPTER 12.

### STUDYING GAMES (J412)

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AMANDA COTE<sup>1</sup> & MAXWELL FOXMAN<sup>2</sup>

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

**Course Title:** Journalism 412 (J412): Studying Games

**Course College/School:** School of Journalism and Communication

**Course Department/Program:** N/A

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 4

**Course Length:** 10 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face

**Course Keywords:** Undergraduate, survey course, introduction to game studies, media studies, journalism, communication, face-to-face

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

Games are one of the most influential sectors of the entertainment media industry, generating billions of dollars in profits for companies around the world while shaping much of contemporary digital culture and society. You encounter them everywhere—on campus and at home, in class and for leisure, in airplanes and on foot. Whether you're a journalist, an artist, a designer, in advertising or any major business, digital games will be integral to your life in the years to come. This course offers an introduction to the fundamentals of game studies, from what a game is to why it matters. No prior knowledge of gaming required! The course covers game industry, history, and culture, plus critical topics from labor and globalization to gender and race representations. It particularly focuses on questions of interest to a hybrid professional/theoretical program, including game journalism, gamification, and play as communication. Through a combination of academic research, documentaries, and hands-on game play, J412: Studying Games will provide the basic building blocks

1. Dr. Amanda Cote (acote@uoregon.edu) is Assistant Professor of Media Studies/Game Studies at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. She explores the industry and culture of video games, with a particular emphasis on gender, identity, labor, and representation.
2. Dr. Maxwell Foxman (mfoxman@uoregon.edu) is Assistant Professor of Media Studies/Game Studies at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. His primary research focus is on how play manifests in non-game contexts—including social media, emerging media, politics and journalistic institutions.

for analyzing and making games, as well as understanding their relationship to communication and media studies.

## COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Games are one of the most influential sectors of the entertainment media industry, generating billions of dollars in profits for companies around the world while shaping much of contemporary digital culture and society. You encounter them everywhere—on campus and at home, in class and for leisure, in airplanes and on foot. Insurance companies are churning out games to manage our health. Colleges and universities are granting scholarships to video game players. Mobile applications and virtual simulations are changing the way we think about classrooms, media, augmented reality, and human relationships. Whether you're a journalist, an artist, a designer, in advertising or any major business, digital games will be integral to your life in the years to come.

This course offers an introduction to the fundamentals of game studies, from what a game is to why it matters. No prior knowledge of gaming required! The course will cover the game industry, its history and video game culture, and will also explore critical topics from industrial labor and globalization to gender and race representations.

In J412, we will guide you through how to understand games in our society, from seeing how Roman senators used them to drum up political support through the impact of games on emerging technologies like Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and even nanotechnology! By combining academic research, documentaries, activities, and hands-on game play both during and outside class time, Studying Games will provide the basic building blocks for analyzing digital and analog games, making games, and understanding their relationship to Communication and Media Studies.

### Learning Outcomes

- Learn to analyze a game and critically reflect on its place within a larger cultural milieu.
- Understand the relationship between games, play, communication, and media studies.
- Have a fundamental knowledge of the major areas of Game Studies as a field.
- Be able to identify the mechanics of games as well as how they work as systems.
- Understand key game genres and narrative concepts.
- Understand and express how games fit into larger political-economic, social, and cultural contexts.
- Identify and critique core concepts of game culture, gamer culture, and the game industry.
- Articulate connections between games and professional interests/skills.

## COURSE CONTEXT

This course is the first of its kind in the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) at the University of Oregon. As is the case with many media studies and communications programs, the SOJC is attentive to the social and cultural value of games and the growth of the digital game industry. Along with hiring two new faculty with a focus explicitly in game studies (us), the school made a

significant material investment into the subject, through the creation of an Immersive Media Lab with access to cutting-edge game and VR technology. Additionally, new hires trained in esports and immersive media, among other topics, have augmented the staff.

Since game studies is new to the SOJC, there are no majors in it. Instead, most students are introduced to topics surrounding games as a component of larger survey courses—the basic media studies course “Media and Society” has one module on games. Likewise, the more specialized “Sports Communication” course has a unit on esports. Given the SOJC’s significant investment in this area, our eventual goal is to develop a game studies curriculum, or even a minor, where “Studying Games” will serve as the introduction. Until then, J412 is listed as a “Special Topics” course, which are voluntary classes that fulfill major requirements. Students can choose from a variety of these lecture-style classes each term, and they can repeat the “J412” class designation multiple times, provided the topics differ each time. The purpose of our J412 course is to further students’ knowledge of games studies beyond superficial, cursory introductions so they may gain an understanding of the broader implications of digital games in society and media professions.

Because Special Topics classes fill advanced major requirements, students in the course tend to be juniors or seniors who have completed most of the coursework in their SOJC majors and are well-versed in communications’ theories and skills. They are also steeped in their chosen concentration: advertising, journalism, media studies, and public relations. Most are interested in how special topics courses can add to their resume in preparation for a career in media and communications industries. A major goal of the course is thus to give students some clarity regarding how games will fit in their professional lives through lectures and self-reflexive exercises.

Enthusiasm about the topic itself is also high; the course regularly fills its enrollment cap of 70 students within the first few days of registration. Many students see games as a new, hip, or even easy subject to apprehend, especially compared to other special topics like Media Law, Reality Television, or Consumer Culture. But experience with analog and digital games varies, from hardcore gamers to those with little exposure beyond casual mobile games. Teaching the course therefore requires us to strike a careful balance between different needs, expectations, and existing knowledge. Strategies for managing this are described further below, in the “Course Best Practices” section.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

Given its size, student body, and placement within the SOJC, J412 needs to introduce students to game studies writ large, connect to their existing interests, and still provide the hands-on nuance that pushes upper-level students to accomplish their best work. To do this, we draw on (unsurprisingly) the pedagogical approach employed in many games as a model: in games, players are introduced to their abilities gradually, receiving a brief tutorial for each new skill, then encountering a challenge in which they need to use it. This structure moves the player from conceptual to applied knowledge, while helping them connect new skills to previously learned capabilities. Similarly, our class attempts to balance a tutorial/application format through a mix of short lectures and hands-on activities.

Each class begins with essential updates (e.g. upcoming deadlines) as well as a quick summary of the previous session’s main points. Students can raise their hands (virtually or face-to-face), ask any lingering questions, and receive an immediate response from us or their classmates. This helps

students reflect on earlier material and eases them into the learning mindset. Then, class proceeds to a short lecture (~20 minutes) about that day's topics. We usually review and build off the assigned readings or the prep work (e.g. assigned game play) students completed prior to class. Sometimes, the lecture period involves a formal slideshow and we do most of the talking; at other times, the class might be more collaborative, generating concept maps or notes organically using discussion questions and the white board. For example, to illustrate the complicated nature of the video game industry, the lecture started with the "hardware producers → publishers → developers" framework written on the board; we then collectively drew out the specifics of the model by discussing its different components (e.g. platforms, pricing/distribution models, types of publishers vs. developers, etc.). Building this web organically allowed students to visualize the tensions of "the industry" more clearly than a traditional slideshow lecture. Other topics, however, can benefit from slides' structure and visual imagery.

After the short lecture, the class generally moves to a hands-on activity. For instance, when discussing game mechanics, the lecture reviews what mechanics are, how our readings for the day discussed them, and why they matter to games' meanings and outcomes. Students then split into small groups—clustering inside the classroom and even spilling out into nearby workspaces—choose a game they're familiar with, and write out its rules. They are asked to think critically about what type of gameplay those rules encourage and suggest one change that would meaningfully alter the gameplay experience (e.g. changing a cooperative game to a competitive one). Groups share their results with the class, and they submit their group worksheets, which are graded as in-class work. Hands-on activities require students to be creative and apply concepts and definitions in more concrete ways. This aids in comprehension and retention, with students remembering more of the material they discuss or teach to one another. Therefore, activities like think-pair-share, minute papers, or case studies form an important part of the course. Through these approaches, we bridge the gap between class size, material, and student skills.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

The course does not require any specific textbooks, software, or hardware. We furnish all readings and carefully choose games that can be played on home computers, phones, or at local arcades. We also offer our students entry to a newly constructed "Immersive Media Lab" where they can play with more advanced hardware like Virtual Reality HMDs, and our university library provides access to some games and systems as well.

Our model reflects both the course's subject matter and the orientation of the SOJC itself. Since "Studying Games" primarily aims to acquaint students with grounded concepts and ideas in game studies, which they can employ in their future careers, we did not want to bog them down with tools that might better fit game designers, such as teaching the intricacies of game engines like Unity or Unreal. Students instead use their existing skills and software provided to majors by the School (e.g., the Adobe Creative Suite): we encourage them to present work in a variety of formats ranging from podcasts to documentaries and, of course, traditional written essays. We also recognized that, as a public university, our course should strive for equity in terms of access. Put simply, a significant number of our students are a family's first generation to attend university, come from low-income households, and/or are working to pay their way through school. Many cannot afford or do not have easy access to game systems beyond mobile phones and browsers. Choosing accessible games and formats was therefore a priority. Consequently, we even play games in class together, with

students shouting out directions to us, for ease of access and community-building. Finally, providing distributed material, rather than committing to a single textbook, software, or other material, allows us to update sections of the course easily. As games are a rapidly evolving technology, and as the SOJC prides itself on being at the cutting edge of media and communications research and practice, this makes the class more durable over time.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

### Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. Each student can miss one meeting for any reason without penalty. Each *unexcused* absence thereafter will lead to a penalty of 20% of the attendance grade. Repeated absences or consistent lateness may incur larger penalties. *Excused* absences will not affect attendance or in-class work scores, but students are expected to catch up on the material they missed.

Given the course's focus on collaborative, hands-on activities (described further below), attendance is essential. It allows students to share their experience with games and understanding of different topics, as well as to benefit from colleagues' expertise and experience. Further, this course covers many topics quite rapidly; attending regularly is key to getting questions answered early and staying on top of the assigned materials.

### Participation and In-Class Work

Participation requires a student to complete the reading and any assigned prep work prior to the session for which it is listed. Classmates are considered collaborators in the discussions and therefore are required to engage with the material and their peers. Participation includes being attentive during class discussion, activities, and exercises, actively listening to each other, and being prepared to discuss the required readings. It also includes respectfully engaging with different viewpoints. Participation can take many forms, from taking notes for a group during an activity to asking questions when confused.

Class will often involve individual or small-group assignments to allow students to analyze the material in a hands-on way. They will be asked to turn some of these assignments in. Because this will often be the first time students engage with ideas, in-class work will be graded on level of detail and effort rather than correctness. At the end of the term, completed in-class work and overall participation will be combined and weighted to 15% of a student's grade.

### Prep Work

As marked on the course schedule, some class sessions have assigned prep work students are expected to complete and submit in addition to their assigned readings. These assignments are due on Canvas (or equivalent course platform) the night before (by midnight) the class to which they are assigned. This is to help students put their best foot forward on these assignments.

Prep work will be graded on a standard A-F scale based on completion, level of detail, and general writing/grammar expectations. Because it shows students' thoughts and experiences, most prep work does not have a "right" answer, but it is expected to be detailed and thoughtful, as well as organized, grammatically correct, and carefully proofread. For assignments that request notes, bullet points are



fine, but students must ensure their notes are detailed enough to be understandable by another reader. This means they should have a clear structure, with titles and subtitles, and be organized thematically rather than chronologically or stream-of-consciousness style.

### **Game Review**

Many students are not going to become academics; because of this, the academic style of writing they use in college may not always be the tone they need in the future. For this assignment, students will work on writing in the style of a specific publication, trying to match its overall tone, length, etc. More specifically, this assignment asks a student to play and review a video game of their choice. They will select a game, play it all the way through, or, in the case of games without endings, such as *Candy Crush*, choose an appropriate amount to play to get a true feel for the game (being ready to defend that choice in the review). They will also choose a news outlet that would be likely to review their chosen game, such as a games magazine or the tech and entertainment sections of larger publications. After a student plays the game, they will write a review of it in the style of the chosen press source and complete a short essay explaining *how* they emulated this style and *why* the chosen source would be a suitable location to review the game. Students submit one journalistic video game review (length based on the outlet) and one reflective analysis (no more than 3 pages, template provided).

### **Final Paper Proposal**

To help prepare for the final paper or creative project, students will submit a 1-3 page proposal. For papers, this proposal will include a draft of its thesis, an outline of main points, and a list of at least three quality academic sources a student plans to draw on to support their points, with 1-2 sentences regarding why they will be useful for the student's topic. For creative projects, the proposal must include:

1. A project summary (2-3 sentences)
2. A brief paragraph explaining how this project is 1) relevant to the class and 2) critical
3. An outline of the content to be covered
4. A list of at least three relevant, quality academic sources (from outside of class), properly cited, and with 1-2 sentences regarding why they will be useful for the student's topic. If there are non-academic sources that a student thinks will be useful, they can also include them. But at least three must be academic books or journal articles.
5. A timeline showing how students will complete the project by the end of the term
6. A list of attributes the student thinks the final product should have to earn an A.

Project proposals are required to be a bit more in-depth than paper proposals, because projects can take on many forms. Therefore, we need more information at the start to ensure students are on track to do well and end the class with a coherent final product.

### **Final Paper**

This assignment requires a student either to write a 5-8 page paper on a topic of their choice OR to complete an alternative project of their choosing (e.g. create a website, film, Twitch stream, comic or zine, storyboard, etc.).

**If a student chooses to write a paper,** they will need to conduct outside research, develop a critical perspective on their topic, and support the side they take with evidence. By “critical”, we do not mean “negative”. Rather, we mean that the paper should connect video games to some larger social or cultural issue, as done in class. Students can expand on an issue we have covered or propose a new topic not discussed in class. The paper must explain the topic and its significance, provide relevant background, and present an argument in a well-researched and well-supported way. Students’ papers will be assessed on the clarity and quality of their argument, the support and evidence provided, use of quality sources, and overall writing and reference formatting.

**If a student chooses to do an alternative project,** it must clearly relate to class, have a deliverable outcome, and take a critical perspective, connecting games to some larger issue. However, the format this project can take is up to the student (pending approval via the proposal).

Both papers and projects should demonstrate an ability to think independently and to approach video games and game culture critically. They are also meant to show how a student can extrapolate new ideas from class discussions and readings. Students have a lot of freedom with this assignment, but it also comes with high expectations, as it is their capstone for the course. We strongly encourage students to meet with a member of the teaching team during office hours early on, to ensure that they are on the right track. Final papers/projects are due during the final exam week in lieu of an exam.

#### **EXTRA CREDIT**

Students may choose ONE of the following assignments to complete for additional extra credit (up to 5%). Extra credit assignments can be done at any point throughout the term, so students can schedule them at a time that is convenient.

***Game company brief-*** This assignment requires a student to research a game company of their choice and write a short memo (1-2 pgs.) regarding its history, one major contribution it has made to games or game culture, and an analysis of why this contribution mattered. The assignment will provide a template to work from.

***Game community analysis-*** A student will select a game community (digital or analog) and observe its members and their interactions with the broader culture surrounding games. Following basic ethnographic principles, they also analyze their observations in relation to course content to produce a short paper (2-3 pgs.).

#### **COURSE ASSESSMENT**

##### **Overall Grade Percentages**

- Attendance- 10%
- Participation and In-Class Work- 15%
- Prep Work/Play Responses- 20%
- Game Review- 20%
- Final Paper Proposal- 10%
- Final Paper/Project- 25%

- Potential Extra Credit (Choose ONE to earn up to 5% extra credit)
  - Game Company Brief
  - Community analysis

### Grading Guidelines

- Assignments such as prep work or in-class work are based on students' individual thoughts and experiences, and these should also be considered works in progress. Therefore, they are graded on level of detail and completeness rather than "correctness". See, for instance, this description, given to students in the class:
  - "Prep work will be graded on a standard A-F scale based on completion, level of detail, and general writing/grammar expectations. Because it shows your thoughts and experiences, most prep work does not have a 'right' answer, but it is expected to be detailed and thoughtful, as well as organized, grammatically correct, and carefully proofread. For assignments that request notes, bullet points are fine, but be sure that your notes are detailed enough to be understandable by someone who is not you. This means they should have a clear structure, with titles and subtitles, and be organized thematically rather than chronologically or stream-of-consciousness style."
- More formal written assignments, such as the game review, the final paper/project proposals, and final papers, are graded on a standard A-F scale. Suggested guidelines include the following:
  - A = Excellent. Shows a full command of the material, a strong sense of purpose, clear and compelling thought, and skillful writing.
  - B = Good to very good. Provides a very solid fulfillment of the assignment, with clear argumentation and presentation.
  - C = Satisfactory. Fulfills the basic requirements of the assignment. Lacks clear organization and argumentation, but shows an understanding of the material. May suggest interesting approaches to the material, but fails to develop them.
  - D = Unsatisfactory. Major weaknesses in writing, organization, and argumentation.
  - E = Unacceptable. Does not satisfy the minimum requirements of the assignment.
- Finally, creative projects can vary widely. This is why the proposal assignment for a creative project requests that students lay out what they think an "A" project should look like. Develop expectations for these submissions in collaboration with the student (e.g. providing written feedback on their proposal suggesting other elements you think an A project will need or scheduling a meeting with students to discuss these.)

### EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE:

#### Class 1: What are Games?

##### *Readings*

- **Required:**

- Watch “Rise of the Video Game: Level 1” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3u3Hc13wzHE>)

- **Optional:**

- Zimmerman & Chaplin: “The 21st Century Will Be Defined by Games” (<http://kotaku.com/manifesto-the-21st-century-will-be-defined-by-games-1275355204>)

*Assignments*

- Take notes on the film using the provided questions. Bring them to class.

**Class 2: Exploring Game Analysis and Criticism**

*Readings*

- **Required:**

- Egenfeldt-Nielson et al.: “What is a Game?” in *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*
- McGonigal: “Introduction” in *Reality is Broken*

- **Optional:**

- Bond: “Definition of a Game”
- Caillois: “The Definition of Play: The Classification of Games”
- McGonigal: “What Exactly is a Game?”

*Assignments*

- None

**Class 3: History of Games**

*Readings*

- **Required:**

- June: “For Amusement Only: The Life and Death of the American Arcade” (<https://www.theverge.com/2013/1/16/3740422/the-life-and-death-of-the-american-arcade-for-amusement-only>)

- **Optional:**

- Donovan: Excerpts from *Replay: The History of Video Games*
- Ryan: Excerpts from *Super Mario*
- “Timeline of Arcade History” (<https://www.wired.com/2014/05/arcade-history/>)

*Assignments*

- Go to a local arcade and play at least 30 minutes of games OR play *Space Invaders*

(<https://www.free80sarcade.com/spaceinvaders.php>), Ms. Pac-man (<http://www.mspacman1.com>), and Double Dragon (<https://megadrive-emulator.com/arcade/double-dragon>). Keep notes on what you play and how you do. Submit them to Canvas before class.

#### **Class 4: Games & Culture- What is Video Game Culture?**

##### *Readings*

- **Required:**
  - Shaw: “What is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies”
- **Optional:**
  - Bogost: “The Rhetoric of Videogames” in *The Ecology of Games*
  - Mäyrä: “Game Culture: Meaning in Games”

##### *Assignments*

- None

#### **Class 5: Games & Culture- Narrative and Aesthetic**

##### *Readings*

- **Required:**
  - Bogost: “Art” in *How to do Things with Video Games*
  - Jenkins: “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” in *The Game Design Reader*
- **Optional:**
  - Ochalla: “Are Games Art? (Here We Go Again)” ([https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/130113/are\\_games\\_art\\_here\\_we\\_go\\_.php](https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/130113/are_games_art_here_we_go_.php))
  - Stuart: “Video Games and Art. Why does the Media get it so Wrong?” (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2014/jan/08/video-games-art-and-the-shock-of-the-new>)
  - Bogost: “Texture” in *How to do Things with Video Games*
  - Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al.: “Video Game Aesthetics” & “Narrative” in *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*

##### *Assignments*

- Play at least 30 minutes of Minecraft (<https://www.minecraft.net/en-us/download/>) and write 250-500 words regarding how it fits in with the readings for the day. Submit on Canvas before class.

## Class 6: Games & Culture- Mechanics and Play

### Readings

- **Required:**
  - Zimmerman: “How I Teach Game Design” (Lesson 3)  
(<https://ericzimmerman.wordpress.com/2014/08/26/how-i-teach-game-design-lesson-3-games-and-rules/>)
- **Optional:**
  - Sutton-Smith: “Play and Ambiguity” in The Game Design Reader
  - Huizinga: “The Nature and Significance of Play as Cultural Phenomenon” in The Game Design Reader
  - Sudnow: “Eyeball” and “Cathexis” in The Game Design Reader

### Assignments

- Game Review DUE FRIDAY at 5pm

## Class 7: The Game Industry- The Basics

### Readings

- **Required:**
  - Kerr: Excerpts from Global Games (Introduction + charts from Ch. 1)
- **Optional:**
  - Whitson: “Voodoo Software and Boundary Objects in Game Development”
  - Consalvo: “Console Video Games and Global Corporations: Creating a Hybrid Culture”
  - Hall: “The games industry is wrong about kids, gaming and gender”  
(<https://www.polygon.com/2015/3/5/8153213/the-games-industry-is-wrong-about-kids-gaming-and-gender>)

### Assignments

- None

## Class 8: The Game Industry- The Rise of Casual and Indie

### Readings

- **Required:**
  - Juul: “A Casual Revolution” in A Casual Revolution
- **Optional:**
  - Martin & Deuze: “The Independent Production of Culture: A Digital Games Case

Study”

- Juul: “What is Casual?” in A Casual Revolution
- Watch *Indie Game: The Movie* on Amazon Prime or otherwise (e.g., <https://www.amazon.com/Indie-Game-Movie-Jonathan-Blow/dp/B008DGRDZ8>)

#### Assignments

- Play a casual game of your choice and submit your thoughts using the questions provided on Canvas. This assignment should be turned in on Canvas before class.

### Class 9: The Game Industry- Labor Practices

#### Readings

- **Required:**
  - “EA: The Human Story” (<https://ea-spouse.livejournal.com/274.html>)
  - Nakamura: “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft”
- **Optional:**
  - Huntemann: “Irreconcilable Differences: Gender and Labor in the Video Game Workplace” (<https://www.flowjournal.org/2010/01/irreconcilable-differences-gender-and-labor-in-the-video-game-workplace-nina-b-huntemann-suffolk-university/>)

#### Assignments

- None

### Class 10: Game Development and Design

#### Readings

- **Required:**
  - Zimmerman: “How I Teach Game Design” (Prologue, Lesson 1 & Lesson 2) (Start with the prologue at: <https://ericzimmerman.wordpress.com/2013/09/15/how-i-teach-prologue/> then navigate to the other pages from there)
- **Optional:**
  - Flanagan et al.: “Embodying Values in Technology: Theory and Practice” in *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy*
  - Bogost: “Relaxation”, “Music” and “Snapshots” in *How to do Things with Videogames*”

#### Assignments

- Find and read the official rules for a board or card game you played as a child. Compare these to how you actually played the game. Critically reflect on how your changes (or lack thereof) affected the process of play. Submit 250-500 words on the topic to Canvas before class.

## Class 11: Game Technology and the Affordances of Platforms

### Readings

- **Required:**
  - Montfort and Bogost: Excerpts from *Racing the Beam*
- **Optional:**
  - Winner: “Do Artifacts have Politics?” (sections)

### Assignments

- None

## Class 12: Virtual Communities

### Readings

- **Required:**
  - Martey et al.: “The Strategic Female: Gender-Switching and Player Behavior in Online Games”
  - Sundén: “Desires at Play: On Closeness and Epistemological Uncertainty”
    - “First Impressions” *required*
    - “Critically Close” and “Machinic Desires” *strongly encouraged*
  - Keogh “Just Making Things and Being Alive About It: The Queer Games Scene” (<https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/5/24/4341042/the-queer-games-scene>)
- **Optional:**
  - Consalvo & Begy: “Those Were the Days” and “Shifting Platforms and Troubled Ground” in *Players and their Pets*
  - Bainbridge: “The Scientific Research Potential of Virtual Worlds”

### Assignments

- Play an MMO of your choosing for at least an hour. Many MMOs are free to play, at least for the first levels; ask the professor if you need help selecting one. Write a 250-500 word reflection on your experience. Be sure to include at least some thoughts on community and sociability. Draw on today’s readings as needed to complete the reflection.
- Final Paper Proposal DUE FRIDAY at 5pm

## Class 13: Gameful World- Gamification

### Readings

- **Required:**
  - McGonigal: “The Benefits of Alternate Realities” in *Reality is Broken* (*read first!*)



- Robertson: “Can’t Play, Won’t Play” (<https://kotaku.com/cant-play-wont-play-5686393>)
- Foxman: “How to Win Foursquare: Body and Space in a Gamified World” in *Rethinking Gamification*
- **Optional:**
  - Raessens: “The Ludification of Culture” in *Rethinking Gamification*

#### *Assignments*

- None

### **Class 14: Gameful World- Esports and Twitch**

#### *Readings*

- **Required:**
  - Taylor: “Playing for Keeps” in *Raising the Stakes*
  - Taylor: “Broadcasting Ourselves” in *Watch Me Play*
- **Optional:**
  - Savov & Byford: “Can Video Games be Sports?” (<https://www.theverge.com/2014/7/11/5890907/can-video-games-be-sports>)
  - McGonigal: “Fun with Strangers” in *Reality is Broken*

#### *Assignments*

- Watch at least 20 minutes of an esports competition (you can find videos from old competitions on YouTube or other sources like Twitch). Take notes on who you see playing, who you see in the crowd, and how the competition is discussed. How is it similar to or different from traditional sports? Submit your note on Canvas before class.

### **Class 15: Gameful World- Newsgames and Serious Games**

#### *Readings*

- **Required:**
  - Susi et al. “Serious Games — An Overview”
  - Foxman: “Play the News: Fun and Games in Digital Journalism” (Chapters III & IV) ([https://www.cjr.org/tow\\_center\\_reports/play\\_the\\_news\\_fun\\_and\\_games\\_in\\_digital\\_journalism.php](https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/play_the_news_fun_and_games_in_digital_journalism.php))
- **Optional:**
  - Klopfer et al.: “Moving Learning Games Forward”
  - McGonigal: “The Engagement Economy” in *Reality is Broken*

### Assignments

- None

### Class 16: Game Effects- Video Games & Violence

#### Readings

- **Required:**
  - Anderson et al.: “Violent Video Game effects on Aggression, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior in Eastern and Western Countries”
  - Ferguson & Kilburn: “Much Ado About Nothing”
- **Optional:**
  - Miller: “Do Video Games Make Us More Cruel?” ([http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2016/11/do\\_video\\_games\\_make\\_us\\_more\\_cruel.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2016/11/do_video_games_make_us_more_cruel.html))
  - Bissell: “Video Games; The Addiction” (<http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2010/mar/21/tom-bissell-video-game-cocaine-addiction>)

### Assignments

- Play any first-person shooting game (many are available in the library!) and write 250-500 words critically reflecting on your experience. Be sure to consider how it fits in with today’s readings. Submit to Canvas before class.

### Class 17: Games & Representation- What are Gamers?

#### Readings

- **Required:**
  - Shaw: “Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity”
  - Kowert et al.: “Geek or Chic? Emerging Stereotypes of Online Gamers”
- **Optional:**
  - Chess: “Playing with Identity” in Ready Player Two

### Assignments

- None

### Class 18: Games & Representation- Race

#### Readings

- **Required:**
  - Brock: “When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong”
  - Leonard: “Live in Your World, Play in Ours”

- **Optional:**

- Nakamura: “It’s a N\*\* in Here! Kill the N\*\*\*!”

*Assignments*

- None

**Class 19: Games & Representation- Gender and Sexuality**

*Readings*

- **Required:**

- Lien: “No Girls Allowed” (<https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed>)
- Cote: “I Can Defend Myself”

- **Optional:**

- Williams et al.: “The Virtual Census”
- Jenkins: “Complete Freedom of Movement” in The Game Design Reader

*Assignments*

- Play at least 30 minutes of a game with a playable female character (your choice). Take notes on her representation (appearance, voice, behavior, reactions of other characters to her presence, etc.) and submit to Canvas before class.

**Class 20: Game Futures – VR & AR**

*Readings*

- **Required:**

- Bailenson: “Introduction” and “Practice Made Perfect” in Experience on Demand
- Mäyrä: “Pokémon GO: Entering the Ludic Society”

- **Optional:**

- Zhang: “Can VR Really Make You More Empathetic?” (<https://www.wired.com/2016/09/can-vr-really-make-people-empathetic/>)
- Dalton: “Virtual Reality: The Future of Narrative Journalism?” (<http://mediashift.org/2015/06/virtual-reality-the-future-of-narrative-journalism/>)
- Taylor: “Intentional Bodies: Virtual Environments and the Designers Who Shape Them”
- Parkin: “Three Psychedelic Visions of the Future of V.R. Gaming” (<https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/three-psychedelic-visions-of-the-future-of-v-r-gaming>)
- Stein: “Why Virtual Reality is About to Change the World.” (<http://time.com/3987022/>)

### Assignments

- Any extra credit assignments must be submitted by 5pm
- Final paper due next week

### COURSE BEST PRACTICES

As mentioned above, one of the biggest challenges this course faces is its location at the nexus of journalism, advertising, public relations, and media studies. We (Drs. Cote & Foxman) are media studies professors; we research and teach from a critical perspective, focusing on how media develop, shape, and are shaped by sociocultural forces and structures of power. Our students, however, represent an array of majors, both within the SOJC and across other programs.

The first time we taught this class, then, we found a sharp divergence between what *we* expected the class to be about and what *our students* expected the class to be about. Advertising majors, for instance, resisted critical reads on the video game industry and wanted practical guides on how to craft promotional campaigns for games. English majors desired a deeper exploration of games as texts. Psychology majors latched on to the media effects classes. In the end, while students enjoyed the class and learned a great deal, no one was 100% happy. This required us to 1) carefully frame what the class actually is about and 2) strike a balance between class structure and student freedom.

To begin, we now make it very clear that J412 is a media studies class. For example, when Dr. Cote taught the class in 2020, she sent this message to students before the start of the term:

“Prior to the term, I wanted to send you all a brief heads up regarding the class and what it’s about. My roster shows that many of you are advertising or PR majors; please be aware that this class falls more in the SOJC’s Media Studies area. As such, we will not be focusing too heavily on game design, games and advertising, and/or working in the game industry. These will all come up, but the class’s main focus is the critical assessment of games (digital and analog) as contributors to politics, society, culture, and economics. We’ll be addressing what a game is, the history of the medium, representation and identity, gamification, industry labor practices, and more. You’ll be expected to look at games, think about why they’re shaped the way they are, and consider what broader cultural impacts these trends have. If this sounds like what you’re looking for, great! Look forward to seeing you in class. But if this is not in line with what you expect from the class, it may be best to switch to an alternative course so you can have your most productive term. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions.”

This message was reemphasized on day one and periodically throughout the term. We believe it was successful. Because students came in with a clearer idea regarding what to expect, they were able to focus more on what the class actually offered.

At the same time, we sought to be aware of our student body and their needs: they are aspiring professionals interested in acquiring skills and insights that dovetail with digital games and the game industry. We imagine our students may eventually work in the communications’ department of game publishers or cover games for a news site. Therefore, in addition to framing the class more carefully and connecting games and other media in the “gameful world” section, we rethought how students could employ their interests and expertise throughout the course. For example, we reworked prep and in-class work to draw more heavily on students’ thoughts and experiences. We also highlighted the

“creative project” option for the final assignment, so that students who had professional skills could simultaneously link these to the course material and build their portfolios.

The final paper format is standard to media studies courses. Students are expected to produce original research that extends beyond the topics in the class to areas of student interest. However, given the course’s subject matter, we have always allowed students to pursue alternate formats, such as designing their own game. In the first year, we received a variety of critically informed final papers, but creative projects were non-existent. Part of the reason, we learned in reviews, was that students were less interested in game development compared to understanding more about how games fit into everyday media and society.

Therefore, in the second round of the course, we clarified “final projects” as less related to game development and more about presenting critical work in alternative formats, such as films, Twitch streams, ad campaigns, or podcasts. This freed students to utilize skills they learned in the SOJC (film editing, audio recording, etc.). While most students still wrote papers, the number who attempted alternative formats rose, and their projects were excellent. For instance, one student, interested in broadcast journalism, crafted a short documentary on female gamers’ experiences in esports. This documentary included interviews with collegiate esports players, gameplay footage, and careful voiceovers, where the student used course materials to contextualize how the masculinized history of gaming affects players. Another student created an advertising campaign proposal to help a hypothetical game company reach more diverse audiences. She developed original concept art for a print/visual media campaign and mocked up Snapchat filters that the hypothetical “client” could use to advertise their game. A third student, a journalism major, wrote a series of magazine-style articles rather than one in-depth research piece. And these are just the first examples of creative projects that come to mind; when given the opportunity to use their skills and build their portfolios, students ran with it.

Basic knowledge of game industry economics or gaming communities is an asset for advertisers, consultants, and other media professionals who will encounter games as part of their work responsibilities, and students can build these connections through hands-on work and creative assignments. As a consequence, we realized that working within the skill sets of students and encouraging their creative application is a valuable addition to a course where assignments are related to research and reading.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

The future plans for this course revolve around the increased investment in games (and their affiliated tools) by both the university and communications fields. Advertising firms, for instance, have job calls that require working knowledge of Unity. Journalists may use newsgames for specific topics like election coverage or major sports events. At the SOJC, the development of the Immersive Media Lab to produce content ranging from games to augmented reality projects is part of a larger initiative to modernize media production at the school. Consequently, we see the course shifting on three fronts.

First, with the growth of emerging media formats, we aim to make students more familiar and comfortable with game development tools and software and how they work. In this way, students can potentially use them alongside programs such as the Adobe Creative Suite in which they are already

versed. Future class iterations will introduce these tools to students but still allow them to pursue projects based on their own inclinations.

Second, and especially since our students come from a diverse set of backgrounds with varied knowledge about games, we urge them to play more in order to understand the medium. The Immersive Media Lab, which is fitted with gaming systems (including virtual reality headsets) will provide space for students in future classes to both develop and play games. We also plan to partner with other labs and libraries on campus to provide our students with a more robust set of games and game spaces to play throughout the term.

Finally, we will strengthen and formalize connections between the subjects of this class and other coursework at the SOJC. This has already begun informally at the school: students who took the class are also involved in a student-driven initiative to cover varsity esports on campus (using the Immersive Media Lab as a production studio). Such enterprises suggest games' broader appeal and applications. We view the course as the pipeline to introduce and connect students to these undertakings, ideally in partnership with clubs for special presentations, activities, and even assignments.

Beyond these long-term goals, we plan to make moderate changes as we are required to move the course online. Much of our course content converts easily to synchronous remote formats—after all, we organize classes around short lectures followed by small-group activity which can be done in online breakout rooms. However, as we discovered from interviews with game educators (Games for Change, 2020), we are uniquely positioned to facilitate online learning with tools which are directly connected to our area of study. Therefore, we plan to make use of platforms like Discord, Twitch, Twine, and Unity to provide additional learning support and community discourse for our students, while also requiring them to be self-reflexive about their use.

In the end, we hope that this course will serve as the launching point for a robust curriculum of game studies courses, professional development opportunities, and interdisciplinary media creation.

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## CHAPTER 13.

### WRITING PLAY AND PLAYING ARGUMENTS (RHET 101)

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JACOB EUTENEUER<sup>1</sup>  
HAMPDEN-SYDNEY COLLEGE

**Course Title:** RHET 101: Writing Play and Playing Arguments

**Course University:** Hampden-Sydney College

**Course College/School:** Arts and Humanities Division

**Course Department/Program:** Rhetoric Program, English Composition

**Course Level:** Freshman level

**Course Credits:** 3 credit hours

**Course Length:** 15 weeks, 1.5 hours twice a week for 15 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face

**Course Keywords:** Composition, Rhetoric, First-Year Writing, Play, Games, Argumentation, Style, Interactive Fiction

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

In this course, students engage with the playing and creation of games as a way to develop their skills as writers and critical thinkers. As digital games continue to become more accessible to wider audiences through mobile phones, subscription services, and simplified game engines, their impact and influence will continue to grow. Through a series of written essays, students will take a critical look at games and play, analyzing how digital games are made, who plays them, what stories they tell, and what makes the medium of games unique. Students will develop proficiency with writing processes by identifying and describing social and critical conversations surrounding digital games, developing research questions, and conducting sustained and focused primary/secondary research. Through a cumulative twenty pages of written work and the creation of their own personal game, students will develop their writing proficiency and a critical understanding of the role games play in society.

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This course is designed to use the playing of games and the active reflection of that play as a way

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for students to write and develop critical thinking skills. Throughout the course, students are asked to play games and reflect on the social, material, fantastical, and cognitive dimensions of the games they are playing. At the same time, the primary focus of the course is to develop student's writing and familiarize them with the standards and expectations of college-level writing. These include researched writing, persuasive writing, audience-based reasoning, and a control of rhetorical style. The playing of games then becomes a way of forming community within the classroom as well as a way of developing common experiences that all students can talk about. On the largest level, the goals of this course are to get students to recognize the similarities between play, games, and writing, to analyze play and games as products of a specific time and culture, and to help students see how effective writing skills and stylistic control can help them create their own games. In particular, the course uses a set of student learning outcomes to assess each student's progress. By the end of the class, the hope is that all students will be able to:

- Identify conversations surrounding a particular subject through research and inquiry, and enter those conversations by crafting research questions, synthesizing outside sources, and identifying potential avenues for further inquiry.
- Describe the role of games and play across multiple dimensions of their life and develop the proficiency to create their own game with a clear, constructed purpose.
- Explore a research subject deeply by identifying important source material about that subject and engage with that material by analyzing and abstracting the material in the form of summaries and analysis.
- Develop an awareness of their own research and writing processes through reflection and self-assessment.
- Develop and explore their own research questions into a thesis-driven, researched essay that builds an original argument in which they make rhetorical decisions about issues including – but not limited to – style, tone, organization, and evidence.
- Demonstrate proficiency with conventions of academic style by consistently and accurately summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting source materials, by clearly citing and distinguishing their own prose from source materials, and by correctly utilizing both in-text and bibliographic citation according to a chosen style guide (such as MLA, APA, or Chicago).
- Revise and edit multiple drafts to produce writing that is well organized, mechanically and grammatically sound, and mostly error free

## COURSE CONTEXT

This course is designed and implemented as part of a first-year writing general education requirement. These courses are typically required by colleges and universities for all incoming students. The expectation is that these common writing courses will help students develop the necessary skills to succeed in their writing assignments throughout their college careers. This course in particular is a “themed” variant of the traditional first-year writing or first-year composition course. Theming a general education course is quite common in Composition Programs so that while every student at the college takes the course, the actual course-by-course selection based on theme allows students to find a course that fits their interests and skills. Essentially, students are required to

take the course, but, from there, they often self-select which particular instance of the course they will take.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

This course takes a student-centered approach to pedagogy. Students are positioned as the focus, leaders, and motivators for the work we do in the course. This means that particular details for many assignments such as what the game or issue they will analyze will be or whether the assignment will be completed individually or collaboratively are up to the students in the class. In addition, by centering students in the course's pedagogy, particular readings or games may come up that the class deems necessary or unnecessary to their understanding of the course's aims and outcomes. Instructors should be flexible and willing to go where the student's desire as long as it is within the framework of the predetermined outcomes.

In particular, the actual day-to-day pedagogy of the course is centered on a discussion-based classroom that also functions as a studio in which students spend time each day writing expressively and crafting persuasive arguments. The bedrock on which the course is built is that students improve their writing by engaging with the act of writing. Play and games are positioned as both important cultural artifacts worthy of our attention and as resources we can use to facilitate the writing process and production of texts. Students are assigned common readings and games to play so that there is a common foundation on which to base the day's discussion. In addition, each class typically begins with a five-minute freewriting exercise that engages with the assigned readings and games for that day. In this way, students begin each class by both practicing the writing process and reflecting on the activities they were asked to engage in. On certain assigned days throughout the semester as projects become due, students are asked to bring in their work and undergo workshopping and peer review of their projects. The process of reviewing and constructively critiquing the works of others is essential to the classroom and future writing communities in which the students will participate. In this way, the course's pedagogy seeks to prepare students for future challenges in their lives, classes, and careers. Through discussion, studio writing sessions, and peer review, this course centers students' experiences and encourages them to actively engage with play and games as important cultural markers and media.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

The following texts are required for this course:

*Play Matters* by Miguel Sicart, 2014, The MIT Press.

*They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing (4<sup>th</sup> Edition)*, by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, 2018, W. W. Norton & Company.

"We Keep Having the Same Video Game Arguments and It's Driving Me Bonkers" by Heather Alexandria, 2020, Kotaku.

The following games are required for this course (all of these are available for free online):

*Today I Die* by Daniel Benmergui

*Every day the Same Dream* by La Molleindustria

*McDonald's Video Game* by La Molleindustria

*Brooklyn Trash King* by Ben Esposito

*Queer Lovers at the End of the World* by anna anthropy

*Am I Part of the Problem?* By Elizabeth Sampat

*The Best Amendment* by La Molleindustria

*Would you have survived the Salem Witch Trials* by jahowell

*No Man's Land (WW I Game)* by Father

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Since this is a writing-based course, the majority of the major assignments are essays and multimedia projects centered on writing. Over the semester, the students will complete five major assignments in addition to several smaller reading quiz and class participation activities. These five major assignments are detailed here.

### Assignment 1: Video Game-Advertisement Analysis and Creation

This assignment asks students to think critically about an advertisement for a video game. Using the free web-based program Adobe Spark, students will create a multimedia webpage that highlights their analysis. While many examples will be shown in class, students are encouraged to find and choose their own advertisement. Students will work on their skills in exploring and summarizing a multimedia text. Students will analyze their text in terms of its rhetorical situation—that is, thinking about the audience, arrangement, purpose, and reason for existing. Students will then evaluate their text in terms of what is being said and what is being left out. After completing their analysis of the original advertisement, students will continue to use Adobe Spark to create a new and improved version of their original advertisement. Students should seek to have a particular goal in their new advertisement such as updating problematic copy, broadening or narrowing the audience for the game, incorporating stronger focal images, or one of many other options.

To be handed in: URL to published Adobe Spark project and your own advertisement you created in .png or .jpg form.

### Assignment 2: First Research Paper – Procedural Rhetoric-Based Analysis

Students will write 4-5-page analysis of a particular game or sporting event using the methodology of procedural rhetoric to inform their claims, evidence, and analytical insights. Students will demonstrate attention to detail through thorough exploration, critical thinking, and argumentative writing by accurately and comprehensively describing a possibility space and its correspondence to established ways of thinking and believing. Using both textual close reading and rhetorical analysis via procedural rhetoric, students will define the rhetorical situation in terms of its audience, limits, and

goals. Once these parameters have been defined, students describe how the space is explored—how the player plays the game. What actions are taken and how do they influence the story and goals? Finally, students draw on the critical aspects of Bogost’s procedural rhetoric to interrogate how the game forms a conceptual model of the ideology that either reinforces or subverts this ideology

To be handed in: 4-5-page essay in .docx or .pdf form.

### Assignment 3: Conversation Survey

This unit tasks students with completing an essay that is developed from the students’ own research and interests. Issues are central to this paper. Through the course readings, discussion, and the students’ own play experiences, they will choose a topic they are interested in surrounding games, play, and sports. Students will examine an issue in order to define the scope of the problem and whom the problem affects. From this initial exploration, students must find multiple voices—across social media, popular media, academic journals, archives, and more—who have engaged with the topic. They will describe the conversation through a variety of summaries and then put these summaries into conversation with each other to define the sides of an issue, who is all involved, what the major positions are, and what the stakes for the topic are.

To be handed in: a 4-5-page essay in .docx or .pdf form.

### Assignment 4: Second Research Paper (Formal Argument)

Having defined the stakes and major voices in the conversation, students will continue to research their subject in order to produce and write an eight-page research paper in response to their selected inquiry questions. Over the course of several weeks, students will create multiple drafts and revisions. We will also study in-text citation, argument structure, and deep revision skills. Students should spend roughly equal energy and space in adapting the conversation to their specific problem and analyzing why this problem exists (and other inquiry questions) and arguing for their particular solution or interpretation of the situation. In this way, each students’ paper should be both analytical and persuasive.

To be handed in: an 8-page essay in .docx or .pdf form.

### Assignment 5: Persuasive Twine Game

For this assignment, students will compose a game in the software Twine. The game, through its processes (i.e. the actual playing of the game and not just the game’s content), will present an argument that adapts, enacts, or is informed by the argument students made in their research papers. Students use the expertise and understanding they developed on their research topics in the previous two papers to develop a Twine game that remediates and remixes their original research papers into a different medium and, often, a different genre.

To be handed in: An HTML file exported from the software of Twine that includes your extended, involved game.



## COURSE ASSESSMENT

Student grades will be determined based on the following assignments and units:

Video Game-Advertisement Analysis and Production 150 points

First Research Paper (Procedural Rhetoric-Based Analysis) 200 points

Conversation Survey 150 points

Second Research Paper (Formal Argument) 250 points

Persuasive Twine Game 150 points

Reading Quizzes and Class Participation 100 points

Total:1000 points

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

### **Week 1: Course Introduction**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Syllabus Overview
- Class introductions and icebreakers
- Description/Reenactments of last game played
- Play “Split the Room” where students make up questions with two answers and try to split the room in half based on their answers.

#### *Assignments*

- Students should set up a GroupMe, Slack, or similar app to stay in contact with each other
- Students must email the professor to establish digital contact and ensure proper delivery/receipt of emails.
- Read Chapters 1 and 2 from Miguel Sicart’s *Play Matters*

### **Week 2: The Rhetorical Situation**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- In class writing exercises and activities – using sensory details to immerse readers in your writing
- Reading discussion focused on defining “play”, “playful”, and “games.”
- Small group gendered advertisements and simple analysis

### *Assignments*

- Read Chapters 3 and 4 from Miguel Sicart's *Play Matters*
- Play Daniel Benmergui's *Today I Die* available at <http://ludomancy.com/today/>

### **Week 3: Visual Rhetoric and Advertisements**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Develop definition of "situation" and "analysis"
- Reading discussion focused on playgrounds and play's potential to take over a space
- Work through aspects of the classical and contemporary rhetorical analyses in this Overview of Rhetorical Analysis Worksheet: <http://bit.ly/3sYGuXo>

### *Assignments*

- Read Chapters 5 and 6 from Miguel Sicart's *Play Matters*
- Select advertisement to use for analysis
- Begin drafting thesis and initial claims

### **Week 4: Style in Writing and Adobe Spark**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Overview of Adobe Spark
- Creation of First Adobe Spark Project Worksheet available here: <http://bit.ly/2YIKwes>
- In-class peer review of classmates' projects

### *Assignments*

- First Major Assignment due. Video Game-Advertisement Analysis and Production due at end of week.

### **Week 5: Play, Games, Power, Culture, and Society**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- In class writing exercise and activities focusing on using ethos, logos, and pathos to immerse readers in your writing and make them sympathetic to your message
- Discussion, definition, and explanation of ideologies
- Explore famous controversies in the world of sports and games

### *Assignments*

- Read Heather Alexandria's "We Keep Having the Same Video Game Arguments and It's Driving Me Bonkers" available at <http://bit.ly/3chm7if>
- Play anna anthropy's *Queer Lovers at the End of the World* available at <https://w.itch.io/end-of->

the-world

## Week 6: Procedural Rhetoric

### Class Topics/Activities

- In class writing exercises and activities focusing on using resemblance claims to reinforce your argument and developing counterexamples to subvert others' arguments
- Discussion of readings and Bogost's analysis of *Animal Crossing*. Discussion of procedural rhetoric in popular videogames such as *Fifa* or *Call of Duty*
- Defining "procedural rhetoric"
- Play and discuss *The Best Amendment* available at <https://www.molleindustria.org/the-best-amendment/>

### Assignments

- Read Ian Bogost's "The Rhetoric of Video Games"
- Play La Molleindustria's *Every Day the Same Dream* available at <https://www.molleindustria.org/everydaythesamedream/everydaythesamedream.html>
- Play through your game that you will analyze

## Week 7: Ideologies, Beliefs, Ideas, and Values

### Class Topics/Activities

- Explore audience-based reasoning and its connection to identity, belief, and personal experience
- Discussion of readings focusing on how systems such as the stock market or college credit can become games or introduce elements of play
- Drafting of thesis statements and initial claims for development of First Research Paper

### Assignments

- Read Chapters 7 and 8 from Miguel Sicart's *Play Matters*
- Play La Molleindustria's *McDonald's Video Game* available at <http://www.molleindustria.org/mcdonalds/>

## Week 8: Finding Sources

### Class Topics/Activities

- In class writing activities and exercises to facilitate students in moving from general to specific and from specific to general in their writing
- Using the library website
- Academic resources

- Using a research compiler (Zotero) vs using Google Chrome

#### Assignments

- First Research Paper -Procedural Rhetoric-Based Analysis due!
- Read “Starting with What Others are Saying” and “The Art of Summarizing” from Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say*

#### Week 9: Summarizing Sources and Creating Conversations

##### Class Topics/Activities

- Finding non-academic sources
- Evaluating sources for credibility, reliability, accuracy, and perspective with the activity available at <http://bit.ly/3r0rJ4w>

#### Assignments

- Read “Entering Online Conversations” and “Reading for Conversations” from Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say*

#### Week 10: Introduction to Twine and Gamification

##### Class Topics/Activities

- In class writing activities and exercises focused on style and genre
- Play Twine games in class: *Brooklyn Trash King* (<http://torahhorse.com/games/brooklyn-trash-king/play.html>), *Am I Part of the Problem* (<https://elizabethsambat.itch.io/am-i-part-of-the-problem>), *No Man’s Land* (<https://bit.ly/2MD0wWA>) and *Would You Have Survived the Salem Witch Trials?* (<https://oldinklewriter.inklestudios.com/stories/4jvq>)
- Brainstorm topics for Formal Argument essay

#### Assignments

- Create your minimum viable product for a Twine game using the worksheet available at <http://bit.ly/36piByr>
- Add a Lock and Key system to your Twine Game Using the worksheet available at <http://bit.ly/2NR0CuF>

#### Week 11: Types of Argumentation

##### Class Topics/Activities

- Introduction to Toulmin argumentation
- Introduction to IMRAD-based essays
- Introduction to Rogerian argumentation

### Assignments

- Conversation Survey due!
- Read “Saying Why It Matters” and “Connecting the Parts” from Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say*

### Week 12: Structuring an Argument and an Essay

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Parts of an essay overview – introductions, conclusions, transitions, and signposting
- Writing effective thesis statements
- Analysis vs persuasion as goals of the research genre

### Assignments

- Read “Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say” and “Planting a Naysayer in your Text” from Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say*
- Complete the Essay Parts and Rhetorical Situation worksheet available at <http://bit.ly/3r0rJ4w>

### Week 13: Performing Research and Incorporating Sources

#### Class Topics/Activities

- In class writing activities and exercises focused on responding to a variety of quotes and sources through disagreeing and explaining why, agreeing and providing further evidence, or agreeing but for different reasons.
- Practice incorporating and citing outside sources using this Creating Quote Sandwich worksheet in class available at <http://bit.ly/3r2S5Tp>

### Assignments

- Read “The Art of Quoting” and “Three Ways to Respond” from Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say*

### Week 14: Drafting and Peer Review

#### Class Topics/Activities

- In class peer review
- One on one conferences with professor to discuss essays and projects, read drafts in progress, and provide feedback

### Assignments

- Second Research Paper (Formal Argument) Due!

## Week 15: Editing, Revision, and Twine

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Course evaluations
- Semester reflection and wrap up
- Working out technical problems in Twine

### *Assignments*

- Persuasive Twine Game Due

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

Since this is a required, introductory course, students will come into this class with a wide range of experiences and skill sets in regard to writing. Some will have been praised for their writing and others may feel like writing is a chore. In a similar manner, the students will all have very different experiences and relationships to games and play. Some may play every newest video game on release night while most will have more experience playing team sports or the occasional mobile game. Instead of trying to homogenize these experiences, it can be very effective to work with these resistances and let the students inform each other about what writing, play, or games means to them. Since the course also asks students to engage in thought and discussion about systems of power in our society—typically through the lens of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability—it is important that everyone’s contributions are valued and add to the overall learning experience. It can be very instructive for a student whose experiences with play are primarily as a competition based on skill where they are trying to beat their opponent into submission to hear a student whose play experiences were largely around imagination and roleplaying talk about the collaborative power of play. In a similar vein, getting students to share their own joys and frustrations with the writing process can help form a strong classroom community where students trust each other and can learn from each other as well.

This goal of forming a community is one that is often sought in writing classrooms, especially considering that these courses usually have the smallest enrollment caps on most campuses. This course relies heavily on Bernard De Koven’s idea of the “play community” to help students develop relationships with each other (2020). Play communities form as we let down our social barriers and engage in play. This becomes especially important as students begin to share their writing and personal beliefs with each other. Having the students play games together in class is a critical aspect of this course because it builds this community of writers and players.

While students have chosen a wide range of topics and games for their analyses and research papers, they typically have a harder time developing the course’s final project: the Twine game. Because of this, I tend to show the students a lot of examples from both professional game designers as well as previous students’ work. Through this, students have been able to develop projects and games in Twine across various genres and multifarious purposes. Some of the strongest examples include history-based projects that put the player in a historical role or historical situation and explore the historical world; natural sciences examples that position the user as an experimental pharmaceutical

that moves through the body and interacts (sometimes adversely!) with the various systems of the body; and geographic-based guides to local areas that map out an area and explain various social, cultural, or historical aspects of the area.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

Over the past decade, I have taught dozens of sections of first-year writing at four different institutions. Throughout that time, I have tried to adapt and expand on the skills my students learn and the experiences they engage with in my classroom. Having now taught this specific instantiation of a first-year writing course infused with game studies readings and principles, I can say that students take great delight in creating games. In fact, they often enjoy the creating of games much more than they do the creation of their essays. While the Twine games have always been well received, it often left many of the students wanting more. After having made a small, text-based game, they want to know what else writing and playing can do for them. For these students, their eyes almost always set on the next goal: a full-fledged, interactive digital game. To that end, I have begun researching and developing my own skills in digital game production. With the increase in availability and shallower learning curves, there are many game engines that may be appropriate to bring into a four-week unit in a largely freshman-based class. The beauty with Twine is that both the programming and the actual content both fit with the outcomes for the course: developing a student's skill in written communication. With simplified game engines such as Game Maker, Stencyl, or even Scratch, much of the coding is drag-and-drop or block-based, and the gameplay itself is image and movement-based rather than text-based. Despite these challenges, my own goal is to develop a way to integrate full image-based digital games into the writing process for the students in my classroom.

In addition to these potential changes, our ever-changing present moment has forced many of us in education to consider how our courses change when they are delivered in a virtual, online context. Fortunately, for courses focused on writing such as the one described here, the shift to a digital classroom actually enhances and reinforces the importance of writing. Whereas discussion in the face-to-face classroom is largely oral, in the online classroom it most often takes the form of message boards and discussion posts. This gives students the opportunity to participate through their writing instead of being forced to speak extemporaneously. While many students will welcome this shift in focus from spoken discussion to written discussion, others may become burnt out with the sheer volume of reading and writing that a writing-focused online course entails. Just as it is important to consider how students who don't always speak still participate in a class, students should be giving multiple ways to participate in discussion boards. For this course in an online context, I would require each student to write at least two discussion board posts a week, typically one on Mondays and one on Wednesdays. Then, students are required to reply to at least two of their classmates' posts on Tuesdays and two on Thursdays. The replies can be anything from questions, to providing further examples, to crafting and posting a meme responding to the situation. In this way, students develop their ability to compose in digital environments while learning about the importance of play and writing in effective communication.

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## CHAPTER 14.

### VIDEOGAME THEORY AND ANALYSIS (MDST 2520)

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PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN HONG KONG

**Course Title:** MDST 2520: Videogame Theory and Analysis

**Course College/School:** School of Arts and Humanities

**Course Department/Program:** Film and Media Department

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 3

**Course Length:** 14 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face (could be blended or online), 2-hour lecture and 1-hour discussion section/tutorial

**Course Keywords:** game studies, media studies, writing, textual analysis, close reading, gameplay, composition, game design, reception, game lab

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

Although videogames are increasingly accepted as works of art, they have received little attention as objects worthy of close analysis. This course aims to improve understanding of videogames, with a focus on analyzing how videogames generate player experiences. To do this, we will first learn theories about aspects of videogames such as gameplay, narrative, and aesthetics. With these theories, we will try to explain how videogames achieve their effects, develop and evaluate criteria for videogame criticism, and also analyze published videogame reviews to understand their structure and conventions.

This course does not involve creating, designing, or programming videogames. You do not need any technical skills. The course also does not focus on videogames as a cultural, economic, or social phenomenon, although these factors will be discussed at points. The focus is on how to analyze, understand, and explain individual videogames, and how videogame design creates player experience.

You do not need to own or purchase any videogame equipment for the class. Registered students will be able to access the university videogame lab to play assigned games.

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## COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This course aims to prepare students to write academic close analyses of videogames in much the same way they might write close analyses of poetry, literature, or film in other courses. As such, it aims to demonstrate how a fairly traditional pedagogical approach can be usefully implemented for less traditional objects of study. An implicit goal is to convey the aesthetic value of videogames as objects worthy of traditional analysis and to show how close discussion of specific elements of videogames is an intellectually rewarding activity that brings out important features of videogames not apparent to even dedicated players.

Although written academic analyses can have different purposes, this course focuses on formal analyses (i.e., analyses of elements of form) that help students understand how particular games create types of gameplay experiences. Minimal alterations in the course could encourage analyses to better understand other aspects of gameplay, such as ways it reflects or influences society, identity, fan communities, or politics.

The course aims are listed in the syllabus as such:

- To enhance student understanding of videogame theory, including concepts such as play, game, and videogames, as well as the concepts of narrative, representation, and rules
- To understand how media studies concepts such as genre, conventions, audience, and historical context can be used to understand videogames
- To teach students how to write formal analyses of artworks
- To improve students' ability to analyze theoretical arguments and to use concrete examples as evidence to support or critique theories

## COURSE CONTEXT

This course is an elective that fulfills general distribution requirements needed for a media studies degree. The degree is focused on art and humanities approaches. Although it has no prerequisites, it would be easier to teach with a prerequisite requirement of a course that taught textual or film analysis. My students were highly varied in terms of familiarity with videogames, some having played only casual games on the phone or having played console games in their youth but not for many years. In the Hong Kong context, student attitudes towards videogames reflected parental and institutional attitudes that videogames were a waste of time and that one should not publicly admit to authority figures significant time playing video games after one had graduated elementary or primary school.

When teaching this course in the United States, I could assume that incoming students had some experience doing formal analyses of poetry or literature. To my surprise, when teaching the course in Hong Kong, I learned that these types of analyses had not been taught to my enrolled students. The course thus had to introduce the concept of analyzing artworks and teach them the corresponding skills needed to write such an analysis. Some of my students already had these skills and those who had taken introductory film courses were familiar with many of the concepts needed to analyze the audiovisual elements of videogames.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

This course aims to teach students how to think about videogames analytically so that they can understand how videogames create player experiences. Although the course assessment methods are traditional (academic papers), these same skills will be useful for students who wish to create videogames.

Class meetings include lectures and tutorials. Lectures center around class discussions, generally as one group (maximum enrollment for the course is 35 students) but occasionally in small breakout groups that then come together to synthesize points. I present the week's topics in an interactive lecture, punctuated with questions posed to students, and after the material is presented I prompt discussion in several ways, such as:

- Socratic interrogation of the ideas through presentation of counterarguments or borderline examples (e.g., Is this reading right to say that there are only three kinds of rules? What about example X?)
- asking students to provide examples of various concepts and discussing whether the examples in fact successfully illustrate the concepts (e.g., How could *Portal* cause players to feel emotions from each of the four emotion frameworks presented in the lecture?)
- presenting small groups with prompts that require them to evaluate and/or reconcile seemingly contrasting positions (e.g., Do you agree with author X or Y's ideas about player identification with avatars?)

In terms of overall course structure, I divide the course into two parts. I teach videogame analysis as a process of learning how to describe the specific features of videogames in order to explain how they create effects on players. Thus, I present the first half of the course as explicating a number of concepts that students must learn in order to identify and accurately describe elements of videogames. This skill is much harder than they first realize. The first half of the course thus focuses on explaining these concepts and discussing examples to get students comfortable with them. The midterm exam is designed to test whether they have mastered the concepts—not just memorizing definitions, but understanding the concepts well enough to generate specific examples or evaluate a prompt describing a videogame they have played.

The second half of the course prepares them to write their final paper, which analyses a particular videogame or videogame mechanic. Class time is divided between discussing ideas that could be useful in analyzing videogames, guiding students through a multi-step writing process with detailed explanations, and discussing examples of published videogame analyses to understand what makes an analysis successful or unsuccessful.

The final paper is broken down into multiple stages, with interim assignments due at each stage. Feedback is given between each stage; experience has shown that this type of ongoing feedback is essential for most undergraduates to write this type of analysis.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

Assigned readings are identified in the course outline and reference list below.

I was able to obtain a teaching grant to create a videogame lab at my institution that includes a laptop, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and several dozen videogames. Enrolled students are thus able to play assigned videogames on school equipment. Creating such a lab is more complex than might first appear due to concerns for security and equipment maintenance. Obtaining a location that can be dedicated to the lab is another potential obstacle, but sharing a space was ruled out because it would have required us to keep the videogame equipment in secure storage and have students remove, set up, and return equipment to storage for each play session, which seemed impractical. The lab provided access to all assigned videogames, which included the following (URLs are provided for videogames available free online at time of publication):

- *80 Days*
- *A Normal Lost Phone*
- *A Small Talk at the Back of Beyond* (<https://www.kongregate.com/games/scriptwelder/a-small-talk-at-the-back-of-beyond>)
- *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*
- *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*
- *Darkest Dungeon*
- *Downwell*
- *Gravitation* (<http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/gravitation/>)
- *Half-Life*
- *Halo*
- *Home: A Unique Horror Adventure*
- *Horizon: Zero Dawn*
- *INSIDE*
- *Loneliness* (<https://www.necessarygames.com/my-games/loneliness>)
- *Monument Valley*
- *One Chance* (<https://awkwardsilencegames.itch.io/one-chance>)
- *Overcooked*
- *Passage* (<http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/>)
- *Portal*
- *SpaceTeam*
- *Spelunky*
- *SuperHot*
- *There Is No Game* (<https://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/659792>)
- *This War of Mine*
- *What Remains of Edith Finch*

If the option for a dedicated videogame lab does not exist, there are many free videogames available—either downloadable or browser-based—that can be installed on computers in a computer lab or that students can access on their own devices. In the latter case, however, expect to be asked to provide technical support for students.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

### **Weekly assignments:**

**Reading and videogame play:** Each week has assigned reading and videogame play that should be completed before that week's class meeting. I ask students to play the assigned videogames either to completion or up to a weekly maximum of four hours total for all assigned games.

**Response papers:** Students write weekly responses to assigned reading or assigned videogame play based on prompts provided by the instructor. These papers are graded credit/no credit with the intention of having a weekly written assignment but with relatively low stress. Students receive credit if their responses are at least 250 words, are submitted on time, and appear to make an honest attempt to respond to the prompt (which includes demonstrating that the student actually completed the assigned reading or gameplay, even if they had trouble with it). My experience suggests that assigning these response papers significantly bolsters student engagement and class discussion.

**Class participation:** student participation is evaluated on multiple factors including attendance and participation in discussions.

**Tutorial presentations:** Groups of two or three students each will present and evaluate an online video analyzing some aspect of videogame play. There are many well-produced and insightful YouTube channels devoted to videogame analysis, such as Game Makers' Toolkit and Extra Credits. I choose and assign specific videos to the student groups to make sure that the videos are worth discussing, are relevant to the week's readings (the videos are deliberately paired to specific readings), and, where possible, discuss videogames available in the videogame lab. Student groups must play at least one of the videogames discussed in the video and lead a 50 minute tutorial presentation about the video. We begin the presentation by watching the video together in class (videos are a maximum of 15 minutes long) and then the group distributes a handout that provides relevant background about the videogame, defines any specific jargon used in the video, identifies the video's main arguments, and evaluates those arguments in relation to the assigned readings.

### **Midterm exam:**

The exam tests student understanding of the concepts discussed in the readings and lecture. The exam was added to the course in lieu of a midterm paper as a way to encourage mastery of the basic concepts needed to follow the course. Students who have little videogame experience often have trouble following the conversation since they are not familiar with videogame terms such as *1-up*, *buff*, or *upgrades*. Even for concepts that they do understand, such as *lives* or *tutorials*, their understanding is less immediate and isn't linked with concrete examples, which makes it harder for them to contribute to the discussion. Since experienced players are more comfortable with these terms, they tend to dominate the discussion, and less-experienced students simply have to do some extra work to catch up with more experienced players. Further, even videogame enthusiasts can struggle with more

theoretical material. Simply knowing that the lecture material in the first half of the course will be tested provides a significant incentive for students to pay attention through these challenges.

**Final paper:**

Students will write a 1800-2500 word paper analyzing one or more game mechanics in one videogame. This is not a research paper. It is for students to analyze and present their own thoughts about the videogame. Although students must cite ideas they get from elsewhere, the main goal of the paper is to present their own ideas. This assignment includes several parts that are discussed extensively in class and through supplementary material given to students. Below is a summary of key points.

*The nature of videogame analysis:*

The purpose of analyzing artworks is to articulate an idea that helps us better understand and appreciate the work. For this course, analysis means to explain how elements of a videogame (its “parts”) combine to create the functions, effects, or meanings (or a combination of these) of the videogame as a whole.

As the assignment goal is better understanding of a videogame, the analysis cannot just describe surface-level features of the videogame that would be clear to most players; it must propose new and/or non-obvious ideas. Note that analysis is not evaluation and should not be focused on showing that a videogame is good or bad. Videogame reviews and videogame criticism often include evaluative claims about videogame quality (i.e. whether a videogame is good or bad in various ways), and they may use videogame analysis to support their evaluative claims, but the analysis is a separate element whose aim is to explain how a videogame’s elements work together to achieve certain effects. Claiming that these effects are good or bad or arguing that videogames should or should not try to achieve these effects in particular ways is outside the scope of this particular assignment.

*Analyzing videogame elements:*

The first half of the course aims to provide students with the concepts needed to accurately identify and describe many elements of videogames. Some of these elements relate to aspects of form such as graphics and sound, others involve play aspects such as rules and control schemes, and still others relate to topics such as narrative or genre. Learning these concepts is needed for students to understand various distinctions that may be central to explaining the play experience that is the focus of their analysis.

*Choosing the videogame:*

I exclude certain types of games that students have historically had difficulty successfully analyzing. Thus, the videogame cannot be a puzzle game, a collecting/breeding game, a pure sandbox game with no story or end condition, or a digital version of a real-world board or card game (such as Monopoly or Blackjack). Exceptions can be made, if well-justified. Students can mention other games in their analysis as points of comparison but should strongly focus on the main game.

The most important element of success in this assignment is developing an appropriate thesis, which is a very challenging task. Developing a thesis should be approached as a process of playing the

videogame, proposing a thesis, and gathering supporting evidence—but crucially, this process should be iterative (back-and-forth), not linear. Students should not start writing by simply thinking about the videogame and trying to invent a thesis that they then support with examples. Although most successful analyses end up with a clear linear structure, a successful writing process involves a constant back-and-forth during which you change and improve your thesis, examples, and argumentation. Here are suggestions for this process that will help students avoid common errors.

#### *Playing the videogame:*

Students must become experts in the videogame they write about, including completing the main story (unless the main story takes more than twelve hours to complete according to <http://howlongtobeat.com>). There are resources online, such as walkthroughs, that can help students make progress if they find themselves stuck, but I recommend that they don't access them unless they are stuck in the videogame for over an hour so that they can have a more genuine play experience.

#### *Taking gameplay notes:*

As students play, they should take notes about anything that they find interesting in order to generate ideas about elements of the play experience that they can analyze. I provide some examples of my own gameplay notes to clarify that these notes do not have to be insightful comments, but should be simple observations or questions designed to draw attention to potential topics that an analysis might want to investigate, e.g. “At the beginning of the level I didn't know where to go” or “I can do some moves that they didn't explain – are they going to tell me about them later?” A few pages of gameplay notes will invariably contain at least a few ideas that can be developed into a thesis. In addition to writing notes spontaneously during gameplay, I encourage students to describe the videogame's overall structure using the concepts taught throughout the course and to consider how variations on elements of that structure might alter the gameplay experience.

#### *Developing a thesis:*

Developing a good thesis is the most important factor in writing a successful analysis. Most students do not have significant experience writing theses for aesthetic analysis and thus need lots of guidance on the types of theses that are likely to be successful. Over the years, I have found it useful to not only tell students what theses should do, but also to present examples of types of theses to avoid.

The thesis must be an argument rather than a description. As such, it must make a claim that a reasonable person who has played the videogame could disagree with. The thesis should propose one or more functions that that videogame's design serves towards creating an overall play experience. The large-scale functions that the analysis discusses are often expressed in terms of effects or meanings, and the analysis shows how specific elements are combined to serve these functions.

#### *Thesis tips:*

- If a thesis claim is true of many videogames, not just the one being analyzed, then the paper won't tell us enough about your game specifically, e.g., “Videogame X creates a scary atmosphere with disgusting monsters and dark lighting.”
- The thesis cannot be a description of what the author intends to do. “This essay will analyze how game mechanics interact with narrative elements of the game” is *not* a thesis, it is just a

claim that the paper will make an argument later. What is the conclusion of the analysis? That conclusion is the thesis.

- Theses shouldn't argue that game X shows that videogames are better/worse than other media. Instead, they could argue how game X shows that videogames are different than other media in specific ways A, B, and C (but don't choose *obvious* ways A, B, and C)
- Two strategies for making an interesting thesis claim are:
  - explain how obvious aspects of a game lead to non-obvious effects
    - e.g. how does a game mechanic that is different from other games in the same genre cause big changes in play style?
  - explain how obvious effects of the game are caused in non-obvious ways (this often means providing a detailed explanation of how various elements of the game contribute to this effect)
    - e.g. why does a survival horror game that is supposed to be scary fail at its attempts to be scary?

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

- Response papers: 10%
- Class participation: 10%
- Class presentation: 10%
- Midterm quiz: 20%
- Final Paper: 50%

The final paper could be changed to allow less-traditional methods of assessment, such as creation of audiovisual analyses of videogames or even creating games that reflect the students' understanding of how videogames afford or encourage certain types of player experiences.

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

### Week 1: Course Introduction

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Introduction to the syllabus
- Class introductions
- Methods for academic videogame studies

#### *Assignments*

- Read: "Studying video games" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2008)
- Play: *A Small Talk at the Back of Beyond* (<https://www.kongregate.com/games/scriptwelder/a-small-talk-at-the-back-of-beyond>)



## **Week 2: Videogames as Art**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Videogames as legitimate works of art
- Definitions of art
- Fine art vs. popular art

### *Assignments*

- Read: “Art and Aesthetics” (Tavinor 2014)
- Play: *Gravitation* (<http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/gravitation/>), *Passage* (<http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/>), *Monument Valley*

## **Week 3: Ludology and Game Design**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Signs and representation
- Meaningful play, rule integration, and discernable rules
- Basic game structure and elements

### *Assignments*

- Read: *Game Design Workshop*, Chapter 2 (Fullerton et al. 2008)
- Read: *Rules of Play*, Chapters 3 and 4 (Salen and Zimmerman 2004)
- Play: two hours each of *Portal* and *Halo*

## **Week 4: Ludology and Game Design**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Ludology and narratology
- Environmental storytelling
- Distinction between story and discourse

### *Assignments*

- Read: “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” (Jenkins 2004)
- Play: *Home: A Unique Horror Adventure*, *A Normal Lost Phone*

## **Week 5: Defining Games**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Defining games and videogames

### Assignments

- Read: *Rules of Play*, Chapters 6, 8, 9, and 10 (Salen and Zimmerman 2004)
- Play: *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons, There Is No Game* (<https://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/659792>)

### Week 6: Understanding Rules

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Types of rules

#### Assignments

- Read: *Rules of Play*, Chapters 11, 12, and 13 (Salen and Zimmerman 2004)
- Play: *Loneliness* (<https://www.necessarygames.com/my-games/loneliness>)

### Week 7: Analyzing Player Experience

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Player emotion
- Motivation to play videogames
- Emotion and gameplay experience

#### Assignments

- Read: “Eight Ways Videogames Generate Emotion” (Frome 2007)
- Read: “Motivations for Play in Online Games” (Yee 2006)
- Play: two hours of either *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* or *Downwell*, and two hours of either *SpaceTeam* or *Overcooked* (the latter require two or more players to play)

### Week 8: In-class Midterm Exam

### Week 9: Videogame analysis

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Writing academic analyses
- Concepts and frameworks

#### Assignments

- Read: *Introduction to Game Analysis*, Chapter 1, (Fernández-Vara 2015)
- Read: “Game Analysis: Developing a Methodological Toolkit for the Qualitative Study of Games” (Consalvo and Dutton 2006)
- Read: “Towards the Definition of a Framework and Grammar for Game Analysis and Design” (Dillon 2014)

- Play: two hours each of *80 Days* and *Spelunky*

### **Week 10: Genre**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Defining genres
- Analyzing genre

#### *Assignments*

- Read: “Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres” (Apperley 2006)
- Read: “The Issue of Genre” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2008)
- Play: *SuperHot* or *Half-Life*

### **Week 11: Game Mechanics**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Defining mechanics
- Mechanics and narrative; ludonarrative dissonance

#### *Assignments*

- Read: “Defining Game Mechanics” (Sicart 2008)
- Play: either *What Remains of Edith Finch* or *INSIDE*

### **Week 12: Characters and Avatars**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Character ontology
- Identification and character control
- PCs and NPCs

#### *Assignments*

- Read: “My avatar and me: Toward a cognitive theory of video game characters” (Schröter 2016)
- Play: *Horizon: Zero Dawn* or *Darkest Dungeon*

### **Week 13: Videogames and Emotion**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Emotion frameworks
- Videogames and sadness

## Assignments

- Read: “Video game sadness from *Planetfall* to *Passage*” (Frome 2016)
- Read: “Eight ways videogames generate emotion” (Frome 2007)
- Play: *One Chance* (<https://awkwardsilencegames.itch.io/one-chance>), *This War of Mine*

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

### **Student resistance to playing videogames:**

I initially expected that almost all students who took this course would be enthusiastic videogame players who would be happy to play all assigned games to and to learn ways to appreciate them. In fact, I was quite surprised to find that students took the course for a wide variety of reasons and many were either not regular players, only enjoyed specific genres such as casual games, or did enjoy playing videogames but lost their enthusiasm once academic work was required. These students created several challenges that required adjustments to my assignments and course structure, as described below.

### **Not playing assigned videogames:**

Many of my students would not play the games that I assigned, skipping them as students often skip assigned readings and assuming that they would be able to pass the course based on class discussion and lectures. I experimented with weekly quizzes to test whether students had played the games. This increased the number that played to some degree, but I always had students who simply would not play the games, although I don't know whether it was from lack of interest, difficulty in playing them, or unrelated issues such as time management.

### **Difficulty playing assigned videogames:**

My students without significant videogame experience had difficulty not just with playing console games or more complicated PC games, but also had totally unrealistic expectations about the typical gameplay experience. Many of them thought that if you play the videogame and died several times within the first 10 minutes, that meant you were not going to be able to play the game successfully because you are not a skilled enough player. Their ignorance of videogame conventions also made it extremely difficult for them to complete assigned videogames. To overcome this, I had all students complete a videogame experience survey and I paired more experienced players with less experienced players in small gaming groups. I designated the more experienced players as videogame “tutors” and had them play the assigned games with their partners.

### **Analyzing a videogame they had not played:**

Some students would try to analyze a videogame that they played extensively years ago and not since, and some would write about a videogame based on watching “Let's Play” videos online rather than playing themselves. For this reason, I added a number of conditions to the final paper assignment such as “Students must write about a videogame they played by themselves during this semester” and “If I suspect that the paper was written based on a video, students must be able to provide proof that they have played the game to completion through a live demonstration or other methods.”

### Finding common examples for discussion:

Leading discussion in this type of course requires the ability to quickly provide relevant examples from specific videogames to illustrate various concepts. On first teaching the course, I was surprised to learn that my students were not familiar with what I considered to be ubiquitous videogames. Thus, I began the practice of assigning videogames to play every week so that I would have examples I knew students would understand. This lack of common references also motivated me to conduct a videogame survey at the beginning of the semester to find out which videogames my students and I both knew.

### FUTURE COURSE PLANS

As the course has been quite successful, future plans will focus on refining material made available to students in support of course goals. Examples include:

- improving resources to help novice videogame players catch up with their peers, such as videos that provide quick overviews of different current videogame genres and game mechanics
- providing more information about writing the final paper, such as examples of successful and unsuccessful practices in describing examples from videogames in ways that allows readers unfamiliar with the game to understand the paper
- compiling additional examples from assigned games for the theoretical points discussed in the readings and the classroom

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## CHAPTER 15.

### UNDERSTANDING AND DESIGNING VIRTUAL PLACES (COM 427)

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CHRISTOPHER KAMPE<sup>1</sup>  
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

**Course Title:** Game Studies (COM 427): Understanding and Designing Virtual Places

**Course University:** North Carolina State University

**Course College/School:** College of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Course Department/Program:** Communication

**Course Level:** Undergraduate (Upper Division)

**Course Credits:** 3

**Course Length:** 15 Weeks

**Course Medium:** *Face-to-face, Blended/Hybrid*

**Course Keywords:** *Media Studies, Qualitative Research, Game Design, Documentation*

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION

A *gameworld* is the strata through which a player experiences story, character, intrigue, and challenge. When well crafted, the virtual place is something that a player becomes intimately familiar with: the geography, demographics, customs, and even histories. Just as these places have the capacity to depict utterly fantastic realms, they can also mirror aspects of our own histories and cultures.

All virtual places are, to some degree, simulations, and all simulations are at best partial depictions of a reality. A simulation is by nature persuasive, as its designers consciously decide upon elements that are significant (rendered) and insignificant (omitted). With this in mind, we can examine how places have been rendered: the populations given voice, the activities shown, and the interactions permitted. In this respect we can use virtual places, their development, and our subjective experience of these places as sites of study and critique.

This course will examine place, representation, and simulation in modern video games through a variety of critical lenses. Students will employ ethnographic research methods, both in observed play sessions and qualitative research. As a central project, the class will develop a virtual place together: one that is (however loosely) informed by a historical or fictional location, complete with populations, their customs and place in the social hierarchy. Individual teams will be responsible

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for detailing specific regions and the characters that inhabit them – such that each team will create playable characters that have unique perspectives (a standpoint) that operates within a collaboratively produced, virtual place.

## COURSE PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES

This course uses games as a means to facilitate interdisciplinary study: wherein we examine games as cultural objects, seek to understand the formal mechanisms by which they engage us, while actively designing with them. In as much as this course concerns the development of games, it chases notions of critical game design, seeking to explore how critical theory and rich social commentary have and can be integrated into game development. In the process of this course, students will develop the following skills:

- Frameworks for analyzing interactive media systems, and how players engage with them.
- How a subject's reading position can dramatically change what they see when engaging with media objects.
- A nuanced understanding of feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality.
- An introduction to qualitative methods and analysis: ethnographic observation, case studies, intra/inter-categorical of social forces.
- Technical proficiency with HTML, CSS, and JavaScript driven game development environments: Twine & RPG Maker MV.
- Game Design Skills: tool analysis, project planning, setting up production pipelines, playtesting, asset generation.
- Creative writing skills: source research, setting design, principles for digital character and narrative development.

In a more material sense, students will:

- Develop analytic and instructional presentations (with support documentation).
- Compose qualitative reports based on field notes and observations.
- Build interactive fiction and 2D RPG games; as well as personalized game assets.
- Articulate game proposals, timelines, and development logs.
- Compose basic usability reports.

## COURSE CONTEXT

Game Studies was an upper division communication course that could be taken as a humanities/social-science elective for computer science students. While the bulk of our students came from the humanities and social sciences, the course tended to draw a multidisciplinary crowd. Class was driven by a combination of lecture, student presentations, and workshopping. Depending on the term, class sizes ranged from 15-30. All students had some experience playing games, though this ranged from casual mobile games, childhood experiences, all the way to PC modding, and prior game design experiences.



I felt that I had the best results when roughly one third of class time was dedicated to some form of digital production (e.g. game design, project planning, and document design). In these workshop sessions, I liked to leverage the subject-specific experience of my students (e.g. creative writing, instructional design, programming, art/music design) so that they were able to act as mentors during workshop sessions. This approach requires some careful monitoring. If a mentor gets assigned a leadership position in a team and they misjudge their own capacities or become burned out, it can lead to catastrophic failure for a group, which could have otherwise been avoided.

Based on entrance and exit surveys, a minority of students wanted to go into professional game design, while a majority of students had some interest in recreational game design. Even students who had no interest in designing games (recreationally or professionally), asserted that they got something out of the experience of game prototyping (e.g. deeper understanding of games, exposure to new tools, understanding of design principles, or planning and coordinating group projects).

To a certain extent, I think the most productive thing an instructor can do is take stock of the productive proficiencies of the students at the start of the class, and then consider what types of games the group could be prepared to make by the end; more than anything, this will dictate the Game Development Environments that students are asked to work with. The challenge will be finding the right balance between playing to your students' existing strengths and giving them the opportunity to develop new skills and software proficiencies. To this end, entrance, exit, and intermediate (check-in) surveys are your best friend.

The whole idea for this class came out of my dissertation work. I had students working with a variety of prompts and a variety of game engines. After reviewing many prototypes, I noticed that groups who communally created a hub area, linked to numerous, individually created areas, tending to do best. This approach forces every member to have some working knowledge of the GDE itself, while also allowing them to specialize.

My favorite group used RPG Maker to simulate the boardwalk of Little Russia in NYC. They were able to use google street maps to get a first-hand look at the location; a relative even went into stores, taking pictures of the interior and even noting the music. The students used a combination of found, modified, and digitally produced assets (e.g. store signs, music, etc.). One student even made her own music, emulated the style of the music heard in the stores. The project was complex enough that each student had their own specialization, and general enough that each student knew what the others were doing.

My focus on virtual placemaking stems from this: a desire to formally recreate the conditions that gave rise to the group's success by emphasizing assignments that, as an aggregate, will cultivate the creative, technical, and analytic skills that the exemplar group leveraged. At the same time, I'm trying to cultivate a sense of distributed expertise and comradery in the classroom, so that students are in a position to share insight and ideas with each other, and ultimately gain some teambuilding competencies.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

My course is designed around a combination of analysis, production, and documentation. Because

of this, the pedagogy I favor borrows extensively from Stuart Selber and Donald Schön; with the former informing analysis (i.e. how I want my students to consider each media object) and the latter informing practice (i.e. how I want my students to engage with work of production and peer-critique).

In *Multiliteracies* (2004), Selber describes digital literacy as a multi-dimensional, moving target: the various communicative media forms are ever evolving, as are the tools we leverage to produce them, the expectations of the audiences we create for, the contexts in which they will access our media, and the channels we will use for dissemination. As a means of navigating this shifting quagmire, he divided the more amorphous notion of literacy into three categories: **functional literacy** (an awareness of the tools available, as well as the affordances and constraints each provided, etc.), **critical literacy** (an understanding of a given technology as historically situated, inclusivity and exclusivity, associated with specific practices, etc.), and **rhetorical literacy** (a recognition of how a given media/interface can be used to persuade audiences, generic expectations, etc.).

Though simplistic, by exposing students to the idea of **multiliteracies**, we are encouraging them to think of games as culturally **situated objects**, predicated on certain technologies, and designed to communicate some message (even if it is only instructions on how to play). Components of critical and rhetorical literacy allow us to interrogate representational methods conveyed through games, while functional literacies (pertaining to engine and game development environments) pertain to more formal analysis and the production of mechanics/dynamics in games.

In *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1990), Schön takes inspiration from less-mainstream methods of teaching (e.g. coaching, studio work), culminating in a process he called **reflection in action** or the practice that gives rise to ‘artistry’. He contends that, within any given discipline, there are known ‘best practices’ that prescribe solutions for certain problems; however, there are also ‘indeterminate zones of practice’ that arise out of more complicated problems. In these instances, there are multiple available actions, each constraining future opportunities. Skilled practitioners recognize such problems; following identification, they engage in a form of anticipatory thinking, wherein they imagine multiple, available actions and the consequences (e.g. first order, second). He argues that this conscious consideration (i.e. what options are available to me, how will they constrain future options) guides practitioners away from intractable problems and towards elegant solutions.

**Reflection in action** is a discipline agnostic habit relevant to the production of any media, ranging from games to documents and presentations. In planning stages, I encourage students to consider multiple design/structuring approaches and tradeoffs associated with each of them, before committing to a single approach and deciding upon the best tools to use. In more complex cases, I ask students to identify their core assumptions (e.g. I can use ‘Library A’ to get ‘Effects X-Z’), consider how they will test these assumptions before committing to them (e.g. building a game around them, designing a guide), and then consider what their fall back plans will be if these assumptions prove faulty. Once students understand this basic practice, I encourage them to interrogate each other’s approaches and (design-driven) reasoning.

I use the idea of **multiliteracies** as a general heuristic for class discussions. While I don’t feel it’s necessary to perform such a robust analysis on every media object we scrutinize, I try to ensure that each of the three domains (e.g. functional, critical, rhetorical) are touched on during each class – with the understanding that some days will be more lopsided.

On game development days, I view the practice of **reflection in action** as indispensable. Novice game designers will often get excited and set themselves down an overly complex path that they will be unable to complete, or they might start to structure their game in a manner that will foreclose on capabilities that they will later need to rely upon. When I attend to individual groups or students, I find that I need to model reflection in action for them initially, then I ask them to do it for their own work (i.e. they talk me through it). If I'm attentive at the beginning, before long I hear groups starting to do it without prompting.

## COURSE TEXT, GAMES, SOFTWARE & HARDWARE

### Books

- Ford, M. (2016). *Writing interactive fiction with Twine*. Que Publishing. [KINDLE]
- Hergenrader, T. (2018). *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Galloway, A. R. (2006). *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture* (Vol. 18). U of Minnesota Press.
- Lidwell, W., Holden, K., & Butler, J. (2010). *Universal principles of design*. Rockport Pub.

### Games

- *Spent* (2011). <http://playspent.org/> (**FREE**)
- *The Fiscal Ship* (2016). <https://fiscalship.org/> (**FREE**)
- *Depression Quest* (2013). <http://www.depressionquest.com/dqfinal.html> (**FREE**)
- *Loneliness* (2010). <https://tinyurl.com/yyqznh8r> (**FREE**)
- *The Stanley Parable* (2013). <https://tinyurl.com/y77uccql>
- *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013). <https://tinyurl.com/y5tasnbe> or <https://tinyurl.com/yxeatofs>
- *This War of Mine* (2014). <https://tinyurl.com/yy3rd3nz> or <https://tinyurl.com/yckgrkuu>
- *Disco Elysium* (2019). <https://tinyurl.com/y3bnq4u4> or <https://tinyurl.com/yb3gnlj6>

### Game Development Environments

- Twine: <https://Twinery.org/> (**FREE**)
- *RPG Maker MV\**: <https://tinyurl.com/y66n6v62> or 2D alternative: <https://tinyurl.com/yteht8m>

### Relevant Software

(Use as needed)

- *Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Slides, Google Sheets, Google Forms* (**FREE**)
- 2D Character Sprites: *Sprite Maker*. <https://tinyurl.com/y5qwa7og> (**FREE**)
- 2D Character Portraits: *Portrait Wizard\**. <https://tinyurl.com/y67ybjjp>
- Fantasy Cartography: *Wonder Draft*. <https://www.wonderdraft.net/>

- Vector based illustration: *Inkscape*. <https://inkscape.org/> (**FREE**)
- Image manipulation: *Gimp*. <https://www.gimp.org/> (**FREE**)
- Audio editing: *Audacity*. <https://www.audacityteam.org/> (**FREE**)
- Additional *RPG Maker MV* assets\*: <https://tinyurl.com/y5zgkqs7>

### Notes on Software

All of the games (as well as *RPG Maker MV*) are both Mac, PC, and Linux/Proton (see <https://www.protondb.com/>) compatible. However, some of the optional software is Windows exclusive. All games/software should be able to run on low end computers, and few will cost more than \$20. As both Steam and GOG have regular sales, encourage students to wishlist the games (and \* marked software), buying them when the price is low. Finally, it is worth noting that GOG games (unlike Steam games) are not packaged with DRM software.

For documentation and reports, I require my students to use the Google Suite, mainly because it allows me to identify individual contributions, while facilitating collaborative development, commenting, and review. I expect students to leverage instructional resources and design techniques developed by their peers, *gDrive* & *gDocs* readily facilitate this without incurring cost. Furthermore, while I expect planning documents to change over time; I want students to be able to accurately detail those changes, and reflect upon them when the work is done – the version history of *gDocs* facilitates this. Finally, I frequently use surveys/spreadsheets to touch base and coordinate with students, while *gForms* is not as sophisticated as *Qualtrics*, it serves these purposes well enough.

### Notes on Game Selection

The first four games serve as examples of ‘serious’ games: with *Spent* and *TFL* serving as prime examples of procedural rhetoric. *Spent* conveys a snapshot of a micro-level experience and *TFL* describes the relationships of a macro-level system. *Loneliness* is a near perfect distillation of how a single mechanic can impart an abstract but human experience. *Depression Quest* does similar work, but through textual description. Furthermore, *DQ* is a Twine game, so it has the added benefits of showcasing a tool that students will be working with throughout the term.

The next two games (*The Stanley Parable* and *Kentucky Route Zero*) are dauntingly rich ‘formal’ objects. *TSP* explores the types of experiences that gameric mechanics can impart to a player, while transparently discussing the illusory surface to the programmatic structure upon which it is conveyed. *KRZ* is an episodic game with strong trans-medial elements (e.g. companion script, virtual play, magical realist information hotline). The game is highly reflexive, relating to specific media technologies, modes of production, and even academic inquiry – all the while moving towards a painful exploration of how debt, exploitative labor, and substance abuse destroy lives. I’ve done my best to sync the play so that it directly relates to reading and development discussions (e.g. the players will enter into a surreal, interactive fiction chapter as they develop a Twine game).

The last two games (*This War of Mine* and *Disco Elysium*) are crucial to the idea of critical placemaking; furthermore, they are representationally complex enough to facilitate some deep analysis via the **GameLog** exercises. While I don’t mean to be prescriptive about the games that should be brought

into the classroom, I'd argue that these two games (especially *DE*) have a requisite, critical complexity that makes them well suited for this work and course trajectory.

*TWoM* is a brilliant inversion of the wargame, told from the perspective of the marginalized and leveraging actual accounts of war survivors in order to tell the story from their (approximate) perspectives. In this capacity, it really lends itself to analysis by way of Feminist Standpoint Theory. Instructionally, the goal is to get students to think about how critical theory can inform game design, and what the outcome of that looks like (in terms of mechanics/dynamics). I've wrote a chapter that outlines how this game does: "Seven Dimensions of a Feminist Wargame," which I will provide a free link to (see GameLog folder in **Assignments**), as soon as I am contractually allowed. I would not assign this reading to students, because I want them to do the work of analysis for themselves; none-the-less, it may be useful resource for teachers.

*DE* is a masterclass in virtual placemaking and the representation of plural standpoints. The details of the locale, and the fact that only certain character configurations will be able to access them, will lend itself to pseudo-ethnographic exploration. Though the world is fictional, its depth lends itself to intersectional analysis. Furthermore, because the final project is a virtual place, the dynamics and details that *DE* imparts will inform student place/character design. On a productive level, students will need to figure out how they can replicate some of the basic features of *DE* in RPG Maker (e.g. through switches, events, and triggers) in order to create a place that can be experienced from multiple standpoints.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

### Survey & Reflection

#### 5% Course Grade

At the beginning & end of the course, students will be asked to complete a brief survey about their gameplay experiences, game design experience, and the software competencies that they developed. At the end of the course, students will be asked to compose a brief reflection about their experiences in the course.

### Presentations & Instructions

#### 20% Course Grade

Working in pairs, students will be responsible for **3 presentations**, two analytic (A) and one training (B), which are defined as follows:

A: An analysis of some gamic object or an event peripheral to gaming that leverages some of the more recent readings (i.e. the current, or the week prior). Presentations should be ~10 minutes in length, with ~5 minutes for follow up discussion. Just as these presentations might apply a critical theory to a game, they might also take on a more formal/design based analysis (e.g. how does the skill system of *DE* contribute to the dynamics of play? How do the designers of *KR0* make use of remediation).

B: A training presentation, in which the leaders teach the students how to accomplish some

specific effect in one of the GDEs that the class is using (e.g. incrementing variables in Twine and using them to trigger threshold events). If the effect is complex, leaders must develop a tutorial file that the class will engage, which must be shared with the class prior to their presentation. These training sessions should be ~10-20 minutes in length (depending on complexity), with one student leading and the other student assisting. *Additionally, the students will produce a formal instructional document that details everything covered in the procedure.*

All presentation topics must be approved by the instructor. For each presentation, the students must select two principles of design (at least one of which, must be novel for both presenters) that they will integrate into their presentation. During the presentation, they must call attention to it, and briefly explain how it works.

## **GameLogs & Reports**

### **25% Course Grade**

You will be asked to critically play games, observe others playing them, and methodically report your experiences/observations using a tailored document for field notes (called a *GameLog*). You will then use your GameLog and those of your colleagues as the primary documents from which you will generate critical, qualitative reports that will leverage specific modes of analysis (e.g. Standpoint Theory, Intersectionality, MDA, Textual).

*[Instructors, links to my updated GameLogs and related documents can be found here (<https://tinyurl.com/1koef15n>). Make a local copy for your students.]*

Using GameLog I, you will examine the gameplay and representation present in *This War of Mine* (2014), paying special attention to how a player's "reading positions" informs their interactions with the gameworld. Working in groups of 2-3, you will fill out your GameLog and then share it with your teammates. After sharing notes and discussing findings, each of you will submit a 1000-1500 word report in which you discuss representational dynamics of the game, the standpoints accessible through these dynamics, and the extent to which different player backgrounds informed interactions with said dynamics.

Using GameLog II, you will explore the game world of *Disco Elysium* (2019) as though you were performing a (simulated) critical, ethnographic study of its inhabitants. This project can be roughly divided into three phases:

1. Students will be paired with one of the three detective archetypes, and randomly assigned a number of geographically, co-located subjects (NPCS) whom they must then interview, with the stated goal of gathering as much information about them as they can, noting said information in their GameLog.
2. In groups dictated by common subject assignments, students will share notes and develop collaboratively case studies for each of the assigned characters (~500 words). These documents should include: a brief biography of the character, qualitative observations about said character's life & behavior (e.g. where they work, what they believe, how they communicate who they are), and some indication of the social forces that shape their identity (e.g. gender, poverty, disability, addiction).

3. Finally, individual students will then review the collectively produced case studies, and apply an intersectional analysis to them; first summarizing the various forces that shape character identity (linking forces to specific characters); second, they will use a single case study to demonstrate how multiple forces, intersecting together either marginalize or empower a specific character. (1000-2000 words)

### Twine Game

#### 15% Course Grade

In teams of two, you will create a brief Twine game that simulates a conversation that has the possibility to go bad (e.g. a conflict leading to a breakup, an argument leading to a fight.) This conversation can be fictional or based on personal experience. Importantly, this conversation must occur within a virtual setting (e.g. a bar, a bus stop) and players must be able to effect different outcomes based on the aggregate of their dialogue options. Finally, the player must be given control of two slightly different personas, each of whom will receive slightly different information and possess slightly different options for interaction. Students will submit a complete draft of the game to their peers for playtesting; they will summarize the key findings of that playtest (250-500 word report), and modify the game accordingly.

### Virtual Placemaking

#### 35% Course Grade

In teams of 3-4, students will use *RPG Maker MV* (or *Unity*, if they are more advanced) to create a 2D virtual place, that is loosely based on specific historical or fantastic location. Rather than creating a quest/level, you will provide a place populated by characters that the player will be able to interact with – and in doing so, players will get a “feel” for the character of the place. This is complex project, some of which have individual stages:

Proposal (10%): Individual or pairs of students will propose places worth constructing. They will be expected to provide a 2-3 **slide presentation** in which they:

- State the source material (e.g. a 19<sup>th</sup> century steam ship, a Neolithic village, *Deadwood*) that will serve as inspiration for your place, provide links or references to sources.
- Coarsely describe the setting in terms of: the appearance/composition of the place, the activities that happen there, the actors (people, animals) that populate it, and the prevailing forces (e.g. social, material) acting on these people.
- Elaborate on the possible standpoints from which the player explore the place, and how these standpoints would affect interactions with the place and its inhabitants.
- Candidly evaluate your own skills, and resources you have discovered, indicate the sorts of help you would require in order to develop this virtual place.

Group Plan (10%): Groups of 3-4 students will provide a concrete summary of the place they intend to build, the features their design will require, the responsibilities of each team member, and the timeline for production, and a changelog that will be updated as tasks are completed. Students will revise this

plan according to instructor feedback. Each team member should take responsibility for at least one of the following, specialized rolls:

- **Lead Programmer:** responsible for reviewing code, ensuring functionality and compatibility.
- **Story Editor:** responsible for proofing all text, checking for: narrative consistency, typographical errors, and readability, while ensuring variation among the standpoints.
- **Researcher:** responsible for gathering all pertinent data (e.g. populations, activities, appearances) about the source material and how documenting it's represented in the gameworld.
- **Set Manager:** responsible for designing/locating suitable assets (e.g. character portraits, sprite assets, and music/sound effects) that are appropriate to the setting.

**Twine Prototype (20%):** The group will collectively build a complete draft of their virtual place in *Twine*. This prototype must include the following:

- All the spatial areas are described and/or rendered (via embedded images) in nodes.
- All non-player characters (NPCs) are described, positioned in their locations, and given dialogue options that will shift according to player character (PC) traits.
- All traits (i.e. qualities that a PC can possess which stipulates interactions) must be articulated, and leveraged by the playable gameworld.
- The gameworld must be traversable from 2-3 playable perspectives, with each perspective representing a crude sort of standpoint; possessing a rich description, and a number of variable traits that will influence how they interact with the gameworld.

**Each team member** will be responsible for building 2-3 locations, each of which should have 2-3 sites of possible interaction which will vary according to PC traits. These locations must be in/directly accessible from a centralized node/hub location.

**Play-testing Reports (10%):** as a part of the development process, students will play each other's games.

- The Playtesters will adopt a think aloud protocol, and will be observed by the design team. With the gameworld traversed, the designers will then formally interview the playtesters about their experience, and any suggestions they have. Ideally, each team should observe three playtests, discuss them, and then summarize key findings.
- The designers will then be responsible for producing a 350-750 word write up of their participant's experience and actionable findings that came from it. This report will then be appended to their project plan.
- Playtesting will be conducted twice: once for the **Twine Prototype** and again when the **RPG Maker Prototype** is completed.

**RPG Maker Prototype (40%)** The team will be responsible for producing a 2D place that attempts to simulate (to some crude extent) what life was like for some of the people living there. In most respects, this gameworld will be a faithful translation of the Twine Prototype that integrates the first round



of playtesting feedback. However, the designers will be expected to include the following, additional elements:

- 2D furnished areas that represent the Twine hub structure and its connected locations.
- 2D characters and objects, that trigger events (those prototyped in Twine) when approached or interacted with (as appropriate).
- Custom assets (e.g. character portraits, custom sprites, sound/music) that have been developed externally and incorporated into the gameworld.
- This gameworld must (through a combination of scripting and narrative) possess activities that certain characters can engage with, through the mechanics afforded by the GDE.

**Project Reflection** (10%) the team will be responsible for a 750 – 1500 word document in which they reflect on the project and the design process:

- Explaining how (if at all) their plans changed during the development process and the reasons for those changes.
- Describing what aspects of this place they felt they were able to capture, and what elements they wanted to include, but were not able to (given the constraints of the GDE or their knowledge of it).
- Speculate as to how they might expand upon this prototype, or something similar to it, if they wanted to make a game out of it.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

### Survey/Reflection

(2.5% CG each) Credit/No-credit; optional partial credit for incompletes

### Presentations & Instructions

(20% CG total) Grading breakdown as follows:

- Analytic Presentations (5% CG, each): expectation: 3 content slides 1 reference slide.
  - Demonstrates clear understanding of the subject matter. (30%)
  - Uses examples pertinent to or illustrative of the selected theory. (30%).
  - Delivery is well spoken, engaging, and adheres to time limit. (20%)
  - Presentation slides appear methodically designed, making good use of the 2 selected principles of design. (10%)
  - All resources are correctly cited; presentation added to class gDrive. (10%)
- Training Presentations (10% CG): a guided, real time demo of the software/code functionality, packaged with novel (student designed) instructional documents.
  - The procedure demoed is complex enough to warrant a training session. (20%)
  - The instructive document provides thoughtful overview of the process, while linking to

all requisite materials (e.g. starting conditions, technical docs). This document should make use of diagrams and screenshots when appropriate, and must be shared with the class via gDrive. (40%)

- Demo provides adequate instruction such that most (if not all) classmates are able to follow along and generate a simple prototype. (20%)
- Speaker is engaging and adheres to the time limit. (10%)
- Assistant is actively moving through the class offering help when asked. (10%)

## GameLogs

(25% CG: 10% / 15%) In both cases, the physical GameLog should be given credit/half-credit/no-credit based on how complete the log looks and whether the instructions were followed. Skim to see if the writing and reflections relate to the given prompts.

- *This War of Mine* Log/Report (5% CG physical log; 5% CG report); report breakdown:
  - Explains how the game, through mechanics and aesthetics simulates the standpoint of a civilian war survivor; specifically illustrating common features held by all characters and communal behaviors that must be engaged with in order to progress/survive. (25%)
  - Details the representational differences between the characters, both in terms of aesthetics and their mechanical analogs. The goal here is to communicate that active elements of a standpoint (i.e. how it changes the way that a subject can interact with the world). (25%)
  - Demonstrates an understanding of how the players “reading position” (e.g. prior habits and enculturation) can change the manner by which they approach gamic problems/solutions, as well as their affective responses to the game. This should touch on the issue of “social realism”. (25%)
  - Quality of the submitted report, relative to organization, reasoning, example pertinence, and general clarity. (25%)
- *Disco Elysium* Log/Reports (5% CG physical log; 5% CG case study; 5% intersectional analysis report)
  - The **Case Study** should be evaluated in terms of
    - The vividness of description of said character and the social milieu in which they are situated. (25%)
    - The robustness of the intersectional analysis: the extent to which the prevailing forces that (can be reasonably said to) shape their relative standpoint (e.g. poverty, race, violence). (25%)
    - The suitability of the evidence provided (e.g. quotes, paraphrases) to justify the presence of the various intersectional forces. (25%)
    - The extent to which case study is able to explain how said forces converge to create a distinctive standpoint. (25%)
  - The **Thematic Analysis** should be evaluated in terms of:

- The extent to which the selected case studies, when taken as a whole, speak to a compelling grouping of people (e.g. homeless, children, disabled). (20%)
- The use of cross-case study evidence to demonstrate the pervasiveness of specific, intersecting issues (e.g. poverty, substance abuse, violence). (50%)
- The suitability of the solution posed (i.e. some sort of intervention) relative to the problems identified. Respecting that this solution will be a product of imagination, evaluate the extent to which the solution seems (at least somewhat) in-line with the rules of the world and can be said to address an intersection of issues. (30%)

### Twine Game

(CG 15%) This game will be evaluated according to:

- Quality of the writing (e.g. descriptive/ believable language, coherence of events). (20%)
- Complexity of narrative structure (e.g. number of nodes/connection). (20%)
- Complexity of programming (e.g. use of variables, macros, etc.) (20%)
- Aesthetics of game (e.g. use of images, audio, typographic decisions, etc.) (20%)
- Clarity of playtesting report (e.g. general takeaway, strengths, weaknesses, actionable targets for improvement) and integration of said feedback into the final submission. (20%)

### Virtual Place

(CG 40%) For most students, this will be the hardest assignment. It is an exercise in planning, creativity, coordination, and translation. There are many ways for this assignment to fall apart; however, by breaking it up into constituent parts, instructors can either mitigate the prospect of catastrophic failure, or spot it from enough of a distance that some intervention can be attempted. Having (over) articulated each phase, I offer only general guidelines:

- **Proposal (10%):** did the student submit something viable and suitable given the tools at their disposal, the time constraints, and the abilities of their classmates?
- **Group Plan (10%):** do not grade them on what they first submit, grade them on what they submit after getting feedback from you; then consider:
  - Is the distribution of labor fair?
  - Taking as a given that no plan of action will be perfect, such that revision is a natural component of complex work, does this project err on the side of ambition rather than ease?
  - Is the timeline both realistic and detailed?
  - Do you believe that the students are adequately assessing both their own abilities as designers and the expressive capacities of the GDE that they are using?
- **Twine Prototype (20%):** evaluate this object relative to the plan they delivered, use it as a means of reality checking the group's ambition. Allow students to resubmit this part of the project until they get it right, because if the students are unable to deliver their vision in

Twine, they will be fundamentally unable to do so in RPG Maker. This phase of the assignment is an *acid test*. **Look for the portents of catastrophic failure here.**

- **Playtesting** (10%): see Twine (e). This can be reduced to, are they spotting new problems and figuring out ways to address them – are they drawing actionable conclusions (even if it is towards the formulation of new content) from their discoveries.
- **RPG Maker Demo** (40%):
  - The appearance of the play; the extent to which it seems thoughtfully laid out and decorated. If applicable, the suitability of the music, and the extent to which custom assets fit well with the world. (25%)
  - The quality of the narrative & dialogue; the vividness of the characters in terms of how they talk and appear. (25%)
  - The extent to which the place can be said to present differently according to the qualities of the subject that engages with it. As this will be largely accomplished by programming and scripting, use this opportunity to evaluate the complexity of the interactions as well. (25%)
  - The extent to which the specific student's work meaningfully contributed to the project as a whole... even if the project failed. (25%)
- **Project Reflection** (10%)
  - Coherence of development narrative and explanation of each member's contribution. (40%)
  - Critical reflection upon what the game's mechanics could or could not capture about the source material. (40%)
  - The extent to which their future speculation, about what the game could be, is conceptually interesting. (20%)

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

*Note: For readings in this section, I only list the first author's name, and the key words in the title. Given the small number of references, this should not lead to any confusion.*

### Week 1: Video Games as Formal Objects

#### *Class Topics / Activities*

- Discuss games as a media built upon prior media and conventions.
- Discuss gameplay as *emergent* from the interplay between *operator* and machine.
- Strategically identify *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* elements of gameplay.
- Discuss player *agency* relative to gamic constraints.
- Thoroughly differentiate *mechanics* and *dynamic*, working through multiple examples.
- Discuss cases where *aesthetics* do and do not align with *dynamics*.
- In the context of the class, this week and the week that follows set up some very foundational

concepts and terms. This can lead to information overload. In order to present this from happening, you need constantly dip into either of the two games, focusing on specific moments and asking students to unpack those moments using these terms.

#### Assignments

- Bolter (1999). “Immediacy, Hypermediacy, & Remediation”
- Hunicke (2004). “MDA: a formal approach to game design... & research”
- Galloway (2006). “Gamic Action in Four Moments”
- *The Stanley Parable* (2013)
- *Kentucky Route 0* (Act I)

#### Week 2: Persuasive Games/Simulations

##### Class Topics / Activities

- Discuss how rules/parameters can make persuasive arguments. Lean on *TFS*.
- Examine the role of player as interpreter of the game’s messages.
- Consider how the narrative, affective, and mechanical elements of a game can be used to convey the specific or general experiences. Lean on *Loneliness*.
- Consider the affordances and limitations of media as a way of exploring perspectives. Lean on *Spent*, *Depression Quest*, and “The Entertainment”. Each of these does some of the same thing, but in a fundamentally different way.

#### Assignments

- Bogost (2008). “Rhetoric of Video Games”
- Galloway (2006). “Social Realism”
- Play:
  - *Spent* (2011)
  - *This Fiscal Ship* (2016)
  - *Loneliness* (2010)
  - *Depression Quest* (2013)
  - *Kentucky Route 0* (Act II), and “The Entertainment”<sup>2</sup>
- **[Student Presentations]**

#### Week 3: Studying Games/Play

##### Class Topics / Activities

- Review methodology for qualitative analysis of games with special emphasis on gameplay

2. Link to Virtual Play: <http://kentuckyroutezero.com/the-entertainment/>

logs.

- Using TWD study as a blueprint, highlight the types of information students should look for, relative to the attractors.
- Discuss conventional and lived attractors relative to social realism/artifice.

#### Assignments

- Consolvo (2006). “Developing a methodological toolkit...”
- Taylor (2015). “Me & Lee...”
- Carr (2019). “Methodology, Representation, & Games...”
- Introduce **GameLog I**, paired *This War of Mine* (2014)
- Show *TWoM* Trailer<sup>3</sup>
- Students should perform solo play sessions *TWoM* before next class.
- **[Student Presentations]**

#### Week 4: Standpoints

##### Class Topics / Activities

- Introduce think aloud protocol; this will serve as the foundation for playtesting. If you're unfamiliar with it, there is a very concise definition in *Universal Methods of Design*.
- Set up teams and coordinate observation sessions. In person observation is ideal, but failing that, Twitch with web cam will suffice.
- Discuss the Marxist feminist origins of standpoint, and its utility (e.g. analysis, activism). If you get pushback, emphasize that engaging with multiple views will always be beneficial for analysis. Stress that one view need not be subordinate to the other, rather each must be accepted as perspective and form of experience that actually exists in the world.
- Emphasize standpoint as being more than perspective (i.e. capacities to inter/act); this is a pitfall for a lot of students. Reconnect to *Spent* as needed: it's not just the world they see, but their limited capacities to engage with it (e.g. the card cannot be paid off).
- Discuss the idea of a civilian war survivor standpoint; query how *TWoM* creates this through dynamics and aesthetics (e.g. the activities that are represented, the emotions presented).

#### Assignments

- Harding (2004). “Introduction: Standpoint Theory”
- Cockburn (2010). “Gender relations as causal...”
- Students will need to complete **GameLog** entries and add reflections this week.
- Give students one full class to work through reflections and start drafting out their reports.

3. Link to “This War of Mine - Teaser Trailer” : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hxf1seOpjE>

## Week 5: Twine Crash Course I

### Class Topics / Activities

- The first workshops should be instructor run; you will need to introduce students to the basics of Twine. Ideally, you will want to lead them into Boolean variables and conditional statements (e.g. the door that can only be opened if the player has found the key).
- Encourage students to start thinking about possible Twine projects, and start recruiting savvy students do instructional presentations

### Assignments

- **GameLog I due.**
- Read: Ford (2016):
  - Ch. 1: “The Nuts and Bolts...”
  - Ch. 2: “Using choice...”
- Introduce **Twine Assignment**: A Conversation that Goes Bad.

## Week 6: Twine Crash Course II

### Class Topics / Activities

- Pivot to a support role wherein students are leading more of the discussion; start asking “how do I...?” questions to the class. Be prepared to meet with students outside class.
- Early in week, have students informally pitch ideas for conversations that go wrong; try to get pairs set up by the end of the first class.
- Talk to students about the two perspective options: ideally, you want to use the same core text progression, but have variable states configured at the start (e.g. a traffic stop where the protagonist is white or black, an argument where the speaker is angry or calm) that will impact outcomes.
- Explore the Interactive Fiction section of *KRO* (III), the fungal cave computer as a historical objet – reconnecting with *remediation* as a concept. Get the students to playfully analyze the features it displays.

### Assignments

- Read Ford (2016):
  - “Ch. 4: Designing Puzzles”
  - “Ch. 5: Building Objects with Variables”
- Play *Kentucky Rout 0* (Act III)
- Form pairs for Twine project; Pairs should start writing out a plan for conversation: subject, context, speakers, variables, protagonist variations.
- **[Student Presentations]**

## Week 7: Playtesting & World Building

### Class Topics / Activities

- Continue the Twine workshops; give the students breaks in between the presentations so that they can try to integrate some of the techniques into their Twine projects.
- Reserve roughly one hour for play testing. Remind students that they are looking for changes that they could implement by next week.
- Present *Disco Elysium* as a game that will tell them a great deal about making complex characters and places. Foreshadow some of the topic of *intersectionality* as a logical continuation of *standpoints*.
- Encourage them to start playing *DE* because it is a considerably longer game. Remind them that they're going to have to produce study their interactions with a few characters, so they should make a hard save every 30 minutes, giving it some descriptive title. This will help them get back to moments they care about.
- Let them know that they can brute force progress in the game by abusing the quick save/load mechanic to retry skills. However, remind them that part of the goal will be identifying the paths they can't take based on their character, so this approach is not generally desirable.

### Assignments

- Read Ford (2016):
  - “Ch.14: Wriggling Words...”
  - “Ch.8: Before you begin your project”
- Hergenrader (2018,) Ch.4: Frameworks for fictional world
- Introduce **Game Log II: *Disco Elysium***
- **[Student Presentations]**
- **[Playtest Twine Drafts]**

## Week 8: Critical Theory, Critical Play

### Class Topics / Activities

- Explore *intersectionality* as a continuation of *standpoint theory*.
- Emphasize the multiple lenses of analysis it deploys, and the complex composites it produces.
- Draw attention to intersectionality's connection to activism.
- Start asking the question, how could one bring this theory into game play and game design?
- Assignments

### Twine Project Due

- Flanagan (2009). “Introduction to Critical play”



- Collins (2020). “What is intersectionality?”
- Create groups for **GameLog II**
- Introduce **Virtual Placemaking Project (VPP)**
- Week 9: Simulated Ethnographic Work

#### *Class Topics / Activities*

- What does it mean to play a game as a qualitative researcher? What do we need to pay attention to in the gameworld? How might our own habits, backgrounds change what we’re able to see?
- For the case studies, encourage students to both leverage some of the more common intersectional elements (e.g. gender, race, class) while asking them to look for other pertinent forces (e.g. mental illness, violence).

#### *Assignments*

- Play *Disco Elysium*(2019)
- Winker (2010). “Intersectionality as multilevel analysis”
- Work on **GameLog II (DE) Case studies**
- **VPP Proposal Presentations Due**
- **[Students VPP Proposals]**

### **Week 10: Understanding the Design of Complex Places**

#### *Class Topics / Activities*

- Revisit Winker’s three levels of analysis, and ask students to look for both patterns and (in the traditions of activism) solutions that might work for gameworld.
- Remind them that they are also studying *DE* as designers. Lead them in discussion about how the skill and thought systems work.
- Consider how the complexity of the skill system might actually force designers to make deep characters that defy a single mode of analysis.

#### *Assignments*

- **GameLog II Case Studies Due**
- Assemble **VPP** Groups
- **[Student Presentations]**

### **Week 11: Using Case Studies**

#### *Class Topics / Activities*

- Get them to see the process by which numerous cases studies become a corpus, and how that

corpus can then be used to identify both larger trends. Finally, talk about how combinations of trends can lead to particularly strong effects.

- Keep the students moving back and forth between their study of *DE*'s gameworld and the plan of the virtual place that they are proposing to make.
- Start reality checking student plans: is the scope too big? Are the features too advanced? Would this work with *RPG Maker MV*?

### Assignments

- Review **GL2: Case Studies** for **GL2: Thematic Analysis**.
- Hergenrader (2018), "Ch.5: Structures and Substructures"
- **VPP: Plans Due**
- **[Student Presentations]**

### Week 12: Recognizing Structural Forces

#### Class Topics / Activities

- We're looking for synergy between the analytic work of inter/intra-categorical analysis and the creative work of placemaking. Ideally, as they talk about the forces (and their intersections) that they are seeing in *DE*, they should move into technical discussions of: *how could we replicate this in our game?*
- For the VPP, they should be in a good position to enumerate the standpoints they want to showcase, and start describing variables that will govern gamic interactions (e.g. who goes where, who sees what?).
- At this point, they should be familiar enough with Twine that they can start prototyping this immediately.

#### Assignments

- Hergenrader (2018), "Ch.10: Developing Structures &..."
- **Game Log II: Thematic Analysis Due**
- **VPP: Twine Prototyping** workshop.
- Week 13: Prototyping -> Translation

#### Class Topics / Activities

- Not all teams will be ready to playtest at this point, allow them to playtest next week if necessary (see advice for VPP assignment). Students should not think of their Twine game as complete at this point, rather it's a work in progress. They can continue expanding it, but they need to start thinking about how they are going to translate their Twine into RPG Maker. However, because it will always take less time to describe an interaction in Twine than to make an area, with characters, and events in RPG Maker, they should continue developing their place in Twine, for now.

- Encourage students to start developing assets (e.g. music, image) now.
- Encourage students who are not actively writing to start experimenting with RPG Maker. They need to start thinking about translation: how will we get the effects that we need in this new program?
- The students who are ahead of the game will be in a good position to lead instructional presentations on RPG Maker. Students will need to have a working understanding of switches & events. At the same time be open to presentations on efficient level generation, asset import procedures, etc. **Ideally, every presentation after today should be instructional rather than analytic, and there should be no more Twine instructional pieces.**

#### *Assignments*

- Read: Ford (2016). “Ch. 18. Developing a Strong Player Character”
- **Twine Playtesting & Report**
- RPG Maker Asset Generation Integration
- **[Student Presentations]**

#### **Week 14: RPG Maker Crash Course**

##### *Class Topics / Activities*

- Demo only if you need to. Ideally, you want students running the training sessions by this point. For this project to work, all students will need to develop: basic level design and even scripting proficiency.
- If students are having difficulties getting an effect in RPG Maker, and you don’t know how to solve it, put a bounty on that problem (offering extra credit to a student to solve it, more if they lead an instructional presentation on it).
- Watch for signs of a catastrophic failure. At this point, if a team is not done with Twine and working away in RPG Maker, give them second option for the VPP assignment. They may be disappointed, but this is an act of mercy; get them thinking about cool things they can add to their Twine and they’ll get over it pretty quickly.

#### *Assignments*

- Workshop: Twine to RPG Maker Translations
- **[Student Presentations]**

#### **Week 15: Workshop, Playtesting**

##### *Class Topics / Activities*

- Help students to spot errors and debug.
- Whenever possible, crowdsource problems; constantly open things up for short discussions
- If a group is scrambling with a bug and you can’t find it, put a bounty on it; if that doesn’t

work, open it to a floor discussion on a work around. **At this point you should be running more of a studio than a classroom.**

- Regarding playtesting, keep students realistic about what changes they can implement in the time they have. Tell them to save bigger problems for the reflection document, which will describe how they could develop the game/place if they had the time and inclination.

#### Assignments

- **RPG Maker Playtest and Reports**

#### Exam: Playing Together & Reflecting

#### Class Topics / Activities

- Bring the class together and play each other's games.
- Bring food and drink, make it a celebration.

#### Assignments

- **VPP: RPG Maker Demo Due**
- **VPP: Reflection Due**
- **Exit Survey Due**

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

You need to play all of the games before the course starts.

*Disco Elysium* is the longest and most complicated of the bunch. *Kentucky Route Zero* (with the supplemental media) and *This War of Mine* are the next longest, followed by the *Stanley Parable*, which can be exhaustively competed in 2-3 hours. All the other games are mercifully short. You will not need to 'beat,' *This War of Mine*; in point of fact, it will beat you and that's the point.

Throughout the process of game, presentation, and document design, refer to the *Universal Principles of Design*. These principles are (largely) content agnostic, and you want to help students internalize notions like 'signal to noise ratio', 'progressive disclosure', and 'affordance', so that they will gain new metrics by which to evaluate the work they're producing. This is key to 'reflection in action'.

For the (first) **Twine Project**, you're probably going to have a number of students with little to know experience programming. Remind them that the skills they develop here will have application outside of game design; with HTML, CSS, and JavaScript all having direct application to web design, typography, and event based programming languages. I find that letting them know that these skills will have purchase elsewhere adds helps them get past a tough start.

Keep in mind that you're going to spend a good deal of time talking newcomers through if/else control structures, Boolean variables, conditional text, and thresholds. As a rule of thumb, it's productive to make the core dialogue terminate when some 'frustration' threshold has been reached. In this sense, you can allow a fairly linear progression of dialogue, in which actions add to the

threshold value; this way, the ‘last straw’ becomes dynamic, and the conversation can terminate at any arbitrary point in which the threshold has been met. Mechanically, this means that ‘threshold check’ (whose code can be written in a single node) will need to be run in each of the ‘progress’ nodes. All of these basic skills will have direct application on the final project.

For both of the **GameLogs**, emphasize that the assignment is more about the process: critical and analytic play, gathering data, making observations, inferences, and then synthesizing them. For the *Disco Elysium* assignment in particular, acknowledge that a character wiki exists. Ask students not to reference the wiki until after they’ve completed their case studies. After this point, allowed them to reference the wiki, adding missing information that no team member was able to uncover.

Primarily, the GameLog activity is about learning qualitative research methods, in this sense the end products are (to some extent) less important to us than the process itself. With that said, the goal, by way of the reports, is to demonstrate the types of information and inferences that these methods can be used to generate. Remind students that there are real world applications for these skills and that the games merely provide a low stakes environment for their development.

As a secondary consequence, the activity will force students to develop a deep familiarity with the dynamics of *DE*. In this vein, the class can have fruitful discussions about how, on a programmatic level, *DE* creates these effects; this can pivot to more germane discussions of, ‘how can we replicate these effects using Twine and RPG Maker?’

This brings us to the final project, the **Virtual Place**, which has two major components: the Twine prototype and the RPG Maker adaptation.

The Twine project serves two fundamental purposes. First, it allows students to quickly prototype and playtest their gameworld. Playtesting at this phase will allow them to sport problems before they’ve invested too much time into development. Second, it acts as a gatekeeper/acid test. If a group is unable to complete and test the Twine prototype, it is likely that they will be unable to complete the RPG maker assignment. Using your own judgment, consider offering the group a lifeline: the option to get a lower grade on this assignment (-15%), with the expectation that they will dramatically improve and embellish their place using only Twine. Include character portraits, area sketches, music, etc., but don’t force them to translate the work into RPG Maker.

With all that said, there are certain quirks to RPG Maker that you as an instructor should be aware of. RPG Maker assets are biased towards fantasy, students may need to reimagine some of their places using an aesthetic that is more easily reproduced using the GDE in question (i.e. functional literacy). While the sprite and portrait tools will allow most students to produce functional visual assets, music production can be trickier. If there is no musically savvy student in the group, allow them to import music from elsewhere. In all cases, the prevailing criteria will be, do the aesthetics of the game seem consistent, and do they fit with the dynamics of it.

Finally, during the playtesting process, encourage students to look for novel techniques and/or implementations in their peers’ work. Actively encourage them to borrow code from each other. Offer stronger teams extra credit if they can help weaker teams in this capacity. As this is not a

programming class, I don't view borrowing code as problematic – all the same, they should provide some form of attribution in the reflection that they submit.

## FUTURE PLANS

I'm fascinated by procedurally-assisted generation, whereby software is used to create terrain, buildings, and set pieces within them. Both procedural and procedurally-assisted generation techniques rely on *pattern languages* (i.e. rule systems which dictate how objects should appear together), the former works using noise and the latter, allows the designer a more deliberate degree area control.

Increasingly, indie developers are leveraging procedural generation as way of creating content more quickly, and building worlds that can be systematically enriched (e.g. changing types of trees that can appear in a forest, or the set pieces that appear in a laboratory). These are powerful tools that designers of the future will need to master if they are to create compelling places populated by complex characters

My father and I have spent the last few years developing simple procedural generation tools for students, designed to automate the work of geographic and ecologic place creation. However, in these tools are currently in an early alpha state. Over the next few years, we will continue to update them. As these tools mature (with my own understanding of how to use them), I will integrate them into my placemaking course, and create modules based around working with them.

Speaking to the state of the technology itself: once we finish the hydrology & ecology models, we will start creating rule systems for the generation of structures and (later) the adornment of rooms. As it stands, the source code for our prototype is available on GitHub:

- The Java-based generator itself: ([https://github.com/markkampe/Java\\_Terrain](https://github.com/markkampe/Java_Terrain)),
- An architectural overview of the application: (<http://cs.hmc.edu/~markk/WorldBuilder>).

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CHAPTER 16.

**LEARNING COMMUNITY: GAMES IN SOCIETY (ENGL 1101; SOCI 1101)**

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**DAVID KIRSCHNER<sup>1</sup> AND SCOTT REED<sup>2</sup>**  
**GEORGIA GWINNETT COLLEGE**

**Course Title:** Learning Community: Games in Society

**Course College/School:** School of Liberal Arts

**Course Department/Program:** Departments of English and Sociology

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 8<sup>3</sup> (3 for ENGL 1101, 3 for SOCI 1101)

**Course Length:** (ENGL/SOCI) Twice/week, 75-minute sessions, 16-week semester

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face, back-to-back in same classroom

**Course Keywords:** analog games, composition, freshmen, game-based learning, game design, learning community, procedural rhetoric, project-based learning, sociology, video games

CATALOG DESCRIPTION

**ENGL 1101: English Composition 1**

A composition course focusing on skills required for effective writing in a variety of contexts, with emphasis on exposition, analysis, and argumentation, and also including introductory use of a variety of research skills. This section will explore the challenges of composition through a collaborative game design project, because games reflect many of the principles of good writing and communication. They are designed to provide specific experiences for audiences; require a

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3. Another 2-credit course, a freshman seminar entitled Introduction to 21st Century Information, played a support role. This information literacy course taught processes of information creation and strategic searching and exploration. Its main function for our purposes was teaching fundamental research skills to help students find and read academic literature to support their game-based arguments. The course is certainly vital in its own right, but for the sake of the discussion of “teaching the game,” we primarily focus on the two core components of the learning community, English and Sociology.



willingness to experiment, fail, and keep experimenting; often require collaboration; and create complex ways to engage information and ideas.

### **SOCI 1101: Introduction to Sociology**

This course surveys the complex relationships between society and the individual by examining games and gaming. Beginning with theoretical foundations in sociology and game studies to understand games as reality and rhetoric, the course systematically examines frames of social life (culture, self, identity, socialization, and deviance), intersectional inequalities (social class, race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality), and key issues in advanced technological societies (rationalization, governance, surveillance, and gamification).

## **COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES**

### **ENGL 1101**

The first half of the 2-semester First Year Composition (hereafter FYC) sequence, Composition 1 establishes foundational skills in academic reading, writing, and research.

- **Writing:** The course objectives stress the students' ability to compose in a variety of formats, controlling style and diction, and to develop original ideas and thesis statements. Critical to this is that students demonstrate engagement in the writing process by developing prewriting and drafts of assignments, reviewing those assignments in class, and revising them for maximum effectiveness. Problem-solving skills are developed by students' ability to respond to a variety of different writing tasks (exposition, argument, etc.), but to reflect critically on the success of their writing process. In that respect, the course frames the "writing process" in game-like terms: as a series of discrete steps, in pursuit of goal, where effort is met with feedback, and where that feedback propels further efforts.
- **Reading:** The course asks students to analyze, evaluate, and appreciate the aesthetics, arguments, and rhetorical strategies in various texts, which includes taking their first steps into becoming acquainted with college-level research (for which the companion information literacy course was instrumental). Academic articles on game studies provided much of the early reading material, allowing students to learn both relevant concepts (like "procedural rhetoric") and the conventions of academic writing.

### **SOCI 1101**

The overarching goal of this course is for students to develop their "sociological imagination" by exploring key topics in a survey of the discipline of sociology through the study of games and gaming. Students read sociological and game studies literature, produce analytical and reflective writing about games and gameplay experiences, critically play games, and collaboratively design games. These activities accomplish six course objectives.

Fundamentally, (1) students will correctly articulate core concepts and theories of sociology and game studies, such as conflict theory and the magic circle. Mastery of guiding concepts enables students to (2) critically examine and discuss social issues and social changes from multiple cultural perspectives. This involves analysis of relationships between micro-level individual and small group associations

as well as macro-level institutional associations, the latter of which is a particular focus of sociology. Therefore, students will (3) clearly articulate the impact of social institutions and social stratification on people's everyday lives in local, national, and international contexts. Teaching about institutions and social stratification—the categorization of people into socioeconomic groups—leads to tough discussions of the causes and consequences of social inequalities, including policies that create and sustain them. Students will necessarily (4) apply sociological thought to moral and ethical questions. They take various positions on issues, so they must learn to (5) communicate coherent, well-organized arguments via written, oral, and game-based modalities. The latter mode of communication is unique to this learning community. Students will apply their sociological imaginations and the culmination of their learning to (6) effectively collaborate in groups of diverse others to design a serious game exploring a sociological topic.

## COURSE CONTEXT

Georgia Gwinnett College (GGC) supports high-impact practices (HIPs) such as collaborative projects, common intellectual experiences, first-year seminars, and learning communities (LCs), which are all designed to foster student success, engagement, and persistence (Kuh et al., 2017). LCs, which consist of two or more courses linked together by integrative content and activities, were launched at GGC in Fall 2017. A version of the Games in Society LC has been offered four times between Spring 2018 and Fall 2019. This chapter reports on the most recent Fall 2019 iteration.

The courses were packaged as the Games in Society LC, into which new freshmen (the almost exclusive audience for LCs at GGC) could enroll at once. Each course also satisfies core requirements mandated for all University System of Georgia schools. ENGL 1101 is part of the required FYC sequence for all Georgia college students. SOCI 1101 satisfies the elective portion of the Social Sciences core requirement.

The LC effectively guaranteed what students at commuter colleges often crave: a set of courses scheduled together that met core requirements. Ideally, students would select this LC because of interest in its specific theme, but such interest-based selection contrasts with the reality that students are generally placed into LCs that fit their schedules during orientation registration sessions. Thus, levels of experience with and initial interest in games and gaming differed dramatically, with some claiming no experience or interest at all, while others were hardcore enthusiasts.

Freshmen at GGC are exceedingly diverse. For the seventh consecutive year, the US News & World Report ranked GGC the most ethnically diverse college in the Southern region (2020). The school's student-to-faculty ratio and affordability make it an attractive destination for students wishing to complete their core coursework before moving on to larger state universities, while its open admissions policies also make it attractive to students who struggled in high school. Flexibility is therefore a hallmark of course design at GGC, as instructors must account for vastly different levels of preparation and interest.

This impacts course content and pedagogy. In composition courses, an emphasis on the writing process and reflection helps students develop metacognitive and project management skills, and challenges instructors to provide close support throughout the semester. To better appeal to the distinct and diverse intelligences (Robinson, 2017) of our students, Scott often designs composition

courses that favor creativity and media savvy. Sociology courses take advantage of GGC students' diversity (especially in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, and social class) to expose them to other cultures and ways of seeing the world. David's student-centered pedagogy employs active learning strategies with emphasis on reflection, critical thinking and analysis, and class discussion. In terms of this LC, flexibility in course design involves choosing accessible games to play and beginning the semester with basic concepts in game studies, including convincing students that games are more than just entertainment media; rather, they are cultural artifacts that can be sociologically examined to tell us something about the social world.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

Learning community pedagogy is the primary driver of the course design. Since the mid-2000s, LCs have been lauded as a HIP, with longitudinal research indicating strong correlation between LC participation and not only higher levels of retention, but also higher levels of academic and community engagement throughout college (Carmichael & LaPierre, 2014; Stableton & Nownes, 2011). Central to that high impact is "integrative learning": not simply the co-presence of different subject matter, but the explicit integration of content and methods across disciplines. For example, while our FYC and Sociology courses shared a set of common readings, we explicitly designed each class to approach them differently: the former approaching the readings as rhetorical frameworks of audience, context, and purpose, and the latter aligning those readings with core sociological concepts. The third class in our LC triad, a library-run course on research skills, not only engaged students with a key on-campus resource, but scaffolded critical reading skills.

More importantly, though, the LC relies on project-based learning as a means of achieving greater interdisciplinary integration. Game design, already being a field that productively resists a single disciplinary home (Mäyrä, 2009), is an ideal method for achieving that integration. Both instructors share an understanding of Ian Bogost's (2007) "procedural rhetoric," which posits that game rules have persuasive power because they impel and constrain player choice within a particular domain that is, whether explicitly or not, grounded in real-world systems. The concept offers an immediate integration point where game design reflects a sociological point of view, and where the success of said design derives from how that design is composed in order to engage its real, socially situated audience. By announcing the shared project from the very start of the semester, students have a framework for understanding how the distinct activities across courses—sociological concepts, rhetorical thinking, and research—coalesce into a single game design project.

In the early weeks, the Sociology class demonstrates digital games that explicitly engage sociological concepts, while the English class provides a simple descriptive vocabulary for identifying and explaining game mechanics. A shared assignment sequence, which counts for credit in both courses, provides venues for students to demonstrate their integration, while allowing time for feedback and revision when first encounters with these unfamiliar concepts prove challenging. In the second half of the semester, both courses shift into a shared studio/workshopping format, where student groups integrate their understanding of both the medium and a chosen social issue into a game design project. The open studio format provides three full weeks for creativity and testing and allows students to self-pace, with each instructor offering regular, individualized guidance and feedback—a high priority for academically under-served students.

The trajectory of the LC provides a way for students to move from consumers to producers, which Miguel Sicart (2014) sees as the key to all playful design: moving away from “designer-centric thinking” and approaching design as fundamentally social and rhetorical work: “as a conversation among user, designer, context, and purpose” (p. 31). Positioning this work in an authentic context and prompting students to explicitly integrate their understandings across multiple classrooms allows not just for creative expression (valuable in its own right), but also leads to higher metacommunicative awareness (Shipka, 2011).

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

Neither course requires students to obtain their own textbooks, software, or hardware. Below are listed the three required readings that both courses share (available on LMS), games that students are required to play (available during/after class from instructors’ collections), and recommended texts for each course.<sup>4</sup>

### Required Shared Readings

- Bogost, I. (2008). The rhetoric of video games.
- Hassenzahl, M., and Laschke, M. (2015). Pleasurable troublemakers.
- Jørgensen, K. (2016). The positive discomfort of *SpecOps: The Line*.

### Required Games (ENGL 1101)

- *Munchkin* (as a first week demonstration and ice-breaker activity)
- *Uno*, *Connect Four*, *Battleship*, *Chutes & Ladders*, *Candy Land*, *Trouble* (simple and familiar board/card games as a lab activity so students could learn to identify gameplay mechanics)

### Required Games (SOC1 1101)

- *Sociopoly* (simulation of social class stratification based on *Monopoly*)
- *Spent* (web-based simulation about surviving poverty)
- *McDonald’s Video Game* (2006; free browser game used as an example of a persuasive game to apply core sociological concepts and theory [ideology, conflict theory, Weberian theory] and to demonstrate procedural rhetoric)
- *The Stanley Parable* (2013; PC game used to analyze magic circle concept, spheres of reality, and the common notion that games are “just” games)
- *Never Alone* (2014; PC game used to discuss culture and cultural transmission through media)
- *Grand Theft Auto: V* (2015; PC game used to analyze the social construction of deviance and crime, labeling theory, and ethics and morality)
- *Papers, Please* (2013; PC game used to examine rationalization, bureaucracy, and work)
- *Orwell* (2016; PC game used to examine surveillance society, privacy, state power, and other

4. We provide links to various course materials in the chapter. To view our shared Google Drive with all these and more LC materials, go to <https://bit.ly/2Ytck0u>

issues of 21<sup>st</sup> century governance and social control)

### Recommended Texts (ENGL 1101)

- Hacker, D., & Sommers, N. (2019). *Rules for Writers* (9th ed.). Bedford/St.Martin's.  
[This is the handbook adopted by our program; any handbook for first-year writing could work.]

### Recommended Texts (SOVI 1101)

- Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2018). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.).
- Schell, J. (2015). *The art of game design: A book of lenses* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).
- Walz, S. P., & Deterding, S (Eds.). (2015). *The gameful world: Approaches, issues, and applications*.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

### Shared Assignment Sequence

#### *Group Gaming Narrative*

The first group assignment in the sequence cloaks important rhetorical work in the guise of a more creative project. After deciding on a social topic to engage through their design, the project asks groups to develop a narrative “skin” for the game, but not before devoting at least a paragraph to the game’s intended audience. Groups have creative freedom to design for any audience, but should recognize that the story elements they design need to pull double duty: providing an engaging surface that will hook players, while effectively staging up the kinds of characters and conflicts that dramatize the social issue.

#### *Group Game Proposal*

After locking in their topic, the proposal asks groups to develop gameplay, while gradually narrowing their focus. After discussing interactivity (how they generally want players to interact with the game and one another), groups had to begin defining some core game mechanics, isolating the “moves” and choices that players would find most compelling. The third section challenged players to begin characterizing the “procedural rhetoric” of their game, essentially re-contextualizing the general interactivity and specific mechanics already established. By integrating outside research on their social issue, students had to finally demonstrate not just *that* their game would effectively model a real-world issue, but *how* it would present a specific argument about that issue.

#### *Demo and Presentation*

Perhaps most central to our approach, student groups were tasked to construct their games from scratch. Using feedback from the first two projects, students had 2-3 weeks of dedicated class time to collaborate on their designs, with instructors facilitating and offering feedback. At the end of the course, teams gave a formal 10-minute presentation to explain the topic their game would engage (including research) and establish three specific criteria by which they wished for their game to be judged (e.g., providing interesting choices to the player, establishing a particular mood, having an aesthetically pleasing design). Teams then had 45 minutes to run a play session of the game, with other

students in the class serving as volunteer players. Players filled out a form to offer feedback on the group's chosen criteria, which players then incorporated into their final evaluation.

#### *Final Evaluation Paper/Artist's Statement*

Capping the project sequence was a solo-authored report that evaluated the success of the Demo/Presentation. Students began by introducing and explaining their group's chosen criteria, then devoted a paragraph to each one. To evaluate the criteria, writers described a particular element of the design, such as a specific game mechanic, and then, accounting for feedback received from peers and instructors, discussed whether that element was successful.

### **ENGL 1101**

#### *Gaming Story*

Students compose 1000-word narratives about a memorable game-playing experience, whether from a video game, board game, or a made-up kids' game. The project challenges students to describe specific moments in the game in concrete terms, and to organize those moments to convey a consistent "essential experience" (Schell, 2015). As the earliest assignment in the ENGL 1101 course, narrative offered an immediately accessible way for students to get started, while the instructor used the assignment as a quick diagnostic tool to assess growth areas.

#### *Summary and Response Assignments*

This series of four short assignments asks students to engage course readings with an eye on their rhetorical situation. Using a consistent two-paragraph format, students first summarized the article, with a view on the source's primary claims and evidence, then discussed the ramifications of those ideas by applying them to examples drawn from their own experience. The format encouraged students to develop several fundamentals of academic writing, including specific thesis statements and source integration. Three such assignments are based on the three required shared readings, with a fourth addressing an outside source on the group's chosen social issue.

#### *Teaching a Week in the Course*

Week 4 is a pivotal time in the course. Having completed their Gaming Story writing project and played a few games in class, students had become familiar with a certain baseline of terms for understanding games, like being able to distinguish between story and gameplay elements, or noticing the points at which the two dovetail together for larger effect. Week 4 is given to a reading that directly attacks those dovetail points: Bogost's "The Rhetoric of Video Games." Unpacking this reading had a twofold purpose for the class: first, establishing "procedural rhetoric" as a concept that would guide their later game design, and second, demonstrating conventions of academic argument, which students would have to do in order to produce their series of Summary/Response assignments.

One simple strategy to achieve both aims, and to help propel class discussion, which can be difficult when starting into a challenging reading, was to use a set of discussion questions. Prior to discussion day, the class was divided into seven small groups, one for each question. (These groups also served as early prototypes for eventual design groups.) The discussion questions asked mostly for comprehension of a few concepts, and we circled the room with each team offering their takes on

the questions, while I recorded answers on the board to construct a concept map. After getting all questions on the board, we discussed the concept map as a class, showing how concepts laid out early — play, procedurality, rhetoric (all three subjects of their own discussion questions) — collide to create the new concept of “procedural rhetoric,” which the article then explores through case studies (the subject of another question). The solidifying concept map then served as a segue into the Summary/Response writing project. The overview, then, provided insight into how academic writers “construct knowledge” by engaging overlapping concepts, all to arrive at a central claim, and then explore those concepts through case studies, which serve as a form of evidentiary support. Dividing the work among the class made it possible for more voices to engage in the conversation, while the recap afterwards helped solidify the basic claim/evidence distinction that was to guide the summaries they would have to write later. Dividing up the work and providing questions ahead of time helped “flip” the class, putting students in charge of leading the discussion, while I could pivot their comprehension towards application, in the form of their upcoming assignments.

This approach would mirror the “studio” approach that dominated the second half of the course. Settled by then into their design teams, students had time to actively collaborate during course hours. My contribution to the process was to work with each group independently, asking them to recap their design decisions and outstanding issues, so that I could help guide them towards a set of benchmarks, like producing a full instruction set or a working demo. Both approaches favor active student engagement, with the professor serving more as coach and facilitator.

## **SOCI 1101**

### *Gameplay Portfolio*

Over the course of the semester, students complete 10 weekly assignments linking readings, course content, and gameplay. These comprise a portfolio demonstrating student learning growth. Students are encouraged to use the portfolio to reflect on artifacts and instances of learning, as well as games they have played, when doing their game design project. Often, students take inspiration from earlier themes, conceptual analyses, or gameplay experiences when creating rules, mechanics, or game spaces for their games. Using *Monopoly*-type boards and movement rules is not uncommon after they have played *Sociopoly*, for example. Portfolio entries mostly take the form of answering critical thinking or analytical questions, but also include generating design elements, creative writing, and original data collection and analysis.

### *Sociology Content Exam*

Toward the end of the semester when the LC has transitioned to workshopping game design, I give a cumulative exam covering the sociological course content. The exam is all essay questions. There is one question for each course topic and students choose four to answer.

### *Teaching a Week in the Course*

This description zooms in to what happens in regular SOCI 1101 class meetings and provides an account of “teaching the game.” The first day (of two) for each week’s topic is primarily PowerPoint lecture punctuated by videos and discussions. Armed with core concepts, students complete assigned readings before the second day, then come to class ready for game-based learning and portfolio work.

In groups, they play the assigned game and work on the week's portfolio entry, completing it before the following week begins.

For example, Week 10 covers bureaucracy, authority, and rationalization. Lecture begins with a review of pertinent Weberian theory and key points from earlier in the course: that games are created in specific social and ideological contexts and are a reflection, to some extent, of those contexts. A key aspect of modern contexts is that boundaries between work and play are increasingly blurred, and we incentivize work by framing it as play (as with gamification of the workplace). Further, play is increasingly used to generate profits (e.g., playbour, mods, and marketplaces for user-generated content or the 20% Project as popularized by Google). Here, someone always makes a connection to social media. Their experiences with YouTube, Twitch, and TikTok have taught them that stunning amounts of collective hustling yield negligible returns of wealth, power, and prestige for everyday individuals compared to the corporations and influencers encouraging them to produce and consume.

I steer the student-driven discussion about the (dis)enchantment of social media fame toward a larger class discussion about how work shapes the ways that students see themselves and the people and objects they interact with. Students who are servers report doing emotion work to maximize tips; students working retail with quotas see customer interactions as data points; and I share my story of how working for years as a transcriptionist in my 20s forever altered my thought process. I think and type using macros; it is super-efficient (and fun!). The point is that if work is highly rationalized then people are likely to view interactions through a lens of efficiency and profit.

This brings us to the first day's finale, *Papers, Please – The Short Film*, an official adaptation of the week's game. *Papers, Please* is a "dystopian document thriller," a sharp critique of rationalized bureaucracies and the ideology of work-as-play—literally a game about work. I send students home to read "Glory to Arstozka: Morality, Rationality, and the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy in *Papers, Please*" (Morrisette, 2017) and "Work" (Bogost, 2011).

Students receive the weekly portfolio entry prompt upon arriving for the second day and are tasked with playing *Papers, Please* in their groups for the duration of the period (see Collaborative Workspace below). The prompt requires students to analyze *Papers, Please* in terms of (subverting) the iron cage and ethical decision-making, to reflect on the experience of processing immigrants for a wage, and to flex their creative muscles to write a letter of resignation from their Arstotskan immigration job conveying issues in terms of course concepts from the week. My role is to spend time with each group facilitating both their gameplay and analysis.

Students will have trouble analyzing a game if they cannot play it. Or, to put another way, students need sufficient data from which to draw analysis. They occasionally require help with controls or figuring out what to do next. Instructors who are avid game players may take their own expertise for granted and must be especially attentive to these issues. I encourage students to figure things out on their own or in their groups, first quietly observing, then giving hints, and finally revealing solutions if they are teetering on the brink of frustration. When sitting with groups, I ask probing questions to spur reflection on thoughts and feelings about the game and what they are doing, as well as more specific questions to spark analysis. In the last 10 minutes of class, students peel away from their machines and we have a quick debrief of their gameplay. I field any questions before sending them



home to complete the portfolio entry. They submit and receive personalized feedback on these before the following week when we embark on the next topic.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

### ENGL 1101

- Engagement: 25%
- Written Projects: 75%
  - Gaming Story: 10%
  - Summary/Responses: 20%
  - Group Gaming Narrative: 10%
  - Group Game Proposal: 20%
  - Demo & Presentation: 15%
  - Final Evaluation: 25%

### SOCI 1101

- Gameplay Portfolio (10 pieces, evenly distributed): 55%
- Game Design Project: 25%
  - Serious Game Proposal Draft: 5%
  - Serious Game Proposal: 15%
  - Presentation: 20%
  - Demo: 20%
  - Artist's Statement: 30%
  - Peer Evaluation: 10%
- Sociology Content Exam: 20%

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

### Week 1 (ENGL 1101): Course Introduction

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Course introductions
- Defining “rhetorical thinking”
- Writing as a “process”
- Assigning first essay project (Gaming Story)

## **Week 1 (SOCI 1101): Thinking Sociologically**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Course introduction
- What is sociology? Defining sociology; society; culture; institutions; sociological imagination
- Introducing sociological theory: structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interaction

### *Assignments*

- “The Promise of Sociology” (Mills, 1959)
- “Invitation to Sociology” (Berger, 1963)
- Portfolio entry 1: Thinking sociologically: Social theory and gamification

## **Week 2 (ENGL 1101):**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- The varieties of gameplay experiences: social, mental, emotional
- Schell’s 4 elements of games (story, gameplay, aesthetics, technology)
- Students play *Munchkin* and discuss story/gameplay/aesthetic elements, how the game supports multiple experiences

### *Assignments*

- Gaming Story essay due

## **Week 2 (SOCI 1101): Thinking Gamefully: Sociology in My Video Games?!**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Introducing philosophy of science, sociological research methods, and information literacy
- How do sociologists study games?

### *Assignments*

- “Sociology and Role-Playing Games” (Williams et al., 2018)
- “The Sociology of Video Games” (Boulton & Cremin, 2011)
- Portfolio entry 2: Thinking gamefully: *The Parable of the Blind Man and the Elephant*

## **Week 3 (ENGL 1101): Procedural Rhetoric**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Defining core concepts like procedurality, possibility space, play, and rhetoric

### Assignments

- “The Rhetoric of Video Games” (Bogost, 2008)

### Week 3 (SOCI 1101): Persuasive Games and Procedural Rhetoric

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Defining ideology
- Exploring games as designed experiences
- Discussing “The Unfulfilled Potential of Video Games”
- Playing the *McDonald’s Video Game*

### Assignments

- “The Rhetoric of Video Games” (Bogost, 2008)
- Portfolio entry 3: *McDonald’s Video Game*: Procedural rhetoric and persuasive games

### Week 4 (ENGL 1101): Making Sense of Academic Writing

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Setting up the first project(s), using Summaries & Responses to work on the foundational components of academic writing: claim, evidence, purpose, audience
- MLA citation style

### Assignments

- 1st Draft of Summary/Response #1 Due

### Week 4 (SOCI 1101): Games, the Magic Circle, and the “Real” World

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Unpacking concepts for discussing the relationship between games and the “real world”: magic circle, spheres of reality, and frame analysis
- Analyzing this relationship through video game advertisements
- Playing *The Stanley Parable*

### Assignments

- “Jerked Around by the Magic Circle” (Zimmerman, 2012)
- “A Rape in Cyberspace” (Dibbell, 1993)
- Portfolio entry 4: *The Stanley Parable*: Games are never “just” games

## **Week 5 (ENGL 1101): Peer Reviewing First Assignment**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Peer review Workshop on thesis statements, evidential support, writing clear sentences

### *Assignments*

- Final Draft of Summary/Response #1 Due

## **Week 5 (SOCI 1101): Culture/Ludus**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Identifying elements of culture: material and symbolic culture; signs, symbols, and gestures; norms, values, and beliefs; subcultures
- Discussing ethnocentrism and cultural relativism
- Exploring the relationship between games and culture
- Analyzing cultural artifacts that students bring to class
- Applying concepts through watching “Failure Workshop: The Story of ‘Kachina’” and playing *Never Alone*

### *Assignments*

- “An Introduction to the Gameful World” (Walz & Deterding, 2015)
- “Surviving the Colonial Blizzard” (Schlag, 2018)
- Portfolio entry 5: *Never Alone*: Teaching culture through video games

## **Week 6 (ENGL 1101): Playful Design; Building Better Habits through Play**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Discussing how material objects can intervene in and help alter patterns of behavior, using examples of common college student habits
- Establishing Design Groups
- Assign Group Gaming Narrative
- Peer Review Workshop for S/R #2

### *Assignments*

- “Pleasurable Troublemakers” (Hassenzahl & Laschke, 2014)
- Summary/Response #2 Due

## **Week 6 (SOCI 1101): Socialization: Learning by Design**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Defining key concepts: socialization, self, identity, role
- Google as an Agent of Socialization activity
- Discussing nonhuman objects as agents of socialization
- Discussing dramaturgy and multiplayer video games

### *Assignments*

- “Pleasurable Troublemakers” (Hassenzahl & Laschke, 2014)
- “The Game Consists of *Elements*” and “The Elements Support a *Theme*” (Schell, 2015)

## **Week 7 (ENGL 1101): Games and/versus Narrative**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Discussing narrative genres and their power to mold expectations
- Individual group members submit potential topics/pitches for narrative ideas; groups work on synthesizing and finding a clear direction

### *Assignments*

- “The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line” (Jørgensen, 2016)
- Summary/Response #3 Due

## **Week 7 (SOCI 1101): Deviance: Playing by the Rules (or not)**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Defining key concepts: deviance, sanctions, and labeling theory
- Discussing students’ experiences with cheating in video games to apply concepts (see Consalvo, 2007)
- Presenting and discussing Zagal’s “Encouraging Ethical Reflection with Videogames” (2012)
- Playing and analyzing example of white phosphorous scene in *Spec Ops: The Line*
- Playing *Grand Theft Auto V*

### *Assignments*

- “On Being Sane in Insane Places” (Rosenhan, 1973)
- “The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line” (Jørgensen, 2016)
- Portfolio entry 6: *Grand Theft Auto V*: Seeing deviance, ethics, and (im)morality through video games

## **Week 8 (ENGL 1101): Workshop: 1st Group Project**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Workshops for Group Gaming Narrative

### *Assignments*

- Group Gaming Narrative due

## **Week 8 (SOCI 1101): Social Class**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Introducing key concepts: social inequality, social stratification, class, power, status, prestige
- Playing *Sociopoly* (one full class period minimum!)
- Debriefing *Sociopoly*

### *Assignments*

- “Ideological Frames” (Bogost, 2007)
- “Gamification and Post-Ford Capitalism” (Rey, 2015)
- Portfolio entry 7: *Sociopoly* (or *Spent* for students who are absent): Reflections on social class stratification

## **Week 9 (ENGL 1101): Research Fundamentals**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Conducting inquiry, assessing sources for reliability
- Open time at library for groups to find research relevant to their sociological topic

### *Assignments*

- Summary/Response #4 Due. (Instead of being based on a common reading, this one is based on a quality source found at the library during the week.)

## **Week 9 (SOCI 1101): Intersectionality: Gender and Sexuality / Race and Ethnicity**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Defining key terms
- Applying social construction of race and ethnicity to shifting census categories over time
- Explaining Gamergate
- Discussing racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on in games and gaming culture

### *Assignments*

- “Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity” (Braithwaite, 2016)

- Portfolio entry 8: Multiplayer gameplay data collection and analysis

#### **Week 10 (ENGL 1101): Game Mechanics**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Brief demonstrations of basic game mechanics, using simple board & card games
- Groups continue to develop Game Proposal

##### *Assignments*

- 1<sup>st</sup> Draft of Group Game Proposal Due

#### **Week 10 (SOCI 1101): Bureaucracy, Authority, and Rationalization**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Reviewing key ideas: Weberian theory, iron cage, and McDonaldization
- Discussing the rationalization of work
- Discussing work-as-play
- Watching *Papers, Please – The Short Film*
- Playing *Papers, Please*

##### *Assignments*

- “Glory to Arstotzka” (Morrissette, 2017)
- “Work” (Bogost, 2011)
- Portfolio entry 9: *Papers, Please*: Dystopian fiction and the iron cage

#### **Week 11 (ENGL 1101): Developing Game Proposal**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Continued workshopping Integrating sources into Game Proposal

##### *Assignments*

- Group Game Proposal Due

#### **Week 11 (SOCI 1101): Governance and Surveillance Society**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Defining key terms: governance, panoptic gaze, care of the self
- Watching *Black Mirror* episode “Nosedive”
- Applying concepts to analyze “Nosedive” in conjunction with learning about China’s social credit system

- Playing *Orwell*

#### *Assignments*

- “Foucault’s Fitbit” (Whitson, 2015)
- “Exercise” (Bogost, 2011)
- Portfolio entry 10: *Orwell*: Surveillance, data, and you: Are your thoughts free?

#### **Weeks 12-14 (Both Sections): Developing Demo**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Develop first version of board/space
- Develop gameplay sequence
- Brainstorm “interesting choices”
- Test gameplay sequence for player interactivity
- Simulate gameplay to reach “interesting choices”
- Basic public speaking tips
- Finalize demo
- Playtesting, if possible
- Assignments
- Sociology Content Exam

#### **Week 15 (Both Sections): Presentations and Demos**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Groups showcase their games in a formal presentation
- Other students playtest and give feedback on the demos

#### **Week 16 (ENGL 1101): Final Conferences**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Scheduled 1-on-1 conferences with students to review Final Evaluation Paper/Artist’s Statement

##### *Assignments*

- Final Evaluation Essay Due

#### **Week 16 (SOCI 1101): Games and Social Change**

##### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Watching and discussing TED Talk: “Gaming Can Make a Better World” (McGonigal, 2010)



## Assignments

- Artist's Statement Due

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

### Overview

A version of the Games in Society LC has been offered four times between Spring 2018 and Fall 2019. It was originally developed by David and Dr. Suzanne Biedenbach, an English instructor with prior experience with a gaming-themed LC. Suzanne alternated between Composition 1 and 2 courses as the LC's English component and sometimes had students in simultaneous English support classes. Our flexibility to cater to diverse student needs meant that this variation affected the level of support we offered, but it did not affect the LC's overall structure or operation. Indeed, the complexity of the LC evolved alongside our ability to teach the material and guide the game design project. In Spring 2018, the LC was only English and Sociology courses, but in Fall 2018 we added a first-year seminar (GGC 1000), which was part of a college-wide HIP initiative to orient freshmen to college and improve student success and retention. That course did not directly help the LC meet its learning objectives. Therefore, when Scott took over the English component in Fall 2019, we switched to the information literacy first-year seminar that specifically bolstered the nascent research portion of the game design project. The LC was significantly altered each semester as we learned from what did not work and improved on what did. The importance of the instructors' flexibility in individual course design and willingness to collaborate toward integrative learning cannot be overstated. Instructors with genuine interest in opting into themed LCs tend to produce more cohesive, coherent learning experiences for students than instructors who are forced to participate or who misunderstand the purpose and potential of LCs. As we strove to create a functionally unified group of classes, our clearest challenges came from scheduling, and balancing individual and group responsibilities. Aided by a unique collaborative workspace, though, we can show how our students were ultimately successful in their designs.

### Aligning Calendars/Making Time for Workshops and Gameplay

To facilitate the shared assignment sequence over both courses, creating an aligned calendar was a foundational practice. This calendar had to respond to three challenges: creating a consistent shared schedule for the LC's shared assignment sequence, enabling both core classes to engage readings at their own pace, and providing ample time for concrete game design and development.

Understanding that the course must afford the development of a narrative, gameplay system, and research, as well as plenty of time for busy college freshmen to collaborate and execute their design, we roughed out a shared schedule right away, which accounted for roughly 60-70% of the courses' run time. (See Expanded Course Outline for more details.) For Sociology, which has a great deal of content to cover, this required a delicate balancing act among course content, readings, and making time for gameplay. Earlier versions of the course attempted to simply layer game stuff on top of the regular SOCI 1101 content, but through regular modifications – finding the perfect reading to pair with a game here; integrating a more accessible game better into lecture there – the course now effectively weaves together sociology and game studies, and the LC version of SOCI 1101 is a fundamentally different experience than the regular SOCI 1101.

The challenge for English is that First-Year Writing is a more process-oriented enterprise, where skills in critical reading can be better developed with less raw content to cover. The second challenge became, then, to balance the needs of both courses against not only one another, but against the demands of the shared assignment sequence. Sharing reading assignments across both courses was the elegant solution that allowed each course to use its “own time” in ways geared towards the distinct objectives of both classes while simultaneously enabling the shared assignment sequence. While the more content-driven Sociology class was able to fold in more readings and gameplay experiences, the more process-driven English class got by on fewer readings, but with a greater emphasis on developing rhetorical reading skills and writing effective summaries. The three shared readings – Bogost’s “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” Hassenzahl & Laschke’s “Pleasurable Troublemakers,” and Jørgensen’s “The Positive Discomfort of SpecOps: The Line” – were curated with an eye on three fundamental corners of the shared game design assignment sequence: procedurality, materiality, and narrative. (A fourth shared reading was reabsorbed back into Sociology to allow more time for the English class to kickstart the research process.)

The third challenge was allowing enough time for students to complete the difficult process of formalizing and actually building the game. This was incrementally increased from zero (students almost exclusively worked outside of class in Spring 2018) to three weeks. In Fall 2019, the instructors agreed to allot three full weeks to the construction and workshopping phase, before demos and presentations commenced. This decision proved wise for a few reasons. First, not all groups collaborated smoothly; while having several weeks and two collaborative projects helped most teams find a groove before the physical design process began, others experienced more persistent personality and/or communication conflicts that often required some intervention to disentangle. Second, the wide window also allowed instructors to intervene with groups whose proposals, especially with regards to gameplay, were underdeveloped. Given the limited time the classes could allocate to tabletop gameplay, many groups defaulted to the mechanics they associated with the board games of their youth, with randomized dice and card mechanics crowding out the player choices necessary to crystallize the game’s procedural rhetoric. With further coaching, those elements could be repurposed or discarded for a better, more playable product. Third, the act of creation meant engaging an unfamiliar, and often infantilized, set of skills: physical craftsmanship. Many students were audibly surprised when one instructor appeared in class carrying a bag of supplies that wouldn’t seem out of place in an elementary school: construction paper, glue sticks, scissors. In addition to re-engaging those skills, students also realized that concrete crafting decisions would have far-reaching consequences. Choosing the size of, say, a playing piece was hardly arbitrary; that choice affects not only how players experience the narrative (the depiction of character), but puts demands on the size of the board or the ways that pieces interact with one another.

### **Collaborative Workspace**

One key to the success of the course came down to scheduling. In previous iterations of the LC, courses were not scheduled back-to-back in the same room. (Indeed, one time they were scheduled back-to-back but on opposite ends of the campus so that students were late every day to the second class!) In Fall 2019 though, the courses were scheduled back-to-back, which enhanced the feeling of continuity we had set out to provide. Furthermore, the Sociology and English sections were scheduled in the same classroom, which allowed student groups to enjoy a fairly unbroken experience between the two classes. This paid particular dividends when the course entered the long studio phase where

groups worked on their game designs, as conversations started in the earlier class could spill over into the latter. The shared location created a convenient way for the instructors to touch base as well, allowing the later instructor to follow up with students or groups who were struggling in the earlier class and allowing students to see both of their instructors at the same time.

The classroom itself was also a strength; it was newly designed to facilitate active and project-based learning. Desks were arranged not in the usual long lecture-style rows, but in six distinct pods, each with four rolling chairs around a movable table. Each pod included a large monitor, wired to the instructor's digital lectern that displayed information that instructors wished to keep visible throughout the session. Students could also hook their own laptops to the monitor to display their work-in-progress, and during gameplay sessions students could take turns playing, observing, and working in their small groups. This set-up resulted in more active engagement and effective game-based learning than in a traditional classroom (as in previous semesters of the LC) where groups of students rather ineffectually gathered around tiny laptop screens or one student at a time played on the single large lecture screen while the other 20 observed. Additionally, the enhanced learning classroom featured rolling whiteboards that students used during their game design workshops and lockable storage cabinets for their work. The environment certainly helped facilitate group communication and collaboration and allowed for instructors to move freely about the room.

### **Balancing Individual & Group Work**

While there are clear pedagogical benefits to a collaborative design project, they can be a minefield when it comes to assessment. Students often resent the pressure applied to their grades by group work, which can be easily hampered by uncooperative members. While assembling groups early in the semester (by the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> week) hopefully allows the team to grow closer (and therefore, more accountable), for the English section in particular, group work exerted a strong pull on the overall grade, counting for almost 50% of the course average, whereas the Sociology section only counts it as 25% of the grade. The heavy weight hopefully makes group members more accountable to one another, as does the factoring in of a group evaluation (conducted as a standalone item in Sociology, and folded into the Demo/Presentation grade in English) where members evaluate the effectiveness of their teammates. Use of clear rubrics for evaluating individual and group work added vital transparency; if someone was not doing their share, we reminded them about the group evaluations.

In the English section, students responded well to the nearly 50/50 balance. Individual engagement and participation counted for a great deal, and while individual assignments only accounted for 25% of the grade, students knew they could revise and resubmit work at practically anytime, allowing them to retain a degree of control apart from their group work.

### **Reflections on the Final Designed Products**

Students have created a range of games with varying levels of success. Nearly all have been analog, with a couple using some digital tools. Sociological themes have included institutional racism, social media's effects on adolescents' mental health, and gender in video game streaming. Some projects are founded on a great idea (e.g., *The Cycle*, which told a complex branching narrative about gangs and generational poverty where player choice affects the outcome), while others excel in visual presentation oozing with style. Some have an especially clever central mechanic (e.g., *Priced Out!*,

a game about gentrification that featured a two-layered *Monopoly*-style game board that could be rotated to increase the “gentrification level” each unit of game time, which changed property and utility values, prevalence of public assistance, and other cost-of-living measures and put pressure on players), while others mount effective procedural rhetorics (e.g., *Nemus*, a critique of Amazonian deforestation where four factions competing for resources must balance their own needs while cooperating against an environmental mechanic that steadily cuts off access to those resources). Most games had something laudable, but the best games were impressive on all measures. The most successful game was *Unspoken*, a life-sized board game about bullying, body shaming, and the power of language, aimed at an adolescent audience. The goal of the game was to navigate a board depicting a high school while avoiding/surviving encounters with bullies. Players could gain and lose confidence and social status and had to manage these variables. For example, they were encouraged to role-play their characters by wearing pieces of their characters’ clothing (e.g., Marcus’s jacket or Grace’s glasses) that offered bonuses.

However, other groups’ projects faltered. The least successful teams built games entirely on simple “roll and move” mechanics, of the kind in most kids board games. While there is a place for randomness in game design, these oversimplified mechanics tended to rule out any interesting player choice, and thereby prevent the game from making a clear statement through procedural rhetoric. These teams, we found, tended to rely solely on narrative elements to provide broad social metaphors. In future iterations, earlier interventions into gameplay design will be helpful, as will carving out more time for gameplay and analysis in class, especially with more complex games that provide interesting choices.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

Future changes to this LC focus on making existing HIPs more robust. LCs themselves are HIPs, and this one contains others, from being exclusively for freshmen and featuring a first-year seminar to its use of integrative learning and collaborative projects. HIPs have cumulative effects; the more that students engage in, the more beneficial they are. They also have compensatory effects; HIPs benefit students more than what would be expected, especially when controlling for variables that are associated with lower student success, such as being from marginalized groups or being the family pioneer to attend college (Watson et al., 2016). Here, we discuss three key improvements: increasing interdisciplinarity, enhancing research opportunities, and migrating to ePortfolios.

### **Increasing Interdisciplinarity**

Expanding the interdisciplinarity of the LC will broaden the game design project, exposing students to other aspects of game development (e.g., coding, art). It will also enhance their collaborative problem-solving abilities and promote appreciation of alternative viewpoints as they interact with more students and instructors. Importantly, they will see how different disciplinary skills, knowledge, and research come to bear on their sociological topic.

One virtue of the current LC structure is that, by having students design tabletop games, there is less pressure to keep up with prevailing technology. Still, nearly every semester, students ask about digital game design. At the end of the most recent semester, we invited representatives from our college’s Game Development Club to speak to the LC, hopefully providing the next step for those interested

in pursuing video game design. Still, an interdisciplinary partnership with Information Technology/Computer Science, while ideal, hits a difficult gap. The freshmen taking first-year composition are not advanced enough to take programming courses at that level. An upper-division version of this LC, though, that could partner more focused Sociology courses with digital/technical writing courses in English, could enable that partnership.

### Enhancing Research Opportunities

The research component of the game design project was introduced in Spring 2019 to address the problem of ineffective procedural rhetorics that were too often grounded in opinion. That semester, we encouraged an especially advanced group (who made the women in streaming game) to submit their demo to a local conference on gender and sexuality. In Fall 2019, we added the information literacy first-year seminar to the LC to enhance the research component of the game design project and sent the *Unspoken* group to demo at a LC symposium. We want to continue bolstering this part of the project, encouraging students to practice systemic inquiry, gather and/or analyze empirical data, and use their insights to inform their game design. We are inspired by games used in the course, such as *Sociopoly* and *Never Alone*, that demonstrate the value of research and community involvement in creating meaningful games about sociological topics. Providing more structured opportunities for public demos, showcases, and conference presentations aligns with incorporating different types of courses into the LC, as they expand the scope of possibility for dissemination of student work.

### Migrating to ePortfolios

The Gameplay Portfolio in the Sociology course is not meant to carry on past the course. It is an isolated portfolio, which may be an oxymoron, but represents the future intent of this assignment. ePortfolios are *digital* repositories of student work and may be constructed throughout an undergraduate career. They allow students to catalog and organize their learning, preserve learning artifacts, and reflect on their learning, and they allow for the assessment of college-wide student learning outcomes. In 2016, the Association of American Colleges and Universities designated ePortfolios as the newest item on its list of HIPs. GGC has recently licensed an ePortfolio platform available to all faculty and students, so we will be ready to implement this next time.

Teaching a Games in Society LC offers numerous opportunities and pitfalls. Variables from the level of student to the disciplines comprising the LC to ways that students access games make flexibility and collaboration key characteristics of instructors. As more colleges and universities adopt HIP initiatives, more students will have LCs as part of their educational experience. We hope that the case presented here inspires others to try something similar, to build on our successes, and to learn from our shortcomings.

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## CHAPTER 17.

### GAME ON! THE RHETORIC AND LANGUAGE OF VIDEOGAMES (ENGL 203)

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**Course Title:** ENGL 203: Game On! The Rhetoric and Language of Videogames

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** Three

**Course Length:** Sixteen Weeks

**Course Medium:** Online

**Course Keywords:** Rhetoric, Composition, Multimodal, Design, Digital, Game Studies, Analysis

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

Whether you're raiding in *World of Warcraft* or playing *Candy Crush* on your phone, chances are games play an important role in your daily life. In this class, we will explore how games act upon us and our world, from the experiences of play to the messages they put forward. You'll be expected not only to read about games and watch games, but to play and even make games yourself. We'll explore topics such as what we mean when we call something a game, how games work persuasively, and how games interact with various intersections of identity, like gender, race, sexuality, and disability. You'll also analyze the various genres that arise around games, such as reviews, walkthroughs, let's plays, and chat forums. No prior gaming experience is necessary, and no purchase of any gaming equipment such as consoles or controllers is necessary either.

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

English 203 is a topics course meant to meet several of the requirements for the University of Kansas Core Curriculum. The three core goals of ENGL 203 are:

1. Reading consciously and contextually to develop interpretations of texts
2. Demonstrating the ability to use English studies methodologies to think critically about language, texts, and experience
3. Writing in ways appropriate to the course subject

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In the context of a specific videogame-oriented 203, the goals have to be bent and broadened a little to encompass the multimodal nature of the texts being discussed; one does not ‘read’ most games but plays them. So, my revised set of course goals that adhere to the spirit of the originals but adapt to the course I have designed are as follows:

1. Playing critically and analytically in order to understand the ways in which the game functions rhetorically
2. Using critical lenses like rhetorical genre studies and feminist, queer, and critical race theory to think critically about both games and the texts that arise around and in response to them
3. Compose in ways that acknowledge and make use of the affordances of interactive media, through both traditional text and multimodal mediums.

Taken together, these goals allow for a more thorough exploration of the digital game medium without being shackled to traditional English classroom assumptions of written texts, either in the context of what is being interpreted or what is being composed.

## COURSE CONTEXT

This course fulfills some requirements of the KU Core Curriculum, which all undergraduate students must complete in order to earn their degree. Thus, while it is housed in the English department, it is not a major-specific course and attracts students from across the disciplines. Students taking English 203 are often sophomores, still working on fulfilling core requirements while beginning major coursework but can be juniors or seniors looking for an elective, or freshmen who have tested out of the first-year composition sequence. This course, as it was taught the first time, was advertised to students in the Film and Media Studies (FMS) and Computer Science (CS) departments and has seen high enrollment from these programs. Since the course is one of several sections of ENGL 203, each with a different topic, students looking for the credit self-select the one they have the most interest in. This means that students generally have at least a passing understanding of games when they enter the class, and most of them game for fun. Some students self-identify as ‘gamers’ and claim it as their primary hobby, while other students consider their relationship to games to be more casual. Because of the presence of FMS and CS students, several students are already familiar with a lot of the composing technologies for the course, such as video editing and simple coding in game engines, and have a large set of digital literacies they can draw on coming into class.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

Because of how highly integrated use of personal technology is to the content of the course, this class functions well as an entirely online offering. The course is a mix of synchronous and asynchronous elements, with some days being devoted to whole-class discussion over voice chat in the Discord application (commonly used for voice chat in multiplayer games), and other days being structured activities to be completed either individually or in static pre-assigned groups (for consistency, the last time this class was run, Monday and Friday were synchronous days and Wednesday was asynchronous). This course structure was originally decided upon because of the nebulous nature of instruction during the Fall 2020 semester, due to the need for social distancing protocols in instruction, rather than for any specific pedagogical concern. With only minor adjustments to course

content, this course could work well as an entirely in-person offering in a traditional classroom or as an entirely asynchronous online experience.

The static groups are called ‘clans’ and function as places for collaborative work to submit assignments, as well as peer feedback on individual work. Lecture is not present, and feedback is given either in real-time during discussion or in the form of written response to the activities. Small videos are created to verbally walk students through large assignments or to demonstrate new software to be used for class. The clans, the videos, and the synchronous discussions were all structured in an attempt to create a sense of classroom community and connection to the instructor even though we were not meeting in a physical classroom. Large assignments are structured as ‘Questlines’ with the larger writing assignment and scaffolding presented as ‘quests’ within that questline, to fit in aesthetically with the course and also to emphasize that the way in which students chose to tackle the assignments was open to individual choice, much like how to complete quests in a role-playing game.

For every week, a document called a ‘checklist’ is posted that outlines expectations for the week, and what days will be discussion versus activity. Activities are always designed to be completed during the period specifically allotted for class, so students don’t have to devote extra time outside of class time. This course is ultimately designed for flexibility of both instruction and student workload: students who opt to take entirely online classes often have schedules that make a traditional classroom experience difficult to manage, and so the course is designed to offer easy asynchronous alternatives to students who can’t manage being present for discussion.

#### COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

This course has two required texts (Ian Bogost’s *Persuasive Games* and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s *Rules of Play*), but also relies heavily on readings, videos and games that are available freely online, with the exception of the game *Democratic Socialism Simulator*, which costs \$3. This was done for multiple reasons: to ensure that students weren’t paying out of pocket for an excess of materials, since the university bookstore generally does not allow for game keys to be put down as course materials so students could buy them with financial aid, and also to ensure that students could engage with all of the media with minimal technological requirements; no top-dollar graphics cards or consoles necessary. Games that would tie into relevant course content were selected, so when the class was talking about gaming communities, students played games with vibrant and complex communities built within them, such as *World of Warcraft*. Similarly, when students were engaged in rhetorical game design, they played games that displayed similar design proficiencies to those they could enact in their projects, like the Twine game *You are Jeff Bezos*, and when the class discussed identity, games with themes of identity like *dys4ia* (a game about the author’s gender-affirming transition) were selected.

Since the course is online, there are certain technological requirements: access to a computer with minimal specs and an internet connection. The course also requires the use of several apps and pieces of software to engage in the course and complete assignments, including: Discord, for group work and large class discussion; Blackboard, for accessing readings and turning in assignments; some form of screen capture software to record gameplay (the class was modeled using the free software Screencast-o-Matic; the student’s preferred form of video editing software (students unfamiliar were

given a tutorial of the free software OpenShot); and a beginner's game design engine, either the Unity Playground interface or the Twine interactive fiction engine.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

1. Readings/Viewings/Playings: Before every class, students are asked to engage with a text about games in some way. Depending on the subject of the day, the text could be an article or book chapter to read, a video to watch, or a game to play (either to completion or for a set period of time). Class then revolves around either discussion of the text or using what they learned from the text to complete an activity that tests their analysis and understanding.
2. Grinds: When class is structured asynchronously, students submit their activities as 'grinds,' to reference the phenomena in role-playing games of completing small tasks to earn experience and level up. Grinds are low-stakes and thus worth only a small amount of points each and include things like freewrites and collaborative analysis or summary of texts completed with their groups.
3. Clan Raids: This assignment mimics the phenomenon of limited-time quests that appear in-game for a short duration and then disappear, as in *Destiny*. A new clan raid is posted each week, and clans have until Friday at 11:59pm to complete the raid, which takes the form of a short composing task that combines the learning from that week. Each clan must complete five raids over the course of the semester, so clans can be selective about which raids they choose to pursue, since thirteen total are posted.
4. Main Questline 1 – Rhetorical Game Review: For their first large assignment, students must select a game and engage with the genre of the game review, with a twist. While they must address all of the normal conventions of a review (mechanics, visuals, playability, etc), they must also devote time to discussing and reviewing the way in which the game uses procedural and other forms of rhetoric to act persuasively on the player.
5. Main Questline 2 – Analytical Let's Play: Their second assignment also involves students analyzing the rhetoric of a given game, but with different parameters and a different focus. The subject of this unit is "Games and Identity" so students must construct an argument about how a particular game deals with and impacts identity write broadly (identity of the players, identity of the characters, etc). Further, instead of writing, students must make a video, wherein they provide commentary over gameplay that supports and demonstrates their argument. Gameplay on screen and commentary must be related: the visual element cannot simply be a backdrop. Students also complete two smaller quests in addition to the making of the video:
  1. Annotated Bibliography: As scaffolding, students have to provide a small annotated bibliography of four sources that they intend to use to support their video argument in their let's play. Two of these sources can be things from class, but at least two must be found through independent research.
  2. Outline: Students must also submit a brief (250-300) word outline, describing their central argument, how they intend to integrate sources, and how gameplay will supplement their argument.
6. Main Questline 3 – Rhetorical Game Design: For their final project, students are tasked with

creating a simple videogame (that can be played in ten minutes) that uses procedural rhetoric to make an argument and act persuasively on the player. Minimal coding in either Javascript or C# (depending on if Twine or Unity Playground is used) is required for this assignment. This project is very in-depth, so lots of scaffolding is provided:

1. Game Development Journal: Students keep a weekly journal where they submit brief (250 word) entries responding to prompts as they move through the game development process, from brainstorming to beta-testing to a final reflection on the finished product.
2. Storyboard: Students must submit a brief (250 word) outline that can contain visual components, demonstrating the rhetorical potential of their game and explaining their mechanics.
3. Game Developer Pitch: Students must submit a written 500 word document to a public discussion board that acts as a business pitch, attempting to persuade their classmates to play their game. Students are told to think of their classmates as potential investors in their project, and to be as persuasive as possible about the potential of their project.

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

- Grinds: 10%
- Clan Raids: 15%
- Main Questline 1: 20%
- Main Questline 2: 20%
- Main Questline 3: 25%

All of the large projects from the questlines (the game review, let's play, and game) are assessed using a collaboratively generated rubric. As a grinding activity, clans, are asked to come up with the criteria they would use to assess the project, if they were the teacher. Then the class discusses and negotiates these criteria, and a final rubric that contains the thoughts of all groups is generated that informs how the projects are assessed.

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

### **Week 1: Course Introduction**

#### *Class Activities:*

- Introduction to the syllabus
- Clans introduce themselves in Discord
- Introduction to first assignment, the Rhetorical Game Review
- Defining Play

#### *Assignments:*

- Post questions about syllabus to Discord

- Introduction activity for clans on Discord
- Read first chapters from *Homo Ludens* by Huizinga and *Man, Play, and Games* by Caillois (PDFs available through KU Library)

## Week 2: Defining Key Terms

### Class Activities

- Defining 'game'
- Introducing procedural rhetoric
- Exploring the language of gaming

### Assignments:

- Read selection from McGonigal, *Reality is Broken* (PDF available through KU Library)
- Read Bogost, Ch.1, "Procedural Rhetoric"

## Week 3: Gaming Paratexts

### Class Activities:

- Examine the genre of the game review
- Examine the genre of the walkthrough
- Examine the genre of gaming chat forums

### Assignments:

- Read samples all genres from sites like *Kotaku*, *Polygon*, reddit, and 4chan. I recommend you select current and relevant sample. Examples:
  - <https://kotaku.com/resident-evil-2-the-kotaku-review-1831951036>
  - <https://www.gamesradar.com/untitled-goose-game-walkthrough-puzzle-guide/>
- Generate a sample game review as scaffolding

## Week 4: Multiplayer Games in Context

### Class Activities:

- Examine multiplayer gaming environments

### Assignments:

- Play several hours (2-4) of *World of Warcraft*
- Play several hours (2-4) of *Heroes of the Storm*
- Engage in peer review of Rhetorical Game Review drafts

## Week 5: Student Conferences

### Class Activities:

- One-on-one conferences with the instructor about their drafts

### Assignments:

- Revise draft based on instructor and peer feedback
- Submit Rhetorical Game Review

## Week 6: Multimodal Gaming Paratexts

### Class Activities:

- Introduction to the second assignment, the analytical let's play

Examine the genre of the gaming YouTube video

- Become familiar with the screencasting and video editing software for the assignment

### Assignments:

- Ask questions about the second assignment in Discord;
- Watch videos from GMTK and Feminist Frequency:
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFv6KAdQ5SE>
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_3FWnAT0pP8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3FWnAT0pP8)
- Complete the structured in-app tutorials for both Screencast-o-matic and OpenShot

## Week 7: Games and Identity, Part 1

### Class Activities:

- Discuss how games intersect with identity broadly
- Begin exploring the intersections between games and identity, including race/ gender/ sexuality/ability

### Assignments:

- Read Gee, ch.3, *What Video Games Can Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (PDF available through KU Libraries)
- Read selections from *Not Your Mama's Gamer*:
  - <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=10164>
  - <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=9131>
- Read selection from *First Person Scholar*: <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/gendered-spaces-and-cultures-in-video-games/>

## Week 8: Games and Identity, Part 2

### Class Activities:

- Continue exploring how games and identity intersect, including how certain identities are accepted or excluded by the community

### Assignments:

- Read selections from special issue of *Games Studies* on queer gaming:
  - [http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips\\_ruberg](http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg)
  - [http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/brubaker\\_dym\\_fiesler](http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/brubaker_dym_fiesler)
- Play flash game *Dys4ia* by Anna Anthropy;
- Read sample annotated bibliography and complete test entry in clans;
- Complete Annotated Bibliography

## Week 9: Games and Identity, Part 3

### Class Activities:

- Explore how games can be made welcoming or unwelcoming to certain identities at the level of development

### Assignments:

- Watch GMTK video series on accessibility in gaming: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLc38fcMfcV\\_vvWOhMDriBIVocTZ8mKQzR](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLc38fcMfcV_vvWOhMDriBIVocTZ8mKQzR)
- Read selections from *Sidequest* and *First Person Scholar*:
  - <https://sidequest.zone/2020/03/17/climbing-mount-celeste/>
  - <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/queer-modding/>
- Play game *Depression Quest*;
- Complete and submit Let's Play outline

## Week 10: Games in the World

### Class Activities:

- Explore how games are used as tools in spheres like education and politics, and often have agendas

### Assignments:

- Read Bogost, Ch. 8, "Procedural Literacy"
- Read Bogost, Ch. 2, "Political Processes"
- Play *Democratic Socialism Simulator*

- Complete and submit Analytical Let's Play

### **Week 11: Rhetorical Game Design**

#### *Class Activities:*

- Introduce the third assignment, designing a short digital game
- Discuss the design process
- Discuss creating meaningful play

#### *Assignments:*

- Read chapters 3 and 4 from *Rules of Play* by Salen and Zimmerman
- Complete first Game Dev Journal Entry

### **Week 12: Indie Game Sampling**

#### *Class Activities:*

- Play various indie games that students can use as inspiration for their final projects
- Discuss the role of interactivity and player choice

#### *Assignments:*

- Play *You are Jeff Bezos*
- Play *Marshmallow Day Spa* (available on itch.io)
- Read Ch. 6 of *Rules of Play*
- Read sample storyboard
- Complete Storyboard
- Complete second Game Dev Journal Entry

### **Week 13: Game Design Workshop**

#### *Class Activities:*

- Demonstrate Twine and Unity Playground interfaces
- Discuss the uses of games in business and marketing contexts

#### *Assignments:*

- Complete Twine tutorial
- Complete Unity Playground tutorial
- Read Bogost, Ch. 5
- Complete Third Game Dev Entry



## **Week 14: Game Dev Pitch**

### *Class Activities:*

- Present Game Dev Pitches
- Act as stakeholders for classmates and decide on investing in games

### *Assignments:*

- Complete Fourth Game Dev entry
- Complete Game Dev Pitch

## **Week 15: Beta Testing**

### *Class Activities:*

- Share game with clan for play-testing

### *Assignments:*

- Complete Fifth Game Dev Journal Entry

## **Week 16: Finals**

### *Class Activities*

- Finish debugging game

### *Assignments:*

- Final Game Dev Journal Entry
- All Clan Raids Completed
- Submit Digital Game

## **COURSE BEST PRACTICES**

Based on my experiences teaching this course, I would recommend being prepared to address great disparity in the identity and self-efficacy of your students in terms of gaming skill. Students who are not self-professed ‘gamers’ can and do often have valuable insight on the topics being discussed but can get drowned out in the enthusiasm of ‘gamers’ getting to finally talk about games in the classroom. Be sure to encourage dialogue both from seasoned gamers and from newcomers to the medium.

I originally envisioned this class as much more discussion-oriented, almost like a graduate seminar, with students submitting questions in advance to be considered during class. As the course evolved into its current digital iteration, however, I realized that 100% synchronous instruction was simply not viable due to concerns of access and transitioned to a mixed synchronous/asynchronous model. I think, with each lesson, I would ask myself “what is the ideal vehicle through which students can demonstrate that they’re engaging with this content?” For some things, like figuring out a working definition of ‘game,’ whole class discussion and debate was truly the best way to tackle this. For other

things, students could show off how they were grappling with ideas through individual writing or collaborative work with their clans.

In terms of dividing the coursework between solo and collaborative work, even individual projects have a sense of collaboration to them, since their clans act as peer feedback and/or play-testers for their individual projects. The class is always situated as a largely collective endeavor, with the sense that things will go more smoothly if everyone helps their classmates.

For this class, students have produced projects that interweave their lived experiences and their gaming literacies in sophisticated ways. One student created a let's play of a specific *Minecraft* server for people on the autism spectrum, and discussed the connections between gaming, technology, and cognitive difference in a cogent and informative way. Some of the most creative projects come out of the final rhetorical game design assignment. One student created a semi-autobiographical text-based game about childhood as a product of divorce in Appalachia, to make points about the cultural impacts of poverty. Another took the project in an entirely different direction and created a parody of traditional high-fantasy RPGs, to point out all of the pitfalls and problems with an uncritical adaptation of *Dungeons and Dragons* to a 21<sup>st</sup> century storytelling medium.

#### FUTURE COURSE PLANS

In terms of future courses, I think my main challenge will be to work to balance the different literacies and technological proficiencies of students, as well as their expectations for what kind of a course this is going to be. While it is clearly unacceptable to gate participation in the course behind things like the purchase of top of the line gaming computers, or even behind purchases of sixty-dollar controllers or headsets, it is undeniable that students coming into the class with two terabyte hard drives and dedicated gaming spaces had a very different and much more comfortable experience than students trying to navigate gaming for the first time on a laptop. The students who had access to technology to make the class easier also tended to have technological literacies in hand that made fulfilling assignments much less stressful: they already had experience with things like recording game footage, and some even had rudimentary programming knowledge. Thus, the class was separated into distinct classes of people with very different levels of preparation for the course, in ways that a sophomore level English course that only has composition as a prerequisite would not seem to make apparent. I think restructuring the class as an upper-level elective would mitigate some of these issues, and perhaps through providing a series of “recommended” technological acquisitions (such as, for example, a USB mouse instead of using a laptop trackpad), I could circumvent some of the issues students working with technology not built for gaming were having.

Additionally, I think in my future promotions for the course I'd do more work in further emphasizing that this class is not just about analyzing games as texts, or about rhetorical game design, but that considering identity and social justice is a key component of the coursework. In my end of semester evaluations, I received comments from a small number of students that the work we did on how gaming intersected with identity was “unprofessional and biased” and “pushed a liberal agenda.” I do not believe that bringing to bear the fact that marginalized identities continue to be marginalized in gaming spaces is unprofessional, biased, or pushing any particular agenda, but I think in the future I would be very explicit that coming into this course (as truly coming into any college course) requires an open mind and willingness to challenge held beliefs and examine privilege.

Pragmatically, I'd also be very interested to see what could be done at a university where the students and I would have easier access to university technology during class time, such as a class held in a computer lab instead of a classroom. This would allow for things like engaging in play more easily during class time and would make technology and software demos a more accessible experience for everyone, since we wouldn't be battling with individual hardware constraints. Looking far, far into the future, it would be fascinating to have a course that could deal more directly with niche gaming technologies like virtual reality, which right now are intensely cost-prohibitive.

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## CHAPTER 18.

### ESSENTIALS OF VIDEO GAME RHETORIC AND DESIGN (EC 133)

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**Course Title:** EC 133: Essentials of Video Game Rhetoric and Design

**Course College/School:** Liberal Arts

**Course Department/Program:** Department of English, Professional Writing Minor Program

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 5.0

**Course Length:** 10 weeks

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face, Blended/Hybrid

**Course Keywords:** Undergraduate, Video Games, Professional Writing, Multimedia Design, Creative Concepts, Industry-Standard Documents.

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

Below is the published catalog description of the course English Composition 133 (EC 133): Topics in Writing for Multimedia Environments: Essentials of Video Game Rhetoric and Design. It's designed for students to decide if they want to enroll in the class: "Examination of video game narratives, aesthetics, and cultures to understand the expressive power of their design. Assignments allow students to apply these analytical and rhetorical skills to writing and performance of their own video game commentary scripts and industry-standard design documents, such as proposal pitch outlining characters, game world, game-play mechanics, enemies, and monetization factors for one's own video game."

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

As one of the advanced courses in Digital Writing and Web Literacy in UCLA's Professional Writing Minor, this course examines the essentials of digital rhetoric of video games through their use of what Ian Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric" and what Katherine Isbister calls "emotional design." Bogost's *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2010) differentiates between rhetoric, visual rhetoric, and digital rhetoric, where the latter needs to account for procedurality as "the unique

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representational property of the computer” (p. 28). In other words, digital rhetoric ought to consider verbal, written, visual, and procedural rhetorics. Video games therefore both represent an aspect of digital rhetoric and are a characteristic example of the procedural rhetoric. Isbister’s *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (2016) articulates the “emotionally transformative” (p. xviii) elements of games ranging from choice and flow in solo play, avatars and NPC’s in social play, to coordinated physical movement and long-distance connections of networked play.

With the two concepts above guiding its theoretical focus, this course considers video game narratives, aesthetics, and cultures to understand the expressive power of their design. Specifically, students analyze concrete examples of PC and console-based games in the context of relevant theoretical frameworks spanning from ludology and narrative theory, to cultures of video games, as well as video game design and storytelling. In addition, students engage with practical elements involved in conceptualizing, designing, and developing a video game. Indeed, one of this course’s overall goals is to challenge students to approach the study of video games from multiple and interrelated perspectives: analytical, interpretive, applied, and creative. This goal is also reflected in the course’s workshop-style structure, where students are active participants in co-creating the course with their both intellectual and creative input. All this constitutes yet another overarching goal of this course, which is to give students the experience of both individual and collaborative team work on creative projects.

The course’s both multimodal and multimedia assignments (the video game commentary and video game design concept) are similarly designed to incorporate the theoretical inquiry into practical game design. This sensitizes students to differentiate between an academic analysis, narrative script, video game industry design document, and performance of their ideas while developing and applying the relevant professional writing skills. In this sense, the learning outcomes in this course also incorporate the program outcomes specific to the Professional Writing Minor.

#### **Learning Outcomes:**

In this class, students can expect to:

- Critically analyze video game narratives, aesthetics, and cultures.
- Critically analyze and reflect on the relationship between the player and the video game(s).
- Explore and understand the experiential, expressive and affective potentials of video games.
- Have a deeper understanding of game mechanics and core fundamentals of game design.
- Conceptualize and design a game.
- Familiarize with and create game design documents that comply with the basic industry standards.

#### **Program Outcomes:**

The course addresses the following Professional Writing Minor outcomes:

1. Perform analysis of discourses to understand the varied audience(s) and purpose(s) for which the writer is creating content.

2. Determine the most effective communication strategies and techniques for achieving goals in specific multimodal forms (print, digital, visual, oral, etc.).
3. Understand the forms (genres, conventions) of a range of professional writing contexts, such as digital, scientific, workplace, and public.
4. Develop writing strategies for oral presentations such as the “elevator pitch,” public speaking, debating, and producing visual media.
5. Apply new communication strategies and rhetorical practices to current academic work.
6. Develop the skills to become creative, next-generation entrepreneurs in diverse professional writing contexts.
7. Understand the role of writing (written, oral, visual) in affecting public conversation.
8. Participate productively in collaborative teams.
9. Compete as skilled writers across a range of professional settings.

## COURSE CONTEXT

The course on Essentials of Video Game Rhetoric and Design is a part of the Professional Writing Minor (PWM), overseen by the UCLA Department of English in collaboration with Writing Programs. PWM is a relatively new program that took off in the winter of the Academic Year 2018-2019. While students from all disciplines can apply to PWM, only those admitted are given enrollment priority. This is important to consider, because it affects the classroom demographics. I’ve only taught this course three times, but it seems that there might be more students from sciences enrolled in this course should it be open to students outside the PWM. For example, the first time I taught this course in the spring of 2019, and this requirement wasn’t in place, there were nine students from sciences out of twenty-two students enrolled. While it makes sense to give priority to PWM students, it’s also interesting to note that courses involving the study of video games seem to inherently attract students across disciplines. They therefore offer a unique opportunity for both instructors and students to take advantage of this encounter of cross-disciplinary perspectives. Moreover, because of this Video Game Rhetoric and Design course’s emphasis on creative and collaborative work, students from wildly diverse cultural backgrounds get to continuously dialogue with one another. Besides raising awareness of the variety of cultural meanings a game can generate in different contexts and across cultures, collaborative work on creative projects allows students to get to know one another, and examine their own learning styles in a deeper, more meaningful way.

Not only are students coming from differing academic and cultural backgrounds, but they also come to class with different levels of gaming experience. First, there are very few complete *novices* that have no gaming experience at all. While these novices might not themselves play video games, they enroll in this course because they have watched their siblings or friends play, and are therefore intrigued to better understand video gameplay. Next, there are some *beginners* that have played a few video games, but do not consider themselves knowledgeable in gaming. These beginners are interested in both playing more and expanding their horizons about video games and video game cultures. Third, there are many students with *intermediary* familiarity with videogames. These are often those students that have been playing their favorite games since they were very young – “Animal Crossing,” “Legends of Zelda,” “Call of Duty,” “Halo,” etc. – and are excited to delve deeper into these, and other games.

Finally, there are several *hard-core gamers*, with videogames pulsating in their veins, who enroll in this course to finally study what they love. These students are all geared up for this class, ready to play, share their expertise, and participate fully!

While I haven't implemented any significant changes to the course syllabus since I first taught it, the students' gaming background affects the way I progress with it and how I introduce the subject matter. This is why on the first day of class, I ask each student to talk about why they are interested in taking the course, what they are hoping to get out of it, how much experience they have with videogames, and what are their favorite games. I do this because the ratios between the four categories of gaming experience described earlier are wildly different every time the course is offered.

For example, the first course in the spring of 2019 consisted of all seniors, 80% of whom belonged to the "hard-core gamers" category. The course seemed to almost unfold on its own, as our class discussions were rich with delving into analyses of students' own experiences, complemented by the expanded perspectives they've acquired from the readings. Entering the classroom in the winter of 2020, I was quite surprised to find out that the majority of students were novices and beginners, with a couple intermediary and serious gamers. This required more introductory lectures with guided class discussions, relying on the assigned readings. In the spring of 2020, during the pandemic, the course took place online, and was, curiously so, quite evenly divided between groups two and three, with several serious gamers, and no novices!

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

This Video Game Rhetoric and Design course is rooted in project-based pedagogy that supports active and collaborative learning, as well as student-centered and polyvocal classroom that supports deep, experiential learning. This is achieved through assignments that emphasize writing as a recursive process of drafting and revision, and in various genres, as well as multimedia (and multimodal) assignments, fostering creativity, collaboration, and community. In addition, class activities are often followed by metacognitive reflections on the individual student's own learning process and style. Overall, this course's pedagogy aims to provide opportunities for students to use their academic skills to engage in creative activities that involve discovery and invention of both the subject matter and their own abilities.

This course engages students through video games-related essay writing in different genres. They begin with a video game commentary script that serves not only as a structural basis for the multimedia assignment of video game commentary, but also as a possible point of departure for the analytical essay on procedural rhetoric of the same videogame. The latter is a rigorously analytical essay, requiring students to delve into a game by deploying the newly acquired conceptual framework distinguishing between various rhetorical modalities involved in a video game. Then the students are tasked to write an essay on an emotional design of a game that they might be currently conceptualizing and developing with their team mates, or they can choose to write about an existing game they're familiar with. Although they have to demonstrate an understanding of the relevant conceptual framework, this assignment demands an imaginative approach, as they have to envision additional ways to emotionally engage the players.

While these writing assignments are written individually, they are not composed in isolation. On the



contrary: much of the work is done in the company of their classmates. From brainstorming and freewriting exercises, to in-depth peer-reviews either in pairs (with written feedback), or in small groups of three or four students (with constructive feedback through discussion), students discover that writing is not a solitary enterprise. Instead, all the writing in this course is influenced by a continuous dialogue amongst students, and between students and myself. I meet with every student individually to discuss their essay ideas and drafts.

This dialogic quality is extended onto their creative and collaborative projects. Their first multimedia project, a video game commentary, is very challenging. Students continuously dialogue with one another both inside and outside the class to trouble-shoot and problem-solve issues with both content and technical. Each student has to create a video, with a voice-over commentary. This video is carefully structured both conceptually and in terms of its visual and aural content. It's also thoughtfully edited – composed – to achieve a rhythm that matches the various tonalities of the content: critical, analytical, ironic, humorous, etc. In a relatively short time, students are challenged intellectually, creatively, and – technologically. Despite the lecture-presentation they are given on how to record and edit both the video and audio content, they still have to work through navigating the various software they have at their disposal: from PC to PS4 gaming platforms, to Apple's iMovie for editing, and the podcasting system for audio recording available at the Lab. Despite the unanticipated amount of time and effort each of them gave their respective commentaries, they were extremely satisfied with their accomplishments. I was profoundly impressed with their creative intelligence, and – so were they! Most of them later commented they have never taken a course where they were asked to creatively engage with the subject matter they've studied.

They also enjoyed working in groups on their original videogame project. They wrote a story, designed the game play mechanics, aesthetic, characters, as well as wrote an industry recognized document to pitch their game. Each group had its own collaborative dynamics, and organically discovered their original approach to the creative process.

At the end of each of these projects, students engage in a variety of metacognitive exercises, reflecting on their own learning process. These allow for students to take ownership of both what they've learned, and most importantly, *how* they've come to understand it. This is what I ultimately consider to be an individually empowering, student-centered pedagogy; a pedagogy that doesn't simply support student "learning" in the traditional sense, but also allows them to feel they have "grown" in a much more holistic sense. Indeed, a video game course like this naturally lends itself to such self-empowering outcomes.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

In an attempt to keep the student expenses to a minimum, this course only requires students to purchase Katherine Isbister's book *How Games Move Us*. All of the other required texts can be purchased, but don't have to be, as the book sections discussed in the class are scanned, and available on the course website.

The required course texts can be divided into two groups, reflecting this course's both theoretical and practical aspects. The theoretical frameworks are drawn from Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games*, proposing the notion of procedural rhetoric students discuss in class and write an analytical essay

on, and Katherine Isbister's *How Games Move Us*, analyzing the elements of emotional design of video games, which students deploy to write an analytical essay with creative elements. The practical frameworks presenting on the videogame conceptualization and their design elements are presented in Tracy Fullerton's *Game Design Workshop*, which students use to understand the game conceptualization and prototyping process, while Scott Rogers' *Level Up!* breaks down the elements of the Game Design Document (GDD), with The Ten-Pager. The sections dedicated to the development of the GDD serves as the basis for the collaborative game design project and its pitch.

There is no hardware or software required for this class, and neither are games. These are all available at several physical locations at UCLA, that have PCs, PS4s, Oculus Rifts, and Quests available for students to play with. These locations also offer students both the hardware and software to record and edit their projects, as well as in person consultation and support from the IT specialists dedicated to instructional support. During the pandemic, these options were restricted or not available. Students had to therefore rely on their laptops, PCs, and gaming equipment they had available at home. However, this didn't impede the class at the slightest: they were all able to participate because the University made the laptops and software available for students to pick up, download for free, or mail in.

Moreover, the games we're discussing in class are most often those addressed in the readings, as well as those favored by the students. They are often tasked to bring to class meetings whatever games they are currently playing or have available to use.

**Required Course Texts:**

Bogost, I. (2010). *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*.

Fullerton, T. (2014). *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*.

Isbister, K. (2016). *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*.

Rogers, S. (2014). *Level Up! The Guide to Great Videogame Design* (2nd Edition ed.).

All of the readings listed in the Course Schedule are available on the Google Drive: <http://bit.ly/36GKzGb>.

**Suggested Course Texts:**

Anable, A. (2018). *Playing With Feelings: Videogames and Affect*.

Flanagan, M. (2013). *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*.

Flanagan, M. and Nissenbaum H. (2014). *Values at Play in Digital Games*.

Galloway, A. (2006). *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*.

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*.

Huizinga, J. (2014). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*.

Juul, J. (2011). *Half-Real: Videogames Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*.

- Murray, J.H. (2017). *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (updated edition).
- McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*.
- Newman, J. (2013). *Videogames*.
- Ryan, M. (2015). *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*.
- Salen, K. and Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*.
- Upton, B. (2015). *The Aesthetic of Play*.
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## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

As is evident from the course syllabus below, this course's assignments include required and optional readings, researching video game related content and excerpts on YouTube, individual and collaborative responses to discussion questions posted on the course website, along with two analytical essays, video game commentary recording, and collaborative game design project. In what follows I describe in more detail only the three major assignments, as the remaining ones are assessed under the rubric of "participation."

### **Assignment #1**

**The first major assignment consists of two parts: Game Commentating and Procedural Rhetoric Analysis.**

#### ***Part 1: Game "Commentating"***

This assignment asks students to choose an existing video game they like to play or are familiar with, and comment on it. Students are free to choose how they're going to approach this creative project: either as a "real" game commentator that talks over her game play while playing, or as an analytically structured video essay, where commentary is interspersed with the (often humorous) visual and audio references outside the game. Regardless of their choice, they are asked to incorporate the concepts and elements of play that we've discussed in class. For example, if pertinent to their chosen game, they can incorporate comments on what play styles the game accommodates, what aspects of the game facilitate the flow state, how its procedural rhetoric plays out and what meanings it generates, as well as in what ways the game relies on the embedded and/or emergent narrative strategies. To create a cohesive commentary or analysis, students are required to write out a script. Finally, they perform and record a video of their gameplay, with a voice-over commentary, along with the visuals and audio they might want to include in their final cut. The final game commentary project is required to be between 5 and 10 minutes.

To help them with this creative assignment, the UCLA HumTech team presents on how to record and

edit gameplay, and offers consultations. They are also provided with readings on what to talk about and how to organize one's ideas for a successful game commentary. For example:

- Brandon M., "How to be a Successful Gaming Commentator and What to Talk About,"

<http://bit.ly/2MvxJna>.

- How to Be a Good Gaming Commentator on YouTube: <http://bit.ly/3jhbBZZ>.

### **Part 2: Procedural Rhetoric Analysis**

After they've presented the commentary of their chosen videogame, students are tasked with writing an analysis of its digital and procedural rhetoric. The aim of this paper is to choose one or two ideas from the commentary script and develop them into an analytical essay that deploys the conceptual framework of procedural rhetoric from Ian Bogost (2010), *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, The MIT Press. To do this, students have to consider both *what* claims does the game make (about its game world) and *how* do these claims play out (through its gameplay mechanics). They are also asked to consider whether the game itself allows for "raising *procedural objections*" (Bogost, 2010, pp. 37-38) and propose one possible objection. In addition, they are invited to consider the interactivity of the game, how participatory it is, its play space, "user empowerment" (p. 43), its "vividness spectrum" (p. 45), its "text and images" (p. 28), and reception.

### **Assignment #2: Emotional Game Design Project/Analysis**

Here, students have to either design an original videogame (accompanied with visuals), or choose one they've played and like it. Then they write an in-depth analysis of its emotional design, consisting of an in-depth analysis of those game elements that emotionally involve its players. Whether they are creatively designing an original videogame or analyzing an existing game, students are invited to also suggest or pitch new elements for enhancing its effectiveness in emotionally involving its players. In order to successfully complete this assignment, they are required to refer to Katherine Isbister (2016), *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, The MIT Press. If pertinent, students are asked to refer to each of the four chapters we have discussed in class. Their essay ought to include the qualities and concepts for enhancing emotional terrain of games presented throughout the book, such as:

Choice and flow; design for social emotions – avatars, nonplayer characters, and character customization; design for shaping social play – coordinated action, role-play, and social situations; physical movement – physical challenges of mastering the body, moving together – in competition, "coopetition," pure collaboration – and body as the vehicle for fantasy identities; long-distance connection and networked play.

### **Assignment #3: Collaborative Group Project: The Ten Pager and Pitch of An Original Videogame Design**

For this final assignment, teams of 3 to 5 students design their own game narrative and both write a proposal – what Scott Rogers calls a "ten-pager" – and pitch it as a group to a live audience.

**The Ten-Pager** is an elaborate, industry-recognized document, consisting of title page, game outline, character, gameplay, game world, game experience, gameplay mechanics, enemies, multiplayer and bonus materials, and monetization. Students are instructed that it can be longer than ten pages, but

no longer than twelve pages of text. This means that, with images, the ten-pager can turn out to be up to fifteen pages, but no longer than sixteen. To illustrate the text, students are encouraged to add minimum one image, and maximum five images per “page.” The Ten Pager has to be well written, succinct, and cohesive. This means it has to be thought out and thoughtfully organized, so readers can envision the storyline, the characters, and the world where the game unfolds without too much effort. The readers need to also be able to understand how the game differs from the other, similar, games and why this game will draw players into its game experience. That is, how do the gameplay, the mechanics, and enemies make for an interesting and exciting new experience?

**The Pitch** is a 10-12-minute PowerPoint presentation that includes all of the elements of the Ten-Pager, but is organized to communicate to the audience primarily through speakers’ performance and visuals, rather than rely on text. Each group pitches their videogame to an imagined publisher, developer, or crowd-funding audience. PowerPoint presentation consists of images, and is sometimes combined with excerpts of pre-recorded audio-visual material. It requires collaborative team work, where everyone in the team equally contributes according to their strengths. Students are encouraged to rehearse the presentation together, as a team, to leave excited and ready to play their game. The progression of the PP presentation can follow the structure of The Ten Pager, but can’t be exactly the same. The presenters need to make sure the slides are visually informative (but not cluttered with text) and aesthetically cohesive. Equally important is the performance of the team, and the rhythm in which the presentation moves along.

The teams pitch their original game design project during the showcase on the last day of class. Every team’s pitch is followed by the Q&A with the audience that also gives ample feedback on all of the elements of the content and presentation. If pertinent, the teams revise their Ten Pager, and submit it, along with the PowerPoint presentation, the following week (during the finals).

## COURSE ASSESSMENT

### Grading

Participation 25%

Game “Commentating” and Procedural Rhetoric Analysis 25%

Emotional Game Design Project/Analysis 25%

Collaborative Group Project 25%

The assessment of each assignment is weighed at 25%. The essays are assessed based on the level of proficiency and success in terms of their conceptual, rhetorical, research, stylistic, and grammatical demands. The two creative multimedia and multimodal assignments as assessed as follows:

1. Video Game commentary is assessed based on the parameters of: conceptual core, research component, form and content, and creative realization. These parameters are described in-depth in an article on Assessing Scholarly Multimedia (Ball, 2012, p. 66), which was recommended to me by my colleague, Dr. Laurel Westrup.
2. The collaborative group project is assessed based on two sets of parameters: the ones

described above, and the teamwork process. The latter involves consideration of everyone's individual engagement and contribution, as well as the team synergy and quality of the pitch, along with the clarity of writing and organization of the ten-pager.

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

Please see the Google Drive link: <http://bit.ly/36GKzGb> to all the class materials in the syllabus/expanded course outline.

### **Week 1, Day 1: Introduction to the Course on Video Game Rhetoric and Design**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Introduction to the syllabus with an overview of course assignments and requirements.*
- *Class introductions.*
- *Introductory conversation about games.*
- *Individual writing activities responding to the questions:*
  1. *What is your favorite game? Explain why?*
  2. *Who are you as a writer? What do you do to begin writing?*
  3. *What are your strengths? What are your challenges?*
- *Group sharing and discussion after each of the writing activities.*

#### *Assignments*

- *Students meet each other in class, but continue conversing about their experience with games and gaming cultures on Discord.*
- *Those students that don't have Discord, are invited to download it and then join our class server.*
- *UCLA Video Game Collection: <http://bit.ly/3pHR96N>.*

### **Week 1, Day 2: Defining Videogames: Ludology vs. Narratology**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Defining Videogames: Ludology vs. Narratology.*
- *Storytelling in Video Games: Group Work and Discussion Board Post.*
- *Lecture followed by class discussion of the readings.*
- *Discussion: What is a game? What are video games and why do we play them?*
- *Discussion of the 6 game features. Video game genres and platforms. Viewing and discussion of examples.*

#### *Assignments*

- *Read the entire articles by Jesper Juul: "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of*

*Gameness” & “Games Telling Stories? A brief note on games and narratives”.*

- *Optional reading: Gonzalo Frasca: “Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology”.*

### **Week 2, Day 3: In the Flow: Narrative and Player**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *In the Flow: Narrative and Player.*
- *Lecture followed by class discussion of the readings.*

#### *Assignments*

- *Watch the 2004 TED talk “Flow, the secret to happiness,” by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.*
- *Required Reading: Jenova Chen: “Flow in Games (and Everything Else)”.*
- *Game UX Summit 2019, Keynote, Jenova Chen: “From Journey to Sky – Lessons Learned”:  
<https://bit.ly/3tptVEC>*
- *Read the handout summarizing key concepts from Craig A. Lindley, “Story and Narrative Structures in Computer Games”.*
- *Find an example of gameplay on YouTube that you’d like to comment on and analyze in class. Post the link to it on the course website’s Discussion Board, and write three sentences responding to why you’ve chosen this particular gameplay example.*

### **Week 2, Day 4: Procedural Rhetoric**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Procedural Rhetoric.*
- *Class discussion in small groups: responding to questions from Bogost’s book and posting responses on the course website’s discussion forum.*
- ***Prompt for Assignment #1, Part 1: Video Game Commentary.***

#### *Assignments*

- *Required reading: Ian Bogost: “Procedural Rhetoric” (pp. 1-65).*

### **Week 3, Day 5: Videogame Commentating**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Videogame Commentating.*
  - *Presentation on how to record gameplay and voice over commentary with Q&A.*
  - *Class discussion: a. Analysis of game commentating styles*
1. *The elements of video game commentary*
    - ***DUE: Outline of Video Game Commentary Script -> peer review in class.***

## Assignments

- Find an example of video game commentating on YouTube that you'd like to analyze in class. Post the link to it on the course website (CCLE Discussion Board) and write three sentences responding to why you've chosen this particular video game commentating example.
- Optional reading: "101 Gaming Topics to Commentate About": <http://bit.ly/2MooENb>

## Week 3, Day 6: Procedural Rhetoric in Action; Embedded vs. Emergent Narratives

### Class Topics/Activities

- *Procedural Rhetoric in Action & Embedded vs. Emergent Narratives.*
- *Class discussion of procedural rhetoric in videogames chosen by student groups.*
- *Interactive lecture on embedded and emergent narratives.*

## Assignments

- Required readings: Ian Bogost: "Procedural Rhetoric" (1-65) cont'd.  
*Huaxin Wei: "Embedded Narrative in Game Design".*
- Optional readings:

*Richard Walsh: "Emergent Narrative in Interactive Media".*

*Gonzalo Frasca: "Some Thoughts on Grand Theft Auto 3".*

- *Kathryn Yu: "Evocative, Enacted, Embedded, and Emergent: Narrative Architectures for Immersive Storytelling": <http://bit.ly/2YFwRPw>.*

## Week 4, Day 7: Video Game Commentary

### Class Topics/Activities

- *Individual Commentating Projects – Please upload the completed project on the course website.*
- *Viewing, feedback, and discussion of each video game commentating project.*
- **Prompt for Assignment #1, Part 2: Procedural Rhetoric Analysis.**

## Week 4, Day 8: Video Game Commentary

### Class Topics/Activities

- *Individual Commentating Projects – Please upload the completed project on the course website.*
- *Viewing, feedback, and discussion of each video game commentating project.*
- **DUE: Videogame Commentating Script, Final Draft.**



## **Week 5, Day 9: My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Games**

### **Class Topics/Activities**

- *Class discussion of identity construction in video games in relation to Waggoner's article.*
- *Class discussion of the possible therapeutic effect of video games in relation to Turkle's chapter.*
- *DUE: First Draft of Assignment 1, Part 2: Procedural Rhetoric Analysis -> peer review in pairs, in class.*

### **Assignments**

- *Required readings: Zach Waggoner: My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games (3-47) – excerpts.*

*Sherry Turkle: "Aspects of the Self" (a Chapter from Life on the Screen).*

## **Week 5, Day 10: Emotion by Design (Part 1) and Video Game Music**

### **Class Topics/Activities**

- *Emotion by Design in Video Games and guest lecture on Video Game Music.*
- *Small group presentations on chapters from Isbister's book and class discussion.*
- *Individual pre-writing activity: brainstorming ideas for Assignment #2: Emotional Design Project.*
- **Prompt for Assignment #2: Emotional Game Design Project.**

### **Assignments**

- *Required reading: Katherine Isbister: How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design:*
2. *Chapter 1: Series of Interesting Choices: The Building Blocks of Emotional Design.*
  3. *Chapter 2: Social Play: Designing for Multiplayer Emotions.*

## **Week 6, Day 11: Emotion by Design (Part 2)**

### **Class Topics/Activities**

- *Emotion by Design in Video Games.*
- *Small group presentations on chapters from Isbister's book and class discussion.*
- *Forming groups for the Final Collaborative Project.*
- *Individual pre-writing activity: drafting and outlining ideas for Assignment #2: Emotional Design Project.*

### **Assignments**

- *Required reading: Katherine Isbister: How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design:*
3. *Chapter 3: Bodies at Play: Using Movement Design to Create Emotion and Connection.*
  4. *Chapter 4: Bridging Distance to Create Intimacy and Connection.*

- *Think about what kind of video game you would like to design so you can describe this to your potential collaborators. Think about content, narrative-driven or not, game mechanics, gaming platform, VR, etc.*

### **Week 6, Day 12: Game Design: Conceptualization**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Lecture on the basics of game design and how to incorporate the principle of the Engineering Design Process.*
- *Collaborative team work: brainstorming for the original video game and outlining of “The One-Sheet.”*
- **DUE: Final Draft of Assignment 1, Part 2: Procedural Rhetoric Analysis.**
- **Prompt for Assignment #3: Collaborative Group Project.**

#### *Assignments*

- *Required reading: Tracy Fullerton: Game Design Workshop – Chapter 6: Conceptualization.*

*Scott Rogers: Level Up! The Guide To Great Video Game Design – excerpts: “Writing the GDD, Step 1: The One-Sheet” (pp. 68-70).*

- *The 13 Basic Principles of Gameplay Design: <http://bit.ly/3rm4jqm>.*

### **Week 7, Day 13: Emotion by Design (Part 3)**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Collaborative team work: conceptualization if the collaborative project and drafting of the story.*
- *Writing Activity: Peer-review of the first draft of Emotional Design project.*
- *Discussion about the essentials of video game design.*

#### *Assignments*

- *How to Design A Videogame: <http://bit.ly/3tAGhKq>.*
- **DUE: Submit the One-Sheet on the course website, as a group.**

**DUE: First Draft of Assignment #2: Emotional Design Project -> peer review in class.**

### **Week 7, Day 14: Collaborative Game Design: Prototyping and The Ten-Pager**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Collaborative team work.*

#### *Assignments*

- *Required reading: Scott Rogers: Level Up! The Guide To Great Video Game Design – excerpts and the “Ten-Pager”: “Writing the GDD, Step 2: The Ten-Pager” (pp. 71-84).*
- *Optional reading: Tracy Fullerton: Game Design Workshop – Chapter 7: Prototyping.*

## **Week 8, Day 15: Collaborative Game Design: Prototyping and The Ten-Pager**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Virtual Reality (VR) Games.*
- *What is VR? What are the VR-specific storytelling strategies?*
- *Lecture and class discussion.*
- **DUE: Revised First Draft of Assignment #2: Emotional Design Project -> peer review in pairs.**

### *Assignments*

- *Required Reading: Scott Rogers: Level Up! The Guide To Great Video Game Design – excerpts and the “Ten-Pager”: “Writing the GDD, Step 2: The Ten-Pager” (pp. 71-84), cont’d.*
- *Optional reading: Nonny De la Peña, “Immersive Journalism: Immersive Virtual Reality for the First-Person Experience of News” (pp. 291-301).*
- *Megan Reusche, “Extended Reality (XR) Series: Interview with Maja Manojlovic”: <http://bit.ly/2YKUx4R>.*

## **Week 8, Day 16: Collaborative Game Design: Prototyping and The Ten-Pager**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Collaborative game design workshop: storyboarding, game outline, characters, game play.*

### *Assignments*

- *Scott Rogers: Level Up! The Guide To Great Video Game Design – excerpts and the “Ten-Pager”: “Writing the GDD, Step 2: The Ten-Pager” (pp. 71-84), cont’d.*
- *Samples of Collaborative Game Design Projects.*

## **Week 9, Day 17: Collaborative Game Design**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Collaborative game design workshop: game world, game experience, gameplay mechanics.*

**DUE: Final Draft of Assignment #2: Emotional Design Project.**

### *Assignments*

- *Scott Rogers: Level Up! The Guide To Great Video Game Design – excerpts and the “Ten-Pager”: “Writing the GDD, Step 2: The Ten-Pager” (pp. 71-84), cont’d.*

## **Week 9, Day 18: Collaborative Game Design**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Collaborative game design workshop: finalizing the PowerPoint Presentations/Pitches.*

## Assignments

### **The Art of Presenting.**

- *How to Pitch to Game Developers:* <http://bit.ly/3czsde2>.
- *DUE: Mock-up PP Presentations of Collaborative Game Design Project due for those groups that have scheduled a feedback session with Maja (after class).*

### **Week 10, Day 19: Collaborative Game Design: Prototyping and The Ten-Pager**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Collaborative game design workshop.*

#### *Assignments*

***DUE: Mock-up PP Presentations of Collaborative Game Design Project due for those groups that have scheduled a feedback session with Maja (after class).***

### **Week 10, Day 20: Conclusion: Class Showcase**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- *Class showcase: teams present their pitches of videogames and get feedback from their classmates.*

#### *Assignments*

- *Final Draft of the Ten-Pager and PowerPoint Presentations are due the week of the Finals.*
- *Please complete the metacognitive questionnaire and upload it to the course website by the end of the day. Thank you.*

### **Finals Week: Finalized Ten Pagers and Power Point Presentations of Team Pitches**

#### *Assignments*

- *DUE: Please post the Final Draft of the Ten Pager and Power Point Presentation of your Game Design Projects on our course website, as a group.*

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

To give suggestions on how to teach this course, I'd like to revisit its workshop-style, project-based, active, and student-centered pedagogy outlined in the fourth section of this chapter.

This pedagogy, along with video games as its subject-matter, seems to be the reason for its success amongst students. From reading their evaluations and responses to the metacognitive “questionnaire” they submit at the end of the class, it appears that they’ve most enjoyed the following elements: expanding their knowledge about video games, being challenged to accomplish something they didn’t think they could do (video game commentary), the classroom community, the creativity involved in all of the assignments, and last, but not least, the opportunity to work one-on-one with the instructor. Moreover, they really liked that they had “something concrete to show and share” with their friends, and family, as well as their potential future employers. All of these reasons seem to be a part of

any successful course. However, it seems to me that this video game course left the students with a sense of joy and accomplishment, primarily because they were challenged to be creative and express themselves in ways that **are not attainable through** traditional educational models (especially big lecture classes).

With its small-group discussion and problem-solving practices, the workshop-style classroom builds classroom community and allows students to express themselves in a safe environment. In order to achieve the latter, we can set up classroom community agreements on the first day of class. These involve, for example, establishing that this is a course that honors each student's unique talents and creative expression, and therefore avoids judgmental, discriminating, and offensive communication. To uphold these agreements, the instructor is in a position to lead by example, which might sometimes turn out to be challenging. For example, when students present their video game commentaries in class, and we have Q&A with feedback after each presentation, I sometimes found it difficult to hide just how much I liked a particular project. While it's important for students to receive authentic reactions in relation to creative projects, it's just as important to give encouraging feedback to all students, and especially after they've put 40-something hours into their project. To ensure this, I let the students ask questions and give feedback first, and then I give mine. I also present a set of possible parameters to look for in assessing creative multimedia projects.

While multimedia and project-based instruction can potentially work for any class size, I believe that this particular course greatly profited from a smaller class size of 18 to 22 students at a maximum. This allows for continuous communication between the instructor and individual students, as well as students with one another. Because this class is challenging for students, and this is so for each of them in a slightly different way, it's important to be able to notice both when students are struggling or thriving.

When I notice that a student is lagging behind or feels stuck, especially with technical issues, I can approach them and have a conversation about that. In a remote teaching environment, Discord enabled me to stay in continuous communication with students. Most often, I'm able to either give them suggestions for how to solve their problem or point them to other sources. For example, producing a video game commentary can be an extremely daunting task for a complete novice to video game play. If a student displays visible signs of anxiety and feels unable to complete the assignment, I suggest they look at someone else's YouTube gameplay recording, analyze it, and come up with their own interpretation without even playing the game. Sometimes I even encourage students to simply follow the analysis of a video game play I present in class. In one such instance, a gaming novice that felt intimidated, decided to replicate the analysis of Thatgamecompany's game "Journey" I presented in class. However, after revisiting the YouTube recording of the gameplay, she had a newfound appreciation for the game, and decided to give it a try. She played the game, recorded her gameplay, and in combination with excerpts from YouTube, created her own, essay-style video game commentary. Her work was a success, and she thrived for the remainder of the course.

The experienced gamers often have very ambitious video game commentating projects, and they need consultation time to bring out what they feel is their best. These students need someone to listen to their ideas and conceptually and creatively work through the options with them. These two examples demonstrate not only the advantage of a smaller class size, but also of being flexible as an instructor in our expectations from students. Multimedia assignments can be particularly challenging, and we have

to assume different levels of knowledge that students have coming to class. It's therefore imperative that as instructors, we get acquainted with where the students are at in order to help them thrive in the class. While challenging, multimedia assignments also enable students to discover (and be surprised by!) their resourcefulness, access their own creative potential, and share their work with others that appreciate it.

As rewarding as the project-based instruction and multimedia assignments might be, they are also challenging for instructors. I found two most important challenges to be time-management, and being comfortable in a student-centered classroom. These two are interrelated. For example, it's very important to set up a very clear and well-scaffolded overall structure for this course, with clearly articulated deadlines for projects, especially because they might overlap. The effective scaffolding for this course can be accomplished with backward course design. This is when we first consider the learning outcomes and then tailor the course's activities, readings, and assignments accordingly.

This particular Videogame Rhetoric and Design course is ambitious in what it sets out to accomplish in ten weeks of instruction, as well as the amount of work students are assigned to do. While mindful of a restricted amount of time, the instructor has to be flexible in terms of adjusting to the students' needs. While in my experience, they all manage to accomplish all of the assigned work, there are a few that struggle with the deadlines. When this happens, I try to avoid being punitive and instead make sure I remain in communication with them to ensure they finish within the reasonable time frame, without interfering with their own and their classmates' progress.

Moreover, a student-centered classroom where students work on creative projects, requires the instructor to not only be comfortable, but also willing to be in the moment, and think creatively along with students. Despite thriving in creative environments, I sometimes found it challenging to navigate certain situations that arose completely unexpectedly, and where students found themselves highly invested, yet diverging radically in their creative goals for their collaborative projects. These situations don't happen too often. In fact, they can be avoided if the instructor addresses the challenges of collaborative work and provides students with possible solutions in class, and before the collaborative work takes place. Once the work begins and the groups are formed, it's useful to help students determine how to best organize their group and divide the responsibilities within it. That said, most groups do this quite organically, without any need to interfere. However, I always make sure I check in how they'd divided their work and speak, at least briefly, to every individual about their respective part.

Moreover, it's important to ensure students have the opportunity to interact both inside and outside of class, and right from the start (through Discord or Slack). This is how they get a clear idea of who they want to work with and what is the project they're genuinely interested in working on. In sum, I think it's important to take into consideration your own teaching style and levels of comfort in being challenged both intellectually and emotionally, when deciding how to run these kinds of classes. I like giving students as much creative freedom as possible, while remaining within the requirements for successful completion of the class.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

My future plans of this course are revolving around its expansion. To begin with, this course could

be a part of a sequence of three to four interrelated courses in Writing Topics in Multimedia Environments. Folded within the cluster of advanced courses in Digital Writing and Web Literacy in UCLA's Professional Writing Minor, this three-course-sequence could amount to a "mini-certificate" or specialization in "Writing and Design for Video Games."

While I envision each of the courses incorporating both theoretical (written) and practical (multimedia/multimodal) components, these would differ in their focus. For example, the first course of the sequence would involve a more in-depth study of history and theory of videogames, involving a research paper and culminating in a multimedia research project.

The next course in the sequence would focus on game design and development, and would, similarly to the course I'm teaching now, involve essays on creative topics, and a collaborative videogame project with a ten-pager and pitch. A variation of this course would also introduce specifically VR/AR games and their design and development. Yet another variation of this course would focus on alternative, experimental, and/or environmental games.

The final course of the sequence, a capstone course, would be for those students who have completed at least two of the courses in the sequence. This course would allow students to complete a full game design document based on the ten-pager they've designed in an earlier course. Moreover, each of these courses would also instruct students to systematically build their e-portfolios, to support them on the job market. To facilitate their job placements, I am also planning to establish collaborations with local game companies.

The ideas outlined above are, to a great degree informed by what the students have been requesting. In particular, the establishment of closer collaborations with the game industry. Indeed, after taking the course on Video Game Rhetoric and Design, several students have considered their future careers in writing critically about video games, as well as writing creatively for video games. It therefore seems vital for students' future to incorporate a higher level of professional mentoring into this course.

Another important component is the development of the variation of this course focusing on VR/AR gaming. This is an area that is developing exponentially. For example, when I first taught the course in the spring of 2019, only a couple of students have even tried a VR headset. In the winter of 2020, I had three students that have specifically asked for instruction on VR games, because they wanted to learn to write content for these kinds of games. Several students from that class, and from the remotely taught spring 2020 course, expressed they wanted to take a course focusing specifically on VR gaming.

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CHAPTER 19.

STORYTELLING IN VIDEO GAMES (HON 3396X)

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**Course Title:** Honors (HON) 3396X: Storytelling in Video Games

**Course College:** Texas State University

**Course Program:** Honors College

**Course Level:** Undergraduate

**Course Credits:** 3 credits

**Course Length:** 1 full semester

**Course Medium:** Face-to-face

**Course Keywords:** Creative writing, English, face-to-face, Honors, narratology, storytelling, undergrad

CATALOG DESCRIPTION

This course will examine how stories are crafted to fit the new interactive media of video games, how these new stories resemble traditional stories from the literary canon, and how these unorthodox plots, characters, and games are used to create a new form of literature. Throughout the semester, students will play and analyze a course video game, *Fable III*, in order to give students a common game to discuss. Students do not need a background in video games to succeed.

COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of the class is to introduce students to the elements of how stories are told in video games through gameplay, narrative structure, character development, and world building. There are four overall objectives for the class that are fulfilled individually and in each of these four units.

**Objective One:** to learn how to critically analyze elements of video game design.

Basic elements of gameplay are discussed, including in-game mechanics, obstacles, and various other elements of player-game interactions, and external elements such as controller design and choice of

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console/PC. When discussing narrative, students analyze traditional structures of linear narrative and learn to apply them to nonlinear context. Narrative structures range from the three-act structure to the hero's journey to *kishōtenketsu*, a four-act structure found most commonly in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese stories. We discuss various levels of interactivity, from linear to branching to fully player-driven, and analyze how these narrative structures can be applied depending on the desired interactivity. Basic principles of character development are discussed and analyzed in terms of archetypes, strategies for creating three-dimensional player characters (PCs), the role of non-player characters (NPCs), and how to align characters with gameplay needs. For world-building, students learn how to prioritize and layer in details, how to space information to avoid exposition dumps, and how to create a fully-realized world through writing, gameplay, art, and music.

**Objective Two: to understand the creative process behind writing for video games.**

As the semester progresses, students read about how video games are made, specifically the role of the writer in the game development process. In addition to writers, students also learn about various related roles such as narrative designer that relate directly to how stories are formed. While this class tends to center on writing as the main method of understanding narrative, we also discuss basics of all roles in game design, from coding to art to sound, in order to give students a feel for the breadth of knowledge that goes into making a game. While learning these roles, students analyze *Fable III* in terms of its specific creation process and how it was designed and produced.

**Objective Three: to intelligently apply literary theory to video game writing.**

Various literary theories are discussed in relation to video games in general and *Fable III* in specific, including structuralism, reader-response criticism, and feminism. Comparisons to both traditional literature and film help students learn how to apply these theories to nontraditional, nonlinear stories and understand how games function in the broader world of literary criticism. Various approaches look at the cultural influences on games, including discussions of how various games reflect the social mores of the world around them and especially the time when they were made. In addition, games are analyzed in terms of how they operate as discrete functions, including how gameplay and narrative work together or against each other as a discussion of the ludonarrative debate. The relationship between player and game is discussed in terms of the narrative as written and the perceived narrative experience that can be dramatically different depending on the player. The feminist approach is also used at several points to understand how some games can be perceived through the male gaze versus games (especially more recent games) that center strong female or queer characters, and how this shift in perspective reflects a deeper understanding of the audience and a growing embrace of gamers as a diverse group.

**Objective Four: to practice writing for video games.**

Throughout the semester, time is given for students to participate in short free writes to practice the strategies being learned, including brief exercises in the three-act structure and quick character creation exercises. Free writes are creative writing exercises addressing a specific prompt that take about ten minutes and range from a paragraph to a page, depending on the student and the prompt. The class culminates in a creative project in which students write a ten-page design document outlining an original game of their creation and pitch it to the class.

## COURSE CONTEXT

Honors 3396X: *Storytelling in Video Games* is an interdisciplinary Honors class and can be substituted for one of the following: Anthropology 3309: *Culture through Film*; English 3307: *Introduction to the Study of Film*; English 3327: *Types of World Drama in English*; English 3328: *Types of World Drama in English (Modern)*; English 3329: *Studies in Mythology*; or English 3340: *Special Topics in Language and Literature*. These classes are required for a variety of majors and minors at the university and this is a big draw for many students; however, most students tend to sign up for the class because they are interested in the content, not because they're fulfilling a requirement.

Classes are limited to twenty students and most are English, creative writing, film studies, or theater majors, though there are STEM students who are interested in everything relating to video games. This is one of only three classes that specifically address video games at Texas State University as of Spring 2021, and the other two – which I also teach – are creative writing classes focusing on writing for video games that are less attractive to STEM students. The overall composition of students is diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, all of which contribute to better discussions and more perspectives on the topics covered.

Students coming into the class do not need to have any background in video games and I frequently get students who are interested in storytelling but don't play any games beyond puzzle games on their phones. Often *Fable III* is the first story-driven game they've played. Other students are avid gamers and spend much of their time indulging in the latest AAA and indie games. Because of this mismatch between students, I'm very careful to introduce the basics of games in a way that doesn't bore my advanced students, and in class discussions I make sure everyone is on the same page when discussing new games. Because the class is so heavily based on students' experiences playing, I include discussions about puzzles and online games, as that is some student's only experience. This variety of students is extremely beneficial in many ways, as it allows for a wide variety of games to be brought up during discussion and gives all students insight into the vast array of games available.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

I teach this class as a mixture of lecture, creative writing, and discussion, reflecting my background teaching English composition and creative writing. I encourage questions and discussions during my lectures as a way to further understanding of the material, but lecture is an important part of the class because so much of the information is new to the students, especially the non-gamers.

During lecture, I aim not to simply repeat information from the readings but to highlight the key points and encourage students to apply them to games they've played before. I use PowerPoint and for every couple of slides of information based on the readings or outside information, I open the class to discussion of their own experiences so that they can understand how the elements being learned directly relate to their lives. This immediate, practical application of knowledge helps students retain what they learn and personalize it to fit their understanding of games.

Because of my experiences earning an MFA in Fiction, I value another form of practical application: putting this knowledge into practice through the creation of student's own stories. Most classes include a creative writing exercise relating to the day's topics, giving them a chance to flex their

creativity and experience the process of creating games. While some activities focus on linear storytelling, such as when they create outlines for a hero's journey, most encourage a combination of linear and nonlinear techniques. For example, we use a Dungeons & Dragons style character creation tool to create randomized characters, then write backstories as well as identify the narrative purpose of the character, mapping out different commands and actions that show how the character interacts with their world. I frequently use randomized elements, as it puts less pressure on students to produce new ideas on such a regular basis and also challenges them to work within the confines of a set number of variables as is frequently the case in game design.

Finally, I value open discussion. In general, students will share their creative work or address a set of questions about the lecture, then tie it to broader themes. I loosely guide the discussion into an analysis of literary theory and encourage them to analyze their favorite games in ways that relate to the lecture and to the themes we are discussing. Because these discussions are driven by the class, they are hard to predict, but I always have a list of at least five questions to ask in case the discussion fizzles. The questions tend to be fairly basic and relate to the day's topics. For example, when discussing character creation, I include questions about the role of gender and sexuality in games and how that impacts player engagement, leading to students talking about their own preferences in games and how the role of women and queer characters has shifted over time. These discussions are a vital part of cementing their knowledge and expanding their understanding of how stories are told.

## REQUIRED COURSE MATERIALS

There are two books and one game required for the class. The first book is *Level up!: The guide to great video game design* (Rogers, 2014), and students are expected to have a copy in hand at the start of the semester. The second book is *Interactive storytelling for video games: A player-centered approach to creating memorable characters and stories* (Lebowitz & Klug, 2015), which is expensive to purchase new but can be found used or rented. This book is not required until several weeks into the semester, giving students time to locate an affordable copy.

The required game is *Fable III* (Microsoft, 2010), which is available on Xbox 360, Xbox One, and PC. While it is easy to acquire for Xbox, it's more difficult to purchase on PC as it is no longer directly for sale on Steam. However, codes are still available for purchase from Microsoft and can be used in Steam. The technical requirements for the game are relatively low, allowing it to be played on older PCs. However, it isn't available for Mac. Students start playing the first week but can take up to two weeks to purchase the game as long as they catch up quickly.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

The course is divided into two papers, one individual creative project, group work, in-class writing, and video game participation. Essays must use MLA format and because this is an upper-division writing-based course, it is expected that students know how to write a quality essay.

### Character Paper

This paper analyzes an existing character from a game played outside of class. Because characters are present in nearly every video game, this is usually easy even for students who don't play a lot of games. It has two parts: a completed template and an essay. Together, these add up to 4-6 pages.

The template is a table from *The ultimate guide to video game writing and design* (Dille & Platten, 2011) asking for information about a character ranging from physical attributes, such as hair and eye color, to psychological quirks, such as deepest fears and favorite hobbies, to backstory, such as what the character was doing before the game began and what the character's childhood was like. While there are no requirements on how detailed the responses need to be (and some categories will be skipped if they don't apply), it is generally recommended that the template take 2-3 pages. The essay incorporates some of the information from the template but synthesizes it with class lecture and discussion.

#### *Character Paper Prompt*

Create a character template of a character in a video game you have played outside of class using the format in the *Ultimate Guide* (pg. 77-82). Then, use the techniques of character building we have discussed in class to analyze that character in a 2-3 page essay. Make sure to summarize the character's development throughout the story, and include spoilers when talking about your character: don't leave out any information!

#### **Narrative Paper**

Students have a variety of strategies that they can use for the narrative paper. Because there tends to be overlap between character development and narrative structure (for example, the hero's journey can be used to analyze both character and narrative), students must use a different game to analyze narrative than they used for character. Because some students have limited experience playing games, I recommend a variety of shorter games with strong narrative structures available on Steam for a low price, such as *Undertale* (Fox, 2015). However, most students are able to choose a second game from outside class with no problem.

#### *Narrative Paper Prompt*

Use one of the theories of narrative we have discussed in class to analyze the plot structure and narrative of a video game you have played outside of class in a 4-5 page essay. Make sure to summarize the plot of the video game for readers who have not played it, and include spoilers when talking about plot twists and the conclusion of the game: don't leave the reader guessing!

#### **Creative Project**

The creative project includes two parts, a written document and a PowerPoint presentation. Both are based on the ten-pager design document outlined in *Level up!: The guide to great video game design* (Rogers, 2014), which includes the following parts: a title page, game outline, character specifics, gameplay descriptions, game world explanation, a description of the game experience, details on gameplay mechanics, specific enemies, an analysis of multiplayer and bonus material, and monetization. The overall document needs to be between 8-12 pages and the PowerPoint needs to be 10 slides, one per part. After the presentations, students will vote on the best game and the winning student will receive extra credit. Ideas for these creative projects can be based on in-class exercises but must be original, not relying on any existing intellectual property. Art is a required element; however, students can use art from the internet if they are unable or don't want to create their own. Music isn't required, but students sometimes enjoy finding songs or clips that match the mood of the game. Some

students also create original music. While original art and music does not impact the base grade in any way, it can influence the voting and potentially earn extra credit.

#### *Creative Project Prompt*

Draft a ten-pager design document for an original video game you design using everything we have learned in class. Illustrations and music are encouraged. Proposals will be written in a document and also presented on PowerPoint to the class. Presentations will take 10-15 minutes.

#### **Group Work**

There is one group presentation during the semester. Students sign up at the start of the semester based on the topic they are most interested in discussing: gameplay, narrative structure, character development, or world-building. Groups discuss the portions of *Fable III* that have been played up to that point in terms of the topics being discussed and present information about how the game does or does not fit with the techniques we've been learning. Presentations frequently discuss the creation process of *Fable III* as well as how it fits in with the rest of the Fable series. The presentations are 10-15 minutes followed by a group-led discussion. Discussions range anywhere from 5-30 minutes depending on class engagement. The length of the discussion does not impact the grade.

#### **In-class Writing**

Every class will include either a free write asking one or two questions from the assigned reading or a creative writing exercise relating to the topics being discussed. Students are encouraged to create a portfolio in case they want to use their creative work later in their lives. Several students have gone on to develop undergraduate Honors theses based on in-class writing, and one developed a board game from a particularly interesting idea. In addition to their grade, I also offer occasional extra credit if students want to take on additional challenges in their writing. For example, I might offer extra credit if they incorporate a puppy with a bone into their three-act structure proposals. This adds a playful element and challenges them to think creatively about the prompts.

#### **Video Game Participation**

Students are expected to play 2-3 hours of *Fable III* per week along with the class and maintain a weekly blog of their activities on our LMS. Each blog entry is at least 200 words. If students have trouble keeping up with or accessing the game, they have the option of following along through their peers' blogs until they catch up or regain access. This is a short-term solution only; each student is expected to keep up with the game throughout the semester. I also write a blog along with them outlining my experiences, though I tend to keep mine fairly dry, mostly outlining what happens in the game for students who might need to keep up through the blog. For students who have played *Fable III* before, I ask that they not include spoilers.

#### **COURSE ASSESSMENT**

Because this is designated by the university as a writing intensive class, at least 65% of the grade is based on writing and there is at least one paper of extended length. The overall grade is composed of writing and presentations, with some variation in style and format.

- Character Paper (15%): a successful paper will analyze a single character with a fully fleshed

out template and an essay that thoroughly discusses how the character is developed and how they change over the course of the game.

- Narrative Paper (20%): a successful paper will take a single narrative structure and break down how the game fits that structure, including any deviations. Successful papers will include enough plot summary to understand the game but keep the focus on analysis.
- Creative Project (20%)
  - Document (10%): a successful design document will present the required information in a way that has visual appeal as well as well-written descriptions. Successful design documents will be creative and original and show a deep understanding of storytelling techniques.
  - Presentation (10%): a successful presentation will include a visually appealing PowerPoint that clearly delineates each point of the presentation. Oral presentation will be persuasive and succinct, covering all required elements in detail within the time allotted.
- Group Work (15%): groups will be graded on individual contribution as determined by both my observations and the other group members through an anonymous survey, and also on the overall presentation by the group as determined by my observations and surveys from the rest of the class.
- In-class writing (15%): discussion questions and creative writing exercises will be graded on a check/check plus/check minus basis looking at completion first, then quality, as many students are less creative than others. In-class writing is completed individually or as part of a group depending on the activity, with an individual option available for students who prefer not to work in groups.
- Video Game Participation (15%): a successful blog will provide insight on the student's journey through the game, including the choices they've made, their opinions of those choices, and any reflections on the game itself. There are four blog checks throughout the semester so that students who fall behind one week have a chance to catch up and are not unduly penalized.
- Extra Credit (maximum 3% to overall course grade): extra credit will be available throughout the semester. While it is enough to raise a borderline grade, students shouldn't expect to pass on extra credit alone.

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

### Week 1, Day 1: Course Introduction

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- What are the expectations of the course?
- Free write: how would you approach a mysterious door if you were in a video game? (Include an image of a door of your choice)
- Class discussion: share free writes as part of class introductions



### Assignments

- Buy/acquire *Fable III* (Microsoft, 2010)

### Week 1, Day 2: Welcome to Gaming

#### Class Topics/Activities

- What is a game?
- How are stories told through games?
- Class discussion: what are the main game genres and which do you enjoy?
- Group presentations assigned

### Assignments

- *Level up!: The guide to great video game design* (Rogers, 2014) (LU): Level 1: Welcome, N00bs! (pg. 1-27)

### Week 2, Day 1: Brainstorming Ideas

#### Class Topics/Activities

- How are game ideas started?
- How does the traditional creative process get adapted when writing games?
- Group activity: brainstorm a variety of game ideas

### Assignments

- LU: Level 2: Ideas (pg. 29-42)
- *Fable III*: escape the palace, the reliquary, free time – do NOT talk to Walter outside pub

### Week 2, Day 2: Nonlinear Stories

#### Class Topics/Activities

- What makes nonlinear stories different than traditional stories?
- Class discussion: what are the differences between games, novels, and films?

### Assignments

- *Game writing: Narrative skills for video games* (Bateman, 2008) (GW) Chapter 4: Nonlinear Game Narrative (on class site, pg. 71-84)

### Week 3, Day 1: Writing Stories

#### Class Topics/Activities

- How are game stories written?
- Free write: outline how you would write out a game idea

### Assignments

- LU Level 3: Writing the Story (pg. 43-64)
- *Fable III*: the mercenaries, free time – do NOT start Brightwall quests

### Week 3, Day 2: Storytelling and Character

#### Class Topics/Activities

- How does storytelling relate to character development?
- Group activity: create a game story

### Assignments

- *Interactive storytelling for video games: A player-centered approach to creating memorable characters and stories* (Lebowitz & Klug, 2015) (IS) Chapter 4: The Story and the Characters (pg. 71-106)

### Week 4, Day 1: Mechanics

#### Class Topics/Activities

- What are mechanics in games?
- Free write: create mechanics for a proposed game based on a fairy tale

### Assignments

- LU Level 12: The Nuts and Bolts of Mechanics (pg. 353-380)
- *Fable III*: support in Brightwall, free time, return to Sabine, free time – do NOT go to Mistpeak Monorail

### Week 4, Day 2: Multiplayer and Monetization

#### Class Topics/Activities

- How does multiplayer impact storytelling?
- How does monetization work?
- Free write: design a multiplayer, monetized version of the fairy tale game proposed in the previous class period
- Group One presentation

### Assignments

- LU Level 14: Multiplayer – the More, the Merrier (pg. 405-418)
- LU Level 15: Everybody Wins; Monetization (pg. 419-426)
- Blog Check

## Week 5, Day 1: The Hero's Journey

### Class Topics/Activities

- What is the hero's journey?
- Group activity: write a hero's journey one stage at a time, rotating stories between individuals with each new stage so that each story has twelve authors

### Assignments

- IS Chapter 3: The Hero's Journey and the Structure of Game Stories (pg. 39-69)
- *Fable III*: meet at Mistpeak Monorail, battle at Mourningwood, free time – do NOT follow Walter into the tunnel

## Week 5, Day 2: Basic Narrative Structure

### Class Topics/Activities

- What is three-act structure?
- What are the essential elements of storytelling?
- What is kishōtenketsu?
- Class discussion: what are some games that represent various narrative structures?

### Assignments

- *Video game storytelling: What every developer needs to know about narrative techniques* (Skolnick, 2015) (VG) Chapter 1: Conflict: The Fuel of Story (on class site, pg. 7-11)
- VG Chapter 2: The Three-Act Structure (on class site, pg. 12-26)
- *Slay the dragon: Writing great video games* (Despain, 2008) (SD) Chapter 4: The No-Act-Fits-All Structure (on class site, pg. 90-109)

## Week 6, Day 1: Traditional Stories

### Class Topics/Activities

- How does interactivity impact storytelling?
- How are more traditional stories told?
- Group work: create a three-act story that follows a traditional narrative structure

### Assignments

- IS Chapter 6: Defining Interactive and Player-Driven Storytelling (pg. 117-124)
- IS Chapter 7: Fully Traditional and Interactive Traditional Stories (pg. 125-148)
- *Fable III*: follow Walter, support in Bowerstone, free time – do NOT return to Page

## **Week 6, Day 2: Multiple Ending Stories**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- What makes a multiple-ending story?
- Group work: change the previous story to include at least three multiple endings

### *Assignments*

- IS Chapter 8: Multiple-Ending Stories (pg. 149-180)

## **Week 7, Day 1: Branching Stories**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- How do branching stories work?
- What makes a branching story different than a multiple-ending story?
- Group work: change the previous story to include at least one major branch

### *Assignments*

- IS Chapter 9: Branching Path Stories (pg. 181-204)
- *Fable III*: return to Page, Reaver's mansion, free time – do NOT go to castle

## **Week 8, Day 1: Open-Ended and Player-Driven Stories**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- What happens when story takes a backseat?
- How do games without a clear story function?
- Group work: change the previous story to reflect an open-ended story

### *Assignments*

- IS Chapter 10: Open-Ended Stories (pg. 205-225)
- IS Chapter 11: Fully Player-Driven Stories (pg. 227-245)
- *Fable III*: go to castle, free time, follow Ben Finn, arrive in Aurora, Darkness Incarnate – do NOT talk to Kalin after exploring the city

## **Week 8, Day 2: Interactivity Debate**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Which is better, a game based on story or a game driven by players?
- Class discussion: debate which level of interactivity works best for which game genres
- Group Two presentation

### Assignments

- IS Chapter 12: The Argument for the Supremacy of Player-Driven Storytelling (pg. 247-254)
- IS Chapter 13: The Argument Against the Supremacy of Player-Driven Storytelling (pg. 255-268)
- Narrative Paper Due
- Blog Check

### **Week 9: Spring Break**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- NA

#### *Assignments*

- *Fable III*: board ship, battle for Albion, judge Logan, talk to Reaver, free time – do NOT return to throne room

### **Week 10, Day 1: Basics of Character**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- What are the basic elements of a strong character?
- How do characters develop over the course of a game?
- How does gender and sexuality impact characters?
- Class discussion: how does a character's gender or sexuality impact the playing experience?

#### *Assignments*

- UG Level 5: Building Characters (on class site, pg. 65-88)
- VG Chapter 4: Characters and Arcs (on class site, pg. 38-55)
- *Fable III*: decision on Bowerstone Old Quarter, free time – do NOT return to throne room

### **Week 10, Day 2: Archetypes and Stereotypes**

#### *Class Topics/Activities*

- How do characters drive the story?
- What is the difference between an archetype and a stereotype?
- What are the common archetypes in game stories?
- Class discussion: what are some successful and unsuccessful archetypes/stereotypes in games?

#### *Assignments*

- IS Chapter 4: The Story and the Characters (pg. 71-106)

## **Week 11, Day 1: Character Purpose**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- How are characters developed?
- How do characters serve a gameplay and narrative purpose?
- How are interesting NPCs created?
- Group work: create a party of characters based on different gameplay purposes

### *Assignments*

- LU Level 5: The Three C's, Part 1: Character (pg. 93-130)
- *Fable III*: decision on interior design, free time, Aurora diamond quest, free time, return to Hobeson, free time – do NOT return to throne room

## **Week 11, Day 2: Dialogue**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- How is good dialogue written?
- What should dialogue accomplish?
- How is dialogue recorded for a game?
- Free write: write a scene of dialogue between three characters without using dialogue tags or exposition

### *Assignments*

- VG Chapter 5: Exposition (on class site, pg. 56-72)
- VG Chapter 7: Dialogue (on class site, pg. 92-98)
- GW Chapter 13: Interchangeable Dialogue Content (on class site, pg. 237-266)

## **Week 12, Day 1: Point-of-View in Games**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- How does point-of-view relate to games?
- Which point-of-view works best for which genres of games?
- Free write: choose a game you've played and write it from another point-of-view

### *Assignments*

- LU Level 6: The Three C's, Part 2: Camera (pg. 131-162)
- *Fable III*: decision on the orphanage, decision on sewage, free time, Page's quest, free time – do NOT return to throne room

## **Week 12, Day 2: Character Controls**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- How are characters controlled?
- How are controllers and keyboards laid out?
- How do controls relate to character development?
- Free write: create a character and map out a system of controls that reflect their personality
- Group Three presentation

### *Assignments*

- LU Level 7: The Three Cs, Part 3: Controls (pg. 163-180)
- Blog Check

## **Week 13, Day 1: Design Documents**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- What is involved in writing for games?
- What is a design document?
- Class discussion: what would a design document look like for your favorite game?

### *Assignments*

- LU Level 4: You Can Design a Game, But Can You Do the Paperwork? (pg. 65-92)
- *Fable III*: decision on Brightwall library, decision on Bower Lake, free time, wealthy citizen quest, free time – do NOT return to throne room

## **Week 13, Day 2: Board Games**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- Do board games tell stories?
- How are board game instructions written?
- Group work: play board games in class

### *Assignments*

- Character Paper Due

## **Week 14, Day 1: Power-ups and Character**

### *Class Topics/Activities*

- How can gameplay improve characters and story?
- Free write: create a character and design power boosts that would reflect their personality

### Assignments

- LU Level 13: Now You're Playing With Power (pg. 381-404)
- *Fable III*: decision on Aurora outpost, decision on Mistpeak, final battle

### Week 14, Day 2: Music and Cut-scenes

#### Class Topics/Activities

- What role does music play in storytelling?
- What are the benefits of cutscenes and other non-interactive storytelling?
- Class discussion: how do music and cutscenes affect the emotional appeal of games?
- Group Four presentation

### Assignments

- LU Level 16: Some Notes on Music (pg. 427-440)
- LU Level 17: Cutscenes, or No One's Gonna Watch 'Em Anyway (pg. 441-450)

### Week 15, Day 1: Presentations

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Creative Presentations

### Assignments

- *Fable III*: aftermath, complete at least 2 non-relationship quests

### Week 15, Day 2: Presentations

#### Class Topics/Activities

- Creative Presentations

### Assignments

- Ten-Pager Due
- Blog Check

## COURSE BEST PRACTICES

In terms of course development, I have taught this class in two different formats in terms of the game(s) played as part of the class. I've found it best to center the semester on a single game, *Fable III* in this case, because it creates a sense of continuity and allows students to follow a single story and analyze its benefits and flaws. However, I've also taught this class using four shorter games rather than a single overarching game. The games in question were *Octogeddon* (All Yes Good, 2018), a rogue game following an octopus's revenge, *Undertale* (Fox, 2015), a well-known role playing game where killing monsters is optional, *Hatoful Boyfriend* (Devolver Digital, 2014), a bird-based dating game with



dark undertones, and *Hue* (Fiddlesticks Games, 2016), a puzzle game that uses different colors to solve puzzles. I aligned each game with one of the four units that best represented the game's strengths, with *Octogeddon* pairing with gameplay, *Undertale* being an example of narrative structure, *Hatoful Boyfriend* showing character development, and *Hue* as an example of world-building. Each game was carefully chosen to be available on Steam for a low price and short enough for students to finish in the time allotted. The group projects centered on the four games rather than the continued experience of *Fable III*.

I found that using four games was less effective because students weren't able to connect each unit to a greater whole, despite my efforts to link everything together in class discussions. Students tended to view games as representative of a single element rather than seeing how everything fit together. The benefits of teaching four games included greater variety and less frustration with the pace of playing, and also the exposure to different genres of games, but the cons of lacking a cohesive understanding of overall storytelling outweighed those benefits and I've returned to teaching *Fable III* as the central game.

I chose *Fable III* for a variety of reasons, and it has stood the test of time so far. First, it's easily available in a variety of formats and can be played on older PCs. Second, it's friendly to new players as it is impossible to die and the fighting mechanics are quite simple. Third, it's a linear game that divides neatly into fifteen sections that take approximately 2-3 hours each, a good amount of time to expect students to play per week. Fourth, it offers interesting moral challenges that inspire debate in class discussions. Finally, it's a good enough game that it establishes a baseline of quality to analyze, but it has enough flaws so that we can have productive discussions on what to look for in games, and what to avoid when telling stories. Playing a single game across a semester can get frustrating for students as they have to artificially pace themselves and any game will grow repetitive playing over such a long time period, but it's still a more comprehensive approach than teaching four different games.

Because many of my students come from a variety of gaming experiences, I've established a policy of requiring students to give a brief description of any game they mention during discussions the first time a game is introduced, even well-known franchises such as *Super Mario Brothers* (Nintendo) or *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo). This gives students a basic understanding of the game without having to admit to a lack of knowledge, and also allows students to see what games are out there that they might be interested in. It's also frequently helpful to me, as they often bring up niche games that I'm not familiar with. Generally students will bring up the same games over and over again throughout the semester, so these game introductions only happen in the first couple of weeks. However, I've found that students are far more willing to join discussions when they understand the basics of the games being discussed.

In addition to requiring brief descriptions of new games, I'm also aware that not all students are comfortable with the same types of content. While discussions are open to games of any rating, I have three rules for free writes: no explicit sex, no explicit violence, and no excessive swearing. I created these rules after an exercise where students practiced pitching creative ideas and one student pitched a game where the objective was essentially to rape other characters, leading to an uncomfortable (but productive) discussion on the role of rape in video games. Since imposing these rules, I haven't had any problems and encourage students to see them as a challenge rather than a limitation.

While much of the work in class is individual, students frequently work together on the free writes, getting into groups to brainstorm and work out ideas for narratives and characters. I also request but not require that they read each other's blogs and have found that they generally do so, at least the more engaging blogs. This leads to better discussions on *Fable III* as they are able to comment on each other's experiences and choices.

One of the challenges I always face in this class has to do with game accessibility: despite my best efforts to choose a game that everyone can play, it's inevitable that a student will be unable to access the game, at least temporarily. So far I haven't had any students who are unable to play at all, though I am aware that it is a possibility. In temporary situations, I ask students to read the blogs to understand what is happening in the game so that they can participate in the discussions and catch up as quickly as possible. If this is a permanent situation, such as their computer breaking midway through the semester, I encourage students to find another student in class that they can play with, or else watch playthroughs online while reading other student's blogs. While this situation isn't ideal, it has worked. This was especially a problem in Spring 2020 when students were sent home at spring break due to coronavirus. Not all of them brought their consoles, assuming it would be a temporary situation, but they were not allowed back on campus until summer in many cases. In response to this setback, we spent more time explaining what was going on in the game and less time in open discussion, and I excused grading on the blogs (though still requested that students complete them for the benefit of students who were reading along).

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

One of my primary goals for the future and one of the most-requested changes is to find a new game for the class, as *Fable III* is quite outdated at this point and the graphics are a frustration for students used to the clarity and realism of current games. If I teach the class again in the next year or two I would feel comfortable using it, as it's still an excellent game for this class, however I don't see myself using it beyond 2022. I'm on the lookout for a fairly linear game that divides neatly into around 15-16 sections of 2-3 hours each and has a strong story. It also has to be widely available and because many students only have access to relatively old PCs, it needs to be playable on a low-functioning device. Barring this, I may return to teaching four shorter games available on Steam and drawn from classics and new releases.

In addition, I'm always looking for new books on storytelling in video games and game narrative in general. I've switched course books every time I've taught this class, holding on to the most valuable readings from each of my previous books until my current syllabus has quite a mix of old and new material. As I find more sources, I'm always looking for ways to improve the readings to reflect new insights into how stories are told in a video game format.

One final change I might consider is making this class a fully online class. In Spring 2020, the course was shifted to an entirely online format at spring break due to coronavirus. I had an advantage in that I've taught online before and have trained in online pedagogy, so the shift to online was seamless. This indicates that the class would function perfectly well in a fully online setting. I divided each of the twice a week eighty-minute Zoom classes into 20-30 minutes of lecture (interspersed with questions and discussion both in chat and aloud), 10-15 minutes of creative work or discussion questions, 10-15 minutes presenting their work and answers in class or in breakout rooms, and 30-45 minutes of class

discussion. On days with group presentations, one student in the group shared their PowerPoint while the rest of the group went over their analysis. Their creative presentations involved them sharing their PowerPoints individually. As with face-to-face classes, we devoted about 15-20 minutes once a week to a discussion of *Fable III*. This format maintains the discussion-based quality of face-to-face in an online setting while still allowing time for lecture and creative writing.

The prompts that I currently use for class discussions and in-class writing should still be applicable in an online class, with a few alterations. I would likely have more questions prepared in advance for class discussions, as conversations on Zoom can be more difficult to sustain depending on the topic. One benefit to Zoom is that students are able to look up resources relating to the topics on a separate page or tab and link the results in the chat, encouraging student research and involvement while leading to a more in-depth conversation. It's also a great way for students to link to pictures and screenshots of the games that we discuss, as that is often hard to convey in a face-to-face setting.

Another significant change in teaching online would come with the in-class writing. In Spring 2020, I had students keep a journal or open a new document on their computers for the free writes, depending on whether they preferred to write by hand or on the computer. I asked students to turn their webcams off to work and back on when they finished, and gave them a two-minute warning before I finished the free write time. The downsides to this method include a lack of accountability, as I have no proof that they are actually completing the free writes during that time, but I encourage participation by calling on students to read their answers aloud, and I also assign them to breakout rooms with instructions to share with each other and respond. While they have the option to pass on reading to the entire class, it puts pressure on them to stay involved. For group work, I put everyone in breakout rooms to use software such as Google docs to collaborate on their answers, then present those answers to the class.

Having free writes and group work online would change the grading for this category, as they would no longer be written in class, handed in, graded, and returned. During Spring 2020, I simply excused grading in this category after the move online. However, in an entirely online class, I could require students to type up and email me or turn in free writes on our LMS as a way to grade this category. I already allow students the option of writing on their computers and emailing me their free writes in face-to-face classes, so it shouldn't be too difficult for all students to do so. For those students who still prefer to do creative writing by hand, they could type up the result before they are due. I might ask them to keep a single document with their responses that I collect and check at several points throughout the semester rather than every week to see if it reduced my workload. There is more accountability with group work as I can access their group documents as they are working on them and grade accordingly.

Aside from changes to discussions and in-class writing, the papers, group work, creative presentations, and blogs would stay the same. Group and individual presentations work well with Zoom and I already have students turn in papers online through our LMS. Depending on the need for online classes in the future, shifting online is potentially an excellent option for this class.

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Bateman, C. M. (2008). *Game writing: Narrative skills for videogames*. Boston, MA: Course Technology.

- Bryant, R. D., & Giglio, K. (2015). *Slay the dragon: Writing great video games*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions.
- Despain, W. (2008). *Professional techniques for video game writing*. Wellesley, MA: A.K. Peters.
- Dille, F., & Platten, J. Z. (2011). *The ultimate guide to video game writing and design*. New York, NY: Lone Eagle.
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- Hatoful Boyfriend [Video Game]. (2014). Devolver Digital.
- Hue [Video Game]. (2016). Fiddlesticks Games.
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- Rogers, S. (2014). *Level up!: The guide to great video game design*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley.
- Skolnick, E. (2015). *Video game storytelling: What every developer needs to know about narrative techniques*. New York, NY: Watson-Guptill.
- Super Mario Brothers [Video Game]. Redmond, WA: Nintendo.
- The Legend of Zelda [Video Game]. Redmond, WA: Nintendo.
- Undertale [Video Game]. (2015). Toby Fox.

## CHAPTER 20.

### GAME NARRATIVE AND INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING (ENMS 803)

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TOF EKLUND (THEY/THEM)<sup>1</sup>  
AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

**Course Title:** ENMS 803: Game Narrative and Interactive Storytelling

**Course University:** Auckland University of Technology

**Course College/School:** School of Language and Culture

**Course Department/Program:** English and New Media Studies

**Course Level:** Graduate

**Course Credits:** 30

**Course Length:** 12 weeks

**Course Medium:** Flexible Hybrid

**Course Keywords:** game studies, media theory, creative writing

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

Introduction to key theories of game design, creation, and criticism, in the context of game history and concrete examples. Hands-on project-based learning with game writing tools, inclusive of considerations of game and interface design. Readings from a range of scholarly and applied sources providing multiple perspectives on creative and critical processes in interactive media.

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This course explores how stories are told in games and interactive media, how narrative and (game) design can support each other, structures for interactive storytelling, and how to write new media narratives using tools such as Twine and Inkscript. It is the goal of this course to teach game writing and game criticism alongside each other, preparing students for work as narrative designers, games journalists, and independent developers as well as laying a solid foundation for advanced study of games. No programming or design experience is required, but students with coding, narrative, sound, interface and/or graphic design skills will have an opportunity to hone those skills and deepen their understanding of narration and worldbuilding in a videogame (and tabletop) context.

1. Tof Eklund (they/them, tof.eklund@aut.ac.nz) is a Lecturer at Auckland University of Technology, where they teach and do research in the areas of game studies, media theory, interactive storytelling, and queer subculture. Their published work includes an intersectional feminist fantasy romance novel, minicomics, tabletop RPGs, Twine games, and games journalism as well as traditional essays and articles.

Game writing techniques covered include branching narrative and dialogue, narrative convergence, decision-point structure, what makes for meaningful choices, descriptive text, lore, voice, environmental storytelling, emergent narrative, diversity and representation, accessibility, and elements of transmedia writing. Essential game studies methodologies are covered, including close reading/close play, analysis of game mechanics, design thinking, and visual analysis.

Course content includes tabletop and nonfictional narrative as well as the digital and fictional. Though video games are the primary focus of the course and the first interest of most students taking it, content is not restricted to digital media or to “games” as such. Gamebooks, such as the Choose Your Own Adventure series; roleplaying games (both tabletop and live-action); wargames, and even traditional games and game-adjacent practices, such as tarot and social script “role playing” are included and treated as important – just not given equal weight. This version of the course does not include the interactive character of storytelling in oral traditions, or content on storywork as an indigenous and liberatory methodology, but only because I am still considering how to do those topics justice in this context.

Some of the most canonical sources on play and games are not represented here, and the difficult decision has been made to not attempt anything like a complete, let alone comprehensive, history of games, play, or storytelling. That could easily be a course in itself. Lectures do include historical content, and touch on both standard and minoritarian histories, and students’ are challenged to examine and reconsider their understanding of the history and culture of game creation and game play.

## COURSE CONTEXT

ENMS 803 is a “recommended” course for all graduate students in English and New Media Studies. Students intending to do traditional or practice-led research on videogames or in games studies for their thesis are expected to pass this class first, but that is not a hard requirement. This course has been fairly popular with graduate students in other programmes, and regularly attracted exchange students from European Universities prior to COVID-19. The level of familiarity with games does vary, as some ENMS students take this course out of in interest in digital/online interactivity or because it is part of the recommended curriculum, rather than out of any particular interest in games.

Perhaps even more than in an undergraduate course, students’ background with games varies hugely, and not just between “gamers” and “non-gamers.” This is only more true at the intersection of different kinds of games and concepts of gaming that this course embraces. A student may be a self-described “hardcore gamer” but have little knowledge of indie games and no experience with analogue RPGs like Dungeons & Dragons, and a D&D veteran may never have only played D&D (and never any other tabletop or live-action RPGs). Not many courses attempt to introduce students to forms of media that are entirely new to them, let alone to multiple new media. Some degree of maintaining focus and managing scope is necessary, but encouraging students to take off and run with the aspects of the course that speak to them is much more productive than trying to keep everyone on the same page. At the postgraduate level, students can be expected to be self-motivated and able to conduct research independently, and should be supported in the further development of those skills.

Students also enter this course with a diverse and variable set of relevant skills. Students with a

background in Computer Science usually take to Ink Script, similar as it is to other focused scripting languages, those coming from Creative Writing are more likely to stick with Twine and develop impressive dialogues between characters, and those with a background in Media Studies or the Social Sciences seem the most likely to enjoy criticism and analysis of games. An interest in game mechanics is a special case: students who are into tabletop games, including RPGs and board games, immediately get game mechanics, regardless of previous study, and that those with no tabletop (or LARP) experience struggle to come up with rules for a game.

Many courses in Game Studies focus on criticism, but the practice of writing interactive narratives is essential to this class. One major draw of the ENMS program is the practice-led thesis path, in which students create a game (or other “artifact”) and supplement it with an explanatory exegesis. ENMS 803 has to span the distance from introducing this kind of critical and creative practice to students developing those skills to the point where they can begin work on a practice-led thesis.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

This course, like the media it studies, is intended to provide meaningful choices and accommodate a range of interests and enthusiasms. There is a lot of scaffolding available to students who want or need that structure, but also a great degree of latitude provided to students who want to exceed requirements. In the previous section, I explained how diverse the academic backgrounds and personal experiences of students taking this course are. As a matter of pedagogy, this both a challenge and a great opportunity.

I follow my mentor, the expansive, counter-apocalyptic Donald Ault (1942-2019), in encouraging students to pursue wild hares all the way to Wonderland and back again. It seems trite to say that I learn more from them than they learn from me, but it is true. Moreover, with so many different backgrounds and experiences, they teach each other in remarkable ways. I am equally proud of the students who come to my class with technical and artistic skills and go on to produce amazing thesis projects, and those who tell me on the first day that they don’t play games and don’t write stories but go on to overcome their doubts and fears.

As a matter of first principles, I reject the artificial divides between creation and criticism, theory and practice, narrative and gameplay, digital and analogue, gamer and non-gamer, and teacher and student. Rather than pretend to impartiality, I try to be upfront with students about what my experience is and what my views are, and to show them that their experiences and views are valued.

I do what I can to develop the trust they need to go on and do things I’d never expected and would never have imagined. I open up early on about my experiences with depression, and remind them of the resources at their disposal. I explain what it means to me to be a nonbinary transgender parent: my kids call me “mop.” I don’t mince words when I discuss “gamergate” or the problems with the game industry, and I tell them why I love games anyway. I don’t play “gotcha” with students who are uncomfortable speaking up, but I do stop and listen when they’re ready to talk.

ENMS 803 is an interdisciplinary course in an interdisciplinary program. The University tends to operate on a progression from the general to the specific, narrowing scope and intensifying focus along the way. To some degree, and in some contexts, that’s necessary. With this course, and in most

of what I do, I take a different tact, taking a specific topic and exploring the broader set of ideas and connections that make it more than just an object of study.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

### Required Texts

Alexander, M. (2018). *The Slow Games Movement Manifesto*.

Baudrillard, J. trans. Glaser, S.F. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation* (excerpt).

Bizzocchi, J. and Tanenbaum J. (2011). *Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences*.

Campbell, C. (2018). *Gaming's toxic men, explained*.

Inkle Studio. (2016). *Writing web-based interactive fiction with ink*.

Isbister, K. (2016). *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (excerpt).

Jongneel, J. (2013). *Environmental Storytelling in Games*.

Koster, R. (2003). *A Theory of Fun*.

McRae, E. (n.d.). *Learning Ink Script – Tutorial One*.

Meiners, R. et. al. (2017) *Group Report: Cosiness in Games: An Exploration of Safety, Softness, and Satisfied Needs*.

Milk, C. (2015). *How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine*.

Nietzsche, F. trans. Kauffman, W. (1974). *The Greatest Weight*.

Pepe, F. ed. (2019). *The CRPG Book*.

Samyn, M. (2008). *The challenge of non-linearity*.

Sydell, L. (2017). *Can Virtual Reality Make you More Empathetic?*

### Recommended Texts

Anthropy, A. and Clark, N. (2015). *A Game Design Vocabulary: Exploring the Foundational Principles Behind Good Game Design*.

Flanagan, M. (2009). *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*.

Kopas, M. (2015). *Videogames for Humans: Twine Authors in Conversation*.

Montfort, N. (2005). *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*.



Quinn, Z. (2017). *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate*.

Schell, J. (2019). *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*

### Assigned Video Games

- Black Mirror: Bandersnatch (optional, (<https://www.netflix.com/title/80988062>))
- Colossal Cave Adventure (<http://rickadams.org/adventure/>)
- Depression Quest (<http://www.depressionquest.com/>)
- Tale of Tales' The Graveyard or Vanitas (<http://tale-of-tales.com/index.php>)
- and a game by Molleindustria (<https://www.molleindustria.org/>) or Far Few Giants (<https://farfewgiants.itch.io/>)

### Twitch/Liveplay Video Games

A selection of games will either be streamed or played live in class. I've included a full selection of Twitch/liveplay games in the course schedule, but it is important to note that I change up which games I stream every semester. Please consider the games listed in the course schedule notional, and emphatically not prescriptive. Below is a more selective list, containing games I stream nearly every term:

- 1979 Revolution: Black Friday (<https://1979revolutiongame.com/>)
- The Average Everyday Adventures of Samantha Brown (<https://lemonsuckergames.itch.io/choosetheoatmeal>)
- Bioshock (<https://bioshockgame.com/>)
- Escape My House (<https://vr.escapemyhouse.co.nz/>)
- Extreme Meatpunks Forever (<https://hthr.itch.io/extreme-meatpunks-forever>)
- Papers, Please (<https://papersplea.se/>)
- Undertale (<https://undertale.com/>)

### Recommended Twine Games

Twine culture embraces confessional and queer work, and sometimes includes sexually-explicit or otherwise potentially disturbing content. The selected games below are notable as exemplars of what Twine can do *and* they are unlikely to trigger anyone:

- Conversations with Emma (<https://yifatshaik.itch.io/conversations-with-emma>)
- The Domovoi (<https://bravemule.itch.io/domovoi>)
- Golden Threads (<https://allanxia.itch.io/golden-threads>)
- The Temple of No (<https://crowscrowscrows.itch.io/the-temple-of-no>)
- A Witch's Word (<https://rainbowstarbird.itch.io/a-witchs-word>)

The games included with Videogames for Humans (<http://www.instarbooks.com/books/videogames-for-humans.html>) are all exceptional, but some contain “mature” content, and Porpentine’s Twines (<http://slimedaughter.com/games/>) are renowned but very raw and confronting. There are over 3000 Twine games on itch.io (<https://itch.io/games/tag-twine>), but that list includes a lot of smut and is of highly variable quality.

### Tabletop RPGs

- Dungeons & Dragons (5.0e SRD [http://media.wizards.com/2016/downloads/DND/SRD-OGL\\_V5.1.pdf](http://media.wizards.com/2016/downloads/DND/SRD-OGL_V5.1.pdf))
- FATE Accelerated (<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/114902/Fate-Accelerated-Edition>)
- Fiasco (<https://bullypulpitgames.com/downloads/fiasco-preview/>)
- GURPS (<http://www.warehouse23.com/products/gurps-lite-fourth-edition>, also available in Simplified Chinese: <http://www.warehouse23.com/products/gurps-lite-chinese-fourth-edition>)

### Tools

Inky: Ink Script visual editor (<http://www.github.com/inkle/inky/releases/latest>)

itch.io: indie game hosting and marketplace (<https://itch.io/>)

Twine: interactive story designer (<https://twinery.org/>)

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

### Assignment 1 (formative): Weekly Reflection

This assignment consists of your online reflections over the course of the class. You will be assessed on your participation in and contribution to the discussion as well as on your own reflection. Weekly prompts are offered as a guide, but you are welcome to bring in your own original research and thoughts on the themes and topics of the class, including critically reviewing games you’ve played. Weekly responses to your classmates’ posts is not required, but participation and interaction overall is part of your grade. You will not be graded based on word count, but you should expect to write 500+ words/week, with no upper limit.

#### *Criteria*

- You critically reflect on topics that have been learned and demonstrate your wider reading around this citing references, articles and other sources that are relevant such as opinion pieces, blogs or websites;
- You show an ability to take an active part in discussions online, including an awareness of what others have said, responding as appropriate, and including links to sources you introduce (including media and criticism).
- You demonstrate intellectual curiosity, contributing to the breadth and/or depth of the conversation.

### **Assignment 2 (formative): Twine Game**

This assessment is based on your submission of a narratively complete, fully playable Twine game and a short reflective statement.

You will be crafting a complete interactive story, or a complete scene from a larger story, using Twine and the techniques of branching narrative, and then writing a short reflection on your process and experience.

#### *Criteria*

- Write a complete story or a complete scene from a larger story using Twine.
- Your story needs to provide the player with meaningful choices, branching and developing significant complexity before converging again.
- Your Twine must have at least one substantial or “true” ending, something that completes the scene or story, and I do not recommend including more than three true endings. You may also have “game over, try again” endings if appropriate.
- Your Twine must contain a minimum of 30 passages, with no maximum. Counting passages is a poor measure of progress: having a complete, well-developed story and meaningful choices is much more important.
- Any theme, topic, or genre is acceptable, including nonfiction. Do provide trigger warnings for common triggers (including but not limited to: graphic violence, gore, torture, domestic or relationship violence, explicit sexual content, sexual harassment or assault, and physical or emotional abuse).
- When you have finished your Twine, write a short (500-1500 word) reflection that considers your process for writing this story, any problems you had and how you addressed them, and your conclusions about what you learned and/or what you would do differently in the future.

### **Assignment 3 (summative): Advanced Game Narrative or Criticism**

This brief is the capstone assessment for the course, and you have two options for completing it. One is storytelling with a critical explanation (exegesis), and the other is in-depth criticism in a traditional essay style. Choose ONE prompt to complete for your Summative Assessment.

#### **Prompt 1: Storytelling and Exegesis**

You may complete the creative component of this prompt in any of the following ways:

- An Inksript game that contains a complete scene or story. Playtime (based on a single playthrough at “reading aloud” speed) should be 10-30 minutes.
- A Twine game that contains a complete scene or story, and uses advanced features such as CSS, macros, and/or Javascript. Your Twine must have an absolute minimum of 60 passages, and should have a playtime (as defined above) of 10-30 minutes.
- A Game Design Document (GDD) / Game Bible. See detailed requirements in the GDD template file.

You must also complete an exegesis on your game. This is similar to the reflection on your Twine (Brief 2), but more formal and somewhat more extensive: it should be about 1000-2500 words, and include an explanation of your critical perspective, process, and goals, as well as a reflection on what worked and what you would do differently.

### Prompt 2: Close Play and Critical Analysis

To complete this prompt, you must choose a game to analyze and make time for close play (as discussed in class and in course readings) of that game before you start writing. Make sure to take notes, screenshots, etc. as you go. You do not have to “beat” the game in order to perform a close play, but you should expect to spend an absolute minimum of eight hours playing and taking notes on your game. You do not need to “know what you are looking for” before you start – if anything, the opposite is true.

Develop a critical analysis based on your close play, making an argument about what your chosen game does or means once one gets beyond the game’s description and first impressions of gameplay. Defend your argument with details from play and use academic sources to contextualize your case and give it broader meaning.

Your critical analysis (essay) should be 2500-5000 words, formatted and cited according to APA style. Use of figures (screenshots and other graphics) is strongly encouraged but not required.

### COURSE ASSESSMENT

This course is graded holistically: improvements in the summative assessment (Assignment 3) can make up for flaws in previous assessments, and formative assessments (Assignment 1 & 2) can buoy the final grade if they clearly demonstrate competencies not equally demonstrated in the summative assessment. In reductive terms, the instructor should compare the average of all three assessment grades to the summative assessment grade (alone) and assign the higher of the two unless there is a particularly strong reason to do otherwise.

Assessment should take progress into account as well as proficiency, to ensure that students with backgrounds in creative writing and/or computer programming are challenged as much as those with neither. Feedback must be clear in this regard, reflecting on both progress and readiness to pursue advanced academic study and/or work in the field. This sort of assessment places a greater burden on the instructor, and is therefore contingent on seminar-sized classes. Everything in this course is adaptable to 100% online instruction, and most of it could be adapted into a MOOC easily enough as long as grading (and thus certification) was removed. The key skills taught here cannot meaningfully be assessed through exams or via machine grading, as they exist at the juncture of creative and critical work, with a variable degree of technical proficiency and craft required.

### EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

Each week’s Activities lead into that week’s online Discussion post and the following week’s theme, as explored in lecture and Stream.

## **Week 1 – Introduction to Storytelling Games: History, Structure, and Theory**

- Stream: Each week’s lecture is followed by an in-class or streamed “let’s play” session. This week we’ll be playing Papers, Please and watching the short film based on the game.

### *Activities:*

- Download The CRPG Book Project (<https://crpgbook.wordpress.com/>) and **read** the Introduction, Using This Book, FAQ, and What is an Old-School RPG? sections, plus any three Reviews (from different “periods”).
- Then play Colossal Cave Adventure (<http://rickadams.org/adventure/>).

### *Discussion Prompts:*

- Briefly describe the three games you read about in The CRPG Book Project, in terms of the stories they tell, and relative to each other. You can discuss game mechanics, but don’t have to.
- Or write and post a short review of Colossal Cave Adventure, focusing on the game’s writing and your play experience.

## **Week 2 – Whose Interactive Fiction is it? Gamebooks, Text Adventures, Visual Novels, and Twine**

- Stream: This Book is a Dungeon, The Average Everyday Adventures of Samantha Brown

### *Activities:*

- Read “From Prussia, with love – the origin of RPGs” in *The CRPG Book Project*.
- Create an itch.io account and play a Twine game (see recommended list, above) or another “decision point” game, such as the Bandersnatch episode of Black Mirror. (<https://www.netflix.com/title/809888062>)
- Read the character creation rules for one of the following tabletop RPGs:
- Dungeons & Dragons ([http://media.wizards.com/2016/downloads/DND/SRD-OGL\\_V5.1.pdf](http://media.wizards.com/2016/downloads/DND/SRD-OGL_V5.1.pdf)); GURPS (<http://www.warehouse23.com/products/gurps-lite-fourth-edition>); or FATE Accelerated (<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/114902/Fate-Accelerated-Edition>).

### *Discussion Prompts:*

- Write about your experience playing the game you chose, and how it met or differed from your expectations.
- Or create a character using the RPG system you chose and post that character’s information and describe the experience relative to creating characters in videogames.

## **Week 3 – The Lessons of Tabletop: D&D, GNS theory, Narrative Branching and Convergence**

- Stream: Langrisser II, Sunless Sea

*Activities:*

- Read Fredrich Nietzsche’s “The Greatest Weight” (course reserves), and the Fiasco Preview (<https://bullypulpitgames.com/downloads/fiasco-preview/>).
- Pick and play any narrative game or interactive story that we haven’t already discussed.

*Discussion Prompts:*

- Write about your experience playing the game you chose, including how it relates to the game you played last week and to the experiences your classmates have had with Twine games so far.
- Or write about an experience you’ve had learning to play a game in terms of what made that experience memorable (for any reason).

**Week 4 – Live or virtual Tabletop RPG Session (Fiasco) with Workshop and Discussion**

- Stream: Instead of a lecture and regular Twitch or live-play session, the class will divide into groups and play a Fiasco (TTRPG) scenario.

*Activities:*

- Read Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum “Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences.” in *Well Played 3.0*. (<https://press.etc.cmu.edu/index.php/product/well-played-3-0/>)

*Discussion Prompts:*

- Write about any aspect of the Fiasco game in terms of character, story, or the social dynamics “at the table.”
- Remember, you always have the option to write a brief game review for your weekly discussion post.

**Week 5 – Game Studies, Game Criticism, and Close Play**

- Stream: The Magic Circle, In Other Waters

*Activities:*

- Read Ralph Koster’s original A Theory of Fun conference presentation (<https://www.theoryoffun.com/theoryoffun.pdf>), Mitch Alexander’s The Slow Games Movement Manifesto (<https://hxovax.itch.io/slow-games-movement-manifesto>), and the excerpt from *Simulacra and Simulation* by Jean Baudrillard (course reserves).

*Discussion Prompts:*

- Analyze any of this week’s readings.
- Or write a “close play” analysis of a short segment of a video game.

## **Week 6 – Timelines, Maps, Lore and Descriptive Text**

- Stream: Tales of Maj'Eyal, Opera Omnia

### *Activities:*

- Read “Gaming’s toxic men, explained” by Colin Campbell (<https://www.polygon.com/platform/amp/2018/7/25/17593516/video-game-culture-toxic-men-explained>).
- Play Depression Quest (<http://www.depressionquest.com/>)

### *Discussion Prompts:*

- Pick one of the people Campbell interviewed and engage with their work (writing, videos, games, etc.). Then analyze that work in terms of the creator’s personal experience with game development and/or gamer culture. Or read another manifesto from Manifesto Jam and either analyze it (in terms of what it calls for, how it makes its case, and what results it could produce) or write your own.

## **Week 7 – Games and Society: Culture, Subcultures, Toxicity, and Representation**

- Stream: Dream Daddy, Extreme Meatpunks Forever, Catacomb Prince

### *Activities:*

- Take a look at the template Game Design Document (GDD)(course reserves).
- Read *How Games Move Us* by Katherine Isbister, Ch. 1 “A Series of Interesting Choices: the Building Blocks of Emotional Design” (course reserves).

### *Discussion Prompts:*

- Select a section of the GDD (such as one item description or character bio), complete it, including all subsections, and post that (copy/paste) to the group. You can write about an original idea of yours, or something from a game/movie/etc. of your choice.
- Or write a reflection on Chapter 1 of Isbister’s *How Games Move Us*, including a game that moved you emotionally.

## **Week 8 – Games and Emotional Affect: an Empathy Machine?**

- Stream: 1979 Revolution: Black Friday, Bury me my Love, Unrest

### *Activities:*

- Watch Chris Milk’s TED talk “How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine” ([https://www.ted.com/talks/chris\\_milk\\_how\\_virtual\\_reality\\_can\\_create\\_the\\_ultimate\\_empathy\\_machine](https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine)).
- Read or listen to “Can Virtual Reality Make you More Empathetic?” (<https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/01/09/508617333/can-virtual-reality-make-you-more-empathetic>).

- Complete Assignment 2 (no discussion this week).

### Week 9 – Game Design as Narrative, Introduction to Inkscript

- Stream: Undertale, Celeste, Octodad: Dadliest Catch

#### Activities:

- Download and install the “Inky” Ink script editor. (<http://www.github.com/inkle/inky/releases/latest>). I recommend keeping Inky open as you complete the following readings so you can test passages of Ink script as you go.
- Read “Writing web-based interactive fiction with ink – *For complete beginners!*” (<https://www.inklestudios.com/ink/web-tutorial/>) and McRae’s Learning Ink Script – Tutorial One. (<https://www.edmcrae.com/article/learning-ink-script-tutorial-one>)
- Try out the commands and techniques in these introductions.

#### Discussion Prompts:

- After completing this week’s activities, choose one of the following options based on your experience:
  - If you got “stuck” trying to learn Ink script, write about the problems you had. Be as specific as possible.
  - Or, if you’re fairly confident with Ink script, write a single scene or interaction in inky and then post the .html or a link to it to the discussion.
  - Or, if you feel you ready to describe how Ink script works, you can respond to someone who got “stuck.” Write your own (brief) tutorial explaining the problems they had and how to fix them as clearly as possible.

### Week 10 – Environmental Storytelling & Emergent Narrative

- Stream: Bioshock, Hollow Knight, Gorogoa

#### Activities:

- Read “Environmental Storytelling in Games” by Jethro Jongneel (<http://www.jethrojongeneel.com/articles/T3.php>) and “The challenge of non-linearity” by Michaël Samyn (<http://tale-of-tales.com/blog/2008/11/27/the-challenge-of-non-linearity/>).
- Play the free (demo) version of Tale of Tales’ The Graveyard (<http://tale-of-tales.com/TheGraveyard/index.html>) or Vanitas (<http://tale-of-tales.com/Vanitas/index.html>). Tale of Tales is Michaël Samyn and Aurelia Harvey.

#### Discussion Prompts:

- Write about a powerful experience you had with environmental storytelling (in a videogame, at a theme park or restaurant, etc.). Consider what made it memorable – Jongneel’s article on Environmental Storytelling may be helpful.



- Or describe an emergent narrative you co-created. This might be an experience you had with a videogame, party game (like charades), tabletop or live RPG, improvised acting, etc. What rules or limitations were involved, and what effect did they have on the story.
- Or write about your experience with *Vanitas* or *The Graveyard* in terms of Samyn's post on non-linearity.

### **Week 11 – Games are Fun? Serious Games, Games for Change, Nonfiction and Edugames**

- Stream: *Escape My House*, *Signs of the Sojourner*

#### *Activities:*

- Play any of Molleindustria's (<https://www.molleindustria.org/>) or Far Few Giants' (<https://farfewgiants.itch.io/>) games.
- Recommendations: Molleindustria: *A Prison Strike*, *Oilgarchy*, *Unmanned*. Far Few Giants: anything in their "The Sacrifices" series.

#### *Discussion Prompts:*

- Play and write about a "serious game," such as *Escape Your House*, one of Molleindustria's games, or *Bury Me My Love* (which we streamed in Week 8).
- Or briefly outline your concept for a "serious game," including its educational or informative theme, plot and/or setting, and play mechanics. You can use the "one sheet" from the GDD template, if you wish.

### **Week 12 – Online Lab/Tutorial**

- No lecture, discussion, or stream this week. Instead we will have a casual final meeting live or online, focused on the final Assignment. Students are encouraged to bring work-in-progress to share and receive feedback and support on. In addition, I will be opening up additional online office hours to provide one-on-one assistance.
- Complete Assignment 3 (due Week 14).

### **COURSE BEST PRACTICES**

There's a lot of content in this syllabus, and potential for a great deal more in lesson plans. You have to be willing and able to throw it out. Not all of it, but whatever bits aren't going to work for that particular class, and whatever else you need to jettison in order to work in what they need and are interested in. For example, tabletop RPGs are a great way to think about making game system and story work together, and an important part of gaming history, but if none of your students are used to thinking about game mechanics (common with creative writing students), they can find it very frustrating. A couple of tabletop or LARP gamers in the class can make a big difference in whether the rest are able to see the value of that module. *Fiasco* is so easy to learn that I find students with any theatre or public speaking experience take to it immediately, but if you can't get all or nearly all of your students to speak up in class, you may have to cancel the class RPG session.

Current events matter. I always check my gaming newsfeeds as well as general news before class: if

there's something great or terrible going on, I bring it up. In addition to keeping the course relevant, it's a good way to find out what you students care about and whether there's something they need support with. It's also important to respect your students' enthusiasms. I'm much more interested in indie game dev than the big companies, but I keep my criticism specific and distinct from whether a game is enjoyable. I've seen jaded, cynical graduate students light up like fireworks when their favorite game come up in class, and it's a moment of real vulnerability for them. They're media-savvy. They already know about the racial stereotypes, objectification of women, and glorification of violence in games. Given a chance, they're happy to rag on their favorite game for its skimpy costumes or kill 'em all attitude, but if you shut them down and dismiss their enthusiasm, you've lost them forever.

The only thing more important than nourishing enthusiasm is maintaining a safe learning space. I've never had to ask a student to leave, but I have had to respond to students who had unconsidered "boy's club" assumptions. I usually have a slight majority of male to non-male (female and gender nonconforming) students, and the most talkative students are almost always male. I have to hold space for students who won't interrupt their more forceful classmates, and respond promptly and clearly on when something ignorant or inappropriate is said. This is a problem throughout academia at every level, but it is a particular hazard in when dealing with video games.

Computer science classes employ a lot of group projects, but creative writing is usually a deeply individual undertaking. Course lectures cover different ways writers work as part of a team, and why good communication with teammates is invaluable, even when tasks have clear borders. All of the Assignments in this course can be completed on an individual basis, but I accept proposals for collaborative work: a successful proposal must involve all team members in creative or analytic writing.

Several of the students I've had in this course have gone on to practice-led theses under my supervision. Those projects include a topographic storytelling alternative to existing social media, *The Library of Babble* (<https://idlemurmurs.itch.io/babble>) and a voxel-based adventure game based on a Māori myth cycle, *Tāwhaki* (<https://waetford.wixsite.com/tawhaki>); as well as an illustrated retelling of stories of women's love and power (mehr) from *Shahnameh*, a game representing the diversity of experience among depression sufferers, an intersectionally representative queer fantasy visual novel, and an experimental tabletop "legacy" game.

## FUTURE COURSE PLANS

The art and craft of game writing and game design are still young. Unlike so many other aspects of video gaming, game narrative is not technology-driven. If anything, the skyrocketing costs of making AAA games with "next gen" graphics have hampered the development of storytelling in this medium. Most of the interesting developments in working game design and story together are happening in indie and even non-commercial spaces, and it is precisely that experimental work that challenges students who are used to well-established game series and genres.

Obsolescence is always an issue. Feverish efforts are being made to preserve games and videos made with once-ubiquitous, now-defunct Macromedia/Adobe Flash software, and it's even worse in console and mobile gaming. It's only a matter of time before the tools I teach now become irrelevant, and the games either vanish or enter the halls of gaming history, alongside milestones like *Colossal*

Cave Adventure and Zork. At the same time, I look forward to being able to retire most of my content on GamerGate, and hope that online hate movements will be less central to every study of gaming in the future.

The specific games I teach and use as examples shift every semester, both to stay current and to address particular student interests. As much as possible, the games I've included here are ones that I believe will remain useful and relevant for years to come, but it should go without saying that it is not only appropriate but necessary to re-consider the burgeoning archive of video games, old and new, on a regular basis. My choices are unapologetically ideosyncratic and sometimes obscure, but never unconsidered. Worrying about what to teach is one of my favorite parts of the job.

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## CHAPTER 21.

### THEORY & PRACTICE OF INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING (DIG 6551)

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**Course Title:** Digital Media (DIG) 6551: Theory & Practice of Interactive Storytelling

**Course University:** University of Central Florida

**Course College/School:** Nicholson School of Communication and Media

**Course Department/Program:** Games and Interactive Media

**Course Level:** Graduate

**Course Credits:** 3

**Course Length:** 15 weeks

**Course Medium:** Online

**Course Keywords:** interactive fiction, electronic literature, adventure games, digital narratives, hypertext

#### CATALOG DESCRIPTION

Analysis and creation of interactive stories within and across platforms. What makes stories compelling, and how do we use the affordances of media to communicate narratives? Part of the Digital Media Master of Arts; Elective for the Texts & Technology PhD program

#### COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

In this course, we will engage with the making and critique of interactive works ranging from “Choose Your Own Adventure” comics to electronic literature and interactive fiction. Drawing on readings including Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Scott Rettberg’s *Electronic Literature*, Merritt Kopas’s *Videogames for Humans*, and Amaranth Borsuk’s *The Book*, we’ll consider historical and current questions of interface, linearity, and interactivity. Students will work towards submission-ready creative or critical work, based on their professional goals. This course is divided into three units:

- **Choose Your Own Adventure.** In this unit, we will read and critique choice-driven narratives, considering the history of design approaches to hypertextual play in print.

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Students will create a game using Twine, a hypertext-based tool for interactive storytelling.

- **Interactive Fiction.** In this unit, we will learn object-oriented approaches to interactive fiction using Inform 7 while playing parser-based interactive fiction, which uses actions and objects to create interactive text-based worlds. Students will make small, contained game experiences using the tool and thinking about narrative puzzles, riddles, environmental design, and interaction with objects.
- **Visual Narrative Games.** In this unit, we will consider visual narrative games, with particular attention to adventure games and quest-driven narratives. Students will use Ren'Py to build small narrative experiences, working with systems for developing simple visual environments and character interactions and conversations. Examples will include games across genres, including visual novels, walking simulators, and casual games.

In addition to the course materials, students will be expected to consume and critique a range of media and may need to buy or borrow additional texts. Upon completing the course, students should:

- Understand the history and future of the “book”
- Play and critique a range of interactive storytelling exemplars
- Develop an understanding of object-oriented narrative design
- Prototype interactive storytelling experiences in a range of genres
- Explore and apply theoretical frameworks of electronic literature

## COURSE CONTEXT

As a graduate-level course, “Interactive Storytelling” serves a range of students, but is primarily designed for specialists in the field embarking on their first year in the MA program in Digital Media or doctoral students engaged in humanist transdisciplinary research in the Texts & Technology PhD program. It is additionally available as a graduate elective for students from other programs at UCF (often focused on education or literature). Thus, the course needs flexibility to fit a range of experience levels, ranging from students with extensive knowledge of games and game design to students with no previous coding or design experience. Typically, few of the students are familiar with the more experimental works engaged (such as electronic literature), which provides common ground for the students to bring their humanist and digital knowledge to this new practice.

## COURSE PEDAGOGY

The organizing principle of the course is the melding of theory and practice: since students are typically approaching the course from either a more technical, design-oriented background *or* a more humanist, research-oriented background, the course is designed to offer both sets of students iterative engagement in both areas. Ideally, the students from each background will leave both with new understanding of the other area (theory or practice), and with an understanding of how they can bring their existing knowledge to bear in addressing challenges in both domains. Both the assignment structure and the grading centers this balance, with an equal weight given to the theory and practice assignments, and one assignment of each type in each module. As the course is currently offered using an asynchronous online model, with optional synchronous sessions for additional conversation, this

iterative process is intended to be personal: projects are individual rather than team-based, and the focus of both assignments and peer discussions is on feedback and the sharing of milestones along the way.

The iteration of the course documented here was designed as a fully-online course to be delivered during the constraints of in-person community necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic: however, the fully-online modality has far more utility beyond this moment, and offers potential value for continuing to reach students underserved by traditional graduate coursework scheduling. The course is well-suited to the format because of its emphasis on individual writing, design, and play: ultimately, the success of the course is evaluated through each student's personal growth in critical and creative work.

## COURSE TEXTS, GAMES, SOFTWARE, AND HARDWARE

As the course is designed to ground the practice of interactive storytelling in historical discourse, the critical texts move from engagements with the book at a conceptual level to works that specifically engage the potential of the digital literary. The theoretical volumes required are:

- ***The Book* (Borsuk, 2018)**. An examination of the book as a concept shaped by, but existing beyond, the physical object. Draws from experimental and artist's books as well as multimodal and electronic literature.
- ***Videogames for humans: Twine authors in conversation* (Kopas, 2015)**. A collection of authors and scholars engaging in critical readings of single works, illuminating the contributions of hypertext games and literature.
- ***Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Murray, 1997)**. A provocative imagining of potential frontiers in interactive storytelling, focusing on emerging platforms and questions of procedural authorship and virtual reality.
- ***Electronic literature* (Rettberg, 2019)**. A historical and genre-driven analysis of electronic literature, looking across international trends and emerging experiments as well as historically significant genres and practices.

Creative works are listed weekly, and usually include either multiple options or a single required work. These examples are frequently updated to provide students with a combination of historical and current playable works, and thus are drawn from sources including the *Electronic Literature Collection* (Boluk et al., 2016) and Interactive Fiction Competition winners list. Given the online nature of the course, cross-platform, freely available tools are essential. Three platforms are used for the practical exercises throughout:

- **Inform 7** (Requires installation) – Inform 7 is a tool for making parser-based interactive fiction, which allows players to type in commands to explore text environments by moving and interacting with objects and characters.
- **Twine 2** (Browser-based available) – Twine 2 is a platform for building web-based hypertexts, with mechanisms built-in for designing poetic and narrative structures for choice-based narrative design.

- **Ren'Py** (Requires installation) – Ren'Py is a Python-driven platform for building visual novels, with a visual editor and simple coding mechanisms for adding conversation and choice-driven set piece narratives.

While these tools are likely to shift over time, they represent accessible entry-points that meet the requirements of this course to allow non-coders to create, while providing those with more programming and design experience with flexibility.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Students are assessed primarily through three types of work: provocations (discussion posts); critique exercises; and creative exercises. Each unit (as described above) includes an appropriate but flexible critique and creative exercise. Here are some of the assignment prompts, with examples for the provocations, and full prompts for all six larger exercises.

### Provocations

Typically, each week begins with a provocation that asks students to share their progress towards one of the larger milestones. Here's an example prompt from the Twine unit:

- This week, you should be working on your story concept for the first creative project. Prototyping and free-writing on paper can be a great way to get started, but you will want to put text into Twine passages as soon as possible. Remember to focus your short story tightly so that you can explore its narrative possibility space: think small, not big, and consider the examples in this week's readings for guidance and inspiration. Personal, emotional narratives are often more effective than sprawling adventures.
- Share a screenshot of a passage from your Twine in progress, and a few thoughts on your story concept here. What are the key choices? How are you defining the scope? Who is the narrator, and what perspective are you telling the story from? Check back to get inspiration from your peers.

### Critique Exercise One: Choice-Driven Texts

Our first critique exercise focuses on choice-driven texts. I strongly recommend choosing a work built in Twine, but other hypertextual, choice-based works are also fine. You'll need to complete at least one traversal of the work (2-3 are recommended) and document the process, so I suggest using screenshots to track interesting passages as you go. This analysis should be a short (1500 – 2000 words) essay and should be submitted with detailed citation information for the work under examination (using the model of the essays in *Videogames for Humans* as a model.) You may use any formal citation style appropriate for their disciplinary background (typically MLA, APA, or Chicago).

Each assignment should include:

- A clear thesis statement
- Contextual information positioning the excerpt relative to the genres and theories of interactive storytelling discussed in the unit
- Strong use of outside sources (primarily from course texts) to support the analysis



For the first exercise, focus on:

- Briefly, describe the book as a text. Note any unusual characteristics (such as the integration of a stats system, dice, etc) and make any comparisons to the games we've viewed so far you find helpful, and think about our discussions from *The Book* and try to make a connection.
- Offer a clear argument regarding the work's design or narrative choices. Are their decision points you found particularly striking? A character perspective that surprised you? Emotional stakes to the narrative that provide unusual engagement? Be precise and pick the most interesting part of the work from your perspective.
- Analyze 2-3 key moments in your traversals. Provide context, screenshots, and quotes as helpful, but make sure not just to describe what's happening: critique it, and think about what makes it stand out to you. Is it the illusion of agency? The way the decision is framed?

In this first critique, you will be providing me with a sense for your background in this type of analysis. Don't worry about academic formality in your voice: feel free to use "I." However, remember this is not a review! Focus on how the piece works, not whether you liked it.

#### Creative Exercise One: Twine

For each creative project, the rubric will serve as a set of constraints to keep you focused as you craft an interactive story. The goal is not to limit the expression of your work, but instead to restrict the toolsets and scope in a way that allows you flexibility but also keeps your projects manageable and gives room for innovation and depth. If you want to break a constraint, please reach out to me with the reason for the change — be warned, it might not be allowed.

With Twine, you should be working on an interactive short story that feels complete in itself. Emphasize:

- **Descriptive text:** Twine passages might describe places, people, imagery, imagined states, encounters, dreams, or faded memories: regardless, they should be evocative and effective, using breaks and passage links to provide pacing and room to explore the text. Pay attention to spelling, grammar, word choice, and visually-evocative language. Your work will likely scale at around 30 passages, though depending on your approach this could vary. (3 points)
- **Narrative:** clear beginning, ending(s), and conflict. Use links, cycling links, and/or timers to progress the action. The player's actions should clearly impact the narrative, even if the end is predetermined, and there should be more than one path to explore. Remember the narrative models we've viewed and think intentionally about your story's scope and scale. Personal is often more effective in Twine! (3 points)
- **Characters:** focus on developing your narrator's voice, as well as the potential for interaction with any other characters, dream beings, memories, or metaphors introduced. Don't leave the player as a passive witness of character interactions if possible: instead, offer opportunities for direct control and engagement. (3 points)
- **Visuals and interface:** Using CSS and the macros available, along with properly credited or original illustrations as appropriate, develop an aesthetic for play that fits with the work. Consider color, contrast, readability, and intentional play with fonts. (3 points)

- **Playful interactions:** Think about opportunities to surprise, challenge, and engage your reader through Twine’s hypertextual navigation. Consider the examples discussed in *Videogames for Humans* and build on their concepts. (3 points)

To submit, you must either upload your .html file to a service such as itch.io, or upload the file directly.

### Critique Exercise Two: Parser Interactive Fiction

Our second critique exercise focuses on parser-based interactive fiction: you must choose a work that uses a noun-verb input system. Interactive fiction varies widely in scale, so note that information in the database and be prepared to spend enough time to complete the work. Parser-based interactive fiction frequently has walkthroughs to assist in this process. This analysis should be a short (1500 – 2000 words) essay and should be submitted with detailed citation information for the work under examination (using the model of the essays in *Videogames for Humans* as a model.) Students may use any formal citation style appropriate for their disciplinary background (typically MLA, APA, or Chicago). For this assignment, your grade will suffer if you make no use of outside sources: you must make an argument and analyze the work. For examples, make sure to refer back to the text. Do not discuss whether you enjoyed the text, this is not a review!!

Each assignment should include:

- A clear thesis statement (2 points)
- Analysis of a key interaction or puzzle in the text (2 points)
- Contextual information positioning the excerpt relative to the genres (look at Rettberg’s chapters) and theories of interactive storytelling discussed in the unit (3 points)
- Strong use of outside sources (primarily from course texts) to support the analysis (3 points)

As you work, consider:

- What other works that you’ve reviewed so far this semester does this text remind you of? Why?
- What are the notable plot structures in the work?
- What type of puzzles are involved in the work?
- Is the story organized by time? Space? Can you draw useful comparisons to other experiences you’ve had in literature?

Don’t forget to cite all your sources, including the primary text, comparative works, and any class or outside texts referenced!

### Creative Exercise Two: Parser Interactive Fiction

When working with Inform 7, you will want to build a spatial narrative and pay particular attention to how you enable the player to reveal narrative through interacting with and exploring the environment. Your game should be short, but have a sense of completion. As you work, focus on:

- **Setting:** Well-developed environment with multiple objects and use of both scenery and

descriptions. Objects listed in the descriptions should be available in the environment. A one-room game with detailed items is recommended, but multiple rooms can be used if needed. (3 points)

- **Narrative:** clear beginning, ending(s), and conflict. The conflict might be resolved through solving a puzzle, revealing information, or otherwise progressing towards an end state. The end game message should appear when a solution is found or the conflict is resolved. (3 points)
- **Characters:** If your character is alone in the game world, the character's personality should be revealed through actions with the environment. If other characters exist, interactions should be possible to move the narrative forward. (3 points)
- **Puzzles:** Focus on three well-defined obstacles for the player to overcome. These might include using objects to get in/out of a space, finding an item or making a connection between objects, or appropriately interacting with a character to gain a valuable point. (3 points)
- **Mechanics:** Use rules to handle possible actions and try to anticipate player confusion. Demonstrate awareness of the value of descriptive language and an ability to use simple constructs, such as conditionals, to evaluate player success and advance the narrative. (3 points)

To submit your Inform 7 project, either upload your “release” zip file directly, using the setting “release along with a website and an interpreter”, or upload to itch.io by creating a project, uploading that folder, and setting the game as web-playable.

### Critique Exercise Three: Visual Narrative Games

Our third and final critique exercises focuses on adventure games, broadly interpreted. The suggested games including walking simulators, “point and click” graphic adventures, visual novels, and many other sub-genres: you’ll find it helpful to first contextualize the game and clarify how you see it fitting into these competing histories, genres, and visions of what interactive storytelling is—and can be.

This analysis should be a short (1500 – 2000 words) essay and should be submitted with detailed citation information for the work under examination (using the model of the essays in *Videogames for Humans* as a model.) Students may use any formal citation style appropriate for their disciplinary background (typically MLA, APA, or Chicago). For this assignment, you are expected to **BOTH** cite at least two sources from class readings and at least **ONE** additional sources. Keep in mind the feedback you’ve received on previous critiques.

Each assignment should include:

- A clear thesis statement (2 points)
- Analysis of a key interaction, character, scene, or puzzle in the text (2 points)
- Contextual information positioning the excerpt relative to the visions Janet Murray describes for interactive narrative, as well as our previous discussions of electronic literature and interactive fiction (3 points)
- Strong use of outside sources (see requirements for at least three sources above!) to support

the analysis (3 points)

As you work, consider:

- What does this work suggest to you about the future of interactive storytelling?
- How does it break your expectations? Is it subversive? Surprising?
- How have other critics discussed this work? How was it received? What is it compared to?
- How does this work fit into your understanding of games?

Don't forget to cite all your sources, including the primary text, comparative works, and any class or outside texts referenced!

### **Creative Exercise Three: Ren'Py**

For this project, you'll be making a short visually-driven game. We will be reviewing the script for the Ren'Py tutorial game, *The Question*, as a starting point: the simplest option for this project is to modify the script and characters, focusing on expressive responses to interactions throughout.

Focus on:

- **Expressive character design.** Your art should be original (either modified from photos, or your own design) and include at least three different emotional responses for the central character interaction. Consider the range of characters we've "met" this semester, and how you might give us a sense of meaning to the representation. (5 points)
- **Meaningful Dialogue.** Use Ren'Py's dialogue system to give the player a sense of opening context, progression through play, and a clear sense of conclusion. The amount of text will vary depending on your narrative concept, but interactive choices should be available throughout. Remember that long blocks of texts are ineffective here: think about pacing, revealing text through interaction, and minimalism. (5 points)
- **Environmental Design.** Your narrative should move through at least three original background (from your own photos or design), drawing on a unified aesthetic. Consider the minimalist and stylized works we've viewed as potential inspiration. (5 points)

Submit your final game directly, or host it on [itch.io](http://itch.io) as preferred. Remember, unlike other deadlines this semester, there is no grace period unless we've discussed a plan for an incomplete!

## EXPANDED COURSE OUTLINE

### **Week One: Introduction and Online Course Orientation**

#### *Online Module*

- **Provocation:** Introduce yourself in the course forum
- **Theory:** Watch the Course Welcome video and read the syllabus
- **Practice:** Install the required software programs for the semester

For Next Week

- **Read:** “The Book as Object,” *The Book*
- **Play:** Choice of the Dragon, Dan Fabulich and Adam Strong-Morse (<https://www.choiceofgames.com/dragon/>)

## Week Two: Choose Your Own Adventure

Online Module

- **Provocation:** Explore the definition of “book” and “game” through the examples in this week’s readings
- **Theory:** Choose Your Own Adventure (optional live lecture with Q&A)
- **Practice:** Introduction to Twine

For Next Week

- **Read:** The Book as Content and The Book as Idea, *The Book*
- **Play:** With Those We Love Alive, Porpentine (<http://slimedaughter.com/games/twine/wtwla/>)

## Week Three: Imagining the Book

Online Module

- **Provocation:** Share a screenshot from your in-progress Twine
- **Theory:** Imagining the Book
- **Practice:** Twine Poetics (Cycling links; Conditional Statements)

For Next Week

- **Read:** The Book as Interface, *The Book*; Genres of Electronic Literature and Combinatory Poetics, *Electronic Literature*
- **Play:** Sea and Spar Between, Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland ([https://nickm.com/montfort\\_strickland/sea\\_and\\_spar\\_between/](https://nickm.com/montfort_strickland/sea_and_spar_between/))

## Week Four: Interfacing the Book

Online Module

- **Provocation:** Share your initial impression of the work chosen for critique
- **Theory:** Interfacing the Book (optional live lecture with Q&A)
- **Practice:** Assembling a Twine narrative from start to finish

For Next Week

- **Read:** Hypertext Fiction, *Electronic Literature*; Introduction /Rat Chaos / Fuck That Guy /

Anhedonia, *Videogames for Humans*

- **Play:** Wide Island, Draconic Chipmunk (<https://draconicchipmunk.itch.io/wide-island>)
- **Complete:** Critique Exercise One: Twine

### Week Five: Hypertextual Interactive Fiction

Online Module

- **Provocation:** Share your favorite Twine tricks and moments from the creative project
- **Theory:** Hypertext, GamerGate, and Bandersnatch
- **Practice:** Twine Aesthetics (CSS and stylesheets)

For Next Week

- **Read:** Interactive Fiction, *Electronic Literature*; *SABBAT / Horse Master / Nineteen*, *Videogames for Humans*
- **Play:** Toby's Nose, Chandler Groove (<http://www.castleprincessdragon.com/InteractiveFiction/TobysNose/play.html>)

### Week Six: Parser Interactive Fiction

Online Module

- **Provocation:** Share your completed creative work in Twine
- **Theory:** Interactive Fiction (optional live lecture with Q&A)
- **Practice:** Inform 7 basics (rooms and objects)

For Next Week

- **Read:** Kinetic / Interactive Poetry and Network Writing, *Electronic Literature*; Scarfmemory/Removed / for political lovers, *Videogames for Humans*
- **Play:** Curses, Graham Nelson (<https://ifdb.tads.org/viewgame?id=plvzam05bmz3enh8>)
- **Complete:** Creative Exercise One: Twine

### Week Seven: Building Parser Games

Online Module

- **Provocation:** Describe a single room in detail, considering every object and its relationships to other elements of the space
- **Theory:** Parser Games and Story Structures
- **Practice:** Creating a first one-room game with Inform 7

For Next Week

- **Read:** Divergent Streams, *Electronic Literature*; Your Lover / Detritus / There Ought to Be a

Word, *Videogames for Humans*

- **Play:** Shade, Andrew Plotkin (<https://ifdb.tads.org/viewgame?id=hsfc7fnl40k4a30q>)

## Week Eight: Making with Inform

Online Module

- **Provocation:** Share your first room and any challenges you're experiencing with Inform 7
- **Theory:** Space, Time, Rules, and inspiration from Narrascope designer talks
- **Practice:** Optional live session with Q&A for debugging Inform 7 puzzle design

For Next Week

- **Read:** Negotiation / reprogram, Mangia, *Videogames for Humans*
- **Play:** 18 Cadence, Aaron Reed (<https://18cadence.textories.com/>)
- **Complete:** Critique Exercise Two: Parser Interactive Fiction

## Week Nine: Crafting Possibility Spaces

Online Module

- **Provocation:** Share your insights from the parser interactive fiction critique
- **Theory:** Possibility Spaces and the Holodeck
- **Practice:** Advancing in Inform 7 using conversation extensions

For Next Week

- **Read:** Sacrilege / Robot Horse / Electro Primitive, *Videogames for Humans*; Part I, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*
- **Play:** The Gostak, Carl Muckenhoupt ([http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/The\\_Gostak](http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/The_Gostak))

## Week Ten: Adventure

Online Module

- **Provocation:** Describe how your play has changed over the course of this class
- **Theory:** Defining "Adventure" through graphical narrative games
- **Practice:** Introduction to the Ren'Py editor

For Next Week

- **Read:** Message / Depression Quest / Even Cowgirls Bleed, *Videogames for Humans*; Part II, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*; Kishonna Gray, Gaming for Everyone (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPkeTDzimBg>)
- **Play:** Hair Nah, Momo Pixel (<http://hairnah.com/>) and There Aren't Really Words, Rose Kiid (<https://rosekiid.itch.io/there-arent-really-words>)

- **Complete:** Creative Exercise Two: Parser Interactive Fiction

## Week Eleven: Environments of Play

### Online Module

- **Provocation:** Share your completed interactive fiction and postmortem
- **Theory:** Environmental Design and Narrative through Space
- **Practice:** Ren'Py optional live tutorial with Q&A

### For Next Week

- **Read:** 3x3x3 / Eden / Eft to Newt, *Videogames for Humans*; Part III, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*; Interview on Heaven Will Be Mine (<https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2019/07/24/the-writer-of-heaven-will-be-mine-on-how-she-made-2018s-most-interesting-game/>)
- **Play:** Heaven Will Be Mine, Worst Girl Games (<https://www.worstgirlsgames.com/>); Florence, Annapurna (<https://annapurnainteractive.com/games/florence>)

## Week Twelve: Dialogue and Character

### Online Module

- **Provocation:** Share your Ren'Py character designs and concepts
- **Theory:** Platform Studies and the influence of hardware and software on play
- **Practice:** Crafting conversation and dialog in Ren'Py

### For Next Week

- **Read:** Dining Table / I'm Fine / Player 2, *Videogames for Humans*; Part IV, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*; Nicole Carpenter on Before I Forget (<https://www.polygon.com/2020/7/21/21332753/before-i-forget-3fold-games-humble-dementia>)
- **Play:** Before I Forget, 3-Fold Games (<https://3foldgames.itch.io/>)

## Week Thirteen: Walking Simulators

### Online Module

- **Provocation:** Describe an interactive story that moves you
- **Theory:** "Wandering Games" and the Walking Simulator
- **Practice:** Wrapping up with Ren'Py optional live help session

### For Next Week

- **Read:** Samantha Gorman on virtual reality (<https://killscreen.com/samantha-gorman/>) and Melissa Kagen on Wandering Games ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U40TbYuB\\_hI&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U40TbYuB_hI&feature=youtu.be))
- **Play:** She Dreams Elsewhere, Studio Zevere (<https://store.steampowered.com/app/492540/>)



She\_Dreams\_Elsewhere/)

- **Complete:** Critique Exercise Three: Visual Narrative Games

#### Week Fourteen: Looking Forward

##### *Online Module*

- **Provocation:** Share your Ren'Py game in progress
- **Theory:** Imagining Futures: Virtual and Augmented Reality Narratives
- **Practice:** Revising for your Portfolio

##### *For Next Week*

- **Complete:** Creative Exercise Three: Ren'Py

#### Week Fifteen: Final Submissions

### COURSE BEST PRACTICES

This course developed out of a desire to take the lessons of alternative and experimental interactive narrative communities into our graduate program. The course builds on my previous course with similar themes targeted at undergraduates, which thus incorporated substantially less theory but a similar emphasis on “learning through making” (Salter, 2015). The decision to decenter mainstream game narratives was crucial to creating a space where students would be encouraged to explore personal approaches to interactive narrative, and to think through the relationships of alternative communities of practice (such as electronic literature and interactive fiction) with gaming culture. This is also driven by the need to forefront feminist, anti-racist, and queer texts to counter the mainstream representations common to games narratives and center what Rouse and Corron describe as a feminist, dialogic approach to the games classroom (Rouse & Corron, 2020).

The format of the online course emphasizes these guiding principles, asking students to participate weekly in three elements:

- **Provocation.** A creative exercise to complete and share on the discussion forum. These will not be formally graded (completion only) and are primarily a chance to play and share.
- **Theory.** A combination of prerecorded lectures, recommended readings and viewings, and games for reflection. In addition, optional live sessions will offer opportunities to gather for group play. Recordings will be available after all optional live sessions.
- **Practice.** Weekly tutorials and exercises towards the completion of creative projects using the semester's three tools: Twine, Inform 7, and Ren'Py. These tutorials include a mix of text and video content.

If the course were to be taught in-person, the emphasis of physical meetings would be on developing similar opportunities to conversation as centered in the optional live sessions. This consistent model reinforces the integration of theory and practice throughout can be difficult on students, who frequently excel in either one or the other aspect of the course: the flexibility of the final project

is designed to allow them the room for specialization, while encouraging them to see building strength in their weaker skillset as a means to improving their primary goals. This emphasis not only reflects the range of students taking the course (typically, the MA students are more design-focused, while the PhD students are more research-oriented) but also the guiding framework of critical making, which Daniel Chamberlain frames as a mechanism for integrating research and design intent (Chamberlain, 2013). This mindset is visible in work completed in the course that was accepted into online exhibitions: Rachel Donley's "I look, but I can't see," is built in Bitsy, and offers a reflection on the nature of reality situated in the early pandemic shutdowns (Donley, 2020). Similarly, Alex Boyd's "Trail," which includes work in both Bitsy and Twine, examines the impact of destructive tourism on Florida parks (Boyd, 2020).

### **Future Course Plans**

I designed and offered this course for the first time in Spring 2020, and rapidly redesigned the course from mixed mode to fully online following the March closure of campus. The course was redesigned again for fully-online offering in Spring 2021: in this version documented here, the course has no synchronous meeting times, so group discussions are optional and hosted on Zoom every other week for those students interested in additional support. Throughout these modality changes, I have emphasized preserving the core structure of provocation, theory, and practice, while shifting the tools for interaction and discussion.

The course works best when the examples build on both historical exemplars and very current works that engage students through timely themes and pressing discourse: given that, I recommend updating the weekly examples with every iteration of the course. When iterating the course, I have noticed the lack of BIPOC representation among narrative games featured in common texts and examples: while I've worked to remedy that in this iteration with the addition of a number of essential games, there's still a great deal of opportunity for improvement in representation throughout, and for reflection on the part of all of us who teach in this field as to how we select and value texts. This iterative work should not ignore historical exemplars, but notably in my experience teaching the course thus far, current games tend to create more student engagement and opportunity for discussion.

The theoretical readings are likewise subject to change, and it is particularly essential to update them to foreground innovative voices from both the scholarly and games design communities. Throughout the course, I include updated readings of blog posts and design postmortems relevant to the featured games, which allows for current voices to balance the more historically oriented theoretical readings that frame the field. I also recently completed a collaboration with Stuart Moulthrop that combines theory and practice in Twine: this open access text was guided in part by the principles underlying this course (pending with Amherst College Press, 2021).

Similarly, the course tools will eventually need to be updated, but the ones currently chosen reflect some of the best available due to their level of documentation and support: many programs popularly utilized in game design courses, such as Unity, demand intense investment to produce playable content and potentially drive away students with less experience. Currently, the course centers Twine, Inform 7, and Ren'Py: of these three tools, Twine and Inform 7 have the longest history and active communities of maintenance and creation, and thus are likely to remain integral to the course. Their emphasis on text allows students to focus strongly on narrative elements and structure. I anticipate

the visual tool will be most in need of change with each iteration of the course (Bitsy was used in Spring 2020) particularly as we continue to look towards new tools for user-friendly development of interactive narratives for platforms including augmented and virtual reality.

With that said, the greatest strength of this type of course is the enduring value of minimalist tools for introducing the range of what interactive storytelling can become: regardless of future modalities or the changes in specific tools, the opportunities to develop the individual creative and critical voice will remain at its heart.

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## ABOUT THE EDITORS

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**Richard E. Ferdig** is the Summit Professor of Learning Technologies and Professor of Educational Technology at Kent State University. He works within the Research Center for Educational Technology and also the School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies. He earned his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Michigan State University. He has served as researcher and instructor at Michigan State University, the University of Florida, the Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna (Krakow, Poland), and the Università degli studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia (Italy). At Kent State University, his research, teaching, and service focus on combining cutting-edge technologies with current pedagogic theory to create innovative learning environments. His research interests include online education, educational games and simulations, the relationship between faith and technology, and what he labels a deeper psychology of technology. In addition to publishing and presenting nationally and internationally, Ferdig has also been funded to study the impact of emerging technologies such as K-12 Virtual Schools. Rick was the founding Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Gaming and Computer Mediated Simulations*, is the past Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, and also serves as a Consulting Editor for the Development Editorial Board of *Educational Technology Research and Development*.

**Emily Baumgartner** is an Assistant Professor of Technology at Ohio Northern University in the School of Science, Technology, and Mathematics. She earned her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology with a concentration in Instructional Technology from Kent State University. Her research interests include digital games for learning, the use of immerse technologies such as virtual reality and 360-degree video in learning, and computational thinking.

**Enrico Gandolfi.** Dr. Gandolfi, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of Educational Technology at Kent State University with the Research Center for Educational Technology. His research interests span games and simulations for learning, augmented and virtual reality, accessibility and critical design in education, and online communities of inquiry. He is author of several peer-reviewed articles (for academic journals like *New Media and Society*, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *Technology in Society*, *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *Convergence*, *Games and Culture*, *Simulation and Gaming*, *E-learning and Digital Media*, *Information Visualization*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*) and book chapters (for publishers like Routledge, MIT Press, ETC Press) about these topics, and of the monographs *Piloti di Console* (Edizioni Paoline, 2011), *Nerd Generation* (Mimesis, 2014) and *Independent Videogames* (Unicopli, 2015). He has been co-PI and key personnel for several grants awarded by the National Science Foundation, the GAR Foundation, and the National Endowment for Humanities.

## ABOUT THE ETC PRESS

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