

Introduction to Game Studies
Comparative History of Ideas

Course: CHID 250 A
Quarter: Winter 2016
Time: T+Th 2.30p-4.20p
Location: MOR 225
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“Play adorns life, amplifies it, and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual - as life function - and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a cultural function. The expression of it satisfies all kinds of communal ideals”

- Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

“Thinking about interfaces is thinking too small. Designing human-computer experience isn't about building a better desktop. It's about creating imaginary worlds that have a special relationship to reality--worlds in which we can *extend, amplify, and enrich our own capacities to think, feel, and act.*”

- Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theater*

“Games teach players how to engage and optimize systems as well as how to manage their desire in a contemporary world. This makes the world of games a principal site to expose, unwork, and rethink the protocols and rituals that rule technoculture.”

- Brian Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames*

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The dazzling expansion and diversification of the game industry over the last thirty years documents a seemingly unquenchable cultural desire for game experiences, and as the influence of games continues to grow in the twenty-first century there will be even greater need for critical reflection and insight, especially by those who will play and design the game experiences of the next decade. Our historical moment calls for the development of critical perspectives that enable players to identify value in games beyond escapist pleasure, produce insightful criticism, and imagine new expressive goals and potentials for gameplay and design. This course will introduce students to the critical study of videogames and the academic discourse of game studies with a special emphasis on the expressive potentials of individual videogames and their capacity for facilitating critical understanding of both self and society. Students will have the opportunity to play and reflect on assigned and self-selected game experiences, create text and image-based analyses of individual games informed by game studies, and produce a multimedia commentary project.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1) Expand and deepen your understanding of digital games as expressive media and sharpen your attention to the subtleties of both game design and gameplay as an experience – to make you more insightful and discerning thinkers and communicators about digital games, understood as a significant cultural art form in the contemporary media ecology.
- 2) Explore and critique the academic discourse of game studies – its strengths and especially its weaknesses, in a concrete way, with a focus on the experiential aspect of games, thereby making sense of particular games and their implications for reflective and creative thought; to *grow* theoretical awareness that is *grounded in examples* rather than received general concepts of gameplay and games from discourse.
- 3) Provide concepts and philosophical context for understanding game media as tools for reasoning, reflection, and inspiration, as well as for developing “critical gaming” practices, analytical perspectives and techniques that open up possibilities for innovation *in both the design and reception side* of games.
- 4) Generate critical thinking about topics of interest in specific games and the opportunity to work through ideas in new forms of scholarship – to create a discussion about these games that addresses their significance for critical thought and contemporary society.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES

The class sessions will be a lecture/seminar hybrid that will include short lectures that make use of multimedia, detail-oriented analysis of games, guided and organic discussions of readings and live gameplay, and informal student game sharing sessions. Although the course can serve as an introduction to Game Studies as a discourse, our approach will *not* be to focus on coverage of the discourse itself but on using concepts and insights from that discourse to understand and reflect on particular games. *This focus on understanding exemplars emphasizes the challenge of reasoning about the game experiences*, which will be the more accessible ground of discussion in our learning community, and relieves us of the less productive challenge of assimilating thought to the nuances of an academic discourse. This *game-centric approach* will also provide us with occasions to critically reflect on the motley, often dismaying, sometimes inspiring discourse of popular game culture that lives online in various media forms and communities.

On Reading - Game Studies is a difficult discourse and can be disorienting to read, especially if you are new to games. We will be reading a lot of primary sources in which authors are advancing arguments, defining new concepts, and working through complex ideas in an academic context. The value of these sources lies not in the provision of easy summaries and neat conclusions, but in the thinking enacted. This means that *the reading experience will be difficult and slow*, and will require effortful reading practices: re-reading, note taking, personal explication of key passages, etc. We will also be watching some presentations and talks by game designers in video form and that will require some form of note-taking/screenshot-taking, too. We will discuss reading strategies more in class, but expect a rewarding challenge!

On Gameplay - Although we will no doubt have fun playing the assigned games, we will be playing for *understanding*, and for many people, and especially self-described “gamers,” this can be an unexpectedly difficult transition. This is because the immediate experience of gameplay, in order to be understood and communicated, must be subjected to mental reformulation, remediation (in the form of notes, diagrams, timelines, descriptions, etc.) and extended critical reflection. This is hard work- no different than a searching analysis of any artwork that rewards the effort, and requires adjustments in approach and

attention. An analogy with reading here is problematic, but useful: there is reading for pleasure and information, and then there is *reading for understanding* or "critical reading"; likewise in gameplay (hence the notion: "critical gaming"). We will have much more to discuss about this throughout the quarter, and rethinking the complex and generally misunderstood activity of gameplay will be an ongoing theme.

COLLABORATIONS & REFLECTIVE EXPERIMENTS

The lectures and readings throughout the quarter will provide a provocative framework (historical context, a narrative of ideas) and resources (terminology, concepts, critical perspectives) for understanding digital games, and the game experiences and discussions we share as a learning community will provide concrete grounds for explication, criticism, and extension. However, *the most important and lasting development that occurs in education is self-development*. Much of the course design is concerned with the creation of the conditions for this aspect of education. The work listed below will constitute the core of your learning experience and will provide focused opportunities for self-development.

Just as the development of scientific understanding of the natural world cannot proceed very far on received knowledge and the isolated speculative reasoning of a solitary individual, understanding human culture (including digital games) *and ourselves* requires, perhaps counter-intuitively, purposeful experimentation and collaboration with other people. Only so much can be achieved from information and introspection. These assignments should be understood as experiments—as mediums for understanding, designed to provide opportunity for insight and collaborative inquiry. *Detailed assignment documents explaining these works will be given in class, but here is a quick overview:*

Engagement

Being engaged not only entails attending, paying attention in class (e.g. not multitasking) and following the material, but also actively contributing to the class sessions. This means sharing insights and questions on lecture or readings and gameplay in discussion – both those that arise organically in class and those that you have formulated in preparation for class. *Included in this category are ad hoc quizzes, blogging and in-class short responses.*

Game Studies One-Sheet

Students will create a "one-sheet" summary/review on a self-selected journal article, anthology essay, or book chapter from a pre-determined list. These will be published to the course website, providing your peers access to aspects of games studies field not covered in assigned readings and videos.

Game Criticism

In lieu of a midterm students will write an analysis of one of the games associated with the class, applying concepts from their learning in game studies.

Exhibit Review

Students will be required to visit the *Indie Game Revolution* exhibit at the Seattle EMP Museum and compose a short reflective review highlighting a key idea or personal learning experience.

Game Share

Over the course of the quarter students will have an opportunity to demo and share insights into a game of their choosing in small groups. This will expand the scope of our collective experience of digital games and thus provide more choices for projects.

Game Commentary Project

Finally, student groups will design and produce media projects that express insights and provoke critical reflection on a specific game through artful reformulation of the gameplay experience. We will be drawing on the spirit of Let's Plays (both video and image-based), a media genre based on the sharing of gameplay experiences, to create short visual media pieces that are crafted as creative criticism.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

Although there are no required *textbooks* you will need the following in order to participate fully in the course:

Internet: We will make heavy use of the course website for distributing media (readings, video links, game software), archiving course documents, and tracking revisions to the schedule based on our collective progress. Therefore, you will need to have daily access to the Web. *Required texts will either be downloadable as PDFs or Web-based*, thus requiring software for reading/printing PDFs and a modern Internet browser. Most computer devices purchased in the last 5 or so years have this capacity by default.

Computer: The course depends on our ability to discuss assigned game media, not just as designed media objects but also (and more importantly) as game experiences. You will need to own or have regular access to a modern, keyboard-based computer (laptop, desktop) with the ability to install game software. The required games (see below) can be played on most modern Windows or Mac OSX-based systems and require no special hardware.

Digital Games: We will be exploring many free indie games throughout the quarter, but a few of the core game experiences that will ground our discussions must be purchased. Here is a list of required commercial games for the course, including costs for DRM-free digital downloads (totaling approx. \$45 on Steam):

- ◆ *Braid* (\$4)
- ◆ *Dear Esther* (\$10)
- ◆ *Eidolon* (\$8)
- ◆ *Gone Home* (\$6)
- ◆ *Papers, Please* (\$4)
- ◆ *Starseed Pilgrim* (\$5)
- ◆ *Superbrothers: Sword & Sorcery EP* (\$2)
- ◆ *Terraria* (\$3)
- ◆ *Thomas Was Alone* (\$3)

DEMONSTRATION OF LEARNING & EVALUATION

Evaluation methods will vary by assignment so more detailed information will be given on specific assignment documents, but the final grade in the course reflects the following elements:

◆ Course Engagement	25%	all quarter
◆ Game Studies One-Sheet	15%	week 3
◆ Game Analysis	15%	week 5
◆ Exhibit Review	10%	week 7
◆ Game Share	10%	signup date
◆ Game Commentary Project	25%	week 10

ACADEMIC ETIQUETTE & COURSE POLICIES

The success of this course depends on many elements, one of which is our ability as a group to create a dependable and inclusive community of vigorous and searching inquiry built on the accrual of common understandings as well as cognitive diversity. In the case of the former, if you miss class you will become alienated from the common understanding; in the case of the latter, the group cannot benefit from your humanity, your insights, your unique experience and point of view. In this context, showing up to class takes on a moral quality! If you must miss class because “life happened” contact me ahead of time via email. Please note that it is your responsibility to get caught up by going to the website for lecture slides and consulting your colleagues for notes on discussion. *Do not email me with “What did I miss?” and expect a detailed reply.*

Tech in the classroom

To maintain optimal conditions for engagement and concentration please observe the following rules:

- ◆ Arrive on time
- ◆ Phones off / muted
- ◆ No headphone use—that’s just rude!
- ◆ If using screen-based technologies (laptops, pads, etc.) in order to take notes or reference readings, sit in the *back rows* of the room to avoid distracting others with your screen

Accommodations

Please let me know if you need accommodation of any sort. You can come directly to me, or I can work in conjunction with UW Disability Resources for Students, <http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/> to provide what you require.

SCHEDULE

The reading/gaming schedule is available on the website and is an idealized plan and should be considered tentative, *subject to revision* based on our progress as a learning community and scheduling of invited guests. The due dates for work listed above are solid, but revisions in reading and lecture topics will turn, most likely, on how discussions go and the changing or sustaining interests of the group as we move through the assigned media. The goal is not to get through all the material for its own sake, but rather to understand and explore implications of the ideas and the play experiences as much as we can. In short, to actually *learn* and apply our accrued understanding.

I've tried my best to schedule the creative projects you will do with enough time for collaboration and reflective thinking, but the reality is the kind of reading and work we are undertaking will test the limits of your time if you proceed sincerely (rather than shrewdly, doing the minimum). Pro tip: prepare for the entire week in the break between Thursday of the previous week and Tuesday of the next. A good strategy is to do the reading for the entire week by Tuesday and then go back over notes, the texts, etc. for Thursday.

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“A *game* must be the ice-axe for the frozen sea inside us.” -Kafka as a gamer