

INVISIBLE HISTORIES OF VIDEOGAMES

University of Washington
Comparative History of Ideas Program

Course: CHID 250 A
Semester: Winter 2017
Time: T+Th 230p-420p
Location: THO 119
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Hours: T+Th 430-530p or appt.
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“A good social history of digital games remains to be written.”

- Aphra Kerr

“Who are we, who is each of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, *games we have played*, things imagined?”

- Italo Calvino

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This project-based course presents an alternative approach to videogame history, identifying the limitations of mainstream histories oriented by commercial and technological events and milestones, pursuing instead game-centric genealogies of paradigmatic play experiences. As a supplement to market- genre histories or general accounts of movements in videogame design, students will research and produce multimedia genealogies mapping the inspirations and enabling conditions for a specific self-selected game that has either been formative in their personal gaming histories or a current catalyst for interest in game media as cultural expression.

We will develop an understanding of the short yet complex history of videogames and an appreciation for the limitations of conventional, industry-centric histories; collaborate on multimedia projects, foregrounding reflective practices and deliberative design; and acquire deep historical knowledge of particular games and the ability to articulate and effectively communicate a network of intellectual, technical, and cultural elements that facilitate new insight into and appreciation for videogames.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1) Expand and deepen your understanding of digital games as cultural media – as *mediations* that provide a unique entry point and focus for thinking about history.
- 2) Gain a critical appreciation of mainstream histories of videogames and identify the limitations and cultural effects of popular reception histories.
- 3) Broaden your awareness of the invisible complexity of game culture and explore the experience of game history and culture from various perspectives.
- 4) Develop a rigorous historical understanding of games through game-centric research, creating a critical history of a self-selected game that articulates a network of cultural, personal, intellectual, technical and commercial connections.

COLLABORATIONS & REFLECTIVE EXPERIMENTS

The most important and lasting development that occurs in education is self-development, so much of the course design is concerned with the creation of the *conditions* for this specific 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 an 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 documents explaining these works will be given in class, but here is a quick overview:*

Participation & Engagement

Participating not only entails attending class prepared and paying attention, but also actively contributing to the discussions. This means sharing insights and questions on lecture or readings in discussion – those that arise organically in class and those that you have formulated in preparation for class. However, it is not enough to *participate*, you must also be *engaged*. This means that your participation must be sensitive to the context and community: your comment or question takes into account what it follows, your colleagues' contributions, and is informed by the readings for the day.

Reading Responses & Exercises

Throughout the quarter we will read and watch material that we will have a chance to discuss in class, but many of the ideas this material contains requires some reflection and more careful consideration than can be got simply reading for information and familiarity for discussion. So, we will also be writing short prompted responses to the material. You will *print these out* and bring them to class (there is a small penalty for electronic submission or lateness).

Visit to *Indie Game Revolution* Exhibit

One of the “texts” for the course is the content and experience of the Indie Game Revolution exhibit at MoPOP (formerly Seattle EMP). Although we will not be going as a group, you are required to visit the exhibit and spend a few hours there reflecting on the material and taking notes (and perhaps inspiration) for your timeline projects. We will be receiving a group discount, so do not purchase your tickets individually. <http://www.mopop.org/at-the-museum/current-exhibits/indie-game-revolution/>

Book Review

As part of your research process you will sign up to review for the class one of the many recent books on the history of videogames. We will publish these reviews on the course website to provide another point of inspiration and resource for the group in the development of our timeline projects.

Annotated Bibliography

In preparation for the major work of the course, the timeline project (see below), you will be collecting, analyzing, and annotating a bibliography of sources that will inspire and inform your creation of a critical history of a self selected videogame. This will be developed throughout the quarter and submitted along with your timeline project.

“Invisible History” Timeline Project

The culminating work of the course will be the creation of a timeline that explores an “invisible history” of a particular game, highlighting remarkable relations that provide new insight into the significance of games as culture, catalysts for rethinking mainstream game history, as well as tools for thinking about history in general. We will be using Northwestern University Knight Lab’s “Timeline JS” tool to generate the multimedia timelines that convey your research and insights.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

Although there are no required *textbooks* you will need regular and convenient access to the 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 ability by default.

EVALUATION

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

◆ Participation & Engagement	15%	all quarter
◆ Reading Responses & Exercises	15%	all quarter
◆ Indie Game Revolution Exhibit	10%	visit by 1/30
◆ Book Review	15%	2/6
◆ Annotated Bibliography	20%	2/20
◆ Invisible History Timeline	25%	3/6

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 dimension! 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.

Writing Center

The Interdisciplinary Writing Studio (located in Smith Hall 113B) offers tutoring sessions for students working on projects in AES, AIS, CHID GEOG, and GWSS. Our tutors have experience writing and tutoring in these departments and can work with you on all aspects of writing and research from brainstorming and planning, through writing and revising. All kinds of projects are welcome. We can talk with you about drafts, research strategies, disciplinary expectations, and finding your own voice in writing. To sign up for an appointment, visit our website: <https://geography.washington.edu/interdisciplinary-writing-studio>.

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 goal is not to get through all the material for its own sake, but rather to understand and explore implications of the ideas 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.