

HS 260 THINKING WITH DIGITAL GAMES

Cornish College of the Arts
Humanities and Sciences Department

Course: HS 260 02 LE
Semester: Fall 2016
Time: M+W 6.00p-7.20p
Location: CLAB 104
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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 multimedia-based analyses of individual games informed by game studies, and organize and participate in a final symposium discussion.

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 – to make you more insightful and discerning thinkers and communicators about digital games as a significant cultural 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 aspects games, thereby making sense of particular games and their implications for reflective and creative thought; to *grow* critical awareness that is *grounded in examples* rather than received general concepts of “gameplay” and “games” from popular discourses.
- 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. We will have much more to discuss about this throughout the semester, and rethinking the complex and generally misunderstood activity of gameplay will be an ongoing theme.

COLLABORATIONS & REFLECTIVE EXPERIMENTS

The lectures and readings throughout the semester 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 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:*

Course Engagement

Being engaged not only entails attending, paying attention in class and following the material, but also actively contributing to the class sessions. This means sharing insights and questions on lecture or readings in discussion and on the course website (blog) – both those that arise organically in class and those that you have formulated in preparation for class. There may also be quizzes and assigned responses to the course material.

Office Hour Visit

Once in the semester you are required to visit office hours to talk about the course materials and your learning experience in the class. This should be done before week 10 (Nov.7).

Game Share

Over the course of the semester students in pairs will have an opportunity to demo and share insights into a game of their choosing. This will expand the scope of our collective experience of digital games and provide a means of discovery and critical connection outside the course materials.

Game Studies One-Sheet

Academic writing on games is vast and varied despite its short history. The reading selections in the course reflect my pedagogical strategies, scholarly background and interests, and present a subset of ideas from the motley discourse of “game studies” that constitutes an initial survey to some key conceptual resources. To increase our coverage and get exposure to more ideas students will compose one-sheet summaries of self-selected journal articles to share with the group.

Game Tetrad

Part of the difficulty of understanding games as expression is the abstraction into market-genres and subjection to commonplaces of value inherited from popular *game* culture, resulting in a general inability to

think their relations to other cultural systems (technical, economic, political, aesthetic, etc.). Students will adapt Marshall McLuhan’s media analysis tool, the “Tetrad,” to create new insights into a specific game and its unacknowledged relations as cultural media.

Critical Gaming Symposium

The final week of the course is dedicated to student lead, course-framed symposium on key topics generated by the group and growing out of our semester-long study of games. Students will be expected to craft a short prepared remark on the chosen topics and write a short reflection of their symposium experience.

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 4 or so years have this ability by default.

Computer: The course depends on our ability to discuss assigned game media, not just as objects but also (and more importantly) as ergodic 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 semester, but a few of the core game experiences that will ground our discussions must be purchased. Here is an initial list of required *commercial games* for the course, including costs for DRM-free digital downloads:

- ◆ *Dear Esther* 10\$
- ◆ *Papers, Please* 10\$
- ◆ *Braid* 15\$
- ◆ *Undertale* 10\$

DEMONSTRATION OF LEARNING & EVALUATION

Evaluation methods will vary by assignment so more detailed information will be given on specific assignment documents, but the course will follow the Humanities and Sciences grading system summarized below.

A	4.0	C+	2.3	D+	1.3
A-	3.7	C	2.0	D	1.0
B+	3.3	C-	1.7	D-	0.7
B	3.0				
B-	2.7			F	0.0

The final grade in the course reflects the following elements:

- ◆ Course Engagement 25% all semester
- ◆ Office Hour Visit 10% by appointment
- ◆ Game Studies One-Sheet 15% 10/7
- ◆ Game Tetrad 15% 11/4
- ◆ Game Share 15% signup date
- ◆ Final Symposium 20% last week of class

READING & WORK SCHEDULE

See the course website: <http://courses.bloodedbythought.org/twdg/>

Please also consider the following departmental policy on attendance for the course:

Effect of Absences on Final Grade														
Absences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Max Grade Possible	A/A-		A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F	

After 3 absences the final grade you can earn in the course is reduced with each subsequent unexcused absence. The success of this course depends on many elements, one of which is our ability as a group to create a dependable 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.

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DEPARTMENT PRACTICE AND POLICY

Academic Etiquette

- ◆ Arrive on time
- ◆ Cell phones off unless being used for purposes related to the course
- ◆ No headphone use during class time unless approved by instructor
- ◆ No checking e-mail or text messaging
- ◆ No surfing the Web during class unless for purposes related to the course
- ◆ Respectful participation and discussion is expected

Attendance: The learning experience cannot be duplicated outside of class and depends on the participation of all classroom community members. Attendance is required for all Humanities and Sciences courses. In all other Humanities and Sciences courses, students are permitted three absences before having their grade affected. In all courses, these permitted absences include absence due to personal matters or illness, and absences due to departmental commitments, such as rehearsals, performances, or show installation. In all cases, it is the responsibility of the student to alert his or her instructor of a pending absence and to make

arrangements to complete all coursework in a timely manner.

Academic Honesty: The College demands a high level of artistic integrity and academic honesty on the part of students. No form of academic dishonesty (for example, cheating and plagiarism) will be tolerated. If an instructor demonstrates to the Department Chair that a student is guilty of academic dishonesty, the student will be assigned a failing grade for the entire course.

All cases of academic dishonesty are reviewed by the Academic Standards Committee. Disciplinary action may be determined by the Academic Standards Committee depending on the circumstances of the particular case. Further disciplinary actions may include warning, probation, suspension, and expulsion.

SUPPORT SERVICES

Student Affairs: Student Affairs is dedicated to enhancing and complementing students' educational experience through programs, services and opportunities that aid in their personal development. Student Affairs is committed to community building, co-curricular learning, and student support. If you are a student with a documented disability and you need accommodations, please make an appointment with the staff in Student Affairs, located in room 301 at the Main Campus Center. You can call 206-726-5098 to reach them.

Counseling: The mission of the Counseling Offices at Cornish College of the Arts is to assist students with their academic and artistic pursuits by providing supportive counseling, referrals and outreach programs that promote students' mental health and emotional well being. To schedule an appointment, call a Counselor at 206-726-5027 or 206-726-5047. If they are not available, please leave a message on their voicemail and they will return your call as soon as possible. The Counseling Offices are located in rooms 308 A & B in the Main Campus Center.

WRITING CENTER

The Writing Center, located in MCC 212 (next to the library), provides Cornish students with free and personalized writing support. Writers can visit for a consultation on assignments from courses, creative writing, professional writing such as artist statements or cover letters, or anything else that includes stringing together words. Writing Center Peer Consultants can help during any and all stages of the writing process, from brainstorming to editing. Drop by to learn more about what's happening in the Writing Center or to read our work in our lounge space.

In addition to drop-in hours Mon-Thurs, the Writing Center accepts submission of writing ONLINE 24 hours a day. Writers who use the online service can expect a screencast video response from a consultant containing suggestions addressing the writer's concerns.

Visit http://www.cornish.edu/writing_center/ for hours, contact information, or to submit your writing for feedback. We also invite our community to follow us and stay in touch on Facebook and Instagram, where we can be found as "Cornish Writing Center." Fall 2016 Hours: Mon 10-4, Tues 12-6, Wed/Thurs 10-6 & Fri by appt or online.

GENERAL SAFETY

Please inform yourself of safety procedures for this room, including emergency evacuation routes and the location of the closest first aid kits and fire extinguishers. Consult the Health & Safety Procedures booklet posted near doors and eyewash stations. Detailed information is also provided in the College student handbook.