

## Game Studies (Winter 2018)

FILMSTUD 259/459: Game Studies

Tue: 10:30am-1:20pm  
Room: McMurtry 360

Professor: Shane Denson  
Office: McMurtry 318  
Office Hours: TBD  
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This course aims to introduce students to the emerging, interdisciplinary field of game studies. We will investigate what games (including but not limited to digital games) are, why we play them, and what the functions of this activity might be. The bulk of the course will be devoted specifically to digital games, which we will approach from a variety of perspectives: from historical, cultural, industrial/commercial, media-theoretical, and formal (narratological/ludological) perspectives, among others. Thus, we will seek to understand the contexts in which video games emerged and evolved, the settings in which they have been played, and the discourses and practices that have determined their place in social and cultural life. In addition, we will ask difficult questions about the mediality of digital games: What is the relation of digital to non-digital games? Are they both games in the same sense, or do digital media redefine what games are or can be? How do digital games relate to other (digital as well as non-digital) non-game media, such as film, television, print fiction, or non-game computer applications? Of course, to engage meaningfully with these questions at all will require us to investigate theories of mediality (including inter- and transmediality) more generally. Finally, though, we will be interested in the formal and experiential parameters that define (different types of) digital games in particular. What does it feel like to play (various) digital games? What are the relations between storytelling and the activity of gameplaying in them? What is the relation between these aspects and the underlying mechanics of digital games, as embodied in hardware and software? What is the role of the human body, and how are our experiences of gameplay inflected by our social, gendered, and other identifications (and vice versa)?

**Please make sure you are registered for the class on Canvas.  
Handouts and additional course material will be posted there.**

### Recommended Textbooks:

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca. *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2016.  
Mäyrä, Frans. *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*. London: SAGE, 2008.

### Course Requirements:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class
2. No more than one failed reading quiz
3. Group presentation and moderation of discussion – 30 min presentation + 50 min discussion (see details below).
4. Analytical essay reflecting on the concrete structures of gameplay in a selected game – (3-5 pages)
5. Final assignment (term paper or critical media project)
6. Students taking the seminar for graduate course credit will be required to attend additional discussion sections and prepare a longer research paper.

## **Grading:**

Your final grade for the course will be calculated as follows:

25% Class participation and preparation

35% Presentation + Moderation

40% Final project

## **A Note on Class Sessions, Readings, and Presentations:**

Each week's class meeting (after the first week) will be split into two sessions (10:30am – 11:50am and 12:00pm – 1:20pm), each of which will start off with a group presentation of about 30 minutes. It will be the responsibility of the group, in consultation with Prof. Denson, to determine and assign the readings for their own sessions. The course schedule below lists a number of articles and books for each session, but the precise selections will be determined by the presenting group (except for week 1, when everyone will be responsible for reading all of the texts listed on the schedule, and week 2, where the two main texts have been determined in advance). Reading assignments must be announced by email to the class one week before the class session. The presenting group will be responsible for reading more than the rest of the class on their subject, and their presentation should reflect this broader scope and contextualize the assigned readings. In addition, presentations should supplement these readings with relevant video clips, games, and other media (see below under "Finders of Things").

Following their presentation, the group should be prepared to field questions from the class and to take a lead in moderating discussion for the rest of the session (approximately 50 minutes). In preparation for the discussion, the group is responsible for circulating a set of discussion questions at least 24 hours in advance of the class session (see below under "Inquisitors").

It is up to the group to ensure that all of their responsibilities are collectively met and that work is divided fairly amongst individual group members. Effective coordination will be key to a successful presentation and discussion. You should make sure that the following three roles (~~stolen~~ adapted from Jonathan Sterne) are covered (please note that depending on enrollment and other factors, you may be required to perform these roles more than once in the quarter):

1. **Inquisitors** will bring in discussion questions and topics, and lead the discussion. When you are in this role, email to the class list no later than 24 hours before your assigned class meeting, with a list of questions and topics to discuss. You should aim to get at the most important issues in the readings, which will also mean prioritizing them, since we won't be able to discuss every aspect of every reading every week. Questions can be oriented around anything from really basic content questions (like "what does the passage on p. 25 mean?") all the way up to "big picture" issues that connect the week's readings with other discussions we've had in the course. During the moderation session, each member of the group should be capable of assuming the role of Inquisitor, but you should decide in advance on a "Grand Inquisitor" who will assume responsibility for keeping the discussion on track.
2. **Finders of Objects** will bring in objects for us to discuss in relation to the readings. Your objects may be images, sound recordings, devices, or anything else you see fit to bring in. Games and game-related media (such as machinima and Let's Play videos) or objects (such as advertising materials, packaging, controllers, etc.) will be obvious choices in this class, and Finders of Objects will do well to search for these not only online but also in the extensive archival holdings of games and game-related materials in Green Library. Depending on your topic, the size of your group, and other factors related to the organization of your presentation and discussion session, there may be several people

in this role. Objects may play an integral role in the presentation portion of the session, or they may be introduced in an ad hoc manner during discussion. It is your responsibility to make sure that these objects *enable* fruitful discussion rather than *replace* it. Please be mindful of the time devoted to these objects. While there is no hard and fast rule, the actual presentation of a given object should probably not take more than 5 minutes, though discussion of it (and its relation to the topic and readings at hand) can of course take considerably longer. Careful planning (especially for objects used in the presentation portion) and a good deal of flexibility (for objects introduced during discussion) will be key.

Inquisitors and Finders of Objects, please note that class dynamics will vary from week to week and will follow people's particular interests and energies. DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED if you prepared something wonderful and the class went in another direction. This happens to us all the time and is part of the teaching process. It is better to have a good class session than to stick to a plan.

3. The Cleaner will take notes of any readings, authors, texts, games, devices, or other objects mentioned in class – especially but not only for items that are not already on the syllabus. Essentially, the Cleaner will be compiling a bibliography or list of works cited for the session. This should include anything introduced by Inquisitors, Finders of Objects, and other group members (so that careful coordination with the group prior to the session will be important), but it should also include things mentioned by other students in the class, beyond the group itself. Within 24 hours of the end of class, the Cleaner will email (or otherwise communicate with) the people who mentioned these things and ask for a full reference. If the reference doesn't appear in a day or two, the cleaner should send a reminder. If a classmate still doesn't respond, the Cleaner should do his or her best to track down the errant source. Once he or she has collected all of the relevant citations, the Cleaner will make a single post on Canvas with all of the information from the previous week's class neatly compiled.

### **Final Assignment:**

**Option 1: Term paper.** If you opt for a traditional, individually authored assignment, your term paper (10-12 pages) is to be submitted by **March 31, 2018 (no later than 3:15pm)**. As a prerequisite for the final paper, a 1-2 page proposal will be due in class on **March 6, 2018**. In your proposal, you should outline the focus or object of your analysis, explain the specific method(s) of analysis, state your reasons for choosing this approach to the topic, and formulate a tentative thesis statement. The final paper should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and should consist of the following:

1. A brief introduction outlining your topic and stating – as clearly and precisely as possible – the thesis of your paper. This section should usually be no more than one paragraph long.
2. A short description of the game(s) or other object(s) of your analysis. Here you should provide any essential background that might be needed for the reader to understand your analysis. You should assume an educated reader, who is familiar with film and media studies but perhaps has not played the games or seen the films (or other media) being discussed in your paper. If it is not relevant to your argument, do not engage in lengthy plot summaries. On the other hand, make sure that the reader has enough context (narrative or otherwise) to understand the more detailed analysis that follows. Overall, in this section you must find the right balance, which you can do by considering whether each detail is truly relevant and informative with respect to your argument. Anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson defined information as "a difference which makes a difference," and you can use this formula as a test for determining which details truly belong in this section. If, for example, providing a plot summary or details about production costs and box-office revenues will make a difference with respect to your thesis (i.e. if a reader needs to know these things in order to

process your argument), then this is clearly relevant and belongs in this section; on the other hand, if it doesn't make a difference to your argument, then it probably doesn't belong here. This section should usually be no more than 2-3 paragraphs long.

3. An in-depth analysis of the game(s) or other media object(s) under consideration. Your analysis should be interpretive and argumentative in nature. In other words, it is not enough simply to describe what you see on screen; you need also to persuade the reader that this is important, and that it has certain implications that may not be obvious at first glance. (If something is overly obvious, then it's probably not very informative and certainly not worth arguing.) You are not just describing things but providing a "reading" of them. Keep in mind that the analysis you provide in this section constitutes the main support for your thesis statement. Your analysis is the argumentation that you offer to back up your thesis, while the thesis statement should be seen as the logical conclusion of your argument/analysis. In other words, while you have already told the reader what your thesis statement is (in the introduction), it is through your analysis that you must now prove that your thesis is correct or plausible. Ideally, after reading the analysis in this section, the reader should see your thesis statement as the logical outcome. Keeping this in mind as the test of success, you again need to ensure that your analysis is relevant and informative with respect to your thesis statement (if it doesn't make a difference with regard to your thesis, then it can hardly prove it). In addition, you need to make sure that your analysis/argument proves your thesis *sufficiently*. This is a question of the scope of your thesis, and of your ability to prove it through your interpretive analysis. Have you claimed too much in your thesis? Not enough? Ideally, there should be a perfect match between what you claim in your thesis and what your analysis actually demonstrates. When writing this section, you may find that you have to adjust your thesis (and re-write your introduction accordingly) or look for stronger arguments to support it. This should be the longest section of your paper.
4. A brief conclusion. Try not to be too mechanical in summarizing and repeating what you've written, but do make sure that the conclusion demonstrates the paper's overall relevance and coherence. For example, you might return to a detail mentioned in the introduction and use it to highlight the significance of your argument: maybe the detail seemed rather unimportant before but has a very different meaning in the light of your analysis or interpretation. Foregrounding the transformative effect of your argument (i.e. the fact that it makes us see things differently) is a good way to demonstrate the overall importance of your paper, and the device of returning in the end to something mentioned at the beginning is an effective way of giving your paper closure. Obviously, though, it is not the only way to approach the conclusion. You might also demonstrate the relevance of your argument by opening up the scope even farther and considering the questions that your thesis raises for other areas of inquiry. Does your analysis suggest alternative readings for other films or media objects? Does it suggest the need to re-think various assumptions about cinema, about a given genre, or about some other aspect of media inquiry? However you decide to approach it, the point of the conclusion, generally speaking, is to take a step back from arguing for your thesis (you are supposed to be finished doing that by now) and to reflect, on a quasi meta-level, about the overall significance of your argument/thesis. This section should normally be one paragraph in length.
5. A full list of works cited, according to MLA style.

**Option 2: Critical Media Project.** You may alternatively choose to create a critical media project (machinima, videographic work, digital game, website, app, etc.) that has a clear scholarly relevance to game studies. The project, which must be proposed in detail (1-2 page proposal due in class on **March 6, 2018**) and approved in advance by Prof. Denson, must be accompanied by a textual description of process and critical relevance. These projects can be either individually authored or collaborative in nature, and they can

focus either on research conducted independently (out of class), or they can build upon a group presentation. Details will be determined on a case by case basis. As with term papers, critical media projects are to be submitted by **March 31, 2018 (no later than 3:15pm)**.

### **Students with Documented Disabilities:**

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://oae.stanford.edu>).

### **Course Schedule:**

#### **01.09. Introduction: How and Why Should We Study Games?**

Frans Mäyrä, "Introduction: What is Game Studies?" and "Game Culture: Meaning in Games," Chapters 1 and 2 of *An Introduction to Game Studies*, 1-29.

Patrick Jagoda, "Videogame Criticism and Games in the Twenty-First Century."

Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century."

Heather Chaplin, "Will the 21<sup>st</sup> Century be Defined by Games?"

#### **01.16. Defining Games/Games of Definition & The Birth of Game Studies**

Jesper Juul, "The Game, the Player, and the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness" <<http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/gameplayerworld/>>. (Main reading for Group 1 – Topic: "Defining Games")

Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories?" *Game Studies* 1.1 (July 2001): <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>>. (Main reading for Group 2 – Topic: "Narratology/Ludology Debate")

Frans Mäyrä, "Play and Games in History," Chapter 3 of *An Introduction to Game Studies*, 30-51.

Selections from: *Game Studies* 1.1 (July 2001)

Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences between (Video)Games and Narrative." *Game Studies* 1.1 (July 2011)

Marie-Laure Ryan, "Computer Games as Narrative," Chapter 8 of *Avatars of Story*, 181-204.

Excerpts from: Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext*.

*Recommended:*

Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

Excerpts from: Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*; Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

**01.23. Games, Culture, and History**

Frans Mäyrä, "Dual Structure and the Action Games of the 1970s" and "Adventures and Other Fiction in the 1980s' Games," Chapters 4 and 5 of *An Introduction to Game Studies*, 52-89.

Excerpts from: Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*.

Excerpts from: Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*.

*Recommended:*

Michael Z. Newman, *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America*.

**01.30. Platform Studies**

Nick Montfort, "Combat in Context," *Game Studies* 6.1 (December 2006): <<http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/montfort>>.

Excerpts from: Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*.

Excerpts from: Nathan Altice, *I Am Error: The Nintendo Family Computer/Entertainment System Platform*.

Excerpts from: Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal, *Codename Revolution: The Nintendo Wii Platform*.

*Recommended:*

Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*.

Dominic Arsenault, *Super Power, Spoony Bards, and Silverware: The Super Nintendo System*.

**02.06. Games, Gender, and Queer Game Studies**

Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw. "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity."

Massanari, Adrienne. "#gamergate and the Fapping: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures."

Selected videos from *Feminist Frequency*.

Carly A. Kocurek, "Gamers vs. Tropes vs. Women in Video Games." (video)

Excerpts from: Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*.

Helen W. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis," *Game Studies* 2.2 (December 2002): <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>>.

Selections from: Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, eds., *Queer Game Studies*.

*Recommended:*

Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell, "Theorizing Gender and Digital Gameplay: Oversights, Accidents, and Surprises," *eludamos* 2.1 (2008): 15-25.  
<<http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol2no1-4>>.

Amanda Cote, "Our Princess is in Another Castle"

"Perspectives" section of *Eludamos* 2.1

Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, *Lara Croft: Cyber Heroine*

### **02.13. Games as Performative Systems**

Excerpts from: Karen Schrier, *Knowledge Games: How Playing Games Can Solve Problems, Create Insights, and Make Change*.

Selections from: Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*.

Selections from: Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*.

### **02.20. Games and/as Art**

John Sharp, *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*.

Selections from: Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell, *Videogames and Art*.

Excerpts from: Grant Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*.

*Recommended:*

Maizels, Michael, and Patrick Jagoda. *The Game Worlds of Jason Rohrer*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016.

### **02.27. Games and Theory**

McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*.

Excerpts from: Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*.

Excerpts from: Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire*.

### **03.06. Practices: Making Games/Writing about Games**

Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*.

Selections from: Ian Bogost, *How to Talk about Games*.

[Please note: there will only be one presentation/discussion section on this day; the other half of the class will be devoted to discussion of final projects. Proposals are due in class!]

### **03.13. Games about Games: Metagaming & Digital Seriality**

Excerpts from: Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming*.

Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, "Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games."

Shane Denson, "Visualizing Digital Seriality, Or: All Your Mods Are Belong to Us!"

Selections from: *Digital Seriality*, eds. Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann. Special issue of *Eludamos* 8.1 (2014).

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