

AMST 408

Gaming in American Culture

Spring 2024
Wednesday 7:00-9:45

Instructor: Dr. Dustin Abnet
Email: dabnet@fullerton.edu
Discord ID: dabnet2
Office: GH-413
Office Phone: 657-278-3225
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 4:30-6:30

Catalog Description

Explores the development and significance of outdoor, board, and video gaming in America. Analyzes literary works, films, television shows, advertisements, manuals, and material artifacts to understand how gaming has addressed larger social tensions and shaped American identity and culture.

Course Objective

Game playing has always been more than a mindless activity; it has played a crucial role in Americans' attempts to resolve some of the most important tensions in their society, politics, and culture. Intertwining analyses of outdoor, board, tabletop, and video gaming, the course will explore why and how people play particular forms of games, the changing places of games in the country's culture, and, ultimately, the ways in which games, as both imagined spaces and metaphors, have helped shape the relationship between power and identity in American life.

At the heart of this class is an analysis of the tension between "freedom" and "order" in American culture. Playing games can be a liberating experience. Games free people to indulge in leisure, act in ways they ordinarily would not, and even pursue new identities. But even the most liberating of games—for example, so-called "sandbox" video games such as *Red Dead Redemption* or *Tears of the Kingdom*--also have rules that restrict player behavior. Games are a structured form of play: they limit the liberty of players in ways that attempt either to ensure equal treatment for all or to preserve particular notions about how the world does or should work. Building on this tension between freedom and order, we will consider four other divisions that have played similar roles in the history of American gaming: 1) the tension between work and leisure; 2) the tension between private and public life; 3) the tension between competition

and cooperation; and 4) the tension between inclusion and exclusion. None of these dichotomies has ever been absolute in American culture; indeed, games have been important precisely because they have created liminal spaces in which people can playfully explore such tensions. Yet, as we shall see, people's beliefs in these dichotomies have created opportunities for game makers, players, and viewers to reshape American culture and identity.

Course Prerequisites

AMST 201; completion of GE section D.2 on American history, institutions, values; or graduate standing.

Student Learning Goals

- Analyze and evaluate games both as artifacts to play with and as metaphors to understand reality.
- Synthesize theories of play and apply them to a broader understanding of the ways in which culture constructs, classifies, and codifies ideas about morality, individualism, gender, race, class, sexuality, and national identity.
- Understand and interpret the ways in which culture and organized play create identities, shape meanings, and guide behaviors by learning to critically analyze and interpret a spectrum of artifacts.
- Develop a rigorous concept of culture and cultural processes as well as an interdisciplinary awareness of the connections among the social sciences and the humanities.
- Acquire research, writing, and expressive skills needed to draw connections among complex materials and communicate an understanding of the underlying meanings.

Course Format

This is an upper-division course focused on the world in which you live. Accordingly, while I will occasionally provide contextualizing lectures, most days will be devoted almost entirely to discussion. I am primarily interested in hearing your thoughts about the readings and viewings and helping you develop your own understanding of these issues. For that to happen, you should do your best to come prepared each day to participate in the conversation. That means, that you will need to at least attempt the readings/viewings before the start of class and look at the Canvas Page for that day for guidance on what we will be talking about.

Discord

During the pandemic, I created a AMST 408 Discord site where we handled things like DnD, game streaming, etc. I had planned on not using it this semester, but, given what is going on, it is helpful to have a non-CSUF controlled site where I can post updates. This isn't a requirement but, if you would like, you can access it here: <https://discord.gg/fpHs8ynTfS>.

I won't post any required materials there but feel free to message me there or post gaming-related things.

Required Texts

Readings

Undergraduate Students

I have not asked you to purchase any books for this course. Instead, you will be looking at secondary and primary sources that can be found on Canvas. These readings should be completed prior to the day we are scheduled to discuss them. In general, longer readings should be skimmed for their main ideas but short ones should be read closely since we will be talking about them in depth by analyzing language and the logic of the arguments.

Graduate Students

In addition to the readings for Undergraduates, I would like you read one book which you can purchase or check out (or ask me for a loaner as long as it is early and you promise to return it):

- Annelise Heinz, *Mahjong: A Chinese Game and the Making of Modern American Culture*, 2021

Films

You are also required to view five films and one television episode about games and gamers in American society. These will be available to be viewed on Canvas and should be watched before class. I'll also post a lot of YouTube videos that analyze games.

King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters (Seth Gordon, 2007)

Darkon (Luke Meyer and Andrew Neel, 2008)

We Met in Virtual Reality, (Joe Hunting, 2022)

GTFO: Get the F&#% Out (Shannon Sun-Higginson, 2015)

WarGames (John Badham, 1983)

Samurai Champloo, Episode 23

Games

Will we actually play games in this course? Of course. However, I'm not requiring you to play any specific game outside of the classroom. Of course, when we do play games, you will never be evaluated on performance—just on your ability to analyze games.

If you have never played Dungeons and Dragons or other tabletop Role Playing Games, I will offer a chance for you to do so (it is really central to the development of both tabletop and video gaming). This might be in class (if I can find 2-3 additional Dungeon/Game Masters) or it might be out of class (if only a small number of people have never played). We'll talk about it

the first week we meet. Regardless, I'll provide everything for this so all you'll have to bring is your imagination and a pencil and paper.

Grading

Essays

Essay 1 (Game Analysis)	150
Essay 2 (Communities of Play)	150
Essay 3 (Context)	150
Final Essay (Synthesis)	250
Let's Play Video or Presentation	50
Discussion Forum Posts (5*20)	100
In Class Writings	100
Engagement/Discussion	50
<hr/>	
Total	1000

Graded Exercises

- 1) **Essays:** Everyone will write four essays in this class. My hope is that most of you will write all four papers on the same game/topic to give you a semester-long research project that examines a game on three different levels; however, I understand that this may not be possible for all of you so I have given you options.
 - a. **Essay 1:** Game Analysis
 - b. **Essay 2:** Communities of Play Analysis
 - c. **Essay 3:** Context Analysis
 - d. **Final Essay:** SynthesisEssays 1-3 should be between 3 and 5 double-spaced pages (4-6 for graduate students) and synthesize course materials with outside research. The Final Essay is a synthesis essay in which you either put together your previous essays into one larger one or you write a new 4-6 page essay that draws on course materials to respond to a prompt. See the end of the syllabus for an explanation of each paper.
- 2) **Let's Play Video/Presentation:** You are required to make a video showing you engaging with either a video or a board game that includes as many instances of American Studies style analysis of the game as you can. Videos should include at least 10 minutes of gameplay per student and may, if it is a multiplayer game, be made into a group project. If this assignment will prove logistically difficult for you or you simply do not wish to, you may opt to give a presentation during Finals week instead. You are welcome to make this about the game you are researching or do another game.
- 3) **Discussion Forum Posts:** You must respond to 5 separate forums this semester (including Introductions). A few days before the reading is due, I will post a forum question that you should respond to before the start of class. Each will be worth 20 points and you will have an opportunity nearly every week of the semester. These answers should draw directly from the assigned text and be sure not to repeat any pieces of evidence that previous responders have used. You should aim for these to be around 200 words. You are welcome to treat the forums

as either a conversation among each other (this would be ideal) or simply to respond to my question. I'm asking you to do one of these per unit (plus the introduction).

- 4) **In Class Writings:** To start our conversation and evaluate your engagement with course sources, I will often have us do a small amount of writing in class. Sometimes these will be individual reflections; sometimes they will be group assignments. They will be graded on a Full Credit/Half Credit/No Credit Basis. Full credit answers will show deep engagement with the assigned sources; half credit answers will show limited engagement with the assigned sources; no credit will typically only be given for a missed assignment. If you must miss a class, let me know in advance and I might be able to give you a chance to email it to me.
- 5) **Engagement/Discussion:** This is a small, discussion-oriented class so you are required to participate in class at regular intervals. Typically, this will mean participating, but I realize that might be difficult for some of you. Consequently, this grade is also based both the quality of your engagement and the effort you make to engage with course materials. The easiest way to ensure a high grade here is to come prepared to participate frequently in our class discussions but if you have difficulty doing so please come and see me.

Additional Graduate Student Requirement

In addition to the requirements for undergraduates and slightly longer essay requirements, graduate students are required to read Annelise Heinz's *Mahjong: A Chinese Game and the Making of Modern American Culture* and write up a brief set of notes on it similar to what I would require in exam preparation. I'll give you more detailed instructions about this. We also might try to meet outside of class time to chat about it. For grading purposes, this assignment will replace the Engagement/Discussion grade above.

Most days, I have also included additional graduate student readings that provide further context and insight into the material that I think you will benefit from. Feel free to skim these and/or bring them up in class.

Points/Grade Breakdown

925-1000	A	725-764	C
895-924	A-	695-724	C-
865-894	B+	665-694	D+
825-864	B	625-664	D
795-824	B-	595-624	D-
765-794	C+	594↓	F

Obviously, this course uses a +/- system. No extra credit will be offered. All rounding is already built into the point totals because I want you to get the best grade possible while still being fair to everyone else.

Attendance and Late Assignments

I want us to talk about games. I want to hear your thoughts and help you develop your ideas about games and their place in American culture. I want everyone else in the class to learn from your experiences and ideas. Therefore, I expect you to be in class. I don't typically take attendance (though I reserve the right to), but we will be doing in class writings most days of the semester. Typically, these will require you to be there and show some engagement with the assigned material. I can, occasionally and in emergency situations, allow you to do these outside of the classroom, but you will need to contact me ahead of time.

An assignment is considered late if it is not turned in by the time noted on Canvas. Every student is entitled to ONE extension on an essay's due date with no questions asked. To get the extension, all you must do is email me with the request at least 6 hours before the assignment is due. I will decide the length of the extension on a case-by-case basis. After you have used your one free extension, subsequent lateness may result in your grade losing up to one half letter grade (5%) for each day it is late. Late Forum posts will be assessed a 50% penalty unless okayed by me in advance.

Expectations

I would like you to do the best that you can do. The material can be challenging, but I will work with you as much as I can to ensure that you learn it. The main things I need from you are: 1) to try as much as you can, 2) to communicate with me if there is anything at all preventing you doing your best. If you ever need anything at all, please do not hesitate to contact me so I can work with you to find a solution. My main goal is for you to succeed and I'll typically do everything I can to help you do so.

Note that I try to give you a lot of choices on what to learn. To that end, I have given you access to more material than I expect you to consume. Each week's Canvas page will let you know the minimum I expect you to consume. Doing more will obviously help with your understanding but you should not consume everything on Canvas. Consume what you are interested in learning and which you think will help you out with the assignments and our class discussions.

Even though I don't take attendance, I want you to be in class because it helps you and everybody else (including me since this is a discussion class) learn. To that end, I expect you to be in the classroom each day prepared to concentrate and participate. In the classroom, you should feel free to ask questions and fully participate. Because participation is critical to this class, we must work together to establish an atmosphere of tolerance and respect. While we are free to disagree, we should not deride or condemn each other. Additionally, you should avoid all distracting, disrespectful, or disruptive behavior that may inhibit other individuals' performance in the class. In particular, you must not engage in private conversations, texting, and so forth.

Finally, just always keep in mind that gaming is vast and that not everyone knows the language and details of particular subcultures. Just be aware of that and do your best to make sure that as many people as possible are understanding your points. I'll always be there to help but do your best to use inclusive, welcoming language that everyone can understand.

American Studies at Fullerton

I am always happy to talk with students about the possibility of majoring, double majoring, or minoring in American Studies. AMST works really well with many other majors on campus that don't have excessively high unit requirements. Please drop by my office hours or to schedule an appointment if you would like to learn more about the department or the discipline. For more information on the American Studies Department, visit our website:

<http://amst.fullerton.edu>.

If you are interested in our Graduate Program, let me know as well as I am its advisor.

Student Accommodations

CSUF complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act by providing a process for disclosing disabilities and arranging for reasonable accommodations. On the CSUF campus, the Office of Disability Support Services has been delegated the authority to certify disabilities and to prescribe specific accommodations for students with documented disabilities. DSS provides support services for students with mobility limitations, learning disabilities, hearing or visual impairments, and other disabilities. Counselors are available to help students plan a CSUF experience to meet their individual needs. Prior to receiving this assistance, documentation from a qualified professional source must be submitted to DSS. For more information, please contact DSS in UH 101; phone 657-278-3117; website: <http://www.fullerton.edu/dss/>.

My policy: if you need anything at all, just ask.

Technology Support

Student Technical support: (657) 278-8888

- StudentITHelpDesk@fullerton.edu
- <http://www.fullerton.edu/it/students/helpdesk/index.php>
- Chat with IT: <http://my.fullerton.edu/> and Click **Online IT Help** Click on **Live Chat**
- Canvas Support Hotline: 855-302-7528
- [Canvas Support Chat Student](#)
- [CSUF Student Software website](#)

Academic Integrity

Integrity is an essential component of all students' academic experience. Students who violate university standards of academic integrity are subject to disciplinary sanctions, including failure in the course and suspension from the university. Since dishonesty in any form harms the individual, other students, and the university, policies on academic integrity are strictly enforced. I expect that you will familiarize yourself with the academic integrity guidelines found in the current student handbook. [<http://www.fullerton.edu/handbook/>]. Cheating is defined as obtaining or attempting to obtain credit for work by the use of any dishonest, deceptive, fraudulent, or unauthorized means, or helping someone commit an act of academic dishonesty. (UPS 300.021). Examples include, but are not limited to:

Unacceptable examination behavior: communicating with fellow students, copying material from another student's exam or allowing another student to copy from an exam, possessing or using unauthorized materials, or any behavior that defeats the intent of an exam.

Plagiarism: taking the work of another and offering it as one's own without giving credit to that source, whether that material is paraphrased or copied in verbatim or near-verbatim form.

Unauthorized collaboration on a project, homework or other assignment where an instructor expressly forbids such collaboration.

Documentary falsification, including forgery, altering of campus documents or records, tampering with grading procedures, fabricating lab assignments, or altering medical excuses.

If you have any questions about Academic Integrity, please consult the following CSUF websites:

[UPS 300-021 Academic Dishonesty](http://www.fullerton.edu/integrity/)
<http://www.fullerton.edu/integrity/>

Note on Generative "AI"

Since I research robots, I'm pretty familiar with AI writing software and keep up to date with their capabilities. Though calling them AI is just marketing bullshit, the tools can, theoretically, be useful in some areas (though you need to be careful). However, the major questions you get for this class require deep engagement with course materials, something online AI tools can't replicate. Also using it to generate your work defeats the entire purpose of enrolling in this class because it will inhibit you from developing your own skills and knowledge (also, it tends to be wrong quite often—especially on AMST style questions). Trust me, you are better thinkers than some tech company's algorithm that unethically (illegally?) skims up random internet content.

That being said, the line between generative AI and assistant AI (like Grammarly) is fluid and we are all going to have to work with these things for our careers and continually justify that we can do better than them. But the use of them must be honest (so acknowledged) and ethical. We will talk a lot about AI this semester so this will probably come up.

Campus Emergency Procedures

Students should be familiar with campus emergency procedures: <http://prepare.fullerton.edu/>

Emergency Plan for Online Learning

If the University decides to shift us to online learning because the world is going even more to shit, we will proceed according to the syllabus but with the following changes:

1. Recordings of any lectures will be posted on Canvas on the Weekly Page.
2. We will meet on Zoom (or maybe Discord if we are feeling rebellious) during our regularly scheduled class time.
3. Any other changes will be discussed as a class, either on Zoom or in a Forum.

Student Resources Website

University required legal disclaimer: It is the student's responsibility to read and understand the required and important [student information for course syllabi](#).

- University learning goals
- General Education learning objectives
- Netiquette/appropriate online behavior
- Students' rights to accommodations
- Campus student support resources
- Academic integrity
- Emergency preparedness/what to do
- Library services
- Student IT services and competencies
- Software privacy and accessibility
- Accessibility statement
- Diversity statement
- Land acknowledgement
- Final exam schedule
- Semester calendar

Class Schedule

This syllabus (especially the readings and films) may be subject to change. For most up to date list, please see the week's Canvas page where you can find PDFs of or links to all the readings.

Note: There are some days with lots of readings listed here. That's because there are lots of articles on similar topics that analyze a different game. On those days, I give you a choice and let you know on canvas the minimum number I expect you to read. All you need to do is come prepared to talk about the topic and you will be fine.

Supplemental Graduate Student Readings are typically not listed here but can be found on Canvas Pages.

Unit I Studying Games

Week 1 Studying “The Magic Circle”? (Strike Pending)

1/24 “It’s Just a Game!” Why Study Play?

READ John Wills, *Gamer Nation*, Introduction; Mia Consalvo, "There is No Magic Circle," *Games and Culture*, 2009. Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton, “Game Analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games,” *Game Studies*, December 2006

FORUM Course Introductions

Week 2 Studying Interactivity and Agency

1/31 The Player with a Thousand Faces: Rules, Agency, and the Possibilities of Play

READ Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Chapter 5: Agency; Sarah Stang, “This Action Will Have Consequences”: Interactivity and Player Agency,” *Game Studies*, 2019; C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art*, Chapter 1; Sebastian Deterding, “Cookie Clicker” Gamification” in *How to Play Video Games*, Edited by Matthew Thomas Payne and Nina B. Huntemann

FORUM Interactivity and Agency

Week 3 Studying Rules and Stories

2/7 The Rise and Fall of Ludonarrative Dissonance

READ Paul Booth, *Board Games as Media*, Chapter 1; Rolf F. Nohr, "Tetris: Rules" in *How to Play Video Games*; Steven Malliet, Adapting the Principles of Ludology to the Method of Video Game Content Analysis, *Game Studies*, August 2007; Gerry Crawford, Daniel Muriel, and Steen Conway, "A Feel for the Game: Exploring Gaming 'Experience' Through the Case of Sports-Themed Video Games, *Convergence*, 2019

WATCH #SocialExperiment Videos on “LudoNarrative Dissonance”

FORUM Stories from Rules

Week 4 Studying Interactive and Social Worlds

2/14 Building Interactive Worlds

READ C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art*, Chapter 8. Henry Jenkins, “Video Games as Narrative Architecture;” John Wills, *Gamer Nation*, Chapter 6, “Grand Theft Los Angeles; Johan Blomberg, The Semiotics of the Game Controller, *Game Studies* September 2018

WATCH Ren or Raven, “Why We Can’t Stop Mapping Elden Ring,” 2023

FORUM Game Worlds

Week 5 Studying Gaming Representation

2/21 **The Possibilities and Problems of Gaming Representation**

READ Lisa Nakamura, "Gender and Race in the Gaming World"; Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gaming Culture*, Chapter 2; Treaandrea M. Russworm, "Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy in The Walking Dead and The Last of Us," in Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, Indiana University Press, 2017; Naomi Clark, "What is Queerness in Games, Anyway?" in *Queer Game Studies*, B. Ruberg and A. Shaw, eds; Paul Booth, *Board Games as Media*, Chapter 8

WATCH Feminist Frequency, "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" Episode 1

FORUM Representation in Games

2/25 **Essay 1 (Game Analysis) Due**

Unit II Gaming Identities and Communities

Week 6 Workers and Players

2/28 **Workplaces of Play?**

READ Jason Schreier, Blood, Sweat, and Pixels, Chapter 1, 3, or 9; Nick Yee, "The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play," *Games and Culture*, January 2006; T.L. Taylor, "Twitch and the Work of Play," *The American Journal of Play*, 2018

WATCH *GTFO: Get the F&#% Out*

FORUM Games as Work

Week 7 Inhabiting Virtual Worlds

3/6 **Identity and Community in Virtual Worlds**

READ Bonnie Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* Chapter 8; Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Chapters 5 or 7; Kishonna Gray, *Intersectional Tech*, Chapters 3 or 6; Paul Booth, *Board Games as Media*, Chapter 7 or 9

WATCH *We Met in Virtual Reality*

FORUM Methods of Analysis: Player Experiences

Week 8 Inventing "Gamer" Identity

3/13 **Making "Gamers" Masculine from Atari to Gamergate**

READ Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans* (selection); Amanda C. Cole, "Writing 'Gamers': The Gendered Construction of Gamer Identity in Nintendo Power," *Games and Culture*, 2018; Adrienne Shaw, "Do you Identify as a gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity," *New Media and Society*, 2011.

WATCH *King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*

Week 9 **Players and Fans**

3/20 **From Players to Spectators?**

READ Erin C. Tarver, *The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity*, Chapters 2; T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, Chapter 5; Paul Booth, *Board Games as Media*, Chapter 5; Kathryn Hammann, "The Legends of Zelda: Fan Challenges to Dominant Video Game Narratives," in *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Justice*

FORUM Fandom and Spectatorship

3/24 **Essay 2 Due**

Unit III **Games in History**

Week 10 **Cultures of Chance and Control**

3/27 **The Gambler in American Culture**

READ Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing*, Introduction and Chapter 1; Jill Lepore, *The Mansion of Happiness*, Introduction; Karen Sternheimer, *Pop Culture Panics: How Moral Crusaders Construct Meanings of Deviance and Delinquency*, Chapter 3, "Anti-Pinball Crusades: Fears of Gambling and Free Time"

FORUM Luck and Gambling in America

April 1-7 **Spring Break**

PLAY Play some games please.

Week 11 **The Games of Nation and Empire**

4/10 **Playing for American Empire**

READ Gerald Gems, *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism*, Chapters 4 or 5; D.A. Shattuck, *Bloomer Girls: Women Baseball Pioneers*, Chapter 2; David Wallace Adams, "More than a Game: The Carlisle Indians Take to the Gridiron, 1893-1917"; Jose Alamillo, *Deportes*, Chapter 2 or 3; Martin, L. L., Fasching-Varner, K. J., & Hartlep, N. D., *Pay to Play* Chapter 2, "The Creation of the Amateur Athlete in America."

WATCH *Samurai Champloo*, Episode 23.

Week 12 Gaming the Cold War

4/17 Game Theory and the Culture of Contingency

READ Toby C. Rider, *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Chapter 2; Aarom Trammell, *The Privilege of Play*, Chapter 1
Steven Belletto, "The Game Theory Narrative and the Myth of the National Security State," *American Quarterly*, 2009
Michael Z. Newman, *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America*, Chapters 1 and 3;

WATCH *Wargames*

Week 13 Gaming Fantasies of Neoliberal America

4/24 "So You Want to be a Hero"

READ Jaroslav Svelch, *Player vs. Monster*, Chapter 2; Eli Cook, "Rearing Children of the Market in the 'You: Decade: Choose Your Own Adventure Books and the Ascent of Free Choice in 1980s America," *Journal of American Studies*, 2020; D. Clary, *Gangsters to Governors: The New Bosses of Gambling in America*, Chapter 11; Anastasia Salter, *What is Your Quest: From Adventure Games to Interactive Books*, Chapter 1

WATCH *Darkon*

FORUM Fantasies of Choice

4/28 Essay 3 Due

Unit IV Gaming the Future

Week 14 Escaping into America 2.0 3.0?

5/1 Gaming Global Capitalism

READ A.R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Chapter 4, "Allegories of Control"; Kenneth J. Gergen, "Playland: Technology, Self, and Cultural Transformation" in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, Valerie Frissen, et al. eds. Lauren Lanmgman and Andra's Luka's, "Capitalism, Contradiction, and the Carnavalesque: Alienated Labor vs. Ludic Play, in T.J. Wright, et al., eds, *Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies*, Gordon Calleja, "Digital Games and Escapism," *Games and Culture*, 2010;

FORUM American Escapism

Week 15 Games and the Pursuit of Social Justice

5/8 Recapturing the Potential of Games

WATCH

READ Lisa Nakamura, "Afterword: Racism, Sexism, and Gaming's Cruel Optimism," in *Gaming Representation*; Anderson-Barkley and Kira Foglesong, "Activism in Video Games: A New Voice for Social Change," in *Woke Gaming*. Karen Skardzius, "Playing with Pride: Claiming Space Through Community Building in World of Warcraft," in Kishonna Gray et al, eds. *Woke Gaming*; Todd Harper, "Role-Play as Queer Lens," in *Queer Game Studies* Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two*, Chapter 5

FORUM Gaming and Social Justice

Week 16 **Final Exam Week**

5/15 **7:00-8:50 PM, Final Presentations OR Let's Play Due**

5/19 **Final Essay Due**

Essay Prompts

You have four essays to write for this course, three short (3-5 pages for undergraduates 4-6 for graduate students) papers tied to the first three units and one synthesis final paper.

- I. **Essay 1:** Game Analysis
- II. **Essay 2:** Gaming Communities
- III. **Essay 3:** Gaming Contexts
- IV. **Final Essay:** Synthesis

If you would like (and I strongly encourage this), you can use this semester to write a multifaceted, complex analysis of a single game/topic that you can use as a writing sample, submit to journals, and/or have a research paper on a topic that is meaningful to you. However, if you would like to treat these as separate papers, you are welcome to do so; however, be aware that it will likely mean more work for you in terms of research and your final synthesis paper.

If you do decide to link up the papers, you should write them in such a way to lead into the next to make your synthesis at the end of the semester easier. In other words, use your conclusions to point to the next topic and your introductions to connect to the previous.

Essay 1: Game Analysis (150 Points)

In this 3-5 (4-6) page paper, you will analyze a game of your choice. This can be a video, board, card, party, or tabletop game or a sport. Here, be sure to pick something that is large enough to write about but not so expansive that it will overwhelm you. So, if it is a large topic, choose something specific to focus on with it.

Once you have chosen a game, we can brainstorm some specific questions to address but generally you will want to apply methodologies similar to those we have encountered in Unit 1. You will concentrate on the interplay between gameplay (rules and mechanics), the narrative, and the world. As we have talked about, when designers craft a game, they try to create a kind of “magic circle” (however permeable) that separates the fictional world of the game from reality. One way to think about this paper would be to analyze how the designers use rules, mechanics, character design and representation, artwork, etc. to create their magic circle in which they or players create narratives. You must use and cite at least three assigned readings from this portion of the course, either for their factual information or for their methodological/theoretical frameworks.

Essay 2: Gaming Communities (150 Points)

In this 3-5 (4-6) page paper you will shift your focus from the game itself to players and the communities they form. You can choose either to keep working on the same game or choose a different one. You can do this in several different ways but you should draw on the methodologies and questions we have encountered in Unit 2 of the course to understand what the game means to people. This could mean that you examine a guild or talk with players of the game itself to understand how they play and what they get out of the game. It could be an autoethnography in which you immerse yourself within a gaming community and write about your experiences or that you examine an online gaming community or look at how players have responded to the game on social media. The key in this paper is to examine what the game means to players themselves. This would also be an appropriate place to look at any divisions in the community—i.e. the issues with race, gender, and sexuality we have talked about. You must use and cite at least three assigned readings/viewings from this portion of the course, either for their factual information or for their methodological/theoretical frameworks.

Essay 3: Gaming Contexts

In this 3-5 (4-6) page paper, you will explore how both historical and contemporary context shapes the meaning of games. As in your previous papers, you can continue writing about the same game or you can switch to a different topic. The key question here is how does context shape the meaning and significance of gaming. To answer that you could place a game in context by looking at its impact; you could look at the larger cultural conversations of which it is apart (any controversies); you could look at the labor practices that went into it. Alternatively, you could look specifically at a particular social tension that comes out of gaming or you could look at a representation of gaming (i.e. in literature, film, tv, etc) to explore what it says about how games are understood in a particular context. Regardless of your topic, you must 1)place the game in the context of the history of gaming we have talked about using at least 3 course sources, and 2)draw on at least 3 contemporary articles (academic or journalistic) on your particular topic that illuminate its context.

Final Essay: Synthesis

For your final essay, you have two options, one that will require you to edit and synthesize your papers from the rest of the semester and one that will require you to synthesize course materials from throughout the semester.

Option 1

Synthesize your previous gaming papers into 12-15 page (15 and 20 for graduate students) examination of a single game or issue in gaming. How much work this entails will depend on how you approached your previous papers. It is perfectly fine to place each paper in its own section with minimal revisions within those sections; however, you are going to want to write a new introduction, conclusion, and transitions between sections. Here, you must use at least some material from all three papers. The assignment is to edit, revise, and synthesize your previous papers. Note that even if you chose different games for your papers, you could still synthesize them into one paper around a particular theme. If you are having trouble here, let me know and I will do my best to help.

Option 2

If you are unable to synthesize your papers, then you can write a new 4-6 page paper that draws on at least 6 course materials (at least 4 readings) and, if you want, some of your previous work, to answer one of the following questions:

1. Why are games important to study? What can we learn about American society and culture from them? How are games different from other mediums of fun? How is a game's meaning and significance shaped by the context in which they are created and consumed?
2. How meaningful do you think the agency we feel when we play games is? Do you agree or disagree with [Sarah Stang](#)'s point from earlier in the semester that the agency promised in games is "illusory"? How and why has the agency offered by games changed over time? Ultimately, why do you think the agency we feel in games has mattered in American society?
3. How successful do you think games have been in creating a "magic circle" in which players can immerse themselves in a world different from reality? Has this changed over time? Why do you think the desire to see games as such a space has persisted? How has the magic circle of games always been incomplete—i.e. how has the real world always intruded upon the world of games?

Essay Alternatives

Though I do think that writing the essays will be the most straight forward way to satisfy course requirements, I am open to alternative suggestions, including creative ones, as long as they show engagement with and learning of the course materials and are the equivalent of the work

other students are doing (i.e. not too little or too much for you). In the past, students have done video essays, written short stories, crafted artwork, or even started designing a game (note that this isn't a game design class so while I can help you, it won't be covered in class). Typically, these have involved also writing short reflections where they show how their projects engage with the materials of the course. If you've got an idea of something you would like to pursue, let me know and we can try to work something out for either an individual essay or the semester.

Just as a general rule, if you have an idea for something that would really engage your thinking about games and help you learn course materials, let me know. I'm more of a yes person than a no so I'll probably just quote Matt Mercer to you: "you can certainly try."