

AMST 408

Gaming in American Culture

Fall 2016
Wednesday, 7:00-9:45
UH-319

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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

In this course we will examine the role of gaming in American society and culture from the 17th to the 21st century. This course shows that game playing has 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, and video gaming, the course will explore motivations which drive people to play particular forms of games, the changing places of games in the country's culture, and, ultimately, the ways in which games have helped transform American culture and identity.

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 *Skyrim* or *Grand Theft Auto*—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 private and public life; 2) the tension between work and leisure; 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 spaces in-between 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 or completion of GE section D.3 on American history, institutions, values.

Student Learning Goals

- Analyze and evaluate games both as material 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.

Assigned Readings and Films

Books to Purchase

You should purchase five texts for this course:

H.G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and A Dream*

Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*

Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*

Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*

Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*

In addition to these books, I will be posting numerous primary and secondary sources that discuss the role of games in American society on TITANIUM. These are listed on the Course Schedule and can be found under the appropriate week's folder on the course website.

ALL READINGS SHOULD BE COMPLETED BEFORE CLASS ON THE DAY LISTED ON TITANIUM (AND SYLLABUS)

Films

You are also required to view two films about games and gamers in American society. These may become available to be viewed on TITANIUM, but it is your responsibility to view these films before the date listed on the syllabus (All are available online either for free or for a nominal rental fee)

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

Wargames (John Badham, 1983)

Games

Will we actually play games in this course? Of course. However, you only have to play two games outside of course: the first video game, *Spacemar!* and the game *Depression Quest* which was at the center of 2014's "Gamergate" controversy. Both can be found at the link listed on the Course Schedule. Note that one day we may go outside to play an outdoor game. Of course, you will never be evaluated on gaming performance—just on your ability to analyze games.

Grading

Essays

Research Paper Proposal	50
Paper 1 (Game Analysis)	200
Paper 2 (Research/Course Materials)	200
Final Paper (Research/Course Materials)	250
American Studies Style Let's Play Video (or alternative)	100
<u>Discussion/Engagement</u>	<u>200</u>
Total	1000

Graded Exercises

You will be graded on three types of exercises:

- 1) Essays: Everyone will write three essays in this class. My hope is that most of you will pursue your own research projects for the entire semester. Accordingly, everyone will propose a research project centered on one game or game series. This game can be a sport, board, parlor, role-playing, or video game. Everyone will then write the first paper, an analysis of the game itself that uses the analytical tools discussed in Part I of the course. Then, you have to make a choice. For paper 2, you can continue writing the research paper by analyzing the same game's public reception OR you can abandon the research project and write an essay that responds to the course materials. Once you abandon the research paper, you cannot return to it and must do the Course Materials Essay for the Final Exam. If you decide to continue, when you get to the final exam, you can either finish the research paper by adding an ethnography of a gaming community and connecting the three parts together or you can abandon the research paper and write an essay on course materials. See the bottom of the syllabus for more details.
- 2) Engagement/Discussion: This is a small discussion oriented class so you are required to participate in class at regular intervals. Your grade will be based on 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 class but if you have difficulty doing so please come and see me. As part of this grade, I will periodically open class with in-class writing assignments based on the day's readings/viewings. I will be evaluating these assignments based on whether or not I can tell if you have done the assigned work.
- 3) Let's Play Video: You are required to make a video showing you engaging with either a video or a board game that includes, in addition to the customary commentary in such videos, as many instances of American Studies style analysis as you can. Videos should include at least 30 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, please see me so we can figure out an alternative.

Additional Graduate Student Requirement

In addition to the requirements for undergraduates, Graduate Students are required to write a more extensive analysis for each of the sections of the research paper. They must also read 2 additional articles/book chapters on gaming in American culture that is relevant to their topic and incorporate a discussion of them in their analysis. Though I strongly discourage it, graduate students may choose to abandon the research project but they must then incorporate their additional readings into their final course materials essay.

Points/Grade Breakdown

This course uses a +/- system of grading.

925-1000	A	725-774	C
895-924	A-	695-724	C-
875-894	B+	675-694	D+
825-874	B	625-674	D
795-824	B-	595-624	D-
775-794	C+	594↓	

Obviously, this course uses a +/- system. No extra credit will be offered. All rounding is already built into the point totals.

Attendance and Late Assignments

I expect you to attend each and every class. Although any absence will negatively affect your participation, you are allowed ONE unexcused absence. After that, each absence, with an exception for critical and documented emergencies, will reduce your final course grade by 10%. After THREE missed classes, you may be dropped from the course.

An assignment is considered late if it is not turned in by the time noted on the syllabus and Titanium. Every student is entitled to ONE extension on a paper's due date with no questions asked. To get the extension, all you have to do is email me with the request at least 12 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, your grade may be docked up to one letter grade (10%) for each day it is late.

Expectations

To be successful in this class, you must work hard and come to class 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, newspaper reading, and so forth. All electronic devices, except those used for note taking, should be turned off during class.

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 Disabled Student 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/>

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:
<http://www.fullerton.edu/senate/documents/pdf/300/ups300-021.pdf>
<http://www.fullerton.edu/integrity/>

Campus Emergency Procedures

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

Class Schedule

This syllabus may be subject to change

Part I: Studying Games

Week 1 Studying Play?

8/24 **Course Introduction: “It’s Just a Game!” Why Study Play?**
READ: Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play”
GS READ: J. Huizinga, *Home Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Chapter 1
ACTIVITY: *Pokémon-Go* Discussion

Week 2 Studying Video Games

8/31 **Narrative and Interactivity in Contemporary Play**
READ: Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Video Games*
ACTIVITY: Group Play of Video Game OR Let’s Play Video Presentation

Week 3 Studying Board Games

9/7 **The Allure of the Tabletop**
READ: Jill Lepore, *The Mansion of Happiness*, Introduction; Assorted News Articles on Contemporary Games
ACTIVITY: Play and Analyze Contemporary Board Games

Week 4 Studying Sports

9/14 **Sports and Identity in *Friday Night Lights***
READ: *Friday Night Lights* (Entire)
ACTIVITY: Possibly Play Outdoor Game

9/18 **DUE SUNDAY AT 11:59 ON TITANIUM: Project Proposal**

Part II: Gaming a Capitalist Empire

Week 5 God and Games in Early America

9/21 **The New Canaan vs. the New Israel: Work and Leisure in American Culture**
READ: Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing*, Introduction, Chapter 1 and 2;
Documents on Thomas Morton’s colony of Merrimount.
ACTIVITY: Analyze Early Card Game Manuals

Week 6 Games, Gender, and Class in Victorian America

9/28 **“The Parlor and the Street:” Social Class and Games in Antebellum America**
READ: Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing*, Chapter 3; Gary Cross, *Kids’ Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood*, Chapter 2
INVESTIGATE: *American Boy’s Book of Sports and Games* OR Eliza Leslie, *The American Girl’s Book* (assigned previous week)
ACTIVITY: Choose ONE game from your book and come prepared to talk about it (and maybe play).

Week 7 Games of Empire, Part I

10/5 **Sports, Competition, and the Strenuous Life**
READ: Robert Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out* (Selection) Michael Oriard, *Reading Football* (Selection)
INVESTIGATE: Alfred Spalding, *America's National Game* or Walter Camp's *Athletes All* (assigned previous class)

10/9 DUE SUNDAY AT 11:59 ON TITANIUM: Paper 1 (Game Analysis)

Week 8 **Competition in a Managerial Society**

10/12 **The Transformation of *Monopoly*: Cooperation, Competition, and the American Dream**
READ: Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing*, Chapters 4 and 5; *NY Times* article on the Origins of Monopoly
INVESTIGATE: Patents for Monopoly

Part III: The Games of Algorithmic America

Week 9 **Gaming the Cold War**

10/19 ***Life, Fate, and Choice in the Culture of Contingency***
READ: William Graebner, *Age of Doubt*, Chapter 2: "The Culture of Contingency"; Jackson Lears, *Something For Nothing*, Chapter 6

Week 10 **Childhood Games and the National Security State**

10/26 **"War Never Changes": Atomic Weapons, Genocide, and American Innocence in the Cold War**
READ: Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*
PLAY: SpaceWar! <http://spacewar.oversigma.com/>

Week 11 **The Military-Entertainment Complex**

11/2 **Games of Empire, Part II**
READ: Article on "The Military-Entertainment Complex;" Dwight Eisenhower, Farewell Address
VIEW: *Wargames*

11/6 DUE SUNDAY AT 11:59: Paper 2 (Research or Course Materials)

Week 12 **The Morality of Games**

11/9 **"Another of Satan's Ploys": Moral Panic, Imaginative Freedom, and the Triumph of Quantitative Play**
READ: Choose 1 of the uploaded articles on D&D
SKIM: D&D Manual
WATCH: *Community*, "Advanced Dungeons and Dragons" or *The Goldbergs*, "Dungeons & Dragons, Anyone?"

ACTIVITY: Play D&D (Hopefully)

Week 13 Competition and Cooperation in a Post-Industrial, Global Age

11/16 **“The End of Western Civilization?” Work, Leisure and Competition in a Post-Industrial Age**

READ: Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing*, Chapter 7; Robin Kelley, “Playing for Keeps: Pleasure and Profit on the Postindustrial Playground.”

VIEW: *King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*.

ACTIVITY: Comparison of Spectator Sports and Spectator Video Games

Week 14 Who is a Gamer?

11/30 **Gamer Identity in the Age of Gamergate**

WATCH: ONE Episode of Anita Sarkeesian’s Feminist Frequency “Tropes vs Women in Video Games”

PLAY: *Depression Quest*

DUE SUNDAY AT 11:59: Let’s Play Video

Week 15 Video Games, Fantasy Sports, and Participatory Culture

12/7 **Gaming and the Rise of Participatory Culture**

READ: *Ready Player One*

ACTIVITY: Short presentation of Let’s Play Videos

Week 16 Final Exam Week

12/14 Meeting? Maybe—If so, optional.

12/17 DUE SATURDAY FINAL ESSAY

Research Project

This is a research project that will require you to analyze a game on three different levels. You will build this paper in four separate stages. Each stage must address the same game. You are welcome to choose any game (outdoor, board, or video) from any time period in American history. It will be easier for you to find materials from more recent games.

Remember that you have two opportunities to abandon the research project (Step 3 and Step 4) in favor of writing an essay on course materials. Once you abandon the research track, you cannot get back on.

Step 1: Project Proposal (50 Points) EVERYONE DOES

Choose a game to analyze. This game should have a public image (advertisements, periodical articles, etc), and accessible community that discusses the game. Write a brief proposal that describes the game and why you are certain that you will have the materials necessary to complete all the papers. Must include a brief bibliography.

Step 2: Paper 1, Game Analysis (200 Points) EVERYONE DOES

In this 4-6 page paper, you will analyze the game itself. Once you have chosen a game, I will try to give you specific questions to address that depend on the type of game you are analyzing but generally you will want to apply similar methodologies to those we have encountered in class. In general, however, you will concentrate on the gameplay, the subject and plot, the aesthetics, and, if applicable, characters.

Step 3: Paper 2, Public Culture/Ethnography Analysis (200 Points)

In this 4-6 page paper you have two options.

Option A: If you examine the public culture, you will need to find advertisements, periodical articles, academic articles, films, television shows, songs, etc., that discuss the game. Much of these materials can be found on databases for which I will provide links; however, a simple internet search will suffice for some games. If it is a famous game, Wikipedia usually provides a list of references to the game in other media. I suggest you start there (be sure to cite).

Option B: If you decide to do an ethnography of the gaming community, you have two options. First, you can find an open online community devoted to the game. Second, if you know players, you can interview them. If you decide to interview, please see me for instructions. Once you have found this community, you should try to figure out why they play the game, what modifications they make, how they play, etc. We will work together to come up with some questions.

Step 4: Final Paper (250 Points)

In your final paper, you will briefly research the portion of the paper you did not do in Step 3 and connect it to the other papers to form a 10-15 page essay that analyzes the game's role in American culture. Your revised paper should have a new introduction and conclusion that make an argument, summarize your findings, and connect the game to the course's themes.

ESSAY OPTIONS (GRAPHICS EDITION)

Research Track

Course Materials Track

