

History and Culture of Games

Syllabus, Fall 2016

Lectures: Monday/Thursday, 10-12, Sage 4711

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Introduction:



*Average Maria Individual
by: Alice Maz*

Digital games have become a dominant part of global cultural discourse; games sales have surpassed the movie industry in profits worldwide, and gaming culture is transitioning from subcultural phenomena into mainstream public conversations. As such, new kinds of critical thought are needed about what games are, how they impact humanity, and what directions the medium may and should take in the future.

This course is designed to give students a critical understanding of the medium of games through a combination of historical research and reflective lenses on contemporary games. As such, the course will be divided into two major components: a lecture that covers the history of human games and play dating back to Sumer, and readings and discussion sessions that analyze the impacts that games and play have upon human life. At the core of both of these components will be an exploration of the emotional, political, gendered, racial, economic, and spiritual currents that games arise out of and contribute to.

Learning Outcomes:

Upon completion of this course, students should have the following sets of skills:

- 1.) A thorough understanding of the evolution of human game play, with a particular focus on the emergence of electronic and digital games
- 2.) Analytical tools for “unboxing” the social and political attributes that games have
- 3.) An ability to consider the social, technological, and historical origins of the dominant views of the role of games in society
- 4.) The ability to use these insights and understandings to design game concepts that acknowledge and address their cultural impacts

Texts:

Readings will be posted on the course's LMS page

Games:

That Dragon, Cancer: (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/419460/>)

Depression Quest: (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/270170/>)

Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes: (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/341800/>)

I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream: (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/245390/>)

Analogue: A Hate Story: (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/209370/>)

Undertale: (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/391540/>)

Other Materials:

Loose-leaf Paper

Assignments and Grade Breakdown:

Mini Papers: (20 Points Total)

That Dragon, Cancer (5 Points)

FLUXX (5 Points)

Depression Quest (5 Points)

Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes (5 Points)

Term Papers: (30 Points Total)

Analogue: A Hate Story: (10 Points) (Approximate Playtime: 5 hours x2)

I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream: (10 Points) (Approximate Playtime: 10 hours)

Undertale: (10 Points) (Approximate Playtime: 12 hours)

Pitch: (30 Points Total)

Initial Pitch Document (3 Points)

Initial Pitch Presentation (2 Points)

Final Pitch Document (15 Points)

Final Pitch Presentation (5 Points)

Class Grade on Final Pitch Presentation (5 Points)

Reading Responses: (20 Points Total)

1 Point per reading assignment.

Project Descriptions:

All text portions of projects (papers, write-ups) must be submitted to the course's Blackboard page by midnight the night the assignment is due. All papers must follow Chicago Style citation format: (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)

Mini-Papers (750 word minimum each):

The mini-papers are short reflections on games that students play during class time, and are generally due the next class day that follows a weekend (check the syllabus on LMS for due dates). Each mini paper has three sections, with a minimum word count of 250 words per section, which follow the overall theme of the class: a Technical, Formal, and Social analysis of the game. For each section, **players should aim for a short, detailed account of ONE particular element of the game that struck them as interesting, rather than a summary of all of the instances of each category in the game.** For example, a formal analysis section of *Super Mario Brothers* may analyze the background music of Level 1-1, rather than a summarize all of the graphics, music, and effects in all levels in the game. While students will gain a deeper understanding of each category (as well as how they overlap) throughout the course, some general examples that players can choose to talk about for each section include:

Technical: hardware, code, algorithms, rules, material properties, software, platform, controller tech, hackability, fixability, stability, bugs, glitches, user control, player and computational agency

Formal: graphics, art, illustration, character design, level design, sound, music, game mechanics, gameplay, avatars, character behavior, aesthetics, poetics, game controller usability, interface design, human-computer interaction design, affective readings

Social: players, multiplayer, online play, gender, race, politics, capitalism, labor, material sources, social implications of game production, game history, socio-cultural context, intertextuality, intratextuality

Full Length Papers (2000 word minimum each):

Each full-length paper will follow the same general structure as the mini-papers, but requires an added depth of analysis. While this depth results in a longer word requirement, **the goals of the assignment, and what the assignment will be graded on, is the incorporation of peer-reviewed research as a method of exploring the observations made by the student. As such, every full-length paper will require that the student cite at least 3 peer-reviewed sources per section, for a minimum total of 9 sources per paper.** These peer-reviewed sources must be external to the readings in class, though students are also encouraged to cite class readings if applicable (in other words, feel free to use class readings, but they don't count towards your citation count). **All in-line and bibliographic citations must follow Chicago Style Formatting, (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html), or a the paper will suffer a one-letter-grade deduction.**

Peer-reviewed sources must come from the following list of academic journals, many of which specialize in Game Studies and other digital technology, which can be accessed through Google or through RPI's library database (library.rpi.edu):

- *Games & Culture*
- *Game Studies*
- *The Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*
- *The Journal of Games Criticism*
- *New Media & Society*
- *Journal of Communication*
- *Digital Humanities Quarterly*
- *Leonardo*
- *Selected Papers of Internet Research (SPIR)*
- *Information Ethics*
- *Science, Technology, and Human Values*
- *Differences*
- *Design Issues*
- *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)*

Other sources found may be used upon instructor approval. You must ask the instructor permission to use any external sources as one of your peer-reviewed sources at least 48 hours before the assignment deadline.

In addition, each individual full-length paper assignment has the following requirements:

Analogue: A Hate Story – **Students must play through the game twice**, selecting each gender option once. The analysis in each section of the paper (technical/formal/social) must reflect how gender politics and values has impacted that facet of the game (for example, the student may choose to write about issues of gender that are built into the game's software for the technical requirement).

Undertale - The analysis in each section of the paper (technical/formal/social) must reflect how violence, death, or ethical choice has impacted that facet of the game.

I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream – The analysis in each section of the paper (technical/formal/social) must reflect the historical context of the gaming world (i.e., the early 90s) in which *IHNMAIMS* was developed and released.

Final Project:

The final project of the class will see students working in teams of 5 to develop a pitch for a game. The game need not be digital. The project will proceed in two stages:

First Pitch and Presentation (5000 word minimum pitch, with minimum 5 accompanying illustrations/interface/play sketches, 10-minute presentation):

The team will pitch their game design to the rest of the class and to the professor. In pitching their design, each student team will construct a first pitch document, hard copies of which will be distributed to the class the class meeting before the first pitch presentation. Each pitch document and presentation should include:

- Initial Grab: What is the game about, why would people want to play?
- Game Genre: What game or games is your design like that we're familiar with? How does it differ from those designs?
- Game Mechanics: Explain how the game is played. Levels? Win conditions? Lose conditions? Single or Multiplayer?

- Storyline (if applicable): Plot, setting, theme, feel
- Character, level, and art sketches (where applicable): What will the game look like? What are its formal properties?
- Platform: How will the game be played? Why did you choose that platform? What are the affordances and constraints in the platform? How do you leverage and defer to those affordances and constraints?
- Target Audience: Who is your game targeting? How do you know that your game is effectively targeting them? If there are multiple audiences, explain how the game targets each. Be sure to address both primary, secondary, and tertiary users. Be specific.
- Play Experience: Walk us through what it's like to play the game. How does play progress? Why does the player want to continue playing? What are the interfaces encountered, and how are they attractive to the player? What kinds of affective responses are you hoping to achieve? How will you achieve them? How will you achieve flow? If you are not aiming for flow, why not, and what incentives does the player have for continuing play?
- Distribution Method: How will players access the game? This may or may not be market based. If market based, what is the price point? The distribution platform? If not, what is the point of access?

This document will be distributed to the class, who will familiarize themselves with it before the presentation. Every presentation will have a 10-minute feedback/critique session by the professor and rest of the class, where suggestions will be given, and constructive challenges made.

Final Pitch and Presentation (10,000 word minimum pitch, with minimum 10 accompanying sketches/illustrations/play sketches, with a 20 minute presentation):

After receiving feedback on their first pitch, each team will “return to the drawing board” to make improvements to their game based upon response to class and professor feedback. Students will then give a final presentation where they demonstrate improvements to their game, based upon feedback. A longer, more fleshed-out pitch document will be due to the professor via LMS on December 12th.

During the final presentations, the student audience and professor will each grade the final game pitch, based upon pitch quality, pitch creativity, and productive response to critique. The average of those grades will count as 5 percent of the student group's final grade.

Reading Responses (Half a handwritten piece of loose-leaf each):

Every class meeting where a reading has been assigned, students will bring a handwritten response to the reading. Each handwritten response will very, very briefly summarize the reading as the student understands it, as well as list any questions, complaints, and inspirations the student has from the reading. At the end of the discussion section of class, students will be given 10 minutes to write a short, post-discussion response on the reverse side of their response sheet, taking into account the class discussion of the reading. These

responses will be turned into the professor at the end of class, and will double as class attendance.

Every response will receive a grade of “Check,” “Check Plus,” or “Check Minus.” Responses that demonstrate student engagement with the reading prior to class, and student attentiveness during discussion, will receive a “Check.” Responses that show lack of engagement with the reading (**engagement is not the same as understanding!**), and a lack of attentiveness to the discussion, will receive a “Check Minus.” Responses that indicate a superior engagement with the reading ahead of class time, and a high level of engagement during the discussion, will receive a “Check Plus.” **A “Check” represents full credit for the assignment. A “Check Plus” effectively represents extra credit, and can theoretically raise a student’s final grade above “100.”**

Every reading assignment is worth 1 point. The grade breakdown per response is:

- Not Turning in a Response: 0 points, plus attendance penalty (unless registered with the professor)
- Check-Minus: .5 Points
- Check: 1 Point
- Check Plus: 1.5 Points

Schedule:

Week	Theme	Tuesday Class	Friday Class
Week 1, August 29th and September 1	Introduction – The Social, the Formal, and the Technical	Syllabus overview, meet and greet, S/T/F, What is a Game?	NO CLASS PLAY: That Dragon Cancer
Week 2, Sep 5th and 8th	Histories of Play	NO CLASS: Labor Day	<i>That Dragon, Cancer</i> Mini Paper Due “The Nature of Play,” by Johan Huizinga
Week 3, Sep 12th and 15th	Games as Media	“Do Artifacts Have Politics?” by Langdon Winner	“The Five Principles of New Media,” by Lev Manovich
Week 4, Sep 19th and 22nd	Gender	PLAY: Fluxx	<i>My Life as a Night Elf Priest</i> , Chapter 8, “Gender,” by Bonnie Nardi
Week 5, Sep 26th and 29th	#Gamergate	<i>Fluxx</i> Mini Papers Due “A Conspiracy of Fishes,” by Chess and Shaw	NO CLASS PLAY: <i>Analogue: A Hate Story</i>

		and “The End of Gamers,” by Dan Golding	
Week 6, October 3rd and 6th	Queerness and Sexuality	<i>Analogue: A Hate Story Paper Due</i> “Love, Twine, and the End of the World,” by Anna Anthropy and “ <i>Ludus Interruptus:</i> Video Games and Sexuality,” by Merritt Kopas	NO CLASS PLAY: <i>Depression Quest</i>
Week 7, October 11th and 13th	Blackness	MONDAY CLASSES HELD ON TUESDAY FOR COLUMBUS DAY <i>Depression Quest Mini Papers Due</i> “When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong: Resident Evil 5, Racial Representation, and Gamers,” by Andre Brock	“Bow, N****r,” by Ian Shannahan and “The Natural: The Parameters of Afro,” by Evan Narcisse
Week 8, October 17th and 20th	Militarism and War	“What it Feels Like to Play the Bad Guy,” by Hussein Ibrahim	“Banal War,” by Dyer- Witthford and de Peuter
Week 9, October 24th and 27th	Games of Empire	“Biopower Play,” by Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter	<i>Undertale Paper Due</i> “imperial City,” by Dyer- Witthford and de Peuter
Week 10, October 31st and November 3rd	Critical Code Studies	“Criminal Code: Procedural Logic and Rhetorical Excess in Videogames,” by Mark Sample	“Do Algorithms have Politics?” by Kate Crawford
Week 11, Nov 7th and 10th	Digital Design and Labor	“Cognitive Capitalism,” by Dyer-	Selection from <i>Developer’s Dilemma,</i>

		Witheford and de Peuter	by Casey O'Donnell
Week 12, Nov 14th and 17th	Games and the Body	<i>I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream</i> Paper Due Queer OS	PLAY: <i>Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes</i>
Week 13, Nov 21st and 24th	Games, Poetry, Aesthetics	<i>Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes</i> Mini Paper Due “A Pixel Artist Renounces Pixel Art” And “The Garden of Forking Paths” by Jorge Luis Borges	NO CLASS Thanksgiving Break
Week 14, Nov 28th and Dec 1st	Critical Game Design	First Pitch Documents Due, 26 copies printed out and brought to class “Critical Computer Games,” by Mary Flanagan	First Pitch 10-minute Presentations
Week 15, Dec 5th and 8th	Final Pitch and Critique	Open Studio Time	Final 15-minute Presentations
Finals Week		Final Pitch Document Due December 12	

Attendance:

Students are expected always to be present during class and recitations. Excellence in submitted work will not make up for delinquency in attendance. **More than three unexcused absences will result in a lowering of your final course grade by a letter grade. If you must miss a class, assignments are due before the class period begins. 8 unexcused missed classes result in an automatic “F” for the course.** Excusable absences include illness, family emergencies, and scheduled Rensselaer athletic events that are disclosed to the professor at the beginning of the semester, all with documentation, and **must be arranged through the Office of Student Experience.**

Academic Integrity:

Student-teacher relationships should be built on trust. Students should be able to trust that

teachers have made responsible decisions about the structure and content of the courses they teach, and teachers must trust that the assignments students turn in are their own. Acts that violate this trust undermine the educational enterprise and contradict the very reason for your being at Rensselaer. *The Rensselaer Handbook of Student Rights and Responsibilities* defines various forms of academic dishonesty and procedures for responding to them. The policies laid out in the *Handbook* are intended to maintain a community of trust and will be strictly enforced. Please review these policies.

For this course, the following penalties will apply:

- Significant acts of plagiarism (e.g., text copied verbatim from an unidentified source): Failure of the course and a written judgment in the student's official record
- Minor acts of plagiarism (e.g., referencing the findings of others without appropriate citations): Failure of the assignment, plus reduction of final course grade by one letter grade
- Other acts of academic dishonesty: Penalties range from a warning to reduction of final grade by one letter grade to failure of the course, depending on the severity of the violation as determined by the instructor. As is evident above, penalties for plagiarism are significant. All direct use of another person's words must be placed inside quotation marks. You must also indicate where you paraphrase another's work and where you borrow another's specific ideas or interpretations. If you have questions regarding proper citation practices, see the instructor for clarification before the assignment is submitted. While collaboration is encouraged throughout the course, others cannot do work for you. All assignment activities must be carried out by the individual or team members submitting the assignment for a grade. Other people may show you *how* to do something (say, when using computer software), but you must follow up by doing the work yourself. *The Rensselaer Handbook* provides specific procedures by which a student may appeal a grade. You should speak to the professor before initiating an appeal. If this does not lead to satisfactory resolution, you have the option of appealing your grade by writing to the head of the STS Department no later than 10 days after your grade has been posted.