

Critical Game Design: History/Theory/Futures

Syllabus, Fall 2021

Introduction:

“Critical Game Design: History/Theory/Futures” is a seminar course that focuses on the history and theory of design for interactive media. Students will read and discuss design history, art history, conceptual artistic practice, and new and emerging theories about digital, critical, and speculative design and the digital humanities. The course is designed to advance students’ understanding of bodies of academic literature and theory that explore the hybridization of hermeneutic analysis and design and making practice.

Students will grapple with the central challenge of critical game design practice—the synthesis of deconstructive or “critical” perspectives on media and technology with compositionist or “applied” research interested in the construction of new media or technical systems. As such, though the course will primarily consist of readings and discussion, classwork will be supplemented with a major paper assignment designed to prepare students for their dissertation proposal, qualifying exam, or Master’s project.

The readings in this course, combined with those in “Game Studies: Theory and Praxis” and “Research Jam” form the foundations for students’ qualifying exams.

Learning Outcomes:

By the conclusion of this class, students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Read, interpret, and analyze critical academic work about interactive media
- Find diverse academic literature to both support and critique ideas covered in the readings and in class
- Connect class readings and discussed theoretical frameworks to their own research projects
- Compose a literature review that clearly and cogently defines the students’ position in academic research

Texts:

- Weekly texts will be available on the class LMS page

Assignments and Grade Breakdown:

History/Theory/Future Annotated Bibliography: 25 points

History/Theory/Future Final Essay: 75 points

Total: 100 points

All text portions of projects (papers, write-ups, design documents) must be submitted to the course's Blackboard page before the start of class on the due date. Papers submitted must be in **.doc, .docx, or .rtf format.**

Project Descriptions:

History/Theory/Future Essay (5000 words)

Annotated Bibliography Due Date: Friday, November 5

Final Essay Due Date: Friday, December 10

Citation Style: MLA, Chicago, or APA

The History/Theory/Future Essay is designed to give students experience tracing the development of an academic analysis and argument over time and authors. Students will choose one article or book chapter from a broad selection provided to the class (possible readings will be listed on the LMS). Students will then perform a “backwards and forwards” bibliographic search, tracing how writings influenced the author’s arguments and analysis in the chose paper, and then tracing how the author’s argument would go on to influence others.

For the “Backwards” part of the analysis, students will select no less than 7 scholarly sources that are referenced in the chosen paper. Students should carefully select the sources according to their importance in the argument of the paper: determine as you analyze the paper which sources are central to the argument, which ones are serving as important supporting points, and which ones are acknowledgements of prior related work. The first two, generally, are more crucial to understanding a paper (though there are always exceptions).

After selecting those seven sources, students will read through them, and identify among all of them, 5 additional scholarly sources important to those sources. While these five sources may be distinct among the seven originally selected sources, it is also likely that students will find that the author’s sources themselves share citations. All told, the student will curate a total of 12 “Backwards” readings.

Using resources like Google Scholar, journal metrics, and other class readings, students will then curate a collection of 10 “Forwards.” scholarly sources that have cited the chosen paper as a core part of the argument. Again, students should select sources where the chosen paper is an important or foundational part of the “Forwarded” papers, rather than papers where the original selection is only tangentially referenced.

Since students will need to carefully curate their sources to find lines of argumentation, you will need to engage with many more texts than you will end up using in your final papers. Try to use good graduate student reading practices, such as skimming and scanning, in order to most efficiently cover material, and be selective about what papers and books you decide to spend a deeper time delving into.

For the first part of the written assignment, students will write an annotated bibliography of the 22 total curated sources. Each entry should include the primary bibliographic information about the source, and three to four sentences summarizing the argument of the piece, and how the piece relates to the arguments or findings of the original selected paper. The annotated bibliography will serve as part of the student’s reference material for their final paper.

The Final Essay will be a 5000 word document that synthesizes your findings in a narrative literature review format. The final paper will first situate the primary document in its scholarly context, arguing for how the essay draws from prior cited work, and how it differs from that prior work, or interprets it in new or different ways. The paper will then trace how the chosen essay has been used in future work, and how that work has interpreted the essay in new, different, or contradictory ways. Overall, the final paper will serve as a tracing of how arguments are stitched together and traced over time, and how context is established in a scholarly format.

The paper should not be a narrative form of the annotated bibliography. That is, the paper should not just be a listing and description of the different sources found. Rather, the paper should work to contextualize and synthesize the different sources. Chances are, many of the sources also cite one another, or are tackling similar issues, or are presenting different takes on a single argument or empirical finding. The paper should draw out these connections and articulate how they have influenced or set the context for the primary source essay.

Overall, this paper will entail more reading, and perhaps substantially more reading, than just the 23 essays that will be featured in the final paper. Students are responsible for finding secondary sources, if needed, that help to explain and contextualize backwards and forwards readings, and may need to do additional background readings on both the selected “Backwards” and “Forwards” pieces. A successful paper will:

- Feature all 23 curated essays (the original source essay and 22 B+F essays)
- Demonstrate the impactfulness of the 22 curated essays on/from the original source (i.e., why these writings were chosen from among all of the bibliographic sources)
- Synthesize the curated essays, showing how they both connect to the original source as well as to one another, when applicable
- Provide context for the greater scholarly conversations being traced over these papers (i.e., what else was “going on” in the field at this time?)
- Demonstrate thoughtfulness and understanding of the curated essays, including, when needed, reading outside of the 23 writings in order to understand meaning and context

Attendance:

Students are expected always to be present during class and recitations. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class. Excellence in submitted work will not make up for delinquency in attendance. **More than two unexcused absences will result in a lowering of your final course grade by one mark for each unexcused absence after 3. More than five absences will result in the failure of the course. Three late arrivals will equal one missed class.** If you must miss a class, assignments are due before the class period begins. Excusable absences include illness, family emergencies, and scheduled Rensselaer athletic events. All excused absences must be delivered to the professor via the Office of Student Life.

Weekly Readings:

Week 1 (September 2) – Introduction: New Media

- Janet Murray – “Inventing the Medium” From *The New Media Reader*
- Lev Manovich – “New Media from Borges to HTML” from *The New Media Reader*
- Ian Bogost – “An Alternative to Fun” from *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*

Week 2 (September 9) – Narrative

- Jan Simmons - Narrative, Games, and Theory, in *Game Studies*
- Merritt Kopas and Lana Polansky - *Videogames for Humans*, “Intro” and “Mangia by Nina Freeman”
- Kishonna Gray – “Historical Narratives, Contemporary Games, Racialized Experiences,” in *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*
- Nathaniel Poor – “Digital Elves as Racial Other in Videogames: Acknowledgement and Avoidance”

Week 3 (September 16) – Cybernetics

- Alexander Galloway – “The Cybernetic Hypothesis”
- Tara McPherson - “U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX,” in *Race After the Internet*, Eds. Lisa Nakamura, Peter Chow-White, Routledge
- Aubrey Anable - “Feeling History,” in *Playing with Feelings: Videogames and Affect*

Week 4 (September 23) – Computation

- Phillip Agre – “Toward a Critical Technical Practice: Lessons Learned in Trying to Reform AI” in in Geof Bowker, Les Gasser, Leigh Star, and Bill Turner, eds, *Bridging the Great Divide: Social Science, Technical Systems, and Cooperative Work*
- Matthew Schmalzer – “The Ontology of Incremental Games: Thinking like the Computer in Frank Lantz’s *Universal Paperclips*”
- Wendy Chun – “Habitual Connections, or Network Maps: Belatedly Too Early” in *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*

Week 5 (September 30) – Graphics

- Friedrich Kittler and Sara Ogger – “Computer Graphics: A Semi-Technical Introduction”
- Theodore Kim, Holly Rushmeier, Julie Dorsey, Derek Nowrouzezahrai, Raqi Syed, Wojciech Jarosz, A. M. Darke – “Countering Racial Bias in Computer Graphics Research” and “Supplemental” in
- James Malazita – “Is the Subject of Light Raced: Color, Shine, and White Photorealism in Unreal’s Physically Based Rendering” (draft)
- Jacob Gaboury – “Model Objects: The Utah Teapot as Standard and Icon” in *Image Objects: An Archaeology of Computer Graphics*

Week 6 (October 7) – Animation

- Lev Manovich – “Media Design” in *Software Takes Command*
- James Hodge – “Out of Hand” in *Sensations of History: Animation and New Media Art* – Chapter 1 Out of Hand
- Amanda Phillips - “Making a Face: Quantizing Reality in Character Animation and Customization” in *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*

Week 7 (October 14) – Flow

- Jay Bolter – “The Aesthetics of Flow and the Aesthetics of Catharsis”
- Ian Bogost – “Why Gamification is Bullshit” in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*
- Braxton Soderman – “Intro” and “An Introduction to the Ideology of Flow” from *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject*

Week 8 (October 21) – Bodies

- Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter – “Biopower Play” in *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*
- Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemeiux – “Blind Spots: *The Phantom Pain, The Helen Keller Simulator*, and Disability in Games” in *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*
- Cadence Kinsey – “Matrices of Embodiment: Rethinking Binary and the Politics of Digital Representation,” in *Signs*, Vol. 39, No. 4.

Week 9 (October 28) – Interfaces

- Ted Nelson (1965), “A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate,” *Complex Information Processing. ACM 20th National Conference*. 24 Aug 1965. Address.
- Shane Denson – “Screen Time” From *Discorrelated Images*
- Aubrey Anable – “Touching Games” in *Playing with Feelings: Videogames and Affect*

Week 10 (November 4) – Data Visualization

- Johanna Drucker -“Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display,” in *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, Vol. 5 No. 1
- Alexander Galloway – “Are some things Unrepresentable?” in *Theory, Culture, and Society*
- Daniel Cardoso Llach – “Tracing Design Ecologies: Collecting and Visualizing Ephemeral Data as Method in Design and Technology Studies,” in *digitalSTS: A Field Guide for Science & Technology Studies*, Eds. Janet Vertesi and David Ribes
- Adrian Mackenzie - “Distributive Numbers: A Post-demographic Perspective on Probability” in *Modes of Knowing: Resources from the Baroque*, Edited by John Law, Evelyn Ruppert

Week 11 (November 11) – Surround and Immersion

- Sherry Turkle – “Design and Science at the Millennium” and “New Ways of Knowing/New Ways of Forgetting” in *Simulation and its Discontents*
- Shannon Mattern – “Waves and Wires: Cities of Electric Sound” in *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt*
- Fred Turner – “The New Language of Vision” in *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties*

Week 12 (November 18) – Making, Remix and Hacking

- Casey O’Donnell – “Wither Mario Factory?: The Role of Tools in Constructing (Co)Creative Possibilities on Video Game Consoles” in *Games and Culture*
- Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemeiux – “Hundred Thousand Billion Fingers: Serial Histories of *Super Mario Brothers*” in *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*
- Jimmy Andrews and Loren Schmidt – “Queer Body Physics, Awkwardness as Emotional Realism, and the Challenge of Designing Consent” in *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg

Week 13 – (November 25) – THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 14 – (December 2) – Radical Play

- Steven E. Jones – “Dimensions” in *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities*
- Alexander Galloway – “Counter gaming” in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*
- Aubrey Anable - “Games to Fail With” in *Playing with Feelings: Videogames and Affect*

Week 15 – (December 9) – Speculative and Critical Design

- Matt Malpass – “Intro” and “History” in *Critical Design in Context: History, Theory, and Practices*
- Mike Michael – “Speculative Design and Digital Materialities” in *Digital Materialities: Design and Anthropology*, Eds. Sarah Pink, Elisenda Ardevol, and Debora Lanzeni
- Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett – “Training Designer Two: Ideological Conflicts in Feminist Games and Digital Humanities” in *Alternative Historiographies of the Digital Humanities* eds. Dorothy Kim and Adeline Koh

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.

Syllabus Supplemental

Critical Game Design History/Theory/Futures Backwards/Forwards List

Fall 2021

Histories and Cultures of Play

Bolter, J. D. (1998). "Hypertext and the question of visual literacy." *Handbook of literacy and technology: Transformations in a post-typographic world*, 3-13.

Boluk, S., & Lenz, W. (2010). "Infection, media, and capitalism: From early modern plagues to postmodern zombies." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 126-147.

Consalvo, M. (2009). "There is No Magic Circle." *Games and Culture*, 4(4), 408-417.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009343575>

Deterding, Sebastien (2016) "The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies: Assessing the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinary Game Research." *Games and Culture*, Vol 12, Issue 6, 521-543

Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2006). "EA Spouse" and the Crisis of Video Game Labour: Enjoyment, Exclusion, Exploitation, Exodus. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 31(3), 599.

Evans, Sarah Beth and Janish, Elyse (2015) "#INeedDiverseGames: How the Queer Backlash to GamerGate Enables Nonbinary Coalition." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*. Vol 2, No. 2, 125-150

Fron, Janine; Fullerton, Tracy; Morie, Jacquelyn Ford; Pearce, Celia (2007) "The Hegemony of Play" *DiGRA '07 - Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play* The University of Tokyo, September, 2007

Galloway, A. R. (2004). "Social realism in gaming." *Game studies*, 4(1), 2004.

Hayles, N. K. (1993). "Virtual bodies and flickering signifiers". *October*, 66, 69-91.

Höglund, J. (2008). "Electronic empire: Orientalism revisited in the military shooter." *Game Studies*, 8(1), 10.

Salter, A., & Blodgett, B. (2012). "Hypermasculinity & dickwolves: The contentious role of women in the new gaming public." *Journal of broadcasting & electronic media*, 56(3), 401-416.

Shaw, Adrienne (2010) "What is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies" *Games and Culture* Volume 5, Issue 4, 403-424

Shaw, I. G. R. (2010). "Playing War." *Social & Cultural Geography*. Vol 11, Iss 8

Design and Systems Criticism

Bateman, C. (2015). "Implicit game aesthetics." *Games and Culture*, 10(4), 389-411.

Coleman, S., & Dyer-Witheford, N. (2007). "Playing on the digital commons: collectivities, capital and contestation in videogame culture." *Media, culture & society*, 29(6), 934-953.

Frasca. (2004). Videogames of the oppressed: Critical thinking, education, tolerance, and other trivial issues. In Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan (Eds.), *First person. New media as story, performance, and game*. (pp. 85-94). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Jagoda, P. (2014). "Gaming the humanities." *differences*, 25(1), 189-215.

Juul, J., & Norton, M. (2009, April). "Easy to use and incredibly difficult: on the mythical border between interface and gameplay." In *Proceedings of the 4th international conference on foundations of digital Games* (pp. 107-112).

Khaliq, I., & Purkiss, B. (2015, October). "A study of interaction in idle games & perceptions on the definition of a game." In *2015 IEEE Games Entertainment Media Conference (GEM)* (pp. 1-6). IEEE.

Murray, Janet. (2004) "From game-story to cyberdrama." *First person: New media as story, performance, and game* 1 2-11.

O'Donnell, C. (2011). "The Nintendo entertainment system and the 10NES chip: Carving the video game industry in silicon" *Games and Culture* 6 (1), 83-100

Roig A, San Cornelio G, Ardèvol E, Alsina P, Pagès R. (2009) "Videogame as Media Practice: An Exploration of the Intersections Between Play and Audiovisual Culture." *Convergence*. 2009;15(1):89-103. doi:10.1177/1354856508097019

Sicart, M. (2011) "Against Procedurality" *Game Studies*, Vol 11, Issue 3

Smith, G. (2014, April). "Understanding procedural content generation: a design-centric analysis of the role of PCG in games." In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 917-926).

Taylor, T.L.. (2009). "The Assemblage of Play." *Games and Culture*, 4(4), 331-339.

Wardrip-Fruin, N., Mateas, M., Dow, S., & Sali, S. (2009, September). "Agency Reconsidered." In *DiGRA conference*.

Framing Play and Games

Apperley, T. H. (2006). "Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres." *Simulation & Gaming*, 37(1), 6-23.

Apperley, T., & Jayemane, D. (2012). "Game studies' material turn." *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 9(1), 5-25.

Boellstorf, T. (2006). "A ludicrous discipline? Ethnography and game studies." *Games & Culture*, Vol 1, 1

Brock, A. (2017). "Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis." *New Media & Society*. Vol 20, Iss 3

Carr, Diane (2017). "Methodology, Representation, and Games." *Games and Culture*, Vol 14, Issue 7

- Chun, W. H. K. (2008). On "sourcery," or code as fetish. *Configurations*, 16(3), 299-324.
- Gray, KL. (2012). "Intersecting oppressions and online communities: Examining the experiences of women of color in Xbox Live." *Information, Communication, and Society*, Vol 15, Iss 3
- LaPensée, B. A., & Lewis, J. E. (2011). "Skins: Designing games with first nations youth." *Journal of Game Design & Development Education*, 1(1), 54-63.
- Mateas, M., & Montfort, N. (2005, December). "A box, darkly: Obfuscation, weird languages, and code aesthetics." In *Proceedings of the 6th Digital Arts and Culture Conference, IT University of Copenhagen* (pp. 144-153).
- Nooney, L. (2013). "A pedestal, a table, a love letter: Archaeologies of gender in videogame history." *Game Studies*, 13(2).
- Penelope Sweetser, Daniel Johnson, Peta Wyeth, Aiman Anwar, Yan Meng, and Anne Ozdowska. 2017. "GameFlow in Different Game Genres and Platforms." *Comput. Entertain.* 15, 3, Article 1 (Fall 2017), 24 pages. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/3034780>
- Penix-Tadsen, P. (2013). "LATIN AMERICAN LUDOLOGY: Why We Should Take Video Games Seriously (and When We Shouldn't)." *Latin American Research Review*, 174-190.
- O'Donnell (2009). "The everyday lives of video game developers: Experimentally understanding underlying systems/structures" *Transformative Works and Cultures* 2 (1), 1-11
- Robinson, N. (2012). "Videogames, Persuasion and the War on Terror: Escaping or Embedding the Military—Entertainment Complex?." *Political Studies*, 60(3), 504-522.