

Critical theory and analysis of videogames

USC School of Cinema-Television, CTIN 462

Instructor: William Huber

Units: 4

Info:

Email: whuber@usc.edu

Office Hours: Tu 3:30-4:30 pm

Course discussion group: <http://groups.google.com/group/ctin-462-spring-201/>

Course website: <http://sites.google.com/site/ctin462/>

Course Description:

Computer games and videogames are complex systems of representation, rich with meaning. The critical vocabulary for interpreting, criticizing, and analyzing them is still be developed. Frameworks of understanding from literature, film and art may provide some material that can be applied to the study of games. The purpose of this seminar is to cultivate a more sophisticated critical and philosophical vocabulary, and to deploy it for the critical study of videogames and game culture.

This course is being run as a seminar. Students will be expected to keep up with the reading load, and be prepared to discuss the material in depth with other members of the class. Three response papers, about 3 to 4 pages in length, will be assigned at different points in the term. Each student will select either a single, large-scale game or interactive artwork, or a closely-related family or series of works, and write a paper which consists of formal analysis as well as critical and hermeneutic analysis of the object, due on the final regular day of class. They will also present their research before the class. There are no exams.

The readings have been chosen with two broad goals in mind: first, understanding and learning critical methods, and second, applying contemporary critical methods to the understanding and interpretation of videogames and interactive media. Students are encouraged to apply their reading to those games that they have already played, to bring examples of games to seminar and use critical frameworks of analysis to discuss them.

Meeting Information:

Lecture: 3 hours

Pre-requisites: N/A

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Required Reading (stocked at book store:)

- John Berger: *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin. London. 1972
- Alex Galloway: *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis. 2006
- Other material will be made available online or in class.

Recommended Reading (stocked at book store:)

- Peter Berry: *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3rd Edition. Manchester University Press. Manchester. 2006
- Ian Bogost: *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. MIT Press. Cambridge. 2007
- Ian Bogost: *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. MIT Press. Cambridge. 2006

Suggested Reading (try the library:)

- Hans Borries, Steffan Walz, et al, eds.: *Space Time Play: Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism*. Birkhäuser. Basel. 2007
- David Lodge and Nigel Wood, eds.: *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Longman. London. 1999.
- David Macey: *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Penguin. London. 2002
- Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds.: *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Blackwell. London. 1998
- Mackenzie Wark: *GAM3R 7H30RY*. <http://www.futureofthebook.org/gamertheory/>
- Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds.: *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Routledge. New York. 2004

Evaluation of student performance:

Participation	20
Assignments (short papers)	30
Presentations	10
Final paper	40
Total:	100

Course content (summarized by class meeting)

Wk	Lecture	Assignments
1	Introduction - Ways of Seeing	January 12. What is critical theory? What is criticism? What is the difference between critical theory and cultural studies? We will meet and introduce ourselves, discuss the goals and assumptions of the program, agree to the readings for the next week.
2	Ways of Playing	<p>January 19. Games as vehicles for meaning. The challenge: can we read games the way that Berger reads paintings?</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Berger, pp 7–43 • Ian Bogost, Comparative Video Game Criticism <p>Assignment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short paper 1 (due week 3)
3	Semiotics of games	<p>January 26. Review concepts of structuralism, particularly Barthes. Distinguish from formalism; relate to genre and semiotics.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Galloway, ch. 2 • Espen Aarseth, Playing Research: methodological approaches to game analysis
4	Post-structuralism	<p>February 2. Discuss post-structuralist theory.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Galloway, ch. 1

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gilles Deleuze, selection from What is philosophy?
5		<p>February 9. Semiotics and phenomenology: the two poles of contemporary art criticism, and their application to games and interactive media.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Galloway, ch. 3. MacKenzie Wark. "Allegory" Other readings TBA <p>Assignment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short paper 2 (due week 6)
6	Mystery week.	February 16. TBA
7	Postmodern theory	<p>February 23. Relationship between postmodernism and games: videogames as a postmo form.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Galloway, chapter 2: "Origins of the first-person shooter" MacKenzie Wark, as assigned Readings from Hiroki Azuma
8		<p>March 2. Problems in game studies: what is the game as a text?</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> TBA
9	Psychoanalytic and cognitive theories	<p>March 9. Psychoanalytic and cognitive theory. Player, character and avatar; games and attention.</p>

		<p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chris Chesher, Neither gaze nor glance, but graze. • Other readings TBA.
10	Gender and sexuality	<p>March 23. Feminist and queer-theoretical approaches to games; representations and game culture.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Berger, pp 45–81 <p>Assignment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short paper 3 (due week 10)
11		<p>March 30. Continued discussion of gender, sexuality. Gender performance in game communities.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other readings TBA.
12	Relational aesthetics	<p>April 6. Games as relational systems.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nicholas Bourriard, "Relational Aesthetics" (Introduction) • Tom Durley, "Video Games and Relational Aesthetics" <p>Assignment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstract/proposal for final paper due.
13	Ideology and representation	<p>April 13. History and representation in games; post-colonialism, transnational media flows.</p>

		<p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Galloway, chapter 4 • Koich Iwabuchi, How “Japanese” is Pokemon? • Other readings TBA. <p>Assignment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bibliography for final paper due.
14	Gaming against gaming.	<p>April 20. Counter-gaming and the exploration of games by artists and game designers. Discussion on presentations.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Galloway, chapter 5 <p>Presentations.</p>
15	Contemporary videogame theory	<p>April 27. Last class: papers are due. Discussion on presentations. Evaluation of the future of games and game criticism.</p> <p>Final paper due.</p> <p>April 21.</p> <p>Presentations.</p>

Missing an Assignment Deadline, Incompletes:

The only acceptable excuses for missing an assignment deadline or taking an incomplete in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must inform the professor before the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled. Students who wish to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor or teaching assistant before final grades are due.

Note for students with disabilities:

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to us as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301, and is open 8:30am-5:00pm Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

Academic Integrity:

The School of Cinema-Television expects the highest standards of academic excellence and ethical performance from USC students. It is particularly important that you are aware of and avoid plagiarism, cheating on exams, submitting a paper to more than one instructor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone other than yourself. Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade and be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs. If you have any doubts or questions about these policies, consult “SCAMPUS” and/or confer with the instructor.