Prospectus

The terms which are used to describe the dominant trends in contemporary culture seem to contradict themselves: “interactive media” is a term which seems both very contemporary and yet very ahistorical, as if the media forms which capture the public imagination (often because the older forms simply recede to the background of everyday use) can be understood in terms of some of their more secondary features. But perhaps “interactivity” isn’t a bad word to start with.

This class is about a number of different things which may not seem to resemble each other at first: first and most significantly, it is about the game—as an artifact, as a metaphor, as a lens for analyzing contemporary phenomena, as a prevailing logic. It is also about emerging aesthetics, (techno-)social networks, mobile technologies, fan cultures, critical art practices, and music. More than a reliance on ICTs (information and computer technologies) connects these things. They are connected by a set of ideas about the uses of those technologies and the relationship between them and knowledge, play, society and subjectivity. This course is not meant to draw a large circle around a large area and to announce that we’ve mapped it, but instead to see what lines cross through a changing terrain.

The lectures, readings and screenings in this class are designed to support two primary goals: 1.) to create a shared field of discourse based on foundational knowledge of the theory and history of interactive media; 2.) to begin mapping some cultural narratives emerging at the intersection of time-based and interactive media. We will all seek out works and texts which are exemplary, challenging, and provocative. This course will also investigate the historical lineage of interactive media and position it in relation to the evolution of media technologies and cultural forms of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Structure

As a trans-divisional class, the activities will reflect a wide range of approaches to contemporary media as well as different competencies in analyzing, critiquing and representing them. The class will be divided into three groups of students: they will also be asked to discuss reading and screenings among themselves and then select one member to present a report on the group response.

Required Texts

Assigned readings must be completed prior to class on the date assigned!

- Roger Caillois, Man, Play and Games
- Ian Bogost, How to Do Things with Videogames
- Ian Bogost, A Slow Year (includes game)
- Alex Galloway, Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture
- paul d. miller, Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture (includes CD)
Games and software
If possible, each student should obtain a Steam account [http://store.steampowered.com/ ] - Steam is a digital distribution site for commercial and independent games for Windows and Mac computers.

Unless specified otherwise, it will be required that you play one or two of the games listed for each given week, but are not expected to play all of them: you may choose from among the listed titles. Games that are required of the entire class will be designated as required.

Suggested reading
- paul d. miller, Rhythm Science
- Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media

Other suggestions for special interests
Particularly apt for students in the critical studies program:
- Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games
- Ian Bogost, Unit Operations

For understanding the practice of game/interactive-design and its relationship to the aesthetic:
- Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, Racing the Beam
- Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Expressive Processing (esp. interesting for writers.)

Reading on games, architecture, space and urbanism:
- Alberto Iacovoni, Game Zone: Playgrounds between Virtual Scenarios and Reality
- Michael Nitsche, Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds
- McKenzie Wark, The Beach Beneath the Street (very different from above)

If you have other related interests, feel free to ask me for reading suggestions.

Course schedule

Week 1 Beginning at the end
Aug. 30
Screening: Until the End of the World (1991) Wim Wenders, 280 min (part 1)

Week 2 From vision to interaction
Sep. 6
Screening: Until the End of the World (part 2)

Reading:

Recommended that students install the Steam client [http://store.steampowered.com] and begin playing some of the assigned games. Please share your Steam account name if you can.

Week 3 Culture in play
Sep. 13
Screening: Existen (1999) David Cronenberg, 97 min

Reading:
• Roger Caillois, Man, Play and Games
• Brian Sutton-Smith, “Play & ambiguity”

Playing (choose 2):
• Sword & Sworcery (available on Steam and for the iPad on the App Store.)
• The Path
• TRAUMA
• The Stanley Parable [http://www.moddb.com/mods/the-stanley-parable/]

Responses: Badgers (*Meles meles*) - other students are expected to comment on at least two responses.

**Week 4 Simulation / aesthetics**
*Sep. 20*

Screening: *Tron* (1982), 105 min

Reading:
• Gonzalo Frasca, “Simulation versus narrative: introduction to ludology”

Playing (choose 2):
• Darwinia
• Inside a Star-filled Sky
• SpaceChem
• Universe Sandbox

**Week 5 Ludus, agon, memory**
*Sep. 27*

Screen: *Chasing Ghosts: Beyond the Arcade*

Reading:
• Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*

Playing (choose 2)
• Braid
• Jamestown
• Gundemonium
• Super Meat Boy

Responses: Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) - other students are expected to comment on at least two responses.

**Week 6 Indiecade**
*Oct. 4*

Find the beach beneath the streets.

**Week 7 Otaku: database animals**
*Oct. 11*

Screening: *Train Man*

Reading:
• Hiroki Azuma, “The animalization of Otaku culture.”
• Akihiro Kitada, “Japan’s cynical nationalism”

Playing (choose 1):
● Recettear - An Item Shop’s Tale
● Chantelise - A Tale of Two Sisters
● Fortune Summoners

Week 8 Otaku++ and database aesthetics
Oct. 18
Screening: Summer Wars
Reading:
● Kaichiro Morikawa, “Learning from Akihabara: the birth of a personopolis”
● Lev Manovich, “Database as symbolic form”
Playing:
● Analogue: A Hate Story
● Audiosurf
Responses: Hedgehogs (Erinaceus europaeus) - other students are expected to comment on at least two responses.

Week 9 Game rhetorics
Oct. 25
Screening: Sheik Attack
Guest lecture: Eddo Stern
Reading:
● Alex Galloway, Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture
Playing (choose 2):
● The Cat and the Coup.
● Opera Omnia [http://www.increpare.com/2009/02/opera-omnia/]

Week 10 Spaces
Nov 1
Screen: Darkon
Reading:
● David Harvey, “Space as a Keyword”
● Henry Jenkins, “Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces” & “Game Design as Narrative Architecture”
Playing:
● Dear Esther (required)
● Minecraft (required: will play through rest of term)
Responses: Badgers - other students are expected to comment on at least two responses.

Week 11 Time, space and procedural poetics
Nov 8.
Reading:
Ian Bogost, A Slow Year
Playing (A Slow Year and at least one other of the listed games):

- Ian Bogost, A Slow Year (required)
- Jason Rohrer, Passage [http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/]
- Tale-of-Tales, The Path

Responses: Foxes - other students are expected to comment on at least two responses.

**Week 12 Remix**
Nov. 15

Screening: RIP! A Remix Manifesto

Guest lecture and discussion: Todd Margolis and Tracy Cornish

Reading:

- Lev Manovich, “Remixing and Remixability”
- Sound Unbound (selected essays)

Responses: Hedgehogs - other students are expected to comment on at least two responses.

**Week 13 Thanksgiving**
Nov 22

No class session

**Week 14 Virtual others: from immersion to distribution**
Nov 29

Screening: Thomas in Love

Reading:

- Anna Munster & Geert Lovink, “Theses on Distributed Aesthetics. Or, What a Network is Not”
- Edwina Bartlem, “Reshaping spectatorship: immersive and distributed aesthetics.”
- Lev Manovich, “The poetics of augmented space”

Playing (choose 2):

- Journey (Playstation 3)
- Portal 2 (coop mode)
- Jason Rohrer, Diamond Trust of London [http://diamondtrustgame.com/]
- Way
- DOTA 2
- Team Fortress 2

**Week 15 Distributed and relational aesthetics**
Dec 6

Screening: Catfish (2010) Henry Joost/Ariel Schulman 85 min

Playing:

- The Wilderness Downtown
- B.U.T.T.O.N / Johann Sebastian Joust (in class)

Final projects due.
Grading
- Responses: 30%
- Comments on responses: 30%
- Final paper/project: 40%

Reading responses
Students are responsible for making two substantive responses as posts to the class group (one post per three weeks of the class to be uploaded no later than the beginning of the class period for each meeting number that is evenly divisible by three). Each posting is valued at 10% of your grade; postings uploaded late will receive half-credit. Each comment is worth 5% of your grade. For a posting to count, it must engage thoughtfully with the content of the course readings, lectures, interactive projects, screenings, etc.

Final Project
Each student is required to submit a final paper or project on or before the final class meeting.

Participation
The only acceptable excuse for missing class is a documented illness or family emergency. Each unexcused absence after the first will lower your total grade by 5%. Thus, three unexcused absences will result in lowering your final course grade by one full letter grade. Five or more unexcused absences will be grounds for failing the class. An example of an unexcused absence is missing class in order to fulfill a responsibility to another class, project or job. Leaving class early without explicit approval from the instructor or TA is the same as missing the entire class. Having “already seen” the film being screened is not an acceptable reason to leave class early.

Academic Integrity
The School of Cinematic Arts 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, 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 Professor or Department Chair.

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 that the letter is delivered to the Professor as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30am – 5:00pm, Monday - Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.