

CMGT 537 [DRAFT]
The industry, science and culture of video games
USC Annenberg School for Communication

Professor Dmitri Williams

dcwillia@usc.edu

ANN 406

Class hours: 6:00-8:50 Thursdays

Office hours by appointment. Preceding class is easiest, but other times are possible.

ANN 414K

Course Description

Video games are now one of the major sectors of the entertainment industry, having surpassed the film industry in receipts. However, video games are having a cultural impact far beyond their role as an economic commodity. In this class, we will explore all of these dynamics, studying the history of videogames, the present industry landscape, their social and cultural impact, and developments in technology, design, and industry organization. There is a strong emphasis on the industry itself—business models, competition, changes in technology, ect. In-class sessions (and evaluations) stress student participation and involvement.

Texts and Supplies:

Readings will be posted on Blackboard at least a week prior to the assigned date. Also required is “Replay” by Tristan Donovan (available on Amazon new, used or Kindle).

All students are required to subscribe to the daily email feed from <http://www.gamesindustry.biz> and gamasutra.com.

Components of the Course Grade:

- In-class participation: 10%
Please note that informed participation in class will matter more than in a typical course.

- In-class group projects: 20%
There are two group-based projects during the term:
 - 1) Group presentations on gender in gaming (10%)
 - 2) Mock debate on game effects and regulation (10%)

- **Industry Interview: 15%**
Find a full-time industry person who will give you 30-60 minutes of their time. Interview them about a topic of your interest, then write up a summary of the interview in a two-page paper. Be prepared to talk about what you learned in class the next week, and use presentation materials if needed. You may not interview one of our guest speakers.
- **Game company profile: 10%**
Write a two-page profile of a game company. Include its origins, its market, and its prospects. Explain where it lives in the overall industry structure, and where it lies on the vertical chain. What are its strengths and weaknesses? How would you advise the company? Would you invest? You'll be graded based on how well you use course concepts in the profile.
- **Game analysis: 15%**
Play a game in depth. In two pages, explain its genre, its pros and cons and suggest what its rating should be, then note whether your assessment matches the actual rating. Then, review the game as if you were a designer, using concepts from the readings, class, speakers or field visits. Get beyond description. If the game does something well or poorly, explain or hypothesize why that is. Pick one you haven't played.
- **Term project: 30% (25% paper, 5% presentation)**
Your term project will consist of a 15-20 page paper analyzing some aspect of games. This can be corporate, cultural, social scientific, or another area proposed by the student. Tailor it to your own interests, and to a practical real-world project if you like. Papers based on some kind of empirical data—whether statistical or qualitative—always fare better. The term paper is due Dec. 10 by 5 pm to my email inbox. If you want feedback, you need to give me a hard copy in addition to the emailed copy, plus a return addressed and stamped envelope.

Academic Integrity Policy

The School of Communication is committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and ethical support. It endorses and acts on the school policies and procedures detailed in the SCampus section titled: "University Student Conduct Code." See especially Appendix A: "Academic Dishonesty Sanction Guidelines." The policies, procedures, and guidelines will be assiduously upheld. They protect your rights, as well as those of the faculty. It is particularly important that you are aware of and avoid plagiarism, cheating on exams, fabricating data for a project, submitting the same paper to more than one professor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone but yourself. If you have questions about any of these matters, confer with the instructor.

Academic Accommodation based on Disability

Any student requesting academic accommodation 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 the instructor as early in the semester as possible. DSP's phone number is (213) 740-0776.

Stress Management

Students are under a lot of pressure. If you start to feel overwhelmed, it is important that you reach out for help. A good place to start is the USC Student Counseling Services office at 213-740-7711. The service is confidential, and there is no charge.

Sexual Assault Resource Center

The Center for Women & Men and the Sexual Assault Resource Center are one and the same. Student Counseling Services is a separate place that also offers confidential counseling and support groups on a variety of other topics. To schedule an appointment with Student Counseling Services, call (213) 740-7711 between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays or visit the Engemann Student Health Center on the University Park Campus.

Schedule

Aug. 25. Introduction: Overview, taxonomy, early history, genres

Reading:

- “Spacewar” in Levy, S. (1994). *Hackers: Heroes of the computer revolution*. New York: Penguin Books.

Sep 1. Industry History of Video Games

Reading:

- Donovan, Ch. 1-8.

Sep. 8. Industry Economics: I/O model, vertical integration, state of the industry, creative destruction, convergence, distribution models,

Reading:

- Kline et al, “Digital Play” Ch. 8, p. 169-192
- Williams, D. (2002). Structure and competition in the U.S. home video game industry. *The International Journal on Media Management*, 4(1), 41-54.

Optional:

- DFC Industry Overview

Sep. 15.

Media Constructions/Social history of gaming, Left vs. Right

Reading:

- Glassner, B. (1999). *The culture of fear: Why Americans are afraid of the wrong things*. New York: Basic Books. p. 58-74.
- Herz, J. C. (1997). *Joystick nation*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. Ch. 4, p. 43-59.
- Williams, D. (2006). A (brief) social history of gaming. In P. Vorderer & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Video Games: Motivations and Consequences of Use*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- “The Coming of the Masses.” Gasset, J. O. y. (1994). *The revolt of the masses*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Excerpt: Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M. (1979). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Game company analysis

Sep. 22. Mainstream gaming

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Play 3 [Studio] games.

Reading:

- Donovan, Ch. 26 (Mainstream gaming)
- DFC Brief, Candy Crush Saga

Sep. 29. Modern Games, eSports, VR/AR

Reading:

- Donovan, Ch. 22 (Beatmania)

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Game review

ASSIGNMENT DUE: 1 paragraph term paper proposals

Esports: <https://newzoo.com/insights/markets/esports/>

Possible guests/panelists on esports: Jeremy Monroe, Jason Yeh, Clinton Foy

Oct. 6. PR and Marketing

Reading:

- Account of an industry milestone:
- <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-kiss-that-changed-video-games>
- News report on a hot topic from E3 this year:
- <https://games.yahoo.com/blogs/plugged-in/ubisoft-facing-backlash-over-lack-of-female-assassins-in-assassin-s-creed--unity-202301284.html>
- Editorial on the responsibility of game developers in light of current events:
- <http://www.polygon.com/2014/8/19/6029085/battlefield-hardline-police>

CONFIRMED GUEST (Second half of class) Mark Van Lommel (PMK•BNC)

Themes:

* How the demographics of "gamers" impacts game design, PR and marketing

* The role of PR in each of these situations (EA, Nintendo, Ubisoft)

* What responsibility, if any, do publishers have in crafting game content?

Oct. 13. Term paper workshop (Revised topic paragraphs accepted.)

Analytics, data and user research, Social networks and their impact/virality

- DFC Brief: Core Gamer
- DFC Brief: AAA Titles

Reading:

INVITED Raph Koster, second half of class

Oct. 20. Class at EA

Social Science of Games: Motivations, Player Types, Presence, Effects

Reading:

- Sherry, J., Greenberg, B., Lucas, S., & Lachlan, K. (2006). Video game uses and gratifications as predictors of use and game preference. In P. Vorderer & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Playing computer games: Motives, responses and consequences*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132117/what_gamers_want_silver_gamers.php?print=1
- Barlett, C., Anderson, C., Swing, E. (2008). Video game effects: Confirmed, Suspected, and Speculative. *Simulation & Gaming*, 20.

- Ferguson, C. (2007) The good, the bad and the ugly: A meta-analytic review of positive and negative effects of violent video games. *Psychiatric Quarterly*. 78, 309-316.

PENDING FIELD TRIP: EA Los Angeles, 5510 Lincoln Blvd, Playa Vista, CA 90094.

SPEAKER: Dom McAree (Global Media Solutions group). Topic: Native Brand Advertising in EA titles.

Oct. 27

Policy, ratings, regulation. Also, term paper discussion.

Reading:

- Donovan Ch. 18 (Mortal Kombat)
- Policy packet on Blackboard: Amicus brief, links to Illinois & US Senate materials, Yee's statement

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Class debate

Nov. 3. Identity, race and community

Reading

- Donovan, Ch. 21 (Girl Gaming)
- Beyond Barbie chapters
- Dibbell, J. (2003, January). The 79th richest nation on Earth doesn't exist. *WIRED*, 12, 106-113.
- Dibbell, J., A Rape in Cyberspace.

Optional:

- Williams, Martins, Consalvo and Ivory, "The virtual census."
- Podcast at <http://itc.conversationsnetwork.org/shows/detail3356.html>
- <http://thenewinquiry.com/features/tni-syllabus-gaming-and-feminism/>

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Group presentations

Nov. 10. Online gaming, Game postmortem.

Reading:

- "Murder Incorporated" handout
- Chiarella, T. (2004). The lost boys. *Esquire*.
- The social side of gaming: How playing online computer games creates online and offline social support. Sabine Trepte, Leonard Reinecke, Keno Juechems. *Computers in Human Behavior* 28 (2012) 832-839

ASSIGNMENT DUE:

1. Play *Mass Effect 2*
2. Play *World of Warcraft* and send me a screenshot of your character at level 5 or higher.

CONFIRMED GUEST, second half of class: Jesse Houston, founder Phoenix Labs (formerly Riot, BioWare). *Mass Effect 2* post mortem.

Nov. 17. Active players.

Spillover material: Order of Light (MTV True Life segment), Avatars Offline

Reading:

- Donovan, Ch. 25 (Little Computer People)

ASSIGNMENT DUE:

1. Play *Minecraft*. Send me a screenshot of your character, with a sword, underground.
2. Game industry interviews due. Be prepared to share your findings with the class.

Tentative Guest: Dennis Wixon on user research

Nov. 24 – No class (Thanksgiving)

Dec. 1 (Long class)

Final Presentations I

Dec. 10

Final papers due by 5pm to my email. (Also paper copies + SASE if you want feedback)

Leftover topics

VR/AR

User Research

GDC VAULT: Can use to fill, find topics, and for an assignment

A) User-created content, modding, cheats, machinima

B) ARGs

http://www.ted.com/talks/jesse_schell_when_games_invade_real_life

http://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world

C) Older and female players

D) Location-based games

E) Games for Education and “Serious Games,” Term Project Workshop

F) Building games in the academic and military contexts: Funding, creativity

G) Game making in the industry context

- Optional: Sellers, M. (2006). Designing the experience of interactive play. In P. Vorderer & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Video Games: Motivations and Consequences of Use*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.

