

Units: 4 | Fall 2015—Tuesday—4-6:50PM | SCI 209

Instructor: Jane Pinckard | Office: SCI 201H

Office Hours: Tuesday, 3-4PM and by appointment

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Course Description

Videogames are complex systems of representation, rich with meaning; they are also systems which create experiences. The critical vocabulary for interpreting, criticizing, and analyzing them is still being developed. The purpose of this course is to cultivate a more sophisticated critical and philosophical vocabulary that connects games to other literary and media studies in the context of a body of scholarship.

We will engage with the themes in two primary ways: by reading, analyzing, and talking about the texts (both essays and games) and by practicing writing theory rigorously in both a traditionally academic style and a more creative, journalistic mode.

This is a collaborative and student-directed class with an emphasis on independent readings, research, and sharing knowledge. Therefore, the syllabus is an evolving document driven by class interests and goals. The first half of the class will cover topics I have chosen; in the second half of the class, you will direct the topics, assign readings and playings, and lead class discussions. These topics will be chosen and assigned in the second and third weeks of the class.

Learning Objectives

You will gain a deeper grounding in classical critical theory and learn how to read and analyze texts, both philosophical work as well as games. You'll practice applying theory rigorously to games in new ways, in both formal and informal ways, through presentations, written assignments, and class discussion.

This course is run as a seminar in which participation is integral. You will engage most deeply with the ideas and themes covered in the class if you talk about the readings and respond to presentations in class. I may at times call on you to respond, so please come prepared to join the conversation.

Remember that it is better to read fewer pages thoroughly and really understand them than to skim over a vast amount of material.

In the second week of class, you will choose a specific game, franchise, or game creator to focus your studies on. (This selection can be modified over time, but I urge you to choose a game or series that offers rich analytical possibilities.) Throughout the class, in your individual assignments, you will be encouraged to apply the concepts of each field we study to the game or body of work you've chosen.

In the second and third weeks of class, we will decide as a group which topics to cover. You will choose a theme or topic that you find most interesting and lead the class discussion on it. You will assign texts, assemble a presentation, and relate the material to the game or game creator you have chosen to study. Plan a 20-minute presentation, texts that will take 2-3 hours to study, and be prepared to lead a 10-minute discussion or in-class exercise.

Prerequisite(s): none

Recommended Preparation: CTIN 190, CTIN 488.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

- Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis, 2009.
- Clara Fernandez-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*. Routledge. New York, 2015.

The above are available through Amazon, BarnesandNoble.com, and other book sellers.

In addition, other texts will be assigned. These will include linked online readings, in-class handouts, games, videos, and other forms of media. Some games may require purchase.

The readings are to be done in the week they are assigned. In other words, Week One's reading (Chandler and Fernandez-Vara) will be discussed in Week Two.

Recommended Resources:

- Digital Games Research Association: <http://www.digra.org/>
- Critical Distance: <http://www.critical-distance.com/>
- Game Studies: <http://gamestudies.org/1402>
- Journal of Game Criticism: <http://gamescriticism.org/>
- American Journal of Play: <http://www.journalofplay.org/>
- The recommended reading list suggested for CTIN 190 is a great resource: <http://web-app.usc.edu/soc/syllabus/20153/18353.pdf>
- Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play*. MIT Press. Cambridge, 2009.
- Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, editors., *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. MIT Press. Cambridge, 2004.
- Ibid., *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Playable Media*. MIT Press. Cambridge, 2007.
- Ibid., *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*. MIT Press. Cambridge, 2009.
- Noah Wardrip-Fruin. *Expressive Processing*. MIT Press. Cambridge, 2009.
- McKenzie Wark. *Gamer Theory*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, 2007
- Alex Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 2006.
- Ian Bogost. *How to Do Things with Videogames*. 2010.
- Janet Murray. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.
- Brenda Laurel. *Computers as Theater*.

We will make use of a Google Groups email list to share writings, playings, and resources. All students should have an email account that can post to and receive email from Google Groups.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

You will explore ideas through writing, presentations, and in-class discussion. More details on each specific assignment will be given as the course progresses.

N.B. There is an assignment due on the first day: a self-introduction presentation. More details will be emailed to students before class begins. This will count towards your overall participation grade but will not be graded as an individual assignment. It is meant as a warm-up exercise.

Final Paper:

There is a 10-12 page paper representing your original research due in the class, on a topic you've discussed with me and the class. This will be assessed on: originality of insights, depth of your research, effective use and relevance of source material, and clarity of expression.

Abstract and Bibliography:

A month before the final paper is due, you will turn in a proposed abstract summarizing your argument and a preliminary bibliography. This is be assessed for quality and relevance of your sources and the clarity and originality of your proposal.

Presentations: You will do at least one presentation based around a topic chosen in the third week of class. This will include researching and assigning readings for the class and a 20-minute presentation that covers the material and relates it to the game or body of work you've chosen to study. These will be assessed on quality (depth and relevance) of original research, clarity of presentation, and your ability to apply abstract concept to a specific piece of media.

In addition to this longer presentation, we will do shorter, 5-7 minute presentations on various topics during the course. These will be assessed primarily for clarity and insight presented, and will be assigned the week before they are due.

Game analyses: You will submit two written game analyses that practice applying concepts we've studied in class to specific games you have chosen to explore. These will be assessed for demonstrating understanding of basic critical theory practices, sophistication of analysis, and clarity of expression.

In-class exercises:

During class time, we will often break into groups to work on a text or an exercise designed to help us deepen our understanding of a core theme. These will be assessed for collaboration, teamwork, and ability to express ideas clearly.

Reading responses:

Each week, you will write a short response to a reading (including an assigned game). The response may be an academic one, or a creative one. The response should be no more than 300 words. A creative response needs to be proposed in advance and discussed with me. It may incorporate a project you are working on for another class. You may submit no more than two creative responses in the semester. These will be assessed on timeliness, clarity of expression, comprehension of material, and originality of response.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	Grading	Due
Research paper	25%	12.1 or 12.8*
Abstract, Bibliography, Outline	10%	11.3
Presentations	20%	Variable
In-class exercises	10%	Variable

Game analysis 1	5%	9.8
Game analysis 2	10%	9.29
Reading Responses**	10%	Variable
Participation***	10%	N/A

*Papers received before midnight on 12.1 will be returned with comments and feedback. Papers submitted after the deadline will receive simply a grade with no written comments. No papers will be accepted after midnight, 12.8.

**Reading Responses are due by 4pm on the Monday before class.

**Participation includes attendance, punctuality, and engagement in class discussions.

Assignment Submission Policy

All assignments are due by class time unless otherwise specified.

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 instructor *before the assignment due date* and present verifiable evidence in order for a deadline extension to be granted. Students who wish to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor or student assistant before final grades are due.

For assignments turned in after the assignment deadline without prior permission from the instructor, a penalty will be imposed equal to 10% of the total available points for the assignment, for each day or part of a day that the assignment is late, up to a maximum of seven days.

Attendance Policy:

Punctual attendance at all classes is mandatory. Students arriving more than five minutes late to three classes, more than ten minutes late to a single class, or leaving early, will be marked as having an unexcused absence from class, unless prior permission has been obtained from the instructor. The following guidelines are from the Interactive Media & Games Division handbook regarding absences and grading and apply to all students.

Guidelines for absences affecting grading

- Two unexcused absences: lowers grade one full grade point (for example, from A to B)
- Three unexcused absences: lowers grade two full grade points
- Four or more unexcused absences: request to withdraw from course (instructor's discretion)

Excused absences are:

- Illness (with a doctor's verification)
- Family or personal emergency (with verification)

Social media, including text messaging and internet messaging, are excluded from class unless explicitly permitted by the instructor. A 0.5% grade reduction will result from each occurrence of a student being found using them.

Diversity

In making games and interactive media in a professional and ethical way, it is important that you consider diversity. When looking at your projects, you should consider who is depicted and how this work will impact others. What kinds of individuals and communities are represented in your work? What point of view does your work express? This class may assist you in learning how to make work that includes diverse viewpoints, and may discuss racial, religious, gender and sexual orientation issues in the context of games and interactive media.

Additional Policies

Add any additional policies that students should be aware of: late assignments, missed classes, attendance expectations, use of technology in the classroom, etc.

Course Schedule

Week one. 8.25: Introduction to Critical Theory and Game Analysis		
topics and agenda	reading	assignments due
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-intro presentations (assigned before class): I, the Player. 2. Overview of the course. Explanation of assignments and structure. Reviewing the syllabus. 3. Lecture: introduction to Critical Theory. What is criticism? What is theory? How do games mean? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fernandez-Vara, Ch. 1 and 2 (1 hour) ● Watch: Introduction to Saussure and Structural Linguistics. ● Chandler, Introduction to Semiotics. (2 hours) ● Reflection: Skim over the chapter headings in the Barry text. Consider which topics interest you and glance over those chapters. Think about how these topics could relate to the game(s) you want to study. (1 hour) ● Take notes for Game Analysis 1 (1 hour) ● Begin reading Barthes, The Language of Fashion, Ch. 2 (1 hour) 	<p>Self-intro presentations</p>
Week two. 9.1: Structures and Signs: the Building Blocks of Critical Theory		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lecture: Semiotics and Signs. The Triadic model. How do signs create meaning in systems of interaction? 2. In-class reading: Barthes, The Language of Fashion, pp. 8-14 3. Discussion and in-class exercise: Evolution of a sign or symbol in a game. 4. Themes and topics brainstorm: assignments for presentations. Any remaining self-intro presentations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Barry, Ch. 1 and 2 (1.5 hours) ● Play: The Cat and the Coup. (15-20 minutes) ● Read: Derrida, Structure, Sign, and Play. (1 hour) ● Writing: Game Analysis 1 (<1000 words, 3 hours) 	<p>Summary of in-class exercise Reading responses</p>
Week three. 9.8. Post-Structuralism, Deconstruction, and Postmodernism.		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Class discussion: Game Analysis. Evaluation of process. How do we apply these practices to talking about <i>the Cat and the Coup</i>? 1. Lecture: Post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism. 2. In-class reading exercise: Derrida, Structure, Sign, and Play. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Said, Orientalism: Introduction: (2.5 hours) ● Geyser and Tshabalala, Return to Darkness. (1.5 hours) ● Watch: Resident Evil 5 Trailer. ● Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels, Preamble and Section 1: Bourgeois and Proletarians. (3 hours) 	<p>Game Analysis 1 Summary of in-class reading exercise.</p>
Week four. 9.15. Marx, Capitalism, and Post-Colonialism: the Mechanics of Power and Control		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lecture: Why is Marxism Still a Thing? 2. Spotlight on mechanics: In-class exercise: structural analysis of a game mechanic/deconstruction of a game mechanic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Play your chosen game. Think about how it reflects on the themes we've discussed in class so far. Power, control, structure, signs, mythology and meaning. Take notes. Work 	<p>Summary of in-class reading exercise. Reading responses.</p>

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion: Orientalism, representations of the “other”. In-class reading and analysis: Roland Barthes, Mythologies (excerpt.) 	<p>on an outline of your Game Analysis 2. (2 hours)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read: Ayn Rand: Excerpt from Atlas Shrugged, “This is John Galt Speaking.” pp. 1-12 and pp. 54-58 (start from “Such was the service we had given you...” (1.5 hour) (Read more if you’re able) Watch: Let’s Play Bioshock (1 hour) OR play about an hour of the game if you have access to it. Read: Bioshock as a critique of Objectivism (1 hour) 	
Week five. 9.22. Objectivism, Critique, and How Games Engage Ideas		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion: How can games engage with philosophy and theory? Is Bioshock successful? Discussion: What makes a good critique? A good game analysis? Discussion and mini-presentations: sharing notes on games and analysis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read: Fernandez-Vara Ch. 3 (30 minutes). Read: Shaw, Putting the Gay in Games (1 hour). Read: Judith Butler, Performative Acts (1 hour). Write: Game Analysis 2. (<1200 words) (3 hours). <p>Recommended: Fullerton, Morie, and Pearce: A Game of One’s Own: Towards a New Gendered Poetics of Digital Space.</p>	Notes on your next Game Analysis. Reading responses.
Week six. 9.29. Gender, Feminism, and Queer Theory.		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> In-class game analysis: Play and discuss Dys4ria. In-class reading exercise: Judith Butler: Mini-presentations on in-class readings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Huizinga: Play-concept as Expressed in Language pp 28-45 and Play and Poetry pp. 119-135. (1.5 hours) Caillois, The Definition of Play. (1.5 hours) Brian Sutton-Smith The Ambiguity of Play. (1 hour) <p>Recommended: Helpful for context on Caillois: Henricks, Caillois’s Man, Play, Games: An Appreciation and Evaluation.</p>	Game Analysis 2 Summary and notes of in-class exercises.
Week seven. 10.6. Play		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion: Play In-class reading: Borges, On Exactitude in Science. and Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group 1: Research your topic, select readings (about 2 hours of material, including playing time) Read: Fernandez-Vara Ch. 4, 5 (1.5 hours) Read: Frasca, Ludology Meets Narratology (30 minutes) Review readings relevant to your topic. 	Summary of in-class exercises. Reading responses.
Week eight. 10.13. Game Studies 101		
<p>Lecture: Approaches to Game Studies: Greatest Hits. Discussion: setting games apart or putting them in context?</p>	TBD.	Group 1: Assign texts for student presentation.

Week nine. 10.20. TBD		
		Group 1: Presentation 1 Group 2: Assign texts.
Week ten. 10.27 TBD		
		Group 2: Presentation 2 Group 3: Assign texts.
Week eleven. TBD 11.03		
		Group 3: Presentation 3 Group 4: Assign texts. Abstract and Bibliography
Week twelve. TBD 11.10		
		Group 4: Presentation 4 Group 5: Assign texts.
Week thirteen. TBD 11.17		
		Group 5: Presentation 5 Group 6: Assign texts.
Week fourteen. TBD 11.24		
		Group 6: Presentation 6
Week fifteen. 12.1. Where to next? Post-mortem and wrap party.		
		Final papers due by midnight 12.1 for full comments; by 12.8 for a grade with no comments.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sa-nctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information

in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Citation Guidelines

All projects will need to include academically appropriate citations in the form of a Works Cited section, which covers all sources, in order to receive a passing grade. The Works Cited is either included in the project or as a separate document, as appropriate to your project. The style we use is APA 5th edition and you may refer to these guidelines: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

Support Systems

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* http://sait.usc.edu/academicssupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

Disruptive Student Behavior:

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

Syllabus Updates:

This syllabus is liable to change up to the beginning of class and possibly over the semester. Please check the posted syllabus regularly, and note all changes that are shared by the instructor in class.