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

Professor Dmitri Williams
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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.

- 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 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-sanctions/. 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*

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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.

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/academicsupport/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.

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.

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Schedule

Aug. 27. Introduction: Overview, taxonomy, early history, genres

Reading:

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

Sep 3. Industry History of Video Games

Reading:

- Donovan, Ch. 1-8.

Sep. 10. 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. 17.

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. 24. Field Trip, mainstream gaming

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Play 3 [Studio] games.

Reading:

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

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Oct. 1. Modern Games
Reading:

- Donovan, Ch. 22 (Beatmania)

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Game review

CONFIRMED GUEST, 6pm: Robin Kaminsky, former SVP of Activision. On free to play studios and marketing vs. development. (90 minutes)

Oct. 8.
Analytics, data and user research, Social networks and their impact/virality

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

Reading:

PENDING Raph Koster, second half of class

Note: Indiecade is Oct. 9-12 (http://www.indiecade.com/2014/)

Oct. 15. PR and Marketing
Reading:

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- 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-assins-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
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ASSIGNMENT DUE: 1 paragraph term paper proposals

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

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

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. 22. No class, but still read the material
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.

Oct. 29
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. 5. 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. 12. Online gaming, Game postmortem. Class will be held via GoToMeeting.
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.

PENDING GUEST: Jesse Houston, founder Phoenix Labs (formerly Riot, BioWare). *Mass Effect 2* post mortem.

Nov. 19. Active players. Term paper workshop (Revised topic paragraphs accepted.)
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.

Nov. 26 – No class (Thanksgiving)

Dec. 3 (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
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.