



## COMM 350: Video Games: Content, Industry and Policy (4 Units)

**Spring 2020**

**Mondays and Wednesday – 2-3:20 pm**

**Section:** 20551R

**Location:** ANN 406

**Instructor:** Dmitri Williams

**Office:** ANN 414k

**Office Hours:** 3:30-5, Mondays, by  
appointment.

**Contact Info:** [dcwillia@usc.edu](mailto:dcwillia@usc.edu)

### I. Course Description

From the Catalog: Introduction to the medium; history of video games; video games as aesthetic products, cultural products, economic outputs; policy issues, effects, and sites of community.

Video games have become the largest sector of the entertainment industry, with a cultural impact far beyond their role as an economic commodity. In this class, we will explore the history of video games, the present industry landscape, their communities, and developments in technology, design, and industry organization. There is a strong emphasis on the industry itself—business models, competition, changes in technology, etc. The class emphasizes student participation and involvement.

### II. Student Learning Outcomes

Students taking the course gain a working knowledge of the industry, its challenges and opportunities, leading to becoming a savvy consumer or citizen, or prepared to find a job within it.

### Prerequisite(s), Co-Requisite(s), Concurrent Enrollment, Recommended Preparation:

None. Many students have no prior interest or background in gaming as a personal interest.

### III. Course Notes

Students will be expected to attend one or more trips out into Los Angeles to visit game studios.

All students are required to sign up for two email services: Daily email feeds from [www.gamesindustry.biz](http://www.gamesindustry.biz) and [www.gamasutra.com](http://www.gamasutra.com).

Optional other services you might want to add:

- 1) USC listserv for games classes and events, here <https://games.usc.edu/>.
- 2) The [Kliules weekly report](#).
- 3) [SuperData monthly report](#).
- 4) [Mobile Dev Memo](#) for those focused on mobile gaming
- 5) [Elite Game Devs](#) for those considering running a studio some day

- 6) The International Game Developers Association is a hub of info and community for those interested in the industry. They run a [periodic email blast](#) with news and events.

#### IV. Description and Assessment of Assignments

- In-class group projects  
There are two group-based projects during the term:
  - 1) Group presentations on gender in gaming (5%)
  - 2) Mock debate on game effects and regulation (5%)
- Credit/NC short assignments: 10%  
You'll be asked to play games and show evidence that you reached a certain point, as well as complete a self-assessment scale. These are credit/no credit tasks. Your friends and family will not take these assignments seriously, but be assured your instructor does.
- Midterm, consisting of short, medium and essay questions: 25%
- Industry Interview: 10%  
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.
- Term project: 30%  
Your term project will consist of a paper with 10-12 pages of text, not including a cover page, bibliography or appendices. You will analyze 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 must be based on some kind of empirical data—whether statistical or qualitative. The term paper is due May 7 by 5 pm to my email inbox (paper by May 3 at 5pm get +3%). If you want feedback, you need to send the email copy, plus also tell me that you're submitting a paper copy under my office door, accompanied by a self addressed envelope with stamps.
- In-class participation: 15%  
*Please note that informed participation in class will matter more than in a typical course.* Look, I even italicized it. At some point in the term you'll remember this or return here and realize, hey, he really meant this.

#### V. Grading

##### a. Breakdown of Grade

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Gender presentation (group project)	5	5
Debate performance	5	5
Credit/No-credit assignments	10	10

Industry interview	10	10
Midterm	25	25
Final Paper	30	30
Participation	15	15
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100%</b>

### b. Grading Scale

95% to 100%: A	80% to 83%: B-	67% to 69%: D+
90% to 94%: A-	77% to 79%: C+	64% to 66%: D
87% to 89%: B+	74% to 76%: C	60% to 63%: D-
84% to 86%: B	70% to 73%: C-	0% to 59%: F

### c. Grading Standards

Only the highest-quality work earns an A. Average work can expect Bs and Cs, with significant underperforming resulting in Ds and Fs. High quality includes critical thinking rather than basic description and always includes professional writing.

### d. Grading Timeline

Assignments are typically graded and returned within 1-2 weeks.

## VI. Assignment Rubrics

**Instructor:** Include assignment rubrics to be used, if any.

## VII. Assignment Submission Policy

A. All assignments are due on the dates specified. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with the instructor, usually with some kind of documentation, grades are reduced by 10% per day late, starting immediately at the time and date due.

B. Assignments are generally submitted via paper at the start of class.

## VIII. Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Readings and slides are posted on Blackboard. Also required is “Replay” by Tristan Donovan (available on Amazon new, used or Kindle and through the regular USC course book process).

## IX. Laptop Policy

All undergraduate and graduate Annenberg majors and minors are required to have a PC or Apple laptop that can be used in Annenberg classes. Please refer to the **Annenberg Digital Lounge** for more information. To connect to USC’s Secure Wireless network, please visit USC’s **Information Technology Services** website.

## X. Add/Drop Dates for Session 001 (15 weeks: 1/13/20 – 5/1/20)

**Friday, January 31:** Last day to register and add classes for Session 001

**Friday, January 31:** Last day to drop a class without a mark of “W,” except for Monday-only classes, and receive a refund for Session 001

**Tuesday, February 4:** Last day to drop a Monday-only class without a mark of “W” and receive a refund for Session 001

**Friday, February 28:** Last day to drop a course without a mark of “W” on the transcript for Session 001. [Please drop any course by the end of week three (or the 20 percent mark of the session) to avoid tuition charges.]

**Friday, February 28:** Last day to change pass/no pass to letter grade for Session 001. [All major and minor courses must be taken for a letter grade.]

**Friday, April 3:** Last day to drop a class with a mark of “W” for Session 001

## XI. Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

*Important note to students: Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change - and probably will change - based on the progress of the class, news events, and/or guest speaker availability.*

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings and Homework	Deliverable/Due Dates
Week 1 1/13	Introduction: Overview, taxonomy, early history, genres		
1/15	History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>“Spacewar!” in Levy, S. (1994). <i>Hackers: Heroes of the computer revolution</i>. New York: Penguin Books</li></ul>	
Week 2 1/20	No class, MLK Day		
1/22	History/Industry Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Williams, D. (2002). Structure and competition in the U.S. home video game industry. <i>The International Journal on Media Management</i>, 4(1), 41-54.</li></ul>	
Week 3 1/27	I/O model, vertical integration, state of the industry,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Shokrizade (2015). The Top F2P Monetization Tricks (blog post)</li></ul>	Play <i>Minecraft</i> . Send me a screenshot of your character, with a sword, underground.
1/29	Creative destruction, convergence, distribution models, mobile games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="#">F2P trend article on Battle Pass</a> (quasi-subscription model)</li><li><a href="#">Optional article on store portals</a>.</li></ul>	
Week 4 2/3	User research Guest: Dennis Wixon	None	
2/5	Analytics, data and user research, performance marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Mapping the UA stack and Modeling video ad effectiveness on mobile, Seufert, E. (2016) (Mobiledevmemo post)</li></ul>	Play <i>World of Tanks</i> through boot camp and at least 5 battles after. Send me a screenshot

			of your Player Record screen.
Week 5 2/10	AR/VR/XR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Koster, R. (2016) AR is an MMO</li> </ul> Optional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My <a href="#">Op-Ed in the LA Times</a>.</li> <li>• SuperData 2019 AR report</li> </ul>	Optional offsite to AR company 1RIC (evening)
2/12	Localization Guest: Sean Bender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TBD</li> </ul>	
Week 6 2/17	<b>No class, President's Day</b>		
2/19	Cloud gaming, social networks and their impact/virality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ball, M. (2019). <a href="#">The Mirage of Cloud Gaming</a></li> </ul>	
Week 7 2/24	In-game advertising, Guest: Dominique MacAree (EA)  Identity	<p>You will be assigned to read and present on one of these:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Donovan, Ch. 21 (Girl Gaming, but skip the Playstation material)</li> <li>• Beyond Barbie chapters (2)</li> <li>• Lynch et al (2016). Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years</li> </ul> <p><i>Optional:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Williams, Martins, Consalvo and Ivory, "The virtual census."</li> </ul>	
2/26	Identity	None	Group presentations on gender
Week 8 3/2	Online gaming and community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dibbell, J., A Rape in CyberSpace.</li> </ul> Optional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chiarella, T. (2004). The lost boys. <i>Esquire</i>.</li> </ul>	Play <i>World of Warcraft</i> and send me a screenshot of your character at level 5 or higher, with a classmate also in the picture.
3/4	Online cont.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Murder Incorporated" handout</li> </ul> Optional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Escape to Another World. Avent, R. (2017). <i>1843 Magazine</i>.</li> </ul>	
Week 9 3/9	Media constructions and social history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Williams, D. (2006). A (brief) social history of gaming. In P. Vorderer &amp; J. Bryant (Eds.), <i>Video Games: Motivations and Consequences of Use</i>. Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.</li> </ul>	
3/11	Term paper workshop		Come with a one-paragraph term paper

			ideas and a rough hypothesis ready for discussion.
Spring Break Dates: 3/16-3/20	<b>No Class</b>		
Week 10 3/23	Indie studios, Guest: Erin Reynolds, Flying Mollusk Studios	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul>	Screenshot from Nevermind. Get a product key <a href="#">here</a> .
3/25	Midterm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul>	
Week 11 3/30	Social science of games: motivations, player types, presence, effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prescott et al (2018). Meta-analysis of the relationship between violent video game play and physical aggression over time. <i>PNAS</i>.</li> </ul> <p>Optional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ferguson, C. blog post, 2018 in Psychology Today</li> <li>• Sherry, J., Greenberg, B., Lucas, S., &amp; Lachlan, K. (2006). Video game uses and gratifications as predictors of use and game preference. In P. Vorderer &amp; J. Bryant (Eds.), <i>Playing computer games: Motives, responses and consequences</i>. Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.</li> </ul>	Player profile at <a href="http://survey.ihobo.com/BrainHex/">http://survey.ihobo.com/BrainHex/</a> (email me a screenshot)
4/1	Policy, ratings, regulation, and the ESRB  Maybe some term paper discussion/workshopping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Limits for minors in Asian countries</a> (NYTimes).</li> </ul>	
Week 12 4/6	Policy Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy packet on Blackboard: Amicus brief, links to Illinois &amp; US Senate materials, Yee's statement. Note: you don't need to read all of this, but you should know pieces that relate to your role.</li> </ul> <p>Optional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Freedom of Speech and loot boxes</a></li> </ul>	Debate prep: Know your role
4/8	Term paper workshopping	None	Play a match of LoL (send a screenshot of the end results)

Week 13 4/13	Tentative off-site visit to Riot Entertainment's eSports arena 5:15 park 5:30pm: Riot leaders speak 6:15pm: Tour 7pm: Dinner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch the 20-minute eSports episode of the Netflix show "Explained".</li> </ul> Optional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NewZoo eSports Report</li> <li>• <a href="#">Shady Numbers and Bad Business: Inside the eSports bubble</a></li> </ul>	Watch one full LoL eSports match.
4/15	eSports debrief		
Week 14 4/20	Game design, Tentative guest speakers, Trish Williams and Joe Unger of Pigeon Hole Productions	None	Industry interview due
4/22	Mobile gaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• App Annie Mobile report</li> </ul>	
Week 15 4/27	[Course evals]  Overflow topics (Glassner/Herz)	None	
4/29	Final boss battle	None	
USC STUDY DAYS	5/2-5/5		
May 7	The term paper is due May 7 by 5 pm to my email inbox. Submit by May 3 at 5pm get +3% to your paper's grade.		

## **XII. Policies and Procedures**

### **Additional Policies**

Attendance is a key part of your participation grade. If you're going to miss a class, a courtesy notice is helpful, but not required. If you aren't there, you aren't participating, and your grade will naturally go lower as a result. If you need to miss a timed class session, you need documentation explaining (doctor's note, etc.). No documentation means a zero on anything that is part of that day.

### **Communication**

I generally reply to emails within 24 hours, except on weekends.

## **Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

### **a. Academic Conduct**

#### *Plagiarism*

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 Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating

University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

## **b. Support Systems**

*Counseling and Mental Health* - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call  
[studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling)

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call  
[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP)* - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call  
[studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault)

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)*- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298  
[equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://titleix.usc.edu)

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected characteristics*: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment* - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298  
[usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report](http://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report)

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity |Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs* - (213) 740-0776  
[dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710*

[uscsa.usc.edu](http://uscsa.usc.edu)

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101*

[diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

*USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)

Non-emergency assistance or information.

*Annenberg Student Success Fund*

<https://annenberg.usc.edu/current-students/resources/additional-funding-resources>

The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.

*Breaking Bread Program [undergraduate students only]*

<https://undergrad.usc.edu/faculty/bread/>

The Breaking Bread Program is designed to provide individual undergraduate students with an opportunity to meet and have scholarly discussions with faculty members outside of the normal classroom setting. Through this program, students and faculty enjoy good company and great conversation by literally “breaking bread” over a meal together and USC will pick up the tab! Your meal event can take place anywhere outside of the normal classroom setting. Your venue can be a restaurant or eatery on or off-campus.

### **XIII. About Your Instructor**

You can learn more about me from a handy Google search, though you'll have to learn to spell my first name. Alternatively, visit my personal website at the creatively titled

[www.dmitriwilliams.com](http://www.dmitriwilliams.com) or [www.keepcalmandcarryons.net](http://www.keepcalmandcarryons.net)