PROFESSOR TREAANDREA M. RUSSWORM, PHD

SPRING 2023   **USC GAMES**

DYSTOPIAS

Course Number: CTIN 464; ROOM: CI 206

Course Meeting Times: Tuesdays 5 - 6:50pm

Office Hours: Mondays 4:15pm—6:00pm and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

In this class, we will study video games, cultural theory, and other media as we ask questions about the persistence of dystopian narratives in print and visual culture. Questions we will address include: Are we living in a dystopia? Why are there so many dystopian games—zombie games, apocalyptic games, post-apocalyptic games? What makes "dark," "moody," and outright apocalyptic narratives like the *The Walking Dead*, *Half-Life, Fallout*, and *Mass Effect* franchises so popular in this current historical moment? What can constantly playing dystopian games teach us about our social and political realities—like living with and navigating the 2020 (and beyond) Covid-19 global pandemic? Is there any harm or danger in the production trends of popular dystopian media? Each week we will compare different types of games (including small games, indie games, RPGs, first-person shooters, action games) to popular dystopian films like *The Matrix* and *Contagion* in order to make arguments about the types of dystopian warnings, anxieties, fears, and dreams that have captured our popular imaginations. For graded assignments students will write short papers, stream gameplay, and participate in a team-based creative utopian reimagining of a dystopian game's story concept and worldbuilding.

COURSE OBJECTIVES
- Come to a shared (if contested) working knowledge of the definition of "dystopian"
- Explore and understand a variety of theoretical and critical perspectives on culture and digital media
- Learn different ways to critically study and research digital games, comics, and other media
- Design and produce creative digital projects
- Experiment with team-based learning models, strategies, and collaborative exercises

COURSE BLACKBOARD SITE
You will need to visit the course website often to download readings, update your team projects, take polls or quizzes, and to view any revisions or updates to the reading schedule. If you are ever uncertain about which pages or which article to read for a particular class, please make sure you check the revised syllabus /schedule on Blackboard. The syllabus on Blackboard is our living document and most reliable source of information. All readings and any revisions to the schedule will be posted there.

COURSE MATERIALS

FILMS:
The Matrix (1999)
Contagion (2011)
Black Panther (2018)

GAMES: TBA
You will write about many games and at least one in depth this semester. Ideally, you will play this game in its entirety. **A note on purchasing games: I will try to make all of the content available for this class in

the form of PDFs online. I will also try to make games available in the lab but you may have to incur some modest costs in order to secure the game your team will play and analyze.

Some of the games we have played in previous years include:

Grand Theft Auto IV and *V*	*The Last of Us*	*Mass Effect* series
Left for Dead	*The Walking Dead*	*Portal 2*
Afro Samurai	*Undertale*	*Half-Life*
BioShock	*Fallout 3*	*Fallout 4*
Infamous	*Day Z*	*Deus Ex*
Dying Light	*Braid*	*Remember Me*
Tales from the Borderlands		

Sample Game Selections for Team Games

> *Plague Inc.*
> *State of Mind*
> *The Walking Dead: Season 4*
> *Tacoma*
> *Booth: A Dystopian Adventure*
> *Far Cry 5* or *New Dawn*
> *Death Stranding*
> *The Division 1 or 2*

**For the team games, we will have a game "draft" and vote. Your team's re-design project will be based on this selected game. Each week (and for quizzes) you will be asked to apply your team's game to the readings for that week so it is important that students play their selected game throughout the semester.

READINGS

Each week there are articles and book chapters to read. You are required to have access to the required readings during each class. Your class participation grade is informed by your preparedness; this includes having access to the readings during class.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Individual Assignments 60%--70%
   1. Game / World Critical Analyses
   2. Term Paper and Rewrite
   3. 2 quizzes
   4. Attendance and Participation

Team Assignments   40%--30%
   1. Teams on call for the weekly recaps and readings
   2. Team Gameplay Sessions
   3. Team Game Redesign Project

Assignment Details

> GAME / WORLD ANALYSES (4) You will use in-class lectures, key concepts, and readings to write close analyses of the games and films we are studying. These analyses should be at least 750 words. You should select games we have used in class as examples or ask for approval to write about a different utopian/dystopian game.

> CRITICAL DYSTOPIA/UTOPIA PAPER AND REWRITE You will write a 7-8 page paper making a clear argument about how dystopia works in a particular game. What are the particulars of how the game is dystopian? What social commentary or critiques are present in the game? You should support your

analysis through close readings of narrative, mechanics, and player reception. By the end of the paper, you will want to offer an assessment of how the game could be a more critical or impactful dystopia. You may also do this assignment by thinking about gamic utopias. After receiving feedback on your paper, you must submit a final revision.

QUIZZES All quizzes will be based on the video games, films, readings, discussions, and short lectures and will be announced two weeks in advance.

TEAM GAME PLAY SESSIONS: Your team will stream gameplay of its selected game. Each member is expected to participate and the class should also view and comment on the streams.

TEAM GAME DESIGN, PRESENTATIONS, AND RECAPS / ON-CALLS
We will make a schedule in class for team on calls. You will work together to create and demonstrate your own dystopian game (which will be created using a variety of digital and analog tools). Your game design will also build upon your research topic and must be a critical utopia.

****ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES****

COVID-19 AND OUR CLASSROOM
Covid-19 is still a part of our shared reality. It is important to begin from that premise because the pandemic will fundamentally shape what the semester looks like, how we inhabit the class, and how we relate to each other and the course materials. We are a community and are thus dependent on, and affected by, the actions, precautions, and protections each of us takes to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. I ask that you take reasonable efforts to protect yourselves, our campus, and our broader community from the spread of COVID-19.

As the pandemic continues, I want to share thoughts about our collective experience.
- Some of our lives may be relatively unaffected by the pandemic, while others have experienced profound tragedies—we cannot make assumptions about others' experiences with the virus.
- We ought to be more compassionate with each other and with ourselves—now, perhaps more than ever.
- Together, we will make this semester as safe, thoughtful, rigorous, and insightful as we can—this applies to both our intellectual efforts and our adherence to COVID safety protocols (which includes wearing masks).

Pandemic Goals
1. Be patient and kind with ourselves and each other.
2. Embrace the opportunity to learn in new ways and grow as students.
3. Do our best, knowing that this semester may probably look different than other semesters.
4. Prioritize community, care, and flexibility above all else.
5. Communicate openly and clearly about our expectations, concerns, and goals. Tell me what you need, and I'll tell you how I can help.
6. Be flexible. This is a strange time. We're all a bit anxious. Circumstances may change over the course of the semester. Let's work together to make this the best class possible, knowing that this may be a moving target.

PRONOUNS: We will respect and use the preferred pronouns of every individual in this class. Please introduce yourself to your team using your preferred pronouns. **My preferred pronouns are she/her.**

CLASS PARTICIPATION: You cannot do well in this class without frequently contributing to our discussions. You are expected to have read all materials by the time the works are discussed in class. In some cases, you are **expected to manage large chucks** of reading by reading ahead and being accountable for that material even if we have not yet gotten to it in class. Active, vocal participation in classroom discussions is encouraged and expected of all students. If you have to miss a class or are participating asynchronously, you need to make sure you have made the required posts for that week and that you are engaging on shared documents.

ATTENDANCE: Attendance will be taken at every class meeting. Importantly, I will count attendance as participation / engagement. This means that you have to engage the class either by posting questions or comments in the chat or by speaking to be counted present. Please be on time to class.

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 Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

STUDENTS AND DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems:

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call
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
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 Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press "0" after hours – 24/7 on call
studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX) - (213) 740-5086
eeotix.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.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298
usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report
Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) - (213) 740-0776
osas.usc.edu
OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.
USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 821-4710
campussupport.usc.edu
Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion - (213) 740-2101
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, 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
Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)
ombuds.usc.edu
A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

*Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-33*40 or otfp@med.usc.edu
chan.usc.edu/otfp
Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

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---Schedule---

1. Week 1

PLAY		
DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN	CLASS INTRODUCTION	TEAM GRADING VOTE
		** TEAM ASSIGNMENT SHEET

2. Week 2

PLAY	READ	ASSIGNMENTS
DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN	Baccolini, Raffaella, and Tom Moylan, eds. "Introduction: Dystopia and Histories" in *Dark Horizons : Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.	TEAM RESEARCH TOPICS DRAFT
	from Kumar, Krishan. *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. Oxford UK; New York NY USA: Blackwell, 1987. Print.	

3. Week 3

PLAY	READ	ASSIGNMENTS
DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN	William Knoblauch, " Game Over? A Cold War Kid Reflects on Apocalyptic Video Games' in State of Play (183-210)	QUIZ: *DETROIT* AND KEY TERMS
		TEAMS: INTRODUCTION OF ADDITIONAL GAMES AND VOTE

4. Week 4

PLAY	WATCH	ASSIGNMENTS
DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN	Film: *Contagion*	PLAY: TEAM ON CALL (ANALYSIS OF *DETROIT*)
		EMOTIONS: TEAM ON CALL (ANALYSIS OF *DETROIT*)
		GAME ANALYSIS #1 DUE

5. Week 5

PLAY	READ	ASSIGNMENTS
GAME #2	KEY TERM: ANTI-UTOPIA	QUIZ (KEY TERMS)

	Antonis Balasopoulos, "Anti-Utopia and Dystopia: Rethinking the Generic Field.' Utopia Project Archive, 2006-2010, ed. Vassilis Vlastaras. Athens: School of Fine Arts Publications, 2011. (59-67)	

6. Week 6

PLAY	READ	ASSIGNMENTS
	FEMINISM AND DYSTOPIAS	
	from Little, Judith, ed. *Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction : Utopias and Dystopias*. Amherst N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007. Print.	

7. Week 7

PLAY	FILM/READ	ASSIGNMENTS
GAME #2	*The Matrix* *From Baudrillard,* The Precession of Simulacra	
	KEY TERM: SIMULATION	**PAPERS DUE**

8. Week 8

PLAY	READ	ASSIGNMENTS
GAME #2	Freud's The Uncanny	**GAME DESIGN AND RESEARCH SESSION**
	KEY TERM: UNCANNY	
		QUIZ (GAME #2 AND KEY TERMS)

9. Wednesday October 31

PLAY	READ	ASSIGNMENTS
GAME #3	**Key Term: Racial Dystopia**	**TEAM ON CALL (ANALYSIS OF *GAME #3*)**
	Russworm, "Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*," in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*	

10. Week 10

PLAY	READ/ FILM	ASSIGNMENTS
GAME #3	An American Utopia	**TEAM ON CALL (ANALYSIS OF *GAME #3*)**

	FILM: THE BLACK PANTHER	
	Key Term: Utopia	

11. Week 11

PLAY	READ	ASSIGNMENTS
GAME #3	Efraim Sicher, and Natalia Skradol. "A World Neither Brave Nor New: Reading Dystopian Fiction after 9/11." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 4, no. 1 (2006): 151-179.	GAME DESIGN AND RESEARCH SESSION
		GAME #3 ANALYSIS DUE
		QUIZ (KEY TERMS AND GAME #3)

12. Week 12

PLAY		
GAME #3	GAME DESIGN PRESENTATIONS	TEAM BIBLIOGRAPHIES DUE

13. Week 13

	GAME DESIGN PRESENTATIONS	GAME #4 ANALYSIS DUE
	COURSE CONCLUSIONS	
	GAME DESIGN PRESENTATIONS	