Professor TreaAndrea M. Russworm
Fall 2023, USC Games

CTIN 499: Special Topics
Section Title: *The Sims* Video Game Franchise
Class meetings: Tuesdays 11-12:50pm
Units: 2

Course Description

In this game franchises class we will study one game franchise for this entire semester. This semester's game franchise is *The Sims*. What makes a game franchise not only playable but successful, engaging, and adaptive over several product iterations and many years that include changing technological and hardware developments? How does a franchise cater to its core audience amid the realities of aging player demographics and the emergence of new player communities? By covering over twenty years of the franchise's development, we will examine the franchise from its earliest iteration (*The Sims*) until now (currently *The Sims 4*). We will study the economic, cultural, production, and artistic dimensions of the franchise's history while also paying close attention to key aspects of the *Sims* games' player reception history. This detailed and longitudinal view of one franchise will help us answer questions about the inherent tensions between brand durability and fluidity over time.

COURSE OBJECTIVES
- Come to a shared working knowledge of what makes this game franchise work—in terms of design, business models, and player reception.
- Explore and understand a variety of theoretical and critical approaches to the study of culture and digital media.
- Conduct reception-based analysis of platforms and tools designed to garner player feedback.
- Learn ways of using our own subjectivity and experiences to document our engagement with the franchise's history.
- Experiment with team-based learning models, strategies, and collaborative exercises.
- Expand our understanding of models and methods that are suitable for contributing critical approaches to the interdisciplinary fields of game studies.

Assignments and Assignment Descriptions

10%--   **Participation**
Regular participation in class discussions in mandatory as is keeping current on all readings.

40%--   **How I Played *The Sims* - Gameplay Reflections**
Four audio/video responses of less than ten minutes that offer critical reflections on how each student accessed and played each of the *Sims* games throughout the semester. Students will experiment with different play styles, challenges, and objectives as a part of these reflections. **Due dates: Weeks 3, 5, 8, and 12 Tuesdays at the start of class**.

15%--   **Interviews (and analysis) of (5) players**
Each student will compose a short survey that asks players to reflect on how they have played the franchise's games. Surveys will be circulated within class and within the division. Responses will be integrated into an in-class analysis of player reception. We will work as a group to correlate some of the findings. At least one of the questions must be about the games' systems. **Due date: Week 7** with outline of final paper as midterm.

15%--   **Content Creator Project**
Each student will create a research-based profile of a YouTube, Twitch, or other type of public *Sims* content creator and present the findings as a part of an in-class presentation. What types of engagement and player agencies do fans of the franchise demonstrate over time and how? **Due dates: Weeks 13, 14 per sign-up sheet for presentations.**

20%   **Systems Analysis**
This is a 5-7 page argumentative paper about one of more of the franchise's systems. Students will make arguments about system functionality and evolution over time and also reflect on how these interpretations of systems correlate with findings in the player reflections, interviews, and content creation projects. **Outline due as midterm (Week 7); final paper due during exam week as our summative experience assignment.**

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COURSE SCHEDULE

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Tue. 8/22
WEEK 1-   **ARE SIMULATIONS GAMES?**

                    Lecture: A brief history of simulations games

Games:
       Tennis for Two (1958)
       Utopia (1981, Don Daglow)
       Microsoft Flight Simulator (1982)
       Little Computer People (1985)
       Sim City (1989)

Discussion: What *are* simulation games?

Readings:
- From Sherry Turkle, *Simulations and its Discontents*
- Seth Giddings, "Simulation" in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*

Tue. 8/29
WEEK 2-   **WILL WRIGHT'S ULTIMATE SIMULATION(S)**

Screening: *Playing with Time* (Brian Eno and Will Wright)

Lecture: The Birth of Maxis

Games: *The Sims* (2000)

Discussion: How does Wright's vision utilize the architectural concepts discussed in A Pattern Language?

Readings:
From Christopher Alexander et. al., *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Plunkett, Luke. "A History Of Maxis: Thanks For SimCity." Kotaku, March 5, 2015. https://kotaku.com/a-history-of-maxis-thanks-for-simcity-1689490370.

Tue. 9/5
WEEK 3-   **THE ECONOMICS OF *THE SIMS* (PART 1)**

Lecture: Marketing *The Sims*

Game: *The Sims* (2000)

Discussion: What do the early *Sims* market campaigns tell us about women and girls as an ideal audience for the product?

Readings:

Jennifer Johns, "Video Games Production Networks: Value Capture, Power Relations and Embeddedness." *Journal of Economic Geography* 6, no. 2 (April 1, 2006): 151–80.

<mark>Assignment Due:</mark> **How I Played** *The Sims* **- Gameplay Reflection**

Tue. 9/12
WEEK 4-   **SYSTEMS ANALYSIS: FROM *THE SIMS* TO *THE SIMS 2***
Guest Speaker: Danny Bilson
Game: *The Sims 2* (2004)

Lecture: Electronic Arts as a Key Stakeholder

Discussion: What are the major system changes from the first to the second
iterations?

Readings: Colleen Macklin's forthcoming book on systems and games

Tue. 9/19
WEEK 5-   Systems Innovations in *The Sims 2*
Guest Speaker: *Sims 2* Designer

Game: *The Sims 2* (2004)

Discussion: What are some distinct *Sims 2* systems?

Readings: Johns, Jennifer. "Video Games Production Networks: Value Capture,
Power Relations and Embeddedness." *Journal of Economic Geography* 6, no. 2
(April 1, 2006): 151–80.

<mark>Assignment Due:</mark> **How I Played** *The Sims* **- Gameplay Reflection**

Tue. 9/26
WEEK 6-   **SYSTEMS ANALYSIS: FROM *THE SIMS 2* TO *THE SIMS 3***

Game: *The Sims 3* (2009)

Discussion: How does *The Sims 3*'s open world system challenge or change the
idea of open world or sandbox gameplay?

Tue. 10/3
WEEK 7-   **FANDOM AND MODDING: AFFECTIVE ATTACHMENTS**

Lecture: *The Sims*, **Race, and Player Agency**

Readings: from Sihvonen, Tanja. *Players Unleashed: Modding the Sims and the Culture of Gaming*. Vol. 5. MediaMatters. Amsterdam: University Press, 2011.

<mark>Assignment Due:</mark> **Interview Survey Questions and Systems Outline**

Tue. 10/10
WEEK 8-   **THE SOUND OF PRODUCTIVITY: SOUND DESIGN AND *THE SIMS***
FRANCHISE

Readings:
Pruett, Jordan. "On Feeling Productive: Videogames and Superfluous Labor." Theory & Event 22, no. 2 (2019): 402-416.

"Sound Design" in Newman, Rich. *Cinematic Game Secrets for Creative Directors and Producers: Inspired Techniques From Industry Legends*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

<mark>Assignment Due:</mark> **How I Played *The Sims* - Gameplay Reflection**

Tue. 10/17
WEEK 9-   **OPEN WORLD UTOPIAS IN *THE SIMS 3***
Guest Speaker: Content Creator and Sims Influencer

Games: *The Sims 3* (2009)

Readings:
Ann McGuire, "Simplification: The Sims and Utopianism," *Papers: Exploration into Children's Literature (Vol. 14, Issue 2). 2004.*

Tue. 10/24
Week 10-   **SYSTEMS ANALYSIS: FROM *THE SIMS 3* TO *THE SIMS* 4**
Guest Speaker: TBA, from Maxis

Game: *The Sims 4* (2014)

Tue. 10/31
Week 11-   **THE ECONOMICS OF *THE SIMS* (PART 2):**
Microtransactions and Player Distrust

Lecture: The Challenges of Longevity

Discussion: What business models are different for *The Sims 4*? Why does this iteration have the longest lifespan of all of the *Sims* games? What can we learn about the free-to-play model as it relates to this franchise?

Reading: Hart et. al. from *The Evolution and Social Impact of Video Game Economics*. Studies in New Media. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.

Tue. 11/7
Week 12- **UPDATING TO REMAIN THE SAME: GLITCHES, PATCH CULTURE, AND THE SIMS**

Lecture: *The Sims* and Glitch Culture

Readings: from Wendy Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same;* from Krapp, Peter. *Noise Channels: Glitch and Error in Digital Culture*. Electronic Mediations: V. 37. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Assignment Due: **How I Played *The Sims* - Gameplay Reflection**

Tue. 11/14
WEEK 13- **CONTENT CREATOR PRESENTATIONS**

Assignment Due: Presentations

Tue. 11/21
WEEK 14 **CONTENT CREATOR PRESENTATIONS**

Assignment Due: Presentations

Tue. 11/28
WEEK 15 **LONG LIVE THE SIMS: THE FRANCHISE'S GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Course Conclusions:
Looking ahead to the next iterations of an inextinguishable franchise.

Reading:
Aiden Strawhun, "The Sims Turns 20, Unlike Your Sim Who Will Probably Always Be 20." *Polygon* (blog), February 4, 2020.
https://www.polygon.com/2020/2/4/20754666/the-sims-20th-anniversary-ea-maxis.

12/6 – 12/13
Exam Week—Final version of systems analysis paper is due during our exam time.

COURSE POLICIES

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 chunks 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.

MISSING DEADLINES AND 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. An Incomplete can only be assigned after the week 12 withdrawal deadline. 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: Punctual attendance at all classes is mandatory. Attendance will be taken at every class meeting. Please be on time to class. 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 absences: lowers grade one full grade point (for example, from A to B). **Three absences**: lowers grade two full grade points. **Four or more absences:** request to withdraw from course (instructor's discretion).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMPUTER USE DURING CLASS
Browsing the internet on computers, phones, or other devices and using 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.

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 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.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work, comprises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the student handbook or the Office of Academic Integrity's website, and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

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

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline - *988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call*
The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - *(213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call*
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX) - *(213) 740-5086*
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*
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 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) 740-0411*
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*

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
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) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call
Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)
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) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu
Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.