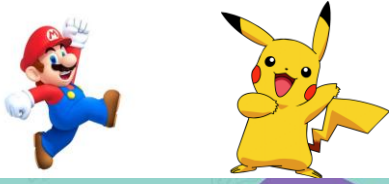


USC Annenberg



CMGT 537: The Industry, Science
and Culture of Video Games
(4 Units)

Spring 2025, Wednesday's – 6-8:50pm

Section: 21746D

Location: ASC 328

Instructor: Steve Fowler

Office Hours: By appointment, usually
before or after class.

Contact Info: fowlerii@usc.edu

stevegowlerconsulting@gmail.com

Mobile – 626-399-3318

Course Description

The business of video games. History, social dynamics, and cultural impact of video games; developments in technology and design; issues confronting the video game industry and how gaming organizations succeed.

Video games are the largest sector of the entertainment industry, grossing over \$184 Billion in revenue globally in 2023 (source NewZoo Global Games Report 2023). This course will cover the origins of the industry birthed in the arcades, through its growth to home consoles and PCs, and finally to its mass adoption on mobile devices.

Students will learn the social and cultural impacts the games industry has had on the world. We will cover how globally known entertainment IPs like Mario and Pokémon and the games they were introduced into became the primary form of entertainment for younger generations.

Deep study will be particularly focused on the business of games. The course will dive deep into the different aspects of how game Publishers and Developers build brands, distribute and price their games and how they market and generate awareness, consideration, and conversion with consumers.

The games industry is a blend of art and science and there will be exploration of how technological advancement pushed interactive entertainment to new platforms and consumers.

Finally, we will study the industry's current challenges and forecast where it will go next. From legal issues to diversity and representation to emerging technologies such as Blockchain and AI; how will the games industry adapt, change, and grow under all these uncertainties.

The class emphasizes student participation and involvement. Students will be required to participate in group projects, class discussions, game-play exercises, and game industry research. We will have a variety of content in each class including lectures, videos, guest lectures and yes, we will be playing games!

Student Learning Outcomes

Students taking the course gain a working knowledge of the games industry, how game companies are organized and run their businesses and the various disciplines and divisions at game publishers and developers. Specifically, students will be able to:

- Articulate to others the history of the games industry and how it became the largest form of entertainment in the world.
- Explain with confidence how the “business” of games works. How do games get green-lit, funded, and brought to market.
- Identify potential career paths in the games industry, with particular focus on the opportunities outside of game development.
- Create a 360 Go-to-Market campaign for a game launch.

Course Notes

Students will be expected to attend one trip out into Los Angeles to visit a game studio. In addition, there will be 2-4 guest speakers that will be in person or via Video Call that will share real-world experiences.

Laptop Policy and Hardware/Software Required

Students will be required to play a number of games. All of these are free-to-play and are available online either on PC or Mobile device. Any student adhering to the Annenberg laptop policy should have what's needed. If you don't have access to a Mac or PC, make sure you can get/borrow/use, etc.

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.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Textbooks: While there is no formal textbook for this class, we will use two primary books as core reference material (required partial reading) for several classes.

Required Books:

Get in the Game: How to Level Up Your Business with Gaming, Esports, and Emerging Technologies by Jonathan Stringfield <https://www.amazon.com/Get-Game-Business-Emerging-Technologies/dp/1119855365>

One Up: Creativity, Competition, and the Global Business of Video Games by Joost Van Dreunen <https://www.amazon.com/One-Up-Creativity-Competition-Business/dp/0231197527>

You are required to sign up for two email services and our class Discord: Daily email feeds from www.gamesindustry.biz and [SuperJoost Playlist](#). Expect us to talk about these newsfeeds regularly, in class and on Discord. You don't need to memorize them. Get these in your daily inbox and make a habit out of at least skimming them so you are "in the know" using real industry sources rather than the popular press. This is something you should expect to do in any field—there is always a layer of specialized knowledge that goes past anything you will find in mainstream reporting. The class Discord is at <https://discord.gg/W9GvjCMX4>

Purely optional, here are some other services you might want to add or explore for your own interests, or as resources during the class:

- 1) USC listserv for games classes and events, here <https://games.usc.edu/>.
- 2) The [Deconstructor of Fun Industry report digest](#).
- 3) [Game Discover Co](#) great newsletter on the Indie game space with particular attention to games on Steam
- 4) [GameDev Reports](#) good source for business data
- 5) [GamesBeat Dean Takahashi](#) is THE voice of the games business
- 6) [Mobile Dev Memo](#) for those focused on mobile gaming
- 7) 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.
- 8) IGDA has a [Game Research Division](#).

Grading Policies:

Each Student will be assigned a final course grade based on their performance in the class. Each student will be evaluated on the following basis:

- Mid-Term Test: 15%
- Group Project Final: 40%
- Group GTM analysis 3-pager: 15%
- Guest Speaker Summaries: 10%
- Class Contribution: 10%
- Credit/NC short assignments: 10%

Mid-Term Test

There will be one mid-term test during this course. Questions related to in-class lectures and discussions, assigned material, and guest speakers will be included. The mid-term is scheduled for 3/12 and will cover topics covered to that point as described in the course calendar. The test

will be multiple choice. Students are expected to take tests at the scheduled times. Consistent with University policy, makeup tests will be given only to students who have written proof of illness or other emergencies. If you cannot take a scheduled test due to an official University activity, it is your responsibility to let me know at least one week prior to the scheduled test and have official documentation. If you fail to attend a test without prior notice and without a medical or other emergency excuse, you will receive a grade of zero for that test.

Group Project

There will be a group project that allows you to apply what you've learned throughout the semester as you develop a 360 Go-to-Market plan for a game franchise of your choice. Working in teams of 2 or 3 you will build a comprehensive Launch and sustaining campaign around an existing game. This project will be presented to the class on 4/30. You will then provide a final summary of a fellow class presenters' Go-to-Market plans as your final test. This is the crux of the class and will carry the biggest grade value. You will be taught the fundamental elements needed to create this plan over the course of the semester.

Group GTM analysis 3-pager

After you are witness to each groups final GTM presentation on 4/30 you will choose one group (not your own) to evaluate. This paper will be written in "business narrative" format and include an evaluation of the groups GTM plan overall strength, use of class techniques, uniqueness and a final summary.

Guest Speaker Summaries

Throughout the semester there will be approximately 2-4 professional guest speakers from the games industry. Students will be required to summarize two key learnings they had from each. Each summary should be one page, single spaced (12 pt. font), submitted via Brightspace before the following class session begins.

Class Contribution

Class contribution will be a large part of this course. We will frequently engage in open discussion with each other. Your opinion matters as much as mine. Ask questions, engage on a topic, feel free to debate me or question my position or methods. I will most likely call on all of you several times during the semester, but I also expect you to volunteer your opinion and be proactive with in class topics.

Credit/NC short assignments

This is a class about video games so we are going to play video games. I will give gameplay homework and I will expect evidence that you played in the form of screenshots. The games we play will be "Free-to-Play" on either mobile or PC platforms. The screen shots you provide (with

my requirements that will be noted before the assignment) will be all that is required for credit. There will also be occasional one-page write-ups to demonstrate comprehension on certain topics.

Discord participation

We have a class Discord channel. Be there and use that space for discussions, during and after class. Use it to help each other in the class, to play and socialize. While this will not be graded Discord is the communication channel for gamers and if you intend to work in this industry you will be expected to know how Discord works.

Grading

a. Grading Scale

Letter grade and corresponding numerical point range		
94% to 100%: A	80% to 83%: B-	67% to 69%: D+
90% to 93%: A- (A minus)	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- (C minus)	0% to 59%: F

b. 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.

c. Grading Timeline & Disputes

Assignments are typically graded and returned within 1-2 weeks. If you have a grade dispute, you're welcome to bring it to me, but no sooner than 48 hours after you receive your grade. My standard approach is to first consider if I've made a mistake, and then to consider regrading it from scratch, which could raise or lower the score.

Course-Specific Policies: GPT

We're all still figuring out what to do about ChatGPT and other Generative AI software. My policy is if you use any of these programs to create work that you are being graded on you will also submit your full prompt work along with the course work. We will cover this in our class but in essence if you use Chat GPT to help create course work I will require that you send me the link to the full set of prompts that you used to get to the final product. If you use Chat GPT or other Gen AI tools and do not disclose that to me I will consider that plagiarism and you will receive a zero for that assignment. These are powerful tools that are not going away and right now they are only really as good as how clever you are at manipulating them with smart prompts and questions, so I need to see your process.

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 email by the start of class.

Classroom Policies

Physical in-person attendance for the entire scheduled time is required. That said attendance is not taken, it's on you to be there, you are an adult. Similarly, you all have laptops and can use them to be distracted, but then why come to class? The research on using laptops in class and comprehension is very clear: it hurts you. The more you actively listen and take notes, the better you do, period. The only exception is active Discord use during class to talk *about* class.

Lastly, but important: The classroom is a safe space for ideas and discussion, which requires that everyone does their part to create an [atmosphere of inclusion and acceptance](#). There will be no discrimination based on anyone's background, demographics, or politics, etc.

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 1/15	Introductions, Syllabus overview and History – Arcade to Early Home Consoles	Read about the first video game https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spacewar ! Play Galaga https://www.free80sarcade.com/galaga.php	Upload a screenshot to Brightspace and highest score wins a prize! DUE 1/22
Week 2 1/22	History (cont'd) – Console, PC and Mobile platform evolution. Genres, Game industry taxonomy and current industry statistics	Read "One Up" Preface, Introduction and chapters 1-3	
Week 3 1/29	Game Publishers and Developers organizational structure and how the	Read "One Up" chapter 10	Provide a one-page summary of your findings and what you

	<p>Business of Games is operated.</p> <p>Forecasting, Budgeting and How games get “Green-lit” or “Killed”</p>	<p>Read EA’s shareholders report https://s204.g4cdn.com/701424631/files/doc_financials/2024/ar/electronic-arts-2024-proxy.pdf</p>	<p>think EA’s priorities are in their next business cycle. Due 2/5</p>
<p>Week 4 2/5</p>	<p>Why do people play games? Group project overview.</p> <p>Audience profiling, demographics, psychographics, geographics, Behavioral</p> <p>GUEST SPEAKER - TBD</p>	<p>Read Chapter 3 “Get in the Game”</p> <p>Read https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.202049</p> <p>Read https://gameanalytics.com/blog/understanding-your-audience-bartle-player-taxonomy/</p>	<p>Take this quiz to find out your Gamer Psychology http://matthewbarr.co.uk/bartle/</p> <p>Then write a 1 page summary of your results and whether you agree or not. DUE 2/12</p> <p>Guest speaker summary 1 pager DUE 2/12</p>
<p>Week 5 2/12</p>	<p>The Marketing of Video Games. How game companies generate awareness, consideration and conversion for their games. SWOT/TOWS/Competitive Audit</p>	<p>Read “One Up” chapter 9 and “Get in the Game” chapters 8 and 9</p> <p>Watch the history of E3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vra1ijmyEvg</p>	<p>Create an account (if you haven’t already) and make a relevant post on a game Discord and game sub-Reddit and provide a link. DUE 2/19</p>
<p>Week 6 2/19</p>	<p>Games as Products vs. Games as Services, operational differences</p>	<p>Listen to “Mastering Retention” Podcast episode 98 “Games as a Service” https://open.spotify.com/episode/7323Ui7chHqe4vehje8EEd</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B71mbSBgZ3E</p>	
<p>Week 7 2/26</p>	<p>Group Exercise Kick Off – Brand DNA/Positioning/Risks and Mitigations/Feature Affinity Analysis</p>	<p>Groups will need to build a Brand DNA Pyramid for their chosen game</p>	<p>Submit your game Brand DNA Pyramid DUE 3/5</p>

Week 8 3/5	Free to Play games and their challenges, legally, financially and morally GUEST SPEAKER – TBD	Download and read “Legal State of play in the video games industry” file:///C:/Users/sfowler/Downloads/baf0d65-ca30-4ebc-a2d6-d07ac144a629.pdf	Play a mobile Gacha game (Genshin Impact or Puzzle and Dragons) screenshot DUE 3/12 Guest speaker summary 1 pager DUE 3/12
Week 9 3/12	Working with Marketing, Advertising and PR Agencies. Mid-Term Test	Create a creative brief for your chosen game that you would submit to an advertising agency	Creative Brief DUE 3/26 Play Clash of Clans or Candy Crush for one hour (screenshot) DUE 3/26
Week 10 3/19	Spring Recess		
Week 11 3/26	The emergence of Mobile Gaming – Everyone is a Gamer. Social media and game community building, Discord, Esports, TikTok, Reddit, UGC and Events.	Read “One Up” chapters 4 and 5	
Week 12 4/2	Cultural Influence of the Games industry. Addiction, Violence in Video Games. IDFA, GDPR PAID MEDIA/UA/Paid Influencers – the science of acquisition GUEST SPEAKER - TBD	Read “Get in the Game” Chapter 4	Guest speaker summary 1 pager DUE 4/9
Week 13 4/9	Influencers, YouTube and Twitch. GUEST - TBD	Read “Get in the Game” Chapters 6-8	Play League of Legends, get to level 3 and play a game of Classic 5v5 (screenshot the result)

			Guest speaker summary 1 pager DUE 4/16
Week 14 4/16	Field Trip – Time and details TBD		Field Trip visit summary 1 pager DUE 4/23
Week 15 4/23	The Future of Games: AI, AR, VR, The Metaverse, Blockchain, NFTs, Cloud and . . . GUEST – TBD	OPTIONAL – Read “Ready Player One” - https://www.amazon.com/Ready-Player-One-Ernest-Cline/dp/0307887448	Play Fortnite and play one round of Battle Royal and at least One Creative Map (screenshots) DUE 4/30 Guest speaker summary 1 pager DUE 4/30
Week 16 4/30	Group Project Presentations: Building a Go to Market Plan		
USC STUDY DAYS Dates: 5/03-5/06			
Week 17 5/07	Final GTM Evaluation Paper and Full Group GTM Documents Submitted		

Communication

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

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university’s mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or “recycle” work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

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

Academic dishonesty has a far-reaching impact and is considered a serious offense against the university. Violations will result in a grade penalty, such as a failing grade on the assignment or in the course, and disciplinary action from the university itself, such as suspension or even expulsion.

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.

AI Generators Policy

I expect you to use AI (e.g., ChatGPT and image generation tools) in this class. Learning to use AI is an emerging skill, and I welcome the opportunity to meet with you to provide guidance with these tools during office hours or after class. Keep in mind the following:

- AI tools are permitted to help you brainstorm topics or revise work you have already written.
- If you provide minimum-effort prompts, you will get low-quality results. You will need to refine your prompts to get good outcomes. This will take work.
- Proceed with caution when using AI tools and do not assume the information provided is accurate or trustworthy. If it gives you a number or fact, assume it is incorrect unless you either know the correct answer or can verify its accuracy with another source. You will be responsible for any errors or omissions provided by the tool. It works best for topics you understand.
- **AI is a tool, but one that you need to acknowledge using. Please include a paragraph at the end of any assignment that uses AI explaining how (and why) you used AI and indicate/specify the prompts you used to obtain the results and what prompts you used to get the results. Failure to do so is a violation of academic integrity policies.**
- Be thoughtful about when AI is useful. Consider its appropriateness for each assignment or circumstance. The use of AI tools requires attribution. You are expected to clearly attribute any material generated by the tool used.

Statement on University Academic and Support Systems

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.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the [Financial Aid Office webpage](#) for [undergraduate](#)- and [graduate-level](#) SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

Support Systems:

[Annenberg Student Success Fund](#)

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.

[Annenberg Student Emergency Aid Fund](#)

Awards are distributed to students experiencing unforeseen circumstances and emergencies impacting their ability to pay tuition or cover everyday living expenses. These awards are not intended to cover full-tuition expenses, but rather serve as bridge funding to guarantee students' continued enrollment at USC until other resources, such as scholarships or loans, become available. Students are encouraged to provide as much information in their application, as well as contact their academic advisor directly with questions about additional resources available to them.

[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 consists 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) 740-2500

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.

About Your Instructor

You can learn more about me by reading my LinkedIn profile or reading my consulting website

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/steve-fowler-3b78241/>

<https://stevefowlerconsulting.com/>