

Critical theory and analysis of videogames

USC School of Cinematic Arts, CTIN 462

Instructors: William Huber

Units: 4

Contact Info:

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Course Description: Computer games and videogames are complex systems of representation, rich with meaning; they are also systems which create experiences. The critical vocabulary for interpreting, criticizing, and analyzing them is still being developed. Critics, writers and creators of culture have developed approaches for the study of other cultural forms (literature, film, the visual arts, theater, etc.) which can be tentatively applied to the study of games; theorists have also begun using digital games as the basis for new creating models of criticism and challenging existing models and divisions. The purpose of this course is to cultivate a more sophisticated critical and philosophical vocabulary, to treat videogames seriously as important objects in contemporary culture, and to help students produce new critical perspectives on videogames and game culture.

This course is being run as a seminar. Students will be expected to keep up with the reading load, and be prepared to discuss the readings. The readings have been chosen for their integration of important key terms, concepts and theorists with the videogames, the game industry and game cultures. Every student will come to class with a single page, two-to-four paragraph long summary of the week's reading. Students are encouraged to apply their reading to those games that they have already played, to bring examples of games to seminar and use critical frameworks of analysis to discuss them. Also, every week, selected students will be responsible for leading the discussion on the previous week's reading, drafting discussion questions and bringing in relevant examples.

Each student will also write a 10 to 15 page paper on a topic agreed upon by the instructor. There will also be gameplay and analysis assignments.

Meeting Information:

Lecture: 3 hours

Pre-requisites: N/A

Required texts:

Nick Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter, *Games of Empire*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis. 2009.
Alex Galloway: *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis. 2006
David Macey: *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Penguin. London. 2002

Other material will be made available online or in class.

Suggested Reading:

Peter Barry: *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory, Third Edition*. Manchester University Press. Manchester. 2002 - especially helpful for students with limited backgrounds in critical theory.
Ian Bogost: *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. MIT Press. Cambridge. 2006 - especially helpful for students with limited background in videogames.
Ian Bogost: *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. MIT Press. Cambridge. 2007

Evaluation of student performance:

Participation and attendance	20
Assignments	20
Presentations	20
Final paper	40
Total:	100

Course content (summarized by class meeting)

Wk	Lecture	Assignments
1	Introduction	What is critical theory? What is criticism? What is the difference between critical theory and cultural studies? We will meet and introduce ourselves, discuss the goals and assumptions of the program, agree to the readings for the next week.
2	"Before theory"	The popular critical vocabulary: the default view of game criticism. Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Espen Aarseth, "Playing research: methodological approaches to game analysis" • Paul de Man, "The resistance to theory" • Steven Poole, <i>Trigger Happy</i>, ch 9 • Mackenzie Wark, <i>Gamer Theory</i>, "Agony" Assignment 1: close-reading and analysis of game of choice (due week 3)
3	Semiotics I: how games signify.	Learning the core concepts of semiotics, and investigating games as semiotic systems. Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daniel Chandler, Semiotics for Beginners: Signs • Daniel Chandler, Semiotics for Beginners: Codes • Galloway, ch 1 (Gamic action: four moments) • Ian Bogost, <i>Unit Operations</i>, "Comparative Videogame Criticism" and "Encounters across platforms" Assignment 1 due.
4	Semiotics II: toward post-structuralism	Discuss post-structuralist theory; reading of Galloway as a post-structuralist game critic. Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Galloway, ch 4 (Allegories of control) • MacKenzie Wark, <i>Gamer Theory</i>, "Allegory"

5	Postmodernity I	<p>The cultural conditions of digital gaming. Digital games as post-industrial cultural forms.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulations ● Frederick Jameson, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism <p>Assignment 2 due: gaming biography.</p>
6	Postmodernity II: subjectivity	<p>The cultural conditions of contemporary gaming, continued; gamers as subjects.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hiroki Azuma, The Animalization of Otaku Culture ● Mackenzie Wark, Gamer Theory, "Boredom, Complex" <p>Assignment 3: assigned game analysis (due week 7)</p>
7	Gaming minds and bodies.	<p>The psychological and cognitive dynamics of gameplay.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Galloway, ch 2 (Origins of first person shooter) ● Tim Ingold, "From the transmission of representations to the education of attention" ● Chris Chesher, Neither gaze nor glance, but graze. ● Huber and Hoeger, Ghastly multiplication <p>Assignment 3 due: assigned game analysis.</p>
8	Representating others	<p>Players, characters, avatars and identities.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Vít Šisler, Digital Arabs: Representation in video games. ● David Leonard, Not a hater, just keepin' it real: the importance of race and gender based game studies.

9	Gender and sexuality	<p>Game content and representations; experiences of women, gays and lesbians as gamers and non-gamers.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Colleen Hannon, "Beauty and Brutality" ● Debbie Ging, "All the Rage: Digital Games, Female Violence and the Postfeminisation of Cinema's New Action Heroines" ● Adreinne Shaw, "Putting the gay in games: cultural production and GLBT content in video games" <p>Assignment 4 due: submit proposal for final paper</p>
10	Game industry, culture industry: a critical history of videogames	<p>The videogame industry and its context: globalization, transnational media, and markets.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dyer-Witthford and Grieg de Peuter, Introduction, ch 1 and 2 ● Adorno and Horkheimer, "The culture industry: enlightenment as mass deception"
11	Mass culture and aesthetics	<p>Popular aesthetics, market imperatives, and the subjects of mass culture.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dyer-Witthford and Grieg de Peuter,, ch 3 ● Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and kitsch" <p>Assignment 5: assigned game analysis (due week 12).</p>
12	The military-entertainment complex	<p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dyer-Witthford and Grieg de Peuter, Introduction, ch 4 ● Galloway, ch 3 (Social realism) ● Mackenzie Wark, "Gamer Theory, "America" <p>Assignment 5 due.</p>
13	Space and place: spaces	<p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, ch 5 and 6 ● Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces" ● David Harvey, "Space as a Key Word" ● Mackenzie Wark, "Gamer Theory, "Atopia" <p>Assignment 6 due: submit outline of paper.</p>

14	Counter-gaming	<p>Game design and game-play against the grain.</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter, Introduction, ch 7 and 8 ● Alex Galloway, ch 5 (Counter-gaming) ● Mary Flanagan, Creating Critical Play <p>Be prepared to discuss paper.</p>
15	Endgame	<p>Last class: final papers are due.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mackenzie Wark, Gamer Theory, "Conclusions"

Missing an Assignment Deadline, 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 professor before the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled. Students who wish to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor or teaching assistant before final grades are due. Incompletes may only be assigned after the 12th week of classes.

Note for students with disabilities:

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to us as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301, and is open 8:30am-5:00pm Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

Academic Integrity:

The School of Cinematic Arts expects the highest standards of academic excellence and ethical performance from USC students. It is particularly important that you are aware of and avoid plagiarism, cheating on exams, submitting a paper to more than one instructor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone other than yourself. Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade and be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs. If you have any doubts or questions about these policies, consult "SCAMPUS" and/or confer with the instructor. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *Scampus*, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>