ENGL 3225.001 Game Studies: Games, Play and Stories

Language 302

MWF 11:15-12:05

Instructor Information

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Principal Lecturer | Department of English
Office Location & Hours: Auditorium 116, MW 9.30-11, 12.30-2, T 10-2, F 9.30-11

Communication Expectations: I will communicate with you through the Announcements in Canvas; all questions should be directed to me through "Inbox" (Conversations). You can expect a reply to an email within the day; my goal for grades and feedback through Comments is to complete them with 24 hours.

I may have some occasional recorded content to share with you also--I will let you know through the Announcements.

CLEAR has a webpage for students that provides Online Communication Tips (Links to an external site.) (https://clear.unt.edu/online-communication-tips); I advise you read it to get a handle on online communication etiquette, really for your own peace of mind than anything else.

My research interests are primarily in twentieth-century British literature and critical theory, especially psychoanalysis; my book *Lacan and the Ghosts of Modernity: Masculinity, Tradition, and the Anxiety of Influence* (Peter Lang) was published in 2004. I've taught a wide range of courses at UNT since 2003, with topics ranging from graphic novels, to James Joyce, to Victorian literature and to videogame narrative.

Course Description, Structure, and Objectives

This is a 16-week online course for 3 credit hours that is structured around weekly discussion, assignments, and two major written projects due at the same time as midterms and finals. The final project may be the creation of a game, which must have a design document to go with it.

Federal regulations state that students may apply only 3 fully-online semester credit hours (SCH) to the hours required for full-time status for F-1 Visa (DOC) holders. Full-time status for F-1 Visa students is 12 hours for undergraduates and 9 hours for graduate students.

In this course, we will study theories of play and how play is expressed in games. There will be an emphasis on game literacy and games as complex cultural and aesthetic objects, as well as inquiry into the social, political, and ethical issues that inform game stories, game design, game genres, game aesthetics, player decision-making, and role-playing and identity within games.

The current scholarship in game studies, primarily founded in the field of rhetoric, interprets the intervention of any kind of game (digital, tabletop, competitive sport, or otherwise) in any culture as a critical act that allows players as well as spectators to think about the ways they interact with the world and each other. In addition to the writing of essays and weekly assignments, students are exposed to a wide variety of critical sources in the field of game studies in order to interpret game experiences. During this course, you will learn to describe digital game experiences by relating them to aspects of art, prose narrative, film, and music, all of which go into the creation of digital games. The course focuses on the three traditional categories used to characterize digital games (design, mechanics, aesthetics), and also introduces them to narrative concepts embedded in games.

In order to cultivate the critical skills to analyze games, the course requires substantial writing every week in addition to both a midterm and final project. This amounts to an output of, at a minimum, 8000 words, equivalent to 25 pages of material. There are also opportunities for students to interact with each other through Canvas discussions over a variety of different questions on a weekly basis relating to games and texts of all kinds and also other sorts of play activity, which is the focus of the first part of the course.

As already mentioned, the rhetorical dimension of game studies has firmly established the idea that games are important to understanding any culture. Games and play are perhaps first and foremost about personal character and integrity, an observation supported by the writing of Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) Dutch cultural historian and author of *Homo Ludens* (1938). Play with others is grounded in a willingness to abide by rules, and violation of game rules characterizes one as a "spoil sport," one outside of the ethos of responsible game playing. This sense of "fair play," rather than being incidental to the playing of games, is something that is found in every community centered around games, and one which underlies all social relationships and community ethics.

In recent years, game culture has seen a number of different controversies over the inclusion of people of color and those with different styles of gender expression in gaming spaces. These moments of conflict have reverberated throughout the highest echelons of digital game production and design. The content of some digital and tabletop games themselves has sought to represent and address marginalized groups, and in ENGL 3225, at least two weeks are reserved during the term to explore these topics. Beyond the political and personal drama of such games as *Mass Effect* and *Skyrim*, there are other, smaller titles such as *Undertale*, *Celeste*, and *Diary of a Spaceport Janitor* that represent gestures toward expanding the subject matter and intent of familiar game genres.

How to Succeed in this Course

My office hours this term are MW 12pm-2pm; TTh 10am-1pm. Connect with me through email and/or by attending office hours. During busy times, my inbox becomes rather full, so if you contact me and do not receive a response within two business days, please send a follow up email. A gentle nudge is always appreciated.

The most important advice I can offer with regard to succeeding in this course is make it a daily habit to check in, and also check in with your fellow students via discussion or the Canvas inbox. Get in the habit of reading and writing every day.

UNT strives to offer you a high-quality education and a supportive environment, so you learn and grow. As a faculty member, I am committed to helping you be successful as a student. To learn more about campus resources and information on how you can be successful at UNT, go to unt.edu/success and explore unt.edu/wellness. To get all your enrollment and student financial-related questions answered, go to scrappysays.unt.edu.

The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request reasonable accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to deliver letters of reasonable accommodation during faculty office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access). You may also contact ODA by phone at (940) 565-4323.

Supporting Your Success and Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

I value the many perspectives students bring to our campus. Please work with me to create a classroom culture of open communication, mutual respect, and belonging. All discussions should be respectful and civil. Although disagreements and debates are encouraged, personal attacks are unacceptable. Together, we can ensure a safe and welcoming classroom for all. If you ever feel like this is not the case, please stop by my office and let me know. We are all learning together.

We will discuss our classroom's habits of engagement and I also encourage you to review UNT's student code of conduct so that we can all start with the same baseline civility and understanding (Code of Student Conduct) (https://policy.unt.edu/policy/07-012).

Required/Recommended Materials

The only class materials are the digital components and texts in Canvas. To fully participate in this class, students will need internet access to reference content on the Canvas Learning Management System and [faculty member to include other required equipment or software such as a webcam, microphone, Adobe Photoshop, etc.]. If circumstances change, you will be informed of other technical needs to access course content. Information on how to be successful in a digital learning environment can be found at Learn Anywhere (https://online.unt.edu/learn).

Course Requirements/Schedule

Week 1 : an introduction to play

Roger Ebert, "Video games can never be art" (rogerebert.com, April 16, 2010)

Johan Huizinga, "Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon." from Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture

Week 2: sociology of free play

Imad Khan, "Why Animal Crossing Is the Game for the Coronavirus Moment," New York Times, (April 7, 2020)

Shulamith N Armintor, "Shula's New Horizon-aries" (August 2020)

excerpt from Celia Pearce and Artemesia, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual World*s, 155-190.

Week 3: what are games?

Ian Bogost, "The Rhetoric of Video Games," from The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning. Ed. by Katie Salen. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008.

C Thi Nguyen, " Philosophy of Games," Philosophy Compass, V. 12, Issue 8 (August 2017)

excerpt from Bernard Suits, The Grasshopper (1978)

Week 4: games as models of reality: mimesis

Greg Costikyan, "I Have No Words & I Must Design," Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference ed. Frans Mäyrä. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002.

James F. Dunnigan, "The Primary Law of Warfare: Murphy's," and "Who Wins," from How to Make War (4th ed.)

Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren, excerpts from the manual for Chainmail (3rd edition, 1975)

Week 5: games as models of (un)reality, part 2: game theory as such

Ken Binmore, "The Name of the Game," and "Conventions," from *Game Theory: a very short introduction*

Binmore, "Reciprocity" and "Information"

Week 6: games without narratives (Tetris, clickers, etc.)

Espen Aarseth, “A Multi-Dimensional Typology of Games,"

The parts of Janet Murray's Hamlet on the Holodeck (1997; 2016) where she famously talks about Tetris as a narrative:

"Games as Symbolic Dramas," and "Agency: 2016 Update"

-- Murray, Janet H. Hamlet on the Holodeck, updated edition: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace. MIT press, 2017.

Moralde, Oscar. "Wait wait… don't play me: The clicker game genre and configuring everyday temporalities." (2019).

Week 7: playing literary games with narrative choices

Christian Swineheart, "One Book, Many Readings" https://samizdat.co/cyoa/

Leslie Jamison, "The Enduring Allure of Choose Your Own Adventure Books," The New Yorker, September 12, 2022.

Edward Packard, *Choose Your Own Adventure 18; Underground Kingdom*

Week 8: playing literary narratives with game choices

Borges, "The Library of Babel,""The Garden of Forking Paths", "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

Week 9: game narrative

Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture"

Dossier on *Zork I* (1979)

Nick Montfort, "The Pleasure of the Text Adventure" from *Twisty Little Passages*

Week 10: ethical decisions in (and through) digital games

James Gee, "Cultural Models: Do You Want to be the Blue Sonic or the Dark Sonic?"

Dossier on Saadia (side quest in *Skyrim* [2011])

Dossier on *Mass Effect* (dev. Hudson, Watamaniuk, Falkner, et al., BioWare, 2007)

Dossier on *Undertale* (dev. Toby Fox, 2015)

Week 11: How to analyze a game experience: digital game narrative, content "goals," and critiquable design choices

Dossiers on the following games:

Detroit: Become Human (2018)

Bioshock Infinite (dev. Ken Levine, et al.., 2013)

Death Stranding (2019)

Cyberpunk 2077 (2020)

Week 12: other expressions and uses of familiar genres

Dossier on *Butterfly Soup* (dev. Brianna Lei, 2017)

Sal Humphreys, "On Being a Feminist in Games Studies.' Games and Culture, v. 14 (7-8), 2019

Dossier on the *Silent Hill* series

Diary of a Spaceport Janitor (2016) **beginning of the game (with commentary): https://youtu.be/26B97tCsdrY?si=xsHN-05PY1PXTlAk**

Celeste (2018): an article about both of these games, among others:

https://www.frieze.com/article/how-video-games-discovered-their-humanity

Interpretive essay about *Celeste*:

https://youtu.be/xhL4fLiX3d4?si=KMuQCUXhwTBAqdo5

Todd Harper, "Role Play as Q*** Lens: How 'ClosetShep' Changed My Vision of Mass Effect" in Q**** *Game* Studies, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minnesota, 2017)

Week 13: games, life and their respective limits

Dossier on Passage (dev. Jason Rohrer, 2007)

Brian Oilu, “Living Inside and Outside Jason Rohrer’s *Passage*”

Dossier on The Stanley Parable (dev. Wreden and Pugh, Galactic Cafe, 2013)

Dossier on The Beginner's Guide (dev. Wreden, Breit, and Flanagan, Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015)

Week 14 : undecidability and games we’re not meant to win

Kafka, excerpt from *The Castle*

Dossier on Dark Souls (dir. Miyazaki; FromSoftware, 2011)

Dossier on *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar, 2018)

Individual zoom meetings about final projects will be conducted during week 15.

There is no final exam for this course.

Final assignment due **December 12th.**

Breakdown of Grade/Description of Assignments:

Weekly Discussion Posts (on Canvas)- 10% of final grade

Weekly Assignments (due Saturdays, on Canvas, 300 words or so) - 15% of final grade

Midterm Project (7-9 pp.) - 35% of final grade

Final Project (8-10 pp.) - 40% of final grade

Weekly Discussion Posts: For the prompt posted early in the week (probably Tuesday), everyone will answer the same prompt. You won't need to have done the reading to answer this prompt, and you do not need to respond to posts (although you may).

Weekly assignments: Prompts for weekly assignments (due on Friday) will be posted on Tuesday.

The **Midterm Project** needs to be a written paper, and based on the readings for the course.

Final Project: this may take the form of either an analytic paper or a creative project (game, dramatic presentation, video essay, or other form of artistic expression). If you choose the latter (and I encourage everyone to do that if you're so moved), you still must write an analytic text accompanying it, explaining your approach and how your project relates to the readings in the course.

Students will be notified by Eagle Alert if there is a campus closing that will impact a class and describe that the calendar is subject to change, citing the Campus Closures Policy (https://policy.unt.edu/policy/15-006).

Assessing Your Work

Don't plagiarize, do sloppy work, or try to get away with not doing the reading. Don't use generative AI either. All policies of UNT are in effect in this course (naturally), but I want to take time to draw your attention to four items in the official UNT Policy Manual [policy.unt.edu], under the heading of 18.1.16, Student Standards of Academic Integrity. My commentary on the policy is in bold type.
[A. Cheating]
"2. dependence upon the aid of sources beyond those authorized by the instructor in writing papers, preparing reports, solving problems or carrying out other assignments"
"4. dual submission of a paper or project, or re-submission of a paper or project to a different class without express permission from the instructor"

People have been doing this double submission thing with increased frequency lately: don't. I'll fail the paper. If you are pressed for time, get in touch with me.

[B. Plagiarism]

"Use of another's thoughts or words without proper attribution in any academic exercise, regardless of the student's intent, including but not limited to:

1. the knowing or negligent use by paraphrase or direct quotation of the published orunpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgement or citation.
2. the knowing or negligent unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or by an agency engaged in selling term papers or other academic materials."

Again, self-explanatory. If you turn in a paper to me of which all or part is plagiarized, you will fail this course, and the incident will be reported to the English Department Chair. If you're not clear on what plagiarism is now (distinguished from simply bad scholarship), do not worry: we'll talk about that at length.

The use of ChatGPT to write things for this class also falls under the rubric of academic dishonesty, and I don't want people to use it. I'll be able to tell. However, I expect that not many of you are going to go for that anyway, because by now, I think we're all seeing how poor a tool it is. The university still hasn't defined its policy on this. But I'm saying here that you shouldn't use it. Much easier to do the writing yourself.

Note on attendance, class participation and papers:

I expect everyone to show up, do the reading, and bring it. Your grades aren't negotiable. If you want me to explain why I graded a certain assignment a certain way, I'll do that. But "A" students don't speak to their professors only to put them on trial.

If you simply vanish into thin air, don't expect me to pester you via e-mail as to your whereabouts. Ditto if you never turn anything in, or are missing your last assignment(s).

Late Paper Policy:

I will deduct .33 of a grade for each day a paper is late. For example, if you turn in a B paper, and it's a day late, the grade gets docked down to a B minus. Also, late papers don't get comments. If you need an extension, ask.

Turning in Papers:

All assignments will be turned in on Canvas.

Notes on grade calculation:

Here are the letter grades I give for assignments, and the grade points they're worth:

A :100-90
B: 90-80
C: 80-70
D: 70-60

Attendance and Participation

Research has shown that students who attend class are more likely to be successful. You should attend every class unless you have a university excused absence such as active military service, a religious holy day, or an official university function as stated in the Student Attendance and Authorized Absences Policy (PDF) (https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-039). If you cannot attend a class due to an emergency, please let me know. Your safety and well-being are important to me.