Fall 2025 - MRTS 3445.001: *Video Game Histories*

Dr. Stephen Mandiberg (he/him) – Stephen.Mandiberg@unt.edu
Tuesday/Thursday 12:30 - 1:50pm in RTFP 264 (or Willis Library 250H)
Office Hours: Wednesday 11:00am-1:00pm in RTFP 224, or by appointment; remote meetings by request

Course Description:
The popular history of video games is based around a logic of upgrades and improvement: a modern understanding of evolution, from the first generation Magnavox Odyssey to the current 9th generation Microsoft Xbox Series X, Sony Playstation 5 and Nintendo Switch. In this class we will begin with this popular, "industry history" of video games before broadening our scope to look at different histories ranging from gendered marketing to centuries of table top games. Students will get a broad understanding of the history of video games, and they will critically approach how different interpretations lead to different futures of video games as a medium, industry, and cultural form. Readings will include academic and popular accounts, and playing and writing about various games is required. While experienced gamers are welcome, experience as a game player is unnecessary for participating in the class.

By the end of this course students will be able to:
• Draw on a survey knowledge of the history of video games.
• Understand the difference between industry and alternative histories of video games.
• Apply different historical approaches to the analysis of video games.
• Play video games with a focus on developing audio-visual and ludic literacy.
• Present complex theories in a succinct fashion to a layman audience.
• Strategically read large amounts of text.
• Compose analytic essays that incorporate both the industry and alternative histories.
• Discuss how video games matter as more than entertainment: they matter as a medium, as a commodity, as a form of communication, as a social practice, as a human problem, as a means of learning, and as an art form.

Required Materials:
• All readings and documentaries are available free online through:
    • Online Course Reserves – at http://iii.library.unt.edu/search/p?SEARCH=mandiberg ; the password is vgh2025f
    • Canvas – all additional readings can be found as either a pdf online or a URL on Canvas
• 2 Games - You will need to play two games: one for each assignment. You may not use the same game for both assignments. Consoles and games are available to borrow through the UNT Media Library (Willis 260). However, you can also acquire/use your own games. There are many free options available for any platform. Contact me if you are having trouble finding/picking games for the analyses.
• Trip to Free Play Denton ($12 entrance fee; $8 with school ID; $6 for early bird access)

Assignments:

• Readings and Documentaries - Readings should be read and documentaries should be watched before the class day they are listed to be able to participate and get the most out of each class and prepare for the quizzes.

• Quizzes - The 3-question in-class quizzes (10 min) are cumulative, drawing from the current and previous weeks' readings, watchings, lectures, discussions, and activities. *The lowest quiz score will be dropped from your final quiz grade.*

• Analysis 1: Industry History: Pick a game and explain how it *fits within* or *breaks from* the standard/dominant/hegemonic industry history of video games? (*Detailed instructions available on Canvas*)
  • Research/Gameplay Notes #1 - four entries (see details below)
  • Expanded Outline - Full outline of argument with unpacked/mostly written thesis, points, examples, and clear argument structure with paragraphs fully organized logically.
  • Industry History Essay - A 1500 word (minimum, not including bibliography) analytic essay that carefully argues how your chosen game *fits within* or *breaks from* the dominant, industry supported history of video games.
  • (*optional*) Industry History Essay Revisions - These must be done using track changes or a similar peer reviewing system so that your edits are clearly visible. Submissions without visible track changes will not be graded. Late initial submissions can be submitted in lieu of revisions without a grade drop.

• Analysis 2: Curating Game History: a) Pick a game and show why it should be included in a museum (must pick museum carefully); b) Pick a game that's in a museum or show why it should be expunged from the museum and canon; c) Each of the above prompts can instead be directed toward the class syllabus. Each option must use theories/readings from the second half of the course. (*Detailed instructions available on Canvas*)
  • Research/Gameplay Notes #2 - four entries (see details below)
  • Draft/Script – *you are locked into your choice when you submit either the draft or script*
    • Analysis #2 Presentation Draft - The fully created argument in written draft, PowerPoint, and other presentation elements.
    • Analysis #2 Script - A two-column script of your proposed video essay
  • Formal Presentation or Video Essay
    • Formal Presentation Option - A 5-10 minute formal and polished presentation of your argument. Q&A session after your presentation. Must use visual presentation aids, and at least one of the readings from the second half of the class.
    • Video Essay Option - An 8-15 minute video that uses extensive audio and visual components and careful editing. Must use at least one reading from the second half of the class, and it must attribute all audio, visual, and written sources in video.

• Research/Gameplay Notes – You will need to pick, play and study a game for each of the two analyses.

- We will discuss studying/researching games in detail during study each game ***four times***; study sessions should last about 45 minutes, and the writing should take about 15 minutes. You must format your notes so that I can see 4 sessions of research/play. Study can include playing or more general researching.
  - 4 hours is not enough time to finish most games, but it is enough time to get a good enough picture of the game to write about it. With many games researching and thinking about the game is equally fruitful and counts as "study" time. For the second assignment, studying the museum counts as research time.
- Your Research/Gameplay Notes ***must engage with the readings of the course***, and should consider the games you are playing in as many ways as you can think of (narrative, design, experiential, cultural, production, etc). You must think through the readings/theory when playing your games and this needs to be visible in your notes. Think of the Research/Gameplay Notes as a step toward writing your essays: the ***notes are descriptive***, but they will help you be analytic when writing your essays!
- Possible formats include: paper notebook, digital text file, personal online blog, or vlog. Let's Play, video recordings, and audio recordings are allowed, but must include one minute summaries for each entry.

Formula for Final Grade:
- Attendance and Participation (10%)
- Quizzes (20% - 10 quizzes, lowest dropped)
- Analysis 1: Industry History
  - Research/Gameplay Notes #1 (5%)
  - Expanded Outline (10%)
  - Industry History Essay (20%)
- Analysis 2: Curating Game History
  - Research/Gameplay Notes #2 (5%)
  - Curating Game History Draft/Script (10%)
  - Curating Game History Formal Presentation or Video Essay (20%)

General Grading Criteria:
- **A.** The student demonstrated an excellent understanding of course material, and presented clear, well-articulated analysis in written works. The student is able to intelligently employ terms and concepts introduced in class in proving his or her thesis. The student was highly motivated and nearly always participated in discussions. [90-100 = A]
- **B.** The student demonstrated accurate comprehension of course material, but the student's understanding did not go beyond the basic requirements. Ideas are presented in clear and direct manner with few errors. Analysis was incomplete, the thesis was unclear, or there was a gap between the thesis and argument. The student was attentive in class, but often did not participate. [80-89.99 = B]
- **C.** The student demonstrated an incomplete understanding of course material. Written ideas and arguments were incomplete, unclear, often inaccurate, and generally needed editing. The student was often distracted in class, and rarely participated. [70-79.99 = C]

D. The student showed inadequate comprehension of the basic premise, and core concepts of the course. Writing did not fulfill the assignment, and was constructed poorly. The student often failed to attend class, or inattentively attended class while on a device. [60-69.99 = D]

F. Work not submitted; or submitted in a way that fails to fulfill requirements. [0-59.99 = F]

Late or Missed Assignments:
Most late work is accepted for one week after the original deadline (peer review and end of term work not accepted late), but will be marked down by one grade point (A→B, etc). Work submitted after the one-week grace period will be marked down by two grade points (A→C, etc). Unsubmitted work will receive a 0. Exceptions may be granted for religious holy days, for active military service, for official university functions, for pregnancy/parenting under Title IX, and for medical or family emergencies. In the event of emergencies, documentation (e.g., doctor's note) must be provide within 1 week following the absence. Upon returning to class you have 1 week to reschedule the exam and/or submit the assignment

Attendance and Participation:
Attendance is mandatory. Attendance may be taken at the beginning and/or end of each class. *Six or more unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the course*. In addition to being in a seat, your grade depends on active participation during class. If you are unable to participate during class please talk to me to work out alternate strategies for participation. Discussing theories during office hours can count as participation!

Questions:
If you have any questions, ask them! Short/simple questions are best through email; long/complex questions are best through office hours. Grades may only be disputed in person during office hours.

Problems:
Please talk to me if you have any problems. Email me immediately if readings are no longer available through the eLibrary, or if the links provided are dead. That said, searching for the text through the library portal (or scholar.google.com) will often solve any broken link problems.

VPN:
The readings are available digitally, but they often require you to be on campus, or to sign in as if you were on campus so that you do not have to pay for the materials. The most common way this happens is through using a VPN (virtual private network). Detailed instructions on setting up a VPN on your computer, tablet, or phone can be found here: https://itss.untsystem.edu/sites/default/files/campus_vpn.pdf.

TurnItIn:
By taking this course students agree that certain required assignments will be subject to submission for textual similarity and AI review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference

database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. Use of the Turnitin.com service is subject to the terms of use agreement posted on the Turnitin.com site.

Academic Integrity:
According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. Using ChatGBT and other forms of AI writing tools is a similar form of academic integrity violation. While some classes utilize AI writing, this class does not. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University. Plagiarism of any sort will not be tolerated. As a minimum, plagiarizing will result in failure for the assignment. It might also result in further sanctions at the university level. Familiarize yourself with the UNT policy at: https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003.

AI Usage:
As stated in the Academic Integrity policy above, this class does not allow the use of Generative AI tools like Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini, etc. While these tools can be helpful in some contexts, they do not align with our goal of fostering the development of your independent thinking. However, some AI adjacent writing tools like Grammarly are allowed with provisions. As noted above in the TurnItIn policy, all work is subject to submission for textual similarity and AI review. In accordance with the UNT Honor Code, if you use Grammarly or a similar writing assistance tool you must disclose your use and submit a clean, initial draft of your paper. Both your initial draft and your final, Grammarly assisted draft must be submitted to TurnItIn. It is mandatory that you disclose your use and that TurnItIn not detect any use of AI in your initial draft.

Disability Accommodations:
UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of 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 accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class.

If you require or think you may require accommodations for disabilities, please register with UNT's Office of Disability Accommodation at 940-565-4323, Sage Hall Suite 167, or https://disability.unt.edu/. If you do not register and request we cannot make arrangements to fit your needs.

Emergency Notification and Procedures:

UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to Canvas for contingency plans for covering course materials.

Content Warnings:
This class requires that you are willing to explore issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion from a critical standpoint within an educational framework. If you are unable or unwilling to do this you should think about enrolling in a different class.

Schedule:
(A Critical Take on) Industry History
August 19 - Class 1 - Introduction

August 21 - Class 2 - Studying Games and History
• "Video Game History." History Channel - https://www.history.com/topics/inventions/history-of-video-games
• "Video Game History." Smithsonian Institution - https://www.si.edu/spotlight/the-father-of-the-video-game-the-ralph-baer-prototypes-and-electronic-games/video-game-history
• "The History of Gaming." HistoryDegree.net - https://www.historydegree.net/history-of-gaming/
• "Video Game History Timeline." The Strong: National Museum of Play - https://www.museumofplay.org/about/icheg/video-game-history/timeline
• Documentary - *Video Games: The Movie* (2014; watch first 32 minutes) [GV1469.3 VID 2014 DVD] [YouTube Access]

August 26 - Class 3 - The Many Origins of Video Game History
• Steven Kent. 2001. *The Ultimate History of Video Games*: Chapters 2-4, 6. (51 pages) [Library eBook]

August 28 - Class 4 - Generations as History
• Quiz #1 (Class 1-4)
• N/A - go to an arcade (see below)

September 2 - Class 5 - Arcade Excursion
[note: due to the early hours of class we will not be going as a class - the arcade is not yet open.]
During the day of class or at some other time during the week you need to go to FREEPLAY (101 W. Hickory Street, Denton, TX 76201) or a similar arcade. Email receipt/notes/picture evidence for attendance/participation credit.

September 4 - Class 6 - The Golden Age
• Kent. 2001. *Ultimate History*: Chapters 10-12. (75 pages) 123-198. [Library eBook]

September 9 - Class 7 - Corporations, Companies, Creators and Crashes
• Quiz #2 (Class 3-7)
• Kent. 2001. *Ultimate History*: Chapters 13, 14, 16. (58 pages) 199-240, 259-276. [Library eBook]

September 11 - Class 8 - The Console Wars (2nd-4th Generations)
MEET IN THE MEDIA LIBRARY (WILLIS LIBRARY 250H)
• Kent. 2001. *Ultimate History*: Chapters 17-18. (35 pages) 277-312. [Library eBook]

September 16 - Class 9 - The Console Wars (5-6th Generations)
MEET IN THE MEDIA LIBRARY (WILLIS LIBRARY 250H)
• Kent. 2001. *Ultimate History*: Chapters 22-24. (63 pages) 397-460. [Library eBook]

September 18 - Class 10 - "Industry History"
• Quiz #3 (Class 6-9)
• Jesper Juul. 2009. "A Casual Revolution" in *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*: pp. 1-23. [Library eBook]

September 23 - Class 11 - Fragmentation
MEET IN THE MEDIA LIBRARY (WILLIS LIBRARY 250H)
• Documentary - *Indie Game: The Movie* (2012; 103min) [QA76.76.C672 IND 2012 DVD] [Library Online Access]

September 25 - Class 12 - Research Workshop (part 1)
MEET IN THE MEDIA LIBRARY (WILLIS LIBRARY 250H)
• Quiz #4 (Class 8-11)

September 30 - Class 13 - Research Workshop (part 2)
MEET IN THE MEDIA LIBRARY (WILLIS LIBRARY 250H)
• Research/Gameplay Notes #1 (upload to Canvas by 11:59pm on Friday)

October 2 - Class 14 - Writing Workshop

October 7 - Class 15 - Writing Workshop: Solo Outlining
• Analysis #1 Expanded Outline (upload to Canvas by 11:59pm on Friday)

Alternate Histories

October 9 - Class 16 - The Hegemony of Play
• Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce. 2007. "The Hegemony of Play." In *Digital Gaming Research Association: Situated Play*. Tokyo. [https://ict.usc.edu/pubs/The%20Hegemony%20of%20Play.pdf]
• (*optional*) Carly Kocurek. 2016. "Identities" in *Debugging Game History*, edited by Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins: pp. 237-246. [Library eBook]

October 14 - Class 17 - The Gendering of Game History
• Documentary - *GTFO: Get the F&#% Out* (2015; 76min) [Library Online Access]

October 16 - Class 18 - Linearity: Progress, Retro, and Nostalgia
• Quiz #5 (Class 10-11, 16-17)
• Industry History Essay (upload to Canvas by 11:59pm on Friday)
• Brett Camper. 2009. "Retro Reflexivity: *La Mulana*, an 8 bit Period Piece" in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2,* edited by Perron and Wolf: pp. 169-195. [Library eBook]

October 21 - Class 19 - Linearity: Demakes and Intentional Aesthetics

October 23 - Class 20 - National Industries and Histories
• Quiz #6 (Class 16-19)
• Choose One (skim the other two ~5min):
    • Wesley Kirinya. "Africa" in *Video Games Around the World*: pp. 17-28. [Library eBook]
    • Alexis Blanchet. "France" in *Video Games Around the World*: pp. 175-191. [Library eBook]
    • Melanie Swalwell. "New Zealand" in *Video Games Around the World*: pp. 377-389. [Library eBook]

October 28 - Class 21 - Local Histories and Indigenous games
• *Never Alone <Kisima Ingitchuna>* Game, Developer, and Publisher info - http://neveralonegame.com/

October 30 - Class 22 - Materiality in History: Board Games (Part 1)
MEET IN THE MEDIA LIBRARY (WILLIS LIBRARY 250H)
• Quiz #7 (Class 18-21)
• Mary Flanagan. 2009. "Board Games" in *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*: pp. 63-116. [Library eBook]

November 4 - Class 23 - Materiality in History: Board Games (Part 2)
MEET IN THE MEDIA LIBRARY (WILLIS LIBRARY 250H)
• Jill Lepore. 2012. "The Meaning of Life." *Harvard Thinks Big 3*. Harvard University. [YouTube]
• (*optional*) Matthew Kirschenbaum. 2016. "Kriegsspiel" in *Debugging Game History*, edited by Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins: pp. 279-286. [Library eBook]

November 6 - Class 24 - Materiality in History: Museums and Boxes
MEET IN THE MEDIA LIBRARY (WILLIS LIBRARY 250H)
• Quiz #8 (Class 20-23)
• Raiford Guins. 2014. "Thinking Outside the (Game Cartridge) Box" in *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife*: 167-206. [Library eBook]

- Paola Antonelli. 2013. "Why I brought Pac-Man to MoMA." *TED*. [https://www.ted.com/talks/paola_antonelli_why_i_brought_pac_man_to_moma/transcript?subtitle=en]
- Paola Antonelli and Paul Galloway. Nov 3, 2022. "When Video Games Came to the Museum." *MoMA Magazine*. [https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/798]

November 11 - Class 25 - Materiality in History: The Changing Materiality of Video Games
MEET IN THE MEDIA LIBRARY (WILLIS LIBRARY 250H)

November 13 - Class 26 - Afterlives: Digging Up History
- Quiz #9 (Class 22-25)
- Documentary - *Atari: Game Over* (2014; 66min) [Library Online Access]

November 18 - Class 27 - Afterlives: Preservation
- Mark Guttenbrunner, Christoph Becker, and Andreas Rauber. 2010. "Keeping the Game Alive: Evaluating Strategies for the Preservation of Console Video Games." *The International Journal of Digital Curation* vol 5, no 1: pp. 64-90 [http://www.ijdc.net/index.php/ijdc/article/view/147/209]

November 20 - Class 28 - Wrap Up and Presentation Workshop
- Quiz #10 (Class 24-27)
- Curating Game History Presentation Draft or Video Essay 2-Column Script (upload to Canvas before class)
    - Peer Review during class; professor comments within 2 days
- Research/Gameplay Notes #2 (upload to Canvas by 11:59pm on Friday)

Thanksgiving Break - November 24-November 30

December 2 and 4 - Class 29 and 30 - Formal Presentations
    - *Note 1: These will be recorded for grading purposes.*
    - *Note 2: Presentations will continue during Finals Week if we run out of time (see below)*

Finals Week (December 8-12)
- (*continued*) Formal Presentations (if necessary) will be during assigned Finals slot (tba)
- Curating Game History Video Essay (upload to Canvas by 11:59pm on day of Finals slot)
- (*optional*) Industry History Essay Revisions (upload to Canvas by 11:59pm on on day of Finals slot)