Film/Media 187CG
Countergaming:
The Video Game Industry and Its Discontents

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SSMS 2024   Mon & Wed 4pm-6:50pm
Office Hours: W 1:30pm-2:50pm, or by appt.   SSMS 2017
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Course Description

Having overtaken the film industry more than a decade ago, the video game industry is poised to become the largest entertainment industry in the world, generating more than $60 billion globally this past year and engaging billions of people through game consoles, computers, and mobile devices. Yet the cost of sustaining such an industry is the standardization of production practices, game styles and genres, the result of which is a lack of innovation, narrative diversity, or representational equality in the largest, most publically visible digital games. Moreover, as an industry dominated by largely young white men, the variety of visions and voices allowed to craft the latest big budget interactive experiences is limited to a narrow worldview.

What is a video game? What is the video game industry? What are the significant challenges and critiques leveled against the games industry by humanist scholars, game designers, feminists, and cultural critics? How can we critique the video game industry using its own technologies as critical tools? How can games be used as persuasive or rhetorical statements? What is a countergame? This six-week intensive course offers students the chance to engage with scholarly critiques of digital game production tropes, gender and racial dynamics, heteronormativity, and relationship to the global machinery of war and capitalism by producing original digital game prototypes that combine theory and practice.

Access to a personal laptop is STRONGLY RECOMMENDED for this course. This course requires little to no programming or artistic experience. We will be using free and/or cheap programs like GameMaker, RPG Maker, and Twine, among others, to implement the creative visions and critiques of the student groups.

Course Objectives

1. Have an understanding of digital games, the gaming industry, and its cultures.
2. Have an understanding of basic game design theories.
3. Have an understanding of some significant critiques of the games industry and cultures.
4. Complete a game prototype that communicates one of these critiques through game design, game narrative, or game aesthetics.

Required Reading

There are no required books for this class. All reading materials are available on the GauchoSpace website. While suggested readings are encouraged, they are obviously not required. However, they will be helpful once your group decides on a critique to emphasize in your game prototype.

Grade Breakdown

Quizzes (10 percent): short writing assignments at the beginning of every class based on the assigned reading. (1-3 points)
Participation (10 percent): remain engaged and active during class and group-work time.
Presentations (15 percent): Final day of class. 15-minute presentation of game prototypes (10 minutes for presentation. 5 minutes for questions and comments from class).
Game Prototype (35 percent): Working within a group (3-4 people), students will create a working game prototype that communicates a critique of the games industry or culture through the game design, narrative, aesthetics, or a combination of these elements. See list of game-making tools below.
Final paper (30 percent): 5-10 pages. 1) addresses how one or more scholarly critiques are expressed in the game design through a detailed description of the game and a reasoned argument for the decisions made during production; 2) includes a self-assessment of your work on the project; 3) includes assessments for other members of your development group.

Assignments

Students will spend the first several weeks of the course reading and discussing article selections that develop an understanding of game design, the games industry, and the most significant critiques of the industry and culture of digital games. During this time students will be responsible for a few readings before every class, along with a choice of assigned games. The games are meant to give students an idea of what kind of prototypes they can make with the software available. Usually students will be able to choose between multiple games to play, and they should be prepared to discuss whatever game they try out.

For the latter portion of the course we will shift to original group-based game projects that critically engage with one or more of the critiques covered in the readings. These critiques will manifest themselves through design, aesthetics, narrative, gameplay, or a combination of these elements. **This course requires little to no programming or artistic experience**, since we will be using free programs like GameMaker, RPG Maker, and Twine, among others, to implement the creative visions and critiques of the student groups. **However, it is STRONGLY RECOMMENDED that students have their own laptop computers they can bring to class**, since a majority of time in the second half of the course will be devoted to group-based game production. Of course, any experienced students are encouraged to create game prototypes with more advanced software, if they choose to. In addition to the game concept developed as a group, students will also be responsible for writing a 5-10 page designer's statement justifying

their group's design decisions using the readings from the course to guide the critical analysis. This statement will also include a self-assessment and an assessment of your group members.

General course politics, procedures, and fine print

Attendance: Owing to the limited number of class periods and the intensive amount of work we need to accomplish in six weeks, attendance is mandatory. Missing class results in missing the quiz for that day and deducts from your overall participation grade. The only exception to this policy is in the case of extreme circumstances, severe illness, or family emergencies. If you absolutely have to miss class, please let me know as soon as possible with the particulars, and we can work out arrangements for making up work. **Missing more than three courses without an excuse of extreme circumstances will result in a failing grade for the student.**

Late work: I will not accept late assignments, barring extraordinary circumstances. All due dates are listed on this syllabus. If you feel you cannot keep up with the reading load or group-work, you should not take this course.

Academic dishonesty: UCSB prohibits students from engaging in academic dishonesty, which includes cheating, plagiarism, forgery, furnishing false information to the University, and alteration or misuse of University documents, records, or identification. Anyone caught cheating or plagiarizing in this course will be reported to the University for disciplinary action. That said, making, modding, and hacking games involves a little bit of borrowing and repurposing. These activities will not be penalized. If you find a game that you want to hack or mod, feel free; just don't present somebody else's game as your own.

Students with disabilities or special needs: I would like to hear from anyone who has a disability that may require some modification of seating or class assignments so that appropriate arrangements can be made. Please talk to me either immediately following class, through email, or during office hours.

Complaint procedure: If you have a question, concern or complaint about the design or content or grading in this course, you should discuss the matter with me as soon as possible. If a satisfactory solution can't be reached, you should make an appointment with Professor Cristina Venegas, Chair of the Film and Media Studies Dept.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Games and Countergames

Day 1: Monday, June 23: Introductions: The Digital Game Industry and Games as Texts

To Read:

> Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, "Defining Play," "Defining Games," and "Defining Digital Games," from Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals

Suggested Reading:

> Kerr, A. (2006). "Digital Games as Cultural Industry," 43-74; "Global Networks and Cultures of Production," 75-102. In *The business and culture of digital games: Gamework and gameplay*, chapter on structure of game industry. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
>
> Jane McGonigal, "Introduction: Reality is Broken" and "What Exactly is a Game?" from *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, 1-34.

IN CLASS: Icebreakers, Syllabus, Intro to game studies and the video game industry; Brief history of generic conventions in digital games; Defining key terms: Play, System, Video Game, Game, Game genres; Overview of game creation tools; Screening: *Indie Game The Movie*

Day 2: Wednesday, June 25: Game Design, Modding, and Meaning

To Read:

> Anna Anthropy, "Changing the Game," from *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*
>
> Alexander Galloway, "Countergaming" from Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture, 1-38.

Suggested Reading:

> Anna Anthropy, "The Problem with Videogames," from *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*
>
> Ian Bogost, "The Rhetoric of Video Games" from The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning, ed. Katie Salen.
>
> Alexander Galloway, "Gamic Action, Four Moments," from Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture, 1- 38.
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> Wollen, Peter. (1982). *Readings and writings: Semiotic counter-strategies*, excerpts on counter-cinema. London: Verso.
>
> Claire Johnson, "Women's Cinema as Countercinema"

To Play: Download and install Game Maker, complete tutorial game: Windows Mac (some of this may be done in class): https://www.yoyogames.com/studio

IN CLASS: Define key terms: Countercinema. Countergaming. Look at examples of games made in GameMaker; Class tutorial of GameMaker.

Week 2: Critical Game Design, Play and Labor

Day 3: Monday, June 30: Critical Game Design

To Read:

Anna Anthropy, "Making the Games," from *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*
Molleindustria: http://www.molleindustria.org/blog/making-games-in-a-fucked-up-world-games-for-change-2014/
Mary Flanagan, "Introduction to Critical Play," 1-15; "Designing for Critical Play," 251-263, from Critical Play: Radical Game Design.

Suggested Reading:

Excerpts from Critical Art Ensemble. (2001). *Digital resistance: Explorations in tactical media*. New York: Autonomedia.
De Certeau, M. (1988). 'Making do': Uses and tactics. In *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Los Angeles: University of California Press.
Rita Raley, excerpts from *Tactical Media*

To Play:
PICK ONE:
Auntie Pixelante, Dys4ia: http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/591565
Merrit Kopas, Lim: http://mkopas.net/files/Lim/
Molleindustria, Kosmosis: http://www.molleindustria.org/kosmosis/kosmosis.html

IN CLASS: Define key terms, subverting canonic game genres, examine critical games; in-class demos in relation to readings; Molleindustria activity (http://www.molleindustria.org/blog/a-computerless-videogame-modding-workshop).

Day 4: Wednesday, July 2: Play and Labor

To Read:

Dyer-Witherford, N., and de Peuter, G., "Cognitive Capitalism: Electronic Arts," from *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Deuze, M., Martin, C. B., and Allen, C. (2007). The professional identity of gameworkers. *Convergence* 13(4), 335-353.

Suggested Reading:

2014 Developer Satisfaction Survey Summary

To Play:
Download Twine and play around with it: http://twinery.org/
PICK ONE:
Even Cowgirls Bleed: http://scoutshonour.com/cowgirl/
A(s)century: http://thecalcutec.itch.io/ascentury
Negative Space:http://mkopas.net/files/notmine/negativespace/negativespace.html

IN CLASS: Labor in the gaming industry; define key terms: Cognitive Capitalism, Knowledge Economy, Crunch; group work: brainstorm game ideas to critique labor issues in games industry,

share with class. Introduction to Twine; play with Twine in small groups, write short story with player choices. PICK GROUPS (2-3 people) FOR FINAL PROJECT and brainstorm with group for final project.

Week 3: Gender and Race in Gaming

Day 5: Monday, July 7: Gender and Games

To Read:

> Consalvo, M. (2008). Crunched by passion: Women game developers and workplace challenges. In Y. B. Kafai, J. Denner, C. Heeter, and J. Y. Sun (Eds.), *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (177-193). Cambridge: MIT Press.
> Leigh Alexander, "Taking on the Challenges of being a Mom in Game Development," http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/209100/taking_on_the_challenges_of_being_.php

Suggested Reading:

> Huntemann, Nina B. "Women in Video Games: The Case of Hardware Production and Promotion," 41-58.
> Thornham, "It's a boy thing: Gaming, gender, and geeks"
> Vanderhoef, J. (2013) "Casual Threats: The Feminization of Casual Video Games." Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology, No.2.

To Play:
> PICK ONE:
> > Always Sometimes Monsters (PC Only)
> > Lisa (PC Only): http://rpgmaker.net/games/4412/
> > Mainichi: http://www.mattiebrice.com/mainichi/
> > To the Moon

IN CLASS: Define key terms: gamer trouble, second-shift, emotional labor, afro geeks; Class demo of RPG Maker; group work: group members pitch game ideas to each other.

Day 6: Wednesday, July 9: Race and Sexuality

To Read:

> Everett, Anna. "Serious Play: Playing with Race in Contemporary Gaming Culture, in *Digital diaspora: A race for cyberspace,* chapter on race and games. New York: SUNY Press.
> Shaw, Adrienne. "Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games." *Games and Culture* 4.3 (July 2009): 228-53.

Suggested Reading:

Evan Lauteria, "Ga(y)mer Theory: Queer Modding as Resistance"
        http://reconstruction.eserver.org/122/Lauteria_Evan.shtml
Guins, Raiford. "'May I Invade Your Space?' Black Technocultural Production,
        Ephemera, and Video Game Culture." Afro-Geeks: Beyond the Digital Divide,
        edited by Anna Everett, 113–134. Center for Black Studies Press: UCSB, 2007.
Gonzalo Frasca, "Videogames of the Oppressed"

To Play: Check Merritt's archive [http://forestambassador.com/]. Pick one game to play and
share with the class.

IN CLASS: Define key terms: planned obsolescence, e-waste; group activities, work time.
Groups pitch presentations of game ideas to class and instructor. Screening: *Gaming in Color*.

Week 4: Planned Obsolescence and Virtual War

Day 7: Monday, July 14: Planned Obsolescence

To Read:
        James Newman, "New Games," in Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and
                Obsolescence," NY: Routledge, 2013.
        Maxwell, Richard, and Toby Miller. "'Warm and Stuff': The Ecological Impact of
                Electronic Games." In *The Video Game Industry: Formation, Present State, and
                Future.*

Suggested Reading:

        Guins, Raiford. "Concrete and Clay: The Afterlife and Times of E.T. The Extra-
                Terrestrial for the Atari Video Computer System." *Design and Culture* 1, no. 3
                (2009), 345–364.
        Swalwell, Melanie. "The Remembering and the Forgetting of Early Digital Games: From
                Novelty to Detritus and Back Again." *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 2 (2007),
                255-273.

To Play:
        PICK ONE:
        Something from the Forest Ambassador Archive: http://forestambassador.com/archive
        Newsgaming, *September 12* http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm

IN CLASS: Define key terms, lecture, group work time.

**Day 8: Wednesday, July 16: Virtual War and the Military-Industrial-Entertainment
Complex**

To Read:

Selection from Games of Empire, "Banal War."
Rita Raley, "Virtual War: Information Visualization and Persuasive Gaming"
        from *Tactical Media*, excerpts.

Suggested: Introduction to *Joystick Soldiers*

To Play:
Adeline Koh, *Trading Races* http://tradingraces.adelinekoh.org
Antiwargame http://www.antiwargame.org
Something from the Forest Ambassador Archive: http://forestambassador.com/archive

IN CLASS: TBA

Week 5: Workshop and Initial Project Presentations

Day 9: Monday, July 21:

To Read: Any materials that might aid your game prototype.

To Play: Anything that inspires your current project.

IN CLASS: Present Prototype ideas to the class; group meetings with instructor; work time.

Day 10: Wednesday, July 23: Critical Crunch Time Part I

To Read: Any materials that might aid your game prototype.

To Play: Anything that inspires your current project.

IN CLASS: Group status reports, group meetings with instructor, work time.

Week 6: Workshop and Final Project Presentations

Day 11: Monday, July 28: Critical Crunch Time Part II

To Read: Any materials that might aid your game prototype.

To Play: Anything that inspires your current project.

IN CLASS: Group status reports, group meetings with instructor, work time.

Day 12: Wednesday, July 30: Presentations

IN CLASS: Finishing touches on game prototypes; groups present their game prototypes to class.

<u>Game Creation Resources</u>
  I will help you locate tutorials and other helpful resources for any of the below game creation tools. However, if you know of another tool your group would like to use, feel free to talk to me about it.

For a full list of accessible, mostly free software, see:
http://www.pixelprospector.com/the-big-list-of-game-making-tools/