

## Introduction to Game Studies: Concepts, Methods, and Issues

This course is designed to give students the basic tools to begin analyzing and writing about games, and to familiarize them with the history and present of academic discussion around games. We will start by analyzing some basic questions: what is play? what is a game? how do we recognize them? what kinds of evidence do we look for? how can we organize them into smaller or larger units? We then move on to survey the range of answers that the last twenty years of game studies has given to these questions. Students will learn about ludology, procedural rhetoric, platform studies, and critical play, among other methods. Finally, we will turn to several lively debates in contemporary game studies about topics such as the gamification of education and work, the role of agency in play, and how identity politics interacts with game culture. As we build a critical toolset throughout the course, we will continually practice those skills by analyzing and discussing a range of video games, from classics like *SimCity 2000*, to controversial titles such as *Grand Theft Auto*, and new experiments like *Thirty Flights of Loving*. Students will leave more prepared to think through their ordinary media environment, more thoughtful about their own design decisions, and with the skills to write about games for a range of audiences.

### Course Works

#### Texts

Debugging Game History  
Reverse Design: Super Mario World

#### Games

AaAaAA!! A Reckless Disregard for Gravity  
Grand Theft Auto, San Andres  
SimCity 2000  
TIS-1000  
Gone Home  
Thirty Flights of Loving

### Course Goals

- Develop a vocabulary of critical terms that make it possible to communicate about games within a scholarly and critical community
- Analyze the component parts of games for their cultural significance, in order to recognize the effects of games and communicate those effects in writing.
- Understand the history of game studies as an academic discipline; identify its potentials and limits for the kind of work you want to pursue
- Connect video games to wider questions and problems from the broader culture, and to discipline specific questions. Use games to illuminate questions that you bring from other coursework.

## Assignments

### Play Reflections

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Each week during the workshop period students will be given two prompts, one to write about the game that we played in the workshop, and one to write about that week's video game. Students should pick **one** of the prompts, write a short reflection (~300 words), and post it to the online course blog. You are responsible for writing **8** reflections over the term.

### Keyword Paper

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At the end of our unit on basic concepts, you will be responsible for writing a 'keyword' entry about some element of games. Some suggested topics include a genre (FPS, room escape, racing games, RTS), an art or audio style (cel shading, chiptunes, retro, hyper-realism), an element of level design (power-ups, secrets, teleports, platforms), or another key term of about the same specificity. In the week before the paper is due, I will hold mandatory office hours to talk about the topic with you. Your paper should outline the concept, give some examples of it, give some history, and make a claim for the importance of that concept.

### Level Analysis

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At the end of our second unit on methodology, you will use the techniques that Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton outline on one of the video games we have studied. For one level of a game, you will construct an "Object Inventory," an "Interface Study," an "Interaction Map," and a "Gameplay Log." Each of these elements has slightly different formal guidelines that will be detailed in a handout. Be prepared to discuss your level analysis in class.

### Argumentative Paper

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At the end of our final unit, you will write a short (5 page) argumentative paper that takes a stand on one of the debates in the field that we have examined. This paper should give a brief summary of how you understand the stakes of the debate, and positions that you are arguing with. It should then go on to stake a claim, and give good reasons and evidence for that claim.

## Basic Concepts

### **Week 1: Play and Game**

#### Readings

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"Playing" in *Debugging Game History*

Brian Upton, *Aesthetics of Play*, Chapters 1-3

#### Games

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Chess (workshop)

## **Week 2: Rules, Mechanics, Uncertainty**

### Readings

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“Mechanics,” “Procedurality” in *Debugging Game History*  
Greg Costikyan, “Uncertainty,” and “Analyzing Games”

### Games

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*HearthStone*, <https://us.battle.net/hearthstone/en/>  
*Magic: the Gathering* (workshop)

## **Week 3: Game Genres and the Medium**

### Readings

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“Adventure,” “Genre,” and “Games as Medium” in *Debugging Game History*  
Roger Caillois, “The Classification of Games”

### Games

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Fiasco (workshop)  
AaAaAA!!! A Reckless Disregard for Gravity (steam)

## A Survey of the Approaches

## **Week 4: Early Debates, Ludology and Narratology**

### Readings

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“Narrative,” “World Building,” “Role-Play” in *Debugging Game History*  
Espen Aarseth, “Aporia and Epiphany in Doom and the Speaking Clock”

### Games

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Emily Short, *Galatea*, <http://pr-if.org/play/galatea/>  
ZDoom, <https://zdoom.org/>

### **Keyword Due**

## **Week 5: Persuasive Play and Allegorithmic Thinking**

### Readings

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“Kriegspiel,” “Metagame” in *Debugging Game History*  
Ian Bogost, “The Rhetoric of Video Games”

### Games

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SimCity 2000 (GOG.com)  
WiiFit Games (in workshop)

## **Week 6: Platform Studies, Code Studies**

### Readings

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“Code,” “Console,” “Controller,” “Platform” in *Debugging Game History*  
Ian Bellomy, “What Counts: Configuring the Human in Platform Studies”

Games

Atari, Odyssey & Intellivision games (in workshop)  
TIS-1000 (Steam)

**Week 7: Aesthetics and Reception**

Readings

“Game Art,” “Game Audio,” “Game Balance,” in *Debugging Game History*  
Kiri Miller, “Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race and Place in Grand Theft Auto”

Games

Grand Theft Auto, San Andreas  
Game design tools demonstration (workshop)

**Week 8: Close Reading**

Readings

Mia Consalvo, Nathan Dutton, “Game Analysis”  
*Reverse Design: Super Mario World*

Games

Super Mario World (emulator)

Contemporary Debates

**Week 9: Gamification**

Readings

“Educational Games,” “Achievements” in *Debugging Game History*  
Patrick Jagoda, “Gamification and Other Forms of Play”

Games

Spent, <http://playspent.org/>  
Third World Farmer, <https://3rdworldfarmer.org/>  
Cookie Clicker, <http://orteil.dashnet.org/cookieclicker/>

**Level analysis due**

**Week 10: Agency vs. Addiction**

Readings

“Fun,” “Immersion” in *Debugging Game History*  
Natasha Schull, “Mapping the Machine Zone”

Games

The Stanley Parable (Demo), <https://www.stanleyparable.com/>  
Slot machine (in workshop)

## **Week 11: The Culture of Gaming**

### Readings

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“Game Culture,” “Identities,” “Classic Gaming” in *Debugging Game History*

Adrienne Massanari, “#GamerGate and the Fapping”

Carly Kocurek, “Gamers vs. Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” (video)

### Games

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Gone Home (Steam)

Twine programming (in workshop)

## **Week 12: Simulation, Realism, & Game Violence**

### Readings

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“Simulation,” “Culturalization” in *Debugging Game History*

Patrick Crogan, “Select Gameplay Mode: Simulation, Criticality, and the Chance of Video Games”

### Games

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America’s Army (<https://www.americasarmy.com/>)

The McDonald’s Game (<http://www.mcvideogame.com/>)

## **Week 13: Critical and Artistic Potential**

### Readings

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“Game Glitch,” “Independent Games,” “Difficulty,” in *Debugging Game History*

Mary Flanagan, “Playful Aesthetics: Towards a Ludic Language”

### Games

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Frog Fractions (<http://twinbeard.com/frog-fractions/>)

Thirty Flights of Loving (Steam)

George Brecht’s Deck: A Fluxgame (in Workshop)

## **Week 14: Review**

### Readings

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None

### Games

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Between

Crawl (in workshop)

Duck Game (in workshop)

Splatoon (in workshop)

**Argumentative Paper Due**