



ATCM 3366.002
Game Studies I
Spring 2023

ATCM 3366.002 | Game Studies I

Thursdays 4 pm – 6:45 pm | ATC 1.305

Cameron Irby

Instructor of Record

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Office Hours:

By Appointment

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Faculty Advisor

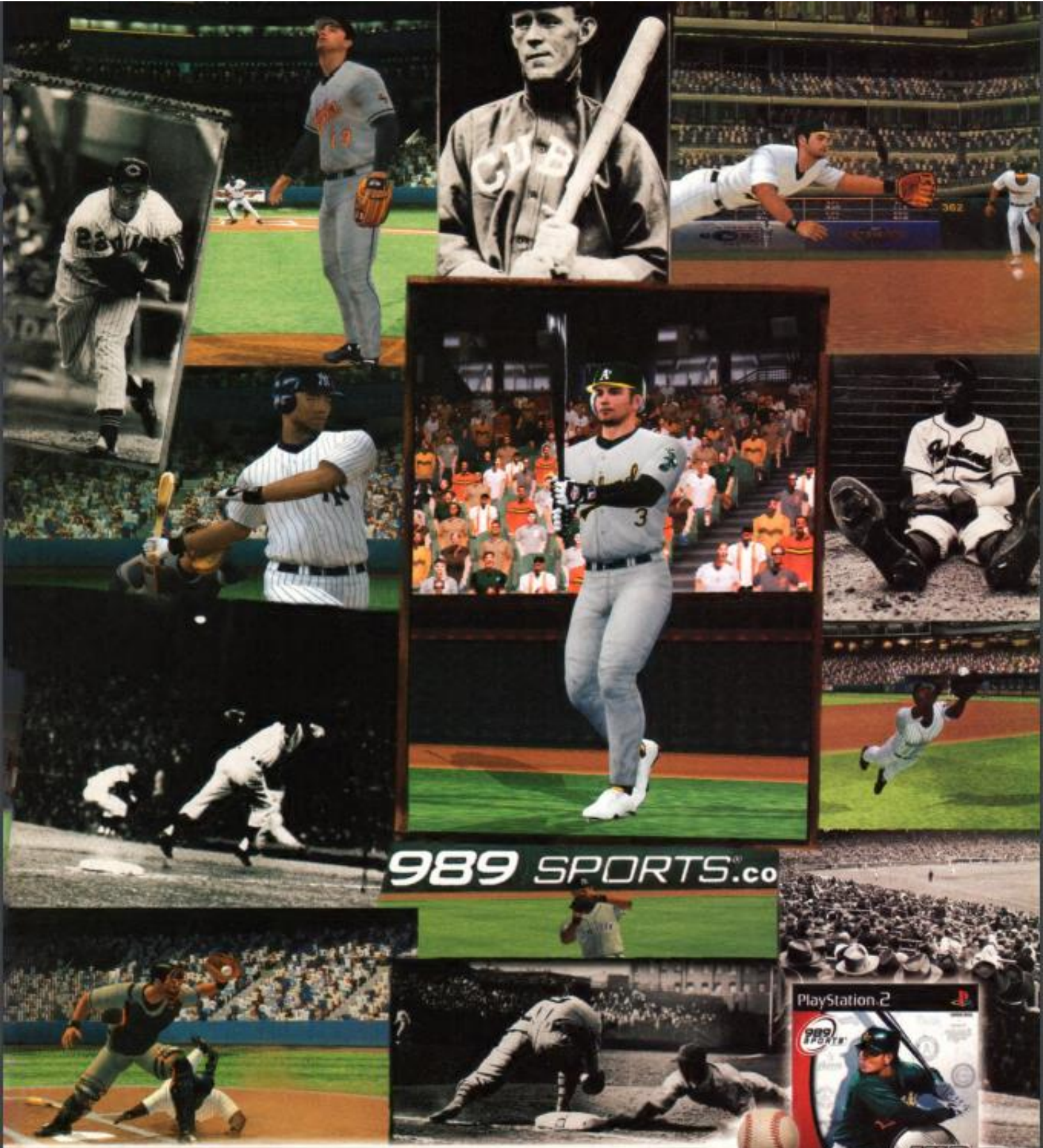
HongAn.Wu@utdallas.edu

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(The games, not so much)



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Introduction to Game Studies I

- **What** does it mean to play a game?
- **Can** games play us?
- **How** do games convey meaning?
- **Who** makes games, who plays them, and who is left out?
- **Why** do some gaming spaces encourage toxic behavior?
- **When** does a game become work, and who profits?

This course is an introduction to basic vocabularies, frameworks, and arguments frequently discussed in game studies. Together, we will explore how established concepts and arguments about games and play can help us examine and reflect upon our experiences as game watchers/players/makers. At the same time, we will consider how our gameplay experiences can contribute to existing understandings about games and play. By extension, we will practice using these concepts and our experiences as building blocks to analyze the historical, material, and cultural contexts of games as technologies of play.



A collection of board and card game pieces; Image by Thomas Buchholz @ Unsplash.com

To do so, each week we will read texts, watch videos, and/or play games to approach and analyze the phenomena of play, analog and digital gaming cultures, games industries, and more through different thematic lenses. Afterward, through class discussions, we will reflect on and analyze how our gameplay experiences intertwine with and/or interject in existing arguments in the field of game studies. Based on our discussions throughout the semester, students will compose two essays analyzing a game of one's choice through the thematic lenses introduced in our course.

A note on the intention and position of this course in your overall learning trajectory at AHT: **This course is intended to be a companion to Game Design I, as the process and practice of dissecting and analyzing play as situated cultural practice and games as technologies will feed into your ability to become responsible, attentive, and intentional game designers.** At the same time, experience creating games will provide you with the ability to better perceive the logic of specific design choices made within the games discussed throughout this course.

Together, we will learn...

- ...about contemporary discussions about game playing as situated cultural practices from various thematic and theoretical approaches.
- ...how to practice critiquing games and constructing analyses of game playing by situating these technologies and practices within historical, material, and cultural contexts.
- ...to develop analytical writing skills for participating in the collective scholarly study of games and play.



Image
Source: Clint
Bustrillos @
Unsplash.com

Course Expectations

- **We come to class to learn from one another;** therefore, your active presence is expected and is expressed by being familiar with the assigned materials and participating in class discussions.
- **We have limited opportunities to meet, discuss, and work together;** therefore, your timely completion of all course assignments is expected, and your attendance is highly treasured.
- **We cannot learn from those who are unwilling to engage with the ideas of others;** therefore, your willingness to learn must be demonstrated by being open to new ideas that challenge your assumptions and by earnest, careful, and generous engagements with those who respond in kind.



A Nintendo 2DS; Image credit: Denise Jans @ Unsplash.com



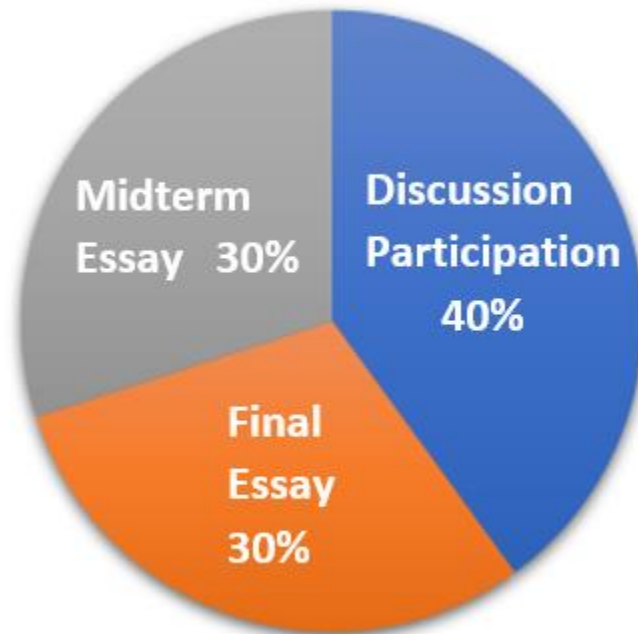
*Spyro the Dragon from
Spyro: Reignited Trilogy*

- **We will be a community of scholars, artists, and curious minds.** To facilitate a learning community for us to work together, I've included the following community agreement for our course to guide our interactions. This agreement was adapted and revised from the 2020 Allied Media Conference Community Agreement¹, and this community agreement is open to our collective revision as our course unfolds.
 - Take good care of yourself and others you live with outside the bounds of our course. Make sure to nourish yourself with good food and rest frequently as you march on through the semester.
 - Ask questions before assuming. The best way to understand the choices, actions, or intentions of one another is by asking.
 - Default to direct communication with the instructor before a public confrontation with others in the course. For any concerns you've encountered with others in our course, please email me or talk to me before or after class.
 - Please do not screenshot and share anyone's information and contributions to our course discussion outside of class without notification and consent. Stay curious, flexible, and patient as we embark on another semester of learning.

¹ <https://amc.alliedmedia.org/how-to-virtual-amc/community-agreements>

Grading Policy

Your final grade for this class will be based on the following:



This class uses the standard grading metric for all assignments (100-90 = A, 89-80 = B, etc.).

Essays must be submitted by the due date, but I will accept any late submissions within a **48-hour grace period**. After this grace period, no further submissions will be accepted.

Discussion Participation will be graded as follows:

- A 'B' grade is awarded for adhering to the course expectations, following the assignment instructions, and meeting the minimum requirements for an assignment.
- An 'A' grade will be granted for exceptional work, while a 'C' or lower grade will be given for failing to meet the minimum requirements, not following instructions, or for not meeting the course expectations.



Absence Policy

As we have seen in the past few years, things happen. Sometimes multiple assignments are due on the same day, and sometimes an international pandemic warps our perception of space and time.

As an acknowledgment of the chaos of the day-to-day, every participant (including myself) has **two days** that they may use for no-questions-asked absences.

Should exceptional circumstances arise (such as illness, family crisis, or travel), please email me to discuss ways to make up for lost time or to make alternative arrangements.

Source: Super Mario Bros.



Accommodations

If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation for this class, you are encouraged to register with the Accessibility Resource Center (ARC), part of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Students who have questions about receiving accommodations, or those who have, or think they may have, a disability (mobility, sensory, health, psychological, learning, etc.) are invited to contact ARC for a confidential discussion. The ARC is in the Administration Building, Room 2.224. They can be contacted by phone at 972-883-2098 or by email at studentaccess@utdallas.edu.



Navi from The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

If you do not have formal accommodation but have needs that the course is failing to meet as currently designed, please set up a meeting with me to discuss how I can support your learning style. Do not hesitate to reach out to me directly to discuss any difficulties beyond those supported by the ARC that might hinder your full participation in our course, and we can work out an individualized plan to support your learning in this course. For additional student resources to support your learning, please visit <https://www.utdallas.edu/campus-life/student-services-support/>.

UTD Syllabus Policies and Procedures

The information contained in the following link constitutes the University's policies and procedures segment of the course syllabus. Please go to <http://go.utdallas.edu/syllabus-policies> for these policies.

Academic Integrity

I value your academic integrity, and academic dishonesty will result in a failing grade. Please review and abide by the academic integrity guidelines set by the University of Texas at Dallas: <https://www.utdallas.edu/conduct/integrity/>.

A Non-Player Character from World of Warcraft



Schedule

Note: This schedule is not final and may change as necessary to meet the needs of the class.

January 19 – Welcome!

Read:

The Syllabus (Doing great so far!)

Play:

Your favorite game and your least favorite game.

Consider:

What and how will we learn together in this course?

5	3			7				
6			1	9	5			
	9	8					6	
8				6				3
4			8		3			1
7				2				6
	6					2	8	
			4	1	9			5
				8			7	9

Figure 1 - Sudoku

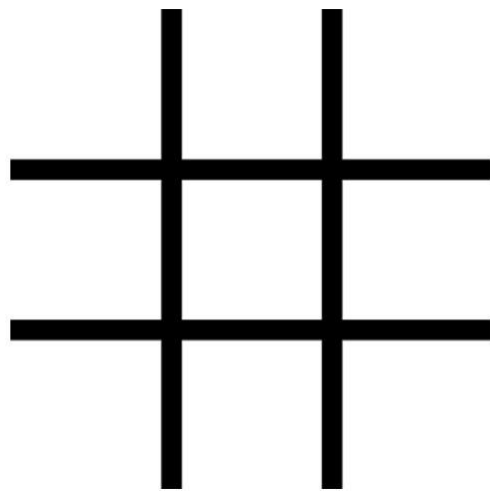


Figure 2 - Tic-Tac-Toe

January 26 – Play Grounds

Read:

“Play Is” from *Play Matters* - Miguel Sicart

“Playgrounds” from *Play Matters* - Miguel Sicart

Play:

Tag, Hopscotch, Pretend, Jump rope, Marbles, Jacks, Hide & Seek

Consider:

What is play? How does play relate to games and culture? Where does one play? How do the context and design of a playground shape how people play?

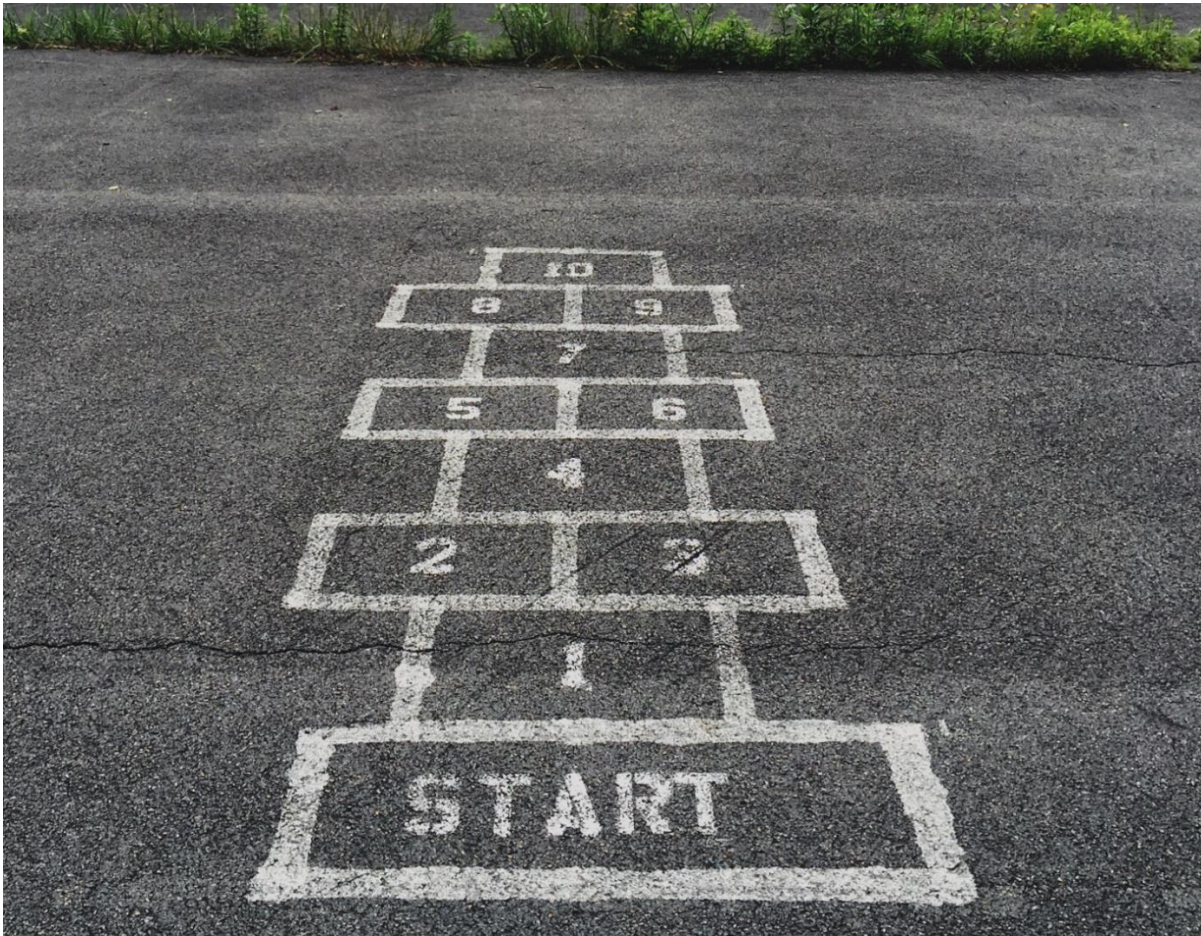


Figure 3 - A hopscotch board; image credit: Jon Tyson @ Unsplash.com

February 9 – (Meta)Games

Read:

“Introduction: Metagaming: Videogames and the practice of play”
from *Metagaming: Playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, making, and breaking videogames*

- Stephanie Boluk & Patrick LeMieux

“Cardboard Poachers: Fan Cultures and Paratext in Board Games”

- Chad Wilkinson

Play:

There Is No Game by Kamizoto

A Book of Surrealist Games

Consider:

How do the ways we talk about games influence the ways we play them? How do we determine the boundaries of games and how we play them?



Figure 5 - The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe

February 16 – Games with Values

Read:

“Do Artifacts Have Politics?” - Langdon Winner

“Groundwork for Value in Games” from *Values at Play in Digital Games* - Mary Flanagan & Helen Nissenbaum

Play:

Will You Press the Button?

Moral Machine

Consider:

How do games operate as technologies? How do games as technologies become inscribed with cultural values?



Figure 6 - Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

February 23 – Games with Politics

Read:

“Game Elements: The Language of Values” from *Values at Play in Digital Games* - Mary Flanagan & Helen Nissenbaum

“With Thumbs In Mind” from *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* - Brendan Keogh

Play:

The Vale: Shadow of the Crown (Demo) by Falling Squirrel

Together We Write Private Cathedrals by Rufus Roswell

Consider:

How do games as technologies convey their politics? How do different game elements work together to create meaning?



Figure 7 - Mass Effect

March 2 – Critical Play

Read:

“Game Engines as Creative Frameworks” from *Context Providers: Conditions of Meaning in Media Arts* – Robert Nideffer

“Introduction to Critical Play” from *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* - Mary Flanagan

Experience:

“Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II Peaceful Victory” – GoldVision
dead-in-iraq – Joseph DeLappe

Cosmic Latte – Pearse Anderson

Consider:

What does it mean to play critically? How does critical play relate to implicit cultural norms and explicit game rules?



Goldvision playing Grand Theft Auto V

March 9 – Midterms (No Class)

The Midterm will be available for submission until 11:55 PM on March 9. See eLearning for the rubric and prompts.



(Top Row) *Black Lotus* from Magic the Gathering, *Charizard* from Pokémon Trading Card Game;
(Bottom Row) *Gabumon* from Digimon: Digi-Battle Card Game, *Kuriboh* from Yu-Gi-Oh!

March 16 – Spring Break

Play:

Whatever you want. Perhaps try something on itch.io or a game of your own creation?

Consider:

What games have made an impact on your own life? What draws you toward a new game or brings you back to an old favorite?



Figure 16 – An avatar from VRChat; Image by Fark0n via Archive.org

March 23 - Hegemony

Read:

"The Hegemony of Play" from *Proceedings of the 2007 Digital Games Research Association Conference* –
Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, & Celia Pearce

"Come Get Some: Damsels in Distress and the Male Default Avatar in Video Games" from *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* –
Anastasia Salter & Bridget Blodgett

"Aesthetics of Ambivalence and Whiteness in Crisis" from *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* -
Soraya Murray

Play:

Depression Quest by Zoë Quinn

Consider: How did the gaming industry create the "toxic gamer?"



Figure 8 - Caution: Radioactive; Image by Dan Meyers via Unsplash

March 30 - Representation

Read:

“Diversity without defense: Reframing arguments for diversity in games” - Adrienne Shaw

“The Natural: The Parameters of Afro” by Evan Narcisse from *The State of Play: Creators and Critics on Video Game Culture*

“Blinded By The Roll: The Critical Fail of Disability in D&D” – Shelly Jones

Play:

Hair Nah – Momo Pixel

Build a character in
Dungeons & Dragons (or any
tabletop role-playing game)

Optional:

“Thunderbird Strike: Survivance in/of an Indie Indigenous Game”
- Elizabeth LaPensée

“Does Anybody Really Identify With FemShep?: Troubling
Identity (and) Politics in *Mass Effect*” from *Gamer Trouble:
Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* – Amanda Phillips

Consider: How do games re-present the world around us?



Figure 9 - Dungeons & Dragons (left); Hair Nah (right)

April 6 - Meritocracy

Read:

"Coding Meritocracy: Norms of Game Design and Narrative" from *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* - Chris Paul

"Games to Fail With" from *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* - Audrey Anable

Play:

Spent by McKinney & Urban Ministries of Durham

<http://playspent.org/html/>

Let's Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: Teaches Typing
by Phippen Barr

<https://pippenbarr.com/lets-play-ancient-greek-punishment-teaches-typing/info/>



You Died - Dark Souls

Optional:

"The Rubble and the Ruin: Race, Gender and Sites of Inglorious Conflict in *Spec Ops: The Line*" from *Gaming Representation* - Soraya Murray

Consider:

What is meritocracy? How do games promote meritocracy? What are the consequences of this dominant narrative?

April 13 – Labor & Professionalization

Read:

“Immaterial Labor: A Workers’ History of Videogaming” from *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* – Nick Dyer-Witheford & Greig de Peuter

“Professionalizing Players” from *Raising the stakes: E-sports and the professionalization of computer gaming* - T.L. Taylor

Experience:

Game Workers Unite: <https://www.gameworkersunite.org/>

State of Play (documentary), directed by Steven Dhoedt (via Kanopy)

Phone Story by Molleindustria: <http://www.phonestory.org/>

Optional:

“Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry” - Julian Kücklich

<https://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>

Consider: How are game makers and players (im)material laborers? How do games become “professional” in both their making and their playing?



Figure 10 - State of Play

April 20 - Globalization

Read:

“Global Game: Race \ Play / Intimacy” from *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games* – Christopher B. Patterson

“Biopower Play: *World of Warcraft*” from *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* – Nick Dyer-Witheford & Greig de Peuter

Experience: Games from around the world:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Video_games_by_country_of_developer

Optional:

“Smart Play: Social Stereotypes, Identity Building, and Counter Narratives of Gold Farmers in China.” From *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Justice* – Zixue Tai & Fengbin Hu

“Localization: Making the Strange Familiar” from *Atari to Zelda: Japan’s Videogames in Global Contexts* – Mia Consalvo

Consider: What are the global contexts of games?



Figure 11 - Street Fighter II

April 27 - Education

Read:

"*Minecraft* and the Building Blocks of Creative Individuality" from *The Digital Is Kid Stuff* – Josef Nguyen

"Indigenizing education with the game *When Rivers Were Trails*" - Elizabeth LaPensée & Nichlas Emmons

Play:

The Oregon Trail

by Don Rawitsch, Bill Heinemann, & Paul Dillenberger :

https://archive.org/details/msdos_Oregon_Trail_The_1990

When Rivers Were Trails

by Elizabeth LaPensée & The Indian Land Tenure Foundation :

<https://indianlandtenure.itch.io/when-rivers-were-trails>

Optional:

Choice: Texas by Carly A Kocurek & Allyson Whipple

"Youth, Technology, and Media Cultures" – Julian Sefton-Green

The Uncensored Library by Reporters Without Borders :

<https://www.uncensoredlibrary.com/en>

Consider:

What are we learning when we play games? How are games always already educational? What knowledge do we consider "valuable," and how do we communicate this through games?

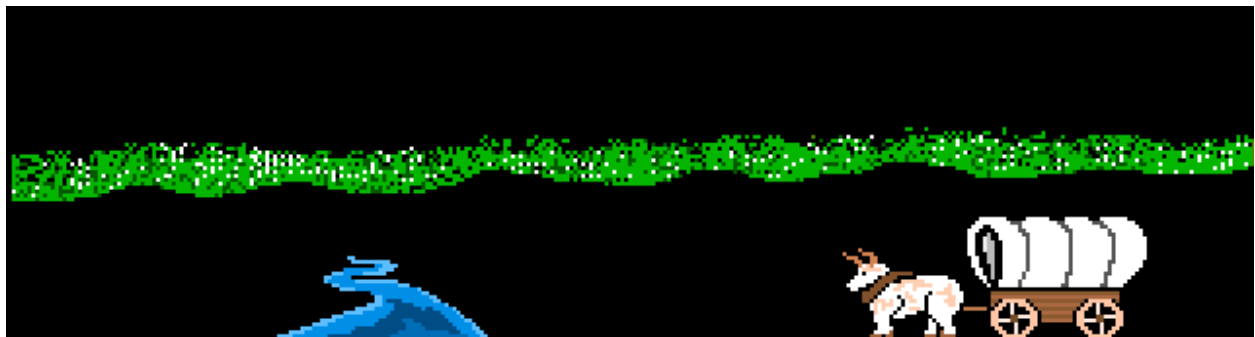


Figure 12 - The Oregon Trail

May 4 – Free Day (No Class)

Read:

Your Research.

Play:

Your Game.

Consider:

Calling your classmates to help them or to work in the same room to remind one another of what you have learned.



Figure 13 - Lady Dimitrescu from Resident Evil 8: Village

May 11 – Finals Due (No Class)

The final paper may be submitted at any time before 11:55 PM on May 11.

Remember: Submitting something is better than nothing.