

Video Games: Culture & Industry

E59.1008

Summer 2009, June 30 to August 6

Department of Media, Culture and Communication

Instructor: **Joost van Dreunen**, jvd228@nyu.edu

Class meets Tuesday & Thursday, from 5:10 – 8:30pm

Game Center, room 941

721 Broadway, 9th floor

(Skirball Center for New Media at the Tisch School for the Arts)

Office: 239 Greene, 7th floor; Office hours: By Appointment

For the most up-to-date reading list and downloadable PDFs, go to: <http://www.waffler.org/nyu09/>

Course Description

Video games are one of the fastest growing sectors of the entertainment industry; according to the Entertainment Software Association, Americans spent \$11.7 billion on computer and video game software (not including consoles and other hardware) in 2008, and the number continues to rise with each passing year. However, videogames are having a cultural impact far beyond their role as an economic commodity; they are also changing the way we tell stories, the way we interact with one another, and the ways in which we understand the world and our own roles in it.

In this class, we explore all of these dynamics, studying the history of videogames, the present industry landscape, and possible future developments in technology, design, industry organization and the cultural role of games. In addition to some fascinating readings, we enjoy class lectures by several guest speakers, including game developers, theorists, and videogame industry executives. The central question that serves as a guideline throughout the course is the extent to which, and what, *how* we play says something about society.

Additionally, we spend a significant portion of each class (probably the last 45-60 minutes or so) playing – and watching each other play – video games. This provides us an opportunity to put our theoretical understanding of the subject in perspective, as well as give us a sense of what makes both classic and contemporary games compelling from a user's vantage point. Each student should expect to spend at least one hour of the semester playing video games in front of his or her colleagues.

Course Objectives

1. To provide students with a broad sense of the history of video games as an art form and an industry
2. To provide students with a sense of the social impact of video games
3. To provide students with an understanding of the organization and culture of the video game industry
4. To provide students with enough information about video games to decide whether they would like to work in the industry, and to identify potential roles they would play in it
5. To provide students with enough basic knowledge to qualify for an entry-level job in the video games industry, should they choose to pursue one

Methods of Evaluation

Attendance and Participation

30%

Because this class is run like a seminar, attendance and participation are of paramount importance: they are the best way to demonstrate what you have been learning as well as fine tune your ideas in dialogue with your classmates. This means regular and prompt attendance, coming to class having done the work, speaking when you have something to say, and listening respectfully when you don't. An excess of **two absences** over the course of the semester will negatively impact your grade.

Class Blog

15%

Once a week, you should post 1-2 paragraphs to the class blog (<http://nyugames.blogspot.com>), asking questions or making observations about the readings and/or class discussions, or alerting us to some new and interesting development in video game industry, culture or design. These will be due by Thursday before (though you can do them earlier), and can cover anything up to and including **Tuesday's** and/or **Thursday's** class. They will be used frequently to guide our discussions. These assignments are not graded individually, and you cannot make them up.

Game Presentation

15%

Once or twice during the course, you will be responsible for researching and playing a game on your own time, and then presenting it to the rest of the class during “lab” time. We will assign games and dates during the first class. While this should be fun, it should also be scholarly: discuss the game from a critical perspective, bringing our class readings and discussions to light, as well as your own experiences and interpretations.

Final Paper

40%

The final paper, due on **August 6**, will be 8-10 pages (or roughly 3,000 words). The paper should draw directly on our class readings and discussions, and should cite at least 8 sources, 5 of them from the class readings. You should send me a 1-2 paragraph paper topic proposal by **June 28**.

Written Work

All submitted work must be typed, double spaced, and paginated in 12-point Times New Roman font, and submitted digitally, to my email address, in Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, or OpenOffice format. The student's name, date, and essay title should appear on the first page, and pages should be numbered. Consult the American Psychological Association (APA) formal style manual or Chicago Manual of Style for proper citation and quotation formatting.

Online and encyclopedic sources such as Wikipedia are excellent *starting points* for your research. They offer a valuable overview of specific subjects, and link to vital primary and secondary sources for your work. However, you are **not** permitted to quote or cite the Wikipedia pages themselves as references in your work.

Free writing help is available through the Writing Center, 269 Mercer Street, 2nd Floor. The telephone number is: (212) 998-8866.

Plagiarism

Academic plagiarism is a serious offense. **If you do it, in any form, you will fail the entire course.** Just to be clear, this includes every unacknowledged use of materials written by others (even sentences or obvious paraphrases without quotes). Please see the University's guidelines for further information on this matter.

Late Assignments

Late assignments will be marked down one letter grade for every day they are overdue. If you think you are going to be late with an assignment, you must notify me before the assignment is due (and this does not mean an email an hour before class). Please respect yourself and me. Lame excuses and lying will not be tolerated.

Students With Disabilities

Any student attending NYU who needs an accommodation due to a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility and/or learning disability, or is Deaf or Hard of Hearing should register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212 998-4980, 240 Greene Street, <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

Texts and Supplies

This course has one required book:

- Kushner, D. (2003). Masters of Doom. Random House.

Others readings will be made available digitally. In addition, students are encouraged to immerse themselves in the business and culture of games, by reading web sites such as the ones listed below:

Websites:

- Joystiq: <http://www.joystiq.com/>
- Kotaku: <http://www.kotaku.com/>
- Wonderland: <http://www.wonderlandblog.com/>
- Terra Nova: <http://terranova.blogs.com/>
- Penny Arcade: <http://www.penny-arcade.com/>
- Slashdot: <http://games.slashdot.org/>
- ChrisM: <http://blogs.sun.com/roller/page/ChrisM/>
- 1up: <http://www.1up.com/>
- Magic Box: <http://www.the-magicbox.com/gaming.htm>
- Game Industry Biz: <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/>
- GameSpy: <http://www.gamespy.com>
- Gama Sutra: <http://www.gamasutra.com>
- Blue's News: <http://www.bluesnews.com/>
- Water Cooler Games: <http://watercoolergames.org/>
- Serious Games: <http://www.seriousgames.org/>
- Greg Costikyan: <http://www.costik.com/>
- Avant Game: <http://avantgame.blogspot.com/>
- Raph Koster's blog: <http://RaphKoster.com>
- Re-Mission: <http://www.re-mission.net/>
- Select Parks: <http://www.selectparks.net/>
- Eddo Stern: <http://www.eddostern.com/>
- Speed Demos Archive: <http://speeddemosarchive.com/>
- Addicting Games: <http://www.addictinggames.com/>
- Game Girl Advance: <http://www.gamegirladvance.com/>
- Int'l Game Dev Assoc: <http://www.igda.org/>
- International Hobo: <http://www.ihobo.com>
- Video Game Museum: <http://www.vgmuseum.com/>

Evaluation

A=Excellent

Outstanding work in all respects. This work demonstrates comprehensive and solid understanding of course material, and presents thoughtful interpretations, well-focused and original insights, and well-reasoned commentary and analysis. Includes skillful use of source materials, illuminating examples and illustrations, fluent expression, and no grammar/typing errors.

B=Good

This work demonstrates a complete and accurate understanding of course material, presents a reasonable degree of insight and broad levels of analysis. Work reflects competence, but stays at a general or predictable level of understanding. Source materials, examples, illustrations, are used appropriately and articulation/writing is clear. Paper has been carefully proofread.

C=Adequate/Fair

This work demonstrates understanding that hits in the ballpark, but which remains superficial, incomplete, or expresses some significant errors or weaknesses. Source materials may be used inadequately or inappropriately, and arguments lack concrete, specific examples and illustrations. Writing/articulation may appear vague, hard to follow, or loaded with typos and other technical errors.

D=Unsatisfactory

This work demonstrates a serious lack or error in understanding, and fails to express the most rudimentary aspects of the course. Sources may be used entirely inappropriately or not at all, and writing/articulation appears deficient.

F=Failed

Work not submitted or attempted.

Plus (+) or minus (-) grades indicate your range within the aforementioned grades. In other words, B+ means very good.

A = 94-100
A- = 90-93

B+ = 87-89
B = 84-86
B- = 80-83

C+ = 77-79
C = 74-76
C- = 70-73

D+ = 67-69

Timeline

6/30. Introduction

7/2. Taxonomy and History of Video Games

To start off our inquiry we will first broadly review the entire scope of the video game universe – from Pong to PS3, from consoles to arcades to PCs to the Internet.

Readings

- Kent, S. (2001). The Ultimate History of Video Games. Prima Publishing; pp. xi-xvi (timeline)
- Bateman, C. & Boon, R. (2004). A Guide to Computer Game Genres. International Hobo (www.ihobo.com)
- Newman, J. (2004). Videogames. New York: Routledge. Chapter 2, pp. 9-28.
- Apperley, T. H. (2006). Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres. *Simulation & Gaming*, 37(1), 6-23.

Games

[Spacewar!](#), [Pong](#), [Asteroids](#), [Space Invaders](#) and [Pac Man](#) (emulators)

7/7. How We Study Games 1: Cultural Theory

The first major body of academic literature on video games involves several of the qualitative methodological approaches, including narratology, ludology, and ethnography.

Readings

- Gee, J. P. (2003). What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy. Palmgrave Macmillan. Introduction, Conclusion and Appendix (20 pages)
- Frasca, G. (2003). Simulation vs. Narrative: Introduction to Ludology. In Wolf, M. J. P & Perron, B. (eds.) (2003). *The Video Game Theory Reader* (13 pages)
- Wolf, M. J. P & Perron, B. (eds.) (2003). *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Routledge. Introduction (21 pages)

Games

[Super Mario World](#) (SNES), [MYST](#) (PC) (Student Presentations)

7/9. How We Study Games 2: Social Science

A second venue of academic inquiry consists of several quantitative methodological approaches, among which are human-computer interface design, media effects research, as well as psychological, sociological and economic perspectives.

Readings

- The Economist (2005, August 4). Chasing the dream. (5 pages)
- Williams, D. (2005). Bridging the Methodological Divide in Game Research. *Simulation & Gaming*. 36(4), p. 447-463.
- Glazer, S. (2006, November 10). Video games. *CQ Researcher*, 16, 937-960.

Games

[Final Fantasy VII](#) (PS), [NBA Jam](#) (SNES) (Student Presentations)

7/14. Video Games as Art

Moving away from the social sciences, we discuss the ways in which video games have been conceptualized as an art form. This includes a review of video game aesthetics, as well as a discussion of the tension between art and commerce in this industry. We also explore the notion of video games as avant-garde art, and their role within the traditional “art worlds” of museums, galleries, etc.

Readings

- Seabrook, J. (2006). Game Master. The New Yorker, November 6, 2006 (14 pages)
- Rossignol, J. (2006, Nov 22). Converging: An Interview With Henry Jenkins. GamaSutra.com. (8 pages)
- Smuts, A. (2005, November 2). Are video games art? Contemporary Aesthetics. (11 pages)
- Sandor, E. & Fron, J. (2001). The future of video games as art. University of Chicago Cultural Policy Center. (8 pages)
- McGonigal, J. (2005). All Game Play is Performance/Game Play is All Performance. Keynote address for Playful: The State of the Art Game Conference, May 2005. (3 pages)

Games

[Spore](#) (PC), [Okami](#) (PS2) (Student presentations)

7/16. Video Games as Rhetoric

Moving beyond aesthetics, we look at video games in their potential for social advocacy, politics, and, more generally, rhetoric. This includes a review and discussion of “water cooler” games and “serious” games, an exploration of video games as training environments for social and career tasks, and a look at the emerging experiments in games and health, in which doctors are using interactive environments to help patients better understand and manage their physical conditions.

Readings

- Thompson, C. (2006, July 23). Saving the World, One Video Game at a Time. The New York Times. (4 pages)
- Corti, K. (2005). Serious Games. Learning Magazine. pp. 6-7
- Bogost, I. (2006). Playing politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism and Advocacy. First Monday. Special Issue number 7. (10 pages)
- Bergfeld, C. (2006, July 26). A Dose of Virtual Reality. Businessweek. (2 pages)
- Pelta-Heller, Z (2006, July 21). Kids Kill in Violent Christian Videogame. AlterNet (4 pages).
- Left Behind Interview with Greg Bauman (5/1/06). (2 pages)
- Hutson, J. (2006, May 29). The Purpose Driven Life Takers. (7 page blog post).
- Jones, Saving Worlds with Videogame Activism (15 pages, class handout)
- Chen, S., Michael, D. (2005) Proof of Learning: Assessment in Serious Games. (Available at: http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20051019/chen_01.shtml)

Games

[Civilization IV](#) (PC), [Left Behind: Tribulation Forces](#) (PC) (Student presentations)

Guest Speaker

Sande Chen, Writer & Game Designer

7/21. Video Game Design Principles

This week, we will discuss the practical matters that go into designing and building a successful video game. What should the game look like? What should the game sound like? What factors go into determining the architecture of a game, such as characters, levels, tasks and commands? We will talk with veteran game designers, who will share their thoughts on best- and worst-of-breed examples from history and the present day.

Readings

- Lopez, M. (2006, Nov 28). Gameplay Design Fundamentals: Gameplay Progression. GamaSutra.com. (5 pages)
- Navarro, A. (2004, Jan 14). Big Rigs: Over the Road Racing Review. Gamespot.com. (2 pages)
- Kasavin, G. (2004, Nov 29). World of Warcraft Review. Gamespot.com (5 pages).
- McGonigal, J. (2006). The Puppet Master Problem: Design for Real-World, Mission-Based Gaming. Second Person. Forthcoming from MIT Press, Fall 2006. Eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. (17 pages).
- Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. (2005). Game Design and Meaningful Play. In J. Raessens and J.

Goldstein (Eds.), Handbook of Computer Game Studies. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 59-79

Games

[World of Warcraft](#) (PC), [E.T.](#) (Atari emulator) (Student presentations)

Guest Speaker

Wade Tinney, [Large Animal Games](#)

Field Trip to development studios of Large Animal Games (TBA)

7/23. Video Games as Industry I

After looking at the overall academic landscape, we move toward building our understanding of the video game industry by reviewing its various distribution strategies, from brick-and-mortar to Internet based to mobile communication networks. We also discuss licensing, franchising, advertising, and marketing – examining the “boilerplate” deals that govern these aspects of the industry and exploring the ways in which this business continues to change as new technologies and consumer behaviors alter the business landscape.

Readings

- Vogel, H. (2001). Entertainment Industry Economics: a Guide for Financial Analysis. (fifth edition) Cambridge University Press. Chapter 10; pp. 251 – 263.
- Kushner, D. (2003). Masters of Doom. Random House. Chapters 1-6; pp. 3 – 104.

Games

[Metal Gear Solid 4](#) (XBOX 360), [Rock Band](#) (PS3) (Student presentations)

7/28. Video Games as Industry II

In this second part we analyze several key components to the video game industry. First, we review its structure, looking at the companies that dominate the market and exploring the entire value chain, from developers to publishers to platform designers to retailers. Second, we examine the key job roles in the industry, and discuss which roles students may be interested in pursuing. Finally, we look at the economic models of the industry, from top-selling \$60 blockbuster titles to phone-based \$2 games.

Readings

- Kushner, D. (2003). Masters of Doom. Random House. Chapters 7-12; pp. 105-210.

Games

[Doom](#) (PC), [BioShock](#) (XBOX 360) (Student presentations)

Guest Speaker

Lazlow, Rockstar Games

PAPER TOPICS DUE

7/30. Emerging Video Game Models 1: Big Games

Because the impact of technologically mediated game play extends beyond the intimacy of the living room, we must also familiarize ourselves with a few groundbreaking projects that re-image existing (non-play) spaces through a technological lens.

Readings

- Ruberg, B. (2006, August 10). Big Reality: A Chat with “Big Game” Designer Frank Lantz. GamaSutra.com. (8 pages)
- Staffan Björk , Jussi Holopainen , Peter Ljungstrand , Regan Mandryk, Special Issue on Ubiquitous Games, Personal and Ubiquitous Computing, v.6 n.5-6, p.358-361, December 2002
- Taylor, T. L. & Kolko, B. E. (2003). Boundary Spaces: Majestic and the Uncertain Status of Knowledge, Community and Self in a Digital Age. *Information, Communication & Society* (6)4, 497-522

- [Big Games Manifesto](#) by Area Code (1 page)
- Surowiecki, J. (2006, December 4). [In Praise of Third Place](#). The New Yorker. (2 pages)

Games

[PacManhattan](#), [PayPhone Warriors](#)

Guest Speaker

Dennis Crowley, [foursquare](#)

8/4. Emerging Video Game Models 2: MMOs

One new model for interactive entertainment includes virtual reality, alternative reality, and massively multiplayer online games. We take a look at the rapidly growing market for MMOs, its business models, geographic distribution and the opportunities for social research.

Readings

- The Economist (2006, Sept. 28). [Living a Second Life](#). (5 pages)
- Castronova, E. (2003). [On Virtual Economies](#). Game Studies, 3(2). [skimmable]
- Spaight, T. (2005) [Who Killed Ms. Norway?](#) Salon.com

Games

[PMOG](#) (PC), [There.com](#) (PC)

Guest Speaker:

Betsy Book, [Makena Technologies, Inc.](#)

8/6. Mobile Gaming

In our final meeting we will investigate the latest emerging form of game play: mobile gaming. Through the use of advance distribution networks and digital production, playing a game on cellular handsets and other handheld devices is becoming increasingly common. We will investigate the characteristics and affordances of mobile gaming, and place them in a larger context.

Readings

- Hall, J. (2005). [Future of Games: Mobile Gaming](#). In J. Raessens and J. Goldstein (Eds.), Handbook of Computer Game Studies. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 47-55.
- TBA

Games

[iPhone Games TBA](#) (Student presentations)

Guest Speaker

Arseny Lebedev, [Magnetism Studios](#)

8/13. Final Papers Due