

# Games 101

Course Syllabus - Fall 2016

New York University  
Tisch School of the Arts

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Games 101 is the foundational course for the NYU Game Center and a prerequisite for all other Game Center classes. The focus of Games 101 is advanced game literacy – the development of a shared understanding of the history of games, culturally and aesthetically. This class is a broad, introductory survey which covers the full spectrum of digital and non-digital games. The class will incorporate lectures, discussions, and writing assignments, but the primary activity of the class is critical play – playing games and writing about them in order to better understand and appreciate them.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

At the completion of this course, the student will be able to:

- Develop a thorough understanding of the most important and influential historical and modern games.
- Place games within a comprehensive overall framework of historical, technological, and stylistic categories.
- Understand games as designed experiences, as technological systems, and as social and cultural artifacts.
- Build a critical vocabulary that allows them to participate in productive, high-level spoken and written conversations about games.
- Analyze games and clearly articulate their formal, cultural, and expressive qualities
- Gain a basic understanding of games as aesthetic objects that lays a foundation for further studies in game design, production, and scholarship.

## OPEN LIBRARY COURSE SUPPORT

Students will have access to required games via the Open Library. The Open Library is the Game Center's collection of digital and non-digital games, provided to the students for the critical play and study of games. Students of Games 101 who are playing games for the class will have priority over all other Open Library patrons.

## **COURSE FORMAT**

Games 101 combines weekly lectures with smaller weekly recitations. Each week the lectures look at particular historical periods, genres or styles of game, putting them in a critical context that incorporates issues of authored design, technological evolution, player experience, and socio-cultural history.

The recitations will meet after each class. The primary purpose of the recitations is to provide access and time for playing the weekly assigned games.

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

### **Critical Play Reports**

Every week, students will be required to play one or more games, called Critical Play Report games. Playing these games is the focus of the weekly recitations. In addition, the student will choose one of these games to write a Critical Play Report about. The student is required to spend an additional 2-3 hours (minimum) time playing this game outside of recitation before writing about it for their Critical Play Report.

The Critical Play Report is a short (between 500 words to 1 page) paper. Each Critical Play Report is based on the experience of playing the game. The exact focus of the Critical Play Report will vary from week to week, depending on the class content. Overall, however, students will have some leeway in deciding what they want to write about. The goal of the Critical Play Reports is to develop an ability to think critically and write critically about games, applying what the student has learned in the lectures, readings, and discussions to articulate their own ideas about games.

These are due at the beginning of each recitation.

### **Quizzes**

At the beginning of each recitation students will take a multiple choice and short answer quiz that covers information from the most recent lecture.

### **Exams**

In addition to the Critical Play Reports quizzes, two major exams will be given during the class. The midterm and final exams will include a slides section, a multiple choice section, a short answer section and a short essay in which students demonstrate higher-level thinking.

## **GRADING**

The course grade will be based on the following percentages from each assignment's grade, as well as overall participation in the discussions during the recitations:

Participation in recitations	20%
Quizzes	15%
Critical Play Reports	20%
Midterm	15%
Final	30%

Students will be given grades based on a 100-point scale. Each assignment will be graded on a point scale, and these points will be added up to determine the final grade, according to the following:

94 - 100+	A	77 - 79	C+	60 - 62	D
90 - 92	A-	73 - 76	C	<60	F
		70 - 72	C-		
87 - 89	B+				
83 - 86	B	67 - 69	D+		
80 - 82	B-	63 - 66	D		

## **STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:**

Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work as though it were your own. More specifically, plagiarism is to present as your own: A sequence of words quoted without quotation marks from another writer or a paraphrased passage from another writer's work or facts, ideas or images composed by someone else.

## **ACCESSIBILITY**

Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212 998-4980 for further information.

## SCHEDULE - Lecture Topics and Critical Play Report Games

### Week 1 - Roots

- Chess
- Backgammon
- Go
- Mancala

**Lecturer:** Charles Pratt

#### Prompts:

**The Purpose of Rules:** Pick one rule of the game you played and explain why it's there. Describe how the game would play if the rule was different.

**Interesting Decisions:** Describe a situation that occurred while playing your selected game that presented you with an interesting decision. Why was it interesting? What did you choose and what was the outcome?

**Getting Good:** If you wanted to become an expert player at your selected game what skills would you need to work on? Describe how you would set out to improve.

### Week 2 - Sports

- Soccer

**Lecturer:** Matt Parker

#### Prompts:

**Power of Ritual:** Describe the formal, ceremonial, or ritual aspects of the match you viewed. How did these elements affect your experience and/or the experience of the players?

**Demonstration of Skill:** Pick the play of one athlete and analyze it in terms of technical skill and performance. Highlight one or more moments that created a strong impression on you and explain why.

**Uncertainty and Drama:** What was the overall dramatic flow of the game you watched? Were there moments of drama and suspense? Were you ever surprised? How good were you at predicting the outcome of individual plays and/or the overall match?

### Week 3 - Adventure

- Colossal Cave
- Myst
- The Walking Dead

**Lecturer:** Naomi Clark

#### Prompts:

**Story:** Analyze the narrative of one of the three games. Was it complex or shallow? Did it seem to fit well with mechanics of the game or was it tacked on? Was the story a prominent part of every aspect of the game or did it simply take place between stretches of uninterrupted gameplay?

**Puzzles:** Analyze a complex puzzle in one of the three games and focus on one or more of the following questions: How exactly is the puzzle constructed to maximize challenge and player enjoyment? Is the puzzle dynamic in any way, or is it completely predetermined? What kind of

problem-solving skills were required to solve the puzzle? How did the puzzle relate to or contribute to the narrative of the game?

**Exploration:** Each of the three games simulates space in different ways. Pick one and analyze how space is used in the game and to what end. Does the game allow for open exploration or directed searching? Does the use of space match the feel of the rest of the game? Would a different way of treating space significantly change the mood or immersion present in the game, and how?

## Week 4 - Action

- Space Invaders
- Super Mario 64
- Mega Man 2

**Lecturer:** Charles Pratt

### Prompts:

**Design a run:** Choose a specific restriction on the play of your chosen game, for instance a speedrun where you have to reach a certain point in ten minutes, or a run where you are only allowed to jump a certain number of times. Describe the conditions of your run and what you learned about the mechanics of the game from your attempts at its completion.

**Ludo/Narrative Dissonance:** Find a mechanic in your game that seems incoherent with the game's theme and story. Describe the mechanic and why you think it is in the game, as well as how much it is at variance with the game's thematic elements. Does it completely contradict the story, or is it simply a quirk that can be easily ignored?

**Home and away:** Talk about the mechanics in your game that you feel were built specifically for the context in which the game would be played. For instance, are the mechanics that make the particularly suitable for a home console, or that are clearly hold overs from the arcade era. Could your game be adapted more to its context without losing something important in the way the game is played?

## Week 5 - First Person

- Doom
- Half-Life
- Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

**Lecturer:** Matt Boch

### Prompts:

**Looking Backward:** (choose this question if you are a current FPS player). As you play Doom, select one FPS from the last 3-5 years that you have played regularly (at least 30 hours of play time logged), and contrast your play experience with Doom with your experience of that game. Identify the game you are using as a comparison point in your report, and compare the two in terms of some of these factors: core game mechanics, level design, pacing, avatar/enemy design, weapon variety and characteristics, ambiance/setting/story, openness of world.

**Looking Inward:** Though the player may never 'see' his or her virtual self, most single-player modes of FPS games have a "back story" about the character that the player is inhabiting in the game. Choose one of these three single player modes and give a detailed, first person account of what clues in the game help you figure out what kind of character you are as you are playing—how did the

game developers signal your identity to you through their design choices? And, how does it impact how it feels to play the game?

**Looking Around:** As you play your chosen game, pay special attention to the environments and level design. What are the particular characteristics which define the overall style of the game's spaces? What design choices did the level creators make and why do you think they made them? How does the level design affect your experience and guide your play?

## Week 6 - Modern Non-Digital Games

- Dominion
- Settlers of Catan

**Lecturer:** Jesse Fuchs

### Prompts:

**Flavor and Mechanic:** How does your game's flavor connect (or not connect) with its mechanics to create (or not create) an engaging experience? Flavor, in this context, refers to anything that can't be reduced to math—the game's thematic framework, the physical quality of its play pieces, the names of its playing pieces, etc. How would this flavor translate (or not) translate to a digital/online implementation?

**Psychological Space:** Analyze the psychological space that your chosen game creates. What aspects of the actual play of the game help create a particular set of psychological relationships among players? Are these relationships fixed or do they change over time during a game or between games? How do the social relationships among players relate to the game goals?

**Fairness:** Is your chosen game fair or not fair? Be sure to define exactly what you mean by fair, whether it comes from chance vs. strategy, experts vs. beginners, gameplay skill vs. social skill, etc. It is perfectly fine to conclude that your game is fair in some ways but not in other ways.

## Week 7 - Strategy

- Advance Wars
- Civilization V
- StarCraft II

**Lecturer:** Frank Lantz

### Prompts:

**Two Ways to Win:** Win a match, level, or scenario of your selected game. Now play it again and win using a completely different strategy. Describe your experience. Did this exercise reveal anything new to you about the game?

**Interesting Decisions:** Describe a situation that occurred while playing your selected game that presented you with an interesting decision. Why was it interesting? What did you choose and what was the outcome?

**Battle Report:** Play through a complete match, level, or scenario of your selected game. Describe the events that occurred in your play session as a short dramatic narrative. Your story should highlight the dramatic, suspenseful, or surprising aspects of what happened.

## Week 8 - Midterm

## Week 9 - Role-Playing

- Dungeons and Dragons

**Lecturer:** Eric Zimmerman

### Prompts:

**Classy:** Which character class did you select for your play session(s) and why? How close to your own personality/characteristics was your choice? Did you enjoy playing this role in the game? Why/why not? Did this change over time?

**Full of Personality:** How was it for you personally to explore the 'vast' terrain of the game? Give concrete details of what you personally saw and traversed, and use one or more games you've played in other weeks of this course as a benchmark/point of comparison for the feel of the game space of World of Warcraft.

**New Arrivals:** (For WoW newbies only) How far were you able to get in progressing your character (be specific)? What did you think of the pace of accomplishment in the game? Would you be likely to continue playing this game after this week, and why so (or why not)?

## Week 10 - Simulation

- The Sims
- SimCity
- FIFA

**Lecturer:** Mitu Khandaker-Kokoris

### Prompts:

**A truthful simulation:** Is your selected game accurate or truthful in how it represents its subject matter? Focus less on the graphics and audio and more on the way that your game represents its subject through its rules and processes. Does it abstract its subject matter faithfully, or do inaccuracies enter into the game? What cultural assumptions might be responsible for a lack of accuracy?

**Process-based representation:** How does your game depict its subject matter through processes? Take a detailed look at one aspect of your game's system and discuss how it uses interaction, game logic, or other elements of the game's mechanics to represent or signify its subject.

**The arc of play:** Take a wide look at how your selected game shapes the gameplay experience from the beginning through the end of the game. How does the player start, and how does the player end – and how does the game orchestrate this journey? Be specific about the mechanics that serve to push the player forward through the game and the elements that change over time to transition from beginning to middle to end.

## Week 11 - Action Adventure

- Adventure (2600)
- Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
- Another World
- Grand Theft Auto III

**Lecturer:** Charles Pratt

### Prompts:

**The skills the game teaches:** Through your playing, examine how the game teaches you new skills, and how new skills are taught based on previous skills.

**The open and the closed:** Playing through the game, describe how the game balances your freedom as a player against the designer's control of your path through the game.

**Puzzle solving:** Describe how you solved the puzzle. (You are not allowed to use the internet or other outside sources for help.) How did the game help you toward the solution? Did the game misdirect you? How was your playing influenced by your experience with other games? How was your playing influenced by earlier experiences in this game?

## **Week 12 - Fighting**

- Street Fighter IV
- Tekken 6
- Super Smash Bros. Melee

**Lecturer:** Charles Pratt

### **Prompts:**

**Head to Head:** Relate a match you had against another player. Analyze what you did correctly and what were your mistakes. What were the mistakes and successes of your opponent and why do you think that made the decisions they made?

**Combo Breaker:** Learn a combo or advanced technique in your chosen game. Practice it until you can easily accomplish it without much thought. Analyze what it took to reach this level of competence and what were the pitfalls.

**Interface:** Describe the controller that you used to play the game. Was it a traditional console controller, or a fight stick? Analyze how this affected the way that you played the game. Are there techniques that it helped executed? What were the drawbacks?

## **Week 13 - Casual and Puzzle**

**Lecturer:** Naomi Clark

## **Week 14 - Contemporary**

**Lecturer:** Bennett Foddy