**Beyond Triple A: Games with Substance**

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Office Hours: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday 10-Noon (by appointment)

Office Location: Pierce 217

Email Hours: Mon-Friday 10am-6pm

Meeting Time: Monday 1-4:50pm

Location: Morton 201, Visual Art & Technology Lab

**Course Description**

This course is a humanities class dedicated to studying, discussing, analyzing, and critiquing independent and experimental video games. As the title of the class indicates, students will be looking at, playing, and writing critical research-driven essays about games that fall outside mainstream or triple-A game culture. Students will collectively and collaboratively develop theories about video game design and content while paying attention to social, political, and cultural motivations for making contemporary media art.

The class is intended to be a primer for students interested in critically examining current trends within video game publishing and distribution while challenging conventions of monoculture perspectives often touted within traditional “industry” settings.

**Course Structure**

Every week we will play video games together, discuss readings, and share independent research into video game design. Taught in the style of a “film studies” course, this class will be viewing and playing games with an analytical eye; studying works based on their content and aesthetics. Each week notes from journaling will be shared in group discussions with peers in order to generate meaningful and critical analysis of contemporary game design.

Additionally, each week students will be expected to take notes in the form of a class blog on games they are playing and their own research for larger scale projects and papers. These notes can be somewhat casual, but keep in mind they will be a public space for your thinking and writing. Students should expect to be reading each other’s writing and providing feedback within class sessions. This feedback will not only help generate conversation, but will also provide critical outlets for generating a community of peers critically engaging with game studies.

**Attendance**

The Visual Art & Technology policy for classes is that attendance is mandatory. The success of this class depends on student participation and engagement. If *you* are not here to participate, then *we* all suffer.

You are allowed two absences. After the third absence your final grade will be automatically lowered by one letter. If you are >10 minuets late you will be marked tardy and three tardies equal an absence. As will be noted later, class participation is part of your grade. This means even if you are here, you must be present. Coming to class unprepared or wasting class time could result in being marked absent.

The only exception to this policy is in the case of extreme illness/injury. Please talk with the professor privately about any concerns you have about this policy.

**Grading**

Grading will be broken down into the following categories:

Class Participation: 20% Midterm: 25%

Weekly Assignments: 20% Final: 25%

Blog Posts: 10%

Class participation is measured by the amount you decide to contribute to class discussions and in-class activities. If you decide to disengage or withhold participation your grade will be effected.

Weekly assignments, the midterm, and the final will be discussed in a section below.

Blog posts will be the equivalent to reading responses based on weekly readings, in-class playthroughs, or game study assignments. These should be between 200 and 300 words (two to three paragraphs). Blog posts are a place to hash out ideas, reflect on in-class discussion, and generally continue dialogs sparked by course materials. Posts will be due Friday before 6pm prior to next weeks class.

General criteria for grading written assignments will be based on a combination of legibility, originality of ideas, quality of research, and insightful observations/analysis. With this in mind, handing in written work that has not been properly proofread is not a good idea. Forming small groups of peers to help with proofreading and feedback is recommended for this course, as it will help share your ideas and increase the legibility of your critiques/analysis. Longer term papers and research projects should contain a solid thesis, supporting arguments, and proper citation (details on this later). Availing yourself to the writing center is recommended and encouraged.

**Copyright and Plagiarism**

For the purposes of this class you *must* consider the copyright of your work and the work of others. Your writing and research should be entirely yours. Any improper citation or copying of other intellectual property will be very seriously dealt with. Failure to provide proper citation or copying of others work will be considered plagiarism, which will result in immediate academic reprimanding and/or reporting to the honor board.

**Required Reading and other Materials**

As stated earlier, we will be looking at contemporary independent video games in class. However, you are *also* required to play video games of your own choosing during the semester. To do so, you are required to register an account with itch.io and humblebundle.com for access to case study case that you wish to research and play. Games from both of these resources will be recommended and often come at marginal cost (in comparison to triple-A titles) or are free to download and play. It is also recommended to acquire a Steam account and to download the application for research purposes.

Think of these registered accounts as part of your required reading for this semester, since we will be using games as “primary texts” for analysis and critique. Some games that will require more substantial cost to students will either be provided or will be played together in class using Stevens equipment.

Additionally we will be reading:

Miguel Sicart’s Play Matters published by MIT Press

Katherine Isbister How Games Move Us published by MIT Press

Cara Ellison, Embed with Games published by Birlinn LTD (excerpts)

Other class materials are as follows:

* Open Broadcaster Software for recording playthroughs for note taking
* Journal / Notebook for taking notes during playthroughs / group-play
* Registered Youtube, Vimeo, or Twitch Account

**Weekly Assignments, Midterm, and Final**

For every reading assignment a blog post will be due. Please consult the schedule below for planning ahead and pacing your reading habits. On top of these reading responses (in the form of blog posts), you will also receive assignments on a semi-regular schedule. These will involve independent research and self-directed playthroughs that should be recorded using Open Broadcasting Software and/or Twitch. Details about this process will occur in class.

The midterm for this class will be a research paper of a topic of your choosing. However, the research paper must focus on one *genre* of games. This could be Visual Novel, point-and-click adventure, or any type of genre that you can think of. You must give an analysis of games that *defy* or *challenge* the conventions of that genre (or enhance the possibilities of a genre that otherwise go unnoticed by triple-A developers). It is encouraged to think about the political, social, and cultural implications of a genre and how games can bend the rules or expectations of what that genre typically offers.

Midterm paper requirements:

* 1750-2000 words, 12-point Times New Roman, Double Spaced
* Three citations in MLA format included as footnotes when referenced (these do not go towards your word count). These citations can include readings we’ve discussed in class
* At least three visual references of the work (or works) that you’re referencing in your paper (with proper captions including name of game and publisher)
* Separate title page with your name, the name of the class, and the title of your paper
* No spelling or grammatical errors (again, get proofreaders)

The final for this class can *either* be a research paper or a creative visual project. Each type of project must investigate a particular source of *content*—that is to say the final can be about anything, but it must be about *something* that doesn’t typically get registered/represented in standard triple-A games. Furthermore, many games often address similar issues, but their method of discussing that content might be possibly much different. For instance how, does *Cibele* discuss issues of contemporary sexuality in ways that differ from *Dys4ia*? Though both titles share *content*, their *process* differs. You must create an analysis of different approaches to content and how those approaches alter and affect the ways players experience those subjects.

Final Paper Requirements:

* 2000-2500 word, 12-point Times New Roman, Double Spaced
* Five citations in MLA format included as footnotes when referenced (these do not go toward your word count). At least two citations must be from readings we have *not* discussed in class.
* At least three visual references of the work (or works) discussed in your paper (with proper captions including name of game and publisher)
* Separate title page with your name, the name of the class, and the title of your paper
* No spelling or grammatical errors (consult the writing center and proofreading peers)
* One draft sent to the professor one week prior to final submission

Both the professor and the class must approve creative project as a proper substitute to a research paper. Presentations on your project will occur prior to starting primary research (please consult weekly schedule).

Creative project Requirements:

* 300-500 word creative statement, 12-point Times New Roman, Double Spaced
* Three citations submitted as a bibliography in MLA format. All three citations must be from readings we have *not* discussed in class.
* Final presentation of work created to entire class

**Weekly Schedule**

(subject to change)

Week 01 — August 29th

Introduction / Getting Started

**Playing: Sunset** by Tale of Tales

**For Next Week:** Read *Play Matters* Chapters 1-3

**LABOR DAY — No Class**

Week 02 — September 12th

Reading Discussion / Opening Lecture “Games vs Art”

**Playing: Lieve Oma** by Florian Veltman

**For Next Week:** Read *Play Matters* Chapters 4-6

Week 03 — September 19th

Reading Discussions / Continued Discourse

**Playing: That Dragon, Cancer** by Numinous Games

**For Next Week:** Read *Play Matters* Chapters 7-8

Week 04 — September 26th

Reading Discussions / Game Study Selection / Independent Play

**For Next Week:** Game Case Study 1 / Continued Playthrough

Week 05 — October 3rd

Games research presentations

**Playing: 1979 Revolution: Black Friday** by Navid Khonsari (iNK publishers)

**For Next Week:** Comparative Game Analysis

Week 06 — October 11th (Tuesday class)

Reading discussion / Games Research Presentation

**Playing: 80 Days** by Inkle

**For Next Week: Submit Midterm paper**

Week 07 — October 17th

**Midterm Papers Due**

Paper submission Discussion

**Playing: Passage by** Jason Rohrer, **TBD** by **Pippin Barr**, **TBD** by **Robert Yang**

**For Next Week:** Read *How Games Move Us* Chapter 1 & 2

Week 08 — October 24th

Reading Discussion / Paper Feedback (hopefully) / Starting Concepts for Final

**Playing: Orchids At Dusk** by Pol Ciarissou

**For Next Week:** Read *How Games Move Us* Chapter 3, Game Case Study 2

Week 09 — October 31st

Reading Discussion / Independent Research

**Playing: Selection of Twine Games and Interactive Fictions**

**For Next Week:** Read *How Games Move Us* Chapter 4 and Endgame

Week 10 — November 7th

Reading Discussion / Lecture presentation on strategies of game design

**Playing: TBD** (depending on reading / research)

**For Next Week:** Final Proposal Presentation

Week 11 — November 14th

Final Proposal Presentation / Feedback / Breakout sessions

**Playing / Watching: Thank You For Playing** by Malika Zouhali-Worral, David Osit

**For Next Week:** Read *Embed with Games* excerpts (TBD)

Week 12 — November 21st

Reading Discussion / Feedback Sessions on Final Presentations

**Playing: TBD** Art Games (depending on availability)

**For Next Week:** Final Draft 1 Complete

**Thanksgiving Break**

Week 13 — November 28th

**Final Draft 1 Due**

Independent Play / Group Feedback & Research

**Playing: TBD** triple-A game analysis (depending on research)

**For Next Week: Final Draft Reworking**

Week 14 — December 5th

Final Lecture / Recapping research / Playtesting projects

**For Next Week: Finals Due**

Final Exam Period — TBD