Decoding the Videogame: Reading and Writing in New Media
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Topic:
In 1962, Steve Russell built Spacewar! on MIT’s PDP-1. Videogames became tech demos, then the new pinball machines, then household toys, and now the American film industry sees them as heavy competition. Over the last five to ten years, videogames have become a staple of modern entertainment, but what are they really and how should we look at them?

The plan for this seminar is to closely examine the videogame as its own art form alongside literature and film and dance and sculpture and conceptual work. Recently, the medium has become more democratic and the number of gamic works (and good and great gamic works) has skyrocketed. But looking at these games as if they’re “the new movies” or “better than books” or “a painting you control,” doesn’t let us understand the full scope of what they do, or what they can do. This seminar will go in depth to begin to find out what games are, what they can be, how they are made, and how we can make them even better.

Some Questions:
—What defines a game? (Must have choice? Must be fun? Must have a good story? Must not have a story?)
—What makes videogames different from other games? Boardgames? Folk games? (Play space? Performance?)
—Who makes games, who can make games? (Mythic video game auteur, Politics of production, insular communities that exist, new nascent communities)
—How do games function? (Encouraging/discouraging certain actions? Prohibiting choice? Enabling the player’s free expression?)
—What will happen next?

Interdisciplinary Qualities:
At Game Developer Conference 2014 yesterday (March 20, 2014), developer Frank Lantz said, “games are basically operas made out of bridges.” He was referring to the fact that, more so than any other, videogames are an inherently interdisciplinary medium. They can be moving and entertaining in ways that make us want to analyze them as intricate works of art or literature, their rules are governed by carefully-tuned logic and math, and underneath, they are made of equally complex code and programming. Since we’ll be examining games’ stories and imagery, students with interests in Visual Arts or in various literatures will be interested. The seminar will also look inside these games at the systematic logic and source codes, which will appeal to Math and Computer Science majors. The theory behind designing games is interesting to logicians and mathematicians, but it’s also an intriguing topic for those who study Psychology, and the way people behave when presented with new rulesets. While it’s less applicable to the physical sciences, it’s likely that students interested in math, humanities, and the social sciences would be interested in this course.
Possible Books:

Homo Ludens, Johan Huizinga
First Person, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan
How to Do Things With Videogames, Ian Bogost
DreamCast Worlds: a Design History, Zoya Street
Reality is Broken, Jane McGonigal
ZZT, Anna Anthropy
A Slow Year, Ian Bogost
Replay: The History of Video Games, Tristan Donovan
Rise of the Videogame Zinesters, Anna Anthropy
Game Feel, Steve Swink
Rules of Play, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman
Killing is Harmless, Brendon Keogh

Games:

howling dogs, Porpentine
30 Flights of Loving, Brendon Chung
The Artist is Present, Pippin Barr
Passage, Jason Rohrer
Minecraft, Markus Persson
Canabalt, Adam Atomic
Super Hexagon, Terry Cavanaugh
Spaceteam, Henry Smith
Half Life 2: Episode 2, Valve Software
Heavy Rain, David Cage/Quantic Dream
Candy Crush, King.com
Gears of War, Epic Games
Pokémon, Game Freak
Pac-Man, Namco
E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial, Atari
E.T. the “fixed” version, NeoComputer
Rogue, Michael Toy et al.
NetHack, NetHack Dev Team
Super Mario Bros, Nintendo
Super Metroid, Nintendo
Grim Fandango, LucasArts
knytt, Nicklas Nygren
Cave Story, Daisuke “Pixel” Amaya
Gish, Edmund McMillen
Gravity Bone, Brendon Chung
Lugaru, David Rosen
Spelunky, Derek Yu

Missile Command, Atari
Cart Life, Richard Hofmeier
Search for the Gay Planet, Anna Anthropy
dys4ia, Anna Anthropy
lim, Merrit Kopas
Papers, Please, Lucas Pope
Republia Times, Lucas Pope
Digital: A Love Story, Christine Love
Radiator 1-1, and 1-2, Robert Yang
Antichamber, Alexander Bruce
The Stanley Parable, Davey Wreden
The Shivah, Wadjet Eye
Portal, Valve Software
Receiver, David Rosen
Nidhogg, Mark Essen
Tiny Tower, Nimblebit
Dungeon Keeper, Electronic Arts
868-Hack, Michael Brough
Hide, Andrew Shouldice
Vesper.5, Michael Brough
Starseed Pilgrim, Droqen
Kentucky Rt. Zero, Cardboard Computer
DOTA2, Valve Software
Call of Duty franchise, Infinity Ward
Probably several games by increpare
Probably several more games in Twine
Articles:
Manifesto for a Ludic Century, Eric Zimmerman
The Ludic Century: Exploring the Manifesto, Heather Chaplin
Will the 21st Century Be Defined By Games?, Heather Chaplin
News Reports: violence in GTA: San Andreas; sex in Mass Effect; Supreme Court
Jonathan Blow on Free-to-Play design
Probably some OUYA-related articles
Nintendo's "I'm not a gamer" commercials
The Art of Screenshake, Jan Willem Nijman
to the right, hold on tight, Anna Anthropy
Maturity, Jamming, Puzzles, Michael Brough
hidden costs of independent game development, Michael Brough
Porpentine’s collections of games for Rock, Paper, Shotgun
Queering Game Development, Robert Yang
Feminist Frequency, Anita Sarkeesian
Fear of the Female Geek,
on Anger, on Civility, Mattie Brice
Two reviews for Bioshock Infinite (One glowing, one highly critical)
Slavery Gives Me a Weird Personal Connection to Assassin’s Creed IV
   and A Game That Showed Me My Own Black History, Evan Narcisse
Bow. Nigger, always_black
A People’s History of the First-Person Shooter, Robert Yang
The article on NeoComputer about “fixing” ET for the Atari 2600
Why Super Metroid’s Hacking Community is Still Going Strong, Victoria Earl
A Letter to Leigh, Raph Coster
A Letter to a Letter, Robert Yang
Fuck Videogames, Darius Kazemi
re: Fuck Videogames, Liz Ryerson

Possible Speakers:
Bob Rehak is an Assistant Professor and Department Chair in Swarthmore’s
Film and Media Studies department. He has written a number of articles on the sub-
ject and teaches a class on the Theory and History of Videogames.

Phoenix Perry started the Code Liberation Foundation, which holds classes
that teach women how to code to help combat sexism in programming and game
development. CL was founded in New York, but has since expanded. She owns a
development company, has been featured in TIME, and is an adjunct professor at
NYU.

Robert Yang is a game developer and critic who teaches at Parsons New
School of Design in New York City. He has written (and spoken) extensively about
games and game design, and is working on a book about analyzing the source
code of Half-Life.

Note: These “possible” texts are part of a pretty extensive syllabus I’ve written up. I’m compressing it
as best I can. Obviously books, games, and articles are all subject to change. It is highly unlikely
(quite probably impossible) that we will play through all games listed, so some will be discussed
through video footage and demonstration of smaller internal systems rather than first-hand play.
Clips, if you will.