

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)
- Who plays games and why? (Insular communities? history of games and games marketing? Racism, sexism, homophobia?)
- 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:

<i>howling dogs</i> , Porpentine	<i>Missile Command</i> , Atari
<i>30 Flights of Loving</i> , Brendon Chung	<i>Cart Life</i> , Richard Hofmeier
<i>The Artist is Present</i> , Pippin Barr	<i>Search for the Gay Planet</i> , Anna Anthropy
<i>Passage</i> , Jason Rohrer	<i>dys4ia</i> , Anna Anthropy
<i>Minecraft</i> , Markus Persson	<i>lim</i> , Merrit Kopas
<i>Canabalt</i> , Adam Atomic	<i>Papers, Please</i> , Lucas Pope
<i>Super Hexagon</i> , Terry Cavanaugh	<i>Republia Times</i> , Lucas Pope
<i>Spaceteam</i> , Henry Smith	<i>Digital: A Love Story</i> , Christine Love
<i>Half Life 2: Episode 2</i> , Valve Software	<i>Radiator 1-1, 2, and 1-2</i> , Robert Yang
<i>Heavy Rain</i> , David Cage/Quantic Dream	<i>Antichamber</i> , Alexander Bruce
<i>Candy Crush</i> , King.com	<i>The Stanley Parable</i> , Davey Wreden
<i>Gears of War</i> , Epic Games	<i>The Shivah</i> , Wadjet Eye
<i>Pokémon</i> , Game Freak	<i>Portal</i> , Valve Software
<i>Pac-Man</i> , Namco	<i>Receiver</i> , David Rosen
<i>E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial</i> , Atari	<i>Nidhogg</i> , Mark Essen
<i>E.T. the "fixed" version</i> , NeoComputer	<i>Tiny Tower</i> , Nimblebit
<i>Rogue</i> , Michael Toy et al.	<i>Dungeon Keeper</i> , Electronic Arts
<i>NetHack</i> , NetHack Dev Team	<i>868-Hack</i> , Michael Brough
<i>Super Mario Bros</i> , Nintendo	<i>Hide</i> , Andrew Shouldice
<i>Super Metroid</i> , Nintendo	<i>Vesper.5</i> , Michael Brough
<i>Grim Fandango</i> , LucasArts	<i>Starseed Pilgrim</i> , Droqen
<i>knytt</i> , Nicklas Nygren	<i>Kentucky Rt. Zero</i> , Cardboard Computer
<i>Cave Story</i> , Daisuke "Pixel" Amaya	<i>DOTA2</i> , Valve Software
<i>Gish</i> , Edmund McMillen	<i>Call of Duty</i> franchise, Infinity Ward
<i>Gravity Bone</i> , Brendon Chung	Probably several games by increpare
<i>Lugaru</i> , David Rosen	Probably several more games in Twine
<i>Spelunky</i> , Derek Yu	

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 subject 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.