University of Toronto
Faculty of Information

INF2255 – Critical Game Studies

Summer, 2022
Time: Wednesday, 6.30-8.30pm
Room: BL 224

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Calendar description
This course critically examines technological, social, cultural and political-economic issues within the interdisciplinary study of games. This course focuses on the play, production, and analysis of games while reading current research and theory from a variety of sources in the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and industry. Topics will focus on issues important to the study of games such as defining games, play and players, game production, cheating, violence in games, and the potential educational benefits of games. Classes and assignments engage students in the critical arguments within Game Studies and expose them to the unique contributions of games to everyday life. Throughout the course, students regularly read, write, play, and design games. No prior game design, programming, or art experience required.

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1. Expectations and Objectives

Course Outline and Objectives

Games are one of the fastest growing cultural industries that builds and innovates information and computing technologies, information systems and architectures, organizational structures, preservation techniques, online media platforms, and educational settings to name but a few, and is increasingly becoming an area of research across the physical and social sciences as can be found in the journals, conferences, and book series that have emerged over the past two decades. This course critically examines technological, social, cultural and political-economic issues within the interdisciplinary study of games. This course focuses on the play, production, and analysis of games while reading current research and theory from a variety of sources in the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and industry. Topics will focus on issues important to the study of games such as defining games, play and players, game production, cheating, violence, representation and inclusivity in game cultures, and the potential educational benefits of games. Classes and assignments engage students in the critical arguments within Game Studies and expose them to the unique contributions of games to everyday life. Throughout the course, students regularly read, write, play, and design games. No prior game design, programming, or art experience required.

The course learning objectives are to familiarize students with current thinking within game studies. The core focus for every question asked will be how games impact our cultural, societal, political-economic, and legal infrastructures in everyday life. To that end, students will be first introduced to concepts and theory surrounding the definition of games, the history of games, and the core topics and issues. Each week, students will be exposed to a variety of theory, methods, and games in the context of the weekly topic. Classes will follow the format of a 30 minute lecture and 20 minute class discussion, followed by a 40 minute game design workshop, with 30 minutes factored in for questions, break, and disruptions—totaling 2 hours of class time. The lecture sessions will examine the weekly topic or issue in game studies to supplement and contextualize the course readings. This discussion session will be devoted to discussion of the assigned readings. The workshop sessions will be dedicated to exposing students to different game design techniques in the context of the final game assignment (See assignments below). Students are expected to contribute to discussion of the core arguments, traditions, and influential games within the interdisciplinary field of game studies. Students are also expected to participate in the weekly topic discussions and game design workshops that introduce students to different types of game design.

Course Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of Critical Game Studies, students will be able to:
1. foster critical thinking with respect to games and their context;
2. use different disciplinary and theoretical frameworks to understand contemporary issues relating to game studies;
3. analyze, research, and critique game studies issues and arguments using interdisciplinary theories and methods;
4. position themselves within the (sub)fields of game studies, such as player studies, education, and labour, as well as within debates amongst scholarship and industry;

5. to design and create a game that has built in an issue or argument from the course material as its core game mechanic.

Relationship MI Program Learning Outcomes
Game Studies is a topic that requires students to be able to apply a range of concepts, theories, and practices derived from a range of information-related disciplines (Program Outcomes 1 & 2). As games become an increasingly studied area of research, students will develop the ability to contribute through research to the continuous expansion of knowledge in Game Studies, including the sub-body of knowledge underlying the information and archival sciences (Program Outcome 3). Games' historical centrality to the preservation and dissemination of human knowledge, whether through play or sports, means that the evolving forms of games are a core concern for information professionals, especially those who work to ensure access to knowledge (Program Outcome 2). Understanding the changing forms of games, from dice to cards to digital, requires a synthesis of theoretical and practical knowledge, linking theories of interpretation to specific encoding and digitization technologies, which will be explored in the workshop component of the course and the produced game assignment (Program Outcomes 4 & 5).

2. Assignments and Grading

This course has a hybrid structure that mixes lectures, group and class discussion to play and create games. Final grades will be assessed based on the performance of each task/assignment according to the weighting below. The result will be a produced game that combines the course's theoretical dimension within a designed game mechanic. A premium is put on any kind of game mechanic that innovates an argument within game studies. The assignment structure is iterative by design. The first Research Paper assignment allows students to explore their ideas and interests in game studies while examining the core literature of a topic or issue. The game design document allows students to formalize their ideas and interests into a game design document with the opportunity for feedback. Lastly, the produced critical game ideally combines a strong theoretical foundation and positioning within the wider domain of game studies with a rigorous argument and innovative game design.

Class Participation and Attendance (20% Ongoing)
- Students will actively participate in class during the class discussion and workshop portions of the class. Students will be evaluated on their participation in class. The aim of class participation is to get students to think critically about the course material during class and to work through their final game projects during the game design discussion (Detailed instructions on Quercus Assignment section).

Research Paper (30% Due Week 5: 8 June 2022 by 11.59pm on Quercus)
- For this individual assignment, students will choose one of the weekly topics and write a 3,000-word research paper on that topic providing a brief overview of the research literature, core questions and issues, its relevance to game studies, and why it is important to everyday society. The aim of this assignment is to get students to think critically about

a potential topic they will design into a game mechanic for their game design document and game. (Detailed instructions on Quercus Assignment section).

Game Design Document (15% Due Week 8: 6 July 2022 by 11.59pm on Quercus)
- For this individual assignment, students will create a game design document that incorporates one of the weekly topics or issues into a core game mechanic. The game design document will be 1,000 words and outlines the purpose of the game, the type of game, and the core game mechanic of the game. In the weeks leading up to this assignment, students will be introduced to genres of games in the workshop component of the class, such as card and board games. Students will design a game design document that will use one of these design options. The aim of this assignment is to get students to begin thinking about game studies issues and how they can be designed into a game. (Detailed instructions on Quercus Assignment section).

Game and Design Statement (30% Due In-Class Week 12: 3 August 2022)
- For this individual assignment, students will create a game based on their game design document and produce an artist statement of their game. Students can create a card game, board game, interactive fiction, or digital game. Students will aim to have their games playable from 5 to 20 minutes. The goal is that students design a game, regardless of their technical or artistic capabilities. Students will have the opportunity during the later weeks of the class to work on their games in the workshop component of the class. This workshop component will give students the chance to iteratively design their game from week to week and have their colleagues playtest its core game mechanic. Students will be evaluated on how well their game incorporates a course issue or topic into the game's play, narrative structure, or design. The aim of this assignment is to get students to think about how games can be useful as a method for articulating new perspectives on topics and issues that have typically been researched via academic articles, journalism, and documentaries. (Detailed instructions on Quercus Assignment section).

Presentation (5% Due In-Class Week 12: 3 August 2022)
- For this individual assignment, students will present their games in class during the final in-class "Game Arcade". Students will be evaluated based on how they articulate their game and its relevance to the issues and topics discussed in class. (Detailed Instructions on Quercus Assignment section).

Required texts
- All course texts will be made available on Quercus via the Library Reading List tab as hyperlinks with institutional access to journal articles, chapters of books, and online essays.
- Though not required, students may find Robert Zukek's *Elements of Game Design* [e-book] and Tracy Fullerton's *Game Design Workshop* [e-book] to be useful books to consult for Assignments 3 and 4 in designing their game.

Assignments, Due Dates and Lateness Penalties
All formal assignments must make consistent use of an accepted citation format (preferably APA style, see Quercus for a style guide). The use of reference managers (e.g., Zotero, Mendeley, or

EndNote) is highly recommended. All work is due on the dates and times indicated in the course timeline. Late assignments will incur a 10% late penalty per week. All assignments are also to be handed in via Quercus except the final game assignment (see assignment for detailed instructions). Deadline extensions will be granted only with authorized documentation or at the instructor's discretion.

Absence Declaration Tool

During summer 2022, the University is continuing to temporarily suspend the need for a doctor's note or medical certificate for absences from academic participation; students should use the Absence Declaration tool on ACORN (ACORN Help > Profile & Settings) to declare an absence if they require consideration for missed academic work; students are responsible for contacting instructors to request the academic consideration they are seeking; students should record each day of their absence as soon as it begins, up until the day before they return to classes or other academic activities.

Grading

Please consult the Faculty of Information's:
- Grade Interpretation Guidelines
- The University Assessment and Grading Practices Policy
- The Guidelines on the Use of INC, SDF, & WDR

These documents will form the basis for grading in the course.

3. Rules and Regulations

Acknowledgement of Traditional Land
I acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and I am grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Equity and Diversity Statement
I and the University of Toronto are committed to equity, human rights, and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. I and the University of Toronto do not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.

Academic Integrity
Please consult the University's site on Academic Integrity. The Faculty of Information has a zero-tolerance policy on plagiarism as defined in section B.I.1.(d) of the University's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (PDF). You should acquaint yourself with the Code. Please review the material in Cite it Right and if you require further clarification, consult the site How Not to Plagiarize (PDF).

Cite it Right covers relevant parts of the U of T [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (1995)](#). It is expected that all Faculty of Information students take the Cite it Right workshop and the online quiz. Completion of the online [Cite it Right quiz](#) should be made prior to the second week of classes as the workshop is now interactive. To review and complete the workshop, visit the [Orientation e-Workshops on the Virtual Inforum.](#)

Accommodations
Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability or a health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach Student Services and/or the [Accessibility Services Office](#) as soon as possible. The Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let us know your needs, the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the [Accessibility Services Office](#) as soon as possible. Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let us know your needs, the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

To book an appointment with the faculty's on-location Accessibility Advisor, Alexa Quach, email accessibility.services@utoronto.ca or call (416) 978-8060 and state that you would like to book a meeting with Alexa Quach at the Faculty of Information.

Absence Declaration Tool
During the COVID-19 pandemic, the University is temporarily suspending the need for a doctor's note or medical certificate for absences from academic participation; students should use the [Absence Declaration tool on ACORN](#) to declare an absence if they require consideration for missed academic work; students are responsible for contacting instructors to request the academic consideration they are seeking; students should record each day of their absence as soon as it begins, up until the day before they return to classes or other academic activities.

Academic Dates
Faculty of Information's [academic dates and deadlines](#).

FIPPA
This course, including your participation, will be recorded on video and will be available to students in the course for viewing remotely and after each session. Course videos and materials belong to your instructor, the University, and/or other source depending on the specific facts of each situation, and are protected by copyright. In this course, you are permitted to download session videos and materials for your own academic use, but you should not copy, share, or use them for any other purpose without the explicit permission of the instructor. For questions about recording and use of videos in which you appear please contact your instructor.

Writing Support

As stated in the Faculty of Information's Grade Interpretation Guidelines, "work that is not well written and grammatically correct will not generally be considered eligible for a grade in the A range, regardless of its quality in other respects." With this in mind, please make use of the writing support provided to graduate students by the SGS Graduate Centre for Academic Communication. The services are designed to target the needs of both native and non-native speakers and all programs are free. Please consult the current SGS Workshops Schedule for more information.

4. Course Schedule

Week 1 – What is game studies? (11 May 2022)

Required readings:
- The Editors. (2018). "The Futures of Game Studies." *The Velvet Light Trap*, 81: 57-80. [e-article].
- Consalvo, M. & Paul, C. A. (2019). Welcome to the Discourse of the Real. In *Real Games: What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Videogames* (pp. xix-xxxvii)*.* MIT Press. [e-book]

Suggested reading:
- Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S., Smith, J. H., & Tosca, S. P. (2020). "Studying Video Games." In *Understanding video games: The essential introduction* (Fourth Edition) (pp.7-14). Routledge. [e-book]

Week 2 – History of Games and its Industry (18 May 2022)

Required readings:
- Mukherjee, S. 2019. "*Age of Empires*: Postcolonialism." In M. T. Payne & N. B. Huntemann (Eds.), *How to Play Video Games* (pp. 157-164). New York: New York University Press. [e-book]
- Nichols, R. (2010). "Target Acquired: America's Army and the Video Game Industry." In N. B. Huntemann & M. T. Payne (Eds.), *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (pp. 39-52). New York: Routledge. [e-book]
- Trammell, A. (2018). "Militarism and Masculinity in Dungeon's & Dragons." In N. Taylor and G. Voorhees (Eds.), *Masculinities in Play* (pp. 129-148). Palgrave. [e-book]

Suggested reading:
- van der Voorn, K. (2022, March 22). "Historical Accuracy Matters in Video Games. Here's Why." Retrieved from *WayPoint* [e-article]
- Gault, M. (2021, November 2). "The Pentagon's Long and Complicated History With Video Games." Retrieved from *WayPoint* [e-article]

Week 3 – Defining Games (25 May 2022)

Required reading:
- Conway, S. (2019). "FIFA: Magic Circle." In M. T. Payne & N. B. Huntemann (Eds.), *How to Play Video Games* (pp. 13-20). New York: New York University Press. [e-book]
- Thomas, D. (2016). "Fun." In H. Lowood & R. Guins (Eds.), *Debugging Game History: A Critical Lexicon* (pp. 143-150). Cambridge: MIT Press. [e-book]

-   Ryan, M-L. (2016). "Narrative." In H. Lowood & R. Guins (Eds.), *Debugging Game History: A Critical Lexicon* (pp. 335-342). Cambridge: MIT Press. [e-book]

Suggested reading:
-   Bogost, I. (2017, April 25). "Video games are better without stories." Retrieved from *The Atlantic* [e-article]
-   Marks, R. B. (2017, Mar 1). "Video games aren't just better with stories, they are stories." Retrieved from *CGMagazine* [e-article]

Week 4 – Players (1 June 2022)) – Guest Lecture Alex Cybulski

Required reading:
-   Patterson, C. B. (2020). "Global Game: Race, Play, Intimacy." In *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games* (pp. 37-76). New York University Press. [e-book]
-   Cote, A. C. (2020). "Core and the Video Game Industry." In *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games* (pp. 23-55). New York University Press. [e-book]
-   Scully-Blaker, R. (2014). A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space With de Certeau and Virilio. *Game Studies*, 14(1) [e-article]

Suggested reading:
-   Grayson, N. (2021, April 3). "Twitch's 'Hot Tub Meta' Has Sparked Off Yet Another Debate About Women's Attire." Retrieved from *Kotaku* [e-article]
-   Klepek, P. (2017, March 1). "The secret shame of Steam cheaters that lasts seven years." Retrieved from *Waypoint* [e-article]

Week 5 – Creators (8 June 2022 Research Paper Due by 11.59pm)

Required reading:
-   Cote, A. C. & Harris, B. C. (2021). "The Cruel Optimism of 'Good Crunch: How Game Industry Discourses Perpetuate Unsustainable Labor Practices." *New Media & Society* Online First: 1-19. [e-article]
-   Ozimek, A. M. (2019). "Outsourcing Digital Game Production: The Case of Polish Testers." *Television & New Media,* 20(8): 824-835 [e-article]
-   Rowlands, T. *et al.* (2018). "Power, Violence, and the Mask: Representations of Criminal Subjectivities in Grand Theft Auto Online." In K. L. Gray & D. L. Leonard (Eds.), *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Justice* (pp. 45-61). Seattle: University of Washington Pres. [e-book].

Suggested reading:
-   EA_Spouse. (2004, November 10). "EA: The human story." Retrieved from *LiveJournal* [webpage]
-   Schreier, J. (2015, February 12). "The pizza party where everyone got fired." Retrieved from *Kotaku* [e-article]. Read through the different edited stories in the article.

Week 6 – The Death Mechanic (15 June 2022) – Guest Lecture Anna Kalinowski

Required reading:
-   Tocci, J. (2008). "'You are dead. Continue?': Conflicts and complements in game rules and fiction." *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2(2), 187–201. [e-article]

- Keogh, B. (2018). "Repetition, Failure, and Permanence." In *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* (pp. 137-166). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. [e-book]

Suggested Reading
- Curtis, S. (2015). "To Fatality and Beyond: The Deathsetics of Failure in Videogames." *The Luminary*, 6(1), 95-108. [e-article]
- Nohr, R. F. (2013). "Restart after death: 'Self-optimizing', 'normalism' and 're-entry' in computer games." In J. C. Thompson & M. A. Ouellette (Eds*.), The Game Culture Reader* (pp. 66–83). Cambridge Scholars Publishing. [e-book]

Week 7 – Representation (22 June 2022)

Required reading:
- Phillips, A. (2020). "Gender, Power, and the Gamic Gaze: Re-Viewing *Portal* and *Bayonetta*." In *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (pp. 99-136). New York: New York University Press. [e-book]
- Gray, K. L. (2020). "Historical Narratives, Contemporary Games, Racialized Experiences." In *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (pp. 38-60). Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. [e-book]
- LaPensée, E. (2021). "When Rivers Were Trails: Cultural Expression in an Indigenous Video Game." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27(3): 281-295. [e-article]

Suggested reading:
- Cole, Y., & DePass, T. (2017, March 1). "Black skin is still a radical concept in video games." Retrieved from *WayPoint* [e-article]
- Hashimoto, K. (2021, January 20). "The Cyberpunk Genre has been Orientalist for Decades—but it doesn't have to be." Retrieved from *Polygon* [e-article]

BREAK **(No Class on 29 June 2022)**

Week 8 – Inclusivity (6 July 2022 Game Design Document Due by 11.59pm)

Required reading:
- Busch, T., Boucreau, K. & Consalvo, M. (2016). "Toxic Game Culture, Corporate Regulation, and Standards of Behavior Among Players of Online Games." In In S. Conway & J. deWinter (Eds.), *Video Game Policy: Production, Distribution, and Consumption* (pp. 176-190). New York: Routledge. [e-book]
- Ruberg, B. (2019). "The Queerness and Games Conference: Community." In M. T. Payne & N. B. Huntemann (Eds.), *How to Play Video Games* (pp. 118-125). New York: New York University Press. [e-book]
- Fordyce, R., Neale, T., & Apperley, T. (2018). "Avatars: Addressing Racism and Racialized Address." In K. L. Gray & D. L. Leonard (Eds.), *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Justice* (pp. 231-251). Seattle: University of Washington Pres. [e-book].

Suggested reading:
- Explore the *Can I Play That* website [webpage]
- Explore the *Game Accessibility Guidelines* developed by studios, specialists, and academics [webpage]

Week 9 – Violence (13 July 2022)

Required reading:
- Burrill, D. (2018). "'We're Going To Have To Do Things That Are Unthinkable': Masculinity/Games/Torture." In N. Taylor and G. Voorhees (Eds.), *Masculinities in Play* (pp. 23-36). Palgrave. [e-book]
- Schott, G. & Mäyrä, F. (2016). "Re-Conceptualizing Game Violence: Who is Being Protected and From What?" In S. Conway & J. deWinter (Eds.), *Video Game Policy: Production, Distribution, and Consumption* (pp. 131-145). New York: Routledge. [e-book]
- Kocurek, C. (2019). "*Night Trap*: Moral Panic." In M. T. Payne & N. B. Huntemann (Eds.), *How to Play Video Games* (pp. 309-316). New York: New York University Press. [e-book]

Suggested Reading:
- Fussell, S. (2019, August 19). "Why it's so hard to stop marketing guns in video games." Retrieved from *The Atlantic* [e-article]
- Ledonne, D. (2005). *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* Retrieved from Columbine Game [website]

Week 10 – Communities (20 July 2022) – Guest Lecture Christine H. Tran

Required reading:
- Taylor, T.L. (2018). "Broadcasting Ourselves." In *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (pp. 1-22). Princeton University Press. [e-book]
- Tran, C. H. (2022). "'Never Battle Alone': Egirls and Gender(ed) War on Video Game Live Streaming as 'Real' Work." *Television & New Media*, Online First: 1-12 [e-article].
- Russworm, T. M., & Blackmon, S. (2020). Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought. *Feminist Media Histories*, 6(1), 93–118. [e-article]

Suggested reading:
- Nakamura, L. (2012). Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficulty Setting There Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology*. [e-article]
- Nooney, L. (2013). A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History. *Game Studies*, 13(2). [e-article]

Week 11 – Preservation (27 July 2022)

Required reading:
- Lowood, H., Monnens, D., Armstrong, A., Ruggill, J., McAllister, K. S., Vowell, Z., & Donahue, R. (2009). "Before it's too late: A digital game preservation white paper." *American Journal of Play, 2*(2), 139-166 [e-article]
- Newman, J. (2012). "Ports and Patches: Digital Games as Unstable Objects." *Convergence*, 18(2): 135-142 [e-article]
- Pow, W. (2019). "Outside of the Folder, the Box, the Archive: Moving towards a Reparative Video Game History." *ROMchip: A Journal of Game Histories*, 1(1) [e-article]

Suggested reading:
- LaFrance, A. (2017). "What it's like to use an original Macintosh in 2017." Retrieved from *The Atlantic* [e-article]
- Play any game in the Internet Archive MS-DOS software library [emulator]

Week 12 – Arcade (3 August 2022)

No readings this week. Students will present their completed digital games and participate in an "Arcade" (i.e., play each other's games).