

**University of Toronto
Faculty of Information**

INF2303 – Critical Game Studies

Summer, 2018
Tuesday, 4-6pm, BL507

Instructor: Dr. Chris Young
Email: christopher.young@utoronto.ca
Office: BL 625
Office hours: Tuesday, 3-4, 6-7pm (or by appointment)

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 programming or art experience required.

Version 1.5
20180605

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 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 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 40 minute lecture, 40 minute discussion, and 40 minute workshop. The lecture sessions will examine the weekly topic or issue in game studies; the discussion session will be devoted to discussion of the assigned readings and games; and the workshop sessions will be dedicated to exposing students to different game design techniques that will assist them in developing their game project (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 workshop activity that introduces 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, class discussion, and workshops 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 paper assignment allows students to explore their ideas and interests in game studies while examining a specific issue or argument using empirical evidence and literature. The game design document allows students to formalize their ideas and interests into a game design document with the opportunity for feedback. The project presentation offers students the opportunity to explain their produced game, and its core argument, and its contribution to game studies. Lastly, the 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 lecture, seminar, and workshop portions of the class. Students will be evaluated on their contributions to class discussion and the completion of in-class mini-assignments, such as workshop tutorials, produced mini-games, etc. The aim of class participation is to get students to think critically about the course material during class discussion and to work through their final game projects during the class workshop.

Research Paper (30% Due Week 5: 29 May 2018)

- 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.

Game design document (15% Due Week 8: 26 June 2018)

- 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. Game mechanics are rule based systems that facilitate and encourage a player to explore and learn the properties of their possibility space using feedback mechanisms. For example, students could focus on the issue of misogyny in the game industry and design a board game where you go through the possible experiences of a female game developer at her studio. 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.

Game (30% Due Week 12: 24 July 2018)

- Students will create a game based on their game design document. Students can create a card game, board game, interactive fiction, or digital game. Students will aim to have their games playable from 5 to 30 minutes. The goal is that students design a game, regardless of their technical or artistic capabilities. Students will have the opportunity during the final 6 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.

Presentation (5% In-Class Week 12: 24 July 2018)

- 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.

Required texts

- All course texts will be made available on Quercus as PDF files or through hyperlinks, such as journal articles, chapters of books, and online essays.
- All digital games will be made available on Quercus as downloadable files or hyperlinks. Almost all games have free education licenses or are made freely available by their creators. Students are also encouraged to watch game playthroughs on YouTube and Twitch if they have trouble playing the games.

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.

Grading

Please consult the iSchool's Grade Interpretation Guidelines (<https://ischool.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/grade-interpretation.pdf>) and the University Assessment and Grading Practices Policy (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/grading.pdf>). These documents will form the basis for grading in the course.

3. Rules and Regulations

Academic Integrity

Please consult the University's site on Academic Integrity <http://academicintegrity.utoronto.ca/>. The iSchool 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 <http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppjun011995.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" <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize>. Cite it Right covers relevant parts of the U of T *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (1995)*. It is expected that all iSchool 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. To review and complete the workshop, visit the orientation portion of the iSkills site: uoft.me/iskills

Writing Support

As stated in the iSchool'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 Office of English Language and Writing Support <http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/English-Language-and-Writing-Support.aspx>. The services are designed to target the needs of both native and non-native speakers and all programs are free. Please consult the current workshop schedule <http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/Current-Years-Courses.aspx> for more information.

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 me and/or the Accessibility Services Office <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as> 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 them and I know your needs, the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

Academic Dates

<https://ischool.utoronto.ca/current-students/academic-resources/academic-calendar/>

Acknowledgement of Traditional Land

I would like to acknowledge this sacred land on which the University of Toronto operates. It has been a site of human activity for 15,000 years. This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. The territory was the subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and Confederacy of the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. Today, the meeting place of Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in the community, on this territory.

4. Course Schedule

Week 1 – What is game studies? (1 May 2018)

Required readings:

- Shaw, A. (2010.) “What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies.” *Games and Culture* 5(4), pp. 403-424. [e-article]
http://resolver.scholarsportal.info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/resolve/15554120/v05i0004/403_wivgcsags.xml
- Nieborg, D. B., & Hermes, J. (2008). “What is game studies anyway?.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(2), 131-147. [e-article]
http://resolver.scholarsportal.info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/resolve/13675494/v11i0002/131_wigsa.xml

Suggested reading:

- Bogost, I. (2015, February 2). *Game studies, year fifteen: Notes on thoughts on formalism*. Retrieved from Ian Bogost: <http://bogost.com/writing/blog/game-studies-year-fifteen/>

Week 2 – History of Games (8 May 2018)

Required readings:

- Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S., Smith, J. H., & Tosca, S. P. (2015). *Understanding video games: The essential introduction*. New York: Routledge. Chapter 4 “History” (pp. 61-119). [PDF scan of ch.4 available; (single user) [e-book](#); and Robarts - GV1469.3 .E44 2013X - [check availability](#)]
- Kerr, A. (2017). *Global games: Production, circulation, and policy in the networked era*. New York: Routledge. Chapter 1 “Introduction” (pp. 1-26). [[e-book](#); and Robarts - HD9993 .E452 K47 2017X – [check availability](#)]

Suggested reading:

- The Strong National Museum of Play. (2017, September 20). *Video game history timeline*. Retrieved from The Strong National Museum of Play: <http://www.museumofplay.org/about/icheg/video-game-history/timeline>

Critical game readings:

- Russell, S. (1962). *Spacewar!* Retrieved from: <http://spacewar.oversigma.com/> [Emulator].
- Crowther, W. & Woods, D. (1976). *Adventure*. Retrieved from: <https://quuxplusone.github.io/Advent/> [Emulator]

Week 3 – Defining Games (15 May 2018)
--

Required reading:

- Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2006). *The game design reader: A rules of play anthology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Chapters by Huizinga (pp. 96-121), Caillois (pp. 122-155), Suits (pp. 172-191), and Sutton-Smith (pp. 296-313). [PDF scan available; and Inforum – Course Reserves – QA76.76 .C672 G357 2006 – [check availability](#)]
- Juul, J. (2011). *Half-real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Chapter 5 “Rules and Fiction” (pp. 163-196). [PDF scan available; and Inforum – Course Reserves - GV1469.3 .J88 2005X – [check availability](#)]

Suggested reading:

- Bogost, I. (2017, April 25). *Video games are better without stories*. Retrieved from The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148/>

Critical game reading:

- Fullbright Company. (2013). *Gone Home*. Purchase a copy through Steam or watch a playthrough on YouTube.

Week 4 – Players (22 May 2018)

Required reading:

- Perron, B. (2003). From gamers to players to gameplayers: The example of interactive movies. In *The video game theory reader* (pp. 237-258). New York: Routledge. [[e-book](#); and Robarts - GV1469.3 .V57 2003 – [check availability](#)]
- Clément, F. (2014). Players/Gamers. In *The Routledge companion to video game studies* (pp. 197-203). [[e-book](#); and Inforum – Course Reserves – GV1469.3 .R67 2014 – [check availability](#)]

Suggested reading:

- McGrath, B. (2014, November 24). *Good game: The rise of the professional cyber athlete*. Retrieved from the New Yorker: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/24/good-game>
- Malik, O. (2016, July 12). *Pokémon GO will make you crave augmented reality*. Retrieved from the New Yorker: <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/pokemon-go-will-make-you-crave-augmented-reality>

Critical game reading:

- Niantic. (2016). *Pokémon GO*. Download for free on iOS or Android Devices.

Week 5 – Creators (29 May 2018 Research Paper Due by 11.59pm)

Required reading:

- O'Donnell, C. (2014). *Developer's dilemma: The secret world of videogame creators*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Chapter 1 “A Tutorial Level” (pp. 3-33). [[e-book](#)]
- Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. Chapter 1 “Immaterial Labor” (pp. 3-33). [[e-book](#)]; and Robarts – Stacks – GV1469.34 .S52 D94 2009X – [check availability](#)]

Suggested reading:

- EA_Spouse. (2004, November 10). *EA: The human story*. Retrieved from LiveJournal: <https://ea-spouse.livejournal.com/274.html>

Critical game reading:

- Schreier, J. (2015, February 12). The pizza party where everyone got fired. Retrieved from Kotaku: <https://kotaku.com/the-pizza-party-where-everyone-got-fired-1685455125>. Read through the different edited stories in the article.

Week 6 – Cheating (5 June 2018)

Required reading:

- Consalvo, M. (2009). *Cheating: Gaining advantage in videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Chapters Introduction “To Cheat or Not to Cheat” (pp. 1-13) and Chapter 3 “Genies, Sharks, and Chips” (pp. 65-79). [[e-book](#)]; and Robarts – GV1469.34 .C67 C66 2007X – [check availability](#)]
- Vázquez, I. S., & Consalvo, M. (2015). “Cheating in social network games.” *New Media & Society*, 17(6), 829-844. [e-article] http://resolver.scholarsportal.info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/resolve/14614448/v17i0006/829_cisng.xml

Suggested reading:

- Klepek, P. (2017, March 1). *The secret shame of Steam cheaters that lasts seven years*. Retrieved from Waypoint: https://waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/vvjg9x/the-secret-shame-of-steam-cheaters-that-lasts-seven-years

Critical Game reading:

- Explore the documentation on Steam surrounding its Valve Anti-Cheat (VAC) system: https://support.steampowered.com/kb_article.php?ref=7849-Radz-6869

Week 7 – Representation (12 June 2018)

Required reading:

- Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., & Ivory, J. D. (2009). “The virtual census: Representations of gender, race and age in video games.” *New Media & Society*, 11(5), 815-834. [e-article] http://resolver.scholarsportal.info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/resolve/14614448/v11i0005/815_tvcrograaivg.xml
- Guins, R. (2007). “May I invade your space?” Black technocultural production, ephemera, and video game culture. In *Afro-Geeks: Beyond the digital divide* (pp. 113-134). Santa Barbara, CA: Center for Black Studies Press. [PDF scan available; and Inforum: T49.5 .A37 2007 – Course Reserves – [check availability](#)]

Suggested reading:

- Cole, Y., & DePass, T. (2017, March 1). *Black skin is still a radical concept in video games*. Retrieved from Waypoint: https://waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/78qpxd/black-skin-is-still-a-radical-concept-in-video-games
- Narcisse, E. (2015, February 19). Video games' blackness problem. Retrieved from: <https://kotaku.com/video-games-blackness-problem-1686694082>

Critical Game reading:

- Feminist Frequency. (2014, June 16). *Women as background decoration*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZPSrwdvsg>

BREAK (No Class on 19 June 2018)

Week 8 – Violence (26 June 2018 Game Design Document Due by 11.59pm)

Required reading:

- APA Task Force on Violent Media. (2015). *Technical report on the review of the violent video game literature*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/violent-media.aspx>
- DeCamp, W., & Ferguson, C. J. (2017). “The impact of degree of exposure to violent video games, family background, and other factors on youth violence.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(2), 388-400. [e-article]
<http://search.ebscohost.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=120771108&site=ehost-live>

Suggested Reading:

- Kleinman, Z. (2015, August 17). *Do video games make people violent?* Retrieved from BBC News: <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-33960075>

Critical Game Reading:

- Ledonne, D. (2005). *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* Retrieved from: <http://www.columbinegame.com/>

Week 9 – Education (3 July 2018)

Required reading:

- Gee, J. P. (2007). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. Palgrave Macmillan. Introduction (pp. 1-15) and Chapter 4 “Situated Meaning and Learning” (pp. 71-111). [Inforum – Course Reserves - GV1469.3 .G44 2007 – [check availability](#)]
- Litts, B. K., Kafai, Y. B., Fields, D. A., Halverson, E. R., Peppler, K., Keune, A., ... & Telhan, O. (2016). *Connected making: Designing for youth learning in online maker communities in and out of schools* (pp. 1041-1047). Retrieved from: https://www.isls.org/icls/2016/docs/ICLS2016_Volume_2.pdf

Suggested reading:

- Shank, H. (2015, February 20). *The myth of the Minecraft curriculum*. Retrieved from The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/02/the-case-against-minecraft/385678/>

Critical game reading:

- Mojang. (2017). *Minecraft Education Edition*. Retrieved from: <https://education.minecraft.net/>

Week 10 – Inclusivity and Accessibility (10 July 2018)

Required reading:

- Nakamura, L. (2012.) “Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficulty Setting There Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital.” *Ada: Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 1(1). Available at: <http://adanewmedia.org/2012/11/issue1-nakamura/>
- Salter, A. & Blodgett, B. (2012.) “Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public”. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56(3). [e-article] <http://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/jbem56&i=407>

Suggested reading:

- Consalvo, M. (2012). Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 1(1). Available at: <http://adanewmedia.org/2012/11/issue1-consalvo/>

Critical game reading

- Quinn, Z. (2013). *Depression quest*. Retrieved from: <http://www.depressionquest.com/>

Week 11 – Preservation (17 July 2018)

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] <http://www.journalofplay.org/issues/2/2>
- Murphy, D. (2013). “Hacking public memory: understanding the multiple arcade machine emulator.” *Games and Culture*, 8(1), 43-53. [e-article] http://resolver.scholarsportal.info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/resolve/15554120/v08i0001/43_hpmutmame.xml

Suggested reading:

- LaFrance, A. (2017). *What it's like to use an original Macintosh in 2017*. Retrieved from The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/05/mac-attack/527979/>

Critical game reading:

- Play any game in the Internet Archive MS-DOS software library: https://archive.org/details/softwarelibrary_msdos_games

Week 12 – Wrap-Up (24 July 2018 Game and Presentations Due In Class)

No readings this week. Students will present their completed digital games and participate in a “Game Arcade” (i.e., play each other’s games).