HOW TO PLAY GAMES OF TRUTH: AN INTRODUCTION TO VIDEO GAME STUDIES

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Ten years ago, self-professed ludologist Markku Eskelinen (2004) was able to state (and rather boldly) that "it is relatively stress-free to write about computer games, as nothing too much has been said yet, and almost anything goes" (p. 36). In the intervening decade, scholars have said much about video and computer games—so much, in fact, that they've devoted entire conferences, academic journals, and monograph series exclusively to the subject. Writing about video games today is no longer the carefree affair Eskelinen described (or perhaps imagined) in the halcyon days of the early aughts. Rules apply. Intellectual debts exist. Territories are, in many cases, starkly defined. In short, video game studies now exist as a vibrant intellectual field, and it bears all the trappings of that designation.

Three years prior to Eskelinen's breezy statement about the ease of speaking on video games, the work of establishing this new intellectual domain was already underway. Espen Aarseth proclaimed 2001 "**Year One** of *Computer Game Studies* as an emerging, viable, international, academic field" (para. 2, emphasis in original), noting that:

> Today we have the possibility to build a new field. We have a billion dollar industry with almost no basic research, we have the most fascinating cultural material to appear in a very long time, and we have the chance of uniting aesthetic, cultural and technical design aspects in a single discipline. (para. 9)

Work like Aarseth's positions the video game as a proper object of academic inquiry. Of course, Eskelinen, Aarseth, and others writing at the time weren't so much describing this nascent project as they were calling it into existence—establishing its limits, policing its boundaries, and architecting the principles under which one could say anything at all about the video game as medium, technology, and abstract form. Their efforts are therefore part of another kind of game: what Foucault (1994) calls a "game of truth," a set of procedures aimed at (re)producing the conditions under which an object of knowledge might come to be, the very regulations according to which one might say something correct about that object. Naturally, games of truth involve the concomitant production of speaking positions from which true statements might seem to emerge, and they adumbrate and authorize the practices one might undertake in the systematic manufacture of these statements. If games exist today as objects of knowledge, then they are legible as such only through games of truth, the particular regime of practices involved in producing an *additional* object, one with its own characteristics, goals, and boundaries—namely, the field of video game studies itself.

And this is the object—these "games of truth"—that a course in video game studies therefore addresses. If the field can occasionally function (as writers like Eskelinen and Aarseth demonstrate it can) like a kind of meta-discourse, a commentary on the object it constantly seeks to produce, then a

course about video game studies is a kind of meta-meta-discourse, an attempt to critically narrate the production of the field as a heterogeneous collection of positions jockeying to say something true, something valid, about video games. Crucially, the point of such a class is not to help students "discover" some universal, enduring truth about video games. Rather, it is to help them see how *any* truth about them is continually manufactured, secured, and contested. Foucault (1994) had a familiar word for this activity: pedagogy.

READY PLAYER ONE

Introduction to Video Game Studies is an upper-level undergraduate course designed for students with an interest in new media. The course attracts students not only from communication studies (my home discipline) but also from academic programs in education, gender studies, government, art and design, and film.

As the syllabus' course overview stresses, the course focuses not simply on video games themselves, but on the academic field of video game studies. This is to say that the course takes a comparative approach to the multidisciplinary intellectual project organized around the study of video games and gaming and asks students to critically assess how people study video games. It requires students to engage primary literatures emerging out of several predominant "perspectives" in this field, each with its own intellectual heritages, philosophical influences, and methodological commitments. In this way, the course enhances more than students' knowledge about video games; it sharpens their abilities to think both flexibly and reflexively about the way knowledge gets produced and contested across multiple academic enterprises.

Selecting a text to assign for such a course is difficult, as most undergraduate textbooks on game studies elaborate their objects with little regard for the institutional conditions that render their accounts intelligible. The course therefore features an instructor-compiled reader consisting of primary sources—an eclectic mix of literatures from game studies "proper" and beyond—as a way of illuminating the (often stark) contrasts between various theoretical and methodological approaches to video games. Assembling this reader is necessary because most popular video game studies textbooks operate uncritically from one (or some amalgamation) of these approaches, but rarely address the ways competing academic approaches to video games and gaming highlight any single perspective's presuppositions, strengths, or shortcomings.

Specifically, Introduction to Video Game Studies explores five perspectives in the field: the ludological perspective, the narratological perspective, the player studies perspective, the ideological/political economic perspective, and the platform studies perspective. The order in which the course presents these perspectives mirrors the historical development of the field (for more, see Behrenshausen, 2012; Trammel & Sinnreich, 2014), and lectures describe the emergence of new perspectives not only as responses to one another, but as reactions to broader trends of thought in media and cultural studies (e.g., a turn to audiences or the advent of new materialisms).

Students grapple with primary literatures firsthand because the course runs as a seminar that meets twice per week. While they occasionally listen to lectures designed to frame readings from a particular perspective, students assume a significant degree of responsibility for the success of the class by more often leading their peers in discussion. Moreover, they enliven these discussions with examples drawn from their own gaming experiences. When classes meet in a lab setting, students can use gaming consoles to display the media artifacts they believe enhance or challenge our readings of course

materials. This is especially important for students who have completed (or are planning to complete) courses in game design. In this way, Introduction to Video Game Studies aims to assist students who wish to become more thoughtful practitioners. And data indicate some success achieving this aim. The majority of participating students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "This course challenged me to think deeply about the subject matter" when it appear on a post-course assessment. The same is true of the statement "The instructional techniques engaged me with the subject matter." Certainly, the course seems to equip students to think more critically not only about the video games they play, but also about the intellectual project devoted to producing something we might call "knowledge" about them.

REFERENCES

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Foucault (1994). The ethics of the concern of the self as a practice of freedom. In. P. Rabinow & N. Rose (Eds.), *The essential Foucault: Selections from the essential work of Foucault* (pp. 25-42). New York, NY: The New Press.

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SYLLABUS: INTRODUCTION TO VIDEO GAME STUDIES

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course concerns the medium of the video game and its relevance to contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic formations. With a focus on criticism rather than production, it asks students to engage the academic literatures that both crosscut and cohere loosely around a multi-disciplinary project called "game studies," and to explore the philosophical, theoretical, methodological, and political tensions that animate numerous perspectives on video games and gaming.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Designed for upper-level undergraduates with backgrounds in communication and media studies, game design, or the digital humanities, this reading-intensive course organized around multiple perspectives on the same object is meant not only to introduce students to the cross-disciplinary literature on video games but also to cultivate intellectual flexibility and critical thinking. Students in media studies will find

opportunities to deploy and hone the disciplinary vocabularies developed in previous media courses as they consider and critique the social, economic, political, and cultural effects of a popular medium/technology. Students of game design will discover materials that prompt reflection on the relevance and purpose of their craft. And students in the digital humanities will learn how a specific technical artifact affords opportunities for new modes of creative expression.

Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

•   define numerous contemporary perspectives on video games and gaming;

•   recognize metatheoretical assumptions guiding video game theory construction and methodological practice;

•   relate key concepts from communication studies, media studies, and critical theory to everyday practices of video game play, analysis, and production; and

•   criticize gaming artifacts they encounter in everyday contexts.

COURSE OVERVIEW

This is not simply a "class about video games." It is a course in video game studies, a vibrant and eclectic intellectual project that takes video games and video gaming as its object. Video games have been the focus of research for decades; however, a concerted and sustained academic discourse around video games has only existed for approximately fifteen years. Yet even in such a short period of time, scholars have published dozens of books on video games, journals dedicated entirely to the study of gaming have appeared, and the field has splintered into various factions organized around different theoretical and methodological preferences (factions that are in some cases entirely incompatible with one another).

This course certainly involves learning about video games. More importantly, however, it examines how people *study* video games—what they do when they claim to perform research on games and gaming; what their analyses presuppose about the nature of players, culture, and mediation; why these scholars do what they do (i.e., how they justify their work); and what their uninterrogated philosophical commitments cause them to overlook in their analyses. If this course is successful, then students should leave able not only to think about video games, but also to think *critically* and *theoretically* about video games.

The course consists of four units, each of which explores a different academic perspective on video games: the ludological and narratological perspectives, the player studies perspective, the political economic and ideological perspective, and the platform studies perspective.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Wardrip-Fruin, N., & Harrigan, P. (Eds.) (2004). *First person: New media as story, performance, and game*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Additional course readings are available electronically.

Note that students in this class read primary texts. One goal of this course is to introduce students to the literature in video game studies—to help them recognize and assess various contributions to the

academic study of games. Textbooks cannot always adequately assist with achieving this goal. To become familiar with any scholarly enterprise, one must read its literature. The same is true for video game studies.

Readings listed below are therefore not necessarily the easiest or the shortest selections, chosen simply to expedite students' learning experiences. The reading selections demonstrate the complexity of the field, and should challenge students to think deeply about video games. As a result, they do not lend themselves to superficial engagements.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS & CLASS DYNAMICS

This is a reading-intensive course designed to introduce students to the academic literature in a multi-disciplinary field called "video game studies," which concerns the formal properties of—as well as the cultural, economic, social, and political effects of—video games. Students should expect to share responsibility for their learning in this class. They play an active role in determining the outcome of each class meeting not only by preparing adequately for each session, but also by coming to each of those meetings ready to contribute productively to them.

The course involves critically analyzing and interrogating writing on video games found in books and journals. And for the most part, it operates as a seminar (see the discussion of student participation requirements below for more on what this means). When students are beginning to explore a new academic perspective on video games, the instructor typically lectures in order to provide students with the background knowledge they need to understand the literature that emerges from that perspective. When they've read that literature, the students engage in group discussions rather than lectures. Students lead these discussions (see assignments below).

Schedule. Accompanying this syllabus is a course calendar outlining the content of each class day. The calendar indicates readings students should complete prior to arriving at class that day.

Course readings. Students should always read all materials listed on the calendar *before* coming to class. Readings serve as starting points for lectures and class discussion; students who don't read will certainly find themselves confused or unable to follow in-class conversations. Every course reading serves a purpose, and the instructor approaches each meeting under the assumption that everyone has prepared for the sessions by checking the course calendar and completing the assigned readings.

Discussion leaders. Every student leads at least one class meeting (see assignments below). Student leaders making use of visual aids (games, films, etc.) should arrive to the classroom a few minutes early in order to set them up (so class can begin promptly). I'm happy to consult with discussion leaders as they prepare their class materials and plans (see my contact information above to make an appointment).

SEMESTER ASSIGNMENTS

The following assignments assess student achievement of course learning outcomes and objectives (see above).

Attendance and participation. All students should attend each class meeting and participate in classroom discussions (see above). Every student begins the class having earned the maximum number

of participation points. Excessive absences or periods of disengagement with the course, its materials, and its conversations prompt deductions in this score.

Class presentation. Every student is responsible for leading at least one class discussion. Leading discussion involves coming to class prepared with a few talking points regarding the day's readings, as well as several questions to generate a dialog. Discussion leaders also present a brief (five- or ten-minute) overview of and reaction to the day's readings in order to set the tone and scope of the discussion (see next assignment). Students should also incorporate artifacts into their presentations to assist with illustrating facets of the day's readings. Successful discussions highlight key takeaways from the day's assignments, draw connections to previous readings or theorists, pose interesting and thought-provoking questions to the class, and demonstrate some crucial about the readings by way of example. The instructor does not assess discussion leaders' public speaking skills, but rather their ability to competently guide classmates through the work they've all read before coming to class.

Class discussant. This small writing assignment is due the day a student leads class. A brief (600-800 words) paper, it summarizes at least one of the day's assigned readings, reacts to it, and concludes with at least three questions for the class (more is better!). Student leaders can simply read all or part of this paper during their opening remarks for the day (see previous assignment).

Critical game review. This medium-length writing assignment (1000-1500 words) requires students to reflect on a video game using the vocabulary drawn from at least one of the theoretical perspectives covered in class (though combinations are possible). The point of the review is not necessarily to deem a particular game definitively good or bad, but rather to demonstrate how concepts from video game studies offer new insight into media artifacts, or how these concepts advance nuanced discussion of the medium. Students must produce one review during the term, but have four opportunities to do so—one at the end of each major unit in the course (see course calendar). Students might consider producing their reviews as multimedia projects. (For grading criteria related to this assignment, see Appendix.)

FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Each student must complete one of the following "final assignments."

Final examination. Students may choose to complete a comprehensive examination as their final assignment in the course. This examination is available immediately following the last course meeting, and is due during the course's designated final exam period. Governed by the university's honor code, students complete the exam outside class. It consists of several questions requiring essay-length responses.

Final paper. Students may choose to compose an original term paper as their final assignment in the course. The paper is due during the course's designated final exam period. Term papers should demonstrate a deep and critical engagement with some element or aspect of the course, and should incorporate original research. Students writing term papers may wish to explore a concept more explicitly, review the academic literature in an area of game studies relevant to their interests, challenge some current research in game studies, survey the work of an author they find particularly compelling (or problematic), etc. Students writing a term paper must submit a paper proposal in advance of the paper's due date (see course calendar), and cannot write a paper without first submitting a proposal. Paper proposals are ungraded, and they need not be lengthy. However, a paper proposal should elaborate a student's intended argument, as well as the reasons she or he wishes to pursue the research. Term papers should be 2500-3000 words in length.

POINT TOTALS

This course weights graded work in the following manner:

•   Attendance and participation (10 points)

•   Class presentation (10 points)

•   Class discussant (15 points)

•   Critical game review (25 points)

•   Final assignment (examination or paper) (40 points)

READING LIST

Aarseth, E. (2001, July). Computer game studies, year one. *Game Studies, 1*(1), n.p.

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TENTATIVE COURSE CALENDAR

Week 1	
Defining a Medium	Read: Newman, "Videogame Studies?" and "Definitions"
Why Game Studies?	Read: Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies: Year 1"; Gee, "Why Game Studies Now?"; Miller, "Gaming for Beginners" Do: Select discussion leaders
Week 2	
Beginnings: The Ludology/Narratology Debate	Read: Caillois, "The Definition of Play" and "The Classification of Games"
Ludology/Narratology	Read: Frasca, "Simulation Versus Narrative"; Carr, "Games and Narrative" (Discussion leaders)
Week 3	
Ludology/Narratology	Read: Murray, "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama"; Aarseth, "Genre Trouble"; Eskelinen, "Towards Computer Game Studies"; all available in *First Person* (Discussion leaders)
Ludology/Narratology	Read: Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture"; Zimmerman, "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games"; both available in *First Person* (Discussion leaders)
Week 4	
The Player Studies Perspective	Read: Hall, "Encoding and Decoding"; Jenkins, "The War Between Effects and Meanings" Potentially due: Critical game review

The Player Studies Perspective	Read: Consalvo, "There is No Magic Circle"; Pearce, "Productive Play" (Discussion leaders)
Week 5	
The Player Studies Perspective	Read: Steinkuehler, "The Mangle of Play" and "Why Game (Culture) Studies Now?" (Discussion leaders)
The Player Studies Perspective	Read: Taylor, "Whose Game Is This Anyway?" (Discussion leaders)
Week 6	
The Player Studies Perspective	Read: Walkerdine, "Playing the Game"; Shaw, "Talking to Gaymers" (Discussion leaders)
The Player Studies Perspective	Read: Taylor, "Multiple Pleasures" (Discussion leaders)
Week 7	
The Political Economic/Ideological Perspective	Read: Thwaites et al, "Ideology" Potentially due: Critical game review
The Political Economic/Ideological Perspective	Read: Bogost, "Procedural Rhetoric" (pp. 1-12); Wark, "Allegory (on The Sims)" (Discussion leaders)
Week 8	
The Political Economic/Ideological Perspective	The Political Economic/Ideological Perspective (Read: Opel and Smith, "ZooTycoon"; Stahl, "Have You Played the War on Terror?" (Discussion leaders)
The Political Economic/Ideological Perspective	Read: Ruggill et al, "The Gamework"; Yee, "The

	Labor of Fun" (Discussion leaders)
Week 9	
The Political Economic/Ideological Perspective	Read: de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, "A Playful Multitude?" (Discussion leaders) Potentially due: Term paper proposal
The Political Economic/Ideological Perspective	Read: Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour"; Postigo, "Of Mods and Modders" (Discussion leaders)
Week 10	
The Political Economic/Ideological Perspective	Read: Banks & Humphreys, "The Labour of User Co-Creators"; Lastowka and Hunter, "Virtual Crime" (Discussion leaders)
The Platform Studies Perspective	Read: Slack and Wise, "Agency" and "Articulation and Assemblage"; Montfort and Bogost, "Afterword on Platform Studies" Potentially due: Critical game review
Week 11	
The Platform Studies Perspective	Read: Bogost, "Videogames are a Mess"; Giddings, "Events and Collusions"; Apperley and Jayemane, "Game Studies' Material Turn" (optional); Behrenshausen, "The Active Audience, Again" (optional) (Discussion leaders)
The Platform Studies Perspective	Read: O'Donnell, "The Nintendo Entertainment System and the 10NES Chip" (Discussion leaders)
Week 12	

The Platform Studies Perspective	Read: Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control"; Galloway, "Allegories of Control" (Discussion leaders)
The Platform Studies Perspective	Ash, "Teleplastic Technologies" (Discussion leaders)
Week 13	
The Platform Studies Perspective	Read: Jones and Thiruvathukal, "Core Controller" (Discussion leaders) Read: Millington, "Wii has Never Been Modern" (Discussion leaders)
The Platform Studies Perspective	
Week 14	
Final Discussions	Potentially due: Critical game review
Final Discussions	Released: Final examination

APPENDIX: RUBRIC FOR CRITICAL GAME REVIEWS

Student: _____

Object under review: _____

Theoretical perspective of critical review:

       _____

This review...

_____ / 5 Clearly demonstrates an understanding of the chosen perspective

_____ / 5 Interestingly develops themes relevant to the chosen perspective

_____ / 5 Effectively and accurately deploys vocabulary appropriate to the chosen perspective

_____ / 5 Generates some insight into the function and significance of the object under review

_____ / 3 Is coherent, well-written, and free of both grammatical and spelling errors

_____ / 2 Cites research appropriately, thoroughly, and consistently

_____ / 25 Total

Comments