Video Games: Culture & Industry
E59.1008
Fall Semester (September 10 to December 10)
Department of Media, Culture and Communication

Instructor: Joost van Dreunen, jvd228@nyu.edu
Class meets Fridays, from 9:30 – 12:00pm
NYU Game Center, room 941
721 Broadway, 9th floor
(Skirball Center for New Media at the Tisch School for the Arts)

Office: 239 Greene, 7th floor; Office hours: By Appointment

For the most up-to-date reading list and downloadable PDFs, go to: http://www.waffler.org/fall2010 (password: NYU2010)

Course Description
Video games are one of the fastest growing sectors of the entertainment industry; according to the Entertainment Software Association, Americans spent $11.7 billion on computer and video game software (not including consoles and other hardware) in 2008, and the number continues to rise with each passing year. However, videogames are having a cultural impact far beyond their role as an economic commodity; they are also changing the way we tell stories, the way we interact with one another, and the ways in which we understand the world and our own roles in it.

In this class, we explore all of these dynamics, studying the history of videogames, the present industry landscape, and possible future developments in technology, design, industry organization and the cultural role of games. In addition to some fascinating readings, we enjoy class lectures by several guest speakers, including game developers, theorists, and videogame industry executives. The central question that serves as a guideline throughout the course is the extent to which, and what, how we play says something about society.

Additionally, we spend a significant portion of each class (probably the last 45-60 minutes or so) playing – and watching each other play – video games. This provides us an opportunity to put our theoretical understanding of the subject in perspective, as well as give us a sense of what makes both classic and contemporary games compelling from a user’s vantage point. Each student should expect to spend at least one hour of the semester playing video games in front of his or her colleagues.

Course Objectives
To provide the student with
1. a broad sense of the history of video games as an art form and an industry
2. a sense of the social impact of video games
3. an understanding of the organization and culture of the video game industry
4. enough information about video games to decide whether they would like to work in the industry, and to identify potential roles they would play in it
5. enough basic knowledge to qualify for an entry-level job in the video games industry, should they choose to pursue one

Methods of Evaluation
Attendance and Participation 20%
Because this class is run like a seminar, attendance and participation are of paramount importance: they are the best way to demonstrate what you have been learning as well as fine tune your ideas in dialogue with your classmates. This means regular and prompt attendance, coming to class having done the work, speaking when you have something to say, and listening respectfully when you don’t. An excess of two absences over the course of the semester will negatively impact your grade.
Class Blog

Once a week, you are expected to post 1-2 paragraphs to the class blog (http://nyugames.blogspot.com). You will write a minimum of 10 posts during the semester, asking questions or making observations about the readings and/or class discussions, or alerting us to some new and interesting development in video game industry, culture or design. These will be due on Mondays, 11:59 pm (though you can do them earlier), and can cover anything up to and including Friday’s class. They will be used frequently to guide our discussions. These assignments are not graded individually, and you cannot make them up. Each post is worth 10 points towards your grade for this segment.

Game Presentation

Once during the course you will be responsible for researching and playing a game on your own time, and then presenting it to the rest of the class during “lab” time. We will assign games and dates during the first class. While this should be fun, it should also be scholarly: discuss the game from a critical perspective, bringing our class readings and discussions to light, as well as your own experiences and interpretations. I will look for the following three characteristics in your evaluation.

Organization. You must send me a digital copy of the presentation via email, before class starts. To minimize technical difficulties and delays everyone will use the same computer (a fully equipped MacBook Pro), which will be waiting for you in the classroom.

Content. You are free to pick any game you want. In presenting your game, please answer the following questions: who is the developer? Who is the publisher? When did it come out? On what platforms is it available? What is the estimated number of sales (units sold/shipped)? What does the game play look like? What is the main demographic for this game? What do you think is noteworthy about the game (and why)?

Format. You will also be evaluated based on your ability to present in a cogent manner. This means:
1. You address the whole group and not face away.
2. Your presentation is no longer than 20 minutes.
3. You speak in a relaxed, clear manner.
4. You do not read of a piece of paper or from a slide.

Final Paper

The final paper will be 8 to 10 pages long (roughly 3,000 words). The paper should draw directly on our class readings and discussions, and should cite at least 8 sources, 5 of them from the class readings. You should send me a 1-2 paragraph paper topic proposal no later than November 19, 2:00pm. The final paper is due on December 17, 11:59pm. For every 24-hour period after that I will deduct a full letter from your grade for this segment.

Content

In this exercise I expect you to make a meaningful argument with regards to the main topic of this course: video games. You are free in deciding whether your paper covers a single game (e.g. Tetris), an entire genre (First Person Shooter), or video game practices in general (e.g. marketing, cultural significance). I recommend that, similar to the presentations, you pick a game/genre/aspect with which you are relatively familiar, as this will make writing about it easier.

Structure

Your paper must contain the following three components:

1. a BEGINNING, consisting of an introduction, a brief statement of argument, and an explanation of your topic’s relevance;
2. a MIDDLE, made up of the arguments that build your argument, and finally
3. an ENDING, offering a conclusion that summarizes your main standpoint and arguments, and suggestions for further research and discussion, and a bibliography.
Format
All submitted work must be typed, double spaced, and paginated in 12-point Times New Roman font, and submitted digitally, to my email address, in Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, or OpenOffice format. The student’s name, date, and essay title should appear on the first page, and pages should be numbered. Pictures, graphs, charts, tables and other visual aids do not count toward the final number of pages. Consult the American Psychological Association (APA) formal style manual or Chicago Manual of Style for proper citation and quotation formatting.

Online and encyclopedic sources such as Wikipedia are excellent starting points for your research. They offer a valuable overview of specific subjects, and link to vital primary and secondary sources for your work. However, you are not permitted to quote or cite the Wikipedia pages themselves as references in your work.

Free writing help is available through the Writing Center, 269 Mercer Street, 2nd Floor. The telephone number is: (212) 998-8866.

Plagiarism
Academic plagiarism is a serious offense. If you do it, in any form, you will fail the entire course. Just to be clear, this includes every unacknowledged use of materials written by others (even sentences or obvious paraphrases without quotes). Please see the University’s guidelines for further information on this matter.

Late Assignments
Late assignments will be marked down one letter grade for every day they are overdue. If you think you are going to be late with an assignment, you must notify me before the assignment is due (and this does not mean an email an hour before class). Please respect yourself and me. Lame excuses and lying will not be tolerated.

Students With Disabilities
Any student attending NYU who needs an accommodation due to a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility and/or learning disability, or is Deaf or Hard of Hearing should register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212 998-4980, 240 Greene Street, http://www.nyu.edu/csd

Texts and Supplies
Readings will be made available digitally. In addition, students are encouraged to immerse themselves in the business and culture of games, by reading web sites such as the ones listed below:

- Joystiq: http://www.joystiq.com/
- Kotaku: http://www.kotaku.com/
- Wonderland: http://www.wonderlandblog.com/
- Terra Nova: http://terranova.blogs.com/
- Penny Arcade: http://www.penny-arcade.com/
- Slashdot: http://games.slashdot.org/
- 1up: http://www.1up.com/
- Magic Box: http://www.the-magicbox.com/gaming.htm
- Game Industry Biz: http://www.gamesindustry.biz/
- GameSpy: http://www.gamespy.com
- Gama Sutra: http://www.gamasutra.com
- Blue’s News: http://www.bluesnews.com/
- Water Cooler Games: http://watercoolergames.org/
- Serious Games: http://www.seriousgames.org/
- Greg Costikyan: http://www.costik.com/
- Avant Game: http://avantgame.blogspot.com/
- Raph Koster’s blog: http://RaphKoster.com
- Re-Mission: http://www.re-mission.net/
- Select Parks: http://www.selectparks.net/
- Eddo Stern: http://www.eddostern.com/
- Speed Demos Archive: http://speeddemosarchive.com/
- Addicting Games: http://www.addictinggames.com/
- Game Girl Advance: http://www.gamegirladvance.com/
- Int’l Game Dev Assoc: http://www.igda.org/
- International Hobo: http://www.ihobo.com/
- Video Game Museum: http://www.vgmuseum.com/
Evaluation

A=Excellent
Outstanding work in all respects. This work demonstrates comprehensive and solid understanding of course material, and presents thoughtful interpretations, well-focused and original insights, and well-reasoned commentary and analysis. Includes skillful use of source materials, illuminating examples and illustrations, fluent expression, and no grammar/typing errors.

B=Good
This work demonstrates a complete and accurate understanding of course material, presents a reasonable degree of insight and broad levels of analysis. Work reflects competence, but stays at a general or predictable level of understanding. Source materials, examples, illustrations, are used appropriately and articulation/writing is clear. Paper has been carefully proofread.

C=Adequate/Fair
This work demonstrates understanding that hits in the ballpark, but which remains superficial, incomplete, or expresses some significant errors or weaknesses. Source materials may be used inadequately or inappropriately, and arguments lack concrete, specific examples and illustrations. Writing/articulation may appear vague, hard to follow, or loaded with typos and other technical errors.

D=Unsatisfactory
This work demonstrates a serious lack or error in understanding, and fails to express the most rudimentary aspects of the course. Sources may be used entirely inappropriately or not at all, and writing/articulation appears deficient.

F=Failed
Work not submitted or attempted.

Plus (+) or minus (-) grades indicate your range within the aforementioned grades. In other words, B+ means very good.

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<td>B =84-86</td>
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<tr>
<td>C+=77-79</td>
<td>C =74-76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+ =67-69</td>
<td>C- =70-73</td>
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Timeline

9/10. Welcome & Introduction

9/17. Video Games: Contemporary Play
To understand video games as contemporary phenomenon, we will first familiarize ourselves with the concept of play.

Readings

Games
Spacewar!, Pong, Asteroids, Space Invaders and Pac Man (emulators)

9/24. How We Study Games 1: Cultural Theory
The first major body of academic literature on video games involves several of the qualitative methodological approaches, including narratology, ludology, and ethnography.

Guest Teacher: Liel Liebovitz
Readings
- Gee, J. P. (2003). What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy. Palgrave Macmillan. Introduction, Conclusion and Appendix (20 pages)

Games
Super Mario World (SNES), MYST (PC) (Student Presentations)

10/1. How We Study Games 2: Social Science
A second venue of academic inquiry consists of several quantitative methodological approaches, among which are human-computer interface design, media effects research, as well as psychological, sociological and economic perspectives.

Readings

Games
Final Fantasy VII (PS), NBA Jam (SNES) (Student Presentations)

10/8. Video Games as Art
Moving away from the social sciences, we discuss the ways in which video games have been conceptualized as an art form. This includes a review of video game aesthetics, as well as a discussion of the tension between art and commerce in this industry. We also explore the notion of video games as avant-garde art, and their role within the traditional “art worlds” of museums, galleries, etc.

Readings

Games
Spore (PC), Okami (PS2) (Student presentations)

10/15. Video Games as Communication
Moving beyond aesthetics, we look at video games in their potential for social advocacy, politics, and, more generally, rhetoric. This includes a review and discussion of “water cooler” games and “serious” games, an exploration of video games as training environments for social and career tasks, and a look at the emerging experiments in games and health, in which doctors are using interactive environments to help patients better understand and manage their physical conditions.

Readings
- Friedman, T. 1999 Semiotics of SimCity.
Games
Civilization IV (PC), Left Behind: Tribulation Forces (PC) (Student presentations)

10/22. Video Game Design Principles
This week, we will discuss the practical matters that go into designing and building a successful video game. What should the game look like? What should the game sound like? What factors go into determining the architecture of a game, such as characters, levels, tasks and commands? We will talk with veteran game designers, who will share their thoughts on best- and worst-of-breed examples from history and the present day.

Readings

Games
World of Warcraft (PC), E.T. (Atari emulator) (Student presentations)

Guest Speaker
Andy Nealen, Hemisphere Games

10/29. Video Games as Industry I
After looking at the overall academic landscape, we move toward building our understanding of the video game industry by reviewing its various distribution strategies, from brick-and-mortar to Internet based to mobile communication networks. In this first part we review its structure, looking at the companies that dominate the market and exploring the entire value chain, from developers to publishers to platform designers to retailers. We examine the key job roles in the industry, and discuss which roles students may be interested in pursuing, and we look at the economic models of the industry, from top-selling $60 blockbuster titles to phone-based $2 games.

Readings

Games
Doom (PC), BioShock (XBOX 360) (Student presentations)

Guest Speaker
Lazlow, Rockstar Games

11/5. Video Games as Industry II
In the second part, we discuss licensing, franchising, advertising, and marketing – examining the “boilerplate” deals that govern these aspects of the industry and exploring the ways in which this business continues to change as new technologies and consumer behaviors alter the business landscape. We specifically focus on distribution.

Readings
Games
Metal Gear Solid 4 (XBOX 360), Rock Band (PS3) (Student presentations)

Guest Speaker
Tina Shih, Arkadium Games

Card-based games are perhaps one of the oldest forms of game play, and trading card games (TCGs) have evolved from a simple past time at role-playing game conventions to an industry of its own. In this week’s class we will discuss TCGs, and their unique properties as a precursor to developments in other forms of game play.

Readings

Guest Speakers
Brian David-Marshall, To Be Continued LLC
Matthew Wang, To Be Continued LLC

11/19. Games: Reality & Fiction
In this class we discuss the various ways in which game play bleeds over into real life. Where does reality end and fiction begin? How do we go back to our real lives after the game has ended? And, do we really want to?

Readings
TBA

Games Film!

Guest Speaker
Andrew Neel, Producer & Director, Darkon
Luke Meyer, Director, Darkon

PAPER TOPICS DUE
11/26. No Classes, Give Thanks.

12/3. MMOs
One new model for interactive entertainment includes virtual reality, alternative reality, and massively multiplayer online games. We take a look at the rapidly growing market for MMOs, its business models, geographic distribution and the opportunities for social research.

Readings

Games
PMOG (PC), There.com (PC)

**Guest Speaker:**
Cindy Cook, Vivendi Games

**12/10. Casual, Social and Beyond**
In our final meeting we will investigate the latest emerging form of game play: casual gaming. Through the use of advance distribution networks and digital production, playing an easily accessible game that requires a low commitment is becoming increasingly popular. We will investigate the characteristics and affordances of casual gaming, and place them in a larger context.

**Readings**

**Games**
iPhone Games TBA (Student presentations)

**Guest Speaker**
Sherry F. Adams, Sarbakan Games

**12/17. Final Papers Due, 11:59 p.m.**