

English 270: Reading Videogames

Fall 2014
Section: 1
Course Meets: M/W 12:35-1:50
Location: Humanities 217
Course Web Site: ilearn.sfsu.edu

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:: Course Description

Welcome to English 270: Reading Videogames. That's a strange title for a course, especially one in English, and one of the primary aims of it will be to explore what it might mean to "read" a videogame. Over the semester, we will encounter various ways to think about videogames as texts, and you will have opportunities to use those methods to analyze videogames. We start from the premise that, if one can read a novel or a poem or a film, then one can read a videogame. Ultimately, this course is not about playing videogames so much as it is about understanding what they mean.

What's the point of that? Well, since their advent some 30-40 years ago, videogames have become nearly ubiquitous, with videogame sales sometimes exceeding those of major films. No longer a niche hobby of computer enthusiasts or disaffected youth, videogames are everywhere—even (probably) on your phone. And, like all forms of popular media, videogames both reflect and generate meanings and values in relation to their larger cultural context. In other words, to paraphrase the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, videogames are stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

Toward the end of the semester, we will flip the central question of the course from "how to *read* a videogame" to "how to *play* a novel." Some schools of literary criticism—particularly reader-response criticism—argue that the meanings of texts don't reside in the texts themselves, but are instead generated through complex interactions between text and reader. So, in order to come full circle, we will consider how a novel might be interactive in the way that a videogame is, depending on an audience to complete its meanings.

:: Required Course Texts

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca (2013). *Understanding Video Games* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Cline, Ernest (2011). *Ready Player One*. New York: Crown.

Selected Videogames (available for purchase on Steam or Amazon)

Electronic Course Readings (made available on-line as URLs and PDFs)

:: Writings and Assignments

Videogame Metareview: For this assignment, you will choose a recent videogame and read online reviews, from both users and professionals, of that game. Then, you will write an essay (approximately 1000 words) in which you describe and analyze these reviews. In what ways do the reviews agree or disagree with each other? Is there consensus about the game? More important, what criteria do the reviews seem to be using to judge the quality of the game? Part of the point of this assignment is to help you see the differences between game reviews and game analysis.

Gaming Literacy Narrative: Whether or not you think of yourself as a "gamer," you have very likely had experiences with videogames. In this reflective narrative (approximately 1000-1500 words) you will explore your own personal history with videogames and the meanings they have for you. This assignment will help you take stock of your own experiences with games.

Multiplayer Project: For this collaborative project, you will work in small groups to identify, research, and report on a topic of interest to the field of game studies. Groups will have considerable freedom both in choosing a topic and in the format of the final report, which may take the form of a slide presentation, poster, video, podcast, blog, wiki, webpage, etc. Groups will form and propose their projects mid-semester, and will complete them once approved by the instructor.

Videogame Analysis: For this final course project, you will write an essay (2400-3000 words) in which you closely analyze a videogame of your choosing. In order to do this, you will need to choose a game that lends itself to analysis, play the game (preferably multiple times), and then use the various analytic tools you learn this semester to perform a thorough analysis of it. This analysis must do more than simply describe the game in question: it must make claims about its meanings, and provide textual evidence from the game to support those claims.

Participation: Active participation is expected both in class and in online discussion forums.

:: Evaluation

Videogame Metareview	10%
Gaming Literacy Narrative.....	15%
Multiplayer Project	20%
Videogame Analysis.....	40%
Participation (iLearn and Classroom)	15%

:: Course Policies

Regular attendance is expected and required. Because stuff happens, you may miss two class meetings without repercussions. Use these “freebies” wisely, or (better yet) not at all. Additional absences will affect your participation grade and final course grade.

Late assignments are highly discouraged. If you fall behind, especially on the reading, you will find it very difficult to catch up. In addition, late work may be penalized, but it is always better to turn something in late than not at all.

Technology is an integral part of this course. You must have regular access to a computer and a decent internet connection in order to participate. A quiet space where you can do your reading and writing is a must. You should also have a backup plan, like an on-campus computer lab or an internet café, in case something goes wrong with your regular setup.

Plagiarism is representing the words or ideas of another as one’s own work in any intellectual endeavor. Don’t do it. Clearly intentional plagiarism, which is surprisingly easy to detect, will be punished to the fullest extent possible. Sometimes students cross the line unwittingly, so speak with me if you are unsure whether you are using a source correctly. See the “College of Liberal & Creative Arts Plagiarism Resources” web site for further information: <http://lca.sfsu.edu/pages/plagiarism-resources>

Civility and inclusiveness of speech will be observed in all the spaces related to this course. While you should feel free to express your ideas, any slurs or epithets based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, religious practice, etc. will not be tolerated.

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415-338-2472) or by email (dprc@sfsu.edu). More information is available at <http://www.sfsu.edu/~dprc>.

Prerequisites and Requirements: Students must have completed First-Year Composition (English 114, 104/105, or the equivalent) with a CR or C- or better. English 270 satisfies the Lower Division Humanities: Literature (C2) general education requirement.

Student Learning Outcomes for Lower Division Humanities: Literature (C2):

After completion of a lower division general education course in literature, students will be able to:

1. use humanistic methods of inquiry, analysis, and interpretation to explore the meanings and purposes of expressive forms, cultural traditions, belief systems, or communicative practices, and to grapple with topics of enduring importance such as imagination’s power to enlarge and invigorate experience, how and why cultural traditions change, the nature of what philosophers term “the good life,” and the formation of individual and group identity through social interaction;
2. recognize what counts as textual evidence and pertinent biographical, historical, cultural, and other kinds of information to support well-reasoned claims about the discursive features, purposes, and meanings of literature;
3. appreciate various literary forms and styles as well as literature that reflects diverse human experiences and perspectives;
4. identify ethical themes or dilemmas that arise in literary works, which may relate to demands for social justice and which may have implications for local and/or global communities;
5. situate works of literature in the local and/or global cultural, historical, and sociopolitical contexts in which they were produced; and
6. articulate the relevance of literature and literary studies to their lives.

:: Schedule

This schedule all due dates are tentative.

Please consult the iLearn news forum for updated information on a regular basis.

Week 1	Introductions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 1: “Studying Videogames”• <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 2: “The Game Industry”	8/25 - 8/27
Week 2	Defining Videogames <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 3: “What Is a Game?”• Juul, “The Game, The Player, The Rules: Looking for a Heart of Gameness” (PDF)	9/3
Week 3	History of Videogames <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 4: “History”• Watch <i>Indie Game: The Movie</i> (2012)	9/8 - 9/10
Week 4	Early Games: Adventure, Combat, and Centipede <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rouse, “Game Analysis: Centipede” (PDF)• Montfort, “Combat in Context” (GS 6.1)• Robinett, “Foreword” to the <i>Video Game Theory Reader</i> (PDF)• Play <i>Adventure, Combat, and Centipede</i>	9/15 - 9/17
Week 5	Rules and Gameplay <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 5: “Videogame Aesthetics” (pp. 117-124)• Juul, “Introduction” from Half-Real• Smith, “The Games Economists Play: Implications of Economic Game Theory for the Study of Computer Games” (GS 6.1)• Due: Videogame Metareview	9/22 - 9/24
Week 6	Aesthetics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 5: “Videogame Aesthetics” (pp. 124-153)• Juul, “Introduction to Game Time” (<i>First Person</i>)• Juul, “The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression”• Play <i>Portal</i> and/or <i>Portal 2</i>	9/29 - 10/1
Week 7	Rhetoric <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bogost, “The Rhetoric of Videogames” (PDF)• Play <i>The McDonald’s Game</i>	10/6 - 10/8
Week 8	Ethics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consalvo, “Gaining Advantage: How Videogame Players Define and Negotiate Cheating” (PDF)• Sicart, “Introduction” to Ethics of Computer Games (PDF)• Play <i>Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic</i> (Steam)	10/13 - 10/15
Week 9	Identity and Community <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 6: “Video Games in Culture” (pp. 157-186)• Play <i>World of Warcraft</i> (Starter Edition, free online)• Due: Gaming Literacy Narrative	10/20 - 10/22
Week 10	Narrative and Storytelling <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 7: “Narrative” (pp. 193-208)• Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” (First Person)• Play <i>Zork</i> (Online)	10/27 - 10/29
Week 11	Reception <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 7: “Narrative” (pp. 208-224)• Tosca, “Reading Resident Evil: Code Veronica X” (PDF)• Rosenblatt, “Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading” (PDF)	11/3 - 11/5

Week 12	Analyzing Games	11/10 - 11/12
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rusch, “Silent Hill 2” (WP 1.0) • Consalvo, “Phoenix Wright” (WP 1.0) • Consalvo & Dutton, “Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games” (GS 6.1) 	
Week 13	Games in Society	11/17 - 11/19
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Understanding Video Games</i> 8: “Serious Games” • James Gee, “Semiotic Domains: Is Playing Video Games a ‘Waste of Time?’” (PDF) 	
Week 14	Games in Popular Culture	12/1 - 12/3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cline, <i>Ready Player One</i> • Watch one or more of the following films: <i>WarGames</i> (1983), <i>Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World</i> (2010), <i>Tron</i> (1982), <i>eXistenZ</i> (1999), <i>The Last Starfighter</i> (1984), <i>Wreck-It Ralph</i> (2012), <i>Ender’s Game</i> (2013) • Due: Multiplayer Project 	
Week 15	Playing Fiction	12/8 - 12/10
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cline, <i>Ready Player One</i> 	
Finals	Conclusions	12/15
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cline, <i>Ready Player One</i> • Due: Videogame Analysis 	