Anthropology 340: Cultures of Online Games and Virtual Worlds
Winterim 2017 – Online Course
Class Time: n/a Class Location: Online
Thomas M. Malaby, Instructor

Instructor: Thomas Malaby Office Hours: Contact to Schedule Phone: 414-229-4175
Email: malaby@uwm.edu Office: Sabin 325 Fax: 414-229-5848

Catalog Description

Introduction to anthropological understandings of online games and virtual worlds including: conceptual foundations, current topics, and first-hand experience.

Course Description

This online course serves as an introduction to how we may understand the place of online games and virtual worlds in culture and society. The recent explosion of attention to computer and console games, especially to the massively multiplayer online games known as MMOGs (World of Warcraft, Everquest) and virtual worlds (such as Second Life), should prompt us to consider the best of what scholarship has had to say about games cross-culturally, and how the current moment may or may not call for their rethinking. This course will focus on key claims scholars have made about games, both within and beyond anthropology, and read them alongside experiences in online games and virtual worlds that students will undertake. In addition to introductory readings during the first week, each of these experiences will be the organizing point of a one-week module, including course readings, discussions, and other activities. The entirety of the course will be conducted online, and involve significant contributions from students in discussion forums and other venues.

This course will examine online games and virtual worlds from a cultural and sociological perspective. Rather than focusing on design tasks like level construction, it will explore the ways culture, socialization, and values are a part of gaming. Using a variety of theoretical & methodological approaches (drawn from the humanities and social sciences) a range of topics will be discussed in an attempt to understand not only the internal workings and social dynamics of computer games, but their place in the broader culture. Topics include: embodiment and play, avatars as social and personal artifacts, social processes and interaction, games as communication spaces and virtual worlds, management and governance, and gender and race in gaming. In no way will this course exhaust the academic and policy dimensions of online games and virtual worlds; it is introductory.

Course Objectives

The goals of the course are that, at the end, every student should:

(1) Demonstrate a conceptual understanding of play and games and their role in culture;

(2) Demonstrate understanding of our individual learning modules as they relate to games, online experience, and culture;

(3) Reflect productively and imaginatively on their experience in online games & virtual worlds; and

(4) Demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of course concepts covered throughout the semester and apply them to a particular case.
PLEASE NOTE: This is a 2.5-WEEK VERSION of a 3 CREDIT course. The Department of Education estimates no less than 48 hours of total coursework PER CREDIT for an average student in a university course. Fulfilling the course requirements for this class would, for such a student, therefore REQUIRE more than 48 hours PER WEEK. To take a 3 credit, 3-week course is an intensive commitment.

Learning activities

Course reading, introductory lectures, discussion, and gaming experiences will constitute the bulk of the learning activities. Active student participation in online discussion is required, and therefore all students will proceed through the course at the same pace. Undergraduate students are also required to write an original essay in the form of a blog post near the end of the semester, posted to the class, that addresses one of the themes dealt with throughout the term. Graduate students must write a final research paper.

Online Resources

The course website is available through the Desire2Learn (D2L) link from the UWM homepage. All enrolled students have access to the course website automatically. The course website hosts all readings, all discussions, and all other course materials, with one exception. An important component of the course is venturing into online games and virtual worlds.

Technological requirements

All enrolled students must have broadband internet access and a computer capable not only of accessing the internet, but also running internet-based client software for virtual worlds such as Second Life and World of Warcraft. See the course handout on Suggested Online Games and Virtual Worlds for more information about technological requirements of these spaces.

Deadlines

Please note: When an assignment’s text indicates that it’s due on a certain day by midnight, that means by midnight at the end of that day (“that is, Friday by midnight” means just before Saturday begins). An unfortunate quirk of D2L’s software is that when I put in 12:00 am on a deadline, it necessarily shows it as occurring on the next day (Saturday, in the example above), which is of course technically true, but doesn't follow colloquial usage. (I considered making the deadlines 11:59 pm, but that seems a little silly.) So please be aware that for midnight deadlines, my text refers to the end of the day on which that occurs, while D2L’s deadline should always (unless I’ve made a mistake) show as the very start of the next day.

Citation Practices for Games

When you cite a game in your papers for this class, please use the game's full, correct title and put its publisher's name in parentheses, like this: World of Warcraft (Blizzard). No year or further information is required. (I also request that all game titles be italicized. This hasn't caught on in the publishing world, but I think it should be done because we also italicize movie titles, etc.)

As for readings, you need not inlude the full citation information in your position papers or final paper (blogpost). Please include the author's name and full title (in quotes if an article, italicized if a book) and leave it at that. You must provide a page number for any quotes or other direct references (for example, if you mention that the author defines "play" or somesuch).

Special Needs

Students requiring special accommodations should contact the instructor as early in the term as possible.
Academic Dishonesty

Cheating or plagiarism will not be tolerated. If you are not sure what constitutes either, refer to plagiarism.org’s Learning Center (http://www.plagiarism.org/plag_article_what_is_plagiarism.html).

Please note that the Dept. of Anthropology subscribes to UWM's Uniform Syllabus Policy regarding student rights and responsibilities. The complete Uniform Syllabus Policy may be accessed online at the following url: http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/SecU/SyllabusLinks.pdf

Course Modules

Each module in this course is a one week unit with, apart from the first week's additional introductory readings, the same structure.

The first week is devoted to the bulk of the term’s reading, and is quite intensive. Also during this week, there are a few further required readings on a specific aspect of virtual worlds, and in connection with them you make your first visit to an online game or virtual world that you have not visited before, documenting your experiences in your gaming journal, and discussing your thoughts with other students in the class.

The second and third weeks each work similarly, with a new set of readings on a different topic, and and you continue in your new (to you) virtual world to explore and reflect. There is no final exam.

In that final (third) week, rather than posting to other students about your experience, you will complete a final project in the form of a essay-format blog post (undergraduates) or paper (graduates).