Brief Description:

This is a first course in the critical study of computer games and the culture of participatory media to which they belong. It will introduce the concept of games and play as meaning-making activities; survey forms, conventions, and practices that inform the design and reception of games; outline major theoretical trends within the field of Game Studies; examine the place of games in contemporary culture; and consider some problems and challenges they pose for our society.

The course is intended for students in any major who want to think critically, creatively, (and, yes, seriously) about playful media. The work will involve a certain amount of reading and writing: critical evaluation of games, applications and evaluations of theory. It will also entail a good deal of spectatorship and performance of play. Fun will be unavoidable; and so, hopefully, will be a sense that computer games represent a significant medium for thought and feeling.

Books to Buy


**Additional Excerpts (No Purchase)**


Assigned reading per week will generally not exceed 150 pages.

**Assignments and Activities**

Every week I will post a brief topical essay as lecture-equivalent. There will be an assigned reading from one of the textbooks and possibly a short supplementary article. We’ll also have a game to consider. By *consider*, I primarily mean *watch online video of game play* (I will provide links). You will need to choose ONE of these games, or an approved substitute, to play in depth as the basis for a critical paper.

The most important activity each week is online discussion. You must post at least once to each of two forums, one on the topic and readings, the other on the week’s chosen game.

There will be open-book reading quizzes, plus two papers: a shorter essay due around midterm and a longer paper with a moderate research requirement due at the end of the term. It may be possible to substitute a Twine game prototype for the longer paper.

**Tentative Outline of Weekly Topics**

1. What are games? Games and/as software; the videogame industry; games and culture; Brown vs. Entertainment Marketing Association (games and the First Amendment)

2. The gaming situation: configuring and interpreting; ergodics and other theoretical frameworks

3. Remediation: games and other media; computer games as remediations of play
4. Aesthetics of computer games; the uncanny valley and other limits of realism; aesthetics of failure

5. Narrative, “ludo-narrative,” and other aspects of story in games

6. Not-narrative: David Myers’ theory of play, among others

7. Serious games: games with social purpose; Galloway on “allegorithm”

8. Computer games and cultural toxicity (GamerGate and beyond)

9. Queering the game: gender identity, resistance, and play

10. The dream of independence: games as art and intervention

11. Metagames; Stanley and other parables

12. Twine and the text-gaming tradition

13. Games, cinema, and the “post-cinematic”

14. No more “gamers?” – Ian Bogost’s post-gaming polemics

15. Reinventing broadcasting: games and Twitch.tv

**About the Instructor**

Stuart Moulthrop joined the UWM faculty as Professor of English in 2010. He has taught previously at Yale, the University of Texas, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and the University of Baltimore, where he co-founded the School of Information Arts and Technologies and helped create an undergraduate major in game design whose graduates now work at major studios including Firaxis, EA Mythic, and Bethesda Softworks. Moulthrop is well known for essays on games and culture and for various works of electronic literature. Based on a continuing interest in branching narratives, and early acquaintance with Twine creator Chris Klimas, Moulthrop is currently co-writing a book about the Twine platform.

**For more Information:** moulthro@uwm.edu.