

# Introduction to Video Game Culture (CMLIT 191)

## T/Th 3:05-4:20 (100 Thomas)

Professor Eric Hayot  
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Office hours: T/Th 10-11am, and by appointment

### Texts:

Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games*  
Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding Video Games*  
Jonathan Gottschall, *Storytelling Animal*  
Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken*

In addition to these books, we'll read a few essays, available as PDF files via CANVAS (labeled *PDF* in the syllabus).

We'll be discussing a number of games in class. You don't have to play all of these, but you should play some of them, or, minimally, watch YouTube videos showing playthroughs. I assume you have access to a Windows-based PC. Many of these games can be downloaded for free; some of them cost \$5-\$10; some more. Games labeled *gog* are available at [www.gog.com](http://www.gog.com); games labeled *aban* are available at [www.abandonia.com](http://www.abandonia.com). Other games are marked (web) or (amazon). In general I assume a basic familiarity with games and gaming, which is why most of the games I'm asking you to look at date from well before most of you started playing games.

Games we'll discuss/play include many of the following:

RPG/Adventure: *Adventure*, *Zork*, *Rogue*, *King's Quest*, *Planescape: Torment*, *Privateer*, *Gabriel Knight*, *Dragon Age*, *Fallout* series, *Heavy Rain*

FPS/RPG: *Doom*, *Quake*, *Bioshock* series, *Half-Life* series, *The Last of Us*, *GTA*

RTS/MOBA: *Command & Conquer* series, *Warcraft/Starcraft*, *Age of Kings*, *LoL*

Will Wright: *SimCity*, *The Sims*

Peter Molyneux: *Black & White*, *Fable*

4X/Sid Meier: *Civilization* series

Indie: *Flow*, *Machinarium*, *Canabalt*, *Passage*, *Gridrunner Revolution*, and many more

Online/MMO: *Minecraft*, *A Tale in the Desert*, *WoW*, *EverQuest*

Puzzles: *Tetris*, *Myst*, *Portal*

Squad/competitive combat: *Halo*, *Battlefield* series, *America's Army*

### Course information:

This course is a comparative introduction to the nature and history of video games as cultural artifacts, from Pong to online role-playing. It introduces students to academic discussion on and creative work in new digital forms including hypertext narrative, video games, machinima, and more. Students will survey major debates over the meaning and value of video games, and study some of the major theoretical terms and perspectives developed to elaborate the cultural and sociological value of video games.

### Grading:

Your grade will be determined as follows:

3 Exams (1.25 hours)	33 percent each, lowest score dropped
Final Exam (2 hours)	33 percent

The first two exams will be multiple-choice only. The next two exams (one in-class and the final) will be team-based exams. We'll talk about how the team-based exams work on the first day of class. I will probably curve the first two exams, aiming for an average around 77 or 78. Again, we'll discuss.

On top of this will be your class participation grade, which can either hurt you or help you (up to 1/3 a grade either way). It will be determined by the degree to which you help the class learn, or keep it from learning. I do not penalize students who do not talk in class.

In exceptional circumstances I will consider the granting of a grade of incomplete, but only when all but a minor portion of the course work has been successfully completed.

#### Lateness, absences, and other rules:

Because this is a large class, I will not be taking attendance. However, I will act to limit distractions, so, no newspaper reading, chatting, and so on, unless you want to leave. You may use laptops, since I assume that occasionally you will want to look up class-related material or take notes. Finally, don't be late. It's annoying.

The only acceptable reasons to miss a test and have it rescheduled are (1) a religious observance (2) participation in a university-sponsored activity (sports, e.g.) and (3) a family or medical emergency. In the first two cases, you need to let me know two weeks in advance. In the third, you need to email me *before* the test begins, and you will need, within two days, to provide paperwork or other evidence showing the reason for your absence.

#### Plagiarism and academic honesty:

Dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated. Dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, fabricating information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, having unauthorized possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used without informing the instructor, or tampering with the academic work of other students. Acts of dishonesty will result in academic sanctions and will be reported to the University's Judicial Affairs office for possible further disciplinary sanction.

#### Equal access:

Penn State welcomes students with disabilities into the University's educational programs. If you have a disability-related need for reasonable academic adjustments in this course, please contact the Office for Disability Services. For further information regarding policies, rights and responsibilities please visit the ODS website at: [www.equity.psu.edu/ods/](http://www.equity.psu.edu/ods/). Please notify me as early in the semester as possible regarding the need for reasonable accommodations.

#### Daily syllabus. Have everything read before coming to class.

- Week 1: Jan 10, 12  
T: What Does it Mean to Study Game Culture?  
Th: Gottschall, 1-44
- Week 2: Jan 17, 19  
T: Gottschall, 45-117  
Th: *Understanding Video Games* 1-53, *Afternoon*, *Patchwork Girl*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djIrHF8S6-Q>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXFEqyXrbqU>
- Week 3: Jan 24, 26

T: Donovan, 1-95; *Adventure* (aban) *Rogue* (aban); *Zork I* (aban); play some Atari games [www.2600online.com](http://www.2600online.com)

Th: Gottschall, 117-155

Week 4: Jan 31, Feb 2

T: *UVG* 117-193

Th: Donovan, 85-153; play some Nintendo games [www.virtualnes.com](http://www.virtualnes.com)

Week 5: Feb 7, 9

T: **EXAM 1**

Th: Donovan, 153-186; *Balance of Power 1990* (aban)

Week 6: Feb 14, 16

T: Donovan, 187-212; *Tetris* [www.freetetris.org](http://www.freetetris.org) Bissell, “Molyneux” (PDF)  
Interview: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/apr/30/molyneux>

Th: *Populous* (aban), *Black & White*, *Fable* series (amazon); *Curiosity: What's in the Cube* (for iOS or Android; defunct; read about it here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curiosity\\_%E2%80%93\\_What%27s\\_Inside\\_the\\_Cube%3F](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curiosity_%E2%80%93_What%27s_Inside_the_Cube%3F)); *Godus*

Week 7: Feb 21, 23

T: Donovan, 213-237; *Myst* (aban);  
McGonigal, 35-76

Th: *The Sims* series (amazon); *spore* (amazon); *Sim City*, *SimCity 2000*, *SimEarth* (aban); see also *Cities: Skylines* for a new version of this genre  
Atkins, “Sim City” (PDF)  
Interviews with Will Wright:  
<http://www.popsci.com/entertainment-gaming/article/2007-02/wright-stuff>  
<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/maxis-will-wright-interview>  
[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6386/the\\_replay\\_interviews\\_will\\_wright.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6386/the_replay_interviews_will_wright.php)  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/may/02/will.wright>

Plan today also includes some discussion of non-Wright games

Week 8: March 28, 2

T: Donovan, 237-265;

Th: *UVG*, 193-227

-- Spring Break --

Week 9: March 14, 16

T: *UVG*, 228-255

Th: **EXAM 2**

Week 10: March 21, 23

T: *Civilization* (I and II aban; III and up amazon); *Alpha Centauri* (gog)  
Interviews/discussion of Sid Meier:  
<http://www.mindjack.com/interviews/sidmeier.html>  
<http://www.next-gen.biz/features/interview-sid-meier>  
[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/1523/the\\_history\\_of\\_civilization.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/1523/the_history_of_civilization.php)  
<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-05-15-sid-meiers-cultural-victory>  
<http://kotaku.com/the-father-of-civilization-584568276>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyH24CHTTHA> (optional)

Th: *Indigo Prophecy* (amazon); *Heavy Rain* (PS3); *Beyond Two Souls* (PS3)  
Interviews with David Cage:  
<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/heavy-rains-david-cage-interview>  
<http://www.joystiq.com/2010/03/19/interview-spoiling-heavy-rain-with-david-cage/>  
<http://tribecafilm.com/stories/beyond-two-souls-david-cage-interview-ellen-page-willem-dafoe-film>  
<http://www.gamespot.com/articles/david-cage-no-one-should-be-allowed-to-define-what-a-game-is/1100-6415457/>  
<http://www.computerandvideogames.com/398914/interviews/david-cage-interview-we-have-to-live-with-the-things-that-make-us-different/>

Week 11: March 28, 30

T: Donovan, 289-320; McGonigal, 119-145  
*WoW*, *Tale in the Desert*; *EverQuest*; *Star Wars Galaxies*; *Endless Forest*  
Edward Castronovo, “Virtual Worlds”  
([http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=294828](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=294828))  
<http://tale-of-tales.com/TheEndlessForest/index.html>

Th: *UVG* 255-78; Donovan, 343-357;

Week 12: Apr 3, 5

T: *GTA* series; *Minecraft* <http://pc.ign.com/articles/119/1197341p1.html>

Th: **EXAM 3**

Week 13: Apr 10, 12

T: Donovan, 321-332; *Red vs. Blue*; *Super Mario Clouds* (web);

Th: Donovan, 357-369; Bissell, “Braided” 91-103 (PDF)  
Article about Jason Rohrer’s Chain World:  
[http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/07/mf\\_chainworld/all/1](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/07/mf_chainworld/all/1)  
*untitled game* (web); *Flow* (web); *Passage* (web); *Flower* (PS3); *Portal* (amazon); see also *Machinarium*, *Canabalt*, *Gridrunner Revolution*, *Inside a Star-Filled Sky*;

Week 14: Apr 17, 19

T: McGonigal 219-296

Th: Gottschall 156-200; McGonigal 296-354

Week 15: Apr 24, 26

T: Class discussion day

Th: Conclusions; preparing for the final

**FINAL EXAM** (date/location TBA)