

MASSCOMM 420
Contemporary Issues in Media Studies Workshop:
Video Game Analysis and Criticism

Fall 2016 – 3 credits

Class Time: W 6:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., McCormick 1229 (Media Hub)

Instructor: Dennis Owen Frohlich, Ph.D.

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Office Hours

Tuesday: 10:45 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.

Wednesday: 3:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Thursday: 10:45 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.

If these times do not work, please email me three (3) possible times that work better for you.

Course Description

In this course we will explore the developing field of game studies, examining how video games affect players, culture, and society. Students will learn game design theories, as well as mass communication theories about media effects. Students will play, analyze, and critic a variety of video games through the lens of educational, design, sociological, and psychological theories.

As a Workshop class, we will create digital analyses in both written and video form and post them online. Students will apply technological skills they've learned through the Emergent Media program, and will learn how these skills can be applied to topics beyond video games. MASSCOMM 220: Multimedia I is a prerequisite.

Required Texts and Readings

Goldberg, D., & Larsson, L. (Eds.) (2015). *The State of Play: Creators and Critics on Video Game Culture*.

Several online readings will also be required. Most of these readings are from game journalism websites. Select chapters from books, as well as research articles, will be available as PDFs on BOLT, as noted in the syllabus.

You should follow gaming news regularly. The following are some of the most popular and influential gaming news sites. These sites are also good sources of information for your writing assignments.

- [Ars Technica](#)
- [engadget](#)
- [Eurogamer](#)
- [Gamasutra](#)
- [GameSpot](#)
- [Giant Bomb](#)
- [IGN](#)
- [Kill Screen](#)
- [Kotaku](#)
- [Polygon](#)
- [Rock, Paper, Shotgun](#)
- [Twinfinite](#)

Required Materials

This semester we will study video games in depth. To understand how games function, you need to play games! For several assignments you will be asked to play, analyze, and critique video games according to design theories discussed in class.

Some of the games you play are freely available online or through your mobile device's app store. In other cases, you may have to purchase games. For each assignment, you will always have freedom to play the games that interest you, so what you spend on games will vary from student to student.

Here are a few ideas on how to obtain games cheaply.

- [Steam](#). Steam is an online platform for playing games on your computer. Steam specializes in hosting indie games, and often games can be obtained for \$5-15. Steam is also known for deeply discounting games during sales periods, so you might find games even cheaper.
- [eBay](#) and [Amazon](#). Used video games are commonly found on both sites. If ordering a game from these websites, please allow time for the game to ship to you. Look ahead in the course syllabus so that you know which assignments are coming up.
- [GameStop](#). The latest remaining video game retail chain, Game Stop sells both new and used games. If you are really looking to save money, after you play a game for an assignment, you can always sell the game back to Game Stop to recoup some of your funds. Bloomsburg has a GameStop in the strip mall near Walmart.
- Borrowing games. You likely have many friends who play video games. Ask if you can borrow a game for a week or two so that you can complete your assignments. If you

have a sibling with gaming consoles, see if you can borrow an older console for a portion of the semester.

- Sharing with classmates. A couple assignments you will have the opportunity to work with a classmate. If both of you want to play a certain game, you could purchase it together and split the costs.
- Free-to-Play games. The Apple App Store and the Google Play Store both feature many “free-to-play” mobile games. These are games that are free to download, but might cost money depending on what sort of upgrades you buy in game. Facebook is also a source of free-to-play games.
- Mobile games. The App Store and Play Store also feature a variety of mobile games that cost between \$1-5.
- Advergaming. Many companies, especially for children’s products like toys, cereal, and candy, feature free “advergaming”, that is, advertisements disguised as games. Some of these games might work for certain assignments.

Course Objectives

After successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Explain how video game technologies influence culture
- Discuss contemporary concerns, issues, and practices related to video games
- Analyze how video games work, deconstruct the mechanics of games, and evaluate how effectively games accomplish their goals
- Apply game design theories to a variety of situations, including the analysis of games and their effects on players and society
- Create and distribute content to a digital audience about video games

Class Meetings

Class will meet once a week in McCormick room 1229, the Media Hub, which is accessed through the Mass Communication department offices. Class sessions will include lecture, discussions, hands-on activities, and student presentations. You are expected to attend class and to participate.

Some of the readings for that week will be discussed in lecture, but not every part of the reading will be discussed. You are still responsible for completing your readings, even if we don’t have time to discuss them.

Lecture slides will be available on BOLT after class. Take notes on what’s NOT mentioned on the slides, such as discussions we have, questions that other students ask, videos, or other media presented during the lecture.

Assignments

Your grade will be based on the following assignments. Assignment descriptions are included in this syllabus, and more descriptive assignment guidelines—plus grading rubrics—are available on BOLT.

Attendance (12 times):	60 points
Discussion Prep (12 times):	120 points
Why Study Games Post	20 points
What are Games? Analysis	100 points
Game Mechanics Analysis	100 points
Let's Play Practice Video:	50 points
Media Effects Analysis:	150 points
Gamification Analysis:	100 points
Controversial Video Game Analysis:	250 points
<u>Final Presentation on Video Analysis:</u>	<u>50 points</u>
Total:	1,000 points

Grading

Grades are calculated by totaling all points from graded work. Grading will be based on the following scale:

A	920-1,000
A-	900-919
B+	880-899
B	820-879
B-	800-819
C+	780-799
C	720-779
C-	700-719
D+	680-699
D	600-679
F	0-599

The grading scale is non-negotiable. A final grade of 879, for instance, is a B. All grades are final unless questions about grades are addressed in writing within **2 weeks** after the grade is posted. If you have concerns about your grades check with me *sooner* in the semester rather than *later*.

The reason I do not round up grades is to remain fair for all students. If I round up a grade for a student who is one point below the cut-off, what do I do for the student who is 2 points below the cut-off? Three points? Five? At some point, there has to be a cut-off to ensure fairness.

Attendance

Attendance is required. If you leave class early without speaking to me, or arrive late, that does not count as attendance. Attendance will be taken via a sign-in sheet. If you miss the sign-in sheet as it is passed around, it is your responsibility to sign in before you leave.

Attendance will be taken each class period, worth 5 points each time. You are allowed **1 unexcused absence** during the semester. If you miss class due to illness, school activities, military service, or other university-approved reasons, please email me before class time, if possible, so that I don't mark you absent.

Assignment Descriptions

The following are brief descriptions of your assignments this semester. More detailed directions will be given in class. Grading rubrics can be found on BOLT so you understand what I am looking for.

Discussion Preparation (10 points each; 120 points total)

To assist in creating productive discussions during class time, before most class periods you will have some prep work to do. Each week on BOLT there will be a discussion prompt that you must answer, and you will sometimes be asked to provide examples of a phenomenon or certain type of video game. You will also be asked to write a discussion question for possible use in class.

Why Study Games Post (20 points)

Your major writing and video assignments will be posted to a course blog this semester. This way, it is easy for your classmates to have access to your work, and will help promote a sense of community among the class. The first, short assignment will refresh you on how to post content to WordPress.

What are Games? Analysis (100 points)

Defining what a game is, and what a video is, are difficult questions. After discussing this topic in class, you will craft a definition of "game" and "video game." For this analysis, you will also play and analyze a game of your choosing that pushes the boundaries of how we define video games. This analysis will be posted on the class blog.

Game Mechanics Analysis (100 points)

Game mechanics are the underlying actions that a player can take within a game, and most games have several core mechanics. Understanding how mechanics work will enable you to more thoughtfully analyze and critique video games. For this assignment, you will play any game of your choosing and identify what the core mechanics are, and how effective these mechanics are in creating a compelling experience. This analysis will be posted on the class blog.

Let's Play Practice Video (50 points)

This semester we will work with video capture equipment to record video game footage. Your final project will be a video that analyzes and critiques a controversial video game. Video capture equipment can be tricky to understand at first. Before creating that larger video, you will create a short Let's Play video either alone or with a classmate. The goals of this project are simple: properly capture game footage, record basic audio commentary, edit a simple video, and post the video online. The video will be embedded on the class blog.

Media Effects Analysis (150 points)

Parents, government officials, journalists, and advocates have long been concerned about what video games might do to players and society. For decades, researchers have studied many possible effects of video games. For this assignment, you will research one possible media effect, seeking to understand both what the press says about this media effect and what research says about it. This analysis will be posted to the class blog.

Gamification Analysis (100 points)

Gamification is a buzzword in the gaming industry these days, and everybody from schools to governments to businesses to nonprofits are trying to create video games that engage with their constituencies. For this analysis, you will identify and play a serious game of your choice. You will apply theories of game design to your analysis, and critique how effectively this serious game accomplishes its goals. This analysis will be posted on the class blog.

Controversial Video Game Analysis (250 points)

Video games have been controversial since the very beginning of the medium, and there are hundreds of examples of games that have pushed the boundaries of decency and respectability. Many critics, however, criticize games with little understanding of how that game works—in many cases, critics haven't even played the games they are critiquing! For this assignment, you will play a controversial video game of your choosing and record footage with video capture equipment. You will record audio analyzing the game. You will edit the video and post it online. This video will be embedded on the class blog.

Final Presentation on Video Analysis (50 points)

During finals week, you will present your Controversial Video Game Analysis video to the class. After the class watches your video, you will field questions from your instructor and classmates about your analysis.

Late Work

Please read the syllabus carefully to know how to turn in assignments and when they are due. When submitting assignments electronically, you will have a 10-minute grace period to account for possible issues when uploading your assignment, after which time the assignment will be considered late. Please do not wait until the last minute to submit assignments.

Assignments turned in late will receive a 25% penalty. Late work will **only** be accepted for **24 hours** after the due date. Work turned in later than 24 hours will not be accepted.

If you are going to miss class or a due date, please notify me BEFORE THE DUE DATE if at all possible. If you have an excused absence, I will still accept your assignment.

Academic Honesty

All work completed for this course must respect the intellectual property of others. When using somebody else's copyrighted material, whether words, images, media, or ideas, proper credit must be given. If direct quotations are used, they must be enclosed in quotation marks and properly cited. If copyrighted material is used indirectly, it must still be properly cited!

If in doubt, include a citation. If you have any questions at all, ask your instructor *before* the assignment is submitted. *Ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism is not an excuse!*

The academic community is operated on the basis of honesty, integrity, and fair play. Bloomsburg's PRP 3512: Academic Integrity Policy applies to cases in which cheating, plagiarism, or other academic misconduct have occurred in an instructional context. Students found guilty of academic misconduct are subject to penalties, either determined by the instructor or the Provost, depending on the seriousness of the offense. Informational resources about academic honesty for students can be found at http://www.bloomu.edu/policies_procedures/3512

Special Notes Concerning Plagiarism on the Web

Stealing another person's content is easy on the web. If you get an image or clip art from another website, you must have permission and give credit. If you get audio or video from another website, you must give credit.

Just because it is easy to steal somebody's content doesn't mean it is ethical. Internet behavior is dictated more by developing cultural norms than by law. The web was built (and is still being built) through a culture of collaboration and open sourcing. Many people even want you to repurpose their content. But most of them also expect credit to be given where credit is due. If you have any doubt, ask your instructor.

How to Give Credit to Others

Blogging is not like writing an academic paper: there are far fewer rules, and you have much more freedom in how you present your content. Many students have asked over the years how to give credit on their websites. While there's no right or best answer, below are some of the ways students give credit to others whenever they borrow or reference their work:

- Provide a simple text link back to the website.
- Include a reference page on your website that lists where everything came from.

- Include a reference section at the bottom of every single blog post telling people where your information comes from.

There are likely many more ways to give credit to others. I take plagiarism very seriously, and students from previous semesters have been known to fail a project or the course for plagiarizing another's work.

Special Needs

Any students eligible for classroom accommodations are invited to meet with Dr. Frohlich to discuss their concerns and to present their disclosure forms from the Students with Disabilities Center.

Our university provides reasonable accommodations to students who have documented disabilities. If you have a documented disability that requires academic accommodations and are not registered with the Students with Disabilities Center, please contact this office in the Warren Student Services Center, Room 043 as soon as possible to establish your eligibility.

Students with Disabilities Center

<http://www.bloomu.edu/disabilities>

Warren Student Services Center, Room 043

Phone: 570-389-4491

If you become sick during the course of the semester, or have some major personal crisis going on, please let me know as soon as possible so I can help you work around it. When I was an undergraduate, I was very sick one semester and missed a lot of classes, but my professors were willing to work with me. I'm sensitive to these issues and want to work with you, but if you do not tell me there's a problem I cannot help you.

Course Schedule

The current version of the course syllabus will be uploaded to BOLT with the revision date included in the file name

Week	Date	Topics
1	Tuesday, August 30 Wednesday, August 31	<p>August 30: CLASS BEGINS</p> <p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course Introduction • Why Study Video Games? <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: Game Over? A Cold War Kid Reflects on Apocalyptic Video Games. <p>Assignments</p> <p>No assignment.</p>
2	Tuesday, September 6 Wednesday, September 7	<p>September 5: Labor Day—No Classes Tuesday, September 6: ADD/DROP ENDS</p> <p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What Are Games? <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: Love, Twine, and the End of the World • The State of Play: A Game I Had to Make <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 1 due to BOLT by Tuesday, September 6 at 11:55 p.m. • Why Study Games Post posted on Class Blog by Friday, September 9 at 11:55 p.m.
3	Wednesday, September 14	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding Game Mechanics <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: The Making of <i>Dust</i>: Architecture and the Art of Level Design • Koster, R. (2014). "What games are." In <i>A Theory of Fun for Game Design</i>, p. 34-46. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] • Gameplay Design Fundamentals: Gameplay Progression • Evaluating Game Mechanics For Depth <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 2 due to BOLT by Tuesday, September 13 at 11:55 p.m.

<p>4</p>	<p>Wednesday, September 21</p>	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Purpose of Play • How to Capture Video Game Footage <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: Advent • Huizinga, J. (1955). "Nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon." In <i>The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology</i>, p. 96-120. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] • In Defense of Play <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 3 due to BOLT by Tuesday, September 20 at 11:55 p.m. • What are Games? Analysis posted on Class Blog by Friday, September 23 at 11:55 p.m.
<p>5</p>	<p>Wednesday, September 28</p>	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players in the Game Industry <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: The Squalid Grace of <i>Flappy Bird</i> • Heineman, D. S. (2015). "Kellee Santiago: Independent Game Development." In <i>Thinking About Video Games: Interviews with the Experts</i>, p. 123-135. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] • Newman, J. (2013). "Industries." In <i>Videogames</i>, p. 27-48. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 4 due to BOLT by Tuesday, September 27 at 11:55 p.m.
<p>6</p>	<p>Wednesday, October 5</p>	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gamer Culture • Basic Video Editing <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: Your Humanity is in Another Castle: Terror Dreams and the Harassment of Women • The State of Play: The End of Gamers <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 5 due to BOLT by Tuesday, October 4 at 11:55 p.m. • Game Mechanics Analysis posted on Class Blog by Friday, October 7 at 11:55 p.m.

<p>7</p>	<p>Wednesday, October 12</p>	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual Worlds • Editing Let’s Play videos: At the end of class, you will have some time to work on your Let’s Play video. <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: Bow, Nigger • The State of Play: What It Feels Like to Play the Bad Guy • Donovan, T. (2010). “Second lives: South Korea becomes a gaming giant and virtual world economics.” In <i>Replay: The History of Video Games</i>, p. 309-320. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] • Boellstorff, T. (2008). “Intimacy.” In <i>Coming of Age in Second Life</i>, p. 151-178. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 6 due to BOLT by Tuesday, October 11 at 11:55 p.m. • Let’s Play Practice Video posted on Class Blog by Friday, October 14 at 11:55 p.m.
<p>8</p>	<p>Wednesday, October 19</p>	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effects of Playing Games • Conducting Research into Media Effects <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: The Natural: The Parameters of Afro • Tawil-Souri, H. (2009). “The political battlefield of pro-Arab video games on Palestinian screens.” In <i>War Isn’t Hell, It’s Entertainment</i>, p. 215-237. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] • Bogost, I. (2007). “Chapter 10: Exercise.” In <i>Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames</i>, p. 293-316. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 7 due to BOLT by Tuesday, October 18 at 11:55 p.m.
<p>9</p>	<p>Wednesday, October 26</p>	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video Games and Violence <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: The Joy of Virtual Violence • Grossman, D., & DeGaetano, G. (2014). “It’s a violent world...for our kids.” In <i>Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill</i>, p. 7-35. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 8 due to BOLT by Tuesday, October 25 at 11:55 p.m.

<p>10</p>	<p>Wednesday, November 2</p> <p>Friday, November 4</p>	<p>Friday, November 4: LAST DAY TO WITHDRAW FROM CLASS</p> <p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex, Sexuality, and Gender in Video Games <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State of Play: <i>Ludus Interruptus</i>: Video Games and Sexuality <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 9 due to BOLT by Tuesday, November 1 at 11:55 p.m. • Media Effects Analysis posted on Class Blog by Friday, November 4 at 11:55 p.m.
<p>11</p>	<p>Wednesday, November 9</p>	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serious Games <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magerko, B., Heeter, C., & Medler, B. (2010). "Chapter 12: Different Strokes for Different Folks: Tapping Into the Hidden Potential of Serious Games." In <i>Gaming and Cognition: Theories and Practice from the Learning Sciences</i>, p. 255-274. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] • Serious Games: Too Broad a Term to be Meaningful <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 10 due to BOLT by Tuesday, November 8 at 11:55 p.m.
<p>12</p>	<p>Wednesday, November 16</p>	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Promise of Gamification <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kapp, K. M. (2012). "Leveling up: What gamification can do." In <i>The Gamification of Learning and Instruction</i>, p. 105-126. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] • Terlutter, R., & Capella, M. L. (2013). The gamification of advertising: Analysis and research directions of in-game advertising, advergaming, and advertising in social network games. <i>Journal of Advertising</i>, 42(2-3), 95-112. [PDF on BOLT under Content, Readings] • Can't play, won't play • Gamification is bullshit <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 11 due to BOLT by Tuesday, November 15 at 11:55 p.m.

13	Tuesday, November 22	<p>November 22: Reading Day: No Class November 23-25: THANKSGIVING RECESS</p>
14	Wednesday, November 30	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Frontiers in Gaming <p>Read</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The promise of virtual reality: How industry leaders envision the future • E3 was secretly terrible for the future of virtual reality • The past and future of location based AR games like Pokemon Go <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion Preparation 12 due to BOLT by Tuesday, November 29 at 11:55 p.m. • Gamification Analysis posted on Class Blog by Friday, December 2 at 11:55 p.m.
15	<p>Wednesday, December 7</p> <p>Friday, December 9</p>	<p>December 9: LAST DAY OF CLASSES</p> <p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work Day in McCormick 1146. We will be editing your final projects. <p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None.
16	<p>Monday, December 12</p> <p>Wednesday, December 14</p>	<p>December 12-16: FINALS WEEK</p> <p>Final presentations and discussion will be on Wednesday, December 14 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.</p> <p>Controversial Video Game Analysis Video posted on Class Blog by Wednesday, December 14 at 6:00 p.m.</p>
17	Friday, December 23	<p>December 23: GRADES AVAILABLE TO VIEW ON MyHusky</p>