

Course Schedule

(Subject to Revision)

All gameplay times offered are estimates based on averages taken from howlongtobeat.com.

Week 1: How to Close Read a Game

Sept 28: Introduction to Critical Videogame Studies: Play *Passage* (Jason Rohrer, 5 minutes) and *Hair Nah* (Momo Pixel, 5 minutes) in advance of the first class period.

Sept 30: Read “[Game Mechanics, Experience Design, and Affective Play](#)” (Patrick Jagoda and Peter McDonald, p. 174-182) and “The Video Game Aesthetic: Play as Form” in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (David Myers, p. 45-63), and play *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 5 minutes)

Oct. 1 (Section): Introductions and Close Readings of Games

Week 2: Genre Theory and Roguelikes

Oct. 5: Read “Genre and the Video Game” (Mark J.P. Wolf, p. 113-134) and “Digital Games and Science Fiction” (Patrick Jagoda, p. 139-151)

Oct. 7: Play ONE of the following four games: *Hades* (Supergiant Games), *Slay the Spire* (Mega Crit Games), *Dead Cells* (Motion Twin), OR *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* (Edmund McMillen and Florian Himsl) for at least 5 hours. Also, watch or read short IGN reviews of the four games (including the three you did not play): *Hades*, *Slay the Spire*, *Dead Cells*, and *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth*.

Oct. 8 (Section): Extended Discussion of Genre and Roguelikes

Week 3: Horror Games

Oct. 12: Play *Soma* (Frictional Games, 9 hours) and *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2 hours), and read “[Coming to Play at Frightening Yourself: Welcome to the World of Horror Video Games](#)” (Bernard Perron, 2005)

Oct. 13: Special *Until Dawn* play session

Oct. 14: Play *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 8 hours but play 2 hours) and *Anatomy* (Kitty Horrowshow, 30-60 minutes), and read “[Losing Control: Until Dawn as Interactive Movie](#)” (Tanine Allison, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 2020)

Oct. 15 (Section): Workshop Midterm “Critical Play” Video Essays

Week 4: Narrative Game Genres: Interactive Fiction, Twine Games, and Visual Novels

Oct. 19: Play *Galatea* (Emily Short, play for an hour), *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (Anna Anthropy, 5 minutes), and *Telling Lies* (Sam Barlow, 4-6 hours), and read “[Game Design as Narrative Architecture](#)” (Henry Jenkins)

Oct. 21: Play *Butterfly Soup* (Brianna Lei, 2017, 3 hours) and *Dungeons and Lesbians* (Noeybodys, 30 minutes), and read “Anime and the Visual Novel: Theoretical Approaches” (Dani Cavallaro, p. 7-32)

Oct. 22 (Section): Modding exercise: Tic-Tac-Toe, Checkers, Mancala, *Up the River*

Oct. 22: MIDTERM “CRITICAL PLAY” VIDEO ESSAYS DUE

Week 5: Metagames

Oct. 26: Play *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato, 4 hours) and *Save the Date* (Paper Dino Software, 30 minutes), and read “Metaproceduralism: *The Stanley Parable* and *The Legacies of Postmodern Metafiction*” (Bradley Fest, *Wide Screen*, 2016)

Oct. 27: GROUP FINAL PROJECT ABSTRACT DUE

Oct. 28: Play *There Is No Game* (Draw Me A Pixel, 5 hours)

Oct. 29 (Section): Task management and roles, optimizing the design process

Oct. 29: MetaMedia Event

Week 6: Idle Games, Slow Games, and Mundane Simulations

Nov. 2: Play *Universal Paperclips* (Frank Lantz, 2017, 6-9 hours) and *Cookie Clicker* (Julien Thiennot, 30 minutes), and *Mountain* (David O’Reilly), and read “*Sociable Media: Phatic Connection in Digital Art*”(James Hodge, *Postmodern Culture*, 2015)

Nov. 4: Play *PowerWash Simulator* (FuturLab, play for 90 minutes) or *A Short Hike* (Adam Robinson-Yu, 90 minutes) and read “*I’ve Been Driving A Video Game Bus, And It’s Wonderful*” (Luke Plunkett, *Kotaku*, 2018)

Nov. 5 (Section): Working on the Game Design Document

Week 7: Time Loop Games

Nov. 9: Game Design Day: Read *Game Design Workshop* (Tracy Fullerton, Chapter 1, “The Role of the Game Designer,” p. 2-21)

Nov. 10: Possible Screening of *Groundhog Day*

Nov. 11: Play *12 Minutes* (Luis Antonio, 4-5 hours) and watch *Groundhog Day* (film, Dir. Harold Ramis, 1 hour 41 minutes)

Nov. 12 (Section): Final Game Project Working Session

Week 8: Serious Games and Educational Games

Nov. 16: Play *SPENT* (McKinney, 30 minutes) and EITHER *Never Alone* or *Kisima Injitchunja* (Upper One Games, 2-3 hours) OR *We Are Chicago* (Culture Shock Games, 2 hours), and read “Procedural Rhetoric” (Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p. 1-40)

Nov. 18: Play one educational game on *Fun Brain* (e.g., *Math Soccer* or *Shape Invasion*), read “Gaming Literacy” (Eric Zimmerman, *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, p. 23-32) and “*A Psychologically ‘Embedded’ Approach to Designing Games for Prosocial Causes*” (Geoff Kaufman and Mary Flanagan, *Cyberpsychology*, p. 1-13), and discuss learning-oriented alternate reality games

Nov. 19 (Section): Playtest Final Projects in Progress

Week 9: R&D (Rest and Development)

NO CLASSES THIS WEEK FROM NOVEMBER 22-28.

Week 10: Genre Trouble and Conclusion

Nov. 29: FINAL PROJECT VIDEO PRESENTATION (GROUP) DUE

Nov. 30: Platypus Day: Play *Pyre* (Supergiant Games, 11 hours)

Dec. 2: Course Conclusion

Dec 6: FINAL PROJECT (GROUP) AND REFLECTION (INDIVIDUAL) DUE

CLASS EXPECTATIONS

Timely Arrival: We only meet a handful of times throughout the quarter so make the most of each session. Arrive on time!

Attendance: Attendance is required for this course. Students absent for more than one class risk lowering their participation grade; students with more than three unexcused absences will be given a final grade of incomplete or fail. However, if you are experiencing symptoms of illness, do not attend class, following the University of Chicago's COVID-19 guidelines.

Preparation: Do the reading and take the gameplay seriously. Meaningful discussion depends on your engagement with our core texts and games. All readings and games are to be completed for the date on which they are listed.

Annotations and Notes: Bring your notes and annotated readings to class. You should get into the habit of writing down ideas that will strengthen your participation in our group exchange. Just because we're discussing digital works, doesn't mean you shouldn't jot down ideas that will strengthen your participation in our group exchange. These notes may also serve as the starting point for your video essay and final project.

Questions and Office Hours: Always feel free to ask questions either in class or during office hours. A seminar can't succeed without open discussion and curiosity!

Plagiarism: As the Office of the Vice President and Dean of Students notes, "It is contrary to ethics, to academic integrity, and to the spirit of intellectual inquiry to submit the statements, ideas, or work of others as one's own. Such conduct is punishable under the University's disciplinary system." If you have any doubts about whether something constitutes plagiarism, you should contact me *in advance* of turning in work with plagiarized content. Academic dishonesty is a very serious offense — *even if it is unintentional*. The penalty for plagiarism might include both failure on the paper and failure of this course. Please review the University of Chicago's official policy online. Keep in mind that academic dishonesty includes buying papers online, outsourcing your academic work to someone else (paid or unpaid), and submitting the same paper to more than one course. This is not an exhaustive list of the practices that constitute academic dishonesty and plagiarism. For more details, please consult the discussion of plagiarism and academic honesty in *Doing Honest Work in College: How to Prepare Citations, Avoid Plagiarism, and Achieve Real Academic Success*.

Cell Phones and Laptops: Cell phones must absolutely be turned off in class. While laptops are permitted, we recommend that anyone tempted to check in with social media, email, and other sites unrelated to class should stick to pen and paper for note-taking. If you have a compulsion about emailing, messaging, or checking social media during class (and cannot control yourself), you should absolutely refrain from bringing your laptop to class.

Late Assignments and Extensions: If any assignment is late, surpassing the deadline, it will immediately drop half grade (e.g. from a B to B-). The grade will continue to drop at a comparable increment every 24 hours thereafter. We do grant extensions

(especially in cases of major life events or emergencies) but you should talk to me about this possibility well in advance of the deadline.

Student Disability Services: We are committed to meeting the needs of all students. To arrange class-related accommodations, please see [Student Disability Services](#) prior to scheduling a meeting with me.

GRADING

- Attendance, Preparation, and Discussion in Class and Section: 15%
- Blog Posts (4 Entries and Weekly Responses throughout quarter): 15%
- Retro Game Review (Blog post, approximately 750 words): post by November 5: 5%
- Midterm Critical Play Video Essay (approximately 10 minutes): 25%
- Final Group Project: Group Abstract (300-400 words), Group Video Presentation (5-7 minutes), Group Project (variable but substantial), and Individual Reflection (2-3 pages): 40%

ASSIGNMENTS: WRITING AND PRESENTATIONS

Blog Posts (4) and Responses (Weekly)

Over the course of the quarter, you will contribute to a class blog (located on this WordPress site) through original posts and responses to your peers. These posts are intended to influence and extend the conversations we have during our shared meetings. You are required to post **at least 4 entries over the course of the quarter**. Each entry should respond to that week's video games or theoretical reading, expand substantively on an ongoing topic of class discussion (without simply reproducing or documenting an exchange), or call our attention to articles or media about related phenomena. The 4 minimum entries can be posted in any week with new content, over the course of the quarter, but you may post no more than one post a week for credit (so plan ahead!). Each post must also comment on a topic from the week in which it is posted (so you can't, for instance, return to a topic from Week 2 on Week 8 unless it is in some way related to a current discussion). While the content of these entries can be wide-ranging and less formal than your video essay, you should observe formal citation standards and be mindful of your prose. **You are also required to read posts by your classmates and respond briefly to at least one entry per week.**

Retro Video Game Review (750 words)

As your special fifth blog post, you will write a critical review of a video game that we do not play together for class that was released during the fifth generation of consoles (1993–1998) or earlier. That means you could review a game that can be played for consoles that include the Atari 2600, Nintendo Entertainment System, Super Nintendo Entertainment System, Sega Genesis, PlayStation, Nintendo 64, or Sega Saturn. Many of these consoles are available for checkout at the Weston Game Lab in the Media Arts, Data, and Design Center, and numerous games are available for checkout at Crerar Library. You are also allowed to play an emulated version from home, for example a version of an older game that you find online or an NES or SNES game available for free on Nintendo Switch Online if you have that console.

Your task with this review is not merely to produce a rhetorical version of a “like” or create a consumer-level review that amounts to a “thumbs up/down.” Instead, we would like you to think about what more intelligent popular short-form writing about video games might look like. How can you use an overview of a game to raise interesting formal, social, and/or political issues? Or how can you elaborate a concept demonstrated by that game? Or does it do something non-obvious relative to genre? You should post your review on the class blog with a format of “Game Review” followed by your game title (e.g., “Game Review: *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*”).

You can post your review any time prior to Week 6 (Deadline: November 5)

Midterm Critical Play Video Essay (approximately 10 minutes in duration)

For your midterm, you'll perform an extended analysis of *any video game that we have covered in class up to that point*. As you explore your topic, you may turn to formal approaches as well as a cultural theory or philosophical methodology of your choice. The best analyses will combine 1.) medium-specific and genre-specific reading practices, 2.) critical theories and methods such as historicism, feminism, critical race theory, Marxism, anthropological ethnography, genre theory, and/or media theory, and 3.) a clear definition of a concept that you are exploring and complicating.

Keep in mind that a persuasive analysis of different forms and media requires specific vocabularies and close reading practices proper to the work in question. For example, if you analyze a film, you must attend not only to plot or character development, but also to features such as shot distance, lighting, costume, mise-en-scène, cut type, sound effects, etc. When you think about a video game, on the other hand, you might consider elements including (but not limited to) aesthetic style, interface design, navigability, (non-)interactivity, game mechanics, platform affordances, networked dimensions, and so forth.

Instead of writing a paper, we are asking you to create a short video that includes your own verbal analysis combined with footage of gameplay that you are analyzing. You will receive additional instructions and resources for creating these essays. Samples of published versions of video essays, which analyze video games and film, include:

- Ian Bryce Jones, “[Special Effectivities](#)” in *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* 6.3, 2019.
- Allison de Fren, “[Ex Machina: Questioning the Human Machine](#),” *Vimeo*.

We are not expecting video essays of this quality but they can serve as models. Both essays grapple with sophisticated theoretical concepts and questions via close readings and media examples. You might also find it helpful to look at YouTube videos reviews of games that analyze their formal or thematic issues, such as:

- What’s So Great About That?, “[Night In The Woods: Do You Always Have A Choice?](#),” *YouTube*, 2017.
- Ben Plays Games, “[How Halo Makes Players Despair](#),” *YouTube*, 2020.

Note that there are elements of these videos that are appropriate to your videos, but that these are not precise models. The level of analysis in your videos should be directed not toward a generalist audience (as these videos are) but toward an audience familiar with the kinds of game studies frameworks and analytical categories you’ve been studying in this course. Your video essay should introduce your game, include a close reading, develop an argument, and foreground implications (the “So what?” of your argument). In addition to footage from your primary game case, you can include footage of other games if they serve your argument.

FINAL GROUP PROJECT ASSIGNMENTS

Final Group Project (Variable Length)

Collaboration is an increasingly vital skill in a cultural landscape dominated by digital technologies. While novels and poems are often written by individual authors, most videogames depend on partnerships among writers, artists, programmers, and designers.

For your final project, you will not write a *traditional* research paper, even as there will be an analytical dimension to your work. Instead, you will create a pre-approved creative project (which can take numerous forms) in assigned groups of approximately 4 team members each. **Options might include a text adventure, a Twine game, a visual novel, an art game, a serious or educational game, a Game Design Document for a larger-scale project such as an Alternate Reality Game, a Machinima film, a game-oriented website, or a piece of interactive scholarship (in the style of journals such as *Thresholds*, *Kairos*, or *Vectors*).** To produce your work, you might consider turning to software such as WordPress, Photoshop, Final Cut Pro, Twine, Unity, Ren’Py, etc. In order to create a compelling digital work, **you need NOT have substantial or indeed any technical**

knowledge. We are interested not only in the creativity of your project but also the quality of the associated writing and your engagement with theoretical concepts we have been exploring throughout the quarter.

We are adding two primary creative constraints to this final projects.

First, you should focus on 2D or multimedia games, and not on 3D games created in something like Unreal Game Engine, which would be too time-intensive relative to the amount of time you have in this course, and would shift you too much from game *design* and experimental making toward game *development*.

Second, your game or game-related project should in some way operate within the broad theme of “Standstill.” We will elaborate on this open-ended category, but it can related to a range of topics including the “shelter in place” of the COVID-19 pandemic; places out of time; the privilege of standstill via vacation or rest; the paralysis of standstill via a traffic jam; the formal frozen time of photography; or interactive standstill genres such as idle games, slow games, or time loop games. As an added bonus, five of the projects in the course will be selected, via an external jury, to be part of a 2022 online exhibition on the theme of “Standstill” hosted by the Goethe-Institut. This selection will come with a small stipend to each winning team.

Rather than a complete departure from academic work and game theory, we would like you to engage in a process of what Walter Holland, Henry Jenkins, and Kurt Squire have called “theory by design.” In other words, instead of working through ideas in an expository fashion, you will do so through creative development. While we are not specifying a set quantity or size for your game or media project, the effort and production should be substantial.

Final Group Project Abstract

As a group, write a brief abstract for your final project that is due approximately a month before the project deadline. In this abstract, you should include several points, in bullet points:

- Offer an overview “elevator pitch” of your project.
- Describe the genre of your project and how it complicates or responds to its genre category in a meaningful way.
- Offer an overview of your narrative or non-narrative scenario
- Describe your core mechanics or gameplay interactions.
- Describe the type of research, technical knowledge, and artistic skills that will be necessary to complete your work in the final weeks of the quarter.
- Describe the division of labor within your group.
- Describe what your project might teach the players. That is, what is the “So what?” of your game beyond entertainment of engagement.

You can adjust all of the above as you continue, but it’s useful to have a starting point, well in advance of the deadline. For groups that take a more creative route, you may also find it useful to write a brief outline of your narrative or description of your interface and core gameplay. For groups that take a more academic route, you might include an initial bibliography of additional readings.

Final Project Pitch (5-7 minute video)

During the final week of the class, as a group, you will hand in a roughly 5-7-minute video that introduces your final project. This assignment will allow you to present the features of your project in a clear and persuasive manner. The video should combine your group members speaking, alongside screenshots, gameplay video, or visual aids (e.g., PowerPoint slides) that convey your concept. Your project does NOT need to be completed, at this stage, but a mockup or selections from the final piece may help. This will be your last opportunity to receive feedback prior to turning in the final project.

Artist Statement (variable)

Along with your creative project, you should submit a collaborative artist statement that summarizes your work and elaborates on its significance. We will discuss what goes into an artist statement prior to your submission. For substantial and playable

game projects, this statement need not be longer than a page or even a short paragraph. But think of this as your public advocacy on behalf of what your project does successfully.

Individual Reflection (2-3 pages).

Along with your actual group project, we would like each of you to turn in a brief (2-3 pages) individual reflection about your project that does two things. First, offer a summary of your analytical project or a brief statement on the significance of your project. This is your chance to assess the formal significance of your analytical project or to reflect on the theoretical dimensions of your game and to give a reader a frame for encountering your text. Second, comment on the collaborative experience. Collaboration is a difficult process but it can produce astonishing results. In writing this response, consider the following questions: What was it like working with peers from other disciplines? What were the benefits and challenges of collaborating on this kind of design project? What did you contribute to the group? What was the balance of work like in your group?