

MCM 09000 – Code, Software and Serious Games

SPRING 2008

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Course Description:

In this course we will examine contemporary trends in theorizing digital media with particular attention given to software and the computer game as new media texts. The semester will be divided into two units. The first unit will present an array of theories that approach questions of code and software. We will discuss the concept of “software studies” in relation to traditional media studies, and investigate how code and software can be examined as aesthetic and political texts. Through an examination of code and semiotics, software and ideology, and critiques of particular software programs, we will lay a theoretical foundation for the investigation of our second unit: video games. In this second unit we will specifically address the emergence of “serious gaming” – a genre of games which explore the aesthetic, political and pedagogical dimensions of gaming instead of focusing purely on entertainment value. Following the rise of this “serious game movement” we will investigate the emergence of political games, persuasive games, simulation games, newsgames, art games, etc.. Throughout the semester we will constantly address the following questions: What is the nature of code? How does code impact our understanding of traditional artworks? What is the relationship between code, software and games to artistic practice? To political practice? What are the theoretical frameworks for interpreting/reading code, software, and games? What is the relationship between games and more traditional media forms?

Who Should Benefit Taking This Course?

This class is intended for students that have already taken a course in Modern Culture and Media. However, given the course topic, this class would benefit students studying computer science who are interested in expanding their cultural and theoretical understanding of programming and software production. Moreover, this class would also be of interest to art students since it addresses many new forms of contemporary aesthetic production – forms which are rarely examined in the academic classroom. Although a previous course in Modern Culture and Media would undoubtedly be helpful, it is not entirely necessary, and I envision students from other departments benefiting greatly from exposure to these materials and ideas. An ideal mixture of students for this class would include artists, programmers and students interested in media studies more generally.

Class Requirements:

Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class meeting. Unexcused absences will potentially impact your final grade. Three unexcused absences will automatically result in a NC for the class.

Participation during our meetings will count toward your final grade. Thoroughly read all materials and always bring your assigned reading to class. I will also be dividing the class

into multiple groups. These groups will be assigned certain days where each individual in the group must post a reading response to the class blog:

www.codesoftwaregames.blogspot.com

You will need to post these responses no later than 9pm the night before class. The reading responses are a chance for you to express your ideas in relation to the class materials. For example, your responses can address questions or confusions that you have about the assigned texts, or you can highlight outside materials that relate to the readings for that week, or you can point to moments in the readings or media texts that you find intriguing and would like to discuss further during class time, etc.. The blogposts will count toward your participation grade. I also invite you to comment on your colleague's posts, or to use the blog to post items which might be of interest to the class.

Papers:

There are two required papers for this class. One mid-term paper (5 pages). One final paper (8 pages). Your final paper will be developed from your own research and theoretical interests. You will be required to turn in a one page description of your final paper in mid-April. NOTE: I am open to creative projects for this assignment (building a small digital game, creating an art project based on class materials, etc.). If you choose this option you will still need to turn in five pages of critical commentary concerning your project. Choosing this option will probably consist of more work in the end than simply writing a final paper, but potentially it will also be more rewarding. You **must** meet with me before Spring Break if you think you might want to pursue this option.

Presentation:

In addition to the papers you will be required to present on class materials during one class of the semester. You will select one reading and/or one media text to address from the week that you are assigned. Your presentation should offer an in-depth analysis of your chosen materials (e.g. an explanation, extension or critique of theoretical arguments, a close reading of a media text, etc.) while providing questions for further class discussion. The presentation should be about 10 minutes, no longer. In addition to the presentation itself you will need to turn in a 3-4 page paper which builds from ideas in your presentation. This paper will be due, in class, exactly one week after your presentation. (If you choose to do your presentation the week before the Mid-Term is due, we might be able to work out an alternative schedule for your presentation-paper due date.)

Readings:

There are three required books available at the Brown Bookstore: McKenzie Wark's *Gamer Theory*, Alex Galloway's *Gaming*, and Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games*. All other materials are contained in the course packet or on electronic reserve through OCRA, as indicated on the syllabus. The password for OCRA reserves is "software". During some weeks you will be required to examine media texts that will be available online. I will post the links to these works on the class blog. If you cannot view these at home we can see about making them available in the Multimedia Lab inside the Graduate Center. You should spend a significant amount of time familiarizing yourself with these materials.

Grade Evaluation:

Participation – 10%

Presentation & Write-up – 20%

Mid-Term Paper – 30%

Final Paper or Project – 40%

UNIT 1: Code and Software**Week One:**

Jan. 24 – “Hello World!” An Introduction

Week Two: Introduction to Software Studies

Jan. 29 - Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, pp.27-48, 63-73 (CP) & Matthew Kirschenbaum, “Virtuality and VRML: Software Studies after Manovich”(ER)

Jan. 31 - Matthew Fuller, “Behind the Blip: Software as Culture” (CP) & Mark Marino “Critical Code Studies” (ER) & Alex Galloway “Code” (CP)

Week Three: Software Criticism I

Feb 5 - Mathew Fuller, “It Looks Like You Are Writing a Letter: Microsoft Word” & “A Means of Mutation” (CP)

Download and play around with I/O/D's Webstalker, Noumena & ZNC Browser

Feb 7 - Adrian Mackenzie, “Introduction: Softwarily”(CP) & "The Performativity of Code: Software and Cultures of Circulation" (ER)

Week Four: Software Criticism II

Feb. 12 - Friedrich Kittler, "There is No Software" (ER)

Friedrich Kittler, “A Semi-Technical Introduction to Computer Graphics” (ER)

Feb. 14 - Philip Agre, “Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy” (CP)

Look at: Hasan Elahi's project Tracking Transience

Week Five: Software as Art

Feb 19 - Florian Cramer and Ulrike Gabriel, “Software Art” (ER)

Florian Cramer, “Words Made Flesh” (Excerpts) (ER)

Look at: Auto-Illustrator, Works by Jodi.org, “Window,” Others TBA

Feb 21 - Lev Manovich, “Generation Flash” (ER) & “Avant-Garde as Software” (ER)

Look at: “Animator vs Animator II,” Future Farmer's “Utopia,” and Flash works in the <http://www.electronicorphanage.com/>

Week Six: Perspectives on Code

Feb. 26 -

Stephen Ramsey and Geoffrey Rockwell, "Untitled Number 4: A Brecht-Socratic Dialogue."(ER)

Katherine Hayles, "Speech, Writing, Code: Three Worldviews"(CP)

Look at: David Rokeby's "The Giver of Names" & MIT Speech Group "Put That There"

Feb. 28 -

Mateas & Montfort, "A Box, Darkly: Obfuscation, Weird Languages, and Code Aesthetics" (ER)

John Cayley, "The Code is not the Text (Unless it is the Text)" (ER)

Cox, Geoff; Alex McLean and Adrian Ward, "The Aesthetics of Generative Code" (ER)

Look at: CODEDOC, codeworks by MEZ, and other works TBA

Week Seven: Software and Ideology

Mar. 4 - Althusser, "Ideology and the State Apparatus" pp. 127-186 (Excerpts, CP)

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge" pp. 26-51 (ER)

Look at: 1984 Macintosh Commercial & websites: Theyrule.org & trackingthethreat.com

William Bowles "The Macintosh Computer: Archetypal Capitalist Machine?" (CP)

Mar. 6 - Alex Galloway, "Language Wants to be Overlooked: On Software and Ideology" (ER)

UNIT 2: Serious Gaming

***** MONDAY MARCH 10th, MID-TERM PAPER DUE BY 4PM *****

Week Eight: Introduction to Games

Mar. 11 - Mark Wolf, "Abstraction in the Video Game" (Handout)

Alex Galloway, "Gamic Action: Four Moments"

Mar. 13 - Chris Crawford, "Process Intensity"(ER)

Ian Bogost, "Procedural Rhetoric"

Look at: Facade, plus blog for list of games Bogost discusses (Congo Jones..., "Balance of the Planet, G!rlpower, Vigilance, etc.)

Week Nine: Simulation Games

Mar. 18 - Ted Friedman, "The Rise of the Simulation Game" (CP)

Alex Galloway, "Allegories of Control"& Stewart Woods, "Loading the Dice: The Challenge of Serious Video Games" (ER)

Look At: McDonald's Game, Third World Farmer, disaffected, antiwargame & others
TBA

Recommended: Sim City Classic (online)

Mar. 20 – Simon Penny, “Representation, Enaction, and the Ethics of Simulation” (ER)
Gonzalo Frasca, “Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology”(ER)

Week Ten:

Mar. 25 – SPRING BREAK – PLAY GAMES!

Mar. 27 – SPRING BREAK – PLAY GAMES!

Week Eleven: Political Gaming

Apr. 1 - Ian Bogost from Persuasive Games, “Political Process”
---. “Ideological Frames,” Frasca, “Ideological Videogames: Press left button to dissent”
Look at: PeaceMaker, Redistricting Game, Sept. 12th, Madrid

Apr. 3 - Alex Galloway, “Social Realism”
Bogost & Frasca, “Video Games Go To Washington: The Howard Dean For Iowa
Game”(CP)
Look at: The Howard Dean Game, Activism, Undersiege Demo

Week Twelve: Gender Gaming

Apr. 8 – Cassell & Jenkins, “Chess for Girls? Feminism and Computer Games” (ER) and
Jenkins, “FROM BARBIE TO MORTAL KOMBAT: FURTHER REFLECTIONS” (ER)
Re-Fresh: Wendy Chun, “On Software...”
Look At: Queer Power, The Intruder & “Purple Moon Rockett's Camp Adventures,”
either “Fashion Fits” or “Fashion Boutique,” selected Dating Sims

Apr. 10 - Mia Consalvo, “Hot Dates and Fairy Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in
Video Games” (ER), Mary Flanagan, “Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge: Women in
Games, Women in Cyberpunk, and Strategies of Resistance" (ER)
Recommended: Helen Kennedy - "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?"

Week Thirteen: Mod Gaming

Apr. 15 - Anne-Marie Schleiner, "Parasitic Interventions: Game Patches and Hacker
Art" (ER) & Alex Galloway, “Countergaming” & “Game Mods as Art”(ER)
Look at: jodi.org, Super Mario Clouds & F1 Racer, Velvet Strike, QQQ, RC_You,
Domestic & Others TBA

Apr. 17 – Hector Postigo, “From Pong to Planet Quake: Post-Industrial Transitions from
Leisure to Work” (ER)

Recommended: Julian Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry"

Week Fourteen: Art Gaming & GAM3R 7H30RY

Apr. 22 – Jahn-Sudmann, "Innovation NOT Opposition" & Henry Jenkins, "Games, the New Lively Art" & The Tale of Tales, "Realtime Art Manifesto"

Look at: The Graveyard, Passage, Flow, You have to Burn the Rope, and others TBA

Apr. 24 - Mackenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*

Look at: State of Emergency, Katamari Damacy, Rez

Week Fifteen: GAM3R 7H30RY

Apr. 29 - Mackenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*

Kracauer, "Bordeom"(Handout)

May 1 - Summary/Conclusion

***** MONDAY MAY 12th, FINAL PAPER DUE BY 4PM *****