

**Communication 599**  
**Communication, Culture, and Commerce in the Video Game Industry**  
**Annenberg School of Communication**  
**Spring 2007**

**Instructor:** Elaine Chan

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**Class time:** W. 6:30-9:30pm

**Office hours:**

W. 5:00-6:30pm, and by appointment

**Course Description:**

Video games are one of the fastest growing sectors of the entertainment industry; according to the Entertainment Software Association, Americans spent \$7 billion on computer and video game software (not including consoles and other hardware) in 2005, and the number continues to rise with each passing year. However, videogames are having a cultural impact far beyond their role as an economic commodity; they are also changing the way we tell stories, the way we interact with one another, and the ways in which we understand the world and our own roles in it.

In this class, we will explore all of these dynamics, studying the history of videogames, the present industry landscape, and possible future developments in technology, design, industry organization and the cultural role of games. In addition to some fascinating readings, we'll enjoy class lectures by several guest speakers, including game developers, theorists, and videogame industry executives.

**Course Objectives:**

1. To provide students with a broad sense of the history of video games as an art form and an industry
2. To provide students with a sense of the social impact of video games
3. To provide students with an understanding of the organization and culture of the video game industry
4. To provide students with enough information about video games to decide whether they would like to work in the industry, and to identify potential roles they would play in it
5. To provide students with enough basic knowledge to qualify for a job in the video games industry, should they choose to pursue one

**Required Course Readings:**

Kushner, D. (2003). *Masters of Doom*. Random House.

CMGT 599 Course Reader, available at the University Bookstore.

**Course Requirements and Evaluation:**

The course requirements have been modified: there will no longer be a mid-semester take-home assignment or a final exam. The bulk of your grade will be a final semester group project and participating in discussions about course topics in and outside of class:

- **Class participation - 10%**
- **Blog postings - 10%**
- **Hosting guests - 15%**
- **Final project written report - 40%**
- **Final project in-class presentation - 25%**

**Class participation and blog postings:**

Your participation includes both participation in class discussions and posting entries and comments to the class blog. Since we have few class meetings and only meet once a week, your attendance is necessary for you to participate in the class. Your participation grade will be based on your attendance, as well as the frequency and quality of your contributions to discussion and to the blog over the semester. You will earn a high participation grade by attending class and making at least one high quality comment to the class blog (<http://cmgt599.blogspot.com/>) weekly.

High quality comments:

- Offer a unique and relevant perspective
- Contribute to moving the analysis forward
- Build on the comments of others
- Include logic or evidence
- Avoid tangents

In addition, comments based on the readings (either reporting on them or critiquing them based on other knowledge you have) will also be considered high quality.

**Hosting guests:**

We will have weekly guest speakers until the end of the semester. Each week two individuals will play a leadership role in the discussion with guest speakers. This will involve coordinating with guest speakers, putting together a biography sheet and other relevant information and introducing them to the class, developing a set of questions to ask, and helping to moderate the discussion. Have fun with this assignment – it will give you an opportunity to get acquainted with very creative and successful people in the videogame industry.

**Final project:**

You have the option to work individually or in groups on a topic of your choice related to video games. You will present an overview of your project to the class and submit a written report. Naturally, more individuals in a group will contribute to higher expectations for the depth and length of your project. (Length guideline: Individual: 7-10 pp; Group: 12-15pp (double-spaced text). Format guidelines will be given later in the semester.

Your project should be on a topic that really interests you and that you would like to learn more about. For example, you could write up a game proposal for a serious game, including a description of the game, definition of the market, business model (where relevant), and the marketing strategy for the game. Or you could examine a particular video game or series of games, analyze its game mechanics and principles of design, and determine how to (and not to) implement those practices in an online community. You could investigate a particular area of the video game industry, such as licensing of music or other content, by examining key roles, players, and economic models that now exist.

A one-paragraph description of your project topic is due on Wednesday, March 21 at the beginning of class. Your written report is due by 5:00 pm on Wednesday, May 3.

**In-class presentation:**

The goal of this course is not only to provide you with information about various aspects of video games, but to enable you to communicate that information to others in a coherent and professional manner. Consequently, you will prepare a 10-15 minute summary of your project to present on one of

the final two weeks of class, to be followed by a 5 minute Q&A session. Specific guidelines will be given later in the semester.

### **Academic Integrity Policy:**

The Annenberg School for Communication is committed to upholding the University's Academic Integrity code as detailed in the SCampus Guide. It is the policy of the School of Communication to report all violations of the code. Any serious violation or pattern of violations of the Academic Integrity Code will result in the student's expulsion from the Communication degree program.

It is particularly important that you are aware of and avoid plagiarism, cheating on exams, fabricating data for a project, submitting a paper to more than one professor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone other than yourself. If you have doubts about any of these practices, confer with a faculty member.

Resources on academic dishonesty can be found on the Student Judicial Affairs Web site (<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS>.)

"Guide to Avoiding Plagiarism" addresses issues of paraphrasing, quotations, and citation in written assignments, drawing heavily upon materials used in the university's writing program; "Understanding and avoiding academic dishonesty" addresses more general issues of academic integrity, including guidelines for adhering to standards concerning examinations and unauthorized collaboration.

The "2005-2006 SCampus" (<http://www.usc.edu/scampus>) contains the university's student conduct code and other student-related policies.

### **Disabilities Policy:**

Students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability are required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when adequate documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is open Monday-Friday, 8:30-5:00. The office is in Student Union 301 and their phone number is (213) 740-0776.

### **Topics and Reading Schedule:**

#### Week 1. Introduction

#### Week 2. Taxonomy and History of Video Games

This week, we will broadly review the entire scope of the video game universe – from Pong to PS3, from consoles to arcades to PCs to the Internet.

Readings:

- Kent, S. (2001). *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. Prima Publishing; pp. xi-xvi (timeline)
- Bateman, C. & Boon, R. (2004). A guide to computer game genres. *International Hobo* ([www.ihobo.com](http://www.ihobo.com))
- Newman, J. (2004). *Videogames*. New York: Routledge. Chapter 2, pp. 9-28.
- Apperley, T. H. (2006). Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres. *Simulation & Gaming*, 37(1), 6-23.

#### Week 3. Qualitative Methodology Overview

This week, we will review several of the qualitative methodological approaches to the study of video games that have been developed over the years, including narratology, ludology, ethnography, and

other methodologies.

Readings:

- Gee, J. P. (2003). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Palmgrave Macmillan. Introduction, Conclusion and Appendix; pp 1-12; 199-212.
- Frasca, G. (2003). Simulation vs. Narrative: Introduction to Ludology. In Wolf, M. J. P & Perron, B. (eds.) (2003). *The Video Game Theory Reader* (13 pages)
- Wolf, M. J. P & Perron, B. (eds.) (2003). *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Routledge. Introduction & Chapter 1; pp. 1-47.

#### Week 4. Quantitative Methodology Overview

This week, we will review several of the quantitative methodological approaches to the study of video games that have been developed over the years, reading some of the best examples and discussions of human computer interface design, media effects research, as well as psychological, sociological and economic approaches.

Readings:

- The Economist (2005, August 4). Chasing the dream. (5 pages)
- Williams, D. (2005). Bridging the Methodological Divide in Game Research. *Simulation & Gaming*. 36(4), p. 447-463.
- Castronova, E. (2003). On virtual economies. *Game Studies*, 3(2). [skimmable]
- Glazer, S. (2006, November 10). Video games. *CQ Researcher*, 16, 937-960.

#### Week 5. Video Games as Art

This week, we will discuss the ways in which video games have been conceptualized as an art form. This will include a review of video game aesthetics, as well as a discussion of the tension between art and commerce in this industry. We will also explore the notion of video games as *avant-garde* art, and their role within the traditional “art worlds” of museums, galleries, etc.

- Aesthetics vs. Commerce in Mainstream Games
- Art Worlds and Video Games
- Avante-Garde and Video Games

Readings:

- Seabrook, J. (2006). Game master. *The New Yorker*, November 6, 2006 (14 pages)
- Rossignol, J. (2006, Nov 22). Converging: An Interview With Henry Jenkins. GamaSutra.com. (8 pages)
- Smuts, A. (2005, November 2). Are video games art? *Contemporary Aesthetics*. (11 pages)
- Sandor, E. & Fron, J. (2001). The future of video games as art. University of Chicago Cultural Policy Center. (8 pages)
- McGonigal, J. (2005). *All Game Play is Performance/Game Play is All Performance*. Keynote address for Playful: The State of the Art Game Conference, May 2005. (3 pages)

#### Week 6. Video Games as Rhetoric

This week, we will look at the role that video games have played in social advocacy, politics, and other rhetorical roles. This will include reviews and discussions of “water cooler” games and “serious” games, an exploration of video games as training environments for social and career tasks, as well as a look at the emerging experiments in games and health, in which doctors are using interactive environments to help patients better understand and manage their physical conditions.

Readings:

- Thompson, C. (2006, July 23). Saving the World, One Video Game at a Time. *The*

*New York Times*. (4 pages)

- Corti, K. (2005). Serious Games. *Learning Magazine*. pp. 6-7
- Bogost, I. (2006). Playing politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism and Advocacy. *First Monday*. Special Issue number 7. (10 pages)
- Bergfeld, C. (2006, July 26). A Dose of Virtual Reality. *Businessweek*. (2 pages)
- Pelta-Heller, Z (2006, July 21). Kids Kill in Violent Christian Videogame. *AlterNet* (4 pages).
- Left Behind Interview with Greg Bauman (5/1/06). (2 pages)
- Hutson, J. (2006, May 29). The Purpose Driven Life Takers. (3 page blog post).

### Week 7. Video Games as Cultural Artifact

This week, we will discuss the many ways in which video games *represent* different cultural attitudes and social ideas – not semantically, through the content of the games, but semiotically, through the symbolism of games themselves. We'll discuss video game chic and the growth of video game nostalgia, as well as the role of games in political battles over censorship and children, and the growing generation gap between the video game cognoscenti and their clueless elders.

Readings:

- Brathwaite, B. (2007). *Sex in video games*. Charles River Media. Chapter 4, pp. 89-122.
- Rushkoff, D. (2005). Renaissance Now! The Gamers' Perspective. In J. Raessens and J. Goldstein (Eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 415-421.
- Newman, J. (2004). *Videogames*. New York: Routledge. Chapter 9, pp. 145-162

### Week 8. Video Game Design Principles (2/28)

This week, we will discuss the practical matters that go into designing and building a successful video game. What should the game look like? What should the game *sound* like? What factors go into determining the architecture of a game, such as characters, levels, tasks and commands? We will talk with veteran game designers, who will share their thoughts on best- and worst-of-breed examples from history and the present day.

Readings:

- Lopez, M. (2006, Nov 28). Gameplay Design Fundamentals: Gameplay Progression. *GamaSutra.com*. (12 pages)
- Navarro, A. (2004, Jan 14). Big Rigs: Over the Road Racing Review. *Gamespot.com*. (2 pages)
- Kasavin, G. (2004, Nov 29). World of Warcraft Review. *Gamespot.com* (5 pages).
- McGonigal, J. (2006). "The Puppet Master Problem: Design for Real-World, Mission-Based Gaming." *Second Person*. Forthcoming from MIT Press, Fall 2006. Eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. (17 pages).
- Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. (2005). Game Design and Meaningful Play. In J. Raessens and J. Goldstein (Eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 59-79

### Week 9. Video Games as Industry I (3/7)

Today, we will begin to discuss the video game industry itself. We will review its structure, looking at the companies that dominate the market and exploring the entire value chain, from developers to publishers to platform designers to retailers. We will also examine the key job roles in the industry, and discuss which roles students may be interested in pursuing. We will also examine the economic models of the industry, from top-selling \$60 blockbuster titles to phone-based \$2 games.

Readings:

- Kushner, D. (2003). *Masters of Doom*. Random House. Chapters 1-6; pp. 3-104.

Week 10. Spring Break - No Class (3/14)

Week 11. Video Games as Industry II (3/21)

Today, we will continue discussing the video game industry. We will review various distribution strategies, from brick-and-mortar to internet-based to mobile communication networks. We will also discuss licensing, franchising, advertising, and marketing – examining the “boilerplate” deals that govern these aspects of the industry and exploring the ways in which this business continues to change as new technologies and consumer behaviors alter the business landscape.

Readings:

- Kushner, D. (2003). *Masters of Doom*. Random House. Chapters 7-12; pp. 105-210.

**Final project proposal due at the beginning of class.**

Week 12. Video Games and Globalization (3/28)

Today, we will review the role of video games in uniting and dividing cultures on a global scale. We will examine the increasing Japanese influence in American culture, driven largely by video games and franchised entertainment, as well as the prospects for reconciliation between Western and Middle Eastern nations through online, interactive collaboration. We will also examine the corporate dimension of globalization, and discuss the scope and strategies of companies such as Sony and Microsoft.

Readings:

- Kendall, L. (2006). All your base are belong to us: Cross-cultural encounters in amateur online videos. *UIUC GSLIS Alumni Newsletter*, 2005-6; pp. 2-7.
- Wikipedia entry: All Your Base Are Belong to Us (6 pages).
- Interview with Heather Chandler, Game Localization expert, *bytelevel research*. (3 pages)
- Au, W. J. (2002, February 26). Kickin’ Corporate Ass, the Video Game. *Alternet*. (7 pages)
- Au, W. J. (2004, June 22). The Second Life of Badgdad. *New World Notes* (7 pages)
- Allison, A. (2004). Cuteness as Japan’s Millennial Product. In J. Tobin (ed.), *Pikachu’s Global Adventure*. Duke University Press; pp. 34-52.

Week 13. Emerging Video Game Models (4/4)

Today, we will look at new models for interactive entertainment – the stuff that’s not yet mainstream, but may be just around the corner. These include virtual reality, alternative reality, hybrid games, massively multiplayer online games, and “big” games. We will talk with next-gen game designers to get a sense of where they see this art (and market) moving in the coming years, and discuss some of the longer-term social implications of these emerging models.

Readings:

- *The Economist* (2006, Sept. 28). *Living a Second Life*. (5 pages)
- Hall, J. (2005). Future of Games: Mobile Gaming. In J. Raessens and J. Goldstein (Eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 47-55.
- Big Games Manifesto by Area Code (1 page)
- Ruberg, B. (2006, August 10). Big Reality: A Chat with “Big Game” Designer

- Frank Lantz. *GamaSutra.com*. (8 pages)
- Staffan Björk , Jussi Holopainen , Peter Ljungstrand , Regan Mandryk, Special Issue on Ubiquitous Games, *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, v.6 n.5-6, p.358-361, December 2002
  - Taylor, T. L. & Kolko, B. E. (2003). Boundary Spaces: *Majestic* and the uncertain status of knowledge, community and self in a digital age. *Information, Communication & Society* (6)4, 497-522

#### Week 14. Video Games and Remix Culture (4/11)

Today we will discuss the interaction between video games in “remix culture,” exploring the increasingly important role of users in shaping the look, feel, and business of games. We will review user-driven behaviors such as modding, emulation, easter eggs, cheats, and machinima, and discuss the conflicting responses of video game professionals and corporations to these bottom-up behavioral trends.

Readings:

- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture*. New York: NYU Press. Chapter 3, pp. 93-130
- Schleiner, A.-M. (2005). Game Reconstruction Workshop: Demolishing and Evolving PC Games and Gamer Culture. In J. Raessens and J. Goldstein (Eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 405-414.\
- Thompson, C. (2005, August 7). The XBOX auteurs. *New York Times Magazine* (6 pages)
- Matlack, C. & Grover, R. (2005, December 19). Young Spielbergs by the thousands. *Business Week*. (2 pages)

#### Week 15. Next-Generation Gaming Technology (4/18)

Today, we will wrap up the class by and spend some time reviewing the semester’s lectures and reading assignments. We will also take a look at the next generation of gaming technology and discuss its implications for the future of games. We will discuss next-generation consoles, new developments in human-computer interfaces, and upgrades in the networked communication infrastructure. We will also begin our in-class presentations of group assignments.

No readings.

#### Week 16. Class Presentations (4/25)

Today, we will continue in-class presentations of group assignments.

No readings.

#### May 3. Final Reports are due

**Project Reports due by 5:00pm.**