

What Video Games Tell Us About Us

Summer Quarter 2026, 3 Units

Schedule: Monday, Wednesday TBA

Location: TBA

Instructor: Dr. Austin Anderson

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Office Hours: By appointment



Description: Video games are inseparable from our larger culture. From the seismic success of video game adaptations like *The Last of Us* and *Fallout* to the use of video game technology in drone warfare to the overlap between movements like #GamerGate and American political elections, it is clear that video games demand our attention. This seminar serves as an introduction to the field of game studies by exploring the history of video games, their influence on our culture, and their status as works of art. As the anti-video game Senate Hearings in the 1990s and the “video games cause violence” debates in the early 2000s show, video games have been demonized as a degenerate, dangerous art form, and this reputation has not been entirely unearned, given the significant overlap between gamer culture and online harassment. We will also, however, explore how video games can serve as liberatory, intentional works of art that transcend the exclusionary behavior often associated with the “gamer” identity. Through our readings in the interdisciplinary field of video game studies and our play with games themselves, we will pay special attention to how games are informed by larger cultural questions around politics, identity, race, gender, sexuality, and capitalism. This course will ask you to play critically and approach these video game texts with the same rigor you would approach a work of literature. Each session is structured around the discussion of assigned readings and games, and students are asked to come to class prepared to participate in discussion. Assignments will include a short paper and an experiential component such as experimenting with game design, game script writing, or interactive media. By the end of the quarter, we will improve our critical thinking and writing skills by examining the key role that video games play in our culture and current political moment while understanding what the games we play can tell us about us.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the semester, students will:

- Play video games critically with special attention to themes, arguments, and content within the works as well as the style, aesthetics, and gameplay loops that creatives use to convey their ideas, be those political, aesthetic, or otherwise.
- Write critically, clearly, and effectively about Game Studies, Video Games, Gaming Culture, and Popular Culture.
- Become familiar with notable video games and demonstrate a basic understanding of the major cultural, scholarly, and political debates around video games.
- Place cultural production in context with larger political and social movements that have informed video game content and creation.
- Learn to develop an academic thesis that centers YOUR arguments about a text while supporting the thesis statement through close reading of the text, scholarly research, and incorporation of secondary sources.
- Engage in a community of learning within the classroom and beyond while collaborating with fellow students to create a productive learning environment.
- Become a more literate consumer of media. One of the key skills developed during an English course is the ability to critically analyze a work of media—a skill that is foundational for how you engage with the world around you. You will take the humanistic skills you learn in this class and be able to apply them to any media you engage with.

CESTA Game Lab

This course is part of a new initiative in the English Department, the CESTA Critical Game Studies lab. Founded by Austin Anderson and Mark Algee-Hewitt in Spring 2026, the game lab brings game studies into Stanford's digital humanities infrastructure through CESTA (Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis), leveraging computational methods alongside humanistic close reading to analyze games as both formal systems and cultural texts. The lab operates through three interconnected pillars: rigorous scholarly research on games as cultural projects; sustained dialogue with game industry professionals about inclusive and justice-oriented design practices; and robust public engagement through workshops and programming that introduce diverse communities to critical game studies. The Critical Game Studies lab serves as a collaborative space where faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, game designers, and community members engage together in the critical study and practice of games. Please make use of the game lab located Wallenberg Hall, 4th Floor.

Materials

Readings

All the readings will be provided as PDFs through the Canvas website or are available as links. If a link is broken, please alert the instructor to receive the reading.

You are expected to bring either an electronic or physical copy of the text under consideration to class each period as I will frequently refer to the texts for reference in class discussion.

Games

This course requires you to play video games. Games can be quite expensive (\$50-80), so I am mostly providing free-to-play games to limit your expense. There are a few games, however, I am asking you to

purchase, check out from the library, or play in the game lab. You will be expected to play the following games in full by the end of the semester.

Games to purchase (4)

- *The Séance of Blake Manor*
- Isometricorp Games, *Tunic*
- TearyHand Studio, *And Roger*
- Galactic Café, *The Stanley Parable*

Tentative Schedule

UNIT 1: Games and Culture, Weeks 1 – 2

In Unit 1, we lay down foundations for the overlap between games and culture. We will discuss the influence that gaming has on wider culture. We will also examine what “gaming” culture is and the cultivation of “gamer” identity.

Week 1: What Video Games Tell Us about Us

Monday: Course Introduction and What Are Video Games?

Read:

Strong Museum History of Video Games Timeline:

<https://www.museumofplay.org/about/icheg/video-game-history/timeline>

Play:

Atari, *Pong*. <https://www.ponggame.org>

Play/Watch:

Sandfall Interactive, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9g6wftT6Igk>

Wednesday: Gaming the Political Sphere

Read:

“How Gamergate foreshadowed the toxic hellscape that the internet has now become.” <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/23/us/gamergate-harassment-reddit-twitter-cec>.

“We are not ready for how much worse video game prices will spiral out of control thanks to AI.” <https://www.polygon.com/open-ai-chips-semiconductor-deal-shortage-ps6-switch-2-prices-ram/>

“Why Trump’s White House is using video game memes to recruit for ICE.” <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2025/oct/29/why-trumps-white-house-is-using-video-game-memes-to-recruit-for-ice>

“Groypers, *Helldivers 2*, Furries.” <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/story/charlie-kirk-tyler-robinson-memes-meaning>

Play:

The New York Times Simulator. <https://molleindustria.itch.io/the-new-york-times-simulator>

Depression Quest. <http://www.depressionquest.com/dqfinal.html>

*****“WHAT IS A GAMER” RESPONSE ESSAY DUE Sunday at 11:59PM PST*****

Week 2: Gamer, Interrupted

Monday: The Evolving Gamer Identity

Read:

Kishonna L. Gray, excerpts from *Intersectional Tech*, “Hypervisible Blackness, Invisible Narratives” pp. 61-67
Amanda Phillips, excerpts from *Gamer Trouble*, “Of Dickwolves and Killjoys: Feminism and Interpretative Violence in Gaming Communities” pp. 32-36
Aaron Trammell, excerpts from *The Privilege of Play*, “Introduction: On Geeks, Whiteness, and Games” pp. 1-15

Play:

Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah*. <https://hairnah.com>

Wednesday: From the Arcade to the Home to the Phone

Read:

Carly Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Boyhood*, Introduction pp. xi-xxvii

Watch:

Dir. Seth Gordan, *The King of Kong*

Play:

Atari, *Paperboy*
Nintendo, *Pokémon Go*

UNIT 2: Verbs for Game Studies, Weeks 3 – 6

In Unit 2, we turn to game studies, an interdisciplinary field explore the aesthetic and cultural work of games. While the current trend in game studies sees a bifurcation between formalist analysis of game aesthetic and cultural studies critiques, this unit refuses this binary and uses the formalist analysis to uncover game aesthetics while simultaneously noting how games overlap with questions of race, gender, identity, sexuality, power, politics, and more. Each session is organized around a different “verb” commonly found in game studies.

Week 3: Foundations for Game Studies

Monday: Play

Read:

Tara Fickle, excerpts from *The Race Card*, “West of the Magic Circle: The Orientalist Origins of Game Studies” pp. 113-137.
Astrid Ensslin, excerpts from *Literary Gaming*, “Playing with Rather Than by Rules” pp. 19-36.

Play:

Namco, *Katamari Damacy*

Wednesday: Video Game

Read:

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, excerpts from *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, “Defining Games” pp 1-14 and “Defining Digital Games” pp 1-7

Jesper Juul, excerpts from *Half Real*, “Video Games and the Classical Game Model” pp. 23-54

Play:

Nintendo, *Super Mario Bros.* Level 1-1

Week 4: Narratology vs. Ludology

Monday: Ludology

Read:

Espen Aarseth, “Genre Trouble” https://com427fall2013ncsu.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/aarseth_genretrouble.pdf

Play:

Isometricorp Games, *Tunic*

Wednesday: Narratology

Read:

Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” <https://paas.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/09.-Henry-Jenkins-Game-Design-As-Narrative-Architecture.pdf>

Janet Murray, “The Last Word on Ludology vs. Narratology” <https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/>

Play:

Isometricorp Games, *Tunic*

*****“CLOSE PLAY ANALYSIS DUE Sunday at 11:59PM PST*****

Week 5: Second Generation Terms

Monday: Proceduralism

Read:

Ian Bogost, excerpts from *Persuasive Games*, “Introduction”
Miguel Sicart, “Against Procedurality”
https://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap

Play:

TearyHand Studio, *And Roger*

Wednesday: Flow

Read:

Madison Schmalzer, “Surviving the Reset: Speedrunning Spyro, Trans Mundanity, and Playing in the Impasse”

Watch:

Tink, “What is Flow in Video Games”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkN9YeAvLj4>

Play:

Maddy Makes Games, *Celeste* demo version
<https://www.lexaloffle.com/bbs/?tid=2145>

Week 6: Third Generation Terms

Monday: Violence

Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witthford, *Game of Empire*, Introduction
Tiffany Hsu, “When Mortal Kombat Came Under Congressional Scrutiny”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/business/video-games-violence.html>

Play:

Rockstar Games, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* selection

Wednesday: Choice

Read:

Patrick Jagoda, excerpt from *Experimental Games*, “Choice” pp. 119-152

Play:

Galactic Café, *The Stanley Parable*

*****TAKE HOME EXAM DUE Sunday at 11:59PM PST*****

UNIT 3: Case Studies, Week 7 – 8

In the concluding unit, we turn to a case study where we take the cultural and textual studies techniques we have learned throughout the semester and combine them with the game studies verbs we learned to methodically analysis *The Séance of Blake Manor*. Supplementary readings will be assigned based on class interest.

Week 7: Case Study *The Séance of Blake Manor*

Monday:

Read:

Readings TBA

Play:

Spooky Doorway, *The Séance of Blake Manor*, play all of Day 1 Friday

Wednesday:

Read:

Readings TBA

Play:

Spooky Doorway, *The Séance of Blake Manor*, play Day 2 Saturday through 3PM

Week 8: Case Study *The Séance of Blake Manor*

Monday:

Read:

Readings TBA

Play:

Spooky Doorway, *The Séance of Blake Manor*, play Day 2 Saturday through EOD and Day 3 Sunday through 12PM

Wednesday:

Read:

Readings TBA

Play:

Spooky Doorway, *The Séance of Blake Manor*, play Day 3 from 12PM through end of game

*****FINAL PROJECT DUE Sunday at 11:59PM PST*****

Course Assignments

%	Assignments and Evaluation	Due
25	Attendance, Participation, and Free Writes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attend class regularly and promptly• Demonstrate preparation with readings, notes, and relevant discussion questions and comments. Your success in this course depends on your careful and sustained engagement with the material.• Always bring either a physical or digital edition of the texts under consideration to class.• Respond to and engage with your classmates during discussion. If you ever feel the class isn't open to discussion, please don't hesitate to see me so I can hear your concerns.• Refrain from technological distractions and show general respect to your professor and peers.• Complete in-class and online assignments.• We will regularly begin class with a free writing exercise. These in-class exercises will not be graded or collected but completing them is a part of your participation grade. I advise keeping track of your free writing papers, so you may review your thoughts throughout the semester and generate potential paper ideas.	Throughout the semester
10	What is a Gamer Reflection <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is significant baggage around the term “gamer,” something used to signal exclusion or inclusion. Yet, nearly everyone has played some form a video game in their life from console games like <i>The Witcher</i> to phone games like <i>Candy Crush</i>. You might have experienced a video game adaptation such as HBO’s <i>The Last of Us</i> series or the <i>Mario</i> movies. Even if you lack interest in games, you likely have thoughts about some aspect of video game culture such as social question (do video games cause violence, for example), political questions (the overlap between gaming and the political sphere), and structural questions (the representation of gender in games).• Considering these ideas, what is a “gamer?” In no more than 500 words,	End of Week 1

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This reflection is meant to be an initial exercise in voicing your thoughts. Consider it an organized free write. I am less concerned with your scholarly brilliance and far more interested in seeing how you voice your ideas on the page. • Though you can choose to cite sources, this assignment does not require any citations or outside research. This assignment will also not be graded on style, grammar, or spelling. • Remember, I am interested in <i>your</i> opinion here! In short: Do it = A. Don't do it = F. 	
20	<p>Close Play Essay (2 Pages)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A close play analysis of any video game of your choice, can be from class or not. We will go over what close playing is earlier in the quarter. • Develop a clearly stated thesis that demonstrates that you have played, understood, and thought about the game in a complex way. If you have any questions about developing a thesis or you would like me to approve your thesis before writing, do not hesitate to ask. • Support argument with quotes from the text and sound analysis. • Include at least two (2) secondary sources from an academic journal or book and a Works Cited page in MLA format. If you have any questions about what constitutes an academic source, do not hesitate to ask. • Will be evaluated based on the strength and originality of the thesis statement; organization and unity; detailed analysis; a sound conclusion; revision, editing, and proofreading; and proper use of MLA documentation. • Ensure your essay is in 12-point Times New Roman font, double spaced, and MLA format. 	End of Week 4
20	<p>Exam</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the end of unit 2, there will be a take home exam going over key words and require short essay responses to questions. 	End of Week 6
25	<p>Final Project You are being provided three options for the final project, depending on your interest.</p> <p>Option 1: Final Paper (7-10 pages)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer argumentative essay based on any video game or gaming topic of your choosing. You may also talk about multiple video games if you wish. You may develop this essay from a previous assignment or writing response paper. • Develop a clearly stated thesis that demonstrates that you have read, understood, and thought about the readings in a complex way. If you have any questions about developing a thesis or you would like me to approve your thesis before writing, do not hesitate to ask. 	End of Quarter

- Support argument with quotes from the text and sound analysis, paying special attention to media specific elements like POV, gameplay loop, sound design, visual design, etc.
- Include at least four (4) secondary sources from an academic journal or book and a Works Cited page in MLA format. If you have any questions about what constitutes an academic source, do not hesitate to ask.
- Will be evaluated based on the strength and originality of the thesis statement; organization and unity; detailed analysis; a sound conclusion; revision, editing, and proofreading; and proper use of MLA documentation.
- Ensure your essay is in 12-point Times New Roman font, double spaced, and MLA format.

Option 2: Video Essay (5 Minutes)

- One of the most pervasive forms of video game criticism is found in video essays. This assignment encourages you to enter that tradition and develop an argumentative essay based on any video game or gaming topic of your choosing. You may also talk about multiple video games if you wish. You may develop this essay from a previous assignment or writing response paper.
- Develop a clearly stated thesis that demonstrates that you have read, understood, and thought about the readings in a complex way. If you have any questions about developing a thesis or you would like me to approve your thesis before writing, do not hesitate to ask.
- Support argument with quotes from the text and sound analysis, paying special attention to media specific elements like POV, gameplay loop, sound design, visual design, etc.
- Include at least four (4) secondary sources from an academic journal or book and a Works Cited page in MLA format. If you have any questions about what constitutes an academic source, do not hesitate to ask.
- Will be evaluated based on the strength and originality of the thesis statement; use of the visual medium; incorporation of clips for analysis; incorporation of academic sources

Option 3: Video Game Proposal (7-10 Pages)

- The final option allows you to pitch your own videogame. You will provide the pitch statement, a sample script, and overview of the game. You are not required to create a prototype of the game, but you certainly can, if you wish.
- The proposed game should respond to some of the questions discussed throughout the semester. It need not only be a “serious game,” but it does need to have a artistic point of view.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the proposal, include at least four (4) secondary sources from an academic journal or book and a Works Cited page in MLA format. If you have any questions about what constitutes an academic source, do not hesitate to ask. • Will be evaluated based on the strength and originality of the game; attention to the specifics of the medium; innovative design proposals; quality of writing; incorporation of academic sources 	
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Course Policies and University Guidance

Absence and Late Work Policy

It is paramount that you attend all meetings. You may miss a single class without penalty, though subsequent absences will each drop your grade by a full point (e.g. from A to B). I will consider short extensions with a valid excuse, which needs to be arranged ahead of the deadline and not retroactively; thereafter late work will be penalized one-third of a grade (e.g., dropping from a "B+" to a "B") per day late. All major assignments of the course must be completed to pass the course.

Affordability

Stanford University and its instructors are committed to ensuring that all courses are financially accessible to all students. If you are an undergraduate who needs assistance with the cost of course textbooks, supplies, materials and/or fees, you are welcome to approach us directly or email us with the word "Secure" typed anywhere in the subject line. If you would prefer not to, the [First Generation and/or Low-Income Student Success Center](#) is designed to financially assist undergraduate students who are experiencing a temporary financial challenge from a hardship or who are seeking funds for an opportunity related to their academic, professional, and/or social development.

All students should retain receipts for books and other course-related expenses, as these may be qualified educational expenses for tax purposes. If you are an undergraduate receiving financial aid, you may be eligible for additional financial aid for required books and course materials if these expenses exceed the aid amount in your award letter. For more information, review your award letter or visit the [Student Budget](#) website. (<https://financialaid.stanford.edu/undergrad/budget/index.html>Links to an external site.)

Mental Health

Stanford is committed to advancing the mental health and well-being of its students. For help, contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at (650) 723-3785 during and after hours, on weekends and holidays. You can learn more about the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus here: <https://vaden.stanford.edu/caps-and-wellness/counseling-and-psychological-services-caps>

Title IX

If you have experienced sexual and/or relationship violence, stalking, sexual harassment, and/or gender-based discrimination, there are a variety of resources available to assist you [here](#). Please

keep in mind that staff and faculty are mandated reporters for campus Title IX violations. This means we're required to report any Title IX violations on campus to [Stanford's Title IX office](#).

Administrative Deadline Resources

- [Adding & Dropping](#) (you must finalize your schedule by the final study list deadline; **NO EXCEPTIONS**. This is **your responsibility** and **not ours**).

The Honor Code

The [Honor Code](#) is the university's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates university expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

You, as students, are responsible for understanding the University's Honor Code policy and must make proper use of citations of sources for writing papers, creating, presenting, and performing their work, taking examinations, and doing research. If you have any questions regarding this policy, please contact me.

Academic Accommodation

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://oae.stanford.edu>).