

American Culture and Video Games: Approaches, Issues, Methodology (American Studies 05.866.410)	Dr. Damien Schlarb
Semester: Summer 2023	Email: schlarbd@uni-mainz.de
Time: 12:00 – 13:45	Office Hours: Tuesdays, 14:00 – 16:00
Room: P 208	Office: Philosophicum II, 02-229
Moodle Course	

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar introduces students to the cultural analysis of digital games – or “video games” – as they pertain to American cultural tropes and analytical paradigms. Note: You need not be an avid or even a casual gamer to participate. The topics and methodological points we will discuss are relevant to American Media and Cultural Studies at large. Broadly speaking, we will ask how games shape and are shaped by culture. To explore this reciprocal dynamic, we will discuss how to perform critical analysis on games as a sample case of contemporary digital media. In the process, we talk about what makes games distinct among the analytical objects we may choose to analyze, and we consider which analytical categories fit the times we live in. We begin by asking a set of methodological questions: How do we talk about games? How do we analyze them? Our methodological approach will be critical-analytical: we will focus our attention on game design and aesthetics to arrive at a critical verdict about what and how games mean. As we do, we adopt an extended textual as well as relational notion of games. Games are texts insofar as they evince structures and transport ideologies; at the same time, they are products of their social and economic environments. Other considerations such as, for instance, games’ materiality and the communities that form around them may also become relevant to our discussion and your prospective research papers. We will supplement our discussions with criticism and theoretical texts from the field of Game Studies but also from other disciplines. In a second step, we try to connect our newfound knowledge about games with our existing cultural studies knowledgebase (e.g. gender, queerness, race, class, disability, etc.) by thinking about how games continue and/or challenge anglophone specifically U.S.-American cultural tropes, identities, ideologies, and media traditions. For example, we may ask how gender is negotiated in certain genres, such as role playing or online shooter games, and discuss if and how that negotiation differs from other media forms.

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

To successfully complete this course, you will need

- Critical Thinking skills
- Formal literary and cultural analytical skills
- Proficiency in academic written English
- Proficiency in academic research methods
- Familiarity with the methodologies and research questions of the humanities
- Familiarity with the Anglo-Saxon essay model
- Familiarity with the basic themes and concepts in American Cultural Studies (courses I & II)

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of the course, you will be able to

- name and critically discuss relevant topics in video game studies
- name and critically discuss genre characteristics of games
- identify cultural themes addressed by videogames
- compare and contrast games based on their treatment of said themes, devices, and motifs
- perform critical analysis of games based on cultural studies questions
- critically evaluate the efficacy of existing culture studies concepts for analyzing games

In order to reach these goals, you must

- discuss analytical reading strategies for video games
- review critical theories and scholarship on video games
- review socio-historical, philosophical, economical, and religious ideas represented in videogames
- relate these contexts to critical readings of videogames as texts
- explore their own thinking on these texts through writing
- position their own readings against those of others in written discussions
- perform independent research into primary and secondary sources
- articulate relevant research questions
- design and execute an original research-paper project

READINGS

- Readings are due the day they are assigned (see schedule below).
- Depending on your budget, you may purchase games or refer to descriptions, game reviews, and/or “Let’s Plays” online. Either way, you should spend at least one hour each week, engaging with and learning about each game, its conceits and history.
- I will occasionally bring games to class to afford everyone the chance to gain first-hand experience handling the games in question, which is significant for games analysis. I’ve tried to select games that are both analytically interesting and affordable.
- Critical secondary readings will be provided via our course Moodle.
- You must conduct individual research to receive credit for this course. Check the course bibliography to begin your research and find readings relevant to your interests. If you are unsure about how to approach this, come see me during office hours.

ASSESSMENT

To receive credit for this course, you must satisfy **all** requirements set forth in the [Prüfungsordnung](#) applicable to your degree program. Please inform me immediately about requirements that deviate from the ones listed below. The assignments listed under “active participation” prepare you for the final paper, which alone will determine your final grade for the course. You can visit the [Studienbüro](#) help pages for more information about your respective program’s requirements.

Active Participation (*aktive Teilnahme*)

The following assignments prepare you for the final paper. The assignments assess whether you conscientiously and continuously participated in the class (see “Workflow”). You must successfully complete **all** requirements (grade of 4,0 or better) listed below to receive “active participation” for the course. Assignments must be turned in on time (see schedule below). I do **not** accept late work. Should you fail an assignment (mock grade 5,0) you get a **one-time** chance to redo it (only good for **one** assignment). Do-overs do **not** apply to late work. If you fail an assignment **twice** or fail to turn it in, your status will be changed to “inactive.” Each assignment comes with a detailed assignment sheet that explains the purpose and the requirements. Read these carefully (see Moodle).

1. **Reading Responses:** You will respond to brief writing prompts on our readings each week to demonstrate that you engage with the assigned materials. Posts (**min. 200 words**) will be due **Sunday, 23:00 h prior** to the session for which readings have been assigned (see schedule below). You must submit **five** posts for the semester. Posts do not have to be consecutive. Late posts will **not** count.
2. **Response Paper:** You will compose one short argumentative response paper (800 words). This paper will not require research. It serves as a diagnostic for your argumentative writing skills.
3. **Paper Proposal:** You will compile a project proposal that outlines your plan for the final research paper. The proposal includes
 - (1) a 350-500 word exposé that explains your argument and states your thesis claim
 - (2) a table of contents that illustrates the structure of your paper and argument
 - (3) an annotated bibliography that lists and briefly comments on criticism you plan to use

Final Paper

To receive credit for this course, you will produce a final argumentative research paper. You must have achieved active participation to be eligible for signing up for the final paper. Note that you must **register for the final paper on JoguSTINE (Prüfungsanmeldephase)**! Your papers must include the [department coversheet](#) as well as an [affidavit \(eidestattliche Erklärung\)](#). Please also list the **word count** at the end of your paper. Note that I will not be able to enter grades without this information.

Program	Paper Length	Active Participation	Paper Counts as
B.A. KF (AS) 2015	5000 words	Yes	Modulprüfung
B.A. BF Extern (AS) 2015	5000 words	Yes	Modulprüfung (optional)
B.A. BF Intern (AS) 2015	5000 words	Yes	Modulprüfung
B.A. (ELC, all varieties) 2015	5000 words	Yes	Modulprüfung (optional)
B.Ed. / WiPäd / AVL 2015	2500 words	Yes	Modulprüfung

KF: Kernfach
BF: Beifach
AS: American Studies

AVL: Allgemeine Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft
ELC: English Literature and Culture
PO: Prüfungsordnung

Submitting Assignments / Feedback

All active-participation assignments must be submitted via Moodle. The final paper must be submitted **in print** form (see schedule below). You can submit them any time **before** the due date. In case of technical difficulties, submit the assignment via email, indicating the course number, your name, and matriculation number. You will receive written feedback, including a mock grade, on the response paper and the paper proposal. You will get verbal feedback on the reading responses in class. I will explain assignments and answer questions in class the week before the assignment is due.

Academic Honesty

All assignments you hand in must be your original creations. It is mandatory that you consult the **plagiarism policy** (see Moodle) as well as the corresponding section in the [MLA Handbook, 8th ed.](#) (ch. 1.6) before turning in your assignments. Both sources contain detailed definitions on what constitutes plagiarism. I will assume your familiarity with those documents, when grading your work. Students caught plagiarizing **automatically fail** the paper and the course.

ATTENDANCE, CONDUCT, COMMUNICATION

Attendance

Attendance is not mandatory but **strongly encouraged**. Participating in class discussions and activities strengthens your ability to complete assignments successfully. Whether you show up or not, I will assume your familiarity with announcements and assignments. There will be no special concessions made to absentees and I will not reiterate class discussions during office hours (see “Communication”).

Workflow / Class Preparation

Readings and assignments must be completed for the day they are assigned (see schedule). You should read all assigned materials carefully, look up unfamiliar vocabulary, and note down critical responses to what you read as well as any questions that emerge. Take (digital) marginal and research notes on readings and texts/objects as well as during class sessions, to keep track of your thoughts and ideas throughout the semester, then, refer back to those notes when you complete assignments. Bring your notes and texts to class. Raise questions and final paper ideas during class discussion or during office hours. I advise you to work continuously and keep up with readings and the online responses to avoid crunch and stress. Plan your semester schedule realistically. Take advantage of the [free courses the university library](#) offer on organizing your work, research techniques. If you need help with academic writing, you can schedule an appointment with [PHILIS](#).

Class Conduct

The classroom is a place to develop and test ideas, get feedback, and solve problems. Doing these things together is key and it is one of the reasons you would want to enroll in a university course in the first place. We should all strive to create the best possible working environment and group dynamic: We will treat each other with courtesy and respect as we earnestly and critically engage complex, multi-faceted, and controversial issues. We will concede to each other the ability to make mistakes (either out of ignorance, unsound reasoning, or linguistic limitations) as long as those mistakes are made in good faith. I reserve the right to eject from the classroom those who refuse to abide by these rules.

Communication

Your student email account (*yourname*@students.uni-mainz.de) is the **only** eligible way for us to communicate. Emails sent from other email addresses may not reach me (university server filters). I will circulate course-related information and announcements via email or Moodle, but I will not communicate grades via email. I will check my email weekdays between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Please check your email regularly to keep up with announcements. It is **your** responsibility to ensure that you have access to all materials via JGU's LMS and that your student account is fully functional. If you experience technical issues, please [contact the ZDV](#).

Office Hours

Tuesdays 14:00 – 16:00 (in person); MS Teams (online) **by appointment**
Email: Anette Vollrath (anette.vollrath@uni-mainz.de)

Consultations during office hours are by appointment only. To schedule an appointment, please contact my assistant, Mrs. Anette Vollrath. Be courteous and state your name and course affiliation when you contact her. You are welcome to visit office hours any time to discuss questions relating to the class or final paper ideas. Please respect your time and mine:

- Consult the syllabus and the assignment sheets **before** contacting me
- Ask specific questions regarding course materials or assignments
- I will discuss ideas for writing projects, answer questions concerning materials, respond to concerns about the overall structure and focus of the course
- I will **not** reiterate or summarize assigned readings or class discussions
- I will **not** read complete assignment drafts

Learning Groups

I encourage you to form (virtual) learning groups outside of class by exchanging contact information or using other social media. You can form groups around shared interests and questions that come up in the discussion forum. You may share research and ideas, and critique each other's work/writing, but you **cannot** co-author papers (see "Academic Honesty").

READING SCHEDULE

Date	Session	Topic / Game	Readings	Dues
17 April	1	Introduction	Syllabus, Moodle, Logistics	No
24 April	2	Methodology 1: Culture Studies	Fluck, "American Cultural Studies" Wald, "Analyzing Culture"	Reading Responses
1 May	<i>Mayday, no class.</i>			
8 May	3	Methodology 2: American Culture Studies & Videogames	Wills, Introduction: A New Realm of Play Pöhlmann, Introduction	Reading Responses
15 May	4	Methodology 3: What Are Digital Games?	Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., Chs. 1 & 3 Wardrip-Fruin, Introduction	Reading Responses
22 May	5	Methodology 4: How Do We Analyze Games?	Fernández-Vara, Introduction , Ch.5: Formal Elements	Reading Responses
29 May	<i>Pentecost, no class</i>			
5 June	6	<i>Limbo</i>	Juul, "The Paradox of Failure"	Reading Responses
12 June	7	<i>Portal</i>	Burden & Gouglas, "Algorithmic Experience"	Reading Responses
19 June	8	<i>Horizon Zero Dawn</i> <i>Flower</i>	Chang, Games as Environmental Texts	Reading Responses Response Paper
26 June	9	<i>Detroit: Become Human</i>	Dornieden, "Leveling Up" (PBS Blog) Fields & Fields, from <i>Racecraft</i> (Moodle)	Reading Responses
3 July	10	<i>The Stanley Parable</i>	Schubert, "Metafictionality"	Reading Responses
10 July	11	Writing & Research Workshop	Writing Resources Bring proposals to class and upload them	Paper Proposals
17 July	12	Review Day	Individual proposal reviews on MS Teams Final Paper Assignment Course Bibliography Plagiarism Policy	None
16 Aug.		Final Paper	See final-paper assignment sheet	Final Paper