

Cultural Media Studies and Digital Games: New Media, Technology, Culture (American Studies 05.866.523)	Dr. Damien Schlarb
Semester: Summer 2023	Email: schlarbd@uni-mainz.de
Time: Tuesday 14:00 – 15:45	Office Hours: Mondays 14:00 – 16:00
Room: P 207	Office: Philosophicum II, 02-230
Moodle Course	

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar offers a transdisciplinary survey and critical discussions of recent academic and popular commentaries on the nexus of American culture, new media, and technology. To explore the connections between these topics, we will discuss digital games as a medium / class of artefacts to be examined but also as an analytical lens through which we will interrogate different facets of 21st-century American culture and cultural production. The course consists of two topical strains, which will run parallelly through the semester: (1) a survey of cultural theories and criticism and (2) critical analyses of pertinent games that reflect and comment on the issues these theoretical texts raise. The first topical strain comprises topics such as identity, computation, work, technology, digital media, economy, surveillance, aesthetics, play, ecologies as well as their respective subordinated discourses. These logics, ideologies, structures, processes, and phenomena shape our shared reality and, arguably, help determine the way we think about and engage with the world and produce cultures. The second component consists of the critical analysis and discussion of games. (Note: You need **not** be an avid gamer to participate.) The course will introduce you (briefly) to the methodology of digital game analysis. We will then use games as a lens through which to view the various phenomena we identify in our initial survey of culture. We will ask how games shape and are shaped by culture and allow us to reflect on these topics. Ultimately, we seek to construct in this course a frame of reference through which we may more cogently analyze 21st-century American cultures (e.g., artefacts and practices), even beyond digital games. The course is designed as a guided-reading and conversation seminar, and it tries to bring together interesting readings and unusual objects of study. Our discussions will both reinforce and hopefully challenge what you already know about American Studies and its theories.

READINGS & RESEARCH

- Unless otherwise noted, all readings will be provided via Moodle
- 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. You should spend at least one hour engaging with and learning about any assigned game, its conceits, and history, beyond the assigned readings
- You are also welcome to bring up games that you feel fit the readings
- 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.
- To prepare for your final exam, you must conduct individual research and read beyond the parameters of the reading schedule. 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.

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

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

- name and critically discuss relevant topics in Cultural Media Studies
- identify cultural themes addressed by videogames
- critically discuss connections between cultural topics and digital games
- compare games based on their treatment of said themes, devices, and motifs
- perform critical analyses of games and critical theories
- critically evaluate the efficacy of existing culture studies concepts for analyzing games

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

ASSESSMENT

To receive credit for this course, you must satisfy the requirements set forth in the [Prüfungsordnung](#) and the *Modulhandbuch* applicable to your degree program. Please inform me immediately about requirements that deviate from the ones listed below. You can visit the [Studienbüro](#) help pages for more information about your respective program's requirements. This is class focus You will receive detailed assignment sheets for all assignments.

Active Participation (*aktive Teilnahme*)

You will compile a portfolio consisting of shorter writing assignments that prepare you for the oral examination at the end of the course. These assignments vary in genre and style and are designed to help you develop your own critical perspectives and arguments on the course readings. You must satisfy **all** requirements to receive "active participation." Failure to complete **any** one of these assignments will lose you active participation for the course. Late work will not be accepted. You earn active participation by completing...

A1. Response Paper: you will write **one** short response paper (1000-1500 words) that lays out your stance on one of the games, issues, or theories we cover in the class. No additional research will be required for these papers.

OR

A2. Book Review: on **one** of the readings (1000-1500 words).

B. Exposé: In preparation for the final oral exam, you will compile a written exposé (approx. 1000 words) that will form the basis of our conversation during the exam. The exposé is a short, thesis-driven, essayistic presentation of your ideas and criticism of one or several course topics and/or texts/objects as well as of the scholarly conversations surrounding these topics and texts. You will choose **two** of the readings engage from the course (at least one theoretical reading + one game) and engage with them more deeply in your exposé and oral exam. Your exposé should (1) situate your chosen texts in American cultural history (list two additional, independently researched sources), (2) critically discuss the text(s)' key ideas and their usefulness for the study of culture/games, and (3) perform a close reading of one of the games based on said theory; you may also choose to read two theories against one another.

Final Oral Examination

Exam Date: 18 July 2023 / last week of semester
 Length: 15 minutes
 Place: TBD
 Scheduling: Mrs. Vollrath will contact you to schedule your exam

You must pass a final oral examination on the course readings to receive credit for this course (15 mins.). The grade for the final oral exam will determine your grade for the course. You must **register** for the exam via JoguSTINE during the [*Prüfungsanmeldephase*](#). Note that **registering** for the exam and **scheduling** an exam time with Mrs. Vollrath are two different processes. The exam will be based on your written exposé (see above) but it will also branch out to cover other subject areas we discussed in class. I will ask questions, offer counterpoints, and ask you to respond or to elaborate on certain aspects of the exposé. The exam will follow a conversational format, where idea is to give you a platform to demonstrate your knowledge. However, any exam is a time-constrained environment that requires you to present your thoughts cohesively and succinctly. Under these time constraints, your performance will be evaluated based on your ability to

- demonstrate comprehension of the materials you have chosen to be examined on
- articulate and explain your interpretations and critically reflect on them
- identify and explain overarching themes and questions in the materials we cover
- situate your materials and interpretations in the larger contexts of the course topic and the field

(see also “Intended Learning Outcomes”)

Submitting Assignments / Feedback

All active-participation assignments must be submitted via Moodle. 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. Late work will **not** be accepted. You will receive written feedback and a mock grade on the response paper/book review. The exposé will be part of your final oral exam and therefore not graded ahead of time. However, we will discuss the exposé format in class and you will receive samples. 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 assignment and may be subject to disciplinary measures.

ATTENDANCE, CONDUCT, COMMUNICATION

Attendance

Regular attendance is expected but not mandatory. If you are not in class, you are missing out on opportunities to ask questions and to hone the skills necessary for completing the credit requirements for this course. Whether you show up or not, I will assume your familiarity with announcements and assignments during the oral exam. 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 present 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.

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

Office Hours

Times: Mondays, 14 - 16h

Registration: Anette.Vollrath@uni-mainz.de

I hold weekly office hours. Please contact [Anette Vollrath](mailto:Anette.Vollrath@uni-mainz.de) to set up an appointment. Please be courteous and state your name and course affiliation when you email her. Appointments usually last 15 minutes. Take advantage of this opportunity to come talk to me in person about the course and your projects. (Do so early in the semester to beat the crowd!) Please respect your time and mine:

- Consult the syllabus and the assignment sheets **before** contacting me
- When you do come in, ask specific questions regarding course materials or assignments. I will not summarize materials for you
- I cannot read complete assignment drafts
- You must comply with the university’s current hygiene policy (mask mandate, etc.)

Communication

Your student email account (yourname@students.uni-mainz.de) is the **only** eligible way for us to communicate via email (mail from other addresses may be filtered out by the university servers). I will check my email **weekdays** between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. You should check your student email regularly to keep up with announcements. I will not communicate grades via email. 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](#).

Learning Groups

I encourage you to form (virtual) learning groups outside class to work on your projects, share resources and give each other feedback. You can form groups around shared interests and questions that come up in the discussion forum and share research. However, you cannot submit coauthored assignments in this class.

Date	Session	Topics	Readings	Games	Dues
18 April	1	Introductions	Syllabus, logistics, requirements, questions		
25 April	2	Economic and Political Orders	Brown, from <i>In the Ruins of Neoliberalism</i>		
2 May	3	New Media and Media Studies	Manovich, from <i>Software Takes Command</i> Galloway, from <i>The Interface Effect</i>		
9 May	4	Digital Games	Wardrip-Fruin, from <i>How Pac-Man Eats</i> Frenández-Vara, from <i>Introduction to Game Analysis</i>		
16 May	5	Solutionism	Marazov from <i>To Save Everything, Click Here</i> Daub from <i>What Tech Calls Thinking</i>	tbd	
23 May	6	Surveillance and Differentiation	O'Neill, from <i>Weapons of Math Destruction</i> Zuboff, from <i>The Age of Surveillance Capitalism</i>	tbd	
30 May	7	Gamification	McGonigal, from <i>Reality Is Broken</i> Bogost, "Why Gamification is Bullshit"	<i>Horizon Zero Dawn</i> , tbd	
6 June	8	Gamers / Hackers	Wark, from <i>Gamer Theory</i> and <i>A Hacker Manifesto</i>	tbd	Response Paper / Book Review
13 June	9	Work	Graeber, from <i>Bullsh*t Jobs</i>	<i>The Stanley Parable</i>	
20 June	10	The Non-/More-than-Human	Morton, from <i>Humankind</i>	<i>Carrion</i> , <i>Flower</i>	
27 June	11	Interpassivity and Distant Play	(Guest Lecture Sonia Fizek) Introduction, <i>Playing at a Distance</i>		
4 July	12	4 th of July Obama Institute Event	<i>Details follow</i>		
11 July	13	Review Day	Bring questions.		Exposés
18 July	14		Final Oral exams (in person). Contact Mrs. Vollrath to schedule examination time slots on this date.		

This schedule is subject to change. We will adjust it according to our needs and interests.