

Games for Digital Humanists

Course pack and schedule

Overview

Games are a popular and quickly growing area of study in humanist disciplines. This course combines treatments of game criticism, game theory and game development toward understanding how to approach this new medium as an object of research. Part of the course will provide instruction about creating a game as part of game-first research -- ultimately combining theoretical aspects of game studies with the practical application of game building for both newcomers to games and experienced game scholars.

Day 1

AM -- What is a game?

- * Defining games and play
- * Introduction to game theory and game genres
- * Approaches to game design and critical gaming

PM -- Critical Gaming Session

Exercise: Critical Gaming

Lab Time: Browser-based games from multiple genres

Analysis: Readings-based game criticism in small groups

Relevant Readings

Game Analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games by Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton

An approach for understanding games as text using qualitative, critical analysis. This paper provides a template for studying a game by analyzing specific elements: 1. object inventory; 2. interface study; 3. interaction map; 4. gameplay log:

http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo_dutton

Defining Narrative, Interactivity, Play and Games by Eric Zimmerman

An overview of four foundational terms in game studies, with working definitions for these four terms and their related lexicon. Frames the analysis of games using text-first language, which will be useful for first-time gaming humanists:

http://www.ericzimmerman.com/texts/Four_Concepts.html

Fear of Failing? The Many Meanings of Difficulty in Video Games by Jesper Juul
This paper discusses the unique role of failure in video games, and the importance of challenge. Juul provides game-specific examples of how failure is central to the experience of game play:

<http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/fearoffailing/>

Day 2

AM -- Serious games and games for education

- * Games and education
- * Entertainment versus education - the myth of chocolate covered broccoli
- * Post-mortem of a successful education game

PM -- Critical gaming session with serious games

Exercise: Critique of Serious Games

Lab time: Browser-based Serious Games

Analysis: Readings-based game criticism for Serious Games

Relevant Readings

Gamification is Bullshit by Ian Bogost

The famous diatribe of Ian Bogost on the gamification craze. Bogost indicts gamification as the ultimate perversion of games as “exploitationware”.

http://www.bogost.com/blog/gamification_is_bullshit.shtml

Learning to Play to Learn: Lessons in Educational Game Design by Eric Zimmerman

Zimmerman’s reflections on designing games for education, which is particularly important for those hoping to use the Critical Gaming class as a platform for designing curriculum-focused games. This paper advocates for game first design, a philosophy shared by the course instructors.

<http://www.ericzimmerman.com/texts/learningtoplay.html>

Day 3

AM -- Making and breaking

- * Play testing
- * Ethnography, case studies
- * Iteration

PM -- Critical Making Session

Exercise: Game building game

Lab time: Break into teams and play a game-building card game

Group Reporting: Share game specifications and design parameters with the group for feedback and analysis

Relevant readings:

Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games (Chapter 1) by Ian Bogost
Drawing the line between rules and meaning, Bogost connects to serious games and the power of mechanics.

Easy to Use and Incredibly Difficult: On the Mythical Border between Interface and Gameplay by Jesper Juul

A discussion of one of gaming's classic paradoxes - the ease of use and the difficulty of choice. This paper examines the important separation between interaction (controllers, mouse, keyboard, on-screen information, menus, etc.) and gameplay (in-game decisions, role playing, solving puzzles, etc.):

<http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/easydifficult/>

Day 4

AM -- Planning and implementation

- * Design workflows
- * Use cases and wireframing
- * SCOPE! (budget, timelines)

PM -- Design in practice

Exercise: Groups create an overview of their game focusing on use case development

Lab time: Groups work on game development

Relevant readings:

Rules of Play: Chapter 2 - The Design Process by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) A great overview of the design process in games including a fantastic journal-style description of the design process for creating the Lord of the Rings boardgame.

Project Scope Management by Darren Wich (2009) This reading is focussed on IT and business-style issues but it does a good job of introducing the topic of scope and provides several useful links for further reading:

http://www.umsl.edu/~sauterv/analysis/6840_f09_papers/Wich/scopemanagement.html

Use Case Examples -- Effective Samples and Tips by Darren Levy (2014) Despite the fun title, this article provides all of the information you need to make use-case-creation a valuable part of your workflow.

http://www.gatherspace.com/static/use_case_example.html

Note: The subject of use cases and user-centric design is a complex one. We have selected readings to introduce the subject in a useful and accessible way. This is not to oversimplify the problem, and in class, we will go a little deeper into the theory and critique of this style of design. For those interested in more detail, Alistair Cockburn has written an entire book on the subject: *Writing Effective Use Cases* (2000) which goes much further into the theory/practice of use cases.

Day 5

AM -- Show and Tell

- * Discussion of projects, progress, and next steps
- * Post mortems