Player Studies – Player Values: Casual versus Hardcore

Class information	**My information**
Dates: TBA	Adam Stangeby, PhD (candidate)
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Course Description

This is a course that situates a new debate in the field of game studies around player values. The course surveys the literature of player studies, focused on digital gameplay (also including traditional gaming), but also builds a historical context through the Narratology vs. Ludology debate of the 1990s and early 2000s which persists among game scholars in the contemporary moment. Additionally, a theoretical semiotics-based context is provided through seminal works of cultural studies and reception studies. The course will explore the evolution of game cultures and player communities, with a focus on the plurality and diversity of playstyles and play approaches. By studying the diversity and changing nature of game cultures, a new pressure emerges which may constitute a second major debate in the field – that of game values between hardcore and casual players. This pressure produces an impulse to redefine familiar concepts and notions about game culture, players and play itself. This course will provide a framework of analysis for how players produce their values around playstyles and play approaches.

Course Objectives

After completing this course, you should:

*be able to articulate the scope and development of player cultures from a player studies perspective.

*gain an understanding of how individual players conceptualize as well as enact their own gameplay interests, beliefs and practices – in short, how they develop their player values.

*gain an understanding of how player values determine player playstyles and play approaches

*gain an understanding of how game communities form around both shared and diverse player playstyles and play approaches

*stake a position on how best to further study and theorize play activities within a diversifying set of player values.

Assignments

Assignment	*Due Date*	*% of grade*
Quizzes (x2) @ 10%	Week 2, 4, 6, 8 (taking best two)	20
Short Essay	Week 5	15
Debate (Group Assignment)	Week 10-11	25
Long Essay (Take Home Exam)	Week 13	40

Quizzes: The quizzes will evaluate knowledge and understanding for two consecutive weeks of readings covered in each quiz. The first quiz will address the topic of reception theory, the second quiz will address the topic of history in game studies, the third quiz will address the topic of game cultures, and the fourth quiz will address the topic of player values.

Short Essay: The short essay will focus on a historical analysis of the Narratology-Ludology debate which formed the first moment of academic rigour in game studies as the field sought to define its aims. Students may choose their area of focus within the topic (example theses will be provided and original theses will have to be approved by Week 3).

Debate: Students will be split into groups and assigned a video, computer, or mobile game in Week 1. Group membership will be adjusted based on particular accessibility issues with certain gaming platforms. Each week, members of the group will play the game at their leisure and make observations about the development of game cultures within the player community. Students will write short reports (one-page single-spaced) and share them with the other members of their group on a weekly basis. Students can play individually or with other team members, but they must be enrolled in the game community from the onset.

In Week 10, the groups will present their findings with respect to the development of player values, play styles, and play approaches in the games that they were assigned. At the end of class in Week 10, the groups will be split-up into new groups and they will prepare to enter into a debate constructed to defend one of two positions – (1) games should be designed for hardcore player values, or (2) games should be designed for casual player values. Those positions will be assigned to the groups and students will be expected to use their experiences and findings from the Week 10 sessions to defend their position in the debate. In Week 11 the debate will be conducted with separate rounds for pairs of groups defending each position. There will be no lecture in Week 12, but instead students will be given a period of discussion to share their personal beliefs and philosophies about player values and the formation and development of game cultures.

Long Essay: Students will devise a thesis statement (requires approval in Week 7) for a 10-12 page (double-spaced) essay on player values, play styles, or play approaches. The thesis statement will be accompanied by a one-page (single-spaced) annotated bibliography which includes three literary sources and two games that will be referenced for research. Each annotation will be one paragraph in length. The annotated bibliography is not an exhaustive list for the students but instead represents a starting point for their research.

General course policies, procedures, and fine print
Rubric (for essays):
-Checking for the clarity and strength of the thesis statement
-Checking for structure and logical organization of the arguments
-Checking for the depth and comprehension of research and evidence
-Checking for rhetorical style, spelling and grammar
-Checking for complexity of ideas and relevance to course material
-Checking for overall effectiveness of the piece

Rubric (for debate):
-Checking for proper use of evidence to support arguments
-Checking for signs of self-respect and cooperation within the team
-Checking for knowledge and understanding of the terms of the debate
-Checking for ingenuity and effectiveness in providing quick retorts

Late work: I will not accept late assignments, barring extraordinary circumstances. All due dates are listed on this syllabus. Stayed enrolled in the course only if you can keep up with the reading and the work.

Academic dishonesty: Concordia University prohibits students from engaging in academic dishonesty, which includes cheating, plagiarism, forgery, furnishing false information to the University, and alteration or misuse of University documents, records, or identification. Anyone caught cheating or plagiarizing in this course will be reported to the University for disciplinary action.

Students with disabilities or special needs: I would like to hear from anyone who has a disability that may require some modification of seating or class assignments so that appropriate arrangements can be made. Please talk to me either immediately following class, or contact me via email. Accommodations can also be made regarding technological access to particular gaming platforms; however, students must find access to at least one major platform throughout the term (PC, console, or mobile).

Complaint procedure: If you have a question, concern or complaint about the design or content or grading in this course, you should discuss the matter with me as soon as possible. If a satisfactory solution can't be reached, you should make an appointment with Professor Charles Acland, Chair of the Communication Studies department.

Office hours: My office hours are by appointment. I'm also available on email at adam.stangeby@concordia.ca. My office is TBA.

Schedule (subject to modification as needed)

<u>Week 1</u>
Introduction and welcome to the class
Discussion of your play history & play genealogy
Groups assigned and games designated to each group

<u>Week 2 – Cultural Studies and Reception Theory</u>
Hall, Stuart. "Encoding, Decoding," In The Cultural Studies Reader – 3rd Edition, edited by Simon During, 507-517. London: Routledge, 2007.

Eco, Umberto "Towards A Semiotic Enquiry into the TV message." In Internationalizing cultural studie: an anthology, edited by M.A. Abbas, John Nguyet Erni, and Wimal Dissanayake, Chp 18. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004.

Hayles, Katherine N. "Print is Flat, Code is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis," In Poetics Today, 25:1 (Spring, 2004): 67-90.

Supplementary Reading:

Hayles, Katherine N. "Traumas of Code," In Critical Inquiry, 33:1 (Autumn, 2006): 136-157.

Group Activity:
Purple Monkey Dishwasher Game (broken telephone plus token exchange to demonstrate how deep code and circuits of communication operate.)

<u>Week 3 – Game Studies History of Debate</u>
Frasca, Gonzalo. "Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology," In Video Game Theory Reader, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. New York: Routledge, 2003. 221-235.

Crawford, Garry and Gosling, Victoria K. "More than a Game: Sports-Themed Video Games and Player Narrative," in Sociology of Sports Journal, 26:1 (2009): 50-66.

Jenkins, Henry. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," In First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. 118-30.

Supplementary Reading:

Juul, Jesper. "A Clash Between Game and Narrative – a thesis on computer games and interactive fiction," Published Master's Thesis from University of Copenhagen (1999).

Group Activity:
Games without Narrative; Rooms without Walls (form small groups. Pick a narrative-based video game and then produce an extensive description of the game without using any narrative components and only by using mechanics. Present the description to other students and see if they can guess the game.)

Week 4 – Player Studies A Brief History
Bartle, Richard. "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players who suit MUDs," In Journal of MUD Research, 1996.

Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: role-playing games as social world.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
excerpts from Shared Fantasy (chapters 2, 5 & 6)

Jenson, Jennifer and De Castell, Suzanne. "Girls@Play," in Feminist Media Studies, 11:2 (2002). 167-179.

Supplementary Reading:

Yee, Nick. "The Demographics, Motivations and Derived Experiences of Users of Massively-Multiuser Online Graphical Environments," In PRESENCE: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments, 15 (2006): 309-329.

Group Activity:
Canuck Swap (self-identify using Bartle's groups and then pair with someone unlike you in that respect. Teach the basics of one of your favourite video games to that person. They do the same for you. Write five questions you have about the game you were taught. Examine the questions after and evaluate if they are consistent with your self-identified playstyle. What playstyle do they best address? Reflect on the notion of game community emerging from Bartle's work.)

Week 5 – Game Cultures The Good, The Bad and The Ugly
Ardevol, E. et al. "Playful practices; Theorising new media cultural production," in Theorising Media and Practice, edited by B. Brauchler and J. Postill. New York: Berghahn, 2009.

Shaw, Adrienne. "Do You Identify as a Gamer?" In New Media & Society, 14:1 (2012). 28-44.

Group Activity:

In With the New (form small groups and take a video game from the past. Devise how the game could be redesigned in the present to be more inclusive. Would this game be marketable? Defend your position. Mix the groups and have new groups try to add features that would make it more marketable. Re-form the original groups with the new suggestions and decide which old feature is most essential to be brought back to the game. Why that feature in particular? How does this compromise inclusiveness? Is there any way around issues of marginalization?)

Week 6 – Game Culture The Good, The Bad and The Ugly
Consalvo, Mia. Cheating: gaining advantage in videogames. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009.

Juul, Jesper. A Casual Revolution – Reinventing Video Games and Their Players. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2012.

Consalvo, Mia. "Hardcore casual: game culture Return(s) to Ravenhearst," In Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games (2009): 50-54.

Supplementary Reading:

Kucklich, Julian "A Techno-Semiotic Approach to Cheating in Computer Games, or how I learned to stop worrying and love the machine," In Games and Culture 4:2 (2009): 158-169.

Group Activity:
The Killer Among Us (form groups and share stories about having cheated in games and having been cheated in games. As a group pick the best story of each and share with the entire class.)

Week 7 – Player Values Failure
Juul, Jesper. The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2013.

Group Activity:
To Fail or not To Fail (students find a partner and discuss their worst experiences with failure in video games. Students then share these stories and the class forms a list of the qualities of a game that make it most likely to lead to player failure. Students discuss the pros and cons of these game features.)

Week 8 – Player Values Counter-Gaming
Galloway, Alexander R. Gaming: essays on algorithmic culture. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Group Activity:
Hardcore vs Casual (form groups and decide on a game that has only either a skill-based reward system or a social-based reward system. Devise the alternative reward system for the game so that the game would be more inclusive to varied player values. How does the reward system work and how does it work well with the pre-existing reward system of the game. As a class, students give feedback and judge if the game would be successful.)

Week 9 – The Individual in the Social; The Social Individual
Jenkins, Henry. Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21 st century. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2009.

Group Activity:
The Transmedia Express (form groups to discuss the para-textual cultural life students have experienced around video games. How has the paratextual culture enhanced or constrained the player community in the game? Groups should devise a set of suggestions for how to use para-textual media in order to best maintain the integrity of a game's player culture. For example, perhaps players shouldn't use cheat guides from outside the game or players shouldn't make personal attacks via chat apps or game developers should officially support tutorial video makers on Twitch or YouTube.

Week 10
Group Presentations

Week 11
Group Debates

Week 12
Group Post-Mortem

Week 13
Guest Speaker
Group Activity:
Show and Tell (Students Find a noteworthy and interesting *cultural curator* for video games and introduce them to classmates. A cultural curator could be a Twitchstreamer or YouTuber, or could be a game blogger or game reviewer. It could be a game designer or game artist or a game activist.)

N.B. Orthopedic Concept for Structure of Course Material
Week 2 – the spine/backbone (theory of semiotics)
Week 3 – solid footing right foot/leg (NvsL debate; polemics)
Week 4 – solid footing left foot/leg (player studies history)

Week 5 – right hand/arm reaching out (game cultures capacity to be inclusive)
Week 6 – left hand/arm casting shade (game culture facilitating dark play)
Week 7 – guts/torso (failure; motivations; affordances & constraints)
Week 8 – heart/torso (protest; freedom in games; truth in games)
Week 9 – head/neck (individual in society; the social individual; judgment; development; scope; perception)

This conceptual tool should help me refine my reading list and provide me with a more extensive supplementary reading list.

Also, credit must be given to Dr. Consalvo because I used her 2016 Players Studies syllabus as a template for this syllabus. In addition, I kept a few sections of the fine print section a verbatim copy of Mia's original. In all other sections it is completely original work save a few sentences where Mia had been so precise that it made no sense to stray from her description for the purpose of novelty.