

# FILM 80V: VIDEO GAMES AS VISUAL CULTURE

Summer 2024, Session 2



**Location:** Async Online

**Instructor:** ksenia fir, she/xs, [kseniaf@ucsc.edu](mailto:kseniaf@ucsc.edu)

**Teaching Assistants:**

- Nena Hendrick, she/her (section 1)
- Stephen Graves, he/they (section 2)
- Jiayi Li, she/they (section 3)

*INSTRUCTOR AND TA OFFICE HOURS ARE BY APPOINTMENT. PLEASE MESSAGE VIA CANVAS TO SCHEDULE.*

## **ABOUT THE COURSE**

This course introduces the study of video games through their cultural meanings and visual, theoretical, and social contexts. Please note that it does **not** provide technical training in game

development, design, or programming. Rather, it is intended to provide students with a useful understanding of **how games function as visual culture** and to increase visual literacy in players, aspiring designers, and others interested in video games. Students interested in game design will benefit from a focused consideration of aesthetics, reception, and interpretation. Those interested in video games from a visual culture/media perspective will be introduced to existing debates and key concepts that shape this new, timely, and shifting area of study.

This course takes a largely **critical game studies and cultural studies approach**. Topics covered include games and play, issues in games and representation, games and ideology, the history of video games, game aesthetics, and visual language, and the intersection of games and cinema. Through the writings of theorists, designers, scholars, and cultural critics, we will also investigate games in context by looking at media responses to popular and controversial games and key conceptions/misconceptions about the impacts on players, games, and identity.

This course is developed and usually taught by Professor Soraya Murray. ksenia fir will serve as the instructor of this class for Summer 2024.

## STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

- (PLO#3) Demonstrate the relationship between different types of form and meaning through the critical analysis of them.
- (PLO#6) Demonstrate scholarly writing skills appropriate to the discipline of film and digital media.
- (PLO#7) Demonstrate an ability to analyze, interpret, and critique media from a variety of theoretical perspectives using the critical vocabulary and methodologies of the discipline.

## RUBRIC

Introductions: 1%

Game Journal (4 total): 40% (10% each)

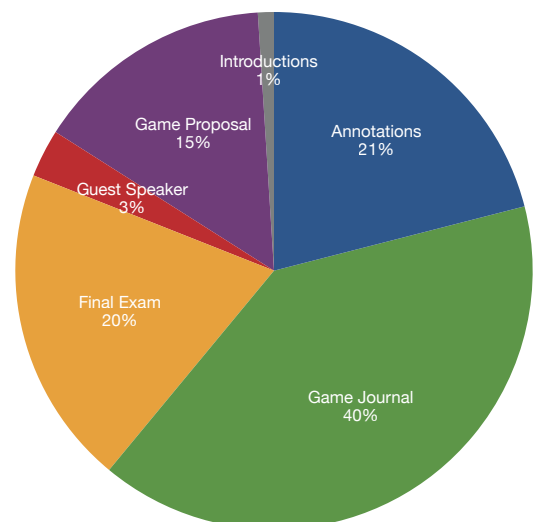
Annotations (7 total): 21% (3% each)

Game Proposal: 15%

Guest Speaker Questions/Talk Attendance: 3%

Final exam: 20%

Extra-credit: 5%



## ASSIGNMENTS

### **GAME JOURNAL (10% each):**

An ~1,000-word entry (1.5-2 pages, double-spaced) that briefly summarizes the main arguments of the course readings of the week and applies them to your game of choice to provide a critical analysis. In your entry, make sure to cite the readings/lectures you're utilizing and the name of the game that serves as your example. Include screenshots when needed for illustration. **Due on Sundays**, with a 2-day grace period.

#### *Journal Rubric:*

10 points (100%) — the entry follows all of the guidelines

8 points (80%) – the entry mostly follows the guidelines, with some issues, i.e., a little too short, missing references, not well-proofread, etc.

6 points (60%) — the entry has significant issues, i.e., too short, does not utilize any course materials, is not written in an appropriate format, has severe typos/grammar issues, etc.

0 points — the entry is missing or doesn't follow any of the guidelines

### **ANNOTATIONS (3% each):**

Leave at least TWO thoughtful comments and/or a response to a classmate on each reading, at least 50 words each. The comments should focus on identifying the main arguments/thesis of the essay and/or on the aspects of analysis that stood out most to you and challenged your previous assumptions, knowledge, or experience in some way.

Examples and outside sources are very welcome as illustrative of your argument, but all comments must be relevant to the main points of the reading and the subjects of the course. You are also encouraged to connect the readings to other course materials.

Responses to classmates should engage with the substance of their comments. Please do not leave “empty” responses like “Good point!” or simply paraphrase their comment — be specific and provide a substantive contribution to the conversation! Annotations that do not follow the guidelines will receive zero.

**Due on Fridays**, with a 2-day grace period.

### **GAME PROPOSAL (15%)**

Utilizing what you have learned in the course so far, write a 2-page proposal for your own video game. Next, using found images, create an image/inspiration board in order to illustrate your vision. **Due Sunday, week 4**, no extensions.

#### **Game Proposal Rubric:**

Points will be removed for the following issues:

- Missing the image board: -2 points
- Not incorporating any course concepts or materials and/or showing serious misunderstanding or lack of knowledge of the material: -3 points (less if some concepts are used but not applied correctly, the engagement is superficial, the work is leaning heavily toward technical aspects, etc.)
- Not following the guidelines for length, quality of writing, citations, and/or timeliness of the submission: -1 point

If any relevant submission is present, the minimum grade is 9 points (60%). Make sure to submit something, even if it's not perfect!

### **GUEST SPEAKER QUESTIONS/TALK ATTENDANCE (3%)**

Prepare two questions for our guest speaker, Belinda Garcia-Maguid. You can either submit them on Canvas or come to the talk on Zoom on **Friday, August 23, 12 PM** (details on Canvas). The questions may be focused on Belinda's experience in the industry, but to the best of your ability, please connect them to our course topics. We will consolidate the submitted questions for the interview with her and prioritize the questions most relevant to our topics. **Due on Friday, Aug 16**, no extensions.

Instead of submitting questions on Canvas, the students can come to the talk to ask their questions in person. Attending the entire talk (beginning to end) will count as fulfilling the assignment, even if we end up not having the time to ask your question. **For extra credit (5%), you can attend the event and submit a 1-2 page report.** The talk recording will be made available as one of the lectures for Week 5.

#### **About Belinda:**

Belinda Garcia-Maguid (she/her) is a Filipina-American writer born and raised in the Bay Area. As a video game writer and narrative designer, she is passionate about telling unique stories with genuine, diverse female characters. Currently, she works at Crystal Dynamics on the future of *Tomb Raider* and is most known

for her work on games like *Call of Duty: Vanguard* and Flight School Studio's *Stonefly*. She resides in Oakland with her husband, two cats, and her overflowing stationery collection.

### **FINAL EXAM (20%)**

An untimed, open-book exam on the readings and lectures of the quarter. The exam will consist of 20 multiple-choice questions focusing on the major concepts of the course. The study guide will be provided. **The exam will be held on August 30** (the last day of the quarter), no extensions.

### **EXTRA CREDIT (5%)**

Attend the guest speaker talk or another relevant talk or event (with the instructor's approval) and write a ~2-page report. Make sure to use at least 2 course readings and cite appropriately. The submissions are graded by the instructor, P/NP. Due by the end of the quarter.

**Important:** Your annotation comments and journal entries should demonstrate an understanding of course concepts and thoughtful engagement with the readings. They should be written in a scholarly manner (this is not social media), carefully proofread, and readable. Please be respectful of each other *and the text*. Being respectful of the text *does not mean agreeing with it*. But it does mean reading it carefully and generously and being able to understand and summarize the author's argument in order to present a scholarly critique/counter-argument. Remember that scholarly works, however critical, are not an attack on the gaming community or you personally.

## **COURSE STRUCTURE AND WORKLOAD**

This is an online, asynchronous course. The weekly modules open on Sundays. Modules consist of mandatory lectures, readings, and assignments. All readings are available in PDF format, downloadable from Canvas, as are the lecture slides.

**Make sure to check the course page frequently and that your settings allow you to receive Canvas announcements and messages daily via email. You should read my announcements promptly. Thank you!**

Please note that the UC policy dictates the expected student workload for a 5-credit summer course should be about **30 hours of work per week**. Therefore, *I do not recommend you take more than two courses at one time*, especially if you are combining school with other responsibilities, such as a full-time job or caretaking.

### **Workload distribution:**

- Lectures: 8 hours per week
- Readings: 10 hours per week
- Assignments: 10 hours per week
- Other: 2 hours per week

### **Sample schedule:**

MON - watch the first lecture and do the readings

TUE - watch the second lecture and do the readings

WED - watch the third lecture and do the readings

THU - annotate the readings

FRI - write the game journal entry

## **ON SELF-CARE AND STUDENT SUCCESS**

In a fast-paced, online summer course, self-motivation and organization are crucial to student success. It is very important to pace yourself and not leave homework until the last minute. Make sure to drink water and take frequent breaks. If you feel like you are starting to fall behind or have any difficulty with the material, reach out! We are here to help you succeed and have the best learning experience. In addition to the instructor and TA, there are many campus resources that you may find useful for your educational journey and campus life.

## **ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS**

Inclusive and equitable teaching and learning practices are very important to me. All lectures are close-captioned, and the readings are screenreader-friendly. If you come across materials that are not accessible to you or experience a barrier to your participation in a class or meeting, please bring this to my attention, and I will gladly work with you to ensure accessibility. I also encourage you to reach out to Disability Resource Center ([drc@ucsc.edu](mailto:drc@ucsc.edu)) to ensure your needs are fully met in this and other courses.

## ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

One of the most important values of an academic community is the balance between the free flow of ideas and respect for the work and intellectual property of others. I take the issues of plagiarism and academic integrity very seriously. As a student, you are required to **always use proper citations** in papers and **may not circulate or post course materials** (handouts, exams, syllabi—any class materials) from your classes without the written permission of the instructor. As an instructor, I am committed to protecting your intellectual property, including not circulating or publishing student papers without your permission.

Any test, paper, or report submitted by you and that bears your name is presumed to be your own original work that has not previously been submitted for credit in another course. In all of your assignments, including your homework or drafts of papers, you may use words or ideas written by other individuals in publications, websites, or other sources, but only with proper citation (generally, quotation marks or an indented quotation) and correct attribution. If you are not clear about the expectations for citing sources, completing an assignment, or taking a test or examination, be sure to consult the library website on citing sources, and if you are still confused, seek clarification from your instructor or TA before turning in your assignment.

Finally, you should keep in mind that as a member of the campus community, you are expected to demonstrate integrity in all of your academic endeavors and will be evaluated on your own merits. The consequences of cheating and academic dishonesty—including a formal discipline file, possible loss of future internship, scholarship, or employment opportunities, and denial of admission to graduate school—are simply not worth it. Consequences and the process for academic misconduct are listed **here**.

## AI / CHAT-GPT POLICY

Using AI (i.e., Chat-GPT) to generate partial or full responses **is strictly prohibited** and will be treated as plagiarism and a violation of course agreements and academic integrity. Please be respectful to the labor of your TAs, who are dedicated to thoughtful engagement with *your* work and providing feedback to help you grow as a writer and scholar, and trust in your own ability to do the assignments. If you need help with academic writing, consider contacting the Writing Center. You are allowed to use Grammarly to improve your writing and find typos; however, please turn off the AI feature (Settings --> Customization --> Generative AI).

# SCHEDULE

## **WEEK 1 (07/29-08/04): VIDEO GAME STUDIES**

### **Topic #1: Introduction to the Course: What Does It Mean to Study Games?**

Readings:

- Ian Bogost, “Nobody Asked for a Toaster Critic,” in *How to Talk About Video Games*, 2015
- “Useful definitions” handout

### **Topic #2: What Is a Game?**

Readings:

- Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” 2001
- Markku Eskelinen, “The Gaming Situation,” 2001
- Janet Murray, “The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology,” 2005

### **Topic #3: Visual Culture**

Readings:

- Soraya Murray, “Introduction: Is the ‘Culture’ in Game Culture the ‘Culture’ of Cultural Studies?” in *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, 2017 (excerpts)
- Richard Dyer, selections from *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, 1993, and *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, 1997
- Recommended: Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, excerpts from *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2001

### **Assignments:**

- DUE FRI: Introductions
- DUE FRI: Reading annotations #1: Soraya Murray, “Introduction”
- DUE FRI: Reading annotations #2: Richard Dyer, “Selections”
- DUE SUN: Game journal entry #1 (prompt on Canvas)

## **WEEK 2 (08/05-08/11): GAMES AND IMAGES**

### **Topic #4: History of Games (and Moral Panics)**

Readings:



— Carly A. Kocurek, “The Agony and the Exidy: A History of Video Game Violence and the Legacy of *Death Race*,” 2012

- Optional: *Death Race* emulation [video](#)

— Henry Jenkins, “The War between Effects and Meanings: Rethinking the Video Game Violence Debate,” 2006

— Optional: Dmitri Williams, “The Video Game Lightning Rod: Constructions of a New Media Technology, 1970-2000,” 2003

### **Topic #5: Issues of Representation**

Readings:

— Soraya Murray, “*The Last of Us*: Masculinity,” in *How to Play Video Games*, 2019

— TreaAndrea M. Russworm, “Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*,” in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, 2017

— Ashlee Bird, “Synthetic Spaces and Indigenous Identity: Decolonizing Video Games and Reclaiming Representation,” in *Return to the Interactive Past: The Interplay of Video Games and Histories*, 2021

— Optional: Khai Trung Le, “The Invisible People: Why Asians Need to Be Better Represented in Video Games,” *VICE*, 2015

### **Topic #6: Gamescapes**

Readings:

— Soraya Murray, “Horizons Already Here: Video Games and Landscape,” 2020

— Oscar Moralde, “Haptic Landscapes: Embodied Video Game Space,” 2014

- **Watch:** *Dear Esther* [trailer](#)
- Optional: You can watch the play-through of *Dear Esther* [here](#)

### **Assignments:**

— DUE FRI: Reading annotations #3: Carly A. Kocurek, “The Agony and the Exidy”

— DUE FRI: Reading annotations #4: Oscar Moralde, “Haptic Landscapes”

— DUE SUN: Game journal entry #2 (prompt on Canvas)

## **WEEK 3 (08/12-08/18): (RE)DEFINING THE “GAMER”**

### **Topic #7: Gender, Race, and Gaming Practices**

Readings:

- Braxton Soderman, “No Time to Dream: Killing Time, Casual Games, and Gender,” in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, 2017
- Abdah St Fleur and Jennifer deWinter, “Unfiltered and True to Itself: How Content Creators Represent the Black Community in *The Sims 4*,” 2021
- Also read about Belinda Garcia-Maguid’s work:
  - Trilby Beresford, “The Independent Gamer: How ‘Star Wars’ Influenced the Tranquil, Forest-Like World of ‘Stonefly,’” *Hollywood Reporter*
  - Mike Snyder, “Call of Duty: Vanguard’: Video game leverages unique strategy to tell a different story from WWII,” *USA Today*

### **Topic #8: Mobile Gaming and Gamification**

Readings:

- Adrienne Shaw and Shira Chess, “Reflections on the Casual Games Market in a Post-GamerGate World,” in *Social, Casual and Mobile Games: The Changing Gaming Landscape*, 2015
- Sebastian Deterding, “Cookie Clicker: Gamification,” in *How to Play Video Games*, 2019
- **Review:** <https://www.darkpattern.games/>
- **Play:** your choice of a casual mobile game (some options [HERE](#))

### **Topic #9: Board and Puzzle Games as Media**

Readings:

- Paul Booth, “Board, Game and Media: Interactive Board Games as Multimedia Convergence,” 2016
- Mark Johnson, “Casual Games Before Casual Games: Historicizing Paper Puzzle Games in an Era of Digital Play,” 2019

### **Assignments:**

- DUE FRI: Questions for guest speaker (Belinda Garcia)
- DUE FRI: Reading annotations #5: Braxton Soderman, “No Time to Dream”
- DUE SUN: Game journal entry #3 (prompt on Canvas)

## **WEEK 4 (08/19-08/25): GAMING DIFFERENTLY**

### **Topic #10: Video Games as Activism**

Readings:

- Paolo Pedercini, “Videogames and the Spirit of Capitalism,” 2014

— Taylor Anderson-Barkley and Kira Fogelson, “Activism in Video Games: A New Voice for Social Change,” in *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice*, 2018

### **Topic #11: Queer Gaming**

Readings:

— Bo Ruberg, “Introduction: Reimagining the Medium of Video Games,” in *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games*, 2020

— **Play:** choose a game from the provided selection on Canvas

### **Topic #12: Ethics and Values in Games**

Readings:

— Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum, “Groundwork for Values in Digital Games,” in *Values at Play in Digital Games*, 2014

— Miguel Sicart, “*Papers, Please*: Ethics,” in *How to Play Video Games*, 2019

- **Watch:** [“Papers, Please” trailer](#)

### **Assignments:**

— DUE FRI: reading annotations #6: Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum, “Groundwork for Values in Digital Games”

— DUE SUN: *GAME PROPOSAL*

— DUE SUN: game journal entry #4 (prompt on Canvas)

## **WEEK 5 (08/26-08/30): PLAYING WAR**

### **Topic #13: Militarism**

Readings:

— Media Education Foundation, “Militarism & Video Games: An Interview with Nina Huntemann,” 2003

— Matthew Thomas Payne, “Introduction: Welcome to Ludic War,” in *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11*, 2016

### **Topic #14: Orientalism and Arab Representation**

Readings:

— Vit Sisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games,” 2008

— Soraya Murray, “The Rubble and the Ruin: Race, Gender, and Sites of Inglorious Conflict in *Spec Ops: The Line*,” 2017

- **Watch:** “Spec Ops: The Line” trailer (CW: violence, blood)

### **Topic #15: Games, Politics, and Ideology**

Readings:

- Colin Campbell, “Why Are Game Companies so Afraid of the Politics in Their Games?,” 2018
- Souvik Mukherjee, “*Age of Empires: Postcolonialism*,” in *How to Play Video Games*, 2019
- Optional: Emanuel Maiberg, "The Not So Hidden Israeli Politics of 'The Last of Us Part II,'" *VICE*, 2020

### **Assignments:**

- DUE FRI: reading annotations #7: Matthew Thomas Payne, “Welcome to Ludic War”
- ***WATCH THE RECORDING THE GUEST SPEAKER TALK***
- no game journal this week!

**FINAL EXAM ON FRIDAY, AUGUST 30.** The exam will be open from 12:00 AM to 11:59 PM and will take about an hour. It is untimed, but you are given only one attempt, so do not close it until you are finished: it will not open again! No make-up exams are given as this is the end of the quarter.

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### **INCLUSIVITY AND DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

I am committed to providing an atmosphere for learning that respects diversity and supports inclusivity. In this course, you may encounter readings and viewings that are challenging or upsetting. To the best of my ability, I provide content warnings for all course material. Please also note that the materials are for you to learn about different — and sometimes contradictory — perspectives, and do not necessarily represent the opinions or personal beliefs of the instructor.

### **TITLE IX / CARE**

The Title IX Office is committed to fostering a campus climate in which members of our community are protected from all forms of sex discrimination, including sexual harassment,

sexual violence, and gender-based harassment and discrimination. Title IX prohibits gender discrimination, including sexual harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. If you have experienced sexual harassment or sexual violence, you can receive confidential support and advocacy at the Campus Advocacy Resources & Education (CARE) Office. In addition, Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) can provide confidential counseling support. Please note that your instructors and TAs are mandatory reporters, meaning that we are required to report any instances of Title IX violation of which we are informed, to the Title IX office. For emergencies, call 911.

## **MENTAL HEALTH**

Your mental well-being is very important to me. Many students at UCSC face personal challenges or have psychological needs that may interfere with their academic progress and social life. Through CAPS, the university offers a variety of confidential services to help you through difficult times, including individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, consultations, online chats, and mental health screenings. These services are provided by staff who welcome all students and embrace a philosophy respectful of clients' cultural and religious backgrounds, and sensitive to differences in race, ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation. CAPS also has a free, confidential drop-in program, Let's Talk, held both in person and on Zoom.

## **UCSC PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY**

In this course, we abide by the UCSC Principles of Community, so please familiarize yourself with these important principles.

## **GRADE DISPUTES**

If you have questions about the grading of your work, please make arrangements to meet with your teaching assistant (TA). If your questions are not resolved, please see me during office hours. If the matter still remains unresolved, I will advise you on further options.

## **SETS / COURSE EVALUATIONS**

Course evaluations for faculty will be available online through CANVAS for students to complete towards the end of the quarter. You will receive a notification from CANVAS in your UCSC email account when online evaluations become available. Please be thoughtful in your responses, as we take these evaluations seriously. Course evaluations help faculty consider ways to improve instruction.