

Professor Bonnie Ruberg, fall 2015
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Office hours Wednesdays 2:00 to 4:00
Student Assistant Allison Comrie

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN VIDEO GAMES

CTIN-499, Tuesdays 5:00 pm - 7:50 pm, seminar room SCI L114

Feminism and queer representation have taken center stage in recent debates about the future of video games. However, gender, sexuality, and identity have long been important to how we experience games and to games themselves. In this course, students will learn about issues of gender and sexuality in video games, game communities, the games industry, and their own media-making practices. Through a combination of creative group projects and analytical writing, students will develop the vocabulary to think critically and speak powerfully about the interactive media they both consume and create.

Topics covered will include: representations of women and sexual identity from across the history of video games; issues of gender and sexuality in video-game communities; sexism and homophobia in games with an emphasis on progress and social justice; feminist and queer theory as tools for analyzing games; intersectional connections in games between gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability; queerness and gender-inclusivity as game design principles; critical self-reflection and community engagement through games.

Students without previous experience in video games, game-making, or programming are very welcome in this course. Those who feel more comfortable working in non-digital media are invited to speak with the professor about alternate assignments.

Assignments

The assignments for this course fall into two main categories: group game-making projects and individual analytical writing.

1) Group game-making projects: working in small groups of approximately 2-4, students will create **two playable games** over the course of the semester. The first will engage with the archives from the Los-Angeles-based, LGBTQ non-profit LAVender LA; the second will address personal experiences of difference. Rather than emphasizing perfect polish, this assignment focuses on translating conceptual thinking into making.

2) Individual analytical writing: over the course of the semester, students will write **two short analytical papers** (one 3-page paper, one 5-page paper) in which they will analyze specific games, respond to readings, or reflect critically on their engagement with interactive media, either as media makers or as consumers.

On Monday, October 26th, students will be asked to present as part of the “QGCon Local” event at USC. Students will also be encouraged to participate in the Queerness and Games Conference in Berkeley (depending on availability).

All assignments will be submitted online through our course Dropbox folder.

Expectations

In order to succeed, all students in this course are expected to:

- Complete required readings and submit assignments on time
- Come to class prepared; participate actively in discussion and activities
- Contribute meaningfully and equitably to group projects
- Keep an open mind about diverse perspectives and engage respectfully

Please note that, in accordance with university guidelines for 2-credit courses, students in this course will be expected to spend an additional three hours (approximately) a week outside of class completing readings, assignments, etc.

Grade Breakdown

The overall grading breakdown for the semester is as follows. Please note that tailored rubrics will be provided in advance for individual assignments:

- Participation and preparedness (15%)
- Writing assignments (25% total: 10% for the first, 15% for the second)
- Group game-making projects (60% total: 25% for first, 35% for second)

Missing an Assignment Deadline and Incompletes:

The only acceptable excuses for missing a deadline or taking an incomplete in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must inform the instructor *before the assignment due date* and present verifiable evidence in order for a deadline extension to be granted. Students who wish to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor before final grades are due.

For assignments turned in after the deadline without prior permission, a penalty will be imposed equal to 10% of the total available points for the assignment, for each day or part of a day that the assignment is late, up to a maximum of seven days.

Attendance Policy:

Punctual attendance at all classes is mandatory. Students arriving more than five minutes late to three classes, more than ten minutes late to a single class, or leaving early, will be marked as having an unexcused absence from class, unless prior permission has been obtained from the instructor. The following guidelines from the Interactive Media & Games Division handbook regarding absences and grading apply to all students.

Guidelines for absences affecting grading

- Two unexcused absences: lowers grade one full grade point (e.g. from A to B)
- Three unexcused absences: lowers grade two full grade points
- Four or more unexcused absences: request to withdraw from course (instructor's discretion)

Excused absences are:

- Illness (with a doctor's verification)
- Family or personal emergency (with verification)

Social media, including text messaging and internet messaging, are excluded from class unless explicitly permitted by the instructor. A 0.5% grade reduction will result from each occurrence of a student being found using them.

Course Materials and Games

All readings will be made available in PDF form in our Dropbox folder or sent as links via email. Please be sure to check your email regularly for course information. In addition to the games we play together in the classroom, a selection of games and other media may be made available for you outside of class. If you have questions about accessing course materials or you are encountering difficulties, please contact the course Student Assistant.

Diversity

In making games and interactive media in a professional and ethical way, it is important that you consider diversity. When looking at your projects, you should consider who is depicted and how this work will impact others. What kinds of individuals and communities are represented in your work? What point of view does your work express? This class will assist you in learning how to make work that includes diverse viewpoints, and may discuss racial, religious, gender and sexual orientation issues in the context of games and interactive media.

Safe Space and Accommodations

While no classroom can be (or necessarily should be) completely safe from discrimination and privileged behavior, it is crucial that we create a welcoming environment for sharing diverse perspectives. Students are expected to be respectful and open-minded toward their peers and the course material. Those who are encountering difficulties or wish to discuss the dynamics of the classroom are encouraged to share their questions and concerns during office hours.

When it comes to discussing video games, one of the most important things we can do to make each other feel equally welcome and valued is to reflect on our own performances of expertise and status. While a passion for video games will make you a great addition to our class, our discussions will emphasize close readings and critical interpretations rather than extensive or anecdotal background knowledge.

Not all students learn in the same way, and some students may need special accommodations to ensure they are able to succeed. Students seeking alternatives to

traditional classroom participation or assignments are encouraged to visit during office hours to discuss accommodations *as early in the semester as possible*.

Guidelines for Group Play

Throughout the semester, we will be playing video games together. Because we all bring different personal experiences and social expectations to our interactions with games, establishing ground rules for good citizenship is an important step toward ensuring that everyone feels equally comfortable playing in a group setting. During group play sessions, please remember that you agree to:

1. Watch attentively and thinking critically, even when you are not playing.
2. Be patient, and remember that all modes of play and play choices are equally valid.
3. Do not offer help (tips, instructions, etc.) unless you are explicitly asked for them.
4. Take timed turns at the controller so that everyone gets a chance to play.

SCHEDULE

UNIT 1: Intro to Cultural Issues in Video Games (Weeks 1 & 2)

Week 1 (8/25). Introductions; creating a shared vocabulary

Required reading: Texts on LGBTQ and gender terminology (in class)

Optional reading: “Game Analysis: Developing a Methodological Toolkit for the Qualitative Study of Games,” Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton; “Adapting the Principles of Ludology to the Method of Video Game Content Analysis,” Steven Malliet

Assignments due: NA

Week 2 (9/1). Diversity and representation in games

Required reading: “The Hegemony of Play,” Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, Celia Pierce; “The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race, and Age in Video Games,” Dimitri Williams, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, James D. Ivory

Optional reading: “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw

Assignments due: NA

UNIT 2: Gender in/and Video Games (Weeks 3 & 4)

Week 3 (9/8). Female players and female characters

Required reading: “Chess for Girls?: Feminism and Computer Games,” Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins; “Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces,” Henry Jenkins; “Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyber Bimbo?,” Helen W. Kennedy

Optional reading: *Feminism Is for Everyone*, Bell Hooks
Assignments due: NA

Week 4 (9/15). Transgender and genderqueer voices

Required reading: “On Gone Home,” Merritt Kopas; “Gaming Is My Safe Space,” Jessica Janiuk; selected Twine games

Optional reading: *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Julia Serano

Assignments due: 3-page game analysis paper

Unit 3: Queerness in/and Games (Weeks 5 & 6)

Week 5 (9/22). LGBTQ representation in games

Required reading: *Gaming in Color* (documentary); “Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games,” Adrienne Shaw

Optional reading: “Fuck That Guy, by Benji Bright played by Riley Macleod,” from *Video Games for Humans*, editor Merritt Kopas

Assignments due: NA

Week 6 (9/29). Queerness and games

Required reading: “Queering Human-Game Relations,” Naomi Clark and Merritt Kopas; *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (excerpts), Alexander Doty

Optional Reading: “Video Games, Queerness, and Beyond,” Bonnie Ruberg; “Circles Charmed and Magic: Queering Game Studies,” Adrienne Shaw

Assignments due: NA

Unit 4: Community-Engaged Game Making

Week 7 (10/6), LAVender LA presentation

Required reading: *Lavender Los Angeles* (excerpts); *Values at Play in Digital Games* (excerpts), Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum

Optional reading: “Designing for the Other: Serious Games, Its Challenges, and Mindful Play,” Mohini Dutta, *Stonewall* (excerpts), Martin Duberman

Assignments due: NA

Week 8 (10/13), Remote midterm project meetings

Readings: NA

Assignments: groups working on midterm projects

Sat, 10/17 – Sun, 10/18: The Queerness and Games Conference in Berkeley

Week 9 (10/20), Workshopping, playtesting, QGCon local preparation

Readings: NA

Assignments: groups working on midterm projects

Thurs., 10/22 – Sun, 10/25 IndieCade

Monday, 10/26, Queerness and Games Conference Local at USC

Week 10 (10/27). Indiecade and QGCon Local reflections

Readings: NA

Assignments due: midterm projects and write-ups due

Unit 5: Sex and Video Games

Week 11 (11/3), The fight for the future of video games

Required reading: “The Nightmare Is Over,” Katherine Cross; “Gamers’ Don’t Have to Be Your Audience, ‘Gamers’ Are Over,” Leigh Alexander

Optional reading: “A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying about #GG and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity,” Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw

Assignments due: NA

Week 12 (11/10), Sexuality in virtual worlds

Required reading: *My Tiny Life* (excerpts), Julian Dibbell; *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (excerpts), Shaka McGlotten

Optional reading: *Life on Screen* (excerpts), Sherry Turkle; “Sex as Game: Playing with the Erotic Body in Virtual Worlds,” Bonnie Ruberg

Assignments due: NA

Week 13 (11/17), Playing sex in games

Required reading: *Screening Sex* (excerpt), Linda Williams; *Sex in Video Games* (excerpts), Brenda Romero (previously Brenda Brathwaite)

Optional reading: *Porn and Pong: How Grand Theft Auto, Tomb Raider, and Other Sexy Games Changed Out Culture* (excerpts), Damon Brown; “Developing Sex in Games,” Bonnie Ruberg interviewing Brenda Romero

Assignments due: 5-page game analysis paper

Unit 6: Exploring Identity through Game Making

Week 14 (11/24), Making personal games

Required reading: “Zoe Quinn’s Depression Quest,” Simon Parkin; “Death of the Player,” Mattie Brice; *The Rise of the Video Game Zinesters* (excerpts), Anna Anthropy

Optional reading: TBA

Assignments due: NA

Week 15 (12/1), Workshopping, reflecting on course themes

Readings: NA

Assignments: groups working on final projects

Study Days – individual meetings with groups re: final projects

Final projects and statements due Tuesday, 12/15 by 4:30 p.m.