



Video Games and Japan

JAPA 370 – Spring 2017

Tuesday and Thursday, 3:00PM – 4:15PM

Innovation Hall 131

Why should you take a class about video games? To begin with, the medium is at the center of an enormous market for digital entertainment. The global video game industry is valued at almost eighty billion dollars. This market is larger than the global cinema industry, and it is only expanding with each passing year. Research has also demonstrated that well over 75% of the populations of many countries around the world routinely play games on their smartphones, tablets, computers, and home consoles. Moreover, recent online and news media discourses surrounding gaming, gender, and violence have demonstrated that people take the stories told by video games very seriously – and very personally. Video games have emerged as one of the dominant forms of artistic expression and social engagement in the 21st century, and it is therefore necessary to develop a critical interest in these texts and the cultures surrounding them.

In this class we will focus on games originating in Japan, as well as the global fandom communities surrounding these games. We will begin with an introduction to the history of Japanese games by using Nintendo as a case study. We will then build a foundation in critical approaches to video games. In the second half of the semester we will focus on international markets and gaming cultures. Along the way we will explore different approaches to the study of video games as we play *Final Fantasy X*, one of the most influential, critically acclaimed, and commercially successful role-playing games in the world. The purpose of this course is to provide students with the means of reading and understanding video games as digital works of art and literature within the context of contemporary transnational mediascapes.

Course Texts

Yoshinori Kitase, *Final Fantasy X* (any version or edition is fine)
Casey Loe and Joe Epstein, *Final Fantasy X Official Strategy Guide*
Jeff Ryan, *Super Mario: How Nintendo Conquered America*
Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*

Instructor

Kathryn Hemmann
khemmann@gmail.com
Aquia Building Room 326
open office hour from 1:15 to 2:45 on Tuesdays and Thursdays

Grading and Assignments

Participation: 25%
Weekly Quizzes: 25%
Class Presentation Proposal: 5%
Final Project Proposal: 5%
Class Presentation: 15%
Final Project: 25%

Participation

Students are expected to complete all required reading assignments and to be engaged and attentive during class lectures and discussions. In addition, each student must have played through *Final Fantasy X* up to the point specified on the syllabus. Although it is acceptable to play the game as a group or watch "let's play" videos, each student is ultimately responsible for becoming familiar with the digital text, including its gameplay elements.

Repeated lack of preparation will significantly lower the participation grade, as will a demonstrated lack of respect for the instructor or the other students.

Weekly Quizzes

Every week on Thursday there will be a short quiz testing students on that week's segment of *Final Fantasy X*. Questions will cover both plot and gameplay elements. There will also be one longer discussion question on each quiz that will incorporate themes from the readings and discussion of the previous class period. Since we will finish *Final Fantasy X* on April 2, the subsequent three quizzes will consist entirely of discussion questions with room for creative expression.

The first quiz will be on January 29, and there will be a total of twelve quizzes. A student's lowest quiz grade will not be dropped. Sufficient documentation is required in order for a student

to make up a quiz in the advent of an absence. A make-up quiz will take the form of a 400-word response to that week's material and will be submitted electronically no later than the Thursday following the missed quiz. Preemptive response papers will be accepted for planned absences.

Class Presentation

In-class presentations are scheduled for **April 13, April 20, and April 27**. During these days, each student will give a seven-minute presentation on a single Japanese video game title (not a series or franchise). In this presentation, you will explain why the game you have chosen is interesting and important, as well as how it relates to the larger themes of the class.

Proposals for this presentation are due as hard copies at the beginning of class on **March 23**, the first Thursday after Spring Break. In this proposal, you will state the title of the game you wish to present on and give a brief summary of why you chose it. This proposal should be about 200 words. It is not necessary to cite any sources or list any works referenced.

I will not allow pair or group presentations, and I will also not allow duplicate presentations on a single game (although different games in the same series or franchise are acceptable). If you want to ensure that you will be able to present on your chosen game, send me your proposal in advance of the deadline. Scheduling sign-ups will also take place at the beginning of class on March 23, but I will accommodate all scheduling requests sent to me in advance.

Final Project

The final project may deal with any topic relating to video games and Japan, including but not limited to close readings of individual games, research on game series, studios, and developers, disciplinary approaches to game history, art, and music, and investigations into fan cultures. Topics not addressed in class are welcome, and comparative approaches are encouraged.

Students have two options concerning this project. The first is an eight-to-ten-page research paper that draws on a minimum of three academic peer-reviewed sources. The second is a creative project that incorporates the themes and methods of academic inquiry covered over the course of the semester. Although students are encouraged to share their ideas with one another, each student is responsible for his or her own work, and group projects are not allowed on either the research paper option or the creative project option. The final project should be emailed to me or delivered to my office no later than **4:15pm on Thursday, May 11**. Deadline extensions must be requested in writing by noon on Tuesday, May 9.

Proposals for this presentation are due as hard copies at the beginning of class on **Thursday, April 6**. The goal of this proposal is to explain the topic and questions you wish to explore in your final project. If you are writing a research paper, your proposal should contain a thesis statement, a brief outline of the structure of your argument, and a formal bibliographic list of sources. If you have opted for the creative option, your proposal should describe your artistic medium and the proposed length of your project, as well as a list of works referenced. Your proposal should be approximately one page (about 250 words) in length. You will be asked to

revise and resubmit if your proposal does not meet the guidelines, or if the project you have proposed is unsuitable or unrealistic.

Course Policies

Required Games and Readings

The books assigned for this course will be held on course reserve at the library. The assigned essays will be available on the course site on Blackboard. Students are required to complete all assigned readings, and it is requested that students come to class with a hard copy of the appropriate reading. If you would like me to have the library order a book, game, film, graphic novel, or television series for your reference, please notify me as soon as possible, as the process can take longer than a month.

Attendance

Each student is allowed **two unexcused absences**, no questions asked and no excuses necessary. If you would like to excuse an absence, you must submit at least one form of written proof of legitimacy (photocopies and printouts are fine) or have an appropriate party write to me on your behalf. If your documents are not submitted within three days of your absence, they become forfeit. Each unexcused absence after the second will result in half a letter grade being deducted from your final course grade. Please be aware that obligations for other classes (such as makeup exams) do not count as valid excuses, even if they are scheduled during our class time. If such a conflict arises, please notify the class's professor to reschedule the commitment. Professional development such as job interviews and graduate campus visits are considered valid excuses.

Technology

Tablets are permitted in their capacity as e-readers, but **smartphones and laptop computers are absolutely not allowed** without a formal letter from the Office of Disability Services.

Academic Integrity

All students are expected to abide by the Mason Honor Code. No instances of cheating, plagiarization, stealing, or lying in matters related to academic work will be tolerated.

Respect

As in any class dealing with media and contemporary social issues, students may find that the course material is directly pertinent to their lives, and discussion may become personal and intense. Nevertheless, each student is expected to be respectful of her or his peers. No speech demonstrating or encouraging discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, body shape, or disability will be tolerated. In addition, the uncritical reproduction of stereotypes relating to culture and nationality in written assignments and class discussions will be harshly penalized.

Tuesday, January 24 – Why Study Video Games?

Course Introduction, Expectations, and Resources

Thursday, January 26 – Are Video Games Art?

How to Do Things with Videogames, pp.9-17

John Sharp, "Game Art," from *Works of Game*, pp.19-48

UNIT ONE:

VIDEO GAME HISTORY

Tuesday, January 31 – The Rise of Nintendo

Jeff Ryan, *Super Mario*

"Mario's Island," pp.59-67

"Mario's Sunshine," pp.68-79

"Mario's Bomb," pp.81-88

"Mario's Smash," pp.89-100

"Mario's Brothers," pp.101-106

"Mario's Drift," pp.107-116

Thursday, February 2 – The Importance of a Good Prologue

Final Fantasy X, until you board the S.S. Liki

(up to page 28 in the strategy guide)

Tuesday, February 7 – The Console Wars

Jeff Ryan, *Super Mario*

"Mario's Clash," pp.119-128

"Mario's Galaxy," pp.129-137

"Mario the Juggler," pp.139-148

"Mario's Advance," pp.149-157

Thursday, February 9 – Villages and Cities, Sin and Summoners

Final Fantasy X, until you set out on the Mi'ihen Highroad

(up to page 35 in the strategy guide)

Tuesday, February 14 – Challenging a Global Century

Jeff Ryan, *Super Mario*

"Mario's World," pp.175-183

"Mario's Melee," pp. 195-206

"Mario's Time Machine," 206-212

"Mario's Revolution," pp.229-238

"Mario's Princess," pp.239-249

Thursday, February 16 – Tone and Pacing

Final Fantasy X, until the morning after the Djose Temple

(up to page 42 in the strategy guide)

**UNIT TWO:
CRITICAL APPROACHES TO VIDEO GAMES**

Tuesday, February 21 – Affective Labor

Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*

"Empathy," pp.18-22

"Reverence," pp.23-29

"Transit," pp.45-51

Tom Bissell, "Braided," from *Extra Lives*, pp.91-103

Thursday, February 23 – Fantasy Landscapes

Final Fantasy X, until you wake up in the Sanubia Desert
(up to page 51 in the strategy guide)

Tuesday, February 28 – Narrative Architecture

Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*

"Kitsch," pp.83-88

"Relaxation," pp.89-95

"Titillation," pp.103-109

Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture"

http://interactive.usc.edu/blog-old/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Jenkins_Narrative_Architecture.pdf

Thursday, March 2 – Love, War, and Drama

Final Fantasy X, until you begin the Bevelle Temple Cloister of Trials
(up to page 56 in the strategy guide)

Tuesday, March 7 – Making Things Work

Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*

"Work," pp.117-124

"Habituation," pp.125-133

"Disinterest," pp.134-140

Ashly & Anthony Burch, "Tactical Espionage Action?: MGS1's Stealth Mechanics Are Weird and Not Very Good," from *Metal Gear Solid*, pp.71-97

Thursday, March 9 – Puzzles and Boss Fights

Final Fantasy X, until you reach the Calm Lands
(up to page 60 in the strategy guide)

* * * SPRING BREAK * * *

Monday, March 13 – Sunday, March 19

**UNIT THREE:
THE TRANSNATIONAL GAMING INDUSTRY**

Tuesday, March 21 – What Do We Mean by "Transnational"?

Koichi Iwabuchi, "How 'Japanese' Is Pokémon?," from *Pikachu's Global Adventure*, pp.53-79

Thursday, March 23 – Why We Care about Sidequests

Final Fantasy X, until you begin climbing Mt. Gagazet

(up to page 64 in the strategy guide)

* Class Presentation Proposal Due *

Tuesday, March 28 – Localization

Mia Consalvo, "Convergence and Globalization in the Japanese Videogame Industry," from

Cinema Journal, pp. 135-141

Brian Ashcraft, "Rhythm Games: Music Blaring, Bodies Moving," from *Arcade Mania*, pp.50-65

Thursday, March 30 – The End of the World

Final Fantasy X, until you return to the Highbridge of Bevelle

(up to page 71 in the strategy guide)

Tuesday, April 4 – Synergistic Media

Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, "The New Cyber-City: The

Interactive Game Industry in the New Millennium," from *Digital Play*, pp.169-192

Thursday, April 6 – Good Endings, Bad Endings, and Sequels

Final Fantasy X, until you beat the game

(up to page 75 in the strategy guide)

* Final Project Proposal Due *

UNIT FOUR:

GAMING FANDOMS AND GAMER CULTURE

Tuesday, April 11 – Why Can't I Hold All These Feels

Stephanie Fisher, Jennifer Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell, "Dynamic (Con)Texts: Close

Readings of Girls' Video Gameplay," from *Girls, Texts, Cultures*, pp.261-286

Hannah Rothman, "A Vicarious Tale of Getting into Video Games for the Plot," from *Chicks*

Dig Gaming, pp.169-174

Mirism Oudin, "Leopards at the Wedding: Finding Love in a Glitchy Landscape," from *Chicks*

Dig Gaming, pp.209-216

Thursday, April 13

Student Presentations

Tuesday, April 18 – Feeding the Trolls

Whitney Phillips, "The Lulz Are Dead, Long Live the Lulz: From Subculture to Mainstream," from *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, pp.137-152

Anastasia Salter and Bridgett Blodgett, "Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public" from *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, pp.401-416

Thursday, April 20

Student Presentations

Tuesday, April 25 – Do It Yourself

Anna Anthropy, "Changing the Game," from *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, pp.69-91

Charles Yu, "NPC," from *Press Start to Play*, pp.16-28

Hiroshi Sakurazaka, "Respawn," from *Press Start to Play*, pp.29-52

Thursday, April 27

Student Presentations

Tuesday, May 2 – Saving the World

Dennis Washburn, "Imagined History, Fading Memory: Mastering Narrative in *Final Fantasy X*," from *Mechademia 4*, pp.149-162

Thursday, May 4 – Debriefing

Summary of Course Themes, Discussion of Final Projects, and Feedback

**FINAL PROJECT MUST BE SUBMITTED BY
4:15PM on THURSDAY, MAY 11**

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