

Play: Heraclitus to Halo3



Prof. Garrison LeMasters

Class: 316 CarBarn, Tuesdays 6:15PM–8:25PM

Course Weblog: <http://ludic.colophon.org>



Email: GL75@georgetown.edu
LEMASTEG@cua.edu

Office: **311 CarBarn**

Office phone: **x72415**

Phone: **(202) 271-8784**

AIM/iChat: **gwlemasters**

Second Life: **Sapiri Whorfin**

World of Warcraft: **LaBas** (Thrall realm)



Course Description

Censured by Plato, condemned by the Church, and marginalized by the Industrial Revolution, play has long been consigned to the peripheries of Western culture as the fatuous pastime of children and the simpleminded. Now, the recent return of serious interest in play and the ludic is made more compelling by the rapid emergence of playful new media like video games and hyperfiction.

This course will focus on new media as we survey a challenging variety of disciplinary perspectives on play, borrowing from rhetoric, aesthetics, cultural anthropology, Continental philosophy, critical theory, political science, computer science, developmental psychology, and biology. We will consider

how these frameworks thicken our understanding of hyperfiction and video games, and how these new media require that we rethink conventional models of play in culture. Building ethnographies of the real world and the virtual, we will examine the liminality of game-space, and discuss the *communitas* of games and play.

Course Texts

Bogost, Ian. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism*. Boston: MIT. 2006. ISBN: 026202599X

Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play and Games*. Chicago: U Illinois. 2001. ISBN: 025207033X

Castronova, Edward. *Synthetic Worlds*. Chicago: U Chicago. 2006. ISBN: 0226096270

Gee, John Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave. 2003. ISBN: 1403965382

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*. Boston: Harvard. 1971. ISBN: 0807046817

Juul, Jasper. *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Boston: MIT. 2006. ISBN: 0262101106

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Avatars of Story*. Minneapolis: U Minn. 2006. ISBN: 0816646864

Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Boston: Harvard. 2001. ISBN: 0674005813

Course Outline

Nota bene that readings are **due** on the date listed below. Please take notes as you read and prepare one or two questions for class that the text raises in your mind.

Suggested readings will be posted to the weblog; I will always make suggested readings available as downloadable PDFs. The suggested films are available on your course DVD.

This schedule is subject to revision.

Week	Date	Topic	Text
One	16 Jan	Introduction	
Two	23 Jan	Play, games, being and becoming Overview of course technologies	Heraclitus, "Fragments"
Three	30 Jan	Disciplining the video game	Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis" Boellstorff, "A Ludicrous Discipline? Ethnography and Game Studies" Bogost, "Comparative Video Game Criticism" Jenkins, "Games: The New Lively Art" Lowood, "Game Studies Now, History of Science Then" Miller, "Gaming for Beginners"
Four	6 Feb	Play and culture	Huizinga, <i>Homo Ludens</i>
Five	13 Feb	Games and culture	Caillois, <i>Man, Play, and Games</i>

Week	Date	Topic	Text
Six	20 Feb	Always historicize: The industry of play	Kline et al., "Histories..." Suggested: Watch <i>South Park</i> , "Make Love, Not Warcraft" Suggested: Watch <i>Tron</i>
Seven	27 Feb	Play and learning	Gee, <i>What Videogames Have to Teach Us About Learning</i> Review: MacArthur Foundation, "Three Dialogues on Kids, Games, and Learning" (Expert email exchange)
Spring Break	6 Mar		
Eight	13 Mar	Play and the literary imagination Propose Second Life exhibit	Ryan, <i>Avatars of Story</i> Suggested: Watch <i>Tristram Shandy</i> Suggested: Read Lebling and Blank, "Zork: A Computerized Fantasy Simulation Game"
Nine	20 Mar	On ludology	Frasca, "Simulation vs. Narrative: Introduction to Ludology" Juul, <i>half-life</i>
Ten	27 Mar	On narratology	Bogost, <i>Unit Operations</i>
Eleven	3 Apr	Play money: MMORPG Economies	Castronova, <i>Synthetic Worlds</i> Suggested: Watch <i>Existenz</i>

Week	Date	Topic	Text
Twelve	10 Apr	Second Life: Guest presentation Second Life exhibits open to class	Jean Miller, TBA McGonigal, "Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play" Yee, "The Psychology of Massively Multi-User Online Role Playing Games"
Thirteen	17 Apr	Rhetorics of play	Sutton-Smith, <i>Ambiguity of Play</i>
Fourteen	24 Apr	Playing for time: The future of play, game, and culture	Congressional Testimony on Games and Violence (transcript) Williams, "The Video Game Lightning Rod" Clinton, Hillary. Speech to the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005) Pope Benedictus XVI, "I bambini e i mezzi di comunicazione" (2007) Suggested: Frasca, <i>Video-games of the Oppressed</i> (MA Thesis)
Fifteen		Second Life exhibits made open to public	

Course Policies

Attendance

Please attend all classes. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know ahead of time and we will make arrangements as required.

Plagiarism

The administrative arms of schools, departments, and programs spend a lot of time decrying plagiarism but often fail to acknowledge the increasing complexity of matters of attribution and authority. The line between plagiarism and sufficient attribution is not always clear. The best way to avoid plagiarism is to make a good-faith effort: Take notes on your sources as you read and cite everything even as you draft. When in doubt, cite the source text: In my experience, most cases of accidental plagiarism could have been avoided with a few circumspect footnotes.

Intentional plagiarism, on the other hand, is entirely unacceptable, and is grounds for failing the course, at least. I will immediately notify senior CCT faculty of any instances of intentional plagiarism.

NB that for the purposes of this course, I understand plagiarism to be the unattributed employ of another's effort: In terms of an environment like Second Life, this may include architecture and design. One of the key innovations of Second Life is that you retain intellectual property rights to the virtual objects you create. If your final project borrows significantly from others' virtual constructs, then you must credit the original designer. More information on Second Life's approach to intellectual property is available in their Terms of Service:

<http://SecondLife.com/corporate/tos.php>

For information on the University's efforts to combat plagiarism, visit

<http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/hc/plagiarism.html>

Virtual Identities

In this course, we will spend time interacting both in our conventional world and in several digital worlds of pretense. While the identities we construct in these virtual worlds are not flesh and blood, and lack the fine grain of our real-world lives, they are yet identities: They often reflect aspects of ourselves that we value, or aspects we want others to value. Please respect the integrity of others' digital avatars.

Course Procedures

Class Participation

Informed intellectual exchange with your colleagues is vital to the success of the course. Please come prepared to discuss the readings. Do not hesitate to bring in examples of texts that support your perspective or might contribute to our learning.

Weblog

During the semester, we will maintain a weblog at <http://ludic.colophon.org>

The weblog is a place for us to continue the most recent week's conversations outside of class, or place material for consideration at the next class meeting. You are welcome to point us to interesting websites or news items (in which case, please comment on the site or suggest how it relates to material we are covering).

By the third week of class, you should try to post a new entry, or comment significantly upon an old entry, on a weekly basis. The nature of your post, or your comment, is entirely up to you.

Synthetic World Benchmarks

You will be responsible for achieving certain benchmarks within *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*. Within *Second Life*, for example, one benchmark will be that you will need to create and clothe your avatar, as well as take a photo (screenshot) of a classmate in a specific region of the Mainland. Within *World of Warcraft*, the benchmarks are equivalent to "leveling up." I will distribute supplementary material on these requirements.

Presentations: Readings

Each week, a pair of students will present a 15-minute overview of the assigned text. The presentation should articulate central themes, emphasize important cases and examples, and, where useful, place the text in relation to the other texts and ideas we've covered. Following the classroom presentation, the pair will be responsible for leading discussion about the text.

The first responsibility of the presentation is to help establish a common vocabulary for our conversation and set an agenda for the class discussion. Where useful, I encourage you to incorporate additional material—external to the text—in order to gloss particularly difficult or important concepts. Feel free, too, to find ways to link ideas from the text to other courses or themes within CCT.

Secondarily, the presentation should identify especially problematic arguments or unsatisfactory methodologies.

NB that it is your responsibility to schedule a one-hour meeting with me, preferably on the Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday prior to your presentation, in order to discuss

possible approaches to the text. After meeting with me, it may be useful for the presenters to meet again before their presentation.

Final Project

As a final project for this course, we will plan and build a virtual exhibit of our research on play, presenting an element of it publicly within the Second Life environment. While your work will be on display in Second Life, your research topic need not necessarily relate to Second Life. Organized around a central theme (tentatively, "Play's Republic: Issues in Ludic Culture"), the exhibit represents an opportunity to further blur the boundaries between intellectual work and play.

At its simplest, your section of the exhibit (you will have roughly 10m X 10m of virtual space) could be a kind of virtual poster session, where you display images, graphs, photos, etc., related to your research. More complex installations could include 3D models, interactive objects, or even scripted games.

The synthesis and support of a sophisticated argument in an unfamiliar medium will require careful planning, frequent experimentation, and a ludic sensibility. Conceiving of your installation and assembling the exhibit will demonstrate a certain mastery of the digital environment (an important cognitive aspect of video games, according to many of the scholars we will read). In a sense, then, your final project is the boss stage of a game you will have played all semester long.

Your contribution to the exhibit will comprise three parts:

1. An abstract of your project (150 words) for the exhibit catalog;
2. The installation (which may include found, purchased, or constructed objects, code, original images, text, downloadable files, music, etc.);
3. A scrupulously researched, carefully argued academic paper, 5–8 pages in length, that is directly related to the topic of your exhibit. After the semester, if you so desire, I am happy to help you develop the paper further, as we look for a venue to publish or present your material.

Early in the semester, I will provide a more detailed set of guidelines and a sample exhibit online. We will devote significant time in class to discussing the projects, sharing ideas, and problem solving. Beginning early in the semester, I will make myself available to discuss and help implement your project.

Caveat. Obviously, this project entails a degree of risk, as this is not something I've tried before (nor, to my knowledge, has anyone else). If this is a project in which you don't care to participate (for any reason), please let me know *prior to the semester's midpoint*, and we will agree on the parameters and subject matter of a traditional research paper that you may do in lieu of the exhibit, without penalty.

Grading:

Class Participation	10%
Weekly Weblog Posts	10%
Synthetic World Benchmarks	10%
Paired Presentations	15%
Second Life Exhibit ¹	25%
Exhibit-related Paper	30%

Virtual Worlds

During the semester, we will spend time in two synthetic worlds: Second Life (Linden Labs: <http://www.lindenlabs.com>) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard: <http://www.blizzard.com>). We will frequently refer to these worlds throughout the course. The time you spend in these environments during the semester will help to thicken what you take from the theoretical material and our class conversations, especially if you are new to video games.

Second Life

Second Life has quickly becoming *the* synthetic environment. If you have a suitable PC or Mac, you can download the Second Life client. I will work with CCT to provide computers upon which you may play in Second Life.

Setting up a basic character is free in Second Life, but gives you very few Linden Dollars (the local currency). Where possible, throughout the semester, I will provide limited funds with which you may experiment with the online economy.



Once you have built an avatar, you need a place to call home. You are welcome to live anywhere, of course, but I am providing a building and space in which to experiment and play. If you wish, please set it as your “home” so that you can automatically return there. Otherwise, mark it on your world map as a “favorite place.”

¹ Part of your grade for the exhibit will reflect the suitedness of your exhibit to the virtual environment in which it is exhibited. How have you taken advantage of the virtual space to present your argument? Does the exhibit you construct expand or extend your argument in a useful fashion? Does your presentation of material suggest, in itself, a novel or sophisticated insight into virtuality, games, or play?

To go there from your web-browser (Second Life should start automatically):

<http://slurl.com/SecondLife/Algira/213/200/38/>

To go there from within Second Life:

Coordinates: 213, 200, 38

Region: Algira

Estate: Castle Manor

World of Warcraft

The *World of Warcraft* is currently the most populous virtual environment online. Although Blizzard, the game's publisher, does not give detailed data about its player base, it is likely that there are at least ten million subscribers globally. When released mid-January of this year, the *World of Warcraft* expansion set, "The Burning Crusade," sold 1.2 million units in North America and 1.1 million units in Europe.

It will be possible to play the game for free, using a Blizzard-sponsored "trial basis," as long as you can accomplish the required tasks (assigned later in the semester) within 10 days. Otherwise, monthly subscriptions cost roughly \$14. You will be able to play the game on CCT computers, or (if your computer is reasonably new) you may download it and play it on your own PC or Mac. I will distribute more information about our live gaming sessions later in the semester.

Please assign the character you create for class to the Thrall realm ("realms" is WoW-speak for "server"; by basing our characters on the same server, we will be able to interact online).