

Seeing Expertise in Contemporary Visual Media
Proposed upper-level undergraduate seminar
Designed around an 11-week quarter; not yet taught

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is the effect of expertise upon perception? Do experts see (or hear) the world in different ways than others, as they attune themselves to salient features others cannot grasp? This course examines ways in which expertise is represented, mediated, or—in the case of interactive media—offered up to participants across a variety of contemporary image-based media, from the moving images of cinema to the simulated words of games. Along the way, we will dive into classic and contemporary theories of expertise in phenomenology, cognitive science, and the philosophy of mind, with a special eye towards issues of embodiment, situatedness, and the outer possibilities of perception and consciousness.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

Games:

Super Hexagon (Terry Cavanagh, 2012 – Windows, Mac, Linux, iOS, Android)

Papers, Please (Lucas Pope, 2013 – Window, Mac, Linux, iOS)

Unmanned (Molleindustria, 2012 – Windows, Mac) (free)

Mainichi (Mattie Brice, 2012 – Windows, Mac) (free)

Software – At least ONE of the following (note: some of these options are free; others are not):

Open Broadcaster (Windows, Mac, Linux)

FRAPS (Windows)

QuickTime (Mac)

(All course readings will be posted online.)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS OVERVIEW

- 1) Attendance and in-class participation. Unexcused absences at 2 or more class sessions or screenings/group play sessions will significantly lower your final grade. For more details on the screenings attendance policy for this class, see below. (20% of final grade)
- 2) Regular participation in course blog, taking the form of comments posted in reaction to prompts generated by other students. For more details on this and all other assignments, see assignment descriptions below. (30% of final grade)
- 3) Authoring one blog post that includes discussion prompts on the weeks readings/screenings for the rest of the class on the blog one week, and additionally leading discussion during class for that week. (20% of final grade)
- 4) One collaborative project (exact form negotiable), due week 11 (30% of final grade)

SCREENINGS/PLAY SESSIONS ATTENDANCE POLICY

Attendance at weekly screenings/play sessions is **mandatory**. If you are unable to attend the screenings/play sessions for this class, you *should not take it*. The films and games to be viewed and played in this course are the primary texts of this course.

Cinema is a medium designed for collective viewing on a large screen; when at all possible, *this* should be the mode of experience one engages a film with. This is admittedly less true of the games we will be looking at, which are primarily single-player and not necessarily embedded within a tradition of social play—which is why I have included some collective play sessions, and opted to leave other games as assignments. That said, for the collective play sessions, playing these games at home (or, worse, substituting a play session with a viewing of “let’s play” videos) is *not* an adequate substitute for the sessions, which will be suffused with conversation and lecturing, and will provide necessary contexts for course discussions.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 – The world as a sphere of potential action

Readings:

William Blattner, “The World” (pp 48–65), in *Heidegger’s Being and Time: A Reader’s Guide*
Béatrice Han-Pile, “Describing Reality or Disclosing Worldhood?”

Screening: *Araya* (Margot Benacerraf, Venezuela, 1959)

Week 2 – Expert coping

Readings:

Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus, “Five Steps from Novice to Expert,” in *Mind Over Machine*
Stanley Cavell, “Photograph and Screen,” “More of *The World Viewed*,” in *The World Viewed*

Screening: *How to Train Your Dragon* (Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders, USA, 2010)

Week 3 – Expertise and embodied affect

Readings:

Noël Carroll, “Themes of *The General*” (excerpt from chapter; read only pp 45–63) in *Comedy Incarnate*
Lisa Purse, “The Action Body,” in *Contemporary Action Cinema*

Screening: clips from *The General* (Buster Keaton with Clyde Bruckman, USA, 1926)
College (Buster Keaton with James W. Horne, USA, 1927)
Casino Royale (Martin Campbell, UK/USA, 2006)
The Bourne Ultimatum (Paul Greengrass, USA, 2007)

Week 4 – *Verstehen*, labor, and gender

Readings:

Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality”
Iris Marion Young, “House and Home: Variations on a Feminist Theme”

Screening: *Jeanne Dielmann, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, Belgium, 1976)

Week 5 – Grasping digital objects

Readings:

James J. Gibson, “The Theory of Affordances,” in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*
Paul Dourish, “Foundations,” in *Where the Action Is*
Susan Kozel, “Techne/Technologies,” in *Closer*

Screening: *The Demo* [a.k.a. *The Mother of All Demos*] (Douglas Engelbart, USA, 1968)

Hands-on: Apple Macintosh emulation

Week 6 – Reception and/as proficiency

Readings:

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, “Thinking in Movement,” in *The Primacy of Movement*
Barbara Montero, “A Dancer Reflects”
David Sudnow, selections from *Pilgrim in the Microworld*

Play Assignment: *Super Hexagon* (Terry Cavanagh, 2012)

Week 7 – Inhabiting simulated worlds

Readings:

Paul Starr, “Policy as a Simulation Game”
Sherry Turkle, “Seeing Through Computers”
Kristine Jørgensen, “The Gameworld as Interface,” in *Gameworld Interfaces*

Play Assignment: selections from *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013)
Unmanned (Molleindustria, 2012)

Week 8 – Breakdown and constraint

Readings:

S. Kay Toombs, “The Body,” in *The Meaning of Illness*
Vivian Sobchack, “A Leg to Stand On”
Samantha Allen, “TransMovement: Freedom and Constraint in Queer and Open World Games”

Collective Play Session: *Realistic Female First-Person Shooter* (Anna Anthropy, 2012)
Ampu-tea (SparklingGames, 2013)
Mainichi (Mattie Brice, 2012)

COLLABORATIVE PROJECT PROPOSALS DUE

Week 9 – Knowing like an animal

Readings:

Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”
Jakob von Uexküll, selections from *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*

Collective Play Session: *Geist* (n-Space, 2005)

Week 10 – Knowing like an object

Readings for class session 1:

Jane Bennett, “Edible Matter,” in *Vibrant Matter*

Ian Bogost, “Metaphorism: Speculating about the Unknowable Inner Lives of Units,” in *Alien Phenomenology*

Screening: *Liquid Crystals* (Jean Painlevé, France, 1978)
20Hz (Semiconductor, UK, 2011)

Collective Play Session: *Dyad* (J| inc, 2012)
I Am Bread (Bossa Studios, 2014)

Week 11

No class.

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS DUE

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS

Regular participation in course blog

Students must contribute brief (no more than 500 words) comments in reaction to the prompts posted on the course’s blog by the discussion leaders each week.

Authoring blog post with discussion prompts/serving as class discussion leader

Once during the course, students must lead discussion of the week’s texts, and preface this by authoring a blog post before the course meeting, with prompts for generating both discussion on the blog and discussion in-class. These prompts can vary in scope and precision—feel free to ask quite specific questions about the week’s readings, or to allowing for more free-form discussion of the week’s films, games, or general themes, as you see fit.

Collaborative project

As a final, students will be required to do some sort of group project. This assignment is quite open by nature, so as to foster the opportunity for students to engage in a wide variety of work—although a project proposal must be submitted by week 8, and subsequently approved by me. My only requirement is that this not be a traditional written assignment. Instead, options would include such things as an extended blog post with interactive elements, or an analytical video essay. (The video capture software listed as required materials for the course will help with the latter option—and perhaps the former, as well.) Students will be required to share this project broadly to the other members of the course, whether this takes the form of posting it online, or demonstrating some sort of work-in-progress during week 10.