

Videogames and Genre Storytelling

MAAD 25630

Spring 2020

Course Conference Calls: T/Th 12:30 PM–1:30 PM, on Zoom unless otherwise noted

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Office Hours: T/Th, by appointment as necessary

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Historically, the genre categorization of videogames has been based around what the player *does*. In place of iconography or thematic content, videogame genres are typically defined in terms of *actions*: shooting, jumping, pointing, clicking. This course takes a sideways approach to videogame genre, examining the ways in which games have taken inspiration from, and put their own unique mark on, genres borrowed from popular literature and cinema. The aesthetic formulas for popular genres such as horror, romance, comedy, science fiction, and the detective story will be examined using examples in literature and cinema, before turning to games and examining the unique challenges and interactivity brings to these genres' typical plot beats and affective techniques. How does the player-avatar relationship complicate point-of-view and identification in the horror genre? What happens to the literary rules of "fair play" in detective stories as they are adapted into actual game form? Can the performative pain of slapstick be successfully adapted into interactive form? How do dating games re-structure the traditional forms of intimacy of the romance novel and cinematic rom com? This course be structured around played examples, in addition to examples from popular literature and film.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this class, students will:

- Understand the concept of genre within a comparative-media context, and be able to assess historical aesthetic trends across disparate media.
- Identify how technological, economic, social and cultural factors have transformed storytelling in a variety of media—not only games, but also cinema and literature.
- Critically assess videogames as a cultural form, from the relationships between game mechanics and storytelling, to their connection to historical generic forms, to their ideological underpinnings.
- Form well-supported arguments about games and their relationship to broader storytelling traditions.
- Undertake critical multimedia research projects incorporating game analysis, cross-media comparative examination, and critical commentary.

COURSE MATERIALS: GAMES

The move to an online-only format for this academic quarter means that, in lieu of the original planned dedicated play sessions, students will be required to play games **on their own time** and **on their own hardware**. The **Weston Game Lab** will be able to provide students with **free, DRM-free** Windows and/or macOS copies of many—but not all—of the games for the course.

Certain games will be required playing for ALL students. Those games are:

- *Last Day of June* (505 Games, 2017)
 - Available for **Windows** (not Mac—we can troubleshoot this) from the Weston Game Lab.
 - Also available for **PS4** and **Nintendo Switch** for \$19.99.
- *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS** from the Weston Game Lab.
- *The Return of the Obra Dinn* (3909, 2018)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS** from the Weston Game Lab.
- *HER STORY* (Sam Barlow, 2015)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS** from the Weston Game Lab.
- *Kindness Coins* (Arden, Spider, Jordan Battison, and Michael Real, 2013)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS** via itch.io, pay-what-you-want (including \$0), DRM-free

On other weeks, students will break into multiple groups to play multiple games, reporting back to the class as part of group presentations. These groups will be at least partly determined by **hardware access** and **student budget to pay for games** that cannot be obtained freely. Please plan ahead when considering which group you would like to be a part of.

Week 2: Choose one game from the following four (both *Siren* games combined into one group)

- *Siren* (Sony Computer Entertainment Japan Studio, 2003)
 - Available for **PS2** (you'd have to track down a disc) and **PS4** (\$9.99 on PlayStation Store).
- *Siren: Blood Curse* (Sony Computer Entertainment Japan Studio, 2008)
 - Available for **PS3** for \$19.99 on the PlayStation Store.
- *Home* (Benjamin Rivers, 2012)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS (32-bit, pre-Catalina only)** from the Weston Game Lab.
- *Friday the 13th: The Game* (IllFonic, 2017)
 - Available for **Windows, PS4, Xbox One,** and **Nintendo Switch** for \$24.99.

Week 5: Choose one game from the following three

- *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018)
 - Available for **Windows, macOS, PS4,** and **Xbox One** for \$24.99–\$29.99
- *The Forest* (Endnight Games, 2018)
 - Available for **Windows** and **PS4** for \$19.99
- *Minecraft* Java Edition Alpha v1.1.0 (Mojang, 2010)
 - Available for **Windows** and **Mac** for \$26.95

Week 8: Choose one game from the following four

- *Katawa Shoujo* (Four Leaf Studios, 2012)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS (32-bit, pre-Catalina only)** as a free download.
- *Hatoful Boyfriend* (PidgeoNation, Inc./Mediatonic, 2011)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS (32-bit, pre-Catalina only)** from the Weston Game Lab
- *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (Game Grumps, 2017)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS** for \$14.99
- *Butterfly Soup* (Brianna Lei, 2017)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS** via itch.io, pay-what-you-want (including \$0), DRM-free

Week 9: Choose one game from the following three

- *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS** from the Weston Game Lab.
 - Also available for **PS4, Xbox One, and Nintendo Switch** for \$14.99.
- *CHUCHEL* (Amanita Design, 2018)
 - Available for **Windows** and **macOS** from the Weston Game Lab.
- *Untitled Goose Game* (House House, 2019)
 - Available for **Windows, Mac, PS4, Xbox One, and Nintendo Switch** for \$19.99.

SIGNING UP FOR GROUP WORK

For most weeks of the course, at least one day will be devoted to group presentations. The default will be for groups to present during our conference call for that day. However, if it is difficult for all group members to join in on the course's conference calls, some sort of asynchronous presentation is also acceptable.

A Google Sheets sign-up sheet for group work has been created, and will be linked on Canvas. All students are expected to:

1. Sign up for **one group** for **each day group work is planned**
2. Sign to be the **leader** of **one group during the quarter**. Group leaders have additional responsibilities, explained further in the assignments and grade distribution section below.

Certain groups will be organized around specific games. Make sure before you sign up for those groups that you have access to the necessary platforms, and are willing to purchase the game if necessary. If not, look for another alternative for that day. Students should make ample use of the course's Slack to coordinate.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADE DISTRIBUTION

Students' final grades will be determined by adherence following three expectations:

1. Students will consistently **participate in course group work**. Some sort of asynchronous participation should be evident even when attendance during synchronous class conference calls cannot be managed. (40% of final grade)
2. Students will also **lead the presentation** during group work **once** during the quarter. This leadership should result in one of two possible tangible results: either a **1500-word blog post**, or a **critical video essay**. These should be posted for the rest of the class to see in time for the

group to give its presentation for the rest of class. They can also be used as an **alternative to** live presentations. (25% of final grade)

3. Students will form groups and undertake a **final group project**. This project will consist of an **abstract** (300–400 words, due prior to the rest of the project) and the project itself. The final project’s form is variable; it could be a creative writing project, video, piece of software, or something else entirely—it just needs to be substantial. (35% of final grade)

CLASS ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION

This course is intended for all University of Chicago students, including those with mental, physical, or cognitive disabilities, illness, injuries, impairments, or any other condition that tends to negatively affect one’s equal access to education. The move to online courses presents many challenges for instructors, but one benefit is that it provides the opportunity to be even more accommodating to the needs of students. If, at any point in the quarter, you find yourself not able to fully access the content and intended experience of this course, you are welcome (and not required) to contact me to discuss your specific needs. I also encourage you to contact Student Disability Services for resources and procedures: <https://disabilities.uchicago.edu>.

HARASSMENT

The University’s guidelines for sexual and gender-based harassment will be strictly enforced. For reference, please see <https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/university-policies/university-of-chicago-policy-on-harassment-discrimination-and-sexual-miscon/>. Students should be aware that the course instructor is a Title IX mandated reporter.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1, Tues, April 7: Introduction to Genre and Medium

Readings to do by this conference call:

- John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), Ch 1, “The Study of Literary Formulas”
- Mark J.P. Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game* (2002), Ch 6, “Genre and the Video Game”

Week 1, Thurs, April 9: Identification, Dramatic Irony, and Suspense

Film viewing to do by this conference call, divided into three student groups:

- **Group 1:** *Sabotage* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1936, 76 min)
- **Group 2:** *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1956, 120 min)
- **Group 3:** *Frenzy* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1972, 116 min)

Play assignment to do by this conference call:

- *9:05* (Adam Cadre, 2000) [online, browser-based] ~5-10 min
- *Atticus and the Boy Electronic* (Bloomengine, 2012) [online, browser-based] ~5-10 min

Readings to do by this conference call:

- François Truffaut with Alfred Hitchcock, *Hitchcock* (1967), excerpts on *Sabotage* and the definition of suspense
- Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (1995), Ch 3, “Engaging Characters”

Week 2, Tues, April 14: Horror, pt 1

Film viewing to do by this conference call, divided into two student groups:

- **Group 1:** *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978, 91 min)
- **Group 2:** *Friday the 13th Part 2* (Steve Miner, 1981, 86 min)

Readings to do by this conference call:

- Steve Neale, “*Halloween: Suspense, Aggression and the Look*” (1984)
- Adam Hart, *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror Across Media* (2019), Ch 3, “The Blackest Eyes ... The Devils’ Eyes—Horror’s First-Person Camerawork Part 1: Killer POV”

Pre-recorded video lecture linked to on Canvas

- This acts as a supplement to our conference call today, not a replacement for it. Call will be shorter as a result.

Week 2, Thurs, April 16: Horror, pt 2

Group presentations, divided by game:

- **Group 1:** *Siren* (Sony Computer Entertainment Japan Studio, 2003) or *Siren: Blood Curse* (Sony Computer Entertainment Japan Studio, 2008)
- **Group 2:** *Home* (Benjamin Rivers, 2012)
- **Group 3:** *Friday the 13th: The Game* (IllFonic, 2017)

(put in ~3 hours on whichever you’re playing)

Week 3, Tues, April 21: Tragedy and the “Retry” Narrative, pt 1

Film viewing to do by this conference call:

- *Der Müde Tod* [a.k.a. *Destiny: A German Folk Song in Six Verses*] (Fritz Lang, 1921, 98 min)

Recommended reading:

- Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (2000), Ch 1, “The *Marchen: Der müde Tod* – Death and the Maiden”

Week 3, Thurs, April 23: Tragedy and the “Retry” Narrative, pt 2

Play assignment to do by this conference call:

- *Last Day of June* (505 Games, 2017) – ~3 hours.

Readings to do by this conference call:

- Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), Ch 5 “Agency,” and Ch 6 “Transformation”

Group presentations, divided by topic:

- **Group 1:** *Last Day of June* and the legacy of *Der Müde Tod*
- **Group 2:** *Last Day of June* filtered through the Janet H. Murray reading
- **Group 3:** Tragedy as a concept—definitions, historical conceptions, previous attempts at interactive tragic narratives

Week 4, Tues, April 28: Melodrama, the Gothic, and Spatial Storytelling, pt 1

Listening assignment to do by this conference call:

- *This American Life*, Episode #199 “House on Loon Lake” (2001, 59 min)

Required readings to do by this conference call:

- Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman, “Gothic Possibilities” (1977)

Recommended reading:

- Guy Barefoot, *Gaslight Melodrama: From Victorian London to 1940s Hollywood* (2001), Ch 3, "Gothic Sources/London Discourses: The Dark Metropolis on Page and Screen"

Pre-recorded video lecture linked to on Canvas

- This acts as a supplement to our conference call today, not a replacement for it. Call will be shorter as a result.

Week 4, Thurs, April 30: Melodrama, the Gothic, and Spatial Storytelling, pt 2**Play assignment to do by this conference call:**

- *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) – ~90 min

Readings to do by this conference call:

- Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" (2004)

Group presentations, divided by topic:

- **Group 1:** *Gone Home* and/as spatial storytelling
- **Group 2:** *Gone Home* as melodrama and/or gothic fiction
- **Group 3:** "House on Loon Lake" and/as spatial storytelling, or in conversation with *Gone Home*

Week 5, Tues, May 5: The Robinsonade, pt 1**Readings to do by this conference call, divided into two student groups:**

- **Group 1:** Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), excerpt [pp 5–140 of Oxford World's Classics edition]
- **Group 2:** Jules Verne, *The Mysterious Island* (1874), Part One, Chs I–X and Chs XVI–XIX

Week 5, Thurs, May 7: The Robinsonade, pt 2**Group presentations, divided by game:**

- **Group 1:** *The Forest* (Endnight Games, 2018)
- **Group 2:** *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018)
- **Group 3:** *Minecraft* Java Edition Alpha v1.1.0 (Mojang, 2010)
(put in ~3 hours on whichever you're playing)

Week 6, Tues, May 12: Mysteries and Detective Stories, pt 1**Readings to do by this conference call:**

- Roger Caillois, "The Detective Story as a Game" (1941)
- Howard Haycraft, ed. *The Art of the Mystery Story* (1978), section 2, "The Rules of the Game"

Week 6, Thurs, May 14: Mysteries and Detective Stories, pt 2**Readings to do by this conference call:**

- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Case of Identity" (1891)
- Marie Rodell, *Mystery Fiction: Theory and Technique* (1943), Ch 8, "Clues"

Play assignment to do by this conference call:

- *The Return of the Obra Dinn* (3909, 2018) – put in ~3 hours (you won't see the game's end in this time, but you'll make progress)

Group presentations, divided by topic:

- **Group 1:** “Rules” in detective fiction and “rules” in detective games, with *Return of the Obra Dinn* as a case study
- **Group 2:** Form and function of clues in *Return of the Obra Dinn*
- **Group 3:** The theme of looking in “A Case of Identity” (or Sherlock Holmes stories, generally) and in *Obra Dinn*

Week 7, Tues, May 19: Mysteries and Detective Stories, pt 3

Readings to do by this conference call:

- Jorge Luis Borges, “Death and the Compass” (1942)

Play assignment to do by this conference call:

- *HER STORY* (Sam Barlow, 2015) – ~2–3 hrs to figure out (~4+ if you want to be exhaustive)

Week 7, Thurs, May 21: Romance and Romantic Comedy, pt 1

Readings to do by this conference call:

- Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (2002), Ch 1, “Comedy and Narrative” [excerpt, pp 50–62]
- Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (2007), Ch 1, “Romantic Comedy and Genre”

Film viewing to do by this conference call, divided into three student groups:

- **All Groups Watch:** *Chess Fever* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1925, 20 min)
- **Group 1 Additionally Watch:** *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938, 102 min)
- **Group 2 Additionally Watch:** *You’ve Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998, 119 min)
- **Group 3 Additionally Watch:** *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (Susan Johnson, 2018, 99 min)

Week 8, Tues, May 26: Romance and Romantic Comedy, pt 2

Readings to do by this conference call:

- Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (1978), Ch 7, “Games and Paradox”

Group presentations, divided by game:

- **Group 1:** *Katava Shoujo* (Four Leaf Studios, 2012)
- **Group 2:** *Hatoful Boyfriend* (PidgeoNation, Inc./Mediatonic, 2011)
- **Group 3:** *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (Game Grumps, 2017)
- **Group 4:** *Butterfly Soup* (Brianna Lei, 2017)

(put in ~3 hours on whichever you’re playing)

FINAL GROUP PROJECT ABSTRACTS DUE for all groups with graduating fourth-years

Week 8, Thurs, May 28: Romance and Romantic Comedy, pt 3

Play assignment to do by this conference call:

- *Kindness Coins* (Arden, Spider, Jordan Battison, and Michael Real, 2013) – ~5–10 min

Readings to do by this conference call:

- Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (1995), various excerpts
- Neil Strauss, *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (2005), various excerpts

Week 9, Tues, June 2: Slapstick and Cartoons**Readings to do by this conference call:**

- Louise Peacock, *Slapstick and Comic Performance: Comedy and Pain* (2014), Ch 1, "What Is Slapstick?"

Pre-recorded video lecture linked to on Canvas

- This acts as a supplement to our conference call today, not a replacement for it. Call will NOT be shorter, as we still have plenty of presentations to get through.

Group presentations, divided by game:

- **Group 1:** *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014)
- **Group 2:** *CHUCHEL* (Amanita Design, 2018)
- **Group 3:** *Untitled Goose Game* (House House, 2019)

(put in ~3 hours on whichever you're playing)

FINAL GROUP PROJECTS DUE for all groups with graduating fourth-years

FINAL GROUP PROJECT ABSTRACTS DUE for all non-fourth-year groups

Week 10, Tues, June 9

FINAL GROUP PROJECTS DUE for all non-fourth-year groups