ENGL398F 2021
T 2:45-5:30 PM
Darren Wershler
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virtual office hours, Discord: Tuesdays 12:45-2:45
v3

NB: THIS IS A FULLY ONLINE CLASS WITH NO PHYSICAL MEETINGS

Video Games and/as Theory
Minecraft and Modernity Edition

Description
Video game studies is a nascent, fragmentary discipline that draws on many different philosophical perspectives and methodologies. Focusing on the key topics of history, ideology and political economy, this course pairs a range of critical theoretical approaches with specific video games in order to consider what the theories can teach us about the games, and what the games can teach us about theory.

This year's course explores key aspects of modernity through intensive interaction with Mojang's Minecraft -- one of the most popular but least studied video games in history.

This is a "flipped" class; we will spend our meeting time in-game, engaged in various collaborative activities designed to teach aspects of the readings on the syllabus through material experience. Lectures will take the form of prerecorded podcasts, which you can listen to while playing or at any other point during your week.

Objectives
1. Introduce students to significant theoretical texts on the subject of modernity

2. Use embodied experience in virtual worlds to help understand concepts from the theory and history of modernity
3. Gain experience working on collaborative research projects in a virtual environment
4. Learn how to write reflectively and critically about collaborative research in digital media

Course Materials
There is no single textbook for this course. A range of scholarly articles are available from various online sources, including course reserves, CLUES and the open Web (see Schedule for details).

Your game for the term is _Minecraft_ (Java version, Mac or PC ONLY. The console and mobile versions of Minecraft will not allow you to access the collaborative online space the class will be using). If you don't already have one, you will need to purchase a full online version of Minecraft ($35.00 CAD) and register for a Mojang account, here: https://minecraft.net/.

You will also need a Discord account if you don't already have one: https://discord.com/. You may or may not want to use the audio channel with your team members, but you can get by with typing and posting images in the chat channel.

Installation instructions for Minecraft and Discord are on the Moodle. Follow them scrupulously. There is also information in the installation document about where to ask for help.

NB: If your personal computer can't play the current version of Minecraft, it is *your responsibility* to borrow or otherwise secure hardware that can do so, for the duration of the term, if you want to be in this course. You will probably need to play for a minimum of around 3 hours each week as research -- same as normally scheduled (non-COVID) lecture time -- but ambitious

projects will require more time in-game to complete than this, so plan accordingly.

Meetings
Lectures for the course will be available as standard audio files on the course Moodle. You can listen to them whenever suits you, but you should do so before class meetings on the relevant weeks. If you live in a shared space, you may want some form of headphones or headset as well as your computer's speakers.

We will meet regularly as a group in the class Minecraft server as scheduled on Tuesdays, 2:45-5:30 PM. My expectation is that, as in any class, you will attend and participate in these collective sessions, and I will be logging attendance and noting participation when I assess grades for all activities. After group work begins, group members may want to work together on the server at other times, but I (and often members of the research team) will always be in-world during scheduled meeting time.

Course Requirements
Choose ONE of the following student profiles:

Communitarian
warmup (30%) + 1 Level I group project (30%) + 1 Level II group project (40%) = 100%

Polymath
warmup (30%) + 1 Level I group project (30%) + term paper (40%) = 100%

Planner
warmup (30%) + 1 Level III group project (70%) = 100% (NB: subject to student interest; minimum 5 people)

Flâneur
warmup (30%) + 2 reports (2 x 35%) = 100%

NB You will need to let me know which profile you have
chosen by week 2 of the course (September 14) so that I can
assign people to groups in a balanced way.

The mark breakdown for individual assignments follows. For
detailed descriptions of individual assignments and how they
will be marked, see the Specifications document for this course.

Warmup (30%)
associated readings: all readings for first 3 weeks plus
Jennifer Daryl Slack & J. Macgregor Wise, "Progress," _Culture +
Technology: A Primer_. 2nd edition. New York: Peter Lang, 2015.
13-31.

All class members participate in the "Complete the Monument"
warmup exercise, which is a low-stakes way of getting an early
sense of how assignments will be graded in this course (in this
case, the grade includes 10% for group completion of the
monument and 20% for a short (3 pages/~800 words) individual
reflection paper, due October 12. See Warmup specifications for
further details).

Group Projects
The group project phase of the course begins on October 5. The
first, easier project needs to be completed in 4 weeks, with the
written component due on the dates indicated in the Schedule.

All group projects include a proposal (one paragraph submitted
through Moodle for approval and suggestions); the actual
construction (10% for Level I, 15% for Level II); and a 3-page/
~800 word individual reports on the project from each group

member (20% for Level I, 25% for Level II). Individual reports
should focus on one aspect of the project without repeating too
much of each other, and should be submitted together to Moodle
as a package (PDF), so the topics of individual reports within a
group will require some coordination. The team should also
provide some visual documentation of their project in the form
of screenshots or video. Part of the group project will involve
giving guided tours and explanations of the work to flâneurs
and/or RAs. See Group Project specifications for further
details.

Most group projects have a "Level II" which involves expanding
on previous work. Level II projects also require the submission
of proposals and individual reports.

I will provide links to several examples of inspirational
student work in the first week. For an example of A+ project
documentation, see and https://mcprojectatlantis.wordpress.com/.
For an example of a final individual report, see Laura Susel,
"'Atlantis Transcends', My Educational Minecraft Experience"
https://tag.hexagram.ca/atlantis-transcends-my-educational-
minecraft-experience/

Level I Projects (30%)

Organizing Nature I
associated reading: Scott, "Nature and Space"

Build some sort of large-scale farm (trees or crops).

Meatpacking I
associated reading: Giedion, "Mechanization and Death"

Build some sort of mob grinder (monsters or livestock).

Industrialization I
associated readings: O'Brien and Szeman, "Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution"; (advanced) Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology"

Build some sort of redstone contraption that isn't a farm or a mob grinder.

Mobile Privatization I
associated readings: Williams, "The Social History of the Uses of Television Technology"; Schivelbusch, "Railroad Space and Railroad Time"

Build a base and connect it to somewhere else: your farm, a grinder, other bases, a nearby village

Constructing Expertise I
associated readings: "Bishop, "Algorithmic Experts"; Marvin, "Inventing the Expert"

Study the videos of a Minecraft YouTuber and use their videos to help build one of their creations.

Level II Projects (40%)

Ramping Up
Take your project for Organizing Nature, Meatpacking, or Industrialization and improve it substantially by redesigning, automating and expanding it with the help of redstone curcuitry and/or devices from mods.

Making Things Public (Mobile Privatization II)

Build some kind of public facility for the server (e.g. an enchanting library; a railroad through the Nether; transit to an

End Portal; an ore-processing factory etc.) and create the
conditions that could encourage others to use it (rail
connections, documentation, etc.)

Constructing Expertise II
Improve on your design from Constructing Expertise I,
documenting the results in the form of a short video.

Level III Projects (70%)
Level III projects are very large and very ambitious. They equal
one Level I + one Level II, so you ONLY have to do this project
plus the warmup if you choose this path. NB: Level III
"Modernist Ruins" projects can only occur if there are at least
5 students in the class interested in this option. Teams should
probably include an experienced Minecraft player.

Modernist Ruins
associated readings: Hatherley, "Forwards (Not Forgetting)";
Lefebvre, "Notes on the New Town"; Binkley, "Kitsch as a
Repetitive System"; "Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents"

Convert the buildings of a Minecraft village into a recognizable
modern architectural style (e.g. Bauhaus, Brutalist, etc.).

Then, conduct a comparison of your building(s) and their
original(s), making reference to Boym, Binkley and any other
relevant critical sources you find useful.

Flânerie (2 x 35% = 70%)
associated additional reading: Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter
of Modern Life." https://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/
Baudelaire_Painter-of-Modern-Life_1863.pdf

Renounce all building activities and teamwork for the duration
of the game and become a witty observer of Minecraft life. Keep

an extensive journal about the activities of others in the game.

Flâneurs file two reports to Moodle over the duration of the
term in the class forum (35% each, about 7 pages, ~2000-2100
words + images + bibliography, or the equivalent length and
quality in a video or audio file -- see Specifications), where
other class members can read and interact with them. Each report
should be in the form of either an illustrated informal essay
plus images; an audio recording plus accompanying slides; or a
video with either accompanying images or images interspersed
throughout the video. See Flânerie specifications for further
details.

Term Paper (40%)
This is a traditional short academic essay in terms of its form
and length (7 pages, ~2000-2100 words + images + bibliography).
Its object of study will be the relationship between one or more
readings from the course and one of your in-game projects. See
Term Paper specifications for further details.

Schedule

SEPT 7
ZOOM MEETING: ORIENTATION
INSTALLATION CLINIC ON SEPT 8

SEPT 14
Minecraft as Allegory
Bart Simon and Darren Wershler, "Childhood's End (or, We Have
Never Been Modern, Except in Minecraft)." _Cultural Politics_
14.3 (November 2018). 289-303.

---. "The Allegorical Build: Minecraft and Allegorical Play in
Undergraduate Teaching." [draft, v7]. _Gamevironments_ special
issue: "Revisiting Teaching and Games: mapping out ecosystems of

learning" (2021). In peer review.

SEPT 21
Bringing Back the Future
Mark Fisher, "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," _Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?_ Winchester: Zero Books, 2009. 1-11.

---, "The Slow Cancellation of the Future." _Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures._ Alresford: John Hunt Publishing/Zero Books, 2014. 2-29.

WARMUP EXERCISE STARTS

SEPT 28
What Was Modernity?
Suzie O'Brien and Imre Szeman, "Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution." _Popular Culture: A User's Guide._ [2004]. Second Edition. Toronto: Nelson Education, 2010. 39-46.

Ben Singer, "Meanings of Modernity." _Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts._ New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. 17-35.

OCT 5
Carpentry, Walking and Other Techniques
Ian Bogost. "Carpentry: Constructing Artifacts That Do Philosophy." _Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing_. Posthumanities. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 85-111.

Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," _The Practice of Everyday Life._ Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. 91-110.

OCT 12
Colonization and Control
Wolfgang Schivelbusch, "The Policing of Street Lighting." _Yale French Studies_ 73 (1987): 61-74.

Slack, Jennifer Daryl, and J. Macgregor Wise. "Progress." _Culture + Technology: A Primer_. Second Edition. New York: Peter Lang, 2015. 13-31.

WARMUP REFLECTION PAPER DUE OCTOBER 12

OCT 19
Mobile Privatization
Wolfgang Schivelbusch, "Railroad Space and Railroad Time," _The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century_. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977. 33-44.

Raymond Williams, "The Social History of the Uses of Television Technology," _Television_ [1974]. London: Routledge, 2003. 12-25.

OCT 26
Stewardship and Slaughter
James C. Scott, "Nature and Space," _Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed._ New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 11-24.

Siegfried Giedion, "Mechanization and Death: Meat"; "Mechanization and Growth" [Excerpts.] _Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History_. [1948]. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. 209-22; 240-51.

PROJECT LEVEL I DUE
FLÂNEUR REPORT 1 DUE

NOV 2
Architecture
Owen Hatherley, "Forwards (Not Forgetting)," _Militant
Modernism_, Winchester: 0 Books, 2008. 3-14.

Henri Lefebvre, "Seventh Prelude: Notes on the New Town,"
_Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959-May
1961._ [1962.] Trans. John Moore. London: Verso, 1995. 116-26.

NOV 9
Cultural Imaginaries and Games of Power
Benedict Anderson, "Introduction" and "The Origins of National
Consciousness." _Imagined Communities._ [1983]. Revised Edition.
London: Verso, 2006. 1-7; 37-46.

Chandra Mukerji, "Cultural Imaginaries and Modern States,"
Modernity Reimagined: An Analytic Guide. New York: Routledge,
2017. 37-50.

NOV 16
Nostalgia and Kitsch
Sam Binkley, "Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the
Theory of Taste Hierarchy." _Journal of Material Culture_ 5
(2000): 131-52.

Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents." _Hedgehog
Review_ (summer 2007): 7-18.

NOV 23
The (Re)Invention of Experts
Sophie Bishop, "Algorithmic Experts: Selling Algorithmic Lore on
YouTube," _Social Media + Society_ (January-March 2020): 1– 11

Carolyn Marvin, "Inventing the Expert" [excerpts]. _When Old

Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century._ New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. 9-17; 56-62.

PROJECT LEVEL II DUE
FLÂNEUR REPORT 2 DUE

NOV 30
CONCLUSION: Utopia and Its Failures
Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *_Diacritics_* 16.1 (Spring 1986): 22-27.

Alexander Galloway, "*_Warcraft_* and Utopia," *_Ctheory_*, "1000 Days of Theory," 2015-08-20. https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14501

PROJECT LEVEL III DUE
TERM PAPER DUE