ENGL 4670-002 (14248): Special Topics in Writing
The Languages of Video Games

Peck 325 | Tues. & Thurs. | 11:20 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.
Instructor: Dr. Eric Detweiler
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Office Hours: Tues. 9:00 – 11:00 a.m. & 2:25 – 3:25 p.m. | Wed. 12:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Course Description
This course takes video games seriously, approaching them as a significant part of our cultural, technological, and artistic landscapes. Students in the course will write about video games from a variety of perspectives. This will include reading and writing about controversies related to video games as well as thinking about the kinds of writing involved in the creation of games themselves. The "languages of video games" referred to in the course's title include the ways players, developers, and critics talk about games as well as the languages games depend upon, from in-game dialogue to programming languages. While students will experiment with game-design technologies, this course does not require any prior experience with computer programming or game design. Students also don't need to be experienced gamers to succeed in the course.

An important note: This is the first time this class has been taught at MTSU. Because of that, it's a little bit of an experiment. Given the wide range of experiences you all might have with video games, plus the technological complications that come with playing games in class and requiring you to play games outside of class, I'm especially open to and interested in any feedback, ideas, or concerns that you all have. If you have suggestions about the course, please let me know. I'm always happy to talk before or after class as well as during office hours. I hope this will be an enjoyable and challenging course, and I hope you'll help me make it even better for future students.

Required Texts
- Anable, Aubrey. *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*. U of Minnesota P, 2018.
- Bogost, Ian. *How to Do Things with Videogames*. U of Minnesota P, 2015.
- other online readings and PDFs available via D2L

Required Games
- *Stardew Valley*
- *Celeste*

A few important details: I won't require you to beat the two required games, especially given how long *Stardew Valley* takes to complete (a minimum of around 50 hours). I'll just expect you to put in a certain number of hours, documenting your experiences in ways described later in this syllabus. This will mean there's some risk of game-related spoilers coming up in class discussions, but we'll just have to roll with that.

I'll also note that *Celeste* is an immensely challenging game when it comes to fine motor skills. I would encourage you to adjust the game's difficulty settings to a level you feel is appropriate for you as a player. You are welcome to play these games on any platform or

console. I would just ask that if you've completed them before, you start anew so you're able to play them with this course's frameworks and concepts in mind.

Course Goals

This course is designed to help students
1. understand the ways video games are tied to cultural controversies and changes;
2. analyze and engage the rhetorical issues at work in such controversies and changes;
3. recognize and analyze the rhetorical principles at work in the ways video games are designed, written, and written about;
4. learn to design simple games that take advantage of video games' rhetorical possibilities and structures.

Coursework

Over the course of the semester, I will provide more detailed prompts for the three major projects and the Game Culture Presentation.

Major Projects

You will submit at least two drafts of all three major projects.
- **How People Talk about Video Games (20%):** Your first paper for the course. You should select *either* a specific platform where people talk about games (could be a website, a podcast, a Twitch stream, etc.) *or* a framework people use to write about video games/video game culture. In a roughly 3000-word paper, analyze how your chosen platform talks/discusses/writes about games or the language people use when they engage the framework you've chosen.
- **How to Borrow Bogost's Approach to Games (20%):** Your second paper for the course. Come up with a keyword that isn't covered in Ian Bogost's *How to Do Things with Video Games* and write a roughly 3000-word essay modeled on the chapters in Bogost's book.
- **How to Make a Video Game (25%):** Your final project. This is also this course's MT Engage Signature Assignment/ePortfolio Artifact (more on that as the course unfolds). Working in groups, you will write and develop an actual, playable game that puts into practice the theories and concepts we'll explore in class. Students in the course will have a great deal of input on the shape this assignment takes. Alongside the collaboratively created game, you will write and submit an individual reflection on the game-creation process.

Other Assignments

- **Gaming Journal (10%)**: Each student will be required to keep an analog journal in which they document their experiences playing video games. You *must* document your playthroughs of the two assigned games (*Stardew Valley* and *Celeste*), but may also document other games you play over the course of the semester. I would recommend buying a new notebook for this purpose. You have a lot of flexibility here. You can describe your emotional experiences with assigned games, including frustration, confusion, joy, excitement, or empathy.

You can link the games to ideas and concepts from course readings. You can compare and contrast assigned games with other games, including ones you've played on your own. You can include diagrams and illustrations (as long as they don't overwhelm the act of writing). For full credit, you'll need an average of *at least* two pages per week, though that will vary depending on the size of your handwriting and the size of your notebook. Two pages assumes a standard-sized composition notebook (around 9" by 7") with around 10-12 words per line. I will collect these notebooks and review them a couple times throughout the semester. If, for reasons of accessibility, a paper journal is not a good option for you, talk with me about digital alternatives.

- **Reading Notes (10%):** On any day there's an assigned reading, I will begin by looking at everyone's reading notes. I use that term pretty loosely. With assigned books, "notes" could include substantial highlighting, underlining, and writing in the margins (you can use post-its if you're renting the book). In the case of PDFs and online readings, you can print them out and write on them or annotate them using a program like Adobe Reader (which is free) or hypothes.is (also free). You're also welcome to take handwritten reading notes in a notebook, including a **separate section** of your gaming journal. If you're taking marginal notes in physical or digital copies of readings, you should have some kind of writing or markup on almost every page (or the digital equivalent). If you're taking notes in a notebook, you should have at least a line of notes per page of reading. Over the course of the semester, I'll give you **two free passes on missed reading notes**. If you have no reading notes on more than two occasions, it will start to affect your grade.

- **Reading Responses (10%):** Over the course of the semester, students are responsible for eight 500-word posts in a Medium publication I'll set up for the course. You can write a post any day there is an assigned reading (see the calendar at the end of this syllabus). The post should substantively engage with that day's reading(s). You're more than welcome to use your reading notes as the basis for your response. Responses are due by 10:00 a.m. the day we discuss the reading in question, which gives me time to read your posts before class begins. You're free to approach the reading in any way you'd like. While the tone of the responses can be informal, they should demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the reading to which you're responding. This could include specific questions about the reading, discussions of passages you found especially interesting or confusing, putting the reading in conversation with games you've played or other work/readings we've done in the class, etc. The main thing the responses should demonstrate is that you actually did the reading, even if you still have a lot of questions about it. Don't try to talk vague circles around what you think an unread chapter or article was probably about. Incorporating quotations from the reading never hurts. (Note that your Medium posts will be readable by people outside this class. If you want to write as if you're only addressing me/your classmates, that's fine, but you can also try your hand at writing in a way that will be accessible to a broader online audience. If you have concerns about the public nature of these posts, let me know ASAP and we can discuss alternatives.)

- **Game Culture Presentation (5%):** Working in pairs or trios, you will be responsible for giving a short, scripted in-class presentation (approximately 7-10

minutes) on some aspect of video game culture.

Grading
The grading scale for this course is as follows:

A: 90-100 B+: 87-89 B: 83-86 B-: 80-82	C+: 77-79 C: 73-76 C-: 70-72 D+: 67-69	D: 63-66 D-: 60-62 F: 59 and under

Students with Disabilities
Middle Tennessee State University is committed to campus access in accordance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Any student interested in reasonable accommodations can consult the Disability & Access Center (DAC) website and/or contact the DAC for assistance at (615) 898-2783 or dacemail@mtsu.edu.

If I can provide or assist with any accommodations related specifically to this course, let me know. I would be glad to help, especially since the digital technologies we'll be using in this course might involve issues related to accessibility.

Late Work
Because they generally contribute to what we are doing in class on the day they're due, I will not accept any late reading notes or reading responses. However, I will give you two no-questions-asked, 48-hour extensions on any draft of any of the major projects (this includes the final project, though you'll need to coordinate with your group members if you want to use an extension there). I would advise you not to blow these extensions early in the semester. I give them to you because I know technology fails and emergencies arise, but you only have two.

If you anticipate a problem meeting a deadline, let me know a couple of days in advance. No guarantees, but I am much more likely to be flexible if I know you are planning ahead.

Attendance
You are expected to attend class, to arrive on time, and to be engaged in all in-class work and discussions. Should you miss the equivalent of five class meetings, excused or not, you will fail the course. If an unavoidable problem has prevented or will prevent you from attending class, contact me as soon as possible, preferably ahead of time, to let me know. If you are late to class or leave early, it will count as half an absence. If you arrive after I take roll, you are responsible for making sure I mark you as in attendance.

As with late work, if you anticipate any problems with this attendance policy, let me know in advance. Again, no guarantees, but I am more likely to be flexible if I know you're planning ahead.

Technology
We are fortunate to be in a room equipped with computers. We will use those computers

often, and in many cases it will be fine if you use a personal laptop or tablet instead.

As for smartphones and other cell phones, there may be some times when it will make sense for us to use them. In general, though, they aren't a good fit for the sort of work we do in this class. For instance, their screens are too small to engage with readings in the detail-oriented way we will during this course. For that reason, don't plan on using them in class unless we decide otherwise during a particular activity. If you have a particular reason for wanting to make use of your phone in class, let me know.

If you're using a device to do something unrelated to class, I'll mark you absent for the day.

Email
MTMail will be the official way that I pass on information about this course. I won't send you email every day, but check your MTMail daily to make sure you don't miss important updates from the university, me, or your other teachers. As for contacting me, I don't check my D2L email regularly, so don't try to contact me that way. Use the email address at the top of this syllabus (eric.detweiler@mtsu.edu). You can find more information on MTMail here: http://mtsu.edu/email/index.php.

MT Engage Designated Course
This is an MT Engage course. The MT Engage program promotes active engagement in learning across educational experiences. In this course, you will participate in a beyond-the-classroom activity and submit at least one assignment to the D2L ePortfolio. You will also answer some questions about your MT Engage experience in an end of course survey. You will receive important informational emails from MT Engage about ePortfolio training and how you can qualify for scholarships and cash awards. For more information, go to www.mtsu.edu/MTEngage.

ePortfolio Statement
As part of the MT Engage program, students will build an ePortfolio presentation showcasing their integrative learning. MT Engage offers ePortfolio training; see http://mtsu.edu/mtengage/student_resources.php for details. Students should be aware that ePortfolios are not to contain confidential personal information, and that use of proprietary and copyrighted materials is illegal.

Course Calendar
I hope this will be an enjoyable course, but it will also be a challenging and carefully coordinated one, so I intend for us to stick to the following schedule fairly closely. Unforeseen circumstances and delays do arise, so I reserve the right to revise our schedule as necessary, though I will not do so without advance notice and, in most cases, discussion. If at any point during the semester you have concerns about the schedule, feel free to bring them to my attention. We will be doing something important every day in this course. Do not assume any day is unimportant.

Assigned readings are *italicized*, while course projects are ***italicized and in bold***. Both kinds of assignments are due the day they are listed below. "(PDF)" means that a reading is available as a downloadable PDF via D2L. If there's an asterisk (*) by the date, that means I'll be checking reading notes and that there's a possible reading response.

The hyperlinks in this document may not work on D2L. If they don't, try downloading it and clicking the links in the downloaded version.

Date	Work
Jan. 15	Introductions, Syllabus Begin playing *Stardew Valley*. Put in approximately 2 hours per week (more is fine, but pace yourself) for the first four weeks of class. Remember to document your experiences in your gaming journal.
Jan. 17*	*Simon Edenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca – Chapters 1 and 7 of Understanding Video Games* (PDF)
Jan. 22*	*Simon Edenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca – Chapter 6 of Understanding Video Games* (PDF)
Jan. 24*	*Dmitri Williams, "The Video Game Lightning Rod"* (PDF)
Jan. 29*	*Brendan Keogh – "Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games"*
Jan. 31*	*Adrienne Shaw – excerpt from Gaming at the Edge* (PDF)
Feb. 5*	*Nick Montfort et al. – excerpts from 10 PRINT CHR$(205.5+RND(1)); : GOTO 10* (PDF)
Feb. 7	***How People Talk About Video Games: First Draft*** Begin playing *Celeste*. Put in 8 hours or beat by Mar. 13, and remember to document your experiences in your gaming journal.
Feb. 12*	*Ian Bogost – How to Do Things with Video Games (pp. 1-36)*
Feb. 14*	*Ian Bogost – How to Do Things with Video Games (pp. 45-69)*
Feb. 19*	Meet in room 348 of Walker Library for MTSU's Open Classrooms Initiative *Miguel Sicart – "Against Procedurality"*
Feb. 21	***How People Talk About Video Games: Second Draft***

Feb. 26*	*Ian Bogost – How to Do Things with Video Games (pp. 83-116)*
Feb. 28	**How to Borrow Bogost's Approach to Video Games: First Draft (due Sun., Mar. 31, by 11:59 p.m.)** **Turn in Gaming Journals** Meet in Makerspace (2nd floor of Walker Library)
Mar. 5	Spring Break
Mar. 7	Spring Break
Mar. 12*	*Ian Bogost – How to Do Things with Video Games (pp. 117-140 and 147-154)* Resume playing *Stardew Valley* and/or continue playing *Celeste*. Put in an hour a week on either game for the rest of the semester.
Mar. 14*	*Anna Anthropy and Naomi Clark – excerpt from A Game Design Vocabulary* (PDF)
Mar. 19	**How to Borrow Bogost's Approach to Video Games: Second Draft**
Mar. 21*	*Anna Anthropy – excerpt from Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (PDF)
Mar. 26*	*Jennifer deWinter – "Just Playing Around: From Procedural Manuals to In-Game Training"* (PDF)
Mar. 28*	*Aubrey Anable – Playing with Feelings (pp. vii-xxi)*
Apr. 2	**How to Make a Video Game: Pitch** Jeffrey Goldsmith – "This is Your Brain on Tetris"
Apr. 4*	*Aubrey Anable – Playing with Feelings (pp. 1-36)*
Apr. 9*	*Aubrey Anable – Playing with Feelings (pp. 37-69)*
Apr. 11	*Aubrey Anable – Playing with Feelings (pp. 71-101)*
Apr. 16*	*Aubrey Anable – Playing with Feelings (pp. 103-134)*
Apr. 18*	TBD Note: Fri., Apr. 19, is the Celebration of Student Writing. Presenting at that event, which will run from 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. in the Miller Education Center, is this course's designated beyond-the-classroom experience for MT Engage.
Apr. 24	**How to Make a Video Game: First Draft**
April 30	**Turn in Gaming Journals** During final exam period (10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.), work on final projects in Peck 325.
May 2	**How to Make a Video Game: Final Draft (due by 11:59 p.m.)**