Course Portfolio

CMCL C420: Video Games in American Culture

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ABSTRACT

This portfolio documents a teaching innovation implemented in C420: Video Games in American Culture, an advanced undergraduate course devoted to the study of the social and cultural significance of interactive electronic entertainment in the contemporary US. The design of the course was driven by three objectives: to create a student-centered learning environment, to foster both disciplinary and metacognitive knowledge through formative assessment, and to enable students to become active practitioners in the field of Game Studies. Towards these goals, the class was organized around a semester-long, multi-stage research project aimed at producing an original and meaningful contribution to the discipline. The assignment allowed the students to work in topic areas they were particularly interested in, drawing on prior knowledge and personal experience. It promoted a process-oriented approach to learning, research, and writing, highlighting the importance of metacognition. Lastly, it mirrored the actual scholarly practice of the field, as well as created opportunities for active, critical engagement with disciplinary knowledge.
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INTRODUCTION

“Video Games in American Culture” is a specialized undergraduate course devoted to the study of interactive electronic entertainment as a cultural form. I designed the class myself and, in the Spring 2010 semester, taught one section of 35 students. The class was offered through the Department of Communication and Culture at Indiana University Bloomington under the general heading CMCL C420: Topics in Media History. C420 is an elective course aimed primarily at advanced (junior and senior level) students. It carries no prerequisites and fulfills the College of Arts and Sciences “Social and Historical Studies” requirement.

The following is an overview of the scope and objectives of the course, as detailed in the syllabus:

COURSE OVERVIEW

Electronic games have been with us for just over fifty years. In that time, we have seen them evolve from Tennis for Two to persistent, massively multiplayer online worlds; from a novelty toy to a 22-billion-dollars-a-year industry; from a mere fad to a permanent feature of our cultural landscape. According to The Entertainment Software Association’s 2009 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry report, games are now played in 68% of American households. Whether it’s a quick round of Bejeweled squeezed in between work tasks, a casual session of Rock Band at a friend’s house, or an all-night marathon of Halo, it is becoming all but impossible to go through the day without encountering electronic games in some shape or form.

Despite this growing prominence, however, games can still be counted among what Reichmuth and Werning dub “neglected media”—forms whose wide popular appeal is offset by a general lack of cultural prestige and critical attention. While neglected media can exert profound influence on the collective imaginary, the modes of engagement and types of knowledge they foster are often dismissed as culturally irrelevant (Reichmuth & Werning, 2006).

In this course we will work to challenge such assumptions. Specifically, we will take a closer look at the cultural, social, and political aspects of games and gaming. Using approaches derived from fields such as cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, and critical theory of technology, we will trace the multiple and complex relationships between electronic games, the people who play them, and the broader socio-cultural context. Our overall aim will be to develop a sound critical understanding of digital interactive entertainment and its roles in the contemporary world. Towards this goal, we will critically engage such topics as: the blurring of boundaries between “the virtual” and “the real;” the ideological dimensions of games; “serious gaming”; identity politics in virtual worlds; and the intersections between video games and other media.
COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of the semester the students should:

- Understand and be able to apply key concepts of video game theory;
- Build a broad critical vocabulary for discussing games and gameplay;
- Develop critical understanding of the variety of experiences electronic games can offer, as well as awareness of the social and cultural significance of these experiences;
- Be able to relate the medium specificity of electronic games to issues such as gender, sexuality, race, nationality, and commerce;
- Find a distinctive, thoughtful, and respectful voice in written and oral discussions of course material.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Of the 35 initially enrolled students, 30 completed the course. All can be described as “traditional” students, 19 to 24 years old (with a mean age of 21). While the general student population at Indiana University Bloomington consists of roughly equal number of men and women (50.2 and 48.8 percent, respectively), in this particular case the former outnumbered the latter 2-to-1 (19 men and 11 women)—presumably due to the assumed gendered bias of the subject matter. Three students were Asian-American; the rest of the group was white.

With regard to academic background, the group included 19 seniors, 9 juniors, and 2 sophomores. 21 students were Communication and Culture majors (including 4 double majors). The remaining 9 majored in Journalism, Marketing, Psychology, Anthropology, East Asian Studies, History, and Telecommunications. Of that number, 7 pursued a minor in CMCL.

During the first class meeting the students were asked to assess their familiarity with and interest in the medium. Of the 27 respondents, 2 identified themselves as “hardcore” gamers, 4 as “avid” gamers, 10 as “casual” gamers, 8 as “occasional” gamers, and 3 as non-gamers. For the majority, electronic games were less important than other regularly consumed media. The declared level of knowledgableness about gaming culture varied strongly, with most responses in the “above average” and “below average” categories. (See Appendix A for the form used to collect the data; the results are itemized in Appendix B.)

COURSE FORMAT

The course was designed with a seminar format in mind. The class met twice a week, for 75 minutes. Before a typical session, the students would have read two pieces of scholarship presenting complimentary or opposing perspectives on the topic under consideration. In order to facilitate in-class discussion, a few students would be required to prepare short response papers (400–500 words in length), in which they identify the key arguments, questions, and/or themes of a given reading, discuss a passage of their choice in more detail, and pose two or three questions they consider worth addressing. The majority of class time would then focus on discussion (both small-group and open forum) or dialogue, guided by the questions put forward in the reading responses.
If needed, I would offer additional questions and, occasionally, provide supplementary information in the form of mini-lecture. While we would always strive to apply the theories and methods introduced in the assigned readings to specific ludic examples, our options were limited by the availability of necessary technology and the logistics of in-class gameplay. To alleviate this problem, the students were required to keep an ongoing game journal (in the form of weekly postings to the course blog), in which they critically reflected on their individual play experiences utilizing concepts and frameworks discussed during class meetings.

**DESIGN RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES**

The past semester was the first time I had the opportunity to teach this particular course. However, in 2006 I designed and taught “Games, Gamers, and Gaming Cultures,” a CMCL C337: New Media special topics course. Offered in the second summer session, the class met for 50 minutes, Monday through Friday, over the course of eight weeks. It was structured in a very conventional way, with midterm and final examinations, and a final research paper—each accounting for 20 percent of the grade. The description of the research paper assignment stated:

At the end of the semester you will be asked to write a 2,000 word research paper investigating a course-related issue of your choice. The topic of your paper can be derived from class readings and discussions, but you should feel free to propose an alternative topic from among the many we will not have time to touch upon, as long as it demonstrates potential for meaningful research and synthesis of information. You need to present your research area and question for instructor’s approval no later than by the 6th week of classes.

Beyond the obvious scheduling issues (in practical terms, the assignment required the students to conduct research and produce a paper in two weeks), the direct problem was the apparent disjoint between the students’ understanding of the concept of “meaningful research” and their ability to actually conduct such research. Even if the overall quality was—expectedly—mixed, most papers proposed original and interesting ideas. Unfortunately, they almost uniformly failed to focus and develop the argument in ways that would fully realize the potential of said ideas. Every submission suffered from at least one of the following problems:

- Topic formulated too broadly or area of inquiry too extensive;
- Thesis too general, imprecise, or altogether missing;
- Insufficient support for the argument;
- Predominance of personal opinions and anecdotal evidence;
- Insufficient engagement with existing scholarship (lacking or limited to course readings)

While the exams indicated that the students knew and understood course material as discussed in the classroom, the issues evident in the papers indicated that they still had problems applying the concepts and theories to new contexts, were not motivated to seek out additional or alternative sources, and were more concerned with meeting the length requirement than with crafting an academically rigorous work. Most critically, I believe, they did not see themselves as participants in the larger conversations taking place in the field. Accordingly, they approached the assignment as
arbitrary and disposable—yet another hoop to jump, rather than an intellectual challenge and opportunity to actively contribute to the body of disciplinary knowledge.

When designing “Video Games in American Culture,” I sought to eliminate or in the least alleviate these problems through overall changes the course structure and, in particular, a radical modification of the final paper assignment (the specific teaching innovation discussed in the following section). The discussions of the IU Teagle Collegium were an invaluable resource in this process, and, since I built the class from the ground up, I was able to structure it in a way that spoke directly to the theoretical and practical issues we addressed during our meetings. Specifically, I found myself focusing on three sets of questions:

1. Is the design student-centered (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000)? Do the overall structure of the class, the selection of course materials, and the choice of assignments leave room for students to make their own sense of the course topics? Will they be able to use prior knowledge and personal experience to enrich their learning? How can the course objectives be best aligned with the students’ interests, needs, and goals?

2. Given the critical importance of feedback for learning, transfer, and metacognition (Bransford, et al., 2000), are there sufficient opportunities for formative assessment? How can metacognitive instruction be most effectively combined with disciplinary learning?

3. Does the design of the course help the students think like experts in the discipline (Chick, Haynie, & Gurung, 2009)? Will they be able to learn to “do, think, and value what practitioners in the field are doing, thinking, and valuing” (Shulman, 2005)? Is the course knowledge-centered, fostering critical understanding rather than information retention (Bransford, et al., 2000)?

With these questions in mind, I decided to organize the class around an extended, semester-long research project, involving multiple formalized stages of development and revision, accompanied by frequent feedback. This framework aimed at fulfilling the three broad requirements delineated above by (a) allowing the students to work in the specific topic areas they are interested in and encouraging them to bring their existing knowledge and personal experience into the process; (b) treating learning, research, and writing not as singular events, but as ongoing, interwoven practices, in which metacognition plays a crucial role; and (c) promoting critical engagement with disciplinary knowledge and mirroring the actual scholarly praxis of the field.
IMPLEMENTATION

By the end of the semester the students were expected to produce a thoroughly researched and well written paper exploring, a specific issue of their choice within the general area of "games and culture." The research field was deliberately defined in a broad way, so as to enable the students to draw on knowledge acquired in other courses, including those offered by other departments. Another concern was to avoid foreclosing any potentially valuable lines of investigation, especially given the relative newness (and therefore considerable flexibility), eclectic nature, and inherent interdisciplinary of Game Studies. Students were encouraged to pursue any avenue of inquiry, as long as the finished paper presented an original and compelling argument and made a meaningful contribution to the existing body of scholarship.

Since the intervention was motivated by the desire to create a meaningful learning experience, allowing the students to further both their disciplinary knowledge and their understanding of the research process, they were required to start working on the foundations for their projects early on, and to continue building on them throughout the semester. Towards this goal, they completed the following assignments:

**Game Biography and Statement of Interest**

This brief (600-800 words) paper was designed to (a) help the students reflect upon their game playing history, habits, and interests, (b) clarify and organize goals for this semester, and (c) start thinking about the possible directions in which they may want to take their research project. Accordingly, it consisted of three basic parts:

a) **A brief game biography.** Here the students were asked to address such questions as: Why do you/don't you play games? What role have games played in your life? What kind of games do you play these days/have played in the past? Why? What specifically draws you to these particular games? Which aspects of the game-playing experience do you enjoy/not enjoy? Rather than providing a mere laundry list of their favorite games, the students needed to think critically about their past and present gameplay experience and try to identify regularities and patterns, illustrating them with specific examples whenever possible.

b) **Goals for this semester.** The key questions to consider here were: Why are you taking this class in the first place? What is it about electronic games and their role in contemporary culture that you find especially interesting?

c) **A general statement of interest.** Drawing on what they have written in so far, the students were asked to identify and briefly discuss one or two topic areas they might want to examine in detail, as well as indicate how they might go about investigating them.

The paper was due at the end of Week 2. At this point, students were also asked to read selections from Mäyrä’s “Preparing for a Game Studies Project” (2008).
Research Project Proposal

At the end of the first month of class (at the beginning of Week 5), the students turned in a short, one-paragraph proposal for their research project. In it, they declared the specific topic they wanted to investigate and formulated their specific research question. The proposal was accompanied by a bibliography of at least four scholarly sources (journal articles, conference papers, book chapters) the students proposed to read as part of their preliminary research.

In anticipation of the need for significant revisions, the proposal was graded on a pass/revise basis.

Research Project Prospectus

Just before spring break (i.e. at the end of Week 9), the students submitted a formal prospectus for the research project. In this document, they were required to:

- Formulate an original thesis;
- Summarize the findings of their research to date and evaluate the sources they have read vis-à-vis their research question;
- Briefly explain what contribution the project is making to the discipline. (Specifically, indicate the way(s) in which it builds on and moves beyond existing scholarship.)

The prospectus was be accompanied by a revised bibliography of at least 6 scholarly sources. These included the sources from the original list that had proved relevant and useful, supplemented by additional sources discovered during research.

The expected length of the prospectus was 500-600 words.

Research Paper: First Draft

At this stage the students were asked to make their first approach to developing the argument into a full-length paper. They had to connect their work to existing scholarship, support their claims with specific evidence, and indicate possible future lines of inquiry.

The draft was to be approximately 1,600-1,800 words in length, with the understanding that it would likely be expanded for the final submission. It was due at the beginning of Week 13, and was graded on a pass/fail basis.

Research Paper: Second (Final) Draft

The revised, polished, and finalized version of the research paper was due at the end of Week 15.
SAMPLES OF STUDENT WORK

The following samples represent three typical trajectories of the development of student projects throughout the semester, as recorded at three “milestone” points: proposal, prospectus, and final paper. Set 1 exemplifies a B/B+ level project, requiring significant revisions early on and continued revisions in the later stages. Set 2 is an A-level work, requiring some early changes and developing relatively smoothly from the prospectus stage. Set 3 represents A/A+ level project, demonstrating from the very beginning a clear sense of direction and growing organically towards (and past) the final draft stage.

SAMPLE SET 1

For my research project, I would like to answer the question: “What effect do videogames have on gamers and society in general?” I would like to briefly investigate the aspects of violence and its effect on gamers. However, I will be more interested in the other effects that’s videogames have on gainers and society in general. For example, I would like to determine if videogames make gamers better problem solvers, or if it makes society lazy, or if videogames are able to unlock our creativity, and therefore, make us more productive in generating new inventions and technological advances.

For my research project, I would like to answer the question: “What are some of the ways in which Christian ideals have been portrayed in videogames?” Recently, there have been quite a few games that deal with many aspects of Christianity. However, games based on Christianity and Christian ideals have been around for a long time. Through my research, I would like to study a variety of games throughout the years that focus specifically on Christian concepts. Moreover, I would like to try to better understand how society views these videogames through the lens of the Bible.

Two videogames recently released, “Darksiders” and “Dante’s Inferno”, contains plots which were based on events and ideals founded in the Christian faith. “Darksiders” is loosely based off of elements found in The Book of Revelation from The Bible. In this game, the player takes the role of “War”, one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse as described in The Book of Revelation. In “Dante’s Inferno”, the player acts as Dante in a very loose representation of Inferno from Dante Alighieri’s The Divine Comedy. For some gamers, this may be their first, or possibly only, encounter with these texts.
Therefore, one may be tempted to ask, **how do these games represent these historically Christian ideals?** Through my research, I hope to discover possible answers to this question, as well as discover how other games may represent the ideals of Christianity and principles associated with the faith.

Through my analysis, **I hope to be able to shed more light onto this under-examined question of how do videogames represent Christian ideals.** I will of course be providing some of my own personal experience, but will primarily focus on the research done by others on the implications of videogames on a broader scale to understand how they may affect the gamers’ understanding of Christian ideals they sometimes represent. In this way, I hope to add a bridge between the two sections of research in order to better understand how they are connected.

Two recently released videogames, “Darksiders” and “Dante’s Inferno,” contain plots which were based on events and ideals founded in the Christian faith. “Darksiders” is loosely based on elements found in *The Book of Revelation* from The Bible. In this game, the player takes the role of “War”, one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse as described in *The Book of Revelation*. In “Dante’s Inferno”, the player acts as Dante in a representation of *Inferno* from Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*. For some gamers, this may be their first, or possibly only, encounter with these texts. Therefore, one may be tempted to ask: **how do these games represent these historically Christian ideals?** There is no one answer to this question. Considering that these texts are only loosely based on biblical texts at best, focusing more on action than story, one may be inclined to assume that the games only provide negative representations. **However, through my analysis, I hope to show that there are positive representations of Christianity to be taken from these, and other mainstream games as well.** The goal of this paper is to not only show how games may influence the ideas of Christianity, but also how ideas of Christianity may be used to influence the production and gameplay of videogames.
For my research project, I am going to explore the myth of “addiction” in relation to videogames. I am referring to it as a myth, as Cover does, because the “addiction” is not a biological one, but rather one created by the player himself. There are countless myths that have existed in the past and continue to exist in our society today, but all are constructed for a certain purpose and carry any number of consequences, which can be political, social, economical, etc. I want to explore the origins of the “videogame addiction” and determine the possible effects it can have on the life of an “addict.” I also want to try to learn who is most prone to this “addiction” and why. I will attempt to answer questions such as: what age group is most likely to develop an obsession with games? Why might this be the case? Is it because they feel a stronger connection with the game and/or its characters? From these questions, I will formulate a thesis that explains what I believe to be the source and possible impacts of the “videogame addiction.”

For my research project, I am going to explore the myth of “addiction” in relation to videogames. I am referring to it as a myth, as Cover does, because the “addiction” is not a biological one, but rather one created by the media and the gaming industry and acted out by the player. There are countless myths that have existed in the past and continue to exist in our society today, but all are constructed for a certain purpose and carry any number of consequences, which can be political, social, economical, etc. I want to explore the origins of the cultural framing of videogames as addictive and determine the possible social and ideological effects of this framing. I will attempt to answer questions such as: Why are videogames portrayed this way in the first place? Who benefits from the myth of video game addiction? Who is responsible for reinforcing and circulating this myth? What effects does it have on the player and the role of video games in our culture? By finding the answers to these questions, I will be able to formulate a thesis that makes specific argument regarding the myth of videogame addiction.
There is little empirical evidence to support the notion of videogames as “addictive,” but this perspective, which can be attributed to some of the inherent qualities of the games and apprehension towards the “unknown,” informs a number of arguments against the medium, and serves to circulate and reinforce our cultural understanding of videogames as sheer entertainment.

A myth can be defined as an unproved or false collective belief, especially one embodying the ideals of society. These collective beliefs are typically accepted as true by members of the society and remain unquestioned despite their political, economic, or social motives. The adoption and communication of these notions is what gives them life, regardless of whether they are backed by sufficient proof or not. There is little evidence to support the myth of videogame addiction, but this perspective, which can be attributed to the reception of the games and an apprehension towards the “unknown,” informs a number of arguments against the medium, and serves to circulate and reinforce our cultural understanding of the videogame medium as insignificant.

This paper will trace the myth from the truth about so-called addiction to the reasons behind and consequences of the construction of this myth, and finally to an explanation of the importance of rethinking of this myth for the videogame medium as a whole.
A good deal of research has been done into the nature of communities formed around massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), including the types of players attracted to these games and the social dynamics within these communities. In 2007, a webseries called The Guild began, chronicling the everyday adventures of a group of people who were members of a guild within an MMORPG. I propose that by studying this webseries, which is written by an avid gamer, a better understanding of the social atmosphere of gaming may be developed. Specifically, my research question would be, “How accurately does The Guild portray the social dynamics surrounding MMORPGs as compared with current academic research?” In order to answer this question, I would analyze the types of players presented by the character in The Guild, the relationships and power struggles within the guild of players, and the relationships characters share with people outside their in-game guild. These analyzes would then be put into real world context by comparing them with academic studies.

The Guild is a webseries that began in 2007 and was created by Felicia Day, an actress and self-professed gamer who is now an icon in the geek world of the internet. Originally created as a television pilot, Day based the series on her own experience of playing World of Warcraft obsessively for two years. In the note included with the special DVD box set of Seasons 1-2, Day wrote that the independent webseries format has allowed her to keep the series true to the reality of online gaming, and keeping the series authentic is a continued goal for her. Based on this goal of authenticity, it is possible to compare The Guild to contemporary games studies research and find that The Guild is a form of ethnographic fiction that has real value within the games studies discipline.

The contribution this project will make to the games studies discipline is a reinforcement of contemporary research by comparison to this work of fictional ethnography. Because of the series creator’s own personal extensive experience with online gaming and pursuit of keeping the series true to reality, The Guild provides an inside perspective from someone who has been a gamer and lived that life; this perspective is not regularly seen in games studies because of lack of use of participant-observation fieldwork methods.
It doesn’t need to be said that the discipline of Games Studies is still coming into its own, finding its land legs like newborn foal, and yet it is a fact worth restating as often as necessary. It is because of this fresh status that it is important for those within the discipline to not discount or overlook any and every possible area of research while forming the discipline’s identity. Those within Games Studies come from a range of academic backgrounds, and it should not be unheard of for multidisciplinary approaches to be taken during research. Thus, it is recommended that scholars consider *The Guild*, a webseries written by a gamer about gamers for gamers, as a form of ethnographic fiction, an area of literature that is sorely overlooked even within anthropology. The aspects of *The Guild* that will specifically be addressed and analyzed in this argument include the ethnographic nature of the characters, the formation of the guild, and the interactions of characters within the guild.

**FINAL DRAFT**

Final thesis presented, with recognition of implication for the fields of Game Studies and Anthropology. Student clearly demonstrates an understanding of the value of cross-disciplinary scholarship and confidently injects own voice into the ongoing discussions.
At the end of the semester I requested that the students anonymously reflect on the research project assignment (in particular, its most and least useful components) and evaluate its effectiveness with regard to developing disciplinary knowledge and metacognitive skills. (See Appendix C for the form used to elicit feedback.) The reactions were overwhelmingly enthusiastic, with 21 out of 25 respondents stating that they found the assignment interesting, enlightening, and—in quite a few cases—enjoyable. Below are some of the positive comments received:

**Overall, what are your thoughts regarding the C420 Research Project assignment?**

“I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was quite a growing experience.”

“I loved it. It was awesome to come to class every day and learn something new to my personal research. Absolutely everything we discussed in class helped shape my understanding and . . . refine my thesis.”

“I think it was an interesting assignment and approach. I appreciated the time we were given because of the open topic, and it was actually fun to go through a detailed process of developing my ideas.”

“I really liked the project, it made me look more into video game studies. My research may become helpful later in the future.”

“The research project was appropriate in length and I liked that we had 3 assignments prior to it to help.”

“I think it was useful and it forced me to research more about video games in general. While researching I learned information I wasn’t even looking for.”

“It was confusing at first, but it all came together eventually.”

“I think the project was good. Giving the class the semester to work on the project allowed for ideas to become fleshed out, more detailed, and permit enough time to seek help.”

“I actually enjoyed writing this paper because I had no restriction on what my topic should be.”

“Seemed a bit overkill at first but everything we did helped when it came to actually writing the final paper.”

“Really loved it. Various check-in steps were helpful to check progress. Lots of good feedback.”

“Really liked the way it was set up. Made the overall process much smoother and helped me fully flesh out ideas.”

“Best way I’ve experienced doing a research paper in my 3 years at IU.”
Are there any aspects of the assignment you found particularly interesting or useful?

““The fact that the entire semester worked towards this one, over-arching, personal goal of mine was awesome.”

“The freedom of choice was a nice benefit, which in turn lead to some fairly interesting research.”

“The step-by-step process was extremely helpful; I haven’t had that sort of experience outside of an intensive writing class, and it’s a useful process.”

“I liked the process aspect. It really made it a research project and gave me a better feel for it than I ever had.”

“I think each of the check points . . . helped me stay organized.”

“The proposal and prospectus enabled us to think more and understand our topics . . . better because of additional feedback.”

“I liked the fact that we were able to develop it over time as the course went on.”

“Doing a first draft really seemed to be a necessity because we had so much freedom in our topic that if we didn’t get feedback, our papers would be all over the place.”

“Making the rough draft a requirement was a really good idea. Getting feedback is really helpful.”

“The rough draft was very helpful because your feedback to help do the final [draft] will really help the final grades.”

“I liked that it was in bits and pieces. Kept me on track and allowed me to think things over.”

“The first few steps were helpful in guiding my final research. Better than just turning in one paper and that's it.”

“Breaking it up to a semester long process was extremely smart and helpful.”

“I think researching was very interesting because I learned a lot about my topic.”

“The prospectus was a great idea. It forced me to do early research.”

“Every step is critical in building a proper project. The prospectus became a turning point, where the thesis began to form what would become the paper.”

Of the 25 students, 22 indicated that the assignment helped them better understand the research process. All but one answered affirmatively to the question whether it helped them gain specific knowledge in the discipline. (The sole dissenter also noted that the project was nonetheless “useful in other fields of knowledge.”)

Roughly half of the respondents provided recommendations for possible improvement. Most commonly voiced (with five occurrences) was the suggestion to provide sample research topics in order to give people unfamiliar with the medium and the discipline some sense of possible direction in the earliest stages of the process. Four students advocated reducing the number of steps involved (specifically, questioning the need for both a proposal and a prospectus);
interestingly, the same number of people claimed that the assignment could in fact use an additional stage, such as a revised prospectus.

Finally, the authors of the two mixed and two largely negative responses maintained that the project was “a bit too much” and “a massive time commitment.” The former still appreciated the overall structure of the assignment (which one of them characterized as a “worthwhile project, but ultimately just another paper”), while the latter suggested that a simple final paper “covering specifically what we talked about would be better.”

**FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

On the whole, I believe that the extended research project assignment successfully met my three original goals: student-centeredness, facilitation of disciplinary and metacognitive learning through formative assessment, and building support for the development of disciplinary expertise. Even though the overall design of the course (in particular, the selection of topics and the accompanying reading materials, gameplay assignments, and screenings) inevitably reflected a subjective and selective approach to a broad and highly diverse field, the parameters of the assignment enabled students to follow lines of inquiry rooted in their interests, informed by their own experience (or lack thereof) with the medium, and guided by theoretical and methodological frameworks relevant to their academic backgrounds. The result was a wide range of highly original and personally meaningful arguments. For instance, the author of the project investigating the web series *The Guild* as a form of ethnographic fiction (see Set 3 in the “Samples of Student Work” section) successfully combined Game Studies research with disciplinary training in Anthropology (her major). Another student, a sociology minor, conducted extensive ethnographic research in a local retirement home in order to explain the popularity of the Nintendo Wii console among the elderly. Yet another one applied his experience as an Iraq War veteran and instructor of Military Operations in Urban Terrain with the US Marine Corps to an analysis of two contemporary military-themed First Person Shooter games as viable learning environments for urban combat tactics training.

For some students the task of producing original research was initially daunting and confusing, but nearly all were eventually able to identify a specific area in which they could make a meaningful intervention. The first two components of the project (the Game Bio/Statement of Interest paper and the Research Proposal) were instrumental in helping students negotiate this hurdle, as evidenced by their comments and the —sometimes radical—changes in the focus of their projects.

At the proposal stage, two most common problems were the students’ limited familiarity with the medium and the tendency to default to basic synthesis when faced with a large body of new information. Consequently, a considerable number of proposals focused on predictable, “high-profile,” and thus seemingly “safe” topics drawn from the “media effects” tradition (e.g. game addiction, influence of violent video games on aggressive behavior, etc.). Of the 30 submitted proposals, 21 required major modifications to the respective research questions, which were typically too broad, unrealistic (considering resource availability and the project’s time frame), or lacking potential for generating new knowledge.

Although I fully expected the research proposal to be one of the critical “threshold moments” (which, as mentioned before, motivated my decision to grade it on a pass/revise basis), the number
of submissions in need of extensive changes was still surprising. I concluded that a remedial measure is necessary and introduced an additional step to the process: a mandatory face-to-face meeting with every student whose initial proposal had not been approved. The meetings revealed that most students did in fact have definite areas of interest, but had difficulty translating it into a research query. Referring back to the Game Bio paper was tremendously helpful at this point. Collaboratively, we teased out the possible guiding questions, identified potential pitfalls, and worked out specific ways in which to rework the proposal. As a result, not only were all of the revised submissions of passing quality, but they also represented projects the students were actually interested in pursuing.

With regard to the second goal, the students received extensive feedback at every stage of the process (as well as on request at any point in the semester). Their comments indicate that frequent formative assessment helped them focus their research, organize their ideas, and develop a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter. As discussed above, this was especially important early in the process. However, numerous students also identified the prospectus stage as one of the points at which feedback was crucial to their continued progress. Transforming ideas and preliminary research data into an argument, and situating this argument within the larger discussions taking place in the field of Game Studies, proved to be a challenge—but also a decisive moment, in which the project truly became “their own.” Additionally, the end-of-semester responses demonstrate that students found the assignment to be conducive to the development of metacognitive knowledge and skills.

I think that the teaching innovation in question was also an effective strategy for building disciplinary knowledge. While I would not go so far as to suggest that C420 students have over the course of the semester all become expert ludologists, I feel quite confident stating that they did acquire a considerable amount of nuanced knowledge specific to Game Studies. Importantly, in the context of their research, they acquired it largely on their own, operating as—in the words of one student—“independent learners.” Moreover, they were able to add to the existing knowledge in unique ways. I would also venture a claim that they developed a degree of “adaptive expertise” (Bransford, et al., 2000) as scholars and researchers—expertise which they can potentially use both within and outside of academy.

Fruitful as the project was, I would like to introduce a few changes. I am not sold on the idea of providing students with “sample topics,” but I believe there a clear need for more guidance in the early stages of the process. An additional mandatory meeting, scheduled prior to the proposal deadline, might be helpful in this regard. Secondly, I deeply regret not being able to incorporate some form of peer feedback into the research process. I think receiving comments and questions from their classmates would allow students to focus their research more effectively. It would also foster a better sense of belonging to and active participation in the academic community by enabling them to engage with each other's work—in addition to that of established scholars.

By way of conclusion, I should note that I was really impressed by the overall quality of the final papers—much higher than in C337. The group’s mean score for this component of the project was 270.5 out of 300 points (equivalent to a low A-). I was particularly happy to hear five students express interest in further revising and expanding their projects, with the intent of turning them into writing samples for graduate school application, conference presentations, or even journal
articles. Although supervision over thirty research projects definitely required a “massive time commitment” and, on more than one occasion, felt like “a bit too much,” I feel my students’ dedication and hard work—as well as the results they achieved—made the experience more than worth the effort.

REFERENCES


Works Cited in Samples of Student Work

APPENDIX A: STUDENT INFORMATION FORM

A. Personal Information

Name

Preferred Name

Age

B. Academic Background

Major

Minor

Level

List a few of the courses you have taken to date that you consider relevant to studying electronic games (e.g. in fields such as media studies, literature, telecommunications, etc.). Use course titles, not numbers, if possible.

C. Gaming Profile

How would you characterize your gameplay habits/preferences?

a. heavy/"hardcore" gamer
b. avid gamer
c. casual gamer
d. occasional gamer
e. non-gamer

Compared to other media you regularly use, games are:

a. most important
b. more important
c. equally important
d. less important
e. not at all important

How would rate your knowledge of gaming culture?

a. high
b. above average
c. average
d. below average
e. none

Approximately how much time a week do you spend playing games?

What is your primary gaming system?

What other systems (if any) do you use regularly?
# APPENDIX B: STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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<th>MINOR</th>
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<th>IMPORTANCE OF GAMES</th>
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APPENDIX C: C420 RESEARCH PROJECT FEEDBACK FORM

1. Overall, what are your thoughts regarding the C420 Research Project assignment?

2. Are there any aspects of the assignment you found particularly interesting or useful?

3. Are there any aspects of the assignment that could be improved? How?

4. Did the assignment help you understand the research process?  YES  NO

5. Did it help you build specific knowledge in the field of Game Studies?  YES  NO