

ENG 3970T | Section 105

# Critical Approaches to Indie Games

Autumn 2020 | Ohio University | Dr. Edmond Y. Chang

ENG 3970T  
Section 105  
CN 14523  
Honors Tutorial  
Online  
Autumn 2020  
Ohio University

Dr. Edmond Y. Chang  
331 Ellis Hall  
Office Hours:  
by appointment  
[change@ohio.edu](mailto:change@ohio.edu)



“Video games are an expressive medium. They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them. As part of the ongoing process of understanding this medium...we must strive to understand how to construct and critique the representations of our world in videogame form.”  
—Ian Bogost

IN GAMING: *Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander Galloway argues that play “is a symbolic action for larger issues in culture” (16) and that video games “render social realities into playable form” (17). Drawing on a survey of “indie games,” scholarship, and other media—this course will consider the questions: What are “indie games and what makes them different than “AAA” games?” Why are indie video games important, and how do we analyze them? In this course, we will read, analyze, and write about independent video games through the interdisciplinary lenses of cultural studies, feminist media studies, and video game studies. We will deploy indie video games as renderings and dramatizations of different social relationships and realities to unpack and analyze the intersections of formations like race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, and nation, particularly in the US context. We will also consider questions of form, genre, design, and the affect in/of playing a game.

A REQUIREMENT for this class is a well-developed curiosity about the world, about the culture we live in, and about the cultural productions we imagine, produce, and consume. In other words, this class is about reading, playing, critiquing, and analyzing our culture through different literatures and texts. We will engage different practices enjoying and analyzing literature and other media, as well as develop literary, feminist, and queer strategies, habits, and perspectives of reading, thinking, and writing. Foremost, we will read and play with pleasure and for pleasure. We will also close read and close play for analysis. And lastly, we will play and deploy games as theory, as dramatizing the concerns, wonders, struggles, and politics of lived life and experience.

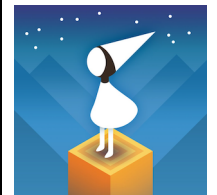
SPECIFICALLY, our course goals include:

- We will develop and demonstrate a familiarity with a range of texts, terms, and theories of the study of digital games, particularly “indie” video games.
- We will identify and articulate different ways to explore, close read, analyze, and critique digital games and other media.
- We will consider questions and intersections of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, nation, culture, and power.
- We will use digital games and popular culture as vernacular theory to think, talk, write, and interrogate the world around us.

WE WILL spend the semester asking and addressing difficult, challenging, and sometimes discomfiting ideas, questions, and topics, focusing on different identities, bodies, histories, desires, experiences, and even struggles and violences. Whether on the page, screen, on campus, or in the community, we will explore and engage multiple perspectives, levels of familiarity with the material, and heady and heartfelt responses. In other words, our class will be a safe, respectful, but not necessarily comfortable space. While pushing boundaries and comfort zones are essential to critical thinking, making connections, and intellectual and personal freedom, see me with concerns and queries, for reasonable accommodations, and for further resources on campus.

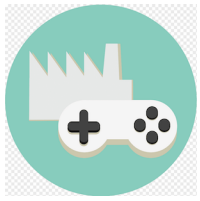
“It should be the experience, that is touching. What I strive for is to make the person playing the game the director.”  
—Shigeru Miyamoto

“Reality is broken. Game designers can fix it.”  
—Jane McGonigal



## Required Course Texts & Materials

- Most game texts are available for download online.
- Some games are available via Steam.
- Short readings will be available via Blackboard
- Web access and an active Ohio University email account.



## Course Requirements

- Critical Responses (40%)
- Research Proposal (10%)
- Final Project (20%)
- Class Participation (30%)

### Requirements & Grading

Your grade should not be the sole exigence or motivation for this class. It is the hope of the course that you walk away from class with something more. Find some pleasure and some edification and some knowledge from this class (or any class really) and success is usually not far behind. With that in mind, your grade will be a reflection of engagement, effort, close reading, critical thinking, writing, and participation.

#### Critical Response Papers (40%)

Over the course of the semester, you will complete a number short, critical, analytical response papers. These single-spaced, one-page writings serve as close readings of, analyses of, and articulations of the texts and connections you see, read, and talk about in the tutorial. These responses are more than just summaries or personal reactions and will be graded on clarity, focus, coherence, critique, and your ability to concisely formulate arguments. You will be required to generate a response paper approximately every other week for a minimum of 8. See the response paper prompt for more details.

#### Research Proposal Memo & Bibliography (10%)

As part of your Final Project research and writing process, you must generate a 1-page research proposal in business memo format and a working bibliography. You will also arrange for a conference with me to go over your proposal. The proposal and bibliography will be graded for clarity, detail, completion, and manuscript format. Your proposal and conference must be completed at least 4 weeks prior to the end of the semester.

#### Final Project (20%)

At the end of the semester, you will complete a Final Project that integrates what you have read, explored, and discussed, that draws on specific terms, concepts, or issues from the class, and that articulates the critical value of indie digital games. The project asks you to make connections and to create an argument across different kinds of evidence and added research. Your final project can be a traditional research paper, a media production (which includes a substantive analytical component), or a hybrid of the two.

#### Participation and Preparedness (30%)

Preparedness and participation forms a large component of your final grade. It is essential that you prepare for class, attend class, and participate. Missing class or participation may seriously compromise your ability to do well in this class. Moreover, negative participation will hurt your participation grade. Participation is determined by 1) your **respectful** presence in class and interactions with me and others, 2) your **willingness** to discuss, comment, and ask questions, 3) your **preparation** for class, which includes having the required materials and doing all of the assigned reading or work for class, 4) your **engagement** and **collaboration** in group work, presentations, office hours, and course events, and 5) your care and use of the class *Blackboard* or “Bb”—bookmark the address, check regularly, comment as required, and think of the blog as an extension of class:

[https://blackboard.ohio.edu/ultra/courses/\\_557970\\_1/cl/outline](https://blackboard.ohio.edu/ultra/courses/_557970_1/cl/outline)

“If one is lucky, a solitary fantasy can totally transform one million realities.”  
—Maya Angelou



“The ‘joy of discovery’ is one of the fundamental joys of play itself. Not just the joy of discovering secrets within the game, but also the joy of uncovering the creator’s vision. It’s that ‘Aha!’ moment where it all makes sense, and behind the world the player can feel the touch of another creative mind.”  
— Derek Yu

“Video games have an unmet potential to create complexity by letting people experience the world from different perspectives.”  
—James Paul Gee

## Guidelines for Online Discussion

Students are expected to conduct themselves on the message board, via email and chat, and in the course in compliance with the Ohio University's Student Code of Conduct. Consider Blackboard, email, chat, and any other communication as if you were in a face-to-face classroom: the rhetorical, cultural, and social context should dictate what you say, how you say it, and why you say it. In other words, do not do anything you would not do in person: be respectful, patient, professional, open, and generous even as we engage differences in beliefs, opinions, perspectives, and approaches. Please bring any communications you believe to be in violation of this class policy to my attention. Active interaction with me, your peers, and the class materials is essential to success in this online course, paying particular attention to the following:

- Students are expected to participate in all synchronous class sessions. You are also expected to participate in all graded or required online discussions threads. While there is more flexibility in online courses, this is **not** a self-paced course (minimum engagement with Blackboard is about 3-4 hours a week).
- Each week, complete the readings and view other instructional materials for each week (i.e. lectures, videos, assignment prompts) before participating on the discussion board.
- You are required to participate in Blackboard discussions 2-4 times over the course of each week (responding to required discussions, tasks, and other threads as directed). Outstanding participation includes additional contributions to lecture and assignment threads, blogging points, and even online office hours.
- Read your posts carefully before submitting them. Keep in mind tone, formality, audience, and language. Challenging the ideas held by others is an integral aspect of critical thinking and the academic process. Please word your responses carefully, and recognize that others are expected to respond and even challenge your ideas.
- In other words, no hate, no spam, no flame, no fluff.



### MLA Paper Formatting

1) 1" margins top, bottom, left, and right on each page.

2) Single-spaced block header on the first page only with your name, date, course, my name:

Student Name  
ENG 4930  
August 24, 2020  
Dr. Chang

3) Appropriate title.

4) Print single-sided. Papers are double-spaced with paper page numbers in the upper right hand corner; no extra space between paragraphs.

5) Standard Times Roman Font, 12 point only.

6) Correct MLA citation and bibliographic format. A paper turned in without a bibliography automatically fails and will be returned with no comments.

### Assignment Format

All papers must be typed or produced on a word processor. All documents should be saved in Microsoft Word format (or if necessary Rich Text Format). All papers must follow the manuscript format outlined by the assignment. Unless instructed otherwise, **all papers must use MLA citation and documentation conventions**. All papers must be neatly printed (in black), stapled in the top, left-hand corner if necessary, and should not be three-hole punched. Papers that do not follow these format guidelines will not be accepted. They will be returned unread to you. Papers will be regarded as late until they are resubmitted in the proper format.

**Always make a backup copy of every paper you turn in**, lest you be one of the unhappy people whose paper is eaten by the computer. You may even want to take the precaution of e-mailing your paper to yourself as an attachment during the drafting process and certainly before you exit the document and leave the computer. Or you may want to invest in cloud-based file storage like OneDrive (which all OU students have already have access) or DropBox.

### Evaluation Rubric

Over the course of the quarter, your assignments will receive feedback and comments that will identify what you are doing well and what still needs improvement. Your grades assess your fulfillment of the assignment, the



### Late Assignments

All assignments must be done completely and turned in on time. Late assignments will be penalized half a grade for every day that they are late. So, if your essay is late by one day and you received a B- for your work, then your final grade would be a C+. Moreover, I will not comment on late work. However, you still need to complete late work or you will receive a zero. If you miss class on the due date of a paper, you must notify me and make arrangements to get the paper to me as soon as possible. **Unless previously arranged, I DO NOT accept assignments via email.** Remember that a paper has not been officially handed in until it is in my hands. Never turning anything in late is always the best policy.



## Contact Dr. Chang

Office:  
331 Ellis Hall  
Office Hours:  
by appointment  
E-mail:  
[change@ohio.edu](mailto:change@ohio.edu)  
Google Talk:  
EDagogy

quality of work, detail, analysis, and argumentation, overall effort, and finally, style, polish, and risk taking. Consider the following evaluation rubric as signposts or a kind of legend to your progress and evaluation:

- **Outstanding (A/A+):** Offers a very highly proficient, even memorable demonstration of the trait(s) associated with the course or assignment goal(s), including some appropriate risk-taking and/or creativity.
- **Strong (B+/A-):** Offers a proficient demonstration of the trait(s) associated with the course or assignment goal(s), which could be further enhanced with revision, additional support, and creativity.
- **Good (B-/B):** Effectively demonstrates the trait(s) associate with the course or assignment goal(s), but less proficiently; could use revision to demonstrate more skillful and nuanced command of trait(s).
- **Acceptable (C/C+):** Minimally meets the basic course or assignment requirement, but the demonstrated trait(s) are not fully realized or well-controlled and would benefit from significant revision.
- **Inadequate (D/D+):** Does not meet the course or assignment requirement; the trait(s) are not adequately demonstrated and require substantial revision on multiple levels.

## Online Instruction and Finding Help

My role in the course, as with any course, is to frame the goals and intellectual conversations of the class, to scaffold readings, assignments, and other tasks, to mentor and moderate projects and discussions, and to assess and grade your work. Given the online nature of the class, I will do my best to engage each and every one of you and the class as a whole in the following ways:

- Synchronous class discussions, which will be recorded and available for viewing and review.
- Short videos or "lecturettes," which first let you see a real "live" person who is professing as professor to the class, and second, are meant to be explanatory, clarifying, and hopefully, interesting.
- Curating blogging points, assignment Q&A, and other discussions, which will complement and supplement your posts and responses.
- Providing regular check-ins via email, blog posts, and online conferences. I will be available electronically by email, Blackboard, and virtual office hours. Email and Bb are the best means of contacting me. I will do my best to answer your emails and blog posts, usually **within twenty-four hours**.
- Holding synchronous virtual office hours once a week via video or text chat; virtual office hours are posted in the sidebar. Please note that group chat is public to the entire class and allows for group discussions. If you would like to converse with me individually, you can use Google chat (**nickname: EDagogy**). If you are not able to attend virtual office hours, email me your availability to set up an appointment, and I will do my best to accommodate your schedule. Otherwise, if you see that I am logged in to chat, during reasonable hours, you are more than welcome to discuss the class or ask questions. Please, when you initiate a chat conversation for the first time, please identify yourself to me; also, be **patient** because my responses may not be immediate.

You can also find additional writing and academic help at the Student Writing Center (SWC) on campus, a good resource for this class and other classes. The SWC is located in the Academic Advancement Center (AAC) on the second floor of Alden Library and offers a variety of services including help with reading, papers, brainstorming ideas, and research. See <https://www.ohio.edu/uc/aac> to make an appointment and for more information.

## Academic Integrity

All students are required to uphold the highest academic standards. Plagiarism, or academic dishonesty, is presenting someone else's ideas or writing as your own. In your writing for this class, you are encouraged to refer to other people's thoughts and writing—as long as you cite them. Many students do not have a clear understanding of what constitutes plagiarism, so feel free to ask questions at any time. For our class, plagiarism includes:

- a student failing to cite sources of ideas
- a student failing to cite sources of paraphrased material
- a student failing to site sources of specific language and/or passages
- a student submitting someone else's work as his or her own
- a student submitting his or her own work produced for another class

If you have any doubt about how to cite or acknowledge another's writing, please talk to me. Any plagiarism or academic dishonesty will result in failure of an assignment or of this course. It is always better to be safe than sorry. Please review the Ohio University's Academic Misconduct page at <https://www.ohio.edu/communitystandards/academic/students.cfm>.

## Accommodations

Any student who feels they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should see me or contact me **in the first week of class** to discuss their specific needs and provide written documentation from Student Accessibility Services. If you are not yet registered as a student with a disability, please contact Student Accessibility Services at 740-593-2620 or visit the SAS office in 348 Baker University Center. The SAS website is: <https://www.ohio.edu/uc/sas/index.cfm>.

## Harassment, Discrimination, and Sexual Misconduct

Ohio University and this course are committed to a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment. Title IX makes clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender is a Civil Rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, and so on. As your instructor, I am a mandatory reporter and am required by law to share with the University any information regarding sexual misconduct or information about a crime that may have occurred on campus. For more information about policies and resources or confidential reporting options, see the Office of University Equity and Civil Rights Compliance: <https://www.ohio.edu/equity-civil-rights/> or the Division of Student Affairs page on Student Conduct & Community Standards:

<https://www.ohio.edu/communitystandards/process/sexualassault.cfm>.

syl-la-bus: *n* 1: a summary outline of a discourse, treatise, or course of study or of examination requirements 2: subject to change

Dr. Chang / ENG 3970T / Autumn 2020 / Ohio University

### Week 1: August 24-28: INTRODUCTION

*Indie Game: The Movie* (2012)

*ImmorTall* (2010): <http://pgstudios.org/games.php?g=2>

"Indie Game," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indie\\_game](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indie_game)

Chang, "Close Playing, a Meditation on Teaching (with) Video Games"

<http://www.edmondchang.com/2010/11/11/close-playing-a-meditation/>

Payne, "Play," *Keywords*

"The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power."  
—Toni Morrison



"My imagination makes me human and makes me a fool; it gives me all the world and exiles me from it."  
—Ursula K. Le Guin

"We absolutely need diversity [in game designers]. And not just diversity of gender, but diversity of cultures, of ethnicity, of sexuality. If we want to reach beyond the audience we have we've got to bring in more players, and to bring in more players we've got to bring in people who might be able to reach those players."  
—Brenda Romero

First Day of Classes

AUGUST

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

Week 1 or 2 CR is recommended.

**Week 2:** August 31-September 4: INDIE GAMES & THE IMMERSIVE FALLACY  
*fIOW* (2006): <http://interactive.usc.edu/projects/cloud/flowing/>  
*The Marriage* (2007): <http://www.rodvik.com/rodgames/marriage.html>  
*Passage* (2007): <http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/>  
 Salen and Zimmerman, "The Immersive Fallacy," *Rules of Play*  
 Chen, "Flow in Games"

**Week 3:** September 7-11: INDIE GAMES & MAGIC CIRCLE(S)  
*SuperColumbineMassacre* (2005):  
<https://www.columbinegame.com/> (PC only)  
*September 12* (2010):  
<http://www.gamesforchange.org/game/september-12th-a-toy-world/>  
 (PC only)  
*Unmanned* (2012): <http://unmanned.molleindustria.org/>  
 Consalvo, "There is No Magic Circle"  
 Frasca, "Ludologists Love Stories, Too"

**Week 4:** September 14-18: INDIE GAMES & AFFECT  
*Dys4ia* (2012): <http://jayisgames.com/games/dys4ia/>  
*Depression Quest* (2013): <http://www.depressionquest.com/>  
*Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013):  
<https://w.itch.io/end-of-the-world>  
 Anable, "Introduction," *Playing with Feelings*  
 Chang, "Queer Dystopias, Queer Mechanics, and *Queers*"  
<http://mediacommons.org/imr/content/queer-dystopias-queer-mechanics-and-queers-love-end-world-0>  
 Georgiou, "Identity," *Keywords*  
 Henderson, "Representation," *Keywords*

**Week 5:** September 21-25: INDIE GAMES & GENDER  
*Gone Home* (2013): <http://www.gonehomegame.com/>  
 Krzywinska, "Formations of Player Agency and Gender in Gothic Games"  
 Halberstam, "Gender," *Keywords*

**Week 6:** September 28-October 2: INDIE GAMES & QUEERNESS  
*Curtain* (2014): <https://dreamfeel.itch.io/curtain>  
*Elegy for a Dead World* (2014):  
[https://store.steampowered.com/app/252290/Elegy\\_for\\_a\\_Dead\\_World/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/252290/Elegy_for_a_Dead_World/)  
 Pow, "Reaching Toward Home: Software Interface as Queer Orientation  
 in the Video Game *Curtain*"  
 Somerville, "Queer," *Keywords*

**Week 7:** October 5-9: INDIE GAMES & RACE  
 (Try to) Dress Up (2015): <https://nivikan.itch.io/try-to-dress-up>  
 SweetXHeart (2016): <https://cattsmall.itch.io/sweetxheart>  
*Hair Nah* (2017): <http://hairnah.com/>  
 Nakamura, "Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficulty Setting There  
 Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital"  
<https://adanewmedia.org/2012/11/issue1-nakamura/>  
 Narcisse, "The Natural: The Trouble Portraying Blackness in Video  
 Games"  
<http://kotaku.com/the-natural-the-trouble-portraying-blackness-in-video-1736504384>  
 Gray, "Race," *Keywords*

**Week 8:** October 12-16: INDIE GAMES & THE ENVIRONMENT  
*Even the Ocean* (2016):  
[https://store.steampowered.com/app/265470/Even\\_the\\_Ocean/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/265470/Even_the_Ocean/)  
 Chang, "Games as Environmental Texts"

SEPTEMBER

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

Week 5 or 6 CR is recommended.

OCTOBER

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
			1	2	3	
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

**Week 9:** October 19-23: INDIE GAMES & DISABILITY  
*That Dragon, Cancer* (2016): <http://www.thatdragoncancer.com/>  
*Gray Skies, Dark Waters* (2017):  
[https://store.steampowered.com/app/543070/Gray\\_Skies\\_Dark\\_Waters/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/543070/Gray_Skies_Dark_Waters/)  
 Crooks and Magnet, “Contests for Meaning: Ableist Rhetoric in Video Games Backlash Culture”  
 Adams, Reiss, Serlin, “Disability,” *Keywords*

**Week 10:** October 26-30: INDIE GAMES & THE GOTHIC I  
*Night in the Woods* (2017): <http://www.nightinthewoods.com/>  
 Krzywinska, “Gamification of Gothic”

**Week 11:** November 2-6: INDIE GAMES & THE GOTHIC II  
*Betweenaside* (2018):  
<https://store.steampowered.com/app/860600/Betweenaside/>  
 Kirkland, “Gothic Video Games, Survival Horror, and the *Silent Hill* Series”

**Week 12:** November 9-13: INDIE GAMES & GENDER II  
*No World Dreams: Sticky Zeitgeist “Episode 1: Hyperslime”* (2017):  
[http://slimedaughter.com/sticky\\_zeitgeist/](http://slimedaughter.com/sticky_zeitgeist/)  
*Secret Little Haven* (2018):  
[https://store.steampowered.com/app/827290/Secret\\_Little\\_Haven/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/827290/Secret_Little_Haven/)  
 Anthropy, “The Problem with Video Games”  
 Muncy, “Porpentine’s New Twine Game Isn’t Just a Twine Game”  
<https://www.wired.com/story/porpentine-twine-game/>

**Week 13:** November 16-20: GA INDIE GAMES MES & INDIGENEITY  
*When Rivers Were Trails* (2019):  
<https://indianlandtenure.itch.io/when-rivers-were-trails>  
*Terra Nova* (2019):  
<https://maizelongboat.itch.io/terra-nova> (PC only)  
 LaPensee, “Self-Determination in Indigenous Games”  
 Byrd, “Other Games, Other Histories”  
<https://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/69>

11/26-11/27  
 Thanksgiving Recess

**Week 14:** November 23-27: THE FUTURE OF...  
*Before I Forget* (2020):  
[https://store.steampowered.com/app/1126600/Before\\_I\\_Forget/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/1126600/Before_I_Forget/)  
*She Dreams Elsewhere* (2021):  
<https://lorenze.itch.io/she-dreams-elsewhere> (Demo)  
 Gray and Leonard, “Introduction,” *Woke Gaming*  
 Chang, “Queergaming”

**Week 15:** November 30-December 4: ...INDIE GAMES?  
 Ruberg, “The Precarious Labor of Queer Indie Game-making: Who Benefits from Making Video Games ‘Better?’”  
 D’Anastasio, “Why Video Games Can’t Teach You Empathy”  
[https://motherboard.vice.com/en\\_us/article/mgbwpy/empathy-games-dont-exist](https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/mgbwpy/empathy-games-dont-exist)  
 Anable, “Conclusion,” *Playing with Feelings*

**Week 16:** Finals Week

Week 10 or 11 CR is recommended.

Research Proposal Due

NOVEMBER						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					

DECEMBER						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

Final Project Due  
 TBD