

## COMM 3344-1 Games for the Web (Interactive Multimedia)

Fall 2009

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Class Location and Meeting Times:    T + TH 9:55 – 11:10    RCC 400 / 402  
W 6:30 - 9:00 p.m.

### Course description

A staple of geek subculture for almost three decades, role-playing games have taken on new life in the era of networked computing. High-speed connections, sophisticated graphics and powerful microprocessors have paved the way for massively multiplayer games (MMOs) such as *World of Warcraft*, *Aion*, and *Mabinogi*. Meanwhile, the social virtual world *Second Life* has demonstrated its potential as a valuable tool for community-building, education, and distributed collaboration.

Of course, virtual worlds are just one subset of a much larger videogame industry. From the Internet cafes of China and South Korea to the living rooms of American suburbs, hardware and software manufacturers generated more than \$42 billion in global sales in 2007. Pricewaterhouse Coopers predicts that sales will climb to almost \$70 billion by the year 2012.

Videogames and virtual worlds are here to stay, but there are some problems.

When graphic virtual worlds first arrived on the scene, they were – for the most part – accessible to players from all corners of the globe. Players from different countries overcame language differences, working together to explore these imaginative on-line spaces. They gained deeper understandings of each other's culture, and their on-line connections often evolved into real-world friendships.

Today, virtual worlds are increasingly likely to segregate players according to national and geographic boundaries. The term “region locking” refers to the industry practice of using IP addresses to deliberately filter out players from other countries. This practice limits opportunities for serendipitous cross-cultural encounters, and it has seriously changed the cultural mood of many virtual worlds. (See Dana Massey's recent column in *MMORPG.COM* for a thoughtful discussion of this problem.)

Game companies have understandable reasons for walling off virtual worlds. Region locking is one way of accommodating strict content regulations imposed by censorious regimes in China and Australia. It can also be a logical response to concerns about technical support. (After all, how does one provide quality customer service to a globally distributed audience that speaks so many different languages?) Furthermore, many companies are *forced* to engage in region locking under the terms of strict licensing agreements that limit the jurisdiction of their business.

Most of all, however, game companies lock out players from other countries because they do not perceive a sound business argument in favor of cultivating and servicing a global player base. It just isn't worth the hassle.

The good news is that a handful of virtual worlds have left the door open to transnational play. There are grounds for cautious optimism.

**“No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” (Albert Einstein)**

In this course, we will develop strategies for nurturing transnational cooperation in virtual worlds. To accomplish this, we will immerse ourselves in *Dungeons and Dragons Online*, paying careful attention to the behaviors, motivations, and cross-cultural interactions of gamers. Along the way, we will play and critically analyze a variety of games including parlor games (*Mafia*), board games (*The Settlers of Catan* and *Lord of the Rings: The Boardgame*), mini-games (*Great Flu*), and even traditional pen-and-paper role-playing games.

We have three objectives:

1. to design strategies for nurturing and extending transnational cooperation in virtual worlds,
2. to explore theories associated with gaming and participatory culture through sustained interaction with gamers from other countries, and
3. to develop a critical vocabulary for analyzing all types of games.

Prior technical and gaming experience is not required for this course.

### Course requirements and materials

Assigned texts for this course include readings from the course packet (available on Tlearn) and the free-to-play games *Dungeons and Dragons Online*. We will also experiment with *Free Realms*, *Perfect World*, and *Second Life*.

Class communication will regularly take place in e-mail and class blogs, so please be sure to check your Trinity e-mail address at least once a day for course-related messages. All class-related e-mail messages sent to your Trinity e-mail account should be treated as “required reading,” and you are responsible for their contents.

Throughout the semester, we will spend a significant amount of time in *Dungeons and Dragons Online (DDO)*. This virtual world is ideal for our purposes because it invites participation from players around the world. Furthermore, this title is a direct descendant of the first modern role-playing game. A significant amount of class time will be spent in the game-world, but you are also expected to devote at least five hours a week to these games in order to conduct your research. To ensure that everyone spends enough time “in world,” a mandatory group gaming session will be held between 6:30 and 9:00 on Wednesday evenings.

You are welcome to play *DDO* and *Free Realms* on the lab computers when other classes are not using the facilities, and you may also be able to install these games on your home systems.

As a side note, it should be noted that massively multiplayer games have a reputation for being addictive. When I taught the first iteration of this course using *Everquest*, I received e-mail from former players who were concerned about the potential for addiction. One person commented “[Y]ou could potentially get people addicted and lost in this world. I was addicted to the game for 3 years and it IS a very, very powerful addiction. I strongly urge you to explain to everyone in advance that if they have strong addictive-type personalities not to force them to do this. . . [I] could not be any more serious.”

Of course, the same factors that make these games addictive make them highly interesting to researchers. If you have a compulsive personality, you might want to consider strategies for placing limits on your access to the game. One possibility is to avoid playing the game in any location other than the computer lab. Also, please remember that the game – though intrinsically fun – is merely a vehicle for understanding the dynamics of virtual worlds. If you are worried about your relationship to the game at any time during the semester, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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## Assignments and grading

Throughout the semester, you will record your thoughts about course themes in an **on-line web log**. Short web log assignments will be distributed throughout the quarter, but you are encouraged to update your on-line journal more frequently. Your web log entries will be accessible to the instructor and to other students in the class. The grading criteria for the web log assignments will be distributed during the second week of class. I will grade your blogs twice during the semester, rather than grading each individual entry. (20% total)

In the **Game Design Document** due on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, you will write a 1,000 to 1,500 word explanation of a fitness promoting game that creatively leverages the Nintendo Wii's kinesthetic interface controls. This will be the first of many experiments in which you are asked to think like a game designer. (15%)

In the **Transnational Player Profile** due on October 15<sup>th</sup>, you will author a 1,500 to 2,000 word profile of an adult, non-American gamer who you have recently met in *DDO* or *Free Realms*. This person should be a new acquaintance who you met within the virtual world. Your profile will discuss the player's biography, the social and cultural context of the country in which they live, the political economy of the gaming landscape in their home country, and their motivations for gaming. As the assignment date approaches, we will talk further about the steps you will need to take to protect this person's anonymity and confidentiality. (15%)

After the midterm break on October 15<sup>th</sup>, we will actively engage with gamer communities to stimulate awareness and discussion about the issues surrounding transnational play. Depending upon your predispositions, you can choose to do this by participating in on-line gaming podcasts, by posting messages in public gaming forums, or by contributing comments to popular gaming blogs. This coordinated outreach is intended to provoke further public discussion about cross-cultural gaming, and – as part of this effort – we will invite gamers to e-mail the class directly with their thoughts and experiences. Player responses will be synthesized into a large, mostly qualitative data set that we will share with the broader gaming community.

In the **Participatory Research Analysis (PRA)**, due on November 12<sup>th</sup>, you will write a 1,500 to 2,000 word summary of your efforts to raise the issue of transnational play via podcasts, blogs, and game forums. This document will identify your outreach channels, summarize the responses you received, and reflect on what you perceive as the most important findings. Ideas generated from your participatory research analysis – as well as ideas emerging from the research efforts of your classmate – will provide a crucial bridge to your final project. (15%)

Your **Final Project**, presented during the final examination period on December 12<sup>th</sup>, will be a 2,000 to 2,500 word design document that elaborates a concrete proposal for nurturing transnational play in virtual worlds. This proposal might be targeted toward game developers, toward players, or toward games researchers. Depending upon the extent of the work involved, this could also be a group project involving one or two of your classmates. (20%)

Participation accounts for fifteen percent of your overall grade.

Design Doc	15%	Blog	20%
Player Profile	15%	Final project	20%
P.R.A.	15%	Participation	15%

Late assignments will have their grade reduced by one-third of a letter grade for each working day that the paper is not received. If you expect to miss class or arrive late please let me know in advance. All assignments must be completed in order to receive a passing grade in this class.

## Participation

### *Attendance*

You are expected to regularly attend class sessions. A total of two absences are permitted. More than two absences will result in lowering of your overall grade or dismissal from the course, at the professor's discretion. The two absences include excused absences and should be conserved like "sick leave."

If you are a member of a Trinity University team or organization, school-sponsored activities may cause you to miss class during the semester. If this is the case, you should present me with the dates of the activities in writing prior to the activity. If notice is not received in advance, the class period will count as an absence.

### *Pandemic influenza*

Throughout the past century – in 1918, 1957, and 1968 – pandemic influenza rippled across the globe. The devastating epidemic in 1918 killed between 20 and 100 million people. Subsequent outbreaks were less deadly, killing between 750,000 and 1.5 million people.

In August 2009, pandemic influenza (H1N1) is with us again. This is a serious global threat. Although most cases appear to be relatively mild, viruses behave in unpredictable ways. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has suggested that up to 40% of Americans could catch the flu during the next eighteen months, and CDC mortality estimates range from 90,000 deaths to several hundred thousand deaths in the United States alone. At a global level, the World Health Organization predicts that close to 2 billion people could be infected within the next two years.

One of the strange things about the 1918 epidemic was the way it seemed to target healthy young adults. The same pattern is evident in 2009. Healthy college-aged youth are particularly at risk. If you think you are even slightly ill, do not come to class. Depending upon the nature of the class activities – and the severity of your illness – you may be able to participate virtually from your dorm room. I will be flexible about medical absences this semester as long as you notify me of your health-related absence in advance of our class meetings.

### *Discussion*

Class discussion is an important part of the Trinity experience. To receive an excellent grade for participation, you should arrive on time and participate in discussion without prompting. An average grade will be given to those students who only answer questions when asked. I do understand that some people are very shy. If you're not comfortable participating verbally in class, there are other ways of participating. For example, you could bring materials to class that would facilitate discussion. Please see me to discuss these options.

### *Quizzes*

From time to time, quizzes will be given in this course. Quizzes are more likely to appear if I notice that people are not prepared to participate in class discussion.

		8/27 <b>Course overview</b>
<b>Week 2</b>	9/1 <b>Multiplayer games: Introduction / Blog set-up</b>  Williams, D., Yee, N., & Caplan, S. (2008, July). Who plays, how much, and why? Debunking the stereotypical gamer profile. <i>Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication</i> , 13(4), 993-1018.	9/3 <b>Globalization</b>  Grier, Peter (2009) "Recession and flu show borderless world," <i>Christian Science Monitor</i> , April 30.  "Chapter 1. While I Was Sleeping" excerpt from Friedman, T. L. (2005). <i>The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century</i> . New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
<b>Week 3</b>	9/8 <b>Role-playing games</b>  Role-playing game. (2009, August 25). In <i>Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia</i> . Retrieved 03:11, August 25, 2009  Dungeons & Dragons. (2009, August 25). In <i>Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia</i> .	9/10 <b>Games as training grounds for the global economy</b>  Reeves, B., Malone, T., & O'Driscoll, T. (2008, May). Leadership's Online Labs. <i>Harvard Business Review</i> , 86(5), pp. 58-66.
<b>Week 4</b>	9/15 <b>Thinking like designers</b>  "Chapter 1. The basics of game design" in Brathwaite, B., & Schreiber, I. (2009). <i>Challenges for game designers</i> . Boston, MA: Course Technology/Cengage Learning.	9/17 <b>Thinking like designers (cont.)</b>  "Chapter 2. Game design atoms" in Brathwaite, B., & Schreiber, I. (2009). <i>Challenges for game designers</i> . Boston, MA: Course Technology/Cengage Learning.
<b>Week 5</b>	9/22 <b>Design document presentation</b>	9/24 <b>East meets West: Gold farming</b>  Nakamura, L. (2009, June). Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in <i>World of Warcraft</i> . <i>Critical Studies in Media Communication</i> , 26(2), 128-144.
<b>Week 6</b>	9/29 <b>East meets West: Aesthetic differences</b>  Cultural differences in role-playing video games. (2009, July 26). In <i>Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia</i> .  Szczepaniak, J. (2009, March). Two worlds, one game. <i>Escapist Magazine</i>  Allison, T. (2008). A path to Western online games success in Asia. <i>Gamsutra: The Art and Science of Making Games</i> , June 28.	10/1 <b>Research ethics</b>  Whiteman, E. (2007, June). Just Chatting: Research Ethics and Cyberspace. <i>International Journal of Qualitative Methods</i> , 6(2), 1-9.
<b>Week 7</b>	10/6 <b>Research methods</b>  Williams, D. & L. Xiong (2008, in press). Herding Cats Online: Challenges in Deriving a Sample from Online Communities. In Hargittai, E. (Ed.). <i>Research Methods from the Trenches: The Nitty-Gritty of Empirical Social Science Research</i> . Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.	10/8 <b>Collaborating in virtual worlds</b>  Nardi, Bonnie and Harris, Justin. 2006. Strangers and friends: collaborative play in world of warcraft. In <i>Proceedings of the 2006 20th Anniversary Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work</i> (Banff, Alberta, Canada, November 04 - 08, 2006). CSCW '06. ACM, New York, NY, 149-158.
<b>Week 8</b>	10/13 <b>Collaborative board games</b>  Zagal, J., Rick, J., & Hsi, I. (2006, March). Collaborative games: Lessons learned from board games. <i>Simulation &amp; Gaming</i> , 37(1), 24-40.	10/15 <b>No Class : AD in DC</b>  Player profiles due

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<p><b>Week 9</b></p>	<p>10/20 <b>Thinking like designers (players)</b> Bartle, R. (1996). Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit muds. <i>The Journal of Virtual Environments</i>, 1(1).</p>	<p>10/22 <b>Thinking like designers (multiplayer considerations)</b> "Chapter 15. But make it multiplayer." in Brathwaite, B., &amp; Schreiber, I. (2009). <i>Challenges for game designers</i>. Boston, MA: Course Technology/Cengage Learning.</p>
<p><b>Week 10</b></p>	<p>10/27 <b>Communicating across cultures</b> Dutta, B. (2008, June). Communication in Cross-Cultural Context. <i>ICFAI Journal of Soft Skills</i>, 2(2), 7-12.</p>	<p>10/29 <b>Communicating across cultures</b> Barna, L.M. (1991). Stumbling blocks in intercultural communication. In L. A. Samovar &amp; R. E. Porter (Eds.), <i>Intercultural communication: A reader</i> (pp. 345-352). Belmont, California: Wadsworth.</p>
<p><b>Week 11</b></p>	<p>11/3 <b>Case study: Global Kids</b> Joseph, B. (2008) "Why Johnny Can't Fly: Treating Games as a Form of Youth Media Within a Youth Development Framework." <i>The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning</i>. Edited by Katie Salen. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. 253-266. Global Kids Inc. (2006) "UNICEF's World Fit For Children in <i>Teen Second Life</i>." Six page comic book produced by teenagers from around the world.</p>	<p>11/5 <b>Case study: JP Button and Final Fantasy XI</b> Final Fantasy XI. (2009, August 25). In <i>Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia</i>. Skim "Japanese players answer questions from English players" from the web site <a href="http://www.jpbutton.com">http://www.jpbutton.com</a>.</p>
<p><b>Week 12</b></p>	<p>11/10 <b>Serious games</b> Schreiner, K. (2008) "Digital games target social change," <i>Computer Graphics and Applications</i>, 28(1), pp. 12-17.</p>	<p>11/12 <b>Serious games</b> Participatory Research Analysis due.</p>
<p><b>Week 13</b></p>	<p>11/17 <b>Globalization</b> Ondrejka, C. (2007). Collapsing geography second life, innovation, and the future of national power. <i>Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization</i>, 2(3), 27-54.</p>	<p>11/29 <b>Globalization</b></p>
<p><b>Week 14</b></p>	<p>11/24 <b>Thinking like designers</b></p>	<p>11/26 <b>THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY</b></p>
<p><b>Week 15</b></p>	<p>12/1 <b>Project review</b></p>	<p>12/3 <b>Project review</b></p>
<p><b>Week 16</b></p>	<p>12/8 <b>Last day of class</b></p>	<p><b>Official final exam period:</b> December 12<sup>th</sup> from 12:00 to 3:00 p.m.</p>

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