Final Paper Assignment: Reading Contemporary Videogames

Final Paper Proposal
1-2 Pages
Due Monday, December 1st

Final Paper
7-10 Pages
Due Thursday, December 11th by 4:00 pm in my mailbox, CL 501, and uploaded to SafeAssign

> *"When I was a kid, it was the golden age of arcades then, and now I guess I can't bring myself to admit it's over. All this home-computer gaming, Nintendo 64, PlayStation, now this Xbox thing, maybe I just want the boys to see what blowing aliens away was like in the old days."*
>   —Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*

> *Video games are allegories for our contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous informatic control. In fact, the more emancipating games seem to be as a medium, substituting activity for passivity or a branching narrative for a linear one, the more they are in fact hiding the fundamental social transformation into informatics that has affected the globe during recent decades.*
>   —Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming*

> *Videogames, for all of their remediations, are not simply the apotheosis of multimedia entertainment. They are aesthetic extensions of an era that has seen a transformation of computers from computing devices to digital platforms for producing and experiencing expressive media. Videogames preserve historical affect through procedures, processes, and protocols that can be accessed at levels that include interface, code, and platform . . . videogames are not mere entertainments but world forms that mediate between subjectivity and history. To understand the parameters and possibilities of that subjectivity, as it is shaped by individual consciousness and a collective life from which it is never autonomous, no game is sufficient. Processing the present, then, remains a perpetual challenge to be undertaken through still more radical forms of play.*
>   —Patrick Jagoda, "Fabulously Procedural"

It is arguable that with the appearance of such artistically ambitious videogames as *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013), and *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013)—to name only a few of the many serious, complex, challenging, and innovative games that have recently appeared—the medium of the videogame has reached what might be called "aesthetic maturity." Writing only a few short years ago, Ian Bogost still felt it necessary to argue with Roger Ebert's (clearly shortsighted) claim that "the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art."[1] Today, in light of the revolution in independent videogame development that has occurred in the last decade, the

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Epigraphs drawn from Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 96-97; Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 106; and Patrick Jagoda, "Fabulously Procedural: *Braid*, Historical Processing, and the Videogame Sensorium," *American Literature* 85, no. 4 (December 2013): 771.

[1] Roger Ebert, "Why did the Chicken Cross Genders?" *Movie Answer Man*, November 27, 2005, http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders, quoted in Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 9. For a later reflection on his claim about videogames not being art, and maintaining that claim even in the face of such games as Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (Number None, 2009) and *Flower* (Thatgamecompany, 2009), see Roger Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art," *Roger Ebert's Journal*, April 16, 2010, http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art.

economic viability and popularity of these experimental games, and the attention given to the videogames industry in general (for good and ill), it is no longer conceivable that a serious, thoughtful critic would consider videogames not to have risen "to the stature of art." Games like *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, and *The Stanley Parable* have settled the issue: videogames are art and their "message," following Marshall McLuhan, might just be all previous media ever created by human hands.[2] Videogames are serious narrative, ludic, procedural, and technological objects that require significant critical attention to understand how they make sense of the world around us. And indeed, as recent criticism has definitively demonstrated, videogame scholars tend to be some of the more perceptive critics of contemporaneity. People thinking hard about videogames, new media, and narrative technologies are on the frontlines of critical, intellectual, and academic inquiry. They are asking difficult questions about what it is like to be alive in the twenty-first century, in a world inundated with information, surrounded by screens, ubiquitously and algorithmically surveilled, connected like never before, controlled and controlling in distributed networks, inhabiting protocological domains that were the stuff of science fiction less than thirty years ago.[3] For your final paper I would like you to take up such questions, to think hard about how meaning is made in these digital artifacts, and to come to complex conclusions about how they make sense of life in the network society. Being able to critically understand videogames has become essential for understanding life in the twenty-first century, and I would like to think that the material we have encountered in this course has not only prepared us for such an encounter, but is on the bleeding edge of such critical inquiry.

  Dear Esther, *Gone Home*, and *The Stanley Parable*, though not as flashy or gigantic as games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar, 2013) or *Destiny* (Activision, 2014), force us to take videogames quite seriously; they also all point toward videogames as *possibility*, as a medium that is only beginning to explore its capabilities. Whether or not it is a "game," *Dear Esther* is a serious piece of experimental, literary art, crafting affect and emotion in ways other media are incapable of approaching, taking us along a contemplative journey about pain and loss that seems light years away from not only *Pong* (Atari, 1972), the Atari 2600, and *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), but also from most other contemporary mass media. *Gone Home*, through a complex engagement with various videogame genres—including the first person shooter (FPS), survival horror, and puzzle games—asks difficult questions about sexuality, family, and the legacies of the 1990s and the riot grrrl movement. And *The Stanley Parable* would fit perfectly into any discussion about postmodernism and its legacies, about metafiction and self-reflexive art, about the avant-garde and the cutting edge of aesthetic expression. That it also is a profound reflection on life in the control society, upon panopticism and surveillance, about play and labor, I imagine, will surprise none of us. In short, these are three serious, difficult, challenging, thoughtful games, deserving of just as much critical attention as any significant work of literature, film, photography, painting, or music. (The fact that they incorporate all of these previous media, need hardly be mentioned.)

  So, for your final paper I would like you to engage with *one or two* of the videogames we are covering during the last part of this course: either *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, or *The Stanley Parable*. We have approached our reading of narratives of technology and technologies of narrative in a variety of ways this semester. We have read numerous critics and theorists

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[2] See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical ed., ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko, 2003).

[3] I guess I am thinking of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984) and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (New York: Bantam Spectra, 1992) here.

alongside our reading, viewing, and playing of diverse texts. Consistently, we have closely and carefully engaged with the text itself in our class discussions, analyzing and interpreting specific moments, passages, and ideas. And we have frequently foregrounded history and politics in how and why we might read. In short, this class has offered multiple ways of critically engaging with twenty-first century narrative art, and videogames like *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, and *The Stanley Parable* not only require of us a rigorous and multiplicitous approach to critical reading and critical play, but these games will reward the variety of reading, playing, and thinking we have done. This paper is meant to function as a culmination of not only the class itself, but also the writing you have done throughout the semester. Beyond simply the major portion of your grade this final paper represents, it is also meant as a space for your individual interests in narrative and technology to take shape and find an outlet. As such, other than the requirements listed below, I am leaving the particulars of what you choose to write about and (more-or-less) how you write about them up to you. *Of course you will still need to articulate a complex and clear argument for a specific interpretation of* Dear Esther*,* Gone Home*, or* The Stanley Parable*, with clear critical stakes*, but, as you can clearly perceive, there are a *host* of interesting directions and approaches you may take with this paper, and I look forward to seeing where you go.

Final Paper Requirements

> *Final Paper Proposal*: Due Monday, December 1st. I would like you to hand in a brief proposal (1-2 pp.) of what you are going to write on. The paper proposal should include:
> 1) What *specific* aspects of either *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, or *The Stanley Parable* you are planning on writing about.
> 2) A brief outline of the issues you are interested in investigating.
> 3) Your thesis/argument (which can still be exploratory in nature).
> 4) A bibliography of what critical articles and other sources you are planning on using.

You do not need to stick to the letter of your proposal for your final paper, and may find it differs dramatically, but the proposal is intended as a way of doing some of the legwork necessary for your final paper before you write it.

> *Final Paper*: 7-10 pages, due Thursday, December 11th by 4:00 pm in my mailbox in room 501 of the Cathedral of Learning (make sure you put it in the right mailbox: mine is *below* my nametag!). The final paper is meant as both a synthesis and culmination of the work you've done in the class. The requirements are:

> > *Close Reading*. Unavoidably, whatever you are writing on will incorporate close, careful attention to the videogames you have chosen to work on, analyzing their forms and structures, engaging with their narrative and content, and attending to both their procedural rhetoric and their aesthetic complexity. In short, you should primarily think of the work you are doing as *interpretation*. *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, and *The Stanley Parable* offer *many* paths for close, careful engagement, so the more specific you are in your approach, the more complex your reading will be.

Context. Whatever you choose to write on, you must address *at least one* of the other texts we have covered in this class in some way: anything from Frank Kermode and Martin Heidegger, to *Gamer* (2009) and *The Circle* (2013), to Alexander R. Galloway and *World of Warcraft* (2004-2014). This may be a lengthy engagement or may be as small as a footnote. Either way, this requirement is intended to put your writing within the context of this course's project, and you are free to choose how you do this. Certain comparisons readily suggest themselves—e.g., *The Stanley Parable* and Gilles Deleuze's "Postscript on Control Societies," or *Gone Home* and Galloway's discussion of cyberfeminism. But obviously the texts we have read, watched, and played this semester confront similar questions, so any engagement with one of the writers, films, or games we have covered that complicates and further develops your reading of *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, or *The Stanley Parable* may fulfill this requirement.

Theory, Criticism, Research. You are required to have *at least two* outside sources that we have *not* read in class informing your work. For this requirement I normally ask students to find and read two sources that were originally published in a scholarly book or journal (i.e., not the internet), but since *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, and *The Stanley Parable* are all such recent games, there is virtually no scholarly criticism of them yet. As such, you will need to be a bit more creative to fulfill this requirement, and will probably find yourself using the internet extensively.

The main restriction here is that you *cannot* use game reviews published in commercial magazines or on websites in order to fulfill the two sources (though you can use reviews in *addition* to your two required outside sources).[4] Also, though things like the Dear Esther Wiki or youtube videos of the other endings of *The Stanley Parable* you may find quite useful in doing research for this assignment, they will not count toward your two required sources. What you can use that *will* count: serious criticism of the game(s),[5] interviews with the creators, essays or articles published by the creators,[6] talks given by the creators,[7] etc. You will necessarily need to be a bit creative here, but I have also included things you may want to look at in

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[4] I will be slightly flexible with regard to this restriction, as there are certain game reviews that go considerably beyond the typical should-you-by-this-or-not review. I am thinking here, for example, of Ian Bogost's, "Perpetual Adolescence: The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home*," review of *Gone Home*, The Fullbright Company, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 28, 2013, http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/perpetual-adolescence-the-fullbright-companys-gone-home.

[5] From my research, there has been only one essay published in a peer-reviewed journal on any of the games, and it just so happens to discuss both *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home*. See Daniel Reynolds, "Letters and the Unseen Woman: Epistolary Architecture in Three Recent Video Games," *Film Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 48-60. I have uploaded this essay to CourseWeb under Additional Documents. There has also been a bunch of serious criticism on *Gone Home* published in alternative venues, much of it collected at the weblog, *This Cage is Worms*. See Cameron Kunzelman, "A Collection of Criticism About *Gone Home*," *This Cage is Worms*, http://thiscageisworms.com/2013/08/19/a-collection-of-criticism-about-gone-home/. On *The Stanley Parable*, see Phillip A. Lobo, "ctrl+issues," review of *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Café, *Open Letters Monthly: An Arts and Literature Review*, December 1, 2013, http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/crtlissues/.

[6] See Dan Pinchbeck, "*Dear Esther*," *Game Developer* 19, no. 8 (August 2012): 22-28. I have uploaded this article to CourseWeb under Additional Documents.

[7] See Dan Pinchbeck, "*Dear Esther*: Making an Indie Success Out of an Experimental Mod," *Game Developers Conference*, San Francisco, CA, March 2012, http://gdcvault.com/play/1015529/Dear-Esther-Making-an-Indie.

the notes and on CourseWeb.[8] You should also try to find other books and essays addressing more general aspects of videogame theory. We have read only the tip of the iceberg of videogame theory, so you will greatly benefit from looking at other work from scholars like Espen Aarseth, Ian Bogost, N. Katherine Hayles, Patrick Jagoda, Jesper Juul, Tanya Krzywinska, Lev Manovich, Jane McGonigal, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Mckenzie Wark, and many, many others, as well as books collecting individual essays like *The Video Game Reader* (2003), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2006), or many, many others.

You should keep in mind that I will be considering *what* you find and use, along with *how* you use it, when considering your grade. Students will not be penalized for the "bare minimum" of sources, but showing that you have done careful and thoughtful research into your topic will greatly benefit you.

Regarding research: it can be quite tempting to simply ape another critic's reading of a text, simply rephrasing their thinking in your own words. This final paper expects that you go considerably beyond this and that you use the work of other critics and scholars writing about *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, *The Stanley Parable*, or videogames in general as material to rigorously and complexly work with and against. Basically, your research will introduce you to a conversation that is already going on. I am asking you to participate in that conversation rather than simply repeat what other people have already said.

Other than that, where you go is up to you.

As always, I am more than available to talk to during the composition of this final paper. You have a nearly a month to think about and write this paper, so please feel free to schedule an appointment with me, visit during office hours, or email me to discuss your ideas. Also, feel free to talk with me about finding and thinking about research material. Databases are always helpful, but it can be nice to plumb an actual human's archive when going about this type of work.

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[8] I have also uploaded to CourseWeb Alexander R. Galloway's second chapter from his book on videogames, "Origins of the First Person Shooter," in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 39-69. This is an excellent essay on the FPS genre and its origins, and might be quite useful to look at for any of the three games, though all three games considerably challenge Galloway's conclusions.