

L
LIFESTYLES
 ■ Editor Celina Kareiva
 lifestyles@dailyuw.com

The poetics of play

The CGP has helped develop four courses for winter quarter that critically study games.

CHID 370

5 credits

Developing the Technological Imagination: Cultural Impact of Information Technology

>> This course is concerned with the omnipresence of technology in our lives. Video games will also be studied.

CHID 496

2 credits

Close Playing, or, "Bioshock" as Practicum

>> Just as English students "close read" a text, students in CHID 496 will "close play" the video game "Bioshock."

CHID 496

2 credits

Play Matters: All Board Games Have Something to Offer by Way of Academic Examination

>> Board games are studied in an attempt to reveal things about our socio-political environment.

CHID 496D

2 credits

Challenging Forth: Methods of Critical Play, an Introduction to Game Studies

>> CHID 496D introduces students to game studies.

SOURCE: depts.washington.edu/critgame/wordpress/courses/



LUCAS ANDERSON / PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

The Critical Gaming Project brings study of games to the UW

BY SEAN SULLIVAN *The Daily*

Timothy Welsh felt like his research paper topic for his Marxism class in the graduate school English department was a dead end.

When talking about it with a friend, Welsh joked that he could instead write about how gang territory acquisition in "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" resembled Marx's description of primitive accumulation. He had suggested it as a joke, but he also realized that there might be something to the idea.

Welsh became so engaged in the topic that his paper ended up straying from "Grand Theft Auto" and instead discussed the "structures of feeling emerging from dissonances between a player's experience of a game world, and [one's] experiences in the real world."

"My professor hated it," Welsh said. "I don't think she had any idea what I was talking about."

Welsh is now a doctoral student and a committee member for a group called the Critical Gaming Project (CGP), an on-campus organization that promotes the critical study of games, including digital games, board games, and pen and paper games. In addition to organizing classes, the CGP also runs a website with information about the topic.

The project has its origins in a failed Huckabay Teaching Fellowship proposal that founding member Terry Schenold tried to acquire in 2008. Titled "Warcraft as Playcraft," the proposal called for a collective playing experience of the video game "World of Warcraft." Schenold's idea was for a group of students to play the game together in a lab, while reading texts that would give a theoretical backbone to the gaming experience. The proposal was rejected, Schenold said, because the plan was too ambitious, and games were not considered a proper subject of study at the time.

"It was still looked at as like: You're going to have students play games? What's that all about?" Schenold said. "[The CGP] grew out of a discontent with the way games were being taught and talked about in 2006-07. We were doing all these interesting things, but they couldn't be made serious or visible. They weren't considered real scholarship."

Initially the website was an online archive where professors could post teaching materials, syllabuses and lesson plans from courses on gaming. From it grew a greater body of study including CGP's first class in the winter of 2008, a focus group for "World of Warcraft" in the Comparative History of Ideas program (CHID).

"I was teaching all these [non-gaming classes], and I found that in all these classes I was teaching one or two students would come up to me after and say, 'Hey, what about this game? This narrative makes me think of this game.'" Schenold said. "I began to have these

conversations in the halls with students. I realized that this is a cultural form that is having its moment, generationally. ... These people think about games more often than we would like to admit."

The project has since grown into a respectable campus institution. In July, news outlets like NPR and The Stranger consulted the CGP for an academic opinion on the question, "Are games art?"

"As the industry has grown and the platforms have expanded, there's been this realization that this is something that a lot of people are putting their time into," Welsh said, "and that this is a significant part of our culture and the way people experience culture. Even as that has been happening, it's still been under-analyzed."

Welsh said that when humanities scholars first began to study games, they analyzed the game narratives using theoretical narratives from films, completely ignoring the way people experience this medium.

"When games started to get a lot of attention, folks who were trained in literary and film scholarship tried to apply their expertise and ended up focusing a lot on narrative and representation," Welsh said. "Folks who knew about game structures and digital media, however, objected that those approaches ignored essential aspects of the gaming part of video gaming. Some of the most vocal of this group, calling themselves 'ludologists,' argued for an approach to studying games specific to its characteristics as a game and helped to define the field of game studies as a discipline and methodology in its own right."

There has been a back-and-forth in the critical discussion about who gets to study games, which makes it difficult to pin down this field of study.

"The conclusions people are coming to are that games are not any one thing — they are the intersection of all of this stuff," Welsh said. "If you try to claim knowledge of it, you are going to miss out. The study of games is so inherently interdisciplinary that people still don't know what to do with it."

Regardless, CGP thinks that video games will only become more relevant in the future.

"That's my response to people," Schenold said. "You don't think games matter now, [but] give it a couple of generations, and they are going to be the whole game."

Reach reporter Sean Sullivan at lifestyles@dailyuw.com.