

MEVIT2725 – Video Games: Aesthetics, Industry and Culture

Evaluation guidelines, autumn 2023

The exam consists of two assignments. The candidate must answer both. The assignments count 50/50 in the evaluation. The candidate must ensure that the two assignments are of approximately equal length in the paper (about 5 pages for each assignment). Significant discrepancies in this page distribution must not occur. Standard rules and principles for academic writing apply. Both assignments must meet at least the minimum requirements for a passing grade (E) for the candidate to pass the exam in its entirety. If one assignment is evaluated as a fail, the entire paper receives an F.

The first assignment is an essay on game history, the game industry and game culture. This assignment is the same for all candidates, but it can be approached in various ways. The second assignment on game analysis offers a choice between two analysis tasks. The essay topic and game analysis test the same types of academic skills (use of relevant theory and examples, discussion and critical reflection), but differ in themes and relevant subject matter. The game analysis assignment also tests the candidate's ability to specify their own analytical focus within a specific framework and conduct an independent analysis in which they interpret and discuss game mechanics and game content using relevant theories and terms.

The candidate must actively and explicitly use the syllabus literature in both assignments. The candidate should use the textbook *Understanding Video Games* and relevant articles throughout the paper. Using the textbook is obligatory. Very good papers require the active use of both the textbook and articles. Secondary sources (like Store Norske Leksikon, Wikipedia, other online sources or other textbooks) or lecture slides must not be used as sources to define terms and theories already covered in the syllabus literature or as replacements for using the syllabus literature.

The following paragraphs explain what to look for in terms of content and focus. It is important that the candidate demonstrates a general understanding of the area the assignment asks for and that they can focus on aspects that are most central to and relevant for their chosen examples and cases.

Assignment 1

Since their commercial inception in the 1970s, video games and gaming have evolved from a niche to a significant and influential mainstream cultural phenomenon. Discuss some key historical events and developments that have been central in this evolution. Then, reflect on the cultural position of video games today, and the opportunities and challenges that come with this position. Use examples from the game industry, games and the metaculture of games as examples in your discussion.

The candidate should demonstrate a sound understanding of how certain key historical industrial and cultural events and developments have evolved gaming from a niche to being mainstream.

There are several events and developments that can be relevant here. Due to limited space, the candidate needs to narrow their historical coverage. The candidate should use the 1970s as a starting point (but may refer briefly to events prior to this if they argue well for their relevance). Key events and developments include: the arcades, the introduction of home gaming consoles, the video game crash of 1983, the proliferation of personal computers, the competition between first-party developers/console wars, the ratings systems, casual games, smartphones, the rise of independent developers, Gamergate, increased digital distribution. The candidate may also include relevant developments in aesthetics and genres. It is important that the candidate can recognize and argue well for how certain historical events and developments have been impactful for gaming's evolution into the mainstream.

The candidate must then reflect on the cultural position of video games today, and the opportunities and challenges that come with this position. The candidate is free to structure this part as they see fit and can argue well for. Regardless of focus, the candidate should comment on some past and present characteristics of games' cultural position and the public perception of games. The candidate must use their own examples to illustrate and concretize the discussion. These examples must reflect the three categories in the assignment: the game industry, individual game titles/series, and the metaculture of games. The examples must serve to argue something specific about game's contemporary cultural position. It is a plus if the candidate can connect this discussion to the key historical events and developments.

Primary sources expected for this assignment are chapters 2, 4 and 6 in *Understanding Video Games*. The articles by Braithwaite, Jørgensen, Consalvo and Srauy contain relevant content about the game industry and game culture that may further contextualize the chosen developments, opportunities and challenges.

Assignment 2

Assignment 2 is a choice between analysis task (a) or analysis task (b).

- (a) Analyze and interpret the form, function and audiovisual aspects of the gameworld in a video game of your choice. Explain the relationship between the gameworld's explicit and implicit rules and mechanics, focusing on what you are encouraged/able to do and what you are discouraged from doing/unable to do. Discuss how this is combined with narrative/storytelling elements or cultural representations to create particular and meaningful interactions and experiences. Formulate a specific research question for your analysis.
- (b) Analyze and interpret a multiplayer game of your choice (local/online multiplayer). Focus especially on analyzing the multiplayer game's rules, mechanics, balancing and level design/topography. Discuss how the game enables and encourages various forms of cooperation and/or conflict between players, and how players can utilize the game's systems to create their own rules, playstyles or strategies. Formulate a specific research question for your analysis.

For both analysis tasks, the game must be appropriate for the selected type of analysis, and the candidate must explain why the game is academically relevant/interesting. If the game seems inappropriate or unconventional (for example, choosing to focus on narrative elements in a

mostly non-narrative game), the candidate must argue convincingly for its relevance/appropriateness and why their perspective is useful for understanding the game. Both analysis tasks require the candidate to formulate a specific research question for the game. It is important that the research question focuses on what is particular for the candidate's chosen game and that it helps narrow and concentrate the aim of the analysis. The question must not be formulated in a way that directs the candidate away from what the assignment asks for.

Relevant terms and theories should be explained briefly. It is important that this part of the paper is an active analysis and interpretation of a game using relevant syllabus subject matter, not a general exposition or exhaustive listing of various syllabus subject matter or details/features in a game.

Analysis task (a): The candidate must demonstrate knowledge about the *gameworld* as a specific construction created with a specific type of gameplay in mind, how a gameworld differs from other fictional worlds, and how gameworlds affect and structure interactions and content. Gameworlds are covered more generally in the textbook and more specifically in Aarseth's and Jørgensen's articles. The candidate must also demonstrate knowledge about types of game rules and game mechanics and how these encourage and discourage certain interactions and playstyles in their chosen game. This must be connected to the game's storytelling elements or cultural representations. Additional game aesthetic terms such as genre, interface, geography, perspective, graphical style, sound and music will also be relevant to include, depending on the gameworld and analytical focus. The choice of either narrative/storytelling elements or cultural representations will determine what additional topics and literature that are relevant:

- For a focus on narrative/storytelling elements, the following is relevant: definitions of narratives; similarities and differences between games and narratives; Aarseth's ludonarrative model; narrative mechanics such as cutscenes, characters, branching, choices and quests; emergent narratives and storytelling through landscapes.
- For a focus on cultural representations, the following is relevant: definition and importance of representation; game representation specifics; historical and current representations of gender in games; masculinity and femininity; types of LGBTQ+ content in games; race/ethnicity in games; species in games; diversity; aesthetic pluralism; optional content.

Analysis task (b): The multiplayer analysis is more focused on gameplay, mechanics and interactions between players than audiovisual content. The candidate is free to choose a game that is exclusively multiplayer or a game that features both single player and multiplayer modes (or a simultaneous combination of both, as in MMORPGs). In the latter case, it is important that the candidate focuses on the multiplayer aspects, not the single player aspects/modes.

The candidate must demonstrate and discuss how the game facilitates multiplayer (player behavior, strategies, motives) through various types of rules (for example, operational rules, interplay rules and evaluation rules), mechanics (core mechanics, supporting mechanics),

balancing (in-game balancing, player-player balancing) and level design/topography (gameworld, perspective, interfaces). The candidate may also include other terms from the syllabus if they are relevant for the analysis.

The candidate must actively discuss how the formal aspects and systems of the game encourage various forms of cooperation and/or conflict between players (player-versus-enemy and/or player-versus-player). Furthermore, the analysis must focus on how players can use the game's systems to create their own rules, playstyles or strategies. This may be related to options and functions made available in the game (for example, by allowing the players to set various parameters, goals, rules and modes themselves), local norms and "meta" contexts, or subversive and unintended use of the game's systems. The candidate needs to focus actively on the interplay between the game and player behavior throughout the analysis.

Appendix: Syllabus literature

Books

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S., Smith, J.H. & Tosca, S.P. (2020) *Understanding video games : the essential introduction*. Fourth edition. New York, Routledge.

Articles

Aarseth, E. (2012) *A narrative theory of games*. ACM. doi:10.1145/2282338.2282365.

Braithwaite, A. (2016) It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity. *Social Media + Society*. 2 (4). doi:10.1177/2056305116672484.

Brock, A. (2011) '«When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong»': Resident Evil 5, Racial Representation, and Gamers. *Games and culture*. 6 (5), 429–452. doi:10.1177/1555412011402676.

Conway, S. (2020) Poisonous Pantheons: God of War and Toxic Masculinity. *Games and culture*. 15 (8), 943–961. doi:10.1177/1555412019858898.

Consalvo, M. (2009) There is No Magic Circle. *Games and culture*. 4 (4), 408–417. doi:10.1177/1555412009343575.

Eskelinen, M. (2001) The Gaming Situation. *Game Studies*. 1 (1). <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>.

Jagoda, P. (2018) On Difficulty in Video Games. Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect. *Critical Inquiry*. 45 (1), 199–233. doi:10.1086/699585.

Johnson, M.R. & Woodcock, J. (2019) «It's like the gold rush»: the lives and careers of professional video game streamers on Twitch.tv. *Information, communication & society*. 22 (3), 336–351. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2017.1386229.

Jorgensen, K. (2019) Newcomers in a Global Industry: Challenges of a Norwegian Game Company. *Games and culture*. 14 (6), 660–679. doi:10.1177/1555412017723265.

Jørgensen, K. (2012) Between the Game System and the Fictional World: A Study of Computer Game Interfaces. *Games and Culture*. 7 (2), 142–163. doi:10.1177/1555412012440315.

Prax, P. & Soler, A. (2016) Critical Alternative Journalism from the Perspective of Game Journalists. *Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*. 13 (1), 1–15. <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/critical-alternative-journalism-from-the->

perspective-of-game-journalists/.

Shaw, A. & Friesem, E. (2016) Where Is the Queerness in Games? Types of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Content in Digital Games. *International Journal Of Communication*. 10, 3877–3889.

Srauy, S. (2019) Professional Norms and Race in the North American Video Game Industry. *Games and Culture*. 14 (5), 478–497. doi:10.1177/1555412017708936.

Thach, H. (2021) A Cross-Game Look at Transgender Representation in Video Games. *Press Start*. 7 (1). <https://doaj.org/article/8a60c157a6c44adf96cc27e6f20fec64>.

Appendix: Grade guidelines for BA-level exams at IMK (in Norwegian only)

A (fremragende)

Svarer på problemstillingen. Selvstendige, klare og interessante resonneringer, relevante eksempler og svært god bruk av teori. Klart og presist språk, klare sammenhenger, svært godt fokusert og gjennomgående god struktur. Overbevisende med hensyn til faktakunnskaper og svært god kjennskap til pensumlitteraturen. Høyt kunnskapsnivå og analytisk kompetanse. Meget godt dimensjonert - formen (bl.a. lengden) tilpasset innholdet. Originale og interessante anslag.

B (meget god)

Svarer på problemstillingen. Tilfredsstillende de fleste, men ikke alle kriteriene i kategori A. Det forutsettes gode resonneringer og gjennomgående meget god kjennskap til pensumlitteraturen også på dette nivået. Relevant og meget god bruk av teori, meget god vurderingsevne og selvstendighet. Språklig klarhet, god struktur og god tilpasning mellom form og innhold vil normalt være nødvendig for å få karakteren B.

C (god)

Svarer på problemstillingen, men ikke alt er like relevant. God forståelse og gode kunnskaper, men noe mangelfull indre konsistens. Har kjennskap til sentrale elementer ved fagfeltet. For eksempel: Originalt anslag, men skriver seg litt bort. Kandidaten viser god kjennskap til pensumlitteraturen, god vurderingsevne og selvstendighet. Noen uklarheter mht språk eller struktur. Tilfredsstillende på de fleste punkter.

D (brukbar)

Tydelig forsøk på å besvare problemstillingen, noe er relevant, men også noe som er irrelevant, unødvendig, feilaktig eller mangelfullt. Nokså god kjennskap til sentrale deler av pensum, men betydelige svakheter i det teoretiske og eller det empiriske. For knapt og kort i forhold til den tiden som er til rådighet. Noe uklarheter i struktur og språk. Kandidaten viser en viss grad av vurderingsevne og selvstendighet.

E (tilstrekkelig)

Anslag til å besvare problemstillingen, men svært lite av besvarelsen er relevant og godt. Besvarelser med store og vesentlige mangler både når det gjelder kunnskap og resonneringer. Kjennskap til de mest sentrale deler av pensum, men lite utfyllende. Store "hull". Tilfeldige eksempler framfor drøfting/empiri. Besvarelsen kan i en viss forstand være en løsning som under kategori D, men med det tillegg at den er tynnere, mer rotete, dårlig disponert og umoden. Tilfredsstillende bare minimumskravene. Liten grad av selvstendighet.

F - Stryk

Besvarer ikke problemstillingen. Dokumenterer ikke kunnskap om sentrale områder i pensum. Dokumenterer ikke kjennskap til fagets hovedlinjer. Holder ikke universitetsnivå, upresist/umodent språk, uklare resonneringer, uklar struktur, manglende vurderingsevne og selvstendighet.