



College of the Atlantic

Course Syllabus

Games and the Social Construction of Reality

Spring 1998 - Gray Cox

Mondays and Thursdays: 6:30 pm to 9:30 pm

This course includes a theoretical study of formal theories of human behavior that use or critique various game models and game metaphors to understand how social reality is constructed and reconstructed. It also includes a practical study of how games are designed, developed, taught, promoted, and used for purposes of research by modeling social activity through role plays and simulations, for purposes of education through conveying information and teaching new behaviors education and for other purposes -- such as altering basic patterns of culture. Students will, individually or in groups, design games to be presented at the end of the term in the form of marketing proposals. To provide a focused series of workshop activities to develop skills we will work as class on an extended project developing concepts, sketches and demos for a suite of games dealing with violence and sex. At mid-term we will also use a version of the "Imaging a World Without Weapons" workshop to practice a variety of game skills and to develop ideas for the projects. While this course has no specific prerequisites it is intended as an intermediate level course which assumes some familiarity with social theories and a readiness to undertake serious reflection on methodological issues. It is especially appropriate as a course for students interested in teaching, popular education, or public policy work that deals with community planning and cultural change.

Goals

1. To develop historical insight, familiarity with relevant theories, and the skills of critical analysis needed to interpret and evaluate the roles games can play in the social construction of reality - including their functions as investigative devices, as pedagogical tools, and as a variety of vehicles for the production and reproduction of culture.
2. To develop skills of collaborative problem solving, creative design, and effective presentation needed to develop and promote game activities that can serve to reconstruct reality in better ways.

Activities

Class sessions will vary widely in format and mix mini-lectures, small group activities, games, role plays, discussions of texts, et cetera. Frequent, short homework assignments will provide preparation for these activities, offer useful follow up or help with preparations for the group presentations. Some of these homework activities will involve the use of email and a web browser and, perhaps, a homepage composer.

Many of the activities will be aimed at developing ideas for a series of games dealing with issues of violence and sex. The initial aim of this suite of games is to tap the energies of violence and sex that motivate some of the most popular and dysfunctional game activities of young people in the U. S. and to transform the ways in which those energies are channeled and use them to cultivate empowering functional behaviors. The working title for the two product lines in this project are, currently, "Killer Games" and "Committing Love". These are currently conceived of as two parallel and related lines that would form a coherent suite of games tentatively called "Hot Blood: Suite 16"

We will normally have at least one very quick, change of pace, energizing game -- a "Light and Lively" -- to start class or provide a break. Students will take turns teaching and leading these in pairs. Terry Orlick's text on cooperative games provides one very useful resource for finding these.

Each student will do a short (ten minute) review of a game she or he finds interesting and exciting and would like to recommend to the rest of us. These reviews should be typed and copies submitted electronically so they can be archived in the homepage that will provide an ongoing list of resources for this class. The homepage for the class and links to those resources will be provided at: <http://www02.coa.edu/Cox/games/home.htm>

During the middle of the term, we will have group presentations on types of games such as ball games, board games, computer games, role playing games, war games, courtship games or others. Each group will do a careful background study and provide an account of the historical origins and transformations of the type of game, an analysis of its key social functions, and suggestions for ways in which it might be used or revised to reconstruct social reality in good ways.

At the end of the term each student will take part in presenting, individually or as a member of a group, a design for a game or line of games. The proposal must include a description of the game, a demo version of it, an explanation of its aims for achieving social change and how it is intended to realize these aims, and a strategy for marketing it. Class activities through the term should serve to help generate ideas for these games. In some cases - e. g. a complex computer game - there may be a mix of portions at different stages of the design process. But in every case there should be at least some finished product material as part of the final presentation. In some cases the group may want to develop a whole series of games that are very simple and that lead successively to different behaviors. To the extent that it is feasible and appropriate we will publish these games on the class homepage.

Evaluation

The evaluation of work in the course will be based on the extent to which students demonstrate progress in achieving the two main goals of the class (stated above) and demonstrate that they have done so making use of the materials and activities dealt with in the course. If this course is taken for a letter grade, the final grade will be determined as follows: 30% class participation; 25% homework, Light and Lively, and game review; 15% group presentation of game type; and 30% final presentation of game design.

Readings

The texts for the course are Elise Boulding's BUILDING A GLOBAL CIVIC CULTURE, Clark Abt's SERIOUS GAMES, Dale Foley's LEARNING CAPITALIST CULTURE, Alfie Kohn's NO CONTEST. A recommended companion text for the course is Terry Orlick's COOPERATIVE GAMES. All are available at Sherman's. Other xeroxes will be handed out.

Internet Resources at: <http://www02.coa.edu/Cox/games/glinks.htm>

Class Schedule

Monday 3/30 Introductions

Thursday 4/ 2 BUILDING A GLOBAL CIVIC CULTURE (BGCC) "Prologue" and "Expanding Our Sense of Time and History"

SERIOUS GAMES (SG) "The Reunion of Action and Thought" and "Improving Education with Games" pp. 3-34

4/6 BGCC 2 "A Planet in Transition: The Intergovernmental Order"

SG III "Educational Games for Physical and Social Sciences"

4/9 BGCC 3 "A Planet in Transition: The Nongovernmental Order"

Readings on formal Game Theory

Guest Lecturer: Chris Petersen

4/13 BGCC 4 "Conflict, Diversity and Species Identity"

SG IV & V "Game Learning and Disadvantaged Groups" & Games for Occupational Choice and Training

NO CONTEST Chapter 8, "Women and Competition"

4/16 BGCC 5 "Growing Up in a High Technology Culture: Problems of Knowing"

SG VI "Games for Problem solving and Planning in Government and Industry"

4/20 BGCC 6 " Uses of the Imagination"

SG VII "How to Think with Games by Designing Them"

4/23 BGCC 7 "Crafting the Civic Culture"

Through International Nongovernmental Organizations"

Reading on the Evolution of Cooperation

Reading from Ludwig Wittgenstein's PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS

4/27 BGCC 8 "Peace Practice: The Craft and Skills of Doing Peace"

Reading from Eric Berne's GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

4/30 First evening session of IWWW workshop

5/1 Second evening session of IWWW workshop from 6:30-9:30

5/2 Final daylong session of IWWW workshop from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm - may be followed by a party

5/4 LEARNING CAPITALIST CULTURE (LCC) "Introduction" and "1. The Civil Rights Movement Comes to Town"

NO CONTEST (NC) "1. The 'Number One' Obsession"

"The Moral Equivalent of War" by William James

5/7 LCC 2 "The Great American Football Ritual"

NC 2 "Is Competition Inevitable?"

SG VII "How to Evaluate the Cost-effectiveness of Games"

5/11 LCC 3 "Finding an Identity in the Social Status Scene"

NC 3 "Is Competition More Productive?"

5/14 LCC 4 "Working and Playing Around in the Classroom"

NC 4 "Is Competition More Enjoyable?"

5/18 LCC 5 "Looking Back on the 1970's: An Epilogue"

NC 5 "Does Competition Build Character?"

5/21 LCC Appendix A, Part I "Philosophical Foundations"

NC 6 "Against Each Other"

5/25 LCC Appendix A, Part 2 "A Performance View of Class Culture Reproduction in Schools" & "Concluding Remarks"

NC 7 & 9, "The Logic of Playing Dirty" and "Beyond Competition"

5/28 Final Presentations

6/1 Final Presentations

6/4 Final Presentations