

COMM 4963: Understanding Video Games

MidAmerica Nazarene University
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Department of Humanities

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As a Christian community in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, MidAmerica Nazarene University seeks to transform the individual through intellectual, spiritual, and personal development for a life of service to God, the church, the nation and the world.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course introduces learners to a wide variety of video, computer, and digital games (hereafter referred to as “video games”) as a form of communication media within culture. Learners will give special attention to the cultural impact of this medium, using the tools of video game analysis.

OBJECTIVES

- **Literacy Skills:** Learners will develop and use the skills of gaming literacy, including the particular tools of video game media analysis.
- **Theoretical Skills:** Learners will develop and use the theoretical skills of critical thinking about video games while exploring interdisciplinary frameworks from communication, technology, philosophy, cultural studies, psychology, education, the humanities, and religion.
- **Communication Skills:** Learners will use their literacy and theoretical skills to critically describe their own experience with video game play.

FORMAT

This course seeks to teach learners how to understand video games, not only in its content but also in its structure. Thus, this course is structured as a fantasy multiplayer game. You are the players. You will each create an avatar that will represent you in the game.

Imagine this course as an extremely hazardous adventure. You will travel in a small guild party, balanced as closely as possible by your skills and interests. Hopefully, the avatars which you create and the skills sets which you select will support and complement one another. Together, your guild can overcome the challenges that you will face, both natural and unnatural. Luckily, your avatars will gain new skills as they quest throughout the kingdom, delve into dark dungeons, craft artifacts of wisdom and beauty, battle against evil minions, go to war against opposing guilds, and other embark upon other missions.

By the time class begins, you will create and name your avatar. Your next task will be to decide the name of your guild. Guild membership will be determined by final class size. You will begin your journey in the Imperial City, your starting zone. The Guild Hall is the most useful and most frequented site in the Imperial City. However, your journey will soon take you outside of that familiar territory into the unknown reaches beyond.

It is not required to be a master of any particular skill set. Instead, each of you will chart your own path through the course, overcoming obstacles and developing skills with each completed

mission. You would be wise to consult your other guild members in order to coordinate your missions with others.

GRADING PROCEDURE

You will begin on the first day of class as a Level One avatar. Level Twenty is the highest level you can achieve. Your class letter grade will be determined by your final level. **You must finish at Level Ten or higher in order to earn a minimum passing grade of D-.**

Observant players will note that the experience point (XP) requirements for Level One through Level Eight are apportioned at irregular intervals. In contrast, the XP requirements for Level Nine through Level Twenty are apportioned at normal intervals for a traditional grading scale.

Level	Title Earned	XP
Level Twenty	High Lord	1000
Level Nineteen	Lord	930
Level Eighteen	Champion	900
Level Seventeen	Hero	870
Level Sixteen	Master	830
Level Fifteen	Liberator	800
Level Fourteen	Crusader	770
Level Thirteen	Sentinel	730
Level Twelve	Steward	700
Level Eleven	Specialist	670
Level Ten	Technician	630
Level Nine	Hunter	600
Level Eight	Vigilante	500
Level Seven	Explorer	400
Level Six	Pathfinder	310
Level Five	Apprentice	220
Level Four	Seeker	140
Level Three	Wayfarer	80
Level Two	Lackey	40
Level One	Noob	0

Your level will be determined by XP on a 1000 XP scale. You gain XP by completing solo and guild missions (assignments) such as questing throughout the kingdom, delving into dark dungeons, crafting artifacts of wisdom and great beauty, battling against evil minions, warring against opposing guilds, etc. **Further details for all missions are available on Moodle—typically in the Guild Hall.**

Some missions are required: these are the foundational path that you must follow. Other missions are optional: you may pursue those paths (or not) at your own discretion. Required missions and optional missions both earn XP. In addition, you will lose XP when you are late to a class session, and you will gain XP at the end of the week depending upon your final rank in the guild (see Leroy Jenkins, below).

The tables below provide the details for each mission. Here's how to read the tables:

- Mission: Is it a solo mission (self-directed work) or a guild mission (group work)?
- Name: What is the name of the mission?
- Description: How do you complete the mission?

- XP Earned: How many points do you earn? All at once, incrementally, or repeatedly?

This table consists of **required missions** that **must** be completed:

Mission	Name	Description	XP Earned
Solo	Skill Set	Submit skill set by 7:00 p.m. 1/13	0 to 10 (one time only)
Solo	Self Intro	Post to Moodle by midnight 1/13	0 to 10 (one time only)
Solo	Avatar	Bring to class completed first day	0 to 15 (one time only)
Solo	Avatar Intro	Tell name and description to class	0 to 10 (one time only)
Solo	Kingdom Quest	Reading / researching Moodle sites	0 to 100 (incremental)
Solo	Dungeon Delving	Playing lab-assigned video games	0 to 150 (incremental)
Solo	Crafting I	Paragraph at the end of the day	0 to 10 (once each day)
Solo	Crafting II	Word journal	0 to 10 (per entry)
Solo	Crafting III	Ten-page video game analysis	0 to 200 (one time only)
Guild	Leroy Jenkins	Peer review (secret ballot)	0 to 5 (once each day)
Guild	Guild Battle	Collaborative test within group	0 to 30 (once each day)
Guild	Guild War	Competitive test between groups	0 to 30 (once each day)

This table consists of **optional missions** that **may** be completed:

Mission	Name	Description	XP Earned
Solo	Beggar's Basket	100% short answer participation	0 or 5 (once each day)
Solo	Bard's Tale	Forum post	0 to 3 (per post)
Solo	Lifeline	Peer assistance	0 to 5 (once each day)
Solo / Guild	Crafting IV	Designing possible Moodle sites	0 to 25 (per submission)
Solo / Guild	Crafting V	ARG proposal	0 to 100 (one time only)
?	?	?	?

This table consists of **XP modifiers** that—when triggered—will affect your grade as follows:

Mission	Name	Description	XP Earned
Solo	Unprepared!	Penalty: tardy to class session	0 to -5 (per tardy)
Solo / Guild	Careless!	Penalty: crafting poorly done	-5% to -15%
Guild	Leroy Jenkins	Award: total / final guild ranking	0 to 50 (at week's end)

*Grading is rigorous. Crafting must be well done: completed thoroughly and carefully, proof-reading of spelling and grammar, etc. Otherwise, XP earned for crafting will suffer deductions.

GOLD PIECES (SKILL POINTS)

During the week, you will earn GP (gold pieces) as well as XP. Whereas XP build toward your final level and course grade, GP build toward in-class purchases that can improve and broaden your skill set: Healer, Paladin, Thief, Warrior, or Wizard. You can find a sample list of in-class purchases at the Guild Hall. Even though you cannot share or pool XP with your guild, you can share or pool GP with your guild. It's up to you: keep your GP for yourself, share them with your guild, or both! XP and GP are normally awarded at the same time: during the public award ceremony as each day begins.

A TYPICAL DAY IN THE GUILD

A typical day begins with a public award ceremony and a guild meeting, followed by some time for solo kingdom questing and an encounter with a talkative old hermit (i.e. the professor). After

lunch, guild members visit a bit more with the old hermit before moving on to solo dungeon delving and crafting. Late in the day, guilds reunite for battle against evil minions and for war against other guilds. As evening nears, guild members vote on the guild leadership, reflect upon the day's events, and slip off to the dungeon for one final solo adventure, finally to return home for the night. The next day will dawn soon enough, and sleep is a ready friend.

HINTS

- Check Moodle often and carefully. The Moodle site will evolve throughout the course, affording new opportunities to earn XP and gain GP.
- Feel free to use hacks—without cheating. A hack consists of legal gaming activities such as calculating and exploiting the most favorable XP earning rates, or sharing insights and knowledge with others about “gaming the system.” A cheat consists of breaking rules, plagiarizing, and other forms of academic misconduct that are governed by university policy. Video game players routinely use hacks to win, but cheating players are often barred from further play. When in doubt, ask the professor. Still in doubt? **DON'T**.
- Late work produces XP penalties. In a one-week course, XP penalties can pile up quickly. Stay on top of all daily tasks and reporting mechanisms.
- Frequent the guild hall. Additional missions await you there. NPCs (non-player character) are yours to hire. Merchants hawk their wares. Experienced travelers will grant advice—for a few coins. Daily in the guild hall, a leaderboard will be posted that indicates the number of students at each Level. This will help you to help track personal progress, particularly in the lower Levels.
- Coordinate your guild activities with care. This course is too massive for any single guild member to master. Working smart means working together.
- Each of you starts at as a Noob (level one). Basically, your grade is an **F** until you earn your way to the higher Levels. You can do it! Don't hesitate to ask questions of each other—or of the professor—in order to start fast and strong. In this class, the only foolish question is an unasked question.
- The professor is the final judge on all XP- and GP-related issues, taking the syllabus into account.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Burnham, Van. (2001). *Supercade: A Visual History of the Videogame Age 1971-1984*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

McGonigal, Jane. (2011). *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.

SPECIAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY

If you need accommodation for special needs or disability, you must speak with the professor. In order to receive modification to any assignment, you will need to register for support through the Kresge Center in Mabee Library.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

Cheating or plagiarism will result in a zero for that specific assignment. A second instance of cheating or plagiarism will result in failure for the course. A third instance of cheating or plagiarism may result in expulsion from the university. The Academic Dean's office tracks instances of cheating and plagiarism. They are cumulative across your course of study at the university.