

MEVIT2725 – Video Games: Aesthetics, Industry and Culture

Evaluation guidelines, autumn 2024

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 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 for both assignments.* Very good papers require the active use of both the textbook and articles. Secondary sources (such as Store Norske Leksikon, Wikipedia, other online sources or other textbooks/articles) 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

Video games and gaming have a multifaceted and creative metaculture. Explain the characteristics and importance of gaming metaculture and productive play, and connect this to significant events and developments in game history. Discuss central opportunities and challenges contemporary metaculture offers for players and the game industry. Use your own concrete examples from different types of content creation, player practices and game industry practices in the discussion.

Gaming metaculture is the culture surrounding games and playing. The textbook specifies *metaculture* as "all the factors beyond the psychological experience of playing, and is defined by a playing community. [...] The metaculture of a game is an array of meanings produced and endorsed by the playing community [...]" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et.al. 2020: 173).

Productive play is the creative activities inspired by games, which is further divided into *instrumental productivity* and *expressive productivity*. The candidate should demonstrate a general understanding of what gaming metaculture and productive play are, various manifestations of gaming metaculture and productive play, and reflect on how and why video games enable such practices. The candidate must connect gaming metaculture to significant game historical developments. Relevant aspects include technological developments, the internet, game communities, multiplayer and social game developments, and various creative and helpful player practices. It is a plus if the candidate can connect this topic to the cultural position of games. The candidate should use most of the paper to discuss and exemplify central opportunities and challenges for both players and the game industry. Relevant aspects include in-game and out-of-game communities, modification of games (modding), player-created fan games, digital genres and experiments (such as Let's Plays, streaming and speedrunning), and economic and copyright issues.

Assignment 2

Assignment 2 offers a choice between *analysis task (a)* and *analysis task (b)*. In *analysis task (a)*, the candidate can choose to conduct either a ludonarrative analysis or a representation analysis of a video game of their own choice. In *analysis task (b)*, the candidate must analyze a multiplayer game (local/online multiplayer) of their own choice. For all 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 conduct a ludonarrative analysis on a mostly non-narrative game), the candidate must convincingly argue for its relevance/appropriateness and why the type of analysis is useful for understanding the game. All analysis tasks require the candidate to formulate a specific research question for the analysis. 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 research question must not be formulated in a way that directs the candidate away from what the assignment requires.

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

Analysis task (a):

Conduct either a ludonarrative analysis or a representation analysis of a video game of your choice:

- **Ludonarrative analysis:** Explain briefly central terms and theories about narratives and storytelling in games. Use these terms and theories to analyze and interpret the relationship between gameplay, aesthetics and narrative elements in your chosen game. Formulate a specific research question for your analysis.

- Representation analysis: Explain briefly central terms and theories about representation and diversity in games. Use these terms and theories to analyze and interpret the relationship between gameplay, aesthetics and representations (e.g. of gender, sexuality, ethnicity) in your chosen game. Formulate a specific research question for your analysis.

Both analysis types require the candidate to discuss the relationship between gameplay, aesthetics and the theme of the analysis. Thus, the candidate must demonstrate knowledge of and ability to use relevant game aesthetic terms, such as game rules and structures, genres, mechanics, interfaces, geography, perspectives, graphical styles, sound and music.

- For a ludonarrative analysis, the following is relevant: definitions of narratives; similarities and differences between games and narratives; Aarseth's ludonarrative model (world, objects, agents and events); narrative mechanics such as cutscenes, characters, branching, choices and quests; emergent narratives and storytelling through landscapes.
- For a representation analysis, the following is relevant: definition and importance of representation; game representation specifics; historical and current representations of gender and sexuality 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):

Analyze and interpret a multiplayer video 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.

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 must 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). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429431791>

Articles

Aarseth, E. (2012). *A narrative theory of games* (FDG '12: Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games, s. 129–133). Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2282338.2282365>

Braithwaite, A. (2016). It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity. *Social Media + Society*, 2(4), 10. <https://doi.org/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. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412011402676>

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

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

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

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

Jorgensen, K. (2019). Newcomers in a Global Industry: Challenges of a Norwegian Game Company. *Games and culture*, 14(6), 660–679. <https://doi.org/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. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012440315>

Prax, P., & Soler, A. (2016). *Critical Alternative Journalism from the Perspective of Game Journalists* (DIGRA/FDG '16: Proceedings of the first International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG, s. 15). Digital Games Research Association. <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/754>

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. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017708936>

McLaren, J. (2023). Towards Representational Adequacy: A Critical Analysis of Transgender Representation in Tell Me Why. *Games and culture*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231176634>

Tompkins, J. E., & Martins, N. (2022). Masculine Pleasures as Normalized Practices: Character Design in the Video Game Industry. *Games and culture*, 17(3), 399–420. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211034760>

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

A (fremragende)

Svarer på problemstillingen. Selvstendige, klare og interessante resonnementer, 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 resonnementer 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 resonnementer. 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 resonnementer, uklar struktur, manglende vurderingsevne og selvstendighet.