



Soupbone Syllabus: Video Games

Adapted from [Soupbone Collective](#) discussions in October 2020
Created by Shawn Coughlin and Margaret Schnabel

Course Description

At the time of discussion, popular games and streaming services have acted as platforms for political activism. Earnings for electronic sports competitions have risen into the millions. Galleries line their walls with glowing computer screens and transform viewers into players through their ludic flirtation: *play me* (many games, we will find, don't play so nice). While these examples speak to the global significance of video games, they often operate on personal, private, and emotional registers as well. For some of us, games are containers for nostalgia better left on the shelf. For others, they are a space for expressing emotions, experiences, and differences. And for many, games represent a hybrid between work and play—skills pay the bills, right? At the risk of sounding cliché, we want to ask: what are games? What is it that they can and cannot be? Who assigns their meaning and limitations, and how are these prescriptions enforced and subsequently violated? Are games making our children gay? What happens in a glitch?

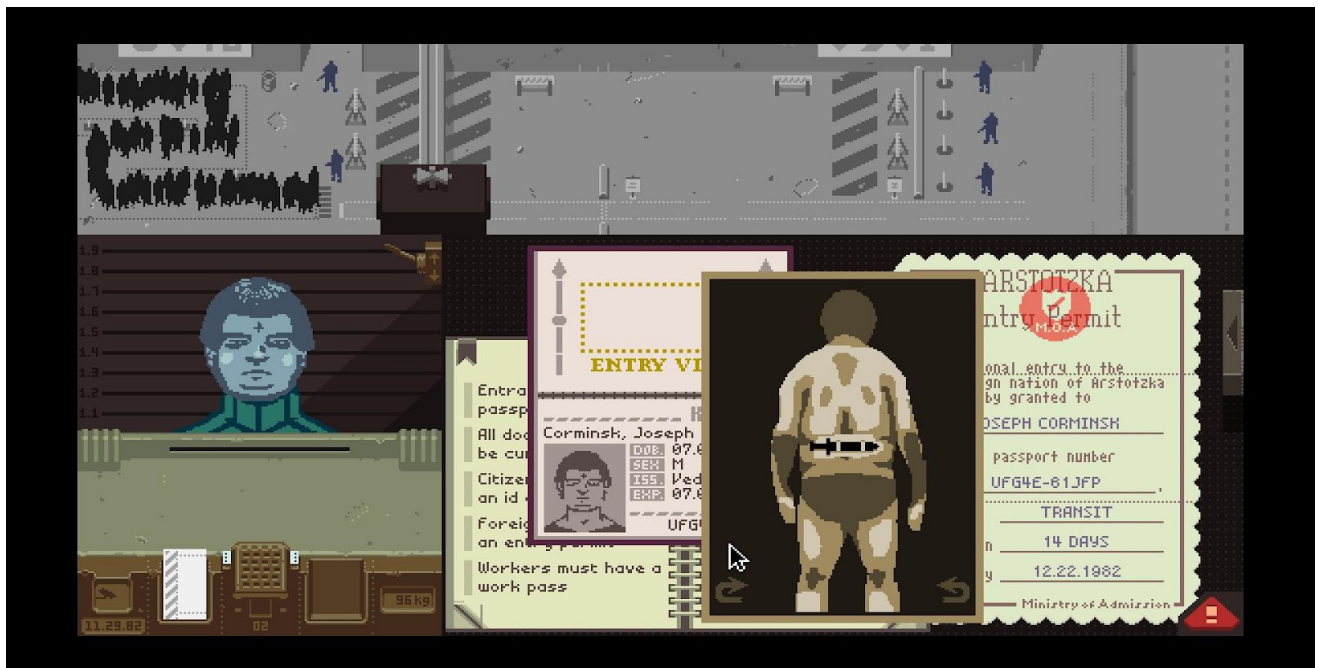
This month is dedicated to video games. Playing, discussing, and theorizing games invites us to explore leisure and labor as well as the bodies and emotions stirred by fantastic games, painful games, boring games, and more. These discussions place an array of game-related media in conversation, including scholarly and popular articles, videos, and of course, video games. We encourage you to read as well as play, play, and play again. Central to the discussion of video games is the experience of playing and touching them, thereby (dis)engaging with their interfaces, stories, and themes through one's own body.

Unit one examines the *pièce de résistance* of beautiful, relaxing games, *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), alongside the paranoid, bureaucratic document thriller, *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013). While the former represents a gendered and racialized ideal for leisurely gaming, the latter straddles players with the anxiety of high pressure, low reward paper pushing. By examining these games alongside relevant scholarship, we prod the ambiguous divide between games and labor and discuss how video games represent, reinforce, and transform gendered prescriptions of work and play. In unit two, we shift our attention to what has been dubbed by Bonnie Ruberg as 'the queer games avant-garde.' Bodies, feelings, and temporality take center stage here as we investigate games by queer

game makers such as Mattie Brice, Robert Yang, Porpentine, and Anna Anthropy. How can games be made and played queerly? How are queer bodies and ways of being translated and mistranslated through game interfaces? Do games act as miraculous ‘empathy machines,’ or are they something more? This unit looks to queer game makers and scholars as an abundant resource for considering the abilities and limitations of games, as well as their exciting trajectories.

In addition to discussion materials, this syllabus provides further resources on games and game studies. We hope you find something to play awhile or a little, quickly or slowly, excited or bored. Meet with friends and play these games together. Try out the odd pleasure of watching games and backseat playing. Torture yourself with a dark room, headphones, and a bootleg copy of *Silent Hill 2* before slipping into a wondrously unproductive waltz through *A Short Hike*. Think with your body and your feelings. Allow yourself to laugh alone, read dialogue out loud, and toss controllers wet with tears. We hope that you enjoy these resources, and we thank you for playing.

Labor and Leisure in Video Games: Fragmented Play and Flow



Papers, Please, Lucas Pope, a screenshot of gameplay, 2013

What are the qualities of excellent leisure / Ever play games at work? Video games have been described as a leisure activity devoid of political or social meaning; they are vehicles for fun and catharsis only. Reversing this, we consider the racial and gendered dimensions of leisure and labor in gaming. How do games intermingle leisure and labor? How are different forms of leisure informed by gender and race?

Readings:

- ❑ “In Praise of Idleness” by Bertrand Russell, *Harper’s Magazine*, 1932
- ❑ “No Time to Dream: Killing Time, Casual Games, and Gender” by Braxton Soderman, *Gaming Representation*, 2017
- ❑ “#2 Automatic Manifesto” excerpt from [Ten Manifestos for Groups of No People](#)

Playing:

- ❑ *Journey*, thatgamecompany, 2012 (Available on iOS, PS3/4, Switch, Steam)
- ❑ *Papers, Please*, Lucas Pope, 2013 (Available on Steam)

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you separate leisure and labor?
2. What is the image of leisure that Russell aspires to see realized? How does his description compare to your own definition of excellent leisure?
3. How does *Diner Dash* succeed as well as fail to prioritize, transform, or reinstate the fragmentation of women’s leisure?
 - a. Do you agree with Soderman’s characterization of women’s leisure as fragmentary, or is a different definition needed? Is fragmented leisure inherently problematic?
4. Is leisure always killing time? How does ‘hard-core gaming’ complicate the divide between work and ‘killing time’?
5. Should we categorize *Journey* as a casual or a hard-core game? Does it complicate or overcome this binary?
6. *Journey* is lauded as an ideal in gaming. How is leisure constructed in *Journey*, and what does this say about idealized or ‘universal’ modes of leisure in video games?

Queer Game Studies: Embodiment, Temporality, and Empathy

The image shows a Google Calendar for October 2020. The calendar is viewed in a grid format with days of the week as columns and dates as rows. The events and transactions are as follows:

Date	Event / Transaction
Monday, Oct 27	Pay Loans - Deduct \$60
Thursday, Oct 30	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Thursday, Oct 30	Pay Rent - Deduct \$800
Friday, Oct 31	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Saturday, Oct 3	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Sunday, Oct 4	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Monday, Oct 5	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Tuesday, Oct 6	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Wednesday, Oct 7	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Thursday, Oct 8	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Friday, Oct 9	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Saturday, Oct 10	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Sunday, Oct 11	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Monday, Oct 12	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Tuesday, Oct 13	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Wednesday, Oct 14	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Thursday, Oct 15	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Friday, Oct 16	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Saturday, Oct 17	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Sunday, Oct 18	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Monday, Oct 19	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Tuesday, Oct 20	Pay Cell Phone Bill - Deduct \$80
Wednesday, Oct 21	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Thursday, Oct 22	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Friday, Oct 23	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Saturday, Oct 24	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Sunday, Oct 25	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Monday, Oct 26	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Tuesday, Oct 27	Pay Loans - Deduct \$60
Wednesday, Oct 28	Pay Loans - Deduct \$60
Thursday, Oct 29	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Friday, Oct 30	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol
Saturday, Oct 31	Conference - Must Spend at least \$50 a day in Food and Alcohol

Events shown in time zone: Pacific Time - Los Angeles

Mattie Brice, October 2020 calendar spreadsheet from *EAT*, 2013- present

"How can we hold on to the utopian dimensions of queer possibility and failure without forgetting or acquiescing to the devaluation, marginalization, and exclusion of queer individuals in modern life"
(Tina Takemoto, "Queer Art / Queer Failure", 87)?

Readings:

- "“Loving Father, Caring Husband, Secret Octopus”: Queer Embodiment and Passing in Octodad" by Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 2019
- "Speed Runs, Slow Strolls, and the Politics of Walking: Queer Movements through Space and Time" by Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 2019
- "#1 Virtual Pet Manifesto" excerpt from [Ten Manifestos for Groups of No People](#)

Playing:

- Sabbat*, ohnopproblems, 2013
- With Those We Love Left Alive*, Porpentine
- EAT*, Mattie Brice, 2013
- Empathy Game*, Anna Anthropy, 2015

Watching:

- ❑ ["Human Angle: Queer Games: The Secret Avant Garde of Videogames,"](#) Polygon, 2013
- ❑ ["Super Mario 64 Speedrun,"](#) Dowsky, 2019

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the connection between the player's body and Octodad's awkward body based on? Absurd difference? Empathy? Mutual understanding or care?
2. Ruberg focuses on the relationship between a queerly designed interface and player's bodies. She emphasizes gaming's ability to translate queer experiences of time and embodiment through their systems. Where does this leave the bodies of creators? Why would we consider the bodies of creators when interpreting queer gameplay?
3. What opportunities or difficulties could *Octodad* offer queer players?
 - a. What are the positives and negatives of *Octodad*'s homonormativity?
4. How is embodiment deployed in games like *Sabbat* and *With Those We Love Alive*? Whose body is being evoked and how? How are bodies treated? How do the interfaces of these games influence, limit, or expand embodied experiences?
 - a. What is the relationship between gaming bodies and the bodies of players?
5. How is temporality represented in games like *Radiator 2* and *EAT*?
 - a. How does *EAT* complicate the divide between "chrononormativity"/"repo time" and Ruberg's description of queer temporality?
6. How do we feel about characterizing non-normative game time and space as a kind of queer failure?
7. How do walking simulators and meta-gaming practices like speedrunning expand traditional notions of what makes games valuable?
 - a. Why is speedrunning offered praise in gaming communities while 'walking simulators' fight for their chance at legitimacy?

Action Items:

- ❑ Think of your favorite childhood game. Reconnect with this game either through consoles or emulators. How does play hold up?
- ❑ Make a game! Experiment with online game making tools like Twine.
- ❑ Read gaming journalism.
- ❑ Try out meta-gaming practices like speed running and modding. Make your own by imagining new rules and win states for your favorite games.
- ❑ Watch a 'play through' or live streaming event.

- ❑ Play queer games and support their creators. Too often, these games are released for free and circulate outside of their creator's control. Supporting these game makers is a critical component for transforming the gaming industry.
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Academic Books, Articles, and Journals:

- Aevee Bee, "[Towards a Cutie Aesthetic](#)", 2014.
- Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*, 2012
- *Game Poems*, 2018
- *Towers Fall Down*, 2015
- Aubrey Anabel, *Playing with Feelings: Videogames and Affect*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- Bonnie Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games*, 2020
- "Playing to Lose: Burnout and the Queer Art of Failing at Video Games", *VGHABQ*, 2019.
- "No Fun: Queer Affect and the Disruptive Potential of Video Games that Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt", *VGHABQ*, 2019.
- Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, *Queer Game Studies*, 2017.
- Christopher Hanson, "Pausing and Resuming", *Game Time*, 2018.
- Irene Chen, "Journey into the Techno-Primitive Desert", *Gaming Representation*, 2017.
- Jennifer Alsever, "[Is Virtual Reality the Ultimate Empathy Machine?](#)" *Wired*, 2015
- Kara Stone, "[Time and Reparative Game Design: Queerness, Disability, and Affect](#)", *Game Studies*, 2018.
- merritt k, Imogen Binnie, and Zoë Quinn, *Videogames for Humans: Twine Authors in Conversation*, 2015
- Mattie Brice, "[Death of the Player](#)," *Alternate Ending*, 2013.
- Naomi Clark and Merritt Kopas, "[Queering Human-Game Relations: Exploring Queer Mechanics and Play](#)," Queer Games Conference, 2015.
- Nathan Schmidt, [Surrealist Games with Mind-Expanding Aims](#), *Gamers with Glasses*, 2020
- Robert Yang, "[Notes on Sex Consent and Intimacy in Games and Tech](#)", 2014.
- Tina Takemoto, "Queer Art / Queer Failure", *Art Journal*, 2016.
- Teddy Pozo, "[Queer Games After Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft](#)", *Game Studies*, 2018.
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Videos:

- Chris Milk, [How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine](#), TED, 2015

Whitney Pow, [The Glitch: Queer and Transgender Video Game History](#), MAGFest, 2020

Related Games:

Her Story (Sam Barlow, 2015); *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (Anna Anthropy, 2013); *Radiator 2* (Robert Yang, 2016); *Howling Dogs* (Porpentine); *Their Angelical Understanding* (Porpentine); *Mainichi* (Mattie Brice, 2016); *fOw* (thatgamecompany, 2006); *Flower* (thatgamecompany, 2009); *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016); *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2011); *Desert Bus* (Absolute Entertainment, 1995); *Depression Quest* (Zoë Quinn, 2013); *Gone Home* (Steve Gaynor, 2013); *EMPATHY MACHINE* (merritt k, 2014); *dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012); *Curtain* (Llaura Dreamfeel); *Lieve Oma* (Florian Veltman, 2016); *Consentacles* (Naomi Clark, 2018).