

# New Course in Game Study – Critical Play

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I'll be offering this class in Spring 2022 as a subtitled section of English/Film Studies 394, Theories of Mass Culture. Like my other undergraduate classes, it will be online and primarily asynchronous -- with options for synchronous involvement (see below).

## Concept

This class meets a specific need. My other two game-related classes, Game Culture and Film and Game, don't do much with active, shared play. Meanwhile, for the last five years graduate students in English and Anthropology have been livestreaming analog and digital play on the Serious Play channel of Twitch.tv. This class taps that activity and expertise, alternating the usual critical discussion of games with streaming sessions (and possibly other broadcast events) hosted by graduate researchers. You are invited to join me in those sessions as an active participant.



## How it will work

Departing from the title-of-the-week model of my other classes, we will instead spend two weeks on selected games or topics. The first week will feature gameplay video, critical readings, and discussion as in my other classes. In the second week, one of the researchers from Serious Play will host a livestreaming session of our chosen game(s). You may attend this session and take part via chat – Twitch is accessible to anyone with an internet connection, and you do not need to own the featured games. The session will be recorded and posted for those who cannot attend live. Part of your course grade will involve written responses to the streaming sessions.

Other assignments for this class will probably include two papers or projects. One may be a critical essay on a game of your choosing, or a topic related to the art of games. The other may ask you to address questions about live streaming or shared play generally. For both these assignments, you may either write the script for a podcast/video or produce the media object itself. I may suggest other non-paper alternatives as well, including the option to produce your own streaming session. As in all my online classes, you will have a dedicated week to work on each assignment.

## Theme and focus: critical play

*Critical Play* is the title of a 2009 book by Mary Flanagan, an acclaimed game designer and researcher who is now a distinguished professor at Dartmouth College. Once upon a time, Dr. Flanagan was an undergraduate at UWM. If all goes well, she'll be coming to the Peck School of the Arts for a lecture during the term.

For Flanagan, critical play and "radical game design" are ways to use games as cultural interventions. Flanagan urges us to take games apart and creatively re-interpret them, to play with and against rules. Her famous gallery exhibition, *Giant Joystick* (pictured on the first page), turns the handheld game controller into a gigantic lever that can be properly operated only by several people working together – a conceptual blueprint for this class. The course invites you to apply this kind of thinking, both in reflection and active play. It asks you to think radically about how play itself can be a critical practice.



### **What this course could offer**

If you join the streaming sessions, even if you can only respond in writing, you will hopefully find a place in a *community of play*. Such communities are essential to a deep understanding of games and play. Bringing in graduate researchers also broadens the generational scope. I am, after all, an old digital immigrant. Like you, the graduate students are native to these spaces – though you may also find their understanding of games differs from yours in ways that lead to dialogue. I also hope the course gives some of you an opening to work with expressive forms other than traditional writing. Above all, this class should give us all a chance to *play for a change*. (Take that phrase however you like.)

### **Details**

Probably no required textbook, with readings online and in PDF. No game purchases required. You will need the same level of computing and internet access as for any online course. Because I need to coordinate with streaming hosts, I probably won't have a syllabus until late in 2021.

Feel free to contact me, [moulthro@uwm.edu](mailto:moulthro@uwm.edu), if you have questions.