ENGL-294: Introduction to Games Studies - Course Syllabus

Spring 2020
Instructor: R. Travis Morton
Contact E-Mail: rtmorton@uwaterloo.ca
Office Hours: TBD

Course Description

Hello and welcome to English 294! This course is an introduction to games studies, a relatively new academic field in which we will be looking at play as a social function, and games as social texts. Games take on many forms, but in order to understand them as texts, we must take the time to explore those forms in detail and grasp what characterizes the various kinds of activities we undertake to play them. This class will build on the work of scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Johann Huizinga to establish the role of play and games in cultural literacy, and how engagement with public texts like these establishes a narrative context for historical social practice. This course will also incorporate the work of scholars such as Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Michael Warner to explore the socio-cultural functions of play and storytelling in order to establish what we do with games. The course will also reflect on several more contemporary games scholars such as Janet Murray, Jesper Juul, Jane McGonigal, and James Newman to give us particular insight into modern game-forms, their broader cultural impact, and their social functions. Ultimately, this course has two primary lessons to impart:

1) **Games are narratives.** This means that they are stories we tell, and they command a certain degree of cultural literacy in order to be understood and engaged with, and they in turn reinforce that cultural literacy when we do so.

2) **Games are about community.** As with most acts of narration, to play is to engage actively with one another and to play by the same rules together as a form of socio-cultural praxis.

I’m certain that many of the names and concepts I’ve just described will be unfamiliar to most of you, and that is okay. It is important that I spell out what we’re doing ahead of time so that you aren’t blindsided by the things we will go into. What I can tell you is that while play itself may be non-serious, the study of games is, and it is my goal that this course be both challenging and rewarding for you. Rest assured, I want you to succeed, and I will be here to talk with you and help you understand more if you need it!

Please be aware, I do try to be as complete and explicit as possible in my syllabi, but this is entirely to make the implementation of the course much simpler, as we will have this comprehensive point of reference to guide your progress. I do not wish to occupy more mental energy than is necessary in this course, so bear with me if the syllabus is a little lengthy—it’s just to make the rest of the course easier on you!

Expectations

Each week, students are expected to have played a game and read a number of short passages made available to you online through the LEARN system. The bulk of the time you
will be expected to put into this class will be in playing games in preparation for that week, and thinking critically about them while you do so. With the readings done and the game we are considering that week having been played, you will then listen to a recorded lecture in which I will review various aspects of those games we have played and the texts you will have read from. These lectures will be posted on Monday.

Also on Monday of each week, you will be expected to reflect upon and answer three game questions to do with the game you will have played, of which you will be required to answer two. These responses will be due by the end of the following Wednesday. These will both test your familiarity with the game, and encourage a degree of reflection on its themes based on the texts you have read in conjunction with that game. To help you in this, I suggest doing the readings first, then playing the game soon afterward so you will be primed to spot some of the features those readings illuminate, and you will have more to say in response to the game questions. On Thursday nights, you will be given access to a set of three discussion questions, of which you will be required to generate either one original post and respond to two of your classmates' original responses, or you can generate two original posts to two different questions. You will be expected to have posted your responses by the end of the following Monday. To summarize, you will be graded on 4-5 posts you will make each week: 2 individual answers to content-related questions, and 2-3 discussion posts between you and your classmates.

All of this might seem complicated but aside from playing games, none of these activities should occupy a great deal of your time. While the context in which we discuss and write about games can be challenging, the playing itself is fun!

Mark Breakdown

Your grade breakdown is as follows:

Weekly Game Questions - 15%
Discussion Posts - 25%
Review Essay - 10%
Argumentative Essay - 15%
Final Project - 25% (Details TBD)
Participation - 10%

Assignments

1) Weekly Game Questions: On Monday of each week, you will be asked to answer two of three questions to do with the content of the game you will have played for that week, due by the end of Wednesday. Each answer must be at least 150 words in length, but you are free to go longer. These questions will be both to test your knowledge of the game and to encourage you to reflect upon the themes discussed in the readings for that week as they pertain to the game you have played. These are to be answered independently, and recorded in a document no more than one page in length, complete with your name, the date, and a title for that week with the specific questions you are answering indicated. That document will then be submitted to that week’s assignment dropbox. I will be getting a lot of these, and expect those details to be there so I can keep them all
sorted--please ensure you have those things, or your answers not be accepted for that week! Each of your answers will be given a mark out of 2.

2) **Discussion Posts:** On Thursday of each week, there will be three discussion questions posted in that week's discussion forum. There, you will be expected to do one of two things: Either A) Answer two of the questions as original posts, or B) you will answer one of those questions as an original post, and reply to two of your classmates' posts. You can reply to another of your classmates' replies if you like, but any interactions with your classmates are to be respectful. You can disagree, absolutely, and you can certainly ask questions of them, but you must be respectful if you hope to gain full marks! Keep in mind also that even your replies must demonstrate a degree of engagement with the original topic in order to obtain top marks. It is good of you to be complimentary, but be specific about what you agree with or disagree with! That will ensure the conversation is able to continue. It will also ensure that you will benefit from each other's insights. This is a significant part of the communal aspects of play! Keep in mind that insight carries significantly greater weight than provocativeness. These will be due by the end of the following Monday, and will be given a summative grade out of 5.

3) **Review Essay:** You will be expected to write a review essay of 1500 words or more on a game of your choosing, subject to my approval at least two weeks prior to the date of submission. Your essay must reflect upon at least two of the broader themes we have discussed in class, with reference to at least two of the theorists or texts we have studied. I am looking for something more than a thesis saying “this game is good/bad”. One sign that you are on the right track is that the thesis you develop makes a claim that demonstrates your opinion without explicitly stating so. For example, I might argue that “Valve’s Portal is an excellent game,” or I could argue that “Valve’s Portal provides players with an excellent example of unreliable narration when it instills a false sense of security within the puzzle-platforming genre. It is only through subtle cues that the player is meant to progressively question their virtual enslavement by a sadistic mechanical voiceover mechanism.” The latter of these is a justified and arguable perspective, and that is what I’m looking for. Success in this assignment will require that you demonstrate A) an understanding of how game texts function, B) reading comprehension, and C) your adhering to a formal essay format.

4) **Argumentative Essay:** You will be expected to submit an essay in response to one of four essay questions I will provide you with. This assignment will adhere to formal essay standards, and must present an answer to one of those essay questions in the form of a clearly articulated and focused argumentative thesis, followed by argumentative paragraphs, supported by examples from games and texts you cite. You are free to use examples from the texts and games we have studied in class, but they must be cited properly. The essay must be at least 2000 words, and must provide at least 5 credible sources in a works cited section at the end of the essay, adhering to MLA citation standards. Always remember (but particularly for this assignment) there is a difference between an opinion and an argued perspective. The latter is clear and fully justified by evidence you provide. Opinions are often thought of as subjective and therefore unimpeachable. While there is some measure of relativity that applies to differing perspectives, opinions are only as valuable as their justification, as they are supported by clear and definitive evidence. Often times, evidence can be interpreted such that it supports different, even opposed conclusions. This is how we arrive at differing, yet fully justified and argued perspectives--but do not mistake these for subjective "differences of opinion"--they are comparable, measurable, and one can easily be shown to be better supported by evidence than the other. It is always going to feel like a risk to take a stand
and argue a perspective on certain matters, but unlike an argument on Reddit, you needn't steel yourself for counterarguments by the uninformed--I am your audience, I know the material, and it is part of my mandate to treat both you and your arguments with the dignity you deserve, and to be constructive. As I am wont to repeat many times: I want you to succeed and will be doing everything in my power to help you do so, provided you are trying in good faith to succeed yourself!

5) **Final Project:** The details of this project are dependent on a number of variables that are, at the time of writing, unresolved. You will be updated on this assignment within the first couple weeks of class, and provided with an assignment sheet.

6) **Participation:** While there will not be any in-class participation, the final 10% of your grade will be based on a measure of your ability to engage with others in the discussion forums, your regular engagement with your classmates and provided class material. This grade will represent how much you're demonstrating what you have learned in previous materials, for example, by demonstrating your understanding of themes discussed in the lecture by incorporating those themes into your essays.

### Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Readings/Games</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: May 11th</td>
<td>The Play Function</td>
<td>Huizinga, Salen and Zimmerman  &lt;br&gt; Free Play</td>
<td>Game Questions: &lt;br&gt; Due May 13th  &lt;br&gt; Discussion Posts: &lt;br&gt; Due May 18th</td>
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<td>2: May 18th</td>
<td>The Rules of Law</td>
<td>Huizinga, Anderson  &lt;br&gt; Papers, Please</td>
<td>Game Questions: &lt;br&gt; Due May 20th  &lt;br&gt; Discussion Posts: &lt;br&gt; Due May 25th</td>
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<td>3: May 25th</td>
<td>My Poker Face</td>
<td>McGonigal, Warner  &lt;br&gt; Poker</td>
<td>Game Questions: &lt;br&gt; Due May 27th  &lt;br&gt; Discussion Posts: &lt;br&gt; Due June 1st &lt;br&gt; <strong>Review Essay:</strong> &lt;br&gt; <strong>Due June 1st</strong></td>
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<td>4: June 1st</td>
<td>Statecraft and Strategy</td>
<td>Peterson  &lt;br&gt; Chess</td>
<td>Game Questions: &lt;br&gt; Due June 3rd  &lt;br&gt; Discussion Posts: &lt;br&gt; Due June 8th</td>
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<td>5: June 8th</td>
<td>Fantasy and Folklore</td>
<td><em>Dungeons and Dragons</em></td>
<td>Game Questions: &lt;br&gt; Due June 10th  &lt;br&gt; Discussion Posts: &lt;br&gt; Due June 15th</td>
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<td>Date</td>
<td>Reading Material</td>
<td>Game</td>
<td>Assignments</td>
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<td>6: June 15th</td>
<td>Meaning and Monopoly</td>
<td>Civilization</td>
<td>Game Questions: Due June 17th</td>
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<td>7: June 22nd</td>
<td>Reactions and Renaissance</td>
<td>SimCity 2000</td>
<td>Game Questions: Due June 24th</td>
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<td>Discussion Posts: Due June 22nd</td>
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<td>8: June 29th</td>
<td><em>H. Ludens and the Machine</em></td>
<td>Murray Return to the Obra Dinn</td>
<td>Game Questions: Due May 24th</td>
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<td>Discussion Posts: Due July 2nd</td>
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<td>9: July 6th</td>
<td>I See Myself In the Pistol Smoke</td>
<td>Rehak, Newman Bioshock: Infinite</td>
<td>Game Questions: Due July 8th</td>
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<td>Discussion Posts: Due July 13th</td>
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<td>Discussion Posts: Due July 20th</td>
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<td>11: July 20th</td>
<td>Alone in the Dark</td>
<td>Silent Hill 2</td>
<td>Game Questions: Due July 22nd</td>
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<td>Discussion Posts: Due July 27th</td>
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<td>12: July 27th</td>
<td>You Don’t Matter: Survival and Prosperity</td>
<td>Subnautica</td>
<td>Game Questions: Due July 29th</td>
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<td>Discussion Posts: Due August 3rd</td>
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<td>13: August 3rd</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>Final Project: Due August 5th</td>
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**Policies**

*Formatting*
Each of your written assignments should be double-spaced, in a legible 12 pt. font. Assignments should have page numbers (pagination) in the top right of the page. They should also have a byline on the first page of the assignment in the top left corner. That means that your first page should have a small, single-spaced series of lines in the top left corner that look like this:

ENGL-294
Leon Kennedy
#00085941
Review Essay - Perspective and the Other in Resident Evil 4
22 June 2020

That’s the course code, followed by your name, your student number, the title, and the date. When the essay then begins, it’s double spaced and in proper paragraph structure. I am fine with different file formats, but not google docs or another cloud editing equivalent, as they do not tend to allow downloading and reformatting. The file names must be in the following format:

Kennedy, Leon - Review Essay.DOCX

That’s last name, comma, first name, space-dash-space, assignment name. This might not seem like a big deal, but it is, as it helps me keep you all accounted for and gets assignments back to you quite a bit faster. When you are submitting your assignments, please do so in the assignment dropbox on LEARN.

**Late Assignments**

Where it is not specified otherwise, assignments are due at 11:00 PM on the due date listed. Late assignments will be penalized at a rate of 5% per day. Extensions may be discussed with me with reasonable advance notice and given appropriate circumstances, though I reserve the right to request proof of any such mitigating circumstances. Please don’t hesitate to ask, I want to make sure you have the opportunity to hand in something you’re happy with, and if that means an extra day or two, I’m usually amenable to it.

**Contact**

I am always available to field any questions or concerns you may have via email. I maintain a schedule policy about emails. I generally only check email once a day, and typically not during weekends or holidays. This is a policy I maintain based on Marxist philosophical praxis. There is a big difference between being 'on call' and 'off the clock', and the constant pressure to monitor email effectively puts both you and me into a state of stressful hyper vigilance. I believe it is unreasonable to ask this of you or of myself. I encourage you to do the same! This may result in your experiencing some issue with your assignments, class, etc. that occur during times that I am unavailable. In those instances, go ahead and email me as usual, and I will retroactively accommodate you. Just do your best to respect deadlines, and I will do all I can to help make things easier--this policy will not impede your ability to succeed in this course.
Marking and Feedback

Assignments in the arts do not often possess a concretized idea of a perfect score in which you have done all that is theoretically required, and made no errors. There are frequently criteria, about which we attempt to be clear as instructors, but it can rarely be easily said that a student has or has not embodied them perfectly. This means that as we grade, we build upward, observing what you’ve accomplished and assign a grade as to how much and how well you have developed that which you have been writing. This means that in this class, an 85% on a paper is an excellent grade, and a 95% is almost unheard of. Strive to do as well as you can, but temper your expectations accordingly! Like chess, you can learn to write well, but mastering it takes a lifetime, and even then, you will likely never master it fully.

It is my natural inclination to write a great deal, and given both space and free time, I would write extended monologues to each of you as feedback for your assignments, but this is tremendously taxing and inefficient, so I must exercise brevity. Assignments will most often be given collective feedback detailing where many of the common errors and successes are in the class’ submissions, though I am more than happy to explicate more fully each individual grade with an email request. I do ask that students wait 24 hours after receiving grades to inquire further, and to do so with specific questions in mind. Thank you!

University Policies

Cross-listed courses
Please note that a cross-listed course will count in all respective averages no matter under which rubric it has been taken. For example, a PHIL/PSCI cross-list will count in a Philosophy major average, even if the course was taken under the Political Science rubric.

Academic Integrity
Academic Integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. See the UWaterloo Academic Integrity webpage for more information.

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. Check the Office of Academic Integrity for more information. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Undergraduate Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline. For typical penalties check Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties.

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70 – Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4. When in doubt, please be certain to contact the department’s administrative assistant who will provide further assistance.
Appeals: A decision made or penalty imposed under Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances (other than a petition) or Policy 71 - Student Discipline may be appealed if there is a ground. A student who believes he/she has a ground for an appeal should refer to Policy 72 - Student Appeals.

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

Note for students with disabilities: The AccessAbility Services office, located on the first floor of the Needles Hall extension (1401), collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the AS office at the beginning of each academic term.

Mental Health Support
All of us need a support system. The faculty and staff in Arts encourage students to seek out mental health support if they are needed.

Note: Due to COVID-19 and campus closures, services are available only online or by phone.

On Campus
• Counselling Services: counselling.services@uwaterloo.ca / 519-888-4567 ext. 32655
• MATES: one-to-one peer support program offered by Federation of Students (FEDS) and Counselling Services
• Health Services Emergency service: located across the creek form Student Life Centre Off campus, 24/7
• Good2Talk: Free confidential help line for post-secondary students. Phone: 1-866-925-5454
• Grand River Hospital: Emergency care for mental health crisis. Phone: 519-749-4300 ext. 6880
• Here 24/7: Mental Health and Crisis Service Team. Phone: 1-844-437-3247
• OK2BME: set of support services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning teens in Waterloo. Phone: 519-884-0000 extension 213

Full details can be found online on the Faculty of Arts website
Download UWaterloo and regional mental health resources (PDF)
Download the WatSafe app to your phone to quickly access mental health support information

Territorial Acknowledgement
We acknowledge that we are living and working on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (also known as Neutral), Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes ten kilometres on each side of the Grand River.
For more information about the purpose of territorial acknowledgements, please see the CAUT Guide to Acknowledging Traditional Territory (PDF).

On a personal note, while I think on balance it is better to include such statements than it is to keep silent about critical Canadian history, particularly for the sake of those students that might otherwise be unaware of the lasting cultural tensions in this country, it is also possible that, for the above peoples, this statement might be seen as adding insult to injury. I’m afraid I have no resolution to offer, other than to acknowledge this Catch-22, and to encourage that students seek out more information on the ongoing epidemic of MMIW in particular for themselves.

Academic freedom at the University of Waterloo  
Policy 33, Ethical Behaviour states, as one of its general principles (Section 1), “The University supports academic freedom for all members of the University community. Academic freedom carries with it the duty to use that freedom in a manner consistent with the scholarly obligation to base teaching and research on an honest and ethical quest for knowledge. In the context of this policy, 'academic freedom' refers to academic activities, including teaching and scholarship, as is articulated in the principles set out in the Memorandum of Agreement between the FAUW and the University of Waterloo, 1998 (Article 6). The academic environment which fosters free debate may from time to time include the presentation or discussion of unpopular opinions or controversial material. Such material shall be dealt with as openly, respectfully and sensitively as possible.” This definition is repeated in Policies 70 and 71, and in the Memorandum of Agreement, Section 6.

About Me

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Waterloo. I have been a TA and adopted various roles in teaching for eight years now, and have taught several courses in Shakespeare, Business Communications, and introductory English Writing as well. I have taught Introduction to Game Studies in the past, and I have also taught Fantasy Literature as well. My areas of study include Discourse and Text Analysis, Games, Folklore, Shakespeare, and American Literature. I am thirty-five years old (updating this paragraph every year feels like watching grains of sand in my life’s hourglass and is mildly terrifying), and am native to Southern Ontario, born and raised in Whitby, having completed my undergraduate degree and my MA at Trent University in Peterborough. I am usually longwinded, though I consider it respectful to be as candid and clear as I can be. Foremost as an instructor I try to be respectful, polite, and to possess and demonstrate integrity as much as possible. My interests include reading and writing, of course, on all kinds of subjects, but I also enjoy fine dining and like to experiment with cooking. I like trying interesting scotch and beer, painting, and I very much enjoy games of all kinds as well.

While I consider myself a leftist Marxist, to the best of my ability my views will not influence how I assess what you write about, positively or negatively. It is about how you argue, not what you argue for, and I encourage you to keep this in mind. Your position on something doesn’t earn or deduct you anything, only your argumentation. My pedagogical philosophy is built upon embracing both the online classroom and my interactions with you as a contact zone for you—a place in which you will likely encounter new concepts and ideas and in which you must work with others that may or may not agree with you to
**develop your understanding.** This means I consider this online space a classroom, and a challenging environment. I expect that anything you do not understand you will ask about, or use what resources are at your disposal to try to understand. I will also always take your questions seriously and treat them with respect, as nothing should make you look or feel stupid in a classroom--only challenged. Classrooms are mediated spaces, but they are not "safe" spaces, per se. They are places to challenge and adapt, because that is what it means to learn.

As a final note, I designed this course with a physical classroom in mind, and it has taken some effort to adapt it to an online format in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will have an impact in diminishing our level of contact with one another. Keep this in mind that this kind of asymmetric communication removes access to three critical aspects of engaging with others: body language, tone, and most importantly, time. What people say in one moment is a product of that moment--it reflects their relative fatigue, hunger, emotional state, etc., and this can influence how we interact. Mitigating these limitations will likely be the work of a lifetime for those of us coming of age with the Internet, and we all have yet to fully adapt, much less understand what its impacts will be. I can’t present perfect solutions to these challenges, but I will be doing everything I can to restore and maintain as much of our communicative capacity as possible, for instance, by responding to emails with audio files that I have recorded, for example, so that you might hear tone and intuit body language.
ENGL-294 Reading List

In Games Studies, the required texts can cost a lot. I have done what I can to choose games that are neither prohibitively expensive, nor difficult to obtain. I expect that you will make good efforts to play the games on this list. There are ways to make things easier on you, however. First, I have ensured that any reading you must do is available online as excerpts rather than have you obtain and read the entire book. That said, I do recommend acquiring and reading them—they have a great deal to teach you. In the interest of cutting costs, you might choose to split game purchases, trade them on the Steam client for discounts, but ultimately you are encouraged to find and play these games by any means you have available to you. As a last resort only, you can also watch "Let's Play" videos of many of the games to at least familiarize yourselves with the game’s exegesis. These games depend upon a certain degree of interaction in order to fully grasp what it is doing, so this really should be a last resort—most of the time you need to feel your own involvement with it! All I ask is that you do your best. Some of the games listed will be largely physical, like chess. There are a multitude of ways to play games like these for free online, such as chess.

Do *NOT* under any circumstances get involved in gambling online--It is highly addictive and predatory, and can do irreparable harm to your financial status and to you personally.

Readings

Most of these will be excerpts made available to you in our online course pack, but these are the titles and authors of the books from which they are taken. Some are more expansive than others, but all of them are excellent books that are worth owning and reading.


Games

Originally in designing this course, I emphasized an even spread of tabletop and online games, and given the online nature of the course, this is among the best approximations I can find. I have attempted to limit my assigning console-exclusive games so as to keep these accessible...
for students. Most are available for Windows and Apple systems relatively cheaply through
Steamp\textsuperscript{2}, which, for the uninitiated, is an online game purchasing client.

3. \textit{Sid Meier’s Civilization}, Microprose, 1991. (Any installment of the series is fine, however.)
4. \textit{SimCity}, Maxis, 1989. (Again, any installment is *probably* fine, but unlike \textit{Civ}, it loses a
little bit of what’s relevant to our purposes over time.)
7. \textit{Silent Hill 2}, Konami, 2001. (This is a Sony Playstation exclusive title.)