



SIERRA ON-LINE: A CRITICAL HISTORY

Instructor: Dr. Jess Morrisette

Email: decafjedi@gmail.com

COURSE DESCRIPTION

An 8-week course exploring the history, design, and cultural legacy of Sierra On-Line, with an emphasis on critical analysis of adventure games.

Founded in 1979 by Ken and Roberta Williams, Sierra On-Line was one of the most influential computer game companies of the 1980s and 1990s. Best known for adventure game series like *King's Quest*, *Space Quest*, *Police Quest*, and *Leisure Suit Larry*, Sierra helped define the genre through its use of graphical interfaces, puzzle-driven storytelling, and cutting-edge multimedia technology. While a rapidly changing marketplace and a series of corporate buyouts effectively dismantled Sierra by 1999, the company's games inspired a generation of adventurers whose fandom, preservation work, and nostalgia continue to shape its legacy today.

ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR

My name is Dr. Jess Morrisette. I earned my MA in Political Science from Virginia Tech and my Ph.D. in Political Science and International Affairs from the University of Georgia. My research focuses primarily on exploring the politics of popular culture and, more specifically, video games. I'm particularly interested in how virtual spaces, game-related media, and gaming culture intersect with real-world issues like gender, sexuality, capitalism, and labor.

Beyond academia, I began creating online content in 1995 by launching Roger Wilco's Virtual Broomcloset, a fan site for Sierra's *Space Quest* series. I'm also the creator of The Video Game Soda Machine Project, an online archive cataloging thousands of virtual vending machines. When I'm not teaching, I can be found streaming adventure games on Twitch, co-hosting *Quest Quest: The Adventure Game Podcast*, or designing my own retro-inspired games, like *Stair Quest* and *Late Last Nite*.

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course, students will be able to...

- Explain Sierra's historical significance in the gaming industry and its contributions to the adventure game genre.
- Apply concepts from the discipline of game studies to understand adventure games.
- Interpret Sierra's games as texts, with an emphasis on critical analysis.
- Use games, manuals, interviews, walkthroughs, and fan materials as primary sources.
- Produce an original analytical or creative project about Sierra's legacy.



REQUIRED TEXTS

- Shawn Mills, *The Sierra Adventure: The Story of Sierra On-Line* (2018).
- Ken Williams, *Not All Fairy Tales Have Happy Endings: The Rise and Fall of Sierra On-Line* (2020).
- Additional readings are listed in the course schedule.

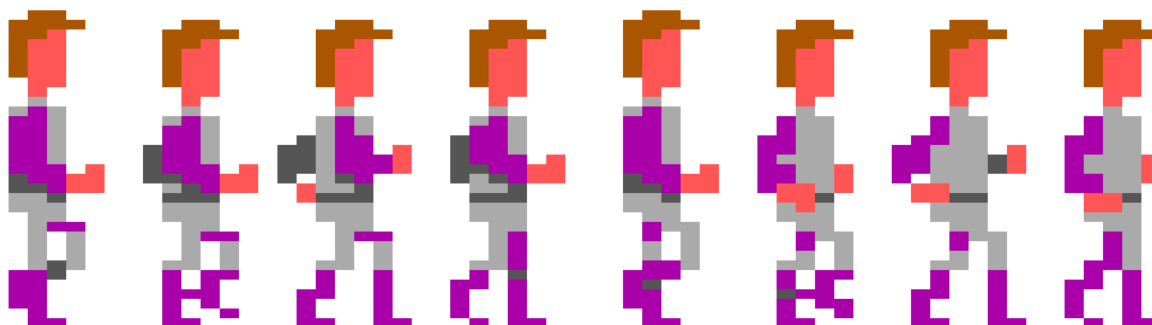
REQUIRED GAMES

- Students will play assigned portions of each of the following games.
 - *Mystery House*
 - *King's Quest* (1984)
 - *Space Quest I* or *Space Quest III*
 - *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*
 - *Police Quest: In Pursuit of the Death Angel*
 - *Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire*
 - *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers*

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING POLICY

Your course grade is calculated based on the following assignments.

25%	Weekly Play Journals	A =	90-100%
20%	Close Play Essay	B =	80-89%
20%	Paratextual Analysis	C =	70-79%
35%	Final Project	D =	60-69%
		F ≤	59%



COURSE POLICIES

- **Walkthroughs:** Students are allowed to access walkthrough and Let's Play videos for help playing the assigned games, but I encourage you to struggle at least a little before searching for solutions for a more authentic experience.
- **Access and Emulation:** Students can purchase all assigned games on Steam, GOG, and other digital storefronts (except for *Mystery House*, which can be downloaded for free). To easily play these games on modern systems, I recommend downloading and installing ScummVM (available online).
- **Content Warning:** Some Sierra games contain dated, offensive, or otherwise harmful depictions of gender, sexuality, race, religion, colonialism, policing, and violence. In this course, we will engage thoughtfully with these games without “giving them a pass” for problematic content.



ASSIGNMENTS

- **Weekly Play Journals:** Students will maintain weekly play journals documenting their experiences playing the assigned games. Entries might include reflections on puzzles, deaths, interface friction, characters, genre conventions, and moments of confusion or surprise. Some questions to ask yourself while writing these journals:
 - How does the interface shape player action?
 - What forms of knowledge or play does the game reward?
 - What kinds of failure does the game produce?
 - What narrative and gameplay techniques does it rely on to tell its story?
 - How does the game represent identity, authority, place, or genre?
- **Close Play Essay:** Students will choose a Sierra On-Line adventure and write an essay (approximately 4–5 pages) analyzing a specific gameplay or narrative element of that game. Some sample topics:
 - Death as comedy in *Space Quest*
 - Procedure and realism in *Police Quest*
 - Gendered humor in *Leisure Suit Larry*
 - Tactical submarine simulation in *Codename: ICEMAN*
 - FMV and player agency in *Phantasmagoria*
 - Edutainment and activism in *EcoQuest*
- **Paratextual Analysis:** Students will write an essay (approximately 3 pages) analyzing a Sierra manual, game box, hint book, magazine, advertisement, catalog, walkthrough, fan site, remake, fan game, or other paratextual material. The essay should explain what the chosen material reveals about Sierra's games, their creators, their intended audiences, and/or their legacy.
- **Final Project:** For their final projects, students may complete one of the following:
 - **Research paper:** Students will select a Sierra-related topic and develop an original research question about it. This research question may focus on a specific game, series, genre, designer, fan project, or Sierra On-Line as a company. The paper (approximately 10 pages) should answer this research question with a clear argument supported by thoughtful analysis and relevant sources.
 - **Video essay:** Students may also choose to submit a 12–15 minute video essay that poses an original research question about Sierra On-Line, its games, or its fandom and addresses it through visual/audio evidence.

- **Game design:** Students can design a short adventure game prototype using Twine or another game engine. They will submit this game along with a 2-page designer's statement that clearly summarizes their creative goals for this prototype and discusses how it draws on (or diverges from) Sierra's approach to adventure game design.



COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introduction to Game Studies and Adventure Games

- Topics
 - What is game studies?
 - What theories and methodologies can we use to study games?
 - What is an adventure game?
 - Quests, puzzles, exploration, and player agency
 - Required reading
 - Salter, "Chapter 2: Adventure Games." Excerpt from *What Is Your Quest?*
 - Keogh, Butt, and Carter, "Chapter 1: Welcome to Game Studies." Excerpt from *Game Studies: A Critical Introduction to the Field*.
 - Nooney, "Let's Begin Again: Sierra On-Line and the Origins of the Graphical Adventure Game"
 - Gilbert, "Why Adventure Games Suck"
 - Required play
 - *Mystery House*
 - Assignments
 - Play Journal 1 due
-

Week 2: A History of Sierra On-Line

- Topics
 - Ken and Roberta Williams
 - From On-Line Systems to Sierra On-Line
 - The rise of the graphic adventure game
 - Technological evolution: parsers, point-and-click interfaces, CD-ROM, and FMV
- Required reading
 - Mills, *The Sierra Adventure*, Chapters 1 and 2
 - Williams, *Not All Fairy Tales Have Happy Endings*, Chapters 1–18
- Required play
 - *King's Quest*
- Assignments
 - Play Journal 2 due

Week 3: Comedy and Parody — *Space Quest*

- Topics
 - Science fiction parody
 - Workplace comedy and reluctant heroism
 - Death as slapstick and gameplay mechanic
 - Metahumor as a storytelling technique
 - Required reading
 - Mills, *The Sierra Adventure*, Chapter 3
 - Williams, *Not All Fairy Tales Have Happy Endings*, Chapters 19–27
 - Cox, “Look in Hole: Gameplay Parody in Sierra’s *Space Quest*”
 - Giappone, “Self-Reflexivity and Humor in Adventure Games”
 - Required play
 - *Space Quest I: The Sarien Encounter* or *Space Quest III: The Pirates of Pestulon*
 - Assignments
 - Play Journal 3 due
-

Week 4: *Police Quest* and Procedural Play

- Topics
 - Procedure as gameplay
 - The limits of realism
 - Police training and professional fantasy
 - The politics of simulated authority
- Required reading
 - Mills, *The Sierra Adventure*, Chapter 4
 - Williams, *Not All Fairy Tales Have Happy Endings*, Chapters 28–30
 - Bogost, “Procedural Rhetoric.” Excerpt from *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*.
 - Cobbett, “*Police Quest* Pretended to Be Serious, But Was Really a Nonsensical Fever Dream”
 - Maher, *The Digital Antiquarian*, “Chief Gates Comes to Oakhurst: A Cop Drama”
- Required play
 - *Police Quest: In Pursuit of the Death Angel*
- Assignments
 - Close Play Essay due
 - Play Journal 4 due

Week 5: *Leisure Suit Larry*, Gender, and Sexuality

- Topics
 - Adult games and moral panic
 - Sexism, parody, and critique
 - Masculinity and sexuality in video games
 - Critically engaging with outdated or problematic games
 - Required reading
 - Maher, *The Digital Antiquarian*, “*Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*”
 - Shaw, “*Leisure Suit Larry*: LGBTQ Representation.” Excerpt from *How to Play Video Games*, ed. Payne and Huntemann.
 - Morrisette, “Passionate Patti and the Politics of Patriarchal Play”
 - Cox, “Women by Women: A Gender Analysis of Sierra Titles by Women Designers.” Excerpt from *Feminism in Play*, ed. Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen.
 - Williams, *Not All Fairy Tales Have Happy Endings*, Chapters 31–36
 - Required play
 - *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*
 - Assignments
 - Play Journal 5 due
-

Week 6: Sierra Visits the Middle East

- Topics
 - Orientalism and fantasy geography
 - Desert cities, bazaars, palaces, and exoticism
 - Sierra and the ludic Middle East
 - Race and ethnicity in Sierra games
- Required reading
 - Said, “Introduction.” Excerpt from *Orientalism*.
 - Al-Rawi, “The Development of Video Game Representations of the Middle East”
 - *Conquests of Camelot* game manual
 - Mills, *The Sierra Adventure*, Chapters 5–8
- Required play
 - *Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire*
- Assignments
 - Paratextual Analysis due
 - Play Journal 6 due

Week 7: What Can *Gabriel Knight* Tell Us About Voodoo?

- Topics
 - Jane Jensen and the literary adventure game
 - New Orleans as setting and mythic space
 - Horror, detective fiction, and research-based narrative
 - Race, religion, Voodoo, and representation
 - Required reading
 - McGee, "Haitian Vodou and Voodoo: Imagined Religion and Popular Culture"
 - Maher, *The Digital Antiquarian*, "Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers"
 - Morrisette, "Werewolves of Bavaria"
 - Mills, *The Sierra Adventure*, Chapters 9–14
 - Required play
 - *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers*
 - Assignments
 - Play Journal 7 due
-

Week 8: Sierra Fandom, Preservation, and Legacy

- Topics
 - Sierra nostalgia and fan memory
 - What happens when a game becomes "retro"?
 - Fan sites, communities, and game preservation
 - Unofficial remakes and fan games
- Required reading
 - Jenkins, "'Get a Life!' Fans, Poachers, Nomads." Excerpt from *Textual Poachers*.
 - Salter, "'Once More a Kingly Quest': Fan Games and the Classic Adventure Genre"
 - Williams, *Not All Fairy Tales Have Happy Endings*, Chapters 37–43.
 - Mills, *The Sierra Adventure*, Chapters 15–17
- Required play
 - Choose any fan remake or original fan game inspired by Sierra
- Assignments
 - Final Project due
 - Play Journal 8 due