



Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization

University of Washington

Department website: <http://depts.washington.edu/nelc/>

DIGITAL MIDDLE EAST

Social Media and Gaming in Iran, Turkey, and Arab Countries

Course Information

Number & Credit: NEAR E 485/585, 5 Credits (VLPA)

Time & Location: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30 pm-3:20 pm

Quarter: Spring 2022

Instructor Information

Name: Mindy Cohoon

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Office Location: Denny Hall TA Loft, 4th Floor

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 1:30 pm-3:20 pm and by appointment

Overview and Course Content

Video games and social media are increasingly part of everyday life, impacting our shared social norms and values across the world. This course explores the socio-cultural relevance and use of social media and video games in the Middle East. It is designed for students to learn about the role of social media in Arab countries, Iran, and Turkey, with specific emphasis the Arab Spring, Gezi Park Protests, and the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran. With special attention, we will examine online communities and the construction of national identities through video games. By examining Middle Eastern digital social phenomenon, we will envision an embodied yet online form of engagement in the making of Middle Eastern communities.

For the first half of the quarter, we will focus on social media. A broad range of topics will be covered, including the public sphere, censorship, diaspora communities, activism, government sanctioned trolling, as well as gender and sexuality in online communities. We will reflect on the state's interest in censorship and authoritarian political culture within these online spaces. Next, we will bridge Middle Eastern social media and gaming with meme culture. During the second half of the quarter, we will focus on games and gaming through frameworks of Islam, identity construction, and digital orientalism.

Learning Objectives

The course will provide the following knowledges for students:

- To provide introductory knowledge on the Digital Middle East and its meanings.
- To show students the important social media trends in the Middle East.
- To assist students in understanding the transformations and disjunctions in Arab, Iranian, and Turkey's social media usage and culture industries.
- To expose students to dominant discourses on the study of social media and video games, ranging from cultural, theoretical, and comparative frameworks.
- To familiarize students on transnational engagement of diaspora communities through social media.
- To critique the role of the culture industry in creating narratives for the state.
- To learn critical thinking skills when using social media, how to blog using WordPress, and video gaming.

Course Structure

Before each class, I will post a short lecture and students will engage in online discussion on Canvas about the materials. Throughout the quarter, students will interact via Twitter weekly on the course readings in class (if the student would prefer a short response each week instead that is an option). This will give students an additional opportunity to interact with their colleagues, and to think digitally yet critically about the Digital Middle East. Classroom time will be used to learn technical skills and integrating course concepts into digital projects. The course will be enriched by two field trips to the Media Arcade for resources on digital access, and lastly, an opportunity to play games at the HUB Gaming Lounge (funded by NELC).

Course Materials and Platforms

This course does not have a textbook. All materials and tutorials will be provided through the Canvas page. Games will be provided to the students.

Social Media Policy

Throughout your time in this class, I will not follow, befriend, or connect with you on social media. I will not monitor, nor will I evaluate your online posts or activity. If you decide to use social media to write about the reading material, I will look at it when you use the course hashtag (#NEARE485). During the first week of class, we will talk about this policy and discuss the importance of online self-representation, privacy, and anonymity, as well as potential online audiences.

Course Assignments

Weekly Twitter Responses and Discussion Boards (55%): you will have opportunities to gain participation points through engaging in class group discussion online and work together to solve digital problems. Once a week, you will contribute to online discussion about the readings and the digital artifacts on Twitter through the course hashtag (#NEARE485). This requires one original post (100 words), and then two response posts to your classmates. If you would prefer to not engage online, you are also able to write a short paragraph. These are due each Tuesday by 11:59 pm, starting with week 2.

Digital Object Essay or Video Essay (20%): the mid-term essay or video is 1,000 words on a chosen digital artifact, which can be either a game, set of memes, or hashtag, pertaining the Middle East. You will write or record a critical essay on the object using course content. The essay is due on 5/6 at 11:59 pm.

Final Essay (30%): The final essay is 3,000 words on a series of games, gaming, or social media phenomenon using methods of either ethnography, comparative analysis, computational social science, or discourse analysis. We will workshop your essay drafts on 5/13. You will also have an opportunity to present in person or record a video essay on your idea in the form of a short lightning talk. For the final product, you may choose to write an empirical essay, or one based on a theoretical topic. This essay is due during finals week on 6/11 by 11:59 pm.

Tentative Weekly Course Schedule

Week 1: Introductions and Contextualizing Online Space

3/30, Course and Syllabus Review

In-Class Excerpt:

- Zayani, Ch 1: “Mapping the Digital Middle East: Trends and Disjunctions” in *Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age* (2018)

4/1, Social Media and the Digital Middle East

Readings:

- Fuchs, Ch. 2: “What is Social Media?” in *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (2013), p. 32-50 skim
- Toska, “Protest Mobilization in the Age of Twitter,” 2015
- Zayani, “Mapping the Digital Middle East: Trends and Disjunctions” in *Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age* (2018), p. 1-31
- Tufekci, Ch. 1: “A Networked Public” in *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017), p. 3-27

Skills Lab: tweeting with purpose and intent.

Week 2: Mediated Social Movements and the Public Sphere through #revolution

4/6, Iran 2009 Green Movement and Turkey’s #occupygezi

Readings:

- Faris and Rahimi, “Introduction” in *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009* (2015), p. 1-5
- Mottahedeh, Ch 1: “HASHTAG: #CNNfail & the slogans of the 2009 Iranian election crisis” in *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life* (2015), p. 1-31
- Yael Navaro-Yashin “Breaking Memory, Spoiling Memorization: The Taksim Protests in Istanbul” (2013), <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/editorial-breaking-memory-spoiling-memorization-the-taksim-protests-in-istanbul>
- Vatikiotis and Yoruk, “Gezi Movement and the Network Public Sphere: A Comparative Analysis in Global Context” (2016), p. 1-12
- Odabash and Reynolds-Stenson, “Tweeting from Gezi Park: Social Media and Repression Backfire” (2018), p. 386-406

Skills Lab:

- Search via Twitter the following hashtags: #occupygezi, #CNNFAIL, and #iranelection, #iranprotests

4/8, The Arab Spring

Readings:

- Peterson, Ch 4: “Mediated Experience in the Egyptian Revolution” in *Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age* (2018), p. 85-108
- Imre and Owen, Ch. 5: “Twitter-ised Revolution: Extending the Governance Empire” in *Social Media and the Politics of Reportage: The Arab Spring* (2014), p. 105-119
- Zayani, Ch 7: “Mediatizing the Revolution: The Appeal of Social Networks” in *Networked Publics and Digital contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia* (2015), p. 168-189
- Kharroub and Bas, “Social Media and Protests: An Examination of Twitter Images of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution” in *New Media & Society* 18.9 (2015), p. 1973-1992

Skills Lab:

- Search via Twitter the following hashtags such as #ArabSpring and #mohammedbouazizi. What are some other important hashtags used for movements?

Week 3: Activism, Censorship, and Diaspora Communities

4/13, Diaspora Community

Readings:

- Akhavan, Ch 1. “Reembodied Nationalism” in *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution* (2013), p. 13-34
- Zayani, Ch 4: “Cyber Activism Comes of Age: Activists, Diasporas, and Networks” in *Networked Publics and Digital contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia* (2015), p. 80-106.
- Moss, “Transnational repression, Diaspora Mobilization and the Case of the Arab Spring” in *Social Problems*, 63.4 (2016), p. 480-498

Skills Lab: Comparing online blogs and social media content.

4/15, Media Censorship and Government Crackdowns

Readings (pick 3):

- Shishkina, Alisa and Leonid Issaev. “Internet Censorship in Arab Countries: Religious and Moral Aspects.” *Religions*, 9 (358) 2018; 2-14. doi:10.3390/rel9110358.
- Tufekci, Ch 2: “Censorship and Attention,” p. 28-48; Ch 9: “Governments Strike Back” in *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017), p. 223-260
- Zayani, Ch. 6 “The Battle over Internet Control: From the Web to the Street” in *Networked Publics and Digital contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia* (2015), p. 131-168
- Khiabany, Ch. 10: “Citizenship and Cyber Politics in Iran” in *Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age* (2018), p. 217-238

Skills Lab: how to blog with WordPress.

Week 4: Online Communities

4/20: Beyond Social Media Movements

Readings (pick 2):

- Maisel, “The Construction of Virtual Identities: Online Tribalism in Saudi Arabia and beyond” in *Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa: Into the New Millennium* (2013), p. 285-300.
- Mohamed, Douai, and Iskander, “Media, Identity, and Online Communities in a Changing Arab World” in *New Media & Society* 21.5 (2019), p. 1035-1042
- Doostdar, “‘The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging’: On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogestan,” *American Anthropologist* 106.4 (2004), p. 651-662
- Atici, “Virtual Communities as a Social and Cultural Phenomenon” in *Journal of Education and Learning* 5.3 (2016), p. 149-158

Skills lab: comparing video blogging with written blogs, and video essay format.

4/22: Gender, Sexuality, and the Digital Divide

Readings (pick 2):

- Serberny, “Women’s Digital Activism: Making Change in the Middle East” in *Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age* (2018), p. 109-124
- Batmanghelichi and Mouri, "Cyberfeminism, Iranian Style: Online Feminism in Post-2009 Iran," in *Feminist Media Histories* 3.1 (2017), p. 50-80
- “Apps and Traps: Dating Apps Must do More to Protect LGBTQ Communities in the Middle East and North Africa” in *Article 19*, <https://www.article19.org/resources/apps-traps-dating-apps-must-protect-communities-middle-east-north-africa/>
- Tzankova, Ch 4: “Affective Politics or Political Affection: Online Sexuality in Turkey” in *Networked Affect* (2015), p. 59-74

Skills lab: and using free software to make videos (Windows PC editor for video essays), VLC Media player, and XMedia Recode.

Week 5: Introduction to Video Games

4/27: Play and Fun as Cultural and Political Phenomenon

Readings:

- Huizinga, Ch 1: “Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon” in *Homo Ludens: A Study of Play-Element in Culture* (1938), p. 1-27
- Bogost, Ch 3: “Fun Isn’t Pleasure, It’s Novelty” and Ch 4: “Play is in Things, Not in You” in *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games* (2016), p. 57-120 (skim for general argument)
- Hoigilt, “The Politics of Fun in Egypt” in *The New Middle East Blog* (2016), <https://newmeast.wordpress.com/2016/03/29/the-politics-of-fun-in-egypt/>.
- Bayat, “Islamism and the Politics of Fun” in *Public Culture* 19.3 (2007), p. 433-459.

- Fadaee, “Ecotours and Politics of Fun in Iran: From Contested State-Society Relations to Emancipatory Nature-Society Relations” in *Sociological Review* 66.6 (2018), p. 1276-1291

Skills lab: learning how to identify and parse out video game mechanics, cultural content, and semiotics in games.

4/29:

Methods for Analyzing Games and Online Communities

Readings:

- Boellstorff, “A Ludicrous Discipline? Ethnography and Game Studies” in *Games and Culture* 1.1 (2006), p. 29-35.
- Caliendo, “Digital Methods for Ethnography: Analytical Concepts for Ethnographers Exploring Social Media Environments” in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 47.5 (2018), p. 551-578.
- Highfield and Leaver, “Instagrammatics and Digital Methods: Studying Visual Social Media, from Selfies and GIFS to Memes and Emoji” in *Communication Research and Practice* 2.1 (2016), p. 47-62.
- Malliet, “Adapting the Principles of Ludology to the Method of Video Game Content Analysis” in *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Research* 7.1 (2007), <http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/malliet>

Visit Media Arcade

Week 6: Culture Industries and Identity Construction through Games

5/4: What is the Culture Industry?

Readings (pick 3):

- Adorno, Theodor W., and Horkheimer, Max. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1977), p. 349–383.
- Hesmondhalgh, Ch. 10 “The Impact of the Internet and Digitalisation on Existing Cultural Industries” in *Cultural Industries* (2013), p. 341-363 (Skim)
- Toker, Cetin, Erdal Yilmaz, and Kursat Cagiltay. “Turkey.” *Video Games Around the World*, edited by Mark JP Wolf; 565-578. MIT Press, 2015.2
- Ahmadi, “Iran,” *Video Games Around the World* (2015), p.
- Kasmiya, “Arab World,” *Video Games Around the World* (2015), p. 29-34
- Sisler, “Digital Heroes: Identity Construction in Iranian Video Games” in *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, (2017)

In-class gaming:

- *Siavosh* (2014)

5/6: Games and Gaming in the Middle East

Readings (pick 2):

- Khoshsaligheh and Ameri, “Video game localization in Iran: a survey of users’ profile, gaming habits and preferences” in *The Translator* (2020), p. 1-19.
- Sisler, “Virtual Worlds and Digital Dreams: Imaginary Spaces of Middle Eastern Video Games” in *Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age* (2018), p. 59-84
- Yilmaz and Cagiltay, “History of Digital Games in Turkey.” *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*. 2005.
- Courmont and Clement. “When Geopolitics Meets the Game Industry: A Study of Arabic Video Games and What They Teach US” in *Hemispheres* Vol.29.1 (2014).
- Amos, “As Saudi Arabia’s Love of Online Gaming Grows, Developers Bloom” in *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/08/10/431241078/saudi-arabias-passion-for-online-gaming>

In-class gaming: *Unearthed: Trail of Ibn Battuta* (2013)

Digital Object Video Essay due 5/6 by 11:59 PM

Week 7: Trolling and Memeing on Social Media and in Video Games

5/11: State Sanctioned Trolling, and Memes

Readings (pick 3):

- Kargar and Rauchfleisch, “State-aligned Trolling in Iran and the Double-Edged Affordances of Instagram” in *New Media and Society* 21.7 (2019), p. 1506-1527
- Yildiz and Smets, “Internet Trolling in ‘Networked’ Authoritarianism: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Tweets by regime Supporters and “Ak Trolls’ in July 2016,” in *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 12.3 (2019), p. 348-368
- Dahdal, “Using Collaborative Gaming to Engage Arab Youth in Cultural Memes,” in the *Journal of Social Media in Society* 5.3 (2016), p. 316-343
- York, “Middle East Memes” in *The Guardian* (2012), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/20/middle-east-memes-guide>
- Selk, “Middle East diplomacy is being done via GIF now: How it’s come to this” in the *Washington Post* (2018), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/06/05/middle-east-diplomacy-is-being-done-via-gif-now-how-its-come-to-this/>

Skills lab: search for memes on Pepe the Frog, and the Middle East. Create own memes on movements based in US socio-cultural contexts.

5/13: Workshop Final Essay

Week 8: Representation of the Middle East in Games

5/18: Digital Orientalism in Games and Gaming

Readings:

- Höglund, “Electronic Empire: Orientalism Revisited in the Military Shooter” in *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 8.1 (2008), <http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hoeglund>
- Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism” in *Games and Culture* 13.5 (2018), p. 504-520
- Sisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games” in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11.2 (2008), p. 203-219

In-class gaming:

- *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (2003)

5/20 Islam in Games

Readings:

- Campbell, Ch 4: “Islamogaming: Digital Dignity via Alternative Storytellers” in *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God* (2010), p. 63-88
- Geraci, Ch 5: “Another Life for Religion” in *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life* (2014), p. 132-169 (focus on Islam section, skim other sections)
- Sisler, “Procedural religion: Methodological reflections on studying religion in video games” in *New Media & Society* 19.1 (2017), p. 126-141
- Sisler, “Video Games, Video Clips, and Islam: New Media and the Communication of Values” in *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption* (2009), p. 231-258.

In-class gaming:

- *Engare* (2017)

Week 9: Presentations

5/25 & 5/27: Final Essay Lightning Talk (Choose: pre-recorded lightning talk or in-person)

Week 10: Wrap Up

6/1: Reflection

6/3: HUB eSports

Week 11: Finals Week

6/11: Final Essay due by 11: 59 pm PST

GRADING SCALE

Grading	Percentage
Participation	25%
Weekly Response Papers	25%
Presentation	10%
Digital Object Paper	10%
Final Project	30%
<i>Total</i>	100%

Letter Grade	Number	Percentage
A	4.0-3.9	100-96%
A-	3.8-3.5	95-89%
B+	3.4-3.2	88-85%
B	3.1-2.9	84-82%
B-	2.8-2.5	81-78%
C+	2.4-2.2	77-75%
C	2.1-1.9	74-72%
C-	1.8-1.5	71-68%
D+	1.4-1.2	67-65%
D	1.1-0.9	64-62%
D-	0.8-0.7	61-60%
E	0.0	≤ 59%