

# Games, Competition, and Play

## Summer 2023 Syllabus

**Room: 320-109**

**Instructor: Nick Sherefkin**

## Description

Dreamed up in the heat of the Cold War, game theory has encouraged generations of strategists in politics, law, the military, and academia to see conflicts as games with rules, players, choices, and payoffs. But game-theoretical situations hardly resemble the games people play in their everyday lives. During this course we study and develop social theory based on how people play games outside of behavior labs and thought experiments. What causes people to join games and how do games keep players engaged? The readings begin with traditional game theory and then expand focus with studies of competitions in settings as disparate as chess, mushroom hunting, schools, and markets.

## Goals

I intend for this course to develop students':

- Skill in modeling social situations as games (defining players, rules, boundaries, relationships, and strategies).
- Knowledge of social science literature about the group-level consequences of competition and play.
- Hypotheses for how changing norms of competitive interaction might influence the culture, hierarchy, and resources of a community.
- Friendship and acquaintance networks—especially in regards to knowing fellow social scientists.

## Assessment

I use assessment to encourage the development of a community in which everyone feels like their ideas have the potential to lastingly impact their peers' perspectives. To that end, I have divided the course's assessments into four categories:

### **Weekly preparation and participation: 50%**

I assess your preparation and participation each week with three questions:

- Did you actively listen to discussion speakers?
- Did you contribute to discussions without crowding out quieter students?
- Did you prepare for discussion by writing a thoughtful weekly memo? (I expect students to write a one to two-page memo that puzzles over a commonality or conflict between the ideas in two of the week's readings.)

For each question to which I respond, 'Yes,' I award you a point on a scale from zero to three.

### **Final paper studying a "game" community: 20%**

As a final project, students will synthesize their ideas from the course in a five to ten page paper that:

- Reports results of interviewing a game player about their game's community.
- Compares the level of competitiveness and playfulness to plausibly similar reference communities.
- Hypothesizes how impending changes to the game's community will impact the social structure, distribution of resources, and culture.

### **Editing and advising on a peer's final paper: 20%**

In preparation for submitting and presenting their final project, students will give and receive thoughtful peer feedback. To ensure high quality feedback, I will assess students' line-edits of their peer's draft paper. For full credit a student must:

- Provide at least minimal written feedback on each page of the paper they review.
- Write comments giving substantive, constructive feedback that is achievable within the time remaining for the course.
- Submit photographic evidence of themselves discussing their paper with their partner (either in-person or over video chat).

## **Final Presentation: 10%**

The course concludes with presentations that I will assess based on the degree to which they are informative, entertaining, and respectful of the class's time.

## **Contacting me**

I respond to emails slowly which has frustrated people with reasonable expectations about email communication. To compensate you for my poor emailing, I will be holding routine open office hours after each class and scheduled office hours on Tuesday and Friday from 2:00 to 3:00 in McClatchy Hall, office 029.

My email address is [nsherefkin@stanford.edu](mailto:nsherefkin@stanford.edu).

## **Syllabus**

### **Week 1: What does game play look like?**

- Graeber, David A. 2013. "What's the Point If We Can't Have Fun?" *The Baffler* 24:50–58.
- Opie, Iona Archibald, and Peter Opie. 1969. *Children's Games in Street and Playground: Chasing, Catching, Seeking, Hunting, Racing, Duelling, Exerting, Daring, Guessing, Acting, Pretending*. Pp. 1-24 (*Introduction and Starting a Game* through "Selection made by chance"), and pp. 62, 124, 149-151, 176, 184-186 (inc. "Types of races"), 212, 233, 263, 275, 304, and 330-331 (introductory paragraphs of remaining chapters). Clarendon P.

### **Week 2: Analyzing conflicts with game theory**

- Frank, R. H., Gilovich, T., & Regan, D. T. (1993). Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation? *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7(2), 159–171. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2138205>
  - OPTIONAL: For follow-up: Gerlach P. (2017). The games economists play: Why economics students behave more selfishly than other students. *PloS one*, 12(9), e0183814. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0183814>
- Gelman, A. 2008. "Methodology as Ideology: Some Comments on Robert Axelrod's" *The Evolution of Cooperation.*" *QA-Rivista dell'Associazione Rossi-Doria* 2:167-76
- Swedberg, Richard. 2001. "Sociology and Game Theory: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives." *Theory and Society* 30 (3): 301–35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/657964>.

### **Week 3: Strategies and how players think**

- Boorman, Scott A. 1971. *The Protracted Game: A Wei-Ch'i Interpretation of Maoist Revolutionary Strategy*. Pp. XX-XX. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Leifer, Eric Matheson. 1991. *Actors as Observers: A Theory of Skill in Social Relationships*. Pp. XX-XX. New York: Garland.

### **Week 4: The magic circle**

- Fine, G.A. (1983) *Share Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Huizinga, Johan. (1949 [1938]) *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Pp. 10-XX. London: Routledge.
- Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. (2004) *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Pp. XX-XX. London: MIT Press.

### **Week 5: Relationships between players**

- Bandelj, Nina. 2020. "Relational Work in the Economy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46(1):251–72. doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054719.
- Collins, Randall. 2014. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Pp. XX-XX. Princeton University Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1961. 'Fun in Games', pp. 15-72 in E. Goffman, *Encounters*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

### **Week 6: Cultures and consequences of competition—Part I**

- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 2013. "1227: Treatise on Nomadology:—The War Machine" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Pp. 351-XX. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Duina, Francesco G. 2013. *Winning: Reflections on an American Obsession*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Hirschman, Albert O. 2013. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*. Princeton University Press.

### **Week 7: Cultures and consequences of competition–Part II**

- Friedman, Hilary Levey. 2016. *Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture*. Pp. XX-XX. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- March, J. G. (1976). The technology of foolishness. In J. G. March & J. P. Olsen (Eds.), *Ambiguity and choice in organizations* (pp. 69–81). Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.
- Sherefkin, Nick. 2022. “Playfulness in Markets and Organizations.” Working Paper.

### **Week 8: Games, competition, and play in everyday life**

- Fine, Gary Alan. 2003. *Morel Tales: The Culture of Mushrooming*. Pp. XX-XX. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Gold, Tomás. 2022. “Contentious Tactics as Jazz Performances: A Pragmatist Approach to the Study of Repertoire Change.” *Sociological Theory* 40(3):249–71. doi: 10.1177/07352751221110625.
- Project presentations: Competition and Play in Game Communities

*Thanks to Jeremy Freese for syllabus inspiration.*

### **Additional Related Readings**

- Read *Embodying the Market: The Emergence of the Body Entrepreneur* <https://doi-org.stanford.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/00018392221135606>
- “Competition: What It Is and Why It Happens” and “The performance complex : competition and competitions in social life”
- Erving Goffman, *Where the Action Is* pp. 149-270