

Georgia Tech
School of Literature, Media and Communication
LMC 4725/6325: Game Design as Cultural Practice

Professor: Dr. Laine Nooney
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Office Hours: M 3pm-5pm, T 11am-12pm

Classroom: Skiles 318
1:35 pm – 2:55 pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course serves as an introduction to the foundations of game design. Talking about games may conjure memories of Pac-Man and Mario, but gaming long precedes the digital forms we know today. Games are as old as any human art form and exist across every culture; playful behavior even precedes human language.

Great games have qualities that make you eager to play them again and again. But what are those qualities? In this course we will predominantly explore this question through a formal approach, focusing on game design as a creative practice with deep history and common principles that can be studied, practiced and effectively enacted. In this setting, game design does not require mastery of code nor a life-long obsession with games. Rather, like other aesthetic and experiential forms, game design has fundamentals that may apply across media, platforms and contexts. Familiarizing ourselves with these principles is the first step to understanding their responsible deployment and crafting engaging play experiences.

And leave your laptop at home! This course will be organized around group-based, analog (non-digital) game design projects, with most class days occupied by lecture, discussion, short exercises, and in-class play or group assignments. While major projects focus on *making* games, supporting assignments emphasize analyzing and theorizing games from formal, cultural and experiential points of view.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Given a game design assignment, the student will be able to effectively brainstorm, plan and implement basic methodologies of game design, such as: systems thinking, rule-building, iterative design, playtesting, prototyping, etc.
- When presented with a game, students will be able to articulate its formal qualities as well as its cultural and context-specific dynamics, verbally and in writing.
- When placed in a group, students will be able to establish a space of productive communication, adapt to conflicts and problems as they arise, and organize their time responsibly.
- When presented with a game, students will be able to offer professional feedback, verbally and in writing, which is constructive in tone, utilizes terminology from the course and offers a balance between strengths and weakness.
- Students will be able to accurately reference and discuss the concepts of major thinkers and theorists in game design and play theory.

REQUIRED READING

- Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT press, 2004.
- All other reading will be made available electronically.

ASSIGNMENTS

This is a project-centered course in which students will be evaluated largely based on the quality of the games they produce and the thoughtfulness of their reflection on games and game design. Class assignments include:

75%: 4 game design projects [Single Mechanic Card Game (15%), Real World Systems Abstract Board Game (20%), Social Game (20%), The Player Experience Game/Final (20%)]

10%: Game Journal

10%: Board Game Analysis Paper (undergrads)/Peer Pedagogy Development (grad students)

5%: Participation

Projects

Course projects involve producing original, completed games in small groups. Groups will be rotated for the first 3 projects; students will be free to choose their own group members for the Final project. Relevant assignment dates for each project are noted on the syllabus, and the expectations and requirements of each project will be detailed on an assignment sheet distributed in class. While some class days will be devoted to working on your projects, please understand that most work must be done outside of class.

Each project must be uniquely developed by the group assigned. Work may not: be based off any group member's previous game design work, be produced with the assistance of individuals outside the group, and cannot intentionally replicate core mechanics from pre-existing games (published or otherwise).

Game Journal

Each student is required to keep a pen-and-paper, handwritten notebook that will serve as their game journal for the course. The journal is your place to take notes and sketch ideas for your projects, but is also required to include 1 paragraph every week, reflecting and analyzing a game (any analog game!) using the language and concepts from that week's readings. Reflections should take the form of written analysis, but may also include diagrams, sketches, pictures, etc. In some cases, a specific prompt will be given for the week, but most weeks the content of the reflection is left to the student's discretion.

Students may also use their game journal as a place for class notes, so long as they clearly flag their weekly write-ups. Game Journals will be collected randomly throughout the semester, and will be graded on completion status, quality of writing, and quality of notes and brainstorming for class projects.

Board Game Analysis Paper (Undergrads)

Undergrad students will be assigned a single short paper, a formal analysis of a board game due in the third week of class. Students will receive an assignment sheet in class. This paper is not collaborative, and is meant to be completed individually. Graduate students are not responsible for this assignment.

Peer Pedagogy Development (Graduate Students)

Graduate students in the course will be paired and required to teach a day of course content, prepared to implement Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory. Grads are responsible for planning the entire course day, including reading lecture, examples and in-class play. Days available for teaching are assigned an asterisk on the syllabus.

Grads must submit a lesson plan to me, via email, two days before their assigned teaching day. The lesson plan should be a brief document outlining the order of pedagogic activities, intended learning outcomes of each pedagogic activity, intelligences addressed, and amount of time consumed by each pedagogic activity.

Participation

The participation grade evaluates a student's level of attentiveness, preparation, and participation in class activities.

COURSE POLICIES

Absences, Lateness and Late Assignments

Students are expected to arrive on time for class, and be present for the entirety classes. Students with routine tardiness will be subject to grade penalties at my discretion.

Because this class hinges on group work, it is extremely important to attend class and communicate with your groupmates. Students are permitted two absences a semester. Absences are yours to do with as you please; I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. After two absences, you may begin to lose up to 5% off your final grade with each subsequent absence. After 6 absences, I reserve the right to remove you from your project group and fail you in the course.

All assignments must be turned in on time, in. Absence is not an excuse for late work. Assignments will be docked 5% per day late.

Learning Environment

Critique, passionate engagement and disagreement are part of the creative process. Yet passion for your position is not a license to disregard other's feelings. Striking that balance between firmness and consideration is a core part of working with others and giving productive feedback. Peer-to-peer communication, as well as communication with your instructor, should be constructive in tone, utilizes terminology from the course and offers a balance between strengths and weakness.

Additionally, I ask that all students take time to consider their own backgrounds and avoid, as much as possible, projecting their own presumptions on other students. Your interpretation of a student's gender, race, nationality, economic status or other demographic qualities may not match a given student's experience or self-identification—so try not to presume. Use gender neutral language, and avoid stereotypes and definitive statements.

Sexist, racist, homophobic or other forms of alienating or violent language don't have a home in this classroom. Threatening or abusive behavior (verbal or physical) will be cause for immediate dismissal from class and notification to the Office of the Dean of Students.

Laptop and Cell Phone Courtesy

This is a hands-on, practice-based analog games course. It emphasizes making, sketching and paper prototyping on the fly. It focuses on getting students away from a screen-based mentality as much as possible. As such, laptops are not permitted for note taking or reading of course material (therefore students must buy the book, and print out course readings). Additionally, current research emphasizes

that lecture retention improves dramatically with hand written notes. Cell phones are not permitted in class, period. They should be left on silent and stowed with your personal belongings.

Email Policy

Responding to students via email is a courtesy I extend to you, and I promise to get back to any student within 48 hours (so please note: a “night before” email may not get answered in time!). However, the best way to get my time and attention is to visit my office hours. Office hours are *yours*; please use them. I do not discuss grades or class performance over email; please see my office hours.

Grade Appeals

Please allow two days to pass before you submit a grade appeal. This gives you time to reflect on my assessment. If you still want to appeal your grade, please submit a short but considered paragraph detailing your concerns. Based on this paragraph I will review the question and either augment your grade or refine my explanation for the lost points.

Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism

When it comes to creative production, you may have heard that imitation is the best form of flattery (or as some like to put it: “steal like an artist.”). Similarly, it’s easy to get inspired by other examples of great design. But what’s the boundary between inspiration and plagiarism in a creative context?

In this classroom context, it is not appropriate to represent work as your own or your group’s that you did not ideate, brainstorm, prototype and refine (this goes for both the game mechanics and written components such as game rules or any story/narrative). Any instances of such behavior will be given serious review and may be taken to the Office of the Dean of Students. For more information on the Georgia Tech Honor Code, please see: <http://www.honor.gatech.edu/>

Students in this course are also bound to the Georgia Tech Student Code of Conduct, which address plagiarism as well as other issues related to academic dishonesty:
<http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/19b.php>

Office of Disability Services

The Office of Disability Services provides information, resources, and support services to students with disabilities at Georgia Tech. Disability Services, located in the Office of the Dean of Students (Charles A. Smithgall Jr Student Services Building, Suite 210), provides students with information and support. Disability Services assists students self-identifying as having a disability. Any student who wishes to receive accommodation for a disability is encouraged to do so and will be fully accommodated, provided they submit the necessary university accommodation form.

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES, READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Week 1

August 17 – Welcome and Introduction to the Course

- Review syllabus, assignments and course goals

August 19 – What is Play?

- Huizinga, Johan. “Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon.” From *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. 1950. Republished in *The Game Design Reader*. Eds. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. 1 – 18.
- BOARD GAME ANALYSIS/PEER PEDAGOGY DEVELOPMENT ASSIGNED

Week 2

August 24 – Introduction to Games and Meaningful Play

- Rules of Play: Chapter 3 [Meaningful Play]
Chapter 7 [Defining Games]
- SINGLE MECHANIC CARD GAME ASSIGNED // DUE SEPTEMBER 14

August 26 – What is Design?

- Rules of Play: Chapter 4 [Design]
- Selections from Game Design Workshop, Chapter 7: Prototyping
- BOARD GAME ANALYSIS EXERCISE DUE

Week 3

August 31 – Playtesting Card Game Prototypes

- Selections from Game Design Workshop, Chapter 9: Playtesting
- SINGLE MECHANIC CARD GAME PROTOTYPE DUE

September 2 – Rules

- Rules of Play: Chapter 11 [Defining Rules]
Chapter 12 [Rules on Three Levels]

Week 4

September 7 – Labor Day // NO CLASS

September 9 –The Magic Circle // SKYPE GUEST: Tim Rodriguez, Brooklyn Indie Games

- Rules of Play: Chapter 9 [The Magic Circle]

Week 5

September 14 – Single Mechanic Card Game Game Due

- SINGLE MECHANIC CARD GAME DUE
- ABSTRACT BOARD GAME ASSIGNED // DUE October 19

September 16 – Systems and Interactivity ***

- Rules of Play: Chapter 5 [Systems]
Chapter 6 [Interactivity]

Week 6

September 21 – Abstract Board Game Prototype Due

September 23 – Emergence and Information ***

- Rules of Play: Chapter 14 [Games as Emergent Systems]
Chapter 17 [Games as Systems of Information]

Week 7

September 28 – Uncertainty and Probability ***

- Rules of Play: Chapter 15 [Games as Systems of Uncertainty]
- “The Theory of Dice,” in *Dice Games Properly Explained* by Reiner Knizia

September 30 – Simulation and Conflict ***

- Rules of Play: Chapter 16 [Games as Simulation]
Chapter 20 [Games as Systems of Conflict]

Week 8

October 5 – ABSTRACT BOARD GAME DUE

- ABSTRACT BOARD GAME DUE

October 7 – IN-CLASS GUEST: Warren Spector

Week 9: Fall Recess

Week 10

October 19 – Games as Social Play

- Rules of Play: Chapter 28 [Games as Social Play]
- SOCIAL GAME ASSIGNED // DUE October 28

October 21 – Experience and Pleasure in Play ***

- Rules of Play: Chapter 23 [Games as the Play of Experience]
Chapter 24 [Games as the Play of Pleasure]

Week 11

October 26 – SOCIAL GAME PROTOTYPE DUE

October 28 – Games and Culture ***

- Rules of Play: Chapter 29 [Defining Culture]
Chapter 30 [Games as Cultural Rhetoric]

Week 12

November 2 – SKYPE GUEST (TBD)

- Rules of Play: Chapter 21 [Breaking the Rules]

November 4 – SOCIAL GAME DUE

Week 13

November 9 – Player Experience Game Assigned ***

- Rules of Play: Chapter 25 [Games as the Play of Meaning]
Chapter 26 [Games as Narrative Play]
- PLAYER EXPERIENCE GAME [FINAL] ASSIGNED // DUE Nov 30/Dec 2

November 11 – SKYPE GUEST: Kevin Cancienne, independent game designer

- Hickey, “The Heresy of Zone Defense”

Week 14

November 16 – Resistance and Environment ***

- Rules of Play: Chapter 32 [Games as Cultural Resistance]
Chapter 33 [Games as Environment]

November 18 – PLAYER EXPERIENCE GAME [FINAL GAME] PROTOTYPE DUE

Week 15

November 23 – Games *as* Culture?

- Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”

November 25 – NO CLASS

Week 16

November 30 – PLAYER EXPERIENCE GAME DUE

December 2 – PLAYER EXPERIENCE GAME DUE