Week 1

TOPICS: introduction to class; what is game design; what makes games meaningful; rules, play, and culture; the iterative process

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: Tic-tac-toe: modify its rules to make it meaningful.

ASSIGNED: Game Modification – Each group will get a simple but broken game as a starting point. Groups will identify what is broken about their game, and make modifications to create a more meaningful experience for players. (1 week)

INTRODUCTIONS
- Introduce yourself
- Students introduce themselves

WHAT IS DESIGN?
- Watch Excerpt from Objectified (it’s on Netflix)
  - 5:14 - 10:40 – the process of designing a peeler
  - discuss what struck students, what was interesting
  - how it might relate to game design
    - (research, prototyping, making up a process, designing for context, designing for extreme users, etc)

EXERCISE: LET’S MAKE A GAME
Class collaborates on making a game together from scratch.
- start with a space (go out into the lobby) – probably will be a physical game
- use the group to collaborate on a game that some of the class or the entire class can play
- perhaps start with an activity: What do the players do?
- What else does the game need? A goal, etc.
- immediately start playing, discussing, refining, in order to show the iterative process

Postmortem discussion:
- The game created meaning out of ordinary objects or activities
- Students were able to create truly innovative game in 15 minutes – it CAN be done!
- Also, it probably had social/physical elements more interesting than the average videogame – there are a million ways to innovate

WHAT IS THIS CLASS ABOUT?
(Go back into the classroom)
- we will consider game design as a discipline
- this is a class where we learn the “classic” rules of “good design” so they can be broken in later classes and later semesters
- what it is: non-digital, collaborative, project-based, reading&writing
- what it isn’t: scholarship, history, theory (they get that in other classes)

BREAK

RULES, PLAY, AND CULTURE
Go over the structure of class
- Rules, Play, and Culture – the three schema of the class
  - Rules: considering games as formal, logical, mathematical systems
  - Play: considering games as human, social, experienced systems
  - Culture: considering games and their relationship to contexts outside the game
- What is “formal”? 
- What are rules?
The problematics of focusing on one way to understand games. Our goal as designers to be as flexible as possible and be able to see games from many points of view.

EXERCISE: Tic-Tac-Toe
- Have the class list out the rules of TTT
  - Usually: play takes place on a 3x3 grid, 2 players take turns placing an X or O in an empty square, 3 in a row wins, if no player can place, it’s a tie
- then groups of 2 will modify the rules of TTT
  - discuss: what might groups modify? – board, turn sequence, number of players, types of marks, winning conditions, etc
  - Have them change only 1, 2, or 3 rules, then try them out
  - What are they trying to do via their changes?
- do NOT have everyone share their game – it may take too long – ask just a few of the groups
  - get students who did not design the game to play through it
  - everyone can quickly talk about what they did without playing through it
  - perhaps ask for a success
  - ask for a failure too – to show how we learn from broken games

ASSIGNMENT: game modification
- split into groups of 3-4 students. Each group gets one of the following games:
  - the card game WAR
  - Matching Pennies (2 players each have a penny and reveal heads or tails – one wins if they match and one wins if they don’t)
  - Rock-Paper-Scissors
  - The Dice Game – roll a die and get that many points. Pass the die. The first player to 20 wins.
  - number guessing game (“guess my number” – wrong or right)
  - 20 Questions
- give out games – play if have time
- For next week, each group will:
  1) Analyze the game – what is working and what is not working about the game?
  2) Design a variation of the game to create meaningful play for players
     (The criteria for when a variation is no longer from the game is when a person from outside the class would not recognize the game as a version of the original)
- reminder: for next class, they need to have a print-out of the RULES and all materials

- Remind about readings for next week
  Have a PDF – for THIS WEEK ONLY – after that they will need to have the book

IN LAB
- talk about collaboration and iteration again
- go over collaboration guidelines in syllabus
- happy face syndrome (when you are too pleased with your own work, too eager to focus on the moments of success and ignore the problems with your design)
- Check in on each group's design
Week 2

TOPICS: games as formal systems; games and rules; the elements of games

READINGS DUE: Rules of Play Chapter 6: Interactivity

IN-CLASS EXERCISE: visualizing the rules of a videogame; formal analysis

ASSIGNED: Abstract Game – Groups will be given both material and structural constraints will have to create a playable, balanced game. (2 weeks)

DUE: Game Modification

PLAY AND CRITIQUE GAME MODIFICATION
(about first 75 mins of class)

Things to remember: a major goal of the class is to encourage a culture of respectful, hard-hitting criticism. What I like to tell my students is that thoughtful criticism is the highest form of respect that one designer can show to another. It will be scary for some students to give and receive criticism, but Game Design 1 is where we teach them how to do it more than in any other class. This first critique is where we get started.

Some suggestions:
- YOU should play every game so that you have firsthand experience of the game's play
- Have other students who are NOT the designers play the game
- Try and have everyone playtest someone else’s game if possible
- This class, the critique takes up a little less than half of the class time – but in general, on days when they are turning in games, the entire class is given over to critique

DISCUSS READING
45 mins - reading

- Talk about the parts of a system
  - Formal/social/cultural
- Meaning: how Rock/Paper/Scissors “signifies”
- Molecules of action/outcome: moment to moment, plus adding up over time
  - As an example of an “Integrated” choice, I use an example of choosing a weapon in a role-playing game. That one choice can have many vectors of meaning (have students list them – cost, weight, handedness, damage, speed, critical hit chance, narrative meaning, etc). So the choice of the weapon is integrated into many future encounters in the RPG.
  - As a negative example of “discernable” - example of a bad game (a student videogame where a ship blows up but the player doesn’t know why) – because the student hasn’t put in any of the parts of the game that show when, how, and why the ship died.

- QUICK EXERCISE: of how meaning is made through designed choices
  The language game – take 2 students through this exercise:
  1. First, they alternate saying single words – they can’t repeat a word
  2. Then, limit the domain – they can only say words that are animals, or food
  3. Finally, add one more limitation: the last letter of one player’s word is the first letter of the other’s

The point: play comes out of carefully designed limitations and restrictions, even if it feels to players like fun in games is all power and freedom
- Anatomy of a choice – chess and asteroids – or pick another game in class
  - Go through each stage of the choice as per the chapter
  - Diner Dash video or another casual game video
    - Shows how hard the designers try to signify the meaning of every mouse click
    - Discernable and Integrated – concepts from the reading

LAST 45 MINUTES
Do ONE of these two exercises

The rules of Pac-Man
1. The class brainstorms all of the TYPES of rules of Pac-Man on the board (controls, AI, scoring, space, etc)
2. Then each group takes one of those types (score, space, enemies, interaction) and makes a visualization of it – they have to ANALYZE the game and than also decide how to VISUALIZE the rules
3. Discuss each group’s rules. One important point should be how different each group’s approach was to visualizing the rules of Pac-Man. There is no right or wrong way to visualize or organize rules.

The rules of Mancala
1. There should be many copies of Mancala in the library. Have enough so that pairs of students can play.
2. Have 2 students play the game as you explain how it works. Students should NOT have access to the written rules – only your demo. They should take notes on how to play as you speak.
3. Each pair of students then plays the game. They write out the rules and put them in a dropbox folder or Google Docs folder. Perhaps they can only use text (if there is not a lot of time). What they include, leave out, and how they organize the rules is important.

FINALLY Assign Abstract game
In groups of 3-4 – there should be an even number of groups.

Each group gets a primary material and a primary structure (see PDF for cards). I use a system for picking their two cards like ABCDDCBA. The games they design can use other materials and mechanics other than the ones on their cards, but the cards should provide the primary structures for their games.

The games should be ABSTRACT. They can name units like “defender” “key” etc if it will help players to understand the game – but the premise of the game should NOT be about a story world, cast of characters, narrative plot, etc.

IN LAB: each student must bring in a concept for their game. Students will go around their group and present their ideas. Then in lab the groups vote on their favorite – you can’t vote on your own. This is one simple brainstorming technique.
Probability Discussion – some of the main concepts from the readings
- probability – macro and micro
- perceived vs real
- fallacies

1. basic probability questions
- getting heads + tails – calculating the odds
- you can double your money flipping a coin twice, betting on how many heads – is it a good bet?
- Chances of having two daughters if I have 2 children (it is 25%)
- if I have 2 children and one is a daughter, what is chance that I have 2 daughters?
- 33% - we can eliminate boy/boy, and girl/girl is only option
- two lying students trying to match the tires that blew out (a story)
- what is chance they match (by randomness) – not 1 in 16 but 1 in 4
- dice - chances for doubles, etc. – use techniques from reading
- (we will be doing more with dice soon)
- as an example of human fallacies: monty haul problem
  - pick 1 of 3, reveal 1 that is not match, then should person switch (answer: YES)

2. DICE exercises – From STONE LIBRANDE
See PDF of his talk for details

Dice battle! Rolling 1 die vs. 1 die – what are the chances of a die winning?
- one die vs. 1 die (use grid handouts) – plot out the results
- then: design own die, with pips that add up to 21 (a side can be zero to 21) – fight each other
- discuss which die in class is best
- get two confident designers – make a chart on board to see whose is better
- THEN – redesign the losing die so that it can beat the winning die more often – usually by making sides that just barely beat the other die
- QUESTION: is there a “best die” – in an ecosystem of players constantly designing their own dice?
Die tiles
Use a "deck" of 1-6 for each player. Have people choose randomly and then play where they choose which card to use.
- first, talk about difference between this and dice battle – what is the main difference? In this game, your rolls are a non-renewable resource that is used up over time. Not better or worse, just a different approach to chance.
- Of the two versions of dice tiles, is it better to make it random, or choose?
- have groups go through random game and determine odds as you go, using Stone’s dice chart - do this as group for the first time

Coda: Connect these kinds of chance to Tetris blocks "bag" system (random + tiles). In Tetris, the program makes a "bag" of equal number of pieces – perhaps 2 or 3 of each piece – then empties the bag randomly, then makes a new bag. Why would they take this approach? What is the worst that could happen?

INVADERS game
Inspired by Sid Meier comment about having to tweak randomness so that it feels right. This is also a game that introduces players to more complex use of probability in a game.

- Go SLOWLY through the idea of percentile dice rolling
  - People without D&D dice experience get confused that rolling LOW is good

- Invaders (rules are on the sheet) – groups of 2
- for teaching: go through first turn with everyone together
- play normally 1x – at the end, the Earth player has to guess at percentages
- If players finish early - switch: the other player sets invaders percentages for ANYTHING &
  troop strength at anything
- Discuss how to modify combat system- what works and doesn’t work

CYBERNETICS discussion – from the reading
- diagram basic feedback loops:
  - air conditioner
  - rubber banding in a race game
  - basketball from the LeBlanc variation in the essay
- game example: POOL (so elegant!!)
  - POSITIVE: if you sink a ball, you go again
  - NEGATIVE: the more you sink, the less targets you have

KINGDOM game
To play with identifying and modifying feedback loops in games
- play it (setup: 10 tokens per person)
- modify the positive and negative feedback loops
  - what are they?
  - MEDIUM POSITIVE: farm
  - WEAK NEGATIVE: thief
  - They also represent a Euro-style game mechanic (generate resources efficiently) vs. an American-style game (direct targeting of another player)
  - What is wrong with the game now? What do you want to change? What happens when you add some feedback loops?
  - If there is time, continue to modify and balance
END OF CLASS:
OR – beginning of lab (if there isn’t time in class):
- Abstract game – groups play each others games once, observing
  then groups swap – you now have to design the game you just played

ALSO IN LAB: Given an illustrator demo:
- basics of using the software
- how to set up a group of cards, prepared for printing
Week 4 – Double Class Week

TOPICS: games as social play

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: social game mechanics

ASSIGNED: Social Game – Groups will be given social and emotional criteria and will create a game that produces these experiences. The emphasis is on how the system can be designed to produce the desired experience through emergent means. [2 weeks]

DUE: Abstract Game

CLASS 1

1. Review abstract games (most of the class)

2. Introduce pivot of the class to social games

3. Social Game Mechanics

   - Chip-taking game (from Characteristics of Games) – as introduction to a social mechanic: so little needs to happen to make social politics, emotional responses, social roles, etc come into being
     o Each player has 10 chips
     o Choose a starting player
     o That player takes one person’s chip and puts it into a central pool
     o Take turns clockwise
     o If you lose all your chips you are out of the game
     o The last surviving player wins

   - it is also possible to do this one with 5 fingers instead. 10 chips emphasizes how irrelevant the opening half of the game is.

4. If there is time, do more social game mechanics that are listed for the next class. Sixteen Tons is a good one here, as it doesn’t tie directly into the readings.

Remind them that READINGS ARE DUE FOR LAB
WEEK 4 - CLASS 2

TOPICS: game theory; psychology of player interaction

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: more social game mechanics

READING: Rules of Play: Chapter 19: Games as Game Theory Systems

GOAL OF THIS CLASS:
Hurl as many social game mechanics at the players as possible so they can understand how social interaction in games works and borrow from them in the weeks to come

1. Review the basics of Game Theory – (15 minutes)
   - zero-sum idea
   - utility: formalizing game pleasure (ie, reward)
   - cake cutting problem – diagram on board
   - prisoners dilemma problem – diagram on board
     note that Naomi’s powerpoint also has a good breakdown of the prisoners dilemma

2. Sheep and Wolves – from Naomi’s powerpoint – (15 minutes)
   play the game twice, once before and after people know the full rules of the game

3. Mafia – class plays two full games (split into 2 groups if necessary) – (30 minutes)
   play the classic version of the game with 2 hidden mafia
   you moderate the first round, and the person who was removed moderates after that
   this can really drag, so you need to move the class along quickly

4. Dungeon Raiders –(20 minutes)
   groups of 4 or 5 – 12 small tokens each (keep hidden in lap)
   shuffle a deck with two 4s (Dragons), three 3s (Trolls), five 2s (Rats),
   - First, reveal the next card – everyone puts any number of tokens secretly in hand
   - then open hands: ALL tokens are gone for the game and go into a center pile
   - if there is a tie for the highest bid, the card is added to the next round
   - if a single player has highest bid, that player gets the card from that round and any from previous rounds leftover from ties
   - play through the deck. The cards you have are your points, and the most points wins.

5. Mississippi Shipping (30 minutes)
   groups of 3 or 4 – a summary of the rules are on the sheet
   give each player 4 tokens of same color
   each turn, take 2 actions:
   - place a piece in boat (boats can hold up to number of players in game)
   - move a boat 1 space to dock
   - move a boat back 1 (uses 2 actions)
   - destroy 1 piece in boat (uses 2 actions)
   when boat reaches dock, put it at x3 place, the next boat goes on x2 place, etc
   score all your pieces
   go around circle, each players gets to be first player 1x

6. Sixteen Tons (if there is time) (20 minutes)
   use sheets & tokens
   start with just the strategy game – no money or bidding –
   on your turn you can move any piece to an adjacent or diagonally adj space
and if your two pieces are directly adjacent you win
then add 3 tokens (the three dollars) + bidding mechanic

Discussion (15 minutes)
Don’t try and discuss each game individually as they are played – it will take too long.
Instead, save discussion for the end and do a comparative discussion.

Chart games on a whiteboard:
What was the main core mechanic of each?
How did they work as social gameplay for players?

- Chip-taking game: POLITICS
- Sheep and Wolves: COOPETITION
- Mafia: HIDDEN ROLES
- Dungeon Raiders: BIDDING
- Mississippi Shipping: SHARED INVESTMENT
- Sixteen Tons: NEGOTIATION

The point is to encourage players to “steal” from these core mechanics to use in the social games that they are currently designing.

Then:
Brainstorm social emotions that students have felt themselves playing a game. The emotions should have to do with a relationship between players. Ie, not “fear” but “suspicion” – not “joy” but “cameraderie.”

LASTLY:

Social game assignment (10 minutes)
Put students in random groups of about 4 players each.

Criteria

1. The brainstormed list of emotions
2. The other criteria is the list of social game mechanics that the class discussed from the social game exercises: POLITICS, COOPERATION, etc.

Each group gets to pick one emotion and one social mechanic. They roll a die and first pick either an emotion or a mechanic. They then go in reverse order and can pick the criteria they didn’t pick before. (ie, ABCDDCBA)
Week 5 - *Double Lab Week*
DUE Prototype & Rules for Social Game

They should NOT be playing their game for the first time this week!
**Week 6 – Double class week**

**TOPICS:** games and narrative; game form and game content

**IN-CLASS EXERCISE:** narrative boardgame design strategies

**DUE:** Social Game

**ASSIGNED:** Story Game – Starting with a provided narrative, groups will create a solo/cooperative game that takes the narrative as its content. The goal is to have the game procedurally represent the narrative through actual gameplay. (3 weeks)

**CLASS 1**

PLAY social games and discuss

Homework for lab is reading the two chapters.

**Class 2**

**TOPICS:** games and simulation; procedural representation; games and drama

**IN-CLASS EXERCISES:** narrative game design exercises

**READINGS:**

- Rules of Play: Chapter 27: Games as the Play of Simulation
- GD Reader: LeBlanc, *Dramatic Game Dynamics*, p. 438-459

**1. RoP Chapter – Games as the Play of Simulation (15 mins)**

Discuss with class - what are the “big ideas” of the chapter?
- Defining simulation - a representation of “reality” that utilizes a dynamic PROCESS
- How does form relate to content
  - we can separate the music in an opera from the libretto
  - but traditionally, there is harmony between form and content
    - ie, the imposing King sings imposing deep melodies
    - unless we want to play with expectation and upend aesthetic assumptions of the audience (which is fine too)
- PROCEDURAL representation – complexifies form and content relation
  - From the reading: Zelda witch character / Deus Ex Character
  - The nip vs. the bite (from Gregory Bateson: the nip represents a bite, but also the opposite of a bite – the dog is NOT fighting but playing) – this is the complexity of procedural representation – even in animal play!
- Generalized vs. Case-Specific strategy
  - Embedded vs. Emergent narrative elements
    - (found in the Games as Narrative Play chapter)

Talk about “regular narratives” – embedded content
- Choose your Own Adventures
- Steve Jackson’s Sorcery! turns Choose-Your-Own into a game
- But there are other ways to think about embedded content: Life in the Garden

**2. Exercise: Life in the Garden (45 mins)**

- play through Life in the Garden 2x
- discuss why it works
  - repeated themes
- no backstory needed (everyone knows the characters)
- small cast of characters
- focuses on a “moment in time” – no permanent changes to world
- each page is a lego block that can connect to others
- uses ambiguity – readers “fill in the blanks” and create causality

- brainstorm possible other settings for a Life in the Garden
  - can be from myths and fairy tales
  - or a general genre situation (cowboys in a barroom brawl)
  - or from pop culture
  - etc

- pairs of players create a life in the garden
  - create a book cover with an opening and an ending
  - write at least 10-12 pages
  - keep in mind WHY the original works!
  - playtest, edit, play again
  - share with class by doing a sample story from each
    - which worked best and why?
    - what was not working?

3. Procedural strategies for creating content/narrative/story/character/etc. (20 mins)
- Up the River – play and discuss
  - the embedded elements (title, illustrations, ship shapes, story in rules)
  - the emergent elements (die rules, sand bar and wave, moving river)
- Ninja – play and discuss (in the lobby)
  - why is it so successful in creating a procedural representation?
    - freezing
    - touching hands only
    - you feel like you are superfast – bullet time
    - climactic showdown

4. LeBlanc Reading (15 mins)
- Go over MDA framework.
- What is drama? In other narratives? In games?
- The specifics of how a system builds drama – uncertainty and inevitability.
- What were the classes’ favorite tools that LeBlanc lists?

5. Exercise: 100 Zombies. (45 mins) – can download from Stonetronix.com

  First, talk about a small town in middle-america where our zombie game will take place.

  Then have the class brainstorm a cast of characters. Record on a whiteboard. Each character should have a couple of characteristics or personality traits. There should be a few more characters than there will be groups.

  Then brainstorm relationships among the characters. Each character should be connected to at least one or two others. Draw these relationships on the white board.

  Each group gets a character. The group has to come up with a list of 3 actions that “feel right” for the character to do. They should include at least one movement and one attack action. The goal is not game balance but instead to make the player FEEL like the character in the situation.

  Play through a game with these characters. Tweak it and play again.
Then have 2 groups team up. Think of narrative relationships between the characters. And translate them into new “combo” actions – add one action to each character that creates the relationship. Play the 2-player version.

If there is time (probably not) Go to 4 characters. Each character should have at least 2 combos with different other characters in the game.

Discuss what worked and didn’t work.

7. Assign narrative game – Grimms stories (5 mins)

Each group is assigned a story.
(I put them in envelopes with the story titles on the outside. Each group randomly picks an envelope and they can keep the story they chose or pick another one randomly which they MUST keep.)

Goal of the story is to represent SOME ASPECT of the story. Not the whole plot, or every scene, or every character. It’s OK to do the whole story, but probably it’s better to take a small element.

6. Talk about different narrative board games and the strategies they take. (15 mins)

These are some examples I like to use – feel free to use others. Encourage students to PLAY these games!

Once Upon a time – what NOT to do: problem of non-creative user
Sherlock Holmes – ritualizing player activity
Cash & Guns – social play in narrative context
Arabian Nights: avalanche of embedded content
The Resistance or Shadow over Camelot – procedural representation via player roles
Pandemic – more pure simulation with narrative scrim
Lord of the Rings – relying on existing narrative world, but masterpiece of procedural rep.

IF there is not not time to do this in class, do it in the next lab!
Week 7 –

TOPICS: short-term and long-term goals; games and fairness; cheating, exploits, and degenerate play; positive and negative rewards; flow and gameplay

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: balancing through goals and rewards

READINGS: Rules of Play: Chapter 20: Games as Systems of Conflict
Chapter 21: Breaking the Rules
Chapter 24: Games as the Play of Pleasure

DUE: Prototype & Rules for Story Game

BIG EXC 1: BALANCING GOALS – STONE LIBRANDE EXERCISE
- Pass out chips, rules, bags, cups
- teach the core mechanic by leading players through the rules
- Then give out PUBLIC goal cards – each group gets a deck
  o Draw 1 and play – that is the goal of your game
  o Play again – go through at least 2 public goals
  o Then draw public goals equal to group number +1
    ▪ When you win a goal, you get that card
    ▪ The first player to 2 cards wins
      • There will be contradictions among the goals! Groups need to decide how to handle them. It’s OK to modify the goals or just draw a new one and get rid of one that doesn’t fit.
  o Then secret goals – each player draws 1 and you play for them
  o DISCUSS: what are the differences between public and secret goals? Which is better or worse in what ways? (Secret goals create tension and excitement but usually games feel “cheap” because you cannot gauge how well players are doing. This connects to the ideas in the chapter about how important it is in a conflict for players to have a sense of how every is approaching a goal. Goals as the “gravity” that orients player actions in a game.
  o (IS THIS PART NECESSARY?) DESIGN: Each group will invent goals. Each group decides to play a secret game with randomly distributed goals or a public game with several goals out to grab. Everyone makes the kinds of goals their group is making and plays.
    ▪ ANOTHER IDEA: make a cheating rule + make an exploit

Discuss Chapter 20 & 21 – conflict + types of players
  How games allow for different kinds of conflict.
  How small changes in gameplay produce big conflict effects
  From Breaking the Rules: different player types and how we move between them

OVERALL: Emphasize that designing games is designing an ACTIVITY
the challenge is how we design structures that create meaning over time and the specific designs that produce particular structures

The CORE MECHANIC is that activity. It is framed by goals.
The goal orients the player and every action in the game: it is like GRAVITY – it lets you know which way is “up” – which actions are more useful and less useful.

Level playing field
Types of players – in exercise: did different goals bring out different player types?
Were there any degenerate strategies or exploits that emerged?

Discuss Chapter 24: List the tools for manipulating player pleasure (keep track on board)

- Behavioral Conditioning
  - kinds of rewards
  - positive vs. negative vs. punishment
  - fixed vs. variable schedules
- Flow – what is it? – Challenge vs. Anxiety & Boredom
  - conditions of flow
  - effects of flow
- Entrainment
- Lusory Attitude
  - Entering into the magic circle and staying there
- Goals – short vs. long – signposts on the journey of playing a game
- Autotelic play – a pleasurable activity
- Typologies of pleasure
- Same-but-different & addiction

BIG EXC 2: CASINO! – probably do this outside the classroom

At least 4 groups
- Explain the exercise – each group will be making a casino game and competing for other players’ money
- Brainstorm content themes – each group pick a theme
  - Players should think about structural approach from concepts from discussion.

What should players think about?
- To succeed, a game needs to be:
  - fun & appealing
  - easy to learn
  - quick to play
  - seem like it is going to be a profitable game

Use poker chips and pass out – these are approximate amounts
- Use the same denominations from Stone’s Rules game – otherwise, things will get too confusing
- Each group gets $1000 – their goal is to take as much as possible from players.
- Each player gets $200 – their goal is to win as much as possible from other games.
- If possible, give time to playtest within each group.

Start the casino with a definite time limit.
- Rotate the groups so that players all get approx. equal time in others’ games.

There is a group winner – the game that ended up with the most money
- There is an individual winner – the person that ended up with the most money

Discuss what did and didn’t work with each game. Why did the winning game win?
Week 8

TOPICS: communicating ideas, the role of the game designer, documenting design

DUE: Story Game

ASSIGNED: Digital Game Pitch

IN CLASS:

PLAY STORY GAMES

ASSIGN Digital Game Pitch

Guidelines:
- must be for a present-day technology platform –
- real-world element is OK, but must have a strong digital component
- emphasis is on (1) an original and innovative game design (2) good communication

For Lab: be prepared to share the basic idea for the game

IN LAB:

For pitch process: have class listen to This American Life-
  http://www.thisamericanlife.org/play_full.php?play=533
  Episode 533 – It's the product, not the person.

Starting at 13:00 – end after Chris’ positive version (not negative version) – around 27:00
  - idea of telling a story – about getting a smooth delivery
  - the point IS NOT to mirror the problem + solution + money structure
    (that is not always best for a creative project)

Go around room and give everyone 30 seconds to pitch their game.
Talk about what did and didn’t work for each pitch.

Then discuss what the final presentations will be.
These are DESIGN pitches, so don’t worry about budget or schedule
  My recommendation: no more than 5 slides total.
  Have students brainstorm a list of what should be covered:
  - core mechanic / gameplay
  - narrative setting / characters / story
  - similar existing games
  - aesthetics / look and feel
  - number of players
  - platform
  - player experience
  - some details of gameplay / design / economy
  do NOT read slides
  focus on WHAT the game is and WHY it is different/innovative/unique/cool
Week 9

TOPICS: games and culture; games and art; game design as cultural intervention

ASSIGNED: Intervention Game: Groups will create a game that is in some way a cultural intervention in the lives of its players, on the level of space and ritual, ideological content, or player lifestyle. (1 week)

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: balancing a complex game economy; spreadsheet demo

DUE: Digital Game Pitch

DIGITAL GAME PITCHES
Presentation and feedback is most of class

GAMES AS CULTURE
Show some projects that highlight the idea of games as culture
Some of my favorites:
- New Games Movement
- Play it by Trust / White Chess, Yoko Ono
- Universal Square, Uri Tsaig http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uo5LegqCkI
  - (show a few minutes at start, and then halfway through (exactly on white line)
- Situationists, Derive
- The hi-line park

INTERVENTION GAME
Larger groups are OK – 3 or 4 groups total.

Each group:
1. Picks an existing social / physical context (elevator, crosswalk, store) – must be less than 5 minutes travel from the classroom
2. Observe the context and see what people are doing
3. Design a site-specific game that either:
   a. Exaggerates a social behavior people are already doing
   b. Makes them do the opposite kind of behavior they are doing

For example, if you notice people are isolated in a public space, you might design a game that either increases their isolation or brings them together in some way.

Possible quote for intervention assignment: Architect Charles Renfro, talking about the hi-line:
He said that for each project, he and his partners carefully establish a problem that the work itself must push through, creating what Mr. Renfro calls the building’s “gentle aggression,” allowing the project both to oppose and complement its surroundings. What was the problem with the Broad?
Week 10

TOPICS: game economies; balancing games; using spreadsheets in game design

ASSIGNED: Final Concept – Begin thinking about final project – who you want to work with, what kind of game you want to make, and what design questions you want to explore. [1 week]

WHY NO READING THIS WEEK? – PERHAPS THE SNIDERMAN READING?

IS THIS STILL IN THE CLASS?

ASSIGNED: Digital Game Concept Document – Working individually or in pairs, students will take the game concept that was pitched to class and turn it into a short concept document, based on a template given to the students. The emphasis is not just on creating a good design concept but also in communicating that design in document form. [2 weeks]

FINAL PROJECTS
This is the kick-off for final projects. Have students talk about what they want to do. Discuss the idea of design as research – design as exploring ideas THROUGH making things. Students can each talk about what interests them as designers and perhaps groups can start to form.

EXERCISE

1. BATTLE!
I like to frame this that the players are a balancing team for a bigger game. They are working at a company and their job is to balance the characters.

SETUP:
- print one of each character type and have them spread out on a central table.
- Have enough vanilla characters, rules, and blank characters so that each group of 2 can get one of them
- You’ll need a bunch of 6-sided dice – a few per player

- Students split into groups of 2
- Each group gets 1 Vanilla character + 1 other character, plus 4d6, tokens, and a writing utensil
- lead them through 1 game, step by step. They mark wins and losses on the non-vanilla character sheet.

- We discuss the idea of balancing against a vanilla unit. Why would you do it?
- Then we talk about how they will balance their character - what criteria to use. We usually came up with 4 criteria:
  (1) power level (2) fun factor (3) simplicity/elegance (4) flavor that matches the character

- They can have 2 or 3 battles against the Vanilla, only changing 1 or 2 characteristics each time. Then they put the character back in a central area and take a new one.
- They are allowed to make notes on the back explaining each generation of changes for future designers.

The main thing to keep in mind is to keep the students moving! They may want to iterate multiple times on a character. Tell them that the goal is to play through as many characters as possible.
- After balancing 2 characters in this way, they're not allowed to use Vanilla anymore. So they begin balancing 2 special characters against each other.
   One of their characters has to have at least 2 tick marks (2 battles) - so they are always rebalancing at least one character that others have already tried to balance.

- We discuss the challenges of balancing this kind of game in which there is a lot of chance and characters that will never be fully balanced against each other.
- And we brainstorm ways to change the game to accommodate this kind of unbalance.
   Some of the ways might involve changing the game design to allow for unbalance
       (ie, each player has a team of characters so it is OK if some always beat others
       or simplifying the number and types of characters)
   Others are methods for achieving balance, such as a big spreadsheet of every character
       vs. every character, or trying to abstract some kind of power level, or having AI play each other

   But every technique has its problems. There is no perfect solution to this problem!

- The final part is for them to make their own characters. They can use any size dice for HP and for their battle die. Start with a name/theme and then build from there.
- They balance them against Vanilla. The goal is BALANCE, not to make a super-powerful character.
- Then they fight each other. Try and have at least 3 matches against other original characters. On the back of each character sheet, list wins and losses – but list the HP of the winning character, whether you won or lost. Have everyone fight the same number of matches. At the end of the exercise, add up the HP total – the lowest number is the winner, because that character has had the closest matches.

2. SPREAD SHEETS! – in LAB if there is not time during class
   Google spreadsheet basics 1: making a deck
   - first, brainstorm a game theme, name cards
   - give them some stats:
     o early, middle, late game
     o small, medium, big
     o and stats (give 3 numerical stats each)
   - show how you can keep track and balance these categories
   - then talk about VALUE – a balancing idea. Can you extrapolate from stats to a value?

Then, show Losswords spreadsheet (or other game I am working on) – what I tried to do to show change over time

This week or in another lab: a more advanced spreadsheet exercise

give students a framework for a game – ie, a fantasy RPG with monsters, experience points, etc. and have them create a spreadsheet for a level up curve that ensures a certain amount of play time between now and the top level.

For example:
- It should be about “encounters” – first just a single one
- Then adding level progression
- Then adding time spent in game (avg time per encounter, time to level up)
Week 11

TOPICS: digital game design; online multiplayer games; player types and play styles

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: balancing a multiplayer game system; spreadsheets part 2

READINGS: GD Reader: Farmer & Morningstar, The Lessons of... p. 728-753

DUE: Intervention Game

DUE: Final Project Concepts – present and discuss in class, form into groups

ASSIGNED: Final Project: Groups of students will work on one of the projects that came out of the final project concepts. Students will be expected to apply concepts and lessons from the rest of the semester into their design thinking as they plan and execute their final projects. (5 weeks)

FINAL PROJECT
This is the class where students officially begin on their final game concepts. There might be a matchmaking exercise to massage students into groups.

Showing Intervention Games should take about an hour.

One strategy is to run around and play all the games, then return to the classroom and discuss comparatively as a group of designs.

Try and leave about 90+ minutes for the exercise

1. EXC: Multiplayer ecosystem

SETUP:
- create the board that is in the photo using the icons.jpg file taped to a whiteboard
- the Ecosystem Diagrams also has a version of the starting board
- Also create a high score chart on the whiteboard

play the basic game with no designers

- Setup
  - randomly give out cards and nametags
  - equal numbers of the three species
  - players tape their nametag to their chest

- during the game, players can:
  - wander around the room
  - touch a player on the shoulder to start an interaction
    - you can interact with each player once per day
  - check the interaction grid to see what happens: - give or take energy from another player
  - write down your new health
  - If you run out of health or energy, you die:
    - go to the game HQ
    - Put your name and energy level on the high score list
- Then you start again (choose any species)

- Run for 2 trial days, 2-3 minutes per day
  - At the end of the day, turn out the lights
  - All players must stand still
  - Except Prickly pods who can feed – they get 1 energy

Discuss the balance of the game – was it balanced?

Then the real game
- 2-3 students are designers – they can do the following:
  - Change the effects in each square off the game grid (energy gain and loss must match in the two matching color squares)
  - Change the starting stats of the creatures
  - Change the powers of creatures
  - Decide when night occurs
  - Decide how much energy each prickly pod gets when the bell rings

- A good tip is for changes to the grid and rules to happen only at night
- The players are trying to collect the most energy and stay alive
- The designers are trying to balance the ecosystem – so that there are equal numbers of species in the game

Ideally, you rotate in several groups of designers who evolve the system
Possibly try a more substantial mod to the game

Discussion:
- What were the problems with the game?
- What communities formed?
- How did the players communicate to the designers?
- What worked and didn’t work?
Week 12

TOPICS: cultural contexts of play; implicit rules; cultural politics in games

IN-CLASS EXERCISE: TA special!

          Parlett, *Hoyle on Troubled Waters*

DUE: Prototype & Rules for Final Game - should be this week!

Most of class can be TA exercise
Then worktime on final game projects

Week 13

TOPICS: techniques and approaches to playtesting; preparation for playtest lab

READINGS:   *A Primer for Playtesting*, Pozzi & Zimmerman

DUE: Prototype & Rules for Final Game

Worktime on final game projects – emphasis on playtesting from readings

Week 14

5/4 Work on your Final Project!

Final
5/11 DUE: Final Project — We’ll present the game to 2 guest critics from the Game Center faculty. Bagels and OJ/coffee will be served!

PROBABLY SHOULDN'T BE SO SPECIFIC ABOUT CRITICS