Overview

Intro to Game Design is a one-semester course that explores the fundamentals of game design. The focus of the class is the actual creation of several non-digital games. Over the course of the semester, we will explore games through many different frames: as formal systems of rules, as the human experience of play, and as culture that derives its meaning from larger contexts. The course focuses on the elementals common to all games that are fundamental for a game designer working in any format, from physical and social games, to board and card games to computer and videogames. Although the focus of the course is on the creation of non-digital games, digital games will also be discussed, including the design and documentation of digital games.

Goals of the course

- Explore the basic methodologies and conceptual skills of game design, including systems thinking, the iterative design process, playtesting, design collaboration, and critical design analysis.

- Gain the experience of actually creating several playable games using an iterative design process.

- Foster an understanding of what games are, on and off the computer, and how they function to create meaningful experiences for players.

- Explore fundamental concepts relating to games and design, such as rules and play, emergent complexity, long and short-term goals, etc. This includes understanding games as formal systems, human experience, and cultural contexts.

- Become familiar with foundational texts in the field of game design, and understand game design as a field that encompasses all kinds of games.

- Link the principles of the course to computer and video games on a variety of platforms, as well as to forms of media and culture outside of games.

Required Readings

Many weeks, a reading will be discussed. All students are required to complete the reading and be ready to discuss on the day that the reading is listed. Many readings for the course will be taken from the following two books. All students are required to purchase both. Note that these two books are available in the NYU Game Center library for reading during library hours.

Rules of Play, Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman
The Game Design Reader, Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman, eds.
# INTRO TO GAME DESIGN - overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
<th>Class Focus</th>
<th>Reading Topics</th>
<th>Due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>09/04</td>
<td>class intro + modding exercises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>09/06</td>
<td>work lab</td>
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<td>Week 2</td>
<td>09/11</td>
<td>critique mod games</td>
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<td>09/13</td>
<td>critique mod games + elevator pitches</td>
<td>communication</td>
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<td>Week 3</td>
<td>09/18</td>
<td>pitch presentations + collaboration exercise</td>
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<td>09/20</td>
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<td>formal systems</td>
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<td>Week 4</td>
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<td>Illustrator demo + rule exercise</td>
<td>writing rules</td>
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<td>09/27</td>
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<td>Week 5</td>
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<td>critique mechanics games</td>
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<td>social play exercises + assign social game</td>
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<td>Week 6</td>
<td>10/09</td>
<td>pleasure exercises + prototype review</td>
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<td>work lab</td>
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<td>Week 7</td>
<td>10/16</td>
<td>spreadsheet exercises + playtest games</td>
<td>player types</td>
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<td>10/18</td>
<td>critique social games</td>
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<td>Week 8</td>
<td>10/23</td>
<td>narrative exercises</td>
<td>simulation</td>
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<td>10/25</td>
<td>work lab</td>
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<td>Week 9</td>
<td>10/30</td>
<td>TA special + surrealist exercises</td>
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<td>work lab</td>
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<td>Week 10</td>
<td>11/06</td>
<td>critique story games</td>
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<td>11/08</td>
<td>review public space prototypes</td>
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<td>Week 11</td>
<td>11/13</td>
<td>critique public space games</td>
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<td>11/15</td>
<td>review polished prototypes</td>
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<td>Week 12</td>
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<td>social ecosystem exercise</td>
<td>multiplayer design</td>
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<td>work lab</td>
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<td>Week 13</td>
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<td>game industry discussion + balance exercise</td>
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<td>Week 14</td>
<td>12/10</td>
<td>final critique</td>
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<td>12/12</td>
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Other readings will be provided by the instructor. Over the course of the semester, readings may change slightly from what is specified here in the syllabus. The instructor will give advice notice for such changes.
Unit One: Games as Formal Systems

Week 1

9/4 WED
IN-CLASS EXERCISES: Exploring the modification of game rules and experience through New Games and Tic-Tac-Toe.

ASSIGNED: Game Modification – Each student will be given a 2-player card game as a starting point. The goal is to identify what is broken about their game, and make modifications to create a more meaningful experience for players. You will be assigned a playtesting partner, who will help playtest your game and give feedback. (1 week)

9/6 FRI
WORK LAB: Work in-class on your Game Modification assignment. Discuss with your playtest partner what is not working about your game and what your design is doing to fix it. Bring in some ideas for your design, try them out and evolve your game design.

Week 2

9/11 WEDNESDAY
ASSIGNMENT DUE: GAME MODIFICATION – play and critique
READING: Rules of Play Chapter 6: Interactivity
A Primer for Playtesting

ASSIGNED: Game Pitch – Each student will present an idea for a digital game that they would like to design through a visual presentation of no more than 5 still images or slides. The purpose of this assignment is to share your interests and point of view as a designer and also to practice how to communicate design ideas. (1 week)

9/13 FRIDAY
DUE: Elevator Pitches for game concept. Students will have 30 seconds to verbally describe their concept to the rest of the class.
READING: Design is a Job
FINISH PLAY & CRITIQUE: Game Modifications

Week 3

9/18 WEDNESDAY
ASSIGNMENT DUE: GAME PITCHES. Each student will give a 4-minute presentation.
ASSIGNED: Mechanics Game – In small groups, students will be given constraints to design a game. The assignment emphasizes the formal, mechanics-oriented aspects of the design. (2 weeks)

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: probability & feedback loops

9/20 FRIDAY
READING: Rules of Play Chapter 15: Games as Systems of Uncertainty
Rules of Play Chapter 18: Games as Cybernetic Systems

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: probability & feedback loops

Week 4

9/25 WEDNESDAY
READING: Design Intuitively, Daviau
Writing Precise Rules, Selinker

DUE: Mechanics Game prototype & rules
IN-CLASS EXERCISES: writing game rules; using Illustrator

9/28 FRIDAY
WORK LAB: Work in class on your Mechanics Game

Unit Two: Games as Experiential Systems

Week 5
10/2 WEDNESDAY
ASSIGNMENT DUE. Mechanics Game: play and critique in class

10/4 FRIDAY
IN-CLASS EXERCISES: social game mechanics
READING: Rules of Play Chapter 19: Games as Game Theory Systems
Rules of Play Chapter 20: Games as Systems of Conflict
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)

Week 6
10/9 WEDNESDAY
Due: prototype & rules for social game
READING: Rules of Play Chapter 24: Games as the Play of Pleasure
IN-CLASS EXERCISES: play and pleasure

10/11 FRIDAY
WORK LAB: Work in-class on your Social Game

Week 7
10/16 WEDNESDAY
READING: Rules of Play Chapter 21: Breaking the Rules
GD Reader Changing the Game, Dekovken p.518-537
PLAYTEST: Students will play each others’ social games

10/18 FRIDAY
ASSIGNMENT DUE. Social Game: play & critique in class
ASSIGNED: Story Game – Starting with a narrative constraint, groups will create a game that tells a story or represents content. The focus of the project is to explore the ways that games can signify narrative experience. (2.5 weeks)

Week 8
10/23 WEDNESDAY
READINGS: Rules of Play Chapter 27: Games as the Play of Simulation
GD Reader LeBlanc, Dramatic Game Dynamics, p. 438-459
IN-CLASS EXERCISES: narrative game design exercises

10/23 FRIDAY
WORK LAB: Work in-class on Story Game

Week 9
10/30 WEDNESDAY
READING: A Book of Surrealist Games
IN-CLASS EXERCISES: Playing with language + TA Special
10/23 FRIDAY
WORK LAB: Work in-class on Story Game
Week 10
11/06  WEDNESDAY
ASSIGNMENT DUE. Story Game: play & critique
ASSIGNED: Public Space Game: Groups will create a game that is in some way an
intervention in the lives of its players, on the level of space and ritual, cultural commentary,
social experience, or unexpected spectacle. (1 week)

11/08  FRIDAY
READING: Critical Play, Flanagan
GD Reader    Sniderman, Unwritten Rules
Due: Public Space Game prototypes - review in class

Week 11
11/13  WEDNESDAY
ASSIGNMENT DUE. Public Space Game: review & critique in class
ASSIGNED: Polished Game, Students will work on a project that in some way is an extension
or a refinement of a previous project. More than the other class projects, the emphasis of the
polished game is on a tested and balanced system, well-edited rules, and considered and
refined presentation and materials. The deliverables for the polished game are slightly different
than for earlier projects, and include a playtest log and documentation uploaded to the NYU
Game Center website. (4 weeks)

11/08  FRIDAY
WORK LAB: Work in-class on Polished Game

Week 12
11/20  WEDNESDAY
IN-CLASS EXERCISE: Social ecosystems & multiplayer design
READINGS: GD Reader    Farmer & Morningstar, The Lessons of…
            GD Reader    Bartle, Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades…
DUE: prototype & rules for polished game

** WEEK OF 11/27: NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY **

Week 13
12/04  WEDNESDAY
IN-CLASS EXERCISES: balancing a multiplayer game system
READINGS: Game Industry - TBD

12/06  FRIDAY
WORK LAB: Work in-class on polished game

Week 14
12/04  WEDNESDAY
ASSIGNMENT DUE. Polished Game: play & critique
Assignments

Below is a description of class assignments. Written components of class assignments, such as game rules, design process statements, etc., should be printed out and brought to class on the day that the assignment is due.

Readings & Reading Presentations
Most weeks during the semester, readings will be assigned. Students are responsible for completing these readings, and for being prepared to discuss them each class. Failure to participate in discussions and demonstrate that the readings have been completed will affect the participation component of your grade.

Design Assignments
There are several game design assignments over the course of the semester. These assignments involve the collaborative creation of a playable game and will constitute the bulk of the work during the semester. These assignments range from one to four weeks in length. Generally, the week after a non-digital game design is assigned, a playable prototype version of the game is due in class, along with the current ruleset.

These design assignments are completed in groups. It is essential that you attend your group meetings and fully participate in the design and creation of your games. For each group design assignment, every group must turn in the following:

- Title and logline: The name of the game and a 1-line summary that communicates its essence.
- Abstract/Overview: The name of the game, its creators, semester and class, and a 200-300 word summary overview of the game.
- Materials list: List of all physical game materials.
- Images: 1-5 images of the game.
- Playtest log: A record of each time the game was playtested, and what observations and changes were made as a result of the playtest.
- Peer Grades: You will evaluate each of your peers based on their participation and positive contribution to the design process. (See below for more details.)

For the Polished Game Project:

- Images will be taken with more care and the resulting documentation and a description of the polished game will be uploaded to the NYU Game Center website. Note that students can also upload other projects to the website as they wish.

Below are the projects that will be completed in class. In addition to the parameters listed below, additional design parameters may be added when they are assigned.

- Modification game: Each student will analyze and modify a simple card game.
- Mechanics game: Groups will create an abstract game in a traditional non-digital game format, such as a card game or board game.
- Social game: Groups will create a game that emphasizes social interaction and player experience.
- Story game: Groups will be given a short narrative that will be the basis of a game project that expresses some aspect of the story. The story game can be a singleplayer game or a multiplayer game.
- Public intervention project: Using an existing public space as a starting point, groups will create a game or playful experience that is in some way an intervention in the lives or experiences of those that are inhabiting the space.
- Polished game: Students will work alone or in groups to refine or create any kind of game, building on the ideas and concepts from the rest of the semester.
- Digital game pitch: Students will work individually to make a 4-minute presentation to class about an original digital game concept.
Grading

Evaluation of work

Each project will be evaluated with the following criteria:

- **Functionality.** Has the student made a playable, enjoyable game that can be completed and does not have any obvious structural problems?
- **Balance.** Beyond basic playability, are the systems of the game well-balanced and does the game provide multiple, meaningful choices for players?
- **Creativity.** Does the project evince innovation and uniqueness? Does it show a creative imagination that does not solve the given design problem in an ordinary way?
- **Appropriate for the assignment.** Each project is a response to constraints given by the instructor. Has the project properly addressed these constraints?
- **Presentation.** Each game is presented in material form, along with its rules and a written process statement. Are these materials well-written, well-organized, and easy to use?

Overall, the emphasis in this class is on EXPERIMENTATION and GAME DESIGN. It is more important that you spend time revising your rules and rebalancing your system rather than on graphic design or creating elaborate and polished materials.

That said, designing the sensory and material experience of play is part of design. So as we move through the semester, the material qualities of the player experience is something that you can also start exploring. The last few projects, especially the polished game, will have more of an emphasis on the final form of the game, including the game materials.

Students will be given grades based on a point scale. Each assignment will be graded on a point scale, and these points will be added up to determine the final grade, according to the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>92-100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90-91%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>88-89%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>82-87%</td>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>80-81%</td>
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The following are the components of the grade:

- Participation & peer grades: 25
- Game Modification: 5
- Mechanics Game: 10
- Social Game: 10
- Story Game: 15
- Public Space Game: 10
- Digital Game Pitch: 5
- Pitch Document: 5
- Concept Document: 10
- Final project: 25

**TOTAL**: 120

Late penalties

All assignments must be turned in on time. If an assignment is not turned at the start of the class for which it is due, its grade will drop by 20%. If it is a week or more late, its grade will drop by 50%.

Participation

The participation & peer grades portion of your grade is based on the following:
- Participation in group discussions and critiques
- Peer grades from group projects

Attendance
The following is the attendance policy for all NYU Game Center classes:

Attending and arriving on time to all class sessions is required and expected. This includes all labs, recitations, and critiques. If you will be missing a class due to illness, or unavoidable personal circumstances, you must notify your professor in advance via email for the absence to be excused.

Unexcused absences and being late to class will lower your final grade. Three unexcused absences lower your final grade by a letter. Each subsequent unexcused absence will lower another letter grade. Two tardies will count as one unexcused absence. Arriving more than 15 minutes late to class will also count as an unexcused absence.

Peer grades
Peer grades will be emailed to the instructor for each group assignment. You will give a grade to each member of your group. You can add a short explanation if you like, and you must add some explanation when giving a grade of C or below.

1 = Outstanding: fully participated, hard worker and great teammate
2 = Good: no complaints, consistent participation throughout the process
3 = Satisfactory: some problems or inconsistencies
4 = Difficult: hindered the progress of the project, or counter-productive in some way

NYU STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:
Plagiarism is presenting someone else’s work as though it were your own. More specifically, plagiarism is to present as your own: A sequence of words quoted without quotation marks from another writer or a paraphrased passage from another writer’s work or facts, ideas or images composed by someone else.

ACCESSIBILITY AT NYU
Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212 998-4980 for further information.

HEALTH AND SAFETY
Your health and safety are a priority at NYU. If you experience any health or mental health issues during this course, we encourage you to utilize the support services of the 24/7 NYU Wellness Exchange 212-443-9999. Also, all students who may require an academic accommodation due to a qualified disability, physical or mental, please register with the Moses Center 212-998-4980. Please let your instructor know if you need help connecting to these resources.
Tips for Working Successfully in a Group

From the Building Virtual Worlds class at Carnegie Melon’s ETC Program

**Meet people properly.** It all starts with the introduction. Then, exchange contact information, and make sure you know how to pronounce everyone’s names. Exchange phone #s, and find out what hours are acceptable to call during.

**Find things you have in common.** You can almost always find something in common with another person, and starting from that baseline, it’s much easier to then address issues where you have differences. This is why cities like professional sports teams, which are socially galvanizing forces that cut across boundaries of race and wealth. If nothing else, you probably have in common things like the weather.

**Make meeting conditions good.** Have a large surface to write on, make sure the room is quiet and warm enough, and that there aren’t lots of distractions. Make sure no one is hungry, cold, or tired. Meet over a meal if you can; food softens a meeting. That’s why they “do lunch” in Hollywood.

**Let everyone talk.** Even if you think what they’re saying is stupid. Cutting someone off is rude, and not worth whatever small time gain you might make. Don’t finish someone’s sentences for him or her; they can do it for themselves. And remember: talking louder or faster doesn’t make your idea any better. Check your egos at the door. When you discuss ideas, immediately label them and write them down. The labels should be descriptive of the idea, not the originator: “the troll bridge story,” not “Jane’s story.”

**Praise each other.** Find something nice to say, even if it’s a stretch. Even the worst of ideas has a silver lining inside it, if you just look hard enough. Focus on the good, praise it, and then raise any objections or concerns you have about the rest of it.

**Put it in writing.** Always write down who is responsible for what, by when. Be concrete. Arrange meetings by email, and establish accountability. Never assume that someone’s roommate will deliver a phone message. Also, remember that “politics is when you have more than 2 people” – with that in mind, always CC (carbon copy) any piece of email within the group, or to me, to all members of the group. This rule should never be violated; don’t try to guess what your group mates might or might not want to hear about.

**Be open and honest.** Talk with your group members if there’s a problem, and talk with me if you think you need help. The whole point of this course is that it’s tough to work across cultures. If we all go into it knowing that’s an issue, we should be comfortable discussing problems when they arise -- after all, that’s what this course is really about. Be forgiving when people make mistakes, but don’t be afraid to raise the issues when they come up.

**Avoid conflict at all costs.** When stress occurs and tempers flare, take a short break. Clear your heads, apologize, and take another stab at it. Apologize for upsetting your peers, even if you think someone else was primarily at fault; the goal is to work together, not start a legal battle over whose transgressions were worse. It takes two to have an argument, so be the peacemaker.

**Phrase alternatives as questions.** Instead of “I think we should do A, not B,” try “What if we did A, instead of B?” That allows people to offer comments, rather than defend one choice.
HOW TO WORK BETTER
1 DO ONE THING AT A TIME
2 KNOW THE PROBLEM
3 LEARN TO LISTEN
4 LEARN TO ASK QUESTIONS
5 DISTINGUISH SENSE FROM NONSENSE
6 ACCEPT CHANGE AS INEVITABLE
7 ADMIT MISTAKES
8 SAY IT SIMPLE
9 BE CALM
10 SMILE

Peter Fischli and Davis Weiss