Intro to Game Design (OART-UT 1605-001)
Tisch School of the Arts, Fall 2015
Office of Special Programs, 4 Credits
Mon. & Wed. 12:30—3:15 pm (Room 802, 2 MetroTech)
Instructor: Jesse Fuchs  Teaching Assistant: Emma Wang

Overview

Game Design 1 is a one-semester course that explores the fundamentals of game design, via readings, discussion, in-class game-like exercises, and group projects. The focus of the class is on the creation of non-digital games; therefore, no programming knowledge is expected or required. However, digital games will be discussed, and assignments on pitching digital game ideas are threaded throughout the course.

Goals of the course

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

- 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, experienced human systems, and cultural systems.

- Become familiar with the 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.

Required Readings

Readings for the course are taken from varied sources, but primarily from these two books:

Rules of Play, Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman
The Game Design Reader, Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman, eds.
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, as well as **emailed** to fj126@nyu.edu and sw2999@nyu.edu.

**Readings:** Most weeks during the semester, readings will be assigned. Students are responsible for completing these readings, on which there will be a quiz and discussion each class.

**Design Assignments:**
There are seven 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. **The week after a non-digital game design is assigned, a playable prototype version of the game is due, along with (currently) complete ruleset and design notes.**

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

- **Abstract:** The name of the game, of its creators, and a 100-200 word overview.
- **Rules:** A complete description of the game rules, including a list of components, illustrated examples of play, and a header image.
- **Design Process Statement:** A description of your design process. What were the design challenges your encountered and how did you solve them?
- **Digital Pitches:** Along with their non-digital game, each group will give a list of 20 one-or-two-sentence “elevator pitches” in related genres.
- **Public Peer Review:** Each student should email me/Emma/the group one positive thing and one thing that could be improved about each other member of the group.
- **Private Peer Grades:** Each student should also separately email me and Emma private peer grades for each member of the group, including themselves.

Below are the projects to be completed, in chronological order—specific parameters will be given in class.

- **Game modification:** Groups will take an existing simple dice-and-chip game and modify it.
- **Abstract game design:** Groups will create an abstract game in a traditional non-digital game format, using some combination of dice, cards, and chips.
- **Social game design:** Groups will create a board and/or card game that emphasizes social interaction and player experience.
- **Story game design:** Groups will be given a narrative that will be the basis of a game project that expresses some aspect of the story.
- **Digital game pitch:** Students will work individually to make a 3-5 minute presentation to the class about an original digital game concept.
- **Intervention/Big game design:** Groups will create a game that is in some way a intervention in the lives of its players on the level of space and ritual.
- **Final project:** Students will work alone or in groups to create any kind of game, building on the ideas and concepts from the rest of the semester.
Week-by-week Schedule

UNIT ONE: Games as Formal Systems

Week 1-2
9/2 TOPICS: introduction to class; what is game design; what makes games meaningful; rules, play, and culture; the iterative process

READINGs: Excerpt from Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud (8 pages)
"On Being the Right Size", J.S. Haldane (4 pages)
"The Fascination of the Miniature", Steven Millhauser (8 pages)
Mister O, Lewis Trondheim (3 pages)

ASSIGNED: Game Modification: each group will playtest the 1920’s folk rules of Monopoly. Groups will contrast it with the modern variant, and make modifications to create a more fun and meaningful experience for players. (2 weeks)

9/9 LAB

Week 3
9/14 TOPICS: techniques and approaches to playtesting; preparation for playtest lab

READINGs: "A Primer for Playtesting", Pozi & Zimmerman (6 pages)
"Problem-Driven Game Design", Kory Heath (2 pages)

PROJECT DUE: Game Modification

ASSIGNED: Abstract Game: groups will be give chips and dice, with which they'll create a playable, balanced game. (2 weeks)

9/16 LAB

Week 4
9/21 TOPICS: games as formal systems; games and rules; the elements of games

READINGs: Rules of Play Chapter 6: Interactivity (p. 61-69)
Game Design Theory, Keith Burgun (10 pages)
Rise of the Videogame Zinesters, Anna Anthropy (12 pages)
Lucky Wander Boy, D.B. Weiss (3 pages)

9/23 LAB

PROJECT DUE: Abstract Game

Week 5 (Double Class Week)

9/28 TOPICS: probability; chance; randomness; perceived vs. real math

Characteristics of Games, Richard Garfield et al., (p. 106-120)

9/30 TOPICS: games as social play
ASSIGNED: Social Game – Groups will be given social/emotional criteria and create a game that produces the desired experience through emergent means. (2 weeks)

PROJECT DUE: Abstract Game
Week 6
10/05  TOPICS: game theory; psychology of player interaction

READINGS: “The Bowerbird’s Dilemma” Larry Gonick (2 pages)
          Rules of Play: Chapter 19: Games as Game Theory Systems (p. 231-246)

10/07  LAB

PROTOTYPE DUE: Social Game

UNIT TWO: Games as Experiential Systems

Week 7
10/13  LAB

10/14  TOPICS: games and narrative; conceit and motif

PROJECT DUE: Social Game

ASSIGNED: Narrative Game: starting with a provided “license”, groups will create a game
          that procedurally represents it through gameplay. (3 weeks)

Week 8
10/19  TOPICS: games and simulation; procedural representation; games and drama

READINGS: Rules of Play: Chapter 27: Games as the Play of Simulation (p. 421-434)
          On Game Design, Chris Crawford (9 pages)

10/21  LAB

PROTOTYPE DUE: Narrative Game

MID-TERM GRADES SENT OUT

Week 9
10/26  TOPICS: short-term and long-term goals; games and fairness; cheating, exploits, and
degenerate play; positive and negative rewards; flow and gameplay

READINGS: Rules of Play: Chapter 20: Games as Systems of Conflict (p. 249-258)
          Chapter 21: Breaking the Rules (p. 267-283)
          A Game Design Vocabulary, Anthropy and Clark (20 pages)

10/28  LAB

Week 10
11/2   TOPICS: communicating ideas, the role of the game designer, documenting design

READINGS: Kobold Book of Game Design, Rob Daviau & Mike Selinker (24 pages)

ASSIGNED: Digital Game Pitch: Students will individually create a 3-5 minute long
          slideshow which pitches a digital game costing between $30k and $30m. (1 week)

11/4   DUE: Narrative Game
UNIT THREE: Games as Cultural Systems + Final Project

Week 11
11/9  TOPICS: games and culture; games and art; game design as cultural intervention
      ASSIGNED: Intervention/Big Game: Groups will create a physical game that is in some way an intervention in the lives of its players, on the level of space and ritual, ideological content, or player lifestyle. (1 week)

      ASSIGNED: Final Project Concept: start thinking about who you want to work with, what kind of game you want to make, and what design questions you want to explore. (1 week)

      PROJECT DUE: Digital Game Pitch

11/11  LAB

Week 12
11/16  TOPICS: game economies; balancing games; using spreadsheets in game design

      PROJECT DUE: Intervention/Big Game

      DUE: Final Project Concept

      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 as they plan and execute their final projects. (5 weeks)

11/18  LAB

Week 13
11/23  TOPICS: digital game design; online multiplayer games; player types and play styles

                 Lucky Wander Boy, D.B. Weiss (3 pages)

Week 14
11/30  TOPICS: cultural contexts of play; implicit rules; cultural politics in games

                 “Hoyle on Troubled Waters”, David Parlett (14 pages)

12/2  LAB
      1ST PROTOTYPE DUE: Final Project

Week 15
12/7  LAB
12/9  LAB

Week 16
12/14  LAB
      2ND PROTOTYPE DUE: Final Project

Finals Week
12/21 (2-4pm) PROJECT DUE: Final Project
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?

Students will be given grades based on a 100-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>Score</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>93-100</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-92</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87-89</td>
<td>B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83-86</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-92</td>
<td>B-</td>
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<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
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The following are the components of the grade:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Points</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance &amp; participation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quizzes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick Pitches</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prototypes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modification Game</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract Game</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Game</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Game</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Game Pitch</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention/Big Game</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final project</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Late penalties

It is your responsibility to turn in assignments on time. If an assignment is not turned in by the class for which it is due, its grade will drop 5% + 5% for each day it is overdue. All assignments will be graded and returned within 48 hours.
Attendance & Participation
The attendance and participation portion of your grade is based on the following:
• Your attendance in class and tardiness
• Participation in group discussions and critiques
• Private peer grades from group projects, if consistently positive/negative

Note that department policy also requires the following additional penalties for absence/lateness, with 2 “lates” counting as 1 absence:
• You can have two unexcused absence without additional penalty.
• Your third unexcused absence will lower your final grade by a full letter.
• Each subsequent unexcused absence will lower your final grade by a full letter.
• Being more than 15 minutes late will count as a full absence.

Absences are excused for religious holidays, illness (with doctor’s note), and because you emailed me as far ahead of time as you could and made an empirically convincing case for it.

Private peer grades
Peer grades will be privately emailed to the instructor and TA for each group assignment. The exact mechanic of this will be discussed in the first class.

Group evaluations
In addition to the private peer grades, students will also write a public evaluation of each team member for each group project. These evaluations will be sent to all group members, the instructor, and the TA. Group evaluations consist of the following:

• **One positive observation.** In a few sentences, point out the particular skills, behaviors, particular decisions, or other ways in which the team member made a positive contribution to the group.

• **One area for improvement.** In a few sentences, point out how the team member can change their working style, collaborative approach, or other aspects of their behavior to improve the project and the team dynamic.

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.
Tips for Working Successfully in a Group

Adapted 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.

**Determine common principles.** Before you get into the specifics of what sort of game you want to make, talk in more general terms about the assignment. What sort of related games do you like? What sorts of things do they have in common. Make a list of the sorts of things that get you excited about a game, and when you start getting into specifics, refer back to it. Many of those things won’t make it into the final game (or else it’s probably an incoherent mishmash), but it’s good to keep them all in mind…and trying to reconcile two seemingly contradictory desires is often the source of innovative game mechanics.

**Make meeting conditions good.** Have a large surface to write on, make sure the room is quiet enough, and that there aren’t lots of distractions. Make sure no one is hungry, cold/hot, or tired.

**Make sure someone takes lots of notes.** And make sure it’s not the same person every time, unless someone really, really likes being the person who takes lots of notes. These notes will be immensely valuable for many reasons: in terms of completing the assignment (a little cleaning up and editing, and bam, you’ve got your design doc), in terms of having a trove of alternate ideas to draw on when you get stuck, and out of simple autobiographical interest.

**Let everyone say their piece.** Even if you think it’s dumb. Cutting someone off is rude, and not worth the small time gain. Don’t finish someone’s sentences; 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.”

**Be careful about going off on tangents.** The flipside of this is being cognizant of other people’s time and attention. Feel free to volunteer outlandish suggestions for a game, as these can spark more workable ideas. And every group needs to take breaks, both to catch their breath and get to know each other. But if you find yourself talking about something unrelated to the game and the response is mere politeness, it’s probably time to get back to the matter at hand.

**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. And don’t try to guess what your group might want to hear about—always CC email within the group, or to me, to all members of the group.

**Be open and honest.** Talk with your group members if there’s a problem, and talk with me if you think you need help. Be forgiving when people make mistakes, but don’t be afraid to raise the issues when they come up.

**De-escalate conflicts.** 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.

**Always remember that this isn’t your last game.** It’s often frustrating when you’re transfixed by a great idea but nobody else in the group gets it. If you can’t sell them on it, remember: you’re going to make plenty of games in the future. Write the idea down in your own notebook, and voila, you’ve got your summer project.
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