Intermediate Game Design – Spring 2015

Instructor: Frank Lantz
frank.lantz@nyu.edu

Assistant Instructor: Toni Pizza
toni.pizza@nyu.edu

Overview

Intermediate Game Design builds directly from the foundation established in Introduction to Game Design. The class takes the fundamental principles of game design and applies them to specific contexts and design challenges. In this course there is a focus on the kinds of real-world design problems that face creative professionals in the game industry and an emphasis on the skills necessary to communicate design ideas effectively. In addition, students will have an opportunity to explore the intersection of games and storytelling.

Goals of the course

• Explore 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.
• Understand the role that the game designer plays in the digital game development process.
• Learn how to make original, expressive game experiences within specific, concrete constraints.
• Gain experience solving the kinds of design problems that face professional game designers.
• Experiment with worldbuilding, interactive storytelling, and the intersection of narrative and play.
• Develop the ability to clearly communicate their creative ideas, both verbally through presentations, as well as through written documents.

Reading and Discussion

In addition to design assignments and in-class exercises, the class will include a variety of readings, which will be handed out by the instructors. Students are required to come to every class prepared to discuss the week’s reading.
# Course Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>ASSIGNMENTS</th>
<th>MAIN CLASS ACTIVITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Class Intro</strong></td>
<td>Level Design 1</td>
<td>Exercise: Bolf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Design as problem-solving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Level Design</strong></td>
<td>Level Design 2</td>
<td>Project Critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Design as communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>Playtesting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Playtesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play as a conversation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>Structures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Project Critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The elements of play</td>
<td>Card Game Prototype</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>Superstructures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Playtesting / Critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The contexts of play</td>
<td>Card Game</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><strong>Balance and Tuning</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise: Balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Designing contexts for play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><strong>Information and Usability</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise: Interface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Visual design of game materials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><strong>Story Play</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Project Critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Games, characters, stories, worlds</td>
<td>RPG Scenario</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><strong>Drama</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise: Improv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enabling improvisational storytelling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><strong>Worldbuilding</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise: Worldbuilding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creating compelling fictional worlds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><strong>Game Ideas</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Project Critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generating concepts for digital games</td>
<td>Concept Brief</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><strong>Effective Communication</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elevator Pitches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing your creative vision</td>
<td>Concept Pitch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><strong>Game Design as Profession</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working in the industry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><strong>Pitch Session</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation &amp; Critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Final concept presentations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Schedule

Week 1
TOPICS: Introduction to class, course overview, problem solving
EXERCISE: Bolf (physical game level design)
ASSIGNMENT: Level Design 1 Using an existing level design tool (VVVVVV), each student will create a 2-part level. The first part of the level will be designed to teach the player a special gameplay trick, element, or way of thinking. The second part of the level will make use of that gameplay element for a more complex and involved experience.

Week 2
TOPICS: Level design, design as communication
DISCUSS READING: Characteristics of Games: Basics
DUE: Level Design 1
ASSIGNMENT: Level Design 2 Using a different level design tool (Knytt Stories), in small groups, players will create a level based on criteria from the instructor. This assignment builds on the mechanical focus of the previous Level Design assignment to emphasize the expressive and narrative elements of the player experience.

Week 3
TOPICS: Level design continued, playtesting, communicating design ideas
DISCUSS READINGS: A Game Design Vocabulary: Chapter 1 – Language
David Sirlin: Secrets in Donkey Kong Country 2
EXERCISE: In-class playtesting and revision of levels

Week 4
TOPICS: Structures, the elements of play
DISCUSS READING: Characteristics of Games: Infrastructure
DUE: Level Design 2
ASSIGNMENT: Card Game Prototype In small groups, students will prepare a card game prototype or concept, to be presented in the next class. The form and content of the card game can be whatever the students want, as long as there is a strong element of a player-customization within the design (eg. in-game or pre-game deckbuilding.)

Week 5
TOPICS: Superstructures, the contexts for play
DISCUSS READINGS: Characteristics of Games: Superstructure
DUE: Card Game Prototype
ASSIGNMENT: Card Game Students will expand their card game prototypes to create a finished game. The emphasis of the project is to create an overall game structure that supports player customization and a tuned and balanced economy with multiple viable strategies that encourage strategic exploration, as well as clear visual design of game cards and elements.
Week 6

TOPICS: Balance and tuning
DISCUSS READINGS: Mark Rosewater: Timmy, Johnny, and Spike
Mark Rosewater: The Value of Pie
EXERCISE: Game Balance

Week 7

TOPICS: Information and usability, the visual design of game materials
DISCUSS READINGS: Tufte: Visual Communication
Williams: The Non-Designers Design Book
EXERCISE: Game Interface

Week 8

TOPICS: Story Play, games, characters, stories, worlds
DISCUSS READING: Game Design Vocabulary: Storytelling
DUE: Card Game
ASSIGNMENT: RPG Scenario In groups, students will take an existing roleplaying game rules structure and design an original scenario for that system. The games will be one-shot short-play role-playing designs, so that groups have time to playtest them as they are developed. The emphasis of the assignment is to utilize procedural representation and social interaction to result in a meaningful union of gameplay and storytelling.

Week 9

TOPICS: Drama, enabling improvisational storytelling
DISCUSS READINGS: Del Close: Truth in Comedy
EXERCISE: Improvisation

Week 10

TOPICS: Worldbuilding, creating compelling fictional worlds
DISCUSS READINGS: Patrick Keefe: Spitballing Indy
EXERCISE: Improvisation

Week 11

TOPICS: Game Ideas, generating concepts for digital games
DISCUSS READINGS: tbd
DUE: RPG Scenario
ASSIGNMENT: Concept Brief In small groups, students will develop an original videogame concept which they will write up in a 1 – 2 page written document. In addition to the written document, design teams will develop a single-sentence “elevator pitch” for the concept.
Week 12

TOPICS: Effective Communication, expressing your creative vision
DISCUSS READING: tbd
DUE: Concept Brief

ASSIGNMENT: Concept Pitch In small groups, students will take their videogame concept brief and develop it into a 5-minute presentation with accompanying visuals.

Week 13

TOPICS: Game Design as a profession, working in the industry
DISCUSS READING: tbd
WORKSHOP: practice presentations and get feedback

Week 14

PRESE Nation OF FINAL CONCEPT PITCHES
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 demonstrate innovation and uniqueness? Does it show a creative imagination that does not only rely on predictable convention?
- **Appropriate for the assignment.** Each project is a response to constraints given by the instructor. Has the project properly addressed these constraints?
- **Presentation.** Are any materials well-composed, well-presented, 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>Grade Range</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>98-100</td>
<td>A+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92-97</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-91</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88-89</td>
<td>B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82-87</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following are the components of the grade:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance &amp; Participation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level Design 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level Design 2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Card Game Prototype</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Card Game</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPG Scenario</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept Brief</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept Pitch</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Late penalties**

All assignments must be turned in on time. If an assignment is not turned in by 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%.

**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
- Peer grades and participation in writing group evaluations
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
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.