Intermediate Game Design (GAMES-UT 151-001)
Tisch School of the Arts, Fall 2015 / 4 Credits
Mon. & Wed. 12:30—3:15 pm (Room 830, 2 MetroTech)
Instructor: Naomi Clark, naomi@halfrobot.com
Teaching Assistant: Reynaldo Vargas, rdv230@nyu.edu

Overview
Intermediate Game Design builds on the foundation established in Introduction to Game Design. This class takes the fundamental principles of game design and applies them to specific contexts and design challenges of the kind that creative professionals in the game industry deal with on a regular basis. Students will learn to design levels and teach players through play; communicate ideas effectively via documentation and presentation; generate and balance complex game economies; and explore the potential for meaningful play at the intersection of games and storytelling.

Goals of the course
- Gain a deeper understanding of methodologies and conceptual skills of game design, such as systems thinking, the iterative design process, playtesting, design collaboration, critical design analysis, etc.
- Gain experience applying an iterative design process and creative collaboration skills to make original, expressive game experiences within specific, concrete constraints.
- Understand the role of a game designer in the game development process and gain experience solving the kinds of creative problems faced by professional game designers.
- Explore advanced topics in game design, including games with dynamic economies, storytelling through games, level design, and balancing and tuning complex games.
- Develop the ability to clearly communicate creative ideas through spoken presentations as well written documents.

Required Readings
Readings for the course are taken from varied sources, but multiple readings are taken from these two books:

- *Characteristics of Games*, by Elias, Garfield, & Gutschera
- *A Game Design Vocabulary*, by Anthropy & Clark
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, and also emailed to nmc5@nyu.edu and rdv230@nyu.edu.

**Readings:** Most weeks during the semester, readings will be assigned. Students are responsible for completing these readings, as we will be discussing them on the day the readings are due.

**Game Design Assignments:** There are five 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. Partway through each game design assignment, a playable prototype version of the game will be due.

These design assignments are completed in groups of two to 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:

- **Overview:** The name of the game, of its creators, and a 100-200 word overview.
- **Elevator Pitch:** A very short description that conveys the most important information you’d want a potential player to know about the game, meant to sound good when spoken aloud in under ten seconds.
- **Rules (card game only):** A complete description of the game rules, including a list of components need to play the game and illustrated examples of play.
- **Design Process Statement:** A description of your design process. What were the design challenges your encountered and how did you solve them?
- **Public Group Evaluation:** Each student must email Naomi, Reynaldo, and the rest of their group members one positive thing and one thing that could be improved about each other member of the group.
- **Private Peer Grades:** Each student should also email Naomi and Reynaldo private peer grades for each member of the group, including themselves. An explanation must be provided for any grade of C or below.

Below are the projects for this class, in chronological order—additional details will be given in class when assigned:

- **Abstract Level Design:** Create and refine a short sequence of levels for an existing game, with sections meant to teach and then reinforce the use of a specific gameplay technique, trick, or game element.
- **Experiential Level Design:** Create a longer sequence of levels using a level-editing engine to create an emotional and aesthetic experience based on criteria which will be provided in class.
- **Narrative RPG:** Groups will create a tabletop roleplaying game using a set of pre-defined mechanics along with a pop culture genre of their choice.
- **Concept Pitch and Document:** Groups will develop an idea for an original digital game, deliver a short presentation to pitch their concept, then create a document detailing the overall vision and initial prototype for the game.
- **Card Game:** Students will work in groups to prototype, iterate, and refine a card game with a strong element of player customization and an economy of cards and resources, similar to collectible-card or deck-building games.
Week-by-week Schedule

**Week 1 (No Lab)**

9 / 2  TOPICS: introduction to class; course overview; basics of level design

**PROJECT ASSIGNED: Abstract Level Design.** 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 should make use of that gameplay element for a more complex and involved experience. (1.5 weeks)

**Week 2 (Lab Only)**

9 / 9  LAB: Complete your Abstract Level Design and play each other’s games.

**PROJECT ASSIGNED: Experiential Level Design.** 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. (2.5 weeks)

**Week 3**

9 / 14  TOPICS: design as communication, developing game verbs through level design, playtesting

READINGS DUE:  
*A Game Design Vocabulary*, Chapter 2-3
“Secrets in Donkey Kong Country” by David Sirlin

**PROJECT DUE: Abstract Level Design**

9 / 16  LAB: working on Experiential Level Design

**Week 4**

9 / 21  TOPICS: game feel and audiovisual context in level design

READINGS DUE:  
*A Game Design Vocabulary*, Chapter 3
*Game Feel*, Intro & Chapter 1

9 / 23  LAB: prototype due for Experiential Level Design

**Week 5**

9 / 28  TOPICS: elements of games as dramatic systems; story as play

READINGS DUE:  
“Writing for Comics” by Alan Moore
“Sound” from *A Poetry Handbook* by Mary Oliver

**PROJECT DUE: Experiential Level Design**

**PROJECT ASSIGNED: Narrative RPG.** In groups, students will take an existing roleplaying game system and design an original scenario for that system, based on a pop culture genre of their choice. 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. (3 weeks)

9 / 30  LAB: working on Narrative RPG.

**Week 6**

10 / 05  TOPICS: enabling improvisational play via storytelling

READINGS DUE:  
“Truth in Comedy” by Del Close
*A Game Design Vocabulary*, Chapter 7

10 / 07  LAB: working on Narrative RPG
Week 7 (Class on Tuesday due to Monday holiday)
10 / 13  TOPICS: creating compelling fictional worlds
          READINGS DUE:  “Spitballing Indy” by Patrick Keefe
                          Selections from *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino
10 / 14  LAB: refining presentation for *Narrative RPG*

Week 8
10 / 19  TOPICS: games and genre; generating concepts for digital games
          READINGS DUE:  TBD

          **PROJECT DUE: Narrative RPG**

          **PROJECT ASSIGNED: Concept Pitch.** In small groups, students will develop an original videogame concept which they will turn into a 5-minute presentation with accompanying visuals. (1 week)

10 / 21  LAB: working on *Concept Pitch;* presentation rehearsal

          **MIDTERM GRADES SENT OUT**

Week 9
10 / 26  TOPICS: effective communication of creative vision; strategies for prototyping
          READINGS DUE:  “Advanced Prototyping” by Chris Hecker & Chaim Gingold (video & slides)
                          Sample design documents

          **PROJECT DUE: Concept Pitch (presentations in class)**

          **PROJECT ASSIGNED: Concept Document.** In the same groups, students will further develop the idea they pitched into a full concept document and prototype specification for their game, detailing the vision, intended audience, platform, visual style, and initial prototyping questions. (2 weeks)

10 / 28  LAB: working on *Concept Document*

Week 10
11 / 2  TOPICS: game design as a profession in the game industry
          READINGS DUE:  TBD

11 / 4  LAB: working on *Concept Document*
Week 11
11 / 9  TOPICS: Structures and elements of play; defining customizable card games

READINGS DUE: Characteristics of Games, Chapter 3: Infrastructure

PROJECT DUE: Concept Document

PROJECT ASSIGNED: 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 (e.g. in-game or pre-game deckbuilding). (1 week)

11 / 11  LAB: working on Card Game Prototype

Week 12
11 / 16  TOPICS: Superstructures and contexts of play; competitive culture

READINGS DUE: Characteristics of Games, Chapter 7: Superstructure
“What I Know About Magic: the Gathering” by Douglas Buel

PROJECT DUE: Card Game Prototype

PROJECT ASSIGNED: 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. (4 weeks)

11 / 18  LAB: working on Card Game

Week 13 (Thanksgiving week, no class on Wednesday)
11 / 23  LAB: first playable prototype due for Card Game

Week 14
11 / 30  TOPICS: balance and tuning

READINGS DUE: Characteristics of Games, Chapter 4: System
“The Value of Pie” and “Timmy, Johnny, and Spike” by Mark Rosewater

12 / 2  LAB: working on Card Game

Week 15
12 / 7  TOPICS: information and usability; the visual design of game materials

READINGS DUE: excerpt from Visual Communication by Edward Tufte
excerpt from The Non-Designers Design Book by Robin Williams

12 / 9  LAB: second prototype due for Card Game

Week 16
12 / 14  TOPICS: the great unknown

READINGS DUE: TBD

PROJECT DUE: Card Game
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:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</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>
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<tr>
<td>80-82</td>
<td>B-</td>
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<td>etc.</td>
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The following are the components of the grade:

- **Attendance & Participation** 15
- **Prototypes ready on schedule** 5
- **Abstract Level Design** 5
- **Experiential Level Design** 10
- **Narrative RPG** 20
- **Concept Pitch** 5
- **Concept Document** 15
- **Card Game** 25

**TOTAL** 100

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.

**Attendance & Participation**
The attendance and participation portion of your grade is based on the following:
- Your attendance in class and tardiness
- Participation in and contributions to group discussions and critiques
- Facilitation of participation by classmates in discussions and by team members in group projects
- Private peer grades from group projects, especially if consistently positive or negative
Attendance Policy
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 the professor in advance via email for the absence to be excused.

Note that department policy also requires the following additional penalties for absence/lateness, with 2 “lates” counting as 1 absence:
- You are allowed two unexcused absences without any 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 may be excused for religious holidays, illness (with doctor’s note), serious emergencies, and other unavoidable circumstances beyond a student’s control. In order to be considered, any request to be excused must be made as far in advance as feasible based on the nature of the absence.

Private peer grades
Peer grades must be emailed to the instructor and TA (and nobody else) for each group assignment. You will give a grade to each member of your group. You can add a short explanation if you like, but you must provide an explanation when giving a grade of C or below.

- A = Fully participated and contributed ideas - hard worker and great teammate
- B = Generally was present during the process - no complaints
- C = Attended some meetings, but could have contributed more (describe how)
- D = Was absent from most or all meetings, or counter-productive in some way (explain what happened)
- F = Completely absent from the process (explain what happened)

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 should be emailed to all group members, the instructor, and the TA. Group evaluations consist of the following:
- At least one positive observation. In a few sentences, point out particular skills, behaviors, particular decisions, or other ways in which the team member made a positive contribution to the group.
- At least one area for improvement. In a few sentences, point out how the team member could change their working style, collaborative approach, or other aspects of their behavior to improve projects and team dynamics.

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. Exchange contact information, and find out the best methods and times to reach each person. Make sure you know how to pronounce everyone’s names and what pronouns (he, she, they, etc) each person prefers.

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 often, trying to reconcile two seemingly contradictory desires is the source of innovative game mechanics!

Make meeting conditions good and take care of your needs. Have a large surface to write on, and make sure the room is quiet enough, without lots of distractions. Do what you can to ensure no one is hungry, thirsty, cold/hot, or tired, and do your best to arrive at a meeting having taken care of your basic needs.

Make sure someone takes lots of notes. And make sure it’s not the same person every time, unless someone really, really like that role. 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 time saved. Don’t finish someone’s sentences; they can do it themselves. Remember: talking louder or faster doesn’t make your idea any better. Check your egos at the door. When you discuss ideas, immediately label and record them. 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 you should be 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 totally unrelated to the game, especially if only one or two of you are interested 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 idea has something interesting lurking inside it, if you look hard enough. Focus on the good, praise it, and then raise any objections or concerns you have about the rest of it. You might discover something you didn’t realize about the idea in the process!

Put it in writing. Always write down who is responsible for what, by when. Be concrete: assign tasks to people. Arrange meetings by email, and establish accountability. Don’t try to guess what your group might want to hear about—always CC email to all members of the group, and optionally to your professor as well.

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.

Mitigate conflict whenever you can. 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: be the peacemaker whenever possible so that conflicts can resolve.

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 captivated 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