Intro GD Unit 1 - Mods and Intro

The first and shortest unit of game design for new students. Introduces the structure and concept of the class, gets started with a "yes, you can design a game!" low-pressure assignment to mod an existing game as a solo project, but playtested with one partner who’s modding a different game. Students should understand that this assignment is a fast process (~1 week) and not expected to be perfect, quite the opposite. The second short assignment is a short (~5 slides) pitch presentation of an original idea that students develop and communicate solo.

**Major Assignment I:** Game Modification (usually assigned first session of week 1, due first session of week 2)

**Major Assignment II:** Game Pitch (usually assigned first session of week 1, due first session of week 2)

**Educational Goals for Unit 1**

- get comfortable with modding as a natural way to fork new game ideas
- giving and receiving feedback as a form of respect for creative process
- basics of the iterative process: create, get feedback, refine, repeat
- articulating and communicating ideas about games; what does your audience need to know?
- structure and format of the class
- (possibly) why this class starts with rules, then moves to play/experience, and then culture
- (possibly) what does a game designer do? and the essential qualities of communicating, collaborating and listening
- (possibly) how to be a good collaborator

**Class-by-Class Lesson Plan**

Sample lesson plans by Eric with times for each activity in each class, both days of each week in this unit.

**Week 1, Class 1: First Session**

**Pre-Class Prep**

- print a copy of your syllabus for each student, plus yourself and TA
- print a set of rules for the moddable 2-player card games (four games, so one set per four students): 2-player card game rules.pdf or 2-player card game rules.docx
- prepare video of Objectified on a laptop hooked up to the classroom projector, cue to 5:23: https://www.dropbox.com/s/tbjjwf5xrqnbtw/Objectified.zip
- decide on readings (see bottom of page) and how you want to distribute them (print, Slack, download from a file repository, etc)

**Introductions** (15m)

- Introduce yourself, do preferred pronouns to model (see also our current Names and Pronouns best-practices document for adjuncts, Fall 2019)
- Have students introduce themselves with name, preferred pronouns, and an icebreaker question (possibly "what interests you about game design?" or "what does a game designer do?" – at orientation they will usually have been asked "what's the last game you played?" and "what is game design?")
- Discuss answers to the question; of various answers that may have come up about game design, most or all answers are probably correct?

**Watch and Discuss Objectified** (15m)

- play Objectified from around 5:23 to 10:35 – discussion of designing peelers, shears, other tools for accessibility, affordance
- Discuss what students noticed, what they thought was interesting
- How does this relate to game design, or what's different? (Commonalities: research, rapid prototyping, collaboration, designing for a context, thinking about extremes of users, making up your own process...)

**Exercise: Modify Rock-Paper-Scissors** (45m) – See below

**Discuss the big ideas of this class** (20m)

- This can and should be different for every instructor and may involve what brought you to game design and/or development, how you think about it
- The class is structure into three large parts: Rules, Play, and Culture. Why is this? Are rules the most important part of a game? (No, but one potential thing to discuss is why it's easy to learn them first. They're like a skeleton: not sufficient to describe an organism, but helpful for structure and getting started in hanging the fuller flesh on the dry bones.)
- why do we talk about games as design instead of or in addition to games as art?
- what does "formal" mean in the context of game design?
- what are rules, anyway? (this leads into the next exercise)

**Exercise: Modify Tic-Tac-Toe** (45m) – See below
Hand Out Syllabus (15m)

- Keep this brief! Discuss structure and description of the class
- **What it is:** non-digital, collaborative, project-based, with reading & writing
- **What isn’t:** scholarship, history, theory
- Be sure to describe any expectations around quizzes, preparation for discussion of reading, and attendance/tardiness
- Answer any questions

**Major Assignment: Game Modification** (10m) – See below

**Assign Readings for Next Class** – See Readings section below

**Week 1, Class 2: First Lab**

Recommended that instructor does not come to this very first lab, to allow students to be less self-conscious / observed and to struggle with each other. Also to set expectations that instructor isn’t present for all labs!

**Expectations for Students** (can tell them these at end of previous class but should also remind via e-mail, Slack or TA): 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.

**Instructions for TAs:** make sure all students have playtested their game with at least their original partner. Assist with discussing and analyzing games, troubleshooting.

**In-Class Exercises**

**Exercise: Modify Rock-Paper-Scissors (45 minutes)**

This exercise involves embodied play, how structures can help create meaning, and modifications that aren't all about structure or logic.

1. **Basic Version:** Have 2 volunteers demonstrate vanilla Rock-Paper-Scissors 1 vs 1
2. **Team Mod:** Now try group vs. group, with equal size groups (can split class in half): the whole group must discuss secretly and decide what symbol to show.
3. **Flavor Mod:** Add a theme: Panther-Person-Porcupine. Panthers beat people, obviously. Porcupines beat panthers because they'll get pricked in the nose. But people beat porcupines because people can wear boots or gloves to step on or handle the porcupine. (Yes, that's the sketchiest one, kind of like paper covering rock...) When picking a symbol, each group must also decide how to represent panther, or person, etc. (Person is usually pretty funny as a relative representation.)
4. **Physical Mod:** Add physical challenge. Mashing up is one way to mod, so let's mash up tag and rock-paper-scissors! When there's a tie, nothing happens. But if one side wins, then each player on the winning side (e.g. panthers winning over people) must physically tag the opponent across from them in order to win. Note that this does not have to be an extreme physical competition, and it may be good to set limits on speed.

Discuss how each of these mods changes the experience in a different way (social, thematic, embodied).

**Exercise: Modify Tic-Tac-Toe (45 minutes)**

This exercise involves analyzing and articulating rules, rapid modification via elements of game structure, writing rules, and playtesting.

1. **Analyze Tic-Tac-Toe.** As a class, list out the rules of Tic-Tac-Toe. Here's the instructor's cheat sheet, see if all these get covered:
   - play takes place on a 3x3 grid
   - 2 players take turns placing either an X (first player) or an O (second player) in an empty square on the grid
   - 3 in a row wins
   - if no player can place a mark, it's a tie
2. Split into groups of two to modify the rules of Tic-Tac-Toe to create a new game.
3. Brainstorm what groups might modify. Common possibilities: board shape or grid size; types of pieces or marks; number of players; where you're allowed to play; win conditions; special spaces; moving pieces around, etc.
4. **Modify the game structure.** Groups can only change up to 3 rules! They should think about what they're trying to affect with these changes.

If there's enough time (30 minutes left out of 45) you can do step 5 and 6, otherwise skip to 7:

5. **Write out modified rules.** Explain how to play your game as clearly as possible.
6. **Playtest each others' games.** At least one other group should play each game, there's probably not time for more.
7. **Discuss.** Don't have every single group share their game, just ask for a few examples. Could have everyone share what they changed very quickly, or look at a couple in depth. Ask for any that felt particularly successful, maybe from the point of view of playtesters! Ask for a failure too, to show how we learn from broken games and that a "failed experiment" is valuable too.
8. **What's the most successful mod of Tic-Tac-Toe?** Well, if you change three rules (larger grid up to 7x6, four in a row instead of three, and marks must be placed in the bottom unoccupied square) you get Connect Four, a mod designed by Howard Wexler and Ned
8. Strongin in the mid-70s. The cool part of their design isn't exactly a rules mod: it's flipping the board to make it more usable and experientially fun, taking advantage of gravity to make the third rule change simple to remember and use!

9. **Extended version.** Probably not time unless other exercises aren't done, but the above process can be repeated with Connect Four. The challenge with modding Connect Four is that it becomes difficult to keep adding and changing elements without it becoming extremely complex; talk about successes and failures here, including the idea that you could mod by simplifying / subtracting elements.

**Major Assignments**

**Major Assignment: Game Modification**

- Give each student one of the four sheets in the 2-player card game rules document. The four games are Game of Pure Strategy (pure budding game), War (purely random), Memory (pure skill), and Uno (pure Uno).
  - PDF: 2-player card game rules.pdf
  - DOCX: 2-player card game rules.docx
- After this, assign students to test with each other. They should be paired with another student who is modding a different game. Students are each responsible for handing in their own completed assignment (it's a solo project) but work together in pairs for purposes of joint playtesting, brainstorming, feedback. If there is an odd number of students, have one group of three.
- They should play and discuss each game in their group to try an analyze it: what's working? What's not working? What might be changed to make the game more compelling or interesting?
- If there's time, have them try changing one or two rules and playtesting. If not, then tell them they can do this, or continue doing it, by meeting outside of class or in the next class's lab.
- No matter what they should be prepared to come to the next class session (lab) with rules changes they want to try, or better yet, a prototype that's ready to play.

**Readings for Unit 1 - Mods and Intro**

**Assigned Week 1 to be discussed in Week 2**

**Standard Readings** (These readings are referenced in the lesson plan, tend to relate to unit educational goals, and are often from Rules of Play, but can be supplemented / replaced)

- Rules of Play, Chapter 6: Interactivity (14pg) (definitions of interactivity, designing interactivity, choice-outcome molecules, anatomy of a choice, communication & feedback, possibility space)
- A Primer for Playtesting by Nathalie Pozzi and Eric Zimmerman (7pg)

**Alternative Readings** (Someone's assigned one or more of these in the past! Feel free to sample.)

- Rules of Play, Chapter 3: Meaningful Play (6pg) (meaningful play via Huizinga, discernable and integrated actions)
- Art of Game Design by Jesse Schell, Chapter 1 (7pg) (about what a game designer does, skills of a game designer, importance of listening)
- Rise of the Videogame Zinesters by Anna Anthropy, Chapter 3 (13pg) (what are games good for, basic definitions, rules, folk and authored games, meaning)
- "On Being the Right Size," J.B.S. Haldane (4pg) (the importance of scale in biology and human institutions)
- "The Fascination of the Miniature," Steven Millhauser (8pg) (scale, modeling and simulation)
- excerpt from Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud (8pg comic) (how comics deal with abstraction & representation of motion, time, sound)
- "Mister O," Lewis Trondheim (3pg comic) (great little example of wordless sequential art creating a narrative)
- "Catalogue of Obsolete Entertainments," Adam Pennyman (3pg) (meaning and interpretation in the experience of Pac-Man)