**Syllabus for Game Design Workshop**

Brian Schrank, PhD

Office: Daley 200F

TuTh 3:10PM - 4:40PM

14EAS 00212 Loop Campus

Course Description

This course is an introduction to both the theory and practice of game design. Students will explore fundamental elements of game design and put these concepts to work in designing, prototyping, playtesting, and developing both physical and computer games. The course will cover formal elements of games, game dynamics, game narratives, and the dramatic components of games. Students will study the game design process including brainstorming, conceptualization, creation of design documentation, and play-testing. PREREQUISITE(S): none

Graduate-Level Effort and Work is Expected

Students are expected to work 20-30 hours a week on their coursework. Failure to put in the expected amount of time and effort will result in a lowered grade.

Additionally, the kind of work expected in this course is graduate-level work. This means developing advanced skills in 1) problem-solving and 2) critical discourse around your work as well as 3) an understanding of how your work performs in its intended sociocultural context.

Help Faculty Help You

This course requires your greatest effort. Faculty understand how stressful, confusing, and challenging it will be for you. It is vital for students to communicate to the professor if they face challenges they don’t know how to resolve. These challenges might be around game development, game design, art, programming, team dynamics, professional practice, or anything else that might get in the way of a healthy iterative creative practice. Post questions to the class Slack channels if you’re comfortable. That is the key communication tool used in the course. However if a student would like greater discretion they could email the professor or ask to speak in person.

Main Deliverable—Game Venues

The main deliverable students develop in the class is a game that would be deemed worthy by juries to show in esteemed game venues. For example, 1) a top-tier independent game festival such as IndieCade or IGF in California, Sense of Wonder Night in Japan, or AMAZE in Europe and South Africa; or 2) a museum or gallery such as the Tate Modern in London, Chicago Design Museum, or CICA Museum in South Korea; or an academic game conference such as DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association Conference) held annually in a different host city.

The nature of the games students develop may be anything they imagine as long as the ideas, if well-produced, would be competitive at target venues. The ideas must also be sufficiently simple enough to be feasibly developed in a quarter.

Team Dynamics and Structure

Students may work independently on their projects or in a team. If students work in a team, each student is responsible for everything in the game. In other words, each student should feel as an owner of the game they’re making. For example, if a team consists of an artist / designer as well as a programmer and the team receives critical feedback about some aspect of how the art must change to meet the development goals of the game, the programmer must be available to the artist to help improve their ideas, references or methods to meet development goals. Teammates must continually help each other problem-solve. This means communication is vital for project success.

Communication

If working on a team each student must communicate in some fashion with their teammates a couple times a day at least. The most effective way to ensure this happens is setting aside 1-4 hours a day for your coursework during which you post questions, screenshots, requests for feedback on work-in-progress, newly found references that could help shape the game to better achieve intended development goals. The mechanism students wish to use for communication are up to them, but Slack is recommended for, asynchronous, near- asynchronous, or short bursts of communication. Create a private group channel within the class Slack group to talk with teammates.

There are many things you could share via the class Slack channel:

reflections – to share ideas about oneself and talk with others about self-inquiry, growth, developing better habits to get the best work done

exploration – to share thoughts about noteworthy games, relevant films, art, or other experiences that help advance our understanding of the potential of games. you could also post any interesting talks, articles about games

design and builds – to post prototypes, level sketches, alpha builds, or anything else related to design

art and audio – post sketches, art, characters, screenshots or audio clips, music, any content you’re making or thinking about for your games

programming – post any questions you have about programming as well as cool links or articles that show interesting or helpful tips

general – post social stuff like if folks are around campus and want to grab lunch, or ask questions about class, etc.

random – post anything you want here! humor or oddities appreciated ;)

Teams Work Together In Person

Team meetings and work sessions should happen in person as much as possible. If working on a team, students must meet in person or work together in person 3x times a week outside of class at a minimum. Most of this time will not be spent talking or meeting, but instead simply working beside one another which helps students show work more iteratively, help each other more casually, and forge a stronger team identity and vision for the game they’re developing together.

Milestones

Students will use the iterative model to develop their games. Very simple, crude prototypes are fleshed out piece by piece each week. This provides flexibility so students can change course if a better version of their game idea shows itself.

Students will orient their work around milestones. The major mechanism through which students receive feedback will be through critiques, discussions, and workshops in which varies techniques are shown. Much of the course content in terms of lectures will adapt to the developing needs of student projects.

Weekly Schedule—Deliverables are Due Tuesdays before Class. For example, Game Conversations are due Sept 11th so use the entire week to finish it.

1. Sept 6-11 Game Conversations
2. Sept 11-18 Cultivating Ideas and Prototypes
3. Sept 18-25 Iterative Loop and Critical Assessment—25% of Grade
4. Sept 25 – Oct 2 Complete Rough Builds
5. Oct 2-9 Refining Flow
6. Oct 9-16 Refining Aesthetics
7. Oct 16-23 Alpha Build and Critical Assessment—25% of Grade
8. Oct 23-30 Polish Beta Build
9. Oct 30 – Nov 6 Beta Build
10. Nov 6-13 Refining Aesthetics
11. Nov 13-20 Polish Final Build
12. Nov 20th Final Build and Critical Assessment—25% of Grade
    1. This is technically the “final exam” which is 2:30pm-4:45pm
    2. Games are submission-ready for target festivals or conferences

Composition of Grades

Participation and Communicating—25%

* Students are expected to communicate regularly, seeking critical feedback so they may improve their work, solve problems, and help peers.
* Students must check in with team on Slack at least a couple times a day (it may be to simply share an idea they had or to comment on a teammate’s post)
* Students should regularly post on the class Slack channels as well.

Iterative Loop and Critical Assessment Milestone—25% of Grade

* Each student in a team is wholly responsible for entire game. Solving problems and having an understanding of what everyone is doing is critical for a team’s success. For this Milestone the game should already have proven to be a viable prototype. It should have a complete interaction loop in which something is visible, audible, etc with / to which the player responds, something happens as a result, causing the player to respond again, preferably in a different way than the first time. The game at this point is a toy allowing play and exploration. Goals or concrete objectives do not have to be in the build at this point. Part of this milestone is a critical assessment written by each student about the state of the game and what the biggest opportunities and challenges exist in its development from the perspective of what they are personally creating in the build. Toward that end each student will post their current assessment in the #reflections channel in the class Slack.

Alpha Build and Critical Assessment Milestone—25% of Grade

* Each student in a team is wholly responsible for entire game. Solving problems and having an understanding of what everyone is doing is critical for a team’s success. The game should be feature-complete and provide the entire experience, albeit rough in places. At this point the game delivers on the promise of the idea and is only missing some content.
* **Clarity**. For each frame of the gameplay the player should know exactly what state the game is in, and what state each element is in (e.g. is enemy X attacking or dodging).
* **Agency and intuitive controls**. The player should always know what to do and potential actions they can take.
* **Precision**. Match up the visual and animated elements with coded events or hitboxes. Hitboxes are often not perfectly aligned with graphical representations. Look at every single pixel and take the time to tweak things until they are perfectly aligned.
* **Reactivity**. Make everything move/happen exactly when they should move/happen and not a frame late. For example, remove the few milliseconds of silence at the beginning of sound effects or any latency between pressing jump and the avatar actually launching up.
* **Positive and negative feedback.**The player should know every frame if their input was successful or a failure. Don't make them think. Make good events punchy, positive and easy to hear and read. Similarly make bad events punchy, negative and easy to hear and read.
* Part of this milestone is a critical assessment written by each student about the state of the game and what the biggest opportunities and challenges exist in its development from the perspective of what they are personally creating in the build. Toward that end each student will post their current assessment in the #reflections channel in the class Slack.

Final Build and Critical Assessment Milestone—25% of Grade

* Each student in a team is wholly responsible for entire game. Solving problems and having an understanding of what everyone is doing is critical for a team’s success. The game at this point is festival or conference worthy. Part of the game is also the transmedia world and content in which the game is situated including:
  + Game Description (300-400 words)
  + Artist’s Statement (300-400 words)
  + Instructions
  + Screenshots
  + Nice Edited Video of Gameplay (not a trailer)
  + Create an Itch.io page hosting the above content and game
* Part of this milestone is a critical assessment written by each student about the state of the game and what the biggest opportunities and challenges exist in its development from the perspective of what they are personally creating in the game. Toward that end each student will post their current assessment in the #reflections channel in the class Slack.