

Learner Experience Design - What's the Meta For?

MAT 620 Winter 2017 Syllabus

Marlboro College Graduate School

Faculty

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Course Description

What does it take to develop interactive content that is both engaging for the learner and effective as instruction? Whether in the K-12 classroom or in higher education, it is a challenge to design innovative digital content that teaches students foundational concepts while also stimulating higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. In this course we will tackle that challenge, applying principles of Learner Experience Design to create compelling educational content that fosters critical thinking and inspires deep engagement with the material. We will cultivate a design practice that integrates insights and techniques from diverse fields such as Film and Media Studies and Game Design. And we will develop the coding expertise needed to create personalized, interactive content with a variety of digital authoring tools.

At the heart of this class are two propositions:

- **Effective instruction helps learners shift from simplified, reductionist views toward more sophisticated modes of thinking.** When the problems facing our societies are complex and multidimensional, the ability to make connections between disparate ideas and fields of knowledge is a critical skill. It is not enough for learners to master discrete facts and concepts; they need to navigate abundant and conflicting sources of information, see the big picture and form coherent conceptual models to guide their decision-making.
- **Engagement is at the very core of learning.** Because of a perceived trade-off between learning and fun, the idea of student engagement is too often instrumentalized through gamification and other reward-based compliance systems. Rather than devising ways to motivate students to spend time on content and tasks they would not otherwise choose to spend time on, it is worth considering what it would take to develop educational content that is intrinsically engaging.

Our goal throughout the semester will be to explore the extent to which complexity and engagement are complementary objectives in the field of Learner Experience Design.

Course Format

This is a fully online course; there are no required class meetings. However, I will hold three optional in-person labs (date and location to be determined) for the purpose of providing a dedicated time and space for students to get additional support as needed.

Coursework will require a minimum of nine hours per week and will include readings; asynchronous written discussion (forum postings and responses); independent exploration of film, literature, online games, interactive fiction, and web documentaries; and the design, production, and critique of digital artifacts.

Learning Objectives

The goal of this course is for students to develop both the analytical and the practical skills necessary to design innovative online educational content. By the end of the course, students will have produced at least 3 original digital artifacts that will support their current teaching or design practice. Additionally, students will be able to:

- Incorporate insights and techniques from a variety of disciplines to create engaging online educational materials.
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of digital authoring tools to determine which tools are best suited for a particular project.
- Apply strategies for modeling complexity with digital content.
- Understand and manipulate variables to create dynamic online content that is responsive to user input.
- Critique the explicit and implicit cultural and pedagogical values expressed through online instructional content and other digital media.

Philosophy

Learner Experience Design is an emerging practice, and as such it presents opportunities that wouldn't be available in a more established discipline. Because we are breaking new ground, we can push the boundaries and explore the possibilities of the field rather than confining ourselves to a limited set of "best practices." The connections you make between theory and practice will be your own; there is no expert to determine how a particular concept should be applied or interpreted. Throughout the course, the emphasis will be on exploration, experimentation, and co-creation. It's important to recognize that this is likely to feel both exciting and disconcerting, and I would like to share some thoughts about how I approach the material and the expectations I have for students.

My Approach

While this is a hands-on course in which you will be producing creative work, your metacognitive processes are more important to me than the finished products. I think that risk-taking and failure are essential to learning, and when it comes to student work I care more about the intention (what you were trying to achieve) and the take-aways (your analysis of what worked and what didn't) than I do about the execution (how polished or finished the work was or whether you successfully achieved your goals).

Additionally, we will each be following different avenues of exploration, so it will be important that we stay accountable to the group by sharing insights from our journeys. I expect students to reflect on and articulate their learning and creative processes. When we share topics and resources with our colleagues, I expect that they will be well-curated (selected, framed, and given context).

What I Expect Of You

- Openness and flexibility
 - Willingness to engage new ideas
 - Reflective and exploratory mindset
- Active and engaged participation
 - Presence in the course several times per week
 - Timely participation in on-going discussions
 - Substantive responses to others' ideas
 - Constructive critique and peer evaluation
- Self-direction
 - Go deeper with the material that is most relevant to your work and interests
 - Take what is useful and leave the rest
 - Seek assistance when you need it
- Investment
 - Spend a minimum of nine hours per week on coursework for this class
 - Remember that others are depending on your effort and insight

What You Can Expect From Me

- Provocative ideas
- Openness and flexibility
- Investment
- Fairness
- Detailed feedback on creative work
- Timely response to questions
- Individual guidance

Note that I do not routinely respond to every post in the discussion forums, as that can shut down communication between students which is where most of the learning occurs. However, I will facilitate cooperative discussion, ask participants to consider alternative explanations, and highlight key ideas as needed.

Required Books & Resources

There is one required textbook for this course:

Bogost, Ian. (2011) *How to Do Things With Video Games (Electronic Mediations)*.
University of Minnesota Press.

ISBN-10: 081667647X

ISBN-13: 978-0816676477

[Price on Amazon](#): \$13.02 (Paperback), \$9.99 (Kindle)

The following games are also required (prices reflect current cost on [Steam](#)):

- Gone Home \$20
- The Stanley Parable \$15

Additionally, a wide range of articles and web resources will be used.

You will need to create accounts for several free online tools, which might include [Twine](#), [Inklewriter](#), and [Gameblox](#), among others. You might also choose to sign up for a free 30-day trial of the instructional design software [Adobe Captivate](#). [Note that the full version of Adobe Captivate is offered at a [substantial discount](#) to students, teachers, and schools.]

You will be asked to choose a number of online games to play from a list of recommendations. Most of the games will be available for free; you are not required to buy any games other than the two listed above. However, I will include in the list of recommendations a few games and apps that are in the \$1 - \$10 range, in the event you might find them interesting and useful.

Additional Resources

Excerpts of the following books will be provided through Moodle; you are not required to purchase them.

Aarseth, Espen J. (1997) *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bogost, Ian. (2007) *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. The MIT Press.

Murray, Janet. (1998) *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The MIT Press.

Graded Assignments

• Participation in online discussion forums	20%
• Instructional Story	15%
• Instructional Game	15%
• Presentation on Technique	10%
• Final Project	20%
• Final Presentation	10%
• Final Reflection	10%

Course Topics

Week 1 Introduction and Framing

What can we do with narrative?

Week 2 Exploration as Exposition
Week 3 Choice and Constraint
Week 4 Perspective and Empathy
Week 5 Hidden Treasure
Week 6 Abstraction and Metaphor

What can we do with variables?

Week 7 Keeping Score
Week 8 Switches
Week 9 Locks
Week 10 Game World Contraptions

What can we do to push the limits?

Week 11 Form and Function
Week 12 Pervasive Games
Week 13 Transmedia Storytelling
Week 14 Wrap-Up

Instructor Bio

Adrienne LaPierre is a freelance instructional designer whose recent clients include the Center for Health and Learning, the New England Wildflower Society, and the Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity. She also works as a technology integrator at Guilford Central School and Putney Central School. She holds an MA in Teaching with Technology from Marlboro College and an MA in International Development and Social Change from Clark University.