

Game Design 1 – Fall 2018

Instructor: Eric Zimmerman
917 554 0214
e@ericzimmerman.com

TAs: Jeff Petriello – jfp259@nyu.edu
Daniel Kimsey – daniel.kimsey@nyu.edu

Overview

Game Design 1 is a one-semester course that explores the fundamentals of game design. The focus of the class is the actual creation of several non-digital games. Just as art students might take “fundamentals” classes in figure drawing or color theory as part of their education to become visual artists, this class remains rooted squarely in the basics. It focuses on the elements common to all games that are fundamental for a game designer working in any format, from physical and social games, to board and card games to computer and videogames. Although the focus of the course is on the creation of non-digital games, digital games will also be discussed, including the design and documentation of digital games.

Goals of the course

- Explore the basic 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.
- Foster an understanding of what games are, on and off the computer, and how they function to create meaningful experiences for players.
- Explore fundamental concepts relating to games and design, such as rules and play, emergent complexity, long and short-term goals, etc. This includes understanding games as formal systems, experienced human systems, and cultural systems.
- Become familiar with foundational texts in the field of game design, and understand game design as a field that encompasses all kinds of games.
- Link the principles of the course to computer and video games on a variety of platforms, as well as to forms of media and culture outside of games.

Required Readings

Many weeks, a reading will be discussed. All students are required to complete the reading and be ready to discuss on the day that the reading is listed. Most readings for the course will be taken from the following two books. All students are required to purchase both. Other readings will be provided by the instructor.

Rules of Play, Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman
The Game Design Reader, Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman, eds.

Over the course of the semester, readings may change slightly in particular weeks. The instructor will give advance notice for such changes.

Course Overview

	TOPICS	ASSIGNMENTS	MAIN CLASS ACTIVITY
Week 1	CLASS INTRO THE DESIGN PROCESS	Game Mod.	Tue: MODIFYING RULES Thu: GAME ANALYSIS
Week 2	FORMAL SYSTEMS PITCHING IDEAS	Digital Pitch	Tue: GAME MOD CRIT Thu: PRESENTATIONS
Week 3	PROBABILITY FEEDBACK LOOPS	Mechanics Game	Tue: FORMAL EXERCISES Thu: DESIGN & PLAYTEST
Week 4	GAME THEORY SOCIAL PLAY		Thu: MECH GAME CRIT Fri: SOCIAL EXERCISES
Week 5	PLAYER DESIRES THE DESIGN PROCESS	Social Game	Tue: PLEASURE EXERCISES Thu: FOCUSED PLAYTESTING
Week 6	WORK WEEK		Tue: [no class - legislative day] Thu: DESIGN & PLAYTEST
Week 7	NARRATIVE PLAY GAMES SIGNIFICATION		Tue: SOCIAL GAME CRIT Thu: STORY EXERCISES
Week 8	DESIGN AS COMMUNICATION	Story Game	Tue: DESIGN & PLAYTEST Thu: PITCH DOC REVIEW
Week 9	DESIGN & CRITIQUE CULTURAL CONTEXTS		Tue: DESIGN & PLAYTEST Thu: STORY GAME CRIT
Week 10	GAMES AND ART DOCUMENTATION	Public Space Project	Tue: GAMES AND CULTURE Thu: DOCUMENTATION
Week 11	DESIGN AS RESEARCH		Tue: INTERVENTION CRIT Thu: DESIGN & PLAYTEST
Week 12	GAME DESIGN	Polished Game	Tue: DOC REV. / TA SPECIAL Thu: [no class - Thanksgiving]
Week 13	MULTIPLAYER DESIGN SOCIAL ECONOMIES		Tue: MULTIPLAYER EXERCISE Thu: DESIGN & PLAYTEST
Week 14	DIGITAL PLAYTESTING SYSTEM BALANCING		Tue: DIGITAL PLAYTESTING Thu: DESIGN & PLAYTEST
Week 15	FINAL PROJECTS		Tue: FINAL PROJECT CRIT Thu: FINAL PROJECT CRIT

Unit One: Games as Formal Systems

Week 1

9/4 TUESDAY

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: Exploring the modification of game rules and experience through New Games and Tic-Tac-Toe

READING: GD Reader: Garfield, *The Design Evolution of Magic*
Design Intuitively, Daviau
A Primer for Playtesting, Pozzi & Zimmerman

ASSIGNED: **Game Modification** – Each student will be given a 2-player card game as a starting point. The goal is to identify what is broken about their game, and make modifications to create a more meaningful experience for players. (1 week)

9/6 THURSDAY

DUE: Informal analysis of your assigned game. First pass at a prototype. Students will share their observations about their assigned game verbally with the class.

READING: Rules of Play Chapter 5: Systems
Chapter 6: Interactivity

ASSIGNED: **Game Pitch** – Each student will share an idea for a digital game that they would like to design through a visual presentation of no more than 5 still images or slides. The purpose of this assignment is to share your interests and point of view as a designer and also to practice how to communicate ideas. (1 week)

Week 2

9/11 TUESDAY

DUE: GAME MODIFICATION – play and critique

DUE: Elevator Pitches for game concept. Students will have 60 seconds to verbally describe their concept to the rest of the class.

9/13 THURSDAY

DUE: GAME PITCHES. Each student will present a 4-minute presentation to the class.

DEMO: Illustrator basics; preparing game materials

ASSIGNED: **Mechanics Game** – In small groups, students will be given constraints to design a game. The assignment emphasizes the formal, mechanics-oriented aspects of the design. (2 weeks)

Week 3

9/18 TUESDAY

READING: Rules of Play: Chapter 15: Games as Systems of Uncertainty
Rules of Play: Chapter 18: Games as Cybernetic Systems

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: probability & cybernetics exercises

9/20 THURSDAY

DUE: Mechanics Game prototype & rules

DESIGN & PLAYTEST: Mechanics game

Unit Two: Games as Experiential Systems

Week 4 – NO TUESDAY CLASS: Make-up on Friday

9/27 THURSDAY

DUE: Mechanics Game - play and critique

9/28 FRIDAY

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: social game mechanics

READING: Chapter 21: Breaking the Rules

Rules of Play: Chapter 19: Games as Game Theory Systems

The Bower Bird's Dilemma, Gonick

ASSIGNED: **Social Game** – Groups will be given social and emotional criteria and will create a game that produces these experiences. The emphasis is on how the system can be designed to produce the desired experience through emergent means. (2 weeks)

Week 5

10/2 TUESDAY

DUE: Social Game – prototype and rules

READINGS: Rules of Play:

Chapter 24: Games as the Play of Pleasure

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: play and pleasure

10/4 THURSDAY

READING: Game Design Reader: Changing the Game, *Dekoven* p.518-537

Game Design Workshop! Chapter 9: Playtesting, Fullerton

IN-CLASS EXERCISE: intentional playtesting

Week 6 - NO CLASS ON TUESDAY (legislative day)

10/11 THURSDAY

DESIGN & PLAYTEST: Social game

Week 7

10/16 TUESDAY

DUE: Social Game - play and critique

10/18 THURSDAY

ASSIGNED: Story Game – Starting with a narrative constraint, groups will create a game that tells a story or represents content. The focus of the project is to explore the ways that games can signify narrative experience. (2.5 weeks)

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: narrative game design exercises

READINGS: Rules of Play: Chapter 27: Games as the Play of Simulation

GD Reader: LeBlanc, *Dramatic Game Dynamics*, p. 438-459

ASSIGNED: Pitch Document – Each student will take a version of their pitch presentation and create a 1-page project brief. The goal of the project is to practice communication of ideas through writing. (1 week)

Week 8

10/23 TUESDAY

DUE: Draft of Pitch Document

IN-CLASS EXERCISE: communicating a design idea through writing

READING: Selections from *Design is a Job*, Montinero

DESIGN & PLAYTEST: Story Game

10/25 THURSDAY

DUE: Story Game – prototype & rules

DUE: PITCH DOCUMENT – review and discuss

Unit Three: Games as Cultural Contexts + Polished Game

Week 9

10/30 TUESDAY

DESIGN & PLAYTEST: Story Game

11/1 THURSDAY

DUE: STORY GAME – play and critique

ASSIGNED: **Public Space Game:** Groups will create a game that is in some way an intervention in the lives of its players, on the level of space and ritual, cultural commentary, social experience, or unexpected spectacle. (1.5 weeks)

Week 10

11/6 TUESDAY

DUE: Public Space Game – concept or prototype

READING: Selections from *Critical Play*, Flanagan
Selections from *A Little Book of Surrealist Games*

DISCUSS: games and art, games and culture

11/8 THURSDAY

READINGS: GD Reader: always_black, *Bow, Nigger* 602-609
GD Reader: Sniderman, *Unwritten Rules*, p. 476-503

DISCUSS: games and culture, game documentation, final project

ASSIGNED: **Concept Document:** Using professional game documentation as models, groups of 2 students will structure and write a short document describing a version of a digital game concept that has been pitched to class. (2 weeks)

Week 11

11/13 TUESDAY

DUE: Public Intervention Game - play and critique in class

ASSIGNED: **Polished Game:** Students will work on a project that in some way is an extension or a refinement of a previous project. These projects can be individual or in groups, although working in groups is strongly recommended. Students will be expected to apply concepts and lessons from the rest of the semester into their design thinking as they plan and execute their final projects. More than the other class projects, the emphasis of the polished game is on a tested and balanced system, well-edited rules, and considered and refined presentation and materials. The deliverables for the polished game are slightly different than for earlier projects, and include a playtest log and documentation uploaded to the NYU Game Center website. (4 weeks)

11/15 THURSDAY

DUE: Prototype & Rules for Polished Game

DESIGN & PLAYTEST: Polished Game

IN-CLASS EXERCISE: Spreadsheets

Week 12

11/20 TUESDAY

DUE: CONCEPT DOCUMENTS - review and discuss

IN-CLASS EXERCISE: TA special!

**** THURSDAY: NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY ****

Week 13

11/27 TUESDAY

IN-CLASS EXERCISES: balancing a multiplayer game system

READINGS: GD Reader: Farmer & Morningstar, *The Lessons of...* p. 728-753
GD Reader: Bartle, *Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades...* p. 754-787

11/29 THURSDAY

DESIGN & PLAYTEST: polished game

Week 14

12/04 TUESDAY

READINGS: Selections from *Game Usability*, Katherine Isbister

IN-CLASS EXERCISE: balancing a complex system

12/06 TUESDAY

DESIGN & PLAYTEST: polished game

Week 15

12/11-13 **DUE: POLISHED GAME - play and critique**

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.

Readings & Reading Presentations

Most weeks during the semester, readings will be assigned. Students are responsible for completing these readings, and for being prepared to discuss them each class. Failure to participate in discussions and demonstrate that the readings have been completed will affect the participation component of your grade.

Design Assignments

There are several 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. These assignments range from one to four weeks in length. Generally, the week after a non-digital game design is assigned, a playable prototype version of the game is due in class, along with the current ruleset.

These design assignments are completed in groups. It is essential that you attend your group meetings and fully participate in the design and creation of your games. For each group design assignment, every group must turn in the following:

- **Title and logline:** The name of the game and a 1-line summary that communicates its essence.
- **Abstract/Overview:** The name of the game, its creators, semester and class, and a 200-300 word summary overview of the game.
- **Materials list:** List of all physical game materials.
- **Rules:** A complete description of the game rules.
- **Images:** 1-5 images of the game.
- **Design Process Statement:** A one page or less description of your design process. What were the design challenges you encountered and how did you solve them?
- **Peer Grades:** You will evaluate each of your peers based on their participation and positive contribution to the design process. (See below for more details.)

For the Polished Game Project, the required materials are slightly different:

- **Title and logline, Abstract/Overview, Materials list, Rules, and Peer Grades** are identical to the other projects.
- Instead of a Design Process Statement, a **Playtest Log** will be kept. Every time the game is playtested, the team will record the results of the playtest and how the design changed.
- **Images** will be taken with more care and the resulting documentation and a description of the polished game will be uploaded to the NYU Game Center website. Note that students can also upload other projects to the website as they wish.

Below are the projects that will be completed in class. In addition to the parameters listed below, additional design parameters may be added when they are assigned.

- **Modification game:** Each student will analyze and modify a simple card game.
- **Mechanics game:** Groups will create an abstract game in a traditional non-digital game format, such as a card game or board game.
- **Social game:** Groups will create a game that emphasizes social interaction and player experience.
- **Story game:** Groups will be given a short narrative that will be the basis of a game project that expresses some aspect of the story. The story game can be a singleplayer game or a multiplayer game.

- **Public intervention project:** Using an existing public space as a starting point, groups will create a game or playful experience that is in some way an intervention in the lives or experiences of those that are inhabiting the space.
- **Polished game:** Students will work alone or in groups to refine or create any kind of game, building on the ideas and concepts from the rest of the semester.
- **Digital game pitch:** Students will work individually to make a 4-minute presentation to class about an original digital game concept.
- **Pitch Document:** Students will individually create a 1-page document that describes a digital game project. The project can be an evolution of the digital game pitch.
- **Concept document:** Working alone or in pairs, students will create a short game concept document that is based on one of the earlier digital game projects. A template will be given as a starting point for the document.

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?

Overall, the emphasis in this class is on EXPERIMENTATION and GAME DESIGN. It is more important that you spend time revising your rules and rebalancing your system rather than on graphic design or creating elaborate and polished materials.

That said, designing the sensory and material experience of play is part of design. So as we move through the semester, the material qualities of the player experience is something that you can also start exploring. The last few projects, especially the polished game, will have more of an emphasis on the final form of the game, including the game materials.

Students will be given grades based on a 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:

92-100%	A
90-91%	A-
88-89%	B+
82-87%	B
80-81%	B-
etc.	

The following are the components of the grade:

Participation & peer grades	25
Game Modification	5
Mechanics Game	10
Social Game	10
Story Game	15
Public Space Game	10
Digital Game Pitch	5
Pitch Document	5
Concept Document	10
Final project	25
TOTAL	120

Late penalties

All assignments must be turned in on time. If an assignment is not turned at the start of 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%.

Participation

The participation & peer grades portion of your grade is based on the following:

- Participation in group discussions and critiques
- Peer grades from group projects

Attendance

The following is the attendance policy for all NYU Game Center classes:

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 your professor in advance via email for the absence to be excused.

Unexcused absences and being late to class will lower your final grade. Three unexcused absences lower your final grade by a letter. Each subsequent unexcused absence will lower another letter grade. Two tardies will count as one unexcused absence. Arriving more than 15 minutes late to class will also count as an unexcused absence.

Peer grades

Peer grades will be emailed to the instructor for each group assignment. You will give a grade to each member of your group. You can add a short explanation if you like, and you must add some explanation when giving a grade of C or below.

- 1 = Outstanding: fully participated, hard worker and great teammate
- 2 = Good: no complaints, consistent participation throughout the process
- 3 = Satisfactory: some problems or inconsistencies
- 4 = Difficult: hindered the progress of the project, or counter-productive in some way

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.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Your health and safety are a priority at NYU. If you experience any health or mental health issues during this course, we encourage you to utilize the support services of the 24/7 NYU Wellness Exchange 212-443-9999. Also, all students who may require an academic accommodation due to a qualified disability, physical or mental, please register with the Moses Center 212-998-4980. Please let your instructor know if you need help connecting to these resources.

Tips for Working Successfully in a Group

From the Building Virtual Worlds class at Carnegie Mellon'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.



Peter Fischli and Davis Weiss