

Professor Bonnie Ruberg
bruberg@cinema.usc.edu
Office: SCI 201T
OH: 5:00 – 6:00 pm Tues/Thurs (and by appointment)

Student assistant Sean Wejebe
wejebe@usc.edu

Experimental Game Topics: Imagination, Identity, and Play
CTIN-492L, spring 2016; 3:00 – 4:50 pm Tues and Thurs; SCI L114

At its core, creative expression is a playful process. Some of the most unique and moving video games of recent years have emerged from what might seem like the silliest or most unusual ideas. What if you played as the wind (*Flower*, thatgamecompany)? What if you translated a gender transition into mini-games (*Dys4ia*, Anna Anthropy)? What if you told a story about childhood abuse through the mechanics of a puzzle-based platformer (*Papa y Yo*, Minority Games)? Each of these games plays, in some way, with our expectations for what a game is and who we are as players.

The spirit of experimentation is key to imaginative innovation. Experimentation gives us the opportunity to try new things, to fail fast and fantastically, and to explore aspects of ourselves we might otherwise leave out of our games. This course provides a challenging, encouraging, and above all playful space for students to experiment with their own game-making practices. Inspired equally by the absurd, poetic games of the mid-20th-century surrealists and the growing interest among indie designers in exploring identity through games, this course is a chance to make games that are goofy, strange, serious, or deeply personal—often all at the same time.

Over the course of the semester, students will work on 8 games. These games will be informed by weekly readings, in-class discussions, and peer-to-peer critique. Some readings will introduce students to the field of avant-garde games. Others will prompt students to think in new ways about games' potential for artistic and cultural expression. This course is fast-paced and demanding. Students will be expected to work across a variety of platforms (see below) and to reflect critically, articulately, and often on their own goals as game-makers.

Expectations

In order to succeed in this course, all students are expected to:

- Commit to a challenging workload and a fast-paced schedule.
- Complete all assignments in full, on time, and with meaningful effort.
- Complete all readings and come to class prepared to discuss them in detail.
- Contribute actively and constructively during peer-to-peer critique.
- Attend all class periods and arrive to class on time.
- Keep an open mind about diverse perspectives and engage respectfully.

Assignments

See schedule below for individual assignment due dates. Tentative game “experiments” are also listed. Full directions for each assignment will be given with appropriate time prior to the assignment due date.

Games: you will complete 8 games over the course of the semester. With a few exceptions, your games will be completed individually. These projects are designed to inspire, challenge, and disorient; they are also designed to be fun! See note below on development platforms.

Written assignments and presentations: you will also complete two written assignments, one on manifestos and one on dream experiments, and give two short presentations about your work.

Reading: in addition to your game-making and written assignments, you will also be reading assigned articles and book selections. All readings can be found in our course Dropbox folder.

Final project: for your final project, you will have the opportunity to return to one of the games you have made over the course of the semester in order to expand and polish it. You will also be writing a 5-page reflection paper in which you discuss your game and your creative development.

Platforms:

This course encourages students to experiment with game-making tools as well as with games themselves. In developing their 8 game projects, students will be required to use at least 6 of the following 12 platforms and/or mediums. Note that the simplest systems often offer the most rewarding opportunities for thinking creatively within constraint. If there is a platform you would like to work with that you do not see listed here, you are welcome to speak with the instructor:

Unity	Pico-8	Twine
Processing	Emotica	Game-Maker
Phaser	RPG Maker	Tabletop
Interlude	Kool Tool	Physical games

Reflection Papers

Along with each game that you create, you will write and submit a short piece of writing (approximately 500 words) in which you reflect on the game you have designed. In coherent, paragraph form, you should respond to the following questions:

1. How would you describe this game?
2. What were your creative goals and how is this game “experimental”?
3. What is the main experience and/or value you want this game to communicate?
4. In what ways does this game respond to or emerge from the assignment?
5. Describe the process of designing and developing the game.
6. What inspirations (games, readings, other art) did you draw from?
7. If you were to continue working on this game, what would you add or change?

Grade Breakdown

Except for your final project, all of your assignments will be graded for completion. In order to receive full credit for an assignment, your work must represent sufficient effort and strong critical and creative thinking. It must also comply with the stated requirements of the assignment.

50% game assignments: games 1-7 and LARPing unit assignment are worth 5% each; game 8 is worth 10%.

20% written and presentation assignments: 4 assignments each worth 5%

30% final project, including accompanying paper

Points can also be deducted from your semester grade for insufficient class participation, inappropriate social media use, not completing readings, and/or a lack of constructive engagement with fellow students’ work during critique.

Submitting Assignments

Unless otherwise noted, all assignments are due by the start of class in the course Dropbox folder.

Written assignments should be submitted in .docx format. These documents should be typed, double-spaced (header information should be single-spaced) with 1-inch margins on all sides and numbered pages. Please use a standard, 12-point font. If you are including images, append them at the end of the document rather than embedding them into the body of the text.

Game assignments should be submitted (or, when appropriate, documented) in whatever format will make them easiest for the instructor to access and play. Note that the instructor is using a Mac, not a PC. Please title your game files as per the following example: Ruberg Game 1 Experimental 2016.

Late assignments will be penalized at a rate of 10% per day. This class moves very quickly and turning in work late is a problem that can quickly snowball. For this reason, assignments will **not be accepted more than two days late**. After two days of lateness, students will receive 0% credit for the assignment.

Extensions will be granted on a case-by-case basis. Students who would like to request an extension must contact the instructor at least two days before an assignment due date. The standard extension period for this course is 48 hours from the original due date and time. After this time, standard deductions for late assignments will apply. Students seeking more than one extension per semester must provide documentation of exceptional circumstances.

Incompletes: students experiencing ongoing, documented medical issues or personal emergencies may request to take incompletes for the semester. If you think you may need to take an incomplete, notify the instructor immediately so that an individual plan for your completion of the course can be established.

Attendance and Lateness

Attendance will be taken promptly at the start of class. You are expected to be in your seat and ready to begin class at 3:00 sharp. Consistent and prompt attendance is a crucial part of your grade and your engagement with this course.

Absences: you are allowed one "free" absence over the course the semester. All subsequent absences will deduct 5% from your total semester grade. Absences will be excused only with a note from a medical professional or documentation of a personal emergency. Do not assume that your absence has been excused if you have not provided this documentation.

Lateness: you are also allowed one "free" lateness (or early departure from class). All subsequent latenesses will deduct 1% - 4% from your total semester grade. The percentage deducted will depend on the time of your arrival. The same rules for excused absences apply to excused latenesses.

Inclusivity and Diversity

In this class, we make a commitment together to foster a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. This means that you will be expected to offer content warnings when appropriate, use students' preferred pronouns, and respect self-identifications. While debate and discussion are welcome, please remain aware of the implications of your words and the images that you include in your work. If the instructor or another student points out that something you have said or shared with the group might be offensive, avoid being defensive; this is a valuable opportunity for us to grow and learn together. If you have a concern about any aspect of the class, you are encouraged to speak with the instructor. If you feel uncomfortable speaking with the instructor, you are encouraged to speak with either the undergraduate or graduate advisor for the division.

In making games and interactive media in a professional and ethical way, it is important that you consider diversity. When looking at your projects, you should consider who is depicted and how this work will impact others. What kinds of individuals and communities are represented in your work? What point of view does your work express? This class will assist you in learning how to make work that includes diverse viewpoints, and will discuss racial, religious, gender and sexual orientation issues in the context of games and interactive media.

Guidelines for Group Play

Throughout the semester, we will be playing games together in class. Because we all bring different personal experiences and social expectations to our interactions with games, establishing ground rules for good citizenship is an important step toward ensuring that everyone feels equally comfortable playing in a group setting. During group play sessions, please remember that you agree to:

1. Watch attentively and think critically, even when you are not playing.
2. Be patient, and remember that all modes of play and play choices are equally valid.
3. Do not offer help (tips, instructions, etc.) unless you are explicitly asked for it.
4. Share time at the controller so that everyone gets a chance to play.

Guidelines for Group Critique

Giving and receiving constructive feedback is a key element of critique. Follow these guidelines:

1. Pair your critiques with compliments. Before pointing out something that you think could be improved, point out something that you like or something that you think has exciting potential.
2. Suggest possible solutions. Rather than simply pointing out what is “wrong,” propose changes or additions that you think might improve your colleague’s work.
3. Speak from the “I.” Rather than stating your critique as fact or your suggestions as imperatives, start your sentences with phrases like “I think...” or “I feel...” or “If this were my game, I would...”
4. Listen carefully and calmly. Avoid the urge to defend your work, unless you feel like that defense adds something important to the conversation. Thank your colleague for their feedback.

If you have a question...

1. First, check the syllabus. Most questions about logistics, assignments, and expectations can be found already listed there.
2. If the information you are looking for is not on the syllabus, contact the course Student Assistant.
3. If the Student Assistant is unable to answer your question, or your question is of a sensitive nature and you would feel more comfortable speaking with the instructor, you can email the instructor at the address listed above. You can usually expect a response within 24 hours during the standard work week.
4. Schedule an appointment during office hours. Office hours are a wonderful opportunity to speak with the instructor one-on-one. Note the office hours listed at the top of the syllabus and email the instructor at least 24 hours in advance to schedule an appointment.

SCHEDULE

Week 1

Tuesday, 1/12, introductions ← self-intro presentation assignment due

Thursday, 1/14, rapid prototyping ← reading due: "Values at Play," Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum

Week 2

Tuesday, 1/19, experimental manifestos ← written **manifesto assignment due** and reading: "Manifesto of Surrealism," André Breton

Thursday, 1/21, breaking the cycle (game #1 assigned) ← reading due: "The Hegemony of Play: Tracy Fullerton, Celia Pierce, et al."

Week 3

Tuesday, 1/26, game #1 critique ← **game #1 due**

Thursday, 1/28, building blocks (game #2 assigned) ← reading due: *A Game Design Vocabulary* (excerpt), Naomi Clark and Anna Anthropy

Week 4

Tuesday, 2/2, game #2 critique ← **game #2 due**

Thursday, 2/4, video games and the avant-garde (game #3 assigned) ← reading due: *Avant-Garde Videogames* (excerpt), Brian Schrank

Week 5

Tuesday, 2/9, game #3 critique ← **game #3 due**

Thursday, 2/11, games and/as art (game #4 assigned) ← reading due: *Works of Game* (excerpt), John Sharp

Week 6

Tuesday, 2/16, special guest ← reading due: "An Experiment with Time," John Dunne (part III)

Thursday, 2/18, game #4 critique (game #5 assigned) ← **game #4 due**

Week 7

Tuesday, 2/23, game #5 critique ← **game #5 due**

Thursday, 2/25, inspiration (game #6 assigned) ← reading due: *Impro* (excerpt), Keith Johnstone

Week 8

Tuesday, 3/1, game #6 critique ← **game #6 due**

Thursday, 3/3, personal games (game #7 assigned) ← reading due: *Rise of the Video Game Zinesters* (excerpt), Anna Anthropy

Week 9

Tuesday, 3/8, experimental thinking ← written **dream diary assignment due**

Thursday, 3/10, game #7 critique ← **game #7 due**

SPRING BREAK

Week 10

Tuesday, 3/22, live-action play ← reading due: *The Birthday of the World* (selections), Ursula Leguin

Thursday, 3/24, live-action play cont.

Week 11

Tuesday, 3/29, live-action play cont.

Thursday, 3/31, " (game #8 assigned)

Week 12

Tuesday, 4/5, game #8 playtest <— **game #8 playable demo due**

Thursday, 4/7, experimental audiences <— readings due: *Game Design Workshop* (Chapter 1), Tracy Fullerton; “The Death of the Player,” Mattie Brice

Week 13

Tuesday, 4/12, game #8 critique <— **game #8 due**

Thursday, 4/14, challenging the foundation (final game assigned) <— readings due: *Homo Ludens* (Chapter 1), Johan Huizinga

Week 14

Tuesday, 4/19, closing student presentations, day 1 <— reflection presentations due

Thursday, 4/21, closing student presentations, day 2 <— reflection presentations due

Week 15

Tuesday, 4/26, final game play testing

Thursday, 4/28, final games showcase <— **final game due**

Tuesday, 5/3 at 3:00 pm <— **5-page final game reflection paper due**

Game Assignments (subject to change)

1. The Bad Games Experiment: What makes a game good or bad? In this experiment, students purposefully create “bad” games to explore what success means for design.
2. The “Found Text” Experiment: Where does inspiration come from? In this experiment, students must translate random selections from non-fiction texts into games.
3. The Feelings Experiment: How do games make us feel? In this experiment, students will be challenged to create games that inspire strong emotional responses in their players.
4. The Body Experiment: Can we imagine new ways of representing bodies in video games? Inspired by the game Exquisite Corpse, this is an experiment in the absurd.
5. The Identity Experiment: What part of you feels “experimental?” This project is an opportunity to explore a piece of your identity through game design.
6. The Love Experiment: Can we design intimacy? Many have argued that games are incompatible with real human closeness. In this experiment, students try to prove them wrong.
7. The Dream Experiment: Do the limits of experimentation have to stop at the limits of reason? After reading J. W. Dunne’s “An Experiment with Time,” students will record dream journals and create games inspired by their “journeys through time.”
8. The Alien Anthropologist Experiment: How would your world look to someone completely foreign? inspired by the short stories of Ursula LeGuin, this experiment prompts student to use game design to interrogate one element of mainstream culture through systems thinking.

Game Introduction Template

This is my game _____.

I built it using _____. It’s designed to be played on _____. My intended audience is _____.

How it works is _____.

The game was inspired by _____.

When I designed it, I was experimenting with _____.

When they play it, I want my players to experience _____. I want them to think about _____. I want them to feel _____.

I’m particularly interested in your feedback on _____.

Thank you for your feedback.