Game Design as Art Practice
Fall 2004 San Francisco Art Institute
Instructor: Jane McGonigal
MW 4:15 - 7:00 PM (CDM2)

Email: jane@avantgame.com / **Course site:** www.artpractice.blogspot.com

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Play has a tendency to be beautiful.
The words we use to describe play belong for the most part to aesthetics, terms with which we try to describe the effects of beauty: tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution. Play is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony.
*- Johan Huizinga, play theorist, _Homo Ludens_*

A game designer is not necessarily a programmer, visual designer or project manager.
The focus of a game designer is the designing of game play, conceiving and designing rules and structures that result in an experience for players.
*- Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, game designers & researchers, _The Rules of Play: Fundamentals of Game Design_*

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Game design allows artists to create meaningful play and interactive experience in any medium. This introductory course, which explores both digital and non-digital games, aims to provide you with a critical vocabulary and historical context for analyzing games as art, as well as the skills and techniques necessary to incorporate game design into your ongoing art practice.

Through a combination of theoretical readings, case studies, critical analysis and design exercises, we will explore together the expressive potential of games. You will learn how to identify, create and manipulate core game elements such as player objectives, rule systems, feedback structures, win-loss scenarios, competitive and cooperative dynamics, and different modes of social interaction.

As a final project, you will work toward the design, development and deployment of a game in any medium of your choice. While digitally-based projects are welcome, you may also choose to work entirely with non-digital media. No programming or computer design experience whatsoever is necessary to enroll in this course.

GRADING

Your final grade will be based on the following:
- In-Class Discussion & Design Exercises 15%
- Game Blog 20%
- Playtesting & Critique 30% (Prototype 10%, Beta 10%, Final Deployment 10%)
- Final Project 30% (Game Design 10%, Game Development 10%, Design Statement 10%)

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Attendance is required for all six of our **Playtesting** meetings, which count for 30% of your final grade. You may miss any other class meeting twice this semester without penalty (although it is your responsibility to find out what you missed and to complete all reading and blogging assignments, even if you are absent). Additional unexcused absences will lower your final grade by 1/3 of a letter grade each (an A becomes an A-, e.g.). If you frequently arrive late or leave early, it may count as an unexcused absence. Excused absences should be requested at least 24 hours in advance.

Positive and consistent participation in class discussion and activities is essential to success in this course! We will be engaging in a variety of discussions, collaborative design exercises and group playtesting. This class therefore requires a high level of active participation, as well as maximum curiosity, enthusiasm and creativity on your part.

During critiques, you are expected to generate and accept specific, useful feedback for and from your classmates. You should complete all reading assignments and be prepared to apply them in your blog writing, your critiques and our in-class exercises.

GAME BLOG

For this course, you will create and maintain a personal game blog @ Blogger.com. You will use this blog to keep track of, and share, your ongoing play research and design work.

Each week, you will **post** at least twice to your blog: one informal game critique and one design update. Each post should be a paragraph or more in length, and should engage with the concepts, readings and design strategies we are discussing in the course.

Each week, you will also **comment** at least once on a classmate's blog. Comments should be thoughtful, specific and responsive, but need not be longer than a few sentences.

Note: You can miss up to two weeks of blogging/commenting without penalty, EXCEPT for Playtesting Critiques.

FINAL PROJECT

Your final game project may be designed for any medium, audience, space, genre, and number of players. The only restriction is that you must be able to develop and deploy a *fully-realized* version of the game by the end of the semester. It is therefore essential that you select a medium, scope and aesthetic that you can execute successfully with the time and resources available.

Some projects will be fully playable within the classroom setting; others will be playable only outside the classroom. If your beta testing and/or final deployment is outside of the classroom, you will be asked to document it, as well as to provide time, date, location or other accessibility information so that your classmates and instructor can potentially participate.

PLAYTESTING

For our first round of playtesting, everyone without exception will be asked to devise an early prototype of their final project that is playable in class.

For our second round of playtesting, you can choose to test a beta version either in class or out-of-class. If you test outside of class, you will present documentation of your beta test in class.

For our final playtesting, you can choose either to deploy the full version of your game in class or to present documentation of your out-of-class deployment.

You will post to your blog a formal critique of one classmates' game after each playtest. You will also receive a formal critique of your game from a classmate after each playtest.

AGENDA

Wed 9/8 Introduction to Game Design as Art Practice
DISCUSS: Goals and requirements and of the course
DESIGN RESEARCH: Gaming Platforms and Genres (Digital and Non-Digital)

Mon 9/13 Introduction to Game Design *for* Art Practice
READ FOR TODAY: Excerpts from *A Book of Surrealist Games*
DISCUSS: Surrealist Games and PLAY: Zen Scavenger Hunt
BRING TO CLASS: Any two objects you would not normally bring to class (for our Zen Scavenger Hunt)

Wed 9/15 Why Play Games?
READ FOR TODAY: "The Structural Elements of Games" from *The Study of Games* and "I Have No Words But I Must Design."
DISCUSS: What is a game? What is the difference being playing a game and just playing?
DESIGN EXERCISE: Game Play vs. Just Play

Mon 9/20 Is This Play?
READ FOR TODAY: "The Magic Circle" from *Rules of Play*.
DISCUSS: How do we know when we're playing?

Wed 9/22 Where Play?
DISCUSS: Context aware and location-based gaming
DESIGN EXERCISE: Site-Specific Gaming

Mon 9/27 How Many Play? When Play?
DISCUSS: From single-player gaming through massively-multiplayer gaming; from 1-minute-games through persistent (24/7) games.
DESIGN EXERCISE: Scale and Duration

Wed 9/29 Story Play
DISCUSS: Narrative in games and the narrative of play
DESIGN EXERCISE: Storytelling

Mon 10/4
Interactive Play
READ FOR TODAY: "Four steps of Interaction" from *Pause + Effect* and "What Is Interactivity?" from *The Art of Interactive Design.*
DISCUSS: What makes for engaging interaction? What is the difference between being interactive and being a game?
DESIGN EXERCISE: Mystery Machine

Wed 10/6 What Play?
READ FOR TODAY: "The Core Mechanic" from *Rules of Play*
DISCUSS: Core Mechanic
DESIGN EXERCISE: Core Mechanic

Mon 10/11 Meaningful Play
READ FOR TODAY: "Meaningful Play" from *Rules of Play.*
DISCUSS: Meaningful Interaction and Consequences in Game Play
DESIGN EXERCISE: Decision Making

Wed 10/13 Unexpected Play
READ FOR TODAY: "Games as Emergent Systems" from *Rules of Play*
DISCUSS: Theories of Emergence
DESIGN EXERCISE: Designing for Emergent Play

Mon 10/18 Game Systems
READ FOR TODAY: "Games and Information Systems" and "Games as Cybernetic Systems" from *Rules of Play*
DISCUSS: Information systems and feedback loops

Wed 10/20 Social Play
READ FOR TODAY: "Games as Social Play" from *Rules of Play*
DISCUSS: Multi-player Dynamics and Extroverted Gaming

Mon 10/25 Individual Meetings
Sign up for a time slot.

Wed 10/27 Individual Meetings Continued
Sign up for a time slot.

Mon 11/1 Rules of Play
READ FOR TODAY: "Defining Rules" and "Rules on Three Levels."
DISCUSS: Refining and Presenting Rule Systems
DESIGN EXERCISE: Game Mods

Wed 11/3 Scoring Play
DISCUSS: Benchmarks, Evaluation and Comparative Feedback
DESIGN EXERCISE: Scoring Systems

Mon 11/8 Playtesting I: Prototype

Wed 11/10 Playtesting I: Prototype Continued

Mon 11/15 FREE PLAY: TOPIC/ACTIVITY TO BE DETERMINED

Wed 11/17 Endgame
DISCUSS: Win-Loss Scenarios, Closure, Cool-Downs, and Payoffs
DESIGN EXERCISE:

Mon 11/22 Game Tuning
DISCUSS: Play Balancing, and other Adjustments
DESIGN EXERCISE: Game Tuning

Wed 11/24 FREE PLAY: TOPIC/ACTIVITY TO BE DETERMINED

Mon 11/29 Playtesting II: Beta Version

Wed 12/1 Playtesting II: Beta Version Continued

Mon 12/6 Design Statement Workshop

Wed 12/8 Design Statement Workshop Continued

Mon 12/13 Playtesting III: Final Deployment

Wed 12/15 Playtesting III: Final Deployment Continued