Interactive Experience and World Design
USC School of Cinematic Arts, CTIN 532

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Course Description:

The portmanteau neologism "videogame" is a powerful descriptor that most of us can understand: it points to the contemporary digital game. But at the same time, it's troublesome – some videogames don't make use of a video screen, and many are not particularly game-like by any commonly accepted definition of "game".

A number of videogames associated with the burgeoning art game movement wriggle out from under the aegis of either "video" or "game", by focusing on the subjective, emotive, experiential aspects of interactive media design. Arguably the best art games do so through the use of dynamically modeled systems that the player can explore in a self-directed, sometimes open-ended way. Storytelling action games, like those in the *Uncharted* series, increasingly embrace sequences of experiential gameplay to act in concert with their more formally game-like elements. "Interactive experience" is a term that encompasses all of these potentially wildly divergent aspects of digital media.

Interactive experiences and videogames are mathematical, spatial models that players investigate like scientists, making experiments, forming hypotheses, and testing them, in order to learn and become empowered. In this sense, they are environments or "worlds" for us to explore; worlds of numerical, symbolic, logical and narrative systems in the substrate of digital computing technologies. These worlds probably, though not necessarily, exhibit spatially dimensional "extension", but first and foremost they are worlds of possibility space. Like any world, they can be welcoming or inhospitable, familiar or alien, activating or enervating, uplifting or degrading.

This course allows students to build on the interactive design and production skills they acquired in their first year IMD MFA studies, in an explorative, experimental, but also rigorously demanding way. Students will have an opportunity to capitalize on the strengths and interests that they have discovered so far in their design practice, and are expected to create ***complete, polished projects*** that evoke richly systemic and/or authored interactive experiences of digitally mediated worlds.

The themes and goals of the class are:

Finish Building an Interactive Experience – Developing a complete, finished, polished experimental interactive experience project set in a digital world, with which a player can have a rich, meaningful, intellectually stimulating experience. The work should be good enough to be shown at an internship interview, or to be submitted to a festival.

Finding a Voice – with every thing that we finish building, we learn more about our unique, distinctive "voice": the signature style that will grow and evolve over the lifetime of our design practice. This class is an opportunity to "level up" that voice, and to reach new thresholds of artistic maturity.

World-Building – exploring the interplay between the systemic and the narrative in a digitally-mediated world, and the boundaries between the different kinds of overlapping worlds that we encounter in a digital experience. Expanding the definition of "videogame" beyond the formally game-like.

Finessing Collaborative Skills – Continuing to work on communication and management skills, and learning more about the dynamic tension between control and concession in a collaborative work environment: when and how to propagate the vision of others, or to take control of the creative process.

Along the way we will explore some inclusive definitions of art that cement design (game design and interactive design in particular) as among the most lively and rapidly-expanding art forms of the twenty-first century. We will continue to study the "playcentric" methods of design and production that are central to life in the Interactive Media Division, and we'll discuss the differences and overlap between storytelling, narrative worlds and the systemic worlds of games and interactive systems.

This is a studio class: we will be strongly encouraged to work in pairs (but may also work individually, on presentation of a strong case for doing so) to build a single finished project over the course of the semester. A large part of the course's content will be focused on in-class discussion, critique and problem solving for each project. ***It is very important that students treat the development of their design projects professionally and bring requested milestones to class on time, ready to present.*** Students will be expected to participate actively in the discussions and critique sessions that take place in class, giving and receiving feedback that honors their fellow students with its depth of analysis and respect for their peers' work.

This class provides a great opportunity for risk-taking and exploration of personal style, while remaining tightly focused on collaboration. Students will be encouraged to either work in partnerships, or in a collaboratively focused way if working solo, and the quality of students' participation in their collaborations is as important to their success in the course as the quality of their finished projects. Interactive media in all forms is a collaborative discipline and learning to communicate, share workload, learn from and help others excel is a core value in this field.

The primary reflective component of the course will be blog postings that are due prior to class on the date assigned. All blog posts must be tagged with "CTIN532" in order to be counted. Finally, you will be asked to write a project post-mortem, and a reflection on the ways in which you imagine mobilizing the issues and insights of this class in conceiving your thesis project.

Meeting Information:
RZC 122
Monday 12:00-2:50PM

Units: 4

Pre-requisites: Open to IMD M.F.A. students (as well as iMAP Ph.D. students and other interested and qualified students, by interview with the instructor)**.**

Assignments & Texts:

Written Assignments
- Project Goal Statement, due Week 2
- Project Proposal Draft and Early Concept Ideation, due Week 3
- Create a map of the systems and content comprising a videogame or other narrative world. Due Week 4
- Each pair consolidates their Project Proposals into one final draft. Individuals revise and finalize their Project Proposal. Due Week 4
- Project Design Macro and Schedule, due Week 5
- Project Post-Mortem, including reflections on the ways in which you imagine mobilizing the issues and insights of this class in conceiving your thesis project. Due Friday December 14th

Practical Assignments
- "Standing up" a simple, working Unity project, due Week 2
- Create a system prototype in Unity, due Week 4
- Create a "Vertical Slice" in Unity, due Week 5
- Implement metrics-gathering tools, due Week 7
- Prepare stable project version for first formal playtest, due Week 8
- Alpha Version (feature complete), due Week 10 (October 29th)
- Prepare stable project version for second formal playtest, due Week 11
- Beta (content complete), due Week 13 (November 19th)
- Gold Master, due Week 15 (December 3rd)

Course Texts
Thinking in Systems: A Primer by Donella H. Meadows

The Art of Immersion: How the digital generation is remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the way we tell stories by Frank Rose

Suggested: *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives* edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin

These texts are available in the USC bookstore or online at Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com. Additional readings listed in the syllabus will be available as handouts in class or as digital files on the course website. Specific readings cited below may be subject to change as the semester progresses.

Course Website

Evaluation and Grading:

Participation	10
Project Goal Statement	5
Project Proposal Draft	5
World Map	5
Project Design Macro and Schedule	5
System prototype	5
Vertical Slice"	5
First formal playtest	5
Alpha Version	10
Second formal playtest	10
Beta Version	10
Gold Master	15
Project Post-Mortem	10
Total:	100

(continues over)

Course content by class meeting

Week 1 – Preproduction Begins
> Discussion of themes and goals of the course. The class introduces itself to itself with short presentations from each student about their interests and skills. Outline of course content, good project development practices and deadlines based on *Method: A Model for Game Design*. Forming into pairs. Communication skills: clarity, brevity and active listening. Brainstorm rules and brainstorming session.
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> Reading: *Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics* by Hunicke, LeBlanc, Zubek
> Reading: Frank Rose, Chapters 5 & 6
> Written Assignment 1: Project Goal Statement, due Week 2
> Practical Assignment 1: Every student "stand ups" a simple piece of interactivity in Unity, due Week 2
> Written Assignment 2: Project Proposal Draft and Early Concept Ideation, due Week 3

Week 2 – Labor Day: no class

Week 3 – Narrative Worlds and Experiential Videogames
> Using salience, the social and systems as lenses for examining videogames. Scripted experiences and emergent outcomes. The Open Work. Review Unity "stand ups" and Project Proposal Drafts. Moving through preproduction from stand-up to Vertical Slice: discovery and planning by doing. The Project Design Macro. Scope analysis. The struggle to and importance of finding a voice.
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> Reading: Frank Rose, Chapters 2 & 7
> Written Assignment 3: Create a map of the systems and content comprising a videogame or other narrative world. Due Week 4
> Written Assignment 4: Each pair consolidates their Project Proposals into one final draft. Individuals revise and finalize their Project Proposal. Due Week 4
> Practical Assignment: Create a system prototype in Unity, due Week 4

Week 4 – Transmedia: Maps and Territory
> How digital media and communications technology afford new kinds of extended narrative & play experience across multiple experiential domains. Interactive media, videogames and space. Review world maps and Project Proposals. Leadership and collaboration: choosing a Project Director and a Lead Designer. Communication skills: barriers and conflict resolution. Recruiting your team. Version control and backing up. The beauty of systems.
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> Reading: Donella Meadows, Introduction and Part One
> Reading: Bret Victor, *Up and Down the Ladder of Abstraction*
>> http://worrydream.com/LadderOfAbstraction/
> Written Assignment 5: Project Design Macro and Schedule, due Week 5
> Practical Assignment: Create a "Vertical Slice" in Unity, due Week 5

Week 5 – Full Production Begins
Donella Meadows' systems model, and its applicability to interactive design in terms of modeling, prediction and experimentation. A visit to the Systems Zoo of Games. Review Vertical Slices. Concentric development and scoping in the absence of knowledge. How much documentation is too much? The power of the list. Team member playtesting contrasted with formal playtesting and usability testing. Metrics-gathering tools. Art as systems of symbols.

Reading: Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*, A Practical Guide & The Archetypes
Practical Assignment: Implement first 20% of project, due Week 6

Week 6 – The Hero's Journey and the Rorschach Blot
The strengths and weaknesses of the Hero's Journey model, as regards videogame narrative. The importance of grounded fictions. The opportunities and perils of genre. Guest lecturer on formal playtesting.

Reading: Bruno Munari, *Design As Art* (excerpt)
Reading: David Kanaga, *Played Meaning (Concerning the Spiritual in Games)*
        http://wombflashforest.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/played-meaning-concerning-spiritual-in.html
Practical Assignment: Implement second 20% of project and metrics-gathering tools, in advance of visiting reviewers. Due Week 7

Week 7 – There's a Reason That They Call It a Game Design Practice
What does it mean to regard one's work as an artistic and design practice? What are the similarities and differences between a game design practice, an interaction design practice, and other kinds of practice? Guest lecturer and project work-in-progress reviewers from IndieCade. Why you should fix that bug today. Communication skills: timely reminders for production partners.

Reading: Nealen, Saltsman & Boxerman, *Towards Minimalist Game Design*
        http://www.cs.rutgers.edu/~nealen/research/tmgd.pdf
Reading: Doug Wilson, *Designing for the Pleasures of Disputation* (excerpt)
Practical Assignment: Implement third 20% of project, address notes given by visiting reviewers and prepare stable project version for formal playtesting. Due Week 8

Week 8 – The Value of Abstraction and the Pleasures of Struggle
Minimalist, micro-challenge, disputative and abusive games. Novel interfaces and designing for the other sixteen senses. Project management by walking around. Why everyone on the team should play the project all the time. First formal playtest session.

Reading: Andre Breton, *The First Surrealist Manifesto*
        http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/F98/SurrealistManifesto.htm
Reading: Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (excerpt)
Play: Jason Rohrer, *Passage*
Play: Anna Anthropy, *dys4ia*
Practical Assignment: Implement fourth 20% of project, due Week 9

Mid-term conferences (by appointment)

Week 9 – Game Design As Art

Art theory for game designers. The characteristics of art games. Games and design as culture, art and literature. The role and responsibilities of culture. Surrealism, neorealism, magic realism and the plurality of voices. Preparing for the Alpha Deadline. Are we done scoping yet? Production skills recap.

Reading: *Third Person:* Michael Bonesteel, *Henry Darger's Search for the Grail in the Guise of a Celestial Child*
Practical Assignment: Implement final 20% of project, Alpha Deadline due Week 10

Week 10 – The Alpha Deadline

Projects are feature complete! Style, fashion and character in game design. Pop art, low art, outsider art and transcendence. Planning to the Beta deadline. The dos and don'ts of populating content. What have we forgotten to put in our games? Communication skills: production partners and project completion.

Reading: *Third Person:* Jason Mittell, *All in the Game:* The Wire*, Serial Storytelling and Procedural Logic*
Practical Assignment: Populate first 33% of remaining content and prepare stable version for formal playtesting. Due Week 11

Week 11 – Writing Worlds

Guest lecture on writing for interactive experiences, videogames and transmedia. Nuance and emotion. Details and finesse. Empathy and vulnerability. Staying on track to the Beta deadline. Second formal playtest session.

Reading: *Philosophy of Mind* Wikipedia article (excerpt)
Reading: Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (excerpt)
Practical Assignment: Populate second 33% of remaining content, due Week 12

Week 12 – Delerium Ludens: Philosophy of Mind for Game Designers

Descartes' Barrel. Cogito Ergo Sum. Free will. Solipsism. Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument. Nietzsche to Jung to Lacan to Guattari. Entering the Void. The importance of the Beta deadline. What to fix and what to leave for post-Beta.

Practical Assignment: Populate final 34% of remaining content for Beta Deadline, due Week 13

Week 13 – The Beta Deadline

Projects are content complete! Class review of projects at Beta. How do our games mean? Are they fun, and does it matter? Bug planning, testing and fixing. Establishing focus areas for improvement.

Reading: *Third Person:* David Lavery, Lost *and Long-Term Television Narrative*
Practical Assignment: Bug fixing, due Week 14

Week 14 – This Must Be the Place

Guest lecture. The Open Work revisited: intertextuality and bricolage for videogames. Discussion of the ways in which our interactive experience and world design practices have evolved, and where we might go from here.

Practical Assignment: Bug fixing to achieve Gold Master, due Week 15

Week 15 – Gold Master

Presentation of Final Projects with guest reviewers. Vote on which projects to present at final 511.

Written Assignment 6: Project Post-Mortem, including reflections on the ways in which you imagine mobilizing the issues and insights of this class in conceiving your thesis project. Due Friday December 14th

Missing an Assignment Deadline, Incompletes:
The only acceptable excuses for missing an assignment deadline or taking an incomplete in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must inform the professor before the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled. Students who wish to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor or teaching assistant before final grades are due.

Attendance Policy:
Punctual attendance at all classes is mandatory. Students arriving late or leaving early will be marked absent from class. The following guidelines are from the Interactive Media Division handbook regarding absences and grading and apply to all students.

Guidelines for absences affecting grading
- Two unexcused absences: lowers grade one full grade point
- Three unexcused absences: lowers grade two full grade points
- Four or more unexcused absences: request to withdraw from course (instructor's discretion)

Excused absences are:
- Illness (with a doctor's verification)
- Family or personal emergency (with verification)

Note for students with disabilities:
Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to us as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301, and is open 8:30am - 5:00pm Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

Academic Integrity:
The School of Cinematic Arts expects the highest standards of academic excellence and ethical performance from USC students. It is particularly important that you are aware of and avoid

plagiarism, cheating on exams, submitting a paper to more than one instructor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone other than yourself. Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade band be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs. If you have any doubts or questions about these policies, consult "SCAMPUS" and/or confer with the instructor.

Instructor Bio:
A Visiting Associate Professor in the Interactive Media Division of the School of Cinematic Arts, Richard Lemarchand is a game designer, a writer, a public speaker and a consultant.

Between 2004 and 2012, Richard was a Lead Game Designer at Naughty Dog in Santa Monica, California. He led the design of all three games in the *Uncharted* series including *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*, and *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, winner of ten AIAS Interactive Achievement Awards, five Game Developers Choice Awards, four BAFTAs and over 200 Game of the Year awards.

Richard also worked on *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, *Jak 3* and *Jak X: Combat Racing* for Naughty Dog, and helped to create the successful game series *Gex*, *Pandemonium* and *Soul Reaver* at Crystal Dynamics in the San Francisco Bay Area. He got his game industry start at MicroProse in the UK, where he co-founded the company's console game division. Richard has made storytelling action games the focus of his career, and he is interested in the way that narrative, aesthetics and gameplay work together to hold a player's attention and facilitate the expression of their agency.

A passionate advocate of indie and experimental games, Richard has been involved with the IndieCade International Festival of Independent Games for several years, and was the co-chair of the IndieCade Conference in 2010 and 2012. He regularly speaks in public on the subjects of game design, development, production, philosophy and culture, and organizes the annual GDC Microtalks, a session which celebrates games and play with short talks by diverse speakers. He is also a faculty member of the GDC Experimental Gameplay Sessions.

Richard grew up in a small town in rural England, dreaming of ancient civilizations and outer space. He has a degree in Physics and Philosophy from Oxford University.