

# Experimental Game Topics: Feel, Systems, Strategy, Chance

## USC School of Cinematic Arts, CTIN 492

### Course Syllabus, Spring 2013

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## Course Description

### Overview

*"There is no such thing as a failed experiment, only experiments with unexpected outcomes"*  
R. Buckminster Fuller

*"I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones."*  
John Cage

Experimentation and exploration are vital for any artistic form that seeks to reflect contemporary life. Traditional ways of understanding the world can be turned on their heads by new tools and new technologies, in turn revealing new ways of expressing truth about the human condition. The Gutenberg printing press, the punch-card loom, the Internet and the modern game controller all led to new creative opportunities that transformed the lives of millions of people.

Experimentation keeps a form dynamic and innovative. This is clearly seen in the world of digital games, where stable (some would say stale) game genres and business models exist in tension with disruptive games introducing new ideas about play on new platforms for new audiences. We find ourselves in a world of tremendously powerful game technologies and very popular and mature game design patterns, even as we stand at the threshold of an entirely new set of artistic and creative possibilities: those of ubiquitous, locative computing, pervasive networking, immersive modes of representation, and new interface hardware.

Experimentation can form part of a personal statement, embodying a unique worldview, or it can be a political act of disconformity and dissent. This class provides an opportunity for students to freely explore their personal interests; whether by experimenting with the formal elements distinguishing games and non-games, experimenting to transcend or expose game genre, experimenting with new hardware or new interfaces, or experimenting with subjects that have been considered poor topics for games, or which have not been considered at all.

## **Class Goals**

This class provides a framework to explore a variety of videogame design strategies using the playcentric approach advocated by USC's Interactive Media Division. This includes paper prototyping, rapid digital prototyping, iterative design and playtesting. By embracing a sequence of design prompts in order to experiment in a focused way, students will have the opportunity to explore game mechanics, interactive media strategies and novel themes with a design research approach that fosters discovery and innovation.

In an experiment, a negative outcome is often as valuable as a positive outcome. As long as each student does sufficient work to create an interesting videogame experiment and to explore its possibilities through playtesting and iteration, "failure" is encouraged. However, equal emphasis will be given to this kind of scientifically experimental testing of falsifiable hypotheses, and to the importance of risk-taking and intuition in the creative process. The class will employ a variety of creative approaches, some of them unusual or from outside the world of videogame development, to draw out the intellectual and artistic interests of the students, and to aid in the evolution of each individual's design practice

We will look at the modern tradition of experimental game design pioneered by the GDC Game Design Challenge session, groups like the GDC Experimental Gameplay Workshop, the ETC Experimental Gameplay Project and Kokoromi GAMMA, as well as the exciting world of "jam" events like Ludum Dare, the Global Game Jam, What Would Molydeux? and F\*#! This Jam. We will look critically at the work of leading experimental game makers, artgame creators, interactive media artists and related practitioners, and will take lessons from their experiments to inform our own.

## **Class Structure**

This is a studio class: students are expected to spend time both in class and outside class to create a series of experimental videogame projects. The class has a focus on games, play and interactive media as culture and art. However, videogames and other interactive media for entertainment, documentary, educational, training and other instrumental purposes are all viable subject matter for investigation during the course of the semester.

In the first half of the semester, students will:

- make one paper game prototype, working in small teams
- make two short digital prototypes, working individually

Each of these projects will use a unique design prompt to explore formal and dramatic game and interaction elements, against a background of readings that provide a conceptual framework and practical prototyping advice.

In the second half of the semester, students will work on a larger digital project, either individually or in teams. This project will draw on the explorations of the first part of the class, and will use a structured production environment composed of preproduction and production phases, culminating in two formal playtests and presentation to a group of guest reviewers.

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.

Beyond in-class discussion, 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 "CTIN492" in order to be counted. (Please note that there is no space between "CTIN" and "492".)

**Meeting Information:**

RZC 122

Wednesday 2:00-3:50PM

Friday 2:00-3:50PM

**Units:** 4

**Pre-requisites:** No prerequisites required. Both undergraduates and graduates eligible for credit.

**Assignments & Texts:**

Written Assignments

- Experimentalist's statement, due 2pm, Wednesday, Week 3
- *Song Game* Design Macro, due 2pm, Friday, Week 9
- Class post-mortem essay, due 12 a.m. Friday, May 10<sup>th</sup> 2013

Practical Assignments

- *Novel Themes* project, due 2pm, Wednesday, Week 2
- *Emotional Intelligence* project, due 2pm, Friday, Week 4
- *First or Last Word* project, due 2pm, Wednesday, Week 7
- *Song Game* first playtest, due 2pm, Friday, Week 11
- *Song Game* second playtest, due 2pm, Friday, Week 13
- *Song Game* final version, due 2pm, Wednesday, Week 15

Course Texts

*Game Feel: A Game Designer's Guide to Virtual Sensation* – Steve Swink

– chapters to be determined

This text is available online at Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com.

Additional readings listed in the syllabus will be available on the World Wide Web, or as digital files on the course website. Specific readings cited below may be subject to change as the semester progresses.

**Course Website**

<http://www.richardlemarchand.com/talks/ctin492>

**Evaluation and Grading:**

Participation	10
<i>Novel Themes</i> project	10
Experimentalist's statement	5
<i>Emotional Intelligence</i> project	10
<i>First or Last Word</i> project	15
<i>Song Game</i> Design Macro	5
<i>Song Game</i> first playtest	10
<i>Song Game</i> second playtest	10
<i>Song Game</i> final version	15
Class post-mortem essay	10
Total:	100

*(continues over)*

### Course content by class meeting

Readings due at the beginning the meeting after the one under which they are listed.

Week	Wednesday	Friday
1	<p><b>Syllabus Overview and Class Introductions</b></p> <p>An introduction to experimentation in the arts</p> <p>Three words, three images and me</p>	<p><b>A Recent History of Experimental Videogames</b></p> <p>Our favorite experimental games and art</p> <p><i>Novel Themes</i> project inception</p> <p>Reading: <i>How to Prototype a Game in Under Seven Days</i> due Weds, Week 2</p>
2	<p><b>Unusual Subject Matter</b></p> <p>Class discussion of reading</p> <p><i>Novel Themes</i> project presentation, playtesting and class critique</p>	<p><b>Lecture: <i>Attention and Videogames</i></b></p> <p>Class discussion of what gets and holds an audience's attention</p> <p>Reading: Steve Swink chapter, TBD</p>
3	<p><b>Feeling Games</b></p> <p>Class discussion of reading</p> <p><i>Emotional Intelligence</i> project inception</p>	<p><b>Systems of Emotion</b></p> <p><i>Emotional Intelligence</i> project playtesting and peer critique</p> <p>Reading: <i>Towards Minimalist Game Design</i></p>
4	<p><b>Minimalist Games</b></p> <p>Class discussion of reading</p> <p><i>Emotional Intelligence</i> project workshop and playtesting</p>	<p><b>Personal Games</b></p> <p><i>Emotional Intelligence</i> project presentation, playtesting and class critique</p> <p>Reading: John Cage, <i>Silence</i> (excerpt)</p>
5	<p><b>Lecture: <i>Formal Experimentation: The GDC Experimental Game Sessions</i></b></p> <p><i>First or Last Word</i> project inception</p>	<p><b>Embracing a Narrative Constraint</b></p> <p><i>First or Last Word</i> project playtesting and workshop</p> <p>Reading: Steve Swink chapter, TBD, &amp; <i>The significance of plot without conflict</i></p>
6	<p><b>Plot Without Conflict</b></p> <p>Class discussion of reading</p> <p><i>First or Last Word</i> project playtesting and peer critique</p>	<p><b>Strategy, Chance and Creativity</b></p> <p><i>First or Last Word</i> project playtesting and workshop</p> <p>Reading: <i>That Cloud Game: Dreaming (and Doing) Innovative Game Design</i></p>

7	<b>Innovative Game Design at USC</b> Class discussion of reading <i>First or Last Word</i> project presentation and class critique	<b>Guest Lecture</b> Class Q&A Reading: <i>Catastrophic Prototyping and Other Stories</i>
8	<b>Song Game Preproduction begins</b> Class discussion of reading Choosing formal and dramatic elements of the project	<b>Fail Early, Fail Often</b> <i>Song Game</i> Preproduction continues Peer playtesting and critique of paper and digital prototypes Reading: Dave Hickey, TBD
<b>Mid-term conferences (by appointment)</b>		
9	<b>Towards the Design Macro</b> Class discussion of reading <i>Song Game</i> Preproduction continues Prototype playtesting and workshop	<b>Song Game Preproduction ends</b> Class critique of <i>Song Game</i> Design Macro and prototypes Reading: Steve Swink chapters, TBD
<b>Spring Break</b>		
10	<b>Song Game Full Production Begins</b> Workshop organized by Student Assistant	<b>Song Game Full production continues</b> Playtesting and peer critique organized by Student Assistant Reading: Brian Eno, TBD
11	<b>Oblique Strategies</b> Class discussion of reading <i>Song Game</i> Instructor leads class critique of projects work-in-progress	<b>Song Game – First formal playtest</b> Playtest of projects with “Kleenex” playtesters from outside class Viewing: <i>Howl</i> (2010)
12	<b>Beatnik Games</b> Class discussion of viewing <i>Song Game</i> Class critique of first playtest	<b>Guest Lecture</b> Class Q&A Reading: Toshio Iwai TBD

13	<p><b>Contemporary Artists Who Make Videogames</b></p> <p>Class discussion of reading</p> <p><i>Song Game</i></p> <p>Instructor leads class critique</p>	<p><b><i>Song Game</i> – Second formal playtest</b></p> <p>Playtest of projects with “Kleenex” playtesters from outside class</p> <p>Viewing: <i>Absolute Wilson</i></p>
14	<p><b>The Theatre of Visions</b></p> <p>Class discussion of viewing</p> <p><i>Song Game</i> presentation, playtesting and class critique</p>	<p><b>A Work of Art is Never Finished, Only Abandoned</b></p> <p>Advice about finishing a project</p> <p><i>Song Game</i> peer critique and workshop</p>
15	<p><b><i>Song Game</i> Final Deadline</b></p> <p>Presentations of projects to guest reviewers</p>	<p><b>Class Post-Mortem and Closing Remarks</b></p>

**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)

**Disruptive Behavior:**

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students’ ability to learn and an instructor’s ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

**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.