USC School of Cinematic Arts CTWR 410

Character Development and Storytelling for Games

4 Units

Professor: Danny Bilson

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Office hours:by appointment; Wednesday afternoons and Thursday at 6pm in SCI 201V.

Class hours: Thursdays 7PM-10 PM, Room SCI 207

Course Description:

The dramatic potential of games and interactive entertainment is in its infancy today. Popular games offer lavish worlds and 3D environments to explore, and attempt to people them with believable and empathetic characters. There is much room for growth, however, in this aspect of games; much opportunity for serious writers and creative thinkers to build the foundation for the next generation of immersive fiction.

The purpose of this class is to give students an understanding of classic dramaturgy – characterization, motivation, story patterns, structures, styles, genres, etc. Our goal is to learn new ways in which to use these storytelling skills to create emotionally rich characters and worlds for interactive entertainment--in other words, how to convey story through objectives and rewards.

The methods in this class will draw from both the wealth of experience in the Writing Division of the USC School of Cinema Arts, as well as high-level thinkers in the game industry who are charting new ground in this area.

The class will explore two core creative issues facing game fiction writers: developing fiction for existing game mechanics, and inspiring original game mechanics with great fiction.

In addition to this convergence of classic and interactive storytelling methods, the class will occasionally have working interaction with game producers, designers, and writers whose games are pushing the envelope on the development of character and story in games.

Meeting Information:

The class will meet once a week for three hours. Generally, the first ninety minutes of each week will be spent discussing the topics described below and screening/playing examples from games. The second ninety minutes will be a working session where student assignments are pitched, critiqued and revised with input from the entire class.

Pre-requisites: CTIN 488 is recommended but not required.

Reccomended Texts:

- *The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design* by Flint Dille & John Zuur Platten, Lone Eagle Publishing Co. 2007.
- Students will also be called upon to critique fiction from different games currently published.

Evaluation of student performance:

- Class Participation: 10%
- Game Fiction Reviews: 10%
- Assigned Fiction Project 1 10%
- Assigned Fiction Project 2 10%
- Game Opening 5%
- Transmedia Project 5%
- Original Game Fiction Project: 50% as follows:
  - 1 page concept 10%
  - 3 page treatment 15%
  - Power Point Presentation 15%
  - Final Walkthrough 10%

Written assignments will be turned in by start of class, usually one week in advance of review.

Course content (summarized by class meeting)

Week 1: Introduction

Introductions: Who we are and why we are here.

How can good writing advance the interactive experience?

- Fiction before mechanics or vice versa?
- The X and the Y.
- Course overview – objectives, assignments, grading, etc.
- Final Project: Original game I.P. (build the game you want to play the most) PP and Walkthrough.
- What are student game fiction reviews?
- Guest Speakers
- Intro PP: Screenwriting in Gamespace

Week 2: Pitching the Original Game Concept

- Discussion: Classic characters in games, films, television & literature. What is character in gamespace? What is motivation in gamespace? Backstory? How do these impact the creation of game characters?
- Student game reviews
- Student I.P. pitches 1

Week 3: Emergent Fiction

- Discussion: Player motivations vs. character motivations. Building character – mechanics vs. dramatics. Character types, character traits.
- Diplomacy: Emergent fiction experience
- Winter's Tale: A narrative game experience
- Student IP one page treatment due.

Week 4: Emergent Fiction pt. 2

- Student Game Reviews.
- Discussion: Meaningful moments, identifying with characters, making choices that matter.
- The Three Act structure for games: Opening, Mid Game, End Game.
- Diplomacy Reports
- Notes on 1 page assignment

Week 5: Using Game Mechanics to Inspire Fiction

- Student Game Reviews
- In class team exercise: Mechanics to Fiction
- Discussion: Developing conflict: collision, complication and culmination.

Week 6: Mechanics to Fiction pt2

- Student Game Reviews
- Team Presentations: Mechanics to Fiction

Week 7: Writing the Game Opening

- Student Game Reviews
- Game opening Demos
- Discussion: The terminology of structure: exposition, point of attack, rising action, turning point, falling action, revelation, twist, and resolution.

Week 8: Review Game Opening Assignments

- Student Game Reviews
- Review and Note Game Opening Assignments

Week 9: Developing Game Mechanics from Story

- 3 page write up for original game due
- Student Game Review
- Discussion: How great game fiction inspires great game mechanics.
- Assignment: Develop original mechanics from existing fiction.
- In class team exercise: Fiction to Mechanics

Week 10: Developing Mechanics from Fiction pt2

- Student Game Reviews
- Review Fiction to Mechanics Presentations
- Transmedia discussion

Week 11: Drama and Memorable Moments in Gamespace

- Discussion: Revelation versus emergence. Creation of drama within levels and across levels. Pacing of playtime and the "mini-arc." Emergent A.I. versus "scripts".

- Review and note 3 page treatments

Week 12: Transmedia Project Reviews

- Transmedia Presentations Reviewed
- Student Game Review

Week 13: The Student IP Project Presentations

- Original Student Power Points Reviewed
- Student Game Review

Week 14: The Student IP Projects pt2

- Student Power Points
- Walkthroughs due.

Week 15: Final Presentations with guest feedback.

Selected Power Points for professional presentation and review

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by one full point (ex: A to a (A-). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to a (B-). Your grade will be lowered by one point for every absence after. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

In order for absence to be excused the student must have approval from the professor and provide documentation at the next attended class session.

Please note that if you are a Writing for Screen and Television major/minor you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have any questions about the minimum grade required for credit please check with your home department.

If you have an emergency and must miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

Statement 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 me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website and contact information for DSP: http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html, (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) ability@usc.edu.

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *SCampus*, the Student Guidebook, (www.usc.edu/scampus or http://scampus.usc.edu) contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

 Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/. Information on intellectual property at USC is available at: http://usc.edu/academe/acsen/issues/ipr/index.html.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

 Disruptive Student 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 fordisruptive 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.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

 Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Section 11,

Behavior Violating University Standards

<https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>

Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct,

http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/

University of Southern California, 3601 Watt Way, GFS-315, Los Angeles, California 90089-1695Tel: (213) 740-9033, Email: gradsch@usc.edu

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity http://equity.usc.edu/ or to the Department of Public Safety

http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us.

This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. The Center for Women and Men http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/ provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the American Language Institute http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. The Office of Disability Services and Programs

http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.**html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information** http://emergency.usc.edu/ **will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.**

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