CTIN 534: Experiments in Interactivity I

Course Description

The goal of Experiments in Interactivity is to guide students through a variety of moving image aesthetics and methodologies in order to highlight how the language of cinema shapes contemporary digital and interactive media practices. This course embraces foundational SCA filmmaking curriculum, with a forward-looking view toward the future of visual media design across formats and platforms.

Lectures and assignments emphasize cinematic structures relevant to students interested in interactive media production. This includes, for example, understanding the role of blocking, lighting, composition, and editing plays in cinematic communication. The class will extend beyond traditional visualization methods to include fundamentals for real-time 3D environments. Finally, students will learn the expressive means sound design affords for both linear and nonlinear projects.

We will get better at two types of communication; we will study how narrative media communicates to the viewer and player, and we will challenge each other to express ideas and criticisms clearly and respectfully during discussions.

And so, what is storytelling to you? Near the end of the semester, with cinema and short story examples in hand, we will ask you to articulate what storytelling approaches - regardless of where they fall on any traditional to experimental spectrum - inform you as a designer. How do you want your interactive experiences to tell stories?

A Perspective

Stories embody two apparently conflicting impulses – to connect us to something real at the same time inviting us to believe in magic. The novelist Marcel Theroux frames the paradox of stories this way. He says that storytelling wobbles between authenticity and enchantment. On one hand, we want stories to feel like they

must be real for someone, and on the other, we want to engage the possibility of what cannot exist.

A creator's authorial intention plays crucially into the audience and players' interpretations. We know our shows, movies, and games are made by people, and as we watch and play, we contemplate how the author and the work makes meaning. In our lifetime, a computer program will write a brilliant screenplay about a boy and his dog, and because we will know that the writer is software, we will understand that story's meaning differently than if a person had written it.

Learning Objectives

Visual and interactive storytelling
- Harness cinematic language in order to communicate through visual, aural and interactive techniques.
- Articulate how individual cinematic structures build theme and story.
- Explore characterization, arc and tone.
- Create rich and meaningful sound designs.
- Articulate aesthetic and conceptual relationships between cinematic and interactive language.

Digital media development
- Design stories for virtual spaces.
- Design and develop 3D interactive worlds with an expressive emphasis on player point-of-view.

Production methods
- Collaborate on shared creative visions.
- Learn how to give and take critique.
- Formally playtest interactive projects.

Readings

* There are many more readings in our folder than any student will be asked to read.

Liking What You See: A Documentary by Ted Chiang
Painting with Light by John Alton
Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud
Counter Intelligence by Jonathan Gold
Everything Now by Rosecrans Baldwin
Down the Rabbit Hole by Matt Margini

The Planiverse by Alexander Dewdney
The Library of Babel, by Jorge Luis Borges
Michael Bay Finally Made an Art Movie by Jane Anders
What is Game University For? by Robert Yang

Grading

3 Projects	20% x 3 = 60%
4 Warmups	6% x 4 = 24%
Vimeo Gems	2.5% x 2 = 5%
Participation	11% x 1 = 11%

Schedule

Part 1:
Perception and Attention

Week 1 (Day 1) Aug 23

After an introduction to the class, we will screen and discuss the relationship between the **camera** and the screen image. What does the viewer see and how is meaning expressed?

<u>Topic</u>: The Camera, The Shot

- Wide, Medium, Close up
- Angles
- Leading the Action; headroom

● Screenings: A Most Violent Year (2014), Grandma's Reading Glass (1900), American Psycho (2000), Ballad Of Buster Scruggs (2018)

Workshop: [Link](#)

Week 1 (Day 2) Aug 25

The principles of **montage** were outlined nearly one hundred years ago. The film cut has meaning; it follows rules of continuity at the same time it provides a substantial change in content. How do sequence and rhythm operate?

Also, we will edit.

Topic: Montage

● Continuity and editing conventions such as the 30 degree rule and the reverse angle
● Film space
● Screening: Paris I Love You (2006)

Due: [Umurangi Generation and Filmic Pro](#)

Workshop: Cinematography

Week 2 (Day 1) Aug 30

*Meet in SCA 110

Read: [Understanding Comics](#) **Chapter 4**

The filmmaker chooses what the viewer sees.

Screening: *Get Out* and Its Antecedents

Due: Made a Vimeo account and share the link with Weston-___

Week 2 (Day 2) Sept 1

Due: [A Tutorial and an Abstraction](#) (Warmup)

Part 2:
Cause and Effect As Argument

<u>Week 3 (Day 1) Sept 6</u>

     Holiday

<u>Week 3 (Day 2) Sept 8</u>

     <u>Workshop</u>: Meet in our classroom and we'll walk to a sound stage for a lighting workshop. Make sure your shoes are "closed toed", so no flip flops. And bring any sort of glovers, mits, or hand towel as you'll be handling hot lighting equipment.

     <u>Read</u>: [Liking What You See: A Documentary](#)
     In class, you will be assigned to have a "for" or "against" opinion. We will debate.

The camera's **point-of-view** operates as a primary mechanism for cinema as argument. What does a film say by what it shows and, conversely, what is not said (or seen)?

     <u>Screening</u>:   Line of Action

- Creed (2015)
- Zero Dark Thirty (2012)

     <u>Screening</u>:   Rule of Thirds

- Inglourious Basterds (2009)

Screening: Argument

- Island of Flowers (1989)

We will discuss the principles of **diegesis** and **storytelling**. Further, what is the relationship between what the character knows and what the audience knows?

Due: Your Vimeo Gems

Week 4 (Day 1) Sept 13

Read: Painting With Light

Due: Install Unity 2020.2.1f1 by first installing Unity Hub

Due: Download the zip, Lighting

Workshop: Unity Timeline and Unity Lighting

Week 4 (Day 2) Sept 15

In dramatic **narrative films**, the protagonist is put in conflict that pressures or forces them to change. As viewers, we anticipate where the character will go (and take us). And if we are surprised by an outcome, we gain insight into that character, often by way of reflecting on prior scenes.

We will discuss how the various forms of **camera movement** create mood and meaning.

Topic: Camera Action and Fundamentals

- Pan, Tracking, Zoom
- Camera mechanics - Focal Length; Depth of Field; Aperture; Shutter Speed
- Screenings: Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)

Due: Three Takes on a Shot (Warmup)

Part 3: Intent

<u>Week 5 (Day 1) Sept 20</u>

*Meet in SCA 110

Read: [Eisenstein](#)

<u>Screening</u>: Los Angeles Movies (Tangerine, The Big Lebowski, Blade Runner 2049, Mulholland Drive, Friday)

<u>Week 5 (Day 2) Sept 22</u>

Considering the camera and editing techniques reviewed in previous classes, what is the expressive power of the **long take**? After viewing scenes with no formal cuts, we will discuss this signature approach in modernist filmmaking. Films can simultaneously provide a fictional story while being about those cinematic modes of production that created that very fiction.

<u>Topic</u>: The Long Take

● Screenings: Birdman (2014), Rope (1948), Sacrifice (1986), The Way Things Go (1988)

Also, we will discuss how a film may operate on two levels - the literal and metaphorical.

<u>Workshop</u>: Unity

<u>Due</u>: Project 1, [A Story Extends Twice (video)](#)

<u>Week 6 (Day 1) Sept 27</u>

….Continue critiquing Project 1

<u>Week 6 (Day 2) Sept 29</u>

Screening: (One Takes) The Way Things Go, Patision Avenue

Screening: World of Tomorrow

Workshop: Unity - A look at the Unity3D game engine with a focus on the first-person-perspective genre; triggers; transform (component). Using [Walking Wonders](#).

Watch: Pick from [here](#)

Read: [Understanding Comics](#) by Scott McCloud (Chapter 3)

Part 4:
Anticipation and Closure

Week 7 (Day 1) Oct 4

*Meet in SCA 110

Topic: World Building

- Are there differences between what the viewer and the character knows? Why and how?

Read: [Everything Now](#)

Read: The Introduction of [Counter Intelligence](#)

Screening: The Green Knight

Workshop Wednesday's assignment.

Week 7 (Day 2) Oct 6

Due: [A Hike With Vistas](#) (Warmup)

Part 5:
Breaking the Rules

Since the earliest days of cinema, filmmakers have defied the rules of cinematic language, including the approaches we have studied during previous weeks. Is the experimental film best understood in contrast to convention? Does the audience need to have a sense of the avant-garde filmmaker's intentions? And what happens to radical techniques after audiences get used to them?

Topic: *Alice in Wonderland* and Its Successors

Topic: Counterculture (before video games)

Screening:

● Twin Peaks, 2017
● Inland Empire, 2006
● Superdyke, 1975
● The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1919
● Phantom of Liberty, 1972
● Space is the Place, 1972

Read: Michael Bay Finally Made an Art Movie

Read: Down the Rabbit Hole

Workshop Project 2

Read: The Planiverse (stop at page 58)

Screening: Imagining the 10th Dimension

*Meet in SCA 110

<u>Due</u>: Project 2, <u>Space and Story</u>

Week 9 (Day 2) Oct 20

Critique the rest of Project 2

<u>Watch</u>: Pick from <u>here</u>

(Indiecade late this week)

Part 6:
World as Character

Week 10 (Day 1) Oct 25

Individual Meetings.

Week 10 (Day 2) Oct 27

*Meet in RZC 119 IMAX Theatre

<u>Due</u>: <u>Your Vimeo Gems</u> (again)

Week 11 (Day 1) Nov 1

Let us think about the videogame, not as a medium, but as an experience. We will describe various types of **design goals**.

<u>Screening</u>: Scripted Spaces

Popular feature **animation** from studios like Disney and Pixar are aligned with dramatic narrative discussed in the previous class. But the history of animation is replete with a separate approach to story. Such examples of "experimental animation" draw from elemental stories of folklore and fairy tales, and feature

"scripted journeys". The character is controlled by surrounding forces, and viewers project their own sensibilities onto the character. The video game designer has much to learn from this history.

Screening: Animation is Dream Allegory

- Morality (Balance, 1989)
- Immorality (Pride of Strathmoor, 2014)
- Desire (The Story of the Cat and the Moon, 1997)

We will study a primary influence on videogames - the **scripted space** (the painted dome, the mall, casinos, theme parks). Additionally, what storytelling approaches do we recognize from our discussion of animation as stories-of-elemental-determinism? Who is the main character - the player/protagonist or the world?

Week 11 (Day 2) Nov 3

Read: The Library of Babel

——Field Trip: Library Labyrinths

——Workshop: Schell Questions

Week 12 (Day 1) Nov 8

Read (before you're done with the warmup, below): Cybernetics and Ghosts

Due: Authored Sense, Algorithmic Nonsense (Warmup)

Week 12 (Day 2) Nov 10

*Meet in RZC 119 IMAX Theatre

 Manifold Garden, Piranesi, The Catacombs of Solaris, Everything, Portal, Antichamber, (and old Dr Who intros because we're in the IMAX theater)

Week 13 (Day 1) Nov 15

Unity Workshop

Week 13 (Day 2) Nov 17

We will continue our discussion of scripted spaces by distinguishing three types of **labyrinths** - unicursal, maze, and network. Historically, what types of stories feature labyrinths, and how is that related to the experience of navigating them?

> View: Fantastic Planet, Le Petit Cubes, Zelda, Tango

Week 14 (Day 1) Nov 22

> Workshop: [Schell Questions](#)

> ...your final project.

Now that we can all make and distribute digital media, what is next? Who should curate art, and what exactly has the internet done for us?

Week 14 (Day 2) Nov 24

> Holiday

Week 15 (Day 1) Nov 29

> So, what do you know now that you did not know then?

> Due: Project 3, [Recombinant Structure](#)

Week 15 (Day 2) Dec 1

> Read: [What is Game University For?](#) by Robert Yang

Final

Write one page about what classes and projects you plan to take on during the next 2 years, due when we are scheduled for an exam. (We do not have an exam).

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 instructor *before the assignment due date* and present verifiable evidence in order for a deadline extension to be granted. Students who wish to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor or student assistant before final grades are due. An Incomplete can only be assigned after the week 12 withdrawal deadline.

For assignments turned in after the assignment deadline without prior permission from the instructor, a penalty will be imposed equal to 10% of the total available points for the assignment, for each day or part of a day that the assignment is late, up to a maximum of seven days.

Attendance Policy:

Punctual attendance at all classes is mandatory. Students arriving more than five minutes late to three classes, more than ten minutes late to a single class, or leaving early, will be marked as having an unexcused absence from class, unless prior permission has been obtained from the instructor. The following guidelines are from the Interactive Media & Games 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 (for example, from A to B)
- 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)

Social media, including text messaging and internet messaging, are excluded from class unless explicitly permitted by the instructor. A 0.5% grade reduction will result from each occurrence of a student being found using them.

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/.

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. Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services https://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault/ 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 by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

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 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.

Syllabus Updates:

This syllabus is liable to change up to the beginning of class and possibly over the semester. Please check the posted syllabus regularly, and note all changes that are shared by the instructor in class.