

CTIN 290: Digital Media Workshop

Units: 4
Spring 2022

SCB 104 on Mondays and SCI L114 on Thursdays @ 1:00
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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.

Or, consider what a former [student](#) of 290 wrote.

Learning Objectives

Visual and Interactive Storytelling

(Pink text indicates learning goals drawn from USC Games Skills Roadmap 2022)

- Describe how visual storytelling approaches builds **subtext and theme** with an emphasis on point-of-view.
- Understand **color theory**, and **lighting** in order to compose communicative visual designs.
- Create **story stakes, pressure**, and **growth** for your characters.
- Compare how **cinematic** and **interactive storytelling** techniques express change and contrast. For example, evaluate how **video editing** creates montage in order to understand relevant approaches in game language.
- Analyze the **arc of experience** in films and games.
- Discuss how **prior art research** inspires your work.

Digital Media Development

- Construct interactive worlds in the Unity **game engine (literacy)**.
- Translate photography and video camera operation to game **camera principles**.
- Understand the essential components of 3D models, including **materials, textures**, and meshes in order to incorporate them in-game.
- Create rich and meaningful **sound designs**.

Production Methods

- Explain how **self-direction** couples with shared creative visions.
- Give and take **critique**.
- Use **ideation, brainstorming, and prototyping** approaches.

Readings

* There are many more [readings in our folder](#) than any student will be asked to read. (You have to log into USC to view).

The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate by Ted Chiang

Painting with Light by John Alton

The Science of Storytelling by Will Storr

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

Down the Rabbit Hole by Matt Margini

Folding Beijing by Hao Jingfang

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 | $20\% \times 3 = 60\%$ |
| 4 Warmups | $6\% \times 4 = 24\%$ |
| Vimeo Gems | $2.5\% \times 2 = 5\%$ |
| Participation | $11\% \times 1 = 11\%$ |

Schedule



Part 1:

Perception and Attention

Week 1 (Day 1) Jan 10

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?

Topic: 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)

Week 1 (Day 2) Jan 13

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](#)

Due: Install Unity 2020.3.x by first installing [Unity Hub Download - Unity](#)

Due: Download the zip, [Lighting](#)

Workshop: [Cinematography](#)

Week 2 (Day 1) Jan 17

HOLIDAY

Week 2 (Day 2) Jan 20

Read: *The Science of Storytelling* (pg 11-32 and 56-58 and 61-78)

The filmmaker chooses what the viewer sees.

Screening: *Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018), *Blade Runner 2049* (2019), *Moon* (2009)

Learning Goals For Screening: story stakes, pressure, and growth; arc of experience

Due: Made a Vimeo account and share the link with Atlas:
Paste it into this doc ([Vimeo Links](#))

Due: Install Davinci Resolve (unless you will use a program you have and know)

Workshop: [Editing](#) (Workshop #2)

Part 2: Cause and Effect As Argument

Week 3 (Day 1) Jan 24

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

Week 3 (Day 2) Jan 27

Read: [Painting With Light](#)

Workshop: 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 gloves, mits, or hand towel as you'll be handling hot lighting equipment. [Link for in class.](#)

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)?

Workshop: Unity [Lighting](#)

Topic: Camera Action and Fundamentals

- Pan, Tracking, Zoom
- Camera operation - Focal Length; Depth of Field; Aperture; Shutter Speed

Due: [Your Vimeo Gems](#)

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.

Week 4 (Day 1) Jan 31

Visit: USC Games Director Danny Bilson visits at 1:15 to lecture about story structure.

Read: [The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate](#)

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

Week 4 (Day 2) Feb 3

Read: The Science of Storytelling (pg 190-200 and 240-246)

Due: [Character Sheet](#) (Warmup for Project 1)

Topic: The Long Take

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

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.

Part 3: Anticipation and Closure

Week 5 (Day 1) Feb 7

*Meet in SCI 106

Screening: *Sorry To Bother You*, 2018

Learning Goals For Screening: subtext and theme; story stakes, pressure, and growth; arc of experience; color theory and lighting; sound design; camera principles

[Questions for Discussion](#)

Week 5 (Day 2) Feb 10

Due: Project 1, [A Story Extends Twice \(video\)](#)

Unity Essentials

Week 6 (Day 1) Feb 14

Due: Project 1, [A Story Extends Twice \(video\)](#)

Week 6 (Day 2) Feb 17

Screening: *World of Tomorrow*

Workshop: [Thing From the Future](#)

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

Read: [Folding Beijing](#)

...Continue critiquing Project 1

Week 7 (Day 1) Feb 21

HOLIDAY

Part 4: Breaking the Rules

Week 7 (Day 2) Feb 24

*Meet in SCI 106

Screening: *Mulholland Drive*, 2001

Learning Goals For Screening: subtext and theme; arc of experience; color theory and lighting; sound design; camera principles

- During the first 30 minutes of the film, what events or moments make you curious? That is, what questions does the film put in your mind, questions for which you anticipate an answer?
- At what point do you realize your questions aren't going to be answered?
- If they don't get answered, then what else is there? In the absence of closure, what interpretations of the story, characters, and actions can you offer?
- What does it mean - to you - for a film to be dream-like?

Read: [Folding Beijing](#)

- What is this story critical of?

Week 8 (Day 1) Feb 28

(PROGRESS reviewed in class): [A Hike With Vistas](#) (Warmup)

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?

Week 8 (Day 2) March 3

Topic: Transgression in Cinema: Counterculture, the Avant Garde

Screening:

- Twin Peaks, 2017
- A Movie, 1958
- The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1919
- Phantom of Liberty, 1972
- Space is the Place, 1972
- Island of Flowers, 1989

Read: [Michael Bay Finally Made an Art Movie](#)

Week 9 (Day 1) March 7

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

Workshop - WALKING WONDERS and help [video](#)

Week 9 (Day 2) March 10

Due: [A Hike With Vistas](#) BUILD zipped and uploaded

*Meet in SCI 106

Watch: *Paprika*, 2006

Learning Goals For Screening: **subtext and theme; story stakes, pressure, and growth; arc of experience; color theory and lighting; sound design**

This film employs two approaches we've discussed this semester. One, it's a dramatic film in which I feel concern for the main character; I feel anxious for their loss; and I anticipate closure. That is, early on, we are given questions to which we ultimately expect answers. On the other hand, dreams and dream logic are central to the story. In life, dreams tend not to provide

closure. This is also true for “dream-like” movies (and their close cousins, avant garde films). Dreams prioritize opportunities for personal interpretation (what does this film mean to **you**?) over giving you the author’s answers. To put it another way, how important is Paprika’s final act? Is the plot’s closure satisfying and important to the film’s emotional and intellectual impact on you? Does this film manage to have it both ways?....do the dramatic structure and dream logic mesh well?

-----*SPRING BREAK*-----

Part 5: World as Character

Week 10 (Day 1) March 21

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

Screening: 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

- The Street of Crocodiles, 1986
- Balance, 1989
- Pride of Strathmoor, 2014
- 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 10 (Day 2) March 24

*Meet in RZC 119 IMAX Theater

Watch: Gris, Fantastic Planet

Due: Play *Inscription* with partner (partners same as for Project 2, below)

Project 2 + *Inscription* partner (although Project 2 is not due today)

| | |
|-------------|-----------|
| Erin | Jeron |
| Ina | Harrison |
| Katy | Charlie |
| Samuel | Annabel |
| Jacob | Adrianna |
| Spencer | Kerry |
| Theryn | Amari |
| Jonan | Felix |
| Anju | Gage |
| Yuheng/Toby | Catherine |
| Cindy | Mudi |
| Jordan | Steven |

Read: Playful Production Process, Chapter 16. Click: [USC library Link](#)then click on "EBSCOhost Ebooks". Next, find Chapter 16 for download, as you have a limited number of pages you can download.

Week 11 (Day 1) March 28

Read: [The Library of Babel](#)

Workshop: [Schell Questions](#)

[Pairs Activity](#)

Week 11 (Day 2) March 31

Due: Project 2, [Space and Story](#)

Week 12 (Day 1) April 4

Play: Back to Bed, Superliminal

Read: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Chapters 1, 2, 3) [Link](#)

Read: [Down the Rabbit Hole](#)

Workshop: Build a scene with [Dark City 2](#)

Week 12 (Day 2) April 7

*Meet in RZC 119 IMAX Theater

Manifold Garden, The Catacombs of Solaris, Portal, Rez, Antichamber

Read (Optional): [Making Games](#)

Week 13 (Day 1) April 11

Guest Speaker

Due: [Level Design, Player's Instincts](#) (Warmup)

Week 13 (Day 2) April 14

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: Zelda, Tango

Play: What Remains of Edith Finch, Disco Elysium

Workshop: [Schell Questions](#) 1a, 1b, 2a, 4a, 4b, 5a, 9a, 20a

Read: [The Planiverse by Alexander Dewdney](#) (About the first 1/3 if you prefer, and you can skip the introduction)

Week 14 (Day 1) April 18

Concerning your final, did you do the work (preparation and incubation) so that you arrived at insight?

Plug & Play

Read: [The Planiverse by Alexander Dewdney](#) (About the first 1/3 if you prefer, and you can skip the introduction)

Week 14 (Day 2) April 21

IMAX

Week 15 (Day 1) April 25

Course Review

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

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

Week 15 (Day 2) April 28

Due: [Final Project](#)

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.