



**CTWR 410L Character Design and Storytelling for Games, aka: Narrative Design Workshop**

**Units: 4.0**

**Fall 2022 – Lecture Section Thursday 7pm-9pm**

**Location: SCI 108**

**Fall 2022- Workshop Sections at various days and times.**

**Lead Instructor: Danny Bilson**

**Office:** SCI 201

**Office Hours:** Scheduled on Zoom

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**Workshop Instructors:**

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**Hours of Service:**

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## Course Description

An overview of narrative fundamentals for playful experiences and interactive media. A class that covers the core lessons of designing narratives that are meant to be played and interacted with building out core lessons of storytelling from cinema and other mediums. Featuring guest speakers in the evening lecture section as well as hands-on writing in smaller weekly workshops.

## Learning Objectives

Students will learn how to formulate characters, goals, conflicts and fundamental story structures for interactive and immersive narratives.

**Prerequisite(s):** None.

**Co-Requisite(s):** None.

**Concurrent Enrollment:** None.

**Recommended Preparation:** Experience as a user of interactive media and games.

## Course Notes

Letter Grade.

## Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Screenwriting software, Google Slides, Google Docs all available at no cost.

## Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

None.

## Description and Assessment of Assignments

Throughout the semester, students will write characters and situations that build to a core narrative design for a video game or immersive attraction, with an eye towards that project's mechanics and audience, supported by strong fundamental storytelling. Each assignment will get feedback and revisions and development will be ongoing.

**Game Review** - Each student will present a review of a game narrative once over the course of the semester.

**Concept Pitch** - A high level concept for a game or attraction

**One Page Narrative Overview** - A one page overview of the project's narrative including character, conflict, and act beats.

**Three Page Narrative Act Summary** - Three pages, one covering each act of the story, with more in depth narrative beats, characters and conflicts.

**Narrative Design Deck** - A full presentation of your narrative design, overviewing central conflict, characters and core mechanics.

**Opening and Closing Script** - A scripted opening and ending for your project, including dialogue and setting.

**Final Presentation** - Present your original project to the group for peer review.

## Grading Breakdown

Assessment Tool (assignments)	Points	% of Grade
Participation		15
Concept Pitch		5
Game Review		10
One Page Narrative Overview		10
Three Page Narrative Act Overview		10
Narrative Design Deck		15

Open and Close Scripts		10
Final Presentation		25
<b>TOTAL</b>		100

### Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale

A	95-100
A-	90-94
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	59 and below

### Assignment Submission Policy

Assignments should be handed in via google drive by midnight the day before lab class.

### Grading Timeline

Feedback will be shared within two weeks of a hand in.

### Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

	Topics/Daily Activities	Notes	Workshops
<b>Week 1</b>	Intro to Narrative Design for Games, and Concept Pitch Assignment	<b>Bilson</b> 8/25/22	
<b>Week 2</b>	Overview of Narrative Design for Games pt 2& Writing for Comics and Cinematics	<b>Bilson/Kelly</b> 9/1	DUE: Concept Pitches
<b>Week 3</b>	The Setup- Three Act Structure	<b>Epps</b> 9/8	DUE: Game Review, Concept pitches refined
<b>Week 4</b>	From Clone Wars to C.O.D. and beyond. Case studies.	<b>Friedman</b> 9/15	DUE:One Page Narrative Overview Play Diplomacy*.
<b>Week 5</b>	Screening/Structure and Analysis*	<b>Beleteche</b> 9/22	DUE: Game Review, Diplomacy Reports. One Page review rnd 1
<b>Week 6</b>	Open World Narrative Design	<b>Cantamessa</b> 9/29	DUE: Game Review, One Page review rnd 2. Begin EIP exercise.
<b>Week 7</b>	Alum panel/Writing is Rewriting	<b>Johnson/Epps</b> 10/06	DUE: Game Review, Team presentations EIP exercise.
<b>Week 8</b>	Writing Champions for FTP Multiplayer	<b>Stauffer</b> 10/20	DUE: Game Review, Script techniques, Openings Demos, 3 page treatment due.
<b>Week 9</b>	Systems, Games, and Stories & Rhythms of Stories	<b>Lemarchand</b> 10/27	DUE: Game Review, 3 page treatment review rnd 1

<b>Week 10</b>	Attention, Not Immersion, Level Design/Dramatic Storytelling and Narrative Design	<b>Lemarchand/Berger 11/3</b>	DUE: Game Review, 3 page treatment review rnd 2, Begin OIP exercise.
<b>Week 11</b>	Themed Entertainment Narrative/Character Creation	<b>Kerrison/Krawczyk 11/10</b>	DUE: Game Review, OIP presentations.
<b>Week 12</b>	Character Arc & Anatomy of an Action Sequence	<b>Epps 11/17</b>	DUE: Game Review, OIP presentations rnd 1 Opening and Closing Scripts due
<b>Week 13</b>	Emotion and Mechanics	<b>Straley 12/1</b>	Review Opening and Closing Scripts notes.
<b>FINAL</b>		<b>12/8</b>	<b>Final Deck Reviews</b> Refer to the final exam schedule in the USC <i>Schedule of Classes</i> at <a href="http://classes.usc.edu">classes.usc.edu</a> .

*\*Three hour session*

## LECTURE SYLLABUS

### WEEK 1

**Introduction to Narrative Design for Games pt 1** - An overview on the nature of narrative design and how it is similar and different from traditional storytelling.

### WEEK 2

**Introduction to Narrative Design for Games pt 2** - An overview on the nature of narrative design and how it is similar and different from traditional storytelling.

**Writing for sequences, storyboards and comics**- Narrative design for storyboards, animatics and comics requires its own skills in how written words are translated and combined with images.

### WEEK 3 (3hr)

**The Setup: 3 Act Structure and Story**- The first 40 pages are the most important pages in the screenplay. The Set-Up is where the screenwriter must establish all of the story and character elements that will be developed and complicated in the Second Act and resolved in the Third Act. It is essential for a writer to understand the importance of establishing essential storytelling elements in the first 40 pages. Areas such a characters, relationships, plot, theme, world, rules, wants and needs, as well as the tone and genre are all established in the Set-Up. The Second and Third Acts are all dependent on the Set-Up. A weak Set-Up will yield a weak story.

### WEEK 4

**Attention not Immersion and Level Design-** We use the words "immersive" and "engaging" all the time when we're discussing the things that are most important about great video game experiences and yet, how well do we really understand the concepts that these words point to? Richard Lemarchand, former lead game designer at Naughty Dog, will use this session to try and dispel some of the confusion about how videogames keep us fascinated, by introducing the psychological concept of attention to our ongoing conversation about play and games. Attention—the process of selectively concentrating on one perception or thought, while ignoring other things—has been one of the most widely discussed concepts in the one hundred and fifty year history of modern psychology, but it is rarely, if ever, mentioned on stage at GDC. What is attention? How does it work? What is its relationship with the overlapping phenomena of entrancement, compulsion and depth in games, and how can we use our awareness of our players' attention to make our games better? By using practical examples from his involvement in the playtesting of the Uncharted games, Richard will describe how you can use metrics data and other methods to get a handle on the elusive subjects of your players' attention, without breaking the bank on elaborate equipment.

## **WEEK 5**

**Story Analysis-** This seminar will focus on the essential storytelling elements found in all powerful and engaging stories. These storytelling elements are universal and transcend culture, place, and time. The attendees will learn what these elements are, and how to recognize them in scripts and films, and other kinds of stories. Professor Belateche will use the film "Back To The Future" to examine how these elements work, how they engage an audience in a story, and how they make a story more emotional. Attendees will learn how to transform their stories into works that engage and resonate emotionally with an audience.

***Please note that no photography, video recording or audio recording is allowed in Professor Belateche's sessions, and the use of computers in the sessions is also not permitted. Students are required to take notes by hand.***

## **WEEK 6**

**Open World Narrative Design-** Christian Cantamessa will share his experiences in designing *Red Dead: Redemption* as well as, *Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor* and *Shadow of War*. He will emphasize the challenges and benefits of open world design, and will present a framework for the creation of an underlying philosophy for successful open world narrative game design, drawing on the concepts of the player's competence, relatedness and autonomy. By examining these psychological concepts, Christian will demonstrate how character-driven stories that draw on the player's ability to direct their own actions can create a rich story world or "narrative space" for the player to explore.

## **WEEK 7**

**Writing is Rewriting** - The concepts of how to get to a quick first story draft and iterate is similar to how we design and develop games with prototyping.

**Alumni Panel-** Former students describe their post USC Games work in narrative design.

## **WEEK 8**

**Writing Champions-** Explores the challenges of writing for free to play multiplayer arena based games. In depth discussion of history and development of Apex Legends. We will also cover League of Legends and how it is extending its IP.

#### **WEEK 9**

**Systems, Games and Story Rhythms-** Every art form that unfolds over time, from novels to pop songs to movies, has a rhythm, and games are no exception. But the rhythms of games are more complex than those of “linear” media, because they are influenced by the actions of our players. Game designers must plan the possible rhythms of their games, whether single-player narrative games, or online multiplayer games, using a variety of techniques. This talk shows some new ways to think about the rhythms of games.

#### **WEEK 10**

**Building persistent stories** - A discussion of the techniques in extending or serializing stories. Television is used as a primary example.

**Dramatic Storytelling and Narrative Design-** Professor Berger will speak to the elements of his book that are most important to him.

#### **WEEK 11**

**Immersive Narrative beyond the Screen-** A discussion of narrative design beyond video games with an emphasis on themed entertainment.

**Character Creation** Character Creation using the origin of *Kratos* from *God of War* as a prime example.

#### **WEEK 12**

**Character Arcs and The Anatomy of an Action Sequence-** Action sequences are an important part of movies and games. The lecture will look at how to build effective and informative action sequences. Action sequences are not just about action, but also places to develop character and story. Using examples from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Die Hard*, and *Terminator 2*, we will explore how the masters, such as Steven Spielberg and James Cameron, design memorable action sequences.

#### **WEEK 13**

**Emotional Mechanics-** An examination in the use of emotions and game mechanics in the world of *The Last of Us*. hosted by its creative director. In this presentation Bruce Straley will share his thoughts on how he uses game design to elicit emotions from the player, and how he thinks about story while designing a game. He'll dive into his personal experience with stories in video games, his most influential playable story experiences and the takeaways from them, storytelling devices he uses when designing core mechanics, and some general “good practice” design principles.

#### **FINAL**

Workshops only. Review final original IP presentations.

## **WORKSHOP SYLLABUS**

### **WEEK 2**

Introductions: Who we are and why we are here.

How can good writing advance the interactive experience?

- Course overview – objectives, assignments, grading, etc.
- Intro Final Project: Original game I.P. (build the game you want to play the most) PP and Walkthrough.
- What are student game fiction reviews? Assign one student per week.
- Fiction before mechanics or vice versa?
- The X and the Y.
- Student High Concept pitches 1- 3 minutes each.

### **WEEK 3**

- Discussion: Classic characters in games, films, television & literature. What is a character in game space? What is motivation in gamespace? Backstory? How do these impact the creation of game characters?
- 2 Student game reviews
- Student I.P. pitches round 2- Students update on current thinking on their story ideas.

### **WEEK 4 (3hrs)**

- Diplomacy: Emergent fiction gameplay experience.
- Student IP one page treatment due.

### **WEEK 5**

- Student Game Review
- Diplomacy Reports- student “journalists” report on their Diplomacy stories.
- Notes on 1 page assignment

### **WEEK 6**

- Student Game Review
- Notes on 1 page assignment (to complete)
- In class team exercise: Fiction to Mechanics- teams of two create a new game narrative based on an existing IP

### **WEEK 7**

- Student Game Review
- Team Presentations: Fiction to Mechanics

## **WEEK 8**

- Student Game Review
- How to write in script format.
- Game opening Demos - Using media, demo examples of great game or immersive narrative openings.
- 3 page treatment for original IP due. One page per act.

## **WEEK 9**

- Student Game Review
- Review and Note 3 page Treatments

## **WEEK 10**

- Student Game Review
- Review and Note 3 page Treatments (to complete)
- In class team exercise: Mechanics to Fiction- Develop an original game IP and narrative design from existing mechanics.

## **WEEK 11**

- Student Game Review
- Review Mechanics to Fiction team presentations
- Assign scripting of opening and ending of student OIP

## **WEEK 12**

- Student Game Review
- Original IP presentations- 10 mins max
- Opening and Ending Scripts due

## **WEEK 13**

- Opening and ending scripts reviewed 5-10 script pages.

## **FINAL**

- Review of original OIP decks.



## 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 Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

### Support Systems:

*Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call*  
[studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling)

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*Student Health Leave Coordinator – 213-821-4710*

Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed.

<https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/>

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call*

[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call*

[studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault)

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298*

[equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://titleix.usc.edu)

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected characteristics*: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298*

[usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report](http://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report)

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Student Accessibility Services - (213) 740-0776*

[osas.usc.edu](http://osas.usc.edu)

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*Campus Support & Intervention - (213) 821-4710*

[campussupport.usc.edu](http://campussupport.usc.edu)

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101*

[diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

*USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)

Non-emergency assistance or information.

*Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)*

[ombuds.usc.edu](http://ombuds.usc.edu)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

PLEASE NOTE:

FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACE IN THE SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX