

# CTIN 290: Digital Media Workshop

## **USC School of Cinematic Arts**

A USC Games Course

### **Instructors:**

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### **Course Description:**

The goal of Digital Media Workshop 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 foundation SCA filmmaking curriculum, with a forward-looking view toward the future of visual media design across formats and platforms.

Formally and topically, lectures and assignments emphasize cinematic structures relevant to undergraduates 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.

The first half of the semester will focus on filmmaking practices. The latter weeks of the semester concentrate on works not strictly passive in nature, but also not limited to purely digital or gamelike works.

Consistently, we will address two types of communication; we will ask how time-based media communicates to the viewer or player, and we will challenge each other to express ideas and criticisms clearly and eloquently during all discussions.

### **A Perspective**

Stories embody two apparently conflicting impulses – to connect us to something real at the same time inviting us to believe in magic.

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 they make meaning. Pondering a

project's "made-ness" is not a supplemental aspect of our endeavor, but it is at its foundation.

## **On the Tensions Between Learning Game Development and Cinematic Techniques**

Let's put something out on Front Street right here at the start:

The things that are easy to do in film are often really hard to do when you're just learning to use a game engine. The things that are really easy to do in a game engine are quite difficult to achieve in film and other passive media. Practicing a crane shot or a rack focus takes seconds with a camera app installed on your phone, and takes a lot of setup, scripting, and tutorials if you're still new to a game engine. Building out a fully explorable haunted house in the real world costs a ton and takes a big crew of people in the real world and can be done in your bedroom for the cost of the computer and time with a game engine (and the Unity Asset Store.)

This is a class about learning best practices and being able to *practice them easily and often*. We'll always prioritize doing things whichever way gives us the least friction and the most XP.

## **On Being a 21st Century Creator**

Fundamentally, this course also takes into perspective the changing nature of being a storyteller and a creator in an increasingly participatory culture of media consumption, especially while living in a world with changing paradigms and platforms that each have their own modes of production and responsibilities. Storytelling is universal, though, and while the tools and audience desires and even platforms might change, much of HOW we tell stories and become more effective communicators is transferable knowledge.

## **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 embedded in digital spaces.
- Design and develop 3D interactive worlds with an expressive emphasis on player point-of-view.
- Utilize hybrid and non-digital tools to create *Experiences* that can be more than just games

## Production methods

- Collaborate on shared creative visions.
- Learn the role of group-planning documents.
- Learn how to give and take critique.
- Formally playtest interactive projects; tally and analyze data.

**Reading** -- *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud, *Art Matters*, Neil Gaiman and Chris Riddel, *The Creative Act* - Rick Rubin

## Meeting Information:

Class meets online for the Fall '23 Semester. Mondays and Wednesdays 1-3.20pm PT

**Please Note this class meets in SCB on Mondays and SCI on Wednesdays.**

**Units:** 2/2

**Class Discord Server:** get help, share tricks, stay on top of assignments. Invite sent first week of class.

## Grading and Due Dates:

Class Participation - 10%

In-Class Exercises - 10%

Analysis Paper and Discussion Recording 10%

Nanoshorts - 15%

3 Choice Film - 15%

Story-Rich Space - 20%

Final Project: Adaptation: 20%

	<i>Monday Topics/Daily Activities</i>	<i>Wednesday Topics/Daily Activities</i>
Week 1	<i>Introduction and Film School Crash Course 1: Shots and Angles</i> <i>Watching Exercise and Discussion</i> <b><i>The Thomas Crown Affair</i></b> <b><i>(opening 30 minutes)</i></b> <b><i>HW: Watch any film and do the exercise assigned in class. DUE: Start of class Monday Week 2.</i></b>	<i>Connecting Shots: The Language of Visual Communication. The Koleshev Effect. Space.</i> <i>Watching Exercises and discussions.</i> <b><i>HW: 3 short Koleshev Experiments. DUE: Wed Week 2</i></b>

Week 2	<i>Movement, Diegesis, and Perspective Watching Exercises and Discussions</i>	<i>Screen Koleshev Experiments. Critique Review: More About Spaces (and Spaces in Games!)</i>  <b>HW: 3 short films about a space. DUE: Mon Week 4</b>
Week 3	NO CLASS, LABOR DAY	<i>Basic Rules of Editing Screenings, Discussions Game Analysis</i>
Week 4	<i>Guest Lecturer Review First Films, Critique <b>HW: Re-Edits. Due Wed, Week 5</b></i>	NO CLASS, <b>Work on Your Re-edits</b>
Week 5	<i>Guest Lecturer</i>	<i>Review Project 2 Re-Edits, Critique <b>HW: Watch a film with a classmate from the provided list, all available to stream on a major service. Record Discussion. Due: Wednesday Week 6</b></i>
Week 6	<i>Picture, Assembly, Perspective Extended Screening</i>	<i>Lens Adjustment and Camera Workshop Part 1 Discussion of Films screened</i>
Week 7	<i>Sound Design for Clear Communication Screenings and Discussions <b>HW: 3-minute Film DUE: Wednesday, Week 9</b></i>	<i>Camera Workshop Part 2: Hands on - Iconic Shots and working together</i>
Week 8	<i>Screening. (Arrive on Time, film begins promptly)</i>	<i>Storytelling and Interactivity <b>HW: Solo Project, the Story Rich Space DUE: Week 12</b></i>
Week 9	<i>Mise En Scene</i>	<i>Screening and Crit for Project 3</i>
Week 10	<i>Color Grades, Process, and encoding information in Color Screening/Playthroughs</i>	<i>Interactivity and Spaces Playthroughs and Discussion of Spaces, Liminal and Otherwise</i>

Week 11	<i>Sound II: In depth look at interactivity and using sound to communicate information Screening/playthrough</i>	<i>The Ethics of AI in Digital Media Creation The Role of AI in Digital Media Creation The Importance of Digital Media as a Cultural Force/Driver Workshop: Bring Projects for help/feedback</i>
Week 12	<i>Project Crits - Story-Rich Space</i>	<i>Project Crits - Story-Rich Space <b>FINAL PROJECT ASSIGNED: Adaptation</b></i>
Week 13	<i>Adaptation as an Exercise in Communication</i>	<i>Documentary - Information Adapted Through Digital Media Playthroughs: Adaptations, Documentations</i>
Week 14	<i>NO CLASS - Thanksgiving</i>	<i>NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING</i>
Week 15	<i>Screening</i>	<i>Class Review - Preliminary Crit of Final Project Final Screening, perhaps</i>
FINAL	<i>Final Turn-in</i>	

### **More on the Projects:**

Nanoshorts: Students will work in groups in two short exercises to produce films not exceeding 15 seconds each that communicate specified ideas and information. After feedback and crits, students will be given a second assignment to re-edit using what they've learned

3 Min Choice Film: Students will work in groups to create a short film with no dialogue in which a character must make a choice. The film must be clearly understood by the audience without the use of onscreen text or spoken words.

The Story-Rich Space Specifics to be revealed in class, but students will work individually to create an *explorable interactive space* that holds a story the player is free to uncover **but must be understood to be judged a success**.

Final Project: Adaptation Students must adapt a public-domain work for interactivity. Final projects must utilize a minimum of six cinematic techniques/tools discussed in this class.

In-Class Exercises Periodically the class will have exercises in person to try out techniques or demonstrate some concepts as a whole.

A Note on Synergy With Other Classes: If possible, and if your taking this class is paired with a game development class like 289, your work in this class can be paired with work and assignments in other classes. However: the requirements for this class and these assignments remains unchanged. To accommodate the different skill levels and familiarities with digital game development tools exhibited by students who take this class, I do not *require* the use of specific tools for any assignment in this class, but do *encourage* you to find opportunities to pair projects and learnings in useful ways.

Reviews & Critiques: In addition to formal testing, projects will also undergo extensive peer review and critique during the class sessions. Students are expected to participate actively in both the giving and receiving of feedback as a crucial part of the design process. These reviews will cover both creative and technical aspects of the project.

#### 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 instructors 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 instructors or student assistant before final grades are due.

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 instructors. The following guidelines are from the Interactive Media Division & Games handbook regarding absences and grading and apply to all students.

#### Guidelines for absences affecting grading:

Two unexcused absences: lowers grade ½ grade (for example, from A to A-)

Three unexcused absences: lowers grade one full grade

Four or more unexcused absences: request to withdraw from course (instructor's discretion)

#### **A Note About Laptops/Phones in Class**

During screenings or playthroughs, screens are expected to be dark, lids shut. This is out of respect for others in the room and for the material being watched critically. As this is a class about developing a critical eye, you are expected to pay full attention to the material being screened. Luckily for you, it's pretty fun material.

Social media use, including text messaging, Internet messaging and email, is not permitted in class unless explicitly permitted by the instructors. A 0.5% grade reduction will result from each occurrence of a student being found using social media in class, or ignoring the laptop screening policy..

## **A Safe Space**

In this class, we make a commitment to foster a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. This means that we will use preferred pronouns and respect self-identifications. While debate and discussion are welcome, please remain aware of the implications of your words and the images that you include in your work. If the instructor or another student points out that something you have said or shared with the group might be offensive, avoid being defensive; this is a valuable opportunity for us to grow and learn together. If you have a concern about any aspect of the class, you are encouraged to speak with the instructor. If you feel uncomfortable speaking with the instructor, you are also welcome to speak with either the undergraduate or graduate advisor for the division, who can discuss the issue with you directly or point you toward other on- and off-campus resources for addressing your concern.

## **Fair Use**

Fair use is a legal principle that defines certain limitations on the exclusive rights of copyright holders. The Interactive Media & Games Division of USC's School of the Cinematic Arts seeks to apply a reasonable working definition of fair use that will enable students and instructors to develop multimedia projects without seeking authorization for non-commercial, educational uses. In keeping with section 107 of the Copyright Act we recognize four factors that should be considered when determining whether a use is fair: (1) the purpose and character of use, (2) the nature of the copyrighted work, (3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole, and (4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work. In general, we regard the reproduction of copyrighted works for the purposes of analysis or critique in this class to be covered by the principle of fair use.

## **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, up to and including expulsion from the program and the university. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* [policy.usc.edu/student/scampus/part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/student/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/).

You are welcome to make use of code libraries, Unity extensions, and the like, as appropriate to your project. However the substance of the project must be your work, and you must document the sources (links to the original work) in a text file submitted with your project. If you are not sure whether you need to document something, document it. If you are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, it is your responsibility to ask the instructors for clarification.

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* [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu) or to the *Department of Public Safety* [dps.usc.edu/contact/report](http://dps.usc.edu/contact/report). 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* (RSVP, formerly known as the Center for Women and Men)

[engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp) provides 24/7 confidential support, and the *Sexual Assault Resource Center* [sarc.usc.edu](http://sarc.usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

**Harassment, sexual misconduct, interpersonal violence, and stalking are not tolerated by the university. All faculty and most staff are considered Responsible Employees by the university and must forward all information they receive about these types of situations to the Title IX Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator is responsible for assisting students with supportive accommodations, including academic accommodations, as well as investigating these incidents if the reporting student wants an investigation. The Title IX office is also responsible for coordinating supportive measures for transgender and nonbinary students such as faculty notifications, and more. If you need supportive accommodations you may contact the Title IX Coordinator directly ([titleix@usc.edu](mailto:titleix@usc.edu) or 213-821-8298) without sharing any personal information with me. If you would like to speak with a confidential counselor, Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) provides 24/7 confidential support for students (213-740-9355 (WELL); press 0 after hours).**

### **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* [dornsife.usc.edu/ali](http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali), which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* [dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu) 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* [emergency.usc.edu](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.