



CTIN 411 Tabletop Game Mechanics Seminar

Units: 2.0

Fall 2023 — Wednesday — 5:00-6:50 PM

Location: SCI 108

Instructor: Kyle Ackerman

Office: EGG 208

Office Hours: By Appointment

Contact Info: KyleAcke@usc.edu, Class Discord for informal communication, Will respond to emails within 24 hours on weekdays.

Teaching Assistant: TBD

Office: TBD

Office Hours: TBD

Contact Info: TBD

IT Help: USC ITS

Contact Info: 213-740-5555, consult@usc.edu

Catalogue Description

Seminar on the design patterns and mechanics of successful tabletop games including trends in gaming content, tools, business and culture.

Course Description

Tabletop gaming has been an important part of the human experience since prehistory, and is experiencing an extended renaissance, blossoming into a multi-billion-dollar industry that now overlaps with the electronic gaming market. Students of game design will find it useful to study the design elements and development of tabletop games, which often pare game mechanics to design fundamentals, and integrate these elements in their own endeavors. General education students will gain a basic literacy in and appreciation of tabletop games and the vocabulary and understanding to discuss the mechanics and styles of tabletop play in a meaningful fashion.

This course explores the design of tabletop games, including all manner of games that are primarily non-digital in nature. Using traditional, popular and successful tabletop games as case studies, we will build a shared vocabulary of mechanics and use that to discuss the elements and design patterns that make up successful games in the tabletop space.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, students will be familiar with a wide range of tabletop games and the vocabulary and mechanics critical to discussing their design. Using mechanics as the primary gateway to understanding play loops, students will be able to analyze these games using thematic, mechanical and experiential perspectives. Students will be able to articulate the elements of tabletop games and perform comparative analysis of tabletop games in both presentations and written papers.

Prerequisite(s): none

Co-Requisite(s): none

Concurrent Enrollment: none

Recommended Preparation: none

Course Notes

Syllabus is posted on Blackboard and the class shared Google Drive. Group and individual assignments will be assigned through Blackboard and must be submitted through Blackboard for grading. Presentation assignments must also be submitted to the shared Google Drive per the Assignment Submission Policy below. As a COVID-safe supplement to physical gameplay and analysis, proficiency in Tabletop Simulator is recommended.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Students should have access to Tabletop Simulator available through Steam Powered.com. Students must also be able to collaborate on visual presentations through a platform such as Google Slides, and post presentations to the shared Google Drive.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Students are not required to purchase any books for this course, but should have access to the Tabletop Simulator software. Tabletop games, comprised of play materials and documentation, will be used for group and individual assignments. Physical game copies of certain games may be checked out from the USC Games Front Desk (SCI 201). Digital games can be explored using platforms such as Board Game Arena or Tabletop Simulator and the associated Steam Workshop.

Optional readings may be distributed as hyperlinks, and students may explore other platforms for the digital play of tabletop games, including sites such as BoardGameArena.com, Tabletopia, and dedicated apps.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Assignment 1 – 4: Group Game Analysis Presentation

Students will work in groups to contribute to a presentation about a game the group has learned, studied, and played during the preceding week. Presentations will be made during class sessions, and should be brief (5-7 minutes). These presentations should include basic information about the game considered (such as mechanics, genre, theme, and core play loops). Each individual member of the group should present a specific topic such as a mechanic, thematic integration, player dynamics, or affordances. As the semester progresses, presentations should rely on vocabulary introduced in previous class sessions. All members of the group should participate in the presentation. All names should be on the title page, and each contributor should place their name on their presented page.

Assignment 5: Licensed Game Pitch

Students will work in groups to pitch a game based on an intellectual property the group chooses (approved by the instructor) that has not been previously adapted as a tabletop game. The pitch should focus on how the design would be approached, specifically in terms of which mechanics would be used to adapt the property and themes. This does not need to be a complete, tested game design, but rather a conceptual pitch on mechanics that would be suited to a particular IP.

Assignment 6: Comparative Analysis Paper

For this assignment, each student will propose a pair of games that will be approved by the instructor. The student will then write an individual 3-5 page comparative analysis paper comparing and contrasting the two games. The analysis should include concepts such as theme, complexity, and player experience, but focus primarily on how each game builds upon its component mechanics to create the final player experience.

Participation:

Participation is an important component of the course, and students are expected to participate enthusiastically in lectures, student presentations and critique.

Grading Breakdown

Assessment Tool (assignments)	Points	% of Grade
Group Game Analysis I	10	10
Group Game Analysis II	10	10
Group Game Analysis III	10	10
Group Game Analysis IV	10	10
Group Licensed Game Pitch	20	20
Class Participation	10	10
Comparative Analysis Paper	30	30
TOTAL	100	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

All written and digital assignments should be submitted through Blackboard and submitted to the shared class drive:

<https://tinyurl.com/LotharLivesHere>

(Must sign in with USC Account to access shared Google Drive)

Additional Policies

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. Incompletes are only available after the withdrawal deadline.

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

Guidelines for unexcused absences affecting grading

Two absences: lowers grade one full grade point (e.g. from A to B)

Three absences: lowers grade two full grade points

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

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.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings/Preparation	Deliverables
Week 1	Introduction to Tabletop Prehistory and Folk Games	Group Game Analysis #1	
Week 2	"Ameritrash" Games	Group Game Analysis #1	Game Analysis #1 Due (Group)
Week 3	Eurogames	Group Game Analysis #2	
Week 4	Input and Output Randomness	Group Game Analysis #2	Game Analysis #2 Due (Group)
Week 5	Social Games	Group Game Analysis #3	
Week 6	Victory and Set Collection	Group Game Analysis #3	Game Analysis #3 Due (Group)
Week 7	Area Control	Group Game Analysis #4	
Week 8	Puzzle and Deduction	Group Game Analysis #4	Game Analysis #4 Due (Group)
Week 9	Auctions and Drafting	Prepare team and property for mechanic pitch	
Week 10	Actions and Exceptions	Prepare team and property for mechanic pitch	Team and Property for Licensed Game Pitch Due (before break)
Week 11	Construction, Placement & Dexterity	Prepare licensed game mechanic pitch	
Week 12	Cooperation, Deceit, and Betrayal	Identify games for comparative analysis	Licensed Game Pitch Due (Group)
Week 13	Legacy Games	Identify games for comparative analysis	Submit Games for Comparative Analysis Paper (Individual)
Week 14	Thanksgiving Break	Comparative game analysis	
Week 15	Express Games	Comparative game analysis	
FINAL	No physical meeting – final paper is due		Comparative Analysis Paper Due (Individual)

Synchronous session recording notice

During remote teaching situations, the Zoom courses will be recorded, and these recordings will be shared with the class. While this will not entirely replace in-class participation, these recorded classes will allow students to catch up on lectures they were unable to attend as well as for useful review.

Sharing of course materials outside of the learning environment

SCampus Section 11.12(B)

Distribution or use of notes or recordings based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study is a violation of the USC Student Conduct Code. This includes, but is not limited to, providing materials for distribution by services publishing class notes. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the Internet or via any other media. (See Section C.1 Class Notes Policy).

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

Support Systems:

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call
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

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

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, 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

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

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

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

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, 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

Non-emergency assistance or information.

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

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