



CTIN 488: Game Design Workshop

Units: 4

Lecture Time: Monday 10:00 AM - 12:50 PM (PST)

Location: SCI 108

Lecture Professor: Richard Lemarchand

Office: SCI 201L

Office Hours by appointment:

Email instructor for hours and appointment

Contact Info: rlemarchand@cinema.usc.edu

Bio: <https://www.richardlemarchand.com/about>

Teaching Assistant: Tim Quach

Contact Info: email will be given out in class

Lab Location: SCI 206

Lab Times and Professors:

Tuesday	2:00-3:50 PM	Tracy Fullerton
Tuesday	4:00-5:50 PM	Brian Upton
Thursday	10:00-11:50AM	Shing Yin Khor
Friday	4:00-5:50 PM	Jared Yeager

Course Description

This course introduces core skills in game design, including ideation of playful systems, prototyping, playtesting, and managing an iterative and playcentric design process to meet specific and meaningful experience goals for players. The overarching themes of the class are:

Preparation – Developing a vocabulary of interactive design concepts, including formal, dramatic, and dynamic elements of game, analysis of game systems, focusing on the player experience.

Process – Setting experience goals, ideation techniques, brainstorming, prototyping methods, playtesting, playcentric design, specification, and presentation skills.

Practice – Developing & exercising design and prototyping skills, articulating ideas, initiating projects, teamwork, follow through, giving and taking critique.

Presentation – Learn to articulate your thinking about design and process. Listening carefully to how others are thinking and talking about their designs.

Partnership – Developing a collaborative mindset, communication and listening skills, sharing authorship, inclusive processes, managing yourself and others.

The course approaches game design as a participatory and collaborative art form, with the design team’s goal to provide a specific and meaningful experience for the players and to respond quickly and creatively to feedback during the design process. During the semester, the team-based exercises and assignments focus primarily on developing design skills and practicing good design process through the analysis of systems and development of prototypes for games using a playcentric design process.

A central purpose of this course is to introduce you to the playcentric design methodology practiced at USC Games, which encourages designers to focus on a central player experience goal that anchors a successful design process. During the semester, you will engage with various types of design problems, discover your

own strengths and areas of interest in design, and develop core design skills upon which to draw in the future.

This class has two components: a lecture and a lab. Every student must register for and attend the main lecture section on Mondays and should also register for and attend one lab section during the week. Lab sections, days and times, are listed above. The lecture topics will provide context and structure for the lab exercises and assignments, so it is important to attend both sessions. The lab sections will be where you are assigned your exercises and projects, do in-class playtesting and critique of your games. There will also be several opportunities to present your work to the main lecture class, and to see the work of your peers from across the lab sections presented.

The lab portion of this class should be thought of as a studio experience, and a large portion of your participation there will focus on in-class discussions, critique, and problem solving for individual projects. As such, it is imperative that you treat the development of your lab projects professionally and bring requested milestones to class on time, ready to playtest or present. Students will be expected to participate actively in all discussions and critique sessions, giving and receiving feedback of the highest quality.

Currently, we are expecting to hold classes in person at the University of Southern California. You should plan on attending all lecture and lab sessions in person, and working on group projects in person, unless you are ill. Students exhibiting any signs of illness should not attend class in person and should contact the professor and lab instructor at the earliest possible notice to plan for the classes and projects you must miss. If possible, accommodations for virtual participation will be made.

Throughout this class, you are encouraged to take risks and to look beyond prior art, in-class examples and common wisdom to explore new and different design ideas. You will be assigned to work in several different teams over the course of the semester, and the quality of your participation within these groups is of great importance – perhaps as important as the final project. Game design is a collaborative discipline and learning to communicate, share workload, learn from and help others excel is a core value in this field and in this program.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Programming is not required for any projects in this class; however, several technical proficiencies may prove beneficial. Many students will likely use image creation or layout software (like Affinity Photo and Affinity Designer) to create artwork for their prototypes. Students may also organize their designs using common office tools such as word processors, spreadsheets, flow-charting software, or free versions of project management tools like Asana or Trello. Miro.com, a collaborative visual brainstorming and group work tool, may also be useful and is available free to students.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

This course has three required texts, all of which are available as digital downloads from the USC Library or from the USC Bookstore. Please do not redistribute these digital copies online – access is for USC student personal use only.

Game Design Workshop, 5th Edition: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games by Tracy Fullerton
https://uosc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USC_INST/273cgt/cdi_askewsholts_vlebooks_9781003858423

The Rules we Break by Eric Zimmerman
https://uosc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USC_INST/273cgt/cdi_askewsholts_vlebooks_9781648962066

Situational Game Design by Brian Upton
https://uosc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USC_INST/hs9vaa/alma991043397372003731

Students will be required to supply their own materials for paper prototyping and developing physical games. As the needs of specific projects may vary, students should plan to have a small budget for these materials. However, commonly used supplies include:

- Index cards
- Colored markers
- Polyhedral dice
- Construction paper

Course Website

A copy of the course materials and this syllabus are available in the course Google folder:
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/14wRzUXQiXvlpOi8W0Pv61lOdmlJxPctI?usp=sharing>

Overview of Assignments

Analysis & Design Presentation Assignments

- System analysis presentation, due in lab sections week 2
- Up the River design solution presentation, due in lab sections week 7
 - Selected Up the River presentations due in lecture week 8
- Mechanics project design solution presentations, due in lab sections week 11
 - Selected Mechanics project design solution presentations in lecture week 12

Design & Prototyping Projects

- Up the River variation v1, due week 5
- Up the River variation v2, due week 6
- Mechanics project v1, due week 9
- Mechanics project v2, due week 10
- Final project v1, due week 12
- Final project v2, due week 13
- Final project v3, due week 14
- Final project v4, due week 15
- Final project presentation video, due at final

Grading Breakdown

Assignments	%
Participation	10
System analysis presentation	5
Up the River variation v1	10
Up the River variation v2	10
Up the River presentation	5
Mechanics project v1	5
Mechanics project v2	5
Mechanics project v3	10
Mechanics presentation	5
Final project v1	5
Final project v2	5
Final project v3	5

Final project v4	10
Final project presentation video due by 8AM PST 12 May 2025	10
Total:	100

Assignment Submission Policy

All prototype and presentation assignments, including the documentation component of each of the game projects, should be submitted to your lab instructors as per their directions. Prototypes that will be playtested in class must be brought to the lab, ready to be played.

Participation

Students are expected to be present and to participate fully in the lectures, labs, and group assignments. The lectures will include some group games, exercises, and responses to concepts. Attendance at lectures is mandatory and concepts and readings from the lectures are expected to be understood and demonstrated as a part of the lab assignments. Participation in lab exercises and group assignments is also mandatory. Students are expected to attend lab, participate meaningfully in group discussions, playtests, and projects. Outside of class, students must work with their teammates to schedule group working time that allows participation by all team members. This may mean working in person or online, depending on schedule constraints. Please be mindful of the schedules of others and make yourself available to work together in real time as much as possible.

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 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 absences: lowers grade one full grade point (for example, from A to B)
- Three absences: lowers grade two full grade points
- Four or more absences: request to withdraw from course (instructor's discretion)

Additionally, we may ask you to withdraw if your total absences become excessive.

However, these guidelines may be altered in respect of absences that are for illness, family emergencies, and (with advance notice) commitments related to a scholarship you are receiving, e.g. for a varsity sport or commitments related to your professional practice, such as to attend a festival where you are showing a game or a conference where you are speaking. You must contact us as soon as possible regarding your absence. Generally, we will expect to hear from you before class; in exigent circumstances we would expect to hear from you within 24 hours. If we do not hear from you in a timely fashion you may forfeit your option to make up what you have missed.

All that said:

1. **If you are sick, stay home.** You need to be healthy to learn, and so do your classmates (and instructor).
2. We do not distinguish between mental health and physical health. If you cannot complete an assignment on time or come to class because of mental health issues, you must contact us promptly, just as with physical health problems. See the Support Systems section below for additional information.

Missing an Assignment Deadline, Incompletes

The only acceptable excuses for missing an assignment deadline or taking an incomplete grade in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must inform the professor and the lab instructor before the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence 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 week-twelve 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.

Unauthorized Social Media Use During Class

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. This policy is meant to prevent distractions from the course experience, but of course, if you are working with your team during lab hours, you may use email and social media tools to collaborate with them. Use good judgment about this policy!

Also, photography, audio, and video recordings of the presentations and of your peers and the professors is not permitted unless it is part of an assignment, such as your design journals. If you need to record the class material as part of an accessibility accommodation, it must be done with permission from the Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS). Please inform the lecture professor and lab instructor of this accommodation before recording any material.

AI Policy

Since creative, analytical, and critical thinking skills are an important part of the learning outcomes of this course, all assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated tools is prohibited for the creative design, analysis, systemic, and written aspects of your assignments.

The only exception to this policy is in the creation of visual assets for your prototypes – if you are not planning to publish or present your prototype beyond the confines of the classroom, you may use AI tools to generate visual assets, especially if you do not have team members with visual design skills. Keep in mind that AI-generated assets may potentially violate existing copyrights, so they may not be used outside of the class assignment. If you plan to print or self-publish your game, you will need to redesign your assets!

A Safer 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.

Because this class involves presentation and discussion of creative projects that will contain a range of materials, some of which may present difficulties for others in the class, students and groups are encouraged to use content or trigger warnings as part of their presentation as appropriate.

If you have a concern about any aspect of the class, you are encouraged to speak with the professor or your lab instructor. If you feel uncomfortable speaking with the instructors, you are also welcome to speak with

the student advisor for the division, who can either discuss the issue with you directly or point you toward other on- and off-campus resources for addressing your concern.

Title IX at USC

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 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).

Course content by class meeting

Week 1 Topics	Overview of the Class: The Role of the Game Designer and an Introduction to Playcentric Design
Readings	Game Design Workshop Chapter 1: The Role of the Game Designer
Lab	IN CLASS: System analysis exercise ASSIGNED: System analysis presentation

Week 2 Topics	No Lecture (Martin Luther King Jr. Day)
Readings	Game Design Workshop Chapter 2: The Structure of Games Rules We Break pages 18-30: A Few Ways to Think About Play
Lab	DUE: System analysis presentations & discussion

Week 3 Topics	The Structure of Games: Formal, Dramatic, and Dynamic Elements
Readings	Game Design Workshop Chapter 3: Working with Formal Elements, Chapter 6: Ideation
Lab	IN CLASS: Affordances for play discussion & design exercise

Week 4 Topics	Focus on Formal Elements of Games: Mechanics and Structure; Setting Experience Goals: Articulating Clear Emotional Goals; Paper Prototyping
Readings	Game Design Workshop Chapter 7: Prototyping
Lab	IN CLASS: Inclusive brainstorming warm-up talk

	<p>Play “Yes, And” game Play Up the River - analysis & new experience goal setting</p> <p>ASSIGNED: Up the River variation assignment</p>
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Week 5 Topics	Focus on Dramatic Elements of Games: Developing Emotional Investment for Players / Playtesting & Iterative Design / The Art of Critique with guest lecturer Martzi Campos
Readings	Game Design Workshop Chapter 4: Working with Dramatic Elements, Chapter 9: Playtesting
Lab	<p>DUE: Up the River variation with new experience goal IN CLASS: Playtest Up the River variations & give feedback</p> <p>ASSIGNED: Up the River iterations: evaluating feedback against experience goals</p>

Week 6 Topics	No Lecture (Presidents’ Day)
Readings	No readings
Lab	<p>DUE: Up the River iterations IN CLASS: Playtest Up the River iterations & give feedback</p> <p>ASSIGNED: Up the River final design reports and presentations (1 from each class will be presented in lecture on week 9)</p>

Week 7 Topics	Focus on Dynamic Elements of Games: Loops, Emergence, Economies, and Balance
Readings	<p>Game Design Workshop Chapter 5: Working with Dynamic Elements, Chapter 10: Functionality, Completeness, and Balance Rules We Break pages 66-78: A Few Ways to Think About Systems</p>
Lab	<p>DUE: Up the River final design reports and presentations IN CLASS: Up the River Solution draft presentations</p> <p>ASSIGNED: Mechanics Project</p>

Week 8 Topics	Formal User Testing Methods; Using Feedback to Reach Experience Goals / Writing Rules: Clarity, Consistency, and the Flow of Knowledge with guest lecturer Sean Bouchard
Readings	Game Design Workshop Chapter 11: Fun and Accessibility
Lab	<p>DUE: Mechanics Project prototypes & formal feedback surveys IN CLASS: Mechanics Project prototype iterations & give feedback, formal surveys</p>

	ASSIGNED: Mechanics Projects iterations: evaluating feedback against experience goals, evaluating formal data
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Week 9 Topics	Selected “Up the River” Design Solution Presentations
Readings	Rules We Break pages 130-142: A Few Ways to Think About Design Situational Game Design Chapter: 1 Introduction, Chapter 2: Situations, Constraints, and Moves, Chapter 3: Playfulness
Lab	DUE: Mechanics Project prototypes & formal feedback surveys IN CLASS: Playtest Mechanics Projects & give feedback, formal surveys ASSIGNED: Mechanics Projects iterations: evaluating feedback against experience goals, evaluating formal data

Spring Recess

Week 10 Topics	Team Structures; Project Management
Readings	Game Design Workshop Chapters 12-13
Lab	DUE: Mechanics Project prototypes & formal feedback surveys IN CLASS: Mechanics Project prototype iterations & give feedback, formal surveys ASSIGNED: Mechanics Projects final design reports and presentations (1 from each lab class will be presented in lecture on week 12)

Week 11 Topics	Communicating Your Designs / Prior Art Research & Setting Innovative Goals
Readings	Game Design Workshop Chapter 14
Lab	DUE: Mechanics Projects final design reports IN CLASS: Mechanics Projects Design Solution draft presentations and Final Project Goal Setting & Team Set-Up / Final Assignment Schedule & Deliverables ASSIGNED: Final Projects

Week 12 Topics	Selected Mechanics Project Design Solution Presentations
Readings	Situational Game Design Chapter: 4 Anticipation, Chapter 5: Goals, Chapter 6: Methods
Lab	DUE: Final Project prototypes & formal feedback surveys IN CLASS: Playtest Final Projects & give feedback, formal surveys

	ASSIGNED: Final Projects iterations: evaluating feedback against experience goals, evaluating formal data
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Week 13 Topics	Focus on Mechanics & Story / Focus on The Arc of Player Experience
Readings	Situational Game Design Chapter: 7 Narrative, Chapter 8: Meaning
Lab	DUE: Final Project iterations IN CLASS: Playtest Final Project prototype iterations & give feedback, formal surveys ASSIGNED: Final Projects iterations: evaluating feedback against experience goals, evaluating formal data

Week 14 Topics	Guest Speakers to be announced!
Readings	Game Design Workshop Chapter 15-16
Lab	DUE: Final Project iterations IN CLASS: Playtest Final Project prototype iterations & give feedback, formal surveys ASSIGNED: Final Projects iterations

Week 15 Topics	Summative Lecture: Playcentric Design in Your Process
Readings	No readings issued this week
Lab	DUE: Final project iterations IN CLASS: Playtest Final Project prototype iterations & give feedback, formal surveys ASSIGNED: Final Design reports, Playtest Survey Data, and Video Presentations

Final: due by 8AM PST 12 May 2025	DUE: Videos of Final Project Presentations, Playtest Survey Data, and final design reports due to lab instructors
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Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct:

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work, compromises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see [the student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems:

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

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

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services

(though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086
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.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298
Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776
OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411
Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101
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
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
Non-emergency assistance or information.

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

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu
Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

<p>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACE IN THE SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</p>
