

**USC School of
Cinematic Arts
Interactive Media
and Games**

CTIN404

Units: 2

Spring2025—Mondays 6:00-7:50pm

Location: LLC-114

Instructor: Heather Desurvire

Office Hours: Arranged upon request

Contact Info: 1 310 463 4603

Player1ubr@gmail.com &

Heather@userbehavioristics.com [use both]

Student Assistant: Marina White

Office Hours: Arranged upon request

marinawh@usc.edu 805- 397-3539

Course Website:

<http://heather3dusc.wixsite.com/uscgameresearch/syllabus-1>

Course Discord:

<https://discord.gg/nUnKtyQZ>

IT Help: Interactive Media and Games Dept for Lab related issues & Creative Computing for classroom issues

Quick Summary

A hands on experience of learning principles of player experience

- Learn how to evaluate a game for barriers to optimal player experience
- Learn principles of optimal player experience and how to apply them to create the best games
- Learn how to plan and create playtesting and user testing, interviews, a report and a presentation
- Learn industry standard methods and diplomacy
- Guest speakers show case studies using methods you are learning

Takeaways

- Arsenal of game research methods you can use
- Knowledge of player experience principles giving you insight to what makes a great game

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Detailed Course Description

The now mature field of game user research and player experience insight is an important and necessary part of game design.

Game User Research draws on the disciplines of cognitive psychology, human-computer interface design, game design, communications, film studies, education, learning and visual design. As games are becoming more sophisticated in their visual and interactive design, features and cultural impact, the study of how we interact and understand them becomes an essential aspect of our media literacy.

This course addresses concepts, principles, and methods of usability and playability assessment for games. The emphasis will be on understanding the human- player related interaction surrounding game interfaces, game play, mechanics, immersion, among other elements, and translating them into design recommendations.

This understanding is derived via several methods including game heuristics and player research using the scientific method from the social sciences. The class will also address the development of games as both a cultural and aesthetic practice.

- **A hands on experience of learning principles of player experience**
 - ✓ Learn how to create and evaluate a game for barriers to optimal player experience
 - ✓ Learn how to plan and create a playtesting test, interview, report and presentations for Industry
 - ✓ Learn industry standard methods and diplomacy
 - ✓ Guest speakers showcase studies using methods you are learning from their studios
- **Takeaways**
 - ✓ Arsenal of game research methods you can use as a game user researcher, game designer or product/program manager
 - ✓ Knowledge of player experience principles giving you insight of what makes a game good or not, and a language for communicating with game team members
 - ✓ Some former students have expanded on their experience in class and are now working as Game User Researchers in industry

The class will be part lecture, part discussion, mostly experiential learning, and team based workshops with direct collaboration with the CTIN 484/489 Intermediate Game

Design course; a large part of the class will be focused on problem solving, identifying optimal/poor player experiences, while exploring the reasoning behind these experiences.

Principles and concepts of optimal player experience, enhancing player experiences as well as an overview of game user research methods will be the major basis of the class. The class will include: identifying and describing player needs in combination with the games' goals; user-centered design; user evaluation of interactive media, and game design with the player in mind.

Students form teams on their own, of two or three students, within the first weeks of class. Those who do not find their own partners will be assigned one by the instructor. You are encouraged to look outside of existing friendships to find teammates whose skills counterbalance your own.

Week 4, students are responsible for teaming with a game design team from the Intermediate Game Design course (CTIN 484/489). Their game concepts will be available online and presented in class for students to choose.

A good grade is possible but not guaranteed, and will only occur with regular, consistent and timely attendance, active participation, as well as thoughtfully and intelligently completing assignments and on time.

Instructor Bio: Heather Desurvire, President/Founder of User Behavioristics Research, Inc. is one of the foremost specialists of Usability and Playability whose published work on usability/playability methodology has been used to set standards for usability and game testing now performed in many game studios such as, Lucasarts, EA, Disney and Blizzard, and formerly works with Google. She currently runs her game user research agency, User Behavioristics and trains several former students of CTIN404 as interns.

As a practitioner, Heather's clients include many of the top game publishers and design studios and interactive media companies, such as Disney, Sega, THQ, Blizzard, Spinmaster, Electronic Arts, Sony Online, BWin, Creative Assembly, Scopely, United Airlines, Paradox Interactive, Rovio, King, the US government, and many more. She is asked to speak at professional conferences, such as GDC, UPA, and ACM-CHI; she has presented workshops for many game design studios and designers to assist them in making better games, such as, LucasArts, UbiSoft, Creative Assembly, and IGT, King, Ludia and many more.

Not only has Ms. Desurvire created principles on player experience you'll use in class, she's created Virtual Reality principles published by the HCI conference and used by VR companies such as Survios. Her other latest publication is presented in the book "Evaluating User Experience in Games: Concepts and Methods", published by Springer. She is founding and board member of GDC/IGDA Special interest group, and of the SIG-Game User Research (GUR). She has co-chaired the GDC/IGDA GUR Summit. She co-created the Game User Research workshop at CHI, and FDG which is now a staple of

the conferences; she was co-chair of the ACM CHI 2014-2015 for the Game Community working with Northeastern's game department head. She has published over 34 publications in the field, and is frequently quoted as referenced in publications.

Learning Objectives

The class covers an overview of user research design, setting up and conducting user tests, and how to provide recommendations for positively affecting the game design. Students will be exposed to the industry standard usability assessment methods, including Heuristic Evaluation, and industry standard, the Think Aloud laboratory method. The class includes guest lecturers currently in the field of game development and playability research.

The team component of the class includes partnering with classmates, and collaborating with the Intermediate Game Design and Development course game design teams (CTIN 484/489). Students in 404 are expected to actively participate in all critique sessions, giving positive and critical feedback to the games presented, as well as students' assessment exercises. The assignments mainly focus on the team project associated with the player research and readings.

The Midterm is based on the readings, and the final is based on a presentation of the two iterations of the player research performed on the game associated with the 484 course, and how their research affected the game design.

For this team component of the course, students will learn to work in group environments where the goal of each member may or may not be the same. Diplomacy and communication techniques are taught to assist in these endeavors.

Recommended Preparation: (not required but recommended) Statistics, Social Science Research Methods

Course Notes

Students will be learning to do the user testing in person, and will use DIY video recording. They will be expected to learn to use and administer the testing from recruiting to technically setting up the online testing, to saving the video to use for analysis and their report/final presentation.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

1. *[HOUT] Handbook of Usability Testing: How to Plan, Design, and Conduct Effective Tests, Second Edition*; Rubin, Jeffrey, Wiley Press, 2008 (Available on Amazon.com, and at the bookstore)

2. Assignments (Handouts and Readings) all on Website
<http://heather3dusc.wixsite.com/uscgameresearch/syllabus-1>

Recommended Reading:

- *The Psychology of Everyday Things*; Norman, Donald, Basic Books,
- *Usability Engineering*; Nielsen, Jakob, Morgan Kaufmann, 1994.
- *What Video Games Have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy*; Gee, James Paul, Macmillan, 2004.
- *Game Usability: Advice from the Experts For Advancing The Player Experience* (2008), Isbister & Schaffer (eds.), Morgan Kaufmann
- "Evaluating User Experience in Games: Concepts and Methods", (Human- Computer Interaction Series) (9781848829626), (2010), Regina Bernhaupt, (ed.), Springer. 2010 and 2nd edition 2012.
- *Quantifying the User Experience: Practical Statistics for User Research*. Jeff Sauro and James R. Lewis.
- <http://www.usability.gov/>
- [Reading list \(from Warner Brothers\)](#)

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Participation & Attendance: Students are expected to participate actively in both the giving and receiving of feedback/information in class. There will be many opportunities to participate and interact in class.

This is a crucial part of the course, that includes experimenting with ideas, concepts, analyses, and experiential learning.

Base your evaluations on principles and concepts of player experience and game design wherever possible and this will result in a better grade. You will be evaluated and graded upon your use of these.

Teams and Individual Assignments: All assignments will be turned in as separate individual reports, even when you are working in teams. Your grade is based on your assignment turned in as an individual. Each member of the team will provide a separate report/presentation for grading.

Handouts: Handouts are available on the course [website](#). There are times the Student Assistant [SA] prints them out for your convenience, however, It is your responsibility to find the Handouts online.

Weekly Assignments and Quizzes: There are from 6 - 8 assignments given during semester. Each of them are of equal weight toward your assignment grade.

First Iteration Usability Study and Report: The grade for your User Research #1 is the average grade you get from your first test plan, screener, and test report

Second Iteration Usability Study and Report: The grade for your User Research #2 is the average grade you get from your second test plan, screener, and test report.

Final Presentation: The Final presentation grade is based on your GoogleSlide presentation of your two user research sessions, including video of both research iterations, and how your research affected the game design.

Lab

- Expectation of Week #3, you are expected to pair up with a partner in class to help each of you with some of the logistics involved with user testing for the semester.
 - Please be responsible for getting their cell, discord and email information.
 - If you are not in attendance at Class #3, a partner will be assigned to you.
- For online testing, the Usability Lab policies are moot for now, however consent forms are imperative.

Collaboration

- It is vital that throughout the course, you contact your game designer partners from 484 and your 404 course usability partners always by phone.
 - This is not to make things more difficult, but to establish relationships with your designers, and usability partners and mimic the team environments you will find out in the world.
 - Collaboration requires time spent with the person, voice is second to being in person. Having that more intimate contact in person will avoid any confusions, and misconceptions. We find it vital to develop good relationships to use the phone, rather than email or text. Please follow this, as it is part of your requirement in class. Of course, use common sense, since using text and email for location and document sending make sense.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Participation	20	20
Weekly Assignments and Quizzes	20	20
1st Iteration User Research	20	20
2nd Iteration User Research	20	20
Final Presentation	20	20
TOTAL	100	100

Assignment Submission Policy

- Upload all assignments to Google docs- folder. The folder links will be in the website-- Be sure to share the assignment in “**editing**” mode with Heather Desurvire and the Student Assistant [See top of Syllabus for our GoogleDoc emails). If this is not done, they may be late, and this will unfortunately not be excused from being late.

Submit all assignments on GoogleDocs

- Share with Instructor: Player1ubr@gmail.com, Heather@userbehavioristics.com and SA email marinawh@usc.edu
- Make sure the document is "editable for all of us"
- All Assignments are due on Saturday evening of that week at 6pm sharp
 - [6pm+1 minute grade goes down (see syllabus for how much)]

- Name the assignments as follows,

CTIN 404 2020 Assignment: “<Week of Assignment> <ASSIGNMENT NAME>
<FIRST NAME> <LAST NAME> “

- Note no underscores
- Share the assignment with Heather and SA on GoogleDocs
- For example: " Week 1 Heuristic Evaluation Fred Smith"
 - If you are turning in a chapter reading and an assignment on the same doc, say so on the naming:
 - for example, “Week 4 Ch 4&5 and Heuristic Evaluation ”

Assignments and Exercises:

- Readings assigned on the day of class, are due the day of class.
- Written Assignments are due on the Saturday at 6pm; that is, the Saturday before next Monday’s class; unless otherwise explicitly stated by the instructor. *There are no excused late assignments.*
- If you have to miss a class, get the assignment from a class buddy.
- Late Work: If you must miss a class, you are still responsible for turning in your assignment on time (See Table 1 below)
- We often discuss completed assignments in class. Be prepared.
- Assignments turned in late will be graded as follows:

Table 1 . Assignment Grading

Time	Consequence
1. On Time	Normal Grade
2. One minute -two days late	Subtract 25 points; ¼ grade
3. Two days+ one minute to one week late	Subtract 50 points, ½ grade
4. One week + one minute to two weeks late	Subtract 1.0, one full grade
5. More than 2 weeks late	No Credit – assignment is given 0

Additional Policies

No Cell Zone

- Cell Phones and other electronic devices must be turned off/vibrated. This is out of respect for everyone else in class.

When instructor is on zoom

No Distractions During Class and CAMERA ON

- It is vital you focus on our class rather than be distracted by chat and other documents.
- We require you to be on cameras. This is to avoid distraction and for students to remain interactive and present with the class itself, rather than focused on something else.
- It is harder to be present online for many and being on camera makes it easier for everyone to be “present”.
- The SA is tasked with ensuring everyone is focused & not distracted. They will call you out if you’re not focused on class. This is not to embarrass you but to ensure everyone is getting the most from class.

Communication

- “Arrangements with me”, what does that mean? This means an agreement with me, either verbally or through email.
 - Leaving me a message or writing an email informing me of your situation does not count as an arrangement. You and I must actually exchange information for the arrangement to be approved.
- If you wish to communicate with me through e-mail or voicemail, please allow 24-48 hours for a response: I will probably get back to you sooner than that, but it is not always possible.

Readings and AI (e.g., ChatGPT)

- It is assumed that all students will complete their assignments ethically and good faith. That is, students **will read the assigned readings and compose a paragraph of their own writing, both without assistance of AI.**
- We recognize that AI will be increasingly used and want to ensure that it is used properly and with integrity.
 - We want you to develop your own critical ideas while completing your coursework, and only use AI as an aid, not a crutch. If you choose to use any AI tools (such as ChatGPT or the like), it is a requirement to include the following in your paragraph:
 - What prompts were used (screenshots are required), and what AI app?
 - What do you think the AI app got right and what is missing?

Saving Work

- Please keep duplicate copies of your work, whether on another electronic device, on the cloud, or paper. Though I may sympathize with stories of spontaneously erasing drives and viruses, I will nonetheless expect you to be able to turn your work on time (see Table 1).

Changes

- There may be changes, additions, or substitutions of assignments/topics as appropriate to our work and pace as a class.

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. Acceptable family emergencies and illness is only according to the Interactive Media and Games Division Handbook.
- Students must inform the professor before the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled.
- Students who choose to not complete assignments will be asked to withdraw from class.
- Students who wish to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor or student assistant before final grades are due.

Attendance Policy:

These guidelines are from the Interactive Media Division and Games handbook regarding absences and grading and apply to all students.

- Punctual attendance at all classes is mandatory.
- Students arriving late or leaving early will be marked absent from class.
- Lateness is defined as 5 minutes past the beginning of class. It is suggested you arrive early in order to avoid being marked absent.

Guidelines for Absences affecting grading

- Two unexcused absences: lowers your whole grade for the class, 1.0 full grade point.
- Three unexcused absences: lowers your whole grade for the class, 1.5 full grade points.
- Four or more unexcused absences: request to withdraw from course (instructor's discretion).

University Mandated Excused absences are:

- Illness (with a doctor's verification)
- Family or personal emergency (with verification)

- No other excuses will be accepted. I mean and repeat: there are NO other excused absences.
- If you are sick with a doctors' note, and you want to still attend class via zoom, that is acceptable, as long as you arrange this with SA & Instructor but it is considered an absence.

Class Dates

Week 1 - Jan 13	Week 5 - Feb 10	Week 9– March 10	Week 12 - April 7
Week 2 - Jan 20 holiday	Week 6 - Feb 17 holiday	Spring Break	Week 13 - April 14
Week 3 - Jan 27 teams	Week 7 - Feb 24	Week 10 – March 24	Week 14 - April 21 Fina
Week 4 – Feb 3 games	Week 8– March 3 UT1	Week 11 - March 31 UT2	Week 15 – April 28 Fina

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 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 of the 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. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> 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.

Title IX

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).

