

# CTIN 290: Digital Media Workshop

Units: 4

Spring 2025

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## Course Description

### Is Life A Story or a Game?

People understand their past and future experiences as stories. In this class, we will study and practice how narrative video games express meaning, make topics and themes playable, and how they uniquely invoke the player's emotions.

Our core interest stems from the fact that artists want to communicate in order to *question* and *persuade*.

The course focuses on two creative principles at a narrative designer's disposal: the language of the moving image and the video game player's role.

Lectures and assignments emphasize cinematic structures relevant to students 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.

We will get better at two types of communication; we will study how narrative media communicates to the viewer and player, and we will challenge each other to express ideas and criticisms clearly and respectfully during discussions. So, what is storytelling to you? Near the end of the semester, with cinema and short story examples in hand, we will ask you to articulate what storytelling approaches - regardless of where they fall on any traditional to experimental spectrum - inform you as a designer. How do you want your interactive experiences to tell stories?

## A Perspective

Stories embody two apparently conflicting impulses – to connect us to something real at the same time inviting us to believe in magic. The novelist Marcel Theroux frames the paradox of stories this way. He says that storytelling wobbles between authenticity and enchantment. On one hand, we want stories to feel like they must be real for someone, and on the other, we want to engage the possibility of what cannot exist.

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 the author and the work makes meaning.

## Learning Objectives

### Visual and Interactive Storytelling

(Pink text indicates learning goals drawn from USC Games Skills Roadmap 2022)

- Describe how visual storytelling approaches builds **subtext and theme** with an emphasis on point-of-view.
- Understand **color theory**, and **lighting** in order to compose communicative visual designs.
- Create **story stakes, pressure**, and **growth** for your characters.
- Compare how **cinematic** and **interactive storytelling** techniques express change and contrast. For example, evaluate how **video editing** creates montage in order to understand relevant approaches in game language.
- Analyze the **arc of experience** in films and games.
- Discuss how **prior art research** inspires your work.

### Digital Media Development

- Construct interactive worlds in the Unity **game engine (literacy)**.
- Translate photography and video camera operation to game **camera principles**.
- Understand the essential components of 3D models, including **materials, textures**, and meshes in order to incorporate them in-game.
- Create rich and meaningful **sound designs**.

### Production Methods

- Explain how **self-direction** couples with shared creative visions.
- Give and take **critique**.
- Use **ideation, brainstorming, and prototyping** approaches.

## Readings

All readings will be provided

## Grading

Student Details Assignment	10%
Assignment Turn In (On Time)	80%
Attendance and Punctuality	10%

## 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.

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## Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### Academic Integrity:

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](http://osas.usc.edu). You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at [osasfrontdesk@usc.edu](mailto: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](mailto: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.

## WEEKLY OVERVIEW

### Course Schedule

<b>Week 1</b> <b>Day 1</b>	<b>Introduction to the Course</b> <b>In Class:</b> <a href="#">Video Games Are Better Without Stories</a> <b>In Class:</b> <a href="#">Student Details Assignment</a>
<b>Week 1</b> <b>Day 2</b>	<b>Elements of Visual Communication</b> <b>Read:</b> Ch. 1 The Basic Visual Components, <a href="#">The Visual Story</a> (Block) <b>Read:</b> Ch. 2 Viewpoints & Composition, <a href="#">The Viewpoints Book</a> (Bogart & Landau) <b>Due:</b> Install Unity 2022.3.x ( the number after the second dot isn't so important) by first installing <a href="#">Unity Hub</a>
<b>Week 2</b> <b>Day 1</b>	<b>Line &amp; Shape</b> <b>Read:</b> Ch. 2 Drawing for Level Designers, An Architectural Approach to Level Design (Totten) <b>Read:</b> Ch. 4 Line & Shape, The Visual Story (Block) <b>In Class:</b> <a href="#">Self Portrait</a> Download <a href="#">"Walking Wonders"</a>
<b>Week 2</b> <b>Day 2</b>	<b>Space</b> <b>Read:</b> Ch. 3 Space, The Visual Story (Block) <b>Read:</b> Ch. 5 Geography, The 99% Invisible City (Mars & Kohlstedt) <b>Due:</b> Walkable Artist Gallery

<p><b>Week 3</b> <b>Day 1</b></p>	<p><b>Tone &amp; Color</b></p> <p><b>Read:</b> Ch. 5 Tone, The Visual Story (Block)</p> <p><b>Read:</b> Ch. 6 Color, The Visual Story (Block)</p> <p><b>Read:</b> <a href="#">The Designer's Guide to Color Theory, Color Wheels, and Color Schemes</a> (Cartwright)</p>
<p><b>Week 3</b> <b>Day 2</b></p>	<p><b>Movement</b></p> <p><b>Read:</b> Ch. 7 Movement, The Visual Story (Block)</p>
<p><b>Week 4</b> <b>Day 1</b></p>	<p><b>Rhythm</b></p> <p><b>Read:</b> Ch. 8 Rhythm, The Visual Story (Block)</p>
<p><b>Week 4</b> <b>Day 2</b></p>	<p><b>Topography</b></p> <p><b>Read:</b> Ch. 5 Introducing the Individual Viewpoints, The Viewpoints Book (Bogart &amp; Landau)</p> <p><b>Read:</b> Ch. 9 Story &amp; Visual Structure, The Visual Story (Block)</p>
<p><b>Week 5</b> <b>Day 1</b></p>	<p><b>Project 1</b></p> <p><b>The Camera, The Shot</b></p> <p><b>Read:</b> <a href="#">Filmish - The Eye</a> (Ross)</p>
<p><b>Week 5</b> <b>Day 2</b></p>	<p><b>Cinematography</b></p>



<p><b>Week 6 Day 1</b></p>	<p>Character Design</p> <p><b>Due:</b> <a href="#">What is Character Design? (Wall)</a></p> <p>In Class: <a href="#">Character Kit Workshop</a></p>
<p><b>Week 6 Day 2</b></p>	<p><b>Plot vs Story</b></p> <p>Read: <a href="#">Game Design As Narrative Architecture</a></p> <p>In Class: Premise</p> <p>Due: Umurangi Generation</p>
<p><b>Week 7 Day 1</b></p>	<p><b>Storyboarding Interactive Sequences</b></p> <p>Read: <a href="#">The Science of Storytelling</a> pg 11-32 and 56-58 and 61-78. These are sections: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4; 1.9; 2.0, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3. and pg 200-205 is section 4.3</p>
<p><b>Week 7 Day 2</b></p>	<p><b>Workshop</b></p> <p><b>Due:</b> Project 1</p>

<p><b>Week 8 Day 1</b></p>	<p><b>Project 2</b></p> <p><b>Worldbuilding</b></p>
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<p><b>Week 8</b> <b>Day 2</b></p>	<p><b>Modeling &amp; Prop Design</b></p> <p><b>Art in Video Games</b></p> <p><b>World Bible</b></p> <p><b>Due:</b> <a href="#">How to 3D Model for Games</a></p>
<p><b>Week 9</b> <b>Day 1</b></p>	<p><b>Technical Art &amp; Camera</b></p> <p><b>Due:</b> Ch. 5 Communicating through Environment Art, An Architectural Approach to Level Design (Totten)</p>
<p><b>Week 9</b> <b>Day 2</b></p>	<p><b>NO CLASS</b></p>
<p><b>Spring Break!</b></p>	
<p><b>Week 10</b> <b>Day 1</b></p>	<p><b>Modernism</b></p> <p>Read: Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill by Jason Farago</p> <p>Read: Michael Bay Finally Made an Art Movie by Jane Anders</p>
<p><b>Week 10</b> <b>Day 2</b></p>	<p><b>The Creative Imagination</b></p> <p>Read: <i>Chat GPT is a Blurry jpeg of the Web</i> by Ted Chiang</p>

<b>Week 11</b> <b>Day 1</b>	<b>The Creator's Mindset</b> Labyrinths
<b>Week 11</b> <b>Day 2</b>	<b>Workshop</b> <b>Due:</b> Project 2
<b>Week 12</b> <b>Day 1</b>	<b>Project 3</b> <b>Puzzles - 1: legibility, 2: potential, 3: performance.</b>
<b>Week 12</b> <b>Day 2</b>	<b>Workshop</b>
<b>Week 13</b> <b>Day 1</b>	<b>Due:</b> Project 3 Milestone 1 - One Puzzle
<b>Week 13</b> <b>Day 2</b>	<b>Workshop</b>
<b>Week 14</b> <b>Day 1</b>	<b>Due:</b> Project 3 Milestone 2 - Two Puzzles

<b>Week 14</b> <b>Day 2</b>	Discuss Final <b>Due:</b> Project 3
<b>Week 15</b> <b>Day 1</b>	<b>Designer Ethics &amp; Reflection</b> <b>Due:</b> Ch. 6, Values: Living by a Love Ethic, all about love (hooks) <b>Due:</b> A Designer's Code of Ethics (Monteiro)
<b>Week 15</b> <b>Day 2</b>	<b>Presentations?</b>