

LMC 4725/6325
GAME DESIGN AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

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Office hours: T/Th 1–2pm and by appt

Classroom: Skiles 246
T/Th 9:30–10:45

**A clickable, PDF version of this syllabus is available at: <http://bogo.st/gamefa18>
It will be updated there over the duration of the course.**

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This is an intensive game design course focused on assessing design opportunities in games and taking advantage of them with new designs. Because this is an advanced undergraduate/graduate cross-listed course, students who enroll will be assumed to have experience in the basics of the history of games and game design, and to have some experience in software development specific to games.

The goal of the course is two-fold. First, to assess the existing and historical game-design space and identify the conditions of large-scale commercial and cultural success for past games. Second, to learn from these conditions and to take advantage of them in our own design experiments.

Games come in different sizes and shapes. The largest games, on the scale of *Uncharted* or *Overwatch* or *Madden NFL* or *League of Legends* or *Clash of Clans*, are not reasonable targets for a semester-long learning context, even if they are reasonable aspirations for students' future careers. For this reason, we will focus on smaller-scale games whose overall ambition we can at least reasonably aspire toward in the short time we have together.

In particular, we will focus on the concept of **variation** as a first-order principle for game design. Even though it is a key idea in design, variation—that is, alterations or adjustments made to existing established games and design patterns—is often seen as undesirable in game design, where novel approaches to game design, visual design, topic, or theme win greater praise. And yet, the benefits of variation should be plain: It offers a connection to existing patterns that players already know, which makes them predisposed toward interest. In addition to a variety of games from the past, we're going to focus intensely on the work of a single, independent designer, Zach Gage, whose entire design process in recent years has centered on variations on existing games. The approach that has earned him consistent success in title after title.

During the course, students will work both individually and in groups on game design prototypes and longer-term development.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Analyze, theorize, and understand the conditions of success for games of the past.
- Given a model game scenario, brainstorm, plan, and execute a design that responds to it.
- Analyze and synthesize written materials about games and culture.
- Motivate design ideas from abstract cultural contexts.
- Execute game prototypes and larger-scale game designs.
- Receive and deliver studio-style critique in a helpful but respectful way.

REQUIREMENTS

The course is split into two parts. For the first part of the course, we will play, read about, and discuss design precedents in games (and other, adjacent cultural domains). Some of these games will require downloading from an app store, and others will require play in the GAL lab (TSRB 113). Students will then produce a prototype in response to those influences for the following week (or so), for a total of six (6) prototypes. Those prototypes will be subject to discussion and critique in class.

For the second part of the course, we will collaborate to evaluate the most promising prototypes from the first part of the course, and then split into teams to revise and expand them into more developed, polished games.

COURSE POLICIES

Attendance

Students are expected to arrive on time for class, and be present for the entirety classes. Students with routine tardiness will be subject to grade penalties at my discretion.

Because this class hinges on both critique and group work, it is extremely important to attend class and communicate with your groupmates. Students are permitted two absences a semester. Absences are yours to do with as you please; I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. After two (2) absences, you may, at my discretion, begin to lose up to 5% off your final grade with each subsequent absence. After six (6) absences, I reserve the right to remove you from your project group and fail you in the course.

All assignments must be turned in on time. Absence is not an excuse for late work. Late assignments will not be accepted.

Assignments

Prototype assignments will be given in-class and by email. This is a small course for advanced undergraduates and graduate students. It is your responsibility to record and synthesize the assignment, asking questions as needed. We should not need a complex course-management system to operate a course of this size, and because the class is cross-listed it poses a challenge to use Canvas/T-Square for sharing. A course Dropbox (or similar) will be set up for the purposes of sharing materials.

Prototypes

Because of the size of our class, it will be difficult to present all the prototypes and discuss them in our course meeting. For this reason, prototypes must be submitted **by 6pm two days prior** to the date of class in which we will discuss the assignment. These dates are marked on the syllabus.

As a first go, we will try using a DISCUSSION on Canvas for sharing materials. Please upload yours to the correct discussion thread. We'll see if this is productive and if not, I'll come up with a new method.

In addition to the prototype itself, submit a short description/instruction/explanation for the benefit of your peers' evaluation. Wherever possible, please submit your prototypes as compiled executables, web pages, or in any case materials that others can view cross-platform. For those who cannot, computers in both our classroom and the TSRB 113 lab are available.

Laptop and Mobile Phones

This is a hands-on, practice-based games course. It emphasizes discussion and critique, which require

attention and person-to-person interaction. At the same time, we need to use laptops and other devices to show and view our work.

Laptops are only permitted in class for the express purpose of showing or viewing course work. When not being used in this fashion, laptops should remain closed and stowed. Current research emphasizes that lecture retention improves dramatically with hand written notes, and I recommend that approach when needed. There is no exam in this course, so you need not worry about retaining every word anyway.

Mobile phones are not permitted in class, period. They should be left on silent and stowed with your personal belongings.

Contacting Me

I will do my very best to respond to students via email as soon as possible. However, the best way to get my time and attention is to visit my office hours. Office hours are *yours*; please use them. I do not discuss grades or class performance over email; please come to office hours for that purpose.

GRADING

A grade will be assigned based on class discussion, class critique, prototypes, and the final game.

The prototypes will be graded pass/fail—that is, completing the weekly(ish) prototype assignments is sufficient for credit. The goal is to produce an experiment, even if it fails.

Class discussion and critique will be graded independently, based on your preparation and participation in class. Strive to be ready and interesting in class, and see the notes further down the syllabus about how to conduct critique appropriately.

The final game will be assessed in two ways. First, weekly progress will be graded based on what the group committed to the previous week, and what they accomplished. The purpose of this grade is to get you to make consistent progress. Second, the final, completed game will be assessed on its merits.

The grading breaks down as follows:

- 25% Course discussion and critique
- 25% Game prototypes (pass/fail)
- 25% Final game weekly development progress
- 25% Final game

DEVELOPMENT PLATFORMS

There are many game development platforms available, including Unity, Unreal, Processing, OpenFrameworks, C/SDL, Phaser, Interlude, Twine, GameMaker, and many more. Students are free to choose between them for the purposes of prototyping, so long as a) it's a computational development environment and b) you bring the appropriate hardware/software setup to class to show the prototypes. For the group project, teams should settle amongst themselves on a platform acceptable to all. I will not adjudicate your development environment, and I will not be moved by excuses laid at the feet of the development environment and what it can or cannot do.

SCHEDULE

The following schedule is provisional and subject to change.

Note: Some games are only available on iOS. If you do not have an iOS device, the games will be installed on one for use in the GAL (TSRB 113), accessible in a manner to be announced

Week 1, August 21/23

<i>August 21</i> Introductions, goals, etc.	<i>August 23</i> Variation in Games Read: Variation in games, https://ubm.io/2L9TZwh Read: Bogost on sport and variation, https://bit.ly/2Pnq0En Read: Zach Gage on variation, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-05-17-casual-free-to-play-without-the-competition Read excerpts from <i>Rules of Play</i> , https://bit.ly/2N0CDnn Play: In-class exercises
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Week 2, August 28/30

<i>August 28</i> Alexey Pajitnov's <i>Tetris</i> , PopCap's <i>Bejeweled</i> <i>Tetris</i> Read: Weird history of <i>Tetris</i> , https://bit.ly/1UD3Cnd Play (via emulator): http://bit.ly/2i6PY1T Watch: https://youtu.be/K8omJvkHag4 <i>Bejeweled</i> Watch: https://bit.ly/2OOXU3Y Play: https://bit.ly/2MYgOow	<i>August 30</i> Zach Gage's <i>Spelltower</i> Read: https://bit.ly/2Mlk4Oi , Read: https://www.inverse.com/article/27712-zach-gage-spelltower-mobile-games-interview Play: http://www.spelltower.com (A slightly different, free online version is also available)
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Week 3, September 4/6

<i>September 4</i> Studio: Prototype 1 Prepare and submit your prototype by Sept 2, 6pm for today's studio meeting	<i>September 6</i> NO CLASS MEETING (Work on another prototype)
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Week 4, September 11/13

<i>September 11</i> Zach Gage's <i>Really Bad Chess</i> Read: https://n.pr/2PoiRUf Read: https://bit.ly/2wear9g Play: http://www.reallybadchess.com	<i>September 13</i> Studio: Prototype 2 Prepare and submit your prototype by Sept 11, 6pm for today's studio meeting
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Week 5, September 18/20

<i>September 18</i> Zach Gage's <i>Sage Solitaire</i> and <i>Flip-Flop Solitaire</i> Play: http://www.sagesolitaire.com Play: http://www.flipflopsolitaire.com	<i>September 20</i> Studio: Prototype 3 Prepare and submit your prototype by Sept 18, 6pm for today's studio meeting
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Week 6, September 25/27

<i>September 25</i> Zach Gage's <i>TypeShift</i> Read: TBA Play: http://www.typeshift.com	<i>September 27</i> Studio: Prototype 4 Prepare and submit your prototype by Sept 25, 6pm for today's studio meeting
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Week 7, October 2/4

<i>October 2</i> Zach Gage's <i>Pocket-Run Pool</i> Read: https://www.geek.com/games/pocket-run-pool-and-other-great-zach-gage-mobile-games-1740966/ Play: http://www.pocketrunpool.com	<i>October 4</i> Studio: Prototype 4 Prepare and submit your prototype by Oct2, 6pm for today's studio meeting
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Week 8, October 9/11

<i>October 9</i> Fall Break NO CLASS MEETING	<i>October 11</i> Studio: Prototype 4 Prepare and submit your prototype by Oct 9, 6pm for today's studio meeting
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Week 9, October 16/18

<i>October 16</i> Final game pitches, discussions, and groups	<i>October 18</i> Final game pitches, discussions, and groups
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Weeks 10–16, October 23–December 3

Final Game Studio (schedule to be announced)	Final Game Studio (schedule to be announced)
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CONTENT, DEBATE, DIVERSITY, AND RESPECT

In this class, we will present and discuss a diversity of perspectives. Although you may not always agree with others' perspectives, you are required to be respectful of others' values and beliefs. Repeated inappropriate or abusive comments and/or behavior will be cause for disciplinary action. If you feel that your perspectives are being ignored or slighted, or you in anyway feel uncomfortable in the classroom, please contact me immediately and we will find appropriate remedy.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students should self-report to the Office of Disability Services, <http://disabilityservices.gatech.edu>. Accommodations will be made as required.

GEORGIA TECH HONOR CODE

You are expected to conduct yourself according to the Georgia Tech Code of honor, which can be found here: <http://www.honor.gatech.edu>, and the Georgia Tech Student Code of Conduct, which can be found here: <http://catalog.gatech.edu/rules/19/>.