**COMM-702 MFA Thesis – Games & Interactive Media**

**Fall 2025 | Thursdays 11:20-2:20pm EST | Location: AU Game Center Classroom (DMTI 117)**

**Professor Andrew Phelps**

**American University School of Communication | Division of Film & Media Arts**

**Director, American University Game Initiative & American University Game Center**

**Contact Information:**

**W**: professorandrewphelps.net | andyworld.io

**X**: @andymphelps

**E**: [phelps@american.edu](mailto:phelps@american.edu)

**P**: +1 (202) 885-6933 (Note: I check this office phone infrequently, email is preferred)

**Office Hours**: Thursday mornings. Or, to schedule an appointment with me, just ask. As capstone students, you should be checking in repeatedly and often already…

**Pronoun**: He/Him/His

**1. Course Description and Logistics:**

**Course Description:** The capstone course is an opportunity for students to produce a project of considerable sophistication and should be an expression of the student’s own personal voice and vision. The final thesis

presentation must demonstrate mastery of the craft of media/gamemaking and should rise to the level of

professional standards in its execution so that it can help the student transition to a professional career.

MFA students complete thesis projects that can be interactive media, films, games, and applications, accompanied by design and process documentation, a professional artists statement for the work, and academic research into how it fits into the field and relates to other relevant work. **Credits: 6 (3 Fall, 3 Spring)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Wk | Date | Topic | Notes | Assignments Due |
| 4 | Sept 26 | **Storyboards, Pre-Prototypes, and Pre-Vis** |  | Everything you have from the first month of design and development. Notes, sketches, pre-prototypes, pre-vis, etc. |
| 7 | Oct 17 | **Initial Game Pitch & Design Materials** |  | Game or media work pitch documents, game design documents, and preliminary statement |
| 10 | Oct 27 | **Thesis Outline, Intro, and Background** | Division | MFA thesis outline, intro, and background due. (presentation to and discussion with faculty) |
| 14 | Nov | **Thanksgiving Holiday** |  | No classes W-F, university closed. |
| 16 | Dec 8 | **Final Prototype Due (with showcase presentation TBD)** |  | PLAYABLE PROTOTYPE DUE (presentation to and discussion with faculty) |
|  | SEM 2 (Spring) | Spring semester you will refine, polish, and prepare your work for publication, as well as finalize the accompanying artists’ statement and MFA documentation |  | Final game, final documentation, all materials and notes, appropriately formatted and submitted for MFA. |

**Course Pre-Requisites:**

GAME-620 Making Meaningful Games

GAME-696 Writing for Interactivity

3rd year standing, Games & Interactive Media

**Required Texts:**

There are no required texts for this course. Students are encouraged to re-use texts from GAME-620 as appropriate in the creation of their design documentation.

**Curricular Positioning:**

This course provides the framework and resources for students to complete their MFA thesis in their third year of study. For MFA students, while it is encouraged that you graduate at the end of your 3rd year, some students will choose to write their thesis after the conclusion of their coursework, during a period of matriculation that lasts up to two semesters (a 4th year). During these two additional semesters, tuition is not charged, but students pay maintenance of matriculation fees. Students are strongly encouraged to finish in their 3rd year.

**Required playing:**

Students may be required to play games readily available on the web, or made available on consoles or computers in the AU Game Center, as case studies for in class discussion and design reference. Students are encouraged to play the required games in groups. Much like a film course requires viewing, this course requires “playing.” Even if you have played the required games, you must play them again for the class. In-class discussion and reading should help re- contextualize your game playing experience. The individual games will be selected based in part on what students are proposing to build, as references to their own designs.

In addition, students will be expected both to play their own games (i.e. those they are developing) as well as the games being developed by other members of the class.

**2. Student Expectations & Evaluation**

**Expectations:**

It is my expectation that each student come prepared for the course, excited to learn, and interested in the topic. Students are expected to read the assigned readings, to discuss them as a class and also with each other, to reference the materials provided as needed in order to complete their own games and associated deliverables, and to create interesting, meaningful games as a part of their work in the course. This course is specifically intended to provide an opportunity to explore creating games in multiple contexts, exploring several methodologies, to engage students in finding what pathways and processes will work for them on an individual basis. There is no single ‘right answer’ to game making, and as such it is my expectation that students approach the subject, and the course, with the maturity, self-honesty, and diligence required to create effective work in interactive games and media.

**Assignments:**

MFA thesis is split into two semesers. In the first semester, there are 4 major assignments: 1) a pitch and design documentation for the proposed work, with appropriate justifications, development timelines, etc. as discussed in class and as previously described in GAME-620, 2) a draft of the Introduction and Background sections of the artists statement and accompanying MFA thesis documentation, and 3) a playable prototype of the game itself. In the second semester, students will polish and prepare their game for publication, as well as finalize the and submit the associated statement and documentation. **In addition, students should consider each meeting of the class as a progress report and be prepared to present on such week by week.**

**Grading:**

Grades will be assigned based on the three assignments as per the prior chart on due dates. Details for each of the assignments will be discussed as a class, as well as individually with each student depending on the nature and specific needs of their proposed work. Points will be distributed for these assignment using the scale below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Points |
| Game design document, pitch, and materials | 25 |
| Draft of Introduction, background sections and thesis outline | 25 |
| Playable Prototype | 40 |
| Participation & Progress Reporting | 10 |
| TOTAL | 100 |

In reference to the points chart above, the following grade scheme is employed to arrive at a letter grade for the course:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Points | Letter Grade |
| 93-100 | A |
| 90-92 | A- |
| 88-89 | B+ |
| 83-87 | B |
| 80-82 | B- |
| 78-79 | C+ |
| 73-77 | C |
| 70-72 | C- |
| 65-69 | D |
| 0-64 | F |

It's important to understand that if you complete all the requirements for an assignment, that is only sufficient for a grade of "B" (i.e. "satisfactory work"). To receive an A for an assignment, you must go beyond the basic requirements, and show some creativity, initiative, and excellence--the grade of A is intended for work that is superior, rather than average.

**It is also important to note that the point chart and grade scale are intended as a guide**. I reserve the right as faculty to assign final grades for the course as I feel best represent my review of your academic work, and may make adjustments as necessary in order to achieve that goal. While I generally adhere to the underlying ‘weight’ of the assignments as expressed, I have been known to make modifications as needed on a case-by-case basis.

**Assignments submitted after the due date/time, without prior approval from me, will not be graded**, and will therefore receive zero points. If you know that a situation will prevent you from turning something in, contact me in advance of the deadline to make alternate arrangements. Furthermore, your game would not then be available for the class to play and critique, which will be catastrophic to continued downstream success. Assignments will be discussed in class, and / or posted online on a regular basis, **and are due at the start of the class period as noted on the schedule**.

If you wish to dispute your final course grade, you must do so before the end of the semester following this one; otherwise documentation of your work may not be available. The policy on challenging grades is available for your review online: <https://www.american.edu/policies/upload/academic-grade-grievances-policy.pdf>

**"Incomplete" Grades**: You may request an incomplete, or "I" grade, only in cases where exceptional conditions beyond your control, such as accidents, severe illness, family problems, etc., have kept you from completing the course. You must alert me to these circumstances as soon as possible. If your request for an incomplete is granted, you must complete the work for the course within the time limits set. Incomplete grades are not given to students who have simply fallen behind in their work. Section 3.7 of the academic regulations for graduate students has additional information on incomplete grades: <https://www.american.edu/provost/grad/upload/graduate-academic-regulations.pdf>

**Participation:**

Students in the course are expected to participate in all aspects of the course, including discussion, progress reports, and individual activities as assigned relative to the nature of their project. Failure to engage in these activities, to engage with the class, and to actively contribute to the group both as a developer and a scholar will result in not only the failure of the course, but in diminishing the experience of the rest of the participants.

**Critique Culture:**

As a part of course participation, students in the course are expected to participate in engaged critique of each others work, as well as of examples brought to the classroom by either faculty, colleagues, peers, or guests, as well as those assigned as a part of the reading. In such cases, careful and respectful criticism is both encouraged and required. The ‘rule’ of critique is that criticism of the *work* is not (and should never be) criticism of the *person*. Lazy critiques of ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ will not be tolerated, and it is expected that students in the class will instead engage in meaningful, constructive dialogue about how to produce the strongest work possible both for themselves and their peers.

**3. Course Policies and Statements**

**Extra Credit Policy:**

There is no extra credit assigned, nor will any be offered. Students are, however, encouraged to watch Extra Credits on their own time if they wish:

[https://www.youtube.com/user/ExtraCreditz/feed](https://www.youtube.com/user/ExtraCreditz/feed )

**Attendance Policy:**

Students are expected to attend each class and arrive on time. Any student arriving late may not be able to adequately participate in class activities, and repeated and substantial tardiness will result in failure of the course. 

**Late Assignment Policy:**

Late assignments are not accepted unless they result from an excused absence. Excused absences are limited to documented medical emergencies and events for which the instructor has given approval. All students are expected to communicate planned or unplanned absence to the instructor’s email as soon as possible.

**Correspondence Policy:**

All electronic correspondence relative to this course directed to supervising faculty should occur through my official email address ([phelps@american.edu](mailto:phelps@american.edu)), and/or in the course shell provided by the university (i.e. Canvas), despite any other official channels for the course as supplied by the instructor (Zoom, Discord, etc.). Other communication mechanisms are to be considered informal, and are not acceptable for official correspondence. When in doubt as to whether a communication can be considered ‘official’, copying the information to my university email is preferred.

**Cheating and Plagiarism Policy:**

This course is bound by the American University Standards on Academic Conduct, as described online: <https://www.american.edu/academics/integrity/code.cfm>

**Note (from the above policy): “**Academic integrity stands at the heart of intellectual life. The academic community is bound by a fundamental trust that professors and students alike undertake and present their work honestly. As a community of the mind, we respect the work of others, paying our intellectual debts as we craft our own work.”

**Students with Disabilities:**

**If you wish to receive accommodations for a disability, please notify me with a letter from the Academic Support and Access Center. As accommodations are not retroactive, timely notification at the beginning of the semester, if possible, is strongly recommended. To register with a disability or for questions about disability** accommodations, contact the Academic Support and Access Center at 202-885-3360 or [asac@american.edu](mailto:asac@american.edu), or drop by the ASAC in MGC 243.

**Academic Support:**

**All students may take advantage of the Academic Support and Access Center (ASAC) for individual academic skills counseling, workshops, Tutoring, peer tutor referrals, and Supplemental Instruction. The ASAC is located in Mary Graydon Center 243.  Additional academic support resources available at AU include the Bender Library, the Writing Center (located in the Library), the Math Lab (located in Don Meyers Technology and Innovation Building), and the Center for Language Exploration, Acquisition, & Research (CLEAR) in Anderson Hall. A more complete list of campus-wide resources is available in the ASAC.**

**Changes to the Syllabus:**

**This syllabus is subject to change at any time. You will be notified of changes, or additions, and specific requirements for assignments either online or in class. It is unlikely that this piece of paper will update itself.**

Last Revised: Aug 21, 2025