**GAME-675 Writing for Interactivity**

**Fall 2025 | Mondays 5:30-8:30pm EST | Location: AU Game Center Classroom (DMTI 117)**

**Professor Andrew Phelps**

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**Office Hours**: Thursday mornings, but if you need another time or to meet with me, just ask.

**Pronoun**: He/Him/His

**1. Course Description and Logistics:**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Wk | Date | Topic | Notes | Assignments & Readings Due |
| 1 | Aug 25 | **Welcome and Course Overview** |  | -none- |
| - | Sept 1 | **A new medium for storytelling** | University Closed | (read ahead) |
| 2 | Sept 8 | **Aesthetics and Practice (Immersion, Agency and Transformation)** |  | HH Part 1 & 2 (Chap 1-6)  UIDN Part 1 |
| 3 | Sept 15 | **Towards a Theory of IDN Design** |  | UIDN Part 2 & 3 |
| 4 | Sept 22 | **Proceduralism, Randomness, Self-Guided-ness and Authorship** |  | HH Part 3 (Chap 7-8) |
| 5 | Sept 29 | **Emergent and Experimental Forms Pt 1** | Andy at AOIR 2019 | HH Part 4 (Chap 9-10) [1] |
| 6 | Oct 6 | **Audience and Research Methods for IDN** |  | UIDN Part 4 |
| 7 | Oct 13 | **Class Playtest, Critique, and Analysis** |  | GAME 1 PROTOTYPE DUE & CRITIQUE |
| 8 | Oct 20 | **M is for Multiplayer, from MUD to MOO to Mega and Massive** |  | “Writing for MMOs” Gamasutra |
| 9 | Oct 27 | **Pitching a Narrative Game** |  | Assorted Pitch Documents |
| 10 | Nov 3 | **Platforms and General Hackery** |  | Assorted documentation and notes [2] |
| 11 | Nov 10 | **Emergent and Experimental Forms Pt 2** |  | UIDN Part 5 [3] |
| 12 | Nov 17 | **Work week (Game 2 Prep)** |  | Development for Game 2 |
| 13 | Nov 24 | **Work Week (Game 2 Prep)** | University closed W-F | Development for Game 2 |
| 14 | Dec 1 | **Capstone Preparation and Wrap-Up** |  | Development for Game 2 |
| 15 | Dec 8 | **Finals**: Grades Due 12/16 |  | GAME 2 PROTOTYPE DUE, PRESENTATION AT GAME CENTEER SHOWCASE DAY |

Description: This course examines storytelling strategies for digital games and other interactive media forms. This is a hands-on course that focuses on story-driven, single- and multi-player experiences in the context of storytelling across media. It introduces students to the design and development of narrative games and media experiences including conceptualization, foundational narrative design strategies, and putting these designs in practice through the authorship and delivery of project-based work. Particular attention is paid to both pre-existing and emergent development practices and technologies, as well as how writing for interactivity relates to more traditional dramatic writing and current research in the field. Credits 3. (F)

**Course-Schedule:**

**Notes:**

[1] Posthyperfiction, Emergent Narrative, Interactive Television, Educational Applications

[2] Twine, Inform7, HTML, Spark, VR/AR, location systems, lexical parsers, etc.

[3] Art, Poetry, Re-making & Revision, Hybrids, etc.

**Required Texts:**

Koenitz, H. (2023). Understanding interactive digital narrative: Immersive expressions for a complex time. Routledge. (UIDN in reading assignment notes)

Murray, J. H. (1997). *Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace*. Free Press. (NOTE: please get the 2016 updated edition!) (HH in reading assignment notes)

**Additional Readings:**

Stranger Things: https://screencraft.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/StrangerThings\_Bible.pdf

Bioshock: <https://bit.ly/3aLZZKd>

King’s Quest IV: <http://sci.sierrahelp.com/Files/Documents/Kings_Quest_VI_Design_Document_(excerpts).pdf>

Seamster, & Danuser. (2019, September 16). *Gdc Austin: Writing for MMOs: You’re doing it wrong*. <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/game-platforms/gdc-austin-writing-for-mmos-you-re-doing-it-wrong>

ZORK talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXdmo2j_CiQ&fbclid=IwAR08KuVm8s-LK9f_AxbnIXRJSZZhonaSqSBUfE2aFaVrl3P3TjXGpF-kBj4>

ZORK online: <https://classicreload.com/zork-i.html?fbclid=IwAR1gjuzkosUaWMVcxLr96GMyKwddRSVR0SWgBKo_1VdZaCfTLosfI9_bj34>

How-To Guide for Tabletop Simulator: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvHj3rMUPInU0Dwi_sG8KdqvFIvyh2Nid&fbclid=IwAR2TAfoHuDY2ec3icbvEVqL_LXdwWOpllHd-LaEB_9rQT9Mo8bxjQcHQ9fA>

**Recommended Texts:**

Koenitz, H., Ferri, G., Haahr, M., Sezen, D., & Sezen, T. (Eds.). (2017). *Interactive Digital Narrative: History, theory and practice.* Routeledge.

Reed, Aaron. *Creating Interactive Fiction with Inform 7*. Boston, MA: Course Technology, Cengage Learning, 2011.

Sheldon, Lee. *Character development and storytelling for games*. Cengage Learning, 2014.

Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages : An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. MIT Press, 2003.

Hergenrader, T. (2019). *Collaborative worldbuilding for writers and gamers*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Heussner, Tobias, Toiya Kristen Finley, Jennifer Brandes Hepler, and Ann Lemay. *The Game Narrative Toolbox*. CRC Press, 2015.

**Other Readings and Resources:**

Numerous other readings and materials will be assigned on an ad-hoc basis based on class discussion, trends, and the individual games and projects proposed by the class (which is why they are not pre-populated on this syllabus). These will be provided via class email and/or the class Discord channel as links to PDF or Word documents, or links to online articles. Please ensure that you have systems or devices capable of viewing this material. It is your responsibility to access, download, and incorporate the lessons therein into your work and practice.

**Curricular Positioning:**

This course is an elective experience for MA and FMA game students, as well as film students and those in the MA in Literature, Culture and Technology pursuing the game track, and occasionally Computer Science as well. It is a required course for students in the MFA in Games & Interactive Media.

**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 Lab, 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 with a critical eye. 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 create, 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:**

There are two major assignments for the course (labelled GAME 1 and GAME 2 in the schedule): both are small to medium sized games or digital interactive narrative experiences that can either be created individually or in small groups. Each of them should effectively illustrate some of the overarching theories and design patterns of interactive narrative as discussed throughout the course and the associated readings. In addition, these media pieces should be in keeping with the goals and objectives of the AU Game Center where the course is offered. As such, they are required to serve some other purpose in addition to entertainment, be it health, education, art, etc., and students are encouraged to think broadly both about potential interventions using interactive narrative techniques, as well as the way games-as-systems and stories-as-structures lend themselves towards particular types of interactions and learning.

In addition, students will be responsible for creating the documentation, media elements, posters, images, websites, and other errata that are required in order to release and support a game project, and these materials are in no way secondary to the game itself. Furthermore, each project will be accompanied by a short 3-5 page paper that describes the authorial intent behind the project, how this relates to the theories and practices discussed in class, and provided a post-mortem style overview of the successes and failures of the work produced.

**Grading:**

Grades will be assigned based on the two games developed, submitted, and reviewed, as well as for participation in reading discussions, critiques, online and offline chats and discussions, etc. Each game itself will be evaluated both on the game itself, and how effectively it conveys its meaning and engages the target audience, as well as the documentation, associated materials, and presentation of the game during critique.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | GAME 1 | GAME 2 |
| Game or media design, presentation, and successful implementation | 15 | 25 |
| Effective use of additional goals and themes beyond entertainment | 10 | 10 |
| Additional materials, documentation, and associated paper | 10 | 10 |
| TOTAL for GAME ASSIGNMENTS: | 35 | 45 |
| TOTAL for COMBINED GAME ASSIGNMENTS: | 80 | |
| Participation in Class Discussion & Critique | 20 | |
| TOTAL GRADE | 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 of the readings, discussions during the course lectures, peer-assessment of games and media, and formal and informal critique (see below). 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