

GAME-610 Games Research Methods

Spring 2021 | Monday 2:30-5:20pm EST | Location: AU Game Lab Discord

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Pronoun: She/Her

1. Course Description and Logistics: (3 credits)

Description: This course facilitates a thorough understanding of research techniques, best practices, and evaluation for purpose-driven game design. Through critical reading of late-breaking research, discussion, and analysis, students learn to accurately assess the efficacy of a game design, construct design play studies, and assess the value of specific research claims. Students also design their own study to be evaluated by their peers.

Note: This course takes a very hands-on approach. Students will be required to spend significant time outside of class to complete projects.

Course-Schedule:

Wk	Date	Topic	In Class	Homework Assigned
1	Jan 18	No Class, MLK Day		
2	Jan 25	Introduction, goal setting, collaborative syllabus	Syllabus review, course expectations	Play a new game and take notes on the experience of being a naive user.
3	Feb 1	Research 101	Introduction to research, scientific method, and game design as a form of research	You're Wrong About: Stanford Prison Experiment
4	Feb 8	Ethics - Human Subjects Research	History of human subjects research; ethical use of human subjects	Ethics of Game Design: youtube.com/watch?v=sZ5EVC8C3R4 CITI Certification (optional) Identify an example of questionable ethics in game design / games industry for discussion next week
5	Feb15	Ethics - Game Design	Content warnings, dark patterns, testing sensitive content	Identify a game you want to playtest OR research topic of interest to be discussed in class next week. (Focus of your project going forward) Chapter 9: Game Design Workshop (exercise 9.1 only, see below) Playtest your own game from Game Dev 1 and record your experience [Ex. 9.1 from Chapter 9 of Game Design Workshop]

6	Feb22	Designing for Research / Playtesting	Setting up a research paper, format, proposal; Creating a playtesting protocol; share your game/research topic	ASSIGNED: PB&J protocol User Interviews: https://www.nngroup.com/articles/user-interviews/
7	Mar 1	Applied Research Techniques: Interviews	Think-alouds and interview techniques	Conduct a think-aloud playtest and a 15 minute post-playtest interview. Video: Survey Design in the Wild https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E41ATQgucmI DUE: PB&J protocol
8	Mar 8	WELLNESS WEEK - NO CLASS		Transcribe post-playtest interview
9	Mar 15	Applied Research Techniques: Surveys	Survey creation, best practices, and tools	DUE: Playtest transcripts
10	Mar 22	Data Analysis	Making sense of quant / qual data; thematic analysis; survey responses	Conduct thematic analysis of playtest transcript
11	Mar 29	Report Writing	Skills and knowledge for effective academic and industry writing / conveying info	Design your own playtest for final / Design your own research study for final
12	Apr 5	Neuropsych for UX	Psych tricks and quirks to help improve UX	DUE: Thematic analysis report
13	Apr 12	Accessibility	Colorblindness, physical limitations, and other accessibility & diversity factors to consider during testing	
14	Apr 19	Guest Lecturer - Research in Games	Dr Rachel Kowert	
15	Apr 26	Working Class Period	Class time set aside for answering questions, working with students, troubleshooting	
16	May 3	Final		DUE: Research Proposal / Playtest Report

Required Texts:

This course does not use a single textbook. Instead a digital course packet will be provided which contains appropriate weekly reading. This is a reading, discussion and presentation course. Substantial reading is expected. Resources will be provided in class and when appropriate and through the class Discord as needed.

Recommended Texts:

Game User Research - Drachen, Mirza-Babaei, & Nacke

Game Design Workshop - Fullerton

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.

Required playing:

Students may be required to play games readily available on the web 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.

In as much as possible, students will be provided access to games free of charge. However, students may be asked to purchase a game as part of required playing. If required, professor will ensure that the cost is minimal (\$<10 or less).

2. Student Expectations & Evaluation

Expectations:

Students are expected to join the GAME 610 discord (<https://discord.gg/5u87UYm>). The discord is the central location for class discussion, assignments, and information. The discord is set up to provide all information, readings, and resources students need for the week. Lectures will be held streamed on discord and students are encouraged to attend in real-time. However, if a student is unable to attend the stream live, they are expected to view the recorded video which will be uploaded the following day by the professor. All assignments, posts, discussions etc must be posted by Monday of the following week to receive credit.

Students are expected to come prepared for class and excited to learn. Students are expected to read the assigned readings, to discuss them as a class and also with each other, and to reference the materials provided as needed in order to complete their own games and associated deliverables. This course is specifically intended to provide an opportunity to explore the history and contemporary understanding of games in multiple contexts. The intersection of games, history, and society is complex and there is no single ‘right answer’ for analyzing games; it is essential that students approach the topics, and the course overall, with the maturity, curiosity, and self-awareness

Assignments and Grading:

Grades will be assigned based on the four projects submitted, as well as for participation in reading discussions, critiques, online and offline chats and discussions, etc.

Project	Points Possible
Naive playtester reflections	5
Questionable ethics reflection	5

Self-playtest reflections	10
Playtest protocol / research proposal draft	35
Playtest transcript	10
Thematic analysis report	45
Final Report	70
Participation	20
TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS	200

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

Point Score Range	Final Letter Grade
185+	A
180 - 185	A-
175 - 179	B+
165 - 174	B
160 - 164	B-
155 - 159	C+
145 - 154	C
140 - 144	C-
135 - 139	D+
120 - 134	D
119 or lower	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 scholar will result in not only the failure of the course, but in diminishing the experience of the rest of the participants.

3. Course Policies and Statements

Extra Credit Policy:

There is no extra credit assigned.

Attendance Policy:

It is preferred that students be present for the live presentation of the course material starting at 2:30pm and ending approximately at 4:00PM. If this is not possible, however, students are expected to view the recording of the lecture and complete relevant assignments before the following week's class meeting.

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 (kdunlap@american.edu) or via the class Discord. 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, or drop by the ASAC in MGC 243.**

Content Warnings:

Whenever prudent, I will provide pertinent content warnings prior to discussing content or assigned homework. A list of common content warnings can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2Qg5nM4>

Students are encouraged to contact me privately as early as possible if there is a content warning that should be added. If there is a specific topic that is particularly sensitive and that a student would benefit from having it added to the above list or otherwise addressed, please contact me privately as early as possible.

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.

Special Notes for 2020 COVID-19

Please note that this course was developed and is being offered during the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic. This means, in essence, that we all need to be patient with one another, and that the core reflection of that patience is communication. If you are ill or dealing with family issues or other situations related to the pandemic, I am here to help, and I would ask for the same patience and flexibility in return. While we have all read it perhaps too often, we are, in fact, all in this together. All I ask is that as issues arise you communicate them to me as best you are able, and we will work through it together. I would also point out my hope that this course will be a joyful and fun learning experience, and perhaps provide an outlet to focus on things besides the pandemic, at least in part.

Also note that the AU Game Lab is working hard to make our systems, software, and resources available to you during these difficult times, and information on the exact procedures for equipment checkout, and for making appointments to work in the lab in a socially distanced, safe environment will be provided in a separate communication from Meredith Fender, Senior Administrative Assistant for the AU Game Lab. Finally, note that there are several resources and information sets available at the AU COVID-19 portal, including a copy of all campus communications and the AU Forward plan at: <https://www.american.edu/coronavirus/>

Last Revised: Jan 21, 2021