**GAME-620 Making Meaningful Games**

**Fall 2025 | Mondays 2:30-5:30pm 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 9-11am, but if you need to meet with me at another time and/or schedule a specific time, just ask.

**Pronoun**: He/Him/His

**1. Course Description and Logistics:**

**Course Description:** The focus of this course is the construction and evaluation of effective argument through play. Students apply foundations of game design and related skills in the examination and construction of multiple games, with a critical eye on underlying design theory and production practices. Students identify audience, medium, distribution, and production methods as they design and develop two games of rhetoric. Specific emphasis will be placed on both learning the production process for games and elevating work from early designs to advanced prototypes and beyond, as well as exploring and comparing strategies and techniques for creating meaningful experiences and tools for research that resonate with players. **Credits: 3**

**Course Pre-Requisites:**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Wk | Date | Topic | Notes | Assignments & Readings Due |
| 1 | Aug 25 | **Welcome and Course Overview** |  | -none- |
| - | Sept 1 | **NO CLASS – Labor Day – University Closed** | University closed | (read ahead) |
| 2 | Sept 8 | **Ideation, Audience, and Pre-Production** |  | MDG Chapters 1-3, GPH Chapter 9 |
| 3 | Sept 15 | **Pitching, Scoping, and Iterating** |  | MDG Chapters 4-5 |
| 4 | Sept 22 | **The Production Pipeline** |  | MDG Chapter 6, GPH 1-2 |
| 5 | Sept 29 | **Agile, Scrum, and other models** | Andy at AOIR 2019 | MDG Chapter 7, GPH 3 |
| 6 | Oct 6 | Class discussion, informal crit, dev |  | Work on finalizing game 1 |
| 7 | Oct 13 | **In-class play and critique of GAME 1** |  | GAME 1 PROTOTYPE DUE & CRITIQUE |
| 8 | Oct 20 | **Review, Reflect, Post-Mortem & Process** |  | GPH Part 2&3 (Chapters 4-8) |
| 9 | Oct 27 | **Class discussion, brainstorming** |  | Class Game Jam and Idea Festival |
| 10 | Nov 3 | **The Production Pipeline at Scale** |  | GPH Part 5 |
| 11 | Nov 10 | **Testing, Testing and More Testing** | Division | GPH Part 6 |
| 12 | Nov 17 | **Class discussion, informal crit, dev** | University closed W-F | Finish GPH, development for GAME 2 |
| 13 | Nov 24 | **Media, Materials, & Presence** |  | 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 |

GAME-605 Games, History & Society

GAME-615 Game Development

**Course-Schedule:**

**Required Texts:**

Rusch, Doris C. *Making Deep Games: Designing Games with Meaning and Purpose*. CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business, 2017. (MDG on Readings Chart)

Chandler, Heather Maxwell. *The Game Production Handbook*. Third Edition, Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2014. (GPH on Readings Chart)

**Recommended Texts:**

The following texts are **not required**, but are recommended for students pursuing success in the field, and have helped inform success on the projects that supervising faculty have delivered in this course in previous iterations. The first two (Shell, Fullerton) concentrate their efforts on early prototyping and design strategies, and are considered foundational to the field. Similarly, the next three (Tekinbas and Zimmerman, Freeman, Isbister) are focused on generalized rules, models, and abstractions that help inform the design process, and also on the incorporation of emotion and desire relative to games and systems. The last set (Dunlop, Bethke) are resources on various aspects of production and process, and are helpful as students aspire to scale their projects and designs beyond the early prototype phase.

Set 1:

Schell, Jesse. *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*. Second edition, CRC Press, 2015.

Fullerton, Tracy. *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*. 3rd edition, CRC Press/Taylor & Francis, 2014.

Set 2:

Tekinbaş, Katie Salen, and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press, 2003.

Freeman, David. *Creating Emotion in Games: The Craft and Art of Emotioneering*. New Riders, 2004.

Isbister, Katherine. *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*. MIT Press, 2016.

Set 3:

Dunlop, Renee, editor. *Production Pipeline Fundamentals for Film and Game*. Focal Press,Taylor Francis Group, 2014.

**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 on Canvas 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:**

In addition to the goals and objectives of the course as listed above, this course also serves as a course to prepared students for the capstone experience in the game program, which involves the ideation, prototyping, creation, presentation, publication and documentation of a student game that sits within the context of the entire graduate program. As such, the work in this course both in exploring audiences, resonance, meaning, and culture as well as the detailed approach to process and production are critical to downstream success in this experience. This course is critical to success in the capstone endeavor, and students are encouraged to engage with supervising faculty, as well as other faculty and staff in connection to the AU Game Center with regard to their prototypes, ideas, and objectives. Wider and sustained feedback means better designs, and ultimately better products.

**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:**

There are two major assignments for the course (labelled GAME 1 and GAME 2 in the schedule): both are small to medium sized games that can either be created individually or in small groups. These are intended to be deep, meaningful games (using the terminology from the readings) and to rest in line with the goals and objectives of the overall program in game design at American University. 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 games, as well as the way games as systems and games 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.

**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 design, presentation, and successful implementation | 15 | 25 |
| Associated documentation, materials, and supporting media | 10 | 10 |
| Effective use of additional goals and themes beyond entertainment | 10 | 10 |
| TOTAL for GAME ASSIGNMENTS: | 35 | 45 |
| TOTAL for COMBINED GAME ASSIGNMENTS: | 80 | |
| Participation in Class Discussion or Readings & Game Critiques | 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 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 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