

Experimental Games: History and Design

What might games be if the computer had never been invented? What would games look like in an alternate reality where fun was suspicious, or where the majority of game designers were queer? What if games were designed for dogs, or by octopuses? In this course we will try to explode our assumptions about what games are, and what they could be, by looking at oddball experiments with the medium, and by designing new interventions. We will be taking a hybrid approach to the subject: one half of the course will be historical and example driven. Experiments that other artists and designers have performed already will give us some signposts to expand our preconceived ideas about games. We will look at works by artists associated with Fluxus and the Situationists, ideas about games as social forms in the social theory of the mid-twentieth century, and the ways that computers have both opened up new vistas and impoverished our imagination. The other side of the course is orientated towards practicing our skills as designers. There will be workshops each week where we test out ideas based on the texts and games we have worked with, and you will be tasked with rapidly inventing and prototyping a dozen different experimental games of your own.

Required Works

Texts	<i>Course Pack of Readings</i> <i>Anna Anthropy, Rise of the Videogame Zinesters</i> <i>Fiasco</i> Rulebook
Games	Tale of Tales, <i>Sunset</i>

Course Goals

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Recognize and frame cultural assumptions about what games should be, and expand those definitions to create innovative designs.
- Know the history of how games became a designed medium, and recognize how a tension with technical constraints shapes their practice.
- Rapidly ideate game ideas, workshop them, and prototype them, with the understanding that it takes many attempts to produce something compelling.
- Describe their own aesthetic, ethical, and political goals as designers, and link those goals to concrete design methods.

Assignments

Participation & Collaboration (15%)

Your participation in the class is absolutely essential, because this is a class about hands on doing. Equally important is your participation in group assignments both in class, during workshops, and outside class time. Participation is about building on our ongoing conversation, and it is as important to listen to other people's contributions as to make your own.

Weekly Designs (50%)

At the end of each week's workshop, you will be given a prompt to write up a design or make a prototype based on what we accomplished in the workshop. These designs are due on the Monday night following the workshop, please post your write-ups and photos to the course blog so that we can discuss them on Wednesday.

Playtest Writeups (10%)

Group work will be important throughout this class. Early on I will divide you into groups of four, and in these groups you will be responsible for planning three play-sessions over the course of the semester. I will provide a number of board games and one-off roleplaying games to play, and after playing them in your groups, you will each write a reflection on experimental elements of the game.

Manifesto (20%)

Your final assignment will be a manifesto for the future of games you would like to see. This should put forward your design philosophy and methods for achieving these ends.

Unit 1: Playful Experiments

Week 1: New Games Movement

Mon: *The New Games Book* (Selections), *More New Games* (selections)

Yehuda Berlinger, "History of the New Games Foundation"

Wed: Bernard DeKoven, *The Well-Played Game*

Workshop: **Practicing Play**

In this workshop we will be using the methods that Bernard DeKoven discusses to try to separate play from games, and to develop a classroom play ethic. You will be taking notes on your own responses to the activities, and on how others seem to be responding. At the end of the workshop, we will use these notes to suggest changes to our play community, and to create rules for play that we will abide by, discuss, and challenge over the coming semester.

Week 2: Fluxus & Happenings I

Mon: *Fluxus Performance Workbook*

Disrupted chess sets by Yoko Ono and Takako Saito

Wed: Dick Higgins, "Art Games,"

George Brecht, "Chance-Imagery"

Fluxgames by George Brecht, Benjamin Patterson, and assorted others.

Workshop: **Game Breaking**

In this workshop you will be taking one of several classic board games that I provide (chess, checkers, backgammon, various card games, etc.) and re-imagining them. I will provide you with some crafting materials to help in this process. In groups, you will find ways to disrupt these games by making one of their basic elements unusable—their rules, goals, boundaries, timing, uncertainty, etc. However, we ideally want to keep the game playable in some larger sense that we will determine together.

Week 3: Fluxus & Happenings II

- Mon: Allan Kaprow, “The Education of an Un-Artist”
Dick Higgins, “Intermedia”
Mieko Shiomi, *Events and Games*
- Wed: Simone Forti, *Handbook in Motion*
Carolee Schneeman, “Banana Hands”

Workshop: **Score Writing**

In this workshop, you will bring a score for an event that you have written, as well as any materials needed to perform it. As a group we will perform and discuss these scores, paying attention to what unexpectedly differs between the live version and the written version. In groups, you will then be tasked with revising these scores and building them into a larger happening that establishes some relation between the parts.

Week 4: Situationist Games

- Mon: Debord, “A Situationist Definition of Play”
Constant, “New Babylon”
Images from *Constant’s New Babylon*
- Wed: Debord “Theory of the Dérive”
Debord and Becker-Ho, *The Game of War* (Selection)

Workshop: **Dérive**

In this workshop we will experiment with the Situationist derive, where we walk through a city and follow its cues. Please bring comfortable shoes, weather appropriate clothing, and water. We will be using this workshop to think about the nature of rules and constraints, their occurrence in our physical and social worlds, and how artificial rules of games differ from those that seem natural. In groups, you will design a city exploration game that embeds directions in the real world.

Unit 2: Social Experiments

Week 5: Psychological and Economic Behavior

- Mon: Erving Goffman, “Fun in Games”
Eric Berne “Games People Play” (Selections)

Wed: Davis, *Game Theory: A Nontechnical Introduction* (Selections)
Carse, “There are at least two kinds of games”

Workshop: **Pranks**

In this workshop we’re going to plan some pranks. In groups, you will decide upon a genre of social situation that you’d like to interrupt. You might use some of Goffman or Berne’s examples (ordering at a restaurant, a meeting, a party) or choose your own. You will identify the ordinary rules that govern that situation, and come up with a countervailing set that starts from the same place, but diverges into a prank by exposing those original rules.

Week 6: War and Simulation Games

Mon: Podcast: Schlapak, “The Serious Role of Gaming at RAND”
Paul Starr, “Seductions of Sim”
HG Wells, *Little Wars*

Wed: Crocco, “Simulating Utopia”
APBA Baseball

Workshop: **Critical Simulation**

In preparation for this workshop, you will be reading “Or Does it Explode?” from *A People’s History of the United States*, which describes the interlocking systems of oppression during the Civil Rights era, and how people resisted them. In groups, you will be designing a board game to simulate the workings of one complex system of oppression and resistance from that chapter. You will not design this game to be played, but rather to accurately reflect the dynamics involved. If we have enough time, you will partner with another group and find ways that your two systems interact.

Week 7: Role-Playing Games, LARPing, and Alternate Reality

Mon: Edwards, “GNS and Other Matters of Role-Playing Theory”
GURPS Lite

Wed: Mason, “A Survey of the First 25 years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Game Theory”
Indie RPG sourcebooks:
Fiasco, Dream Askew, Legendary Guys, Ghost/Echo, Hot Guys Making Out

Workshop: **GM-Free Roleplaying**

In this workshop you’re going to rapidly prototype a roleplaying game where no person is the game master. You can interpret this directive in a couple of different ways: maybe everyone has some GM like roles, maybe there are other game elements that take over that role, or maybe there are other mechanisms for creating consensus among the players. You should think about how setting, mechanics, and genre can help you accomplish this

goal. You will be handing these prototypes to other groups for playtesting next week.

Week 8: Role-Playing Games, LARPing, ARGs

- Mon: Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*
Montola et al. *Pervasive Games* (case studies)
- Wed: Boal, continued
LARP case studies from Knudepunkt
- Workshop: **LARPing**
In this workshop we're going to practice LARPing, as well as observing and thinking about the relationship between boundaries, consent, identity, and roles. Participation as a player is optional, but those who don't perform will have other roles in the game and observation process.

Unit 3: Computational Experiments

Week 9: Early Video Games as Experimental Media

- Mon: Wilson, "Odyssey renewed: Towards a new aesthetics of video gaming"
Battlezone, Breakout, Missile Command, Yar's Revenge, Crystal Castle
- Wed: David Parisi, "A Counterrevolution in the Hands"
Look at "Gotland Game's Most Wacky Custom Controllers"
Zaxxon, Burgertime, Donkey Kong, Qbert
- Workshop: **Bizarre Interfaces**
In this workshop I will be providing examples of game interfaces for video game consoles, hand held devices, and computer peripherals. We will also look at some examples from arcades. Based on these examples, in groups you will design a unique game interface and prototype it with materials on hand. Each of your group members will then pitch a game idea for use with this interface.

Week 10: Interactive Fiction

- Mon: Emily Short, *Galatea & "Multilinear IF"*
Inform 7 Instruction Manual (Selections)
- Wed: ELO Volume 1 & 2, play **four** of the following works:
Separation, Toucher, The Mandrake Vehichles, Entre Ville, 88
Constellations for Wittgenstein, Public Secrets, Semantic Distrubances,
Sooth, Chroma, Flight Path, Slippingglimpse, Trope
- Workshop: **Twine Workshop**
Games made with Twine are text-heavy and have relatively little choice, and they are sometimes dismissed by gamers and game critics as non-games. In this workshop you will learn to use the Twine software to compose a

work that meditates on some aspect of games, play, or the cultures surrounding them. We will largely be learning the basic building blocks of the software, and some slightly more advanced tricks to change how it behaves.

Week 11: Hacking & Modding

- Mon: Boluk & Lemieux, “Introduction. Metagaming: Video Games and Practices of Play”
Triforce, Memento Mortem Mortis, It Is Pitch Black, 99 Exercises in Style, and Tide Hunter
- Wed: Nina Belojevic, “Circuit Bending Videogame Consoles as a form of Applied Media Studies”
Vagla, “The Art of Rom Hacking”
Mario Adventure

Workshop: **Rom Hacking Tutorial**
In this workshop we will use the basic tools of rom hacking to take apart some classic video games and repurpose them in inventive ways. In groups you will each be given a game to play and analyze, and then collectively plan an intervention that you would like to make. You will then use the Rom Hacking tools provided to find a way to execute your vision. You may wish to take a look at existing rom hacks at romhacking.net.

Week 12: Art Games

- Mon: Flanagan, “Critical Play and Responsible Design”
Average Shoveler, Façade, Passage, Thirty Flights of Loving
- Wed: Pearce, “Games as Art: The Aesthetics of Play”
Sunset

Workshop: **Outside Collaboration**
In this workshop you will be using materials created by other people to design a game. Before the workshop begins you must approach one or more people who are not in the class, and ask them to generate assets for you. You will not be allowed to make anything yourself—including rules--so make sure to ask for enough different kinds of things. A lot of the fun and experimentation will come from working with materials that are not too scripted though, so don't try to constrain your outside collaborators. Moreover, once in the workshop, you will have to trade away half of what you have, so don't get too attached!

Week 13: Deconstructing Genre and Form

- Mon: Wilson & Sicart, “Now it's Personal: On Abusive Game Design”
QWOP, Cactus Arcade
- Wed: Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*
Redder, Frog Fractions

Workshop: **Re-Designing Game Design**

In this workshop you will be designing a meta-game, one that helps design games, but that might also create never before seen combinations. We will look at examples like GameGame, GameSeeds, ANGELINA, and Game Generator. You will then come up with a system for creating new games, iterations within a genre, or some part of a game sub-system.

Week 14: Manifestos for the Future of Games

Mon: Yang, "Take Ecstasy with Me: A Manifesto for Gay VR"
Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century"
Harvey & Samyn, "Realtime Art Manifesto"
VNS Matrix, "A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century"

Wed: **Review**

