

GAME1111 – Games & Society (Lab), Fall 2011

Instructor: Jason McIntosh (j.mcintosh@neu.edu)

Time and Location:

- Section 1: Tuesdays, 3:25 - 5:05, Ryder 427
- Section 2: Wednesdays, 3:25 - 5:05, Ryder 427
- Section 3: Fridays, 3:25 - 5:05, Ryder 161

Class Website: www.jmac.org/game1111

Class Twitter hashtag: #game1111

Office hours: By appointment

Overview and Objectives

This class is the laboratory accompaniment to Brian Sullivan's **GAME1110**, Games & Society. As that class covers the history of games and how they intersect with culture, this lab will examine the games themselves, exploring them through play and discussing them as a group. We'll get a little bit of game-design experience in, as well.

We will study a broad sampling of commercial, independent, and traditional games, both tabletop and digital, mostly from the last half-century. I have selected them for not for fame or commercial success, but because I consider them worthy of our attention and discussion. The list of very different examples will help us look at games in just as many different ways – and to observe the various traits they may hold in common, despite apparently vast differences in design or medium.

Students completing this course will find themselves exposed to a diverse array of games in various media. Students completing this course *with high grades* will also have fully explored the games' spaces and possibilities through our in-class play, actively participated in classroom discussions about them, and learned a little about thinking like a game designer as well.

Schedule

In each class, we will play a game or a group of related games. Then we'll discuss their design, the experience of playing them, and their cultural context. As the semester continues, we'll increasingly discuss how they compare to games we've already studied.

This schedule is *subject to change*, given time and resource constraints. The mood this schedule sets is the one we'll keep to, in any event. I'll broadcast any schedule changes via email and Blackboard.

Week	Theme	Activity
1	Introduction	(You are here.)
2	Pressing your luck	<i>Cosmic Wimpout</i> (W. W. Swilling), <i>Can't Stop</i> (Sid Sackson)
3	Building on tradition	Poker (Traditional), <i>Lamarckian Poker</i> (James Ernest)
4	Abstract challenges	<i>Tetris</i> (Alexey Pajitnov), <i>Blokus</i> (Bernard Tavitian)
5	Adventures in Text	<i>Zork</i> (Blank & Liebling), <i>Lost Pig</i> (Admiral Jota)
6	Reacting to failure	<i>Donkey Kong</i> (Shigeru Miyamoto), <i>Limbo</i> (Arnt Jensen <i>et al</i>)

7	Art games, contemplative and manic	<i>Passage</i> (Jason Roher), <i>Don't Look Back</i> (Terry Cavanagh), <i>Galatea</i> (Emily Short)
8	Co-op strategy	<i>Pandemic</i> (Matt Leacock)
9	Co-op action	<i>Left 4 Dead</i> (Mike Booth <i>et al</i>)
10	A eurogame that invites fiddling	<i>Dominion</i> (Donald X. Vaccarino)
11		Design exercise, part 1: Create and test new <i>Dominion</i> cards
12		Design exercise, part 2: Playtest and discuss others' <i>Dominion</i> cards
13	Controlled chaos	<i>Fluxx</i> (Andrew Looney), <i>We Didn't Playtest This At All</i> (Chris Cieslik)

Grading

Your grade in this class will be calculated thusly:

- 50% In-class quizzes
- 25% Attendance and participation
- 25% *Dominion* design exercise

At the end of the semester, your final GAME1111 grade will become 10 percent of your GAME1110 grade.

Homework

Generally, your homework after each meeting will involve familiarizing yourself with the games we'll discuss in the following week's meeting. Your arriving at class already knowing about the games will help us spend less time setting up, and more time playing and discussing them.

Some homework will involve playing certain games outside of class. Tabletop games assigned as homework will be playable with common materials (e.g. Poker decks), or have digital editions that are free to download or play online. Feel free to play these games with the help of friends or family, so long as you personally experience the game enough to be able to discuss it (and answer quiz questions about it) at our next class meeting.

Homework assignments will always be posted on the class website.

Quizzes

Each class will open with a short quiz, confirming that students have actually performed the assigned reading and play. Students who read the games' rules and actively observed and engaged with the gameplay should have no problem with the quizzes.

Students who arrive late for class won't get a chance to re-take any quiz they missed.

Participation

To get a good grade in participation, attentively play the games at hand during each class's gameplay session, and then actively participate during the ensuing class discussion about those games.

Students goofing around online and suchlike during class will have their non-participation duly noted.

Gameplay

The games we'll play will often demand groups of around four people. Before playing these games, we'll break the class into several play-groups, chosen randomly.

In-class Behavior

(a.k.a. *This class isn't Xbox Live*)

While we play games in this class, our context is an academic one, and I expect students to act accordingly. Have fun, but leave any penchant for trash-talking at the classroom door, please.

Furthermore: racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise hateful language sabotages our efforts to maintain a safe and engaging environment for learning. I'll ask students who engage in such language during gameplay to leave, and mark them as absent for the class. Yes, this will affect their final grade. So, don't do that.

To put it more positively: practicing good sportsmanship in this class will help your grade. Many games we play involve competition, and will contain winning and losing moments for everyone. Acting gracefully in either case will both improve your grade in this class, and make you a better game player in general.

The Design exercise

In lieu of exams, this lab features a design exercise where students will design new cards for use with the tabletop game *Dominion*. (We'll dedicate a lab meeting to playing and discussing *Dominion* prior to this exercise, so that everyone knows what's involved.) Students will then playtest some of their classmates' cards, and provide feedback.

Students should be prepared to explain the design process that went into their cards, and how they would respond to the feedback they received. Each student's grade for this project will consider both this explanation as well as the quality of the feedback they provide their classmates.

Yes, that means that your design can end up a complete flop, but if you can show that you understand why it failed, *and* you provide excellent feedback to your classmates, you'll still get full credit for that assignment.

I'll provide more detailed information about this exercise once we approach it in the schedule.

Accessibility

Participation in this class involves manual activities such as throwing dice, holding cards, or using a videogame controller. If you have a condition or disability that requires additional equipment (e.g. card holders) or other assistance to help you play games in class, *and* you have registered with NU's Disability Resource Center (<http://www.northeastern.edu/drc/>), please notify me after class or through email. I'll follow up through the DRC and do what I can to help accommodate you.

F.A.Q.

"I thought this class was going to be about gaming? I'm an awesome gamer: I play *CoD:BIOps* all day, my Gamerscore looks like Steve Jobs' bank account, and I forgot how many epic mounts I own in *WoW*. What's all this weird stuff doing in the schedule?"

Like GAME1110, this class is not about the dedicated hobby we call "gaming"; it's about games. If you've joined this class thinking that you could turn your sick skills at the latest blockbuster FPS into an easy A, these may not be the classes for you.

On the other hand, if you do consider yourself a gamer and choose to stick around anyway, you just might learn a thing or two you never knew about the games you love.