

Course Vision

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This is a class where we will be ideating and producing original, generally termed *video game* content. By the end of these 14 weeks, you'll not only have the knowledge and the skills need to do this, but you will also have a much deeper understanding and appreciation of the immersive mediums of the past, present and future: the book, theater, film, television, video games and virtual reality.

For that reason, this isn't just a course on technical tools, software or programming, but rather a course that challenges you towards a purposeful understanding and creation of media that situates users in new worlds.

Before we dive into the technical concepts we'll be covering, I'd like to outline the small vision I have for this course as well as describe some benchmarks for successful projects. This is going to be one of the few non-technical posts, but it covers what I believe to be the most timeless aspects of our work, so I hope it proves useful to you.

No one will argue with me when I say that if you want to create compelling interactive media and experiences, it's critically important to roll up your sleeves and start to build something—write a lot, sketch a lot, prototype and tear-down, and at the end of it all, you'll have learned so much and most likely will have something of value to yourself, and others too. You want to be building always, and testing often.

You will be learning skills throughout the course, but not always from me directly (I'm pretty sure most of my prior students learned more skills from YouTube!). You must be open to spending the few minutes it takes to investigate various methods to help turn your vision into something tangible—don't wait for me to cover a topic if you find yourself faced with a problem.

These days, this more often than not means not only exploring the internet for inspiration and help, but also talking to people and observing your environment. We live in *the* era of the video game as a driving force not only in entertainment, but society at large. Meanwhile, virtual reality technology today is moving us further towards a total media experience, so in a sense, an awareness of the physical world and the affordances it provides can really help you become a better creator.

The Importance of Project Management

Secondly, none of us have all of the skills to make our ideal projects a reality, we need a team. Once we have a team, how do we organize ourselves for the best possible outcome? Well, that depends on the answers to three seemingly simple questions: (1) what are we going to do? (2) what has to happen in order to do those things and (3) how quickly can we test it?

Before we can answer these questions, we need to pick a variety of time-scales. How zoomed in are we, our activities-per-day if you will. By the way, this matters more than the order in which we do things. Order matters when you're brushing your teeth or driving to work, goals with known activities associated with them (open the car, turn on the car, grab the wheel...arrive at work), but when you're at the very beginning of a new, nebulous, creative project, assuming an order of operations immediately limits the set of opportunities your team has to be creative. Plus, what have you really learned? You want to constantly be testing assumptions and leaving the path open to experimentation. In this way, we'll be keeping task lists very high-level until we have the information we need to commit to a particular theme, interaction, color scheme, sound etc...

So what do I mean by time-scale matters? Well, take an example. You'll be paired up with 2 others in the course, and your task is to create an immersive video game experience for screens or VR that elicits a particular emotion in the player (that's the project). That seems like a reasonable challenge, but few of you have done that before—you have some prior experience that might be relevant, one of you has some experience with the Unity game engine, where you made a small game for a mobile phone, another has done some animation or 3D modeling, while another team member loves to draw and is especially talented and gifted artistically. You talk and decide that you'd like to create an experience where the player feels an impending sense of doom, you all like that idea. Great.



Now, back to our two questions. What are you going to do? What has to happen in order to do it? If you think in terms of the next few hours, the next few days? The entirety of the 14 weeks? As you zoom out, the answers to these questions become relatively well-defined in vague terms, and also easier to agree on, so you do this first, and the team is happy. You want to use virtual reality technology makes players feel a sense of dread. What has to happen in order to do this? Well, you may decide upon using sound to put them on edge, and light to inhibit the players ability to sense their surroundings, or you might have them stalked by an unseen horror, or cast them into a strange dark world, etc... That is all the 'what' and 'how' when we're all zoomed out, the project is completed, and that's it. Success to us is nearly everyone ends our dreadful VR experience a little bit worse for wear.

Now, instead of moving backwards through time, zoom in to each of these options and ask yourselves what prototypes you need to build **today and tomorrow** in order to validate your fully zoomed-out project. Well, sound is interesting so you need to prototype something with sound. What does that prototype look like? Well, it needs to have some sounds. What kind of sound? (probably not happy), what sounds are dreadful on their own? Pick a few. Since it's virtual reality, a simple google search for '[VR Sound](#)' brings up some awesome resources, looks like Unreal Engine 4.20 has great spatial audio features.



Zoomed in we also have the same two questions but very different answers. What are we going to do? Make a few prototypes to test out different ways to use sound to give people a sense of impending doom. What has to happen in order to do those things? We need to download a bunch of different sounds, create an Unreal Engine project, create a few test levels with different soundscapes, some timelines where the sounds move closer to the player, and finally schedule a playtest with a few unsuspecting friends and gather feedback. At the end of this, we are in a much better position to answer the same questions on a more zoomed-out timeline. For example, we know that when you have a normal everyday sound at some distance from the player, and suddenly play a strange whisper in their ear, they jump in terror, but when you take that same everyday sound and add a low filter to it over time, the player is much more likely to end the experience feeling that sense of dread that you aimed for.

This informs project further—you decide you're going to make an experience where the player is buried alive, and the sound is the dirt piling on top of their coffin. Yes, morbid I know, but you get the point. You don't start with the 'we're going to make an experience where the player is buried alive' but rather you get there through prototyping for validation and to enhance, not limit, your creative opportunity set.

Summary

So to summarize, this course will not only teach you the basics of creating immersive experiences, but will also help you more broadly learn the value of repeatedly prototyping and testing big and small ideas in order to learn more efficiently and ultimately create a better experience by figuring out what works and what doesn't.