

Introduction to Tabletop Roleplaying Games: Theory, Narrative, and Design

Term:	Summer 2024
Times:	Monday 1-5
Location:	TBD
Instructor:	Sarah “Sam” Saltiel (she/they)
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Office Hours:	calendly.com/sarah_saltiel/30min

Contents

Overview	P. 1
Structure/Assignments	P. 2
Materials Needed	P. 4
Schedule	P. 5
Accessibility and Resources	P. 7

Overview

Description

Welcome! How might we understand gaming as an art form? What are the affordances, ethics, and considerations of interactive storytelling? In this introductory game design workshop and seminar students will learn about, analyze, and build their own tabletop roleplaying games. We will study the theories and narratives behind games as cultural devices, tools of social change, and as collaborative storytelling devices. Alongside our readings, students will complete short game design exercises, ultimately culminating in designing their own complete draft of a tabletop roleplaying game for a final project. No prerequisites or prior gaming experience required.

Course Learning Objectives

You will:

1. Analyze the various strategies employed in game design—how they work together to create player experience
2. Experiment with these strategies through short game design exercises of your own, one of which you will revise for the final project.
3. Learn about the context, history, and theory of gaming.
4. Question the role of power and identity in structuring or limiting storytelling and gaming.
5. Learn how to create and critique work within collaborative community-focused spaces.
6. Create a sustainable game design practice that takes play and exploration as core touchstones.

Structure

The course is divided into five sections:

- **“Reading”:** You will read/play assigned material at home each week. For games, I will be assigning you gaming groups that will rotate each week. You will post two craft questions for the reading on Canvas each week, which will be used to fuel discussion in-class.
- **Creative Work:** Each week you will receive a short game design prompt. You will be asked to post this on Canvas and to bring it into class to playtest.
- **Reflection Journal:** In class every week, you will be asked to spend ten minutes writing a reflection on the feedback that you received.
- **Class:** The class will meet once per week for a four hour in-person session. Class time will be split into craft talks, playtests, and homework discussion
- **Office Hours:** Students will be taking one-on-one meetings with me to receive feedback on their work.

Assignment Guidelines

- You will be turning in work every week. Please post your piece on Canvas by noon the Saturday before classtime.
- You will be asked to post two questions for the assigned reading on Canvas the Saturday before class at noon. You will also be asked to come to class with questions for your partners’ game design exercise.
- In responding to the work of your peers, be kind and generous, acknowledging that this is a space of learning and growth for everyone.

Office Hours

I do ask that you meet with me at least once at some point during the semester. You can sign up on my calendly (listed above, on the first page). You are welcome to sign up for office hours more than once throughout the semester, whether you want to check in and get feedback, ask about the gaming world at large, or just chat, my door is open.

Classroom Guidelines

We may encounter some difficult subjects through assignments or classroom discussions. In these moments, please be sensitive towards yourself and others and if you need to take a moment or excuse yourself from a discussion, please take care of yourself and let me know how I can best support you. I encourage you all to stay open and compassionate towards each others’ emotions and perspectives, such that we may work through the classroom space with mutual understanding, responsibility, and care.

Attendance

It is important to show respect for your peers and their work through your attendance and participation. If you have to be absent, please let me know as early as you can. If there are extenuating circumstances surrounding your ability to attend class, please come talk to me so

that we might come to a solution. Make up work will be assigned in the case of absence and excess absence

Late Assignments

***Reading Questions:** Questions not submitted prior to 10AM Sunday will be noted and will reflect negatively on your evaluation.

Weekly Design Exercises: Exercises not finished in time for class will be noted and will reflect negatively on your evaluation.

*-I am very willing to grant unpenalized extensions or work with you to rearrange the schedule should unforeseen circumstances arise. Life happens! That being said, I have a responsibility towards the whole class to keep things on schedule. The late policy is in place to allow you all the time that you need to read and respond to each other's work. If you need an extension, please reach out to me as soon as you are able.

Class Time

Each week classtime will be split into roughly four sections:

45 min: discussing the games and reading from last week

45 min: playtesting each others' gaming exercises in small groups

45 min: Craft talk, wherein we talk through different strategies for approaching a specific craft topic

1 hr, 45 min: gameplay, wherein we will play through games touching on the aforementioned craft topic.

These will be the games you write about in that week's "questions for the reading"

Materials Needed

The readings are still tentative, however, I will be posting PDFs of them all on Canvas so you will not need to purchase them beforehand. At the moment, these are the texts and games I'm planning to assign.

Nonfiction

- “Cathartic Warfare” by Jamil Jan Kochai
- *Reality is Broken* by Jane McGonigal
- *Worlding Through Play* by Patrick Jagoda, Melissa Gilliam, Peter McDonald, and Christopher Russell
- “My Words to Victor Frankenstein” by Susan Stryker
- “In the Shadow of the Wolf” by Vanessa Villarreal

Fiction

- *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by Gabrielle Zevin

TTRPGs

- *Void 1680AM* by Bannerless Games
- *Follow Me Down* by Joie Martin
- *Bluebeard's Bride* by Sarah Doom, Marissa Kelly, and Whitney “Strix” Beltran
- *Mork Borg* by Pelle Nilsson and Johan Nohr
- *Monsterhearts* by Avery Alder
- *MUD: A Golem Memoir* by Hannah Shaffer and Evan Rowland
- *The Quiet Year* by Avery Alder
- *Ten Candles* by Stephen Dewey
- *Honey Heist* by Grant Howitt

Other Types of Games

- *World Without Oil* by Ken Eklund
- *Secret Hitler* by Tommy Maranges, Mike Boxleiter
- *Train* by Brenda Romero

Schedule

Gaming Exercises: By noon on Saturday

Discussion board posts: By noon (PST) on Saturday

Office hours meetings with me: Deadlines to sign up are end of third week.

Week One: Introduction (What is a tabletop roleplaying game?)

- (6/24) Introductory Class
 Fill out google form and introduce yourself (on Canvas)
- (6/29) Readings and Responses
 Reality is Broken
 World Without Oil
 MUD: A Golem Memoir

Week Two: Central Idea and Mechanics (Beginning the game design process)

- (7/1) Class
- (7/7) Readings and Responses
 The Quiet Year
 Ten Candles
 “In the Shadow of the Wolf”

Week Three: Player Actions (what does the player do in your game?)

- (7/8) Class
- (7/13) Readings and Responses
 Void 1680AM
 “Cathartic Warfare”
- (7/14) Deadline to sign up for office hours with me

Week Four: Player Character (designing a character sheet)

- (7/15) Class
- (7/21) Readings and Responses
 Monsterhearts by Avery Alder
 “My Words to Victor Frankenstein”

Week Five: Player Interaction (how do players interact with each other?)

- (7/22) Class
 Roundtable Discussion about the Class
- (7/28) Readings and Responses
 Follow Me Down
 Worlding Through Play

Week Six: Pacing your Game (designing the session)

- (7/29) Class

(8/04) Readings and Responses
 Bluebeard's Bride

Week Seven: Long-term pacing and harm Mechanics (what do the characters risk? How do they change)

(8/05) Class

(8/11) Readings and Responses
 Mork Borg

Week Eight: Playtesting + Receiving Feedback

(8/12) Class

(8/18) Readings and Responses
 Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow

Week Nine: Thinking through interactive art forms

(8/19) Class

(8/25) Readings and Responses
 Secret Hitler
 Train
 What Remains of Edith Finch

Week Ten: Revision!

(8/26) Celebratory Class
 Honey Heist

Week Eleven: Reading Period

(TBD) FINALS ARE DUE

Accessibility and Resources

It can be common practice within collaborative spaces to use feedback to assert authority and perform certain types of knowledge. That is not the spirit of this class. This class aims to be open and welcoming to students from a wide variety of backgrounds and traditions and it is the expectation that students will treat each other with respect and act as advocates for each others' work.

It is also understood that students are human beings before they are students. I aim to make this class accessible and inclusive by meeting the needs of each student, including if circumstances arrive that create an issue for any of the stated deadlines. The sooner you get in touch with me the better so we can work towards a quick resolution that best suits your needs and the needs of the classroom.

On Content

In this class we'll be engaging with some difficult and emotionally-loaded topics. If there are any topics that you would like to be forewarned about, please let me know, and I will include those content warnings in the homework.

Academic Integrity

As artists we might take inspiration from those around us, or borrow, emulate, or riff from existing work. You do not need formal citations the way you might for a critical essay, but if your work significantly lifts content from another work, I ask that you make this clear, whether contextually in the work, through your workshop letter, or by some other means. You should also be able to justify the way in which your work transforms the inspiring work—straight, unfiltered plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated per University guidelines. If you have any questions or clarifications, please feel free to email me.