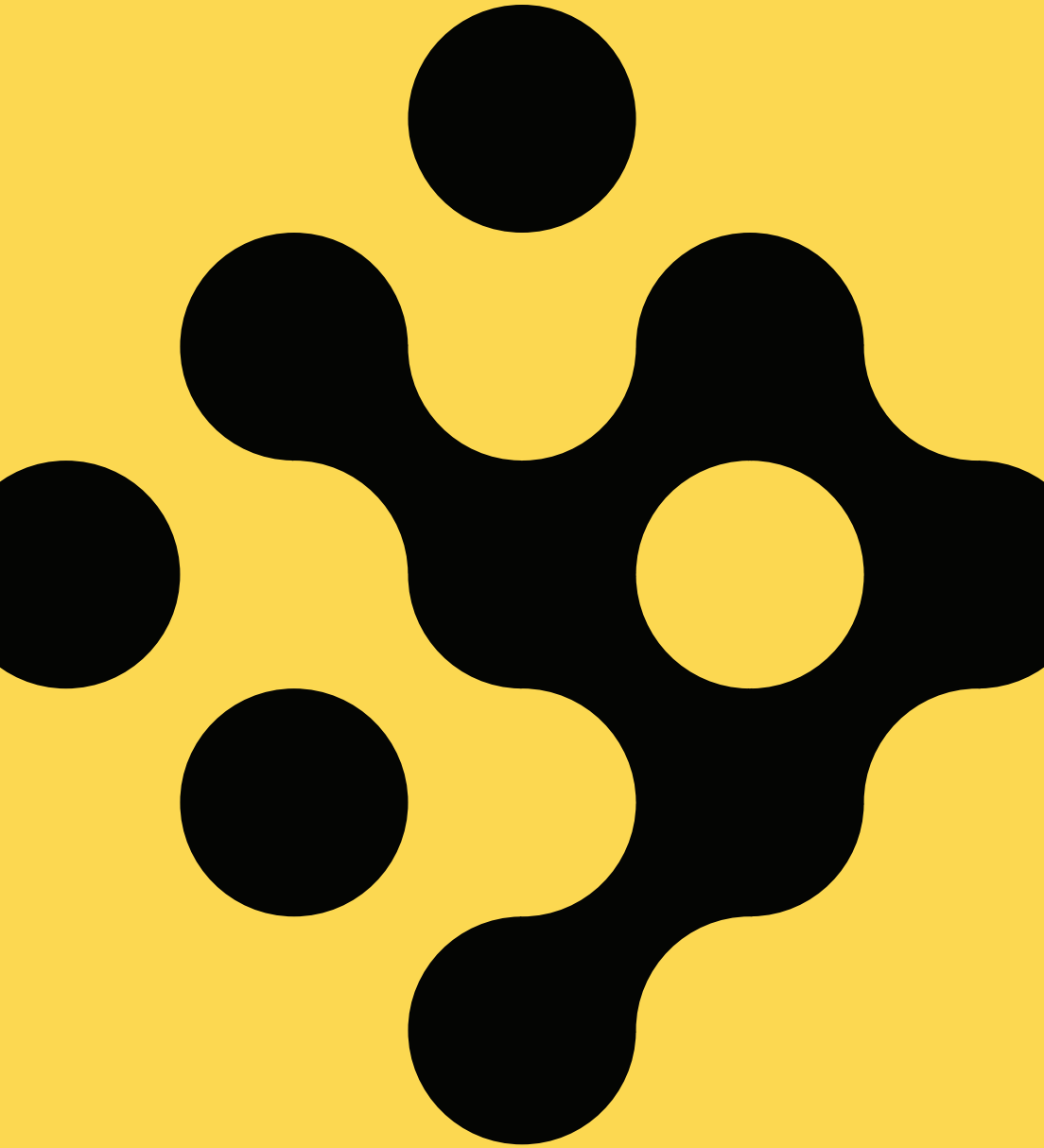
NYU GAME CENTER
STUDENT GUIDEBOOK
Fall 2016



Welcome

Welcome to the NYU Game Center MFA. The purpose of this guide is to familiarize you with how the program works and help you get the most out of it.

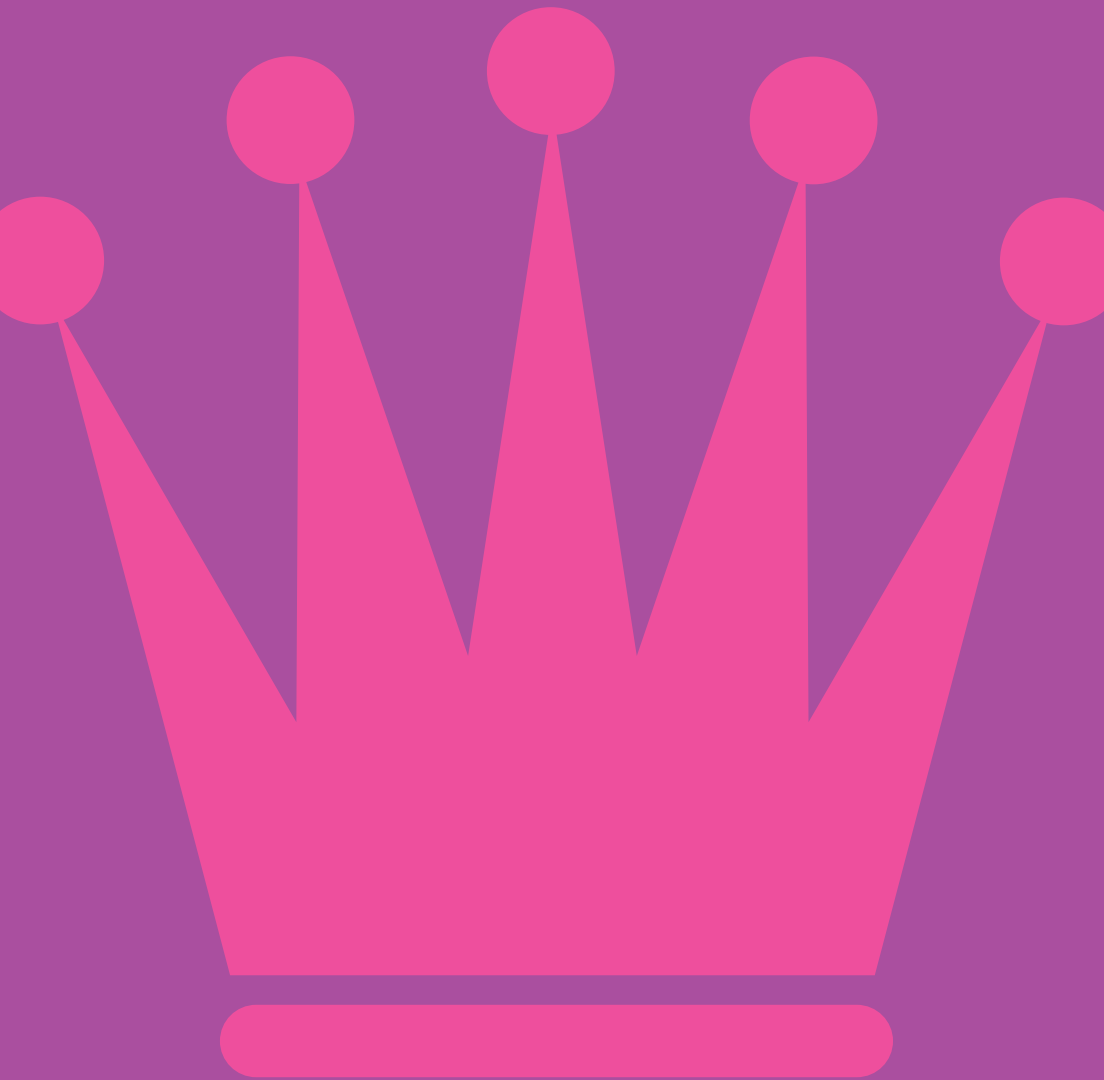
Congratulations

First of all, congratulations. This is not an easy program to get into. There are many more people who apply than there are available slots. If you are reading this then you have run a gauntlet of tough critical evaluation and thorough scrutiny. You convinced people with unreasonably high standards that you had some mix of the qualities they were looking for: passion, intelligence, skill, and vision.

Maybe it was the work in your portfolio, maybe it was the insight of your application essay, maybe it was the way you presented yourself in an interview, or (probably) a combination of all of these and more. Whatever it was, you've got it, and you are now going to spend the next two years expanding, refining, broadening, and multiplying those qualities up to their world-conquering maximum.

Look around you. The other people here also have it. You're now a member of a rare group. Over the next two years there will be challenges ahead for all of you. But never forget the impressive feat you have already accomplished.

THE BIG IDEA



The Game Center MFA is a new kind of program devoted to an idea that is simple and obvious and, at the same time, radical and revolutionary.

That idea: *games are important*. They aren't important because they are the most advanced form of human-computer interaction (although they are); they aren't important because they make you smarter (although they do); they aren't important because they can make you rich (although they can).

Games are important for their own sake, because playing games is a deeply vital and intrinsic part of being human. They are important because games are a powerful way of exploring complex ideas and grappling with ourselves, with each other, and with the world. They are important because games can be beautiful in ways that defy explanation and meaningful in ways that exceed understanding.

At the Game Center we study games the way they study painting at the Sorbonne, acting at the Royal Academy, and music at Juliard – passionately, proudly, and without apology. We want to understand them more deeply and make them more beautiful.

This is our big idea:

We study games as a form of culture and game design as creative practice

…and this is the purpose of the Game Center MFA.

The Studio Approach

The NYU Game Center MFA is based on a studio approach of hands-on game creation within a context of advanced critical literacy and sophisticated theoretical analysis.

WORK

We call the hands-on game creation part "work" and it's the heart of what we do here. Even if you go on to apply your MFA to something other than actually making games, while you are here you are, first and foremost, a game creator.

Many of the classes you take are built around game creation projects and exercises. The other ones are meant to inform, guide, and inspire your work. At the center of everything is the work. When you aren't sure what to do – work. Ask yourself, "what should I be working on?" and then work on it.

To quote artist Corita Kent:

"The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something. It's the people who do all the work all the time who eventually catch on to things."

HOW TO WORK

Game creation is more art than science - that's why you're getting an MFA instead of an MS. But we're so confident about some things that we treat them like scientific facts:

iterate

Game creation is a loop. A great game emerges out of the continual process of making & testing & refining & testing & refining & testing etc. Embrace the loop.

fail fast

Get out of the idea phase and into the creation loop as quickly as possible. Don't expect your first version to be fun. Expect it to be a train wreck. Turning your beautiful idea into a glorious train wreck is an important milestone. Celebrate it.

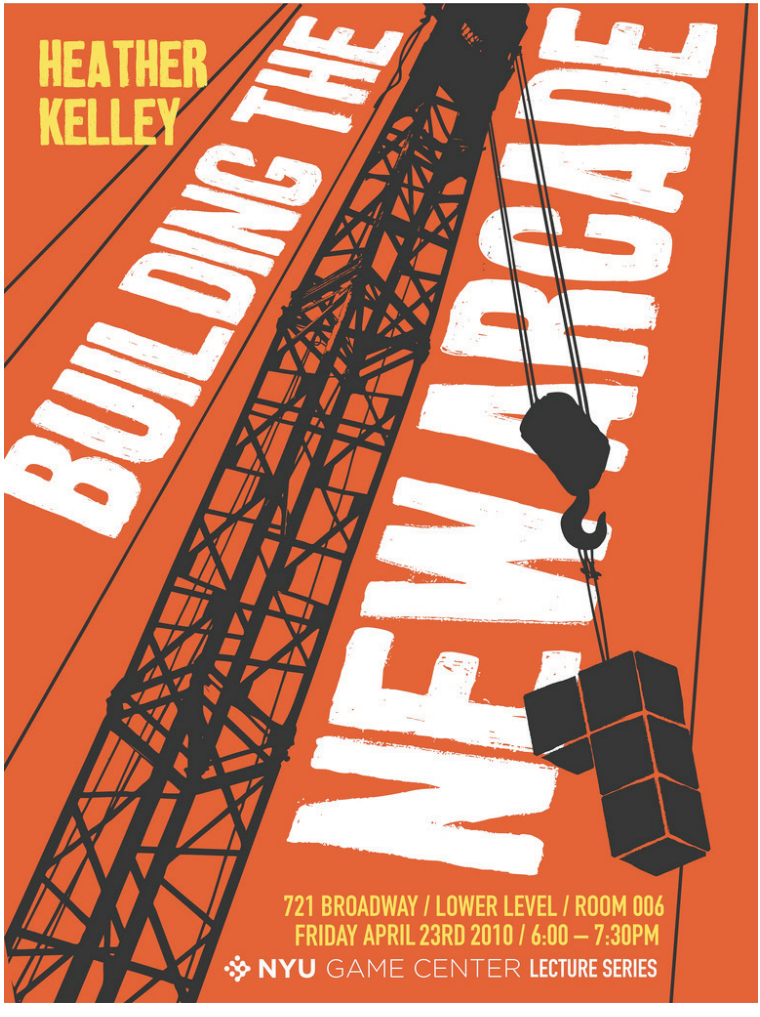
*follow the fun**

Sometimes your train wreck contains nothing worth pursuing. If so, start over. But almost always, there will be a glimmer of something promising. We call that glimmer "fun," but that can mean anything – interesting, surprising, weird, cool, beautiful, compelling. Learn to recognize this glimmer. Your job is to rescue it from the wreckage and give it room to breathe.

playtest

The heart of the iterative loop is playtesting. Good games surprise us. Don't just run them in your head - run them on the table, in the room, on the screen. And don't just run them on yourselves, run them on other people. Other people are called "players" and they are the magical ingredient that makes your game work.

* "Fail Fast & Follow the Fun" © Marc LeBlanc, ca. 2000



Collaboration

Making games, especially videogames, is an interdisciplinary process. In this program you will sometimes be working solo, but more often you will be on a team. Learning to collaborate well is one of the most valuable skills you can develop and is one of the central pillars of the Game Center MFA.

Some basic rules of thumb for collaboration:

arrive early

Be eager, respectful, and prepared. When it's time for a team meeting, show up early and ready to contribute.

make your partners look good

Your goal should always be to get the best work out of the other people in your group. (Ironically, this is the secret to developing the most impressive personal reputation.)

"Yes, and..."

Learn the classic improv rule of co-creating by accepting and building off of your partner's ideas instead of shutting them down.

respectful criticism

A complement to "Yes and…" is the idea that you should bring a spirit of rigorous critical evaluation to everyone's ideas and work, including your own. For a professional designer, serious critique is a sign of deep respect. Learn to give it and receive it honestly and with patience and good humor.

bias towards action

A fast prototype is always better than a long discussion.

it's ok to fail

Not every team dynamic works. If, after honestly trying, your team just can't function, it may be time to iterate on your team composition. Talk to your team and talk to your instructor to try and work things out, then move on to a new context and keep working.

Roles and Disciplines

During the application process we asked you to choose one or more areas of focus, most of which reflect the different disciplines that go into game creation.

Your chosen area of focus helps us to understand who you are, your skills, and your goals and interests.

But what it *doesn't* do is pigeonhole you into one type of role on collaborative teams. We do not subscribe to a factory model where individuals have carefully pre-defined roles that tell them how to contribute.

Our model is *flat* and *flexible*.

Everyone in a collaborative group is a game creator

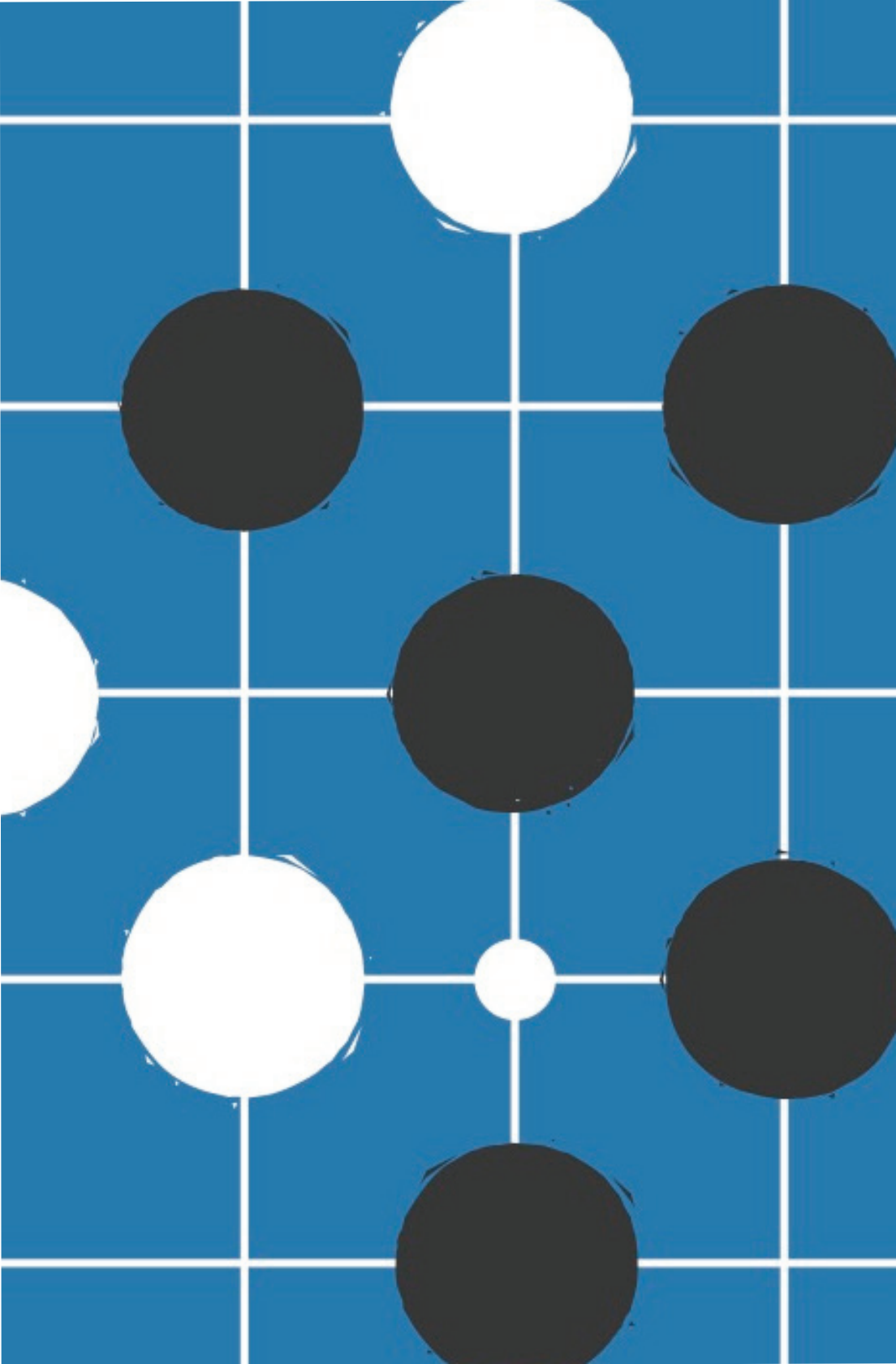
Everyone is responsible for getting to the best possible version of a completed project. You should define clear roles and responsibilities within each project, which may or may not correspond to your selected areas of focus, but you will always be expected to work across boundaries, learn new skills, and apply yourself eagerly to whatever task needs doing.

In other words, on a team you have two responsibilities:

1. ***pull your own weight***
Take responsibility for the individual role you have chosen on a particular project.

2. ***help out everyone else***
Go beyond your role wherever you can.

This sounds like a contradiction, but it's not. In an environment of trust, people don't get territorial with their roles. Instead, just the opposite happens – people become eager for critical feedback and outside ideas. Work towards establishing this level of trust and collaboration on every project.



What is “Game Design”?

We use the term “game design” in two different ways. In one sense, it refers to a specific discipline and craft, which includes concept creation, system design, game balance and tuning, writing and scripting, interaction design, level design, design documentation, and responsibility for overall user experience.

But game design is also the name of the entire program, and the degree that you are all getting.

Game design in this larger sense represents the overall process of mindful, creatively-driven game creation. Regardless of your specific skills, interests, and individual project responsibilities, you are all learning to be game designers in this larger sense.

Game design is woven through *every* atom of the creative process – from project management to art direction to programming to marketing to QA. Every decision and every action that goes into the game has an impact on its design.

GAME
DESIGN

There are no "creative directors" on Game Center projects. On every project where you make a contribution, whatever your role, you will share full responsibility for the game's design, creative vision, and overall player experience, and you will be expected to answer these important questions:

- Why are you making this game?
- What is this game's main idea?
- How does this game work?
- What needs to happen to make this game great?

In this sense, all of you are always game designers, even though only some of you might be responsible for specific "game design" tasks on a project.

We admit that this is confusing. Sorry about that. The most important thing is that all of you graduate from this program with the ability to be creative leaders and the capacity to develop and articulate a strong vision and execute on that vision, regardless of your title.

That's what game design is.

Digital and Non-Digital Games

The Game Center is committed to helping elevate the evolving form of the video game. However, our interest is not limited to just digital games. We see video games as one vector within the larger field of games and play as a whole.

During your time at the Game Center, you will be encouraged to go wherever your interests and passion lead you. You are welcome to develop games that use computers, physical objects, human bodies, real-world spaces, and any combination thereof. A game is a game is a game. We don't discriminate.

NYU GAME CENTER
OPEN LIBRARY

Name
Number
Expires
Signature

The Game Center Library

Our collection of digital and non-digital games contains more than 3,000 titles, making it one of the largest game libraries in the world.

We call it the “Open Library” because it’s accessible to all NYU Students, but the main purpose of the Library is to be a resource for you, the dedicated Game Center students.

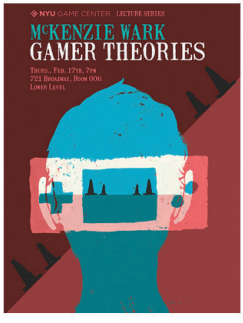
The Library exists so that you can build advanced game literacy through critical play. It’s also there to serve your design research needs. If there's a game you want to play that isn't part of the collection, let us know and we'll track it down.

Prof. Alex Galloway
Philosophy & Games
NYU GAME CENTER
Lecture Series

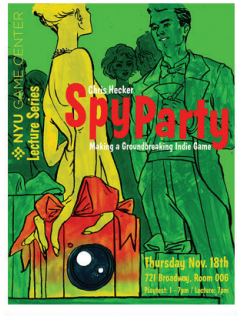
NYU GAME CENTER
GAME DEVELOPMENT
SUMMER
WORKSHOP
STARTING
JUNE 28TH,
2010
GAME DESIGN
VISUAL ART
SOUND
ANIMATION
DESIGN WRITING
PROGRAMMING
GAMECENTER.NYU.EDU

NYU GAME CENTER
FILM
SERIES
2/24 – Play!
3/10 – Beyond the Game
3/31 – GET LAMP
4/14 – I Got Next

GAME JOURNALIST PANEL
Thursday March. 25th, 2010 / 6:00pm – 7:30pm
721 Broadway, Room 004, Lower Level
PRESS
NYU GAME CENTER Lecture Series


NYU GAME CENTER LECTURE SERIES
McKENZIE WARK
GAMER THEORIES
THURS., FEB. 17TH, 7PM
721 BROADWAY, ROOM 006
LOWER LEVEL

THE SECOND ANNUAL
FALL BRAWL
SMASH BROS. TOURNAMENT
10.30.10 / 6PM / 721 BROADWAY, 9TH FLOOR
TO REGISTER EMAIL GAMECENTER@NYU.EDU
ONLY 30 SLOTS AVAILABLE!
NYU GAME CENTER

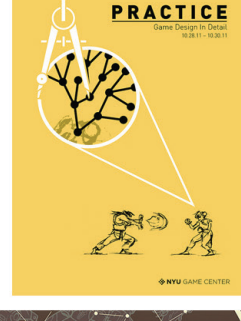

NYU GAME CENTER
Lecture Series
Chris Hecker
SpyParty
Making a Groundbreaking Indie Game
Thursday Nov. 18th
721 Broadway, Room 008
Doors 7pm / Lecture 7pm

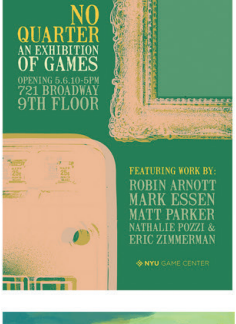
NYU GAME CENTER
2013
SPECIAL GUESTS
SETH KILLIAN & DAIGO UMEHARA
FOR MORE INFORMATION
GAMECENTER.NYU.EDU

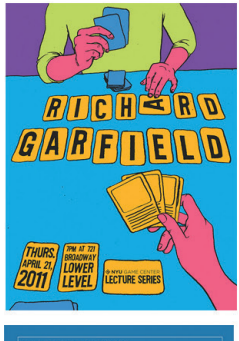
JANET MURRAY
GAME CHANGERS: INNOVATIVE DESIGN
WITHIN ESTABLISHED TRADITION
THURS., SEPT. 23RD / 7 PM / 721 BROADWAY, ROOM 006, LOWER LEVEL
NYU GAME CENTER LECTURE SERIES

NYC MAKES GAMES
THRIVING AS A GAME DEVELOPER IN NEW YORK
LEWIS ROSNKY - CURIOUS PICTURES
VADIE TINNEY - LARGE ANIMAL GAMES
ZACH WILSON - KAOS STUDIOS
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21ST / 7PM
721 BROADWAY, ROOM 008 / LOWER LEVEL
NYU GAME CENTER LECTURE SERIES

NO
QUARTER
AN EXHIBITION OF GAMES
THURSDAY, MAY 12TH, 2011 ■ 721 BROADWAY, 9TH FLOOR
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC ■ FEATURING WORK BY
TERRY CAVANAGH ■ RAMIRO CORBETTA ■ LUKE O'CONNOR ■ CHARLEY MILLER
NYU GAME CENTER

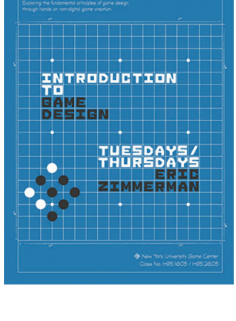

PRACTICE
Game Design In Detail
10.28.11 – 10.30.11
NYU GAME CENTER

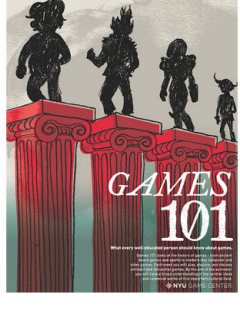

NO
QUARTER
AN EXHIBITION
OF GAMES
OPENING 5.6.10-8PM
721 BROADWAY
9TH FLOOR
FEATURING WORK BY:
ROBIN ARNOTT
MARK ESSEN
MATT PARKER
NATHALIE POZZI &
ERIC ZIMMERMAN
NYU GAME CENTER

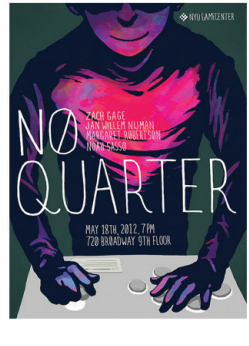

RICHARD
GARFIELD
THURS
APRIL 21,
2011
7PM AT 721
BROADWAY
LOWER
LEVEL
NYU GAME CENTER
LECTURE SERIES

FALLCRAFT
NYU GAME CENTER
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 27TH, 2012
721 BROADWAY, 9TH FLOOR
10AM – MAP JAM
7PM – ESPORTS (FAME)
8:30PM – EXHIBITION NYU VS. COLUMBIA

NYU'S FIRST ANNUAL
SPRING
FIGHTER
STREET FIGHTER IV
TOURNAMENT
721 BROADWAY
9TH FLOOR
2:00 PM
4/17/10
SPECTATORS
WELCOME!
FOR MORE
INFO EMAIL
GAMECENTER@NYU.EDU
NYU GAME CENTER


Exploring the fundamental principles of game design
through hands on, tutorial game creation
INTRODUCTION
TO
GAME
DESIGN
TUESDAYS/
THURSDAYS
ERIC
ZIMMERMAN
New York University Game Center
Class No. 14570 / 14571, 26C/S


GAMES
101
What every well-educated person should know about games


NYU GAMECENTER
NO
QUARTER
ZACH GAGE
SAM WILLEY NUMAN
JENNIFER KOLSTAD
MAY 18TH, 2012, 7PM
720 BROADWAY 9TH FLOOR

Events

The Game Center maintains a busy schedule of events throughout the year. These events are a mainstay of the NYC game dev community and are a great place to get exposed to new ideas and mingle with cool people from the local scene.

Lecture Series Featuring world-renowned designers and scholars.

Workshops and Masterclasses Intensive hands on skill-building seminars.

PRACTICE Our annual conference that brings together professional game designers from videogames, boardgames, and sports.

No Quarter A yearly exhibition that commissions indie designers to create works for a gallery setting.

Tournaments For competitive games including StarCraft, Smash Bros. and Street Fighter.

Make Your Mark Many of the best Game Center events are created by our students. Have an idea for a speaker you'd like to invite, a workshop you want to run, or an event you'd like to organize? Let us know and we'll figure out how to make it happen.

UARTE

Civility and Respect

The world of games and the people who love them is vibrant and diverse but there are aspects of traditional gamer and game development culture which can be homogenous and exclusionary. Problems of bias can range from a subtle but pervasive "boys club" mentality to explicit sexism or racism in game content to hostile or offensive language and behavior at gaming events.

It is important to us that the Game Center community be an inclusive, diverse, safe, and welcoming environment. Our policy is simple:

We have zero tolerance for any type of offensive behavior or harassment

If you aren't sure about what constitutes appropriate behavior or language, simply ask yourself - will the person I'm interacting with find the behavior offensive? If so, don't do it. You should always err on the side of courtesy and respect.

This is our policy for all members and guests of the Game Center community. As MFA students you have a special responsibility to be stewards of this community and to represent our values in all of your interactions with other students and the outside world. We hope you will take pride in this responsibility and see it as an integral part of your creative contribution to gaming culture.

Games Connect to the World

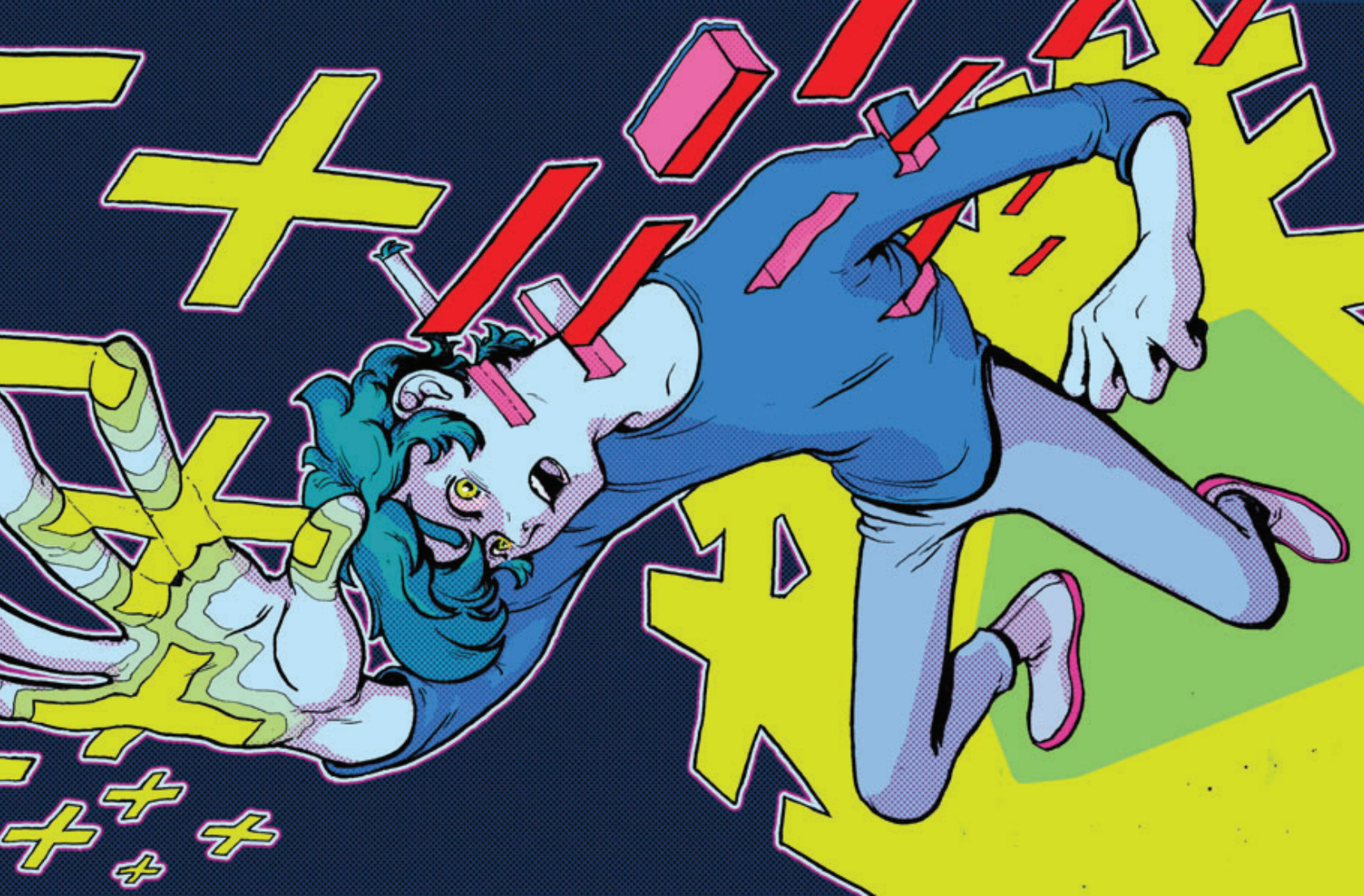
In this program we don't have a preconceived notion of the type of games you should make. You will choose the kinds of games you want to design, the questions about games you want to answer, and the creative directions you want to explore. Our job is to help you get there.

But there is one guiding principle we ask you to keep in mind – you should always be thinking about how your work fits into the world. Who will play your game and how will it affect them? What ideas does it embody? How does it relate to the games that came before it and all the possible games that might come after? And even more importantly - how does it speak to the present moment, to you as a person in the world with a life that includes games but also goes beyond them?

Our goal is to provide a broad, open, educational environment that encourages well-rounded creative individuals with wide-ranging knowledge, interests, and tastes, capable of drawing inspiration, ideas and techniques from outside of the world of gaming.

NYU is a world-class university with a diverse array of deep educational resources. During your time in the program, we want you to tap into these resources and apply them to your creative work. The MFA curriculum includes slots for free electives which allow you to take classes in other departments, and your advisors can help guide you towards relevant classes whether they are in computer science, philosophy, psychology, history, art, performance studies, or any other field.

We encourage you to take advantage of these resources to enrich your time at the Game Center and deepen your creative practice as a game designer.



Thesis

Thesis is the culmination of your MFA experience, and the primary focus of your second year in the program

A thesis project can be just about anything. While we expect most thesis projects to be some kind of game, they might take the form of a significant game-related research project, a games exhibition, a podcast series, a website, or something else.

Your thesis can be a solo project or a collaboration with other students. (Although we strongly encourage you to work on a group thesis project.) It should explore your specific interests and express your personal creative vision. It should be the kind of project that can reach beyond the walls of the program and make an impact on the larger world of games. It should be ambitious enough to be truly challenging but focused enough to be completed in one year.

You should begin thinking about your thesis now. By the end of your first year you will be required to submit an initial idea for what you want your thesis to be about.

MFA Curriculum

YEAR 1 / *Semester One*

Everyone takes the same classes in semester one:

- Code Lab Zero (intro to game programming)
- Games 101 (historical overview of games as a cultural form)
- Game Design 1 (fundamental principles of game design)
- Game Studies 1 (theoretical frameworks for understanding games)
- Game Studio 1 (developing small digital game projects using a variety of game creation toolsets)

YEAR 1 / *Semester Two*

In semester two you will continue on to the next phase of Game Studio and then choose 3 electives (see sidebar):

- Game Studio 2 (taking a single game project from concept to completion)
- 3 Electives

At the end of year one, you will choose a direction for your thesis project, which will form the core of your second year at the program.

YEAR 2 / *Semester One*

In your third semester you take the first phase of thesis project:

- Thesis 1 (beginning your substantial game development or game-related project)
- 2 Electives

YEAR 2 / *Semester Two*

Your final semester is focused on finishing your thesis project:

- Thesis 2 (completing your substantial game development or game-related project)
- 2 Electives

Electives

When choosing electives, you will work with your advisor to pick from a range of possible classes. Here are some examples:

- Game Design 2 (advanced topics in Game Design)
- Game Studies 2 (advanced topics in Game Studies)
- Games and Players (a focus on players through social, psychological, and analytical methods)
- Visual Design for Games (strategies for developing art direction, look & feel, and user interface)
- Code Labs (skill-building courses in game programming)
- Biz Lab (legal & economic aspects of game development)
- Play Labs (deep dives into a single game, or the games of one designer or genre)
- Prototype Studio (rapid-fire, small-scale game creation)

In addition to these Game Center electives, any NYU course, from any department, can be taken as an elective as long as it is relevant to your game design work and approved by your advisor.

A Work in Progress

The Game Center MFA is a framework for thought and action. Like a game, its true meaning emerges as people interact with it.

The best games are the ones that surprise us, that unfold in ways we can never totally predict, take us places we didn't expect, and create new and unforeseen kinds of pleasure and beauty.

In the Well-Played Game, Bernie DeKoven describes the idea of a play community:

In a play community, it's the players, you and everyone you're playing with, who determine whether the game is good enough. If it's not, you change it. You change something about the rules, or you discover a hitherto unknown variation, or you play something entirely else. It's you who determines if the game is good enough.

The Game Center MFA is a play community in exactly this sense. This program is yours now: it belongs to you. You can adapt it to fit your needs, modify it to make it better, and re-direct it to take you wherever you need to go. Our hope is that you explore it deeply, master its challenges, discover its true meaning, and leave it different than it was when you arrived.

This is a process of learning and evolution. We are all in it together. But now it's your turn to lead.

We can't wait to see what happens.

A Welcome Message from Red Burns (1925 - 2013)

Founder of NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program

You are here, and I welcome you.

Look around you. You come from parts of the world that many of you have never visited.

As you come together, depend on each other, you will find yourself wearing the ill-fitting clothes of someone else's world and dine on what is the strange food of someone else's thought.

If you can resist the temptation to run back to the shelter of your own comfort zone – if you permit yourself the intellectual curiosity to explore your differences just as you would explore a new city, you might be pleasantly surprised.

Collaboration will jar you - provoke and confront you with different ways of looking at the world - allow this to happen, embrace it

Our signature is collaboration - not competition.

Resist your own comfort zone.

What I want you to know:

Understand the question before looking for the answers.

That there is a difference between the mundane and the inspired. The biggest danger is not ignorance, but the illusion of knowledge.

That the inherent preferences in organizations are efficiency, clarity, certainty, and perfection. Human beings are ambiguous, uncertain, and imperfect. How you balance and integrate these contradictory characteristics is difficult.

That imagination, not calculation, is the "difference" that makes the difference.

That creativity is not the game preserve of artists, but an intrinsic feature of all human activity.

That in any creative endeavor you will be discomfited and that is part of learning.

Provoke the Unexpected – Expect it.

That there is a difference between long term success and short term flash.

That organizations are really systems of cooperative activities and their coordination requires something intangible and personal that is largely a matter of relationships.

What I hope for you:

That you combine that edgy mixture of self-confidence and doubt. Enough self-confidence to try new things. Enough self-doubt to question.

That you create opportunities to improvise.

That you make visible what, without you, might never have been seen.

That you communicate emotion.

That you play, observe, imagine and create.

That you look for the question, not the solution.

That you are not seduced by speed and power.

That you don't see the world as a market, but rather a place that people live in - you are designing for people - not machines.

That you have a stake in magic and mystery and art.

That poetry drives you, not hardware.

That you are willing to risk, make mistakes, and learn from failure.

That you develop a practice founded in critical reflection.

That you build a bridge between theory and practice.

That you value serendipity.

That you reinvent and re-imagine.

That you listen.

That you ask questions.

That you speculate and experiment.

That you play.

That you are spontaneous.

That you remember to collaborate.

That each day is magic for you.

That you turn your thinking upside down.

That you make whole pieces out of disparate parts.

That you find what makes the difference.

That your curiosity knows no bounds.

That you understand what looks easy is hard.

That you imagine and re-imagine.

That you develop a moral compass.

That you welcome loners, cellists, and poets.

That you are flexible.

That you are open.

That you can laugh at yourself.

That you are kind.

That you engage and have a wonderful time.

This will be 2 years for you to expand - take advantage of it.

Images taken from Game Center posters designed by Rachel E. Morris www.rachelelm.net