



### Course Proposal Form

Title of Proposed Course:

#### **Playable Fictions**

A Playable Media project group proposal for UCSC/DANM (2010–11)

**Course Type:**  Core Course       Elective       Collaborative Research Project Group  
*If elective, will this be a cross-listed course?*  No     Yes  
*If Yes, please list dept(s) and course number(s) it will be cross-listed under:* CS290

**Instructor Name:**      **Noah Wardrip-Fruin <nwf@ucsc.edu>**

#### **course description:**

The possibilities of digital media have enabled a blossoming of new models of character, story, and language. From computer games with epic structures to experimental interactive films, digital fictions are providing diverse experiences for a wide range of audiences. From ambitious AI experiments to straightforward uses of weblogs and email, authors are creating digital fictions at a wide range of technical complexity.

Within this wide range, some projects focus on the potential of *play*. This is a powerful technique for engaging audiences — but it is also something more. Play can change the audience’s relationship to a fiction, as when they are invited to play the roles of one or more characters. Play is also a powerful method of developing audience understanding of a computational system, which is perhaps the most promising future territory for the development of digital fictions.

Such computational models make play possible with fiction’s materials, and along fiction’s themes. This offers more potential for fiction than the current approach of most computer games: embedding snippets of fiction between segments of play focused entirely on movement, combat, and economics. Play that integrates more fully with fiction can take a variety of forms. For example, the virtual reality game *Screen*, created by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and collaborators, uses traditional spatial gameplay to involve the audience in the act of trying to keep a memory fiction’s language in place — using familiar game mechanics to enact play that connects to the fiction’s themes. On the other hand, UCSC faculty member Michael Mateas is one of two creators of the interactive drama *Façade*, which required the development of novel conversational game mechanics to give players the role of one of three characters in a computationally-driven one-act play.

This project group will explore the potential of playable experiences that combine the concerns of fiction (language, character, story), the techniques and research methods of media making and computer science, and the insights of game design. Students with significant background in

several of these areas are ideal, though those with strong qualifications in one area (combined with interest in the others) are also encouraged to apply.

During the project group's first term (Spring 2010) students in the group will take part in Wardrip-Fruin's *Playable Media* graduate course, cross-listed between DANM and the Computer Science department. This course will bring DANM MFA students together with CS PhD students who are working on research projects to enable new genres of fiction and gaming. All students in the course will design a series of prototypes, critique each other's work, and discuss a series of readings, digital fictions, and games.

Over the summer students will have opportunities to begin project work. This work may take a number of forms. Students may pursue projects they conceived before applying to DANM, individual or collaborative projects conceived in the *Playable Media* course, or make contributions to ongoing, large-scale projects taking place under the direction of UCSC faculty involved in playable media (e.g., Wardrip-Fruin, Mateas, and Warren Sack). Projects may be conducted entirely by UCSC students and faculty or may also involve collaborators at other universities, in the wider field of the arts, and/or in industry.

In the following two academic quarters, project work will continue and come to fruition. As appropriate, students will participate in Wardrip-Fruin's research seminar, Sack's "Software as Culture" group, lab meetings within the Computer Science department, and other aspects of the diverse intellectual life around these topics at UCSC. Further coursework, workshops, and critique opportunities — from UCSC faculty and visitors — will be arranged based on student interests and project directions.

In addition to standard DANM student support, this project group will have access to interdisciplinary funding sources which may provide support for students during their degree program and/or support for projects to continue development after student MFA work is complete.