



Image credit: "Deathmaw Castle" by Intro to Level Design CMU ETC student Ian Accetta. Used with permission.

Teaching Level Design: Process, Challenges, Opportunities

Keywords

Game design, level design, game education, media theory

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Are you interested in teaching level design, but struggling to figure out how to do it? Or do you already teach level design and have insights to share from your experience? Perhaps you study the craft of level design, and want to spend some time with other scholars interested in the subject?

Join us in this three-hour workshop as we compare notes about our experiences, best practices, course design, learning goals, and share practical advice for successfully teaching level design.

The workshop is open to all attendees at DiGRA 2026.

Workshop Date: DATE, from TIME to TIME

Organisers: Heather Kelley and Richard Lemarchand

If you're interested in joining the workshop as a participant, please sign up using this form:

<https://forms.gle/Tnt1jGW54GShQg5D7>

There is no deadline for signing up, but if you're interested to join us, please register as soon as possible, so that we can understand who our participants are.

PROGRAMME

Section	Duration	Start time
Opening and introductions	0:15	9:00 AM
Two presentations (20 minutes plus 10 minutes questions each)	1:00	9:15 AM
Break	0:15	10:15 AM
Roundtable Discussions	1:15	10:30 AM
Closing remarks	0:15	11:45 AM
End Time		12:00 PM

WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

The practice of level design for digital games unites many aspects of game design and development. As such, it's a topic with broad appeal to a wide range of students. The process of teaching level design, and the challenges and opportunities faced by a teacher of level design, are the focus of this DiGRA workshop.

There are several helpful texts for teaching level design in higher education including Totten (2019), Salmond (2021), Pears (2020, 2021), Yang (2021), and *101 Things I Learned in Architecture School* (Frederick, 2007). However, teaching level design offers enormous challenges. In approaching a student community of wildly diverse game design interests, how can we design a learning experience that suits everyone? Level design, like other aspects of game development, is highly iterative. How can an instructor ensure that their students are playtesting sufficiently? Evaluating progress towards the learning goals of a course can also be challenging. How can an instructor receive and evaluate playable coursework from a class full of students every week, delivering feedback in a timely enough way to be useful? Different schools and students have different levels of resourcing around hardware and software for game development. How can the learning of level design be made more economically accessible and socially equitable?

Despite these challenges, teaching level design can be a delight, as students in a level design class can display a great outpouring of creative energy. In keeping with the "Intersectional Pleasures" theme of DiGRA 2026, this workshop will look at how enjoyable and rewarding it can be to teach level design to a diverse student community, finding ways to cater to their individual tastes, passions, and creative ability.

Theorists have given us valuable frameworks for scholarly inquiry into level design that can productively dovetail with creative practice in level design courses, including Nitsche's five analytical layers (2008), Fizek's discussion of "playing at a distance" that can inform the design of game spaces (2022), Bonner's examination of prospect-refuge theory (2015) and the architectonics of open world games (2023), and

Jayemanne's remarks about about spatiality and the performative aspects of games (2017). Theory and practice can interact well: theory can inspire creativity, and level design practice might give new tools to theorists.

The organisers of this workshop are Professor Richard Lemarchand and Professor Heather Kelley. In teaching level design for the past three years, Richard Lemarchand has devised a course that teaches an adaptable level design process rooted in industry best practices, tailored to game design in higher education, and applicable to a wide variety of game styles. Heather Kelley's approach incorporates imaginary professional scenarios, foregrounding iteration, prototyping, and frequent playtesting using Hammer and Cook's peer feedback methodologies (2018). For the past two years, Heather's students have practiced getting work to publication-readiness by actively releasing their game levels as *Fortnite* "Islands." To encourage level designers to delve into a game level's psychological and emotional possibilities, Heather also incorporates a study of Rusch's "deep game design" (2017). In an introductory pair of presentations, the organizers will share insights from their teaching and research practices. Then the workshop will break into smaller groups for further discussion and sharing.

We are looking forward to bringing together DiGRA scholars from diverse backgrounds who teach and study level design, or who are interested to do so, to compare notes about our experiences, best practices, course design, learning goals, and to share practical advice for successfully teaching level design.

Organisers' Backgrounds:

Richard Lemarchand is a game designer and educator, known for his work in the game industry on the game series *Uncharted*, *Jak and Daxter*, *Soul Reaver*, and *Gex*. He is now a tenured full Professor of Cinematic Arts, teaching in the USC Games program at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, and is the author of, *A Playful Production Process: For Game Designers (and Everyone)* (2021).

Award-winning game designer and curator Heather Kelley is Associate Teaching Professor at Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center. Before joining the ETC, Heather built an extensive career in the games industry, working with Ubisoft, Eidos (Ion Storm) and Behaviour Interactive on AAA games as a level designer and game designer. Her research interests include disability justice, climate-conscious play and alternative sensory interfaces.

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