

Winter 2010
ENGL 398D/4: Videogames and/as Literature

Wednesday 14:45 – 17:30, Room H 620 Lab LB 618

Instructor: Cindy Poremba

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Office hours: Wednesday 12:30 – 2:30 Location: TBD

Course Description:

Videogames have become increasingly significant in terms of both popularity and role as a cultural form. This course will explore formal, aesthetic, and cultural aspects of videogames, the emerging discourse around digital narrative, the expressive potential of games, and the nature of meaningful gameplay; with particular emphasis on the relationship of digital games to text-based forms such as poetry and literary fiction. Through readings, in-class “screenings” and take-home play-assignments, students will be challenged to consider how videogames both extend and complicate traditional models of analyzing and understanding texts.

Prerequisites:

None

Course Objectives:

Through this course, students will be able to:

- Play and analyze games -- both in and out of class -- in terms of the topics explored in the readings and examples drawn from both “traditional” fiction, and interactive and non-linear fiction and poetry.
- Identify and interpret the ways in which games relate to other forms of literature (formally, culturally, conceptually, etc.)
- Describe the relationships between the roles of narrative aspects (such as setting and character), user interactivity, and interpretation.
- Articulate multiple perspectives on the nature and aesthetics of games.

Additional Considerations:

Due to the number of electronic texts required in this course, it is highly recommended that students registering for this course have internet access and the ability to download and install software onto a computer. Students for whom this is

a problem are advised to contact the instructor at their earliest opportunity. Assigned games that require download can be played in the LB 618 computer lab *Monday and Tuesday (12-5PM), and Wednesday and Thursday (3PM-8PM)*. You will need to log in to your personal Steam account to play your purchased games on Steam. All other games and software are pre-installed on all lab computers.

Evaluation:

Game Journal (20%)

On a weekly basis, students will be asked to contribute to a Moodle-based game journal detailing their experiences with games both in and out of class throughout the semester. The purpose of the journal is to practice critical thinking skills in relation to games, to explore connections between games and related forms such as e-poetry and interactive fiction, and to develop a base of knowledge and insight from which to approach the written assignment and final exam.

Creative Written Assignment (40% consisting of Proposal 10%, Critique 10%, Submission 20%)

In teams of 4-5, students will develop and submit a 6-9 page (approx. 4000 word) original game treatment, informed by course materials, based on a pre-assigned work of literature. Using a short story as a point of departure, student teams will identify the medium specific qualities of the work, and make adaptation decisions based on their understanding of the ways in which games might support, enhance or undermine different aspects of the text. The treatment will consist of a short analysis of the original text, an overview of the game concept, a close examination of at least two aspects of the game treatment (character, setting, interactivity/mechanics, plot, genre, aesthetics) in relation to meaning, and a brief reflection on the adaptation process. Students will be asked to formally workshop/critique each other's proposals in Week 9, with the final assignment due in Week 12.

Final Exam (30%)

The final exam will ask students to apply the various theoretical perspectives (for example, ludology) and specialized concepts (for example, the notion of an ergodic text) from the lectures and course readings, in the analysis of works (print, electronic literature, or game) presented in the course.

Participation (10%)

Students' participation grade will be based on questions and commentary posted in Moodle (particularly in response to fellow students' game journals), class and team contribution and course attendance.

Required Texts:

The following texts (including digital texts) are required in addition to game play assignments and possible assigned readings that may be accessed online. Longer-form games (2+ hours) are indicated with an asterisk *.

E.J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

N.W. Fruin and P. Harrigan, *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, The MIT Press, 2006.

Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (1938)

Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979)

**The Path*, Tale of Tales (Mac/PC, 2009, available on Steam for purchase)

**The Longest Journey*¹, Funcom (full version, available on Steam for purchase)

**Façade*, Procedural Arts (free, Mac/PC, 2005-2008)

Passage, Jason Rohrer (free, Mac/PC, 2007)

Spectre, Vaguely Spectacular (free, Mac/PC 2009)

Samorost 2, Amanita (free demo available, full version recommended)

The following texts (including digital texts) are *recommended*.

Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges: Collected Fictions* (1999)

Flower, thatgamecompany (PS3, 2009)

Course Schedule:

Week 1: Introduction to the Course

Week 2: What is a Game?

- Eric Zimmerman: "Narrative, Interactivity, Play and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline," *First Person* pp. 154-164
- Vansowerwine, *Play with me* (game, online)
- Jim Andrews, *Arteroids* (game, online)
- Gregory Weir, *The Majesty of Colors* (game, online)

¹ *The Longest Journey* takes about 30 hours of gameplay to complete— for the purposes of this course, and for practical reasons, I would be satisfied with 5-10.

- Amanita, *Samarost 2* (game, online)
- thatgamecompany, *flOw* (game, online)

Week 3: Ergodic Texts 1

- Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext* (Ch 1-4)
- Byrne, Joseph. "Blake's Contraries Game." *Digital Designs on Blake.* (online)
- Selections from the Electronic Literature Collection (works by Montfort, Munroe, Andrews, Flanagan; available online); TBD.

Week 4: Ergodic Texts 2

- Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext* (Ch 5-9)
- Nick Montfort, "Interactive Fiction as 'Story,' 'Game,' 'Storygame,' 'Novel,' 'World,' 'Literature,' 'Puzzle,' 'Problem,' 'Riddle,' and 'Machine,' First Person pp. 310-318
- Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies.* (game, online)

Week 5: Literary Adaptation

- Thomas Leitch, "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory," *Criticism* Spring 2003. Vol. 45, Iss. 2
- Miller, Kiri. "Grove Street Grimm: Grand Theft Auto and Digital Folklore." *Journal of American Folklore* 121.(121:481) (2008): 255-85.
- *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Jorge Luis Borges (on reserve)
- *The Interloper*, Jorge Luis Borges (on reserve)
- *The Intruder*, Natalie Bookchin (game, online)
- Tale of Tales, *The Path* (game)
- RECOMMENDED: Mark Rowell Wallin "Myths, Monsters and Markets: Ethos, Identification, and the Video Game Adaptations of The Lord of the Rings," *Gamestudies* 7:1, 2007.

Week 6: Understanding Narrative in Games 1

- Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories—A brief note on games and narratives," *Game Studies* 1:1, 2001 (online)
- Jan Simons, "Narrative, Games and Theory," *Game Studies*, 7:1 (online)
- Funcom, *The Longest Journey* (game)

Week 7: Understanding Narrative in Games 2

- Beckett, *Murphy*
- Ewan Kirkland. "Restless dreams in Silent Hill: approaches to video game analysis," *Journal of Media Practice* Volume 6 Number 3, 2005. (online)
- Vaguely Spectacular, *Spectre* (game)
- Tyler Glaiel, *Closure* (game, online)
- ***Creative Written Assignment Proposal due***

Week 8: The Role of Genre

- Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" *First Person* pp. 45-55
- Yellowlees Douglas and Andrew Hargadon, "The Pleasures of Immersion and Interaction: Schemas, Scripts, and the Fifth Business," *First Person* pp. 192-206

Week 9: *Creative Written Assignment Critique*

Week 10: The Role of Character

- Celia Pearce, "Towards a Game Theory of Game," *First Person* pp.143-153
- Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*
- Steve Meretzky, *Planetfall*, (game, available online)
- Procedural Arts, *Façade* (game)

- RECOMMENDED: Michael Mateas, "A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games," *First Person* pp. 19- 33

Week 11: Narrative Spaces and Storyworlds

- Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," *First Person* pp.118-130
- Doris C. Rusch. "Genetically Enhanced Possibility Spaces: Depth and Coherence in Bioshock," *Eludamos*, 2:1, 2008 (online)
- Tanya Krzywinska "Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories: World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture*, 1:4, 2006 (online)
- Aaron Oldenberg, *The Mischief of Created Things* (game, online)

Week 12-13: Games as an Expressive Form

- ***Creative Written Assignment due (week 12)***
Game Journal completed (week 13)
- Gonzalo Frasca, "Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance, and Other Trivial Issues," *First Person* pp.85-94
- Frasca, *September 12th* (game, online)
- Rohrer, *Passage* (game)
- Humble, *The Marriage* (game)

- RECOMMENDED: thatgamecompany, *Flower* (game)

Course Policies:

All assignments must be submitted in hard copy at the start of the class session in which it is due, contain appropriate citations and references (where appropriate) and meet scholarly standards. Hand-written assignments will not be accepted. Late submissions will be penalized by one full letter grade per day late, including the assignment due date. Deadline extensions will only be provided on substantive medical or compassionate grounds, with supporting documentation.

Students are responsible for *completing* all course readings and assigned games *in preparation* for the class session for which they are assigned. Resolving technical and logistic (including time-management) issues to this end is the responsibility of the student.

Please ensure you arrive promptly for all classes, and set all digital devices to silent mode. Laptops and devices are welcome in-class, but students should bear in mind failure to engage in-person in the class will result in a lower participation grade.

Plagiarism:

The most common offense under the Academic Code of Conduct is plagiarism which the Code defines as "the presentation of the work of another person as one's own or without proper acknowledgement."

This could be material copied word for word from books, journals, internet sites, professor's course notes, etc. It could be material that is paraphrased but closely resembles the original source. It could be the work of a fellow student, for example, an answer on a quiz, data for a lab report, a paper or assignment completed by another student. It might be a paper purchased through one of the many available sources. Plagiarism does not refer to words alone - it can also refer to copying images, graphs, tables, and ideas. "Presentation" is not limited to written work. It also includes oral presentations, computer assignments and artistic works. Finally, if you translate the work of another person into French or English and do not cite the source, this is also plagiarism.

In Simple Words:

DO NOT COPY, PARAPHRASE OR TRANSLATE ANYTHING FROM ANYWHERE WITHOUT SAYING FROM WHERE YOU OBTAINED IT!

(Source: The Academic Integrity Website:
<http://provost.concordia.ca/academicintegrity/plagiarism/>)