

**Fall 2010**  
**ENGL 398D: Videogames and/as Literature**

**Wednesday 14:45 – 17:30**  
**Instructor: Cindy Poremba**  
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**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.

## **Evaluation:**

### Journal (25%)

On a bi-weekly basis, students will be asked to contribute to an online 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 (35%, consisting of Proposal 10% Submission 25%)

In teams of 3-4, 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.

### Final Exam (40%)

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.

## 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 \*.

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 (2009, Mac/PC, available on Steam for purchase)

\**The Longest Journey*<sup>1</sup>, Funcom (1999, PC only, full version, available on Steam for purchase)

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

\**Braid*, Number None (2008-2009, multiple platforms, available on Steam for purchase)

The following texts (including digital texts) are *recommended* (but not required).

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

*Spider*, Tiger Style Games (iPhone)

*Bioshock*, Irrational Games (multiple platforms)

*Flower*, thatgamecompany (multiple platforms)

*Heavy Rain*, Quantum Dream (PS3)

## 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)
- Tyler Glaiel, *Closure* (game, online)

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<sup>1</sup> *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 6-8.

- Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies.* (game, online)
- **Screening: *Get Lamp (2010)***

### Week 3: Ergodic Texts

- Reading from Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext* (on reserve)
- Joseph Byrne, "Blake's Contraries Game." *Digital Designs on Blake.* (online)
- Nick Montfort, "Interactive Fiction as 'Story,' 'Game,' 'Storygame,' 'Novel,' 'World,' 'Literature,' 'Puzzle,' 'Problem,' 'Riddle,' and 'Machine,' *First Person* pp. 310-318
- Selections from the Electronic Literature Collection (works by Montfort, Munroe, Andrews, Flanagan; available online); TBD.
- Sutou, *Nawlz* (online)
- Jim Munroe, *Everybody Dies* (online)
- Andrew Plotkin, *Shade* (online)

### Week 4: Literary Adaptation

- Kiri Miller, "Grove Street Grimm: Grand Theft Auto and Digital Folklore." (on reserve)
- *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)

### Week 5: Games in Narrative

- Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*
- Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories—A brief note on games and narratives," *Game Studies* 1:1, 2001 (online)

### Week 6: Narrative in Games

- Funcom, *The Longest Journey* (game)
- Ewan Kirkland. "Restless dreams in Silent Hill: approaches to video game analysis," *Journal of Media Practice* Volume 6 Number 3, 2005. (online)
- ***Creative Written Assignment Proposal due***

### Week 7: 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 8: ***Creative Written Assignment Workshop***

### Week 9: The Role of Character

- Celia Pearce, "Towards a Game Theory of Game," *First Person* pp.143-153
- Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*
- *Façade*, Procedural Arts (game)
  
- RECOMMENDED: Michael Mateas, "A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games," *First Person* pp. 19- 33

### Week 10: 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)

### Week 11: Collective and Emergent Storytelling

- ***Creative Written Assignment due***
- 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)

### Week 12: Games as an Expressive Form

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

### Week 13: Games and/as Literature

- Number None, *Braid* (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/>)