English 3361
Word and Digital Technology
Spring 2020

Instructor: Dr. Matthew Kelly
Class Meetings: Mon/Wed, 4:00 pm - 5:20 pm
Class Location: College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) 258

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Course Description

In contemporary literary studies, the term "narrative" is often used to describe the abstract, theoretical, and philosophical underpinnings of a given text. For example, the narrative of James Joyce's *Ulysses* not only encompasses the specific chain of events that constitute the book's plot, "narrative" also represents the larger symbolic significance of the concepts expressed by Joyce's imagery or character dialogue. Hence, narrative denotes the ways in which an author constructs a fictional universe via storytelling devices (such as character or setting) and, furthermore, how we derive some form of symbolic significance from said textual universe via our own personal interpretations. While this two-fold deployment of "narrative" has provided the foundation for contemporary literary analysis, this seminar seeks to explore another dimension that influences how texts are composed and analyzed; namely, we will be looking at how the material and technological features of a text fundamentally shapes its narrative structure and the interpretive methodologies afforded to readers. In other words, this seminar will not focus on literary depictions of technology. Instead, we will look at how technological advances fundamentally shape the ways in which we tell stories and construct narrative significance, which, in turn, can offer us new ways of envisioning the world and our position therein.

Now, it would be impossible to examine the relationship between narrative and technology across the entirety of literary history. In fact, it would be difficult to even identify a single, coherent starting point: do we start looking at the narrative/technology dialectic with advent of the industrial printing press during the 19th century (which allowed for long-form storytelling via serialized fiction in periodicals)? Do we start with the ornate tapestries throughout medieval Europe (which visualized traditional lyrics or folklore that described the crusades of past kings)? Or, do we start with some of the earliest forms of writing via the use of papyrus scrolls in ancient Egypt? In order to refine the focus of our seminar and engage with contemporary trends, we will be looking at the rise of digital information technologies from the mid-twentieth century onward in order to explore how these technologies have shaped the ways in which we compose, circulate, and interpret narratives across a variety of genres. More specifically, we will be examining how interactive digital media—including video games, hypertexts, and even augmented-reality programs—simultaneously create new methods for critical inquiry while also transforming pre-existent literary concepts (such as character, plot, and setting).

Some guiding questions for this course include: how does a narrative's material form contribute to its meaning, and vice-versa? How can we use the relationship between narrative and technology to better understand the historical circumstances and socio-cultural significance of interactive texts? How might we, as scholars and critics, begin to use digital media technologies to undertake new forms of literary analysis? To explore these questions, we will read historical accounts that trace the inception and evolution of contemporary technologies, scholarly investigations that explore the philosophical impact of new media platforms, and digital texts that will provide you an opportunity to read, reflect, and play around in virtual environments.

Course Goals

Despite the heavy digital emphasis of this seminar, a majority of our projects will be traditional written assignments (personal reflections on readings, short responses to in-class worksheets, and a handful of longer essays, and a dynamic critical/creative final project). In other words, this is not a digital media studio and I do not expect anyone to have familiarity with specific software or programs. However, there will be several moments where you will need to test some foundational digital literacy skills (such as needing to install games on your computer, taking screenshots, and integrating images into your written assignments). If you encounter any obstacles during these processes, your first course of action should be to load up your web browser and start researching how to resolve these problems. Put bluntly, please do not contact me for tech support.

By the end of the semester, you will be expected to be capable of satisfying the following course goals:

1. **Understand the ways in which technological advancement does not happen in a vacuum but, rather, exists amid a complex constellation of social, political, and economic forces.** Several class readings will contextualize the larger historical development of popular technologies. The reason for including these readings is to demonstrate how technological advances are very rarely the product of a single great mind at a single moment in time. Instead, tech advancements often happen as a response to pre-existent research, economic incentives, and material constraints. Taking a nuanced, holistic approach to technological progression will help you better understand the complexity surrounding new technologies, which, in turn, can help you understand the variables influencing emergent tech trends today.

2. **Understand how digital media technologies create new methods for constructing and analyzing narratives amid larger socio-cultural contexts or significance.** It would be a lost opportunity to simply apply traditional text-based terminology onto digital media. In other words, reading a video game, hypertext, or website in the same exact way as a novel runs the risk of overlooking the unique dimensions of digital media. Hence, throughout this course you will be expected to undertake new methods of literary analysis beyond isolated close-readings (such as applying the ideas of a digital text to current real-world events or examining how rule-based algorithms implicitly create a hierarchy of information in virtual worlds). In learning how to undertake different interpretive

methodologies, you will test your ability to read, write, and think critically in conjunction with pressing real-world issues.

3. **Understand how digital media technologies build upon traditional literary terms and methods for examining the larger socio-cultural significance of texts.** Despite our current cultural obsession with newness and "disruption" (to steal a phrase that permeates contemporary tech circles), digital media often builds upon traditional literary terms just as much as it introduces brand new concepts. Being able to understand how we can apply several of the reading/writing strategies you've cultivated in other English classes can demonstrate the relevance of literary study today while also reinforcing the need to examine digital media with the same rigor applied to great works of literature. To clarify, this course goal should not be viewed as contradicting Course Goal 2 (stated above). Rather, this course goal should be seen as a compliment to Course Goal 2, seeing as both of these learning objectives will help you produce nuanced, thoughtful examinations of digital texts without succumbing to overly-simplified new-vs-old dichotomies.

Course Structure

Neither art nor scholarship nor technology exists in a vacuum, so understanding the historical and scholarly circumstances surrounding all of our readings will help you contextualize their larger significance or impact. Hence, a typical class session will begin with me offering background information on primary texts and calling attention to a few key ideas expressed in the assigned readings in order to provide everyone with a "common vocabulary" that can enhance your own interpretations, thoughts, or questions. Put differently, I do not expect anyone to have previous knowledge of the authors, concepts, technologies, or general fields-of-study that we will be examining. However, as a small seminar, a good deal of our class will be dictated by the ideas, issues, examples, or questions that YOU find personally compelling. Hence, consistent participation is essential for not only receiving an excellent grade in this course but also helping our seminar evolve in interesting and productive ways (please see the "Participation Policy" section below for more clarification).

A typical week will unfold as such: we will read and discuss several historical and/or philosophical texts on Wednesday. Then, you will read a case study or interactive text over the weekend, which we will then discuss as a class the following Monday. This course structure will help us take a balanced theory/practice approach, wherein you can apply, re-interpret, or even push back on the ideas of a critic via your own analysis of digital texts. In doing so, we will begin to move away from isolated close readings and towards a method of literary analysis that requires you to make connections between complex philosophical essays, artistic/creative texts, current historical circumstances, and your own personal interpretations.

Course Materials

All course readings (which include essays, online articles, and videos) will be posted to Canvas; there is no required textbook for this class. Given the emphasis on interactive fiction throughout the semester, there are several video games that you will need to purchase and install. You are

free to use any online marketplace to purchase these games but I recommend using the following due to ease-of-access:

Steam: http://store.steampowered.com/
GoG (Good Old Games): https://www.gog.com/
Humble Bundle: https://www.humblebundle.com/

Grading

Each major project is designed to help you move towards the three course goals outlined above but every assignment prompt will also include a handful of specific criteria that will be used to evaluate your success on a given project. If you ever have any questions about how I will evaluate a project, feel free to ask.

Your final grade will be calculated based on the following breakdown:

Mid-term Essay	30%
Final Project	30%
Short Written Responses	30%
Participation (includes attendance)	10%

Participation Policy

I understand that everyone has their own processes for (and even hesitations about) participating in social scenarios; some need a lot of time to work through ideas before speaking, others like bouncing ideas off peers in order to suss out their own arguments, others enjoy listening and synthesizing different ideas discussed in class into his/her own writing. For these reasons, I will offer a variety of outlets for participation, including short in-class writing assignments, longer take-home assignments, class conversations, and opportunities to provide feedback to your peer's writing.

It is perfectly normal to be more comfortable sharing your ideas in one type of social scenario versus another, but it is imperative that you are able to discuss complex ideas across a multitude of different contexts in order to be successful in the professional world. Therefore, I will evaluate your participation across all of the outlets I mention above.

Attendance Policy

Because of the rapid pace of this course and the emphasis on in-class activities/discussions, consistent attendance is very important. Every student is allowed FOUR absences. Each additional absence will result in lowering your final grade by one full letter (i.e., a B+ will be lowered to a C+). **Coming to class without the assigned readings or materials will result in being absent for the day.** Being late (showing up after I begin lecturing) twice equals one absence.

Technology policy

While we will often use digital devices for in-class activities, these devices will not be used for socializing (Facebook, Twitter, texting, etc.). When digital devices are not required for in-class activities, I ask that you turn off your cell phone and keep it out of sight. If you are socializing online or on your phone (including texting) during class, you will be marked absent for that day.

Email Policy

Email is the easiest way to contact me. However, etiquette and courtesy in correspondence is important; that is, be rhetorical and think about your audience. Because email is quick and easy, people often do not take the time to formulate emails that will effectively communicate what is desired. When emailing me, please include a subject header with helpful information, an opening address, and a closing signature. This will help me know who has written me and what it is about.

This class will be dynamic in the sense that class readings, exercises, and discussions will revolve around the ideas you are actively working through. Consequently, I will regularly email out readings, worksheets, and questions to consider for class discussion based on the evolution of our class conversations and your individual assignments. Seeing as it is impossible to foresee these ideas in advance, it is important that you keep up-to-date with your email in order to properly prepare yourself for class activities. **Hence, everyone needs to check their official UT Tyler email account once every 24 hours**.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Below is the first seven weeks' worth of readings. I will have finalized the readings for the remainder of the semester by the end of the seventh week.

Week	Scheduled Readings	Assignment Due
1	-Class Syllabus -Read "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" by Jenkins	Course Goals, Reading reflection
2	-Play "The Vanishing of Ethan Carter"	Reading reflection
3	-Finish "The Vanishing of Ethan Carter" -Read "Critical Ethical Reasoning" by Simkins and Steinkuehler	Reading reflection
4	-Play "Papers, Please" -Read "The Rhetoric of Videogames" by Bogost	Gameplay reflection
5	-Play "What Remains of Edith Finch" -Readings TBD	Gameplay reflection
6	-Finish "What Remains of Edith Finch"	Gameplay reflection
7	-Research and Draft Midterm Project	Rough draft of

		Midterm
8	-Finalize Midterm Project	Final draft of Midterm
9	-Read "Gaming Literacy" by Zimmerman -Play "Her Story"	
10	-Introduction to Final Project -Play "Minecraft"	