Digital Storytelling (Spring 2017)

Jim McGrath

When: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1-2:20pm
Where: Digital Scholarship Lab (main floor of the Rockefeller Library)
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3-4:30pm (or by appointment)
Contact: james_mcgrath@brown.edu (or @JimMc_Grath)

Course Description

This course surveys the current state of digital storytelling, examining topics ranging from digital curation to data journalism to social media activism (and beyond). We will consider the narrative conventions, multimodal dimensions, and mechanics of a wide range of digital stories, carefully examining both the tools available to creators and the theoretical perspectives that motivate their authors. Students will determine best practices for digital storytelling projects through their engagement with course readings, their participation in in-class workshop sessions where we experiment with particular tools and publishing platforms, and their implementation of a digital storytelling project.

Course Requirements

Over 14 weeks, students will spend three hours per week in class (42 hours total). Engagement with course readings / experimentation with digital tools will take 7 hours per week (98 hours total). Completion of major course work -- weekly writing assignments, project case studies, Projects #1 and #2 (Distortion and Curation) and the final digital storytelling project for the course -- will take 100 hours to complete over the course of the semester.

Information on readings and project deadlines can be found here as well as our course site. Important updates about the course will be circulated via email.

Reliable web access is a requirement for this course. Given the nature of the class, it’s essential that you be able to get on the web on a regular basis for course readings and project work. Please see me if you have any questions about this requirement or if you’d like to talk about resources here at Brown.

You are not required to bring a laptop, tablet, and/or smart phone to every class, but there will be occasions (primarily workshop days) where I will require you to bring a laptop or tablet with wifi access. Generally, access to web materials during class discussions may be extremely useful, so feel free to bring and use digital devices in class when relevant to the course.
My hope is that our Slack space is used to share links / additional points of conversation during class, so it would be useful if you had the app on your computer or device. We’ll have Slack running on a screen during class, so if you’re not online you’ll still be able to follow what’s going on.

If you don’t have a laptop or a tablet, we can provide one for you – check with me before class – or you can check one out at Media Services.

Course Readings

Course reading are outlined in the semester calendar. Direct links to readings can be found on the course site. Readings will be taken from material that is accessible online or via physical / digital library resources; check email and Slack on a regular basis for materials, and be in touch if you can’t find a particular text.

Readings are taken from the following sources:


*Digital Humanities Quarterly* (academic journal; ongoing)


*Journal of Digital Humanities* (academic journal; ongoing)


*No Medium*. Craig Dworkin. MIT Press. (2013)
The Public Historian (academic journal; ongoing)

Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound. Lori Emerson. University of Minnesota Press. (2014)


Storybench (Northeastern University Media Innovation Lab; ongoing)


Various blogs, newspapers, social media accounts, and other online publications

Course Policies

I expect that students will regularly attend class sessions, keep up with readings, and submit graded work on time. I also assume that students will participate in class discussions and be respectful of their peers in said discussions. Please contact me ASAP if you have any questions or issues related to the course. I’m also happy to meet with students during office hours or by appointment.

Course Breakdown

The course is broken up into three major sections: Distortion, Curation, and Transformation

Distortion: We’ll begin with “distortion” in part because it’s a timely subject in the wake of discussions of “fake news” and some of the concerns raised about Facebook’s News Feed. An emphasis on “distortion” calls our attention to the subjective and material dimensions of our chosen mode of storytelling: people, algorithms, visualizations, and data structures all arguably “distort” narratives in useful and detrimental ways. What ideas about narrative, argument, aesthetics, and audience engagement arise when we consider modes of digital distortion?
How might distortion turn into disruption, amplification, silence? Where are forms of distortion visible and hidden? And how might we use particular digital tools to productively create, critique, or reject particular kinds of distortion?

**Curation:** After we’ve made things different or completely unrecognizable, we’ll consider the role “curation” in rhetoric and realities of digital storytelling. All of us are arguably curators in our digital lives: we’re constantly taking and sharing photos, developing heavily-mediated images of ourselves on social media, and sharing / annotating the various things we come across online when we should be doing work. What does curation look like in digital contexts? What are the steps involved in digitizing and contextualizing archival materials? How do digital interfaces anticipate (or, in unfortunate cases, ignore) user needs with regard to digital objects? Generally speaking, where does curation come into play in our personal and professional lives online, and how might we become better curators on and off the clock?

**Transformation:** The idea of “transformative use” is particularly important in digital storytelling projects: without guidelines regarding “fair use” of digital objects, we may not know what resources are available to us for our own work. Beyond the legal connotations of “transformation,” we’ll spend this unit considering the transformative potential of digital storytelling. How is telling a story within the context of a digital network different from contexts familiar to more traditional modes of storytelling (and how are these “analog” forms now shaped by digital reception networks)? How does the creation of databases and visualizations invite new avenues of engagement and critical inquiry? What does it mean to think of stories as comprised of “data” instead of “text”? And how might digital storytelling projects invite both creators and audiences to find avenues for collaboration, transforming what it has traditionally meant to be a reader or passive consumer of texts and cultural objects?

**Major Assignments**

**General Breakdown**

*Contributions to Online Discussion Board: 10%*

*Digital Stories About Your Professional Identity: 5%*

*“Distortion” Assignment: 20%*

*“Curation” Assignment: 20%*

*Digital Storytelling Project: 45%*

*Contributions to Online Discussion Board:* This semester we’ll be using Slack, a digital communication platform, to discuss weekly readings, circulate relevant links, complain about particular digital tools and platforms, and generally stay in communication beyond class time. You will be required to
post regular responses that are “substantial” in terms of their demonstration of
critical and creative thought. That being said, our use of Slack can (and should!)
inform the form and style of responses: they may be more informal,
conversation, and networked (in terms of reliance upon links, etc.) than
“traditional” class responses. **(10% of final grade)**

**Digital Stories About Your Professional Identity:** At some point this semester,
you will create, extend, or revise your “professional” identity in a digital context.
Options here range from creating / updating a “professional” social media
account, building a professional portfolio section of your personal website, or
other suggestions. We’ll discuss this requirement early in the semester. **(5% of final grade)**

**“Distortion” Assignment:** To finish up our first unit, you will be required to use
a digital tool to explore and build on the ideas of “distortion” informing our
conversations. You may use a digital tool to “distort” something for a particular
set of reasons, or you might use a tool to highlight evidence of distortion
elsewhere. Whatever you do, you’re required to write a 500-750 word blog post
describing this activity, what informed it, and why others might find it interesting.
If your distortion project is text-centric or text-heavy, talk to me about how we
might modify the length requirements. Depending on the nature of the distortion,
we may also circulate it in the “Lab” section of our course site. **(20% of final grade)**

**“Curation” Assignment:** Taking the assumption that we are all curators on the
web, you are required to play the role of the curator on a digital platform or in an
“analog” space that utilizes digital technology. Students may decide to
collaborate if there is interest in similar materials or a set of shared
methodologies; in fact, the class may decide it wants to work as a whole on a
particular project. A 500-750 word description of your curatorial exercise, its
goals, and a justification of digital tools / platforms is required here for the blog
as well. **(20% of final grade)**

These are opportunities to try out new tools, to experiment a bit with
approaches to curation and digital storytelling, and (hopefully) to have some fun
while thinking about ideas for your major assignment (though your major project
may have little or nothing to do with this earlier work, depending on where your
interests take you). Talk to me if you have questions or potentially strange ideas
about how to interpret “distortion” and “curation” or the attendant requirements
for these assignments.

**Digital Storytelling Project:** You have three (3) options for your major course
project this semester. I’m providing this range in hopes that students with varied
academic and professional interests might have a wider range of options. You may also collaborate with other people in the class (or outside collaborators!): talk to me about specifics if you’re interested in doing so (45% of total final grade; broken down into smaller components below)

1. **Join a Digital Storytelling Project or Initiative That Already Exists:** There are many opportunities to join a digital storytelling initiative that is already in place here at Brown or beyond. For example, the Nightingale-Brown Digital House tour is still in development as an active initiative, and the JNBC also has ties to Rhode Tour, a mobile storytelling platform. Beyond Brown, there are many public-facing collaborative projects and publishing platforms that may present opportunities for you to tell innovative digital stories without reinventing the wheel, creating a new digital space, etc.

2. **Develop Your Own Digital Storytelling Project:** Some of you may want to set out on your own: that’s fine too! While you may not have time in one semester to get an entire project off the ground, you can still do things like create a project blueprint and develop a “proof of concept” of this kind of work.

3. **Commentary on Digital Storytelling:** Some of you may be less interested in telling your own digital stories and more interested in surveying the field and identifying best practices. This is the more “academic” of the three options, but there’s also a public-facing dimension here: in addition to creating your commentary, you need to identify one or more public-facing platforms for the next iteration of your discussion: will you submit this work to a journal? Present it at a conference? Submit it to an online publication? Create a new resource for professionals interested in digital storytelling?

Regardless of the option you select, you’ll be required to:

- Write a Project Proposal (500 words plus a list of 3-5 models inspiring this work) and share it with the class. In this proposal, you’ll develop and document concrete goals for the semester work, including metrics for how to measure success and potential next steps post-semester. (10%)  

- Hit your goals, then circulate the project or a representative sampling / summary of the project in its current form online; you can use the “Lab” or “Blog” portions of our course site to do so if relevant, and you should use the Blog to briefly note where to find your project/sampling if it exists elsewhere on the web (25%) 

- Present your Digital Storytelling idea / assessment to the class at the end of the semester (5 minute presentation; visual aids required (10%)
If anything changes below (readings, deadlines), I’ll let you know in class and via email. Full-text versions of readings not directly linked to below will be provided to you via email or Slack.

Distortion

TH 1/26 Introductions

T 1/31 Distortion: Texts and Contexts

READINGS FOR TODAY: "Network Theory, Plot Analysis" (Moretti; Stanford Literary Lab); "The Image of Absence: Archival Silence, Data Visualization, and James Hemings" (Klein); “The Blackness of Meme Movement” (Jackson)

TH 2/2 Distortion in The Humanities

READINGS FOR TODAY: "What’s Next? The Radical, Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities" (Posner); "Notes Toward A Deformed Humanities" (Sample); "TXTual Practice" (Raley)

T 2/7 Social Distortion (TAGS Workshop)

READINGS FOR TODAY: "The Googlization of Literature" (Emerson); "# Logic" (Scheible); "The Leakiness of Friends, or Think Different Like Me" (Chun); Documenting The Now (Various)

TH 2/9 Fake News

READINGS FOR TODAY: Excerpts from The Grey Album (Young); Excerpts from The Filter Bubble (Pariser); "Here Are 50 Of The Biggest Fake News Hits On Facebook From 2016" (Silverman); "The Agency" (Chen)

T 2/14 Alternative Facts (Wikipedia Workshop)

READINGS FOR TODAY: “Top 25 Wikipedia Articles” (Various); Excerpts from Wikipedia and The Politics of Openness (Tkacz); “Gender Bias on Wikipedia” (Wikipedia)

TH 2/16 Distorted Archives (Metadata Workshop)
READINGS FOR TODAY: “RadTech meets RadArch: Towards a New Principle for Archives and Archival Description” (Drake); “Library of Congress to Cancel the Subject Heading ‘Illegal Alien’” (Library of Congress); “Going Meta on Metadata” (Kramer)

T 2/21 LONG WEEKEND (NO CLASS)

TH 2/23 Discussion of "Distortion" Projects (DISTORTION PROJECTS DUE)

Curation

T 2/28 Curation and Interfaces; Intro to “Curation” Assignment

READING FOR TODAY: “Generous Interfaces for Digital Cultural Collections” (Whitelaw); “Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What’s In A Name?” (Price)

TH 3/2 Thinglink Project (TBD)

T 3/7 Curation and Data (OpenRefine Workshop)

READING FOR TODAY: “The Hermeneutics of Data and Historical Writing” (Gibbs and Owens); “Against Cleaning” (Rawson and Muñoz)

TH 3/9 Curation, Data, and Visualization (Patrick Rashleigh)

READING FOR TODAY: TBD

T 3/14 Curation, Data, and Visualizations, Part 2 (Raw Workshop)

READING FOR TODAY: Excerpts from Design for Information (Mereilles); Excerpts from The Best American Infographics 2015 (Various)

TH 3/16 Curation, Data, and Visualizations, Part 3 (Mapping Workshop)

READING FOR TODAY: “What is The Spatial Turn?” (Guldi); “Mapping The Empire: Google Maps and the Process of Postmodern Cartography” (Farman)

T 3/21 Curation and Crowdsourcing
READINGS FOR TODAY: HW: “Crowdsourcing and Community Engagement” (Peaker); NYPL Labs; Zooniverse

TH 3/23 Discussion of “Curation” Assignments (CURATION PROJECTS DUE)

T 3/28 SPRING BREAK; NO CLASS

TH 3/30 SPRING BREAK; NO CLASS

Transformation

T 4/4 Digital Storytelling Proposal Brainstorming

TH 4/6 Reinventing Digital Storytelling

T 4/11 Discussion of Digital Storytelling Proposals (DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROPOSALS DUE)

TH 4/13 Transforming Place (Augmented Reality Workshop)

READINGS FOR TODAY: “Using Virtual Reality for Storytelling” (Migieliicz and Zacharia); “The IRL Fetish” (Jurgenson); “What are the differences among virtual, augmented, and mixed reality?” (Johnson)

T 4/18 Transforming Museums

READINGS FOR TODAY: “Applying Digital Humanities Approaches to Museum Collection Data” (Gonzalez); “How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Open Data” (Burgin and Ledesma); “Designing The Pen” (Cooper Hewitt)

TH 4/20 Transforming Memory

READINGS FOR TODAY: Excerpts from When We Are No More (Rumsey); "As We May Think" (Bush)

T 4/25 Transforming Texts (Voyant Workshop)

READINGS FOR TODAY: Excerpts from Track Changes (Kirschenbaum); Excerpts from Software Takes Command (Manovich); “Reprinting, Circulation, and The Network Author in Antebellum Newspapers” (Cordell)
TH 4/27 Transforming Networks

READINGS FOR TODAY: TBD

T 5/2 Transforming Media Archaeology

READINGS FOR TODAY: “Making Noise in The Roaring Twenties” (Thompson); “From damage to discovery via virtual unwrapping” (Various); Excerpts from Remediation (Bolter and Grusin)

TH 5/4 Transforming Institutional Spaces

READINGS FOR TODAY: “Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?” (Lothian and Phillips)

T 5/9 Final Presentations / Last Day of Classes

Public Dissemination of Digital Storytelling Project / Email Due during Finals Week