Science Fiction and Technology
ENG 296 (Spring 2021)
Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:50-11:05am on Zoom

Instructor: Dr. Mark Sample (he/him)
Email: masample@davidson.edu
Coffee breaks: This is when you can be sure to find me on Discord. Mondays and Tuesdays from 3-4pm I’m there. But you can often find me there other times.

Course Overview

The science fiction novelist William Gibson famously noted that “the future is already here, it’s just not very evenly distributed.” Think about the implications of this observation:

1. Science fiction is not about the future so much as it is about the present.
2. The “future” is a social and technological condition rather than a chronological state.
3. Not everyone has access to that social and technological condition.
4. There must be forces at work determining who’s locked out of that condition.

Science fiction has long been dismissed as escapist fantasy. Yet contemporary science fiction—whether it’s novels, short stories, television, or films—is preoccupied with these kinds of considerations: who has power, who doesn’t, and who gets to decide. Science fiction is in fact a rich, dynamic narrative genre that’s not afraid to ask big questions about society. This semester, in addition to the questions about access and power implied in Gibson’s observation, we’ll tackle questions about these critical issues:

● The rise of surveillance society
● The ethics of AI and the nature of free will
● The intersectionality of gender, race, and disability with technology

And perhaps most fundamentally:

● What counts as “human” in an increasingly inhuman world?

Learning Outcomes

ENG 296 satisfies the following requirements: (1) the Literary Studies, Creative Writing, and Rhetoric Ways of Knowing Requirement, (2) the Justice, Equality and Community (JEC)
graduation requirement, (3) an elective for the English major and minor, and (4) the Digital and Screen Media major and Digital Studies minor.

By the end of the semester, you will be able to do the following:

- Actively engage with complex texts, which involves asking questions, recognizing complexity and ambiguity, and understanding both literal and figurative uses of language
- Analyze primary texts in relation to relevant scholarship and criticism on selected texts
- Identify and evaluate assumptions (personal, disciplinary, cultural, etc.) about the interplay between technology and justice, equality, and community
- Identify and evaluate information related to contemporary cases of (in)justice, (in)equality, and community in the digital realm and relate these to themes raised in class readings.

Course Meetings and Accessibility

ENG 296 is an online-only course with synchronous meetings 9:50-11:05am on Tuesday and Thursday. Class sessions will be recorded and captioned for later viewing. We’ll also have a number of asynchronous activities.

I will be available regularly online for chats and meeting with you one-on-one or in groups. The best way to reach me is direct messaging on our Discord server (more about that below), or, for longer messages, through email at masample@davidson.edu.

I am committed to the principle of inclusive learning. This means that our virtual spaces, our practices, and our interactions be as inclusive as possible. Mutual respect, civility, and the ability to listen carefully before speaking are crucial to inclusive learning.

The college welcomes requests for accommodations related to disability and will grant those that are determined to be reasonable and maintain the integrity of a program or curriculum. To make such a request or to begin a conversation about a possible request, please contact the Office of Academic Access and Disability Resources, which is located in the Center for Teaching and Learning in the E.H. Little Library: Beth Bleil, Director, bebleil@davidson.edu, 704-894-2129; or Alysen Beaty, Assistant Director, albeaty@davidson.edu, 704-894-2939. It is best to submit accommodation requests within the drop/add period; however, requests can be made at any time in the semester. Please keep in mind that accommodations are not retroactive.
Graded Activities

- **Moodle Discussion Prompts and Tasks.** These *asynchronous* activities will regularly be due the evening before class, by 9pm. They are geared toward making sure you’re engaged with the course material. The prompts and other tasks will help me assess your progress toward meeting our Learning Outcomes. Moodle prompts will be graded on a 3-point scale, as either Unsatisfactory, Satisfactory, or Excellent. Altogether, your work on Moodle will count toward 20% of your final grade.

- **Investigations.** These are 3-4 page investigations into particular elements or themes of a work. There will be two investigations—one on *Neuromancer* and an episode of *Black Mirror*. Each investigation is worth 20% of your final grade.

- **Video Essay.** This is a lively 4-5 minute video in which you take a single portrayal of technology from one of our texts and discuss how it intersects with recent discussions about justice, equity, and community. You’ll have three deadline options to choose from, with each deadline corresponding to a different chunk of texts to work from. The video essay is worth 20% of your final grade.

- **The Unessay.** The unessay is a critical and creative project that attempts to transform, undo, subvert, or challenge some conventional aspect of science fiction. As an “unessay,” this project also seeks to undermine the traditional essay form while still retaining intellectual rigor. We’ll have an unessay “show and tell” at the end of the semester, and the polished version will be due May 10 for seniors and May 12 for everyone else. The unessay is worth 20% of your final grade.

Aside from the Moodle prompts, I will evaluate your work with a letter grade that carries a percentage equivalent:

- \( A = 95\% / A- = 90\% \)
- \( B+ = 88\% / B = 85\% / B- = 80\% \)
- \( C+ = 78\% / C = 75\% / C- = 70\% \)
- \( D+ = 68\% / D = 65\% / F = \text{below } 60\% \)

Attendance and Engagement

Given the unpredictability of the semester and the myriad of personal circumstances, it is inequitable to maintain a conventional attendance policy. I will note who’s present during our synchronous course sessions, but attendance will not factor into any grade. Rather, during our
Final Interview we will talk together about your overall engagement for the semester. Engagement comes in many forms, not just attendance. Taken holistically, engagement includes (but is not limited to) the following:

- **Preparation** (reviewing readings and material before class)
- **Focus** (avoiding distractions during synchronous and asynchronous activities)
- **Asking questions** (in both synchronous and asynchronous forms, and in regular “coffee breaks” online)
- **Specificity** (referring to specific ideas from readings and discussions)
- **Synchronous presence** (verbally and nonverbally engaged during synchronous activities)
- **Asynchronous presence** (being responsive on Discord and Moodle, and using Hypothesis for social annotations)

**Community and Communication Plan**

As a fully remote learning class about the digital world, ENG 296 obviously embraces technology. But it also recognizes that digital tools and environments complicate personal interactions. As a group, we will develop communication norms and expectations for the semester. We will also strive to balance expectations of engagement with privacy concerns and the threat of tech overload.

We’ll use several platforms throughout the semester:

- **Moodle.** Our online base for the semester will be Moodle. You’ll find the course calendar, links to readings, and discussion forums there. Moodle will also be where you submit assignments and receive feedback on those assignments. Links to all our other online platforms will branch out from Moodle.

- **Zoom.** Our synchronous class sessions will be hosted and recorded via Zoom. Shortly after a class session is over, I’ll share a link to the video via Moodle. Zoom’s auto-captioning will provide some measure of captioning for the videos.

- **Discord.** Originally geared toward gamers, Discord is a chat platform like Slack, but less formal. We’ll use Discord for asynchronous and synchronous informal chats. You can also DM each other and have small group discussions there. Discord can host audio and video channels, so it will be a home for coffee breaks and informal chats as well.
Google Docs. Your written work will be done on Google Docs. We may also work on collaborative documents throughout the semester, and the Google suite is what we’ll use.

Other tools. Given the nature of ENG 296, we may experiment with other platforms for online engagement and interaction.

Credits: Robot icon by iconcheese from the Noun Project
ENG 296 Weekly Calendar

Part 1: What is Science Fiction? (Week 1)

Tuesday, January 26 (Week 1)

- Introductions
- In-class: Ted Chiang, “What’s Expected of Us” (2005)

Thursday, January 28

- Moodle Activity: Annotate the Syllabus

Part 2: Cyberpunk (Weeks 2-4)

Tuesday, February 2 (Week 2)

- Blade Runner (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982)
- Moodle Activity
- Discord Activity: Live Chat during Blade Runner watch party

Thursday, February 4

- Blade Runner
- Moodle Activity

Tuesday, February 9 (Week 3)

- William Gibson, Neuromancer (1984), chapters 1-6
- Moodle Activity: What makes Neuromancer difficult?

Thursday, February 11

- Neuromancer, chapters 7-12
- Moodle Activity: Creating a Cyberpunk Glossary

Tuesday, February 16 (Week 4)

- Neuromancer, chapters 13-18
• Investigation #1 due

Thursday, February 18

• *Neuromancer*, chapters 19-24
• Moodle Activity

Part 3: Dystopia (Weeks 5-7)

Tuesday, February 23 (Week 5)

• Ursula Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973)
• Moodle Discussion Forum: Your Favorite Worst Dystopia

Thursday, February 25

• Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993), chapters 1-9
• Moodle Activity
• Video Essay Round #1 due Sunday, February 28

Tuesday, March 2 (Week 6)

• *Parable of the Sower*, chapters 10-16
• Moodle Activity

Thursday, March 4 - No Class

• No Class

Tuesday, March 9 (Week 7)

• *Parable of the Sower*, chapters 17-25
• Moodle Activity

Thursday, March 11

• *Parable of the Sower*
• Moodle Activity
Part 4: Decentering Humanity (Weeks 8-11)

Tuesday, March 16 (Week 8)

- Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely, *We3* (2005)
- Moodle Activity

Thursday, March 18

- *We3*
- Moodle Activity

Tuesday, March 23 (Week 9)

- Ted Chiang, “The Lifecycle of Software Objects” (2010), pages 62-123
- Moodle Activity

Thursday, March 25

- “The Lifecycle of Software Objects,” pages 123-172
- Video Essay Round #2 due Sunday, March 28

Tuesday, March 30 (Week 10)

- Selected episodes of *Black Mirror*
- Moodle Activity

Thursday, April 1

- Selected episodes of *Black Mirror*
- Moodle Activity

Tuesday, April 6 (Week 11)

- Selected episodes of *Black Mirror*
- Investigation #3 Due

Thursday, April 8 - No Class

- No Class
Part 5: Recentering Humanity (Weeks 12-14)

Tuesday, April 13 (Week 12)
- Moodle Activity

Thursday, April 15
- *Autonomous*, chapters 7-12
- Moodle Activity
- Video Essay Round #3 due Sunday, April 18

Tuesday, April 20 (Week 13)
- *Autonomous*, chapters 13-18
- Moodle Activity

Thursday, April 22
- *Autonomous*, chapters 19-23
- Moodle Activity

Tuesday, April 27 (Week 14)
- Unessay Show and Tell

Thursday, April 29
- Unessay Show and Tell