ENGL4160EA
Technology, Literacy, & Culture: How Games Tell Stories

Course Description
We are quickly approaching the 50th anniversary of Dungeons & Dragons, the 10th anniversaries of Twitch and Itch.io, and the ninth generation of video game consoles. The most successful TV/film Kickstarter of all time funded the animated series for D&D livestream Critical Role. Game Studies has existed as an interdisciplinary field for over three decades, with its own subfields and debates.

This course will explore games as storytelling devices. We'll read academic articles, games journalism, and video reviews, and think about what makes for successful writing about games. We'll think about the new narrative frames introduced by actual plays and livestreaming. We'll think about games as transmedia phenomena, influencing and being influenced by television, film, comic books, and many other genres and modes. We'll examine representation in games: both what is depicted and who creates them. And of course, share a lot of games, big and small, with one another.

Students will gain knowledge of the field of narratology (the study of the structure of stories) and how it related to ludology (the study of actions and events in games). In an active-learning classroom and in collaboration with the new RBD Library Innovation Commons, students will apply what they learn in practice as both makers and critics. No prior technical experience or console/specific platform is required.

Logistics
• Meetings: TTH 11.00 AM-12.15 PM, Library 3133
• Professor: Dr. Emily C. Friedman (she/her)
  o Email: ecfriedman@auburn.edu (expect response within 24 hrs during week)
  o Appointments (Zoom or in-person): https://calendly.com/emilycfriedman
    ▪ Best availability: before/after class (in person), TTH 1-5 PM (Zoom)

The University currently is operating under a mask mandate.
This course will continue to require a mask throughout the semester.
The Adventure
(a brief overview)

Part One: The Lore Dump
(Weeks 1-5)
We have a lot of different kinds of experience & expertise in the room, so we will spend the first weeks of the semester getting on the same page. This will be guided reading introducing narrative concepts, the history of roleplaying games.

Student Grade Contract (Due August 27)
Student Goal: Further Research/Making Interest Worksheet (Due September 17)

Part Two: The Open World
(Weeks 6-10)
After the Lore Dump, we will take some time to discuss what the collective’s interests are. This will be a good time to start thinking about what you want to do for your UnEssays. From there, we will select a set of readings and games to focus on.

Some possible pathways I’m prepared for:
- RPG design principles
- Representation & Equity
- Playing the Past
- Experimental games
- Visible & Invisible Labor
- RPG History
- Multiday campaign in a single RPG system
- Extended viewing/response to a livestream (or comparative streams)
- Applications of RPGs (in teaching, mental health, etc.)
- Further exploration in any topics already covered

Student Goal: UnEssay Proposal (Due October 21)

Part Three: How Do You Want To Do This?
(Weeks 11-15)
In the final month of the course, you will work on your last UnEssay, which will look differently for every student. We will work together to support each other in this work.

Student Goal: Final UnEssay (Due Last Week of Class)
(“Final Exam” is reflection writing)
The Adventure
(full reading schedule for Weeks 1-5, Other Due Dates)

Note: these initial weeks of readings are designed as invitations to further reading, viewing, listening, & playing. They are generally the tip of a much larger iceberg. Readings are subject to change – when in doubt, Canvas is the official record of reading assignments.

Note: All readings, videos, and podcasts are available on Perusall unless otherwise specified. If you have challenges with video/audio playback in Perusall, the exact title has been used from the RSS feed or YouTube, so you should be able to find it quickly.

Week 1: What is a Roleplaying Game?

Tuesday:
- Syllabus Overview
- Contract Grading Discussion
- Game Gallery
- Travis Casey, “What is a Roleplaying Game?” (2021)
- **In-Class Play:** Two Rooms & A Boom (2013)
  
  If you miss class: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMy2EDfkTa8

Thursday:
- Deterding and Zagal, “Many Faces of Role-Playing Game Studies,” “Definitions of Role-Playing Games” from Role-playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations (Routledge, 2018) (51 pages)
- Monte Cook, “The Game Master and the Roleplaying Game Campaign (7 pages)
- **In-Class Play:** For the Queen (card-based RPG)

Further Reading:
- José P. Zagal, “An Analysis of Early 1980s English Language Commercial TRPG Definitions” (26 pages)
Week 2: Writing About Games (Part One)

Tuesday:
(it’s my birthday, so... I’m making you read my work?)
- Friedman, "Is It Thursday Yet?" Narrative Time in Critical Role" (2020)
- Friedman, “Fantasy Friends” (work in progress)
- Colville, The Climax of Critical Role, Season One, and "Mistakes." Running the Game #49 (2017)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nz8EoyXTHV8 (35 minutes)

Thursday:
- **Class Visit (virtual): Mx. Tiffany Leigh (confirmed)**
- Leigh, “In the Shadow of Protest – Bloc by Bloc: The Insurrection” and “The Brindlewood Bay RPG and the Mystery of Cozy”
- Richard A. Bartle, “Alice and Dorothy Battle Together” (10 pages)
- Ken Rolston, “My Story Never Ends” (5 pages)

Week 3: Narrative & Genre

Tuesday:
- **Read:** Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941, 1962 English)
- **Play:** www.borges.garden
- Grouling Cover, from The creation of narrative in tabletop role-playing games (2010)
- **In-Class Play:** Tim Hutchings, Thousand Year Old Vampire (2020) (sample)
  https://timhutchings.itch.io/tyov

Thursday: Twine & Interactive Fiction
- “The Ideology of Ludology and Narratology in the studies of Analog Play and Games” (2015)
- **Pre-Class Play:**
  - Porpentine Charity Heartscape, Howling Dogs (201):
    http://slimedaughter.com/games/twine/howlingdogs/
    https://matthewseiji.itch.io/twwds
- **In-Class Play:** story framing with Twinery.org
Week 4: Obligatory *Dungeon & Dragons* Lore

**Tuesday: Overview**
- Watch: Stephen Colbert & Matthew Mercer, Red Nose Day Charity D&D One-Shot (2019)
- **In-Class Play**: Character Formation, 5th Edition Dungeons & Dragons (D&D 5e) *(you can also use dndbeyond.com – founded in Alabama!)*

**Thursday: Debates**
- 2014 - Trammel, “Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons” | *Analog Game Studies*
- Portraying Asian Themes and Ideas in D&D - D&D Beyond

**Week 5: Actual Play**

**Tuesday**
- **Watch**: *Misfits & Magic* Episode 1 (2021)

**Thursday**
- Class Visit, London Carlisle (Auburn Alum, actor, streamer)

**Weeks 6-11: Student-Directed Reading & Viewing**

*Some Possible Pathways Forward:*
- Multiday campaign in a single RPG system
- Extended viewing/response to a livestream (or comparative streams)
- Designing RPGs
- Live Action Roleplaying (LARP)
- Audience Analysis/Reader Response (player “bleed”)
- Mechanics and Storytelling
- Applications of RPGs (in teaching, mental health, etc.)
Roleplaying games are collaborative exercises. While there are sometimes stats/strengths, there aren’t winners and losers. The experience, the process, is everything. In that spirit, this course will use principles of ungrading and contract grading. I have looked to my friend and colleague Professor Ryan Cordell and the work of Professor Cathy Davidson as I have developed my version of contract grading for this course. To quote Davidson:

_The advantage of contract grading is that you, the student, decide how much work you wish to do this semester; if you complete that work on time and satisfactorily, you will receive the grade for which you contracted. This means planning ahead, thinking about all of your obligations and responsibilities this semester and also determining what grade you want or need in this course._

_The advantage of contract grading to the professor is no whining, no special pleading, on the students part. If you complete the work you contracted for, you get the grade. Done. I respect the student who only needs a C, who has other obligations that preclude doing all of the requirements to earn an A in the course, and who contracts for the C and carries out the contract perfectly. (This is another one of those major life skills: taking responsibility for your own workflow.)_
To fulfill any grade contract a student must do the following, which should nonetheless be specified in the contract submitted for approval. When writing self-assessments students must describe how they have met these requirements in addition to the grade-specific requirements:

1. Come to class prepared to discuss any assigned readings, videos, or other media. Participate actively in class activities and discussions, making observations and asking questions that help the class think together.
2. Meet with me (on Zoom, before/after class, or another scheduled time) at least once around midterm (roughly between weeks 5-8) to ensure you are on-track to meet your contract requirements, discuss any questions or concerns you have about the course or your progress, and decide on any necessary contract amendments.
3. Contribute significantly to a [ ]
4. Revise contractual assignments as necessary until both you and I consider them “Satisfactory.”
5. Complete a final self-assessment demonstrating that your work has met the agreed requirements, submitting it to me no later than 3pm on Friday, December 10.

All students will submit a written contract:

1. the requirements you will meet in order to receive the grade for which you’ve contracted,
2. the penalties you will incur for not meeting those requirements,
3. a calendar you will follow for meeting the requirements you have outlined. Many aspects of this calendar will be determined by windows outlined on the course schedule, but your contract will take ownership of these deadlines while committing to specific due dates for the course’s more flexible assignments.

Contract Adjustments

Periodically during the semester I will ask you to evaluate your work thus far and compare it against what you agreed in your grade contract. In these moments you can also take the opportunity to request an adjustment to your contract in either direction. If you find that you will be unable to meet the obligations of your contract, you may request to move to the next lowest grade and its requirements. Contrariwise, if you find that you’ve been performing above the obligations of your contract, you may request to fulfill the requirements for the next higher grade.

Important Note: In order to effectively evaluate your own progress, you must keep track of your work, including days missed, IO days taken, and so forth.
Master of the Realm (A)

To contract for an “A” in this course, you agree to:

1. Meaningful annotations on all Perusall readings/viewings save two.
2. Take no more than one information overload day during the semester.
3. Write at least eight “Satisfactory” reports for either playtests or actual plays/livestreams OR scholarly article outlines over the course of the semester. Reports are due within a week of play session/viewing.
4. Complete two “Satisfactory” Unessays on a schedule you will specify in your contract and present the strongest in class in the last week of class (November 29)

Hero of the Realm (B)

To contract for an “B” in this course, you agree to:

1. Meaningful annotations on all Perusall readings/viewings save three.
2. Take no more than two information overload day during the semester.
3. Write at least seven “Satisfactory” reports for either playtests or actual plays/livestreams OR scholarly article outlines over the course of the semester. Reports are due within a week of play session/viewing.
4. Complete one “Satisfactory” Unessay on a schedule you will specify in your contract and present it in the last week of class (November 29)

Local Hero (C)

To contract for an “C” in this course, you agree to:

1. Meaningful annotations on all Perusall readings/viewings save four.
2. Take no more than three information overload days during the semester. Write at least six “Satisfactory” reports for either playtests or actual plays/livestreams OR scholarly article outlines over the course of the semester. Reports are due within a week of play session/viewing.
3. Complete one “Satisfactory” Unessay on a schedule you will specify in your contract, which you may choose to present or not in the last week of class (November 29)

NonPlayer Character (D and F)

Professor Cordell and I shamelessly quote Professor Davidson, again:

_The professor reserves the right to award a grade of D or F to anyone who fails to meet a contractual obligation in a systematic way. A “D” grade denotes some minimal fulfilling of the contract. An “F” is absence of enough satisfactory work, as contracted, to warrant passing of the course. Both a “D” and “F” denote a breakdown of the contractual relationship implied by signing any of the contracts described above._
Community Policies

In all our interactions this semester, we should lead first with empathy and understanding. We are all feeling our way to what the new "normal" is, and community can help us do that. In my courses, we do not debate people’s right to personhood, legal identity, and ability to live in peace. We use people’s preferred names and pronouns. We don’t make people the butt of the joke, and we laugh with, not at each other. It is all of our responsibility to hold this standard for one another and to constructively challenge behavior that falls below this line. We’re learning and you can learn here. If something happens that needs my attention or if you have any questions about this, email me. (my thanks to Professor Kate Ozment for this language)

Your BodyMind At Work: All of us come into this class with different bodyminds (a term borrowed from disability studies). I try my best to honor that variety in my teaching. That means I recognize that "participation" looks different for different people, and that we have different needs (and sometimes that can vary from day to day). It also means that any student can request accommodations, regardless of official documented status. This can be included in the grading contract.

Participation

Participation isn’t explicitly graded, but all grading contracts assume you will come prepared to class and participate actively in our collective learning. Participation can look like a lot of different things, depending on your personality and inclinations – all are valid:

1. Raising ideas from our assigned materials for class discussion, including directing our attention to specific moments you found evocative, inspiring, infuriating, or otherwise salient
2. Asking questions about materials or ideas you found puzzling or difficult (I cannot overstate how valuable good questions are to a thriving class, and how desperately I wish more students were courageous in asking them);
3. Sending pertinent materials discovered outside of class to Dr. Friedman or the course Discord, or bringing them to our attention during discussion;
4. Assisting classmates with lab assignments or other in-class work;
5. Visiting during office hours to extend course conversations around subjects or questions you find particularly interesting.

Attendance

Similarly, these following are baseline expectations about what “attendance” means:

- Be awake and attentive to the conversation of the day;
- Prepare assigned texts before class begins;
- Bring your assigned texts to class. If we’re reading online articles, you should either bring a device on which to read them or print them and bring that hard copy.
“Information Overload” Days

I do understand that the semester can get hectic. The reading load for this class is often challenging, and you must balance it with the work in your other classes. Most likely you will have days when you simply cannot—for whatever reason—complete the assigned reading. Please do not simply skip class, compounding your stresses, when this happens. Instead, you may take “information overload” (IO) days during the semester up to the number specified in your grade contract. On these days you will not be expected to contribute to class discussion and you will receive a pass on class preparation. In order to take an IO day, you must follow these rules:

1. You must attend class, listen attentively to any lectures or class discussions, and take part in any activities or group work not dependent on the day’s reading. Your IO days cannot be used as additional excused absences.
2. You must inform me before the beginning of class that you are taking your IO day. You may not wait until I call on you or until you see day’s the in-class assignment. I will deny any IO requests made during class. To that end: take special care to be on time if you plan to request an IO day, as you won’t be allowed to request one if you arrive late.
3. You may not extend an IO day into another class session. If, for instance, you take your IO day during our first class on a novel, you will not then be excused from discussing the book during subsequent classes.
4. You may not take an IO day to avoid completing a major assignment.
5. In general you should not use IO days to avoid drafting writing before our in-class workshops. The writing demands in this class are high and the workshops are designed to help you stay on task for completing them, as well as to give you valuable feedback as you write or revise. It would strongly advise against foregoing these benefits.

IO days are intended to help you manage the inevitable stresses of your individual semester. Use them wisely.

Technical Snafus

This course will rely on access to computers, specific software, and the internet. At some point during the semester you WILL have a problem with technology: your laptop will crash, a file will become corrupted, a server will go down, a piece of software will not act as you expect it to, or something else will occur. These are facts of twenty-first-century life, not emergencies. To succeed in college and in your career you should develop work habits that take such snafus into account. Start assignments early and save often. Always keep a backup copy of your work saved somewhere secure (preferably off site). None of these unfortunate events should be considered emergencies: inkless printers, computer virus infections, lost flash drives, lost passwords, corrupted files, incompatible file formats. It is entirely your responsibility to take the proper steps to ensure your work will not be lost irretrievably; if one device or service isn’t working, find another that does. When problems arise in the software I have assigned for you to learn, we will work through those problems together and learn thereby. However, I will not grant you an extension based on problems you may be having with the specific devices or the internet services you happen to use.