

## COM 390-102 Electronic Writing Workshop

### Course Outline and Syllabus

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Office Hours: T/Th 1:15-2:15 pm W (by appt.)  
Classroom: GITC 2400  
Term: Spring 2024

### Course Format and Objectives

This class will meet for formal crits and discussion on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 2:30 and 3:50 pm. Extra writing labs and project help can be scheduled on Wednesdays between 12 pm and 4 pm one week in advance.

#### *Instructional Objectives*

*As Theodor Nelson notes in his famous and early study of hypertext formats, Literary Machines, "a computer is essentially a trained squirrel: acting on reflex, thoughtlessly running back and forth and storing nuts away until some other stimulus makes it do something else;" nevertheless, few tools beyond computation has provided literature and its many genres with the in-depth capacity to change the very foundations of modern literacy.*

*On one level, this course seeks to explore the growing number of cultural intersections between art, information, and computation that, in turn, inspire a diverse range of new, often experimental directions in digital writing. Looking at a variety of exemplary programmable literary works now in circulation while tracing them historically to pre-digital culture will provide valuable starting points for long-term critical analysis and discussion. On another, more production-oriented level, the course challenges us to engage with these technologies as creative artists and thinkers calling on you to represent a new generation of authors and readers. Participants will be given the opportunity to work on a select number of screen-oriented literary projects, employing a wide range of different digital tools and software made available for electronic art and writing.*

### Course Requirements

Participation:	10%
Formal Critiques (4x5)	20%
Electronic Writing Projects (5 x 10)	50%
Portfolio with statement	20%

### Exam Dates and Policies:

There are no formal exams scheduled for this course

### Course Prerequisites: Successful completion of HSS 101 and HSS 102

## Primary Course Themes and Topics

Electronic literary practices introduce us to many important arguments concerning the complex relationship between technology and aesthetics that has evolved over the past two centuries. Few can doubt the significance of ongoing advances in design and reproduction technologies as a fundamental feature of our cultural ecosystem, exemplifying our immense capacity as social beings to communicate effectively with each other and build integrated systems of interaction. This course aims to show ongoing diversity in cultural values and creative modes of expression such systems continue to generate will be explored according to four primary themes:

### **Visual Meaning/Mapping and its Relationship to Technological Advances in Graphics and Representation**

As will become quickly evident in this course, imagery and visual media continue to lead creative art. And if we begin to understand language in this way, it is not surprising to see how important computation and coding practices have subsequently become to all writing practices in general. The contemporary poet and literary theorist Christian Bok once exclaimed that the increased prominence of digital media in culture demands all writers, regardless of the genre they work in, to have to know how to code or program in their work. Just how important computer languages are to literary writing will come up as a topic of discussion throughout the course, but even if we decide that actual programming skills are not mandatory in the literary arts, we will still need to consider how computation technology continues to influence our cultural literacies.

### **Digital Aesthetics**

Cultural relationships between technology and aesthetics run quite deep, invoking many complex arguments and historical lineages of debate and discussion within modernity from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present moment. The enduring sensual appeal to both the eye and ear of simple geometric patterns and logical systems immediately complicates any quick interpretation of facts and ideas in messages. As we'll see early in the course, our very capacity to comprehend and evaluate information seems to carry an innate aesthetic dimension, where the design and layout of data deeply affect how clearly, quickly and easily it is understood. Many, if not all, of the projects assigned here will thus inherently challenge us to develop aesthetic theories of knowledge construction – in other words, how the design of work plays a central role in how well we understand the messages and ideas informing it.

### **Interactive Storytelling and Strategic Engagement**

Although we'll be working in a variety of different genres and forms of writing, each of the five major projects we produce over the course of the term will feature, perhaps even focus, on how writers and readers continue to interact directly with the story as it takes place, typically evoking elements of uncertainty and strategic thinking. Ambiguity and multiple interpretations seem almost inherently central in all interactive media. In fact, the recent introduction of gen-AI tools seems to have only increased the need to develop clear strategies in how we create and produce art. The more advanced, screen-based projects will look specifically at digital media according to three different modes of digital interaction: performative, immersive and network-based.

### **Media and Social Praxis**

Digital media formats extensively redefine both the functional and social roles of nearly every type of cultural communication in the present day. Our discussions and project work within the course accordingly give us the opportunity to discuss how these changes may influence political and ideological positions as new modes of social interaction are developed. Such issues will be specifically examined in relation to contemporary practices in tactical media and participatory culture.

## Detailed Description of Course Assignments

### **Attendance and Participation:**

Each class will offer students the opportunity to engage simultaneously in both a workshop and seminar environment. The workshop portions of these classes allow students to actively engage with and use sound production technologies. My pedagogy emphasizes a learner active approach to in-class assignments, where I hope

*learners* lead discussions as often as *me*, the instructor. Learners are encouraged to introduce material and ideas they believe are relevant to the topic at hand. Learners are expected to attend every class.

Absences due to illness must be confirmed a minimum of **4 hours** before class by email to avoid penalty. In-class activities and general participation will account for **10 marks** and will be based on both the frequency, relevance, and general quality of the learner's comments, questions, and observations. More than **6 unexcused absences (6 weeks of the curriculum)** will result in automatic failure of the course; excessive unexcused lateness of **15 minutes** or more throughout the course will be considered as **one absence**. Learners who expect to miss classes or exams because of religious observance or athletic events must submit to their instructors a written list of dates that will be missed by the end of the third week of classes. Learners are expected to make up missed work to receive full or partial marks.

- **If a class cannot be attended for any reason other than physical illness, I must be notified a minimum of one day before the class is scheduled to enable me to prepare alternative access to the same material.**
- **Extra time to complete individual assignments must be petitioned a minimum of one week (7 days) before the assignment is due.**
- **Assignment drafts or requests for assignment-specific advice must arrive a minimum of 9 days before the assignment's due date if extra help is to be delivered in a timely fashion.**

Alternative submission access for late assignments and extra course material will be provided for each graded task; however, late assignments and missed classes that occur outside these guidelines will be penalized. Late assignments will be deducted 10 percent of the task's course value up to 1 week after the submission date. Late assignments will be deducted 20 percent of the task's course value from 8 days to 2 weeks after the submission date. Late assignments will be deducted 50 percent of the task's course value from 15 days to 4 weeks after the submission date. Assignments missing for more than 4 weeks will not be accepted. No late assignment will receive commentary supplementary to its graded evaluation.

Proper and accepted communication guidelines serve to minimize the risk of penalty in terms of grading as well as critical commentary. Compromising your access to resources, including the time you may need to complete each assignment, can be seriously incapacitating, preventing you from learning the actual skills and approaches required to understand the course material. This will remain a very serious risk throughout the term. Providing information as early as possible concerning any challenges you are facing this term will enable me to work with you more effectively and conceivably prevent the assigned work from overtaking your abilities. Losing access to the course material and my assistance strongly risks a withdrawal or a grade of F by the end of the term.

Learner success in this course demands consistent access and proper use of these electronic resources is the student's responsibility, as it is assumed that their general availability is constant, 24/7. If technical problems with the software or any specific interface occur during the course, it is up to the student to contact either the professor or one of the IT/Help resources associated with the website as quickly as possible.

## **Electronic Writing Projects**

Five different writing projects, each one designed around distinct electronic/programmable tools and some of the themes and debates about creative writing these technologies often generate, will comprise the bulk of assigned and assessed work. The coursework has been organized to provide an overview of multimedia formats in literature as their technical complexity and sophistication as digital works of art continue to evolve.

**The types of projects include the following genres or programming styles associated with electronic writing:**

- **Infoaesthetics and Visual Design**
- **Non-linear or Hypertext Narratives**
- **Combinatorial Poetics: Language Models, Processors, and Generators**
- **Tactical, Gaming, Puzzle-based Narratives**
- **Interactive texting stories/videos**

**Due dates and technology information are listed in the syllabus**

## **Academic Writing**

### **Formal Critiques**

Four formal critical papers will be assigned, complementing (in theme) the five creative assignments. While providing an opportunity to determine effective principles (perhaps even codes) for assessing them, the course also includes four critical analyses to be completed over the term. Each critique will feature a range of questions and topics specifically relevant to the writing assignment under consideration at the same time.

**The critiques are organised according to the following themes:**

- **Form and Function**
- **Experiments with Textuality**
- **Literary Machines**
- **Learning by Playing**

**Due dates and resource information are listed in the syllabus**

All written assignments should conform to the guidelines for presentation set out in the class. Any evaluative or critical papers should be submitted in accordance with the MLA style sheet as laid out in the most recent edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. The correct use of sources and their documentation remain important factors in the grading schema.

## **Course Policy on the Use of AI Content Generators for *Formal Critiques Only***

**Writing practices are being drastically transformed by advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI content generators (e.g. ChatGPT) are acceptable for use in this course if the following guidelines are followed:**

- **AI-generated texts *cannot* be submitted as original work for assessment. However, AI content generators can be used for early drafts. Learners are expected to revise and submit an original draft for final assessment.**
- **Extra cover sheet with the following details must be submitted with your assignment, including:**
  - 1. name of AI content generator used**
  - 2. date used**
  - 3. prompt or prompts submitted to the AI content generator**
  - 4. The full AI version of draft with the final document the student has revised and written for assessment**

**Learners not in full compliance with this policy will receive an automatic F.**

**Required Texts:** Consistent with the workshop format, there are no specific texts required for purchase, though learners are obliged to survey examples of electronic literature and read all assigned critical essays as they are made available on the Canvas site in the form of electronic, downloadable documents. They will help facilitate ideas, class discussion and possible models for your own work.

## Student Outcomes

Upon successful completion of these activities, students will be able to:

- Introduction to electronic writing and literature and some of the software, methods/practices, history that inform its production
- Introduction to current e-lit archives, and networks supporting publication and distribution venues
- Develop your own practices in the field
- Develop peer review and critical practices in the field
- Develop your own venues and networks of publication, promotion, and distribution

## Course Rubric

A = 90-100	B+ = 87-89	B = 80-86	C+ = 77-79	C = 70-76	D = 60-69	F = 0 – 59
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**Exam Dates and Policies:** No exam is scheduled for this course

**Course Prerequisites:** Successful completion of HSS 101 and HSS 102

# Syllabus Outline

Date	Topics/Projects	Due Dates, Assignments and Readings
<b>Week 1</b> <b>16/18 January</b>	<b>Artifice and Intelligence: An Introduction to Electronic Creative Writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Course Introduction: Electronic concepts on reading, writing, and clicking in the digital era</li> </ul>	<b>No Reading Assignment</b>
<b>Week 2</b> <b>23/25 January</b>	<b>Early Forages and Explorations</b> Class Discussion: Pre-electronic and non-electronic or analogue modes of digital writing	<b>Critical Readings:</b> Kenneth Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?" from <i>Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing</i> . <b>Literary Readings:</b> Selected concrete poems, infoaesthetic technologies; See Canvas site <b>Begin Project 1: Being Visual (Due Week 4)</b>
<b>Week 3</b> <b>30/1 February</b>	<b>Form and Function: An Intro to Visual Meaning in Writing</b> <b>Concrete and Visual Poetics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Playing with Data</li> <li>Using datamining tools</li> </ul> <b>Roundtable Discussions: Infoaesthetics and Visualization</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creative Experiments using Maps, Charts, Graphs and Genealogies, and Datamining tools</li> <li>How do we compare visual or concrete poetics and digital poetics?</li> </ul>	<b>Critical Readings:</b> Walter Ong, "Print, Space, and Closure," taken from <i>Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word</i> (1982) <b>Literary Readings:</b> Selected Concrete poems, infoaesthetic technologies; See Canvas site <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Formal Critique 1: Being Visual (Due Week 5)</b></li> <li><b>Project 1 Workshop</b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 4</b> <b>6/8 February</b>	<b>Visual and Image-based and Storytelling</b> <b>Experimenting with Imagery and Textuality</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examples of Image-based "narratives"</li> <li>From Robert Smithson to Jeff Wall likeness, image, portrait</li> <li>"Pictures Generation" (1974-1984)</li> </ul>	<b>Assign draft versions of Visual/Image-based and Digital Storytelling:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Project 1 Due</b></li> <li><b>Showcase Project 1</b></li> <li><b>Draft Image-based Narratives</b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 5</b> <b>13/15 February</b>	<b>Roundtable Discussion: Mise-en-scene and how every media form tells a story.</b> <b>Hypertexts: Textuality and Link as a literary device</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ted Nelson and the Network as a Readership</li> </ul>	<b>Literary Readings:</b> Pictures Generation Selections; See Canvas site <b>Critical Readings:</b> Janet H. Murray, "The Cyberbard and the Multiform Plot," from <i>Hamlet on the Holodeck</i> , (MIT press, 1997; 2016) Jeremy Andriano, <i>Creating Playable Stories with Ink and Inky</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Formal Critique 1 Due</b></li> <li><b>Project 2: Take me to your Reader: Experiments in Interactive Fiction (IF) (Due Week 7)</b></li> <li><b>Introduce Twine as an IF tool</b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 6</b> <b>20/22 February</b>	<b>Electronic Literary Genres: New Interfaces, New Interactivities</b> <b>Roundtable Discussion: Rhizomatic Thinking: The Reader as Writer</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From StorySpace to the Web</li> </ul> <b>Introduction to Twine and Network-Based Writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Twine Basics</li> <li>Using CSS/JS in Twine</li> </ul>	<b>Literary Readings: (Generate Fiction)</b> <b>Critical Annotated Readings:</b> Scott Rettberg, "Hypertext Fiction" From <i>Electronic Literature</i> (Polity, 2019) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Project 2 Workshop</b></li> </ul>

<b>Week 7</b> 27/29 February	<b>Roundtable Discussion: Designing Responsive Modes of Writing.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What happens to literacy and textuality when books, interactive storytelling, and even games all seem to unify into a single new form of reading and writing.</li> </ul>	<b>Literary Readings</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Project 2 Due</b></li> <li><b>Showcase Project 2</b></li> <li><b>Begin Formal Critique 2 (Due Week 10)</b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 8</b> 5/7 March	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Literary and Poetic Machines</b></p> <b>Procedure and Immersion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Roots of Procedural Poetry: Potential Literature: from Mac Low to OuLiPo</li> <li>Computationalism and Coding as an Artform</li> </ul> <b>Generative Writing and the Culture of Indeterminacy</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>The Algorithm as Author</b></li> <li><b>Remixed Readings</b></li> </ul> <p>GTR Workbench</p>	<b>Literary Readings: (Generated Fiction)</b> Selected Experimental Narratives; Selections from Milton Laufer, <i>A Noise Such as a Man Might Make</i> (Counterpath, 2018) Ractor, <i>Policeman's Beard</i> , (1984)  <b>Critical Readings:</b> Scott Rettberg, "Hypertext Fiction," from <i>Electronic Literature</i> (Polity, 2019).  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Begin Project 3: The Algorithm as Author: Experiments in Generated/AI Narratives (Due Week 11)</b></li> </ul>

**10-17 March**

### Week 9 (Spring Break)

<b>Week 10</b> 19/21 March	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Gaming and Metagaming</b></p> <b>Roundtable Discussion: Building Strategies for Interactive Fiction and Text Games</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gaming and Rule-based Social Interaction</li> <li>Text Gaming from Zork to MUD</li> <li>AI and Text Gaming</li> </ul>	<b>Critical Readings:</b> Aaron A. Reed, "Zork, Pirate Adventure, The Cave of Time" from <i>50 Years of Text Games</i> (92-123) Aaron A. Reed "AI Dungeon by Nick Walton" from <i>50 Years of Text Games</i> (589-599)  <b>Literary Readings:</b> Luka Rejec, "Holy Mountain Shaker" (2021) Nick Walton "AI Dungeon" (2023)  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Formal Critique 2 Due</b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 11</b> 27/29 March	<b>Roundtable Discussion: Social Play and Community Building</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can RPGs help build strong social relationships? What are the social benefits and challenges of communities that might emerge from gaming and roleplaying?</li> </ul>	<b>Critical Readings:</b> Alejandro Ponce de Leon: Architectural Soundscapes for Project 4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Project 3 Due</b></li> <li><b>Begin Project 4: Interactive Play and Narrative: Interactive Soundscapes (Due Week 13)</b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 12</b> 2/4 April	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Experiments in Performance and Haptic Technologies</b></p> <b>Roundtable Discussion: Inter/tactile Media</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Netprov</li> <li>Live Coding</li> </ul>	<b>Critical Readings:</b> Rob Wittig, "The Impulse to Fiction" from <i>Netprov Networked Improvised Literature for the Classroom and Beyond</i> (Amherst College Press, 2022) _____, "Literature and Netprov in Social Media" from <i>Bloomsbury Handbook</i> (2018).  <b>Begin Formal Critique 3 (Due Week 14)</b>
<b>Week 13</b> 9/11 April	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Experiments in Performance and Haptic Technologies</b></p> <b>Roundtable Discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Showcase Project 4</b></li> </ul> <b>Roundtable Discussion: Participatory Culture and Literary Communities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Project 4 Due</b></li> <li><b>Begin Formal Critique 4 (Due Week 15)</b></li> <li><b>Begin Project 5: Chat and Text Message Stories (Due Week 15)</b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 14</b> 16-18 April	<b>Roundtable Discussion: Participatory Culture and Literary Communities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social Media, Mobile Telephony and Writing Experiments in Reality Media and Immersive Art</li> </ul>	<b>Literary Readings:</b> Selected Texting or Chat Stories; See Canvas site <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Formal Critique 3 Due</b></li> <li><b>Project 5 Workshop</b></li> </ul>

**Week 15**  
**23-25**

**Portfolios and Class Questions**

- Discussion on Portfolio Design
- Showcase submitted Texting Stories

**Critical Readings:**

Maria Engberg and Jay David Bolter, "The Aesthetics of Reality Media," *Journal of Visual Culture* (2020)

- **Project 5 Due**
- **Formal Critique 4 Due**
- **Portfolios (Due 4 May/Reading Day)**