**English 20303**

**Writing Games**

Spring 2013

Scharbauer 3019

9:30 – 10:50 am T R

**Dr. Jason Helms**

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**Office Hours:** W 9 – 10 and 11 – noon (Scharbauer 2003)

R 11 – noon (Reed 317c) and by appointment

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T 11 – noon (Reed 402) and by appointment

**Course Description**

Much like a culture’s writing practice in general, games provide insight into the people by whom they are produced and consumed. Just as ancient board games like *Mancala* are key artifacts for understanding cultures of the past, today’s games articulate much about who we are and what we value. Games both influence and are influenced by other elements of culture, as we see game adaptations of books and movies as often as games themselves are depicted through other media. Video games, in particular, have become a major part of American culture, as titles like *Skyrim* have budgets of over 100 million dollars and are played by millions of people all over the world, making them as economically and culturally pervasive as books, television, and even film. Video game simulations are also used as training tools in professions as diverse as sports, medicine, and even the military.

While games are themselves written by designers, a great deal of writing is also produced through and about the play of those games. ***English 20303: Writing Games***, asks students to explore the rhetorical dimensions of writing within and about games, considering both how games are a form of writing and how writing hybridizes genre conventions. While both games and writing have long been important elements of culture, students in this class will come to better understanding how the two are mutually informative. Students will consider how games inform writing, how writing informs games, and how both games and writing compose the world at large.

This iteration of the course will focus on text-based games. Text-based games or interactive fiction (IF) have been around for over thirty years, and still retain a vibrant community of designers and players. While many videogames are written metaphorically (like a film is “written” beyond the script), these games are designed entirely through text. As you design your own games, you will be doing a great deal of writing. You will design two games for this course. The first game will be collaboratively designed and you will be responsible for one small part of it. The second game will be entirely your own. We will start small, with no assumption that anyone knows anything about coding, video games, or even computers. The program we will be using, Inform, is renowned for its ease of use. Smaller projects along the way will help you to become competent in basic interactive fiction writing.

**Required Textbooks & Materials**

1. Various handouts and selected articles, videos, and games online
2. Regular access to e-college and TCU e-mail
3. Regular access to files on thumb drive, dropbox, or other device
4. Inform 7 (free download)

**Learning Outcomes**

1. Demonstrate competence with contemporary writing theory through critical analysis and discussion of theoretical texts, practicing the problem-solving skills of critical reading and interpretation.
2. Pose and answer critical questions about the value of writing and games in human culture through primary and secondary research
3. Demonstrate knowledge of the ways various modes of language – including verbal, visual, cinematic, and procedural – are deployed in gaming culture through rhetorical analysis of primary texts (including interactive texts)
4. Compose in a variety of modes and reflect critically on the choices made in those compositions, demonstrating awareness of how those choices are guided by considerations of audience, context, etc.
5. Compose original arguments about the influence of writing on gaming culture, gaming culture on writing, and gaming culture on culture at large
6. Demonstrate an understanding of the interconnectedness of society, culture, and individual identity through analysis of cultural and social constructions of individual identity in video games.

**Course Requirements & Grading**

All students in the course will produce the following products. A grading breakdown is included at the end of this section.GTAs make grade recommendations in this class.  All final grades for every assignment are determined by the Professor.

Minor Assignments

Throughout the semester there will be quizzes, informal writing, and other assignments. Some of these will be to engage with the reading done for class, typically not just checking to see if you read, but asking you to think further. Some of these will be used as “scaffolding,” building between projects. These will introduce new concepts or techniques to help you with these projects. Some will be technological, for example, creating an object in Inform. Others will be reflective, for example, reviewing a video game to enable you to improve your own game design.

Project 1: Rhetorical Analysis

This project will ask you to ‘read’ a video game critically, interpreting it as a rhetorical artifact and solving the problems it presents as a cultural artifact. More specifically, we will look at how video games can be used to construct identities. We compose ourselves through our reading, our writing, our work, and our play. Focusing on a game not already played for this class, I want you to consider how the game designer constructs the player. How can the player also compose her or himself? What choices did the designer make? What choices can a player make? What problems did the designer face and how did she or he overcome them? How does the game designer rely on prior societal and cultural values, norms, or beliefs to create a compelling world for players? In this assignment, you will produce a 4-6 page rhetorical analysis of a game of your choosing, focusing on how the game uses rhetoric to connect author and audience.

Project 2a: A Room of One’s Own

Whereas Project 1 asked you to analyze how identities are constructed, Project two will ask you to take an active part in constructing the identity of a player. After spending some time playing games, it’s time to get serious and make one of your own. For this first project you will create a simple room in which a few objects exist. There must be at least two tasks for players to complete. There must be a win-game scenario. Your final product will be accompanied by a short essay (500-700 words) explaining how rhetorical considerations inform the choices made in your room and how player identity is constructed through your game design.

Project 2b: Plays Well with Others

Game design typically relies on collaboration between dozens of different people. While text-based gaming does not follow this trend, we will attempt to investigate it briefly. In this assignment, you will create a working room for a player to walk through. The room will contain objects that can be used in your room and at least one object that works in another person’s room. We will glue all of the rooms together into a single, playable game. During this project, you will. Your final product will be accompanied by a short, collaborative essay (500-700 words) explaining how working with others created challenges and opportunities for you.

Project 3: Gaming as Cultural Critique

In your final research project, you will produce a text-based game that interprets a pre-existing cultural artifact. A simple example would be adapting a popular film or book into a game. This, however, would not be enough because adaptation is only one level of interpretation. This assignments demands *critical* interpretation. For example, if you are adapting *Twilight*, you must offer commentary and analysis, not just transparent adaptation. A more complex example might involve players moving through the world of *Twilight*, but populating that world with objects that would analyze it. There might be a book on a table that offers a short history of vampires that players can read. Investigating the “sparkling” skin of one of the vampires might cause the player to think, “It sparkles like diamonds. That seems dumb. Is this even a vampire novel?” The possibilities for critique are endless as are the options for cultural objects. Films, books, commercial products (“Coca-Cola the Game!”), plays, television, music, and, of course, video games are all options.

## Grades

Simply fulfilling the minimum requirements of the course warrants an average grade (i.e., C).

Coming to class every day and doing assignments is not something that earns extra credit or an

automatic A; it’s an expectation for being in the course.

## Final Numerical Grade Calculation (+/-):

| **Grade** | **Score** |
| --- | --- |
| A | 94-100 |
| A- | 90-93 |
| B+ | 87-89 |
| B | 84-86 |
| B- | 80-83 |
| C+ | 77-79 |
| C | 74-76 |
| C- | 70-73 |
| D+ | 67-69 |
| D | 64-66 |
| D- | 60-63 |
| F | 0-59 |

Grading Weights

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Minor Assignments | 10% |
| Project 1: Rhetorical Analysis | 20% |
| Project 2a: A Room of One’s Own | 20% |
| Project 2b: Plays Well with Others | 20% |
| Project 3: Gaming as Cultural Critique | 30% |

Note: A grade of “C” on any assignment indicates that you have met the minimum requirements for that assignment adequately. A “B” indicates that you have exceeded expectations and produced a quality product, while an “A” indicates work that is exceptional. Grades of “D” and “F” are reserved for work that does not meet the requirements of an assignment.

**University Policies and Support**

New Media Writing Studio

The New Media Writing Studio (NMWS) is available to assist students with audio, video, multimedia, and web design projects. Located in Scharbauer 2003, the Studio serves as an open lab for use by students during posted hours. The Studio has both pc and Mac computers outfitted with Adobe CS3, which includes Adobe Acrobat, Dreamweaver, Photoshop, Flash, and InDesign. A variety of equipment is available for checkout to students whose teachers have contacted the Studio in advance. For more information and a schedule of open hours, see [www.newmedia.tcu.edu](https://mobile.tcu.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=1221ef495cce4fcc9c874a9fdb17d47b&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.newmedia.tcu.edu%2f" \t "_blank)

## The Writing Center

The Center for Writing offers assistance with writing projects and assignments to all TCU students. Staffed by professional writing instructors and peer consultants, the Center for Writing provides students with one-on-one tutorials free of charge. Conferences usually focus on a particular project or assignment, but may also include general writing instruction. The 10 PCs in the center's computer lab are available for use by any TCU student during normal office hours. Located in Reed Hall 419, the Center for Writing is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Students may make appointments by accessing an online scheduling service through the center's Web site ([www.wrt.tcu.edu](http://www.tcu.edu" \t "_self)) or by calling 817.257.6520.

## Policies and Procedures for Students with Disabilities:

*Disability Statement approved Fall 2007 by the Undergraduate Council / Revised Summer 2011*: Texas Christian University complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 regarding students with disabilities.  Eligible students seeking accommodations should contact the Coordinator of Student Disabilities Services in the Center for Academic Services located in Sadler Hall, 1010.  Accommodations are not retroactive, therefore, students should contact the Coordinator as soon as possible in the term for which they are seeking accommodations. Further information can be obtained from the Center for Academic Services, TCU Box 297710, Fort Worth, TX 76129, or at (817) 257-6567.

Adequate time must be allowed to arrange accommodations and accommodations are not retroactive; therefore, students should contact the Coordinator as soon as possible in the academic term for which they are seeking accommodations.  Each eligible student is responsible for presenting relevant, verifiable, professional documentation and/or assessment reports to the Coordinator.  Guidelines for documentation may be found at <http://www.acs.tcu.edu/disability_documentation.asp>.

Students with emergency medical information or needing special arrangements in case a building must be evacuated should discuss this information with their instructor/professor as soon as possible.

## TCU Campus Resources for Students

Many resources exist on the TCU campus that may be helpful to students: Mary Couts Burnett Library (257-7117); Center for Academic Services (257-7486, Sadler Hall. 1022); the William L. Adams Writing Center (257-7221, Reed Hall 419); Student Development Services (257-7855, BLUU 2003); and Office of Religious & Spiritual Life (257-7830, Jarvis Hall), Campus Life (257-7926, Sadler Hall 2006),  and the Counseling, Testing, and Mental Health Center (257-7863, Brown Lupton Health Center).

Academic Conduct Policy

An academic community requires the highest standards of honor and integrity in all of its participants if it is to fulfill its missions. In such a community faculty, students, and staff are expected to maintain high standards of academic conduct. The purpose of this policy is to make all aware of these expectations. Additionally, the policy outlines some, but not all, of the situations which can arise that violate these standards. Further, the policy sets forth a set of procedures, characterized by a "sense of fair play," which will be used when these standards are violated. In this spirit, definitions of academic misconduct are listed below. These are not meant to be exhaustive.

Academic Misconduct  
Any act that violates the spirit of the academic conduct policy is considered academic misconduct. Any act that violates the academic integrity of the institution is considered academic misconduct. The procedures used to resolve suspected acts of academic misconduct are available in the offices of Academic Deans and the Office of Campus Life and are listed in detail in the Undergraduate Catalog (Student Policies>Academic Conduct Policy Details; <http://www.catalog.tcu.edu/current_year/undergraduate/>). Specific examples include, but are not limited to:

**Cheating**: Copying from another student’s test paper, laboratory report, other report, or computer files and listings; using, during any academic exercise, material and/or devices not authorized by the person in charge of the test; collaborating with or seeking aid from another student during a test or laboratory without permission; knowingly using, buying, selling, stealing, transporting, or soliciting in its entirety or in part, the contents of a test or other assignment unauthorized for release; substituting for another student or permitting another student to substitute for oneself.

**Plagiarism**: The appropriation, theft, purchase or obtaining by any means another’s work, and the unacknowledged submission or incorporation of that work as one’s own offered for credit. Appropriation includes the quoting or paraphrasing of another’s work without giving credit therefore.  *(If you are using Turnitin* [*www.turnitin.com*](http://www.turnitin.com/)*, place information about your course ID and password or LearningStudio dropbox reporting.  If you only want to use Turnitin as a spot check, please indicate in your syllabus that you may use Turnitin for plagiarism detection.)*

**Collusion**: The unauthorized collaboration with another in preparing work offered for credit.

**Course Policies**

Attendance and Participation:

Attendance in this class is mandatory. You are allowed **2** “free”unexcused absences. Although I would suggest saving them for times when you are too sick to attend class, you may use them however you would like. Official university absences do not count against you.

Beyond your 2 “freebies,” every two unexcused absences beyond that will result in a ***deduction of 1 letter grade*** (again, not counting official university absences). After 4 unexcused absences, your grade would drop from an “A” to a “B.” After 6, from a “B” to a “C.” In genuine, major emergencies please discuss your situation with me and I will make special arrangements for you (i.e., medical emergencies). Accumulating more than 6 unexcused absences during the semester will result in likely failure of the course. Please see the following guidelines:

@ 4 absences – Highest final grade possible is “B”

@ 6 absences – Highest final grade possible is “C”

@ 8 absences – Likely failure of course

Tardies:

This class begins promptly at the scheduled time. You will be counted tardy for coming in late, and three tardies will result in an unexcused absence. The work you miss cannot be made up unless it is part of an official university absence.

Late Work:

Work is due by class time on the date noted on the schedule (unless otherwise indicated) and will be considered late thereafter. Submitting assignments electronically during classtime is not acceptable. If there is ever a reason that you know you will not be able to turn an assignment in on time, you ***should always*** talk to me about it in advance.

Office Hours

During the office hours posted above, I will be in my office and available to talk with you about any questions, comments, or concerns you have about the course. Please stop by and see me during these hours—that time is yours. If the hours don’t work for you, come make an appointment.

Pearson e-Learning:

We have a course website we’ll use for various activities throughout the course and it will be a ***major*** component of this class. You should spend some time during the first week getting comfortable with it. I am always available to answer whatever questions you have concerning the e-Learning course tools, but lack of proficiency with the site is never an excuse for not turning in an assignment. You can view their grades on LearningStudio’s gradebook throughout the semester. Because LearningStudio makes weighting a fairly cumbersome procedure, I can only guarantee that the weighting is done correctly at certain times of the semester (typically just before mid-term and finals).

**Tentative Course Schedule** (schedule subject to change):

Week 1:

Jan. 15

Course Introductions

Setting up e-Learning

Introduction to Text-based gaming

Jan. 17

Introduction to Rhetorical Analysis and Project 1

Play writing games in class

*Read Timmons “Intro to IF”*

*Read Wikipedia’s entry on IF*

Week 2:

Jan. 22

Discuss procedural rhetorics

*Read Bogost Ch. 1*

*Play* Zork *(explore, kill troll)*

Jan. 24

Practice Analysis on Games for class

*Play* Phototopia *(finish)*

**Due: idea for Project 1**

Week 3:

Jan. 29

Discuss purpose and audience in games

*Read Montfort “Selections”*

*Play* Earth and Sky

Jan. 31

Introduce Inform and Project 2

*Read* Inform Documentation *Chs. 1 & 2*

*Play Inform School*

\*\*\*Project 1 Due\*\*\*

Week 4:

Feb. 5

Discuss problems / solutions in game design

*Read Timmons “Creating Your World”*

**Due: Create a room**

Feb. 7

*Read Timmons “Decorating Your World” and “Making Your World Behave”*

**Due: Create two usable objects**

Week 5

Feb. 12

Discuss problems / solutions in game design

*Read Timmons “Doors” and “Finishing Up”*

Feb. 14

Introduce Project 2B

Workshop interaction between rooms

*Read Timmons “New Verbs”*

\*\*\*Project 2A Due\*\*\*

Week 6:

Feb. 19

Workshop objects

Discuss Actions

Play other students games (your group)

*Read* Inform Documentation *Ch. 7*

**Due: One object to lend one to borrow**

Feb. 21

Plan Game

Play other students games (other group)

*Play Lost Pig and Place Underground*

**Due: One Activity, Property, Kind, or Action**

Week 7:

Feb 26

Discuss alternative game designs

*Read Juul “Selection”*

*Play Metamorphoses*

Feb 28

Discuss problems with interactivity

*Play Shade*

\*\*\*Project 2B Due\*\*\*

Week 8:  
Mar. 5  
Discuss Project 2 and introduce Project 3  
*Read Aarseth “I Fought the Law”*  
*Play both games*

Mar. 7

Discuss ideas for Project 3 and cultural critique  
Work in small groups and as a class on Project 3 ideas

*Read Bogost “Art”*

*Play Zork: A Troll’s Eye View*

**Spring Break**

Week 9:

Mar. 19

Discuss Project 3 Proposals

**Due: proposal for Project 3**

Mar. 21

Discuss game review assignment and actions

*Read* Inform Documentation *Ch. 12*

**Last day to drop**

Week 10:

Mar. 26

Discuss Design

*Read Brass Lantern “Wrong”*

*Read Zimmerman “Play as Research”*

**Due: Game Review Topic**

Mar. 28

Workshop Puzzles

*Read Brass Lantern “Better Puzzles”*

*Read selected video game reviews*

**Due: Bring Two Puzzle Ideas**

Week 11:

April 2

TBA

**Due: Map / Outline of Project 3**

April 4

TBA

Week 12:  
April 9  
Presentations

**Due: Present game review to class**

April 11  
Presentations

Week 13:

April 16

Are games good for us?

*Watch McGonigal Ted Talk*

Critique games in peer groups

**Due: Playable demo of Project 3**

April 18

Critique games in peer groups

Discuss affect and expression in video games

*Read Holmevik (online)*

Week 14:

April 23

Critique games in peer groups

**Due: Complete Working Draft of Project 3**

April 25

Critique games in peer groups

**Play Peer Games and Bring Notes to class**

Week 15

April 30

Discuss challenges for Dr. Helms

**Due: Bring two tasks for Dr. Helms to complete for the next iteration of this class**

\*\*\*Project 3 Due Online\*\*\*

May 2

Study Day

Final

May 7 8:00-10:30a

\*\*\*Project 3 Presented During Exam\*\*\*

*Play other students’ games*