

**ENGL 2020-H01 (12413)****Themes in Literature and Culture: Video Games and/as Literature**

Peck 319 | Tues. &amp; Thurs. | 1:00 – 2:25 p.m.

Instructor: Dr. Eric Detweiler

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Office Hours: MW 2:05 – 3:20 p.m., TR 2:30 – 3:15 p.m.

**Prerequisites:** ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020**Course Description**

In recent years, gamers, critics, and scholars have started asking whether video games qualify as art and whether they merit serious study. In other words, video games are following in the footsteps of more established media—novels, movies, television—that were once dismissed as trashy entertainment but gave rise to respected works of art. Along the way, video games have started using complex literary and narrative techniques. In some cases, game designers have adapted written works like Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In others, independent game designers have created games with interactive narratives that explore complicated questions about identity, death, and relationships—questions that have long been explored by other forms of literature and art.

In this course, students will draw on scholarly frameworks from English studies, game studies, and related fields to analyze video games as a narrative form. Students will explore how video games' interactive multimedia narratives shift and affirm our assumptions about what stories can do and how they affect us. Along the way, students will read scholarship about literature and video games; read works of literature alongside video-game adaptations; and play video games that extend and challenge our notions of story-driven art.

An important note: This is the first time this class has been taught at MTSU. Because of that, it's a little bit of an experiment. Given the wide range of experiences you all might have with video games, plus the technological complications that come with playing games in class and requiring you to play games outside of class, I'm especially open to and interested in any feedback, ideas, or concerns that you all have. If you have a suggestion on how to make in-class gameplay run more smoothly, make outside-of-class gameplay easier for you and your classmates, and so on, please let me know. I'm always happy to talk before or after class as well as during office hours. I hope this will be an enjoyable and challenging course, and I hope you'll help me make it even better for future students.

**Required Readings**

I have purposefully frontloaded this course with online articles and PDFs so that you have a couple of weeks to get the two required books. Just make sure you have copies of them in hand by January 31.

- Anthropy, Anna. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*. Seven Stories P, 2012.

- Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca. *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Routledge, 2015.
- Thoreau, Henry David. [\*Walden\*](#). (free via Project Gutenberg)
- Selected texts available via D2L

### Likely Required Games

A few notes on required games: Most of the following games are free. Three of them are not: *Never Alone*, *Night in the Woods*, and *Papers, Please*. Those games are newer and require a little bit of hardware, software, and computing power. Whether or not I assign those three will depend on the results of a quick anonymous survey you'll take near the beginning of the semester and some updates I'm waiting on from the university. There will also be some additional games that we'll play in class that are not listed here.

Finally, you won't be required to complete all of these games. In many cases, I'll just expect you to put in a certain number of hours, documenting your experiences in ways described later in this syllabus. The number to the right of game titles is an estimate of the total hours required to beat that game, which I'm pulling from the website

[HowLongToBeat](#).

- [A Dark Room](#) (4)
- [The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy](#)
- [Never Alone](#) (3)
- [Night in the Woods](#) (8)
- [Papers, Please](#) (5)
- [Secret of Monkey Island](#) (7)
- [Star Court](#)
- [Universal Paperclips](#) (8)
- [Zork I](#) (3)

### Learning Objectives

In this course, students will

1. improve their ability to read, think, and write critically and analytically about a wide variety of texts;
2. be able to identify basic structural and/or technical elements and strategies and to discuss how those elements contribute to the overall effect of a literary work;
3. gain a greater sense of the range and sorts of texts that are available to them as readers and, hopefully, of the sorts of texts that they most enjoy and wish to continue reading;
4. gain a greater sense of the "conversations" between texts; that is, they will have a sense of the ways in which texts respond to earlier texts, develop ongoing cultural conversations about key issues, develop genres and style, etc.;
5. gain a greater sense of the ways in which texts function within culture(s), of the ways in which texts can be used to understand and gain insight into cultures/historical movements, and of the ways in which cultural context shapes both the production and reading of texts; and

6. develop a sense of themselves as readers; they will gain greater independence in their interpretations and become more aware of their own approaches, assumptions, and interpretive strategies. Conversely, they will become aware of the range of possible reading strategies, encounter and test out new ways of working with texts, and increase their interpretive repertoire.

### Coursework

This course will include three major research projects. You will be required to create and submit multiple drafts of all three. The final draft of each will be accompanied by a piece of reflective writing documenting your writing process.

1. **Reception History (15%):** Students will select a video game released prior to the year 2000. Incorporating primary sources about the game's release and reception, students will write a paper of 1500-1750 words that offers an overview of the game's history and reception.
2. **Literary Analysis (20%):** Drawing on both primary and secondary sources, students will write a roughly 2000-word paper in which they analyze the cultural context and narrative of a video game released since 2000.
3. **Game Scholarship (25%):** Working in small groups and using software such as [Twine](#), students will develop games that make an argument about video games.

In addition to the three major projects, coursework will include the following:

- **Reading Responses and Reading Notes (20%):** Over the course of the semester, students are responsible for twelve D2L forum posts in response to course readings. Each response must be 200-250 words and is due by 10:00 a.m. the day we discuss the reading in question, which gives me time to read the posts before class begins. In some cases, I will provide a specific prompt on D2L. If I don't, you're free to approach the reading in any way you'd like. While the tone of the responses can be informal, they should demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the reading to which you're responding. This could include specific questions about the reading, discussions of passages you found especially interesting or confusing, putting the reading in conversation with other work we've done in the class, etc. The main thing the responses must demonstrate is that you actually did the reading, even if you still have a lot of questions about it. Don't try to talk vague circles around what you think an unread chapter or article was probably about. Incorporating quotations from the reading never hurts.

In tandem with these responses, on any day we're discussing an assigned reading, I will begin by looking at everyone's reading notes. I use that term pretty loosely. With assigned books, "notes" could include substantial highlighting, underlining, and writing in the margins. In the case of PDFs and online readings, you can print them out and write on them, annotate them using a program like Adobe Reader (which is free), or use an online annotation platform like [hypothes.is](#) (also free). You're also welcome to take reading notes in a separate notebook or digital document. I'll give you three free passes over the course of the semester. If you have no reading notes on more than three occasions, it will start to affect your grade. You're more than welcome to use these notes as the basis for your D2L

posts. As long as they demonstrate actual engagement with readings, individual D2L responses and notes will be assessed on a pass/fail basis: full credit or no credit.

- Gaming Journal (20%):** Students will be required to keep an analog journal in which they document their experiences playing through assigned games. I would recommend buying a new notebook for this purpose. You have a lot of flexibility here. You can describe your emotional experience with assigned games, including frustration, confusion, joy, excitement, or empathy. You can link the games to ideas and concepts from course readings. You can compare and contrast assigned games with other games, including ones you've played on your own. You can include diagrams and illustrations (as long as they don't overwhelm the act of writing). I'd recommend an average of at least two pages per week, though that will vary depending on the size of your handwriting and the size of your notebook. Two pages assumes a standard-sized composition notebook (around 9" by 7") with around 10-12 words per line. I will collect these notebooks and review them a couple times throughout the semester. As with the reading responses and reading notes, this is a pass/fail thing. If, for reasons of accessibility, a paper journal is not a good option for you, talk with me about digital alternatives.

Along with the assignments described above, coursework will include short writing assignments, in-class activities, and other homework. While these assignments will not affect your grade directly, completing them is a necessary part of doing well on the major assignments. In other words, if you don't do the small stuff, you won't be prepared to get a good grade on the big stuff.

### Grading

The grading scale for this course is as follows:

A: 90-100	C+: 77-79	D: 63-66
B+: 87-89	C: 73-76	D-: 60-62
B: 83-86	C-: 70-72	F: 59 and under
B-: 80-82	D+: 67-69	

### Late Work

Because homework contributes to what we do in class the day it's due, I will not accept it late. That includes D2L posts and reading notes. As for the major assignments (Reception History, Literary Analysis, Game Scholarship), while deadlines are an important part of the drafting process, I will give you a single two-day extension—no questions asked—on a single draft of one of the three projects. Everything else must be turned in the day it is due. If you anticipate a problem meeting a deadline, let me know at least 48 hours in advance. No guarantees, but I am much more likely to be flexible if I know you are planning ahead.

### Attendance

If you miss class more than four times, you will not pass this course. Any time you are absent, you are responsible for getting in touch with me to find out what you missed. If you arrive after I take roll or leave class early, you'll be marked tardy. Tardiness counts

as half an absence. As for the four absences you are allowed, you do not need to provide me with an excuse or explanation. Just be sure you get in touch to find out what you missed. As with late work, if you think you'll have any problem sticking to this attendance policy, let me know in advance. Again, no guarantees, but I am more likely to be flexible if I know you're planning ahead.

### **Students with Disabilities**

Middle Tennessee State University is committed to campus access in accordance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Any student interested in reasonable accommodations can consult the [Disability & Access Center \(DAC\) website](#) and/or contact the DAC for assistance at (615) 898-2783 or [dacemail@mtsu.edu](mailto:dacemail@mtsu.edu).

If I can provide or assist with any accommodations related specifically to this course, let me know. I would be glad to help, especially since playing video games might involve some particular challenges when it comes to accessibility.

### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is complicated. Here is the academic integrity statement from MTSU's Lower Division office:

“Learning to use source material responsibly will be a focus of this class. In your compositions and presentations, you must give credit for text, ideas, and images that did not originate with you. Your handbook distinguishes between unintentional and intentional plagiarism. Unintentionally failing to attribute researched material, or misuse of sources, is a ‘teaching moment’; intentional plagiarism—such as downloading a paper, having someone else write your essay, or cutting-and-pasting with no acknowledgement of the source—is a form of academic misconduct.

“I am required to report all instances of academic misconduct to the Provost's Office. See the MTSU student handbook for an explanation as well as the possible consequences of engaging in academic misconduct. In this class, sanctions range from a mandatory rewrite for partial credit to an F in the course. The Provost's Office may impose additional sanctions such as probation or suspension. To avoid such penalties, always do your own work, and ask for help when you are using source material. You can get help in class, during my office hours, at the University Writing Center, from a librarian, or online at Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL).”

Now here's a strange thing: I copied and pasted that statement from somewhere else. It's not plagiarism because I told you where it's from (even though the statement uses the word “I,” which would suggest that I wrote it myself if it weren't for the fact that I told you I didn't). Here's a stranger thing: part of the “Students with Disabilities” section on the previous page is copied and pasted from somewhere else, which I didn't tell you till now. In fact, some words are meant to be copied without citation.

So anyway, plagiarism is complicated, and we'll have a few conversations about it over the course of the semester. Here are a couple tips: (1) If you think that you might be using another person's words or ideas without giving enough credit to that person, talk to me about it before the assignment is due. There is no penalty for asking in advance whether or not you're plagiarizing. (2) If it's the night before a deadline and you have no idea what to write, don't panic and just copy and paste someone else's words. It's better to turn in nothing than to turn in something plagiarized, though neither is a good option. Better to talk with me a week before the deadline so that the moment of panic never arrives.

Plagiarized papers will get a failing grade. I reserve the right to offer partial credit if I determine the plagiarism wasn't done on purpose. I'll try to do my part by creating course-specific assignments that are hard to plagiarize. Also, I'll only assign papers that I believe will contribute to your development as a thinker and writer, which is to say I genuinely think you'll be missing out on important skills and experiences if you do decide to plagiarize instead of writing any of them yourself.

### **University Writing Center**

The University Writing Center is in room 362 of the James E. Walker Library and on the web at [www.mtsu.edu/uwc](http://www.mtsu.edu/uwc). The UWC offers students valuable one-on-one assistance with their writing. You can make an appointment for a conference by calling (615) 904-8237. Online writing assistance is also available. Visit the UWC website for hours and more information.

Seriously: the UWC is great.

### **Inclement Weather**

MTSU does not usually close because of inclement weather, but students are allowed to use their own discretion when snow and icy conditions exist and will be given the opportunity to make up missed classes should they decide not to attend. To determine if classes are cancelled, listen to area radio and television stations or visit <http://www.mtsunews.com/weather/>.

### **Email**

MTMail will be the official way that I pass on information about this course. Because of privacy laws, I will not use your personal email accounts. I won't send you email every day, but check your MMail every weekday to make sure you don't miss important updates from the university, me, or your other teachers. As for contacting me, I don't check my D2L email regularly, so don't try to contact me that way. Use the email address at the top of this syllabus. You can find more information on MMail here: <http://mtsu.edu/email/index.php>.

### **Technology**

We are fortunate to be in a room equipped with computers. We will use those computers often, and in many cases it will be fine if you use a personal laptop or tablet instead.

As for smartphones and other cell phones, there may be some times when it will make sense for us to use them. In general, though, they aren't a good fit for the sort of work we do in this class. For instance, their screens are too small to engage with readings in the detail-oriented way we will during this course, and they won't run most of the games we'll play in class. For that reason, don't plan on using them in class unless we decide otherwise during a particular activity.

**Lottery Statement**

Do you have a lottery scholarship? To retain the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship eligibility, you must earn a cumulative TELS GPA of 2.75 after 24 and 48 attempted hours and a cumulative TELS GPA of 3.0 thereafter. A grade of C, D, F, FA, or I in this class may negatively impact TELS eligibility.

If you drop this class, withdraw, or if you stop attending this class, you may lose eligibility for your lottery scholarship, and you will not be able to regain eligibility at a later time.



## Course Calendar

I hope this will be an enjoyable course, but it will also be a challenging and carefully coordinated one, so I intend for us to stick to the following schedule fairly closely. Unforeseen circumstances and delays do arise, so I reserve the right to revise our schedule as necessary, though I will not do so without advance notice and, in most cases, discussion. If at any point during the semester you have concerns about the schedule, feel free to bring them to my attention. We will be doing something important every day in this course. Do not assume any day is unimportant. Assigned readings are italicized, while writing assignments are italicized and in bold. Both kinds of assignments are due the day they are listed below. Everything else is a description of what we'll be doing in class that day. "(PDF)" means that reading is available as a downloadable PDF via D2L. If there's an asterisk by the date, that means there's a possible D2L post in response to that day's readings.

The hyperlinks in this document probably won't work on D2L. You'll need to download it and click the links in the downloaded version. One important heads-up: this version of the syllabus only contains our first few weeks of readings plus deadlines for the major writing assignments. I will post a revised version of the syllabus with the full schedule by the end of January, once I have a clearer sense of your interests and the class's personality and direction.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Work</b>
Jan. 16	Snow Day
Jan. 18	Introductions, Syllabus
Jan. 23*	<i>Rachel Adler, "The 19th Century Moral Panic Over ... Paper Technology":</i> <a href="http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2017/08/the_19th_century_moral_panic_over_paper_technology.html">http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2017/08/the_19th_century_moral_panic_over_paper_technology.html</a> <i>Alexis Madrigal, "You Had to Be There":</i> <a href="https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/11/the-secret-knowledge-of-obsolescence/546902/">https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/11/the-secret-knowledge-of-obsolescence/546902/</a>
Jan. 25*	<i>Henry David Thoreau, Walden. Read "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," "Reading," and "Sounds":</i> <a href="http://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm">http://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm</a>
Jan. 30*	<i>Henry Jenkins, "Games, the New Lively Art" (PDF)</i> <i>Sarah Laskow, "Welcome to Interactive Fiction: You're a Wizard-Sniffing Pig":</i> <a href="https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/welcome-interactive-fiction-wizard-sniffing-pig-controversy-video-games">https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/welcome-interactive-fiction-wizard-sniffing-pig-controversy-video-games</a>
Feb. 1*	Begin playing <a href="#"><i>The Secret of Monkey Island</i></a> , play 6 hours or beat by Feb. 27 (to play downloaded version, follow <a href="#">these instructions</a> ) <i>Dmitri Williams, "The Video Game Lightning Rod" (PDF)</i>
Feb. 6*	<i>Understanding Video Games (UVG), Introduction (pp. 1-6)</i> <i>Optional Reading: UVG, Ch. 1 (pp. 7-14)</i>
Feb. 8*	<i>UVG, first half of Ch. 4 (pp. 61-101)</i>
Feb. 13*	<i>UVG, second half of Ch. 4 (pp. 101-119)</i>
Feb. 15	<b><i>First Draft: Reception History</i></b>



Feb. 20*	<i>Anthropy, Ch. 2 (pp. 23-42)</i>
Feb. 22*	<i>UVG, Ch. 2 (pp. 15-29)</i>
Feb. 27	<b>Final Draft: Reception History</b>
	Individual Conferences in Peck 376 Turn in Gaming Journals During Conference
Mar. 1	Begin playing <i>Papers, Please</i> , play 5 hours or beat by Mar. 20
Mar. 6	Spring Break
Mar. 8	Spring Break
	Virtual Reality Demo Meet in Makerspace (Second Floor of Walker Library)
Mar. 13*	<i>UVG, Ch. 7 (pp. 199-237)</i>
	<b>No Class Meeting – see D2L</b>
Mar. 15*	<i>UVG, Ch. 5 (pp. 121-155)</i>
	Reply All, “The Cathedral”: <a href="https://gimletmedia.com/episode/50-the-cathedral/">https://gimletmedia.com/episode/50-the-cathedral/</a>
Mar. 20*	Reply All, “At World’s End”: <a href="https://gimletmedia.com/episode/episode105-how-we-first-met/">https://gimletmedia.com/episode/episode105-how-we-first-met/</a>
Mar. 22	<b>First Draft: Literary Analysis</b>
	<i>UVG, Ch. 6 (pp. 157-198)</i>
Mar. 27	Begin playing <i>Night in the Woods</i> , beat by Apr. 10
Mar. 29	TBD
Apr. 3	<b>Final Draft: Literary Analysis</b>
Apr. 5*	<i>Anthropy, Ch. 1 (pp. 1-21)</i>
Apr. 10*	<i>Anthropy, Ch. 7 (pp. 143-158)</i>
Apr. 12*	<i>Anthropy, Ch. 8 &amp; Appendix A (pp. 159-177)</i>
Apr. 17	<b>First Draft: Game Scholarship</b>
Apr. 19	TBD
Apr. 24	Turn in Gaming Journal
May 3	<b>Final Draft: Game Scholarship (due by midnight on Thurs., May 3)</b>