



ENGL 2020: Themes in Literature and Culture

Video Games and/as Literature

3 Credit Hours

Instructor Information

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Course Information

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 works of literature 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 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.

Objectives and Outcomes

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.

Prerequisites and Co-requisites

ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020.

Topics

The course will include three major units: video game history, analyzing video-game narratives, and creating video games.

Requirements

Students will need regular access to a computer or console capable of running assigned video games.

Course Materials

Required Textbook

The textbook for this course is the third edition of *Understanding Video Games*. It can be ordered online at [Phillips Bookstore](#). An ebook version can be purchased [here](#). Here are the full details on the book:

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca.
Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction. 3rd edition, Routledge,
 2015.

Required Games

You are also required to purchase two video games for this course. Below, I have provided links to the games' websites, where you can find more information about how and where to purchase them. You are welcome to purchase them on a console or through any other platform. All students must have access to *Celeste*. You can choose whether to purchase *Undertale* or *Kentucky Route Zero*—you have to get one of the two, but not both.

- [Celeste](#)
- [Undertale](#) or [Kentucky Route Zero](#)

We will play parts of other games during this class, but they will be free browser-based games. I'll provide additional instructions for accessing them as the semester unfolds. If, for reasons of accessibility or disability, it isn't possible for you to play the assigned games, I am happy to discuss alternatives.

Assessment and Grading

Grading Procedure

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	

The grade for this course is broken down across three major projects and two kinds of day-to-day work. Here's the initial breakdown. Each assignment is described in more detail below:

Major Projects: Video Game History (15%), Narrative Analysis (20%), Game Scholarship *or* Video Game Keyword (25%)

Other Work: Gaming Blog (15%), Reading Responses (20%), Other Discussion Posts (5%)

Incomplete grades are given rarely and only in extenuating circumstances. Page 56 of the MTSU [Undergraduate Catalog](#) states: "The grade I indicates that the student has not completed all course requirements because of illness or other uncontrollable circumstances, especially those which occur toward the end of the term. Mere failure to make up work or turn in required work on time does not provide the basis for the grade

of “I” unless extenuating circumstances noted above are present for reasons acceptable to the instructor.” Please refer to the Undergraduate catalog for the complete Incomplete Grade Policy.

Feedback

- You will receive my feedback on drafts of the major projects within a week of submitting those drafts.
- Major projects must be submitted to the corresponding D2L dropbox and will not be accepted via email.
- Assignment deadlines are listed in the dropboxes and the course calendar.

Testing Policies

There will be no tests or exams in this course.

Academic Integrity/Misconduct

Please review the [information on Academic Integrity and Misconduct](#). Academic integrity is a hallmark of Middle Tennessee State University. We expect students to complete academic exercises, i.e., assignments turned in for credit, that are original and appropriately credit all sources used.

Academic misconduct includes, but is not limited to:

1. Plagiarism: The adoption or reproduction of ideas, words, statements, images, or works of another person as one’s own without proper attribution. This includes self-plagiarism, which occurs when an author submits material or research from a previous academic exercise to satisfy the requirements of another exercise and uses it without proper citation of its reuse.
2. Cheating: Using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise. This includes unapproved collaboration, which occurs when a student works with others on an academic exercise without the express permission of the professor. It also includes purchasing assignments or paying another person to complete a course for you.
3. Fabrication: Unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise.

Going online and using information without proper citation, copying parts of other students’ work, creating information to establish credibility, or using someone else’s thoughts or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment is academic misconduct. If you have a question about an assignment, please ask me to clarify. All cases of academic misconduct will be reported to the Director of Student Academic Ethics and may result in failure on the test/assignment or for the course.

When students participate in behavior that is considered to be academic misconduct, the value of their education and that of their classmates is lessened, and their academic careers are jeopardized.

Students guilty of academic misconduct are immediately responsible to the instructor of the class. In addition to other possible disciplinary sanctions (including expulsion from the university), which may be imposed through the regular institutional procedures as a result of academic misconduct, the instructor has the authority to assign an “F” or zero for an activity or to assign an “F” for the course. Students guilty of plagiarism will be immediately reported to the Director of Student Academic Ethics.

Assignments and Participation

Assignments and Projects

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. You can find more detailed prompts for each of the three on D2L.

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

or

Video Game Keyword (25%): Students will come up with a keyword relevant to video games and write an argumentative essay focused on that keyword. We will read models of such essays throughout the course.

Note that you have two options for the final project. I would encourage you to choose Game Scholarship, the first option. It will give you the chance to make your own small video game, which is a worthwhile learning experience and will add a little more variety to the major projects and to the skills you’ll take away from the course. However, because I know the project may feel daunting and come with potential accessibility challenges, you may choose to write a third essay instead. Whichever of the two options you choose, it will count for 25% of your overall grade in the course.

In addition to the three major projects, coursework includes a gaming blog, reading responses, and other discussion posts. All of these are completion grades, meaning you will get full credit for whatever portion of them you complete.

- **Gaming Blog (15%):** Students will be required to use the D2L blog function to post five 500-word blog posts in which they document their experiences playing video games. Students *must* document their playthroughs of the two assigned games (*Celeste* and *Undertale* or *Kentucky Route Zero*), but may also document other games they play over the course of the semester. These posts can be informal, and you have a lot of flexibility in how you write about the games you're playing. You can describe your emotional experiences 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 also incorporate diagrams or illustrations you make as you're playing, screenshots from games, or other multimedia.
- **Reading Responses (20%):** Over the course of the semester, students are responsible for 14 D2L forum posts in response to course readings (more than 14 are possible, but you only need to complete 14). You're more than welcome to connect your responses to your gaming blog. Each response must be at least 200 words. Seven of your posts are due by 11:59 p.m. Central Daylight Time on the day they're listed in the course calendar. For example, your reading response to Ch. 4 of *Understanding Video Games* would be due by 11:59 p.m. CDT on July 10. Your other seven posts must be replies to your classmate's responses, and are due within 48 hours of the initial deadline. For example, you would have until 11:59 p.m. on July 12 to post a reply to a classmates' initial post about Ch. 4 of *Understanding Video Games*. The purpose here is to create a conversation between you all and to maintain sustained attention to and discussion around readings. More detailed instructions for each post are provided on D2L. 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 course, 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. Incorporate quotations liberally, and not just quotations from the first page of a reading. I have a pretty good idea of what trying to fake a reading response looks like. Finally, you're always welcome (though not required) jump in with additional short, informal posts and replies in the reading response forum.
- **Other Discussion Posts (5%):** In addition to the reading responses, you will need to participate in a few other D2L discussions, most of which will help you develop your ideas and arguments for the major projects. More detailed instructions will be included in the corresponding discussion forums.

Late Work

I will not accept late reading responses or gaming journals. That includes reading responses 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 **one 48-hour extension**—no questions asked—on a draft of one of the three projects. If you take the extension on the first draft of a project, you are responsible for making up the peer workshop for that assignment. 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.

Class Participation

Student participation is required in all interactive aspects of the course. Students are expected to

- complete all assignments,
- participate in peer workshops for the first drafts of the three major projects,
- communicate with the instructor,
- frequently check the course homepage for announcements,
- actively participate in reading response forums and all other D2L discussions.

Attendance and Punctuality Reporting

University policy requires instructors to complete an attendance report for each course. Regular class attendance is required and will be monitored by the D2L system report, discussion board participation, and timely submission of course assignments. If several class assignment submissions are missing, your attendance will be reported as “no longer attending.”

Course Ground Rules

Students in the course are expected to

- engage respectfully and regularly with classmates and the instructor,
- have a basic familiarity with D2L and Microsoft Word,
- ask questions when they are unsure about aspects of the course (technology, coursework, grading, etc.). For example, don't assume you'll get a free pass on a reading response if you have trouble finding the relevant D2L forum.

Communication Guidelines

Email

Per the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#), all course communication will be conducted using D2L email. In a pinch, you may also contact me using my

MTMail address. In that case, email me using your MTMail address. I will not respond to student emails via a non-institutional assigned email account.

Student Feedback

Students will be able to provide feedback via a course survey administered halfway through the course (sometime during the week of July 22). You are welcome to email me or otherwise meet with me at any time to discuss concerns or provide feedback related to the course.

Discussion Groups

Some guidelines for reading responses and other D2L forums you'll participate in this semester:

- Review the discussion threads thoroughly before entering the discussion. Lurk before you write.
- Respond to your peers rather than simply repeating what they've already said.
- Try to maintain threads by using the "Reply" button rather than starting a new topic.
- Do not make insulting or inflammatory statements to classmates. Be respectful of other's ideas.
- Be constructive in discussion posts.
- Respond in a thoughtful and timely manner.

Student Resources

[Frequently Used Student Resources](#)

Technical Support

Students who experience problems logging into their course, timing out of their course, using the course web site tools or experience other technical problems, should be encouraged to contact the [MTSU Help Desk](#) online (24/7) or at 1-615-898-5345.

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. Also, if you require the use of assistive technology, please make sure to download the documents in order to access the accessibility that I have built into the content for you.

Hope (Lottery) Scholarship Information

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 may not be able to regain eligibility at a later time.

For additional Lottery rules, please refer to your [Lottery Statement of Understanding form](#) or contact your [MT One Stop Enrollment Counselor](#).

Grade Appeals

[University Policy 313, Student Grade Appeals](#), provides an avenue for MTSU students to appeal a final course grade in cases in which the student alleges that unethical or unprofessional actions by the instructor and/or grading inequities improperly impacted the final grade.

Title IX

Students who believe they have been harassed, discriminated against or been the victim of sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence or stalking should contact a Title IX/Deputy Coordinator at 615-898- 2185 or 615-898-2750 for assistance or review [MTSU's Title IX website](#) for resources.

MTSU faculty are concerned about the well-being and development of our students and are legally obligated to share reports of sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence and stalking with the University's Title IX coordinator to help ensure student's safety and welfare. Please refer to [MTSU's Title IX website](#) for contact information and details.

The True Blue Pledge

[I am True Blue](#). As a member of this diverse community, I am a valuable contributor to its progress and success. I am engaged in the life of this community. I am a recipient and a giver. I am a listener and a speaker. I am honest in word and deed. I am committed to reason, not violence. I am a learner now and forever. I am a BLUE RAIDER. True Blue!

The following course calendar has five columns: Date, Read, Write, Play, Discuss. “Date” is pretty self-explanatory: it lists the day on which everything else in that row is due. As for the other columns:

- “Read” includes any assigned readings for that day (and occasionally includes things like podcast episodes and YouTube videos). If you see “(D2L)” after a listed reading, that means it’s available as a PDF in the Content section of D2L.
- “Write” includes any significant writing assignments that are due that day.
- “Play” includes any video games you should play or be in the process of playing. If there is an amount of time listed after a game’s title, that’s about how long I’m asking you to spend on it.
- “Discuss” includes any D2L discussion forums you should be participating in.

Unless otherwise indicated, the deadline for everything is 11:59 p.m. Central Daylight Time on the day it’s listed. In almost all cases, it’s fine if you work ahead. See the syllabus and D2L news items for more information on writing assignments and discussion posts.

Date	Read	Write	Play	Discuss
Week 1				
July 8	Introductory News Item on D2L Homepage Syllabus		Begin playing <i>Celeste</i> . (Though we will discuss <i>Celeste</i> first, you can also begin playing <i>Undertale</i> or <i>Kentucky Route Zero</i> at any time—remember you only need to play one of those two.)	Introductions
July 9	<i>Understanding Video Games (UVG)</i> , Chapter 1: "Studying Video Games"		Tennis for Two (5 min.)	Reply to Introductions Reading Response to Ch. 1

July 10	UVG, Chapter 4: "History"		Spacewar! (5 min.) This is meant to be a two-player game, so you may want to find someone else to try it with you.	Week 1 AMA (Optional, short for "Ask Me Anything") Reading Response to Ch. 4
July 11	Rachel Adler, "The 19th Century Moral Panic Over ... Paper Technology" Dmitri Williams, "The Video Game Lightning Rod" (D2L)		Colossal Cave Adventure (30 min.)	Week 1 AMA (Optional) Reading Response to Adler and Williams Video Game History: Game Selection
July 12	Nick Montfort, "Adventure" (D2L) Sarah Laskow, "Welcome to Interactive Fiction: You're a Wizard-Sniffing Pig"		Zork I (30 min.)	Reading Response to Montfort and Laskow Video Game History: Sources
Week 2				
July 15	Carly Kocurek, " <i>Night Trap</i> : Moral Panic" (D2L) Jennifer deWinter, "Miyamoto/Kojima: Authorship" (D2L)		Continue playing <i>Celeste</i> . Beat the game or play a total of seven hours by the end of this week.	Reading Response to Kocurek and deWinter Video Game History: Key Components
July 16		First Draft: Video Game History		Week 2 AMA (Optional)
July 17	Joanna Wolfe and Laura Wilder, <i>Digging Into Literature</i> (D2L)			Reading Response to Wolfe and Wilder, Sparks

	Amber Sparks, "Take Your Daughter to the Slaughter" (D2L)			Peer Workshop: Video Game History Week 2 AMA (Optional)
July 18	Ian Bogost, "Art" (D2L)			Reading Response to Bogost Narrative Analysis: Game Selection
July 19	UVG, Ch. 7: "Narrative"	Blog Post 1 & 2	King's Quest (30 min.) To play, hit Start button, then hit ESC after the initial loading screen.	Reading Response to Ch. 7
Week 3				
July 22	Anastasia Salter, " <i>King's Quest: Narrative</i> " (D2L) Justin McElroy, " Royal with Cheese: A King's Quest Primer "		If you haven't yet, begin playing <i>Undertale</i> or <i>Kentucky Route Zero</i> . Put in seven hours or beat by the end of August 2.	Week 3 AMA (Optional) Reading Response to Salter and McElroy Narrative Analysis: Thesis Questions
July 23		Final Draft: Video Game History		Week 3 AMA (Optional)
July 24	Celia Pearce, " Game Noir: A Conversation with Tim Schafer "		Secret of Monkey Island (1 hr.) On the linked page, scroll down past the game screen for information on controls.	Reading Response to Pearce

July 25	UVG, Ch. 5: "Video Game Aesthetics"			Reading Response to Ch. 5
July 26	Game Score Fanfare, "The Anxiety of Celeste and its Music" Dan Golding, " <i>The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time</i> : Music" (D2L)	Blog Post 3		Reading Response to Golding and Game Source Fanfare Narrative Analysis: Sources
Week 4				
July 29		First Draft: Narrative Analysis		Week 4 AMA (Optional)
July 30	Adam Hammond, "A Total Beginner's Guide to Twine 2.1" (Over the course of this week, work through the first part of Hammond's tutorial: 1. Passages and Links. If you plan to make a Twine game for your final project, I would highly recommend reading all four parts of his guide and watching the accompanying videos.) Anna Anthropy, "By Your Bootstraps" (D2L)		Twine Games from Past ENGL 2020 Students (Optional): SpaceEdge Hero 811 The Chaos of Happiness	Week 4 AMA (Optional) Peer Workshop: Narrative Analysis Reading Response to Anthropy
July 31	UVG, Chapter 6: "Video Games in Culture"			Reading Response to Ch. 6
Aug. 1	Mark J. P. Wolf, " <i>BioShock Infinite</i> : World-Building" (D2L)		A Dark Room (30 min.)	Reading Response to Wolf Final Project: Pitch

Aug. 2	<p><i>Reply All</i>, "The Cathedral" or "At World's End" (These are both episodes of a podcast called <i>Reply All</i>. "The Cathedral" is about a young boy who was diagnosed with terminal cancer and a video game his parents made based on the experience. If that sounds too emotionally intense for you, you can listen to the more light-hearted episode "At World's End" instead. Both offer interesting insights into the process of video-game development.)</p>	Blog Post 4	Universal Paperclips (30 min.)	Reading Response to <i>Reply All</i>
Week 5				
Aug. 5		First Draft: Twine Game or Video Game Keyword Paper		Peer Workshop: Video Game Keyword or Game Scholarship Week 5 AMA (Optional)
Aug. 6				Week 5 AMA (Optional)
Aug. 7				
Aug. 8		Blog Post 5		
Aug. 9	Revised Twine Game or Keyword	Final Drafts: Narrative Analysis; Twine Game or Video Game Keyword		