



ENGL 2020-027: Themes in Literature and Culture

VIDEO GAMES AND/AS LITERATURE

Mon. & Wed., 11:20 – 12:45 p.m.

3 Credit Hours

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

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Office: Peck 376

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Virtual Office Hours (via Zoom): 12:30 – 2 p.m. on Mon., 1 – 3 p.m. on Thurs., & by appointment

COURSE INFORMATION

Prerequisites and Co-requisites

ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020.

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

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.

Topics Covered

This course will address three major topics, each of which will correspond to a major course project.

- The History of Video Games
- Analyzing Video Games
- Arguing with Video Games

COURSE MATERIALS

Required Textbooks

There is no required textbook for this course. All course readings will be available as PDFs or hyperlinks through D2L.

Supplementary Materials

You are required to purchase two video games for this course: (1) [Celeste](#) and (2) [Undertale](#) or [Kentucky Route Zero](#). You are welcome to purchase them on a computer, a console, or any other platform where they're available. If you already own one of them, that's totally fine.

We will play other games in 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 assigned games, I am happy to discuss alternatives.

ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Grading Procedure

This semester is going to be different from most semesters, and I know that will come with challenges. Because of that, I've tried to make the grading system for the course as straightforward as possible. Your grades on all individual assignments will be pass/fail. That means if you meet the requirements of the assignment, you'll get full credit for it. See the tables below for a breakdown of how coursework will correspond to different letter grades. This will be a little different from how grades work in most courses and may take a minute for you to wrap your head around. But my hope is that, in the end, it will make it simpler for you to succeed in the course and keep the focus on learning instead of hitting specific percentages with each assignment just so you can maintain the GPA you want. I will update the D2L gradebook regularly, so you can keep track of the work you've completed there.

Grading Scale

See the two tables below for specific details on how grades will be broken down in this course. More detailed guidelines for all of the assignments listed in the first table will be available in the Content section of our D2L course shell.

Here's a key thing to keep in mind with the second table: The percentage of work you've completed in the course does not correspond to the grading scales used in a lot of other MTSU courses. For example, in other courses, having an 85% often means you have a B. In this course, if the D2L gradebook shows you have an 85%, that means you've done 85% of the required work and currently have a C, not a B. Make sure you aren't accidentally assuming the usual MTSU scale applies in this course.

Assignment	Percentage of Grade
<i>Day-to-Day Work</i>	
Reading Notes	10%
Gaming Journal	10%
Peer Workshops (3)	15%
<i>Major Writing Projects</i>	
Video Game History	20%

Assignment	Percentage of Grade
Narrative Analysis	20%
Game Scholarship <i>or</i> Video Game Keyword (2 drafts required)	25%
Total	100%

Letter Grade	Criteria
A	At least 100% of required coursework completed.
B	90% – 99% of required coursework completed.
C	80% – 89% of coursework completed.
D	At least 70% of coursework completed
F	Less than 70% of coursework completed.

Incomplete Grades

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

- I will provide feedback on all your major writing projects via the D2L dropboxes where you submit those assignments. I will provide feedback no more than two weeks after you submit the assignment. In most cases, you will receive audio recording of my feedback. If there is any reason why audio feedback will not work or be accessible for you, please let me know and I'm happy to find a form of feedback that will.
- Major writing assignments must be submitted to the corresponding D2L dropbox and will not be accepted via email. If you ever have trouble getting a file uploaded to a D2L dropbox, please let me know and we can figure out a solution.
- All assignment deadlines are listed in the calendar in D2L.

Deadlines and Late Work

I have deadlines in my classes for three main reasons, which I think it's worth taking a moment to explain as a way of helping you understand where I'm coming from as a teacher:

1. Because of my own limitations. If I have every student turning in every assignment at a different time, it gets easy for me to overlook things, which can delay my feedback and cause confusion for you all.

2. Because you all will be learning to write together. As much as we sometimes think of writing as a solitary activity (a lone author sitting in their room typing away at a novel or essay), learning to write is a deeply social experience. We'll discuss this point in this course. But for now, it means you'll be developing your writing in conversation with each other, and you'll be providing each other feedback on what you're writing. For that to work, you'll need to be working on writing assignments at roughly the same time as your classmates.
3. Because the writing assignments in this class build on each other. That means you'll apply things you learn from writing earlier assignments while you're working on later assignments. If you try to do everything in the last few weeks of the semester, then you won't be able to build on what you've already learned. It would be like trying to climb a ladder by immediately jumping to the highest step—a difficult if not impossible task.

So there will be deadlines in this class, which you'll be able to see using the D2L calendar. I ask that you stick to those deadlines as much as possible. But because I know that personal emergencies and technological problems pop up, **I am more than willing to offer extensions as needed and will not penalize late work.** I just ask that, if you anticipate needing an extension on a major writing project or other day-to-day work, you email me in advance of the deadline so that I can plan accordingly. If you don't provide me with advance notice, I may not be able to provide you with a way to make up the work.

PARTICIPATION

Course Ground Rules

The following are expected of all students in this course:

- learn how to navigate D2L, referring to the D2L resources within our course shell for help as needed;
- address technical problems as soon as possible (feel free to email me if you have a technical problem you aren't sure how to address on your own); and
- be respectful to your instructor and peers; refrain from derogatory statements.

Class Participation

Student participation is required in all aspects of the course. Here are the expectations:

- Log in to course a *minimum* of 3 times per week.
- Attend real-time course meetings and/or view recordings of them afterward.
- Communicate with other students during Zoom meetings, in D2L discussion boards, etc. on a regular basis.
- Keep track of the deadlines in the D2L calendar and let me know if you anticipate any problems meeting those deadlines.
- Use the FAQ discussion board when you have questions about course.
- Communicate with me via office hours, email, Zoom meetings, and/or discussion boards.
- Read or watch any announcements posted to the course home page.

Attendance and Real-Time Course Components

This is a remote course, which means that (unlike fully online courses) you are expected to be available for synchronous (real-time) meetings during the course's scheduled meeting times. We will be using Zoom for those meetings. You can find instructions for accessing those meetings in the "Welcome to ENGL 2020" news item on D2L and the "Zoom" tab. That news item will also include instructions for attending my office hours, which will take place in a different Zoom meeting room.

That said, I know that this semester is going to come with some major technological and scheduling challenges. Some students will discover their internet bandwidth isn't always sufficient to stream live video. Some will have computers crash in the middle of the semester. Some will get sick or have to care for family members who get sick in ways that interfere with their ability to attend synchronous course meetings. For that reason, I will be recording all our Zoom meetings so that any students who aren't able to attend can watch them after the fact. Specifically, here's how those meetings will go:

- **Tuesdays:** Every Tuesday from Jan. 26 – Apr. 28, we will have a roughly 85-minute meeting that will be fairly similar to a regular face-to-face course meeting. I will make relevant announcements and cover upcoming and ongoing assignments, introduce you to key concepts and skills relevant to the course, and facilitate discussions where you all will discuss course readings, games, and the projects you're working on. I expect you to attend those meetings in person or, if you are unable to do so, watch the recording of the meeting later in the week. That said, I strongly, strongly encourage you to attend if you are able to do so. If you don't attend regularly, it will be much harder for you to succeed in the course. As with most skills, it's very hard to get better at writing without practicing it and discussing it with others. Imagine if you were trying to learn a musical instrument, but instead of practicing that instrument or taking lessons with an experienced player, you just watched videos of other people taking lessons. You could do that for a very long time without getting much better.
- **Thursdays:** We will start the semester meeting on Thursdays as well. However, as those of you who took remote courses in the fall might know, two 85-minute Zoom meetings a week can be a lot. For that reason, I may pull back on our Thursday meetings after the first couple weeks of class, making them more informal and/or optional as needed. This will depend in part on getting a sense of what will be most useful and beneficial for you all.

One last note: Because I will be recording our Zoom meetings and posting the recordings to our D2L shell, you are *not* required to have your video turned on in Zoom. I understand some students may not be comfortable having their faces or personal spaces recorded, or may have internet connections that get unstable when streaming video. I encourage you to turn your video on if you're comfortable doing so—seeing students' faces and reactions helps me be a more effective teacher. But it is totally up to you.

In short, here's the attendance policy for this course: you should spend some time in the course shell at least 3 times a week and attend class Zoom meetings or, at the very least, watch the recording of the meeting later in the week (D2L allows me to see which students have viewed

each video). If you stop checking in 3 times a week or don't attend/watch Zoom meetings for more than two weeks in a row, or if several class assignment submissions are missing, your attendance will be reported as "no longer attending."

Academic Integrity/Misconduct

Please review MTSU's policy on [Academic Integrity and Misconduct](#).

When it comes to detecting and addressing plagiarism, I refuse to use Turnitin because I have [major problems](#) with its business model and the assumption that students are guilty of plagiarism until proven innocent. I've been teaching for over a decade and am pretty good at noticing when a student is plagiarizing. If I do, I will almost always use it as an opportunity to start a one-on-one conversation about plagiarism rather than automatically failing the student or reporting them to university authorities. If you're ever concerned that you might be plagiarizing in a project you're working on (by not citing sources correctly, etc.), I encourage you to check in with me. I hope this is obvious, but I won't penalize you for accidentally plagiarizing in an early draft of a project that you share with me. If you submit a plagiarized assignment to one of the D2L dropboxes, you will have to redo it to get credit for the assignment. Resources on how to cite work correctly are available through the website of the [University Writing Center](#). You may read more about how to avoid plagiarism from the [Office of the University Provost](#).

Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to:

- submitting someone else's work (papers, themes, reports, drawings, laboratory notes, computer programs, etc.) as if it's your own;
- knowingly assisting another student in obtaining or using materials they attempt to pass off as their own work (this does *not* include collaborating with each other while you're working on a writing project, which I encourage you to do);
- submitting assignments previously used in other courses where you received credit for the work (in other words, you can plagiarize yourself); and
- improperly crediting or not crediting another author's work.

Ultimately, the consequences for plagiarism are my call. If you repeatedly and intentionally plagiarize assignments in this course, possible disciplinary sanctions (including expulsion from the university) may be imposed through the regular institutional procedures for addressing academic misconduct. I have the option of not giving you credit for plagiarized assignments until they're redone or of giving you an F for the course. Students guilty of plagiarism may be reported to the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.

Email

If you need to get in touch with me outside of office hours, my MTMail address is the best way to do so: eric.detweiler@mtsu.edu. In most cases, I'll reply to any email I receive before 5 p.m. on a weekday by the end of that day. If it's during the workweek and you email me after 5, I usually reply the next day. If you email me during the weekend, don't expect to hear from me till the following Monday. If you have a pressing question or concern and the weekend is coming up, make sure to email me before 5 p.m. on Friday.

Per the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#), all communication related to your grade will happen inside D2L. While I do not typically use my D2L email account, if you ask me a grade-related question via MTMail, I may suggest we continue the conversation using D2L email because it provides a little more privacy. While we're on the topic of FERPA: I cannot and will not communicate with your parents, guardians, or others about your grades or how you're doing in the course. That's because of the privacy protections FERPA grants you as a college student. If there is a parent, guardian, or other person you want to grant access to your grades and other educational records, they will need to register through the [Partners in Education program](#). Once they are enrolled in that program, they can request relevant records through the MT One Stop.

STUDENT RESOURCES

Technical Support

[D2L Resources](#) are available to MTSU Online Students. You can also find some links about D2L and online courses in the Getting Started module. Keep in mind that, as a "remote" course, our class is a little different from an "online" course (the real-time Zoom meetings are the main difference).

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 [DAC Email](#).

I know that the remote nature of this course, the games we'll play, and the mental and emotional stress of COVID-19 may present additional accessibility challenges that extend beyond what is officially on file with the DAC. If I can assist with any additional accommodations or accessibility needs, please don't hesitate to get in touch. I'm happy to help.

University Writing Center

The University Writing Center is a great resource for both remote and on-campus students. Its physical location is room 362 of the James E. Walker Library, and it's online at www.mtsu.edu/uwc. The UWC offers students valuable one-on-one assistance with their writing, and they offer virtual appointments. You can make an appointment for a conference using their website or by calling (615) 904-8237. Whether you feel like you're the best or the worst writer in the class, the UWC is a wonderful resource.

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](#) or contact information and details.

Tutoring

MTSU Online supports multiple [Online Student Services](#).

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.

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](#).

True Blue Pledge

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!

Course Calendar

The following schedule lists the deadlines for readings and other course assignments. There are four columns: (1) the date, (2) the readings/reading notes due to be complete that day, (3) major writing projects due that day, and (4) games that you should be playing/completing outside of class. All readings and writing assignments are due the day they're listed in the calendar below. In some cases, the "Read" column starts with a quick overview of other things we'll be doing that day.

I will do my best to keep us in line with this schedule throughout the semester. However, I reserve the right to make changes as needed (in the event of things like natural disasters, personal health issues, etc.). If I ever do make changes to this calendar, I will announce them via a news item on our D2L homepage and update due dates across D2L. If you ever see any discrepancies between this calendar and a deadline listed somewhere else in D2L, please let me know and I'll address it ASAP.

All readings can be found in the Content section of our course's D2L shell as PDFs or links.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Read</i>	<i>Write</i>	<i>Play</i>
Week 1			
Jan. 26	Syllabus (read and discuss in class)		Start playing <i>Secret of Monkey Island</i> as soon as you'd like. Beat it or put in 7 hours by Feb. 16.
Jan. 28	You do need to read the chapter listed below, but don't need to take notes on it in advance. This time only, I'll give you time to take notes in class so you can practice developing and submitting those notes. <i>Understanding Video Games</i> , Chapter 1: "Studying Video Games"		
Week 2			

Feb. 2	In class, we'll read and discuss the prompt for the Video Game History assignment. Carly Kocurek, <i>Save Point</i>		
Feb. 4	Dmitri Williams, "The Video Game Lightning Rod"		
Week 3			
Feb. 9	Nick Montfort, "Adventure" Sarah Laskow, " Welcome to Interactive Fiction: You're a Wizard-Sniffing Pig "		
Feb. 11	In class: introduction to Twine. No notes needed for today's reading. Adam Hammond, " A Total Beginner's Guide to Twine 2.1 " (read through the end of "1. Passages and Links," or further if you choose)		
Week 4			
Feb. 16	Celia Pearce, " Game Noir: A Conversation with Tim Schafer "		By the start of this class meeting, beat or put 7 hours into <i>Secret of Monkey Island</i> .
Feb. 18	Peer workshop!	Video Game History (First Draft)	
Week 5			
Feb. 23	Carly Kocurek, " <i>Night Trap</i> : Moral Panic" Jennifer deWinter, "Miyamoto/Kojima: Authorship"		If you haven't already, begin playing <i>Celeste</i> . Beat or put in 8 hours by Mar. 30.
Feb. 25	In class, we'll read and discuss the prompt for the Narrative Analysis assignment.		

	Justin McElroy, "Royal with Cheese: A King's Quest Primer" Anastasia Salter, " <i>King's Quest</i> : Narrative"		
Week 6			
Mar. 2	Joanna Wolfe and Laura Wilder, excerpt from <i>Digging Into Literature</i>		
Mar. 4	Amber Sparks, "Take Your Daughter to the Slaughter" N. K. Jemisin, "On the Banks of the River Lex"		
Week 7			
Mar. 9	Ian Bogost, "Art"		
Mar. 11	Nothing due, but optional Zoom meeting in case you have questions or things you'd like to discuss with me.		
Week 8			
Mar. 16	<i>Understanding Video Games</i> , Chapter 7: "Narrative"		
Mar. 18	<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.)		
Week 9			
Mar. 23	<i>Understanding Video Games</i> , Chapter 5: "Video Game Aesthetics"		

Mar. 25	In class, we'll discuss the prompts for the Video Game Keyword and Game Scholarship assignments, which are the two options for your final project in the course. Mark J. P. Wolf, " <i>BioShock Infinite</i> : World-Building"		
Week 10			
Mar. 30	Dan Golding, " <i>The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time</i> : Music" (D2L) Game Score Fanfare, " The Anxiety of Celeste and its Music "		By the beginning of class, beat or put in 8 hours playing <i>Celeste</i> .
Apr. 1	Peer workshop!	Narrative Analysis (First Draft)	
Week 11			
Apr. 6	Anna Anthropy, "By Your Bootstraps"		If you haven't already started, begin <i>Undertale</i> or <i>Kentucky Route Zero</i> . Beat or put in 7 hours by 4/27.
Apr. 8	In an optional Zoom meeting, we'll discuss the student Twine games in the right-hand column. I'll be there to help with any questions you have about them, or just to work through Twine challenges you're facing.		Twine Games from Past ENGL 2020 Students (put in an hour or two playing and/or looking at the back ends of these games): SpaceEdge Hero 811

			<i>The Chaos of Happiness</i>
Week 12			
Apr. 13	Work on revising Video Game History or Narrative Analysis in class.		
Apr. 15		Video Game History <i>or</i> Narrative Analysis (Second Draft)	
Week 13			
Apr. 20	Merritt Kopas, excerpts from <i>Videogames for Humans: Twine Authors in Conversation</i>		
Apr. 22	Peer workshop!	Game Scholarship <i>or</i> Video Game Keyword (First Draft)	
Week 14			
Apr. 27	Nothing due, but be present for our final Zoom meeting. It'll include a final wrap-up conversation about what we've covered in the course and a look ahead to the second draft of the final project.		
Finals			
May 6		Game Scholarship <i>or</i> Video Game Keyword (Second Draft) due by 11:59 p.m.	