



PWR 4210-001 / ENGL 4670-004

Narrative Design for Games

PH 325 | TR 1:00 – 2:25 p.m. | 3 credits

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Name: Dr. Eric Detweiler

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Student Hours: Tuesdays 11 – 12:30, Wednesdays 12:30 – 2, and by appointment

COURSE INFORMATION

Prerequisites and Co-requisites

For ENGL 4670, completion of 1000- and 2000-level English requirements with a grade of C- or better.

Description

This course focuses on the theoretical and practical work involved in designing narrative materials for games. Our work this semester will include reading about narrative games and game design, playing games with a variety of narrative frameworks, and—most importantly—writing and creating games. You will learn skills that are applicable not just to game design, but to creative and technical writing more broadly.

A few important notes:

- This will be an intensely collaborative class, involving a lot of group projects and peer feedback. This is not arbitrary. It's because few games get made without



Original quotation from Jordan Mallory, not Sonic the Hedgehog.

extensive collaboration. While I will do my part to prepare you for collaborative work, make sure you're prepared for that work as well.

- The games we will play and discuss in this course represent a wide range of perspectives and life experiences, and some include mature themes and language. I expect us all to approach those games and conversations respectfully.

Objectives

The course is designed to teach students to

1. identify narrative designers' typical workflow and responsibilities,
2. produce technical documentation and other written documents central to the work of narrative design,
3. create narratives for original analog and digital games as well as prototypes of those games,
4. produce and/or curate other components (mechanics, music, visuals, etc.) that complement a game's narrative,
5. playtest story-driven games, and
6. collaborate effectively and ethically with others to craft narrative- and writing-centered game materials.

Major or Minor in Public Writing and Rhetoric!

Interested in more courses like this one? Consider majoring or minoring in [Public Writing and Rhetoric](#)! Our program is unique in the state of Tennessee, preparing you with a set of in-demand professional skills that can also help you make a difference in your communities. Our major requires 36 credit hours and can be paired with lots of other MTSU programs as a double major. Our minor requires 15 credit hours, giving you writing experience that can supplement what you're learning in your major. If you want to learn more, talk with your instructor or email program director Dr. Eric Detweiler at eric.detweiler@mtsu.edu.

PWR Portfolio

Throughout their coursework, students majoring and minoring in PWR submit major projects to a special D2L shell, the PWR Program Hub. In PWR 4999, the program's capstone course, students return to those projects and revise them as part of a professional portfolio. All students in this course will be given access to that D2L shell later this semester. **If you are a PWR major or minor, you should upload final versions of all major course projects to that shell.** If you aren't a PWR major or minor but think there's a chance you might become one, you're welcome to upload your projects as well. That will allow you to return to them in case you end up joining the program and take the capstone course at a later date.

COURSE MATERIALS

Required Textbooks

For this course, you will need access to one book and two video games. The book is

- Case, Julialicia, Eric Freeze, and Salvatore Pane. *Story Mode: The Creative Writer's Guide to Narrative Video Game Design*. Bloomsbury, 2024.

The games are

- [Oxenfree](#) (available for PC, Mac, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation, and Xbox, as well as iOS and Android if you have a Netflix subscription) and
- [Citizen Sleeper](#) (available for PC, Mac, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation, and Xbox; included with Xbox Game Pass as of January 2025)

Additional course readings will be available as links or PDFs through D2L. You will also need a composition book and regular access to a computer outside of class. (If you don't have your own computer, that's fine as long as you can use one in a campus computer lab and/or [rent one](#) through the library.)

ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Grading Procedure

I've tried to make the grading system for the course as straightforward as possible. Your grade on each assignments will be pass/fail. That means if you meet a set of basic requirements for an assignment, you'll get full credit for it. If you don't, you'll get no credit. See the tables below for a breakdown of coursework and how it will correspond to different letter grades. It's 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 developing as a writer and designer 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'll be able to keep track of the work you've completed there.

I will provide more detailed prompts for all the assignments listed below as the semester unfolds.

Assignment	Percentage of Grade
<i>Recurring Work</i>	
<i>Reading Notes:</i> You'll take notes on required readings and submit them to corresponding D2L dropboxes.	10%
<i>Games Notebook:</i> A notebook where you'll keep notes on the games you make and play throughout the semester.	10%
<i>Peer Feedback:</i> You'll provide feedback on classmates' major projects throughout the semester.	10%
<i>Bigger Projects</i>	
<i>Practice Pitch:</i> An individual in-class presentation where you'll present on a narrative game that's meaningful to you. Meant as practice for a later presentation.	5%
<i>One-Page RPG:</i> Working in small groups, you will create a one-page tabletop role-playing game.	10%
<i>Game Project</i>	
<i>Game Pitch:</i> The first step toward a video game you'll be creating this semester. Working in a small group, you'll give an in-class presentation pitching an initial concept for that game.	10%

Assignment	Percentage of Grade
<i>Game Design Document</i> : The next step. Working as a group, you'll create a document laying out your game and your group's planned workflow.	10%
<i>Game</i> : The game itself, which your group will submit in a few stages and forms during the second half of the semester.	25%
<i>Narrative Design Philosophy</i> : An individually written document in which you describe your philosophy as a narrative designer, turned in along with the final version of your group's game.	10%
Total	100%

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	

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 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 my feedback as an audio recording. 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.
- Most coursework will require you to upload something to a D2L dropbox. If you ever have trouble getting something uploaded to a dropbox, just let me know.
- I will also provide short written feedback as needed on smaller course assignments. For instance, if you submit a set of reading notes that doesn't meet the requirements, I'll note that in the D2L dropbox.
- All major assignment deadlines are listed in the course calendar and the D2L calendar.

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. That's especially important since so many assignments in this course are collaborative.
3. Because the 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. That said, if something comes up that prevents you from turning something in on time—an illness, a technological issue, a family emergency—please let me know. I am often, though not always, willing to give extensions as needed. I just ask that, if you anticipate needing an extension on a major writing project or other recurring 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 coursework.

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 another person'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.

Okay, what about AI?

As you probably know, large language models like the one used by ChatGPT—often referred to as "AI"—have become a big deal in the last couple of years.

I think it'd be unrealistic and impractical for me to just say, "No AI allowed!" Text-generation tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly AI, etc. will probably play a role in the writing you do in your future lives, so you might as well learn how they work. Moreover, certain kinds of AI tools are already common in the games industry (though others, like ones designed to replace voice actors, remain highly controversial).

With that in mind, here's the AI policy for this course: You may use AI tools to help you plan and polish your major projects (generating potential topics, doing grammar checks, etc.), but you **must** document and submit any AI usage along with your drafts of those projects. So, for instance, if you use ChatGPT to generate a list of potential topics for the first draft of a project, screenshot or copy-and-paste that chat, then submit it with your first draft. If you use Grammarly AI to help you rework a paragraph in a revised draft, submit what you put into and get back from Grammarly AI along with the final draft (this doesn't include using basic grammar-check features that do things like change "than" to "then" or a period to a question mark). There's no penalty for using AI in these ways as long as you document that use.

You may **not** use AI tools to generate projects for you. For instance, don't ask ChatGPT to write you 500 words on a particular topic and drop it straight into a project. In other words, you can use AI tools as documented assistants, but not as authors.

On a side note, I want to emphasize that I am not the sort of teacher who looks for ways to fail students or tell them what bad writers they are. I don't deduct points for grammatical mistakes, for instance. The worst kinds of writing classes just expect students to be perfect writers from the start, then label students as "good" or "bad" writers and grade them accordingly. This is not one of those classes. Writing is a messy process, and I expect you to make mistakes and present half-formed ideas and cite sources that aren't a great fit for your project, then do better based on feedback and practice. I know students often plagiarize (with or without AI) because of anxiety and confusion about how their writing will be received. I hope knowing that my goal is to support your development as writers, not to force you to prove that you're already great at

writing, will make you more comfortable experimenting with AI without handing off your whole writing process.

If I have good reason to suspect a project was entirely or primarily written by AI, I will ask you to rewrite the project before giving credit.

OTHER COURSE POLICIES

Attendance

I ask that you miss no more than four class meetings. If you miss a fifth class meeting, you **must** schedule a one-on-one meeting with me to develop a plan to make sure you can keep up with the course. If you don't schedule that meeting, or if we're unable to determine a sustainable path forward, you won't be able to pass the course.

Masks

Because COVID levels are high as the semester begins, I will be wearing a mask until/unless those levels subside. I welcome you to do the same.

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 emails I receive during the workweek within 24 hours. I don't always check my email on the weekend, so if you have an urgent question and the weekend is approaching, email me by 5 p.m. on Friday.

Per the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#), if you email me with detailed questions about grades, I may recommend an in-person meeting as a way of keeping your educational records private. 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.

OTHER MTSU RESOURCES AND POLICIES

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.

I know that students may encounter accessibility needs and challenges that extend beyond what is officially on file with the DAC. If I can assist with any additional accessibility issues, 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 students. Its physical location is room 362 of the James E. Walker Library. 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 a great writer or an awful one, 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.

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](#).

Course Calendar

The following schedule lists the deadlines for readings and drafts of major course projects. Major project deadlines are in ***bold and italics***. Both readings and projects are due by the start of class on the day they're listed unless otherwise noted. Some days also include a brief overview of the topic we'll be covering or things we'll be doing.

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 inclement weather, personal health issues, etc.). If I ever do make changes to this calendar, I will announce them in class and via a news item on our D2L homepage. 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.

With the exception of *Story Mode*, all readings will be available in the Content section of our course's D2L shell.

This calendar is now updated to include a full list of activities and assignments for the second half of the semester.

<i>Date</i>	<i>What We're Up To</i>
Week 1	
Jan. 21	Syllabus and Introductions
Jan. 23	Discuss Prompts for Games Notebook and Reading Notes Readings: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vincent Manileve, "What Is Narrative Design?"• "2024 State of the Game Industry" Report Outside of Class: Begin Playing <i>Oxenfree</i> , finish by Feb. 27.
Week 2	
Jan. 28	Discuss Prompts for Practice Pitch and Game Pitch Readings: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Salem Press Encyclopedia, "Monomyth"• Ursula K. LeGuin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" and "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"• N. K. Jemisin, "The Ones Who Stay and Fight"
Jan. 30	Readings: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Story Mode</i>, Chapters 2 & 3• Miguel Sicart, "<i>Papers, Please</i>: Ethics" In-Class Playthrough of <i>Papers, Please</i>
Week 3	

Feb. 4	<i>Practice Pitches</i>
Feb. 6	<p>Introduction to Twine</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anastasia Salter, "<i>King's Quest: Narrative</i>" Anastasia Salter and Stuart Moulthrop, "From Links to Stories" <p>Get into Groups for Game Project</p>
Week 4	
Feb. 11	<p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Story Mode</i>, Chapters 4 & 5 <p>In-Class Game Playthrough</p>
Feb. 13	<p>Discuss Prompts for Game Design Document, Remaining Components of Game Project</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Danielle Riendeau, "How To: Write a Game Design Document" Anthony Sansone, "Game Design Documents: Changing Production Models, Changing Demands"
Week 5	
Feb. 18	<p>In-Class Play Session: <i>Arcs</i></p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To Be Determined (see D2L)
Feb. 20	<p>Guest Speaker: Cole Wehrle</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To Be Determined (see D2L)
Week 6	
Feb. 25	<i>Game Pitches</i>
Feb. 27	<p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Story Mode</i>, Chapters 7 & 8 <p>Finish <i>Oxenfree</i> by start of class, discuss in class. Begin Playing <i>Citizen Sleeper</i>, finish by Apr. 3.</p>
Week 7	
Mar. 4	<p>Discuss One-Page RPG Prompt</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Story Mode</i>, Chapters 9 & 10
Mar. 6	<i>Games Journal Check</i>

	In-Class Play Session: One-Page RPGs
MAR. 10-15: SPRING BREAK	
Week 8	
Mar. 18	<i>Game Design Documents</i>
Mar. 20	Guest Speaker: Nash Meade
Week 9	
Mar. 25	Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Story Mode</i>, Chapters 12 & 13 <p>Work on One-Page RPGs in Class</p>
Mar. 27	Discuss Narrative Design Philosophy Prompt Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alex Tilley, Carmen Blandino, and Jennifer deWinter, "Developing a Testing Method for Dynamic Narrative"
Week 10	
Apr. 1	<i>One-Page RPGs</i> Play one-page RPGs in class.
Apr. 3	Play one-page RPGs in class.
Week 11	
Apr. 8	Finish <i>Citizen Sleeper</i> by start of class, discuss in class Note: this is extended from the original deadline, which was Apr. 3.
Apr. 10	<i>Game Prototype</i>
Week 12	
Apr. 15	Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casey O'Donnell, "<i>Game Dev Tycoon: Labor</i>" • Jason Schreier, "<i>Stardew Valley</i>" <p>In-Class Game Playthrough</p>
Apr. 17	Readings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John Vanderhoef, "<i>Shovel Knight: Nostalgia</i>" • Jason Schreier, "<i>Shovel Knight</i>" <p>In-Class Game Playthrough</p>
Week 13	
Apr. 22	<i>Full Game Draft</i>
Apr. 24	Work on Games in Class
Week 14	

Apr. 29	<i>Games Journal Check</i> Final Reflections and Discussions, Work on Games in Class
Finals	
May 8	Final Exam Session, 1 – 3 p.m. Playtest and Finetune Games <i>Final Games + Narrative Design Philosophy Due By 11:59 p.m. on Fri., May 9</i>