**Composing Digital Media**

***writing as layering***

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email: millerb@pitt.edu Spring 2019, TuTh 9:30-10:45am

office: Cathedral of Learning 617-N class location: CL 435

office hours: Tu 11:00am-1:00pm, or by appointment

Our course website: **https://pitt-cdm.github.io/miller2019spring/**

All this information and more will be posted there.

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## Course Description

This course requires students to compose digital media while exploring the rhetorical, poetic, and political implications of multiple writing platforms. Students will learn how to compose a range of critical media objects using web-authoring languages, text, sound, and images, primarily in open-source software. Classes will focus on theories of writing, composing, design, critique, delivery, and networked distributions; critique and analysis of digital media produced by professional and amateur digital media practitioners; and analysis and revisions of digital media composed by the students themselves.

## Assigned Texts

We will not have a required textbook; however, I will assign texts to read and videos to watch, as well as some tutorials and walkthroughs for which I expect you to produce your own copies of files. Most of these assigned texts will be available by direct link online; for some, I will share a scanned copy in a limited-access space (so as to respect copyright through fair use). Please do not distribute the scanned copies further than our class members, and please let me know right away if you’re having trouble accessing one of these files. My email address is at the start of this syllabus.

## Assigned Software

If you wish to use a personal or home computer (vs. the lab computers), you are responsible for downloading and installing the following software packages, all of which cost zero dollars:

* **Git** (https://git-scm.com/). Version control software for the command line.
  + Mac users may wish to install via Homebrew (https://brew.sh/)
  + Windows users may wish to install Git for Windows.
  + There are also GUIs (graphical user interfaces) available for both platforms, should you prefer those.
* **Audacity** (https://www.audacityteam.org/). Audio editing toolkit.
  + In addition to the main application, you’ll need the LAME MP3 Encoder plugin. Look for a separate download link on the page where you download Audacity.
* **GIMP** (https://www.gimp.org/). The GNU Image Manipulation Program.
* **Atom** (https://atom.io/). A cross-platform text editor for programming environments.
  + Alternatives like Notepad++ (for Windows) and TextWrangler (for Mac) are acceptable, but you *cannot* use something like Microsoft Word for this.

I recommend downloading these at your earliest convenience

## Course Outcomes and Responsibilities

Students in this course will:

* compose frequently, building a habit of reading and composing as reciprocal activities;
* respond orally and in writing to the ideas in multimodal texts about digital media and composing;
* respond orally and in writing to the ideas and strategies in their peers’ texts;
* revise in response to their own reflections and feedback from peers and the teacher;
* use a variety of modes to revise for emphasis and coherence;
* develop proficiency with a number of digital tools for composing in aural, visual, and hypertext modes;
* develop proficiency in one popular tool for version control and collaboration;
* develop shared criteria for assessing multimodal compositions in particular genres and/or media, in consultation with the professor;
* gain various learning strategies for extending knowledge in practical and theoretical aspects of digital media composition;
* work individually and on a team to produce sharable multimodal texts;
* complete a portfolio containing, at a minimum, three shaped multimodal pieces, one set of drafts, and an introductory reflection.

As the teacher in this course, I will:

* respond orally and in writing to students’ ideas and the ideas of scholars;
* provide exercises for generating multimodal texts, analyzing the features of multimodal texts, and revising texts;
* provide links to extensive online resources for further individualized study;
* discuss with students rationales for what each exercise is designed to do, and why it ought to work;
* encourage students to retry earlier exercises in later contexts, to support the development of mastery;
* choose assigned texts that balance accessibility for novices with constructive challenges that allow for learning;
* provide background context and guidance in understanding difficult texts;
* structure in-class time, especially time spent working in small peer groups, so there is meaningful work to be done (even if we finish early or run out of time);
* build in flexibility to per-class and semester-long schedules, recognizing that the complexity of writing – including digital writing – means insights and lessons do not follow a linear order of development, but leap from teachable moment to teachable moment;
* guide the class in developing shared criteria for assessing multimodal compositions in particular genres and/or media;
* provide a detailed grading contract that outlines criteria for success in the course, and communicate with students about their successes, failures, and possibilities.

## Welcome Letter

Dear digital media composers,

I’m going to start with that crucial question, of grades. There are no quizzes in this course, and no tests. Here’s the deal: if you participate actively, and meet some baseline unit criteria that we come up with together, your minimum grade – the minimum, not a guarantee, but a floor – is a B. I’ve got a four-page packet explaining what that means, and how you can go up or down from there, but that’ll be part of the reading for homework.

I’m very excited for this course. But also a little anxious. You see, I’ve spent much of my adult life thinking about how to do things with words – first as a poet, carving language into art; then as a compositionist, teaching academic writing and thinking; and more recently in my role as a digital researcher, where I work with the words and syntax of programming languages... often, to organize and study other people’s words. I’m comfortable with that kind of text, that alphanumeric text.

But this course, Composing Digital Media, is here in part to remind us that there are other kinds of texts, and other kinds of writing, than what we do with words. This course takes me out of my comfort zone, pushing me, for example, to re-see the cover of a book or the side of a cereal box as composed of multiple elements, arrayed just so; or to think about the sound effects in a TV show and realize they were added later, chosen to adjust the mood or highlight certain actions. Most importantly, this course pushes all of us not just to notice, but to build: to see if we can recreate an effect we see, or make a different choice, and see what happens.

I’ve arranged the units of the course to build on each other, adding a new layer or wrinkle while carrying forward something of what we’d done previously. In the first unit, we’ll think about the affordances of digital media: that is, what’s made possible by working with bits instead of paper, even when we are still working with words? How do the answers change, or shift, as we move beyond words into aural and visual modes? The vocabulary we build here, at the start of class, will carry through the semester as a set of lenses, shaping what we pay attention to. In this first unit, rather than build a particular object, we’ll get used to using version control software with our writing, which is to say, we’ll keep track of what’s changing from microdraft to microdraft. The tools we’ll use here are Git and GitHub, which were developed for computer programming, but are adaptable to any kind of digital composing. In fact, GitHub is how we'll be hosting nearly all the materials for this course, including our discussion forum and your projects-in-progress. (The occasional file I need to keep private, I’ll post to Box.)

The second unit is focused on soundwriting; it adds a layer of simultaneity by allowing several audio tracks to play at once (as opposed to the single linearity of prose text). We'll take a little tour of our sonic neighborhood to practice paying attention to the sounds of the spaces around us, and the stories those sounds tell, sometimes below the level of conscious awareness. The major project for this unit is a soundscape narrative of your own design, whether documentary, fictional, or even science-fictional: I'll ask you to record and rearrange the sounds that surround you, using Audacity as our tool of choice.

Unit three moves into visual rhetorics, adding multiple layers of depth to our x-y grid, even as that grid becomes more spatial, dropping the axis of time. (Apologies to anyone who was especially excited to work on video; other sections will include it, but I had to sacrifice something in designing this course.) The major project in this unit is a kind of collage, but one which makes an argument through its juxtaposition of images and text. Though some of you may have some experience with Photoshop, I'd like us all to try GIMP this time around: it's nearly as powerful, and because it's free, you'll be able to keep using it easily after graduation.

The fourth unit, and with it the third major project, takes us deeper into the computer's stack: we'll be working with HTML and CSS to build responsive websites more or less from scratch. If you've never worked with markup languages before, don't worry; I know an excellent tutorial. As for tools, there are many excellent markup-sensitive text editors out there, but if you don't have a preference, I recommend the cross-platform Atom. (Just don't use a word processor like MS Word or even LibreOffice, which would add a lot of junk code behind the scenes.)

Unit five will be a collaborative project, asking you to put it all together. My main thought here is that we can design Twine games: interactive stories that let readers choose among the branching paths of possibilities you create. One risk of group work, often, is that one member will have to sacrifice their own vision out of deference to the team. With branching games, you can explore multiple possibilities, allowing for multiple play-throughs with alternate endings!

That being said, I want to hold open the possibility that you have a vision of what this course can offer you, a vision I haven't yet made room for. If you can convince a team of your classmates to sign on to your proposal for an alternate group project, I'm here to support you in that branching path, as well.

Maybe you noticed that I'm not planning to teach you any "industry standard" software. This is a design choice I made, deliberately, if not without some hesitation. Here's why: even if I could teach you every aspect of a single program, there are many more out there, all of them changing with each new release, each new competitor. Ultimately, there’s no way to learn all there is to know about Composing Digital Media in one semester, or maybe a lifetime. Instead, what I hope the course can teach you, what I hope you’ll learn, are strategies for dealing with that endless churn – a sense of what to look for, and where to look, to figure out the next new tool, and the next, and the next.

So I'll frequently ask you to pause, to notice where your attention is drawn, and to consider what possibilities are present or suggested. I’ll ask you to read and respond to both model texts and arguments; to reflect in writing frequently on the choices you’re making, and why. And, above all, I’ll ask you to keep making choices, and making new things. As composition scholar Doug Hesse put it, you can’t learn to play piano just by reading about the piano; why should we expect any differently about writing, in any form?

I don’t expect us all to become concert-solo ready in just fifteen weeks. But I am looking forward to rehearsals.

All best,

Benjamin Miller (please call me Ben)

## Avoiding Plagiarism

This is a collaborative class, in which we offer each other suggestions and constructive criticism. However, the goal of all this collaboration is to clarify the expression of original ideas – never to substitute someone else's ideas for our own, or to impose our ideas on someone else.

To misrepresent the origins of an idea is *plagiarism*, and it will not be tolerated.   
If you want to cite an outside source, there are ways of giving credit to the original author; section 33 of the *Pocket Style Manual* presents one standard method of documenting sources, and the English department has some useful resources at [http://www.english.pitt.edu/ undergraduate/understand-and-avoid-plagiarism](http://www.english.pitt.edu/%20undergraduate/understand-and-avoid-plagiarism).

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask, because Pitt takes a very hard stance on plagiarism. It could get you expelled. Here's an excerpt from the official Policy on Academic Integrity, to give you the flavor:

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, from the February 1974 Senate Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom reported to the Senate Council, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz or exam will be imposed.

A student has an obligation to exhibit honesty and to respect the ethical standards of the profession in carrying out his or her academic assignments.  Without limiting the application of this principle, a student may be found to have violated this obligation if he or she: […]

8. Depends on the aid of others in a manner expressly prohibited by the faculty member, in the research, preparation, creation, writing, performing, or publication of work to be submitted for academic credit or evaluation.

9. Provides aid to another person, knowing such aid is expressly prohibited by the faculty member, in the research, preparation, creation, writing, performing, or publication of work to be submitted for academic credit or evaluation.

10. Presents as one's own, for academic evaluation, the ideas, representations, or words of another person or persons without customary and proper acknowledgment of sources.

11. Submits the work of another person in a manner which represents the work to be one's own.

12. Knowingly permits one's work to be submitted by another person without the faculty member's authorization.

You have the right to a fair hearing, and I’ll talk to you before I talk to anyone else, but it’s far easier just to avoid plagiarism in the first place. All clear cases of deliberate plagiarism will be referred to the appropriate Dean for disciplinary action, including an Academic Integrity Board hearing. For the University's full policy on Academic Integrity and the adjudication process for infringements, including plagiarism, go to <http://www.pitt.edu/~provost/ai1.html>.

## Available Resources at Pitt

**The Writing Center**

The Writing Center, located at 317B O'Hara Student Center, is an excellent resource for working with an experienced consultant on your writing – and not only alphanumeric writing. Although not every consultant has experience with multimodal composing, they’re a great resource for developing ideas, getting feedback from an outside reader, and getting organized for revision and reflection.

Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis or throughout the term. In some cases, I may require that you go to the Writing Center for help on a particular skillset; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance. To make an appointment, come to the Writing Center or call 412-624-6556. For more information, including answers to frequently asked questions, visit <http://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu/undergraduate-services/student-faqs>.

**Disability Resources**

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890 / 412-624-3346 (Fax), as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.  For more information, visit [www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/drsabout](http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/drsabout).

**Counseling Services**

Pitt also offers free counseling for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties. The Counseling Center, located on the 2nd Floor Nordenberg Hall, offers Psychological Services and Sexual Assault Services (412-648-7930) (8:30 am-5:00 pm, Monday-Friday) or (412-648-7856) (after 5 pm, Monday-Friday or on weekends). For more information, see <http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/cchome>.

# Schedule Preview

The following schedule is just a preview, and is subject to change; **the full and most up-to-date version will be posted on the course website (https://pitt-cdm.github.io/miller2019spring/)**, including more detailed explanations of each homework assignment and full lesson plans with space for comments or notes. This gives me more flexibility to adapt the specifics to our needs as a reading and writing community.

Assignments are listed (as HW) on the day they are assigned, and are **due online at 9pm the night before** the following class meeting, unless otherwise specified. You should in general **also bring a copy to class**, so that we have access to it for discussion and/or revisions. Digital versions are usually fine.

Unit I: What Makes Digital Media New? (weeks 1-2)

Unit II: Soundscapes and Soundwriting (weeks 2-5)

Unit III: Visual Rhetorics and Argument (weeks 5-8)

Unit IV: Webslinging with Markup (weeks 8-10)

Unit V: Collaborative Composing (weeks 10-14)

Unit VI: Reflection and Revision (week 15)

*Final portfolios will be due at the final exam slot, which has not yet been announced.*

## Unit I: What makes Digital Media New?

Week 1

* Lesson 1, Tuesday 1/8 ­– Introductions

HW:

* + Read syllabus and grading contract; return with questions or a signed contract.
  + Read Sorapure, “Five Principles of New Media: Or, Playing Lev Manovich”: <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/8.2/coverweb/sorapure/>. Skim the text-only version *after* reading through the interactive one.
  + Watch Wesch, “Information R/evolution”:
  + Respond to the Tech Comfort Survey if you haven’t done so in class: http://bit.ly/cdm2019survey
  + Join github.com (it’s free):
  + Post an introduction on the Issues page at   
    https://github.com/pitt-cdm/miller2019spring/issues/1.
* Lesson 2, Thursday 1/10 – What is New about Digital Media?

HW:

* + Watch the YouTube videos “Git and GitHub for Poets,” starting at least with the Introduction and going as far as your interest and time allow. Take notes on what you don’t understand, and we’ll talk about it next class.
  + Install Git if you don’t have it already. On a Mac, you’ll want to use Homebrew to install, which may require installing Homebrew first. On Windows, you’ll probably want GitBash.
  + If you're not comfortable with the command line, try the Command Line Crash Course (https://learnpythonthehardway.org/book/appendixa.html).

Week 2

* Lesson 3, Tuesday 1/15 – Building a Repository

HW:

* + Listen to example sound narratives
  + Write a short blog post in response: what do you notice? what do you wonder? Post this to the Issues page.
  + Schedule a one-on-one conference with Ben at <https://benmiller314.youcanbook.me>

*I’ll fill in the rest of these lessons and homeworks online, as we go, but here are the essential dates:*

## Unit II: Soundscapes and Soundwriting

*In this unit, you will arrange layers of sound to project a sense of place, and of things happening in that place. The genre of the narrative you convey is open: it could be documentary, fictional, even science-fictional. (The title you choose will help steer listeners' expectations, and thus their perceptions.)*

Th 1/17 Soundwalk. Let me know as soon as possible if you have to be absent.

Tu 1/22 Soundscape narrative proposal due

Th 1/24 Soundscape narrative preview due

Tu 1/29 Soundscape narrative full draft due

Tu 2/5 Soundscape narrative final-for-now draft due

## Unit III: Visual Rhetorics and Argument

*In this unit, you will make a claim through the juxtaposition of images and text. As with the sound project, the context for your argument is open: you could be making a social commentary, calling for action, constructing a parody, riffing on a pun, explaining a concept, and so on. Whatever you choose, you should consider your audience and what they would find persuasive or interesting, and how you therefore wish to attract and direct their attention.*

Tu 2/12 Visual argument proposal due

Th 2/14 Visual argument preview due

Tu 2/19 Visual argument full draft due

Tu 2/26 Visual argument final-for-now draft due

## Unit IV: Webslinging (html+css markup)

*In this unit, you will build a multi-page website from scratch, beginning with html and css files.*

Tu 3/5 Web portfolio proposal due

Th 3/7 Web portfolio preview due

Tu 3/19 Web portfolio full draft due

Tu 3/26 Web portfolio final-for-now draft due

## Unit V: Collaborative Composing (deadlines t.b.d.)

Th 4/18 Last day of class; final project presentations