

Making Videogames, Making Arguments

Course Objectives

Since as early as George Herbert's pattern poems, the physical arrangement of words on the page has played a central element to the narrative that page produces. Increasingly, in the twenty-first century, techniques such as Herbert's (and classical Greek texts before him) are central to the narratives produced by videogames. While the tradition of visual poetry is often associated with religious experience, independent videogame designers today use textual movement to express subjective experiences of culture, politics, and sexual identities. Consider Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please*, in which the player takes on the reading experience of a passport officer in the fictional country of Arstotzka. Or perhaps Meritt Kopas's LIM, which uses color and motion to communicate transgender experiences of normative spaces. While games such as these use visual rhetoric to express the emotional labor of the passport officer and the emotional strain of the transgender experience, others force us to question the ethical risks in identifying with others based purely on our interpretations of their art (Davey Wreden). This class thinks about how videogames such as these are both like and unlike visual poetry including concrete writing, cut-ups, automating writing, and recombinant poems. We will come to understand both not just as texts to analyze but tools we can use to create our own interactive narratives. Our course ends with a unit on videogame prototyping, where we will learn to create short videogames that express our own cultural and political arguments. The future of digital narrative is yours to shape.

*You will need a recent computer with an integrated graphics chip that can play independent games on the Steam gaming platform. We will also use two pieces of prototyping software in this course: Axure and Twine. Axure can be downloaded for free with an educational license and Twine is free of charge. The games for this course are either free or cost about twenty dollars each. A mac or Linux operating system is required (macs are recommended).

Course Materials

Books

Apollinaire, *Caligrammes: Poems of Peace and War (1913-1916)*, A Bilingual Edition
Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*
Brotchie, Alistair and Mel Gooding. *A Book of Surrealist Games*.
Drucker, Johanna. *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modernist Art, 1909-1923*
Zimmerman, Eric and Katie Salen. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*

Games

Davey Wreden, The Beginner's Guide (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/303210/>)

Fullbright, *Gone Home* (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/232430/>)
Jonathan Blow, *Braid* (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/26800/>)
Lucas Pope, *Papers, Please* (<http://store.steampowered.com/app/239030/>)
Meritt Kopas, *LIM* (<http://mkopas.net/files/Lim/>)

Prototyping Software

Axure (<http://www.axure.com/>)
Twine (<http://twinery.org/>)

Course Outline

Unit One: Experimental reading experiences

Week One

Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word* (Introduction and chapter one)
George Herbert, "Easter Wings" and "The altar"
Stephane Mallarmé, *A Throw of the Dice*
(<http://jimhanson.org/documents/Athrowofthedicetypographicallycorrect02-18-09.pdf>)

Week Two

Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word* (chapter two)
Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes*

Week Three

Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word* (chapter three)
Marcel Duchamp, Rotoreliefs
Raymond Queneau, *Exercises in Style*
(<http://www.veryinteractive.net/content/6-library/14-exercises-in-style-preface-and-excerpts/queneau-exercisesinstyle.pdf>)

Week Four

Individual analysis due

Alstair Brotchie and Mel Gooding, *A Book of Surrealist Games*
Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse, *Between Page and Screen*
(<http://www.betweenpageandscreen.com/>)

Unit Two: videogame reading/reading videogames

Week Five

Text: Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games* (chapters 1 and 2)
Videogame: *The Beginner's Guide*

Week Six

Text: Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games* (chapters 5 and 6)
Videogame: *Papers, Please*

Week Seven

Text: Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games* (chapter 8)
Videogame: *Gone Home* & *LIM*

Week Eight

Comparative analysis due

Text: Patrick Jagoda, "Fabulously Procedural"
Videogame: Braid

Unit Three: Videogame prototyping and production

Week Nine

Reading: Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* (Unit 1: Core concepts)
Software: Twine

Week Ten

Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* (Unit 2: RULES)
Software: Twine

Week Eleven

Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* (Unit 3: PLAY)
Software: Axure

Week Twelve

Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* (Unit 4: CULTURE)
Software: Axure

Week Thirteen

Workshop for final projects

Ted Talk due one week following our final class

Assignments and Marking

Rather than your final mark reflecting the average of a series of judgments of the quality of your work, I prefer for our marking practice to reflect your scholarly and intellectual growth over the course of our fourteen weeks. To that end, I will determine progress toward your finals mark using a gamelike point system. Each completed assignment will earn you a maximum number of points; although the points you receive for each assignment will depend on the quality of your work (in this way, they still work as marks), I hope they will suggest that you are actively earning the expertise you develop, rather than having it conferred upon you by my assessments. At the end of the semester, final marks will be determined by the cumulative number of points you have built up over the course.

For students who are particularly active in class discussion, a maximum of 50 bonus points can be earned over the course of the semester. Bonus points can be used to push your final mark up to a higher level. For instance, a student with 790 points, who earns 15 bonus points, may finish with a final score of 805 points. These additional points will not be given easily.

Individual Analysis (200 points)
Comparative Analysis (300 points)
Ted Talk (400 points)
Participation (100 points)

A+ (900-1000)
A (850-890)
A- (800-840)

B+ (770-790)
B (730-760)
B- (700-720)

C+ (650-690)
C (600-640)

D (500-590)
F (490 and below)

Individual Analysis: Concrete Poetry (200 points)

For this assignment, you will be asked to write a short (3-4) page paper examining one of Apollinaire's calligrams and arguing how the material arrangement, and rearrangement of the poem plays a central role in its meaning. Papers on texts other than Apollinaire's calligrams will be allowed, but must be approved by me first.

Comparative Analysis: Twine Game (300 points)

For this assignment, you will be asked to write a medium length (5-6) page paper that examines the design and reading strategies of a game made in Twine. This will be a comparative paper, in which you compare an analog text (a calligrammatic poem) and a digital text (an interactive game on Twinehub). Your paper should consider what elements of interactive reading change between page and screen and what elements stay the same. You may write on the same text used in your previous assignment; if you do so, the text of your comparative analysis must not repeat the content of your individual analysis (avoiding self-plagiarism).

Places to find games: Twinehub (<http://twinehub.weebly.com/>) and Forest Ambassador (<http://forestambassador.com/>).

Final Assignment: Ted Talk (400 points)

For the final assignment, you will develop your own prototype reading game and present it in a Ted Talk style video that demonstrates why the game is important and why your audience should play it. These videos should be no more than 5-6 minutes in length and include demonstrations of your working game prototype. This assignment will be evaluated on your ability to demonstrate the prototype, explain how specific features produce arguments and experiences of interest to the audience, and overall polish and presentation.

Participation (100 points) This is a seminar-style course that emphasizes sharing ideas and hands-on learning by playing games and building prototypes. Active in-class participation is key to successful learning in this discussion-based environment and counts as a key component of your final grade.

Academic Integrity Students are encouraged to discuss the readings and assignments together and to share their work with one another. Still, the work presented for evaluation must be the student's own and must follow the WPA statement of best practices (available online at <http://wpacouncil.org/positions/WPAplagiarism.pdf>).