## Welcome Letter

Dear digital media composers,

I’m going to start with that recurring question, of grades. There are no graded 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 / Canvas module explaining what that means, and how you can go up or down from there, but that’ll be part of the reading for homework.

Feeling a little better? Or still curious about the course’s actual content? (I hope it’s both!)

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 electronic bits instead of objects like paper? How do the answers change, or shift, as we move from words into aural and visual modes? The vocabulary we build here, at the start of class, will form a set of lenses that can guide our attention throughout the semester.

For this first unit, rather than build and revise some discrete project, we’ll practice using *version control software* – which is to say, tools that help us track what’s changing from revision to revision. These tools, Git and GitHub, were developed for computer programming, but they’re useful for 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 Canvas.)

The second unit is focused on *soundwriting*; it adds the layer of simultaneity by allowing several audio tracks to play at once (as opposed to the single line of prose text we can keep track of). The major project for this unit is an *audio 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, layering them into foreground and background for an immersive experience. My go-to software here is Audacity.

Unit three moves into *visual rhetorics*, adding a second dimension to our grid of simultaneous presentation, even as we cede control of the axis of time. (Apologies to anyone who was especially excited to work on video, but I had to sacrifice something in designing this course: 14 weeks is really not a lot of time!) The major project in this unit is *visual argument*: a kind of collage that aims to make an intervention in the world through its juxtaposition of images and text. My go-to software for this unit is GIMP, the Gnu Image Manipulation Program.

The fourth unit, and with it the third major project, take us deeper into the computer’s stack: we’ll be working with HTML and CSS to build beautiful responsive websites more or less from scratch. If you’ve never worked with *markup languages* before, don’t worry; I’ve found some amazing tutorials. If, on the other hand, you’re used to generating this code using JavaScript frameworks, you may just find that a better understanding of the basic building blocks of structure and style helps you simplify, streamline, and learn more from the websites you encounter every day. As for tools, you’ll need a developer-friendly browser, like Chrome or Firefox, and a syntax-aware text editor. There are many of the latter out there, but if you don’t have a preference, I recommend the cross-platform Pulsar (simpler out of the box) or VS Code (more tutorials available); both are also extremely extendible with plugins and settings. (Just don’t use a word processor like MS Word or even LibreOffice, which would add a lot of junk code behind the scenes.) You can even publish your websites with GitHub’s free built-in Pages functionality.

Unit five asks you to put it all together, revisiting earlier projects and/or skillsets to consolidate what you’ve learned and to project forward beyond the semester. We’ll talk more about how to do that as it gets closer.

Maybe you noticed that I’m not planning to teach you any “industry standard” software like Adobe’s suite (Audition, Photoshop, Illustrator, Dreamweaver). This is a design choice I made deliberately, if not without some hesitation. Here’s why: For one thing, everything I’ve selected is free and open-source software, meaning you’ll maintain access to it and its successors for the low, low price of $0, even after you leave Pitt. For another, this class is largely an introductory seminar, planting seeds for future growth – not a space to polish a portfolio that will be interview-ready for a design-industry job. What’s more, even if I could teach you every aspect of some preferred program, there are many more out there, all of them changing with each new release, each new competitor. Regardless of software, it’s important to realize that the biggest differences are in surface trappings – which are a lot less important than the functions they invoke, and the design principles that help you decide what you’re trying to do.

That said, if you feel strongly that (e.g.) Photoshop is more appropriate for your learning and career goals, talk to me about it in office hours, and we can work something out.

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, as you figure out the next new tool or version, 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 fourteen short weeks. But I’m looking forward to rehearsals, just the same.

All best,

Benjamin Miller (please call me Ben)