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# WRITING FOR GAMES

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## RTF 344M/AET 337

CMA 4.144 | TTh 5 - 6:30pm

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### Why study interactive storytelling?

Because it explores two of the most powerful forces in our lives: the stories we tell, and the technology we use.

Stories and computers are both tools that enable us to connect with the world around us — and with each other.

We can think of interactive storytelling as a form of dramatic writing, just like theater or television. But what makes it exciting and weird is that the writer does not control the story; the audience does. Creatives (like you) have only just begun to explore the storytelling possibilities of this field.

All semester long, we will be wrestling with one central idea:

## How we tell stories in this new medium

### Why is this course important?

Because this moment in time is a turning point for digital storytellers. We still don't really know how this medium works when it comes to narrative. The creative discoveries we make in the next few years could shape games (and stories) for decades to come - and this class can be the beginning of that adventure for you.

In the 1920s and '30s, writers invented new ways to tell stories, using an exotic technology called film. Writers today are playing around with games, digital media, VR, and augmented reality. They have questions, lots of questions. What does it mean, to share the story with the audience? What new possibilities does that open up for us? What can we do now, that we could never do before?

In this class, we will ask new questions, make new discoveries, and (with any luck) start to blaze a new path forward.

## What will I be able to do by the end of this course?

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Compare and contrast different forms of media, to better understand how writers create interactive stories
- Understand and analyze how stories are structured - in both old media and new
- Create a cast of characters, including player avatars and non-player characters (NPCs)
- Understand how game design and narrative intersect - or collide
- Use storytelling tools from different media to craft a story for a level of a game
- Write an interactive script, just like the pros do

## What skills will I develop?

Over the course of the semester, you will develop strengths in the following areas:

- Creative writing and problem-solving skills
- Communication skills, both written and verbal
- Critical thinking skills
- Collaborative learning; the ability to give (and receive) constructive feedback
- Design-thinking skills, including emotional intelligence and empathy
- Creative flexibility - the ability to generate and revise content under tight deadlines

## How will you teach this class?

This class relies heavily discussions and small-group work, both inside and outside of class. Lectures will be kept as short as possible. The best way to learn is to learn by doing, so come to class ready to Do. Class participation is an important part of your grade.

## How do I succeed in this class?

To answer this question, I looked to two of my past students. One was an AET major; one was from RTF. This class was a real challenge for both of them. But they stuck with the work, they persevered through the challenging moments in the semester, and they came out the other side as more confident and skilled creatives. I learned a lot from them about how to succeed.

Here's what I think they would suggest:

- **Be prepared.** Do the readings, play the games, come ready to work. We will be doing a fair amount of work in-class, and you want to be able to hit the ground running.

- **Help others when you can.** Your attendance and your level of participation - in class conversations, in workshops and in online discussions - will be part of your overall grade. Bring your whole self to class. You will be learning from each other as much as you will be learning from me.
- **Ask for help when you need it.** This subject matter is a combination of left-brain and right-brain work, and it can be challenging in surprising ways. Reach out for help when you need it - myself, the TA, the writing tutor, and your fellow students can be great resources.
- **Be here now.** Don't use cell phones in class. They prevent you and those around you from learning. Most of the time, you won't need your laptops open, either. I need you for a few hours a week. For the short time we are together, let's give each other our full attention.
- **Go pro.** Professionals deliver work that is clean and well-written. Set this as a standard for yourself, too. Before turning in writing assignments, use spellcheck. A paper full of errors is difficult to read, and this will negatively affect the grader's first impression.

This class is designed with your success in mind. You've got this. I'm here to help.

## What textbooks will I need?

You will spend plenty of time this semester reading books, watching movies, and playing games. Hooray! A few textbooks that you will want to order right away are:

- *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (2016 edition) by Janet Murray (be sure to get the 2016 edition!)
- *The Anatomy of Story* by John Truby

You can find the full list of required materials on Canvas.

## What does our class schedule look like?

The course follows a series of modules that include Story Structure, Character, Design, Environment, and Dialog. See Canvas for more.

## How will I be graded?

The main focus of this class will be your final deliverable, which will be worth 40% of your grade. I will be assigning frequent in-class and out-of-class supporting activities, which will comprise another 40% of your grade. You'll also be graded on attendance (10%) and participation (10%).

For the full grading scheme, see Canvas.

## This class carries a Writing Flag. What does that mean?

In this class - as in any Writing Flag course - you will:

1. Write regularly, several times during the semester, and complete writing projects that are substantial, such as critical essays and creative work;
2. Rewrite your work, incorporating feedback from the instructor, TA, and fellow students; and
3. Earn at least one-third of your grade - if not more - through your writing assignments.

### What if I need extra help with my writing?

No problem! Just visit the Moody Writing Support program.

They provide one-on-one support for students enrolled in this class.

## But wait! What about [\_\_\_\_\_]?

If you don't see your question answered here, please let me know. I am here to help. The full syllabus - including policies on late work & absences, as well as university-wide policies and campus resources - will be posted on Canvas under Module 00, Class Resources.

## OK sounds good. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Yes, I can. After graduating from UT Austin (B.A. Art History), I started my career as a writer at a small game studio down on Congress Avenue. Since then, I've worked on over 25 game titles. Some were good, some were not so good! The good ones include *BioShock*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Far Cry 2*. Titles in my portfolio have sold over 30 million copies and generated over half a billion dollars in sales. (Not all of that money went to me.)

Early in my career, I didn't know any other game writers. I wanted to find them, and to create a place where we could come together and learn from each other, so I founded the Game Writers Conference, which is now the Game Narrative Summit at GDC.

Some of my recent projects include an interactive-television show with Netflix and a VR game with a studio here in Austin. And, of course, this class. I feel very fortunate to be your professor, and I'm looking forward to working with you and exploring this material together.

- Professor O'Connor