
WRITING FOR GAMES

RTF 344M/AET 337

CMA 4.150 | MW 5 - 6:30pm

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Why study writing for games?

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 creatives. We still don't really know how this medium works when it comes to telling stories. We kind of know, we have a few ideas - but nothing's written in stone. The 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!

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 details.

How will I be graded?

The main focus of this class will be your final deliverable, which will be worth 30% of your grade. I will be assigning frequent in-class and out-of-class supporting activities, which will comprise 50% of your grade. You'll also be graded on attendance (10%) and participation (10%).

There will be peer-grading in this class. Studies have shown that grading other people's work is a great way to deepen your understanding of the material. All peer-grading will be anonymous.

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.

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 great, some were terrible. The great ones include *BioShock*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Far Cry 2*. Past clients include Telltale Games, Ubisoft, Electronic Arts, and Netflix.

Some of my recent projects include an interactive-television show with Netflix and a VR game with a studio here in Austin. 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. If you are interested in working in the gaming industry, I can help you navigate that world.

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

Policies and Resources

Classroom Policies

Grading policies

Grading policies will be posted to Canvas.

Policy on late work

Workshops depend on having work to critique. Therefore, most of a student's grade will derive from timely, thoughtful completion of assignments. Since students will also be expected to review each other's work and provide feedback in a workshop setting, class participation will be an important component of the final grade.

Late work will be handled on a case-by-case basis. Generally, except in the case of an excused absence, work submitted after an assigned deadline will not be eligible for full credit. Please communicate with me if you have problems keeping to the schedule. It is better to talk through problems than ignore them.

Policy on absences

Given the range of techniques covered during the course, attendance at every class will be critical. Later segments will depend heavily on mastery of earlier segments.

If we are doing group work, and you are absent on the day that your group meets, you are responsible for providing your team with the necessary information to compensate for your absence. It is crucial to keep in communication with your group; you are responsible for letting both us and your team know if you cannot make it to a class.

Excused Absence: the only absences that will be considered excused are for religious holidays or extenuating circumstances due to an emergency. If you plan to miss class due to observance of a religious holiday, please let us know at least two weeks in advance. You will not be penalized for this absence, although you will still be responsible for any work you will miss on that day if applicable. Check with us for details or arrangements.

If you have to be absent, use your resources wisely. Ask your group and other classmates to get a run-down and notes on any lessons you miss. If you find there are topics that we covered while you were gone that raise questions, you may come by during office hours or schedule a meeting to discuss. Email specific questions you have in advance so that we can make the most of our time. "What did I miss?" is not specific enough.

University Policies

Religious Holy Days

By UT Austin policy, you must notify me of your pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, I will give you an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

Q Drop Policy

If you want to drop a class after the 12th class day, you'll need to execute a Q drop before the Q-drop deadline, which typically occurs near the middle of the semester. Under Texas law, you are only allowed six Q drops while you are in college at any public Texas institution. For more information, see: <http://ugs.utexas.edu/vick/academic/adddrop/qdrop>

Student Accommodations

Students with a documented disability may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 512-471-6259 (voice) or 1-866-329-3986 (video phone). <http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/about/>

- Please request a meeting as soon as possible to discuss any accommodations
- Please notify me as soon as possible if the material being presented in class is not accessible
- Please notify me if any of the physical space is difficult for you

Academic Integrity

Each student in the course is expected to abide by the University of Texas Honor Code:

“As a student of The University of Texas at Austin, I shall abide by the core values of the University and uphold academic integrity.”

This means that work you produce on assignments, tests and exams is all your own work, unless it is assigned as group work. I will make it clear for each test, exam or assignment whether collaboration is encouraged or not.

Always cite your sources. If you use words or ideas that are not your own (or that you have used in previous class), you must make that clear otherwise you will be guilty of plagiarism and subject to academic disciplinary action, including failure of the course.

You are responsible for understanding UT's Academic Honesty Policy, which can be found at the following web address: <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/>

University Resources for Students

The university has numerous resources for students to provide assistance and support for your learning, use these to help you succeed in your class. In addition to the Moody Writing Center, mentioned earlier in the document, you have access to:

The Sanger Learning Center

Did you know that more than one-third of UT undergraduate students use the Sanger Learning Center each year to improve their academic performance? All students are welcome to take advantage of Sanger Center's classes and workshops, private learning specialist appointments, peer academic coaching, and tutoring for more than 70 courses in 15 different subject areas. For more information, please visit <http://ugs.utexas.edu/slc> or call 512-471-3614 (JES A332).

The University Writing Center

The University Writing Center offers free, individualized, expert help with writing for any UT student, by appointment or on a drop-in basis. Consultants help students develop strategies to improve their writing. The assistance we provide is intended to foster students' resourcefulness and self-reliance. <http://uwc.utexas.edu/>

Counseling and Mental Health Services

Taking care of your general well-being is an important step in being a successful student. If stress, test anxiety, racing thoughts, feeling unmotivated or anything else is getting in your way, there are options available for support.

For immediate support:

- Visit/Call the Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC): M-F 8-5p | SSB, 5th floor | 512-471-3515 | cmhc.utexas.edu
- CMHC Crisis Line: 24/7 | 512.471.2255 | cmhc.utexas.edu/24hourcounseling.html

CARE Counselor in the Moody College of Communication is: Abby Simpson, LCSW

- |CMA 4.134 | 512-471-7642 (Please leave a message if she is unavailable)

FREE Services at CMHC:

- Brief assessments and referral services
- Mental health & wellness articles - cmhc.utexas.edu/commonconcerns.html
- MindBody Lab - cmhc.utexas.edu/mindbodylab.html

- Classes, workshops, & groups - cmhc.utexas.edu/groups.html

Student Emergency Services

<http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/>

ITS

Need help with technology? <http://www.utexas.edu/its/>

Libraries

Need help searching for information? <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/>

Canvas

Canvas help is available 24/7 at <https://utexas.instructure.com/courses/633028/pages/student-tutorials>

Important Safety Information

BCAL

If you have concerns about the safety or behavior of fellow students, TAs or Professors, call BCAL (the Behavior Concerns Advice Line): 512-232-5050. Your call can be anonymous. If something doesn't feel right – it probably isn't. Trust your instincts and share your concerns.

Evacuation Information

The following recommendations regarding emergency evacuation from the Office of Campus Safety and Security, 512-471-5767, <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/>

Occupants of buildings on The University of Texas at Austin campus are required to evacuate buildings when an alarm or alert is activated. Alarm activation or announcement requires exiting and assembling outside, unless told otherwise by an official representative.

Familiarize yourself with all exit doors of each classroom and building you may occupy. Remember that the nearest exit door may not be the one you used when entering the building.

Students requiring assistance in evacuation shall inform their instructor in writing during the first week of class.

In the event of an evacuation, follow the instruction of faculty or class instructors. Do not re-enter a building unless given instructions by the following: Austin Fire Department, The University of Texas at Austin Police Department, or Fire Prevention Services office.

Link to information regarding emergency evacuation routes and emergency procedures can be found at: www.utexas.edu/emergency