

DIGITAL STUDIES: HISTORY AND PRINCIPLES

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jentery.github.io/minimal/ (HTML) | jentery.github.io/minimal/2017.pdf (PDF)

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE TERRITORIES

The Department of English acknowledges and respects the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ peoples on whose traditional territories the University of Victoria stands and whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar introduces you to the histories and principles of digital literary and cultural studies. Digital literary studies involve the interpretation of electronic literature but also the use of digital technologies to examine and remediate literature. How, for instance, is literature composed for screens or through algorithms? Or how is it analyzed by machines and encoded for discovery, scanning, and preservation? Overlapping with many literary questions, digital cultural studies entail the interpretation of new media and computational cultures, but also the integration of digital technologies into cultural production. How, for example, do labour practices morph with the internet and social networks? Or how do scholarship and other communications transform or expand with platforms? Both fields are unique (or simply odd) within the humanities because they blend technical knowledge with creative and critical approaches to research questions. Both fields also engage matters of *design*: interests in interfaces, interactions, graphics, systems, code, reuse, stewardship, performance, materiality, and information architecture, for instance.

Given the centrality of design to digital literary and cultural studies, this introductory seminar combines cultural criticism with creative and technical practices by treating design as *inquiry*. Design is not something found in objects. A technology does not “have” design. Design is not an idea, either. A person does not imagine a design on their own. Like any labour practice, design is social; it is also a negotiation among materials/forces. In digital studies, design encourages us to ask how stuff is composed, under what assumptions, by whom, for whom, and to what effects. It also prompts us to consider how digital stuff and its conditions can *change*. What else was it? What else will it be? What else could or should it be? How does change happen not just around it, but with or through it?

Quite a mess, right? To keep us focused, this seminar narrows design in digital studies to *minimal computing* in particular. Minimal computing foregrounds access, infrastructure, and persistence against various types of scope, function, and feature creep now common in fields such as digital humanities, where projects are never done. This creep usually happens because technologies make it possible to add all the things to the inquiry at hand. Lines become increasingly difficult to draw as digital projects continue to grow. You could say minimal computing serves as a corrective of sorts; more accurately, it is an *analytical and creative framework* for navigating the politics

and aesthetics of design in digital studies: a way to examine and critique as well as reuse, build, and preserve projects.

I selected minimalism as a heuristic for this seminar because it is: 1) conducive to an introduction; it fosters attention to specific elements of production while also bypassing assumptions of technical expertise, which may not be common in English studies; 2) impossible to engage meaningfully through critical distance alone; it entails the study of digital literature and culture from the “inside,” blending skepticism with immersion; 3) steeped in the contingencies of design; we can’t talk persuasively about minimalism as an idea or form outside of history, medium, setting, action, or ideology; 4) a popular research and discussion topic in digital studies right now, due partly to concerns about digital security, not to mention the constant maintenance and repair of digital projects; and 5) inclined to decentre the “digital” by entwining it with other formations; digital technologies and new media do not exist independently of mechanical procedures, analog machines, tactile media, people, and environments.

To be clear, minimal computing is not without its problems. Discursively, it functions within a collocation set that also includes “reduction,” “simplicity,” “clarity,” “limited,” “necessity,” “few,” and “flat.” These terms are value-laden; they weave materials and actions together with concepts and beliefs as they draw our attention to interesting design problems. Through case studies, workshops, discussions, project development, and a lecture or two, we will study that entanglement and those problems in the context of digital literature and culture. What are minimalist interfaces, architectures, media, and approaches in digital studies? What do they promise? What do they afford? For what are they responsible? When and why should they be adopted, rejected, or modified? By the term’s end, I’m not asking you to affirm minimal computing as a methodology or ideology. I am asking you to articulate your own position on minimal computing through an integration of immanent critique with experimental practice: to compose about, with, through, and against it. In doing so, I hope you develop a concrete sense of how digital literature and culture are written, read, and—most important for this seminar—designed.

FORMAT

This seminar is project-based. After two weeks of workshops and discussion in May, you will have four weeks in June to develop your own projects, related to your own areas of research, with periodic feedback from me. Here, the goal is for you to leave the seminar with a functioning project or prototype for further development during/after your graduate studies. You might make a simple website or bot, create an open data set or repository, develop an accessible workflow, or cook up a minimal edition or collection. During this process, I will ask you to ground the research in a particular approach to digital studies. I will also ask you to share (via a presentation, rationale, and documentation) the decisions you’ve made.

Each of our seminar meetings will involve the following:

- *Workshop:* You will experiment in pairs with particular techniques in/around minimal computing. You will use a research log to document this work and your findings/results.
- *Discussion:* We will chat as a group about workshops and case studies in minimal computing. During these discussions, I may decide to listen, without much (if any) intervention in the conversation. I may also decide to briefly lecture about a given topic or ask you to present material from your research log. Seminar discussion will also be an opportunity for us to talk about the histories and principles of digital studies.

You should arrive to each meeting having reviewed the assigned case studies and completed the assigned exercises, all of which will be communicated to you during seminar and via email.

ASSIGNMENTS AND ASSESSMENT

For this seminar, you will be required to keep a research log, give a presentation, develop your own project, and participate in workshops and discussions. Below is a list of the assignments, together with a description of what is expected for each and how each will be assessed. Please note that the requirements are subject to minor changes as the seminar progresses. If I do make a change to any of the assignments, then I will notify you in writing.

The project and presentation are essential to passing the course. Failure to complete these two requirements will result in a failing N grade (calculated as a 0 for your GPA). Please also note: I do not post marks outside my office, and I do not use plagiarism detection software.

Log (35% of your final mark, due by 12pm on Thursday, June 1st)

Throughout the term, you will keep a research log documenting your work during and outside of seminar. You should contribute to this log during each seminar meeting. Consider treating the log like a laboratory notebook, with hypotheses, literature reviews, findings, documentation, and reflections on methods and experiments. The log will be assessed holistically, meaning I will give it one grade based on its: 1) consistency, 2) development over time, 3) reflexive character (including its awareness of methods and decisions), 4) integration of seminar discussions and assigned case studies, 5) quality (including its combination of critique with creativity and experimentation), 6) inclusion of documentation or sample material from workshops, and 7) attention to change (including attention to hiccups and surprises). Each entry in your log will be related to a particular workshop and/or case study. I will provide detailed instructions during seminar.

Please note that the tone and style of your log should be less formal than, say, a seminar essay intended for an academic audience. Where applicable, entries should be self-aware. In the log, please feel free to reference work conducted by your peers or to spark dialogue with them. Please also feel free to combine your preferred modes of

composition: writing, drawing, collage, outlining, sketching, graphing, copying, pasting, etc. During the process, you'll need to create an online folder, site, or repository (e.g., with UVic, GitHub, Drive, or Tumblr) to share digital files. Then you can point your peers and me to the appropriate URL. For the purposes of this seminar, your log may be composed across digital and tactile media, with material available online and off.

For the log, grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

- 90-100 = A+: Logs in this range are incredibly detailed, rife with documentation, and demonstrate new or innovative uses of specific methods or techniques. They respond to seminar discussions, engage assigned case studies, are reflexive, and exhibit a combination of critical thinking, creativity, and design.
- 85-89 = A: Logs in this range are incredibly detailed and rife with documentation. They respond to seminar discussions, engage assigned case studies, are reflexive, and exhibit a combination of critical thinking, creativity, and design.
- 80-84 = A-: Logs in this range are incredibly detailed and rife with documentation. They respond to seminar discussions, engage assigned readings, and are reflexive.
- 77-79 = B+: Logs in this range are rife with documentation. They respond to seminar discussions and are reflexive.
- 73-76 = B: Logs in this range are marginally acceptable at the graduate level. They do not meet graduate standards, and they do not demonstrate an understanding of the course material.

Please submit your log by 12pm on 1 June 2017.

Project (35% of your final mark, due by 12pm on Thursday, June 29th)

Your final project should engage theories and practices of minimal computing in the context of digital literary and/or cultural studies. For the project, you might make a simple website or bot, create an open data set or repository, develop an accessible workflow, or cook up a minimal edition or collection. If you are interested in critiquing minimalism through maximalist techniques or baroque aesthetics, then feel free. I only ask for purposeful critiques, with clear motivations (as opposed to reactions).

Due by 12pm on Thursday, June 29th, your project should include:

- All of your source files (e.g., images, markup, audio, video, code, and data) compiled in a single folder or repository;
- An executable version of those files (e.g., a website, visualization, workflow, spreadsheet, or bot);
- A README file containing the motivations and contents of your project, together with any applicable instructions; feel free to include an FAQ, if you wish;
- A project title, which may be included in the project itself (e.g., in the file name, metadata, or content);
- A draft or alpha version to me by Wednesday, June 14th; and
- A consultation with me by Wednesday, June 14th.

You may submit your project and project files via a URL or USB stick.

For the project, grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

- 90-100 = A+: Projects in this range are especially sophisticated and perceptive pieces of work that make an original contribution to scholarly thinking about digital studies and/or minimal computing. They are ready for public circulation and review.
- 85-89 = A: Projects in this range are perceptive and original, but may require substantial revision for public circulation. They could act as core material for a public digital project, and they speak clearly to the principles of minimal computing and digital studies.
- 80-84 = A-: Projects in this range are adequate at the graduate level with regard to the research, presentation, and quality of content. With additional work, they could act as core material for a public digital project. They demonstrate a clear understanding of minimal computing and digital studies.
- 77-79 = B+: Projects in this range have significant flaws in some areas, but they still meet graduate standards. With significantly more work, they could act as core material for a public digital project. They demonstrate a basic understanding of minimal computing and digital studies.
- 73-76 = B: Projects in this range are marginally acceptable at the graduate level. They do not meet graduate standards, and they do not demonstrate an understanding of minimal computing or digital studies.

Presentation (15% of your final mark, on Wednesday, May 31st)

Scheduled for the last day of seminar, your presentation should include the following elements:

- An eight-minute talk (or, no less than seven minutes and no more than nine minutes) about the project you plan to develop in June;
- An outline of your project's design, motivations, and content (including file types and architecture);
- Remarks about how your project engages the histories and principles of digital studies as well as the theories and practices of minimal computing;
- Comments on the gaps/needs your project addresses, or the intervention(s) it makes in a particular area of scholarship; and
- Questions you have for your peers and me.

For the presentation, grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

- 90-100 = A+: Presentations in this range are incredibly compelling and even memorable. They demonstrate what was learned during the term and provide convincing evidence of that learning. They prompt the audience to ask questions, and they spark conversation about a concrete topic emerging from the seminar. Their structure is tangible and easy to follow.
- 85-89 = A: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned during the term and provide convincing evidence of that learning. They prompt the

audience to ask questions, and they spark conversation about a concrete topic emerging from the seminar. Their structure is tangible and easy to follow.

- 80-84 = A-: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned during the term and provide some evidence of that learning. They prompt the audience to ask questions. Their structure is tangible and easy to follow.
- 77-79 = B+: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned during the term and provide some evidence of that learning.
- 73-76 = B: Presentations in this range do not meet graduate standards for presentations.

Participation (15% of your final mark)

Conversation and invested participation are central to the graduate seminar format, and they are important dimensions of academic labour. I believe they should be recognized as such and will thus assess your seminar contributions, including questions you ask during meetings as well as your involvement in workshops, contributions to discussions, and familiarity with the case studies at hand.

For your participation mark, grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

- 90-100 = A+: Participation in this range demonstrates an incredibly high level of engagement with the course material. You are clearly familiar with the case studies at hand, actively engaged in workshops, sparking dialogue with your peers and me, listening attentively to others, and asking compelling questions, which have not occurred to me or your peers.
- 85-89 = A: Participation in this range demonstrates a high level of engagement with the course material. You are clearly familiar with the case studies at hand, actively engaged in workshops, sparking dialogue with your peers and me, listening attentively to others, and asking important questions.
- 80-84 = A-: Participation in this range demonstrates a high level of engagement with the course material. You are clearly familiar with the case studies at hand, actively engaged in workshops, sparking dialogue with your peers and me, and listening attentively to others.
- 77-79 = B+: Participation in this range demonstrates an acceptable level of engagement with the course material. You are clearly familiar with the case studies at hand and actively engaged in workshops.
- 73-76 = B: Participation in this range does not meet graduate standards for seminar participation.

POLICIES

Below are the policies for the seminar.

Late Submissions

Barring exceptional circumstances, I will not accept your logs or projects after the due date. Since log entries are meant to build on each other, I recommend that you do not fall behind on them. Of note, the presentation can only occur during the final meeting of the seminar. Thanks for understanding.

Absences

Regular attendance in graduate seminars is expected. Attendance and active participation in discussions and workshops are part of fulfilling the course requirements. If you must be absent from a seminar meeting, then you should contact me beforehand, if only to keep me in the loop. Cases of continuous, unexplained absence will result in a penalty to your participation grade and/or your ineligibility to complete the course. I will notify the Graduate Adviser if you have three or more unwarranted absences.

Laptops

The use of laptops during seminar is encouraged but not required.

Extensions

No extensions will be given except in extreme (and verifiable) circumstances. These circumstances include reasons of health and extenuating circumstances, such as the death of a family member.

Learning Climate

The University of Victoria is committed to promoting, providing, and protecting a positive, supportive, and safe working and learning environment for all its members. Students and faculty members are expected to adhere to the UVic human rights policy. You should alert me immediately if you have any questions about this policy and its application, or if you have concerns about course proceedings or participants.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the UVic academic integrity policy. (Please note the new regulation change, effective May 2017: “unauthorized use of an Editor is prohibited, unless the instructor grants explicit written authorization.”) Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade for the given assignment and may additionally result in a failing grade for the course. By taking this course, you agree that all submitted assignments may be subject to an originality review. I do not use software to detect plagiarism in essays or any other assignments.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the Resource Centre for Students with a Disability (RCSD) as soon as possible. RCSD staff is available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let us know your needs, the sooner we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

Email

With the exception of holidays and weekends, I will respond to your emails within twenty-four hours.

SCHEDULE (May 23-31, with projects due by June 29)

Several of our meetings build on and respond to Hartmut Obendorf's *Minimalism: Designing Simplicity* (2009), including his use of functional, structural, architectural, and compositional minimalism. My descriptions below echo but also revise his descriptions of these terms. Also, I would like to thank Daniela Rosner for introducing me to the notion of "design as inquiry," which informs this seminar's approach to workshops.

Please note: each workshop should be conducted in pairs; however, you are not required to work with the same person for the entire seminar.

Meeting 1 / 23 May / Digital Studies + Minimal Computing

We'll begin the seminar with a survey of digital literary studies, digital cultural studies, minimalism, and minimal computing. What are the intersections? Differences? And why an emphasis on design in a seminar about digital studies? Edward Strickland's *Minimalism: Origins* (1993) may be of interest here. Also, we might consider pop philosophies such as, "keep it simple, stupid" (KISS), "everything is a text stream," and "do one thing and do it well."

Readings (please study and annotate prior to seminar):

- "Electronic Literature: What Is It?" (N. Katherine Hayles),
- "Media Studies and the Digital Humanities" (Tara McPherson), and
- "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" (Matthew G. Kirschenbaum).

Case Studies (no need to review prior to seminar):

- *Ed.* (Alex Gil),
- *Log Jammer* (Allison Burtch),
- *First Screening: Computer Poems* (bpNichol),
- *The Illuminator* (anonymous collaboration),
- *DH-USB* (Jonathan Reeves),
- *Garfield Minus Garfield* (Dan Walsh),
- *Raspberry Pi* (single-board computer),
- *Sublime Text* (text editor),
- *Markdown* (syntax), and
- *Pandoc* (John MacFarlane, format converter).

Workshop and Log: Use a text editor to convert a minimalist poem or short story of your choice from print (or page images) into Markdown. Then convert the Markdown into HTML using Pandoc. Wherever possible, document and explain your editorial decisions. Note significant changes, including losses, gains, and affordances emerging from the conversion. Account for changes to not only the text but also the page, frame, foreground, background, display, inscription, texture, weight, and file size.

Meeting 2 / 24 May / Functional Minimalism

Functional minimalism concerns the *use of features*. It reduces the number of accessible features to increase *robustness* in interpretation. For instance, we might call an *interface* “simple,” with an emphasis on design as an *ideal*. How, then, do we engage ideals and their assumptions through design as inquiry?

Case Studies (please review prior to seminar):

- *Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries* (Young-hae Chang and Marc Voge),
- *Expanded Cinema* (Tate and Gene Youngblood),
- *LIM* (meritt k),
- *Invaders* (Elizabeth LaPensée, Steven Paul Judd, and Trevino Brings Plenty),
- *Algorithms are Thoughts, Chainsaws are Tools* (Stephen Ramsay),
- *The Lisp Programming Language* (John McCarthy),
- *The Shakespeare Programming Language* (Karl Wiberg and Jon Åslund),
- *Voyant* (Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell), and
- *Wireframe.cc* (mockup tool).

Workshop and Log: Use a mockup tool to design multiple interfaces for the same minimalist poem, short fiction, or game of your choice. Wherever possible, document and explain your design decisions, with an emphasis on functional minimalism. During the process, consider deleting, collapsing, and lumping features across iterations.

Meeting 3 / 25 May / Structural Minimalism

Structural minimalism concerns *access to features*. It reduces perceived access to features to increase *frequency* or *activity* of interpretation. For instance, we might call an *interaction* “friendly,” with an emphasis on design as *masking* or *layering*. How, then, do we engage masking, layering, and their assumptions through design as inquiry?

Case Studies (please review prior to seminar):

- *in absentia* (J.R. Carpenter),
- *The Shape of History* (Lauren Klein, Caroline Foster, et al.),
- *Black Quotidian* (Matt Delmont),
- *Multimodality in Motion* (Melanie Yergeau, et al.),
- *The Ethical Ad Blocker* (Darius Kazemi),
- *SOD* (Jodi),
- *Dublin Core* (metadata standard), and
- *WebAIM* (accessibility service).

Workshop and Log: Use accessibility tools to render a minimalist poem or short fiction across at least three different modalities. Wherever possible, document and explain your design decisions, with an emphasis on structural minimalism. During the process, consider treating your text as sound, gesture, metadata, and image.

Meeting 4 / 26 May / Architectural Minimalism

Architectural minimalism concerns *contexts of access*. It reduces the perceived complexity of a project to increase *distribution* of interpretation. For instance, we might call a *system* “transparent,” with an emphasis on design as a *modularization of responsibility*. How, then, do we engage modularization, responsibility, and their assumptions through design as inquiry?

Case Studies (please review prior to seminar):

- *The Ephemerides* (Allison Parrish),
- *poem.exe* (Liam Cooke),
- *African Diaspora, Ph.D.* (Jessica Marie Johnson, Kidada Williams, and Ana-Lucia Araujo),
- *OPenn* (University of Pennsylvania Libraries),
- *Fluxkits* (Alison Knowles, et al.),
- *Wunderkabinet* (Pamela Z, Matthew Brubeck, and Christina McPhee),
- *jamesmithies.org* (James Smithies),
- *The Dark Interpreter* (Martin Howse),
- *The Max Visual Programming Language* (Miller Puckette), and
- *The Python Programming Language* (Guido van Rossum).

Workshop and Log: Use Python to combine the creation of a text with at least two scripts/modules. Wherever possible, document and explain your design decisions, with an emphasis on architectural minimalism. During the process, consider how procedure differs from intention as well as how behaviours are dedicated to particular modules.

Meeting 5 / 29 May / Compositional Minimalism

Compositional minimalism concerns *contexts of use*. It reduces restriction and prescription of performance to increase *creativity* of interpretation. For instance, we might call a *procedure* “indeterminate,” with an emphasis on design as *facilitation*. How, then, do we engage facilitation and its assumptions through design as inquiry?

Case Studies (please review prior to seminar):

- *my body – a Wunderkammer* (Shelley Jackson),
- *Tracery* (Kate Compton),
- *Adafruit* (Limor Fried),
- *Kit-Of-No-Parts* (Hannah Perner-Wilson),
- *Hotwriting* (Todd Anderson),
- *Uncle Buddy’s Phantom Funhouse* (John McDaid),
- *Public Secrets* (Sharon Daniel and Erik Loyer),
- *Slope : Intercept* (Sara Hendren), and
- *Git* and *GitHub* (version control system and hosting service).

Workshop and Log: Use whatever you wish to create a grammar, library, context, or . . . that prompts others to write digitally. Wherever possible, document and explain your

design decisions, with an emphasis on compositional minimalism. During the design process, consider ways to test and have others test your ideas. Also, experiment with tensions between generative constraints and reduced restriction/prescription.

Meeting 6 / 30 May / Project Design

We'll conclude the seminar with a discussion about creating, structuring, developing, circulating, and archiving projects. We'll also discuss the promises and problems with minimal computing from digital literary and cultural studies perspectives.

Workshop and Log: Draft a design brief and begin a README file for a project you'll develop during the month of June. For now, focus on the motivations of your project and the gadget(s) you'll use to make it happen. Try things. See what happens. Take notes. Repeat.

Week 7 / 31 May / Final Presentations and Feedback

It's time for you to present your plan for a project you'll develop in June. You've got eight minutes, plus Q&A.

Workshop and Log: After your presentation, pair up with someone for a feedback session. What suggestions do you have for them? What suggestions do they have for you? What can be tested right now?

Log / 1 June

Your log is due by 1 June 2017.

Project / 29 June

Your portfolio is due by 29 June 2017. Please submit a draft and also consult with me by 14 June 2017.



~ THE END ~