**Critically Analyzing Interactive Texts**

**Abstract:** A key aspect of any text is interpretation: without a reader, the information in a book is, in virtually all cases, meaningless. Interpretation is technically a form of interaction, and thus anything that requires interpretation is interactive in theory. However, in practice, when one reads a conventional book, one is nearly always thinking about output, and practically never about input – that is, the reader simply reads what the book provides, rather than contributing anything to the book. Compare such a book to, for instance, a game of solitaire: even though one plays the game alone, one must think both about the game’s output (the boardstate), one’s input (the cards one plays), and the interactions between the two. In other words, while one could say that the average book is interactive, and that the average book is a text, it could hardly be called an “interactive text.”

In this course, students will have the opportunity to engage directly with pieces that require direct interaction. Rather than conventional textbooks, a significant amount of course material will be in the form of interactive texts. These will generally take the form of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books, *Twine* games, online hypertexts, or other, similar materials. Students will be expected to engage with and critically respond to this material to the depth they would with more conventional course material, although while accounting for the fact that analyzing some of this course’s material may require approach a different mindset. Students will also have opportunities to create their own interactive texts.

In addition to in-class discussion and assorted assignments, a key component of this course is the class blog. While it may seem somewhat farfetched or tangential to the purpose of the course, a class blog is an interactive medium, just like much of the course material: one reads material that others generate, and one generates material for others to read. The blog is meant to serve as a group repository to share thoughts and ideas about class discussions and course material, and as something of a secondary community outside the classroom. Students are strongly encouraged to be active on the blog, but actual requirements for using the blog is discussed later.

Note: This syllabus contains information that will remain relevant throughout the semester. It will be referenced regularly, and a digital copy is available via the course website.

**Content Disclaimer:** This course may occasionally address potentially disturbing content. Use caution and discretion; students should know and respect their own personal limits. Students are encouraged to contact the instructor in the case that any course content is unacceptably upsetting to them. Many pieces on the *SCP Foundation* website and many *Twine* projects have warnings on them; students should read both content warnings here, and any that appear directly on course material

**Course Requirements and Grading:** This course focuses primarily on written reflection. While this may seem obvious at first glance, it is worth keeping in mind that it will be incredibly difficult to adequately reflect on course material without sufficiently and meaningfully interacting with it. What this means may differ from student to student, but as a general rule, “skimming” an interactive text is likely less effective, and certainly significantly hardly than “skimming” a book, for instance.

**Attendance and Participation (15%)**All students are expected to come to class prepared, ready and willing to participate in discussion and in-class activities, and on time. Additionally, students are expected to remain undistracted during class and to show respect towards one another as well as to the instructor. If a student is going to be absent, that student is expected to present a doctor’s note or other appropriate documentation excusing that absence. More than two unexcused absences during the duration of the semester will result in significant decrease in overall course grade.

**Weekly Upkeep and Course Blog (20%)**Each week, students are expected to post to the class blog. These posts should reflect on one or more piece of course material in a critical or analytical manner, but they do not need to be overtly formal: students are encouraged to share personal experiences with the material and discuss opinions they have on it. As an example, constructing a post while one goes through the course material for the week may be an appealing format to some, as it will allow one to record one’s emotions and reactions as one goes through that material. These posts should be at **300 words**, but any student that wishes to produce a longer-form response may do so at their own discretion.

Students are expected to read comments left on their own post, and encouraged to at least skim discussion that take place on other posts. By the end of the semester, students are expected to leave **at least 3** well thought-out comments on the work of other students.

IMPORTANT: The “consider” section of each week outlined in the “Course Schedule” portion of this document contains questions that will likely be helpful to take into account while writing a blog post. Additionally, after Week 3, each week will have slightly more detailed prompts in a “For the Blog” section.

**Projects (25%)**Several larger-scale projects, spanning one or more weeks, are required to be completed for this course. These are expanded upon in-depth in the “projects” portion of this syllabus, and students will be provided with detailed handouts covering the specific expectations for each project when it is assigned. These projects will sometimes err on the side of form-agnosticism: that is, a more creative, artistic product will be just as acceptable as a traditional response paper. These projects are expanded upon in-depth in the “projects” portion of this syllabus, and students will be provided with detailed handouts covering the specific expectations for each project when it is assigned.

**Final Project (40%)**At the end of this course, students will complete a final assignment. More information can be found in the “projects” portion of this syllabus.

**Course Material – Traditional:** In the interest of accessibility, all required course material in this section will be made available either online on the course website, or through a course packet or handout.

* Eric Berne’s *Games People Play* (available via course packet)
* Roger Callois’ *Man, Play, and Games* (available via course packet)
* Jonathan Gottschall’s *The Storytelling Animal* (available via course packet)
* Various books from the *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebook series (available via handout)
* Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (available via handout)

**Course Material – Digital:** In the interest of accessibility, all required course material in this section is freely available online.

* *PBhere* (available via YouTube and TikTok, content warning: generally disturbing)
* *Petscop* (available via YouTube, content warning: generally disturbing, brief mentions of deceased children)
* Selected articles from *SCP Foundation.*
* Selected articles from *The Holders* series, via “Serene Knowledge” collection.
* Various projects made using the Twine engine (see Course Schedule for more information)

**Recommended Texts:** These are suggested, mainly for the purposes of gaining background knowledge, but not required reading. They will not necessarily be as easily accessible as the required texts, however. It should be noted that a number of these texts are exceptionally long. If you do choose to give them a look, you are absolutely not expected to read them in their entirety.

* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Anti-Oedipus*
* Excerpts from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (.pdf available on course website)
* Excerpts from James P. Carse’s *Finite and Infinite Games* (.pdf available on course website)
* Excerpts from Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (.pdf available on course website)
* Jorge Luis’ *The Garden of Forking Paths* (.pdf available on course website)
* *The Human Pet* (available via YouTube, content warning: generally disturbing, depicted kidnapping, depicted physical and psychological abuse, possibly very coarse language, very much a horror series)
* Stephen Ramsay’s *Reading Machines: Towards an Algorithmic Criticism* (.pdf available on course website)

**Course Schedule:**

**Week 1: Introduction – CYOA and Pre-Digital Age Interactive Texts**

* Consider: What is a hypertext? What effect does increasing reader agency have on a narrative, both in terms of narrative structure and reader experience?
* Read: *Man, Play, and Games* (pages 1-37), one Choose-Your-Own-Adventure gamebook selected during class. Read through it several times, and take note of the endings you reach.

**Week 2: Hypertexts and Collaborative Online Writing**

* Consider: How does collaboration impact the construction of a piece? How does a traditional text differ from a digital one? How does the Internet enable and facilitate interactive and collaborative writing?
* Read: *Man, Play and Games* (pages 38-69), any three articles from the curated *SCP Foundation* collection and the curated *The Holders* series collection. Make sure you read at least one article from each.
* Start: Digital Exquisite Corpse Project

**Week 3: Hypertext and Collaborative Online Writing, Continued**

* Consider: How does a narrative with no definitive start or end function? Is there any sort of distinct appeal or benefit to a text that a reader can start at any point and end at any point? What sort of structural consequences and implications are there in such a text?
* Explore: Rhizcomics (link available via course website). This is a very informal exploration: simply go on the website, and traverse to your heart’s content.
* Read:“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
* Watch: *PBhere* (link available via course website).

**Week 4: How it Factors In: Audience Activity and Appeal**

* Consider: In what ways can a narrative appeal to and engage an audience? What happens to a narrative when the audience is able to directly influence it? Is “pandering” a loaded term or otherwise problematic, and how?
* Read: *The Storytelling Animal* (pages 1-21), *Man, Play and Games* (pages 70-81)
* For the blog: This week, integrate the ideas from the Walter Benjamin piece in your post. Feel free to revisit material from past weeks, or even works you’ve engaged with prior to this course.
* Due: Digital Exquisite Corpse Project
* Start: Extended Critical Response Project.

**Week 5: Ludonarrative, at a Glance**

* Consider: What structural pre-planning goes into creating an interactive narrative? What, if anything, lies at the intersection between “game” and “book?” How do the narratives of games differ from the narratives of books?
* Read: *Man, Play and Games* (pages 81-99)
* Watch: *Petscop* (link available via course website).
* For the blog: This week, consider the two “Watch” assignments so far. Try to discuss the narrative and structural differences between pieces like *Petscop* and *PBHere* and the other course material thus far.

**Week 6: Twine and Gamifying Interactive Texts**

* Consider: How does presenting multiple choices for narrative progression to the reader impact a narrative? How can a writer persuade (or dissuade) a reader from going back to explore all possible options? When are multiple choices for progression preferable to just a single choice, and vice versa?
* Read: *Man, Play and Games* (pages 100-129)
* Play: Choose one of the following, and play through it (links available via course website): *16 Ways to Kill a Vampire at McDonalds, Cactus Blue Motel, The Play*. Play through several times, aiming for different endings, if possible.
* For the blog: With what you’ve read of *Man, Play, and Games*, you’re now familiar with the core characteristics of games, the forms of play, and the types of play. Going forward, if you haven’t done so already, attempt to reflect on what you play, read, and watch with that information in mind.
* Start: Interactive Narrative Project

**Week 7: Twine and Gamifying Interactive Texts, Continued**

* Consider: How are interactive digital texts like games, and how are they like non-ludic narratives? Would you classify interactive digital texts as games or non-games, or would you argue that it’s a sort of case-by-case situation? Which form or forms of play (*agon*, *aela*, *mimicry*, *ilinx*) would you say most interactive digital texts exemplify?
* Play: One of the *Twine* games that you didn’t play for last week, and then *The Temple of No* (links available via course website). Again, play through the games at least twice, aiming for different endings, if possible.
* For the blog: *The Temple of No* is quite a bit different from the other the other *Twine* games we’ve looked at up to this point, and certainly different from the other material we’ve covered. Reflect specifically on *The Temple of No* if you can, focusing on how it differentiates itself from other narrative you’ve encountered in this course or others.
* Due: Extended Critical Response Project.

**Week 8: Distinct Elements of Narrative in Games**

* Consider: What narrative and storytelling conventions can narrative-based games break, and what restrictions are they bound by? What can giving a player/reader control influence in a narrative’s composition? What does adding gameplay elements to a narrative do to that narrative?
* Read: *The Storytelling Animal* (pages 22-87)
* Play: *Queers in Love at the End of the World*. Then, choose and play through one of the following: *Hallowmoor, The Domovoi (content warning: generally disturbing, spiders), SCP-5500, The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo (content warning: very much a horror game, not for the faint of heart)* (links available via course website)*.* You need not play through any one of these more than once this week, but feel free to do so if you please.
* For the blog: *The Temple of No* and *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo* offer the reader (and/or player, perhaps) the ability to make decisions about the protagonist. *Queers in Love at the End of the World* and *Hallowmoor* contain elements that are incredibly “game-y,” (a time limit and a whole slew of elements including a player “ability,” an inventory, and a compass). If possible, discuss how these aspects in particular differentiate these works from others you’ve encountered.

**Week 9: Text First? Or Game First?**

* Consider: Is a work that can be classified as both a text and a game a game first or a text first? Can you ascribe elements of narratives to games, and vice versa? Are interactive digital texts games, and are digital games interactive digital texts?
* Read: *The Storytelling Animal* (pages 88-139)
* Play: Find a board game, a card game, or some other traditional game. Play through it alone or with friends. If you cannot, that is fine – in any case though, please do make an effort to do this.
* For the blog: If you were able to play a traditional game this week, think about if that game contained some manner of narrative, and if that narrative has anything in common with the *Twine* projects we’ve covered. Otherwise, do the same, but with any traditional game you’ve played before.

**Week 10: Examining Emergent Narrative**

* Consider: What makes a character, a plot point, or other story element particularly endearing or memorable? What makes a reader or player “want more?” What is “headcanon” and what is its significance?
* Read: *The Storytelling Animal* (page 140-177)
* Play: Choose one of the following: *Deliverance, Night of Nights, Snakeroot* (content warning: body horror)*, Wayfarer*. It’s completely fine if you don’t finish the chosen game this week, but make sure you finish it before class of Week 12. (links available via course website)
* For the blog: Talk about the character customization choices you made in the *Twine* project you began playing this week, as well as any choices you felt were particularly meaningful.
* Due: Interactive Narrative Project

**Week 11: Examining Emergent Narrative, Continued**

* Consider: What gets one engrossed or immersed in a narrative? How do emergent narratives come about? What lasting effects does an immersive narrative have on one?
* Play: If you have finished last week’s “Play” assignment, pick another option from the list and play through it, or choose one from a past week that you haven’t played yet and play through it.
* Explore: *Accidental Character Generator*. (link available via course website)
* For the Blog: See last week’s “For the blog.”
* Start: Final project.

**Week 12: User Experience, Subjective Experience, and Narrative Application**

* Consider: What is “applied” narrative? What smaller elements compose “user experience?” Can enough subjective experiences paint a picture of something resembling objective fact, and is this significant in any way, or simply arbitrary?
* Explore: Library of Babel (link available via course website).
* Play: *Confess* (may look creepy, but it’s actually quite lighthearted)
* For the Blog: Final required weekly blog post. Feel free to re-reflect or discuss any work you want from past weeks, and to bring up any unanswered questions you may have. Next week is the roundtable discussion; feel free to get out any ideas in this post, or use it to help prepare you for the discussion.

**Week 13: Bringing it All Together**

* Consider: Taking everything into account, quite simply, what do you personally think of interactive texts? Do you think they have any place in the “future” of storytelling, either with regard to Gottschall’s ideas, or your own ideas?
* Due: End-of-semester-seminar this week. We will also be discussing the final project in-depth as a class: come prepared with questions. Continue work on your final project.

**Week 14: Wrapping Up Part 1**

* Consider: Was this course intellectually stimulating? How has what you’ve learned, for instance, during week 1, impacted your understanding of the content of week 12, or vice versa?
* Due: Continue to work on your final project. Also, the end-of-semester celebration and final project presentations are this week. Sign up to bring in food or supplies.

**Week 15: Wrapping Up Part 2**

* Consider: What’s next for you? How much do you think what you learned in this course will be helpful in your future, academic or otherwise?
* Due: Final project.