**Snake's Coils: Underhanded Tactics in Art and Problem Solving**

**Or**

**Charlatans and Chicanery in and Around Mythology, Society, and Literature**

**Or**

**Cheat Against the Impossible Scholastic Load**

**Abstract:** For all of human history, lying, cheating, and other forms of unorthodox or even unfair levying have been present throughout all parts of life, whether one acknowledges them or not. Sometimes, they’re used as a means of survival for those living on the fringes of society, other times they’re used by those already well-off to further indulge themselves, and other times they’re simply mindless acts committed by average individuals out of convenience. These practices are so pervasive, so basal to human life that they exist in myths and traditions, the arts, and even the sciences, and often are taken for granted to the point where if deeply analyzed at all, they’re often not directly examined or thought about.

A key aspect of this course is skirting the intentionally impractical and infeasible restrictions of certain assignments. An assignment where such tactics are absolutely required will be clearly identifiable as such, although even on these assignments, students are not discouraged to request assistance from the instructor on thinking through them. These assignments will count for a completion grade at absolute most – some will be graded based on simple participation, and others will be entirely ungraded. However, the purpose of these exercises is to provide a hands-on, intellectually-stimulating experience that requires creative thinking for students to reflect on, and to potentially provide a resource for higher-stakes writing assignments and projects. This course will also emphasize concepts of metatexuality, author intent (or lack thereof), and the historical and social context of works.

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. Additionally, during the first day of this course, students will be given a sheet to put an email address on. While it’s generally assumed that addresses given to an instructor are addresses that are actively used by those who submitted them, it’s fairly integral to this course that a submitted email is one that receives alerts, or at least is checked periodically and often.

**Content Disclaimer:** This course’s material will deviate significantly from what many may consider “conventional” course material, both in that it will require more hands-on interaction and careful examination, and that sometimes sheer perseverance will sometimes not be sufficient to get everything one wants out of every piece of course material. Student should keep in mind that this is largely intentional, and should not worry if they don’t “get” a piece of material – students with this fear on a more persistent scale are encouraged to speak to the instructor.

Additionally, this course may occasionally address potentially disturbing content particularly in the realm of existential dread. Use caution and discretion; students should know and respect the limits of others in addition to their own personal limits. Students are encouraged to contact the instructor in the case that any course content is unacceptably upsetting to them.

**A Contextually-Aware Note on Academic Integrity:** Certain assignments in this course will encourage or even necessitate the use of measures that go against most conventions of academic integrity, including plagiarism, falsifying information, obtaining otherwise-unacceptable outside assistance, and outright lying. Even with these assignments, students are expected to not plagiarize one another’s work, although collaboration on any assignment in this course is permitted and very highly encouraged. Furthermore, if not obvious, students should know that just because they are taking this course and this course has an unorthodox relationship with academic integrity, they are not exempt from the conventions of academic integrity in other courses.

**Course Requirements and Grading:** This course focuses primarily on completing tasks and using the course material in practical, industrious manners. Any exams this course features will involve some manner of a gimmick beyond simply studying material, and will rely more on puzzle solving, industriousness, and creative thought than memorizing facts from course material. Class sessions will be dedicated to group discussion of course readings, although many sessions will have material beyond that.

**Attendance and Participation (15%)**

All students are expected to come to class prepared, ready and willing to participate in discussion and class activities, and on time. Additionally, students are expected to remain (or at least convincingly appear to remain) undistracted during class and to show respect towards one another as well as to the instructor (this one is very serious, do this in earnest; respecting others in this class is not optional). 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. Students have one “mulligan” – a convincing faked piece of documentation used in lieu a legitimate one will functionally excuse an absence even if caught, although only once. The instructor has until the end of the semester to uncover any such faked documentation, so if a student has submitted three and all three are found after the fact, it will count as two unexcused absences (due to one being functionally excused due to the “mulligan” rule). More than two unexcused absences accrued during the duration of the semester will result in significant decrease in overall course grade.

**In-Class Presentation (5%)**

Once during the semester, students are asked to present in class. This presentation will take the form of an independent presentation on topics covered by the previous week’s assigned readings and other material, as well as on one’s personal, subjective experience with that material. Student presentations must include at least one direct and explicit self-contradiction.

**Assignments (35%)**

This portion of the grade is composed of various smaller-scale assignments, generally assigned weekly. These assignments will often have some element that will make them incredibly difficult, if not outright impossible to complete, without thinking outside the box and bending, if not outright breaking rules. The readings each week will aid students in thinking of ways to go about these assignments. If not stated otherwise, weekly assignments are due the week following their assignment.

**Final Project (40%)**

At the end of this course, students will complete a final assignment. This final assignment will consist of 100 pages (or an equivalent amount of words) on a course topic or topics of your choice, but there are no holds barred: so long as the response is legible, coherent, and cohesive, relates to course material in some manner or another, and is written in font size no larger than 12 point, with margins no greater than 1” and no greater spacing than double spacing, and each page is filled with information, it will be acceptable.

For every page less than 100 the final project is, the grade it receives will drop by 1 percent.

**Ambiguously-Obtained Credit (5%)**

Students will not be informed about how they may receive this 5% of their grade. Students may be able to figure it out with enough effort, gumption, and/or gall, however.

**Foul Play (Extra Credit – Up to 5%)**

Students who show mastery of underhanded tactics and who utilize unorthodox and creative solutions to solve problems and complete assignments may qualify for extra credit. The “Foul Play” grade is tacked on after the rest of the grade in compounded – students’ grades cannot be increased above 100%, no matter how proficiently foul their play is.

**Honor between Thieves (Extra Credit – Up to 5%)**

The efforts of students who readily and openly avail themselves to assisting other students in getting through rough patches in assignments will not go unnoticed. Students are encouraged to contact the constructor with praise for any of their peers who assist them in assignments: doing so will only help both the contactor and the receiver of praise. The “Honor between Thieves” grade is tacked on after the rest of the grade in compounded – students’ grades cannot be increased above 100%, no matter how honorable their thievery is.

**Course Material:** 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.

* Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (.pdf available on course website)
* Excerpts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Anti-Oedipus* (available via handout)
* Excerpts of Roger Callois’ *Man, Play, and Games* (.pdf available on course website)
* Gary A. Rendsburg’s “The Subversion of Myth” (link available on course website)
* Jack Zipes’ *The Original Folk & Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (.pdf available on course website)
* Excerpts from Stephen F. Davis, Patrick F. Drinan, and Tricia Bertram Gallant’s *Cheating in School: What We Know and What We Can Do* (available via course packet)
* Timmothy Dexter’s *A Pickle for the Knowing Ones* (via lordtimmothydexter.com, link available on course website)
* Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (available via handout)

**Recommended Texts:** These are suggested, mainly for the purposes of gaining background knowledge, but not required reading. Unlike the course material, these texts will not necessarily be provided by the instructor.

* Austin Kleon’s *Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative* (Week 1)
* J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (Weeks 4-5)
* Luigi Serafini’s *Codex Seraphinianus* (Week 6-8)
* William Ian Miller’s *Anatomy of Disgust* (Week 8, Week 11)
* ZUN’s *Danmaku Amanojaku ~ Impossible Spell Card* (video game, available on Steam) (Weeks 1-3)

**Course Schedule:** Students should keep in mind that until their associated weeks are reached, questions about readings and assignments will likely go unanswered by the instructor.

**Week 1: It’s Often What You Don’t Notice – Introduction**

* Consider: Can victimless crimes exist? Is there such thing as a “necessary evil?”
* Read: *Cheating in School: What We Know and What We Can Do* excerpt set 1 (“A Critical Problem for the Twenty-First Century” and “From Cheat Sheet to Text Messaging: The Evolution of Techniques”)
* Assignment: Write a response approximately ten pages in length about any of Shakespeare’s works and how they relate to this course’s readings. Due at the start of week 20.  
  In Class: Select In-Class Presentation topics.

**Week 2: Trickery and Scoundrels in Ancient Myth and Folk Tradition**

* Consider: Why are benevolent and heroic tricksters so common in myths and folk traditions? Why is the “loose cannon that doesn’t play by the rules” trope beloved even today?
* Read: *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (pages 35-41, 116-149). Select any three pieces from *The Original Folk & Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* and read them.
* Assignment: Write an informal response approximately two pages in length about this week’s readings in relation to the “consider” questions.

**Week 3: Textual and Metatextual Aspects of Chicanery**

* Consider: If life cannot be considered a form of play, can trickery be seen as an attempt at gamifying life? When does playing outside the confines of “the rules” become necessary?
* Read: *Man, Play, and Games* (pages 3-37). Choose any book with at least 500 pages that does not exist. Read that book.
* Assignment: Write a response approximately five pages in length on this week’s latter reading. Cite at least three passages from the reading. You may reference other texts in this assignment, but please do focus on this week’s latter reading. Due Week 5.
* In class: Exam 1.

**Week 4: The Unreliable Narrator**

* Consider: What happens when the creator, presenter, or in-universe narrator of a work’s word becomes untrustworthy? Does this have any sort of connection to plagiarism or “the rules?”
* Read: *Homestuck* (entire comic)
* Assignment: Compose an original 130-measure musical piece in the style of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Write a 210-page novel in a genre of your choice. Spend at least 4 hours painting a self-portrait. Play through *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Then, do each again.

**Week 5: “Ok, Seriously, This Time I Mean It” and Other Sorts of Subversion**

* Consider: What happens after to a trickster after they are revealed? Is “double subversion” real, and if so, how can it manifest?
* Read: “The Subversion of Myth”
* Watch: “I, Borg” (link available via course website)
* Assignment: In class, you will be divided into pairs. Your task is to write a piece that convincingly resembles the work of your partner. This piece should be approximately three pages in length, and should analyze any piece of course material thus far. You may show your partner pieces of your own work for inspiration, but unless you think you can convincingly write a response yourself that looks like someone emulating your writing style rather than you simply writing as you normally would, it is in your best interest to do this assignment (relatively) legitimately. Due week 7.
* In class: Group assignment, Exam 2.

**Week 6: The Intricacies of Suspending Disbelief**

* Consider: By what mechanism do we suspend our disbelief, and when do we suspend our disbelief? What happens when we are unable to suspend our disbelief, and can one continue to enjoy an experience even when one’s suspension of disbelief is broken?
* Read: *Women, Work, and Jobs* (pages 169-203, available via course website). *Cheating in School: What We Know and What We Can Do* excerpt set 2 (“The Nature and Prevalence of Student Cheating”). You may also want to revisit Week 3’s latter reading.
* Assignment: Write an informal analysis paper roughly two pages in length comparing this week’s former reading to the piece you read for Week 3’s latter reading assignment. Due Week 8.

**Week 7: Cyclical Narrative and “Less is More”**

* Consider: How can a piece with less content use that content effectively? Is there anything more to a piece with no definitive start or end than novelty?
* Read: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* set of excerpts.
* Assignment: Prepare to come to class next week with a collection of popular and niche works that you’ve engaged with in your life: books and movies that have had an impact on you, artistic experiences you’ll never forget, etc.

**Week 8: Applied Smoke and Mirrors; Cult and Mass Appeal**

* Consider: How can cult and mass appeal be used to make a piece appear to be more than it seems? What happens to a piece or a collection of pieces when mass appeal grows so strong that the pieces in question become “too big to fail?”
* Read: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
* Assignment: Write a formal critical analysis paper approximately five pages in length on the following popular topic: [PLACEHOLDER](sic). Cite no fewer than two sources for this paper. Due week 10.
* In class: Exam 3.

**Week 9: About [PLACEHOLDER], (sic), and [PLACEHOLDER](sic)**

* Consider: How can unknown factors be used to augment a piece, or to give a trickster an unexpected edge? How do intentional errors differ from unintentional errors, and what happens when it isn’t clear if an error is intentional or not?
* Read: *A Pickle for the Knowing Ones*
* Assignment: Write an original piece of any specification approximately three pages in length. This piece must contain no punctuation, and regular grammatical and spelling errors are expected. The piece, however, must remain intelligible enough to be largely understood despite its diversions from conventional literature. Due week 11.

**Week 10: Puzzling Puzzle Deep Dive**

* Consider: Can a puzzle be truly unsolvable? How do puzzles augment works they’re found in?  
  Watch: Choose one between *NOC-10* (content warning, generally very creepy) and *Petscop* (content warning, mentions of deceased children) and watch it (YouTube links available on course website).
* Alternatively, Read: SCP-2719, SCP-3127, and SCP-4703 (if you want a frame of reference for the series, give SCP-173 and SCP-1499 a read. The articles in this selection were chosen for being relatively tame). All material here is linked to on the course website.
* Assignment: Write an informal analysis paper roughly two pages in length reflecting on this week’s “watch” assignment.
* In class: Exam 4.

**Week 11: Just Straight-Up Unapologetically Breaking the Rules Out in the Open and Getting Away With It**

* Consider: When do the ends justify the means, and what happens when one “crosses the line,” in art, or in real life? What consequences, beyond the obvious, do breaking “the rules” have, and can those consequences be avoided?
* Read: *Cheating in School: What We Know and What We Can Do* excerpt set 3 (“Finding the Good in Student Cheating”)
* Assignment: Using turnitin.com or another comparable resource to aid in doing so (examples will be given in class), write an original piece on a topic of your choice approximately three pages in length that is over 80% plagiarized. Do not cite any sources in the actual paper, but do include a separate list of sources from which you plagiarized from.

**Week 12: Tricking the Tricksters**

* Consider: Revisiting popular tropes, why is it fulfilling to see someone beaten at their own game? Revisiting fairy tales, is tricking a trickster poetically just?
* Read: Select any five pieces from *The Original Folk & Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* that you haven’t already read and read them.
* Assignment: Begin work on final project and prepare for next week’s in-class roundtable discussion. Due week 15.

**Week 13: The Big Reveal – Bringing it All Together**

* Consider: Are there are greater implications of trickery as a concept? If so, what are they?
* Assignment: Sign up to bring in food or supplies for the end-of-semester celebration.
* In class: Roundtable discussion.

**Week 14: Just an End-of-Semester Celebration with Concessions, Nothing More**

* Consider: Who can and cannot be a trickster? How does the sheer existence of trickery influence everyday life?
* In class: End-of-semester celebration.

**Week 15: Finale**

* Due: Final project