

DIGITAL LITERARY STUDIES: HISTORY AND PRINCIPLES

FOCUS THIS SEMESTER: “ARGUING WITH COMPUTERS”

English 507 | University of Victoria | Spring 2014 | CRN: 21265

Meetings: Monday | 10:00-12:50 | CLE C316

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DESCRIPTION

Digital literary studies (DLS) are frequently associated with not only the interpretation of literature through computational means but also an investment in how literature changes through networked culture, algorithms, and new media. For instance, Alan Liu claims that—in DLS—“everything old and new is up for grabs again,” as scholars, artists, programmers, and an array of practitioners negotiate the tensions between imagination and simulation, writing and encoding, reading and browsing, mimesis and modelling, surface and depth, publication and transmission. Since this seminar is an introduction to DLS, it gives you the opportunity to survey a variety of methods and perspectives, and it is **intended for students who are absolutely new to—and even skeptical of—digital humanities**. The seminar’s design assumes that digital literary studies (in particular) and digital humanities (in general) are best understood through the combination of theory with practice. Such an assumption means that we will blend knowing and doing, resisting the prevalent-but-fallacious divides between techniques and concepts as well as intellectual and physical labour.

More specifically, the focus of this semester’s instantiation of English 507 is “Arguing with Computers,” which—as you might guess—is meant to be multivalent. First, it underscores the fact that **we will be using computers and computational methods to make claims about literature and culture**. By extension, we will ask how such methods shape our understanding of the purposes and aims of literary and cultural criticism. Are computational methods more “scientific” or “objective” than non-computational ones? Are they reductive? Are they too quantitative, or ever qualitative, or potentially ambiguous? How (if at all) do they facilitate exegesis, hermeneutics, or deconstruction? All of these questions point to two other interpretations of “Arguing with Computers”: **we will develop a healthy resistance to computational methods, and we will experience frustration with technologies** and practices such as programming, encoding, and processing. What concepts, habits, and beliefs congeal within and around computers, operating systems, and their default settings? What cultural questions do computational methods foreclose or restrict? How (if at all) are the constraints of computational analysis conducive to literary critique? And how is frustration with computing and its devices at once a matter of literacy, aesthetics, and culture—who gets to hack, and why? Finally, and perhaps most importantly: **we will unpack how computation can be persuasively integrated into the histories and modes of literary and cultural criticism**, including how we routinely interpret and perceive texts. At its core, how is computational analysis part and parcel of a longer legacy of defining mediation, of understanding reading and writing? How is human

vision melded with computer vision, and under what assumptions about time, space, and labour? How do we combine existing practices in close reading, listening, and watching with emerging computational modes, such as “distant reading,” “surface reading,” pattern recognition, algorithmic criticism, web ethnography, scanning, and compiling? If these practices can actually be combined, then to what effects on English studies? That is, how (if at all) and when (if ever) do “multimodal” or human-computer approaches yield surprise for literary critics? Or tell us something new or unique about literature and culture? To be sure, we won’t produce definitive answers to all of these questions. After all, there are already quite a few. However, they will pop up frequently throughout the semester, in our readings, discussions, and workshops, and I hope they spark dialogue and differences of opinion.

FORMAT

This seminar is project-based, meaning **you will iteratively develop your own research based on your existing interests**. Through a scaffold of assignments (or “research logs”), you will share stages of this research with me and your peers, present it at the semester’s end (in the form of a public panel), and integrate it into a scholarly essay about literature and culture. The essay will be “web-ready” and published online (but it does not need to be public or discoverable; for instance, it can be password-protected). Rather than selecting a topic new to you, I encourage you to build upon research you’ve already done in a particular research area, literary period, or domain of cultural study. This way, you can determine how (if at all) computational or multimodal techniques meaningfully shape existing approaches to your work.

Each of our seminar meetings will usually involve the following:

- **Lecture:** I will speak for approximately thirty minutes, introducing terms, histories, and issues for future discussion.
- **Workshop:** For approximately sixty to ninety minutes, we will collectively experiment with a particular language, tool, platform, or approach related to digital literary studies. Between meetings, you will be asked to apply what you learned during these workshops.
- **Seminar Discussion:** For approximately thirty minutes, we will chat as a group about the workshop, lecture, and/or readings.

You should arrive to each meeting having read the required texts, which are listed in the course outline.

STIPULATIONS

During this particular instantiation of English 507, I am asking you to entertain the following stipulations:

- **We will not spend a significant amount of time asking what digital humanities are or how to define them.** We will also not read any texts about the meaning of digital humanities or its competing articulations. Instead, we will focus on the practice of computational approaches in the study of literature and culture as well as their relevance to your existing research. This focus should

also allow you to avoid imposter syndrome (i.e., feeling like you do not “belong” in digital humanities).

- Wherever possible, **we will focus on transduction, or how this becomes that in computational approaches.** This means we will likely avoid using many “What You See Is What You Get” (WYSIWYG) tools and instead focus on writing, encoding, programming, and compiling. The impulse for this move is to give you a granular sense of how computational arguments work, even if—to be fair—you can probably do more in less time with a WYSIWYG tool. I am not assuming (as many people do) that focusing on source code is an immediate or more authentic way of conducting computational analysis. In other words, I am not promoting “brogramming” or a source code fetish. And again, I am not assuming any technical competencies on your part.
- Your final argument with a computer will not assume the form of a “meta” or reflective essay about your research or what you’ve made/built in English 507. Instead, **you will integrate your research and what you learn this semester into a final, web-ready essay about literature and culture.** This essay should be intended for a particular audience (e.g., modernists, Victorianists, feminist media scholars, or critical race theorists) in or related to English studies rather than digital humanities broadly understood. This practice of bringing computational analysis back to our “home” discipline(s) will allow us to focus on the results of multimodal approaches, not just the approaches themselves. Again, computation in literary and cultural criticism, but for whom, under what assumptions, and to what effects?

OBJECTIVES and EXPECTATIONS

By the seminar’s end, you will be expected to:

- Via multiple research logs that use a distributed revision control system, document and share the iterative development of your own research project (this process of documenting and sharing the iterative development of your work should correspond with scholarly practices conducted outside of this seminar, including writing a thesis/dissertation, collaborating on a data-driven or code-based project, and working in a laboratory);
- Via seminar discussions and workshops, review the work of other practitioners, provide feedback on that work (in writing and verbally), and evaluate it based on emerging guidelines published by the Modern Language Association;
- Persuasively present your work during a collaborative, public roundtable consisting of at least three people and intended (at least hypothetically) for a specific, forthcoming conference, which you should identify and to which you could submit a proposal;
- Effectively model and test a computational approach to literature and culture, and then integrate that approach into a scholarly, web-ready essay intended for a specific academic journal or venue, which you should identify and to which you could ultimately submit your work; and,

- Verbally and in writing, articulate the affordances of specific computational approaches to literature and culture (including their benefits and limitations) based on a combination of media theory and technical practice.

In terms of techniques and competencies for conducting digital literary studies, you should gain familiarity with:

- Revision control and versioning;
- Basic programming;
- Data modelling, curation, provenance, and interoperability;
- Data forensics and emulation;
- Translating media theory and history into technical practice, and vice versa;
- Data visualization, topic modelling, and text analysis;
- Interaction and interface design; and
- Reviewing and assessing digital projects.

REQUIRED TEXTS, TOOLS, and PLATFORMS

There is no textbook for this seminar. All readings are available online and will be disseminated via links from the course website (see me for the URL). Most readings are also open access. That said, you are not required to purchase any texts. Since most of the technologies we will be using are free and open source, you will also not be required to purchase any tools, apps, or platforms (even though I might recommend some technologies that are not free but are worth purchasing for research purposes).

ASSIGNMENTS and ASSESSMENT

Below is a list of the assignments for this seminar, together with a description of what is expected for each and how they 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 and well in advance.

The final project and the final presentation are essential for 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.

Research Log (40%)

Throughout the semester, you will keep a log documenting the iterative development of your learning, research, and experimentation. Consisting of several relatively short contributions written in Markdown (using Git for revision control), your log will be visible to everyone in the seminar (but not to the public), and you will be expected to comment on contributions published by your peers. I will openly comment on your logs, but marks will never be publicly posted. Your log will be assessed holistically, meaning your work will be given one grade (at the semester's end) based on its: (1) consistency; (2) development over time; (3) self-reflexive character; (4) integration of seminar discussions, lectures, and workshops; (5) quality; (6) attention to change; and (7) ultimate relation to your final essay. There will be a prompt for each entry in your

log, and it will be related to a particular workshop and/or lecture. It will be circulated at least one week prior to its due date. Log entries should be submitted before seminar on the day they are due.

Near our sixth meeting of the semester, I will circulate an interim mark for your log. My intention for holistically assessing your log is not to keep you in the dark about your academic progress. It is to treat a log as it should be treated: as a genre that develops and increases in complexity over time. Please note that the tone and style of your logs can be less formal than, say, a seminar essay intended for an academic audience. Where applicable, logs should also be self-aware and self-reflexive. In your research log, feel free to reference work being conducted by your peers or to spark dialogue with them. In fact, I encourage you to link to entries by your peers and to quote/paraphrase what other people have said during seminar.

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

90-100 = A+	Research 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, are self-reflexive, and exhibit a combination of critical thinking, creativity, and awareness of computational mechanisms.
85-89 = A	Research logs in this range are incredibly detailed and rife with documentation. They respond to seminar discussions, are self-reflexive, and exhibit a combination of critical thinking, creativity, and awareness of computational mechanisms.
80-84 = A-	Research logs in this range are incredibly detailed and rife with documentation. They respond to seminar discussions and are self-reflexive.
77-79 = B+	Research logs in this range are rife with documentation. They respond to seminar discussions and are self-reflexive.
73-76 = B	Research logs in this range are rife with documentation and respond to seminar discussions.

Final Essay (30%)

Your final essay (due after our last seminar meeting) should follow the conventions of a scholarly, academic essay written for a specific audience in literary or cultural studies. I will also ask you to identify an intended journal for the essay. The essay should rely (at least in part) on a computational approach, and it should be web-ready and published online, using one of the following: 1) hand-coded HTML5 and CSS3, 2) GitHub Pages, 3) WordPress, 4) Scalar, 5) Bootstrap, 6) ScrollKit, or 7) another option not listed here but approved by me in writing.

During the second half of the semester, I will circulate a prompt for the essay, detailing the requirements and expectations. For now, you should know that the essay should be well-researched (making use of sources that are additional to any research bibliography I have provided), carefully proofread and encoded, follow MLA conventions, include media (images, audio, or video), have a clear and well-supported argument, reference (if applicable) any data collected/modelled, emerge from work detailed in your research log, and consist of 3000-5000 words. Where appropriate, the essay should use endnotes.

Of note, you can co-author your final essay with up to two other people in the seminar. If you select this option, then you'll need to make special arrangements with me. For one, I'll likely need to modify the requirements (including the word count) listed above. Before your proposals are due (on March 3rd), please let me know whether you will, in fact, be co-authoring.

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

90-100 = A+	Essays in this range are especially sophisticated and perceptive pieces of work that make an original contribution to scholarship. They could be published in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal.
85-89 = A	Essays in this range are perceptive and original, but may require substantial revision for publication in a scholarly journal. They would normally be accepted as conference presentations.
80-84 = A-	Essays in this range are adequate on the graduate level both with regard to the quality of content and writing and to research and presentation.
77-79 = B+	Essays in this range have significant flaws in some areas, but they still meet graduate standards.
73-76 = B	Essays in this range are marginally acceptable at the graduate level.

Final Presentation (15%)

Your final presentation will assume the form of a collaborative roundtable, consisting of at least three people in the seminar and conducted during our last meeting of the semester. People from outside the seminar will be invited, and I will ask you to identify an upcoming conference at which (at least hypothetically) your roundtable could be conducted. Roundtables of three will last thirty minutes, and (if necessary) roundtables of four will last forty minutes. Each will have a question-and-answer period. By “collaborative” roundtable, I mean its design *and* implementation should be collaborative in character. How you present (including content, style, and technologies

used) is up to you. However, please keep in mind two things: (1) you should reflect on and assess what you learned during the entire seminar (meaning the roundtable is not solely about your final essay), and (2) everyone participating in your roundtable will be given the same grade (meaning collaboration is key). Please do not use the roundtable as an opportunity to read draft essays. During the second half of the semester, I will review the purpose and expectations of the roundtable with you.

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

90-100 = A+	Presentations in this range would be noteworthy at a conference on digital humanities, media studies, literary studies, cultural studies, or an allied field. They are clearly collaborative in their composition and delivery, and they keep the audience engaged throughout the presentation period. They perform or demonstrate what was learned during the semester and provide clear evidence of that learning. They prompt the audience to ask questions, and they spark conversation about a concrete topic emerging from the seminar. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text, such as a draft final essay. Their structure is clear, memorable, and easy to follow.
85-89 = A	Presentations in this range are clearly collaborative in their composition and delivery, and they keep the audience engaged throughout the presentation period. They perform or demonstrate what was learned during the semester and provide clear evidence of that learning. They prompt the audience to ask questions, and they spark conversation about a concrete topic emerging from the seminar. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text, such as a draft final essay. Their structure is clear, memorable, and easy to follow.
80-84 = A-	Presentations in this range are clearly collaborative in their composition, and they keep the audience engaged throughout the presentation period. They perform or demonstrate what was learned during the semester. They prompt the audience to ask questions. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text, such as a draft final essay. Their structure is clear, memorable, and easy to follow.
77-79 = B+	Presentations in this range are clearly collaborative in their composition, and they keep the audience engaged throughout the presentation period. They perform or demonstrate what was learned during the semester. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text, such as a draft final essay.

73-76 = B Presentations in this range keep the audience engaged throughout the presentation period. They perform or demonstrate what was learned during the semester. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text, such as a draft final essay.

Participation (15%)

Discussion and invested participation are central to the graduate seminar format. That said, I will assess your contributions to the seminar this semester, including questions you ask, your involvement in workshops, your investment and role in dialogue, and your familiarity with the readings at hand. Near our sixth meeting, I will circulate interim participation grades.

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 reading(s) 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 reading(s) 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 reading(s) 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 reading(s) at hand and actively engaged in workshops.
73-76 = B	Participation in this range demonstrates suggests you are likely familiar with the reading(s) at hand and engaged in workshops.

POLICIES

Late Submissions

Barring exceptional circumstances, I will not accept your Final Essays after the due date. Belated log entries will negatively influence your final mark for the Research Log.

Since log entries are intended to build upon each other, I recommend that you do not fall behind on the entries. Also, I will not comment on entries submitted after the due date. Of note, the Final Presentation can only occur during the final meeting of the semester.

Absences

Weekly attendance in graduate courses is expected. If you must be absent from a course for a serious reason, then you should contact me before the missed class and explain why you will not be in attendance. Cases of continuous, unexplained absence will result in a penalty to your grade or your ineligibility to complete the course. Attendance and active participation in discussions and workshops are part of fulfilling the course requirements. I will notify the Graduate Adviser if you have three or more unwarranted absences.

Laptops

Laptops are welcome in (but not required for) the seminar. In fact, if you have one, then I recommend bringing it to each meeting. It will be especially useful during workshops.

Extensions

No extensions will be given except in extreme—and verifiable—circumstances. These circumstances include reasons of health and extenuating circumstances such as 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. Students should alert me immediately if they have any questions about this policy and its application, or if they have concerns about course proceedings or participants.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the UVic academic integrity policy. 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, students 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 respond to student emails within twenty-four hours.

OUTLINE

Although it is subject to change, below is the course outline as of Meeting 1. Please note that the prompts for each assignment will be provided on the course website. Links to the readings listed below are provided on the course site, too.

January 6th (Meeting 1) – Introduction

Lecture: “Arguing with Computers” and the State of Hermeneutics Today
Discussion: What Do You Want and Expect from 507?
Workshop: How to Use a Text Editor and Write in Markdown
Reminder: Tell Me What Computer You Will Be Using, Version Included

January 13th (Meeting 2) – Keyword

Reading: Sayers, “Technology”
Galloway, “Love of the Middle”
Log: Keyword Statement: Introduce Us to Your Research Interests
Lecture: What Is Mediation? Why Does It Matter for 507?
Discussion: Two-Minute Reviews of Your Keyword Entries
Your Responses to Galloway’s “Fury Mode of Mediation”
Workshop: How to Use the Command Line, Git, and GitHub
Reminder: Start a GitHub Account and Email Me Your Handle

January 20th (Meeting 3) – Media

Reading: Chun, “The Enduring Ephemeral”
Manovich, from *The Language of New Media*
Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
Log: Response to “Love of the Middle”: Against Hermes?
Lecture: New Media as Both Object and Method
Discussion: Your Responses to Chun’s Emphasis on “Memory”
Workshop: How to Search/Spider the Web for New Media Artifacts
How to Use Photogrammetry to Stitch New Media Objects
Reminder: Let Me Know What Questions You Have about Git and GitHub
Form Feedback Groups and Email Me a List of Group Members

January 27th (Meeting 4) – Model

Reading: Brown, Clements, and Grundy, “Going Electronic”
McCarty, “Knowing . . . : Modeling in Literary Studies”
Bowker and Star, from *Sorting Things Out*
Log: Environmental Scan: Gathering and Structuring Media for Analysis
Lecture: Reading between Data Modelling, Processing, and Expression
Discussion: Your Responses to “Standards,” “Model Of,” and “Model For”

Workshop: How to Use the Programmable Web for Research
Reminder: Let Me Know about Issues Related to Your Environmental Scan

February 3rd (Meeting 5) – Procedure

Reading: Bogost, from *Persuasive Games*
Kirschenbaum, from *Mechanisms*
Log: Environmental Scan Continued
Lecture: Emulation, Transduction, and the Trace: Doing Media History
Discussion: Your Responses to “Procedural Literary” and “Medial Ideology”
Quick Updates on Your Environmental Scans
Workshop: How to Use Arduino to Build Circuits or Program Microcontrollers
Reminder: Your Proposal Is Due March 3rd

February 10th – Break

We don't meet this week. It's reading break.

February 17th (Meeting 6) – Pattern

Reading: Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”
Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction”
Klein, “The Image of Absence”
Lecture: Are Distant and Surface Reading Post-Hermeneutic Modes?
Discussion: Your Responses to “Distant Reading” and “Surface Reading”
Quick Updates on the Status of Your Proposals
Workshop: How to Use MALLET to Topic Model Texts
Reminder: Consider Meeting with Me to Chat about Your Research

February 24th (Meeting 7) – Transformation

Reading: Samuels and McGann, “Deformance and Interpretation”
Kraus, “Conjectural Criticism”
Ramsay, “Algorithmic Criticism”
Ramsay, “Algorithms Are Thoughts, Chainsaws Are Tools”
Log: Topic Modelling a Text: Interpreting the Results
Lecture: Speculation or Proof?: The Cultural Functions of Computation
Discussion: Your Responses to “Deformance” and “Conjecture”
Quick Updates on the Status of Your Proposals
Workshop: How to Use Algorithms to Transform Texts
Reminder: Your Proposal Is Due March 3rd

March 3rd (Meeting 8) – Proposal

Log: Proposal: Outline Your Argument with a Computer
Workshop: How to Use MLA Guidelines to Review Digital Projects
Peer Review of Proposals
Reminder: Your Final Presentation Is March 31st
Your Presentation Group Should Consider Meeting with Me

March 10th (Meeting 9) – Translation

Reading: Peruse Posts at maker.uvic.ca
Log: Revised Proposal
Lecture: Roundtable of Presentations from Maker Lab Researchers
Discussion: Conversations with Maker Lab Researchers
Workshop: How to Translate English 507 into Future Work
Reminder: Consider Taking a Break from Your 507 Research

March 17th (Meeting 10) – Interface

Reading: Drucker, “Humanities Approaches to Interface Theory”
Drucker, “Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display”
Galloway, from *Gaming*
Log: First Page of Your Web Essay: Get Started on a Draft
Lecture: What Are Humanities Interfaces?
Discussion: Your Responses to “Capta,” “Machine,” and “Operator”
Workshop: How to Assess a Website from a Design Perspective
How to Build a Web-Ready, Scholarly Essay
Reminder: Your Final Essay Is Due April 14th

March 24th (Meeting 11) – Labour

Reading: Nakamura, “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game”
Fitzpatrick, “Beyond Metrics: Community Authorization and Open Peer Review”
Log: Draft Essay
Lecture: Why Digital Labour Is and Isn’t Immaterial
Discussion: Your Responses to “Open Peer Review” and “Gold Farming”
Workshop: How to Generate and Interpret Usage Stats
Reminder: Touch Base with Any Concerns about the Final Presentation/Essay

March 31st (Meeting 12) – Final Presentations

Log: Presentation Materials
Discussion: Your Final Presentations
Reminder: Before Your Presentations, We Will Conduct Course Evals

April 14th – Final Essay Due