

# Narrative & Technology

ENGLIT 512-1100 | Cathedral of Learning 318 | Mon/Wed 10-1:15 | Summer 2017

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Office hours: Mon/Wed after class until 2:00 or by appointment

## Course Description

**This course explores the ways in which technologies impact how we tell stories and engage with narrative, thinking broadly about what we mean by "technology" and "narrative."** When we talk about "technology" today we're often referring to new and emergent computer-based and digital technologies, but remember that pen and paper, too, are technologies. The term itself is derived from the Greek *technē*, meaning craft. The etymology of the Latin *technologia* first referred to the systematic treatment of grammar. Technology, thus, has always been related to processes of making, and even making with language. Narrative encompasses both the stories we tell each other in conversation as well as literary genres like the short story or narrative poems, or technical genres like long-form narrative journalism or creative nonfiction. We use narrative to describe and try to make sense of the world and the beings in it. Together, narrative and technology have co-evolved to produce "new" media such as board games, video games, hypertext, snap-chat stories, and other narrative modes. The readings for this course come from some of those media. Some of the media of the course you'll provide, based on your own investments and interests. **As a writing-intensive course**, "Narrative and Technology" will ask you to engage thoughtfully through writing (also broadly conceived) textual and multi-media experiments. You will have opportunities not only to **write critically** about the relationships among narratives and technologies, but also to **write creatively**, experimenting with interactive old and new media forms.

**The writing you produce is as much the content of this course as the texts we engage with.** You can expect that this course will help you develop your sense of what "writing" is and what it does, through regular in-class workshops and discussions. You will share your work with your peers, and have your work brought to the table (anonymously and not) for discussion by the whole class. **Expect to return to just about every piece of the writing you do in this course in some way, to revise, rethink, remediate it into new and more complex iterations for evaluation as well as play and experiment.**

**As you might have noticed by now, experimentation<sup>1</sup> is the name of the game**, but keep in mind that experimentation is a serious process. It is the act of trying out that might begin with a playful (even silly) act, but that (ideally) leads you to robust, thoughtful, complicated, and probing questions, ideas, and implications. **Be brave. Take risks. Try new things. Deliberately take yourself outside of your comfort zone.**

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<sup>1</sup> The term "experiment" appears nine times in this document. "Narrative" appears nineteen times. "Technology" appears eleven times. "You" appears 97 times. "I" appears 16 times. "We" appears 56 times.

## Course Materials

We're largely thinking through course concepts with and through primary. As mentioned above, your own writing will also serve as texts for this course. We'll be thinking a lot about the *mechanics* of our texts, their material qualities, the technologies that made them possible, where an author is or isn't, where the "story" is or isn't. There will be more things we do/explore than we'll be able to spend a whole lot of talk about intensely. In that case and with many other things in this course, we learn by doing/making/trying out/experimenting.

- ***The Mezzanine***, by Nicholson Baker (book)
- ***Vanishing Point***, by Ander Monson (book & companion website)
- **A sandbox/role-playing video game** (recommending *Minecraft*, *Ark: Survival Evolved*, or *The Sims*, but other games could work so long as they have both **character development and building** mechanics. Keep in mind your computer's specifications (*Ark*, for example, requires a beefy gaming machine). These games retail for \$30 or less, if you catch them on sale.)
- **A notebook/journal/blank book you really like** (seriously, this will work best if you love the look and feel of it, and you want to carry it around with you. It should be, to you, a perfect example of the technology of the notebook). Pages can be blank, lined, graphic, or dotted, depending on your preference. It can be a 3-ring binder with loose-leaf if that's the perfect notebook to you. It helps if you also have a favorite pen or pencil.)
- **A variety of other media**, which will be provided via PDF or hyperlink.

## Course Site

Courseweb (<https://courseweb.pitt.edu>) is where you will turn in assignments and gain access to readings in PDF (if they are not freely accessible online). There you'll also find the syllabus, detailed schedule, and assignment instructions. I will provide feedback on written assignments via Courseweb as well.

## Your Responsibilities for This Course

### **Participation/Active Engagement/Preparedness (20%)**

This is a discussion-oriented seminar and engagement in class conversation and activities is mandatory. Individuals who are actively engaged arrive on time, take notes, ask questions, and interact with peers and the ideas of your peers with curiosity and respect. Engagement is evidenced in the body (making eye contact, putting your cell phone away, etc.) as much as through more explicit contributions. I prefer not to "cold-call" people, but I will if discussion and activity is stagnant. **If you do not appear engaged I will assume you are unprepared for class.**

**If you are not prepared, you cannot participate fully.** Being prepared means arriving to class having completed everything asked of you and a readiness to discuss your work in class. If it is clear your work is incomplete, that you have not read, that you are unable or unwilling to share your work with your peers, and/or that you did not attend carefully and thoroughly to the work asked of you, your participation

grade will be lowered. I will not provide warnings or call you out. If you are uncertain about the quality of your participation, feel free to ask me at any time.

### **Major Course Projects (80%):**

**Commonplace Book (10%):** You will each keep a *hand-written* notebook-based reading log documenting textual excerpts and examples you encounter in your reading and research throughout the course. You'll use those examples for in-class discussion, writing project idea generation, and for remixing and experimentation.

**Weekly Writing (10% each, x5 = 50%):** Each week you will write three pages (or the equivalent, depending on the project) which you'll turn in at the end of each week. The tasks for these assignments will vary, but will generally include both critical and creative elements, and will generally rely on and expand on whatever sparked your curiosity in the week's work.

**Final Project (20%):** For the final project you will develop a substantive 8-10 page project (or the equivalent, depending on the media) directed at an audience outside of this course as a revision, remediation, expansion upon one or more of your earlier projects, in-class experiments, or commonplace book.

### *My Responsibilities for this Course*

**Fostering a Fun and Safe Collaborative Learning Environment:** As a discussion-based seminar, my role in this course is to design activities that have you engaged in applied learning through collaborative problem-solving (working together to figure something out), critical analysis (analysis by inquiry and interpretation), and critical making (aiming to understand a thing by making that thing).

**Facilitating Workshops:** I will often bring examples from student writing being generated for this class for discussion and writing activities. The purpose of these workshops is not to have you critique the examples; rather, the idea is that you'll learn something by looking at works-in-progress about the challenges (and excitement!) of inquiry-based writing.

**Making Myself Available for One-on-One Conversation Outside of Class:** I am to meet for one-on-one or small group conversations about your class projects and performance. Please especially see me at the first sign of confusion or difficulty understanding or getting through the process (this is another reason to start writing early -- you don't want to hold off and then panic). Unless otherwise noted, I will hang out in my office (CL 617F) for around an hour or so after class, at which point if you didn't see me directly after class you can just stop by to chat (if it's close to 2pm please email to check and make sure I'm still there). We can also meet by appointment, with enough advanced notice.

I am generally available over email, though I try to keep regular "business hours" and do not typically respond past 6pm unless the matter is urgent. Please reread this syllabus and other course materials to find out if your question is answerable without me before contacting me. If you do email, please use proper business email etiquette (see below).

**Providing feedback on and Evaluating Your Work:** I will provide written feedback on each of your weekly writing assignments (always) and your final project (by request). In general, feedback amounts to a few marginal comments and at least one substantive paragraph of response, questions, and considerations for further development/revision. Your participation and course projects will be evaluated by the assignment of letter grades and the following numerical equivalents:

- A Superior Attainment.** This work impresses in terms of its nuance and complexity. The writer took risks that paid off.
- B Meritorious Attainment.** Compositions evaluated at the “B” level are moving toward nuance and complexity, but may still be working something out, or took risks that might not be working well yet.
- C Adequate Attainment.** Compositions evaluated at the “C” level reach expectations to some degree, but are lacking robustness of response or a lack of adventurousness (the writer tried to take an “easy” way out).
- D Minimal Attainment.** Compositions evaluated at the “D” level have met some expectations but have delivered something without the appropriate depth and breadth required of the task at hand, have “phoned it in” etc.
- F Failure.** Compositions evaluated at the “F” level were incomplete to the point of unreadability in relation to the assignment, or were turned in late (see late policy below).

Pluses or minuses reflect movement toward or away from another level of attainment. Final grades will be assigned per following scale: A = 93-100, A- = 90-92, B+ = 88-89, B = 83-87, B- = 80-82, C+ = 78-79, C = 73-77, C- = 70-72, D = 60-69, F = below 60.

## Course Policies

**Attendance:** Attendance is mandatory, as each class relies on the last and builds up to the next. Students missing any more than one class session (the equivalent to 2-3 class sessions during a full semester) will be at risk of not passing this course, as your grade will drop one full letter grade per additional absence. Chronic lateness at the start of class or after break will count as an absence.

**Due Dates, Extensions, & Late Work:** All projects must be turned in at the time they are due. I understand, however, that occasionally circumstances arise that prevent you from achieving your best work by the due date assigned. I may grant short extensions for projects if you speak to me in advance (not the day the project is due) and if the request is reasonable (e.g. you want to change the direction of your paper, you experience a family emergency, you’re so sick you can’t focus, etc.). If an extension is granted, a new due date will be determined on a case-by-case basis. Work turned in beyond either the initial due date or a past the agreed-upon extension will receive an automatic failing grade (F/55) and will not receive written feedback. *Students missing assignments entirely are unlikely to pass this class.*

**Respectful Use of Technology:** We will take advantage of technology in this class, and you are welcome and expected to use your laptops/tablets for class purposes. If we are not having a discussion that relies on your access to your personal tech, please close them/put them away.

## Campus Policies & Resources

**Writing Center:** I highly recommend planning for multiple Writing Center sessions, as the tutors in the Center will serve as wonderful early audiences for your work. The Center has provided the following language for instructors to include on syllabi for the University of Pittsburgh:

*Located on the third floor of the O'Hara Student Center, the Writing Center offers events, courses, and one-on-one tutorials for undergraduate students. Although consultants do not correct, edit, or proofread papers, they can teach you strategies for organizing, editing, and revising your writing. You can meet with a consultant once or regularly over the course of the semester. In some cases, your teacher may send you to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can seek assistance on your own. Their services are free. You can browse the services they offer or make an appointment by visiting [www.writingcenter.pitt.edu](http://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu).*

**Academic Integrity:** All students are expected to adhere to the standards of academic honesty. Any student engaged in cheating, plagiarism, or other acts of academic dishonesty would be subject to disciplinary action. Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level, as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity.

**Disability Services:** I am committed to making sure all students with learning and other differences are accommodated in my classes. If you have a disability, contact the Office of Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 216 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890/412-383-7355 (TTY) as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course, though feel free to also communicate with me and we'll work together to come up with reasonable accommodations.

**Statement on Classroom Recording:** To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

## Detailed Schedule

*A few general notes:*

- ◆ *This schedule is subject to change, depending on where our discussion goes and what you're all invested in.*
- ◆ *Weekly Writing assignments are due Saturday by 11:59pm to the "Assignment Dropbox" on Courseweb, except for Week 5, when your proposals for final projects are due (that week, weekly writing is due Monday).*
- ◆ *Always read with a purpose, that is, keep in mind the main points of inquiry for this course. Read deeply enough to get a sense of how narrative and technology intersect and rely on each other, and read with more attention those moments that you want to bring up in discussion or discuss further in your weekly writing. Use your time wisely.*
- ◆ *Although we are not getting into video games until Week 4, it'll be to your benefit to start playing early. You may choose to work with a partner, either to create a world/story/situation together or to share the cost of the game you've chosen.*

### WEEK 1: INTRODUCTIONS & DEFINITIONS

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**Monday, May 15:**

We'll introduce ourselves, and come up with some working definitions of our key terms, "narrative" and "technology". Come to class prepared to talk about the technologies of narrative you already interact with, and those you *make with* in your intellectual and personal life.

### **Wednesday, May 17:**

We'll continue work as a class to come up with course key terms, using the technology of the commonplace book as our purpose for doing so, discussing approaches and organizational strategies. We'll think further about the technology of the printed book. To prepare for class:

- **Read:** A selection of works in and around the commonplace book. Readings from Desiderius Erasmus and Douglas Crase, are in PDF form on Courseweb. Read also, [John Locke's "New Methode..."](#), "[The Glass Box and the Commonplace Book](#)" from Steven Johnson, "[How and Why to Keep a "Commonplace Book"](#)" by Ryan Holiday, and browse Harvard University Library's Open Collection Program [selection of digitized examples](#).
- **Get (if you haven't already):** A notebook you like (see course materials on the syllabus) for use as your own commonplace book.
- **Be working on your weekly writing!** Due Saturday by 11:59pm.

## **WEEK 2: TECHNOLOGIES OF THE PAGE**

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### **Monday, May 22**

We'll continue to think more about the book and page as technologies, and dig into another literary work that exploits a textual device for narrative and rhetorical purposes, a book that's written almost entirely in footnotes. What do we know about paratextual devices like the footnote? The note in general? What is its function in technical genres of writing? In your home disciplines? In this narrative? We'll think primarily from this point of inquiry. We'll also discuss and share the practices you've chosen for your commonplace books, and workshop last week's weekly writing. To prepare for class:

- **Read:** *Diagrammatic Writing*, by Johanna Drucker (PDF).
- **Read** *The Mezzanine*. Try to get at least half-way through.
- **Log** excerpts from both texts in your commonplace book under the appropriate themes. If a theme or concept emerges that you decide you want to track, add it to your commonplace book.

### **Wednesday, May 24**

We'll continue our discussion of *The Mezzanine* and experiment with other textual and typographical devices based on texts you bring to the table, working toward this week's writing projects. We'll also discuss your progress with the commonplace books. To prepare for class:

- **Read:** *The Mezzanine*. Try to finish it. **Continue to log** excerpts that interest you in your commonplace book and be prepared to discuss those examples in class.
- **Bring:** Examples of texts that make use of textual devices in ways that impact and influence narrative and/or movement, either through conventional use or exploited as in Baker or Drucker's works. Note: these need not be narrative genres, you may bring in technical writing or works that serve professional or public purposes.
- **Bring** your commonplace book (as always). Reflect on your use of it so far, what it's taught you, what frustrates you about it, what surprises you about it, etc.

## WEEK 3: WEB-TEXTS, HYPERTEXT, FLASH POEMS

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### Monday, May 29: Memorial Day (no class)

- Be thinking about what you might want to do for your final project.
- Be playing your chosen video game and developing a character and narrative.
- Be reading in advance of our work on Wednesday.

### Wednesday, May 31

Sadly, we only have one day and could have been about this. Computational media and web-based mechanics offer an extraordinary number of affordances for narrative and, truly, all texts. We'll return briefly to your writings from last week but we'll do so to launch our discussion of *Vanishing Point*, which shares much with the other texts we've read in terms of exploitation of book and page devices, but expands further into web text. Both of our primary readings this week have book and web versions. What tensions arise between the two? What affordances? What if these *only* existed in digital renditions? What do we gain? What do we lose?

- **Read:** *Vanishing Point*. Read the opening section "How-To," and then choose three essays/chapters that look/seem interesting to you to read closely and follow the dagger symbols (†) to the accompanying website to explore further ([www. \*http://otherelectricities.com/vp/\*](http://otherelectricities.com/vp/)). Consider how book and web-text function together and separately. **As always, log** interesting excerpts and examples in your commonplace book.
- **Read:** Oni Buchanan's "The Mandrake Vehicles" ([the full e-book Spring is available via the library](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/buchanan_mandrake_vehicles.html)) and the flash versions (focus on a few particular poems that strike your interest): [http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/buchanan\\_mandrake\\_vehicles.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/buchanan_mandrake_vehicles.html) (sometimes Chrome doesn't like Flash, so if when you hit "Begin" the poems don't show up, try a different browser). **As always, log** poignant moments in your commonplace book.

## WEEK 4: VIDEO-GAMES, ROLE-PLAYING, & STORYBOARDING

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### Monday, June 5

We'll workshop your web-texts from last week's writing projects. We'll also begin to explore video games, and their world-building potential and capacity. To do so, we'll play an interactive narrative game in class (possibilities include *The Stanley Parable*, *Firewatch*, *Life is Strange*, or *Gone Home*... we'll play whatever has been played the least and what people seem most interested in). Since this will take up most of the class, your preparatory work will help you make progress toward Wednesday's class. Be working on the following:

- **Continue to play your chosen game** and develop potential scenes and stories.
- **Research** ways other people have used your chosen game for narrative purposes (possible search terms include your game and "role-play" but also specific narrative plots to see if anyone has gone after the kind of story you're thinking about). YouTube and Twitch videos on-demand should offer abundant examples, but don't limit yourself to video. Consider what your game enables and what it limits, what stories are possible within your game's mechanics. What does the world of your game suggest is possible? What does the world of your game limit or prevent? What narratives are already in place? Find ways of logging examples in your commonplace book.

- **Read:** This short piece by story-boarding  
<https://accad.osu.edu/womenandtech/Storyboard%20Resource/>

### Wednesday, June 7

The well-promoted affordance of sandbox games is that the potential narratives are endless. You can do anything! But is that really true? Consider the narrative potential and constraints of the game you've been playing. What stories develop regardless of your intention (e.g. how does game progression necessitate a certain kind of story?), and what stories can you make happen? We'll play with story-boarding to think further about possible stories, and as a way of bringing the visual experience of your gameplay into our discussions, since otherwise we cannot experience your gameplay unless we're playing with you, or watching you play. To prepare for class:

- **Continue to play your chosen game, with a bit more focus on story-telling** (if so far you've mostly been learning game mechanics and messing around). **Find ways of logging** examples and excerpts in your commonplace book, or do some additional research in uses of the game and log excerpts and examples from those works/texts.
- **Bring in** 8-10 screenshots from your gameplay.

## WEEK 5: REPLAY & REMIX

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### Monday, June 12

Some technologies of writing can be thought of as process-based technologies, technologies that transform texts into new forms, that disrupt your sense of authorship, that allow *possible* texts to emerge. We'll undertake a bunch of experimental constraints to play with and transform texts you've produced earlier in this course, using both analog and digital tools to do so. To prepare for class:

- **Work on** your final project proposal and project planning. *A reminder that your weekly writing is your proposal, and it is due Monday at 11:59pm instead of later this week.*
- **Bring photocopies of sections from your commonplace book** dedicated to themes you found most interesting and helpful, or perhaps just the sections that ended up accumulating the most excerpts and examples.
- **Return to your weekly writing projects and fill in to your commonplace book with your own writing**, recording passages from your writing that you feel did some productive work and correspond well to your organizing themes and concepts.

*A reminder: you'll turn in your physical commonplace books to me for evaluation at the end of class. Make sure you have it with you! Students who do not turn in their commonplace books can only be evaluated based on what they've said in reflections along the way – which isn't much without seeing the work behind those reflections.*

### Wednesday, June 14

Compositional experiments, continued.

- **Bring TWO hardcopies of TWO weekly writing projects.** It could be projects you anticipate evolving in your final projects, as our experiments will help you see them differently. It could be projects you choose at random.

- **TBD.**
- **Work on your final projects.**

## **WEEK 6: FINAL PROJECTS**

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### **Monday, June 19**

We'll have a full session of final project workshopping and final troubleshooting, and round out the term with a discussion about our key course concepts and what we've gathered for them. To prepare for class:

- **Make progress on your final project.** Get as much done as possible and bring what you've been able to do so far to class for workshopping with your peers.
- **Fill out your OMET!** Your feedback is very important for my own teaching and planning, and for Pitt.
- **Write your one-page introductory rationale for your commonplace book.** Turn it in to Courseweb before the start of class.
- **Bring your “completed” commonplace book.** You'll turn it in to me this class.

### **Wednesday, June 21**

Everyone will share what they've been working on and thinking about in informal presentations to the rest of the class. If your project has an interactive component, have your peers interact with it! If your project is an essay, pitch your argument and see what your peers might have to say in response. Present it in such a way that we all get to engage with your experience with narrative and technology, and this project as the culmination of this course. To prepare for class:

- **Send any presentation aids to me over Courseweb by Tuesday evening** so I can queue them up on my computer (rather than have everyone line up to use the projector).

**Final projects are due Wednesday, June 21<sup>st</sup> by 11:59pm to Courseweb.**