Humanities Syllabi   NJIT Syllabi

Spring 2021

COM 390-002: Electronic Writing Workshop

Andrew Klobucar

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COM 390-002 Electronic Writing Workshop

Course Outline and Syllabus

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Office Hours: TBA
Classroom: Synchronous Online
Term: Spring 2021

Course Format and Objectives

This class will meet online for formal crits and synchronous discussion on Tuesdays between 2:30 and 4pm. Related asynchronous tasks and extra reading material will be posted on Thursdays at 2:30 pm. Extra workshops will also be set up to complete assignments and projects.

Instructional Objectives

Theodor Nelson notes in his well-known, early study of hypertext formats, Literary Machines, "a computer is essentially a trained squirrel: acting on reflex, thoughtlessly running back and forth and storing nuts away until some other stimulus makes it do something else;" nevertheless, few tools outside computation have provided literature and its many genres with the in depth capacity to change the very foundations of modern literacy.

On one level, this course seeks to explore the growing number of cultural intersections between art, information and computation that, in turn, inspire a diverse range of new, often experimental directions in digital writing. Looking at a variety of exemplary programmable literary works now in circulation, while tracing them historically to pre-digital culture will provide valuable starting points for long-term critical analysis and discussion. On another, more production-oriented level, the course challenges us to engage with these technologies just as creatively, while representing a new generation of authors and readers. Learners will be given the opportunity to work on a select number of screen-oriented literary projects, employing a wide range of different digital tools and software made available for electronic art and writing.

Competencies and Aims:

- *Introduction to electronic writing and literature and some of the software, methods/practices, history that inform its production*
- *Introduction to current e-lit archives, and networks supporting publication and distribution venues*
- *Develop our own practices in the field*
- *Develop peer review and critical practices in the field*
- *Develop our own venues and networks of publication, promotion and distribution*

Course Requirements

Class Participation + Roundtable Discussion:	10%
Formal Critiques (4x5)	20%
Electronic Writing Projects (5 x 10)	50%
Writer Portfolios with Statement	20%

Primary Course Themes and Topics

Electronic literary practices introduce us to many important arguments concerning the complex relationship between technology and aesthetics that has evolved over the past two centuries. Few can doubt the significance of technology as an inherent feature of our present cultural landscape, exemplifying our immense capacity as social beings to communicate effectively with each other and build integrated systems of interaction. For the purpose of this course, the many and varied cultural values such systems evoke will be explored according to the following primary themes and topics:

Language and the Computer
As will become quickly evident in this course, digital information technology hosts an array of interesting questions concerning language and its formal development as a literal tool or device used to facilitate procedural functions. In other words, to use language in the context of information technology automatically emphasizes specific algebraic and computational utilities in its structure and design, where representation itself takes on very distinct symbolic, sign-based operations. And if we begin to understand language in this way, it is not surprising to see how important computation and coding practices have subsequently become to all writing practices in general. The contemporary poet and literary theorist Christian Bok once exclaimed that the increased prominence of digital media in culture demands all writers, regardless of the genre they work in, to have to know how to coding or program in their work. Just how important computer languages are to literary writing will come up as a topic of discussion throughout the course, but even if we decide that actual programming skills are not mandatory in the literary arts, we will still need to consider how computation technology continues to influence our cultural literacies.

Digital Aesthetics
Cultural relationships between technology and aesthetics run quite deep, invoking many complex arguments and historical lineages of debate and discussion within modernity. The enduring sensual appeal to both the eye and ear of simple geometric patterns and logical systems immediately complicates any quick interpretation of utilitarian values as anti-aesthetic. As we'll see early on in the course, our very capacity to comprehend and evaluation information seems to carry an innate aesthetic dimension, where the design and layout of data deeply effects how clearly, quickly and easily it is understood. Many, if not all, of the projects assigned here will thus inherently challenge us to develop aesthetic theories of knowledge construction.

Electronic Literature History/Genres
Successful innovation and experimentation within the arts and sciences tend to depend upon a solid and accurate familiarity with prior historical movements. Each of the six major projects we produce over the course of the term will be situated in part with reference to past lineages as well as contemporary genres in the ongoing development of electronic literary practices. As we'll see, many of the themes and techniques we engage with in our different workshops derive directly from previous formalist experiments in visual and literary modernism. The more advanced projects introduced at mid-term will look specifically at digital media categorized according to three different modes (or genres) of screen-based interaction: namely, performative, immersive and network.

Media and Social Praxis
Digital media formats extensively redefine the social roles and functioning of nearly every type of artwork in the present day. Our discussions and projects within the course accordingly give us the opportunity to discuss how these changes may influence political and ideological positions as new modes of social interaction become possible. Such issues will be specifically examined in relation to contemporary practices in tactical media and participatory culture.

Attendance and Participation:

Each class will offer students the opportunity to engage simultaneously in both a workshop and seminar environment. The workshop portions of these classes allow students to actively engage with and use sound production technologies. My pedagogy emphasizes a learner active approach to in-class assignments, where I hope *learners* lead discussions as often as *me,* the instructor. Learners are encouraged to introduce material and ideas they believe are relevant to the topic at hand. Learners are expected to attend every class.

Absences due to illness must be confirmed a minimum of **4 hours** before class by email to avoid penalty. In-class activities and general participation will account for **10 marks** and will be based on both the frequency, relevance, and general quality of the learner's comments, questions and observations. More than **6 unexcused absences (6 weeks of the curriculum)** will result in automatic failure of the course; excessive unexcused lateness of **15 minutes** or more throughout the course will be considered as one absence. Learners who expect to miss classes or exams because of religious observance or athletic events must submit to their instructors a written list of dates that will be missed by the end of the second week of classes. Learners are expected to make up missed work.

Remote Learning in a Pandemic Era

Remote synchronous and asynchronous learning presents a unique set of additional challenges to all learners enrolled in an undergraduate course. Regardless of one's skill level or access to technology, remote learning requires learners to self-manage both their time and resources more independently than classes attended in-person. To make matters even more complicated, learners are also being asked to cope with many additional emotional, psychological, and economic difficulties brought on by the current situation. Experience shows that up to a third of the class will very likely be unable to complete the course by the final week. Others will find it challenging to complete individual assignments by prescribed due dates or will feel obligated to submit substandard work in order to meet all deadlines. For these reasons, the importance of open, timely, and consistent communication cannot be overstated. As your instructor, I bear strict accountability for ensuring your access to the assignments, specific utilities, and all related material necessary for completing this course successfully. If, for whatever reason, this access seems compromised at any time, it is vital that you contact me personally through email or in-class as soon as possible. The following communication guidelines have been set up to help you avoid unnecessary penalties for missed or late assignments.

- **If a class cannot be attended for any reason other than physical illness, I must be notified a minimum of one day before the class is scheduled to enable me to prepare alternative access to the same material.**
- **Extra time to complete individual assignments must be petitioned a minimum of one week (7 days) before the assignment is due.**
- **Assignment drafts or requests for assignment specific advice must arrive a minimum of 9 days before the assignment's due date if extra help is to be delivered in a timely fashion.**

Alternative submission access for late assignments and extra course material will be provided for each graded task; however, late assignments and missed classes that occur outside these guidelines will be penalized. Late assignments will be deducted 10 percent of the task's course value up to 1 week after the submission date. Late assignments will be deducted 20 percent of the task's course value from 8 days to 2 weeks after the submission date. Late assignments will be deducted 50 percent of the task's course value from 15 days to 4 weeks after the submission date. Assignments missing for more than 4 weeks will not be accepted. No late assignment will receive commentary supplementary to its graded evaluation.

Proper and accepted communication guidelines serve to minimize the risk of penalty in terms of grading as well as critical commentary. Compromising your access to resources, including the time you may need to complete each assignment, can be seriously incapacitating, preventing you from learning the actual skills and approaches required to understand the course material. This will remain a very serious risk throughout

the term. Providing information as early as possible concerning any challenges you are facing this term will enable me to work with you more effectively and conceivably prevent the assigned work from overtaking your abilities. Losing access to the course material and my assistance strongly risks a withdrawal or a grade of F by the end of the term.

Learner success in this course demands consistent access and proper use of these electronic resources is the student's responsibility, as it is assumed that their general availability is constant, 24/7. If technical problems with the software or any specific interface occur during the course, it is up to the student to contact either the professor or one of the IT/Help resources associated with the website as quickly as possible.

Electronic Writing Projects

Five different writing projects, each one designed around distinct electronic/programmable devices and themes, will comprise the bulk of assigned and assessed work. The coursework has been organized to provide an overview of multimedia formats in literature in increasing complexity and technical sophistication.

The types of projects include the following genres or programming styles associated with electronic writing:

- **Infoaesthetics and Visual Design**
- **Non-linear or Hypertext Narratives**
- **Combinatorial Poetics: Models and Engines**
- **Tactical, Gaming, Puzzle-based Narratives**
- **Interactive, Haptic Texts**

Due dates and technology information are listed in the syllabus

Academic Writing

Formal Critiques
Four formal critical papers will be assigned, complementing (in theme) the five creative assignments. while providing an opportunity to determine effective principles (perhaps even codes) for assessing them, the course also includes four critical analyses to be completed over the term. Each critique will feature a range of questions and topics specifically relevant to the writing assignment under consideration at the same time.

The critiques are organised according to the following themes:

- **Form and Function**
- **Experiments with Textuality**
- **Literary Machines**
- **Learning by Doing**

Due dates and resource information are listed in the syllabus
Students are expected to abide by the NJIT Honor Code, the content of which is available for consultation at **http://www.njit.edu/academics/honorcode.php**.

Required Texts: Consistent with the workshop format, there are no specific works required for purchase, though learners are obliged to survey examples of electronic literature and read all assigned critical essays as they are made available on the Canvas site in the form electronic, downloadable documents in order to facilitate ideas, class discussion and possible models for their own work.

Course Syllabus

Date	Topics/Projects	Due Dates, Assignments and Readings
Week 1 **19 January**	**Artifice and Intelligence: Introduction to Electronic Writing** Course Introduction: Electronic Concepts **Roundtable Discussion: Reading, Writing, and Clicking in the Digital Era** • Early Examples of Visual Meaning	**Critical Readings:** Kenneth Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?" from *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. **Assignment: Reconceptualizing Reading and Writing**
Week 2 **26/28 January**	**Form and Function: an Intro to Visual Meaning in Writing** **Roundtable Discussion: Concrete and Visual Poetics** • "Graphesis," and Diagrammatic Writing • Artist Books and Experiments in Book Design	**Critical Readings:** J. Drucker, "Interpreting Visualization, Visualizing Interpretation" (2014). **Literary Readings:** Selected concrete poems, infoaesthetic technologies; See Canvas Site • **Begin Project 1: Being Visual (Due Week 4)**
Week 3 **2/4 February**	**Playing with Data** **Roundtable Discussion: Infoaesthetics and Visualization** • Creative Experiments using Maps, Charts, Graphs and Genealogies, and Datamining tools	• **Project 1 Workshop** • **Begin Formal Critique 1: "The Aesthetics of Information" (Due Week 5)**
Week 4 **9/11 February**	**Experiments with Textuality: Writing a Non-linear Story** **Roundtable Discussion:** • From Hypertext to Twine: Designing Responsive Modes of Writing. • Introduction to Scalar	**Critical Readings:** Astrid Ensslin and Lyle Skains, "Hypertext: From Storyspace to Twine," from *Bloomsbury Handbook* (2018) **Literary Readings:** Selected non-linear narratives; See Canvas Site • **Begin Project 2: Take me to your Reader: Experiments in Ergodic Texts (Due Week 7)** • **Project 1 Due**
Week 5 **16/18 February**	**Electronic Literary Genres: New Interfaces, New Interactivities** **Roundtable Discussion: Interactive Narratives and Changing Fictions** • Arborescent Narratives • Interactive Fiction	**Critical Readings:** Theodor Nelson, "Chapter Zero: Hyperworld," from *Literary Machines* (1980). *From* E. J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (John Hopkins, 1997). **Literary Readings:** Selected Twine IF examples; See Canvas Site • **Project 2 Workshop** • **Formal Critique 1 Due**
Week 6 **23/25 February**	**Never the Same Way Twice** **Roundtable Discussion: Introduction to Generative Fiction** • What is Narrativity? • Remixed Readings	**Critical Readings:** Daniel Punday, "Narrativity," from *Bloomsbury Handbook* (2018).

		Literary Readings: Selected Experimental Narratives; Selections from Milton Laufer, *A Noise Such as a Man Might Make* (Counterpath, 2018) • **Project 2 Workshop** • **Begin Formal Critique 2: (Due Week 8)**
Week 7 **2/4 March**	**Literary Machines I** **Roundtable Discussion: Procedure and Immersion** • Roots of Procedural Poetry: Potential Literature: from Mac Low to OuLiPo • Introduction to Text Generation: The Algorithm as Author	**Critical Readings:** Scott Rettberg, "Combinatory Poetics" (Polity, 2019) Selected Early Combinatory Poems; see Canvas Site **Literary Readings: (Generated Fiction)** Aaron A. Reed, *Subcutanean* (The BookPatch, 2020) • **Project 2 Due** • **Begin Project 3: The Algorithm as Author: Combinatory and Generative Approaches to Writing (Due after Reading Week)**
Week 8 **9/11 March**	**Literary Machines II** **Roundtable Discussion: Combinatory Poetics** • Semantic technologies and their development in writing and publishing.	**Critical Readings:** Manuel Portella, "Writing Under Constraint of the Regime of Computation," from *Bloomsbury Handbook* (2018). **Literary Readings: (Generated Fiction)** Aaron A. Reed, *Subcutanean* (The BookPatch, 2020) • **Formal Critique 2 Due** • **Project 3 Workshop**
14-20 March	**Spring Recess 2021** **No Class**	
Week 10 **23/24 March**	**Creative Experiments in Programming** **Roundtable Discussion: An Introduction to Critical Code Studies** • Compututationalism • Posthumanism and Post-Digital Thinking	**Critical Readings:** Florian Cramer, "Post-Digital Writing" from *Bloomsbury Handbook* (2018). *From* Mark Marino, *Critical Code Studies* (CUP, 2020) **Literary Readings: (Generated Fiction)** Aaron A. Reed, *Subcutanean* (The BookPatch, 2020) • **Project 3 Due** • **Begin Project 4: Experiments in Tactical Media (Due Week 13)** • **Begin Formal Critique 3 Due Week 11**
Week 11 **30/1** **March/April**	**Kinetic and Tactile Poetics** **Roundtable Discussion: Tactical Media** • Politics and Performance • Netprov • Live Coding	**Critical Readings:** Rita Raley, "Tactical Media as Virtuosic Performance," from *Tactical Media* (2012) Rob Wittig, "Literature and Netprov in Social Media" from *Bloomsbury Handbook* (2018). **Literary Readings:** N. Katherine Hayles, Patrick Jagoda, AND Patrick Lemieux, "Speculation" (2014) • **Project 4 Workshop**
Week 12 **6/8 April**	**Playing with Texts** **Roundtable Discussion: Gaming/Metagaming** • Gaming and Rule-based Social Interaction • Ludism and Puzzle-solving in Narrative	**Critical Readings:** Jane McGonigal, "The Puppet Master Problem: Design for Real-World, Mission Based Gaming," from *Second Person* (MIT 2006). **Literary Readings:** Selected game narratives and texts; See Canvas Site • **Project 4 Workshop**

		• **Formal Critique 3 Due**
Week 13 **13/14 April**	**Textual Performance** **Roundtable: Experiments in Performance and Haptic Technologies** • Semiotics of Space and Touch • Poetics, Modelling, and 3D Imaging	**Critical Readings:** Scott Rettberg, **"**Kinetic and Interactive Poetry" from *Electronic Literature* (Polity, 2019). **Literary Texts:** Selected Installation and Performance Works; See Canvas Site • **Project 4 Due** • **Begin Project 5: Making Space: Experiments in Haptic Media (Due Week 15)** • **Begin Formal Critique 4: From the Tactical to the Tactile (Due Week 15)**
Week 14 **20/22 April**	**Participatory Culture and Literary Communities** **Roundtable Discussion:** • Social Media, Mobile Telephony and Writing	**Critical Readings:** Jorgen Schafer and Peter Gendolla "Reading (in) the Net," from *Reading Moving Letters* (Transcript 2010). **Literary Texts:** Selected platform specific and locative works; See Canvas Site • **Project 5 Workshop**
Week 15 **27/29 April**	**Portfolios**	• **Portfolios Due** • **Project 5 Due** • **Formal Critique 4 - Due**