

Narrative and Technology

“Narrating Information Technology in the Twenty-First Century”

University of Pittsburgh
ENGLIT 0399
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MWF 11:00-11:50, CL 435

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& by appointment

Those of us who have contributed to the new science of cybernetics thus stand in a moral position which is, to say the least, not very comfortable. We have contributed to the initiation of a new science which . . . embraces technical developments with great possibilities for good and for evil. We can only hand it over into the world that exists about us, and this is the world of Belsen and Hiroshima. We do not even have the choice of suppressing these new technical developments.

Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics*

The network, like the galaxy, has a black hole at its center: a void into which all information disappears and out of which nothing ever returns. There's always a moment when the system freezes or crashes, and everything has to be rebooted from scratch.

Steven Shaviro, *Connected*

Required Texts

Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, eds., *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A “World of Warcraft” Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

Dear Esther (Brighton, UK: Chinese Room, 2012).

Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (2013; repr., New York: Vintage, 2014).

Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

Gone Home (Portland, OR: Fullbright Company, 2013).

The Stanley Parable (Galactic Café, 2013).

World of Warcraft: Battle Chest (Irvine, CA: Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-2014).

Additional texts to be covered can be found on the calendar below. These will be available on CourseWeb under the heading “Course Documents.”¹

The epigraphs are drawn from Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1961), 28; and Steven Shaviro, *Connected, or What it Means to Live in the Network Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 173.

¹ You will note that a number of video games are required for this course. These games are not available in the bookstore but are available for download. Please see the accompanying handout on acquiring the games for this course. If you will have a problem playing any of these games on your own computer, *please see me ASAP*.

Film (screened in class)

Gamer, directed by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor (Beverly Hills, CA: Lakeshore Entertainment, 2009).

Recommended

As we will be spending significant time playing videogames in this course, and I am assuming the vast majority of you will be playing these games on your own Macintosh or PC, I recommend getting a mouse or a game controller, or both. Either can be obtained relatively inexpensively. Having more than just a touch pad will make your life significantly easier this term, especially with the first-person games we will be playing near the end of the semester.

Course Description

Famous literary critic Frank Kermode once noted that human beings are in a curious position with regard to time: we cannot know or experience our beginning or end, our birth or death. This position, however, is a difficult one to inhabit. Without beginnings or endings, without a sense of genesis or eschatology,² life seemingly has no meaning. To combat this difficulty and the prospect of a meaningless universe, Kermode argues that humans create *narrative*—a structure with a coherent beginning and ending—to give meaning to our chaotic experience of time. As such, narrative serves a number of diverse functions and has considerable power over how people live their lives. Narrative gives us access to history and our communal past while also allowing us to imagine the future. For thousands of years, our understanding of the forces of nature was largely constructed by various myths. Often these myths were organized into larger stories that eventually became globe-spanning religions that millions of people have killed and died for. Today, narrative causes us to be fascinated by our blinking and flickering furniture. Narrative compels, it entertains, it is ideologically powerful, and it draws us together as communities.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries how and why narratives were told became inextricable from changing technologies. In the nineteenth century, the novel emerged because of its unique ability to mobilize other literary forms within itself (the lyric, the epic, letters, history, biography, etc.). Its formal, narrative flexibility allowed the novel to quickly become the dominant technology for making meaning in modernity. As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, no one would dispute that the novel's cultural relevance has been overtaken by newer media and more flexible technologies. Indeed, the twentieth century has seen a host of changes in the relationship between technology and narrative. The nuclear bomb and the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction during the Cold War changed the species' sense of an ending. Radio, film, television, and the internet have changed the way we communicate, the very way we *tell* narratives. And biological and genetic technologies are quickly changing how long we can live and thus how we experience temporality. If narrative is a technology that produces meaning, these changes in technology and narrative are changing what it means to be human.

In this section of Narrative and Technology we will be looking at different narratives of technology and different technologies of narrative in order to think about these larger changes in human life. We will be asking a number of questions about the relationship between narrative and technology during the twenty-first century: How do narrative and technology shape and make meaning of the world? What is the relationship between technology and narrative? How

² "Eschatology" comes from the Greek word *eschaton* (meaning "end"), and is used to refer to things concerned with ends.

does a narrative's form contribute to its meaning? What are some the differences and similarities between novels, films, and video games? How do videogames change how we might think about and study narrative? To help us answer some of these questions the course will focus particularly on how information technology has been represented and theorized over the past thirty or so years.

We will begin by reading a handful of important theoretical and philosophical texts by Kermode, Martin Heidegger, and Donna Haraway that will allow us to establish some common conceptual ground. We will then engage with two relatively mainstream twenty-first century narratives concerned with information technology: Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor's film, *Gamer* (2009), and Dave Egger's novel *The Circle* (2013), the latter of which will be read in conjunction with the theories of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Alexander R. Galloway about how control and power function in the network society. We will then turn our attention toward theorizing videogames by reading Marshall McLuhan alongside contemporary videogame theorists like Ian Bogost. To accompany this reading, the course will critically play *World of Warcraft* (2004-2014), read a number of critical essays on the game, including further essays by Galloway, Espen Aarseth, Patrick Jagoda, and others. We will then investigate a small handful of some of the more compelling, artistic, and serious videogame narratives to appear in the last two years. Our investigations this semester are intended not only as an introduction to the practice of critically engaging with diverse kinds of narrative, but also to provide significant, rigorous tools to look more closely at the world, to take a critical stance, and to make arguments about the ways narrative and technology produce our world.

Course Requirements and Assignments

Texts—Students will be required to have read and be prepared to discuss the assigned texts for each class meeting. This also entails that students bring the texts to class, whether the book or printouts of the .pdfs from CourseWeb. Additional readings for the course (see below) can be found under the “Course Documents” section of CourseWeb. *Failure to bring the assigned texts to class will count as an absence.* This course asks students to read *quite* a bit, and *very* carefully. Our meetings and discussions will depend upon the rigorous, intelligent, and frequent involvement of each and every participant of the class, and this involvement is simply not possible if students do not come to class prepared. All students should obtain the edition of the texts specified above. Students should expect to read around 150-200 pages per week.

Papers—Students will be asked to write 2 essays of 5-6 pages and a final paper of 7-10 pages during the course of the semester. The assignments for these essays are designed to build upon one another in preparation for your final paper. Their percentage of your grade will reflect this process. Consequently, the final represents the most significant portion of your grade. All papers should be proofread and polished. They should be typed, double-spaced, in 12 point Times New Roman font, with one-inch margins, and should accord to MLA guidelines for citation and format.³ Students who do not follow the directions for assignments and fail to meet the basic requirements of any assignment—e.g., not meeting the page requirement⁴ or failing to format a

³ For a good website on how to do this, visit <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>. The savvy reader will note that I prefer Chicago Style. Students who wish to use Chicago Style are encouraged to do so, but must speak with me beforehand.

⁴ 5-6 pages means that the paper must be at *least 5 full* pages (i.e., not 4 ½ pages). Students will not be penalized for going over the page requirement (within reason).

paper correctly—will automatically cost that student a *minimum* of half a letter grade (so C+ to C-). Papers will be assessed primarily on the *strength of their argument* and the *quality of their idea*. Due dates for these papers are below. The assignments will follow. All papers *must* be handed in as hard copies in class *and* submitted on CourseWeb through SafeAssign. There will be a link under “Assignments” to electronically submit your papers.

Blog—Because some of the central questions of this course revolve around how changes in media and information technology have affected narrative production in the recent past, the class will be keeping a collective blog. During the course of the semester, in addition to other requirements for the blog, each student is required to write a *minimum* of four blog posts and should comment on at least eight other posts. (See below for the due dates.) A student’s total participation in writing posts and, just as importantly, *commenting* on other posts will be taken into account when determining the grade for this section of the course. The bare minimum of work on the blog will earn a student no higher than a “C” for the blog portion of their grade. Students will receive an email from me through Wordpress.com inviting them to write for the blog in the first week of class. They should be signed up and ready to participate by Friday, September 5th. See the assignment sheet I will be passing out the first day of class for more specific details. Also, each post will have a specific assignment that I will be handing out later in the semester. The blog is separate from CourseWeb and can be found at: <http://eng0399.wordpress.com>.

Quizzes—Students will often be given unannounced short quizzes on the assigned material. Students who have done the reading will, for the most part, find these quizzes quite manageable. Students who fail a quiz will lose two points off the possible fifteen points of their participation grade. If you do the math, multiple failed quizzes could *dramatically* lower your grade (by as much as almost two letters). Unless otherwise informed, all quizzes are open book.

Participation—An absolutely crucial part of this class will be student participation. Though I will lecture from time to time, this class will be primarily discussion based, as I would like to see this course as a collective endeavor into the subject matter. I am quite excited to delve into the material, as I see it as both quite challenging and, in all honesty, quite fun. But this class will be a two way street and will require the input of all its participants. I am completely aware that some students may be more vocal than others, but if I see a student consistently attempting to add to the discussion, I will take this into consideration. I have a habit of a rambling a bit, so please help me with this by asking questions of me if you are unclear. Asking questions can be an excellent way of participating. Since this class will rely heavily on student participation, your attendance is a necessity. More than three unexcused absences can be grounds for failure, in which case you may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances.

As we will be spending considerable amounts of time in a virtual environment, additional modes of participation are available in this class that are unavailable in other classes. As such, I will *strongly* consider your participation playing *World of Warcraft* when considering your participation grade, and indeed, there will be a few participation incentives (i.e., extra credit) that will be outlined in the assignment for *Warcraft*. Failure to meet the various requirements for playing the videogames will negatively affect your participation grade.

(Also, anyone observed texting in class, whether I call attention to it or not, will be marked absent for the day. Phones will simply not be tolerated in this class. The use of laptops or tablets is acceptable, as is using the desktop computer in front of each student. It goes without saying that only content relevant to the course should be viewed during class.⁵)

Grading

Participation: 15%

Blog Posts: 10%

Essay 1: 15%

Essay 2: 20%

Final: 40%

⁵ In other words, this class gives us the unique opportunity to *all* have technology in front of us, and we will also be using this technology frequently in class. As such, I would like the resources in CL 435 to be available as productive tools for members of the course. There is a danger, however, that students might look at unrelated things and become distracted during class. I would prefer this not to happen. If students end up using technology for purposes outside of class, I will be forced to require that computers stay off. Most of our attention should be directed toward the text we are reading and discussing anyway, so I imagine the need to look something up will be quite rare indeed.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious and intellectually inexcusable offense, and it will not be tolerated. Don't do it. It will result in an immediate zero for the assignment, and could result in more serious action, including failing the class completely and potentially being expelled from the University. *Plagiarism includes: lack of proper citations when quoting from someone else's work, representing someone else's work as your own, and knowingly allowing one's work to be submitted by someone else.* This should ultimately be a fun and stimulating class, and there is absolutely no reason for you not to take advantage of being able to do your own work and discuss it in an academic environment.

Students With Disabilities

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both myself and the Office of Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, or 412-228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Writing Center

Located at 317B O'Hara Student Center, 4024 O'Hara Street, the Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to "correct" your work for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your papers. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. In some cases, I may require that you go to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance. Their services are free, but you should check on-site, call ahead (412-624-6556), or visit their website (<http://www.composition.pitt.edu/writingcenter/index.html>) to make an appointment.

E-mail Communication Policy

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. I will also communicate with students via their pitt.edu address. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to either University or my own communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address.

Calendar⁶

- 8.25 Introduction
Syllabus
- 8.27 Frank Kermode, “The End”¹
- 8.29 Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”²
- 9.1 Labor Day, no class
- 9.3 Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”³
- 9.5 *Gamer* (screened in class)
- 9.8 *Gamer* (screened in class)
- 9.10 **Blog Post 1 and Two Comments Due**
Steven Shaviro, “Gamer”⁴
- 9.12 Michel Foucault, “Panopticism”⁵
Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on Control Societies”⁶
- 9.15 Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (pp. 1-79)
- 9.17 Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (pp. 79-160)
- 9.19 Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol* (preface[s], introduction and chp. 1, pp. xi-xxiv, 1-53)
- 9.22 Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (pp. 160-225)
- 9.24 Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (pp. 225-306)
- 9.26 Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol* (chp. 2 and chp. 4-5, pp. 54-78 and 118-172)
- 9.29 **Blog Post 2 and Two Comments Due**
Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (pp. 307-380)
- 10.1 Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (pp. 380-466)
- 10.3 Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol* (chps. 6-7 and Conclusion, pp. 175-246)
- 10.6 Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (pp. 466-497)
- 10.8 Marshall McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message”⁷
- 10.10 **Essay 1 Due**
World of Warcraft tutorial, please have already created a character before class
- 10.13 *Fall Break, class will be held Tuesday*
- 10.14 Alexander Galloway, “Gamic Action, Four Moments”⁸
- 10.15 Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Video Games* (intro and Chps. 1-7, pp. 1-57)
- 10.17 Reach Level 10-14 in *Warcraft*
Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Video Games* (intro and Chps. 7-15, pp. 58-109)
- 10.20 Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Video Games* (chps. 16-Conclusion, pp. 110-154)
- 10.22 Scott Rettberg, “Corporate Ideology and *World of Warcraft*” (*WoW Reader*, 19-38)
- 10.24 Reach Level 20-24 in *Warcraft*, in-class activity

⁶ N.b. that additional readings or handouts may be assigned when appropriate. The bibliographic citations for the readings are included as endnotes.

- 10.27 **Blog Post 3 and Two Comments Due**
Lisbeth Klastrup, “What Makes *World of Warcraft* a World?” (*WoW Reader*, pp. 143-166)
Espen Aarseth, “A Hollow World” (*WoW Reader*, pp. 111-122)
- 10.29 Hilde G. Corneliussen, “*World of Warcraft* as a Playground for Feminism” (*WoW Reader*, pp. 63-86).
Jessica Langer, “The Familiar and the Foreign” (*WoW Reader*, pp. 87-108)
- 10.31 Reach Level 25-29 in *Warcraft*, in-class activity
- 11.3 Alexander R. Galloway, “*Warcraft* and Utopia”⁹
11.5 Alexander R. Galloway, “We Are the Gold Farmers”¹⁰
11.7 Reach Level 30-34 in *Warcraft*, in-class tournament
- 11.10 **Essay 2 Due**
Dear Esther (in-class play)
- 11.12 *Dear Esther* (finish game on your own)
11.14 *Gone Home* (in-class play)
- 11.17 *Gone Home* (continue playing game on your own)
11.19 *Gone Home* (finish game on your own)
11.21 *The Stanley Parable* (in-class play)
- 11.24 **Blog Post 4 and Two Comments Due**
The Stanley Parable (finish at least 3 more endings on your own)
- 11.26 Thanksgiving
11.28 Thanksgiving
- 12.1 **Final Paper Proposal Due**
12.3 Patrick Jagoda, “Gamification and Other Forms of Play”¹¹
12.5 TBD
- 12.11—**Final Papers due in my mailbox, CL 501 by 4:00 pm**

Endnotes

¹ Frank Kermode, "The End," in *The Sense of and Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-31

² Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" (1954), trans. William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings: Ten Key Essays, Plus the Introduction to "Being and Time"*, rev. and exp. ed., ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 307-41.

³ Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" (1984), in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7-46.

⁴ Steven Shaviro, "Gamer," in *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: Zer0 Books, 2009), 93-130.

⁵ Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), 2nd ed., trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 195-228.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies" (1990), in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 177-82.

⁷ Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical ed., ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko, 2003), 17-36.

⁸ Alexander R. Galloway, "Gamic Action, Four Moments," in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 1-38.

⁹ Alexander R. Galloway, "Warcraft and Utopia," *Ctheory.net*, February 16, 2006, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=507>.

¹⁰ Alexander R. Galloway, "We Are the Gold Farmers," in *The Interface Effect* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), 120-43.

¹¹ Patrick Jagoda, "Gamification and Other Forms of Play," *boundary 2* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 113-44.