

“A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words.”
—William Carlos Williams

ENGL 467: Computer and Text (Spring 2004)

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Office Hours: 2:30-3:15 Monday and Wednesday, after class, or by appointment.

Please note, this course meets in two separate rooms: on Mondays in SQH 1105 and on Wednesdays in SQH 2112, unless otherwise announced. Class time is 3:30-4:45 on both days.

Description

In ENGL 467 we will explore what one critic has recently called “cybertexts”: works of literature, primarily but not exclusively digital, that are meant to be **played, navigated, and manipulated** in addition to “read” in the conventional sense. *Choose Your Own Adventure* books are examples of printed cybertexts with which you might be familiar, though as we will see they only scratch the surface—quite unimaginatively—of what is possible within the form. Specific topics will include: procedural texts and their origins in the literary avant-garde (Dada and the Oulipo); interactive fiction; text-based virtual realities (MUDs and MOOs); writing and/as code; hypertext, both stand-alone formats and networked on the World Wide Web; literary games and simulations; and emergent literature or “smart” texts. We will read/play/explore works from all of these different genres and formats, and our discussions will focus on both identifying the cybertextual traits they have in common as well as discriminating each form’s unique achievements and significance. These discussions will be set within a broader consideration of textuality, including the question of what a text actually is—an old question which digital technologies now ask us to ask anew. You will leave the course with a sense of the literary and digital traditions of cybertext, hands-on experience of some of the most innovative literature being produced today, and (hopefully) some fundamentally new ways of thinking about texts and textuality.

There are no technical pre-requisites for this course. You do not have to be—nor should you expect to become!—a computer professional. Our emphasis will instead be on critical and theoretical approaches to these works. The workload and my expectations regarding your level of critical engagement and the quality of your writing will be commensurate with that of a 400-level English course. Students seeking only practical instruction in software, programming, or Web design would do best to look elsewhere. We will, however, be using a computer-equipped classroom for weekly exercises and experiments to build on our theoretical understandings, and try our hands at producing some actual cybertexts ourselves.

Texts

All of the following are available for purchase at the University Book Center. You may also, of course, purchase them from online vendors. *Afternoon* is also available direct from Eastgate Systems: <http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/Afternoon.html>.

- Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Johns Hopkins, 1997). ISBN: 0901855799.
- Michael Joyce, *Afternoon: A Story* (Eastgate Systems, Macintosh or PC). ISBN: 1884511015.
- Ellen Ullman, *The Bug* (Doubleday, 2003). ISBN: 0385508603.

There is also a required course packet from Beljean Printing, available at the Maryland Book Exchange (*not* at the University Book Center, sorry). Please purchase the packet ASAP as it contains some of our very earliest readings.

Finally, each student will be required to locate and purchase a *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebook. Though the series is out of print they are still widely available through second-hand bookstores and sites like eBay. You should not have to pay more than a couple of dollars. Any title on the following list is acceptable: <http://www.gamebooks.org/cyoalist.htm>. Copy-cat products (*Which Way Books*, etc.) are also fine, though you may want to check with me first.

Requirements and Grading

All grading will use the university's plus/minus system. The requirements for the course, and their weight in determining your final grade, are as follows:

- HTML assignment: 15%.
- *Choose Your Own Adventure* assignment: 15%.
- Final Paper or Project: 25%.
- Midterm exam: 20%.
- Final exam: 25%.

Due dates are listed on the course calendar below, with the exception of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* assignment which must be completed and handed in any time prior to Week 14. The HTML and the *Choose Your Own Adventure* assignments will both be described in more detail on separate handouts. The paper or project, which will also have a separate handout, will be either an 8-10 page paper on a topic of your choosing (requiring secondary research), or a digital project comprising an equivalent amount of written content and intellectual substance. If you opt for the digital project it is essential that you discuss it with me beforehand. The two exams may include short answer, identifications, technical exercises, and essays, and will also be described in more detail closer to the dates on which they are given. Depending on when you submit the *Choose Your Own Adventure* assignment, you may have up to 50% of your final grade in hand by

midterms. Please note that your final course grade is subject to modification as per the attendance policy detailed below.

A word on my grading standards: an A-grade must be earned. Merely fulfilling the terms of an assignment, and doing so in a competent, reasonable manner, is generally only enough for a grade in the B-range. Weaker work will receive grades in the C-range or below. A-grades will only be awarded (and should only be expected) if your work goes above and beyond terms like “good,” “solid,” and “competent” to reveal notable depths of creativity, insight, and excellence.

Participation is not graded, but it counts—a lot. Participation will be the primary means by which I resolve inevitable borderline grades. For someone with a 3.5 final course average (let’s say), a consistent record of strong participation, in class and/or online, will make the difference between a B+ and an A-.

It is my policy never to discuss grades via email. Please do not hesitate to see me during office hours if you have a question about a grade you’ve received.

Attendance Policy and Late Work

Attendance is mandatory: if you’re not here, you’re not contributing to the group. You will be allowed two absences for the semester without penalty, no questions asked. After that, every unexcused absence will result in the loss of one degree off your final course grade. For example, someone with an A for their final grade but two unexcused absences on their record would receive a B+ for the semester. There *may* be one or more opportunities to make up an unexcused absence (attendance at lectures and other special events relevant to the course)—but you shouldn’t count on these. Common cold-type illnesses will not be excused. Consistent lateness to class will be treated as an absence. Excused absences will typically only be granted for documented medical or family emergencies; for religious or cultural obligations; or for university-sanctioned athletic travel. Students who *know* they will require special accommodation for attendance or assignments for any of these reasons should inform me of the fact as far ahead of time as possible.

You are still responsible for the material you miss if you are absent, whether you are excused or not. Please note that I will not respond to “what did I miss” queries via email (it’s not my idea of fun; ask a friend in the class or come see me during office hours instead).

All assigned work is due on the date given on the course calendar, unless you have made a specific prior arrangement with me. Late work without prior arrangement will be demoted up to one full letter grade (or not accepted at all if more than a week overdue).

Electronic Resources

This class has a blog:

<http://www.otal.umd.edu/~mgk/courses/spring2004/467/>

Please bookmark this address and get into the habit of checking the blog regularly, at least several times per week. I will use the blog to post announcements, assignments, updates to the calendar, and other administrative items. I will also post questions, provocations, and items related to our current reading and discussions. You may respond to these in the comments section of each entry. I will take blog comments into account when evaluating class participation.

The class also has an electronic coursemail list. Subscription is mandatory. All students who have a valid email address in Testudo should be automatically subscribed. If you prefer to read mail at another address you must let me know. I will use the list to post announcements, assignments, updates to the calendar, and other administrative items (just like the blog). The email list will not, however, function as a discussion medium (that's what the blog is for). You should get into the habit of checking your email at least once a day. You will be held responsible for the content of all email announcements 24 hours after they have been posted.

Finally, all of you must open a WAM (or GLUE) account, which you will learn to use as part of the course. All online work *must be done on WAM/GLUE*, and not on a private ISP. (This policy will help me to help you troubleshoot if and when problems arise.) Further information on opening WAM/GLUE accounts is available here: <http://www.helpdesk.umd.edu/documents/1/1302/>.

Academic Integrity

All students are expected to abide by the University's code of academic integrity: <http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/code.html>. Students are also required to sign the Honor Pledge to all written work: "I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this assignment/examination." Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty will be referred to the Honor Council.

Course Calendar

Generally, Mondays will be lecture/discussion sessions (meeting in SQH 1105) and Wednesdays will be (usually, not always) hands-on workshop sessions (meeting in SQH 2112 unless otherwise announced). Most of the heavier reading assignments are due on Monday. Note, however, that you will often still have some reading assigned for a Wednesday, even if it's a workshop. Some of the readings are only available online. These are as much a part of the class as the printed readings, and you can expect to be examined and otherwise held responsible for them. Please bring your books to class.

Abbreviations used: CP = course pack.

Week One: Poetry and Checkers

M 1.26: Introduction to course;

Raymond Queneau, *One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*:
<http://www.bevrowe.info/Poems/QueneauRandom.htm>.

W 1.28: Checkers (<http://www.darkfish.com/checkers/Checkers.html>, or any other online version); George Quasha, “Too Late”; Arthur C. Clarke, “The Longest Science-Fiction Story Ever Told”; Georges Perec, brief excerpt from *A Void*; Tristan Tzara, “How to Make a Dadaist Poem” (all texts to be distributed).

Week Two: Loops and Branches

M 2.2: Queneau, “Story As You Like It” (CP); Coover, “The Babysitter” (CP); Atwood, “Happy Endings” (CP).

W 2.4: Ryan, “The Structures of Interactive Narrativity” (CP).

Week Three: Labyrinths (Ergodic Literature)

M 2.9: Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths” (CP); Aarseth, 1-23.

W 2.11: HTML (1): <http://www.mith.umd.edu/teaching/tutorials/html/index.html>.

Week Four: The Book Machine

M 2.16: McCaffery and Nichol, “The Book as Machine” (CP).

W 2.18: HTML (2): <http://www.mith.umd.edu/teaching/tutorials/html/index.html/>.

Week Five: Procedural Texts and Potential Literature

M 2.23: Aarseth, 129-141; Knuth, “Basic Concepts” (CP); have a talk with ELIZA:
<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/if/canon/eliza.htm>.

W 2.25: Mathews, “Mathews’ Algorithm” (CP).

Week Six: Spatial Texts: Interactive Fiction

M 3.1: Aarseth, 97-128; play Crowther and Wood’s *Adventure* online,
<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/if/gallery/adventure/index.html>.

W 3.3: Andrew Plotkin, “Shade”: <http://www.eblong.com/zarf/zplet/shade.html>;
HTML assignment due.

Week Seven: Social Texts: MUDs and MOOs

M 3.8: Aarseth, 142-161; Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace":
<http://www.juliandibbell.com/texts/bungle.html>.

W 3.10: Introduction to the MOO: <http://www.rc.umd.edu:7000>.

Week Eight: Exam Week

M 3.15: Ullman, *The Bug* (1-83); catch-up and exam review.

W 3.17: **Midterm Exam.**

Week Nine: Spring Break

M 3.22: No Class.

W 3.24: No Class.

Week Ten: Writing and/as Code (1)

M 3.29: *The Bug* (87-257).

W 3.31: *The Bug* (cont.);
 Steve Ramsay and Geoffrey Rockwell, "Writing as Programming as Writing":
<http://cantor.english.uga.edu/docs/u4.3.pdf> (requires Adobe Acrobat Reader);
 more of the MOO.

Week Eleven: Writing and/as Code (2)

M 4.5: *The Bug* (258-End).

W 4.7: *The Bug*; examples of codework (to be announced).

Week Twelve: Hypertext Before the Web

M 4.12: Aarseth, 76-96;
 Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think" (sections 6, 7, 8 especially):
<http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/flashbks/computer/bushf.htm>;
 begin Joyce's *Afternoon*.

W 4.14: Joyce's *Afternoon*.

Week Thirteen: Writing for the Web

M 4.19: Olia Lialina, "My boyfriend came back from the war":

<http://www.teleportacia.org/war/> (1996 HTML version especially);
Shelley Jackson, "My Body": <http://www.altx.com/thebody/>.

W 4.21: Poems by Jason Nelson: <http://www.heliozoa.com> (requires Flash);
Last day to submit the *Choose Your Own Adventure* assignment.

Week Fourteen: *Literary Games and Instrumental Texts*

M 4.26: Borges, "The Interloper" (CP);
Natalie Bookchin, *The Intruder*: <http://dian-network.com/con/intruder/>;
"Literary Games" issue of PoemsThatGo: <http://poemsthatgo.com/>.

W 4.28: Stuart Moulthrop, *Pax*: <http://iat.ubalt.edu/moulthrop/hypertexts/pax/>;
Interview with Moulthrop by Noah Wardrip-Fruin:
<http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/tirweb/feature/moulthrop/>.

Week Fifteen: *Emergent Literature and Smart Texts*

M 5.3: Johnson, from *Emergence* (CP); Richard Powers, "Literary Devices" (to be distributed).

W 5.5: Rheingold, from *Smart Mobs* (CP); "Location Aware Narrative":
<http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/Opinion/index.cfm?article=83>;
Onesixty: <http://www.centrifugalforges.co.uk/onesixty01/pages/main.html>;
UniFiction: <http://unfiction.com/>; *Flight Risk*: <http://shes.aflightrisk.org/>.

Week Sixteen: *Logging Off*

M 5.10: Shelley Jackson, *Skin*: <http://ineradicablestain.com/skin.html>.
exam review; evaluations;
Paper/Projects due.

Final Exam: Saturday, May 15th, 1:30-3:30