



DIGITAL RHETORIC AND NEW MEDIA  
ENGH 376 / 508 (FALL 2012)

Professor Mark Sample  
*Email:* msample1@gmu.edu  
*Office:* Robinson A 441  
*Office Hours:* T 3-4:30p, R 11a-12p and by  
appointment

*Meeting Time:* W 7:20-10p  
*Location:* Innovation 320  
*Online:* [samplereality.com/gmu/digital](http://samplereality.com/gmu/digital)

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

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The digital is an inescapable part of everyday life. Nearly every activity that a generation ago required face-to-face contact or interaction with another person can now be accomplished digitally, mediated by phone trees, automated systems, and the web. And countless activities that were unheard of even a few years ago are now possible, thanks to digital technology. Unlike the grand technologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—improbably tall skyscrapers, massive hydroelectric dams, rocket ships to the moon and beyond—the digital technologies that capture our attention today are mostly small and personal. Cell phones, videogame consoles, HDTVs, iPads and ebooks.

While there are countless questions to ask about the social, psychological, and economic implications of ubiquitous digital technology, ENGH 376/508 will focus upon the *expressive power* of new media. By expressive power, we will mean the way digital media enables and shapes different modes of creative and cultural expression.

We will approach the expressive power of new media through four lenses in ENGH 376/508:

1. **Platforms.** This introductory section lays the groundwork for the semester, exploring the history and materiality of new media. We will consider new media not as a vague concept or as something that happens only on screens, but as very specific and historically-situated forms of technology—as what we will call “platforms.”
2. **Literature.** This second section considers how artists and writers use new media to create aesthetic and literary works that challenge accepted notions of art, narrative, and poetry.
3. **Data.** The third section of the semester focuses on database culture, particularly the aesthetic and narrative potential of seemingly objective infographics, data visualizations,

and mapping.

4. **Games.** The final section of the course explores the expressive and rhetorical power of videogames. Often dismissed as adolescent entertainment, videogames are in fact complicated and compelling, and can both evoke and provoke.

ENGH 376/508 is a hybrid course in many ways. Unlike most English Department classes, words will frequently be of less interest to us than other **multimodal expressions**: images, numbers, sound, movement, rules, and so on. We will also adapt an **inclusive approach** to digital culture, studying works that range from the digital equivalent of high modernism to low and even vulgar popular culture. We ourselves are a **mixed body**, comprised of both undergraduate and graduate students, a unique learning opportunity for all of us. And finally, our weekly class will follow a **studio model** of instruction more than a classroom model. That is, we will learn how to analyze existing new media works, but we will also spend our class time building and designing our own digital pieces.

## ENDURING CONCEPTS

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While we will cover an enormous amount of theoretical, historical, and contemporary material over the course of the semester, there are several concepts that are fundamental for understanding new media and digital rhetoric. I aim for these core concepts to endure in your mind long after the semester is over:

- All media forms possess unique **affordances** which structure, shape, and limit what can be done in that form;
- New media must be approached with an attentiveness to their specific historical and material **conditions**;
- Culturally accepted designations such as author, originality, narrative, literature, art, and games are **contested** terms;
- Text is only one expressive form among many others, including images, sound, data, and computation, that contribute to digital object's **meaning**.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

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- Rita Raley, *Tactical Media*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009
- Selected online readings and digital material

## REQUIRED WORK

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The required work for ENGH 376/508 will take several forms, detailed below: (1) class participation; (2) weekly blogging; (3) a digital creation of your own making; (4) a media specific analysis; and (5) a final project.

- (1) This class places a high premium on **participation**. Class sessions will be divided between discussion and “studio” work. It is essential that everyone has carefully considered the week’s material, attends class, and participates. If you cannot attend ENGH 376/508 regularly, please reconsider your decision to enroll. The deciding factor in borderline final grades is often your class participation grade. **ENGH 508 graduate students**: in addition to the usual level of

participation, graduate students in the class will also be responsible for leading a class discussion on the week's reading. I will work individually with the graduate students on the details of this assignment.

*Participation is worth 15% of your final grade.*

- (2) Each student will contribute to the weekly **class blog**. There will be two roles on the blog, and each week a third of the class will rotate through these roles (one group has the week off in terms of blogging). Students in one group will post an approximately 300-400 word critical response to the week's reading, while students in another group will write with a critical eye about a new media object they have explored on their own (called creative response on the daily schedule below). Blog posts are due by 7pm the day before class.

*Blogging is worth 20% of your final grade.*

- (3) Every student will design one expressive **digital object**, emulating the examples we study and using the tools we encounter in the workshop part of the class. Some possibilities include generative digital poetry, a small videogame, a Twitter bot, and so forth. The digital project will be accompanied by an Artist's Statement. This project is due **Wednesday, November 14**.

*The digital object is worth 20% of your final grade.*

- (4) Over the course of the semester you will have several opportunities to write a **media-specific analysis**. This short paper is a media-specific analysis of a single new media object, in which you explore its literary, rhetorical, and expressive potential. The investigation will be roughly 4-5 pages long. While there will be several media-specific analysis topics to choose from over the course of the semester, you will only select one of these to work on.

*The media-specific analysis is worth 20% of your final grade.*

- (5) The final project is a **multimodal project** that explores several existing new media artifacts using new media itself as an organizing and interpretive principle. **ENGH 508 graduate students:** final projects for graduate students will include a research component that consists of an annotated bibliography and a "literature review" that situates your object of study within the larger framework of new media studies. For all students in ENGH 376/508, the final project can build upon your media-specific analysis, and it is due **Wednesday, December, 12**.

*The final project is worth 25% of your final grade.*

## **GRADING**

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The final grade will be calculated in the following manner:

- Participation: 15%
- Blogging: 20%
- Digital Object: 20%
- Investigation: 20%
- Final Project: 25%

The blog posts will be evaluated according to the following 0-4 point scale:

<b>RATING</b>	<b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>
4	<b>Exceptional.</b> The blog entry is focused and coherently integrates examples with explanations or analysis. The entry demonstrates awareness of its own limitations or implications, and it considers multiple perspectives when appropriate. The entry reflects in-depth engagement with the topic.
3	<b>Satisfactory.</b> The blog entry is reasonably focused, and explanations or analysis are mostly based on examples or other evidence. Fewer connections are made between ideas, and though new insights are offered, they are not fully developed. The entry reflects moderate engagement with the topic.
2	<b>Underdeveloped.</b> The blog entry is mostly description or summary, without consideration of alternative perspectives, and few connections are made between ideas. The entry reflects passing engagement with the topic.
1	<b>Limited.</b> The blog entry is unfocused, or simply rehashes previous comments, and displays no evidence of student engagement with the topic.
0	<b>No Credit.</b> The blog entry is missing or consists of one or two disconnected sentences.

Every other assignment will be given a letter grade that has a percentage equivalent:

A+ = 100% / A = 95% / A- = 90%  
B+ = 88% / B = 85% / B- = 80%  
C+ = 78% / C = 75% / C- = 70%  
D = 65% / F = below 60%

## **ATTENDANCE**

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Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class. The last day to add this course is September 4, 2012. The last day to drop this course without tuition penalty is also September 4, 2012. After September 28, withdrawal from ENGH 376/508 requires the approval of the dean and is only allowed for nonacademic reasons.

Attendance is mandatory (excepting hospitalization or observation of religious holidays). More than four absences will lower your class participation grade by at least one letter grade. More than six absences will result in a zero for your class participation grade.

## **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

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Mason is an Honor Code university. The principle of academic integrity is taken very seriously and violations are treated gravely. What does academic integrity mean in this course? Essentially this: when you are responsible for a task, you will perform that task. When you rely on someone else's work in an aspect of the performance of that task, you will give full credit in the proper, accepted form. Another aspect of academic integrity is the free play of ideas. Vigorous discussion and debate are encouraged in this course, with the firm expectation that all aspects of the class will be conducted with civility and respect for differing ideas, perspectives, and traditions. When in doubt (of any kind) please ask for guidance and clarification.

## **COMMUNICATION**

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Students must use their MasonLIVE email account to receive important University information, including messages related to this class. Failure to check your MasonLIVE email every day may result in missed messages, which you are responsible for. See <http://masonlive.gmu.edu> for more information.

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

## **CLASSROOM COURTESY**

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Laptops and smart phones may be used in class but only for classroom activities such as note-taking. Occasionally I may ask students with laptops or tablet computers to turn them off. Text messaging unrelated to class is not acceptable. The use of MP3 players and portable game systems during class is also unacceptable.

Late arrivals or early departures from class are disruptive and should be avoided.

## **EMERGENCY INFORMATION**

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George Mason issues emergency warnings affecting the university community through its Mason Alert system. If you have not already signed up to receive email, page, or text message alerts, please do so at [alert.gmu.edu](http://alert.gmu.edu).

## **A NOTE ABOUT CHANGES**

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While the assignments and major readings are fixed, other details about ENGH 376/508 may change over the course of the semester, including additional readings and changes in due dates. The most recent version of the syllabus can always be consulted at [samplereality.com/gmu/digital](http://samplereality.com/gmu/digital).

## **HEADER**

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[Broken LCD screen](#) image courtesy of Flickr user slworking2 / Creative Commons Licensed

## ENGH 376/508 CALENDAR

### PART I :: PLATFORMS

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#### Wednesday, August 29 (Week 1)

- Concepts: *new media, digital rhetoric*
- Introduction to the syllabus, schedule, and enduring concepts

#### Wednesday, September 5 (week 2)

- Concepts: *technological determinism, black box, platform studies*
- Blogging: Critical Response (Group 1); Creative Response (Group 2)
- Raymond Williams, "The Technology and the Society" from *The New Media Reader* (Blackboard)
- Tarleton Gillespie, "The Stories Digital Tools Tell" from *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality* (Blackboard)
- Lisa Gitelman, "Imagining Language Machines" from *Scripts, Groves, and Writing Machines* (Blackboard)
- Mark Sample, "[Platform Studies as Historical Inquiry](#)" from *Play the Past* (Online)
- Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, "[Platform Studies: Frequently Questioned Answers](#)" from the 2009 Digital Arts and Culture Conference (Online)

#### Wednesday, September 12 (Week 3)

- Concepts: *modularity, digital forensics, writing and materiality*
- Blogging: Critical Response (Group 2); Creative Response (Group 3)
- Tara McPherson, "U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and Unix" from *Race after the Internet* (Blackboard)
- Matthew Kirschenbaum, "'Every Contact Leaves a Trace': Storage, Inscription, and Computer Forensics" from *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Blackboard)
- Jay David Bolter, "Seeing and Writing" from *Writing Space* (Blackboard)
- Craig Mod, [Post-Artifact Books and Publishing](#), [The Digital↔Physical](#), [Hack the Cover](#) (Online)

### PART II :: LITERATURE

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#### Wednesday, September 19 (Week 4)

- Concepts: *agency, interaction, immersion, hypertext*
- Blogging: Critical Response (Group 3); Creative Response (Group 1)
- Janet Murray, "From Additive to Expressive Culture" from *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Blackboard)
- N. Katherine Hayles, "Print is Flat, Code is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis" from *Poetics Today* 25.1 (2004) : 67–90. ([E-Journal](#))
- Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "Five Elements of Digital Literature" from *Reading Moving Letters* ([Games and Playable Media site](#))
- Scott McCloud, "The Infinite Canvas" ([Online](#))
- Explore Olia Lialina, [My Boyfriend Came Back from the War](#) (1996), Andy Campbell, [Dim O'Gable](#) (2008), Jason Nelson, [Promiscuous Design](#) (2005), Horang, [Bongcheon-](#)

[Dong Ghost](#) (2011), and selected works of electronic literature from [Alan Bigelow](#) and [Dreaming Methods](#)

### Wednesday, September 26 (Week 5)

- Concepts: *codework, chance operations, dysfunction, glitches*
- Blogging: Critical Response (Group 1); Creative Response (Group 2)
- William S. Burroughs, "The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin" (Blackboard)
- Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "Digital Media Archaeology: Interpreting Computational Processes" from *Media Archaeology* (Blackboard)
- John Cayley, "Time Code Language: New Media Poetics and Programmed Signification" from *New Media Poetics* (Blackboard)
- Marie-Laure Ryan, [Between Play and Politics: Dysfunctionality in Digital Art](#) from *Electronic Book Review* (2010)
- Explore Nick Montfort's [Taroko Gorge](#) and selections of digital poetry from [J.R. Carpenter](#) and others
- Selected Readings on the New Aesthetic

### Wednesday, October 3 (Week 6)

- Concepts: *bots, expressive intelligence, interactive fiction*
- Blogging: Critical Response (Group 2); Creative Response (Group 3)
- Nick Montfort, [Interactive Fiction's Fourth Era](#) (2006); see also Montfort's [video introduction](#) to Interactive Fiction
- Play Andrew Plotkin, [The Dreamhold](#) (2003) and Jason McIntosh, [The Warbler's Nest](#) (2010)

## PART III :: DATA

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### Wednesday, October 10 (Week 7)

- Concepts: *database, algorithm, control*
- Blogging: Critical Response (Group 3); Creative Response (Group 1)
- Lev Manovich, "The Database" from *The Language of New Media* (Blackboard)
- Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control" from *October* (JSTOR)
- Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" from *Image-Music-Text* (Blackboard)
- Jonathan Harris, [We Feel Fine](#) (with Sep Kamvar) and [The Whale Hunt](#)
- Jason Nelson, [Weather Visualizer](#) and [Conversation](#)

### Wednesday, October 17 (Week 8)

- Concepts: *mapping, distant reading*
- Blogging: Critical Response (Group 1); Creative Response (Group 2)
- Roberto Simanowski, "Mapping Art" from *Digital Art and Meaning* (Blackboard)
- Lev Manovich, "The Poetics of Augmented Space" from *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality* (Blackboard)
- Stephen Mamber, "Narrative Mapping" from *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*
- Lisa Parks, "Satellite and Cyber Visualities: Analyzing 'Digital Earth,'" from the *Visual Culture Reader* (Blackboard)
- Charles Cumming, [The 21 Steps](#) (2008)

### Wednesday, October 24 (Week 9)

- Concepts: *big data*
- Blogging: Critical Response (Group 2); Creative Response (Group 3)
- Rita Raley, Introduction and “Speculative Capital” from *Tactical Media*, pp. 1-31 and 109-151
- Lev Manovich, “Trending: The Promises and the Challenges of Big Social Data” from *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (Blackboard)
- [ChronoZoom](#), the [Digital AIDS Memorial Quilt](#), and other large-scale data visualizations
- AIDS Memorial Quilt Mobile App [Kickstarter Campaign](#)

## PART IV: GAMES

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### Wednesday, October 31 (Week 10)

- Concepts: *procedural rhetoric, documentary game*
- Blogging: Critical Response (Group 3); Creative Response (Group 1)
- Ian Bogost, “Procedural Rhetoric” from *Persuasive Games* ([MIT Press website](#))
- Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer, “Documentary” from *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (Blackboard)
- Brenda Laurel, “The Six Elements and the Causal Relations Among Them” from *Computers as Theater* (Blackboard)
- Selected videogames

### Wednesday, November 7 (Week 11)

- Concepts: *countergaming, abusive game design*
- Blogging: All graduate students blog this week, either a critical or a creative response
- Alexander Galloway, “Countergaming” from *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Blackboard)
- Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart, “Now It’s Personal: On Abusive Game Design” from *Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on the Future of Game Design and Technology* ([Online](#))
- Selected games from [Jason Nelson](#)
- In class studio working on Digital Object

### Wednesday, November 14 (Week 12)

- Digital Object Due

### Wednesday, November 21 – Thanksgiving (Week 13)

- No Class

### Wednesday, November 28 (Week 14)

- Rita Raley, “Border Hacks” and “Virtual War” from *Tactical Media*, pp. 31-107
- Blogging: All graduate students blog this week, either a critical or a creative response
- Selected videogames

### Wednesday, December 5 (Week 15)

- In class studio working on Final Project

### Wednesday, December 12 (Finals Week)

- Final Project Due