

ENGL 4680 Section 001 -

Game Narratives as

Literature (Spring 2026 1)

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ENGL 4680: Game Narratives As Literature

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MW 2:00PM - 3:20 PM Lang 201

Office Hours for Spring 2026: Auditorium 116 MW 10am-2pm; TTh 10am-12pm

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Overview

The purpose of this course is to examine the concept of narrative in video games—from all eras and genres—to show how the familiar questions of structure, cultural critique, and (especially) intertextuality commonly applied to literature and film can be extended to games and the gaming

ethos. At the same time, we will investigate why the conventions of games make their narrative experiences unique. We will be approaching these questions from two distinct lines of inquiry.

1. Psychological: the character of storytelling from the first-person perspective; this can be found in interactive fiction and also afforded to players through the one-point view of “shooters,” such as *Doom* or *Call of Duty*. The cinematic qualities of these narratives, recall, not surprisingly, psychologically evocative works from Hitchcock and Kubrick, who each depended on one-point perspective to orient viewers, and to force them to identify with the anxieties or fears of the protagonist (as with Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo*, for example).

2 Cultural: The practice of world-building, however small or large, drawing from texts devoted to the creation of new environments, with special attention to exploring ethical conflicts found within them.

We will also encounter a number of related subjects from these two lines of attack: what is character? By extension, what is consciousness? What happens when we negotiate a game-space without a weapon (or even props)? How are old genres of either film, text, or even old games, reinvented with new layers of storytelling on top of them? And what is the relationship between *ludemes* (bits of gameplay) and *narremes* (bits of narrative)? How and why do they complement each other? Also, how are literary genres deployed in game spaces?

Discussions of individual game texts (and play-throughs, viz., recorded play-sessions) shall be paired with critical texts each week, along with instructor-authored content to provide contexts for discussion, and directions for further reading.

Readings/subjects may change over time, but I promise not to pile more work on you.

Week 1: **Introduction: narration, plot, character, first-person as “operator”**

January 12th Introduction; a brief lecture about [Henry James's "Art of Fiction"](#)

January 14th [Tzvetan Todorov, "Narrative-Men"](#)

Week 2: The riddle as the genesis for narrative games

January 19th MLK Day (course will not meet)

January 21st Dossier on *Adventure*, Crowther/Woods (1970s-ish) and *Zork* (1978)

Nick Montfort, "[The Pleasure of the Text Adventure](#)" and "[Zork and Other Mainframe Works](#)" from *Twisty Little Passages* (MIT Press, 2003.)

A discussion of the "visual novel" format, including *Danganronpa*, *Hatoful Boyfriend*, *Va-11 Hall-A*, among others

Week 3: What is interaction? What is agency?

January 26th [Schell, "The Loop of Interaction," from Art of Game Design \(260-278\)](#)

["A Tango with Zombies and Dualism" \(311-323\) from I Am a Strange Loop, Douglas Hofstadter](#)

January 28th [Dossier on The Stanley Parable \(2013\)](#)

[Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths"](#)

Week 4: Thinking machines, feeling machines

February 2nd De Graaf Maartje M. A., et. al., "Who Wants to Grant Robots Rights?" *Frontiers in Robotics and AI* (8), 2022

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frobt.2021.781985>

Dossier on *Detroit: Become Human* (2018)

Dossier on *The Talos Principle* (2014)

Dossier on *Ctrl Alt Ego* (2022)

February 4th an entire day discussing cookie clickers (I am not joking)

Week 5 : **Technology, memory, mortality, horror**

February 9th Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny [1919]”

Dossier on *Iron Lung* (2022)

February 11th Dossier on *Mouthwashing* (2024)

Dossier on *Omori* (2020)

Week 6: **Gender, sexuality, and relationships as puzzles in interactive fiction**

February 16th Dossier on *Butterfly Soup* (2017)

Dossier on *Undertale* (2015)

February 18th Readings on *Uncharted* series (dev. Naughty Dog, 2007-)

Other TBA

Week 7: **Grief, mourning and the cycle of violence**

February 23rd Readings on *Fire Emblem* series (2013-) and *Final Fantasy*

Dossier on *Last of Us* (2013)

February 25th Dossier on *Firewatch* (2016)

Week 8: Grief, mourning and the cycle of violence, part 2

March 2nd Dossier on *Death Stranding* (2020)

Readings on *Metal Gear Solid* series (1998-)

March 4th Dossier on *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005)

Spring Break March 9th-March 13th

Week 9: The Minimalist's Guide to World Building and Environments

March 16th a discussion to define world-building

Readings about games for younger players: *Pokemon*, *Wizards 101*, *Webkins*, *Sonic*, etc.

Dossier on *A Dark Room* (2017)

March 18th Dossier on *Limbo* (2010)

Dossier on *Inside* (2016)

Week 10: Environments for emergent narratives

March 23rd Dossier on *Minecraft* (2009)

Dossier on *Half-Life* series (1998 -)

March 25th Readings on city builders and survival games (*Rust*, *The Long Dark*, etc.)

Week 11: RPG Week

March 30th-April 1st Dossiers and readings on *Elder Scrolls*, *Dark Souls/Elden Ring*, and *Baldur's Gate 3*

Week 12: Ethical decidability in world-building

April 6th-8th Dossier on *Mass Effect* (2005)

Theresa Krampe, "No Straight Answers: Queering Hegemonic Masculinity in BioWare's *Mass Effect*"

Dossier on *Fallout* series (1997-2014)

Marcus Schulzke, "Moral Decision Making in *Fallout*"

Olli Tapio Leino, "Death Loop as a Feature"

Dossier on *Grand Theft Auto* series (1997-present)

Readings on *Horizon Zero Dawn* series (2017-present)

Week 13 : Open-World Fantasy of One Kind or Another

April 13rd-15th Dossier on *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017)

Sarah M Stang, "(Re-)Balancing the Triforce: Gender Representation and Androgynous Masculinity in the Legend of Zelda Series," November 2019

Kathryn Hemmann, "I Coveted That Wind: Ganondorf, Buddhism, and Hyrule's Apocalyptic Cycle," August 2019

Dossier on *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020)

Week 14: Repetition, Compulsion, Iteration, Nostalgia

April 20th-22nd Dossiers and readings on *Hades* (2020), *Blue Prince* (2025), and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) [and open to revision, by suggestion]

Week 15: individual meetings

ASSIGNMENTS

Weekly Discussion Posts (due Fridays): For Monday, everyone will answer the same prompt. You won't need to have done the reading to answer this prompt, and you do not need to respond to posts (although you may).

Weekly Assingments (due Saturdays): Also on Monday, there will be choice of prompts grounded in the reading for the week.

The **Midterm Project** as well as the **Final Project** needs to be a written paper, and based on the readings for the course.

Midterm project (6-8 pages) 30%

Final Project (10 pages) 35%

Weekly Assignments 25%

Participation and Weekly Discussion Threads 10%

Assessing Your Work

Don't plagiarize, do sloppy work, or try to get away with not doing the reading.

All policies of UNT are in effect in this course (naturally), but I want to take time to draw your attention to four items in the official UNT Policy Manual [policy.unt.edu], under the heading of 18.1.16, Student Standards of Academic Integrity. My commentary on the policy is in bold type.

[A. Cheating]

“2. dependence upon the aid of sources beyond those authorized by the instructor in writing papers, preparing reports, solving problems or carrying out other assignments”

“4. dual submission of a paper or project, or re-submission of a paper or project to a different class without express permission from the instructor”

If you want to double submit for a good reason, ask me about it. If you are pressed for time on any of this, get in touch with me.

[B. Plagiarism]

“Use of another’s thoughts or words without proper attribution in any academic exercise, regardless of

the student’s intent, including but not limited to:

1. the knowing or negligent use by paraphrase or direct quotation of the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgement or citation.
2. the knowing or negligent unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or by an agency engaged in selling term papers or other academic materials.”

Again, self-explanatory. If you turn in a paper to me of which all or part is plagiarized, you will fail this course, and the incident will be reported to the English Department Chair. If you’re not clear on what plagiarism is now (distinguished from simply bad scholarship), do not worry: we’ll talk about that at length.

The use of ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Claude, Grok, Writesonic/Chatsonic, Meta AI, Copilot, Perplexity AI, Pi, Personal AI, Poe, You.com, Character AI, or any other AI entity to create content in fulfillment of assignments for this course is prohibited, absolutely.

Why? These AI chatbots create crappy writing that does nothing but SUMMARIZE, and they always do it in a three-paragraph format where every sentence is a summary of the previous one. Good writing for any humanities course opens up more possibility for discussion, more areas to think about. ChatGPT and the like can't do that. They also don't know what it is like to play a game. You, a human, know that, and can think of more questions about that experience. And that is what I want.

Similarly, do not use Grammarly, or any other AI writing aid such as ProWritingAid, Hemingway App, WhiteSmoke, Readable, WordTune, Ginger, Sapling, PaperRater, Reverso, Slick Write, LanguageTool, Writer, SentenceCheckup.

Why? For much the same reasons as I noted with ChatGPT above. It makes NO SENSE for me to critique your writing in the slightest if you used Grammarly, and as my colleague Anna Kornbluh has observed, using AI tools for writing amounts to cognitive de-skilling, which is not what we do in college. I understand they are recommending Grammarly's usage for Tech Comm classes, and I condemn that wholesale in the strongest possible terms. I think that is bad pedagogy.

Perhaps the whole Grammarly thing isn't clear?

Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class. Do not use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly for assignments in this class.

Did I mention nobody should use Grammarly in this class? When I say that "nobody should use Grammarly or anything like Grammarly in this class," I mean it. If you do it anyway, that assignment will be a zero.

Note on attendance, class participation and papers:

I expect everyone to show up, do the reading, and bring it. Your grades aren't negotiable. If you want me to explain why I graded a certain assignment a certain way, I'll do that. But "A" students don't speak to their professors only to put them on trial.

If you skip more than four class meetings, I'll be very disinclined to round your grade up if things come to that. Be mindful of the drop deadline for this semester. If you simply vanish into thin air, don't expect me to pester you via e-mail as to your whereabouts. Ditto if you never turn anything in, or are missing your last assignment(s).

Late Paper Policy:

I will deduct .33 of a grade for each day a paper is late. For example, if you turn in a B paper, and it's a day late, the grade gets docked down to a B minus. Also, late papers don't get comments. **If you need an extension, ask.**

Turning in Papers:

Papers will be turned in on Canvas.

Notes on grade calculation:

Here are the letter grades I give for assignments, and the grade points they're worth:

A :100-90

B: 90-80

C: 80-70

D: 70-60

ADA compliance notice

In accordance with the terms and the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504, Rehabilitation Act, I will work with the Office of Disability Accommodation to make reasonable arrangements for you in order to take this class. Don't hesitate to talk to me about what you might need; all discussions will be confidential.