Digital Narratives
Instructor: Whitney Trettien
Syllabus for upper-level undergraduate English/Creative Writing course
Taught Fall 2013, English Department, Duke University

For as long as anyone can remember, novelists like Gore Vidal and Phillip Roth have been sounding the death knell of narrative, killed off (we hear) by the rise of screen-based digital media. While it’s true that the sale of printed novels has declined, other forms of interactive storytelling – from video games to “netprov” and virtual reality fiction – have demonstrated how narrative persists, even prospers, in new media. In fact, in Japan, SMS technology has breathed new life into the novel through “cell phone literature,” a popular genre written and distributed in text-message-sized snippets.

This course considers what it means to tell stories in an age of digital media. We’ll begin by writing a traditional short story (fiction or creative non-fiction), focusing on plot and structure. We’ll then experiment with “translating” this narrative into a variety of new media forms. How does your story change when told as an interactive fiction? as a video game? as a hypertext novel? or on different platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook or Second Life? With each “translation,” we’ll read relevant texts on narratology and media theory as a way of giving us a shared vocabulary for discussing these new genres, and we’ll explore some of the best examples of creative writing in them.

This course will be run as a workshop. While there will be a significant amount of reading (or playing, or watching, or listening) each week, emphasis will be on 1) learning some basic skills necessary to work within new media genres and 2) playfully, creatively experimenting with these skills. You’ll leave this course with a deeper understanding of the architecture of new media, including the World Wide Web and audiovisual forms like digital film and video games, as well as with a suite of basic technical literacies applicable across all disciplines.

Assignments

The core assignments of this class are:

- a weekly remediation, or rewriting, of your story
- and a final project that significantly augments or expands one week’s remediation, paired with a short “artist’s statement” contextualizing your work.

Think of the weekly remediations as series of experiments in form. How does your narrative change when told only in images? or audio? What is your story like as a first-person interactive game? The goal is not to create, e.g., the perfect hypertext – indeed, some of your stories won’t fit well in certain media – but to test the limits of narrative under strict conditions, while expanding your horizon as a storyteller (and gaining a few useful skills along the way).

In the final project, you will transform one of these prototypes into a polished, ready-to-publish piece. You will contextualize this work with a brief (4-6 page) artist’s statement, drawing on some of the critical literature and examples we’ve looked at all semester. This project is an opportunity to apply what we learned about narratology and different forms under strict experimental conditions to a mixed-media narrative. You will be graded on how effectively you use different media to tell your story; a more detailed rubric will be forthcoming.

SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: Text

Write a story. It should be roughly the length of a 5-page paper, between 1000-2000 words. It should have enough narrative content to give you material to work with throughout the semester, but not so long that you’ll need to remediate a novel every week. You should be interested enough in it to want to spend the next three months working with it.

This story can be fiction, creative nonfiction, nonfiction, or anything in between. It should have a plot (i.e., something should happen – this is not an imagist poem), but that doesn’t mean you
shouldn’t focus on crafting your language. Think of this as a first draft of a story you would want to publish in a venue appropriate to the genre.

- “Story Structure: Parts of the Narrative”: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwIJzYM58X0
- Using Narrative Structures: http://narrativestructures.wisc.edu/structures

Week 3: Print

Compose a printed story from your text. It can be bound or unbound; it can be cut and paste from found printed objects or designed on your own in Word or InDesign, then printed. You can even

The aim in this exercise is to investigate about how physical substratum of a text can alter its meaning.

- Chapter 1 of The People of Paper, by Salvador Plascencia.
- Chapter 1 of Woman’s World, by Graham Rawle (pp. 1-23).

Week 4: Hypertext

Remediate your story in hypertext. Although you are welcome to design your website with pretty colors and fonts, please focus on the mechanism of interaction – which words link where, which pathways through the story are open to your reader, which are closed.

Note that this week you should also begin thinking about next week’s exercise: transforming your story into an event unfolding in time. Begin choosing what medium you wish to use (Twitter, SMS, Tumblr, a blog), set it up and begin marking out a schedule for this work.

- Michael Joyce, afternoon: a story.
- For more examples, browse any of the works in the Eastgate Reading Room: http://www.eastgate.com/ReadingRoom.html

Week 5: Unfolding in Time

Produce your story as an event that unfolds over time on the web. The story’s unfolding needn’t be finished by class but should be significantly underway. If you’re stuck, imagine yourself as staging a play for the internet. What would be your theatre? Who would be your actors? How would people watch it?
Week 6: Audio

Produce your story entirely in audio. You needn’t (and in fact shouldn’t) just read your initial text story, rather, think of this as a radio play. What kind of sound effects do you need, if any? What kind of background noises? Will you only speak the dialogue, or will you need to narrate some of the description?


Week 7: Visual

Produce your story entirely in visual material. You may interpret “visual material” however you like – photographs, art, colors, and so on. You can even sculpt your story if you’d like. Because we want to focus on the narrative potential of visual material, whatever you use should be silent and without text.

- Bayeux Tapestry.
- A Trip to the Moon (1902). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JDaOOw0MEE
- The Great Train Robbery (1903). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oTdpkI6E0Y

Week 8: Visit to the Duke immersive Virtual Environment (DiVE)

Week 9: Game

Storyboard and/or prototype your story into an interactive game. Who are the players? How do they win (or lose)? What medium would it be played in (board game, video game, interactive fiction)?
• “Parasite.” http://aliendovecote.com/uploads/twine/parasite.html#b
• For more examples of interactive fiction, browse the iFiction site: For more examples, browse any of the works in the Eastgate Reading Room: http://www.eastgate.com/ReadingRoom.html
• Browse this list of board games that create narrative tension: http://boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/11417/games-that-create-narrative-tension
• Oregon Trail, on Virtual Apple 2: http://www.virtualapple.org/oregontraildisk.html
• Resources: Twine: http://aliendovecote.com/?page_id=4047

Week 10: Workshop Day

Week 11: Augmented Reality

Storyboard and/or prototype your narrative as an augmented reality experience – that is, a narrative that can be read, experienced or played within a particular space. Where would your narrative be played? By whom? What are the mechanisms of interaction and experience (i.e., the tools and technologies you’re using)?

  o http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FsemGrYvYs
• Kate Armstrong, Ping (2003). http://vimeo.com/28567062
• Explore McGonigal’s other games: http://janemcgonigal.com/play-me/

Week 12: Workshop Day

Week 13: Final Projects