

DIG 220: Electronic Literature (Fall 2017)

Love letters written by a computer. A poem thirteen billion stanzas long. A love story between printed pages and a computer screen, played out in the space between the two. An ocean buoy tweeting mash-ups of *Moby Dick*. Welcome to the weird world of electronic literature—digitally born poetic, narrative, and aesthetic works read on computers, tablets, and phones. Experimental, evocative, and sometimes simply puzzling, electronic literature challenges our assumptions about reading, writing, authorship, and meaning. Yet e-lit, as it is often called, has also profoundly influenced mainstream culture. Literature, film, comics, apps, and video games have all learned lessons from electronic literature. This course will trace the rise of electronic literature and explore both historical and contemporary works of e-lit. Along the way we'll explore the expressive power of new media—the way digital media enables and shapes different modes of creative and cultural expression.

Enduring Concepts

I aspire for students to recall some enduring concepts long after DIG 220 has wrapped up:

- All media forms possess unique affordances which structure, shape, and limit what can be done in that form
- Digital 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

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of DIG 220, students will be able to:

- *Analyze* electronic literature through close reading and procedural literacy
- *Connect* avant-garde aesthetics to mainstream popular culture
- *Engage* in intellectually valuable discussions about creative expression and technology
- *Evaluate* how conventional literary and aesthetic categories apply to new media environments
- *Create* original multimodal work that takes advantage of the unique aesthetic and literary affordances of digital environments

Reading and Other Course Material

There is one book to purchase for DIG 220 from the college bookstore:

- Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse, [*Between Page and Screen*](#) (2012)

In addition, there are several games and apps to purchase, download, or borrow for the class, including:

- Aaron Reed and Jacob Garbe, [The Ice-Bound Concordance](#) (2014)
- Sam Barlow, [Her Story](#) (2015)
- Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro, [Pry](#) (2015)
- Amaranth Borsuk, Kate Durbin, and Ian Hatcher, [Abra: a living text](#) (2017)

Work

There are five major assignments over the course of the semester:

1. Weekly blogging
2. A Tracery combinatory project (Project 1)
3. A Let's Play-style video (Project 2)
4. An entry for the Electronic Literature Directory (Project 3)
5. Final Port project (Project 4)

In addition to these five tasks, this class places a high premium on engagement. It is essential that everyone has carefully considered the day's material, attends class, and participates. I also expect students to bring the day's materials to class, marked up with notes and annotations. Missing class outside of excused absences will lower your final grade. Religious observation, medical emergencies, or college-sanctioned commitments count as excused absences.

Grading Specifications

Your grade in DIG 220 corresponds to your success in meeting the course's five learning objectives. Individual assignments are evaluated on a pass or fail basis. This style of grading is called specifications grading. You can read more about it on [Inside Higher Ed](#). Certain elements of this method were also inspired by Professor Jason [Mittell's implementation](#) of specifications grading at Middlebury College and conversations with Professor Churchill here at Davidson.

In general, the more learning objectives you meet, the higher your grade.

All students who pass DIG 220 (indicated with a C grade) will be able to:

- Analyze electronic literature through close reading and procedural literacy
- Evaluate how conventional literary and aesthetic categories apply to new media environments

All students who achieve a higher degree of mastery (indicated by a B grade) will be able to achieve the above plus:

- Connect avant-garde aesthetics to mainstream popular culture
- Engage in intellectually valuable discussions about creative expression and technology

All students who achieve the highest degree of mastery (indicated by an A grade) will be able to achieve all of the above plus:

- Create original multimodal work that takes advantage of the unique aesthetic and literary affordances of digital environments

Grade Bundles

Individual assignments for DIG 220 do not receive a letter grade. Instead, each assignment will either be considered Unsatisfactory or Satisfactory. That's it. Your work either meets the stated specifications or it doesn't. Don't think of Satisfactory as merely passing the assignment (like a C grade). Satisfactory means you have succeeded in the assignment and demonstrated a firm understanding of the material and a solid execution of the project. Major projects have one level above Satisfactory, called Sophisticated. Sophisticated work demonstrates an excellent grasp of the material combined with originality and a superb sense of style and argument.

Of course, I do have to assign a final grade that represents the quantity and quality of your work. Final grades consist of "bundles" of your work for the class.

The C Bundle

Students who complete the following will pass the course with a C:

- Actively attend all course meetings, with up to 5 absences, per the attendance policy
- Complete at least 5 blog posts at a Satisfactory level
- Complete at least 3 projects at a Satisfactory level

B Bundle

Students who complete the following will pass the course with a B:

- Actively attend all course meetings, with up to 3 absences, per the attendance policy
- Complete at least 6 blog posts at a Satisfactory level
- Complete at least 2 projects at a Satisfactory level and 1 project at a Sophisticated level

A Bundle

Students who complete the following will pass the course with an A:

- Actively attend all course meetings, with up to two absences, per the attendance policy
- Complete at least 7 blog posts at a Satisfactory level
- Complete an 8th reflective blog post
- Complete all four projects, including at least two projects at the Sophisticated level (and the remaining at the Satisfactory level)

Pluses and minuses (A-, B+, etc.) will be used when your work falls in between bundles. For example, if you fall just short of the A Bundle specifications by missing a blog post, you'd receive an A-.

Tokens

Over the course of the semester you can earn up to 3 virtual tokens. Each token can be exchanged for one of the following:

- Strike an absence from your attendance record
- Hand in a project up to 72 hours late
- Count an uncompleted or Unsatisfactory blog post as Satisfactory
- Revise and resubmit an Unsatisfactory project in order to fulfill Satisfactory expectations (due 1 week after project is returned)
- Revise and resubmit a Satisfactory project in order to fulfill Sophisticated expectations (due 1 week after project is returned)

Earning Tokens

To earn a virtual token you must contribute what's called a "Sightings" post to the class blog. A sighting post identifies some phenomenon related to our class material "in the wild"—online elsewhere, in the news or media, in pop culture, or offline. The sighting post then explicitly connects the phenomenon to theories and perspectives we've encountered in class.

To count as a token, each sighting post must meet the following criteria:

- Include a descriptive title and posted under the "Sightings" category
- At least 300 words in length
- Include at least one illustrative piece of media (an image, a GIF, an embedded video, audio, etc.). Illustrative means that the media is directly related to the phenomenon you've sighted. The media must be fully sourced.
- Connect the sighting to the class material, using the appropriate terminology and concepts.
- Written in a clear manner, less formal than a conventional paper but still serious and rooted in evidentiary-based reasoning
- Contain no more than 3 grammatical or spelling errors
- Practice standard procedures for writing online, including hotlinking text (instead of dropping in unlinked URLs in the body of your post), embedding videos properly, etc.

Inclusive learning

I am committed to the principle of inclusive learning. This means that our classroom, our virtual spaces, our practices, and our interactions be as inclusive as possible. Mutual respect, civility, and the ability to listen and observe others carefully are crucial to inclusive learning.

For assistance through the Office of Academic Access and Disability Resources contact Mallory Hall at [mahall@davidson.edu](mailto:mahall@ davidson.edu). The Dean of Students' office will forward any necessary information to me. Then you and I can work out the details of any accommodations needed for this course.

Academic Integrity

Students at Davidson College abide by an Honor Code. 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.

Classroom Courtesy

While this course embraces the digital world it also recognizes that digital tools and environments complicate personal interactions. Studies have shown that students who use laptops in class often receive lower grades than those who don't. Even more worrisome are studies that show laptop users distract students around them. I permit laptops and tablets in class, but only when used for classroom activities, such as note-taking or class readings. Occasionally I may ask students to turn off all digital devices.

Messaging or other cell phone use is unacceptable. Any student whose phone rings during class or who texts in class will be responsible for kicking off the next class day's discussion.

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

Calendar

The Bookish

What, really, are books? What's the relationship between books and technology? How does art and literature in digital forms challenge the conventions of print?

Monday, August 21 (Week 1)

- The Great American Eclipse!
- Introduction to the syllabus, schedule, and enduring concepts

Wednesday, August 23

- Matthew Kirschenbaum, [“Bookscapes”](#) (2008)
- Video introduction to [the affordances of books](#) (2015)
- **Meet in the Rare Book Room**

Monday, August 28 (Week 2)

- Janet Murray, [chapter 3](#) from *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997)
- Aaron Reed and Jacob Garbe, [The Ice-Bound Concordance](#) (2014)
- Blog (Round 1): Group A

Wednesday, August 30

- *Ice-Bound*
- Marie-Laure Ryan, “The Many Forms of Interactivity” from *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (2015)
- Tracery Combinatory Project handed out
- Blog (Round 1): Group B

The Random

What's the history of randomness in art and literature? How does randomness upset our notions of originality and authorship?

Monday, September 4 (Week 3)

- Video introduction to [randomness in the arts and sciences](#) (2015)
- William S. Burroughs, “The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin” from *The New Media Reader* (2003)

- Chris Funkhouser, “First Generation Poetry Generators” from *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of the Digital Arts* (2012)
- Video introduction to the [Strachey Love Letter Generator](#) (2015)
- [One](#) and [two](#) implementations of the love letter generator
- Video on ways of [reading the Strachey Love Letter Generator](#) (2015)
- Blog (Round 1): Group C

Wednesday, September 6

- Josh Dzieza, [“The Strange World of Computer-Generated Novels”](#) from The Verge (2014)
- Blog (Round 2): Group A

The Automatic

What happens when literature is like a film, unspooling in front of us, beyond our control?

Monday, September 11 (Week 4)

- Peter Rabinowitz, Chapter 1 (pages 15-46) of *Before Reading* (1987)
- Video introduction to [the automatic](#) (2015)
- Hannah Higgins, “An Introduction to Alison Knowles’s *The House of Dust*” from *Mainframe Experimentalism* (2012)
- Two emulations of “House of Dust”: (1) [Zach Whalen’s](#) and (2) [Nick Montfort’s](#)
- Blog (Round 2): Group B

Wednesday, September 13

- Rob Dubbin, [“The Rise of Twitter Bots”](#) from *The New Yorker* (2013)
- Harry Giles, [“What Can Poets Do About Robots?”](#) (2015)
- Lainna Fader, [“12 Weird, Excellent Twitter Bots Chosen by Twitter’s Best Bot-Makers”](#) from *New York* (2015)
- Assortment of bots
- Blog (Round 2): Group C
- **Tracery Combinatory Project due on Friday, September 15**

Monday, September 18 (Week 5)

- Brian Kim Stefans, [Star Wars, one letter at a time](#) (2005)
- Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries, [Dakota](#) (2002)
- Jessica Pressman, “Speed Reading” from *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (2014)
- Let’s Play Project handed out
- Blog (Round 3): Group A

Wednesday, September 20

- Amaranth Borsuk, Kate Durbin, and Ian Hatcher, [Abra: a living text](#) (2017)
- Blog (Round 3): Group B

The Uncanny

How are our media haunted?

Monday, September 25 (Week 6)

- Video Introduction to [the Uncanny](#) (2015)
- Video on [Freud and the Uncanny](#) (2015)
- Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919)
- Andy Campbell, [Glimmer](#) (2009)
- Andy Campbell, [The Flat](#) (2006)
- Blog (Round 3): Group C

Wednesday, September 27

- *The House Abandon* (available as the free demo in [Stories Untold](#) on Steam)
- Shelley and Pamela Jackson, [the doll games](#) (2001)
- Blog (Round 4): Group A

Monday, October 2 (Week 7)

- Alan Resnick, [“This House Has People in It”](#) (2016)
- Blog (Round 4): Group B

The Sublime

Literature has traditionally been bound in books, but what happens when digital forms enable works too massive, too awesome to behold?

Wednesday, October 4

- Video Introduction to [the Sublime](#) (2015)
- Video on the [technological sublime](#) (2015)
- Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland, [Sea and Spar Between](#) (2012)
- Mark Sample, [House of Leaves of Grass](#) (2013)
- Blog (Round 4): Group C
- **Let's Play Project due on Thursday, October 5**

Monday, October 9 (Week 8)

- Fall Break – No Class

The Database

The database is a special category of the technological sublime, allowing writers and artists to create data-based stories

Wednesday, October 11

- Electronic Literature Directory project handed out
- Lev Manovich, “The Database” from *The Language of New Media* (2001)
- Deena Larsen, [Marble Springs](#) (1993) and [Marble Springs 3.0](#) (2013)
- Jonathan Harris, [The Whale Hunt](#) (2007)
- Blog (Round 5): Group A

Monday, October 16 (Week 9)

- Chris Rodley and Andrew Burrell, “On the Art of Writing with Data” from *The Future of Writing* (2014)
- Donna Leishman, [Front](#) (2015)
- Jonathan Harris and Greg Hochmuth, [Network Effect](#) (2015)
- Blog (Round 5): Group B

The Procedural

What are the procedures for moving through stories?

Wednesday, October 18

- Stuart Campbell, [These Memories Won't Last](#) (2015)
- Alan Bigelow, [How to Rob a Bank](#) (2016)
- Blog (Round 5): Group C

Monday, October 23 (Week 10)

- Carolyn Petit, [“Power to the People: The Text Adventures of Twine”](#) from *GameSpot* (2013)
- Michael Lutz, [My Father's Long, Long Legs](#) (2015) (mouse required, audio too)
- Porpentine and Brenda Neotemie, [Neon Haze](#) (2015)
- Gavin Inglis, [Hana Feels](#) (2015)
- Joyce Hatton, [The Ocean](#) (2014)
- Tom McHenry, [Horse Master](#) (2013)
- Blog (Round 6): Group A

Wednesday, October 25

- Sam Barlow, [Her Story](#) (2015)
- Blog (Round 6): Group B

The Dysfunctional

What's the role of the broken, the glitched, and the ruined in digital narrative?

Monday, October 30 (Week 11)

- Video introduction to [dysfunctionality](#) (2015)
- Jon Bois, [17776](#) (2017)
- Blog (Round 6): Group C

Wednesday, November 1

- JR Carpenter, [The Gathering Cloud](#) (2017)
- Ansh Patel, [Perfect World](#) (2015)
- Blog (Round 7): Group A

The Embodied

Gestures, touch, movement—how do our bodies contribute to digital narrative?

Monday, November 6 (Week 12)

- **Electronic Literature Directory project due**

Wednesday, November 8

- Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse, *Between Page and Screen* (2012)
- Blog (Round 7): Group B

Monday, November 13 (Week 13)

- Danny Cannizzaro and Samantha Gorman, *Pry* (2014)
- Blog (Round 7): Group C

Wednesday, November 15

- *Pry*

The Port

What does it mean to translate a work of digital literature from one form to another? What changes? What remains? What's lost?

Monday, November 20 – Wednesday, November 22 (Week 14)

No class

Monday, November 27 (Week 15)

- Workshopping Final Project

Wednesday, November 29

- Workshopping Final Project

Monday, December 4 (Week 16)

- Work on Final Projects

Wednesday, December 6

- Present Final Projects at Digital Project Showcase