# Botanicals: An E-Literary Approach to Cultivating Pedagogical Platforms

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In this in-progress research-creative project, I explore the role of "teacher" as creative maker, designer, and crafter of epistemological experiences. Building on the work of artist-scholar-teachers such as Lynda Barry (2014, 2019), Jody Shipka (2011), Kate Hanzalik (2021), and Hanzalik and Virgintino (2019), I investigate what it means to be a digital designer who cultivates aesthetic learning experiences for my students, with all the wonder and uncertainty and risk this process entails.

Specifically, I develop an interactive webcomic that constructs an online gallery for an assignment in an asynchronous graduate-level professional writing course. By breaking away from the temporal logics of a course content management system, a webcomic designed from scratch instead allows instructors to use the logics of the "infinite canvas" (McCloud, 2009) to craft spaces that foster exploration according to a student's own pace, sequence, and learning goals. Inspired by interactive webcomics such as Emily Carroll's "Margot's Room" (2011) and "Grave of the Lizard Queen" (2013), "Botanicals: An Interactive Pedagogical Webcomic" is built from HTML/CSS with embedded hyperlinked illustrations and other media. Designed around the visual metaphors of a greenhouse and a garden path, the comic offers several interwoven paths. Viewers might wander through as students in pursuit of a pedagogical experience, or they might situate themselves as scholarly readers and fellow designer-teachers through "framed reflections" on the pedagogical-aesthetic decisions informing the webcomic's design process.

This project emerges from my ongoing work as digital scholarship designer and independent comics creator, in an attempt to bring this critical-creative practice into closer conversation with my teaching practices. Recent global shifts to online learning have offered increased opportunities to design media for students in online environments, via a range of teaching modalities. Responding to these exigencies, I strive to create pedagogical webcomics that are beautiful, engaging, and aesthetically pleasing for their own sake, as works (like Lynda Barry's *Syllabus* [2014] and *Making Comics* [2019]) at the intersections of "pedagogical delivery tool" and "aesthetic object." These interactive comics facilitate pedagogical user experiences (Borgman and McArdle, 2019) that invite students into inventive exploration, that will help them design their own learning experiences, and that encourage instructor-designers to bring their critical making imaginations to bear upon teaching as a way of creating knowledge together with students through interactive design.

As instructor and designer, I reflect on how the role of asynchronous course designer overlaps with that of webcomic designer, and on the possibilities these connections suggest toward designing pedagogical materials for online asynchronous course modalities. Overall, I ask what it means to approach teaching as a process of making and designing for and with my students, and offer this critically theorized webcomic as one possible answer to that question.

## TASK: Using HTML and CSS as your foundation, cultivate a digital garden that suggests a story through images, text, audio, video, and spatial layout.

### FRAMEWORK
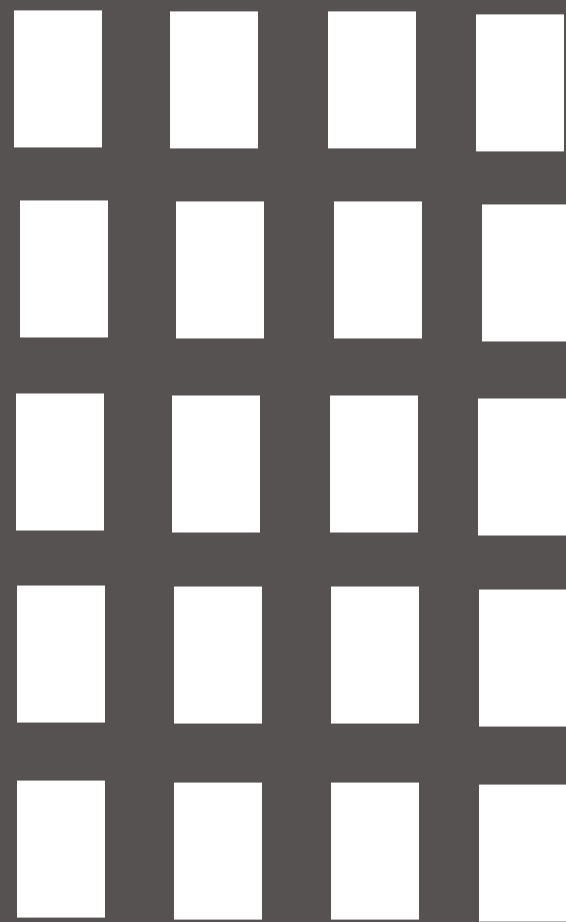
This section presents the informing thought behind the project's design. In a course context, it is replaced by the syllabus, policies, and other language required to establish shared working expectations.
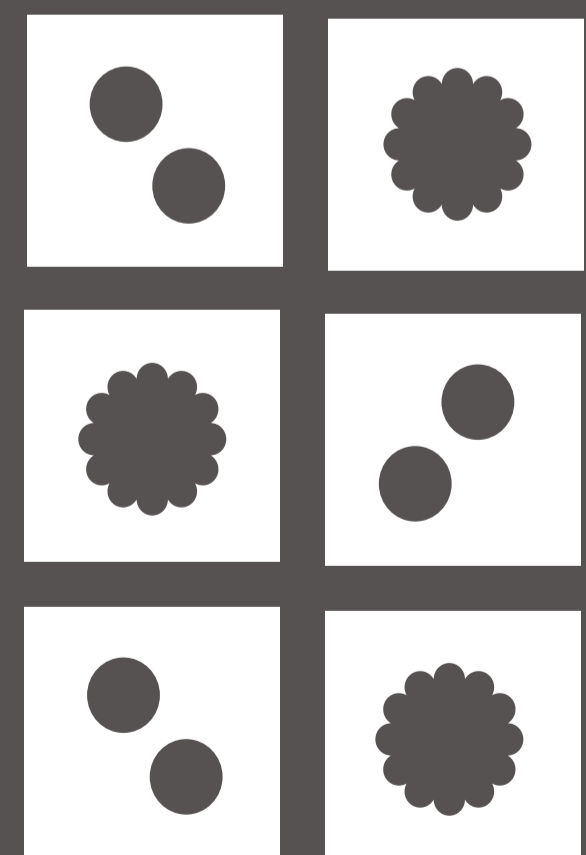
### INSTRUCTIONS

This section presents the assignment prompt detailing the primary task and learning objectives, along with rubrics, further readings, and any other information needed to complete the assignment.

### RESOURCES
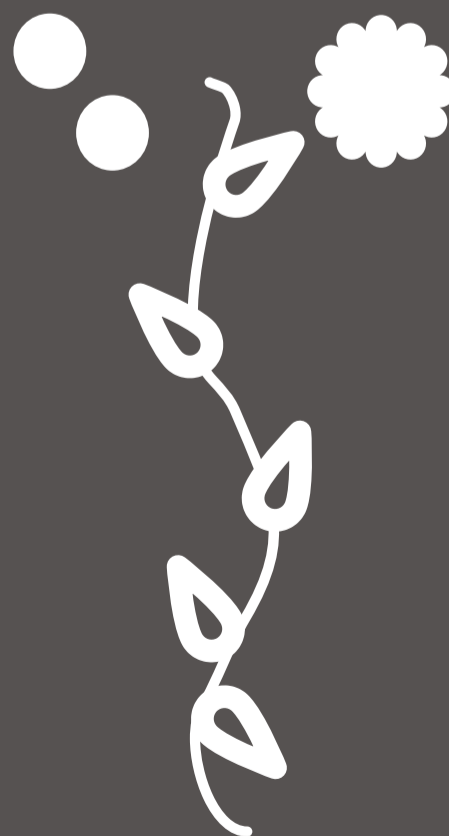
This section provides media resources (image, audio, video, text, and code) students may use to complete the assignment, as well as links to example projects and further resources they might explore.

### GARDENS

This section features student work and responses to the prompt; they upload their digital garden as a web project file to the course server via SFTP, and the instructor maintains the overall gallery space.