

Writing For Interactive Games and Media

RTF 344M | AET 337
08655 | 19750

*“The last collaborator is your audience ... when the audience comes in,
it changes the temperature of what you've written.”*
- Stephen Sondheim

Fall 2017
CMA 5.176
MW 5:30 - 7 pm

Instructor	Susan O'Connor
Email	susanoconnor@utexas.edu
Office location	CMA 6.166
Office hours	M 4 - 5:30pm

I will hold office hours in CMA 6.166 on Mondays from 4 - 5:30pm. If you wish to speak with me privately, or outside of my normal office hours, I would be happy to accommodate you. We can always set up a virtual meeting over Skype/Google Hangouts. Feel free to approach me at the end of class to set up an appointment.

Course Description

Interactive storytelling is a form of dramatic writing, just like theater or television. What makes the medium unique is that the author does not control the story; the audience does. Creatives have only just begun to explore the storytelling possibilities of this field. In this class, we will study the fundamentals of dramatic writing, and then learn how to adapt those rules for this new medium. This is a period of invention and exploration for storytellers working in the realms of video games, digital media, VR, and augmented reality, as well as television, film and theater. Your final deliverable in this course - a Narrative Design Document - will serve as a writing sample for your portfolio.

Instructor Bio

Franchises in Susan O'Connor's portfolio have sold over 30 million copies and generated over half a billion dollars in sales. Now, the award-winning writer (*BioShock*, *Far Cry 2*, *Tomb Raider*, *Star Wars 1313*) is teaching a course at UT Austin on interactive storytelling.

What will I learn?

The digital medium is new, but the human audience is not. People have been crafting narratives for thousands of years. We are hardwired for story. In this class, we will study the fundamentals of dramatic writing, and then learn how to adapt those rules for this new medium.

In the 20s and 30s, writers found an entirely new way to tell stories, using film. Writers today are in the midst of similar period of invention and exploration in the world of digital media, VR, and augmented reality. What does it mean, to share the story with the audience? What new possibilities does this create for us? What can we do here, as storytellers, that we can't do anywhere else? In this class, we will ask new questions, make new discoveries, and forge a path forward.

Over the course of the semester, you will develop strengths in the following areas:

- Creative writing and problem-solving skills
- Communication skills, both written and verbal
- Critical thinking
- Collaborative learning; the ability to give (and receive) constructive feedback
- Design thinking skills, including emotional intelligence and empathy
- Creative flexibility - the ability to generate and revise content under tight deadlines

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Transform an existing story into an interactive experience
- Create a narrative design for your project
- Develop a full cast of characters, including player avatars and non-player characters (NPCs)
- Craft a story world
- Write an interactive script
- Craft and deliver a story pitch

How will I learn?

The course is all about interactive storytelling, so the class will be interactive as well. Lectures will be kept to a minimum. We will explore most topics through group discussions, small-group work, media analysis and in-class development of your writing work.

Students will spend the semester adapting a classic play or piece of literature into a Narrative Design Doc (NDD) that transforms the original story into an interactive experience. In the same way that architects draw up blueprints before building a home, studios develop design documents before going into production. This NDD can serve as the foundation for a future project.

You may be wondering: why are we adapting someone else's story? Why aren't we creating a story of our own?

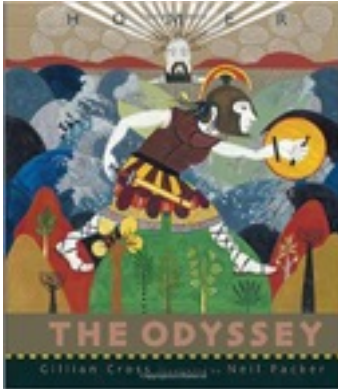
For two reasons:

1. It will establish good creative habits. When interactive writers join a development team, they often discover that the team has already created a story for the project. Writers who have the ability to develop other people's ideas are highly valuable.
2. It will deepen your understanding of the underlying structure that makes a great story work. (We will be adapting and modifying that structure in your NDD.)

Students will present their projects in-class on a rolling basis throughout the semester. This will allow you to learn from each others' works-in-progress, and practice your ability to collaborate and problem-solve together.

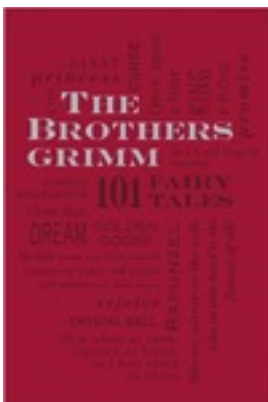
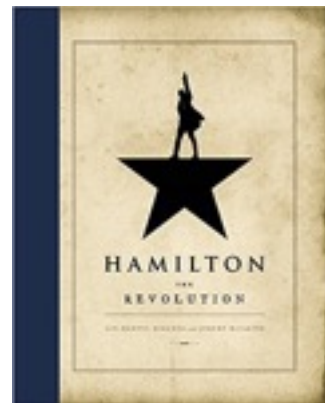
Source Material For Your Adaptation

Select one of the following texts for your project. Find one that connects with you on an emotional level, because you will be spending a lot of time with it over the course of the semester.



“Odysseus faces storm and shipwreck, a terrifying man-eating Cyclops, the alluring but deadly Sirens, and the fury of the sea-god Poseidon as he makes his ten-year journey home from the Trojan War. While Odysseus struggles to make it home, his wife, Penelope, fights a different kind of battle as her palace is invaded by forceful, greedy men who tell her that Odysseus is dead and she must choose a new husband. Will Odysseus reach her in time?”

“Lin-Manuel Miranda's groundbreaking musical Hamilton is as revolutionary as its subject, the poor kid from the Caribbean who fought the British, defended the Constitution, and helped to found the United States. Fusing hip-hop, pop, R&B, and the best traditions of theater, this once-in-a-generation show broadens the sound of Broadway, reveals the storytelling power of rap, and claims our country's origins for a diverse new generation.”



“They are the stories of characters we’ve known since childhood: Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella. But the works originally collected by the Brothers Grimm in the early 1800s are not necessarily the versions told before bedtime. They’re darker and often don’t end very happily--but they're often far more interesting.”

Prerequisites for this course

There are no prerequisites for this course, but bringing an inquisitive approach and reflective attitude to what you will learn will allow you to reap maximum benefits. There is a strong writing component to this course. If you feel you need help with writing skills, use the many resources on campus to help you. (More information on those resources can be found at the end of this syllabus.)

How to Succeed in this Course

Be open to both old and new ideas.

In this class, we are bringing the ancient art of storytelling to a new medium. Our job is to learn what's come before, while at the same time inventing new ways to move forward.

Play well with others.

Interactive storytellers don't work alone — you always have teammates. The key to your success in this (or any) field will be the ability to collaborate effectively.

Take risks.

It is the best way to learn. We are entering uncharted territory, so go for it.

Course Requirements

Class materials, supplemental resources, grades, and announcements will be posted on the course's Canvas site: <http://canvas.utexas.edu/>

Classroom Expectations

Class participation

Your level of participation in class discussions and in brainstorm/critique sessions will be part of your overall grade. Bring your whole self to class. You will be learning from each other as much as you will be learning from me.

Class courtesy

Turn off the phones. Refrain from texting. Most of the time, you won't need your laptops open, either. I need you for a few hours a week. I will be completely present; I expect you to be as well. This class follows the same rules as Alamo Drafthouse: people on their phone will receive one warning, and then be ejected from the theater without a refund.

Reading/Gameplay assignments

There will be reading and gaming assignments outside of class. However, you are expected to come to class with your written assignments prepared for discussion.

Writing/Presentation

Deadlines in the working world are serious, so deadlines in this class are as well.

A word on plagiarism: don't do it. Not in this class. Not ever. See "Academic Integrity" below for more.

Do NOT submit homework with spelling and grammar errors. Spellcheck is a thing that exists. Use this class to strengthen your ability to express your ideas clearly. It is a skill that will help you for the rest of your days.

Assignments

Through your deliverables, class presentations, homework assignments, and class/team participation, we will be able to track your learning progression in this course.

The class workload is designed to mimic the workload of an actual project — these deliverables are similar to those you would be creating in a studio.

The deliverables include:

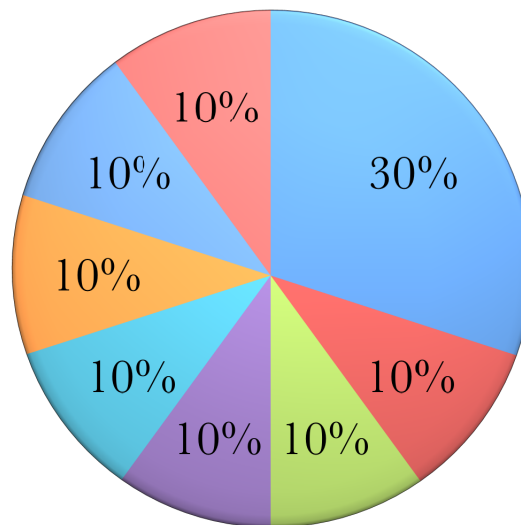
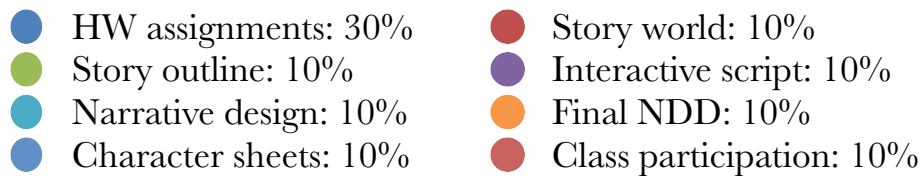
1. Story outline — a high-level look at how you will structure your adaptation
2. Narrative design — how you will balance interactivity with storytelling
3. Character sheets - how you will create the user's avatar, as well as NPCs
4. Story world - how you will use the environment to tell the story
5. Interactive script (samples) - how you will bring the audience onto the virtual stage

Students will combine all of these deliverables into a final Narrative Design Doc (NDD) at the end of the semester. See Canvas for more details.

Grading for this Course

Deliverables will be worth 10 points each. Homework assignments - in total - will be worth 30 points. Class participation will be worth an additional 10 points.

Here is a pie chart that over-explains our grading system.



Course Schedule

We will dedicate roughly three weeks to each of the five components of your NDD: story outline, narrative design, character sheets, story-world development, and interactive script.

See Canvas for more details.

Policies and Resources

Classroom Policies

Grading policies

Grading policies will be posted to Canvas.

Policy on late work

Workshops depend on having work to critique. Therefore, most of a student's grade will derive from timely, thoughtful completion of assignments. Since students will also be expected to review each other's work and provide feedback in a workshop setting, class participation will be an important component of the final grade.

Late work will be handled on a case-by-case basis. Generally, except in the case of an excused absence, work submitted after an assigned deadline will not be eligible for full credit. Please communicate with me if you are having problems keeping to the schedule. It is better to talk through problems than ignore them.

Policy on absences

Given the range of techniques covered during the course, attendance at every class will be critical. Later segments will depend heavily on mastery of earlier segments.

If we are doing group work, and you are absent on the day that your group meets, you are responsible for providing your team with the necessary information to compensate for your absence. It is crucial to keep in communication with your group; you are responsible for letting both us and your team know if you cannot make it to a class.

Excused Absence: the only absences that will be considered excused are for religious holidays or extenuating circumstances due to an emergency. If you plan to miss class due to observance of a religious holiday, please let us know at least two weeks in advance. You will not be penalized for this absence, although you will still be responsible for any work you will miss on that day if applicable. Check with us for details or arrangements.

If you have to be absent, use your resources wisely. Ask your group and other classmates to get a run-down and notes on any lessons you miss. If you find there are topics that we covered while you were gone that raise questions, you may come by during office hours or schedule a meeting to discuss. Email specific questions you have in advance so that we can make the most of our time. "What did I miss?" is not specific enough.

University Policies

Religious Holy Days

By UT Austin policy, you must notify me of your pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, I will give you an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

Q Drop Policy

If you want to drop a class after the 12th class day, you'll need to execute a Q drop before the Q-drop deadline, which typically occurs near the middle of the semester. Under Texas law, you are only allowed six Q drops while you are in college at any public Texas institution. For more information, see: <http://ugs.utexas.edu/vick/academic/adddrop/qdrop>

Student Accommodations

Students with a documented disability may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 512-471-6259 (voice) or 1-866-329-3986 (video phone). <http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/about/>

- Please request a meeting as soon as possible to discuss any accommodations
- Please notify me as soon as possible if the material being presented in class is not accessible
- Please notify me if any of the physical space is difficult for you]

Academic Integrity

Each student in the course is expected to abide by the University of Texas Honor Code:

“As a student of The University of Texas at Austin, I shall abide by the core values of the University and uphold academic integrity.”

This means that work you produce on assignments, tests and exams is all your own work, unless it is assigned as group work. I will make it clear for each test, exam or assignment whether collaboration is encouraged or not.

Always cite your sources. If you use words or ideas that are not your own (or that you have used in previous class), you must make that clear otherwise you will be guilty of plagiarism and subject to academic disciplinary action, including failure of the course.

You are responsible for understanding UT's Academic Honesty Policy, which can be found at the following web address: <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/>

University Resources for Students

The university has numerous resources for students to provide assistance and support for your learning, use these to help you succeed in your class.

The Moody Writing Support Program

Even the best writers sometimes struggle when learning the unique language of communication professionals. Don't panic. We can help. The Moody College Writing Support Program, located in BMC 3.322, offers one-on-one assistance without charge to undergraduates seeking to improve their professional writing in all fields of communication.

You may come in to brainstorm story ideas, to work on problems or to polish specific skills. Return as often as you like, knowing that we don't charge a penny. Everyone working for the Moody Writing Support Program embraces the mission of giving students a boost in skills and the encouragement to succeed.

Students may guarantee their time by booking half-hour appointments on our website for assistance during all stages of the writing process. Writing coaches also will take drop-ins if they are not working with appointments.

==> This class has its own, dedicated RTF writing coach - [Seth Dumas](#). <==

For more information, visit <https://moody.utexas.edu/students/undergraduate/moody-writing-support-program>

The Sanger Learning Center

Did you know that more than one-third of UT undergraduate students use the Sanger Learning Center each year to improve their academic performance? All students are welcome to take advantage of Sanger Center's classes and workshops, private learning specialist appointments, peer academic coaching, and tutoring for more than 70 courses in 15 different subject areas. For more information, please visit <http://ugs.utexas.edu/slc> or call 512-471-3614 (JES A332).

The University Writing Center

The University Writing Center offers free, individualized, expert help with writing for any UT student, by appointment or on a drop-in basis. Consultants help students develop strategies to improve their writing. The assistance we provide is intended to foster students' resourcefulness and self-reliance. <http://uwc.utexas.edu/>

Counseling and Mental Health Services

Taking care of your general well-being is an important step in being a successful student. If stress, test anxiety, racing thoughts, feeling unmotivated or anything else is getting in your way, there are options available for support.

For *immediate* support:

- Visit/Call the Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC): M-F 8-5p | SSB, 5th floor
| [512-471-3515](tel:512-471-3515) | cmhc.utexas.edu
- CMHC Crisis Line: 24/7 | [512.471.2255](tel:512.471.2255) | cmhc.utexas.edu/24hourcounseling.html

CARE Counselor in the Moody College of Communication is: Abby Simpson, LCSW

- |CMA 4.134 | [512-471-7642](tel:512-471-7642) (Please *leave a message* if she is unavailable)

FREE Services at CMHC:

- Brief assessments and referral services
- Mental health & wellness articles - cmhc.utexas.edu/commonconcerns.html
- MindBody Lab - cmhc.utexas.edu/mindbodylab.html
- Classes, workshops, & groups - cmhc.utexas.edu/groups.html

Student Emergency Services

<http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/>

ITS

Need help with technology? <http://www.utexas.edu/its/>

Libraries

Need help searching for information? <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/>

Canvas

Canvas help is available 24/7 at <https://utexas.instructure.com/courses/633028/pages/student-tutorials>

Important Safety Information

BCAL

If you have concerns about the safety or behavior of fellow students, TAs or Professors, call BCAL (the Behavior Concerns Advice Line): 512-232-5050. Your call can be anonymous. If something doesn't feel right – it probably isn't. Trust your instincts and share your concerns.

Evacuation Information

The following recommendations regarding emergency evacuation from the Office of Campus Safety and Security, 512-471-5767, <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/>

Occupants of buildings on The University of Texas at Austin campus are required to evacuate buildings when an alarm or alert is activated. Alarm activation or announcement requires exiting and assembling outside, unless told otherwise by an official representative.

- Familiarize yourself with all exit doors of each classroom and building you may occupy. Remember that the nearest exit door may not be the one you used when entering the building.
- Students requiring assistance in evacuation shall inform their instructor in writing during the first week of class.
- In the event of an evacuation, follow the instruction of faculty or class instructors. Do not re-enter a building unless given instructions by the following: Austin Fire Department, The University of Texas at Austin Police Department, or Fire Prevention Services office.
- Link to information regarding emergency evacuation routes and emergency procedures can be found at: www.utexas.edu/emergency