



Video Game Storytelling ENGL 2090-070

Summer Semester 2025
Fulfills HF Gen Ed Requirement

Instructor: Clay Grubbs

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Office Hours: By appointment.

Our class meets on **Mondays and Wednesdays** from **5:00-8:00 PM** at the Sandy Center in room **SANDY 113**.

Course Description

Explores the interplay between **game** and **story** in video game media. Students will play and analyze video games, specifically those with strong narratives, and engage with broader literary/theoretical issues in video game studies. Texts include video games, films, fiction, and critical/theoretical resources.

This summer course, I'll be taking us from the beginnings of video game narratives, such as text-adventures and interactive fiction, towards contemporary projects, such as 3D puzzlers, walking sims, and souls-likes, to highlight many of the core nuances between gameplay and narrative!

To properly ground our studies, I'll be assigning readings both from contemporary games studies like MDA-GFI, as well as theories on narratology, specifically those of Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette. These readings should help us parse the intersection between game and story, and hopefully reveal the amount of similarities between them.

Course Outcomes and Objectives

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

- Think critically about the structure of gameplay and how it not only informs, but constructs narrative.
- Discuss, write about, and analyze your personal experiences of play and its narrative relevance using specifics from assigned games.
- Use the MDA-GFI framework for game narrative to unpack and closely consider how elements of game design contribute to narrative.
- Describe the nuances between the form and content of narrative as it pertains to games by applying theoretical knowledge.

General Education:

This course meets the Humanities Exploration (HF) requirement. This course addresses the following Essential Learning Outcomes: Critical Thinking, Written Communication, Foundations and Skills for Lifelong Learning.

Course Requirements

This course will be focused on our in-class engagement with material. Students will be expected to come to class each day having played/read/watched the assigned texts for the day, and to actively participate in discussion.

Given the intensive nature of this half-semester course, I will not be taking absence lightly. Students are permitted two missed sessions without penalty; after this, your attendance and participation grade will suffer without a note of some kind.

Outside of discussions, there will be three short papers, written during class sessions without notes, with prompts given a week in advance. Students will be expected to perform analyses of games we've covered in class in response to the given prompts

Missing a class period in which we are scheduled to write a short paper will result in a zero for that paper. If you have an absence note for that day, I will accept an online submission of a slightly longer paper in which you will have to use specific quotations from covered theoretical sources and games to support your argument.

Total grading percentages look as follows:

- Attendance and informed participation – 40%
- Three short papers – 60% (20% each)

In-Class Computer/Device Policy

For the sake of making sure our class discussions are active and attentive, I have a strict no-device policy in place. Given the fact that a majority of our class will be focused on our discussions, I'll permit no room for attention to be diverted towards a personal device.

Computers may NOT be used during class (not even for note-taking). This means no laptops, tablets, cell phones, Kindles, Apple Watches, etc. All devices should be turned off and put away BEFORE class begins – do not make me have to ask.

For the sake of active note-taking, please be sure you bring a notebook and pen or pencil with you each session.

If you have special circumstances that require that you be “on call” for emergencies – including for campus alerts, etc. – email me for individual approval and I'll work with you as best I can.

Required and Recommended Readings

Some alterations to this list might occur during the semester. You are required to play full games, not just demos! Many games go on sale unexpectedly. I also recommend that you add these games to your

*Wishlist on Steam to receive updates if they go on sale. (**The Steam Summer Sale is from 6/26 to 7/10 this year!!**)*

Video Games:

- Loneliness (Browser)
- Atari Adventure (Browser)
- Colossal Cave Adventure (Browser)
- Photopia (Browser)
- The Stanley Parable (Steam)
- Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy (Steam)
- The Witness (Steam)
- Tunic (Steam)
- Anthology of the Killer (Steam/Itch.io)

Films:

- Mulholland Drive (Available for Streaming)

Electronic Readings:

All assigned critical readings will only be available electronically as PDFs. These texts are just as important as the games we will play. Always print out electronic selections, read them well in advance of each session, and mark them up just like you would a regular text. And be sure to bring them to class so we can discuss them properly!

Important note on technical requirements for video games: Computer literacy and basic web navigation skills are expected in this course. It will be your job to follow instructions carefully and put in the effort required to purchase, download, install, and play all assigned games. Although I will provide links and am happy to help with questions about the material itself, I am NOT available as technical support. If you have technical difficulties with any of the assigned games, please re-read all instructions and make sure that the machine you're using meets the required specifications. The computers in Marriott Library's Knowledge Commons should work well. Last I checked, Steam is supported in all campus labs (though if PC gives you problems, use Mac instead). The Engineering CADE Lab is the best campus lab to use if you're having trouble.

Technical support for Steam games is here:

<https://support.steampowered.com/>

For difficulties with Campus computers, the Campus Help Desk is here:

<http://it.utah.edu/services/helpDesk/>

Grading Scale

A 94-100, **A-** 90-93.9, **B+** 87-89.9, **B** 84-86.9, **B-** 80-83.9, **C+** 77-79.9,
C 74-76.9, **C-** 70-73.9, **D+** 67-69.9, **D** 64-66.9, **D-** 60-63.9, **E** 00-59.9

Department Policies

Mutual Respect

Literature, film, and video games help us to imagine the lives of others and to broaden our perspectives. How we talk about them together is part of that process. Our diverse identities and experiences will inform and enhance those discussions. As we tackle sometimes difficult topics, each member of the class is expected to foster a respectful, generous, and supportive classroom environment that makes room for productive difference and reasoned debate.

Incompletes

The English Department offers Incompletes only under extraordinary circumstances.

Course Withdrawals.

See this semester's *Class Schedule* for deadlines and procedures.

Plagiarism Policy

Plagiarism consists of using the work of someone else and passing it off as your own. Even if you plagiarize by accident you will still be held accountable, and the penalty is not pretty! In the age of the Internet it is easy to cheat—and just as easy to get caught cheating. I continue to be astonished (and pained) by discovering that students have stolen their work from Sparknotes, Wikipedia, or other sources. **Don't do it.**

If you are tempted to use AI to help complete your work, **this is not the class for you.** It would miss the point of the class completely. This is not a course oriented around outside research, so I don't want you to depend on outside sources, even if you do cite them properly. I am looking for YOUR OWN engaged analysis of the assigned materials based on YOUR OWN close reading and playing, with the aid of class discussion and assigned readings. You will be graded accordingly.

The English Department's standard sanction for plagiarism is (minimally) a failing grade (E) for the course in question (!!!). See sections II and V of the Student Code for details. If you are having trouble with this course, please contact me! I'm sure we can work something out. **Cheating is not the answer.**

Official Department Statement

It is expected that students adhere to University of Utah policies regarding academic honesty, including but not limited to refraining from cheating, plagiarizing, misrepresenting one's work, and/or inappropriately collaborating. This includes the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools without citation, documentation, or authorization. Students are expected to adhere to the prescribed professional and ethical standards of the profession/discipline for which they are preparing. Any student who engages in academic dishonesty or who violates the professional and ethical standards for their

profession/discipline may be subject to academic sanctions as per the University of Utah's Student Code:

<https://regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-410.php>

University Policies

Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)

The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities.

All written information in this course can be made available in an alternative format with prior notification to the [Center for Disability & Access](#) (CDA). CDA will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations. Prior notice is appreciated. To read the full accommodations policy for the University of Utah, please see Section Q of the [Instruction & Evaluation regulations](#).

In compliance with ADA requirements, some students may need to record course content. Any recordings of course content are for personal use only, should not be shared, and should never be made publicly available. In addition, recordings must be destroyed at the conclusion of the course.

If you will need accommodations in this class, or for more information about what support they provide, contact:

Center for Disability & Access

801-581-5020

disability.utah.edu

Third Floor, Room 350
Student Services Building
201 S 1460 E
Salt Lake City, UT 84112

Safety at the U

The University of Utah values the safety of all campus community members. You will receive important emergency alerts and safety messages regarding campus safety via text message. For more safety information and to view available training resources, including helpful videos, visit safeu.utah.edu.

To report suspicious activity or to request a courtesy escort, contact:

Campus Police & Department of Public Safety

801-585-COPS (801-585-2677)

dps.utah.edu

1735 E. S. Campus Dr.

Salt Lake City, UT 84112

Addressing Sexual Misconduct

Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender (which includes sexual orientation and gender identity/expression) is a civil rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, color, religion, age, status as a person with a disability, veteran's status, or genetic information.

If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you are encouraged to report it to university officials:

Title IX Coordinator & Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action

801-581-8365

oeo.utah.edu

135 Park Building

201 Presidents' Cir.
Salt Lake City, UT 84112

Office of the Dean of Students

801-581-7066
deanofstudents.utah.edu
270 Union Building
200 S. Central Campus Dr.
Salt Lake City, UT 84112

To file a police report, contact:

Campus Police & Department of Public Safety

801-585-COPS (801-585-2677)
dps.utah.edu
1735 E. S. Campus Dr.
Salt Lake City, UT 84112

If you do not feel comfortable reporting to authorities, the U's Victim-Survivor Advocates provide free, confidential, and trauma-informed support services to students, faculty, and staff who have experienced interpersonal violence.

To privately explore options and resources available to you with an advocate, contact:

Center for Campus Wellness

801-581-7776
wellness.utah.edu
350 Student Services Building
201 S. 1460 E.
Salt Lake City, UT 84112

Academic Misconduct

It is expected that students comply with University of Utah policies regarding academic honesty, including but not limited to refraining from cheating, plagiarizing, misrepresenting one's work, and/or inappropriately collaborating. This includes the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools without citation, documentation, or authorization. Students are expected to adhere to the prescribed professional and ethical standards of the profession/discipline for which they are preparing. Any student who engages in academic dishonesty or who violates the professional and ethical standards for their profession/discipline may be subject to academic sanctions as per the University of Utah's Student Code: [Policy 6-410: Student Academic Performance, Academic Conduct, and Professional and Ethical Conduct.](#)

Plagiarism and cheating are serious offenses and may be punished by failure on an individual assignment, and/or failure in the course. Academic misconduct, according to the University of Utah Student Code:

"...Includes, but is not limited to, cheating, misrepresenting one's work, inappropriately collaborating, plagiarism, and fabrication or falsification of information...It also includes facilitating academic misconduct by intentionally helping or attempting to help another to commit an act of academic misconduct."

For details on plagiarism and other important course conduct issues, see the U's [Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities.](#)

Preliminary Course Schedule

This schedule is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.

Week 1:

Monday 6/23:

- Discussion on Mechanics as Metaphor

- Assigned Games: Loneliness, Atari Adventure

Wednesday 6/25: Discussion on Content vs. Form, Fatalistic Interactivity

- Assigned Games: Colossal Cave Adventure, Photopia

Week 2:

Monday 6/30: Discussion on Fatalistic Interactivity, Narrative Triad

- Assigned Games: The Stanley Parable

Wednesday 7/2: Discussion on Narrative Triad, Environment as Story

- Assigned Games: The Stanley Parable, Getting Over It

Week 3:

Monday 7/7: **Paper on Fatalistic Interactivity/Narrative Triad**

- Discussion on Environmental Puzzles
- Assigned Games: The Witness, Tunic

Wednesday 7/9:

- Discussion on Discussion on Quests, Puzzles
- Assigned Games: Tunic

Week 4:

Monday 7/14: Discussion on Environmental Puzzles cont.

- Assigned Games: The Witness, Tunic

Wednesday 7/16: Discussion on Mise-en-Abyme/Self-referentiality

- Assigned Games: Tunic

Week 5:

Monday 7/21: **Paper on Puzzles/Quests/Narrative**

- Discussion on Mystery as Puzzle, Diegesis
- Assigned Films: Mulholland Drive

Wednesday 7/23: Discussion on Mystery as Puzzle, Diegesis cont.

- Assigned Games: Anthology of the Killer

Week 6:

Monday 7/28: Discussion on Reality Effect

- Assigned Games: Anthology of the Killer

Wednesday 7/30: **Final Paper**

- Concluding Discussion

This syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.