

PROTOTYPING TEXTS: INTERPRETATION THROUGH ALTERATION

English 508 | Digital Studies | UVic | Spring 2016 | CRN: 21320 | M 2:30-5:20pm

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Course site: jentery.github.io/508/

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In both theory and practice, this seminar brushes against four popular assumptions about digital humanities: 1) as a service to researchers, the field merely develops digital resources for online discovery and builds computational tools for end-users; it does not interpret texts or meaningfully engage with “pre-digital” traditions in literary and cultural criticism; 2) digital humanities is not concerned with the literary or aesthetic character of texts; it is a techno-solutionist byproduct of instrumentalism and big data; 3) digital humanities practitioners replace cultural perspectives with uncritical computer vision; instead of privileging irony or ambivalence, they use computers to “prove” reductive claims about literature and culture, usually through graphs and totalizing visualizations; and 4) to participate in the field, you must be fluent in computer programming, or at least be willing to treat literature and culture quantitatively; if you are not a programmer, then you are not doing digital humanities.

During our seminar meetings, we will counter these four assumptions by examining, historicizing, and creating “design fictions,” which Bruce Sterling defines as “the deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change.” Design fictions typically have a futurist bent to them. They speculate about bleeding edge technologies and emerging dynamics, or they project whiz-bang worlds seemingly ripped from films such as *Minority Report*. But we'll refrain from much futurism. Instead, we will use technologies to look backwards and prototype versions of texts that facilitate interpretative practice. Inspired by Kari Kraus's conjectural criticism, Fred Moten's second iconicity, Bethany Nowviskie and Johanna Drucker's speculative computing, Karen Barad's notion of diffraction, Jeffrey Schnapp's small data, Anne Balsamo's hermeneutic reverse-engineering, and deformations by Lisa Samuels, Jerome McGann, and Mark Sample, we will conduct “what if” analyses of texts already at hand, in electronic format (e.g., page images in a library's digital collections).

Doing so will involve something peculiar: interpreting our primary sources by altering them. We'll substitute words, change formats, rearrange poems, remediate fictions, juxtapose images, bend texts, and reconstitute book arts. To be sure, such approaches have vexed legacies in the arts and humanities.

Consider cut-ups, constrained writing, story-making machines, exquisite corpses, remixes, tactical media, Fluxkits, or détournement. Today, these avant-garde traditions are ubiquitous in a banal or depoliticized form, the default features of algorithmic culture and social networks. But we will refresh them, with a difference, by integrating our alterations into criticism and prompting questions about the composition of art and history today.

-ISMS and AIMS

Our focus will be texts with charged design elements (experiments with fonts, typefaces, arrangement, simultaneity, synesthesia, space, time, and automation, to name a few) that were published between the 1870s and 1970s. These texts correspond with various “-isms” from the period: Symbolism, Cubism, Nowism, Futurism, Dada, Minimalism, Expressionism, Imagism, Vorticism, Constructivism, Realism, Surrealism, Thingism, Concretism, Verticalism, Plasticism, and more. Early in the seminar, we will survey these -isms, and you will each be asked to research one in particular for a majority of the term. This research will involve bibliography and close reading together with the deliberate alteration of an -ism in order to foreground what made it compelling, or not so compelling, in the first place.

Our aim, then, will not be to “prove” anything about literature and culture. It will not be build tools, reveal networks, learn some code, or share whiz-bang visualizations, either. It will be to design and make texts differently, *to better understand their significance by not only refusing to take them at face value (a hermeneutic impulse) but also prototyping what else they could be (a design impulse)*.

No experience with digital humanities is required for this seminar. Assumed technical competence: you know how to send an email. Please note, too, that this course involves a low-tech approach to digital humanities, with an emphasis on art, design, and aesthetics over computation, networks, distant reading, and big data. You will not be required to do any programming.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

For this seminar, please acquire a high-quality notebook for conducting seminar exercises. You will be asked to periodically circulate this notebook during seminar but also submit it for review and assessment. I also recommend access to a computer. You will probably need to circulate digital materials via a file sharing mechanism (FTP, Google Drive, GitHub, Tumblr) of your choice. (I'll provide options here, in case you're unfamiliar with any.) All readings are online

or will be distributed via a course reader (in PDF) available at jentryteaches.com/noneshall/508/ (see me for ID and password).

FORMAT

This seminar is project-based, meaning you will iteratively develop your own research in response to a series of prompts. You will periodically share this research with me and your peers, present it at the semester's end, and integrate it into a scholarly portfolio of your work.

Each of our seminar meetings will usually involve the following:

Workshop: For up to two hours, we will collectively experiment with a particular technique for altering texts. Between meetings, you will be asked to apply what you learned during these workshops.

Seminar Discussion: For up to an hour, we will chat as a group about the workshop and/or readings. During these discussions, I may decide to listen, without much (if any) intervention in the conversation. I may also decide to briefly lecture about a given topic.

You should arrive to each meeting having read the assigned texts and completed the assigned exercises, all which are listed in the course outline.

ASSIGNMENTS and ASSESSMENT

You will be required to keep entries in a notebook, create your own prototypes of a historical text (as part of the notebook), give a presentation, and compile a portfolio, which will integrate your prototypes into a collection of observations about your selected -ism. These portfolios will treat prototypes as evocative objects for describing your text, reflecting on your work, and projecting toward next steps. They will not act as seminar papers or follow the conventions of academic journal articles. For our purposes during seminar, "prototype" will be synonymous with "alteration" or even "version."

Below is a list of the assignments, together with a description of what is expected for each and how they will be assessed. Please note that the requirements are subject to minor changes as the seminar progresses. If I do make a change to any of the assignments, then I will notify you in writing and well in advance.

The portfolio and presentation are essential for passing the course. Failure to complete these two requirements will result in a failing N grade (calculated as a

0 for your GPA). Please also note: I do not post marks outside my office, and I do not use plagiarism detection software.

Notebook (30%)

Throughout the semester, you will keep a notebook documenting your alterations to an -ism. Consisting of several simple experiments across digital and tactile media, your notebook will be frequently distributed during seminar, and you will be expected to comment on experiments and prototypes by your peers. Your notebook will be assessed holistically, meaning your work will be given one grade (at the semester's end) based on its: (1) consistency, (2) development over time, (3) reflexive character, (4) integration of seminar discussions and workshops, (5) quality (including its combination of critique with creativity), and (6) attention to change. There will be a prompt for each entry in your notebook, and it will be related to a particular workshop, seminar discussion, and reading. The prompt will be circulated at least one week prior to the entry's due date. Entries should be completed before seminar on the day they are due.

Near our sixth meeting of the semester, I will circulate an interim mark for your notebook. My intention for holistically assessing your notebook is not to keep you in the dark about your academic progress. It is to treat a notebook as it should be treated: as a genre that develops and increases in complexity over time. Please note that the tone and style of your notebooks should be less formal than, say, a seminar essay intended for an academic audience. Where applicable, entries should be self-aware and reflexive. In the notebook, please feel free to reference work being conducted by your peers or to spark dialogue with them. Please also feel free to combine your preferred modes of composition: writing, drawing, collage, outlining, etc. In so doing, you'll likely need to create an online folder or repository to share digital files, and then point your peers and me to its URL. In fact, for our purposes during seminar, *your notebook should be considered a composition across digital and tactile media, with source material available offline and on.*

For the notebook, grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

90-100 = A+: Notebooks in this range are incredibly detailed, rife with documentation, and demonstrate new or innovative uses of specific methods or techniques. They respond to seminar discussions, are reflexive, and exhibit a combination of critical thinking, creativity, and awareness of media/materiality.

85-89 = A: Notebooks in this range are incredibly detailed and rife with documentation. They respond to seminar discussions, are reflexive, and exhibit a combination of critical thinking, creativity, and awareness of media/materiality.

80-84 = A-: Notebooks in this range are incredibly detailed and rife with documentation. They respond to seminar discussions and are reflexive.

77-79 = B+: Notebooks in this range are rife with documentation. They respond to seminar discussions and are reflexive.

73-76 = B: Research logs in this range are rife with documentation and respond to seminar discussions.

Portfolio (40%)

Your portfolio should collect all the work you've done during seminar, curate it, and contextualize it with a cover letter (750-1000 words). The portfolio can be digital, tactile, or both, and it can be submitted online, by hand, or both.

During the second half of the semester, I will circulate a prompt for the portfolio, detailing the requirements and expectations in consultation with you. For now, you should know that the portfolio should not be a seminar paper, and its primary function is to share or exhibit your work, not make an argument about it.

For the portfolio, grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

90-100 = A+: Portfolios in this range are especially sophisticated and perceptive pieces of work that make an original contribution to scholarly thinking about a particular -ism. They could be published in a multimodal journal or exhibited in an academic venue.

85-89 = A: Portfolios in this range are perceptive and original, but may require substantial revision for public circulation. They could act as core material for a conference presentation.

80-84 = A-: Portfolios in this range are adequate at the graduate level with regard to the research, presentation, and quality of content.

77-79 = B+: Portfolios in this range have significant flaws in some areas, but they still meet graduate standards.

73-76 = B: Portfolios in this range are marginally acceptable at the graduate level.

Presentation (15%)

Your final presentation will assume the form of an informal talk drawn from a particular aspect of your seminar research and notebook. You will be asked to speak for four to five minutes, using a combination of media, with a four- to five-minute question-and-answer period. People from outside the seminar will be invited to attend the talk.

For the final presentation, grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

90-100 = A+: Presentations in this range are incredibly compelling and even memorable. They demonstrate what was learned during the semester and provide clear evidence of that learning. They prompt the audience to ask questions, and they spark conversation about a concrete topic emerging from the seminar. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text. Their structure is tangible and easy to follow.

85-89 = A: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned during the semester and provide clear evidence of that learning. They prompt the audience to ask questions, and they spark conversation about a concrete topic emerging from the seminar. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text. Their structure is tangible and easy to follow.

80-84 = A-: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned during the semester and provide recognizable evidence of that learning. They prompt the audience to ask questions. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text. Their structure is tangible and easy to follow.

77-79 = B+: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned during the semester and provide recognizable evidence of that learning. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text.

73-76 = B: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned during the semester and provide recognizable evidence of that learning.

Participation (15%)

Discussion and invested participation are central to the graduate seminar format. That said, I will assess your contributions to the seminar this semester, including questions you ask, your involvement in workshops, your investment and role in dialogue, and your familiarity with the readings at hand. Near our sixth meeting, I will circulate interim participation grades.

For your participation mark, grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

90-100 = A+: Participation in this range demonstrates an incredibly high level of engagement with the course material. You are clearly familiar with the reading(s) at hand, actively engaged in workshops, sparking dialogue with your peers and me, listening attentively to others, and asking compelling questions, which have not occurred to me or your peers.

85-89 = A: Participation in this range demonstrates a high level of engagement with the course material. You are clearly familiar with the reading(s) at hand, actively engaged in workshops, sparking dialogue with your peers and me, listening attentively to others, and asking important questions.

80-84 = A-: Participation in this range demonstrates a high level of engagement with the course material. You are clearly familiar with the reading(s) at hand, actively engaged in workshops, sparking dialogue with your peers and me, and listening attentively to others.

77-79 = B+: Participation in this range demonstrates an acceptable level of engagement with the course material. You are clearly familiar with the reading(s) at hand and actively engaged in workshops.

73-76 = B: Participation in this range suggests you are likely familiar with the reading(s) at hand and engaged in workshops.

POLICIES

Late Submissions

Barring exceptional circumstances, I will not accept your portfolios after the due date. Belated entries in your notebook will negatively influence your final mark. Since entries are intended to build upon each other, I recommend that you do not fall behind on them. Also, I will not comment on entries submitted after the due date. Of note, the presentation can only occur during the final meeting of the semester.

Absences

Weekly attendance in graduate courses is expected. If you must be absent from a course for a serious reason, then you should contact me before the missed class and explain why you will not be in attendance. Cases of continuous, unexplained absence will result in a penalty to your grade or your ineligibility to complete the course. Attendance and active participation in discussions and

workshops are part of fulfilling the course requirements. I will notify the Graduate Adviser if you have three or more unwarranted absences.

Laptops

Laptops are welcome in (but not required for) the seminar.

Extensions

No extensions will be given except in extreme—and verifiable—circumstances. These circumstances include reasons of health and extenuating circumstances, such as death of a family member.

Learning Climate

The University of Victoria is committed to promoting, providing, and protecting a positive, supportive, and safe working and learning environment for all its members. Students and faculty members are expected to adhere to the UVic human rights policy. You should alert me immediately if you have any questions about this policy and its application, or if you have concerns about course proceedings or participants.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the UVic academic integrity policy. Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade for the given assignment and may additionally result in a failing grade for the course. By taking this course, you agree that all submitted assignments may be subject to an originality review. I do not use software to detect plagiarism in essays or any other assignments.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the Resource Centre for Students with a Disability (RCSD) as soon as possible. RCSD staff is available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let us know your needs, the sooner we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

Email

With the exception of holidays and weekends, I respond to your emails within twenty-four hours.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE TERRITORIES

The Department of English respectfully acknowledges that the University of Victoria is situated on the territory of the Coast and Straits Salish peoples and sits on the site of a former Lkwungen village.

THANKS

I would like to thank Kari Kraus and Bill Turkel, whose work deeply informs this course, which was also inspired by Herbert Blau's "Traditions of the Avant-Garde" seminar (2005) at the University of Washington.

SCHEDULE

Somewhere between design studies and literary studies, we will conduct a series of exercises where you will repeatedly alter a text across formats and media. Each exercise will be accompanied by a reading.

Week 1 | 4 January | Interpretation through Alteration

Why interpret texts by altering them? What are some low-tech approaches to prototyping and interpreting texts in a whiz-bang world? How do we think about design and fiction together?

Background: Balsamo, "Design" | Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* | Drucker and Nowviskie, "Speculative Computing" | Guilford's Alternative Uses Task | Jackson, "Rethinking Repair" | Kraus, "Conjectural Criticism" | Moten, *In the Break* | Rosner and Ames, "Designing for Repair" | Sample, "Closed Bots and Green Bots" | Sterling, "Design Fiction" (no need to read any of these in advance)

Week 2 | 11 January | Survey Some -isms.

Between the 1870s and 1970s, what are some notable -isms operating across art, culture, and politics? How were these -isms designed?

Workshop: Sharing digital files for this seminar (FTP, GitHub, Drive, Tumblr)

Read: Caws, "The Poetics of the Manifesto" | Digital Manifesto Archive | Modernist Journals Project

Notebook: Take notes on your general impressions of at least five -isms. Please attend to the politics and aesthetics of each -ism, with notes on the historical particulars of when each occurred and why.

Lecture on campus this week: Andrew Stauffer (English, University of Virginia)

Week 3 | 18 January | Pick an -ism.

What's your -ism?

Workshop: In-class presentations (five minutes each, plus Q&A)

Notebook: Select an -ism you wish to study throughout the term as well as a key text (poem, manifesto, fiction) representing that -ism. Ideally, this text will have significant or notable design elements. Thoroughly describe the aesthetic (style, composition, materials), political (ideologies, representations, biases), and cultural (community, modes of expression) contexts of your text.

Week 4 | 25 January | Image It.

When is text also image? When do images resist translation into text? How are screens and pages entangled in interpretation?

Workshop: Intro to metadata (including Dublin Core)

Read: Selections from Drucker, *Figuring the Word* | Mitchell, "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?"

Notebook: Digitize or acquire your text as a series of page images (TIFF, JPG, PNG). Interpret the text as an image on a screen.

Week 5 | 1 February | Make It Metadata.

When is text merely description? What does text about text do? What does metadata do beyond keeping things found?

Workshop: On ASCII and plain text; also, composing with HTML5

Read: Schnapp, "Small Data: The Intimate Lives of Cultural Objects"

Notebook: Articulate ten metadata fields for your text and provide data for each field. Interpret the text as metadata.

Week 6 | 8 February | Holiday

No seminar. This is Family Day.

Week 7 | 15 February | Make It ASCII. Mark It Up.

What does plain text do? How is it processed?

Workshop: On typefaces and fonts

Read: Selections from Tenen, *Plain Text*

Notebook: Generate an ASCII (or plain text) version of your text, removing all formatting. Interpret the text as plain text. Then encode your text in HTML5. Interpret it as markup.

Week 8 | 22 February | Change the Typeface. Print + Assemble It.

What is the relation between print and digital typography? How do we think about them together? How does typography invite readers?

Workshop: Making forms

Read: Selections from Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style* (PDF) | See also, Lupton, *Thinking with Type*

Notebook: Change the typeface of your text, print it, and assemble it as a booklet. Interpret the text as type.

Week 9 | 29 February | Make It a Form.

When and why do texts become documents? How do they gather and store information? How do they exhibit traces of use?

Read: Gitelman, “A Short History of _____”

Notebook: Convert your text into a fillable form. Have at least three other people complete it. Interpret the text as a document.

Week 10 | 7 March | Reverse It.

How are texts also performances? How is text welded to reading?

Workshop: On bots and databending

Read: Samuels and McGann, “Deformance and Interpretation”

Notebook: Reverse the order of your text. Read it backward. Interpret the text as a performance.

Week 11 | 14 March | Redact It. Glitch It.

How are texts what's missing? How might their materiality surprise us? What happens if we accelerate their aging or compression?

Workshop: Ways to repair texts

Read: Craze, "In the Dead Letter Office" | Menkman, "Vernacular of File Formats"

Notebook: Hide, mask, or erase aspects of your text. Interpret the text as a redacted text. Now repeatedly compress and bend your text. Interpret the text as a glitch. If you wish, then feel free to turn your text into a bot, too.

Lecture on campus this week: Daniela Rosner (Human Centered Design and Engineering, University of Washington)

Week 12 | 21 March | Repair It.

How do we conduct reparative readings of texts? To what effect on legacies of suspicion in critical practice?

Workshop: Presenting your work

Read: Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading"

Notebook: Repair your redacted, glitched text. Interpret the text as a repaired object.

Week 13 | 28 March | Holiday

No seminar. This is Easter Monday.

Week 14 | 4 April | _____ It.

It's your turn. Looking forward to hearing your ideas and seeing your prototypes!

Workshop: In-class presentations

Notebook: Cook up your own exercise. Run an experiment. Interpret the results. Present them during seminar.

Week 15 | Portfolio

Please compile all of your digital and tactile materials into a portfolio using an approach of your choice. With the portfolio, include a brief cover letter

describing the effects of your various alterations. Please note: a cover letter is not a seminar paper or journal article. For the purposes of this seminar, it should describe, reflect, and project, not analyze, deconstruct, or interrogate.