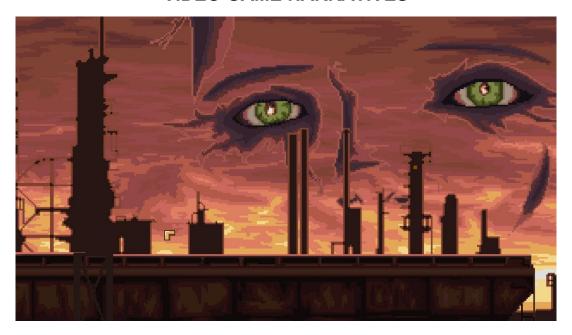# VIDEO GAME NARRATIVES

Norco (2022), Geography of Robots

Dr. Shane Snyder (just call me Shane)
ENGL 1102, Spring 2025
Office Hours (virtual): See Canvas front page
Zoom Link: See Canvas front page
Email: See Canvas front page

ENGL 1102 ENGL COMPOSITION II

This is a Core IMPACTS course that is part of the <u>Writing</u> area.

Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help master course content, and support students' broad academic and career goals.

This course should direct students toward a broad <u>Orienting Question</u>:
- How do I write effectively in different contexts?

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following <u>Learning Outcomes</u>:
- Students will communicate effectively in writing, demonstrating clear organization and structure, using appropriate grammar and writing conventions.
- Students will appropriately acknowledge the use of materials from original sources.
- Students will adapt their written communications to purpose and audience.
- Students will analyze and draw informed inferences from written texts.

Course content, activities and exercises in this course should help students develop the following <u>Career-Ready Competencies</u>:
- Critical Thinking
- Information Literacy
- Persuasion

Welcome to ENGL 1102, which is designed to enhance your capacity to communicate using **W**ritten, **O**ral, **V**isual, **E**lectronic, and **N**onverbal forms of communication. During the semester, you will draft individual and collaborative projects using each of these modes of communication.

In 2017, Ian Bogost published a controversial article in The Atlantic, titled "Video Games Are Better Without Stories." In it, Bogost argues that "games' obsession with story obscures more ambitious goals" such as "taking the tidy, ordinary world apart and putting it back together again in surprising, ghastly new ways." Bogost's thesis is that famous video game stories like *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*—both daring queer narratives—set the bar for interactive storytelling too low. Bogost believes video games should abandon storytelling ambitions altogether and focus instead on being, "the aesthetic form of everyday objects." In other words, according to Bogost, video games are inappropriate venues to tell stories if they can be told in more effective storytelling media such as literature or film.

Why not use video games to tell stories? Could video games continue to thrive without stories? While Bogost helpfully identifies the peculiarities of adjacent art forms to articulate his core argument that video games are games first and stories second, he ignores three interconnected realities: video games contain stories because people demand them; there's a demand for video game stories because their interactive affordances present exciting new ways to merge sensory experience with narrative comprehension; and designers recognize and harness these audience demands and affordances to tell compelling interactive narratives that privilege slowness, agency, co-authorship, and self-expression over linearity, authorial rigidity, and limited participation.

Proceeding from this thesis, we will look at video games and gamer communities, both old and new, to explore the ways storytelling shapes an increasingly complicated medium. We will explore topics like video game authorship and co-authorship; the problem of individualism in video games; labor, unionization, crunch (i.e., forced overtime), and artistry in the video games industry; and problems related to contemporary video game communities, esports tournaments, and the game consumer identity (or "gamer," as it's popularly known).

Assignments for this class include an archival research project, a creative nonfiction or fiction narrative project, a collaborative building project in Minecraft, and a final portfolio of your semester work. The two overarching goals of this course are the following: to research video game narratives and scholarship, and to build multimodal projects that integrate your original research about video games, gamer communities, and the video games industry.

COURSE-SPECIFIC OUTCOMES

- Learn to analyze the rhetoric of various texts—fiction and nonfiction—while also considering tone, audience, writer/creator/designer, argumentation, and aesthetic.
- Gain critical tools to distinguish between human- and AI/LLM-written prose.
- Engage in both writing and design processes to compose complex multimodal projects. This process includes editing, revising, and reflecting upon your work.
- Develop an efficient research process and, through that process, a unique intellectual and creative voice that best suits your multimodal projects
- Integrate original research into your multimodal projects to craft persuasive arguments.
- Improve upon multimodal communication skills. In the process, comprehend the affordances of each medium of communication (i.e., writing, visual design/art, oral communication, computer programs/electronic communication, and nonverbal communication).
- Collaborate in pairs and small groups to design content that is greater than the sum of its parts. By extension, learn how to delegate tasks and divide labor so everyone within the group contributes equally.
- Understand and appreciate the cultural impact of each form of communication.
- Approach each mode of communication with critical insight.

COURSE TEXTS

The required texts below are essential for engaging with the critical concepts of this course. Only three of the video games cost money, while the rest are free. Look out for sales in the weeks ahead on Steam, GOG, Epic Store, or any other game purchasing platform. While I will do my best to accommodate where and when I can—such as providing access to YouTube let's plays for those who can't access certain games—any form of accommodation is likely to limit your engagement with and appreciation for the games. I tried to keep costs as low as possible. Having said that, please alert me if you encounter any issues with purchasing.

Texts to Purchase:
- *Unpacking* (available on all consoles and Steam)
- *Minecraft* (available on all consoles, mobile phones, and Steam)
- *Norco* (available on all consoles and Steam)

Other Texts (no need to purchase):
- Additional games for in-class play include *Slay the Princess, Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy, Unsolicited* by Lucas Pope*, the original *Oregon Trail, When Rivers Were Trails,* Twine narratives, and curated Atari, MS-DOS, NES, SNES, and Genesis games

- Additional readings will be posted to Canvas (also free)

REQUIRED EQUIPMENT AND PROGRAMS
- A working computer
- Discord (I'm setting up a Discord server for this course so we can have real-time discussions about gaming and share pictures of our pets).
- An internet connection (preferably a high enough speed that you won't encounter issues uploading your content).
- A camera of some kind (for Artifact 0—a smartphone will work just fine)
- Editing software (Also for Artifact 0. DaVinci Resolve is excellent free editing software—linked in Canvas)

COURSE POLICIES:
ChatGPT/AI:
By now, you've no doubt used ChatGPT or another controversial "AI" large-language model (LLM). I am not against AI. In fact, this course's large assignments will variously demand that you use AI in prescribed ways. What this means is that, *as a rule*, you can *only* use AI in the way each large assignment specifies. What inspired me to make this decision is the precipitous rise in 2024 of students cavalierly submitting unaltered, ChatGPT-written assignments. It's a problem that I can only address by arming you with the critical tools to distinguish responsibly between human- and machine-written prose. If I do my job well, you'll finish the semester agreeing that ChatGPT is a serviceable writing assistant but a terrible writer. So, rather than use the syllabus to bore you with course policies aimed at fending off the coming AI apocalypse, I'll simply distribute those boring policies throughout the large assignments as "rules."

Participation:
Participation is key to a productive and rewarding college career. Learning new skills and discussing provocative ideas is a privilege. I encourage us to test our opinions, even if they elicit controversy, in an open discussion forum without fear of a backlash. As such, I ask that everybody respect their peers as we discuss galvanizing subjects. In other words, let's keep it productive. Don't insult or bully each other. To have meaningful discussions in class, it is vital that we learn to balance listening with speaking.

Attendance:
Ordinarily, the Writing and Communication Program's (WCP) common attendance policy permits four missed classes. That same policy states that missing eight classes may result in a failing grade, as determined by me and with the blessings of the Director of the WCP.

However, COVID has exposed the heartlessness in punishing those who take sick days. Consequently, I'm adopting a flexible attendance policy to encourage you to stay home if you're sick. In this context, sick doesn't merely mean COVID. If you have the flu or a cold, please err on the side of caution and heal at home so none of us fall ill. All I ask is that you communicate with me *in advance* that you will be absent from class. If you don't communicate with me, I will log it as an official absence and the WCP's attendance policy will kick in. Just remember that *flexible doesn't mean optional*. After all, I don't design course content with the expectation that I lead an empty classroom. Flexible simply means prioritizing self-care over labor.

Assignment Submissions:
You will submit all your work on Canvas. For the assignment (Artifact 0) that requires you to film content, it is easiest to upload your finished video to Google Drive, generate an embed code, and embed the video into the Canvas assignment submission page. Or alternatively, you can post your filmed content to YouTube for easy access. Keep in mind, however, content posted to YouTube is publicly searchable *unless* you designate it as "unlisted" (which I recommend). In terms of the assignment that requires a video, I will create a field in the assignment submission page where you can copy/paste the script and, below that, embed the video. You should submit all other written assignments, whether they're smaller process documents or part of a larger project, in .docx format (Microsoft Word). I prefer .docx for the sake of consistency.

Late Work:
I am willing to grant extensions under certain circumstances, but you must let me know at least two days (48 hours) in advance of the assignment submission deadline. However, please understand that unless I decide otherwise (for specific reasons), I will reduce your grade by 5% for each full day, or 24-hour period (that means a calendar, not class, day), that it is late. Keep in mind that this policy does not (and cannot) apply to the final portfolio, whose submission deadline is non-negotiable.

Academic Honesty: As defined in the Georgia Tech academic honor code, plagiarism is the "Submission of material that is wholly or substantially identical to that created or published by another person or persons, without adequate credit notations indicating the authorship." When you borrow an idea from somebody else and include it in your own work, you must give proper attribution to that author. This applies across all modalities of communication. For more information on academic honesty and best practices, go here:

http://policylibrary.gatech.edu/student-affairs/academic-honor-code

At the link, you'll notice there is, at present, no stipulation about AI/LLMs. For that, you'll need to see my specific AI course policies above and in the larger assignments. You can treat both the general course policies on AI, as well as the assignment-specific

ones, as both a plagiarism policy and an informal explanation for why AI isn't included in GT's academic honor code. In any case, keep in mind that I take plagiarism very seriously and will check your work if it makes me suspicious. Please make sure your work is entirely your own. If you are unsure of whether you've plagiarized something in your work (confusion is fine and mistakes happen—I've made them myself), don't hesitate to contact me. Wherever possible, I will not resort to punishment where diplomacy will do.

ASSIGNMENTS:

Assignments are divided into small and large projects for which you will receive assignment sheets in advance. Small projects (or process assignments) are low-stakes assignments such as weekly journals, project proposals, research notes, and reflections. All these assignments, which are done individually, paired, or in groups, are integral to the process of building your larger projects (described in greater detail below). In other words, consider all your small projects necessary steps in building larger projects. ***Please note: the smaller process documents for each of your artifacts constitute 25% of the final artifact grade. In other words, if Artifact 1 is worth 20% of your overall grade, but you turn in no process assignments for it, your grade will drop significantly to 15% of that 20% by default. Since these process documents also factor into your final portfolio, their absence would necessarily hurt your final portfolio grade.*** At the end of the semester, you will include these process documents in your final portfolio.

- **Participation (10%):** See the course policies section for more information. This is a holistic score based on your participation in group work, class and group discussions, assignment effort, attendance, and overall engagement in the course material.

- **Group Discussion Notes (10%):** Starting **Week 3**, on some Mondays (six times in all throughout the semester) you will get into your semester groups and, for up to twenty minutes, collectively discuss a text or texts (game or reading) assigned for that week. During your discussion, you should assign one of your group members to take notes that do two things: **1.) indicate who is the notetaker, 2.) answer guiding questions that I will project on the board, and 3.) indicate who says what during your discussion**. You will **switch up the notetaker each week** to distribute the labor fairly. Only one group member should submit the completed notes to the assignment immediately following your discussion. This assignment has the following three practical functions:

  - It holds you accountable for playing the games and doing the (very short) readings each week.
  - It teaches you to take minutes, which are detailed notes of items covered during a meeting (in this case group discussion).

- o It encourages you to practice your oral communication skills in small group settings (you also get used to each other).

- **Artifact 0 – Diagnostic Video (5%) W, O, V, E, N**: For this assignment, you will record a 60-90-second video in which you will introduce yourself, identify the course you're taking, and discuss a challenge you anticipate facing in this course. Find the detailed assignment sheet for the diagnostic video on Canvas.

- **Artifact 1 – Narrative and Technology Study (With AI Component) [Paired] (20%) [10% final document, 5% presentation, 5% process documents] W, O, V, E, N:** For this assignment, you and a partner or partners will write and present on a **4-5-page multimodal research paper** that analyzes one classic video game narrative in relationship to the creative, design, and computational affordances of the hardware that powers it, as well as the sociocultural contexts that influenced the game's production. To prepare, you will spend the **entirety of our 1/15 class meeting** looking at archival documents and playing video games on either your laptops or consoles I bring to class. You will choose one SNES, NES, MS-DOS, or Atari 2600 game from a curated list and take detailed notes during the hour. Your initial notes should consider the affordances of the game, console, and controller (or other accessories, if applicable)—i.e., what forms of expression and creativity all these technologies, working together, allow or disallow.

  In the initial writing stages of this project, you will utilize an AI/LLM to determine a topic, research process, and research questions for your co-written and presented multimodal paper, then turn in a proposal articulating what that topic is and the research question(s) the paper intends to answer. The week after you submit your final document, your group will deliver a **5-7-minute** presentation about your findings to the class.

  This assignment will include an AI component during the ideation process but, importantly, not the writing process.

- **Artifact 2 – Social Issue Narrative (with AI Component) [Individual] (15%) W, E:** A common misconception about creative labor is that it represents ultimate freedom. For the artist, it's more complicated than that. Creativity entails imposing constraints on, or making rules for, oneself to produce an original work of art. For example, as we will explore at length in class, video games are not about providing unlimited choices to players. Rather, developers work within the constraints of technology, environments, and rules to design experiences for players that *feel* as though they offer a *measure of* freedom. Here are the rules of this assignment:

1.) For this step, you are not allowed to use any AI platforms. Your first task is to write a creative short story. You will research and, in so doing, learn about a social issue of some kind. Then, you will write a fictional or nonfictional narrative based on that research. Your written narrative should be **five or six double-spaced pages in length**.

2.) After you've written your short story, you will direct an AI platform to rewrite that narrative in any style you specify. You'll turn in both stories (your original, plus the rewrite) to Canvas as the assignment.

3.) For your reflection assignment, you will critically interrogate the ways in which AI compromised and/or built upon your ideas.

You will include a works cited page at the end of your narrative that alphabetically lists your citations in MLA, APA, or Chicago styles (your choice).

- **Artifact 3 – Build a Visual Narrative with *Minecraft* (AI Component TBD) [Collaborative] (20%) W, (O), V, E, N:**
  For your final artifact, you and your semester design group will build a visual narrative based on one of your group member's second artifact short stories using the tools provided in *Minecraft*'s Creative Mode. To accomplish this goal, you will conduct original (or perhaps just additional) research on the narrative topic. As with the second artifact, research will help you to reconstruct as many details of the environments and events described in the short story as you can within a five-week period. This assignment is divided into two parts:

  1.) A video or photographic tour of the finalized *Minecraft* build.

  2.) A **4-page, double-spaced** document in which your group elaborates upon the research and creative/design processes involved in finishing the build (i.e., what choices did you make to adapt the written narrative? Why did you make those choices? What additional research, if any, was involved in finishing the build?).

  The written portion should include multimodal items that illustrate the creative process as well as the sources that informed your design (cited in MLA, APA, or Chicago—your choice).

- **Final Portfolio (20%) W, O, V, E, N:** In lieu of a final exam, you will compile a portfolio of your work throughout the semester. The portfolio is due by midnight on 4/30.

GRADE BREAKDOWN*:

A+	98-100	You've produced exceptional work throughout the semester. You consistently followed assignment instructions and paid great attention to detail in your work.
A	94-97	
A-	90-93	
B+	87-89	You produced above average work, finished all or almost all of your assignments, participated in class frequently, and generally followed assignment instructions.
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	While you could have done a better job of following instructions and participating in class, your work was of average quality and worth a passing grade overall.
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	You rarely followed instructions, only sometimes participated, and produced below-average work throughout the semester.
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	You rarely, if ever, participated in class and either never turned in your work or turned in poor quality work.

As GT does not register grades as +/-, the granular grade designations in the above table are just for reference purposes.

CAMPUS RESOURCES:

Naugle CommLab:
Located in Clough Commons, Suite 447, the Naugle CommLab is a resource for every student at Georgia Tech to seek help with their multimodal assignments. The CommLab specializes in virtually everything this course covers. If you find that the WordPress or Wix tutorials I post don't adequately help you to design your group's website, the CommLab can render you the assistance you need. For more information, visit their website: http://communicationcenter.gatech.edu/

Dean of Students and Counseling Center:
College is a stressful time that can exacerbate anxiety and depression. There's no shame in seeking help from mental health professionals if you need it (I've been there and had to seek help myself!). You can seek help in the following two ways:
- Office of the Dean of Students: https://grandchallenges.gatech.edu/office-dean-students
- The Counseling Center: https://counseling.gatech.edu/

Accommodations:
Georgia Tech supports students through the Office of Disability Services. Any student who may require accommodation for a documented disability should inform me privately during the first week of class or as soon as you become aware of your disability. Anyone who anticipates difficulties with the content or format of the course due to a documented disability should arrange a meeting so we can create a workable plan for your success in this course. The Office of Disability Services serves any Georgia Tech

student who has a documented, qualifying disability. Official documentation of the disability is required to determine eligibility for accommodation or adaptations that may be helpful for this course. Please make sure I receive a Faculty Accommodation Letter form verifying your disability and specifying the accommodation you need during the first week of class.

- Visit: Smithgall Student Services Bldg, Suite 210 on 353 Ferst Drive
- Email: adapts@vpss.gatech.edu.
- Call: 404-894-2563 (V); 404-894-1664 (TDD); 404-894-9928 (fax)

WEEKLY SCHEDULE:**

Week	Readings, games, videos, etc.	Assignments/activities
1	**Introductions / Surveys** M 1/6: Introductions / Syllabus / Artifact 0 Sheet / What this class is about / Defining narrative W 1/8: Best Research Practices / Group assignments / Introduce Artifact 1 Assignment Sheet / What is a narrative and technology study? / Workshop: CFW Video Script	• **Due Wednesday by 11:59PM:** Spring 2025 Access Survey
2	***Authorship / Retro Gaming*** M 1/13: In-class play: *Slay the Princess* W 1/15: Group Splits / Retro gaming in-class play (decide on a text for Artifact 1) **Read**: No readings this week.	• **Due Tuesday by 11:59PM:** Artifact 0 – Diagnostic Introductory Video • **Due Friday by 11:59PM:** Artifact 0 Reflection

3	**_Narrative and Technology Study / Authorship_** M 1/20: MLK Jr. Day (No Class) W 1/22: Group Notes / Discussion (Bogost and _StP_) / Workshop: Narrative and Technology Study Proposal **Read**: Bogost "Video Games are Better Without Stories"	• **Due Wednesday by end of class:** Group notes 1 • **Due Friday by 11:59PM:** Proposal
4	**_The History of (Video) Games / Narrative Adaptation_** M 1/27: In-Class Play: _Adventure_ and _CCA_ / Discussion: Narrative adaptation, Warren Robinette, Cold War and video games, and arcades W 1/29: Discussion cont'd / Workshop: Peer Review (within-group) **Read**: TBA	• **Due Monday by end of class:** Group notes 2 • **Due Friday by 11:59PM:** Peer Review
5	**_The Pain and Joy of Play_** M 2/3: In-Class Play: _Getting Over It_ / the point of a challenge / emotional experience, non-trivial (manual) labor, and monotony W 2/5: Discussion cont'd / Introduce Artifact 2 / Workshop: Finish Narrative and Technology Study OR Prepare your presentations **Read**: No reading this week	• **Due Friday by 11:59:** Narrative and Technology Study

6	***Presentations / Artifact 2*** M 2/10: Artifact 1 Presentations (Scheduled presentation time slot based on Group #) W 2/12: Finish Artifact 1 Presentations / Developing effective research questions / Deciding on a topic / Workshop (if time): Proposal **No readings or Group Notes this week**	• **Due Wednesday by 11:59PM:** Narrative and Technology Study Reflections • **Due Friday by 11:59:** Narrative Proposal
7	***Norco and Big Oil / Rethinking Narrative*** M 2/17: Group Notes 3 / Discussion: *Norco* / Norco, LA's Diamond Neighborhood W 2/19: Workshop: Research Summary **Play at home:** *Norco*	• **Due Monday by end of class:** Group notes 3 • **Due Friday by 11:59:** Research Summary
8	***Industry and Labor*** M 2/24: Bad game designs, before the crash, and troubled development cycles W 2/26: Discussion: Crunch, Activision/Blizzard, and unionization / Schreier / Workshop: Rough Drafts **Read**: Schreier – Chapter 1 – "Pillars of Eternity"	• **Due Monday by end of class:** Group notes 4

9	**_Games About History / Audiences_** M 3/3: In-Class Play: _The Oregon Trail_ and _When Rivers Were Trails_ / Discussion/lecture: Games about history W 3/5: Discussion/Activity: Games about history / Peer Review Workshop (within-group critique—3 or 4 sets of feedback)	• **Due Friday by 11:59:** Peer Review feedback
10	**_Conference Week_** Sign up using Calendly (Optional)	• **Due Friday by 11:59PM:** Final Narrative
11	**_SPRING BREAK (3/17-3/21)—Enjoy!_**	
12	**_Visual Narratives / Unpacking and Minimalism_** M 3/24: Build second artifact portfolio page / introduce Artifact 3 / _Minecraft_ / Discussion: _Unpacking_ W 3/26: Discussion cont'd / Workshop: _Minecraft_ project proposal and planning **Play at home**: _Unpacking_	• **Due Monday by end of class:** Group notes 5 • **Due Tuesday by 11:59PM:** Artifact 2 Reflections • **Due Friday by 11:59:** Minecraft project proposal (full-group submission)

13	**eSports and Contemporary Design** M 3/31: Paul / eSports contemporary problems / eSports, conventional design, and the problem of meritocracy W 4/2: Discussion continued (if necessary) / Workshop: Research/Creative document and *Minecraft* build project **Read:** Paul *Toxic Meritocracy* ch. 2 (toughest reading of the semester)	• **Due Monday by end of class:** Group notes 6
14	**Workshop Week** M 4/7: Workshop: *Minecraft* project W 4/9: Peer review (between group) **No reading this week**	• **Due Friday by 11:59PM:** Peer review
15	**Final Conference Week (Mandatory)** I will meet with all groups remotely during designated time slots	• **Due Friday by 11:59PM:** *Minecraft* Project
16	**Final Week** M 4/21: Portfolio / Closing comments & farewell	• **Due Tuesday by 11:59PM:** Artifact 3 Reflections • **Final Portfolios due 4/30/2025 by 11:59PM**

**I reserve the right to change aspects of the syllabus if it becomes necessary.