



LITERATURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

English 229-01
Tuesday/Thursday 2:10-3:30 pm
Palamountain 301
Professor Paul Benzon
pbenzon@skidmore.edu

Office: Palamountain 333
Office Hours: Monday 1:00-2:00pm, Tuesday 3:45-5:45pm, and by appt.
Course Blog: <https://lda19.wordpress.com>

What is the place of literature in the digital age? We exist in a moment when more people have access to more text than ever before, when words jostle constantly against images, videos, and sounds, and when many of us carry the tools to become globally published authors in our pockets every day. What does it mean to read and write literature within such a moment? What new social and cultural questions arise, and how might authors address those? What new possibilities emerge for writing itself in a digital context—what new modes of representation and expression? How do we as readers need to think differently in order to read within the digital?

In this course, we'll take up these and other questions as we consider how contemporary authors represent, respond to, and employ digital technology in their writing. We'll read stories and novels by authors attempting to capture how recent technological changes have redefined our culture. We'll engage with experimental works that push at the boundaries of the page and the book in an attempt to rethink print literature alongside the digital. And we'll explore “born-digital” texts, from Netflix's *Bandersnatch* and the visual narrative *Doki Doki Literature Club!* to the multimedia iOS fiction *Pry*, in order to consider how literature takes shape within our computers and mobile devices and across the constantly changing space of the web. Our ultimate goal will be to develop a new understanding of the creative possibilities for reading and writing within the digital environment of the twenty-first century.

Course Goals

In this course, you will learn to

- Read complex literary works in a variety of forms and media carefully and critically
- Study literary experimentation in response to technological change
- Analyze how factors such as visuality, materiality, medium, and interactivity shape literary meaning
- Engage with critical and theoretical material in ways that illuminate larger issues within course texts
- Participate in class discussions and workshops focused on the formal and cultural analysis of literary texts that engage with technology
- Write critically about contemporary literature and technology in a range of formats and contexts

Required Texts

Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (ISBN 0375703764)

Sam Barlow, *Her Story* (available online via Steam)

Charlie Brooker, *Bandersnatch* (available on Netflix)

Team Salvato, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (available online via Steam)

Tender Claws, *Pry* (available online via the App Store)

Amaranth Borsuk, *Abra: A Living Book* (available online via the App Store)

Selected other texts available in the course packet or online, listed below in the course schedule

Grading

You must complete all of the following course assignments in order to pass the course:

Class Participation	15%
Course Blog	15%
Textual Annotation	15%
Paper One	15%
Paper Two	20%
Final Exam	20%

Late work will be marked down one grade level for each class period after the due date (for example, from a B+ to a B for one late day). Extensions will only be granted in the case of an emergency documented by a college dean.

Preparation, Participation, and Class Structure

We will spend our class time each day on a variety of different activities, including but not limited to full-class discussions, small-group discussions, writing workshops, and in-class writing. While I may occasionally give short lectures, the bulk of our time will be spent talking and engaging together with the course material and with each other's ideas. In order to do this, it is essential that you come to class prepared to address the day's material. This means completing all reading before class, bringing any relevant texts to class, and being prepared to discuss them thoughtfully. You should have interpretations, questions, and responses to share with the class, and you should be prepared to offer these on your own as well as in being called on in our conversation. Strong class participation includes contributing regularly to class discussion in a range of ways, listening respectfully and attentively to others, responding thoughtfully to their comments, and working diligently during in-class work both on your own and with others—in order to do well in the participation element of the course, you should expect to do each of these each day. More generally, the more each of you brings your own thinking to the discussion, the more all of us will get out of class—I encourage you to offer perspectives, ideas, examples, oppositions, questions, and other contributions as much as possible. If you are uncomfortable with speaking in class, please let me know or come see me at the beginning of the semester so that we can work together to make things easier for you.

In order to facilitate a productive experience for everyone in class, please be in your seat and ready to start at the beginning of class time. Unless I indicate otherwise or there is an emergency, please remain in your seat during class so that we can all remain focused on our work at hand (this means using the restroom, getting water, etc., **before or after class** rather than during class).

Although I will lecture relatively rarely, that does not mean that you should not take notes on what the class has to say about the material we are discussing, just as you would in a lecture course. Having a record of the class' comments, concerns, debates, etc., will be extremely valuable to you in preparing to develop topics and arguments for further writing and thinking in the course. More broadly, consistently remaining actively engaged in our discussions, even if only as a listener and note-taker at certain moments, will help you to develop as a critical thinker and writer.

During class discussion, I expect you to be attentive to what your classmates have to say and respectful of their ideas and opinions. Thinking critically and openly about complex issues is a crucial part of college education—we all have a responsibility to create a classroom atmosphere where everyone is free to offer their opinion, as long as we all do so respectfully and kindly.

Because some of our course material exists only in electronic format, being able to use electronic devices to engage with the readings and do research and other work will add a great deal to our thinking in class. However, these devices should be used in class only for class-related work such as note-taking, class writing or reading when applicable, and research. If I ask the class to put away electronic devices so that we can focus on other material, please do so. If inappropriate computer or electronic use becomes a problem for some members of the class, I will revoke permission to use them for the class as a whole. If you have questions about whether a certain use of technology is appropriate or not, please don't hesitate to ask me.

Course Blog

Over the course of the semester, you will post regularly to a course blog focused on the texts and issues we will be discussing in class. This work will serve several purposes: firstly (and most immediately), it will give us a chance to think and talk critically about some of the course material before we discuss it in class and to gear our discussion towards issues and questions that are important to you or that you are curious about. In giving you the opportunity to bring new material and new areas of concern into our conversation, it will also help you to generate topics, ideas, and arguments for papers.

Blog Posting. Note that the blog is located on our independent course website at <https://lda19.wordpress.com>, **not on Blackboard** (although we will use Blackboard for email, papers, and other elements of the course). You are not required to register with WordPress in order to post on the blog, but you must subscribe to the blog so that you receive notifications of new material that I post, and you should include your name or other identifying information in your posts so that we can all follow the conversation online and I can give you credit for your work. The most recent main post will appear at the top of the page—click on the comments link for that post to read what others have written and post your writing.

Blog Content. Your work on the blog will take different forms at different points in the semester. Sometimes I will post a question for you to respond to, while at other times your posts can be more open-ended; sometimes I will ask you to address a particular passage or other element from the reading, while at other times I will ask you to think about a broader issue or question that connects several texts. The blog is a space for us as a group to be reflective about the material we are discussing, and to begin to air initial responses, interpretations, and reactions before we pursue them more fully in class discussion. In this spirit, your posting to the blog should be thoughtful and analytical—you should always ground your writing in quotation and close analysis of our reading for the day, and you should offer interpretations and critical questions rather than summaries or solely personal responses. The more engaged an approach you take, the stronger your posts will be and the more you will be able to bring to our discussions.

Your post should be **at least 250-300 words** (this is roughly equivalent to one double-spaced typed page—you might write and edit your post in Microsoft Word or a similar program so that you know the length of your post and so that you have a backup of it on your computer). I encourage you to include images, links, video clips, and other media elements in your posts as relevant.

Blog Scheduling. Unless I specify otherwise, each week’s blog post will be due by midnight Monday before Tuesday’s class (consult the course schedule below for specific details). **Because of the time-sensitive nature of the blog, late posts will not receive credit.**

Blog Grading. I will grade your blog posts on a scale of 0-4 each week. Criteria for each grade are as follows:

Grade Characteristics

- 0 The post is missing or late.
- 1 The post is severely underdeveloped: it shows superficial thought and/or minimal or no engagement with the text and the issues it raises.
- 2 The post is underdeveloped: it uses textual material in a minimal, incorrect, or overly generalized manner, consisting mostly of summary, generalization, and/or personal response rather than close analysis of or critical thinking about the text.
- 3 The post is successful: it uses correctly integrated textual material to make analytical claims that demonstrate a clear, solid understanding of the issues at stake, but does not engage those issues at the level of an exceptional post.
- 4 The post is exceptional: it uses correctly integrated textual material to make thoughtful, original analytical claims and/or connections, and engages and analyzes the issues it raises in independent, in-depth ways.

Textual Annotation

As part of our work in the first section of the course on “Extreme Books,” you will choose a single page or two-page spread from *House of Leaves* to scan, annotate, and write about in a short (3-4 page) reflection. This assignment is intended to give you an opportunity to engage in close, in-depth analysis of a small unit of text with an eye towards how visual elements such as layout, paging, color, and typography shape the literary meaning of a print text, and will also ask you to draw on critical material from the course to frame your analysis. I will provide more in-depth instructions for this assignment as we begin our work on *House of Leaves*.

Analytical Papers

At the ends of the second and third sections of the course (“Text, Data, and Information” and “Narrative”) you will write short analytical papers (of 4-5 pages and 5-6 pages, respectively). In each of these papers, you should advance an argument about how one or more texts from that section engage with questions of literature and technology and what that engagement suggests more broadly, developing that argument through sustained close analysis of the text(s) you choose. In the second of these papers, you will also work with critical material from the course to frame and amplify your argument. I will provide more in-depth instructions for these assignments early in their respective sections.

Final Exam

At the end of the course, you will complete a final exam consisting of short answer and essay questions. This exam will assess your understanding of key issues of the course and your ability to analyze digital literature.

Attendance

You are permitted a total of **two absences** throughout the semester without penalty. For each subsequent absence, your final course grade will drop one-third of a letter (e.g., from an A- to a B+), and after four absences, you risk failing the course. Repeated or excessive lateness will also count as an absence.

If you miss all or part of a class, it is your responsibility to keep up with the work for the course—make sure to follow the syllabus, stay on track with the reading, turn in any written work that was due for the day, and consult a classmate, check the course website on Blackboard, or come see me during my office hours to talk about what you might have missed in class.

Office Hours

I want each of you to be successful in this class. Helping each of you develop as readers, writers, thinkers, and students of literature and media is important to me, and I want to do what I can to help you achieve those goals and succeed in my class. More importantly, I have a great deal of interest in the material we will be working on this semester, and I would love for you to get the same enjoyment and excitement from it that I do. If you have any questions, problems, or things you want to discuss—about the course, the readings, writing assignments or paper ideas, the English major, life at Skidmore, future academic or career plans, or anything else at all—or if you simply want to talk more about what we're doing in class, please come see me. I encourage you to think of meeting with me not just as a last resort or something to do when you need help, but as a central part of making your learning more productive, meaningful, and enjoyable. My office hours are Monday from 1:00-2:00pm and Tuesday from 3:45-5:45pm in Palamountain Hall 333—this time is set aside for us to talk and for me to help you and work with you. If you aren't free during that time, get in touch with me before or after class or by email and we can set up a time that is more convenient. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you are having trouble or feel you need help, or for any other reason at all.

Accessibility

If you anticipate needing accommodations regarding any element of this course, please come talk with me early in the semester so that we can work together to address these issues. You should also visit the Office of Student Academic Services at <http://www.skidmore.edu/accessibility/index.php> for more information.

Academic Integrity

Independent thinking and writing are crucial elements of both your work in this course and the intellectual culture of Skidmore more broadly. Violating these principles through plagiarism or other academic dishonesty is a serious offense. Plagiarized work will receive a failing grade for the assignment and may result in more serious consequences as well. If you have any questions about citation, attribution, or plagiarism, please do not hesitate to ask me before you hand in your work. For more information about Skidmore's academic integrity policy, visit <http://www.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.php>.

Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct

Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available.

More information can be found at <https://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/> or by contacting the *Title IX Deputy Coordinator*.

Course Schedule

The schedule below may change over the course of the semester. I will announce any changes in class and/or via email. It is your responsibility to keep abreast of these changes by attending class, checking your email and the class blog regularly, and contacting me or coming to my office if you have any questions.

Extreme Books

Thursday, Sep. 5	Course Introduction: What is Literature in the Digital Age?
Tuesday, Sep. 10	Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel" Jonathan Basile, "libraryofbabel.info" Blog Due Midnight Monday
Thursday, Sep. 12	Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths"
Tuesday, Sep. 17	Mark Z. Danielewski, <i>House of Leaves</i> front cover-54 • NB for <i>House of Leaves</i> : read all materials—appendices, footnotes, exhibits, etc.—as they are referred to in the text, not at the end Blog Due Midnight Monday
Thursday, Sep. 19	Mark Z. Danielewski, <i>House of Leaves</i> 55-79 (including appendix material 584-644)
Tuesday, Sep. 24	Mark Z. Danielewski, <i>House of Leaves</i> 80-252 Blog Due Midnight Monday
Thursday, Sep. 26	Mark Z. Danielewski, <i>House of Leaves</i> 253-346
Tuesday, Oct. 1	Mark Z. Danielewski, <i>House of Leaves</i> 347-422 Blog Due Midnight Monday
Thursday, Oct. 3	Mark Z. Danielewski, <i>House of Leaves</i> 423-528
Tuesday, Oct. 8	Bonnie Mak, <i>How the Page Matters</i> (excerpts) Alberto Manguel, "A Brief History of the Page" Johanna Drucker, "Experimental Typography as a Modern Art Practice" (excerpts) Blog Due Midnight Monday
Thursday, Oct. 10	No Class: Professor Benzon away at Conference

****House of Leaves Annotation Due Sunday, October 13, 11:59pm****

Text, Data, and Information

- Tuesday, Oct. 15 Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries, “Dakota,” “Samsung Means to Come,” “Cunnilingus in North Korea,” “ASMR MY DMZ”
Blog Due Midnight Monday
- Thursday, Oct. 17 Thomson & Craighead, “Beacon”
Erica Scourti, *Life in AdWords*, “*Life in AdWords*, Algorithms and Data Exhaust: In Conversation with Marc Garrett”
- Tuesday, Oct. 22 Jordan Abel, *Un/Inhabited* (selections)
Kathleen Ritter, “Ctrl-F: Reterritorializing the Canon”
Blog Due Midnight Monday

Narrative

- Thursday, Oct. 24 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Toward an Interactive Narratology”
****Analytical Paper One Due Sunday, October 27, 11:59pm****
- Tuesday, Oct. 29 Sam Barlow, *Her Story*
Blog Due Midnight Monday
- Thursday, Oct. 31 Sam Barlow, *Her Story*
- Tuesday, Nov. 5 Charlie Brooker, *Bandersnatch*
Blog Due Midnight Monday
- Thursday, Nov. 7 Charlie Brooker, *Bandersnatch*
- Tuesday, Nov. 12 Team Salvato, *Doki Doki Literature Club!*
Blog Due Midnight Monday
- Thursday, Nov. 14 Team Salvato, *Doki Doki Literature Club!*

Interface

- Tuesday, Nov. 19 Tender Claws, *Pry*
Blog Due Midnight Monday
- Thursday, Nov. 21 Tender Claws, *Pry*
****Analytical Paper Two Due Friday, November 22, 11:59pm****
- Tuesday, Nov. 26 Joanna Drucker, “Reading Interface”
Jason Farman, “Embodiment and the Mobile Interface”
Blog Due Midnight Monday

Thursday, Nov. 28

No Class: Thanksgiving

Tuesday, Dec. 3

Amaranth Borsuk, *Abra: A Living Book*

Blog Due Midnight Monday

Thursday, Dec. 5

Amaranth Borsuk, *Abra: A Living Book*

Tuesday, Dec. 10

Final Class: Conclusions, Reflections, Celebrations

****Final Exam Monday, December 16****