

ENGL-CUST-4703H-A: Critical World Building 2020FA – Remote (Peterborough Campus)

Instructor

Instructor: Brent Ryan Bellamy

Email Address: bbellamy@trentu.ca

Phone Number: NA

Office: NA

Office Hours: By Appointment

Meeting Times:

Synchronous Meeting Time: Tuesday 3:00 PM - 5:50 PM

Department

Academic Administrative Assistant: Patricia Heffernan

Email Address: english@trentu.ca

Phone Number: 7733

Office: Traill College, Wallis Hall, Room 134

Description

In this course we explore storyworlds as more than mere backdrop or setting. Storyworlds are shaped as much through genre expectations and audience reception as by authorial craft. This course will focus on primary and secondary storyworlds, storyworld elements, how various media and mediums construct storyworlds, and the generic determinations of worldbuilding. In our investigation of the workings of worldbuilding we ask about the ways imaginative worlds are built and what this construction might reveal about their relationship to culture, politics, and ideology. The course will be divided into two units. The first unit will focus on case studies and worldbuilding theory. We will watch, read, and listen to epics, dystopia/post-apocalyptic fiction, fantasy, and the new weird. The focus of our investigation will be the techniques and protocols of building storyworlds as well as what critical questions arise from such texts. The second unit will have you engage in a collaborative worldbuilding exercise—the writing of a metanarrative. You are encouraged to focus on a particular genre and to create a metanarrative that critically presents the tropes, elements, and characters of such a world. These worlds will be presented at term's end.

Class Preparation

Readings are to be read ahead of class. We will also be playing tabletop games in class. Come prepared. Know the rules and come to the specified classes ready to play. You will complete weekly short writing exercises and will have the opportunity to write either a critical or a creative piece as the culminating assignment. Finally, this class is meant to be a space where we can be open about who we are and what we like. Please show up to class in a mindful way and take care with each others thoughts and feelings.

Collaborative Groups

Groups will be formed based on shared-interest and desire to work together. The ideal group size is four to five. Each group will establish clearly defined roles (facilitator, recorder, reporter, timekeeper, and materials manager) and decide on a week-to-week basis which of you will fulfill which roles. During the second unit, groups will have a weekly meeting with the professor to discuss their progress. There will be a peer-assessment portion of the course. Groups are encouraged to operate under the golden rule: from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Identify and understand various genres and styles of worldbuilding;
 - Demonstrate understanding of the cultural, historical, and political contexts in which world building takes place;
 - Apply techniques of critical analysis as appropriate to multiple forms, genres, and media;
 - Use literary and visual studies to develop skills for careful reading and clear writing;
 - Develop your own collaborative style best suited to accomplishing group tasks;
 - Discuss worldbuilding on the levels of contents, implications, practices, and politics.
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Texts

Dimaline, Cherie. *The Marrow Thieves*. Dancing Cat Books, 2017. (Dystopia)
Hergenrader, Trent. *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. (Theory)
Le Guin, Ursula K. *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Puffin, 2016. (Fantasy)
VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. (Weird)
Vaughn, Brian K. and Fiona Staples. *Saga: Volume One*. Image Comics, 2013. (Comic)
Please get a copy of each of the above titles however you can. All other critical and additional readings will be posted on Blackboard and Leganto.

Readings

Please consult the reading lists on Blackboard and Leganto.

Assessments, Assignments and Tests

5 Critical Reflection Posts (5% ea., 25% total) 250 words each
Group Metanarrative (25%) 4000–6000 words
Self-Assessment (25%)
Culminating Assignment (25%) 2500-5000 words or equivalent

Grading

Critical Reflections

Five individually written, short entries on each case study, posted to blackboard on Mondays by Noon (September 21, September 28, October 5, October 12, October 20)

Group Metanarrative

Collaboratively written, overview of the imaginary world composed during the second unit on a weekly basis, posted to Blackboard on December 7th by Noon

Self-Assessment

Individually written, a survey-style report, submitted by December 14 at Noon

Culminating Assignment

Individually written, either a critical theoretical essay on imaginary worlds, worldbuilding, genre theory, or one of the case studies //OR// a creative contribution that imagines a narrative or element of one of the imaginary worlds studied or built in the course and is accompanied by a brief creative statement, submitted by December 22 at Noon

Grade Total by Withdrawal Date

25% by 10 November 2020

Schedule

15 September: Introduction to Worldbuilding

Class will begin with an introductory conversation about the course, then we'll play Li and Kabo's *Loving Allness* together, and we'll wrap up by reflecting on our experience. *Loving Allness* is a collaborative worldbuilding game, where you are all strangers to each other, but share a common goal - to create a new world to travel to, leaving your old ones behind.

Before class: play *Loving Allness* at least once

- Unit One: Case Studies -

22 September: The Spiritworld

Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (Studio Ghibli) shows just how we might reconceive of storyworld rules in order to defy entrenched beliefs about character and world can shift and change along with our understanding.

Before class: watch *Spirited Away* and post your critical reflection

29 September: Secondary Storyworlds and the Power of Language

Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* turns Tolkien-derived fantasy on its head while remaining true to its found principals of wonder, danger, and heroism.

Before class: read *A Wizard of Earthsea* and post your critical reflection

6 October: Epic Worlds

Vaughan and Staples' *Saga* takes us beyond standard fantasy tropes and terrestrial boundaries to develop a fantastic space opera storyworld with strong characterization. Before class: read *Saga: Volume One* and post your critical reflection

13 October: Estranging Traumas

Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* presents a dystopian primary storyworld that explores the traumatic impact of residential schools on indigenous peoples in the land now known as Canada.

Before class: *The Marrow Thieves* and post your critical reflection

20 October: Weird Displacements

VanderMeer's *Annihilation* introduces a strange world with a fragile balance of power. Could this world be related to our own? One cannot be sure due to the weird elements that saturate this storyworld.

Before class: read *Annihilation* and post your critical reflection

27 October: Reading Week

- Unit Two: Collaborative Worldbuilding -

3 November: Bluesky Brainstorming

By this point we should have established groups. The first thing to do as a group is have an open conversation about everyone's lines and veils. Familiarize yourself with the traffic lights system, as well. You will also decide at this point if you would like to produce a metanarrative that can exist beyond the classroom and decide on how you agree the material can be used in the future.

Before class: read Chapters 1-3 and 8 of *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers*

10 November: Framing Storyworlds

How large is your storyworld? Where is it? Who is describing this world? What has happened to shape this world and its peoples? When was the world formed and when will it end? This week you will establish the boundaries of your world in space and time and decide about who's perspective to write your metanarrative from.

Before class: read Chapters 4 and 9 of *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers*

17 November: Structures and Substructures

How important is governance in your world? What about economics? Do people get along? If not, which tensions are most important? What are the strongest cultural influences in your world? You will start to form your world by working through these structural categories and assign group members to begin writing these sections of the metanarrative.

Before class: read Chapter 5 and 10 in *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers*

24 November: Putting It All Together

You should run check-in #1 this week. Take class time to write, and also to discuss where you are headed. It is crucial that everyone works to be on the same page. Swap sections if need be.

Before class: read Chapter 11 in *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers*

1 December: Final Touches

You should run check-in #2 this week. Take class time to revise, and also discuss where you are headed. Swap sections if need be.

Before class: read your group's metanarrative.

- Course Close -

8 December: Introducing your Worlds and Course Wrap Discussion

Groups will share their imaginary world's metanarrative and have a chance to answer questions about their worldbuilding process. The class will have an overview discussion of the course as a whole.

Before class: submit your metanarratives

Course Guidelines

Email

Students in this class are required to check their official university email account at least once a day, in case there are any announcements. Course instructors and workshop leaders will endeavor to respond to emails within 48 hours. Students are encouraged to post non-confidential questions to the blackboard discussion boards so that everyone can benefit from having the question addressed.

Course Discussion Boards

Students in this class are required to check the blackboard discussion board at least once a day, in case there are any announcements. Course instructors and workshop leaders will respond more quickly to discussion posts than to emails.

Academic Skills Centre

Students are strongly encouraged to make use of the Academic Skills Centre at any stage of the course or writing process. Please visit their website: <http://www.trentu.ca/academicskills/>.

Flexibility

If it will benefit the class, changes may be made to the syllabus after notice, discussion, and online vote has taken place.

Accommodations

If you who believe you will require accommodations in this course you should contact Student Accessibility Services by visiting their website at <https://www.trentu.ca/wellness/sas>. Please feel free to be in touch with your course instructor or workshop leader.

Academic Integrity

The university expects that you will hold to the highest level of academic integrity. The university's standards for academic integrity are outlined in the [Undergraduate Academic Integrity Policy](#). For questions, please consult the [Academic Integrity FAQ](#). Because this course requires you to work with each others' ideas and writing, it is of the utmost importance that we recognize who's work we are building upon and make note of it.

Academic Freedom

We all enter this classroom with pre-existing political, ethical, and intellectual commitments. You are all required to engage the material—but you are absolutely not required to agree either with any of the writers we will discuss in whole or in part.

Respect

This course forms a community. It is crucial that we treat each other with the appropriate level of courtesy and respect. No one should be made to feel unwelcome here. Failure to treat other students with the respect they deserve will severely negatively impact your standing in this course. Please take care with others' feelings and thoughts.

Notice Regarding Remote Participation

Regular participation is central to your success in the course. Courses delivered remotely may invite student participation in scheduled (synchronous) lectures and seminars via web-based platforms, such as Zoom. Students unable to participate fully (i.e., video and audio) or partially (i.e., audio only) should email their instructors at the beginning of term to make alternative arrangements for participation in these synchronous discussions.

University Policies

Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty, which includes plagiarism and cheating, is an extremely serious academic offence and carries penalties varying from failure on an assignment to expulsion from the University. Definitions, penalties, and procedures for dealing with plagiarism and cheating are set out in Trent University's *Academic Integrity Policy*. You have a responsibility to educate yourself – unfamiliarity with the policy is not an excuse. You are strongly encouraged to visit Trent's Academic Integrity website to learn more: www.trentu.ca/academicintegrity.

Access to Instruction

It is Trent University's intent to create an inclusive learning environment. If a student has a disability and documentation from a regulated health care practitioner and feels that they may need accommodations to succeed in a course, the student should contact the Student Accessibility Services Office (SAS) at the respective campus as soon as possible.
