

From Earth to the Stars: The Story of the Galactic Diaspora
UHON 351
Time: TR 11 am – 12:15 PM
Room: Morris 0112

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Office Hours: TR 2 – 5 PM

TEXTS

Dawn: The Xenogenesis Trilogy Book 1, Octavia Butler
Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta, Doris Lessing
Orphans of the Sky, Robert Heinlein
Binti, Nnedi Okorafor
The Left Hand of Darkness, Ursula LeGuin
2001: A Space Odyssey (novel Arthur C. Clark and film Stanley Kubrick)
Elite: Dangerous (computer simulation)

“A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.” (Robert Heinlein)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course asks students to consider, through thought experiments, encounters with established narratives, role-playing games, virtual reality simulations, and other creative means, what the coming human diaspora from Earth to the solar system and beyond might look like and what effects it might have. Are humans who, through many generations of space travel, have come to look different from present-day Earth people still human? Are the intelligent machines that we will need to guide us through space human? When we encounter other self-aware species, will they be “human” to us? The answer might seem simple in the abstract, but will our theories withstand contact with “others”?

We will spend the semester attempting to separate abstraction from experience by going on a great galactic journey. We will use imagination (primarily), as well as novels, films, television shows, computer games, podcasts, and virtual reality experiences to create a plausible (if a bit fanciful) simulation of deep-space travel and exploration. Students may use their real-world interests and studies to inhabit a role within our space-going class, or they may conjure up a fictional identity and skillset. Everyone from any discipline or background is welcome: chefs, physicists, programmers, botanists, sustainability experts, psychologists, doctors, veterinarians, astronomers, mathematicians, literature experts, painters, dancers, poets, warriors, pacifists, priests and atheists—all these and more are vital to a robust society. Most of us will have to learn any number of new and unanticipated skills before we make planetfall.

To create the atmosphere of a long journey through the Milky Way, the class will leverage the portable recording equipment of the Creative Writing Program's podcasting lab to create a series of "logs" to narrate our journey, our discoveries, our failures and our accomplishments. Likewise, we will make use of the VR lab and classroom of the College of Liberal Arts as well as the VR equipment made available by the Virtual Reality Classroom Initiative (a powerful VR headset for each student) to work together in space.

The class will also use the SIU campus and surrounding region for the scavenging missions that our crew will need to undertake to make progress toward our goal: faculty from many disciplines, as well as staff and students, will be recruited to play the roles of the denizens of distant worlds whom we will meet along the way, and from whom we will have to learn important pieces of information to help guide us.

The eventual product of the class will be a multi-faceted, many-layered audio-visual narrative of our journey, documented by a multiplicity of voices. Though the first part of the class is structured, the latter weeks encourage "emergent gameplay," in which the participants of a game depart from the intentions of the game maker to engage in their own pursuits. By semester's end, the class and I will either reach a habitable distant world upon which to found a new human civilization (whatever we decide that must be), or we will drift forever, lost among the scattered stars.

This class offers a unique opportunity for students from diverse disciplines, backgrounds, and belief systems to participate in the creation of a space-bound society with an ethos and a culture all its own. Will it be a tyranny? A technocracy, a theocracy, a military dictatorship, a pure democracy, a socialist utopia, a libertarian paradise, an anarchy? Can we learn cooperation in order to attain an all-but-unachievable goal?

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This class makes use of the enduring genre of the literature of human diaspora, including myths, legends, traditional written literature, film, television series, graphic novels, music, games, podcasts, virtual reality, and other forms of narrative experience, to introduce students to the writer's process and perspective. Students will partake of and respond to assigned literature not as critics or passive audience members, but as fellow creatives who are making use of foundational texts in the genre. Students will create their own narratives via weekly audio and video "logs" documenting how they've spent their time aboard the "ship" and on "away missions"; participate in group narrative creation (roleplaying) by interweaving their narratives with the narratives of others.

Think of this as a class in envisioning a fully fleshed out fictional world as a writer does, and in using that imaginative material to inform the writer's work and life. Students will learn how to respond inventively to dramatic situations created by others and to improvise in a cooperative way ("yes and") to solve the problems and resolve the conflicts with which they are faced. The design of the class is meant to encourage active listening, creative vulnerability and robust collaboration, sustained suspension of disbelief, and the ability to see one's actions in the context of the lives of others and within an interdependent community. The ship is our world in microcosm, and the galactic voyage is our shared life together in that world.

SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

WRITING: Students will take part in logging the events of the class's journey, in and out of class, individually and in teams, via audio and video recording. As a capstone to the semester, students will cooperate to weave together a synthesis of the most cogent narratives captured in these logs, to create an overarching tale.

PARTICIPATION: Students will engage actively in both the individual and team logging assignments as well as the in the roleplaying elements of the class. Energetic participation is of primary importance in a class like this one.

EVALUATION

LOGS: The creation of individual logs and contribution to the synthesis of those logs into the overall story of the class will account for 50% of the final grade. Grades will be determined by evidence of students' substantial investment of time, effort, and energy in tracking and journaling about the events of the class, and by inventiveness as well as effectiveness in making these logs interesting.

PARTICIPATION: General class participation will account for 50% of the final grade. Participation includes but is not limited to a lively interest in and constructive contribution to the improvisational roleplaying element at the heart of the class.

ATTENDANCE

Because of the communal nature of an improvisational class like this one, attendance will typically be 100%. All absences must be excused by the instructor in advance. Unexcused absences will result in diminution of the student's class participation evaluation.

LATE SUBMISSION OF WORK

The format of the class demands that work be submitted punctually. No unexcused late submissions will be accepted.

A SHORT STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLE

A storytelling class like this one must be the creation of all its participants. It is a community of mutual responsibility. Behave accordingly.

INSTRUCTOR CONTACT & CONFERENCES

If at any time you have questions regarding assignments, responses to assignments, class procedures, grades, critiques, critical techniques, or any other element of the business of this class, or questions regarding creative writing at Southern Illinois University or in general, please do not hesitate to contact the instructor.

A conference with the instructor is not a requirement for successful completion of this course. It is, however, desirable to have at least one face-to-face conversation with the instructor and/or the TA during the semester, if only to say hello. Individual conferences may be required of students at the instructor's discretion.

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Benedict

THE SCHEDULE

Week 1

- roll and syllabus
- improvisation ethos (egolessness, “yes and”)
- discussion: what’s our mission? Why go to the stars? What is your role?
- emergent game play: The Distant Worlds 2 Expedition
- giving our ship an awesome name
- introduction to *Dawn: The Xenogenesis Trilogy Book 1*, Octavia Butler

Week 2

- the habit of logging (audio and video)
- in-class roleplaying: the launch
- introduction to the *Elite: Dangerous* universe
- class participation: creation of sample logs

Week 3

- class participation: log sharing
- excerpts from *Solaris* (Tarkovsky)
- in-class roleplaying: away missions
- discuss *Dawn: The Xenogenesis Trilogy Book 1*, Octavia Butler
- **homework:** audio and video log entries

Week 4

- introduction to *Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta*, Doris Lessing
- class participation: log sharing
- The Holodeck (VR experience): **Universe Sandbox 2**
- in-class roleplaying: **Year One**
- **homework:** away missions, audio and video log entries

Week 5

- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: life aboard a colony ship
- The Holodeck (VR experience): **Tour of Rama**
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Two**
- **homework:** shipboard life, audio and video log entries

Week 6

- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: first contact with extraterrestrial life
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Three**
- discuss *Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta*, Doris Lessing
- **homework:** first contact, audio and video log entries

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Week 7

- introduction to *Orphans of the Sky*, Robert Heinlein
- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: the law (crime and punishment on a colony ship)
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Four**
- **homework:** TBD (emergent gameplay), audio and video log entries

Week 8

- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: TBD (emergent gameplay)
- The Holodeck (VR experience): **eSports in Zero G**
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Five**
- **homework:** TBD (emergent gameplay), audio and video log entries

Week 9

- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: TBD (emergent gameplay)
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Six**
- discuss *Orphans of the Sky*, Robert Heinlein
- **homework:** TBD (emergent gameplay), audio and video log entries

Week 10

- introduction to *Binti*, Nnedi Okorafor
- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: TBD (emergent gameplay)
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Seven**
- **homework:** TBD (emergent gameplay), audio and video log entries

Week 11

- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: TBD (emergent gameplay)
- The Holodeck (VR experience): **TBD**
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Eight**
- **homework:** TBD (emergent gameplay), audio and video log entries

Week 12

- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: TBD (emergent gameplay)
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Nine**
- discuss *Binti*, Nnedi Okorafor
- TBD (emergent gameplay), audio and video log entries

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Week 13

- introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula LeGuin
- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: TBD (emergent gameplay)
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Ten**
- **homework:** TBD (emergent gameplay), audio and video log entries

Week 14

- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: TBD (emergent gameplay)
- discuss *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula LeGuin
- in-class roleplaying: **Year of Arrival (?)**
- **homework:** TBD (emergent gameplay), audio and video log entries

Week 15

- class participation: log sharing
- thought experiment and discussion: founding a new society—challenges and pitfalls
- in-class roleplaying: **Year Zero**
- create documentary from selected audio and video logs
- share and watch audio/video documentary