

ENGLISH 436

Fiction, Game, World

Summer 2012 - 271 Willard, 2:20-3:35pm MTWRF
noendofneon.net/worlds

Adam Haley
44 Burrowes / adamhaley@psu.edu / noendofneon.net

Office Hours: TW 3:45-5:15pm in Kern
and by appointment

A world is an odd thing. But like so many fundamental components of how we think about and experience our lives, its oddness as a concept is not immediately apparent. The world is just . . . everything, right? All The Stuff? It's the way we refer to our surroundings (personal, political, economic, cultural, material; local, national, global) as a *totality*, as a singular object of thought rather than a whole lot of disparate, individual aspects. It's our name for the baseline of existence, the much larger background to the foreground of our individual and interconnected lives, the stage on which we act life's play. It's terrain, both literally and figuratively—terrain none of us will ever explore completely but which we theoretically could, if we had but time and an infinite supply of frequent flier miles. There's us and there's the world we live in; we inhabit it and it contains us; we are small and it is large (it probably wouldn't work very well if we were bigger than our world, now, would it?). Seems simple enough.

Conceptually, though, "world" is a dizzying knot of contradictions. It seems universal and comprehensive ("the whole wide world") but may in fact be partial and exclusive ("[wish I could be part of that world](#)," sings the Little Mermaid memorably). It suggests commonality and oneness ("[we are the world](#)," or we were when an army of pop stars said we were) but also depends on idiosyncrasy and particularity (the world of the ancient Greeks, the Third World, [the world of competitive mustache-growing](#)). It encompasses everything, or maybe only actually a few things—which, from a certain standpoint, may *feel* like everything. There's my world and your world and that other guy's world; there's the ancient world, the medieval world, and the modern world (each different from the others but, confusingly, enveloping the same planet); there are worlds smaller than the eye can see (the amoeba doesn't worry about globalization) and worlds so distant the physical laws of the universe likely prevent any of us from ever setting foot on them; there's the wide world of sports, the small world in which we inevitably run into people from our kindergarten class in random places decades later, the limited and sometimes limiting world of a small town, the unthinkable tiny and provincial world of academia.

What I want to impress on you at the outset of this class, in other words, is that "world" as a concept is much more complicated, flexible, plural, and remarkable than it first seems. Like Whitman, it contains multitudes.

Enter fiction, stage right. As anyone who got a little weepy upon finishing the third *Hunger Games* book or watching the last *Harry Potter* movie can attest, fictions produce worlds—worlds we feel like we're inhabiting for a time, worlds we grow to feel at home in, worlds we *miss* when we put down the book or eject the DVD or beat the final boss. Our task for the next six weeks is to unpack the relationship between the kinds of narrative and/or interactive fiction we tend to consume, on the one hand, and our concept of worldness on the other hand. What do we mean when we talk about "the world of that novel" or "the world of this film"? How do novels and short stories create, simulate, imagine, imply, or refer to a world? Does television, each series spread across months and years, generate a fictional world in the same way as the two hours of a film? How do we participate differently in the world of a graphic novel and the world of a video game? How do these various cultural objects construct or suggest their worlds, and what does that reveal to us about how we think about non-fictional worlds? How can we think of worldness as a matter of form and structure rather than of content, and how do fictional and virtual/game worlds facilitate this? How does each narrative—by definition smaller and narrower than the fictional world presumed to contain it—imply the parts of its world it doesn't expressly depict? How do traditional narrative gizmos like plot, character, and perspective shape the way we imagine fictional worlds? How does our experience of fictional worlds affect our experience of "real" worlds? The question here is not what each text *means*, but rather what it *does*—how it molds our way of thinking, perceiving, imagining, and thus living.

As this is ostensibly a class on contemporary fiction, we will limit ourselves to texts from the last few decades. I would suggest, moreover, that this question of worlds and worldness is particularly pressing in these same decades. The world used to be something one only had to think about in its totality if one was trying to conquer it—Alexander the Great had to be a theorist of worldness in a way that Joe Schmo the 19th Century Chimneysweep did not. In the era of globalization and virtual worlds, however, all such bets are off. Narrative fiction has always had interesting relationships to worldness (Dante's Hell was a virtual world of sorts long before *World of Warcraft*), but these relationships are particularly compelling now that world-thinking is so urgent. As such, the question of worldness and its relation to fiction may be one of the most pressing questions to ask about contemporary literature and culture. Through the wide array of texts we'll encounter this summer, we will hope to shed some useful and interesting light on these and other questions.

Grading:

in-class participation:	15%	Twitter participation:	15%	ANGEL forum:	15%
paper 1:	15%	Storify project:	15%	final paper/project:	25%

Attendance: Regular attendance is **required**. Please come to every class, and please come on time. Your grade will be lowered if your attendance is poor, down to and including "F." Specifically, you are permitted **two (2!)** absences; after that, your grade begins to drop. Excused absences for illness or emergency are appropriate, but beyond that, let me repeat PSU policy: a student whose absences are excessive "may run the risk of receiving a lower grade or a failing grade," whether or not some of those absences are "excused." In other words: *don't miss class*. Pretty please.

Participation: I want to hear from you, in any and all forms you're comfortable with. This is why participation (in-class, Twitter, and ANGEL) totals nearly half of your course grade. What we're reading is not dry, stodgy, solitary literature. It should elicit responses from you—emotional, ethical, intellectual, or otherwise. I hope you'll feel comfortable weighing in during class discussions, and even if you're not normally inclined to talk in class, I'd encourage you to step outside your comfort zone here. We won't bite. (*Note: please don't bite.*) Those who still don't feel comfortable speaking up very often should focus extra energy on participating on ANGEL and Twitter, above and beyond the required postings.

ANGEL Forum: Twice a week (not on the same day), you'll post responses to the texts on ANGEL. You may have observations or provocations about one or more of the readings in terms of theme, character, plot, setting, and so on. Something interesting or noteworthy may have stood out to you. Or you might relate a given reading to other readings we've covered, other conversations we've had in class, or broader philosophical/political/literary issues. Your response need only be a paragraph long (about five or so sentences—ideally more than "See Spot run. See Spot reflect on the philosophical quagmire of fictional worlds. Reflect, Spot, reflect!"), but if you have more to say, by all means, let fly. These brief writings not only tell me that you're keeping up with the reading and thinking about the course material outside of class, they will also give me a better sense of the topics that interest and provoke you, so that our in-class discussions can be happier and more productive. (*Note: if you want to make me really happy, start responding to and following up on each other's posts. This should be part of a conversation.*)

Twitter: You will be responsible for a minimum of six tweets a week that respond to course readings or to aspects of the broader class conversation. You need to start a Twitter account (if you have one, ensure that it is public, not locked) and send me an email identifying what your Twitter name is. Append our course hashtag (**#ENGL436**) to each tweet so your classmates and I can see it. Respond to others by using the @ symbol (e.g., @noendofneon). Ideally, a remark will come to you as you read for each class session, so keep your phone or computer handy if possible. You're also not only welcome but encouraged to tweet during class; I'll have the feed up on the screen throughout class. In general, your tweets should both help demonstrate your engagement with the texts and further flesh out the conversations taking place in class and on the discussion forum. (What your cat ate for breakfast is not a relevant tweet topic for the purposes of the class, unless your cat somehow ate a world, in which case we all likely have more serious problems.) I suggest that two of your weekly tweets respond to other users' tweets on our hashtag. I will be posting questions and comments as well, off and on.

Academic Freedom: In English classrooms, academic freedom most frequently comes up in two contexts: charges of "offensiveness" on the one hand, "brainwashing" or "indoctrination" on the other. While you have the right to be free of gratuitous insult, you do not have the right not to be offended. I mean something very specific by this: at a university, you do not have the right to be protected from words, ideas, values, or beliefs—whether conservative or liberal, religious or secular, putatively obscene, or any other category—that you find distasteful. A key part of any education is the careful scrutiny of received ideas. By the same token, you should feel free to disagree, either verbally or in your written assignments, with any idea expressed in class, whether by me or by any student. Your grade will not be determined by how closely your thought agrees with mine or how aptly you mimic my own views in your papers and forum posts; rather, it will be the product of the quality of both your thinking and your expression of that thinking. Every semester, I happily give "A" grades to students with whom I strongly disagree, because they write and speak with such clarity and grace.

Penn State Sexual Harassment Policy AD-41: Penn State is committed to an open, sensitive, understanding, and responsive campus environment, and as such, sexual harassment of faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated. Penn State's sexual harassment policy is available in greater detail [online](#).

Penn State Accommodations Policy: It is Penn State's [policy](#) not to discriminate against qualified students with documented disabilities in its educational programs. If you have a disability-related need for modifications in this course, contact the Office for Disability Services at University Park (located in 116 Boucke Building) at 863-1807, preferably as early as possible, and please let me know as well.

Texts available at the PSU bookstore:

- *Alison Bechdel - *Fun Home* (ISBN: [0618871711](#))
- *Susanna Kaysen - *Girl, Interrupted* (ISBN: [0679746048](#))
- *Octavia Butler - *Kindred* (ISBN: [0807083690](#))
- *Colson Whitehead - *Zone One* (ISBN: [0385528078](#))

Texts available at the Comic Swap (110 South Fraser St):

- *Felicia Day/Jim Rugg - *The Guild* (ISBN: [1595825495](#))
- *Brian Ralph - *Daybreak* (ISBN: [1770460551](#))
- *Jason Shiga - *Meanwhile* (ISBN: [0810984237](#))

Texts available on Amazon/iTMS/etc.:

- **The Wire* season 1 ([DVD](#), [Amazon instant](#), [iTunes](#))

Schedule

DATE	READING DUE
WEEK 1: FICTIONALITY, FORM, WORLDNESS	
5.14	Paul Kerschen - " Atlas "
5.15	Joanna Russ - "When It Changed" (PDF), Darko Suvin - "Estrangement and Cognition" (PDF)
5.16	John Barth - "Lost in the Funhouse" (PDF), David Foster Wallace - " A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life "
5.17	<i>Lonelygirl15</i> (episodes TBA, linked on course website)
5.18	film: <i>Babel</i> (screening Thursday evening); Horia Gârbea - " Father's Return from War. Topics "
WEEK 2: PERSONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL WORLDS	
5.21	watch Girls - "Pilot" ; Jenna Wortham - " Where (My) Girls At? ," Kendra James - " Dear Lena Dunham: I Exist ," Ta-Nehisi Coates - " Girls' Through the Veil "
5.22	Alison Bechdel - <i>Fun Home</i> p. 1-150 (ch. 1-5)
5.23	<i>Fun Home</i> p. 151-232 (ch. 6-end), Susanna Kaysen - <i>Girl, Interrupted</i> p. 1-63
5.24	<i>Girl, Interrupted</i> p. 65-168
5.25	film: <i>Melancholia</i> (screening Thursday evening); Ken Dahl - " Sick " #1-17
WEEK 3: SOCIAL/INSTITUTIONAL WORLDS	
5.28	* * * NO CLASS - Memorial Day - eat/drink things, and don't come to class! * * *
5.29	watch <i>The Wire</i> episodes 1-3
5.30	<i>The Wire</i> episodes 4-6
5.31	<i>The Wire</i> episodes 7-10
6.1	<i>The Wire</i> episodes 11-13; PAPER 1 DUE
WEEK 4: VIRTUAL/GAME WORLDS	
6.4	Joshuah Bearman - " The Perfect Game "; play <i>Pac-Man</i> , <i>Tetris</i> , <i>Super Mario Brothers</i> , <i>Flow</i> , <i>Small Worlds</i> (a few minutes each, enough to talk about them), <i>Passage</i> (all the way through; it's very short!)
6.5	Felicia Day and Jim Rugg - <i>The Guild</i> ; watch The Guild season 1
6.6	play Clearance , The 21 Steps
6.7	play Portal ; Daniel Story - " Love in the Time of Cityville "
6.8	Brian Ralph - <i>Daybreak</i> ; play Second Person Shooter Zato
WEEK 5: MULTIPLE/PARALLEL WORLDS	
6.11	Jason Shiga - <i>Meanwhile</i> ; watch <i>Community</i> - " Remedial Chaos Theory "
6.12	Octavia Butler - <i>Kindred</i> p. 9-107
6.13	<i>Kindred</i> p. 108-188; STORIFY PROJECT DUE
6.14	<i>Kindred</i> p. 189-264
6.15	film: <i>The Fountain</i> (screening Thursday evening)
WEEK 6: THE FUTURE AND THE END OF THE WORLD	
6.18	William Gibson - "The Gernsback Continuum" (PDF)
6.19	film: <i>Children of Men</i> (screening Monday evening)
6.20	Colson Whitehead - <i>Zone One</i> p. 1-103; " Resolution "
6.21	<i>Zone One</i> p. 105-217; play One Chance
6.22	<i>Zone One</i> p. 217-259

The **final paper** will be due on Monday, June 25th by 11:59pm.