Course Proposal for the First Year Seminar

Name: Joe Essid

Department: Rhetoric & Communication Studies

Availability (Fall and/or Spring Term; one or two sections): Fall 2010--1 section

Approval of Department Chair: pending

Title: Cyberspace: History, Culture, Future

Description of Course Content/Theme:

William Gibson, who gave us the term "cyberspace" and described a dystopia of revolutionary hackers, "megacorporations," and collapsed governments in his 1984 novel Neuromancer, once noted that he intended his fictions as cautionary tales about the power of media. He found, to his chagrin, that a critical mass of hackers, gamers, and corporations decided that they wanted to build his "consensual hallucination." And by the mid-90s, the digital genie was out of the bottle: a new way of communicating, playing, and making money had emerged with the World Wide Web.

In our breathless rush since then, we rarely stop to ask: How did we get to this point? Where might we be going? What costs and benefits might accrue from an age of constantly accelerating technological change? How could such change alter our identity as biological creatures, not to mention our careers, notions of privacy, and conceptions of intellectual property?

Students taking this seminar would not only discuss the Web and cyberculture but get close to it in ways they may not have imagined from the "comfort zones" of Facebook and restricted course-management software like Blackboard. They'll see and actually explore a few cutting-edge venues online, and some of their work will help develop future iterations of this seminar.

Briefly describe how the course will seek to achieve the five goals of the First Year Experience:

. Expand students understanding of the world (e.g. state how the course will challenge students either to think about important questions and issues they may not have thought about before, or think about them in ways they have not thought about them).

Though our students use the Internet daily, in my experience only a few of them have considered the origins of this network and its indigenous culture. From dark visions of Cyberpunk writers, to the writings of Lawrence Lessig about the ownership of intellectual property, to the manifestos of John Perry Barlow and Ted Kaczynski about personal freedom in an age of digital surveillance, the Web has a "backstory." A host of utopians, Cassandras, neo-luddite critics, even a terrorist have published textual and non-textual media about the radical social and intellectual changes that are upon us.
This course aims to make students aware of the origins and possible futures of a technology that has become a personal and academic necessity for us all. They should leave it as critically aware.

Enhance their ability to read and think critically (e.g. a preliminary list of books and articles for the course and exercises or pedagogical methods that will be used to improve critical reading and thinking).

The course will include works of fiction, cinema, and non-fiction, including these likely candidates:

--Anderson, M. Feed.

--Barlow, J. "A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace" and other writings from the Electronic Frontier Foundation

--Birkerts, S. Selections from The Gutenberg Elegies

--Forster, E.M. "The Machine Stops"

--Gibson, W. Neuromancer and selected short fiction from the anthology Burning Chrome

--Kaczynski, T, "The Unabomber's Manifesto"

--Lessig, L. The Future of Ideas

--Pineiro-Escoriaza, J, Dir. Second Skin (documentary film about gamers)

--Poe, E.A. "The Fall of the House of Usher"

--Stephenson, N. Snow Crash

--Sterling, B. Selections from The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier

--Turkle, S. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet

--Wachowski, dir. The Matrix

Students will practice close-reading, synthesis, film analysis, and explore and create interactive media. They'll use Second Life, Metaplace, and Open Sim virtual worlds, including a 3D simulation of Poe's House of Usher developed by the University of Richmond, with volunteer actors in the roles of Madeline and Roderick Usher.

Enhance students’ ability to communicate effectively in writing, speech, and other appropriate forms (e.g. describe the type and number of writing assignments students will complete, the opportunities students will have to develop their writing skills, the kinds of
1) A major research project, on a topic approved with a preliminary annotated bibliography, of at least 2000 words, plus a series of photos. We will have class presentations and a "mixed reality" cybersalon. Students will give simultaneous talks in our classroom to their peers and online, using voice-over-IP technology that I use regularly, to members of the Second Life Education Roundtable. I am a transcriber and Web manager for this group of faculty members and technologists.

I am currently developing a "virtual showcase building" for my former students' multimedia projects in Second Life. We can host events in Second Life for up to 100 participants using video, voice, and Web-linked materials. I am fluent with these technologies and the students would merely need to prepare their Web-based materials and wear a headset while presenting in our classroom.

This will be the culmination of many shorter projects and ideas developed in a weekly blogging assignment; each writer will keep a blog and be required to follow and comment upon classmates' work.

2) An earlier project of 1000 words that prepares a synthesis of fiction or film & materials about cyberculture from both popular books and articles I recommend. This will prepare writers for doing less "tethered" research during the final project.

3) A group project, with each member preparing a 1000 word analysis of UR's simulation of The House of Usher. Students will be co-creators in this venture, and their recommendations will shape revisions to the ongoing work with the Usher "build."

4) A short story of 1000 words or more based upon ideas developed by the Cyberpunk writers of the 1980s and 90s.

Develop fundamentals of information literacy and library research. Make time on your syllabus for students to complete the required library workshop outside of class and at least one additional library-related assignment for the class. Indicate any additional ways in which students will make use of library resources.

The final project, described above, will feature a preliminary proposal and annotated bibliography that will be read by me and our Writing Consultant. We will have our library liaison visit the class after receiving copies of the students' proposals to discuss avenues for researching their final topics.

Provide the opportunity for students to work closely with a faculty mentor (e.g. Indicate specific efforts you will make to interact with each student, learn more about each student’s interests and abilities, and provide appropriate guidance for their intellectual growth.)

As I do in all of my smaller courses, I will meet each student personally about the final project.
In addition to this work, as they learn about virtual worlds, I will meet at least once with each writer to help them with their first steps online. In practice, most of my writers meet me as well as their Writing Consultant several other times during the term.

Briefly state your background for teaching this course:

My dissertation focused on the role of technological enthusiasm in American culture before World War II, and I've published articles on technology in the classroom and the pedagogical links between creative hypertext and theories of mise-en-scene and montage from film theory.

Two of my students from earlier courses that employed Second Life and multimedia projects presented, in early June, at a Second Life Education Roundtable meeting to over 50 academics from around the world.

I am currently revising an article on a "playful pedagogy" for Millennial-generation writers who use virtual worlds and craft multimedia projects.