Course Description

This course explores digital culture in the United States after 1945. In the span of only a few decades, the role of computers in society dramatically transformed from a complicated tool serving bureaucratic and militaristic aims during World War II to a children’s toy found in the domestic space of the American home by the 1980s. Against this backdrop, we will draw on a diverse set of cultural sources ranging from classic midcentury novels by Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon, to Looney Tunes cartoons and DC Comics to examine the many ways these digital devices help us think about labor, gender, sexuality, and national identity in the information age.

Course Requirements and Breakdown of Grades

- Research Scavenger Hunt*  5
- Close-Reading Short Essay  15
- Final Essay Proposal*  5
- Show and Tell Assignment*  5
- Final Essay Draft*  10
- Final Essay  35
- Participation  25

*You will receive full marks for completing the Research Scavenger Hunt, Show and Tell Assignment, Final Essay Proposal, and Final Essay Draft
Course Schedule

Week 1  

**Computers Before Computers**

*In class*
Look up definitions of “Computer” in the Oxford English Dictionary
Ada Augusta, Countess of Lovelace, “Notes,” October 1842
Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” *MIND*, October 1950
View *The Machine that Changed the World*, Part I (1992, documentary film)

Week 2  

**Building a Better Brain: Harvard’s History of Computers**

*To read and view for class today*
Kurt Vonnegut, *The Player Piano* (1952), Chapter 1 - 18
View “The Story of Mark I,” *The Mark I Computer* (chsi.harvard.edu)

*In class*
Class visit to Mark I (ASCC) Computer at Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments. Science Center, Harvard University.

Week 3  

**The Problems of Postindustrial Society**

*To read for class today*

Week 4  

**Women’s Work and Office Automation**

*To read and view for class today*
Angelica Gibbs, “Punch with Care,” *The New Yorker* 17 February 1940
View “Jean Bartik and the ENIAC Women,” *Computer History Museum Channel, YouTube*

*In class*
View scenes from *Desk Set* (1957, film)
View scenes from *That Touch of Mink* (1962, film)

**Assignment Due – Research Scavenger Hunt**
For this scavenger hunt your task is to track down and bring to class two different pictures. The first should be a historical photograph of a woman working at her actual job at a computer, encoder, or punch card system in the 1940s or 1950s. Collect any information you can on this worker: What is her name? What was her job title? What company did she work for? You might begin these searches with the ENIAC and Mark I since many women worked with these machines. The
second picture should be an advertisement from the same time period for a computer than features the image of a woman. Be prepared to answer what year the ad is from and what product featured.

Week 5

Machines Smarter Than Men: The UNIVAC Computer on TV

To read and listen to for class today
“A Machine Makes a Monkey Out of Man,” Jacksonville Journal, 11 November 1952
“Unhappy Univac,” Washington Post, 8 November 1952
Edmund C. Berkeley, “Can Machines Think? What is a Mechanical Brain?” from Giant Brains or Machines that Think (1949)
“The Night a Computer Predicted the Next President: All Tech Considered,” NPR, 31 October 2012

In class
Superman’s Girlfriend, Lois Lane Issue #24 – The Perfect Husband!, April 1961
View CBS Television Coverage of the 1952 Presidential Election
View “Rocket Squad,” Looney Tunes, Warner Bros. 1956
View “To Hare is Human,” Looney Tunes, Warner Bros. 1956

Week 6

White-Collar Work and Postwar Suburban Families

To read for class today
Richard Yates, Revolutionary Road
Elaine Tyler May, Chapter 1 “Containment at Home: Cold War, Warm Hearth” Homeward Bound
Brian Rajski, “Writing Systems: Richard Yates, Remington Rand and the Univac” Contemporary Literature

Week 7

A Computer in Every Store: IBM Commercializes the Computer

To read for class today

In class
View The Machine that Changed the World, Part II. (1992, documentary film)

Assignment Due: Close reading short essay
Choose a single primary source (one cartoon, comic, movie scene, computer ad, or novel) and write a short essay (5-7 pages) that analyzes your selected text. Be sure to cite specific evidence, explain in detail something surprising or unusual about your text given what we’ve learned about computers so far.
Week 8

Integrated Circuits and Postmodern Fiction

To read for class today
Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

Week 9

Student Protests: Universities and the Tyranny of the Punch Card

To read for class today
Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man*
Steven Lubar, “‘Do Not Fold, Spindle or Mutilate’: A Cultural History of the Punch Card”

In class
View *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes* (1969, Disney film)
Writing Discussion: What is an Argument?

Week 10

Personal Computers and Commune Culture

To read for class today

In class
Explore back issues of the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968-1972)

Assignment Due: Final Essay Proposal
Choose a topic for your final essay. In your (1 page) proposal, first describe this topic using terms we’ve covered in class and explain what sorts of questions you have about the topic that you’d like to explore further in your essay. Then, name the primary and secondary sources that we’ve read together in class that you would like to write on. For each text that you list, explain what information it might offer your paper.

Week 11

Xerox PARC and Child’s Play

To read for class today
**In class**
Visit to Lego Mindstorms at MIT Media Lab
https://www.media.mit.edu/sponsorship/getting-value/collaborations/mindstorms

**Week 12**

**A Family’s Best Friend: Computers in the Home**

*To read and view for class today*
View “Video: The Evolution of 8-bit Art” and “Interactive Timeline of Game History,” *The Video Game Revolution*. (pbs.org)

*Assignment due: Show and tell*
Present one print ad or a television ad for a 1980s video game to the class and, in 5 minutes or less, explain how it was marketed to children, parents, or families by pointing to specific examples.

**Week 13**

**Writing Workshop**

*Assignment due: Draft of Final Essay*
Bring two hard copies of your final essay draft to class today. Your draft should be a substantial amount of your final essay (8-10 pages). It should include all the elements required for your final essay including: engagement with secondary sources, an intervention in the critical conversation, a thesis statement, and close-reading of primary sources. Be prepared to point to aspects of your draft you’d like specific feedback on.

*In Class*
Peer Writing Workshop

**Week 14**

**Expanding Family Networks**

*To read for class today*

*Assignment due: Final Essay*
Choose one of the topics we’ve covered in class. Write a final essay (10-12 pages) that first explains how other writers have approached the topic. Offer your own argument and explain how your point differs from what’s been said. Be sure to offer a close reading of a single text to support your argument.