Grades, Assignments, and Videogames

Wait a minute ... did he say videogames?
Yes, he did. Think of this course as a semester-long videogame. In many videogames you undertake quests or tasks in order to obtain experience points. This class will operate on a similar principle, your grade being determined by how many points you accrue over the course of the semester.

Due to the nature of the grading system, there are no required assignments. Instead, you may choose from an array of writing objectives. Completion of each objective will earn you a certain number of points up to the stated maximum for that task. By earning points you “level up” your grade. As in a videogame, these objectives are optional. Not every player will attempt every task. You may complete as many or as few you wish. *Points can also be gained or lost for things like participation, attendance, and preparedness.* That said, the primary way you will earn points is by completing the writing tasks. This mechanic, however, provides you the freedom to attempt only those that interest you. The total points you earn over the semester will determine your final grade.

**Rules & Gameplay:**
- There will be *twelve weeks* during which you may complete and submit writing tasks. Once a week has passed, you may no longer submit an objective for that week.

- You may complete and turn in only one writing task per week. This means you may attempt at most twelve tasks. This also means you may not turn in all of your work at the end of the semester.

- Level one and level two objectives may be repeated as frequently as you like. For instance, you may write an author introduction for each of the writers on our syllabus.

- Each level three and level four objective may be completed no more than twice, although you may elect to complete multiple objectives at these levels. You may write two book reviews, a craft analysis, and two creative responses. You cannot write three book reviews.

- Yes, you can earn more than 100 points.

**Leaderboard:**
Each of you will choose a unique game-name for this class: *ShyKid1987*, for instance. This game-name will represent you on the class leaderboard. The leaderboard will present a tally of the top point scorers each week. The individual who accrues the most points at the end of the semester will receive a prize.

**Writing Objectives:**
As in a videogame, certain tasks are more difficult and hence offer greater rewards. The writing tasks below have been grouped into four levels, each level providing significantly more points. The expectations increase commensurately. You can complete a task well or poorly. You earn points based on the quality of the work submitted.

**Level 1**
*Author Introduction (10 points) (400-500 words)*
This course is unique in that we will be reading the work of writers coming to campus. One of the cool elements of these visits is that students introduce the writers. Although most of you will not actually get up on stage, you can earn points by submitting an introduction as if you were. Voice is important here. You want the tone to be respectful yet conversational. In addition to describing the author’s career, her major publications, awards, and a discussion of the work we have read for class, the best introductions offer some sort of personal connection. What was it that you found compelling about the material?

**Event Review (10 points) (400-500 words)**
The event review is your chance to offer an insightful summary of the writer’s trip to Butler. Imagine that you are writing this for a professional blog. Try to set the scene in an engaging manner. Discuss the location, the atmosphere, your expectations. Your goal here is not simply to describe what happened – Susan Writer came to the stage and told some funny jokes. Rather, you should suggest how the event helps us better understand the work we read in class.

**Ethical Reflection (10 points) (400-500 words)**
Perhaps the main goal of a liberal arts education is to encourage you to think critically and conscientiously about the world and your place in it. Doing so will enable you to engage thoughtfully with your community and provide the kind of active participation that is the foundation of democratic society. A liberal arts education should force you to ask difficult questions. It will not provide easy answers. Much of the writing we will be discussing this semester deals with pressing social issues such as race relations, environmental degradation, addiction, and gender inequity. This writing objective offers you a chance to consider the ethical implications of the work we are reading. What might these poems tell us about the world we live in? About our own lives beyond the text? Use this opportunity to connect what we do in class to your life.

**Level 2**

**Character Interview (12 points) (see description)**
For this writing task, your goal is to interview one of the characters in a piece of writing. Treat the character as if he/she were an actor in a film. So you may ask, for instance, what it was like working with the author, or what the character felt about a choice the author made. Obviously, this will entail some creative thinking on your part about the literary work. Your interview should consist of twelve to sixteen substantive questions along with thoughtful, in-depth responses that, in the end, offer us some further insights into the work at hand.

**Visual Translation (12 points) (accompanying explanation 250-500 words)**
Select one of our works this semester and create a visual response to it. As we read, pay attention to the images that interest or excite you, then draw, paint, or collage them. Get as creative as you want. These can be anything from comics to watercolor paintings. Your visual translation can be realistic or abstract. Be sure to consider what element(s) of the reading experience you are translating. Are you focusing on the events, personalities, ideas depicted, your response to them, or both? The translation will not be graded on the quality of your art, but rather the extent to which you used the project to engage more deeply the literary work. A 250-500 word reflection on what you were trying to achieve must accompany your work.

**Level 3**

**Book Review (20 points) (750-1,250 words)**
The aim of a book review is to explicate and offer an assessment of the work. Does it succeed or fail? What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? Your model is not a review on Amazon or GoodReads, but rather a professional review written for, say, *The New York Times* or the *New York*
Review of Books. Read several of these and you will notice the following elements. 1. A description of the characters and plot (this should relate to a specific point you are making). 2. A brief biography / bibliography of the author and an assessment of his / her career. 3. A claim about the novel’s theme or what the reader should take away from the work (this is the explication of the work’s meaning). 4. An assessment of the work.

Craft Analysis (20 points) (750-1,250 words)
The craft analysis focuses on a specific element, technique, or device of the literary work. It is an attempt to better understand how a writer writes. For example, “You've read John Updike’s ‘A & P.’ You realize that one of the story's strengths is the way that it is grounded in setting—not just in a grocery store, but in an A&P near the beach as seen through the eyes of the teenaged narrator. So you ask, ‘How does Updike use concrete detail to convey setting and atmosphere—and, simultaneously, to characterize the narrator?’” Some other elements you might consider include:

- The use of metaphor in ...
- The effect of sentence variety in ...
- The use of inner dialogue in ...
- Variations in tone in ...
- Flashbacks in ...
- The effect of jargon in ...

The point of a craft analysis is to get under the hood of a literary work and understand how its engine turns. For an excellent discussion of craft annotations see http://www.peterturchi.com/resources-for-writers/ from where this example came. Please clear your idea with me before you begin.

Creative Responses/Extensions (20 points) (see description)
This objective allows you to creatively engage with any of the works we have read this semester. You might decide to write a short story that recounts events in a novel from a minor character’s perspective. Maybe you want to rewrite the opening or closing chapter. You might write a series of poems in response to one of our poets. The field is wide open here. The only requirement is that you clear your idea with me before you begin.

Level 4
Essay (25 points) (1,250 – 1,750 words)
In this essay you will make a claim about some aspect of the work and then support that claim by analyzing selected passages from the text. For instance, you might discuss the imagery of racism in The Moor’s Account, or the critique of capitalism in Joyce Carol Oates’ short stories. Remember, the point of an essay is to persuade, argue, reason, consider. I am happy to consult with you throughout your work on this objective.

Achievements:
Unlocking the following achievements will earn you additional points.

- Complete each objective at least once (10 points)
- Respectful & Ethical behavior (5 points)
- Attend a Reading (2 points) – may be completed more than once.
- Reading Journal (10 points): Throughout the semester keep a journal in which you take notes on what surprises, bores, shocks, disturbs, or depresses you. Think about why you have those reactions and write about it. This is informal writing, and can be hand-written. Turn it in at the end of the semester.