THE CHALLENGES OF DEFINING A BORN-DIGITAL "TEXT" AS AN EXAMPLE OF A LITERARY GENRE TODAY

ESSENTIALS OF THE ASSIGNMENT

In this 8-to-12-page essay, you will examine a particular born-digital text in detail to explore some challenges of defining such texts as literary. You may ultimately decide that the text does or does not lend itself to literary reading and interpretation. Or you may leave the question open, having developed a fuller, more elaborated understanding of some questions and issues for your readers to decide for themselves.

Your essay should combine **close reading** of your chosen born-digital text (what we'll call the "**primary text**" of your essay) with ideas and examples drawn from "**secondary sources**" such as Hammond, Bissell, or Moretti, and other relevant, critical texts. These secondary sources will help you provide intellectual, historical, and cultural contexts for your close reading.

At the end of your essay, you should document your primary text and secondary sources in a Works Cited section following MLA formatting style.

CHALLENGES

The assignment's first word, "challenges," means that the focus of your essay should be on developing an in-depth understanding of questions, controversies, issues, fundamental assumptions, or decisions entailed in interpreting or analyzing a born-digital text as literature. It's too easy to have an instant opinion--to give a thumbs-up or -down--and then to argue for that "is-or-isn't" position without ever appreciating the underlying questions and assumptions.

The English word "essay" comes from the French verb meaning "to attempt," and an essay like this is an attempt to explain the intellectual and cultural challenges involved in "defining" your primary text as literary.

DEFINING

The problem investigated by this essay is not a matter of fact. Whether or not something is literary is a matter of interpretation, reading, or experienced meaning. On the other hand, it's also true that the question is not simply a matter of personal opinion. To varying degrees, a text may or may not lend itself to literary reading and interpretation no matter who you are. This is why you need to write an essay to explore this interpretative problem we share, rather than writing a factual report or argument.

LITERARY

As we've talked about in class, literature is not a thing or even a category of things, but a set of *functions*. When we used the Venn diagram on the board in class to breakdown various ways of defining "the literary," we were talking about what a text might do--how it works in a literary way--rather than what it is.

Rather than focusing on superficial features of literature to define it, your essay should try to describe and concentrate on the essential cultural, psychological, and aesthetic functions of literature, and how they differ from the functions of other kinds of writing or cultural representations.

TODAY

The word *today* is in the assignment's title to remind us that interpretive questions--such as what literature does or doesn't do, or what in culture counts as literary--are always evolving. Ours is a moment in history, and to discuss that moment we need to know both how this moment is different from what came before, as well as how it's continuous with the past.

TEXT

We're using this word in the broad sense that any kind of representation is a "text," whether it's verbal or visual, fixed or flowing, an object like a painting or a space like a videogame, a "work" by a single author or a collaboration or conversation among many. A text is anything in culture that you can draw a frame around and study as a representation of the world. In this assignment, the primary text should be born- digital.

GENRE

While your essay will be spotlighting an individual primary text, you will by implication be talking about genres of "born-digital" texts from which your example is chosen: for example, certain kinds of video games, online videos, web sites, social-media events, etc.

In thinking about "the literary," it is also helpful to think and talk about specific literary genres rather than literature in the abstract: for instance, confessional poetry, dystopian adolescent novels, the modernist short story, Stephen King horror novel, etc. The idea of genre helps us put both the specific digital text and literature into a bigger picture. The more specific you can be in naming and discussing the digital or literary genres, the more you'll find to say in your essay.

SECONDARY SOURCES

So you can add critical ideas or historical contexts to your own observations and insights, I will ask you to quote, cite, and document secondary sources using MLA format. You should productively use **at least five secondary sources** in your essay, which can include Hammond, Bissell, and/or Moretti, or academic articles available to download online through the UMD Library databases. Note that Hammond is a particularly good place to look for summaries of and references to secondary sources you might want to search for and quote in your essay.

Rather than simply using secondary sources simply to back up what you have to say or to serve you as a straw soldier to argue against, try to engage these sources in a creative, dialogical conversation of ideas, implications, interpretations, or decisions.