

**English 450**  
**Free and Open Source Culture**  
**Fall 2024**  
**M/W/F 10:00-10:50 AM**  
**Liberal Arts-3232**

**Course Syllabus**

**Instructor:** Dr. Amit Ray, Associate Professor, Department of English

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**Office Hours:** T/Th 2:00-3PM and by appointment

**Course Description**

The relationship between creator and creation has never been a simple one; law, culture, commerce and technology continuously reshape how humans use language and representation to fashion and instantiate new ideas through creative works. The emergence of the Internet and World Wide Web have transformed how we think about the written word (amongst many other things). Since the turn of the century, the Free Culture movement has tried to promote and build open-access systems characterized by transparency and the ability to modify and distribute creative works across a range of mediums. Drawing upon a variety of institutions, including the Free Software Foundation, Wikimedia Foundation, and Creative Commons, amongst others, Free Culture aspires to the notion of a readily accessible and modifiable Public Domain as the vital center of contemporary ‘free and open’ societies.

Central to understanding the concept of Free Culture is the dominant intellectual property regimen of copyright that arose in the eighteenth century. Specifically, we will examine the rise of the concept of the individual author during these last three centuries. Using a variety of historical and theoretical readings, we will note how law and commerce have come to shape the prevailing cultural norms surrounding authorship, while also examining lesser known models of collaborative and distributed authoring practices. This background will inform our study of the rapid social transformations wrought by media technologies in last two centuries, culminating with the challenges and opportunities brought forth by digital media, mobile communications and networked computing.

Finally, the idea of open source must be characterized against what has become the dominant trend on the web since the mid-2000’s: namely, the rise of closed source culture. So called “walled-gardens” and proprietary systems have come to define the experiences of virtually all internet users. *We will examine this historical push and pull between open and closed in real time—paying attention to examples that have recently emerged or will emerge over the course of the term.*

**This will be a reading intensive course.** *Though background technical knowledge is not necessary, the readings can sometimes be complex and will require disciplined attention, patience and time.*

### **Grades**

- 35% of your final grade will be determined by considerations related to attendance and active classroom participation. A lot happens in class. *If you miss class, I assure you that notes alone cannot capture fully what you will have missed.* Attendance is not only expected; it is *required*. **More than three unexcused absences will affect your final grade.**
  - 15% of your final grade will be determined by a written essay, due in Week Six
  - 15% of your final grade will be based upon your write up and presentation of a chosen reading. (You will sign up for a reading in Week Three.) You will provide a brief written overview of the reading, and then lead class discussion based upon questions and insights gleaned from the reading. [Guidelines for Presentation](#)
  - **Final Essay:** 35% of your final grade will be determined by the quality of a research-based essay that you propose and write. In addition to exploring texts and themes from the course, you may propose additional areas or texts for inquiry. The paper proposal and abstract is due no later than the end of **Week Twelve**. Otherwise, I will assign a topic for the Final Paper
- OR**
- **Final Project:** In lieu of the final essay, students may individually or collaboratively submit a project –creative or analytical or some combination. Your project can take any form (writing, film, painting, animation, sculpture, multimedia, machinima, software, a musical piece, etc.) as long as it deals with topics, issues and/or works that we have studied in this course. The prerequisite is that you draw up a formal proposal in order to obtain our input and final approval. If you are considering this option, please consult with us sooner rather than later. We will not consider proposals after **Week Ten**.

### **Selected Course Resources:**

Bridle, James. *Ways of Being* (2022)

Coleman, Gabriella. *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking* (2013)

Crawford, Kate. *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (2021)

Galison, Peter. "Removing Knowledge (2004)

Kelty, Chris. *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (2006)

Lessig, Lawrence. *Free Culture* (2004)

Nolan, Michael. "The Evolution of Open Source" (2021)

Pasquale, Frank. *The Black Box Society* (2015)

Stallman, Richard. "Free Software and the GNU Project" (2006)

All course materials will be available on the web or as PDFs on myCourses, save for Bridle's *Ways of Being*.

As mentioned before, many of the texts we read this term will be developed based on current events and class interests. So expect to read a range of materials rich in depth and breadth.

## **Acceptable and Unacceptable uses of Generative Artificial Intelligence (e.g. ChatGPT, Bard, Claude, etc.):**

### Acceptable Use of AI

· The use of generative AI tools is permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Brainstorming and refining your ideas;
- Fine tuning your research questions;
- Finding information on your topic;
- Drafting an outline to organize your thoughts; and
  - § **Please note:** you must disclose and upload the prompt you use and the response from AI for any written work along with your completed work so the professor can compare the two.
- Checking grammar and style.

### Unacceptable Use of AI

The use of generative AI tools is not permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Impersonating you in classroom contexts, such as by using the tool to compose discussion board prompts assigned to you or content that you claim as your writing.
- Completing group work that your group has assigned to you, unless it is mutually agreed upon (**with permission from the professor**) that you may utilize the tool.
- Writing *an initial* draft of a writing assignment
- Writing entire sentences, paragraphs or papers to complete class assignments.

You are responsible for the information you submit based on an AI query (for instance, that it does not violate intellectual property laws, or contain misinformation or unethical content). Your use of AI tools must be properly documented and cited in order to stay within university policies on [Academic Honesty](#).

## **Schedule of Readings and Assignments:**

### Week One

M 8/26 Intro to the Course. Self introductions. Homework: Read “What is Free Software?” (2021). <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.en.html>

W 8/28 Discuss “What is Free Software?” Homework: Read “Why Open Source Misses the Point of Free Software” (2022) by Richard Stallman.  
<https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/open-source-misses-the-point.html>

F 8/30 Discuss “Why Open Source Misses the Point of Free Software.” Homework: Read “Background and History of Intellectual Property” (2007) by Aaron Schwabach.  
PDF/myCourses

### Week Two

M 9/2 Labor Day/No Class

W 9/4 Discuss “Background and History of Intellectual Property.”

F 9/6 Continue discussion of “Background and History of Intellectual Property.” Homework: Read “Introduction” and “Piracy” from *Free Culture* (2004) by Lawrence Lessig.  
PDF/myCourses

### Week Three

M 9/9 Discuss Lessig, “Introduction” and Chapter One

W 9/11 Discuss Lessig, Chapters Two and Three

F 9/13 Discuss Lessig, Chapters Four and Five. Homework: Read Lessig, “Property” from *Free Culture*.

### Week Four

M 9/16 Discuss Lessig, Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight.

W 9/18 Discuss Lessig, Chapters Nine and Ten .

F 9/20 Discuss Lessig, finish Chapter Ten. **Essay One Topic Announced.** Homework: Read “Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study)” (2008) by Robert Proctor. PDF/myCourses

### Week Five

M 9/23 Discuss “Agnotology.” Homework: Read “Removing Knowledge” (2004) by Peter Galison. PDF/myCourses

W 9/25 Discuss Galison. Homework: Read “Hush-Hush Affair: How the NDA became the defining legal document of our time” (2024) by Reeves Wiedemann. PDF/myCourses

F 9/27. Discuss “Hush-Hush Affair.” Homework: Read “The Evolution of Open Source” (2022) by Mike Nolan and “The future of open source is still very much in flux” (2023) by Rebecca Ackermann <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/08/17/1077498/future-open-source/> and PDF/myCourses

### Week Six

M 9/30 Guest Lecturer: Mike Nolan. Discuss Nolan and Ackermann. Homework: Read “Introduction” and “Geeks and Recursive Publics” from *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (2008) by Chris Kelty. PDF/myCourses

W 10/2 Discuss Kelty “Introduction.”

F 10/4 **Essay One Due by 11:59PM.** Discuss Kelty “Geeks and Recursive Publics.” Homework: Read “The Fog of Freedom” (2014) by Chris Kelty. PDF/myCourses

## Week Seven

M 10/7 Discuss Kelty, “The Fog of Freedom.” Homework: Read Gabriella Coleman, “Introduction” and “The Craft and Craftiness of Hacking” from *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking* (2013). PDF/myCourses

W 10/9 Discuss Coleman, “Introduction.”

F 10/11 Discuss Coleman, “The Craft and Craftiness of Hacking.” Homework: Read “Introduction” from *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* by Gabriella Coleman (2014). PDF/myCourses

## Week Eight

M 10/14 Fall Break - No Class

W 10/16 Discuss Coleman, “Introduction: And Now You Have Got Our Attention.” Homework: Read “On Trolls, Tricksters, and the Lulz” from *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*. PDF/myCourses

F 10/18 Discuss Coleman, “On Trolls, Tricksters, and the Lulz.” Homework: Read “A General History of Pirates” from *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates* (2009) by Adrian Johns. PDF/myCourses

## Week Nine

M 10/21 Discuss Johns, “A General History of Pirates.” Homework: Read “The Invention of Piracy” from *Piracy*. PDF/myCourses

W 10/23 Discuss Johns, “The Invention of Piracy.” Homework: Read “Introduction—The Need to Know” from *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (2015) by Frank Pasquale. PDF/myCourses

F 10/25 Discuss Pasquale, “Introduction” by Pasquale. Homework: Read “The Hidden Logics of Search.” PDF/myCourses

## Week Ten

M 10/28 Discuss Pasquale, “The Hidden Logics of Search.” Homework: Read “Toward an Intelligible Society.”

W 10/30 Discuss Pasquale, “Toward an Intelligible Society.” Homework: Read “Data” from *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* by Kate Crawford (2021) PDF/myCourses

F 11/1 Discuss Crawford, “Data.” **Last day to propose a Final Project.**

## Week Eleven

M 11/4 Watch *AlphaGo* (2017).

W 11/6 *Finish AlphaGo.*

F 11/8 No class. Discussion of *AlphaGo* on Slack. Read “Open for Business: Big Tech, Concentrated Power, and the Political Economy of Open AI.” (2023)  
[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4543807](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4543807)

## Week Twelve

M 11/11 Discuss “Open for Business.” Homework: Read “Introduction” and “Thinking Otherwise.” from *Ways of Being* (2022) by James Bridle.

W 11/13 Discuss Bridle, “Introduction” and “Thinking Otherwise.” Homework: Read “Wood Wide Webs.”

F 11/15 Discuss Bridle, “Wood Wide Webs.” Homework: Read “The Thicket of Life.” **Last day to propose your own Final Essay Topic.**

## Week Thirteen

M 11/18 Discuss Bridle, “The Thicket of Life.” **Final Essay Topic Announced.** Homework: Read “Seeing Like a Planet.”

W 11/20 Discuss Bridle, “Seeing Like a Planet.” Homework: Read “Talking to Strangers.”

F 11/22 Discuss Bridle, “Talking to Strangers.” Homework: Read “Non-Binary Machines.”

#### Week Fourteen

M 11/25 No Class

W 11/27 Thanksgiving Break No Class

F 11/29 Thanksgiving Break No Class

#### Week Fifteen

M 12/2 Discuss Bridle, “Non-Binary Machines.” Homework: Read “Getting Random.”

W 12/4 Discuss Bridle, “Getting Random.” Homework: Read “Solidarity.”

F 12/6 Discuss Bridle, “Solidarity.” Homework: Read “The Internet of Animals” and “Conclusion: Down on the Metal Farm.”

#### Week Sixteen

M 12/9 Discuss Bridle, “The Internet of Animals” and “Conclusion: Down on the Metal Farm.”  
Semester overview and summary.

W 12/11 **Final Essay or Final Project Due by 11:59PM.**