PROPOSAL TO LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS
UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON INTERNAL GRANTS
Marquette Faculty Fellowship Proposal

Name: Dr. Timothy Welsh College/Department: H&NS / English
Tenure Track Ordinary
Rank: Assistant Professor

Title of Project: Mixed Realism: A Theory of Fiction for Wired Culture
Year of Project 2013

Project Summary: Mixed Realism is an academic book for scholars, students, and general audiences interested in media and cultural studies, literary theory, and digital technologies. It explores the expanded role of media-generated virtuality in contemporary life. While much recent criticism focuses on the specific media properties or practices, my book forwards an innovative methodology that integrates literary criticism and theory with digital media studies. The aim of the book is to draw out social, political, and ethical issues bound up with the digital by updating discussions concerning relationships between art and life, media and mediation, and representation and responsibility for a wired culture.

Budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Supplies (itemize below)</td>
<td>$</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Printing &amp; Copying</td>
<td>$</td>
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<td>3. Journal Page Charge</td>
<td>$</td>
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<td>4. Travel (itemize below)</td>
<td>$</td>
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<td>5. Per Diem (itemize below)</td>
<td>$</td>
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<td>6. Other Costs (itemize below)</td>
<td>$500</td>
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<td>Books, research materials, and image rights.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>$500</td>
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Budget Justification:
I am budgeting $500 to pay for books, research materials, and the permission costs for copyrighted images to be included in the book.

Where will the results be published, exhibited or performed?
I am currently working with a senior editor at the University of Minnesota Press to revise my manuscript for the Electronic Mediations series. It will be completed by fall of 2013 and published by fall of 2014.
What other sources of funding (internal and external) have you identified for this project? 
None.

List years and amounts of prior Loyola University faculty grants (for the last three years):
Bobet Fellowship (2012) to develop my concept of “contemplative gaming”: $2,500

Does your research involve human subjects? ____ Yes  _X__ No.
If yes, funding for this project is contingent on receiving IRB approval. If you have IRB
approval prior to submitting your proposal, please attach the approval memo to your
application. If you do not have IRB approval at the time of your submission, please
complete the IRB protocol as soon as possible after your proposal submission.

Narrative Description of Project:
The proliferation of digital communication technologies has made interactions in virtual
environments – once the stuff of science fiction novels – an everyday occurrence. Many of us,
for example, carry in our pockets cellphones on which we check our bank balance, update our
Facebook status, and engage in a quick session of Angry Birds. Even as these technologies have
become more commonplace, however, as Pierre Lévy notes, the virtual is still widely taken to be
"false, illusory, or imaginary.” This often assumed opposition between the “virtual” and the
“real” is out of step with the ways in which we actually interact with digital technologies. In
addition to the ontological questions this raises, a host of ethical issues are also bound up with
the use of digital media. As our social, economic, and political lives are increasingly mediated by
digital technology, the status of these media-generated virtualities has significant and very “real”
consequences. What, then, is the nature of “the virtual”? What roles does it play in our wired
culture? What is its relationship to reality? What are the implications of this relationship for
issues of social justice?

criticism and theory with digital media studies to address the place of media-generated
virtualities in contemporary culture. Print literature is often assumed to have little to say about
digital culture, positioned in competition with more “immersive” media such as the latest high-
definition videogames. Yet, the description of media as “immersive” – a metaphor comparing
user-media interface to the experience of being submerged in an alternate (virtual) reality – relies
on and proceeds from prior assumptions that characterize reading as getting “lost in a book.”

Capitalizing on the common application of this metaphor, my book explores what I’m
calling the mixed realism of media-generated virtuality in contemporary culture. Mixed realism
refers less to a representational style or technical paradigm than to the multifarious ways the
virtual participates in ‘real’ life. Perhaps the most prominent recent example occurred during the
Arab Spring, as protesters used social media sites like Twitter to augment a restricted and
dangerous physical environment with the virtual one of update timelines. Or, on a more mundane
level, mixed realism describes the simulated leather of Apple’s iCal application as it creates what
I am calling a circuit of interaction that connects on-screen and off-screen workspaces. Trying to
separate the ‘virtual’ from the ‘real’ in these scenarios might obscure the network of social,
political, and ethical issues bearing on these engagements with digital media. My concept of
mixed realism, however, can reveal the ways the virtual participates in the practice of wired
culture.
My continued research in this area makes a case for the importance of literary perspectives in drawing out the very real issues of social justice bound up with the pervasive use of digital media today. Indeed, there is an invaluable literary history of interrogating the relationship between fictional worlds described in printed books and the real worlds of the people who read them. When the printing press was a “new media,” for example, Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* addressed the common concern that virtualities of narrative fiction might mingle with the realities of its readers. Despite this established history, literary scholarship has been largely marginalized in digital media studies. Early applications of literary perspectives to digital technologies like hypertext, virtual reality simulators, and videogames tended to treat the digital as simply one more narrative medium, no different from print or film. Digital media studies pushed back against this trend – too strongly in my opinion – leading to more than a decade of giving prominence to the materiality of the hardware, embodied uses of the technology, or social practices surrounding it. However, this emphasis on media properties and media users, though it produced very insightful and valuable scholarship, sidestepped questions of virtuality. The “reality” of the virtual, it was asserted, lies in some other “more real” component like the hardware, the code, or the user. Virtuality itself became a secondary and largely ignored concern.

In other words, this is a crucial moment for the future of the study digital technologies and for media studies in general. My research into the ways literary methodologies can help us think about the real world consequences of the virtual puts me in a unique position to respond to this moment. Early versions of my research have received favorable responses at major conferences and from major publishers. Arguments from *Mixed Realism* were warmly received at the 2011 and 2012 Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts annual conferences, as well as the *Mimesis Now* conference this past March. A shortened version of my fourth chapter concludes *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games* (2012), the first genre study of the first-person shooter. Last January, I presented my research on two panels at the Modern Language Association (MLA) annual convention, the largest and most prominent conference for literary scholarship. Following MLA, three major presses—Routledge, University of Michigan Press, and University of Minnesota Press—solicited my manuscript. I ultimately decided to submit to Minnesota, and have since been working with the senior editor responsible for the esteemed *Electronic Mediations* series.

Via email, my editor said he shared my project with Katherine Hayles, perhaps the most prominent member of their editorial board, and they were “very interested” in my book because the topics of immersive worlds and narrative are “exciting directions” for the future of the series. Though initial reader reports were positive and called *Mixed Realism* “innovative,” they agreed on the need for thorough, though not substantial, revisions and recommended a “leaner and meaner approach” that asserts the central argument more forcefully. Such encouraging feedback speaks to the need for critical frameworks like the one I present in *Mixed Realism*; however, the field of digital media studies can move very quickly. It is therefore imperative that I forward my book project during this decisive moment for digital media studies, right when it will have the

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1 These areas of emphasis in what I refer to as the *materialist turn* are exemplified in recent work by Matthew Kirshenbaum (2008), Mark BN Hansen (2006), and Henry Jenkins (2006), respectively.

greatest relevance and potential impact. The Marquette will support my efforts to complete
*Mixed Realism* this summer. I will use the grant period to concentrate on revisions and then
submit the final draft of my book to my editor by next fall.

Beyond the significance for my field and my professional development, this is a crucial
period for Loyola and its new Film and Digital Media program (FDM) as well. With this new
program we are stepping into on-going debates regarding what constitutes the digital humanities.
The definition that seems to be “winning” at the moment – at least in terms of funding – is the
version in which humanists build technology or use technology to do traditional humanities
research. While many of these projects are productive in their own right, the emphasis on digital
humanist “builders” risks marginalizing the very pressing need to think critically about these
technologies. Alan Lui, for example, spoke at last year’s MLA conference about digital
humanities losing its critical perspective on digital media and ignoring its duty to cultural
criticism as it has pursued grants to make databases, research tools, and software.

Loyola’s commitment to the Jesuit values of critical thinking and social justice gives us a
unique voice in digital humanities and one that is needed at this crucial juncture in its formation.
By developing a program that combines the builder and the critic’s objectives, that challenges
students to think critically about digital media and applying those perspectives to create digital
media, we will build a digital humanities that embodies our mission to educate the whole person.
Right now, however, there are few models for the study of digital media consistent with such a
mission. My book will exemplify a humanities-based, critical approach to digital technologies,
which will inform the on-going development of the FDM curriculum. There are not many
programs like the FDM concentration in the country, and when my book comes out it will define
digital humanities at Loyola to both the profession and to prospective students. Not only will my
book make a strong statement about the possibility of a more critical digital humanities, it will
also demonstrate Loyola’s commitment to training a generation of students to be socially
conscious media users and content creators.

Thank you for considering my project.

**Timetable and Plans for Publication:**

| June 2012 to July 2012 | • complete new introductory chapter  
|                        | • revise core chapters, splitting, expanding, and contracting where necessary |
| July 2012 to August 2012 | • finalize core chapter revisions  
|                         | • rewrite the conclusion  
|                         | • proofread for grammar and clarity  
|                         | • format manuscript to publisher’s specifications  
|                         | • collect images and secure rights  
|                         | • submit completed manuscript to publisher |