Course Objectives

The purpose of this class is to prepare students for the production of the advanced interactive project required to complete the MFA degree in Interactive Media and Games. Emphasis will be on understanding the dynamics of “research production,” i.e., between exploring something new and getting something done, with strong encouragement on strategies for doing both. The course will assist students with articulating their vision of the thesis project, assessing the tools and techniques available to them and reconciling their vision with the realities of time, budget, and resources.

The first half of the semester is devoted to the evolution of the topic; motivation, definition and focus. The first half of the semester is devoted to research, resources and familiarization with prior work in the chosen field. The second half of the semester involves scoping and refining the thesis concept, identifying advisors, and preparing a Final Proposal. The Final Presentation will invite comments to be incorporated into the Final Proposal. An additional component of the course will be strategizing the most effective means of documenting, presenting and writing about your project. With an emphasis on constructive critique, students will be encouraged to develop their skills in both giving and gracefully receiving feedback on their work.

Course Requirements

• Regular attendance and active participation in class discussions is required

• All assignments have clearly stated due dates; if a due date is missed without prior arrangements having been made with the instructor, you will have one calendar week during which the assignment will be accepted as “late.” Late assignments will be graded down by one complete letter grade. Assignments may be submitted for feedback beyond this one-week period, however no grade will be given.

• Work must be posted or brought to class by the beginning of the class meeting when it is due. If you need an extension, please make arrangements with the instructor at least a day before the due date.

Schedule and Class Organization
Weeks 1-3

Diagnosing your passion; Imagining your contribution

Weeks 4-6

Methodology + Resources

Week 7:

Commitment

Week 8-9:

Individual meetings

Weeks 10–12

Scope + Focus: Refining the proposal

Weeks 13-15

Proposal Presentations & Feedback

January 13: Week 1

Discussion

A thesis project is a year-long commitment; what it is about your topic that will keep you interested and result in a significant contribution to your field? This class aims to help you explore your internal and external motivations (passion + pragmatism) and to encourage you to have an answer to the question: why does the world (not just your committee or community) need what you have to offer at this moment in history?

In-class Brainstorming Exercise:

Regardless of genre (game, performance, application, installation, mod, etc.), what do you expect to deliver at the end of next year? What do you expect from both this class and the final project? What does a thesis mean to you?

January 20: Week 2

Discussion:

(1) Scope and Expectations: advisors, resources, crews, collaborators

(2) Sample thesis proposals: format, content, mechanics, research
Discussion with IMGD Division Chair Tracy Fullerton (1-2PM)

Everything you ever wanted to ask your Chair about department requirements and program expectations.

Bring your preliminary thesis topics and get early feedback

Assignment:
(1) Begin to articulate potential topics/genres/goals and post your thoughts on the class wiki

(2) Begin a ‘notebook’ – physical or electronic – with thesis proposal ideas and concepts

January 27: Week 3

Discussion: The current third year MFA projects. What did you “crew” on? Who do you identify with?

February 3: Week 4

Discussion: Areas of Interest, Topics and Projects

Brainstorming: Blue Sky Proposals Freedom vs. Constraints, Limits and boundaries: When is it done?

Assignment:
Start visualizing activity around your topic: collect (and post, if appropriate) imagery: storyboards, sketches, short films, games, links. Keep a detailed bibliography of your sources.

February 10: Week 5

Discussion: Methodology, Genre and Format

What is the form/format of your thesis project?

Write and/or sketch your ideal vision of an encounter with your finished thesis from the interactor/user/player’s POV

February 17: Week 6

Tools & Resources: Nuts and Bolts; The role of Advisors & campus resources:

Assignment:
Identify at least two potential outside advisors. Contact them if appropriate at this point.

Identify your prospective equipment and facility needs.

February 24: Week 7

Commitment 1: What is your thesis?

March 3: Week 8

*Individual meetings with instructor for those who are attending GDC*

March 10: Week 9 (GDC Week)

*Individual meetings with instructor for those not attending GDC*

March 17: Spring Break

March 24: Week 10

Additional feedback on topics and presentations

*Assignment*: Identify your audience, potential venues, distribution

March 31: Week 11

Formalize your literature review, prior art

Commitment 2: What is your thesis?

April 7: Week 12

Attend IMD 3rd year thesis presentations and come to class prepared to offer detailed critiques of this year’s thesis projects. What can we learn from the successes and missteps of our colleagues?

*Assignment*: Write and post a detailed, constructive critique of one of the thesis projects that resonates with your own work

April 14: Week 13

Scope + Focus

*Assignment*: Submit a draft thesis proposal to your instructors and prospective advisors (within IMGD or outside) for feedback to inform your presentation.

April 21: Week 14
Proposal Due

April 28: Week 15

Fellowship Presentation

FINAL PROPOSALS
The final project proposal must be completed and approved by Finals Week. You must include a written treatment of the project citing similar work in the field and its relationship to your proposed project. You should describe aesthetic issues you will explore, discuss the potential contribution to your field, and describe the specific techniques you will employ to realize your project. The proposal must also include relevant visualizations, budget, production schedule, and supporting materials demonstrating your ability to successfully pursue the project. Samples of well-structured proposals will be provided.

Grades
Grading will be determined through a combined process of peer review and self-assessment:

10% Class Participation

40% Class Assignments / Critiques

25% Final Presentation

25% Final Proposal

Attendance
Attendance at all classes is mandatory. In accordance with university regulations, the only acceptable excuse for missing class is a documented illness or family emergency. Guidelines for absences affecting grading:

· Two unexcused absences: lowers grade one full grade point

· Four or more unexcused absences: request to withdraw from course

Incompletes
In accordance with university policy, the only acceptable grounds for requesting an incomplete in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students who wish to take an incomplete must present documentation of the problem to the instructor before the final class meeting.
Academic Integrity

The School of Cinema-Television expects the highest standards of academic excellence and ethical performance from USC students. Violations of University policies with regard to academic integrity will result in a failing grade and be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs. If you have any doubts or questions about these policies, consult “SCAMPUS” and/or confer with the Professor or Department Chair.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism—presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words—is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Section 11, Behavior Violating University Standards https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity http://equity.usc.edu/ or to the Department of Public Safety http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community—such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member—can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. The Center for Women and Men http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/ provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the American Language Institute http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. The Office of Disability Services and Programs http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus
infeasible, USC Emergency Information http://emergency.usc.edu/will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.