Course description

The words we use to talk about interactive media and the Internet reveal much about where such things sit in our imaginations. We store our posts and documents in the “cloud.” We escape into the virtual. But the cloud is not a cloud, and the virtual is inescapably tied to the real. While things like videogames and social media may seem weightless and uninvolved in the messy stuff of heavy industry and labor exploitation, they are in fact significant dependents and drivers of both. Each new generation of game consoles, smartphones, laptops, headsets, graphics cards, and so on depends on cheap and replaceable labor, and supports a panoply of mining concerns, fuel suppliers, financial strategies, governments, data markets and marketers, and so on. Game developers report their lives being “destroyed” by endless cycles of crunch. And even before studios and designers get involved, multitudes of real human lives are put to work to make our streaming and immersion possible. Much of this work is as anonymous as it is underpaid.

This course seeks to create an opening for understanding videogames, social media, and other forms of interactive media and entertainment in terms of the human, industrial, and ideological contexts that enclose and produce them, and that they co-produce. In specific, it invites students to consider the social and material supports, impacts, and futures of interactive media and entertainment. Students will engage with the themes of the course through readings, in-class discussions, guest lectures, writing (and/or the creation of artworks), and group presentations.
Readings will draw on a variety of sources, including selected articles from science and technology studies, cultural studies, sociology, game studies, and technology journalism. In-class discussions will be led by the course instructor, special guests, and students themselves, each of whom will be responsible for working in a group to present and facilitate discussion on one of the weekly themes.

The primary deliverable for each student will be a 2500-4000 word scholarly paper on a relevant topic. The idea for this paper must be pitched to the instructor and class before writing. With the permission of the professor, students may also choose to explore a topic via the creation of an appropriately scoped artwork, such as a game, installation, or short film.

Learning objectives

This course critically explores the implications of interactive media’s imbrication in transnational networks of extraction, exploitation, and marketization. Students will emerge from the course with:

- An understanding of critical approaches to interactive media that go beyond formal, representational, or rhetorical analyses (i.e., this class is as much interested in what interactive media “does” up and down the supply chain as it in what it can “say”);
- An awareness of the range of scholarship and art practice that addresses questions of materiality and labor in interactive media; and,
- Practical experience in critically assessing, through scholarship and design, the impact of the many industries arranged around computing machinery in general and digital entertainment in specific.

Required readings

Readings will be supplied as PDFs or web links. Readings are listed in the schedule below.

Assignments and grading breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deliverable</th>
<th>Description*</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical responses (x5)</td>
<td>5 ultra-mini responses/comments (100-250 words each) responding to readings or other materials related to the themes of the course.</td>
<td>Jan 21, Feb 18, Mar 10, Apr 14</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Due Date</td>
<td>Points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>A presentation, solo or in a small group, covering and expanding on a weekly reading or set of readings. Also includes discussion facilitation and/or orchestration of class activity.</td>
<td>Presentation dates selected in first class</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final paper pitch</td>
<td>A 5 minute micro-presentation of your proposed final paper project.</td>
<td>Mar 31</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final paper</td>
<td>A 2500-4000 word scholarly paper exploring in depth a specific topic related to the themes of the course.</td>
<td>Apr 28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Participation in class discussions.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
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**Assignment submission policy**

Critical comments will be submitted to the instructor through a web form. Presentations and final papers should be submitted as PDFs directly to the instructor’s email. Due dates are strictly enforced.

**Attendance Policy**

Punctual attendance at all classes is mandatory. Please contact me if you need to miss a session.

**Course schedule**

Students are expected to read and be prepared to discuss the texts listed for each week. The readings listed below are subject to change prior to the start of the course. Your recommendations are welcome! Please email your ideas to jeff.watson@cinema.usc.edu or click here to add your idea to the syllabus Google Doc.
Part I:
Material Worlds

Illusions and Invisibility

January 14, 2020


Extractivism

January 21, 2020

Due: Critical response #1 (5 percent of final grade)

In-class: Presentation scheduling


Footprints
January 28, 2020


https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.12181.


Ecomedia
February 4, 2020


Part II: Human Beings

Framework: Race

February 11, 2020


Framework: Gender

February 18, 2020

Due: Critical response #2 (5 percent of final grade)


“Crunch”

February 25, 2020


“Playbor”

March 3, 2020


Fans and streamers

March 10, 2020

Due: Critical response #3 (5 percent of final grade)


Spring Break

Week of March 16, 2020

Relational labor

March 24, 2020
Due: Critical response #4 (5 percent of grade)
In-class: guest speaker


Part III:
Infrastructure, Imagination, and Futures

Surveillance and platform capitalism

March 31, 2020
Due: Final paper pitch (10 percent of final grade)


Representing labor

April 7, 2020


https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030902860252.


Representing materiality

April 14, 2020

Due: Critical response #4 (5 percent of final grade)


https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015603844.


https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0057.


http://www.phonestory.org/.

Alternative futures

April 21, 2020


https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON_a_01087.


https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934.
Flex class/catch-up presentations

April 28, 2020
Due: Final Paper (30 percent of final grade)

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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. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct at 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 or to the Department of Public Safety. 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 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 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 will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.
Disruptive Student Behavior

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students’ ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

Syllabus Updates

This syllabus is liable to change up to the beginning of class and possibly over the semester. Please check the posted syllabus regularly, and note all changes that are shared by the instructor in class.

rev. 28 October 2019