

USC School of Cinematic Arts
CTIN-599
Spring 2020

Labor and Materiality in Interactive Media

Instructor: Jeff Watson, PhD
Office: SCI 201W
Office Hours: by appointment
Email: jeff.watson@cinema.usc.edu

Tuesdays 2:00-5:50p [usually ending at 5] - SCA 258 (sec 18416D)
Credits: 2.0

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

Deliverable	Description* <small>* I will provide students with complete descriptions and rubrics when each assignment is issued.</small>	Due Date	Grade
Critical responses (x5)	5 ultra-mini responses/comments (approx. 250 words each) responding to readings or other materials related to the themes of the course.	Jan-28, Feb-18, Mar-10, Apr-7, Apr-21	25
Presentation	A presentation covering and expanding on a weekly reading or set of readings. Also includes discussion facilitation	Presentation dates selected in	25

	and/or orchestration of an in-class activity.	class on Jan 21	
Final paper pitch	A 5 minute micro-presentation of your proposed final paper project.	Mar-24	10
Final paper	A 2500-4000 word scholarly paper, suitable for publication, exploring in depth a specific topic related to the themes of the course.	Apr-28	30
Participation	Participation in class discussions.	N/A	10

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](#).

#	Date	In-Class Activities, Readings, and Assignments	Due

PART I: Material Worlds

1	Jan-14	<p><u>Illusions of Immateriality</u></p> <p>Introduction to the course</p> <p>Required readings</p> <p>Carruth, Allison. 2014. "The Digital Cloud and the Micropolitics of Energy." <i>Public Culture</i> 26 (2 (73)): 339–64. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2392093.</p> <p>Ensmenger, Nathan. 2013. "Computation, Materiality, and the Global Environment." <i>IEEE Annals of the History of Computing</i> 35 (3): 80–80. https://doi.org/10.1109/MAHC.2013.33.</p> <p>———. 2018. "The Environmental History of Computing." <i>Technology and Culture</i> 59 (4): S7–33. https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2018.0148</p> <p>Recommended</p> <p>Crain, Marion, Winifred Poster, and Miriam Cherry, eds. 2016. <i>Invisible Labor</i>. 1st ed. University of California Press. https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520287174/invisible-labor.</p>	
2	Jan-21	<p><u>Extractivism</u></p> <p>Presentation scheduling</p>	

		<p>Readings</p> <p>Crawford, Kate, and Vladan Joler. 2018. "Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo as an Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources." AI Now Institute and Share Lab. http://www.anatomyof.ai.</p> <p>Merchant, Brian. 2017. "Everything That's Inside Your iPhone." <i>Motherboard</i> (blog). August 15, 2017. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/433wyq/everything-thats-inside-your-iphone.</p> <p>Polansky, Lana. 2016. "Distraction, Consumption, Identity: The Neoliberal Language of Videogames – Sufficiently Human." August 1, 2016. http://sufficientlyhuman.com/archives/1487.</p> <p>Schreier, Jason. n.d. "Activision's CEO Made \$28.6 Million Last Year, 306 Times The Median Activision Employee." Kotaku. Accessed July 22, 2019. https://kotaku.com/activisions-ceo-made-28-6-million-last-year-306-times-1825715966.</p>	
3	Jan-28	<p><u>Footprints</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Beaumont, Peter. 2019. "Rotten Eggs: E-Waste from Europe Poisons Ghana's Food Chain." <i>The Guardian</i>, April 24, 2019, sec. Global development.</p>	Critical Response #1 (5 percent of final grade)

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/apr/24/rotten-chicken-eggs-e-waste-from-europe-poisons-ghana-food-chain-agbogbloshie-accra>.

Campbell, Katie, and Ken Christensen. 2016. "Where Does America's e-Waste End up? GPS Tracker Tells All." PBS NewsHour. May 10, 2016.
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/america-e-waste-gps-tracker-tells-all-earthfix>.

Glanz, James. 2012. "Data Centers Waste Vast Amounts of Energy, Belying Industry Image." *The New York Times*, September 22, 2012, sec. Technology.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/technology/data-centers-waste-vast-amounts-of-energy-belying-industry-image.html>.

Mayers, Kieren, Jonathan Koomey, Rebecca Hall, Maria Bauer, Chris France, and Amanda Webb. 2015. "The Carbon Footprint of Games Distribution: The Carbon Footprint of Games Distribution." *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 19 (3): 402–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.12181>.

Mills, Evan, Norman Bourassa, Leo Rainer, Jimmy Mai, Ian Vaino, Claire Curtin, Arman Shehabi, Louis-Benoit Desroches, and Nathaniel Mills. 2019. "A Plug-Loads Game Changer: Computer Gaming Energy Efficiency

		without Performance Compromise.” California Energy Commission.	
4	Feb-4	<p><u>Ecomedia</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Chang, Alenda, and John Parham. 2017. “Green Computer and Video Games: An Introduction.” <i>Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment</i> 8 (November): 1–17.</p> <p>Corbett, Charles J. 2018. “How Sustainable Is Big Data?” <i>Production and Operations Management</i> 27 (9): 1685–95. https://doi.org/10.1111/poms.12837.</p> <p>Taylor, T.L. 2009. “The Assemblage of Play.” <i>Games and Culture</i> 4 (4): 331–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009343576.</p>	
PART II: Human Beings			
5	Feb-11	<p><u>Framework: Race</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Richard, Gabriela T., and Kishonna L. Gray. 2018. “Gendered Play, Racialized Reality: Black Cyberfeminism, Inclusive Communities of Practice, and the Intersections of Learning, Socialization, and Resilience in Online Gaming.” <i>Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies</i> 39 (1): 112–48.</p>	

		<p>Nakamura, Lisa. 2014. "Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture." <i>American Quarterly</i> 66 (4): 919-41. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2014.0070.</p> <p>Yee, Nick. 2006. "The Daedalus Project: Yi-Shan-Guan." <i>The Daedalus Project</i> (blog). January 2, 2006. http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/print/001493.php.</p>	
6	Feb-18	<p><u>Framework: Gender</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Barad, Karen. 2003. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." <i>Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society</i> 28 (3): 801-31. https://doi.org/10.1086/345321.</p> <p>Hicks, Marie. 2013. "De-Brogramming the History of Computing." <i>IEEE Annals of the History of Computing</i> 35 (1): 88-87.</p> <p>Ruberg, Bonnie. 2019. "The Precarious Labor of Queer Indie Game-Making: Who Benefits from Making Video Games 'Better'?" <i>Television & New Media</i>, May, 1527476419851090. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419851090.</p>	Critical Response #2 (5 percent of final grade)

7	Feb-25	<p><u>“Crunch”</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Campbell, Colin. 2019. “How Fortnite’s Success Led to Months of Intense Crunch at Epic Games.” Polygon. April 23, 2019.</p> <p>https://www.polygon.com/2019/4/23/18507750/fortnite-work-crunch-epic-games.</p> <p>Fenlon, Wes, and Andy Chalk. 2019. “Former Devs Speak out about ‘severe Crunch’ at Mortal Kombat Studio.” <i>PC Gamer</i> (blog). April 26, 2019.</p> <p>https://www.pcgamer.com/former-devs-speak-out-about-severe-crunch-at-mortal-kombat-studio/.</p> <p>Glasner, Eli. 2019. “‘I Just Broke down Crying’: Canadian Video Game Creators Face Gruelling ‘crunch’ Hours.” CBC. April 26, 2019.</p> <p>https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/burnout-crunch-canada-1.5109599.</p> <p>Lécuyer, Christophe. 2017. “From Clean Rooms to Dirty Water: Labor, Semiconductor Firms, and the Struggle over Pollution and Workplace Hazards in Silicon Valley.” <i>Information & Culture: A Journal of History</i> 52 (3): 304–33.</p> <p>https://doi.org/10.1353/lac.2017.0012.</p>	
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • * Schreier, Jason. 2017. <i>Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made</i>. HarperCollins. (optional) <p>———. 2018. "Video Games Are Destroying the People Who Make Them." <i>The New York Times</i>, January 20, 2018, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/opinion/work-culture-video-games-crunch.html.</p> <p>———. 2019. "The Human Cost Of Call of Duty: Black Ops 4." Kotaku. June 26, 2019. https://kotaku.com/the-human-cost-of-call-of-duty-black-ops-4-1835859016.</p>	
8	Mar-3	<p><u>"Playbor"</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Fast, Karin, Henrik Örnebring, and Michael Karlsson. 2016. "Metaphors of Free Labor: A Typology of Unpaid Work in the Media Sector." <i>Media, Culture & Society</i> 38 (7): 963–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716635861.</p> <p>Taylor, Nicholas, Kelly Bergstrom, Jennifer Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell. 2015. "Alienated Playbour: Relations of Production in EVE Online." <i>Games and Culture</i> 10 (4): 365–88.</p>	

		<p>https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014565507.</p> <p>Terranova, Tiziana. 2003. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." Electronic Book Review. June 20, 2003. http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/free-labor-producing-culture-for-the-digital-economy/.</p> <p>Wong, Julia Carrie. 2019. "It's Not Play If You're Making Money': How Instagram and YouTube Disrupted Child Labor Laws." <i>The Guardian</i>, April 24, 2019, sec. Media. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/apr/24/its-not-play-if-youre-making-money-how-instagram-and-youtube-disrupted-child-labor-laws.</p> <p>Midterm student consultations</p>	
9	Mar-10	<p><u>Fans and Streamers</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>De Kosnik, Abigail. 2012. "Interrogating 'Free' Fan Labor." Spreadable Media (blog). December 3, 2012. http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/kosnik/.</p> <p>Lacey, Kim. 2014. "Book Review: Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory, Edited by Trebor Scholz." <i>The Information Society</i> 30 (2): 159–60.</p>	Critical Response #3 (5 percent of final grade)

		<p>https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2014.875790.</p> <p>Scholz, Trebor. 2016. "Platform Cooperativism. Challenging the Corporate Sharing Economy." http://ictlogy.net/bibliography/reports/projects.php?idp=3111.</p> <p>Stanfill, Mel, and Megan Condis. 2014. "Fandom and/as Labor." <i>Transformative Works and Cultures</i>, no. 15. http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/593/421.</p> <p>Recommended</p> <p>Scholz, Trebor, ed. 2012. <i>Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory</i>. New York: Routledge.</p> <p>Midterm student consultations</p>	
10	Mar-17	<i>S P R I N G B R E A K</i>	
11	Mar-24	<p><u>Relational Labor</u></p> <p>Mears, Ashley. 2014. "Who Runs the Girls?" <i>The New York Times</i>, September 20, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/opinion/sunday/who-runs-the-girls.html.</p> <p>———. 2015. "Working for Free in the VIP: Relational Work and the Production of Consent." <i>American Sociological Review</i></p>	<p>Final Paper Pitch (10 percent of final grade)</p>

		<p>80 (6): 1099–1122. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122415609730.</p> <p>Roberts, Sarah. 2016. "Commercial Content Moderation: Digital Laborers' Dirty Work." <i>Media Studies Publications</i>, January. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/commpub/12.</p>	
PART III: Infrastructure, Imagination, and Futures			
12	Mar-31	<p><u>GUEST LECTURE TBD</u></p> <p>Optional: meet-up at SCMS</p>	
13	Apr-7	<p><u>Surveillance and Platform Capitalism</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Foster, John Bellamy, Robert W. McChesney. 2014. "Surveillance Capitalism." <i>Monthly Review</i> (blog). July 1, 2014. https://monthlyreview.org/2014/07/01/surveillance-capitalism/.</p> <p>Hope, Andrew. 2015. "Governmentality and the 'Selling' of School Surveillance Devices." <i>The Sociological Review</i> 63 (4): 840–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12279.</p> <p>Walker, Austin. 2014. "Watching Us Play: Postures and Platforms of Live Streaming." <i>Surveillance & Society</i> 12 (3): 6.</p>	Critical Response #4 (5 percent of final grade)

14	Apr-14	<p><u>Representing Labor</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Nakamura, Lisa. 2009. "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft." <i>Critical Studies in Media Communication</i> 26 (2): 128-44. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030902860252.</p> <p>Ruberg, Bonnie. 2018. "Representing Sex Workers in Video Games: Feminisms, Fantasies of Exceptionalism, and the Value of Erotic Labor." <i>Feminist Media Studies</i> 0 (0): 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1477815.</p>	
15	Apr-21	<p><u>Representing Materiality</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Abraham, Benjamin. 2018. "Video Game Visions of Climate Futures: ARMA 3 and Implications for Games and Persuasion." <i>Games and Culture</i> 13 (1): 71-91. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015603844.</p> <p>Chang, Alenda Y. 2011. "Games as Environmental Texts." <i>Qui Parle</i> 19 (2): 56-84. https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0057.</p>	Critical Response #5 (5 percent of final grade)

		<p>Molleindustria. 2011. "Phone Story." Phonestory.Org. 2011. http://www.phonestory.org/.</p>	
16	Apr-28	<p><u>Alternative Futures</u></p> <p>Readings</p> <p>Anderson, Kayla. 2015. "Ethics, Ecology, and the Future: Art and Design Face the Anthropocene." <i>Leonardo</i> 48 (4): 338-47. https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON_a_01087.</p> <p>Flanagan, Mary. 2019. "A Path to Our Futures." <i>ROMchip</i> 1 (1). http://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/81.</p> <p>Haraway, Donna. 2015. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." <i>Environmental Humanities</i> 6 (1): 159-65. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934.</p>	Final Paper (30 percent of final grade)

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. 2019-12-23