USC School of Cinematic Arts

Interactive Media & Games Division

Preparing the Interactive Project aka "Masters Thesis Pre-Production"
CTIN 548

Prerequisite - CTIN 532L / Concurrent registration with CTIN 542
Units: 2
Spring Semester 2022: Wednesdays from 1:00 pm - 3:20 pm via Zoom
Optional Meet Location: SCI 206

Instructor:
Laird Malamed
Office: SCI 201T (behind the lounge area)
Zoom Office Hours: Fridays 5-6 pm PT and as requested via Zoom
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Course Description & Introduction

Preparing the Interactive Project (PIP) is a 2-unit course taught in conjunction with CTIN-542 Interactive Design and Production II. PIP and 542 follow on the topics and coursework of CTIN 532L.

By the end of the upcoming MFA 4th semester (that is, completing year 2 of the program), you, the candidates for a MFA, must be ready to enter the production phase of your year-long thesis project which will be the course-work of the 594a/b Thesis sequence in year 3.

So how do you (and we as a cohort) get to that point of readiness?

Part of the work will occur in 542 with an emphasis on the prototype. All aspects of creativity in "interactive" endeavors require exploration. Here, we mean the most basic form of interactivity - an artist creating an artifact which is then experienced by viewers/readers/audiences/players. So, a book, a cave painting, a sonnet, Citizen Kane, a blockbuster video game, a 5 minute puzzle - all benefit during development from iterative development, prototyping and feedback along the way.

DaVinci used sketches to plan. Michelangelo was meticulous in the Sistine Chapel. Herman Melville had Nathanial Hawthorne reading draft after draft of Moby-Dick. Steven Spielberg and Alfred Hitchcock rigorously drew storyboards updating them right up to the start of shooting. Miyamota iterates and iterates on new interaction paradigms (plus he loves to rearrange his home furniture over and over). The paradigm is global from China to Liberia to Switzerland to Canada and all places in between.

Thus, to find your thesis requires time to iterate and think. So, while you are developing and testing your playable mechanics in 542, in 548 you will be working on your planning documents and the various versions needed to pitch your idea, your thesis, your capstone, to the faculty and your peers.

548 will focus on the ideation through the lens of idea generation and sharing those ideas via written, visual and verbal means. The ability to share and have your ideas understood - and for you to receive feedback - are crucial steps in your careers as designers/producers/leads/team members/etc…

The successful student completing PIP will create the following during the term:

1. Thesis concept and key pillars/features
2. Design Macro and Design Documentation
3. Inventory and Skill Assessments
4. The thesis pitch
5. Production schedule overview with major milestones and deliverables
6. Thesis prototype or demonstration of ideas (from 542)
7. Thesis committee requests

It is also hoped that the student will begin assembling their team (as applicable) and using the various 542 prototypes during this class and semester to demonstrate the efficacy and appeal of their thesis ideas.

The class is a combination of lectures, in-class discussion, brainstorming sessions and readings about the development process. We also hope to have a few guest lectures to relate their industry experiences.

Major assignments are the above pieces. The class jointly culminates with CTIN 542 and the thesis pitch during the last week of school. Pitches will be scheduled in 542 and 548 times but may also require a third session for all 20+ pitches. Exact dates will be fixed later in the semester.

CTIN-548 was developed by Laird Malamed and Carl Schnurr with great input from Sam Roberts, Richard Lemarchand, Tracy Fullerton, Archie Prakash, Jesse Vigil, Peter Brinson. Martzi Campos, and Jeff Watson (who also helped iterate the course during his tenure in 542). It continues to improve today with your feedback.

Learning Objectives

The key learning objective is how to concept, design and prepare for the thesis project production. To this aim, the class will focus on the various phases of pre-production including:

1. Preparing the longer project
2. User experience focus
3. Concepting and evaluating ideas
4. Developing the project pillars
5. Evaluating risk and planning mitigations
6. Scheduling
7. Writing the design macro

At the end of the class, besides the required deliverables, you will have road maps and plans to begin work on your thesis projects as soon as during the summer break between years 2 and 3. In parallel, the material we will cover is applicable to work you will undertake in industry, starting your own company, or any other of project work be it personal or professional.

The class builds upon the concepts taught in 532L and expands them to address the year long project focusing on the differences between short projects with small teams and longer form development sequences with possibly larger teams. Part of the learning objective is to introduce additional brainstorming and team tools that the student can use during development and production.

Finally, 548 will discuss and offer opportunities to practice key project lead skills. These include the ability to write project documentation, make verbal presentations and lead a creative team.

Working Hours
The standard formula of two hours of work outside class per unit per week is the minimum expectation for hours put into this class. Students are expected to perform at the high levels needed to create a viable thesis project.

Class attendance is mandatory.

Schedule Overview
Specific class-by-class assignments and expectations will be presented the week prior.

The general format of the classwork and flow is:

Section I: Weeks 1-5: Concepts and pitching / Inventories / Finding your concept
Section II: Weeks 6-11: Iteration and idea development
Section III: Weeks 12-15: Perfecting the Pitch and Final Materials

During Sections I & III of the course, generally, you all will be working on the same types of materials at the same time, culminating in the week 15 thesis pitches.

Section II will offer flexibility in the order of deliverables based on each of your starting places. Some of you will have clear thesis ideas, perhaps based on 532 projects or other longstanding passions. Others of you will be starting from a broader point of affinity for types of projects but not exactly knowing how that will apply to their work.

Neither state (or any in between) is good or bad, desired or rejected. Where you are is where you are. Trite but true.

So, during the longer Section II (six classes + spring break), you will review all the deliverables and choose a development path that best fits your working style and preparation layer to deliver:
  Thesis preliminary pitch
  Vertical Slice Macro
  5-minute gameplay experience
  Prior Art paper

We also expect to have a handful of guest lectures from industry members.

Week-by-Week Detailed Schedule (subject to change!)

Section I
1. Jan 12: Introduction to 548 / Thesis / What is a Concept? / AGP Pitching
2. Jan 19: Guest Speaker: Tracy! + Review inventory lists / Prior Art / Pitching
3. Jan 26: Mini-pitch presentations / Choose Your Own Adventure / Goals
4. Feb 2: Player Motivations / What makes a thesis? / Dual thesis projects / CS MS Students
5. Feb 9: Guest speaker TBA / The 5-minute experience / Users first! / Prelim concepts due next week!

Section II
6. Feb 16: 3rd Years panel / Thesis macro and rubric! / Choose your path planning
7. Feb 23: Scheduling / Teams / Risks / Scope
8. Mar 2 Draft Macro / Initial Design / Prelim Pitches
9. Mar 9: Thesis Again / Tool Shed Inventory / Prelim Pitches
   Spring Break Week
10. Mar 23: Brainstorming Workshop / Thesis advisors / Prelim Pitches
11. Mar 30: Guest Speaker TBA / Soft skills / User Testing / Prelim Pitches

Section III
12. Apr 6: Leadership styles / Team dev & recruiting / Workshopping
13. Apr 13: Scope Workshop
14. Apr 20: Attend 3rd Year Thesis defenses
15. Apr 26-27 Thesis Pitches

Formal Check-ins
In addition - during February or March, please schedule time with Laird for a 1:1 check in (and you may do this as often as you need)

Grading:

Assignment	% of Grade
Inventory Assessment	10
Vertical Slice Macro	10
Prior Art Paper	10
5-Min Experience	10
Concept Prelim Pitch	10
Final Pitch (material and presentation)	20
Final Preproduction Macro and Design Documentation	20
Class Participation & Attendance	10
TOTAL	100

Grading breakdown:

        93-100 = A
        90-92 = A-
        88-89 = B+
        83-87 = B
        80-82 = B-
        78-79 = C+
        73-77 = C
        70-72 = C-
        60-69 = D
        Below 60 is an F

Note that graduate students must maintain a B average (3.0 GPA) as per USC Graduate School requirements.

Assignment Submission Policy
Generally, written assignments will be submitted via the shared Google Docs Drive. Please be aware that the entire class can view these files, so please do not share materials in this location you wish to keep private. Please email Laird and Taylor that you have submitted your work.

Oral assignments (project updates, pitches, etc) will be presented in class.

Attendance Policy

Punctual attendance at all classes is mandatory. Students arriving (or logging in for Zoom classes) more than five minutes late to three classes, more than ten minutes late to a single class, or leaving early, will be marked as having an unexcused absence from class, unless prior permission has been obtained from the instructor. The following guidelines are from the Interactive Media & Games Division handbook regarding absences and grading and apply to all students.

Excused absences include:
- Illness (with a doctor's verification)
- Family or personal emergency (with verification)
- Religious Observance

We all understand emergencies arise, and breaks will be provided during class to handle the usual deluge of electronic messages. Please inform an instructor or SA of urgent situations.

Given the online nature of the class, we recognize the strain of multiple hours per day with VC. As such, if you need a break, please let your instructors know and take it. We will have break time as part of our classes.

We also realize that since we have devices all around us, the distraction is real. We recommend trying to close down all forms of other comms during class, and silencing alerts from social media, email etc.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
In making games and interactive media in a professional and ethical way, it is important that you consider diversity and inclusion. When looking at your projects, you should consider who is depicted and how this work will impact others. What kinds of individuals and communities are represented in your work? What point of view does your work express? This class may assist you in learning how to make work that includes diverse viewpoints, and may discuss racial, religious, gender and sexual orientation issues in the context of games and interactive media.

Safer Spaces
In this class, we make a commitment to foster a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. This means that we will issue content warnings as appropriate, use preferred pronouns, and respect self-identifications. While debate and discussion are welcome, please remain aware of the implications of your words and the images that you include in your work. If the instructor or another student points out that something you have said or shared with the group might be offensive, avoid being defensive; this is a valuable opportunity for us to grow and learn together. If you have a concern about any aspect of the class, you are encouraged to speak with the instructor. If you feel uncomfortable speaking with the instructor, you are also welcome to speak with either the undergraduate or graduate advisor for the division, who can discuss the issue with you directly or point you toward other on- and off-campus resources for addressing your concern.

Harassment, sexual misconduct, interpersonal violence, and stalking are not tolerated by the university. All faculty and most staff are considered Responsible Employees by the university and must forward all information they receive about these types of situations to the Title IX Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator is responsible for assisting students with supportive accommodations, including academic accommodations, as well as investigating these incidents if the reporting student wants an investigation. The Title IX office is also responsible for coordinating supportive measures for transgender and nonbinary students such as faculty notifications, and more. If you need supportive accommodations you may contact the Title IX Coordinator directly (titleix@usc.edu or 213-821-8298) without sharing any personal information with me. If you would like to speak with a confidential counselor, Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) provides 24/7 confidential support for students (213-740-9355 (WELL); press 0 after hours).

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 Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems:

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call
studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

Student Health Leave Coordinator – 213-821-4710
Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed.
https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call
suicidepreventionlifeline.org
Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press "0" after hours – 24/7 on call
studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298
equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu
Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected*

characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298
usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report
Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity |Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Student Acessibility Services - (213) 740-0776
osas.usc.edu
Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

Campus Support & Intervention - (213) 821-4710
campussupport.usc.edu
Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101
diversity.usc.edu
Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call
dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu
Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call
dps.usc.edu
Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)
ombuds.usc.edu
A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

PLEASE NOTE:
FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL
SPACE IN THE SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX