

# 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 2025:** Wednesdays from 4:30 pm - 6:50 pm

**Class Location: SCI 206**

Optional: Zoom

<https://usc.zoom.us/j/94841820859?pwd=vc2XrZELNSQPuOnCB6L2WTko6R7ZO.1>

Meeting ID: 948 4182 0859

Passcode: 308161

**Instructors:**

**Laird Malamed**

**Office:** SCI 302

**Zoom Office Hours:** Fridays 5:00-6:00 pm PT (with requests in advance) and as requested via Zoom at other times (weekends work very well for me)

**Contact Info:** [lairdo@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:lairdo@cinema.usc.edu) Cell 310-903-0886 Discord lairdo

**Whitney Wade**

**Office Hours:** Mondays, 5:00-7:00 pm via Zoom and as requested

**Contact Info:** [whitneyw@usc.edu](mailto:whitneyw@usc.edu) Cell 310-435-4273 Discord whitwad

**Student Assistant**

**Moss Dooley**

**Contact:** [ecdooley@usc.edu](mailto:ecdooley@usc.edu) Cell 916-280-7649 Discord sunat3am

**IT Help:** USC Cinema Creative Computing

**Contact Info:** [creativetech@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:creativetech@cinema.usc.edu)

**Important Links:**

**Discord:** [Invite Link](#)

**Google Drive:** [Class Folder Link](#)

## **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 MFA program), you, the candidates for an 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) reach that point of readiness?

Part of the work will occur in 542 with an emphasis on prototyping. 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, God of War, Guitar Hero - 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 Nathaniel 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. Miyamoto iterates and iterates on new interaction paradigms (plus he loves to rearrange his home furniture over and over). Call of Duty starts with written descriptions of each level, then blocks them into rough layouts followed by many passes on layout, AI, and other elements.

This 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 written creative and 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 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 7 listed above. The class jointly culminates with CTIN 542 and the thesis pitch during the last week of school (April 28-May 2 2025).

The pitches for 2025 are tentatively planned for  
**May 2, Friday from 10 am - 6 pm.**

The entire cohort is required to be at everyone's pitch except if they have a conflicting class at that time. Please clear all other personal commitments from these sessions (particularly May 2).

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 Whitney Wade starting in 2024 and 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 and using 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 the industry, starting your own company, or any other flavor 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 6-10: Iteration and idea development

Section III: Weeks 11-15: Building the team, Perfecting the Pitch and Final Materials

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 15: Introduction to 548 / Welcome! / Thesis / What is a Concept? / AGP Pitching
2. Jan 22: Guest Speaker: Tracy! + **Review inventory lists** / Prior Art / Pitching
3. Jan 29: **Mini-pitch presentations** / Goals
4. Feb 5: Player Motivations / What makes a thesis? / Dual thesis projects / CS MS Students
5. Feb 12: Guest speaker TBA / The 5-minute experience / Users first! / **Prelim concepts due next week!**

### ***Section II***

6. Feb 19: 3rd Years panel / Thesis macro and rubric! / Design from the outside in or inside out?
7. Feb 26: Prior Art / Scheduling / Teams / Risks / Scope / **5-Min experience Due**
8. Mar 5: Macro again - why we make them and how we use them
9. Mar 12: Thesis Again / Tool Shed Inventory / **Prior Art Due**  
*Mar 19 Spring Break Week*
10. Mar 26: **Mid-term: Prelim Pitches**

### ***Section III***

11. Apr 2: Soft skills / Thesis advisors / **Macro due**
12. Apr 9: Leadership styles / Team dev & recruiting / Workshopping
13. Apr 16: 3rd Years Panel 2 - leadership lessons / Scope Workshop / User Testing / Thesis Papers
14. Apr 23: Attend 3rd Year Thesis defenses
15. Apr 30: Wrap-up class & May 2 (all day) **Thesis Pitches**

**Final paperwork is due on Wednesday, May 14, 4 pm.**

### **Formal Check-ins**

In addition - during section II, please schedule time with Laird and Whitney for a 1:1s check-in (and you may do this as often as you need)

## Grading:

Assignment	% of Grade
Inventory Assessment / Lists	5
Lists 2	5
Vertical Slice Macro	10
Prior Art Paper	10
5-Min Experience	10
Concept Prelim Pitch	10
Final Pitch (material and presentation)	25
Final Preproduction Macro and Design Documentation	25
Class Participation & Attendance	Not graded but we are expecting you all to speak up!
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>

All assignments need to be clearly identified: **Your file name should include the name of the assignment and your name. The header or start of your documents should include your name, the assignment, and the due date.** This helps us read everything and know who's who. We will deduct 1 point from each assignment that does not include this information.

Late assignments without prior approval are deducted 1 point until 0 for every day late starting from class time. E.g., after 4:30 PM PT Wednesdays.

### Grading breakdown:

Letter grade	Corresponding numerical point range
A	93-100
A-	90-92
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	59 and below

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, Whitney, and Moss that you have submitted your work.

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

Due dates will be announced in class but are generally prior to the next class time. Late assignments will be decreased 1 pt per day late.

### **Grading Timeline**

We plan to grade all assignments within 10 days of submission (but ideally in a week).

### **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.

### **Classroom Norms**

When in class, we expect you to be attentive, not having side conversations, and participating. The cohort is stronger for your input and feedback. If you need to step away for any reason, please do so quietly and without interrupting others. We all understand things come up.

### **Zoom Etiquette**

As Laird will be participating remotely about one-third of the semester, we will have a Zoom option and use 360 cameras. It is expected that those on Zoom will have their cameras on, and their other work minimized so they can focus in on class. We will be having breakout groups and will work to fold in the Zoomers to ensure they get the benefit of small group discussion.

Please use discord or text messages if you need to reach us due to technical issues.

And please contact Laird and Whitney with any concerns about the above.

### **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](mailto: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).



## **Academic Integrity**

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the [student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

## **AI Generators in 548**

### **Permitted on specific assignments (sort of)**

With the wide adoption of AI tools, we recognize there are some very powerful uses. For example, creating sample art with DALL-E might be a great way to generate imagery (especially if you are not strong in artistic skills). However, as 548 is a class designed to see your creative output, generally AI tools should not be used unless discussed in advance.

You should also be aware that AI text generation tools may present incorrect information, biased responses, and incomplete analyses; thus they are not yet prepared to produce text that meets the standards of this course. To adhere to our university values, you must cite any AI-generated material (e.g., text, images, etc.) included or referenced in your work and provide the prompts used to generate the content. Using an AI tool to generate content without proper attribution will be treated as plagiarism and reported to the Office of Academic Integrity. Please review the instructions in each assignment for more details on how and when to use AI Generators for your submissions if allowed.

If found responsible for an academic violation, students may be assigned university outcomes, such as suspension or expulsion from the university, and grade penalties, such as an “F” grade on the assignment, exam, and/or in the course.

### **Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies**

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other media. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

### **Course Evaluations**

Course evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university-wide. It is an important review of students’ experience in the class. The process and intent of the end-of-semester evaluation should be provided.

### **Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

#### **Students and Disability Accommodations:**

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University’s educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive.

More information can be found at [osas.usc.edu](https://osas.usc.edu). You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at [osasfrontdesk@usc.edu](mailto:osasfrontdesk@usc.edu).

## **Support Systems**

### [Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

### [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

### [Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

### [Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

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.

### [Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

### [The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

### [USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

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

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

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

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.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or [otfp@med.usc.edu](mailto:otfp@med.usc.edu)

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

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