Immersive Social Worlds
MIT CMS.341/941, Fall 2023
https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/23075

Instructor: T.L. Taylor (tltaylor@mit.edu)   **Class**: W 7-10, 56-169
Office hours: By appointment

Description and Learning Objectives

This course focuses on critical media sociology of immersive social worlds, from digital environments and avatar-based worlds to live action role-play (LARP) and theme parks. It draws on both historical and contemporary cases. We will investigate key issues including communication and community; authorship and co-creativity; embodiment and identity; and ownership, governance, and management. Attention will be given to cultural and socio-technical nature of these environments and their ongoing construction within a broader media system. The class will center around readings, in-class exercises and conversation, and hands-on engagement with various systems (though we will not be focused on developing any specifically). Active participation is required for successful completion of this course. There are no pre-requisites, but the class will run seminar-style with limited enrollment.

After successful completion of the course the student should be able to:
- Identify key critical issues within a specific immersive world system
- Offer an analysis through the lens of media studies/sociology
- Carry out an original case study on a system with an eye toward the themes of the course

Learning Activities

The course is very hands-on and will require students to engage with a variety of immersive worlds both on their own and with classmates. It will be taught via a combination of lectures, class discussions, group exercises, and assignments.

Assignments & Grading

Your final grade will consist of the following components. Your hand-ins must reflect your sole work and authorship rather than a group effort unless otherwise specified.

- Participation, including prep-work via Canvas – 20%
- Video essay (group project) – 25%, due Oct 21
- Case study presentation – 25%, varying dates by sign-up
- Final paper – 30%, due Dec 15

Additional details will be provided on the various assignments. Students enrolled in the graduate number for this class are expected to work at a level commensurate with advanced study.

Policies and Expectations

Participation & engagement: You should come to our sessions prepped, having done the readings, have them at hand during class, and being ready to be involved in our shared time. Full participation means not simply attending, but being truly engaged; not only speaking, but actively listening to fellow class members and engaging in conversation together. We often discuss complex, even difficult topics and we should all enter those as thoughtful, generous listeners. I strongly encourage you to not check email, social media, etc. and really focus on being present and attentive. If laptop use/distraction becomes an issue, restrictions may be utilized.

Keeping safe online: Since part of the work of this class is exploring a variety of actual online immersive worlds, we are not situated solely within the classroom but will also be inhabiting a variety of (typically online) public spaces. This means there may at times be a risk of encountering offensive images, speech, or interactions. Central to this endeavor is that all students know they can and should immediately leave any situation they are unproductively uncomfortable in and, if possible, notify me so I can help/intervene as needed. While some of this may fall into the "useful data" category that one could write up as a kind of fieldnote, there is absolutely no expectation that anyone puts themselves in harm's way (emotional/psychological, social, physical, etc.) for the purposes of the course.

Covid and illness: MIT policies and protocols regarding Covid can be found at https://now.mit.edu/. If you have flu-like symptoms, or other reasons to be concerned that you might be contagious, *please stay home and rest*. Email me when you can so we can make sure we accommodate your recovery. I do not record our classes out of consideration for both student privacy and the desire to retain a space of open conversation but if I use a presentation "deck" I will upload the pdf and I will share any links used in the class via Canvas. I also encourage you to reach out to one of your fellow students to check in on any notes, insights, etc. from class they may have to share. Let's all look out for each other and be as safe as possible!

Late work: Extensions without penalty can be granted if I receive a note of support from MIT Student Support Services (S³ @ http://web.mit.edu/uaap/s3/); they are a vital resource to be connected to for help. I am also happy to make accommodations for religious holidays if notified in advance. Any late work beyond this is penalized at a full grade per day. Please note that final papers have a firm turn-in date due to the registrar's grade timeline.

Library and research assistance: The work you do in this course requires you to be able to undertake social scientific literature searches (well beyond just "googling") and evaluate those materials. The libraries offer useful help and advice for how to find relevant materials. See http://libraries.mit.edu/research-support/ for assistance. You may also find the research resources I link to on my website of help: http://tltaylor.com/teaching/research-resources-for-students/.

Writing and presentation assistance: The Writing and Communication Center offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts with advanced degrees and publishing experience. The WCC can help you learn about all types of academic and professional writing and further develop your oral communication skills. You can learn more about the WCC consultations and access advice about writing and oral presentations at http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/.

Academic integrity: I take academic integrity very seriously and consider it a core foundational principle of the university and research more broadly. Violations of it, including falsifications, plagiarism, or the use of any services to complete your work, will be treated severely. See http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/avoiding-plagiarism/ for some helpful advice on plagiarism and please don't hesitate to talk to me if you have any questions about this issue or any others.

There is also a lot of great discussion/investigation around using generative AI (ChatGPT+) in scholarly work and science but the bottom line for this class it that it is a profoundly unreliable system that regularly falsifies knowledge ("hallucinates") or offers overly simplistic/hackneyed formulations. *It should absolutely not be used as a substitute for your own authorship or analysis in this course. Doing so will incur the same serious penalties as falsifying data or plagiarism does*.

Reading Material
Course articles will be made available via Canvas the week before the associated class session. You must bring a copies of all assigned readings with you to class, either in electronic or paper form.

Schedule

Sept 6 – Introduction

Sept 13 – Histories and Futures
Initial mapping out of the space and setting up socio-technical convo, early imaginaries and utopic visions, subcultural/"cyberspace" milieu

- Boellstorff – "History" (from *Coming of Age in Second Life*)
- Winner – "Do Artifacts Have Politics"
- Taylor – "The Assemblage of Play"

Sept 20 – Bodies, Identities, and Presence I

Identity, bodies, race, gender, and structures of socio-technical systems. Presence, bodies, multiplicities and early experiments.

- Sundén – "Introduction" (from *Material Virtualities*)
- Turkle – "Aspects of the Self" (from *Life on the Screen*)
- Nakamura – "Race In/For Cyberspace"

Sept 27 – Bodies, Identities, and Presence II
Identity, bodies, race, gender, and structures of socio-technical systems. Presence, bodies, multiplicities and early experiments.

- Boellstorff – "Place and Time" (from *Coming of Age in Second Life*)
- Stone – "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?"
- Taylor – "Living Digitally"

Oct 4 – Socio-technical design
Designers, imagined users, politics of artifacts

- Lessig – "Cyberspaces" (from *Code is Law*)
- Morningstar & Farmer – "The Lessons of Lucasfilm's Habitat"
- Taylor – "Intentional Designers"

Oct 11 – Social Action and Communication
Emergent and instrumental action, communication, team sports, collective experiences, social interactions

- Chen – "Communication, Coordination, and Camaraderie in *World of Warcraft*"
- Jakobsson & Taylor – "The Sopranos Meets *Everquest*"
- TBD

Oct 18 – No class, groupwork for video

Oct 25 – Governance & Co-creation
Managing worlds, harassment & moderation, ownership & governance

- Dibbell – "A Rape in Cyberspace"
- Humphreys – "Productive Players"
- deZwart – "Models of Virtual World Governance"

Video essays due

Nov 1 – Commercialization
Corporate consolidation, commercialization, and scale

- Nagy & Turner – "The Selling of VR"
- Egilston & Carter – "The Political Economy of Meta's Reality Labs"
- Egilston & Carter – "Oculus Imaginaries"

Nov 8 – Colonization
Work & play, expansive (colonizing?) worlds

- Roquet – "Telepresence Enclosure"
- Kerr – "Surveillant Assemblages in MMOs"
- Chia – "The Metaverse, But Not the Way You Think"

Nov 15 – No class, online video

Nov 22 – No class (Thanksgiving Break starts 11/23)

Nov 29 – LARPs
Offline immersive worlds of play; rules and emergence

- Montola – "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing"
- Sihvonen & Stenros – "Cues for Queer Play"
- TBD

Dec 6 – Theme parks
Offline immersive worlds of space and entertainment, commercialization and fandom

- Lukas – "Theme Park as Oasis" and "Theme Park as Machine"
- Moulton – "Pay (to Pay) to Play"

Dec 13 – Open topic/fieldtrip

Dec 15 – Final paper due