

COMPUTATION AND CULTURE

DHSS 101 (11059) | Fall 2019 | TR 12:30pm-1:45pm | LBR 3233

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 2:30-4:30pm (in-person); Fridays 1:00-2:00pm (online)

OVERVIEW

In this course we'll think carefully about the intersections between computation and culture, particularly how those intersections shape what a recent United Nations report dubs our "age of digital interdependence." I divided the course into four focus units—gender, class, race, and disability—that will help us consider these intersections. In addition to providing a critical foundation for your future digital work (and future DHSS program work if you are a DHSS student), this course will invite you to think about the cultural, social, and political contexts and consequences of technology.

Alongside our critical readings, our understanding of computation and culture will be shaped through our extensive interaction with digital media. Each course unit includes several workshop days during which we will analyze digital projects, working backwards from interface to design and project management. Supplementing our readings about the cultural situated-ness of technology, our analysis of these digital projects will allow us to analyze first-hand how digital projects are designed and managed within cultural and institutional constraints. Our goals for these workshop sessions are: 1) to understand thoroughly the basic components and workflow of a digital project (from data to interface), and 2) to reflect carefully on how decisions made at any point in a project affect its outcome.

COURSE MATERIALS

All course readings are available on our [myCourses](#) page (unit content folders will open 2 weeks prior to unit start) or as open-access material on the web. For our Reverse Engineering Workshop days, you will be working in small groups to study a digital project. Suggested project links are included in the myCourses module for each unit, but your group is also free to choose an unlisted project with my approval.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

[To be determined together during our first week.]

ASSIGNMENTS

Process Letters (3). You will produce three “process letters” on how your work and thinking evolve over the course of the semester. These letters can take the form of either a written document (maybe linking to notes or representative examples of work you don’t otherwise turn in) or a multi-media object (video, audio, etc.). Whatever your chosen media, your letters need to give both you and me a sense of how your thinking about computation and culture is changing based on our course work.

Here are some prompts to get you started. Your letter need not address all of these questions, but they might be helpful to start the process of self-reflection.

- what reading or computational artifact that we’ve studied thus far has made a particularly strong impression on you and why?
- how is your relationship to technology changing as a result of our coursework? if it’s not, why not?
- what do you find most compelling during our “reverse engineering” workshop days? do you get excited, intrigued, frustrated by particular elements of the digital projects? do you find yourself thinking about the workshop process and the dynamics of working with a small group of colleagues?

[**Specifications:** written letters must be around 500 words (+/- 50w); video 1-2 minutes; audio 2-3 minutes. If you want to share your process letter in another media form, come talk to me. **Grading:** process letters will be graded on a complete/ incomplete basis. If you follow the assignment specifications and put thought and care into your self-evaluation, you will receive a “complete” (A-grade). If your assignment does not follow the specifications or does not demonstrate a thoughtful and careful approach, you will receive an “incomplete” (F-grade) for the assignment. You then have one chance to resubmit your process letter for full “complete” credit.]

Blog Posts (5). At the end of each unit, you’ll write a blog post applying the critical thinking we’ve been doing in class to the unit’s core ideas. You’ll choose 1 of 3 prompts to respond to and post your response to the designated Discussion Forum on our myCourses page.

[**Specifications:** blog posts must be around 350 words (+/- 50w) and must be posted to the designated myCourses Discussion Forum by midnight on the due date. **Grading:** blog posts will be graded on a 3-point scale: strong (3/3, A-grade), satisfactory (2/3, B-grade), or weak (1/3, C-grade). I will also include qualitative comments in my feedback for each blog post. Please refer back to these comments as you approach each subsequent blog post. See the blog post rubric for specifics.]

Reverse Engineering Projects: Presentations and Worksheets (4). For each of our focus units, you will work in small groups in class to “reverse engineer” an existing digital project. This means working backward from the finished artifact and figuring out how it was made: what software does the project use, what platform hosts it, who’s in charge of the project, how did they acquire the necessary resources, what data set(s) populate the project’s content and who owns the data? We’ll think about both the technical logistics for these projects and the cultural decisions/frameworks that inform their construction.

At the end of our workshop days for each unit, you and your group will present a short presentation on your findings and what you would do differently if you could revise or rebuild the project. You'll also catalogue your findings on the reverse engineering project worksheets. There are two main goals here: 1) to introduce you to a wide variety of tools and platforms used in digital humanities work, and 2) to hone your ability to analyze and critique computational artifacts.

[Specifications: presentations must be a tight 2-3 minute summary of your findings and critical thinking about your chosen project. Presentations must incorporate a concept, argument, or question from at least one of the unit's critical readings. For each workshop series, you'll also submit one worksheet per group on myCourses, due by midnight the day of your class presentation. **Grading:** presentations and worksheets will be graded together on a 3-point scale: strong (3/3, A-grade), satisfactory (2/3, B-grade), or weak (1/3, C-grade). I'll also include qualitative comments in my feedback for each group's project. Please refer to these comments as you approach each subsequent project. See the presentation rubric for specifics.]

GRADING

“The grade takes the complexity of human interaction within a learning environment and makes it machine-readable” (Jesse Stommel).

I'm happy to talk about grades anytime and will keep up on grade records in myCourses, but try to be more concerned with comments and qualitative feedback I give you rather than quantitative. If you are worried about your grade, your best strategy is: join the discussions, do the reading, and complete the assignments.

You will also be reflecting carefully on your own work throughout the semester in the Process Letter assignments. The intention is to help you focus on your own evolution in the course, rather than focusing on what I “expect” your evolution to be. If this practice causes more anxiety than it alleviates, see me at any point to confer about your progress.

Your final grade for the course will be calculated as follows:

Participation and 3 Process Letters	20%
5 Blog Posts	40% [lowest grade dropped]
4 Reverse Engineering Projects	40%

A note about **late assignments**: if you submit an assignment after the due date, your assignment grade will drop 1 full grade (A to B, complete to incomplete) for every late day.

READING AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

Openings/Foundations

T August 27	Course Introduction
R August 29	Megan Roberts, “Welcome to the Age of Digital Interdependence,” United Nations Foundation https://bit.ly/2zh4Xfv
T September 3	Raymond Williams, “Technology and Society,” pages 9-14
R September 5	Raymond Williams, “Technology and Society,” pages 19-31

Focus Unit 1: Gender

T September 10	Due: Blog Post 1 Jennifer Light, “When Computers Were Women” Claire Evans, “‘We are the Future Cunt’: Cyberfeminism in the 90s” https://bit.ly/2JD01qE
R September 12	Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, “Feminist Data Visualization” Christine Masters, “Women’s Ways of Structuring Data” https://bit.ly/2Y6hb9j
T September 17	Miriam Posner, “How Did They Make That?” https://bit.ly/2Y4QzFM Reverse Engineering Workshop
R September 19	Due: Process Letter 1 [familiarize yourself with the unit’s DH Projects] Reverse Engineering Workshop
T September 24	Reverse Engineering Workshop
R September 26	Reverse Engineering Presentation Day

Focus Unit 2: Class

T October 1	Due: Blog Post 2 [on gender and computation] Cathy O’Neil, “Introduction,” from <i>Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy</i> Alana Semuels, “The Internet Is Enabling a New Kind of Poorly Paid Hell,” <i>The Atlantic</i> https://bit.ly/2ry9oIA
R October 3	Spencer D.C. Keralis, “Disrupting Labor in Digital Humanities; or, The Classroom Is Not Your Crowd”
T October 8	[familiarize yourself with the unit’s DH Projects] Reverse Engineering Workshop
R October 10	Reverse Engineering Workshop
T October 15	No Class [Fall Break]
R October 17	Reverse Engineering Presentation Day

Focus Unit 3: Race

- T October 22 **Due: Blog Post 3** [on class and computation]
Lisa Nakamura, “Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture”
Kim Gallon, “Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities”
<https://bit.ly/2XN7dFs>
- R October 24 Safiya Noble, “Searching for Black Girls,” from *Algorithms of Oppression*
- T October 29 Roopika Risam, “Now You See Them: Self-representation and the Refugee Selfie”
- R October 31 [familiarize yourself with the unit’s DH Projects]
Reverse Engineering Workshop
- T November 5 **Due: Process Letter 2**
Reverse Engineering Workshop
- R November 7 Reverse Engineering Presentation Day

Focus Unit 4: Disability

- T November 12 **Due: Blog Post 4** [on race and computation]
Kairos, “Multimodality in Motion” <https://bit.ly/32pNAXN> [explore introductory site and read **ONE** of the following essays]
Stephanie Kerschbaum, “Modality”
Elizabeth Brewer, “Community”
Sushil Oswal, “Ableism”
- R November 14 Rick Godden and Jonathan Hsy, “Universal Design and Its Discontents”
<https://bit.ly/269N6AG>
Naseem Jamnia, “Access (Sm)all Areas: Disabled Gamers vs. the Industry’s Status Quo” <https://bit.ly/2Y8qeGH>
AbleGamers, “A Quest to Game: Walter F” <https://bit.ly/2OEybiR>
[captioned video link included with myCourses unit material]
- T November 19 [familiarize yourself with the unit’s DH Projects]
Reverse Engineering Workshop
- R November 21 Reverse Engineering Workshop
- T November 26 Reverse Engineering Presentation Day
- R November 28 No Class [Thanksgiving Break]

Closings/Speculations

- T December 3 **Due: Blog Post 5** [on disability and computation]
Reading TBA
- R December 5 Course Reflection, Revisit Digital Projects
- R December 12 **Due: Process Letter 3**