

digital 258 // english 290 // ftvm 366 // wgs 213

FEELING DIGITAL

When: [REDACTED]

Where: [REDACTED]

Professor: Jeff Nagy // jsnagy@umich.edu

Office hours:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]



image: a geometric grid pattern connects a smiling mouth and eyes

Course Description:

We're used to thinking about digital technologies in terms of information: petabytes of it flowing this way and that, from our phones, laptops, and watches to networks that circle the globe, and back. But the devices and platforms we use in our everyday lives also play host to systems that encourage, measure, police, and monetize our feelings and how we give them voice. In this class, we'll look at digital systems not just as information technologies, but as emotional ones. We'll investigate how they came to serve as the habitat for age-old feelings like joy, sadness, and shame. And we'll ask how they might be prompting new ones, glimpsed as we doomscroll through the news or watch the floating dots disappear in a text thread with a friend.

Because the question of who gets to express what kinds of feelings and how they may do so is deeply political, this course also introduces students to the intersections of emotion, digital technologies, and race, gender, and disability. We'll explore how assumptions about emotions are baked into our technologies in ways that shape what feeling digital looks like: what emotions are and who can have them, what kinds are normal and what kinds aberrant, whose are legitimate and whose are not. In so doing, we'll draw on critical frameworks from affect theory, feminist theory, and disability studies, to infrastructure studies and the history and sociology of emotions. We'll read this scholarship in combination with a range of emotional media, from films, digital art, and video games, to tweetstorms and internet memes.

Materials:

- >> Readings available in Canvas.
- >> Occasional digital material available either via Canvas or online.
- >> Access to a laptop or tablet during class meetings.
- >> Are.na account. Please sign up for a free account ██████. Are.na is a platform for saving, organizing, and annotating digital content, and we'll use it this semester to host our final project portfolios.

Participation:

Everyone has different styles of learning and engagement, and we'll work together to enable everyone to contribute meaningfully to the classroom community. The "standard" model of participation, involving reading and vocal in-class discussion, may not be optimal for everyone. If there are other ways of engaging with your classmates and with course material that would work better for you, please do let me know and we will adapt accordingly!

Accessibility and Accommodations:

Accessibility is as much a process as it is a set of practices. I am committed to making our learning experience both inside and outside of the classroom as accessible as possible. Accordingly, if there are any steps I can take to make your learning experience more accessible, no matter when over the course of the semester they occur to you, please do inform me.

Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) offers accommodations for students with documented disabilities. However, you need not be registered with SSD in order to request accommodations. Please let me know what I can do to maximize your learning, participation, and access in this course. Likewise, please let me know if there are other life circumstances that may affect your participation. These may be personal, family-related, or health-related, or related to your particular learning style. I am happy to discuss adjustments or alternatives as needed.

Course structure:

After our introductory session, in which we'll discuss this syllabus and the overall structure of the course and assignments, we will proceed through three larger units:

- 1. Theories and Methods:** In this first unit, we'll explore a handful of approaches that will help orient us in our later investigations of digital feeling. We'll look at approaches to emotion from the sciences of the mind, particularly from psychology and psychiatry. We'll pay particular attention to a major theory of emotion that originates with Darwin, and to criticisms of it that have emerged more recently. We'll also learn about the history of emotions, how they're shaped by social and political forces, how they play a role in economics, and how they come into contact with technology and technological infrastructures.
- 2. The "Big Six":** In this unit, we'll use the framework of the "big six" emotions – sadness, happiness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust – to dig into specific cases where emotion comes online or is embedded into digital devices and platforms.
- 3. New Horizons:** In a third and final unit, we'll investigate what new constellations of emotion and digital technology might be emerging, from digital lethargy to the pathos and humor of generative AI. We'll draw on the portfolios we've been collecting over the course of the term to think together about these new kinds of digital feelings.

Assignment Breakdown:

In-class Discussion and Activities

Part of our time in class together will be spent exploring course themes through discussion and in-class activities. Periodically, we'll share pieces from our ongoing portfolio collection (see below) and discuss our in-progress projects. We may also make time for hands-on group research and "serious play."

Reading Responses (4 posts and 4 comments)

Throughout the semester, students will contribute short responses via Canvas in response to that week's readings. These should be a minimum of 200 words and no more than 400 words each. More important than the length requirement, however, is that these responses engage closely with the readings: What arguments are the authors making or what questions does an example raise? Where do you see opportunities to push a line of thinking further or to take a left turn? Similarly, four times over the semester students will compose and post short responses to their peers' comments and questions. We'll use these questions and comments for our in-class discussion. At least one of the reading responses must be submitted before the due date of the midterm paper, but when you submit the others is up to you: you can submit them at regular intervals if you like, or you can wait for readings and themes that spark your interest.

Please submit these **before** the class for which the readings are due! This may not always be possible, but submitting them before class will allow our online discussions in the reading responses to shape our in-class discussion.

Midterm Paper – Object Lessons (5-6 pages)

This midterm paper will provide students the opportunity to think through the entanglement of emotion and technology in the form of a situated case study. More information will be provided early in the term, but broadly speaking, you'll be asked to choose one object or example and analyze it via at least one of the theoretical lenses or methodologies we'll discuss. You absolutely may draw on the portfolio described below in choosing your object!

Portfolio Collection and Comments (1 each per week, beginning in week 4)

Over the course of the semester, you'll engage in hands-on research to uncover some new aspect of digital feeling. Each week, I'll ask you to add one new item related to our investigations in this course to your digital portfolio on Are.na. The possibilities here are vast: it could be a patent, a scholarly article you find interesting, a TikTok or tweet, a TV show, or an article from the tech press. For each item, add a short annotation that describes it and why you found it interesting. Each week, you'll also choose an item from one of your classmates' portfolios to leave a short comment on.

Please aim to add an item to your portfolio before the first class of each week!

Final Project

In our final project, you'll draw on our readings and discussions for this term and the portfolio you've collected along the way. Individually or in small groups, you will assemble a multimedia project that theorizes an emergent digital feeling that might sit alongside the new kinds of emotions we'll discuss in the final unit of the course. This project can take many forms, and I encourage you to discuss options with me at any point in the semester. Possibilities include (but are not limited to):

- Instagram lecture
- Podcast
- Twine game or other interactive format
- Poster or PowerPoint presentation
- A website
- A white paper or think piece
- Other creative/critical options in consultation with the professor

Grading Distribution

Discussion and in-class activities:	15%
Reading responses and comments:	20%
Midterm paper:	25%
Media Portfolio:	20%
Final project:	30%

Class Policies and Helpful Resources:

Attendance and Course Recordings

As of the writing of this syllabus, this course is envisioned as meeting entirely in-person, twice a week, on Mondays and Wednesdays at 10 AM. If you have access or health needs that make regular in-person attendance and participation difficult, please do let me know as soon as possible so we can make alternative arrangements. Our course sessions will be recorded by the UM Lecture Capture service, and these recordings will be made available to students on request. If you need to miss a session or have missed one, please notify me and I will provide access to the recording.

Deadlines and Extensions

The assignment structure is meant to distribute work in a way that replaces high-stress, high-stakes crunch periods with smaller, continuous assignments like reading responses and portfolio-building that lock in course credit. Periodically throughout the semester, I will ask you for your feedback on how manageable the workload and schedule are and I may alter the course depending on your responses. I am deeply uninterested in

penalizing you for your work style, or for needing extra time on an assignment. If you need an extension, please do let me know and I will work with you to grant one if at all possible.

Academic Misconduct

The University of Michigan community functions best when its members treat one another with honesty, fairness, respect, and trust. LSA promotes the assumption of personal responsibility and integrity, and prohibits all forms of academic dishonesty and misconduct. All cases of academic misconduct will be referred to the LSA Office of the Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Education. Being found responsible for academic misconduct will usually result in a grade sanction, in addition to any sanction from the college. For more information, including examples of behaviors that are considered academic misconduct and potential sanctions, please see [Academic Integrity](#).

Writing Center

The Sweetland Center for Writing provides free consultation and assistance with all stages of the writing process. Sweetland provides support for all multilingual and international undergraduate students, offering a range of credit-bearing courses and sessions at their Writing Workshop and Peer Writing Center. You can find information about Sweetland's consulting services [here](#).

Shapiro Design Lab

The Shapiro Design Lab offers workspaces, equipment, and guidance for students working on creative projects. They have everything from 3D printers to audio and video editing rooms. Depending on how you envision your final project, this might be an excellent resource for you. Learn more [here](#).

Digital Media Commons

Located in the Duderstadt Center, the DMC offers audio and video equipment checkout for UM students. Like the Shapiro Design Lab, this might be a useful resource for final project production. More information is [here](#).

CRLT Resources

The Center for Research on Teaching and Learning maintains a master list of useful links to resources for UM students, including everything from advising centers to technology tools. You can find the list [here](#).

ESC @ UM

The Center for Ethics, Society, and Computing is an interdisciplinary research group dedicated to creating more equitable technological futures. Many of the events they sponsor are related to topics we'll discuss this term. I'll highlight speakers of particular interest, but you can learn more about ESC [here](#).

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Students may experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and their personal well-being. These may include academic pressure and challenges associated with relationships, mental health, alcohol or other drugs, identities, finances, etc. If you are experiencing concerns, seeking help is a courageous thing to do for yourself and those who care about you. If the source of your stressors is academic, please contact me so that we can find solutions together. For personal concerns, UM offers a variety of resources, many of which are listed on the [Resources for Student Wellbeing](#) page.

Class Schedule:

Note – Please stay tuned for a full schedule in the next few days! I am waiting to hear back about a few potential guest speakers, artists and scholars working at the intersection of emotion and technology, and I will update this section as soon as possible.

UNIT 0: Introduction		
Week 1	Mon 1/2	Wed 1/4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take a look at the syllabus before Wednesday's class meeting Please respond to this [REDACTED] by 1/11 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introductions Syllabus walk-through
UNIT 1: Theories and Methods for Emotion and Technology		
Week 2: Stealing Feelings or Empathy Machines?	Mon 1/9	Wed 1/11
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This week, we'll explore contemporary emotion AI in terms of its promises and pitfalls to ground our unit on theories and methods. 	READ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noone, "Emotion Recognition Is Mostly Ineffective. Why are Companies Still Investing" 	READ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Picard, <i>Affective Computing</i>, Introduction and skim Chapter 3 Higginbotham, "Welcome to Rosalind Picard's"

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reminder to please respond to this [redacted] by 1/11 	<p>In It?," available here: shorturl.at/CPTUW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> McStay, from <i>Emotional AI</i> <p>WATCH:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levenson, <i>Stealing Ur Feelings</i>, at https://stealingurfeelin.gs/ 	<p>touchy-feely world of empathic tech," available here: shorturl.at/ikln8</p>
<p>Week 3: The Psy- Sciences and Theories of Emotion</p>	<p>Mon 1/16</p>	<p>Wed 1/18</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We'll explore theories of emotion from psychiatry and psychology, core conflicts in the field, and how these theories made their way into computing 		<p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selection from Ekman, <i>Emotions Revealed</i> Selection from Crawford, <i>Atlas of AI</i> Selection from Barrett, <i>How Emotions Are Made</i>
<p>Week 4: Histories of Emotion in Science and Technology</p>	<p>Mon 1/23</p>	<p>Wed 1/25</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This week, we'll put digital feeling in deep historical perspective, from 19th c. science to the rise of AI 	<p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dror, "The Scientific Image of Emotion" 	<p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selection from Wilson, <i>Affect and Artificial Intelligence</i>
<p>Week 5: Watching Feeling – Surveillance, Data, Labor</p>	<p>Mon 1/30</p>	<p>Wed 2/1</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We'll learn about critical frameworks from surveillance studies, the sociology of emotion as labor, and critical data studies 	<p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zuboff, "Big Other" Seaver, "Knowing Algorithms" 	<p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stark and Crawford, "The Conservatism of Emoji" Selection from Illouz, <i>Cold Intimacies</i>
<p>Week 6: Affect Theory and Unruly Emotions</p>	<p>Mon 2/6</p>	<p>Wed 2/8</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In this final week of Unit 1, we'll investigate a critical turn towards foregrounding emotions known as "affect theory." 	<p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Williams, "Structures of Feeling" Sedgwick and Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" 	<p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect"

UNIT 2: The “Big Six” Go Digital		
Week 7: Big 6 – Anger, Disgust, Fear	Mon 2/13	Wed 2/15
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We’ll take a quick tour in this unit through cases where the “Big Six” so-called universal emotions collide with technology 	READ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chen, “The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed” (Disgust) Mulvin, “Media Prophylaxis” (Fear) 	READ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lewis, Marwick, & Partin, “We Dissect Stupidity” GUEST LECTURE with Becca Lewis (Stanford)
Week 8: Big 6 – Sadness, Joy, Surprise	Mon 2/20	Wed 2/22
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We’ll take a quick tour in this unit through cases where the “Big Six” so-called universal emotions collide with technology 	READ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parisi, “Shocking Grasps” (Surprise) PLAY: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Porpentine. Howling Dogs Zoë Quinn. Depression Quest (Sadness) <p style="text-align: center;">Midterm Project Due</p>	READ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marwick, “Memes” (Joy) Douglas, “It’s Supposed to Look Like Shit” (Joy) Dozier. “Patia’s Fantasy World Isn’t For Everyone. It’s For Us” (Joy) EXPLORE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yacht Metaphor: The Collected Works of @CoryInTheAbyss (NB: May not work in Safari!)
Week 9	Mon 2/27	Wed 3/1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spring Break – no class! We resume 3/6 		
UNIT 3: New Horizons for Feeling Digital		
Week 10: Dopamine Overdrive & Digital Lethargy	Mon 3/6	Wed 3/8
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This week we’ll think about digital emotion at the extremes, from dopamine-driven digital addiction to burnout 	READ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interview with Lembke Schüll, “Engineering Chance” 	READ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hu, from <i>Digital Lethargy</i>

Week 11: Feeling Machines	Mon 3/13	Wed 3/15
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This week we'll deal with what we might make of machines that feel in their own right, or seem to? 	<p>CHECK OUT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ELIZA ○ ChatGPT (requires free account creation) <p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lemoine, "Is LaMDA Sentient?" (skim) ○ Roose, "A Conversation with Bing's Chatbot" ○ "Bing's AI Chat: I Want To Be Alive" (skim) ○ Johnson, "LaMDA and the Sentient AI Trap" 	<p>WATCH:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Spike Jonze, Her (2013) <p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Hodge, "Gifts of Ubiquity"
Week 12: Melancholic Media	Mon 3/20	Wed 3/22
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How are digital systems shifting our relationships to one of our oldest, stickiest structures of feeling: grief and mourning? 	<p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Zeavin, "Melancholic Media" <p>GUEST LECTURE with Dr. Hannah Zeavin (IU)</p>	<p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Kneese, "Breakdown as Method" <p>Final Project Proposal Due</p>
Week 13: Empathy	Mon 3/27	Wed 3/29
<p>Are immersive technologies "empathy machines?" Is empathy all it's cracked up to be?</p>	<p>WATCH:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Chris Milk, "How VR Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine." <p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Nakamura, "Feeling Good About Feeling Bad" <p>**We'll meet in the LSA Media Center Mac Classroom in the Modern Languages Building for this session**</p>	<p>PLAY:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Anna Anthropy, Dys4ia ○ Andrews & Schmidt, Realistic Kissing Simulator ○ Rohrer, Passage ○ Yang, Hard Lads <p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Yang, "Hard Lads as Important Failure" ○ D'Anastasio, "Why Video Games Can't Teach You Empathy."

Week 14: Affect and New Media Art	Mon 4/3	Wed 4/5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can art that leverages new media technologies help us understand emerging ways of feeling digital? 	<p>WATCH:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carolyn Lazard, CRIP TIME <p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hobart and Kneese, "Radical Care" Mills and Alexander, "Scores" 	<p>WATCH:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lauren Lee McCarthy, LAUREN <p>READ:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hu, from <i>Digital Lethargy</i> Sterne, from <i>Diminished Faculties</i>
Week 15	Mon 4/10	Wed 4/12
Final Project Presentations	Workshops / Presentations	Workshops / Presentations
Week 16	Mon 4/17	Wed 4/19
Final Project Presentations	Workshops / Presentations	
Final Projects Due: Friday, April 21		