

Professor Huan He

Office location:

Office Hours:

In-person office hours or virtual

ENGL 3726: New Media

Department of English

Vanderbilt University, Fall 2023

Classroom:

New Media:
Race and the Technological Imagination
(syllabus subject to revision)

Course Description

In digital culture, we are constantly engaging in acts of the imagination—from the “user” we assume to be on the other side of the screen, to the personification of AI algorithms, to myths of innovation progress and technological benevolence, to who is included in utopic and dystopic visions of technological futures. Drawing from literary, artistic, and theoretical texts, we will examine how technologies and technological worlds are produced through imaginative techniques, often with real-world consequences. This course examines how ideas of race and social difference (including gender, sexuality, and disability) reflect how we imagine information technologies, shaping how technical systems are embedded within human worlds. How is the history of the digital also a history of race? What is the relevance of literature and art for future technologists?

A foundational premise of the course will be to consider technology itself as a product of literary or artistic expression, and thus a world-making project subject to reinvention. Topics will include Silicon Valley history, pre-digital predecessors such as the US railroad, artificial intelligence machines, surveillance cultures, digital gaming, and more. Since the technological imagination is a contested terrain, this course will also explore alternative expressions of technology by writers, artists, and theorists, with emphasis on works by creators and makers of color. Through a seminar format emphasizing discussion, students will learn how cultural forms can intervene in technical design as well as develop critical frameworks and vocabulary for recalibrating and reimagining our digital present.

Learning Objectives

Through a mix of humanistic approaches, ranging from textual, visual, and multimedia analysis, students will be able to:

- **Identify** narratives of technological progress and **analyze** their social and political consequences.
- **Explain** how race, gender, sexuality, and disability are encoded into sociotechnical systems, processes, and beliefs.
- **Interpret** how cultural and artistic forms, such as literature, art, film, games, and popular media, reflect social concerns of identity and power.
- **Express** complex, critical ideas through argument-driven essays and multimedia forms.

Required Texts for Purchase (Other weekly readings are available on Brightspace)

- Janice Lobo Sapigao, *microchips for millions* (ISBN: 978-0-9981792-1-6)

Optional Texts for Purchase (Scanned pdfs are uploaded; purchase if you prefer a hard copy and just want a personal copy of a great collection!)

- Ted Chiang, "The Lifecycle of Software Objects" from *Exhalation: Stories* (ISBN-13: 978-1101947883)
- Jamil Jan Kochai, "Playing Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain" from *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories* (ISBN-13: 978-0593297193)

Assignments

In order to successfully complete this course, you must submit all assignments for a grade (for instance, you cannot miss an entire short essay assignment and still pass the class). Assignments must be turned by their due date or points will be deducted per day. However, urgent things come up. If you need an extension, **you must contact me at least 24 hours before the due date**. I will try my best to accommodate. Assignments must be submitted via Brightspace (not via email).

- **Class Contribution** **20%**
Thinking together throughout a course means there will be a diversity of learning styles and approaches. This in-person class will **require mandatory attendance**, with some flexibility, given the urgent circumstances that come up in life.

At the beginning of the course, you will complete a "Class Contribution survey," where you will have the chance to share how you hope to contribute to/engage in the class. While meaningful participation in discussion is encouraged, prioritized, and valued, I recognize that we all process material in different ways. Outside of vocal participation in class, other ways to contribute include:

1. Note-taking for our class discussions and distributing notes to all students
2. Coordinating an out-of-class writing feedback session with a group of classmates and submitting a write-up reflection
3. Sharing relevant contemporary articles you come across in the news with the class, with your thoughts attached
4. Other creative ways that contribute to overall class learning

At the end of the course, you will complete a "Class Contribution reflection (300-400 words)," where you will assign yourself a class contribution grade with a narrative explaining the reasoning. This reflection will factor strongly in the class contribution grade you ultimately receive.

- **Discussion Posts** **20%**
Throughout the semester, you will submit **7 weekly discussion posts (300-400 words)** analyzing the week's readings covering Tuesday and Thursday. You can choose to focus on one reading or all of the week's material. These posts are due on [REDACTED]

The first two weeks of readings are mandatory for discussion post submission, and you have the remaining weeks to decide which weeks you will submit 5 additional posts. Your post can also directly respond to another classmate's discussion post. Posts are NOT straight summaries or reports of the readings. Instead, they should offer valuable reflection, analysis, close-reading, and/or connections to broader themes and topics. They are graded on a pass (check plus = 10/10, check = 8/10) or fail (minus = 5 or less/10) scale. Each Brightspace post must include the following:

1. A clear understanding of the reading's argument or purpose (ask yourself: what question is the author trying to answer?). To move beyond summary, think about the argument's implications, contradictions, and/assumptions.
2. At least one quote (with page citations) from the readings that is *meaningfully* incorporated into your post. Choose argument-driven quotes that you can interpret or evaluate rather than descriptive quotes that provide factual information. Unpack the quote for us: think about its word choice, its implications, its assumptions, or maybe make connections to other parts of the reading(s).
3. At least one significant question posed to the class that relates to the reading. Keep in mind the scale of question. If you want to ask LARGE questions ("how do we stop racist tech?"), make sure to also scaffold this question with smaller, reading-specific questions ("Do you think the author's use of X is helpful for Y, in the context of tech justice?"). In other words, make sure your questions are scaled appropriately for a weekly discussion post within the parameters of the readings. This question can also be something that you did not understand about the reading.

- **Midterm Essay** **25%**
You will submit a midterm essay. The full detailed prompt and rubric will be distributed at a later date in the semester. Each paper will include a proper header, works cited page, and be between 1600-2000 words (about 6-8 pages long, double-spaced, standard 12 pt. font). You must also submit a mandatory cover page at the beginning of your paper. The cover page is addressed to yourself and will be between 300-400 words. The cover page is a formal piece of writing in letter form and will discuss:
 1. What you are most proud of accomplishing in the paper
 2. Why you decided to write on this topic
 3. What you struggled with in the paper
 4. What more you could add / change if you had more time to work on it
- **Final Project: Proposal** **5%**
Weeks before your final project is due (see semester schedule), you will submit a proposal which will include a 300-400 word description of the critical-creative project you hope to build for our class-wide "Technological Imagination" portfolio. For your bibliography, you must cite at least 4 texts or cultural works from the class. You must also include an additional list of 3-4 sources outside of course material in your bibliography.
- **Final Project: The Technological Imagination** **30%**
Completed individually or in small groups of 2-3, the final project will be a critical-creative project that will allow students to express research-based argumentation and analysis in various creative forms. Just like the cultural forms that have guided and enhanced our

thinking in the course (from poetry, to games, to graphic novels, to short fiction, and more), these creative forms are not simply “entertainment” but provide serious, critical commentary on a social aspect of technology. You will have the opportunity to distill ideas and arguments from the course (the “critical” part) into a media form of your choice (the “creative” part). The full detailed prompt and rubric will be distributed at a later date in the semester. The workload will be equivalent to an 8-10 page paper per student (double-spaced, standard font). Possible final products might include (among many other possibilities!):

1. a media-rich research essay made for a public readership on a publishing platform such as Wordpress or Scalar (default option)
2. a curated digital exhibition of multimedia art (not already covered in class) that critical responds to and enhances a key argument of your choice
3. a boardgame or a videogame (or detailed designed prototype of one) that is argument-driven, with an accompanying gaming narrative and instruction manual

Course Policies

- **Attendance**

This is a discussion course, so **attendance is required** (with the understanding that life happens). We aim to cultivate a support, collaborative discussion-oriented learning environment. We will take attendance each class in our Class Notebook. Because your class contribution grade will take into account your attendance, participation, and other forms of engagement and contribution, it is a holistic grade assigned to you at the end of the semester. **If you are ill / feeling / positive for COVID, do not come to class! Rest and recover!** You are responsible for notifying me if some circumstance will prevent you from regularly attending in-person. For serious obstacles to mandatory attendance, communication with me is key.

- **Community Expectations and Standards**

The success of this course will be the result of the openness, communication, and community we build together. Because we will be discussing real-world issues of social difference (race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, etc.), different backgrounds and perspectives will contribute to a lively course. Students may not agree on all issues, but as a ground rule, hate speech, bigotry, and other violent acts will not be tolerated. I expect us to handle all topics with dignity, care, and respect. This means that we sometimes must lean into the messiness of these topics. We will sometimes leave the class without any solutions or answers. Nonetheless, to engage in civil discourse, we must continue to ask hard questions, listen and support each other in our shared growth, and embrace our very own contradictions.

- **Technology Policy**

Please bring your laptop to class for attendance and classwork, and be sure to avoid online distractions. Keep your phones hidden for the duration of the class and on silent mode.

- **COVID Policy**

We are living in an ongoing pandemic, and our community consists of people who may have varying degrees of health vulnerabilities and concerns. While masking is not required

in our class, I encourage you to wear your mask if you feel you may have been exposed to COVID or for other precautionary measures.

- **Accessibility and Accommodations**

Please notify me of any accessibility and accommodation needs, whether they stem from official documentation or would just generally improve your embodied experience of learning. For more information on being listed with Student Access Services, please see: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/student-access/>.

- **Academic Honesty**

In order to cultivate a supportive environment for critical learning, our class follows the University Honor Code and anti-plagiarism policy. Please review the University Honor Code: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/student_handbook/the-honor-system/. On plagiarism, see: <http://researchguides.library.vanderbilt.edu/plagiarism>.

- **Vanderbilt Writing Studio**

For both improving and experienced writers, I encourage you to make a free appointment for writing feedback: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/writing/>. This is a great campus resource!

SCHEDULE

Week 1: Who Are We?

- █ | Introductions
Syllabus Overview
Class Contribution Survey

Unit 1: Foundations

Week 2: Code / Decode

- █ | Ruha Benjamin, "Introduction: The New Jim Code," *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*
- █ | Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, "Race"
Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts" (p. 1-6)

Week 3: Cultures

- █ | Toni Morrison, "Preface" and "Black Matters," from *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*
- █ | Anne Balsamo, "Introduction," from *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work*
Donna Haraway, "The Persistence of Vision"

Unit 2: World-Builders


Week 4: Circuits

- █ | Lisa Nakamura, "Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture"
Fairchild Semiconductor, Select Digitized Archival Material X
- █ | Janice Lobo Sapigao, *microchips for millions* X


Week 5: Labor

- █ | Tung-Hui Hu, "Laugh Out Loud," *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches from an Age of Disconnection*


Adrienne Williams, Milagros Miceli, Timnit Gebru, "The Exploited Labor Behind Artificial Intelligence,"
<https://www.noemamag.com/the-exploited-labor-behind-artificial-intelligence/>


Yoshua Okón's *Canned Laughter* 

Sarah Roberts, "'Modern Heroes,'" *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*

Disorientalism, *Plugging Away*, 
<https://disorientalism.net/projects/plugging-away/>

Week 6: AI (part 1)

Ted Chiang, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* (Part 1) 

Ted Chiang, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* (Part 2) 

Week 7: AI (part 2)

N. Katherine Hayles, "The Subversion of the Human Aura: A Crisis in Representation" (excerpt)

Kate Crawford, "Introduction," *Atlas of AI*

View: Anatomy of an AI system
<https://anatomyof.ai/img/ai-anatomy-map.pdf>

Read and watch: Stephanie Dinkin's *Not the Only One* project,
<https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/ntoo.html> 

Optional: Ted Chiang, "Chatgpt is a blurry jpeg of the world,"
<https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/chatgpt-is-a-blurry-jpeg-of-the-web>

Lab 1: AI Personas and ChatGPT


Midterm Due by Fri. Oct. 6, 11:59pm


Unit 3: Imaginaries

Week 8: Otherness

David Roh, Betsy Huang, Greta Niu, "Introduction," *Techno-*

Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media


Franny Choi, "Soft Science" (poem excerpts) 

Franny Choi, "Imitation Games" 

<http://gulfcoastmag.org/journal/34.1-winter/spring-2022/imitation-games/>

Michelle Huang, *Inhuman Figures* (video essay) **In-class viewing**

<https://smithsonianapa.org/inhuman-figures/> 

 | Jennifer Rhee, "Dying: Drone Labor, War, and the Dehumanized," from *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor*


Teju Cole, "Seven short stories about drones" 


<https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/seven-short-stories-about-drones/>

Context for piece:

<https://directory.eliterature.org/individual-work/4873>

Week 9: Looking


 | Simone Browne, "Notes on Surveillance Studies," from *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*

Stephanie Dinkins, *Secret Garden* 


<https://secretgarden.stephaniedinkins.com/>


 | NO CLASS, Fall Break

Week 10: Systems

 | Simone Browne, "Branding Blackness: Biometric Technology and the Surveillance of Blackness," from *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*

1 Short Film out of the "Screening Surveillance" collection:

<https://www.surveillance-studies.ca/projects/screening-surveillance> 

 | Ivan Char-Lopez, "Sensing Intruders: Race and the Automation of Border Control"

Week 11: Interactivity

██████████ | Juan Llamas-Rodriguez, "First-Person Shooters, Tunnel Warfare, and the Racial Infrastructures of the US-Mexico Border"

Lab 2: TBD (DALL-E, or game console)

██████████ | NO CLASS, Professor He is presenting research at the American Studies Association Conference

Unit 4: Games

Week 12: Play

██████████ | Tara Fickle, "Introduction," *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*

Cory Doctorow, "Anda's Game" 
(Link: https://www.salon.com/2004/11/15/andas_game/)

Optional: Tara Fickle: "Made in China: Gold Farming as Alternative History of Esports,"
<https://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/132>.

██████████ | Attend Identity and Esports Virtual Lecture, Dr. Tara Fickle, "Playing Like An Asian: Race, Gender, and Athleticism in Esports" (Prof. He will be in attendance as the organizer and respondent)

Week 13: Pleasure

██████████ | Chris Patterson, "Loop: Violence / Pleasure / *Far Cry*," *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games*

Jamil Jan Kochai, "Playing Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain" 

██████████ | Lisa Nakamura, "Feeling Good about Feeling Bad: Virtuous Virtual Reality and the Automation of Racial Empathy"

Lab 3: *Traveling While Black* (MetaQuest 2)

Unit 5: Our Technological Worlds

Week 14: Rest

██████████ | NO CLASS, Thanksgiving Break

██████████ | NO CLASS, Thanksgiving Break

Week 15: Who Are We?

██████████ | Alex Rivera, *Sleep Dealer* (2008) X

██████████ | Final Project Workshop / Presentations

Week 16: Our Technological Imaginations

██████████ | Final Project Workshop / Presentations

██████████ | Final Project Workshop / Presentations

Final Project due: Thursday, Dec. 14, 11:59pm