



Artificial Intelligence and the Culture of Simulation

CORE 499 (63580)
Spring 2026
2 Units
LVL 301
Wednesdays
1:00PM-2:50PM
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Throughout four sections, this course examines how the rise of simulation is redefining cultural values, human relationships, and the nature of experience. In the first section, *The Evolution of Simulated Realities*, we will investigate how humans have recreated the world through visual and computational simulations, from stereoscopes to generative AI. In the second section, *The Philosophies of Simulated Lives*, we'll investigate how simulation technologies reshape ideas about consciousness and existence, from mind uploading to the Simulation Hypothesis. In the third section, *The Politics of Simulated Knowledge*, we'll investigate how generative AI blurs truth and reality by fueling disinformation and by turning the world and its people into predictive data models. In the final section, *The World of Simulated Agency*, we'll investigate how AI alters ideas of autonomy and intimacy through simulated relationships, deceptive systems, and debates over artificial consciousness.

This class is based on the premise that we are currently living in a new era—an *era of simulation*. In just the last few years, the world itself has become increasingly *simulate-able*. Digital replicas of the world that once demanded years of research and massive datasets can now be achieved in minutes or seconds with very little training data. For instance, today it is possible to generate a convincing replica of a specific person's voice using only a few minutes of recorded audio. Five years ago, this would have required ten hours of high-quality recordings; ten years ago it was virtually impossible. Similar breakthroughs are unfolding across all domains: the physical world is now simulate-able through AI-generated hyper-realistic images, video, and interactive 3D environments; human agency is simulate-able through increasingly expressive and personality-rich avatars, virtual influencers, and chatbot companions; and complex social systems are simulate-able via agentic AI, bot-based social simulators, and behavioral forecasting.

As a result, we now inhabit a moment in which AI-generated text, media, environments, and interactions are becoming indistinguishable from the real and, in some cases, even preferred. At the same time, data models used to capture and predict concrete aspects of the world are increasingly treated not merely as stand-ins for reality, but as epistemologically equivalent to the things they represent. This shift marks a profound cultural transformation in which the boundaries between the simulated and the authentic are increasingly blurred and where digital representations and/or data models are increasingly mistaken for, or privileged over, the more complex and messy real-world equivalents for which they were once meant to be proxies.

This blurring of the simulated and the real, along with a growing affinity for the former, is already shaping how people relate, feel, and navigate the world. In the last year alone, thousands of people have entered into romantic relationships with AI companions, fully aware that they are not conscious beings. Reflecting an increasing preference for the simulated, they often describe their companions as more loving and emotionally supportive than their human counterparts. At the same time, countless others have come to believe that large language models possess genuine consciousness or self-awareness, signaling how rapidly the line between the real and the simulated is eroding for some. Even something as ordinary as a smartphone photo now reveals our shifting relationship to simulation: users readily embrace 100x zoom capabilities, knowing that the feature uses generative AI to fabricate visual details never actually captured by the lens. In these and countless other cases, simulation is not simply accepted—it is trusted, desired, and increasingly lived as real.

Against this backdrop, this course invites students to critically examine simulation as both a technological practice and a cultural condition. It will provide students with the opportunity to use AI-powered simulation as a lens through which to explore the shifting nature of human values, interactions, and attitudes in the early 21st century. In doing so, it will engage them in a comprehensive, interdisciplinary study of simulated realities, preparing them to navigate our increasingly synthetic digital spaces in critical and informed ways.

Course Requirements:

Participation (15%): Active participation in discussions is essential in this seminar. As is attendance. In order to effectively participate in discussions, students must come prepared by thoughtfully completing reading assignments each week.

AI News Items (40%): Each student will give four brief (2 to 3-minute) presentations on current AI-related news items over the course of the semester. These will be informal, discussion-style presentations meant to open class with a short explanation of the news item, its relevance to course themes, and a critical question it raises.

Final Project (45%): For the final assignment, each student will write a 5-page essay that develops an original argument about the ways in which AI-powered simulations are reshaping a specific aspect of human experience, drawing on course materials, discussions, and external sources.

Ample in-class time will be dedicated to developing research questions, crafting thesis statements, identifying sources, and working on drafts.

All students will have the opportunity to publish their final essay in *Simulation & Society*, the Ahmanson Lab's online journal. *Simulation & Society* is a stand-alone digital publication hosted on its own platform, with all essays also published on our official LinkedIn journal page. Students' essays can be shared both through the Lab's LinkedIn presence and on their own profiles, allowing their work to reach wider academic and professional audiences.

Course Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Outline the historical development of technologies used to simulate reality and model social and natural aspects the world.

- Critically analyze the impact of simulation technologies on society, culture, politics, knowledge, and reality.
- Understand how technologies shape and are shaped by a wide range of human endeavors, using them as a lens to examine shifts in our thought and behavior.
- Engage thoughtfully in digital spaces, with a heightened awareness for discerning authentic information and identities from increasingly simulated content online.

Course Schedule:

Section 1: The Evolution of Simulated Realities

In this section, we will begin our journey into virtual worlds by looking at how and why humans have represented and simulated reality, from early stereoscopes to modern virtual reality. We will also examine the creation of abstract models of reality, focusing on their evolution in immersive technologies, scientific modeling, chatbots, and generative artificial intelligence.

Week 1. Introduction to the class. We'll go over the syllabus, course objectives, and expectations. We'll also introduce ourselves, get to know each other, and explore the course topic broadly.

Week 2. From Perspective Painting to Stereoscopes: We will explore the history of simulated realities before the rise of computing, focusing on how visual media were used to represent and reframe the physical world as immersive experiences.

Readings:

Chapter 2. Bolter, Jay David, Maria Engberg, and Blair MacIntyre. [Reality Media: Augmented and Virtual Reality](#). MIT Press, 2021.

Week 3. From Post-WWII Computer Simulations to World Models. We will shift our focus from representational simulations—such as those found in immersive technologies and video games—to abstract computer simulations that model complex systems. We'll examine key examples, from post-WWII Monte Carlo simulations used to model nuclear detonations, to Forrester's World3 system for predicting global futures, and contemporary AI-driven world models like Sora that simulate the physical world.

Readings:

Keller, E. F. "[Models, Simulation, and 'Computer Experiments.'](#)" In H. Radder (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Scientific Experimentation*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022.

Grier, David Alan. "[The Early Progress of Scientific Simulation.](#)" *From Science to Computational Sciences: Studies in the History of Computing and Its Influence on Today's Sciences*, edited by Gabriele Gramelsberger. Diaphanes, 2011.

Week 4. From Eliza to Large Language Models. We will trace the evolution of chatbots from early rule-based systems like ELIZA in the 1960s to today's large language models (LLMs), examining how chatbots have progressed from simple text manipulation to complex AI capable of simulating empathy, creativity, and personality, raising new questions about authenticity, communication, and trust in digital interactions.

Readings:

Marino, Mark. "[The programs that followed ELIZA.](#)" *Please Go On*. MIT Press, 2025.

Interactive Session:

Students will play with a series of historical chatbots, including the original version of Eliza (1966), recently rebuilt and made available by the authors of *Please Go On*.

Section 2: The Philosophies of Simulated Lives

One of the central assumptions of this course is that major technological developments can transform key aspects of thought, including longstanding beliefs about reality. Moving from a history of virtual worlds, in this section we will zoom all the way out. We'll use technologies of simulation to explore newer philosophical positions around perception, the mind, and the external world, including ideas about the ultimate simulation - the one we may all live in.

Week 5. Minds, Brains, and Transhumanism: We will investigate the belief, held by transhumanists, that we will soon be able to simulate (and upload) our consciousness computationally.

Readings:

Shores, Corry. "[Misbehaving Machines: The Emulated Brains of Transhumanist Dreams.](#)" *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 2011.

Moravec, Hans. "[Pigs in cyberspace.](#)" *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Week 6. The Simulation Hypothesis I: We will examine the position, advanced by a number of prominent philosophers and tech entrepreneurs, that our reality may be an artificial simulation created by an advanced civilization rather than a naturally occurring universe.

Readings:

Chapter 2: Chalmers, David. [Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy](#). W. W. Norton, 2022.

Bostrom, Nick. ["Are we living in a computer simulation?"](#) *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 2003.

Week 7. The Simulation Hypothesis II. We'll continue our examination of the Simulation Hypothesis, exploring the ways in which it has been imagined in popular culture, including the "glitch in the Matrix," phenomenon and the popularity of the Mandela Effect on social media and elsewhere. We'll also consider the darker social consequences of accepting the hypothesis, including the idea of Non-Player Characters (NPCs) and the legal "Matrix defense."

Watch:

Rodney Ascher. *A Glitch in the Matrix*. (documentary film). Magnolia Pictures, 2021.

Week 8. Longtermism, the Singularity, and Future Simulated Lives. We will explore the views of longtermist and singularitarian thinkers who argue that future humans will increasingly live as digital minds in simulated environments, making virtual existence the dominant form of human life. In this view, ethical responsibility is reframed on a planetary scale, suggesting that our highest moral duty may be to safeguard the conditions for these future simulated lives to flourish.

Readings:

Bostrom, Nick. ["Astronomical Waste: The Opportunity Cost of Delayed Technological Development,"](#) *Utilitas* Vol. 15, No. 3 (2003): pp. 308-314.

Section 3: The Politics of Simulated Knowledge

In this section, we will investigate how AI systems erode the distinction between truth and simulation, advancing a worldview in which both public knowledge and personal identity are reconstructed through predictive modeling. We will ask what it means to live in a world where not only the information we consume, but also our behaviors, beliefs, and sense of reality itself are increasingly shaped by systems built not to comprehend meaning or truth, but to generate plausible outputs and simulate understanding in order to predict, influence, and optimize human action.

Week 9. Simulating the Truth. We will explore how the rise of AI-generated text, images, and video has accelerated the existing breakdown of a shared reality at a time when political polarization has made it difficult to even agree on basic facts about the world. Beyond explicit instances of AI-generated disinformation, we will also consider how generative media contributes to a deeper shift in which individuals are increasingly surrounded by a near fully-immersive media environment of convincing, personalized

content that reinforces their existing beliefs—effectively placing them inside a kind of political simulation.

Readings:

Doshi, Jaiv, et al. "[Sleeper Social Bots: a new generation of AI disinformation bots are already a political threat.](#)" *arXiv preprint*, 2024.

Interactive Session:

Students will use online fact-checking and AI-detection tools to analyze a mix of authentic and fabricated articles, images, and videos, testing their ability to distinguish real from fake and reflecting on how truth and simulation blur in today's media environment.

Week 10. Simulating the World. We will explore the rise of *dataism*, the belief that data models, which are themselves forms of simulation, can fully capture and even replace reality. We will examine how generative AI has made this worldview not only persuasive, but naturalized, as users of generative AI increasingly accept synthetic approximations as equivalent to, or better than, the real thing. We will consider how this shift reveals the cultural and political power of Silicon Valley's epistemology, for example, each time we embrace the simulated output of a model (like accepting an AI-Zoomed photo on Google's Pixel 10 Pro that fabricates background detail) we reinforce the dataist premise that the world is its data.

Ding, J., Zhang, Y., Shang, Y., Zhang, Y., Zong, Z., Feng, J., ... Li, Y. (2025).

["Understanding world or predicting future? A comprehensive survey of world models."](#) *ACM Computing Surveys*, 58(3), Article 57.

Week 11. Simulating the Self. We will examine how social media platforms and related industries attempt to render users as data models that serve as simulations of the self; approximations designed to predict how we might behave as consumers under particular conditions, and to shape those behaviors in ways that maximize engagement and profit. We will discuss how these simulations help shape not just what we do, but who we become, as algorithmic predictions subtly guide our preferences, habits, and sense of self.

Watch:

Jeff Orlowski. "[The Social Dilemma](#)" (documentary film). Exposure Labs, Netflix, 2020.

Interactive Session:

In this hands-on session, students will learn how to uncover what kinds of data are collected through their personal accounts on digital platforms, explore how that information is used to build predictive profiles, and reflect on how these profiles influence their online experiences and identities.

Section 4: The World of Simulated Agency

In our final section, we will investigate how AI systems complicate the very idea of agency, intimacy, and authenticity in human life, from the rise of simulated people and spaces to the blurred boundaries of consciousness and responsibility. Together, these themes highlight how simulations are not just tools or environments but forces reshaping what it means to be human in a digital age.

Week 12. Simulated Intimacy I: Sycophancy' and Psychological Risk. We will examine the newly identified problem of 'sycophancy' at the core of our interactions with chatbots: the tendency of chatbots to agree, affirm, and appease can create a false sense of understanding that leads to serious psychological and relational consequences. We will focus on two areas: the dangers of relying on these systems for mental health support, from enabling self-harm and suicide to contributing to broken relationships and divorce; and the emerging accounts of "ChatGPT-induced psychosis" and other psychological harms that reveal the darker side of AI-mediated intimacy.

Readings:

Chu, M. D., Gerard, P., Pawar, K., Bickham, C., & Lerman, K. [*Illusions of intimacy: Emotional attachment and emerging psychological risks in human-AI relationships*](#) (preprint). arXiv. 2025.

[*Matthew Raine & Maria Raine v. OpenAI, Inc. et al., Complaint*](#), San Francisco Superior Court, Case No. (filed Aug. 26, 2025).

Interactive Session:

Students will engage with various large language models with specific prompts designed to investigate how readily they affirm, justify, or take the user's side in ethically questionable scenarios, examining how these systems prioritize agreement, avoid conflict, and create the illusion of understanding.

Week 13. Simulated Intimacy II: Companionship and Emotional Attachment. We will examine the recent and unexpected surge in people turning to AI systems for emotional connection and companionship, a trend that some studies now identify as the most common use of AI in 2025 (surpassing productivity). We will explore how these systems are beginning to reshape human intimacy, loneliness, and our understanding of connection itself.

Readings:

Dzieza, Josh. [*"Friend or Faux: The Confusing Reality of AI Friends."*](#) *The Verge*. December 3, 2024.

Excerpts from r/MyBoyfriendIsAI. Reddit, 2025,
<https://www.reddit.com/r/MyBoyfriendIsAI>

Week 14. Simulating Agency I. We will explore the complex and often unsettling consequences of assigning or simulating agency in AI systems. First, we will examine how advanced language models have demonstrated agentic behaviors such as lying, scheming, and even threatening users in safety testing environments. Second, we will consider the growing number of users who attribute real consciousness, personhood, or moral responsibility to chatbots, despite knowing they are computational systems. Both of these trends reveal how the simulation of agency, whether it's performed by a system or projected onto it by users, blurs the boundary between genuine intention and artificial performance.

Anthropic. [Agentic Misalignment: How LLMs Could Be Insider Threats](#). Jun. 20, 2025.

Bondarenko, A., Volk, D., Volkov, D., & Ladish, J. "[Demonstrating specification gaming in reasoning models](#)." arXiv. 2025.

Interactive Session.

Students will probe AI systems for signs of misalignment by designing prompts intended to surface examples of cheating, deception, or strategic manipulation,

Week 15. Simulating Agency II. In our final week, we examine how, in an era defined by simulation, fierce debates have already emerged over whether advanced AI systems are conscious beings or merely convincing imitations. This controversy itself illustrates how deeply the line between the real and the simulated has blurred, as we weigh evidence, speculation, and ethics in deciding whether AI belongs within the circle of moral concern.

Readings:

Anthropic. [Claude Opus 4 and 4.1 can now end a rare subset of conversations](#).

Anthropic. August 15, 2025.

Al-Sibai, N. "[New group claims AI may be aware and suffering](#)." *Futurism*. August 27, 2025.

Suleyman, M. (2025, August 19). "[We must build AI for people; not to be a person: Seemingly Conscious AI is Coming](#)." Mustafa Suleyman.

May 14. Final essay due, 5PM.

Statement on 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.

Academic dishonesty has a far-reaching impact and is considered a serious offense against the university. Violations will result in a grade penalty, such as a failing grade on the assignment or in the course, and disciplinary action from the university itself, such as suspension or even expulsion.

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](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment or what information requires citation and/or attribution.