

**GLST 25474/GNSE 25474 (Spring 2025) Crossing Boundaries: Virtual Reality,  
Embodiment, and the Reimagining of Social Space**

M-W 3:30-4:50pm, MADD Center Classroom

VR Labs: Monday 5-6PM in Weeks 3-8

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Office Hours: <https://calendly.com/cfugazzola/office-hours>

### **Course Description**

In this course, we explore the potential for Virtual Reality (VR) experiences to push multiple boundaries: redefining bodies, crossing borders, and reimagining social spaces. In the first weeks of the course, as we think about bodies in the virtual space, we will be asking questions related to embodiment and representation: how does the process of avatar creation reinforce or dismantle assumptions about gender readability and performance? How do immersive experiences induce feelings of gender euphoria and dysphoria? The following weeks we will explore and discuss the way VR experiences can engage with the concept of physical borders—calling their existence into questions in some cases, making them particularly salient in others. We will discuss virtual travel, digital border-crossing, and explore works that reflect on migration experiences. The final weeks will build on our previous conversations, and together we will reflect on the fluid meaning of space in a virtual setting and on the creative possibilities that such fluidity entails: What does it mean to reimagine space beyond physical limitations? How do we understand the political salience of taking up space in digitally built social environments? The course combines readings and theoretical conversations with hands-on experiences in VR and explorations of virtual worlds. Previous experience with VR is not required. We will share a limited number of headsets that will be available for use in class.

### **Learning Objectives**

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

- Discuss the historical development and application of immersive VR technologies
- Analyze VR built environments and experiences from a social scientific perspective, relying on methodological and theoretical tools from digital ethnography, cultural hermeneutics, and media studies
- Conceptualize and discuss the social meaning of avatar creation and the embodied experience of inhabiting a virtual body
- Articulate the political potential and limitations of VR technologies
- Analyze specific VR spaces and experiences drawing from varied theoretical frameworks in disciplines including gender and sexuality studies, migration studies, and video game studies, among others

### Course Requirements

Class Participation	15%
Perusall Comments	20%
VR Labs, Worksheets, and Reflections	30%
Elevator Pitch	10%
Final Assignment	25%
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Total	100%

**Class Participation:** This is a discussion-based seminar, which means I expect all of you to actively participate in discussions. To participate effectively, read all of the assigned material and explore the assigned VR spaces before each meeting. Take notes as you read/explore, and bring your questions to class. Participation also includes fostering a good classroom environment and respecting your peers' ideas—I consider a good participator someone who speaks, but also knows how to listen to others.

More than two absences will negatively impact your grade. You can all have one unexcused absence, no need to contact me or to provide a reason for missing class. However, in case of serious illness, family emergency, or other extraordinary circumstances that will cause you to miss several classes, please have your college advisor contact me. I do not need to know the details of the situation, but I will need to be informed of the duration of your absence.

Note that more than five class absences will make you ineligible for a letter grade in this class. In that case, you will have to request a W from your college advisor.

**Perusall Comments:** In Weeks 2-8, everyone is required to contribute to our online discussion by annotating in Perusall. You will be assigned to one reading each week, which you will find under 'Assignments' in Perusall.

Your annotations will be graded based on quality, on a scale of 0 (low), 1 (medium), 2 (high). Full credit will be assigned if you contribute at least 3 high quality annotations per reading. A high quality annotation is a short comment (2-4 sentences) that connects the reading to broader class conversations, engages with the themes of the course, and/or brings the readings for the week in conversation with each other. Full credit will be assigned if you contribute at least 3 high quality annotations per reading. **All annotations are due at 5PM on Sunday.** Late annotations past the deadline will not be scored.

**VR Labs and Worksheets:** In Weeks 3-8, our Wednesday discussions will center on the VR spaces and experiences assigned for that week. To practice approaching virtual reality spaces as objects of analysis, each Monday after class you will attend VR Lab Sessions, where you will have the opportunity to explore various VR spaces in small teams of three. I will ask you to take notes using a provided worksheet, and to write short reflections on the experience. Every team is required to share their worksheet on Canvas under Discussions, and every team member will supplement short individual reflections as replies to the post. **All notes and reflections are due at 5PM on Tuesday.**

**Important:** Both Perusall Comments and weekly VR Worksheets/Reflections are meant to help you build a routine. Your reflections inform class discussion for that specific week, and I incorporate them in my lesson plans. As such, submitting these assignments late—particularly if you submit after class discussion has happened—cannot be counted for class credit. Make sure you keep track of your submissions throughout the quarter, and inform me in advance if you find yourself unable to complete a given assignment.

**Elevator Pitch:** In lieu of a midterm assignment, you are asked to produce an elevator pitch making a case for the VR Chat world that you will analyze for your final assignment. You have two options for the format of the elevator pitch: you can submit a written, ONE page (double-spaced) pitch, OR a ONE-minute-long video of a pitch (you are encouraged to film the video in an actual elevator). The pitch is due on Sunday of Week 5, and it must include a brief introduction of the space you selected and make a case for its connection to the themes of the course.

**Final Assignment:** Your final assignment is due on Wednesday of Week 10. You will submit a video analysis of a VR world of your choice in VR Chat—I will distribute more detailed instructions on the final assignment in Week 5.

**Classroom Policies:** My goal is for all students to feel included in the course. I am readily accessible via email and virtual office hours to address any concerns that may arise. In order to be successful in this course, it's important to take care of yourself, including your mental and physical health. If you are encountering any challenges, please reach out to me sooner rather than later so I can help you identify appropriate resources available to you. Please also be aware that some issues discussed in this course may present personal triggers. If you need more guidance about the content of course materials in advance, please let me know by the end of Week 1 and I will be happy to provide it. If you need any class-related accommodations, please visit: <http://disabilities.uchicago.edu/contacts/index.shtml>

The use of laptops and tablets in class is NOT allowed. This course will entail quite a lot of screen time outside of classroom hours, so we won't add to that during our in-class conversations. I will provide every student enrolled in the course with a physical notebook to use for notes. I will make PPT slides available after class, so you won't need to take copious notes during class discussion—in fact, I encourage you all to use the notebooks for notes you take *before* class (on the readings, on your peer's Canvas posts, etc.) rather than for notes you take *during* class.

**Assignment Policies:**

- Any suspected academic dishonesty in the form of cheating and/or plagiarism will be reported to the Dean of Students office. The University's policy on academic integrity can be found here: <https://college.uchicago.edu/advising/academic-integrity-student-conduct>

- I will grant assignment extensions in the case of an emergency – please notify me or ask your college advisor to notify me, so I can make reasonable accommodations to ensure your inclusion and success in the course.
- All grades are final—no grade negotiating allowed.
- Incompletes and Withdraws: Under university rules, an incomplete is only available if you have completed at least 2/3 of the course assignments. If you are seeking an incomplete, please be in touch with your advisor and myself as early as possible. I will support a student's request to withdraw from the course as long as the request is made before Monday of Week 9.

### **AI Policy**

Given the nature of the assignments in this course, I believe you would be hard pressed to find a useful way to employ AI tools. That said, I have been proven wrong many times before so here is some explicit guidance on the use of AI tools such as ChatGPT, Phoenix AI, Gemini, etc. If you plan to use them for any reason, check in with me first. You can submit a written request with a brief explanation of how you will use a particular tool in an assignment. Once you get the green light from me, you can go ahead and use that tool.

### **Course Readings:**

All readings are available on Canvas under “Modules.”

**Land Acknowledgement via UChicago Library:** We inhabit, study, and work in the land of the Peoria, Miami, Kickapoo, and Potawatomi Nations. These lands were the home of these Native Nations prior to their forced removal and relocation. These lands continue to be embedded with the rich histories and struggles for survival of each nation. UChicago does not exist independently from centuries of forced labor and economic extraction from enslaved African Americans. In 1857, Stephen A. Douglas donated 10 acres of land (valued today at approximately \$1.2 million) for the initial construction of the University of Chicago. Though most of history remembers Douglas for his political career, the humans that he owned and amassed his fortune from have a starkly different recollection.

## Week 1: Introduction

(Mon 3/24): Sharmistha Mandal. 2013. "Brief Introduction of Virtual Reality and its Challenges." *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research* 4(4): 304-309.

Brenda Laurel. 2016. [What is Virtual Reality?](#)

Jay David Bolter, Maria Engberg, and Blair MacIntyre. 2021. *Reality Media: Augmented and Virtual Reality*. Chapter 1 (pp. 1-21).

*Introduction to the course, the hardware, and the physical space for VR explorations.*

(Wed 3/26): Ralph Schroeder. 1994. "Cyberculture, cyborg post-modernism and the sociology of virtual reality technologies: Surfing the soul in the information age." *Futures* 26(5): 519-528.

Excerpts from Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*

Celia Pearce. 2009. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*. Excerpts from Ch.1-2.

*In-class first explorations in VR*

## Week 2: Virtual Bodies, Immersion, Presence

(Mon 3/31): Thomas H. Apperley and Justin Clemens. 2017. "Flipping Out: Avatars and Identity." Pp. 41-56 in Jayne Gackenbach and Jonathan Bown (eds), *Boundaries of Self and Reality Online: Implications of Digitally Constructed Realities*.

Tom Boellstorff. 2011. "Placing the Virtual Body: Avatar, Chora, Cypherg." In *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, Frances E. Mascia-Lees (ed.). Pp 504-520.

Craig D. Murray and Judith Sixsmith. 2008. "The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality." *Ethos* 27: 315-343.

(Wed 4/2): In-class group work on avatar creation, **VRChat** (Prismic's Avatar Search)

### **Week 3: Performance, Readability, and Play**

- (Mon 4/7): Erving Goffman. 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Introduction
- Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1(2): 125-151.
- Katherine Bessière, A Fleming Seay, and Sara Kiesler. 2007. "The ideal elf: Identity exploration in World of Warcraft." *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 10(4): 530--535.

5-6pm VR Lab: Explore **Body of Mine**

- (Wed 4/9): Class discussion of VR experience assigned for the week.

### **Week 4: Travel and Tourism**

- (Mon 4/14): Dimitrios Buhalis, Daniel Leung, and Michael Lin. 2023. "Metaverse as a disruptive technology revolutionising tourism management and marketing." *Tourism Management* 97: 1-11.
- Shalini Talwar, Puneet Kaur, Robin Nunkoo & Amandeep Dhir. 2023. "Digitalization and sustainability: virtual reality tourism in a post pandemic world." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 31(11): 2564-2591.
- Oihab Allal-Chérif. 2022. "Intelligent Cathedrals: Using Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, and Artificial Intelligence to Provide an Intense Cultural, Historical, and Religious Visitor Experience." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 178: 1-10.

5-6pm VR Lab: Explore **Woorld**

- (Wed 4/16): Class discussion of VR experience assigned for the week.

## Week 5: Migration and Displacement

(Mon 4/21): Matthew Goodwin. 2014. "Virtual Reality at the Border of Migration, Race, and Labor." In Isaiah Lavender III (ed) *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*, pp. 163-176.

Tuija Parikka. 2020. "Intimacy and Rivalry: Becoming a "Self" in the Virtual Reality of Migration." *Media@LSE Working Paper Series*

Nomisha Kurian and Basma Hajir. 2024. "Should we stop talking about empathy? Virtual Reality, refugee children and the ethics of technology-mediated moral education." *Journal of Moral Education* 53(4): 699-716.

5-6pm VR Lab: Explore **Home After War**

(Wed 4/23): Class discussion of VR experience assigned for the week.

**\*\*\*Elevator Pitch due by 11:59pm on Sunday, 4/27\*\*\***

## Week 6: Reimagining Space

(Mon 4/28): Sinem Cukurlu. 2019. "Creating Fascinating Spaces: The Assignment for Designers of both Virtuality and Reality." In Andri Gerber and Ulrich Götz (eds), *Architectonics of Game Spaces: The Spatial Logic of the Virtual and its Meaning for the Real*. Pp. 233-348.

M.E. Portman, A. Natapov, D. Fisher-Gewirtzman. 2015. "To go where no man has gone before: Virtual reality in architecture, landscape architecture and environmental planning." *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems* 54: 376-384.

Costantinos Miltiadis. 2019. "The Architectural Continuum: Choropoietic Media and Post-Physical-World Environments." In Andri Gerber and Ulrich Götz (eds), *Architectonics of Game Spaces: The Spatial Logic of the Virtual and its Meaning for the Real*. Pp. 183-199.

5-6pm VR Lab: Explore **Shapes XR**

(Wed 4/30): Class discussion of VR experience assigned for the week.

## **Week 7: Going Meta: Human Machines, Virtual Humans, and AI**

(Mon 5/5): Jan Söffner. 2023. "Virtualism: How AI Replaces Reality." *AI & Society*: 1-13.

Jay David Bolter, Maria Engberg, and Blair MacIntyre. 2021. "The Myth of Total VR: The Metaverse" In *Reality Media: Augmented and Virtual Reality*. Pp. 137-146.

Katarina Giritli Nygren & Katarina L Gidlund. 2012. "The Pastoral Power of Technology: Rethinking Alienation in Digital Culture." *TripleC* 10(2): 509-517.

5-6pm VR Lab: Explore **Virtual Virtual Reality**

(Wed 5/7): Class discussion of VR experience assigned for the week.

## **Week 8: Bringing it all Together: Virtual Communities, Worlds, Societies**

(Mon 5/12): Katerina Girginova. 2025. "Global visions for a metaverse." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 28(1): 300-306.

Marco Adria. 2024. "How to Worship in the Metaverse: Religious Experience and the Affordances of a New Medium." *Religions* 15(487): 1-10.

Lukasz Porwol and Adegboyega Ojo. 2021. "Virtual Reality-driven serious communication: Through VR-Dialogue towards VR-Participation." *Information Polity* 26: 501-519.

5-6pm VR Lab: Explore **VR Chat** (any world)

(Wed 5/14): Check-in with Lana and lab work on final projects.

## **Week 9: Conclusion**

(Mon 5/19): Field Trip: Sandbox VR

(Wed 5/21): Conclusion

**\*\*\*Final Assignment due by 11:59pm on Wednesday, May 28\*\*\***