

**IML-575: World Building as Design Practice for Storytelling**  
**Spring 2016 | 4 Units**

Tues + Thurs 9:00 - 11:50

World Building Media Lab | Robert Zemeckis Center, Room 120

**Professor Alex McDowell RDI** | [amcdowell@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:amcdowell@cinema.usc.edu)

*Office hours by appointment only (Please schedule with Lauren - [lauren@5dglobal.com](mailto:lauren@5dglobal.com))*

**TAs**

Brandon Cahoon | [bcahoon@usc.edu](mailto:bcahoon@usc.edu) / (323) 934-7987

Laura Cechanowicz | [laura.cnz@gmail.com](mailto:laura.cnz@gmail.com) / (248) 672-9102

WbML Staff & Research Associate | Geoff Long - [glong@geoffreylong.com](mailto:glong@geoffreylong.com)

**Syllabus**

World building as design practice for storytelling

*A hands-on mentoring graduate research lab experience within the context of media art and in association with a real-world project*

**Introduction:**

World building exists at the intersection of Design, Technology and Storytelling. In its ability to enable and conjure deeply considered holistic worlds, it represents the foundational narrative and design practice for transmedia, spherical storytelling, and the post-cinematic. At the same time it gathers current methodologies from all media that can be powerfully integrated into any contemporary media practice.

Any storyteller can weave a compelling narrative, but world builders create story worlds that can support myriad stories by multiple storytellers across disparate platforms including those platforms for which there may not yet be a name. Such world building becomes even more powerful when it moves beyond transmedia entertainment experiences and tackles real-world challenges in real-world environments.

**Studio:**

**IML 575: World Building as a Design Practice for Storytelling** is a practice-based studio class that introduces world building as a comprehensive methodology that defines the connective tissue and logic of any story driven world, allowing narratives to evolve organically and defining both history and future in either the real world or fictional ones. Past students have come from a widely diverse set of disciplines, from Media Arts Practice, Interactive Media, Architecture, Theater, Music, Urban Planning, Engineering, Economics, Writing and Fine Art.

Students will learn:

- the narrative designer's art of world building
- how to use world building to rethink existing narrative forms and practices
- how to build compelling story worlds with new media technologies in mind
- how to apply multi-media narrative and world building practice to the real world, and our near future, through deep research and extrapolation forward

### **Course Goals:**

Over the course of the semester, students will collaboratively create new woven narratives for a future City, the city of Lagos, Nigeria in 2036. This fast growing city is soon to be the largest city in the world. We will world build for a society that exists after a recent world economic collapse and the privatization of water to imagine radically different social systems. Throughout we'll be consulting with domain experts (see list below) across multiple disciplines to ensure this world is imaginative, plausible and extensible.

The robust, holistic world developed in this class will support multiple narratives to be iterated, designed and prototyped by the class. These might include, but are not limited to, short films, animations, interactive media, comic books or VR experiences. In producing these narratives, the class will engage in design visualization, interactive prototyping, location scouting (virtual or real), research of environments, population, and inception, and development of characters and stories for various platforms.

This extensibility also extends to the creative process itself. One of the central goals of the class is to radically reimagine the creative production process for crafting transmedia worlds. The world developed during the semester must be designed to continue beyond the class and support continuing semesters and lab research as narrative experiences set in this world evolve into full production.

Students will have the opportunity to work collaboratively across disciplines and outside of their comfort zone, and will be selected from across the various divisions of Cinematic Arts and other USC schools as part of a creative team. They will work in large and small groups, and will be in constant interaction with professional creators and thought leaders.

### **Assignments and Deliverables (grade % in parenthesis):**

Specific topics will be decided together during the first few classes, based on participants' interests, skills and expertise. Grade breakdown and policies:

- **Attendance and Participation (20%)** Due to the collaborative nature of world building, attendance and thoughtful participation are critical to the success of the class. Timely

attendance is mandatory. Class attendance includes being on time to class, both at the start and after break. Two times being late equals one unexcused absence. Any absences should be pre-arranged with the TA and instructor. Two unexcused absences result in a lowered grade; four unexcused absences are grounds for failing the class.

Required readings are included in this portion of the grade.

To the extent possible, field trips, visits and off-campus activities will be scheduled during class time. There may also be class-related activities outside of class periods. We may also hold joint sessions with ASCJ420 (Hacklab/Worldbuilding DTLA's future Prof. François Bar).

- **Design and World Build Download (30%)** Each participant will be expected to contribute to the group online encyclopedia and world book (this will be located on a site such as SLACK or SCALAR). Students are expected to update the online resources weekly with their research, designs, sketches and discoveries about the world. These posts add to the common knowledge of the world, as well as prove your design work.
- **Final Project (45%)** Students will work with feedback from the Professor and TAs to create and submit a project proposal including the deliverables and timeline for their final project. This will outline our expectations for your final. Students will also be required to submit a PDF or JPEGS of their final work to the Professor and TAs concurrent with the final presentation; failure to do so will result in a lowered grade. Please see the Project Deliverables and Student Projects Sections below for further details on the projects themselves. **These projects should be coherent with the world of *Dry City*, and students will need to document (in the online World Build Download) the ways their final project reveals, modifies, and adds to the general knowledge of *Dry City*.**
- **Publicly present work (5%)** For the final exam, students will present their project in front of a panel including their classmates, domain experts, community stakeholders, etc.

By necessity, the schedule for the class can only be set once we have a sense of the participants, their skills and interests. Our general outline is as follows.

### **Schedule for Spring 2016 (Subject to Change):**

#### **Week 1**

Introduction and overview of World Building

Discuss syllabus

Brief introduction to Dry City - 2036

Dry City discussion & collaborative brainstorming to rapidly generate and visualize new ideas

Thing From the Future game play

*Assignment - Read Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*

## **Week 2 – 3**

Intro to Tesseract Project and traditional workflow across mediums

Introduction to transmedia - Geoff Long

Apply world build ideas from assigned reading to Dry City 2036

Begin individual world build

Prototype a main object from your day in the life

Students present their object & day in the life

*Assignment - Reflect on how world building could change their field*

## **Week 4**

Students report on how world building might be integrated and/or change their field

Introduction to VR storytelling

Students swap characters

*Assignment - Complete a day in the life for new character*

## **Week 5**

Introduction to research map

Begin to map based on research, highlighting intersections

Continue research with focus on compelling storytelling possibilities

Present the rough details of story world

*Assignment - Prepare to work as a team and present*

## Week 6

Group Presentation, Feedback and World Extrapolation

## Week 7-15

The schedule for the later weeks of the course will be determined by the direction of our work in the first weeks. As such, the schedule here is TBD dependent on the world building process

## PROJECT DELIVERABLES

**By the end of the class, students will be expected to deliver fully experiential, immersive and or tangible project(s), that respect and respond to the fabric of the world that frames *Dry City*, while delivering unique and thoughtful explorations into uncharted territory, extending our understanding of the fictional world, and the ways in which this applies to the human scale and condition. The project(s) should be coherent with the world of *Dry City*, and students will need to document the ways their work modifies and adds to the general knowledge of *Dry City*.**

Students are encouraged to design a media work that fundamentally challenges cinematic tradition, while utilizing the full scope of cross-media, trans media and multi-media opportunities to frame a holistic container for new narrative forms.

Project(s) will extend the evolution of the existing world, they will also express their own unique world and vision within the larger *Dry City* framework. Like a real city, which constantly changes depending on which perspective and trajectory you adopt, this world is an imaginary space united by a common sense of place, but which also accommodates multiple identities, all built on deep research and exploration.

## STUDENT PROJECTS

**Each of these projects, which might include virtual reality experiences, video installations, performances, graphic art, interactive architecture prototypes, short films and games, will need be developed with sensitivity to the narrative tension between the city, its inhabitants, its history and interior fictions.**

World building students will be expected to participate in real world collaboration with thought leaders. As such students will be expected to remain engaged and adapt to any changing aspects of the narrative and the production, as with any real world production.

Students will begin to develop several collaborative projects that will become the final deliverables for the semester.

**Students will be expected to form collaborative working groups exploiting the multi-disciplinary skills of the class, to develop a (series of) project(s) that grow organically from the world space.**

They will also be expected to attend field trips as relevant.

## **Venue**

This class will take place in the World Building Media Lab (WbML) at the Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts, where students are engaged in practice-based arts research, creating robust and tangible experiences for undergraduates and graduates alike. The world building class will integrate research and learning in innovative ways, and the students will have access to the resources of the lab.

## **REQUIRED READING:**

Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino. (can purchase at USC bookstore or online)

Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth, R. Buckminster Fuller. (please purchase online)

Introduction to Gene Youngblood's 'Expanded Cinema,' R. Buckminster Fuller. (will email)

The City & The City, China Mieville. (can purchase at USC bookstore or online)

## **Recommended Books:**

The Emancipated Spectator, Jacques Rancier, any edition.

The Beach Beneath the Street, McKenzie Wark.

The Situationist City, Simon Sadler.

Sum, David Eagleman.

Einstein's Dreams, Alan Lightman.

Building Imaginary Worlds, Mark Wolf.

Homo Ludens, Johan Huizinga.

Chromophobia, David Batchelor.

Man, Play Games, Roger Caillois.

Finite & Infinite Games, James Carse.

Thinking In Systems: A Primer, Donella H. Meadows.

And others ...

**Potential Domain Expert Visitors:**

Henry Jenkins, transmedia

David McConville, Buckminster Fuller Institute (CLASS 1)

Stephane Blais, Ubisoft world building

Puneet Ahira, office of the CTO, the White House

Alan Gershenfeld (CEO E-Line Media)

Ann Pendleton-Jullian, architect

Julian Bleeker, Near Future Laboratories

Dr. Beth Coleman

Kristina Woolsey

Mark Lambert, CEO IDE Americas

Aaron Koblin, CTO Vrse

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS**

**Fair Use**

Fair use is a legal principle that defines certain limitations on the exclusive rights of copyright holders. The MAP program seeks to apply a reasonable working definition of fair use that will enable students and instructors to develop multimedia projects without seeking authorization for non-commercial, educational uses. In keeping with section 107 of the Copyright Act we recognize four factors that should be considered when determining whether a use is fair: (1) the purpose and character of use, (2) the nature of the copyrighted work, (3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole, and (4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work. In general, we

regard the reproduction of copyrighted works for the purposes of analysis or critique in this class to be covered by the principle of fair use.

### **Statement on Academic Integrity**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own.

All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. SCampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>.

### **Statement for Students with Disabilities**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.

### **Emergency Plan**

In the event that classes cannot convene at the university, all IML courses will continue via distance education. Specifically, the IML portal and course wikis will be deployed to enable faculty-student interaction (asynchronously and also via virtual office hours), complete syllabi, course readings and assignments, software tutorials, project assets, parameters and upload instructions, peer review processes and open source alternatives to professional-level software used in the IML curriculum. Further details are available on the course wiki.

### **Disruptive Student Behavior**

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.