Borders, Boundaries and Barriers: Telling Stories at the Edge of the World

More than ever we can feel the threat and tension at our borders; enclosing or repelling populations, politics, cities, states, countries, individuals, worlds.

When is this tension beneficial and when destructive?

The class will search for the metaphors that allow us to express the dislocation at the edges, through storytelling, narrative design, disruptive systems, and the power of fiction.

“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. World building takes a lateral anthropological stance, borrowing specifically from ethnographic practice to contextualize speculative designs in real world research. World builders as designers then use this ethnographic groundwork as a place from which to begin imagining future possibilities. This process allows designers to intelligently project plausible scenarios and outcomes through the creation of diegetic prototypes and models backed by rigorous research, envisioning desirable futures and the steps we may take to realize them - or the parallel universes we may be grateful to prevent …”

*World Building and the Future of Media: A Case Study - Makoko 2036, Laura Cechanowicz, Brian Cantrell, Alex McDowell*
Instructors

Professor: Dr. Alex McDowell, RDI
Visiting professor: Dr. Sergei Gepshtein
Visiting designer: Patrick Meegan
TA: Brian Cantrell

Class Meetings

USC Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts, 3131 S Figueroa St, Los Angeles, CA 90007
RZC120
Tuesday 9am-11:50am in RZC 120 (WbML lab, Zemeckis)
Thursday 9am-11:50am in RZC 120 (WbML lab, Zemeckis)

Class Structure

The class will meet twice a week for three hours, over a period of 12 to 13 weeks. Because research and diversity of exploration is crucial to the development of a world, we will invite guests across disciplines to provoke new perspective of our core narrative.

The evolution of the class will first gather the students around a single, complex and interconnected world and then disseminate the knowledge gathered by the collective into individual but interconnected storytelling.
Syllabus

For this class - in the setting of the World Building Media Lab - the world we build - collectively and collaboratively - will consider the edges of a fictional world.

This exploration will reference numerous possibilities of several worlds -

The students will build this world together and provoke its evolution through discussion, disagreement and consensus until it becomes the container for multiple narratives.

Within this world the class will build a microcosm - a ‘Street Corner’ - that reflects the structure, systems, behavior and rules that govern this world, projected into a near future altered by informed speculation and disruptive events.

A systemic gathering of knowledge within the constraints of any world will supports power of fictional storytelling using elements of narrative design and systems theory. We will explore the possibilities of trans-disciplinary and disruptive collaboration within the framework of a networked and immersive world.

We have folded fundamental elements of world building to evolve into a narrative interrogation of Boundaries, Barriers and Borders - increasingly part of the daily conversation thanks to the global return to nationalism and supremacy, but also fundamental to Skid Row, the Peace Wall in Belfast. the ‘Wall’, the rise of the City State in the US, and the connection of City to the Human Cell and its membrane. This will be set against the fictional narrative of Miéville’s The City & the City* and other references. The class will focus on developing fiction narratives from the world they evolve and its unique rules.

* “But pass through Copula Hall and she or he might leave Beszel, and at the end of the hall come back to exactly (corporeally) where they had just been, but in another country, a tourist, a marvelling visitor, to a street that shared the latitude-longitude of their own address, a street they had never visited before, whose architecture they had always unseen, to the Ul Qoman house sitting next to and a whole city away from their own building, unvisible there now they had come through, all the way across the Breach, back home.” -- China Miéville, The City & the City.
The Class

The class will be loosely* divided into three integrated sections (100%).

[*note: it is central to the process of world building that discovery propels adaptation, and that evolving ideas will develop unexpected design and narrative solutions.]

1: DISCOVERING THE WORLD (30%)

Weeks 1 – 4: introduction, research and development

Alongside guest visits we will conduct initial topical and visual research, hold seminar-style discussions with the aim of defining the rules of our world, and explore the emergent properties and ecologies. To help facilitate this process, we will also conduct generative games and exercises, including The Situation Lab’s “The Thing From the Future,” which will help accustom students to systemic thinking. During this period, all students will participate in developing a single holistic world from which each project will organically develop.

The first phase engages in the systemic capture of knowledge to be distributed across multiple ecologies at multiple scales.

We ingest knowledge through deep research and access to domain expertise. From these sources we develop a series of high level what if why not provocations to challenge and develop the world.

Suggested deliverables:

- visual and text-based research, including interviews with visiting domain experts and others
- multiple and varied reference sources an overview of an initial [web-based] archive of research content categorized and connected to its sources
- a custom 'mandala' visualizing multiple aspects of this specific world
- an overview of the rules and properties of the world

2: PROTOTYPING & EMERGENT NARRATIVES (30%)

Weeks 5 - 8: full collaboration framing the rules of the world, evolving into individual narratives and their structural relationship to the shared world

Production begins on design prototypes and emergent narratives that will serve both as iterative tools and entry points into the world we build. Throughout the process, we will continue the seminar format as a means of tightening the world rules and curating deliverables. By week 5, we will have begun the process of intensive curation and determination of what in our world is “canon” and what is “myth” and begin compiling the work into a “design bible.”

As the world develops, we ideate and prototype emerging stories using design visualization, developing new approaches to existing media.
Because this world will be set in Los Angeles, we will plan student- and expert-curated field trips and workshops during this phase.

Multiple characters are developed within each project to intersect and flow through the spatial structure of the world.

By week 7, logic structures are tested as characters engage and interact and narrative develops. Students start to develop individual or group projects tied to the core world.

The structure of the world and its inhabitants is framed by the complex design problems defined by the students. At its core the world continues to frame the flow of stories that emanate from it. At this stage narrative and design can develop platform-agnostically across media, as determined by the individual skills and interests of the students.

Suggested deliverables:

- **a design bible** for the world, and subset ‘chapters’ for each evolving narrative project.
- **intersecting narrative architecture** exploring and defining - through fiction based in research - a future metaverse of the city, viewed through the microcosm of the Street Corner.
- **analogue or digital prototypes** which will test emerging lenses within the Street Corner, based on the research and provocations that emerge from Section 1.

### 3: DEVELOPING THE NARRATIVE OUTCOME (40%)

**Weeks 9-13 : populating the world and its narrative architecture with character and lens; final presentations**

The third phase defines the outcome of the collective world and demonstrates the ways in which the emergent future world, its process, its evolving narratives, and its distribution can create the potential for change in the present.

As the world continues to develop as a narrative container, multiple characters must intersect and flow through the infrastructure, interrogating the world through their narrative and defining their arc relative to its structure and rules.

In sub-groups or as individuals, students will spend the remainder of the semester seeding their characters in relation to the strata of the world that they inhabit. Each student will be expected to create a lens or lenses that will delivers insight and provocation while clearly defining the narrative architecture of the Street Corner.

Finally, the intention of the class is to create a multi-media outcome that can be distributed through appropriate media to provoke radical change, discussion, and further development of the world.

Suggested deliverables:

- The class will determine an appropriate format for presentation to a wider audience and present a final designed ‘container’ as a framework for the various projects contained within the world of Skid Row 2035. It will be exhibited during the presentation session of the class, and tested for further distribution.
Grades and Evaluation

A - Excellent. The student was present and engaged, participated fully and insightfully in all class discussions, listened to colleagues, conducted meaningful research in and out of class sessions, and produced prompt and well-executed deliverables. The student was respectful and provided constructive criticism.

B - Good. The student was mostly present and engaged, participated in class discussion, conducted sufficient research and produced deliverables on time. The student was respectful and participated in reflection and critique.

C - Average. The student was mostly present, but occasionally absent. The student provided a bare minimum of research and was sometimes late with deliverables. Participation in class discussion and reflection was inconsistent.

D - Unsatisfactory. The student was often absent, conducted little research, and produced few or late deliverables. The student displayed no interest or engagement in discussion and reflection.

F - Failed. The student was absent most of the time and/or hardly participated in discussion or production of deliverables.

Breakdown of Effort for Grade

CONCEPTUAL CORE

• The project's controlling idea must be apparent and be productively aligned with one of more multimedia genres.
• The project’s efficacy must be unencumbered by technical problems (typically involves a back-up plan).
• The project must approach the subject matter in a creative or innovative manner.

RESEARCH COMPONENT

• The project must display evidence of substantive research and thoughtful engagement with its subject matter.
• The project must use a variety of credible sources, which are cited appropriately.
• The project must effectively engage with the primary issue(s) of the subject area into which it is intervening.

FORM & CONTENT

• The project’s structural or formal elements must serve the conceptual core.
• The project’s design decisions must be deliberate, controlled and defensible.
• The project must achieve significant goals that could not be realized on paper.
Recommended Reading/ Viewing

Essential reading:

*The City & The City*, China Miéville

“But pass through Copula Hall and she or he might leave Beszel, and at the end of the hall come back to exactly (corporeally) where they had just been, but in another country, a tourist, a marvelling visitor, to a street that shared the latitude-longitude of their own address, a street they had never visited before, whose architecture they had always unseen, to the Ul Qoman house sitting next to and a whole city away from their own building, unvisible there now they had come through, all the way across the Breach, back home.” China Miéville, *The City & the City.*


Recommended reading/ viewing:

*Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino - multiple metaphorical narratives about a single city, 'described through 55 fictitious cities many of which can be read as parables or meditations on culture, language, time, memory, death, or the general nature of human experience'; a complex system for the structure of multi-lensed and folded storytelling.

*Highrise*, Katerina Cizek, National Film Board of Canada - an interactive website accessing architectural time-space, allowing the viewer access to parallel narratives in multiple media [http://highrise.nfb.ca/](http://highrise.nfb.ca/)

*Here*, Richard McGuire - HERE by Richard McGuire is the story of a corner of a room and the events that have occurred in that space over the course of hundreds of thousands of years. A wonderful way to visually contextualize a multi-layered narrative over time and demonstrate the multi-dimensional power of the graphic novel [https://screendiver.com/directory/here-by-richard-mcguire/](https://screendiver.com/directory/here-by-richard-mcguire/)


*Stalker*, Andrei Tarkovsky