

Speculative Design (HNRS 301)

Pennoni Honors College, Drexel University
Course Syllabus, Fall 2025

Mondays and Wednesdays
Section I: 3:30–4:50 p.m. in Bentley 157

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“It’s a poor sort of memory that
only works backwards.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

Course Overview

My invitation to you

Welcome! In this class, we’ll explore the discipline of speculative design, which is all about imagining possible futures and helping other people do so, too. While this in itself can be fun and interesting, there’s also real-world value: Imagining possible futures helps us see what actions we can take today, in our real world, to step toward a preferable future rather than undesirable ones.

You may already know something about design, or even speculative design—or you might be entirely new to this way of thinking. Either way, my goal in this class is to welcome you into the fold and help us all learn together. Have fun!

Course description

What might video games be like in a world without war? What if air travel were banned? These are the kinds of questions that students will explore in this class through learning speculative design. While most methods for creative innovation are driven by market considerations to envision the near future, speculative design looks further. It is not about proposing new products, but rather engaging debates about the ethical, cultural, social and political implications of possible futures. What kind of world do we want to live in? Where do we want to go? In this class, students will learn and practice the skills of speculative design. These skills will enable students to interpret emerging trends in technology, society and politics and channel their understanding into leadership, policy, community, product ideas and more. The course will also touch on related areas, such as futures thinking.

Course purpose

This is an Honors Colloquium for students in the Honors Program. These types of courses provide a forum for students to engage with Drexel faculty and Visiting Scholars across a variety of topics and issues. The content of these courses often combines multiple disciplines and perspectives.

Learning targets

As a result of your experience in this course, you will be able to:

- Identify emerging trends in current events and research, and interpret their meaning as pathways to possible futures
- Create speculative design artifacts to engage stakeholders in experiencing a possible future
- Communicate design ideas using multiple modalities
- Debate the consequences of future designs to explore possible futures and action items for today
- Advocate for perspectives and decisions you care about, to help us move toward a more preferable future

Relevant Concept

Signals of Change

Prototyping

Documentation

Critique

Repertoire

Honors Program learning objectives

In moving toward the above learning targets, this course will also help you address the following learning objectives from the Honors Program:

- Create and defend an idea through dialogue (both written and spoken) and the implementation of constructive feedback.
- Demonstrate critical thinking with an emphasis on appreciating ambiguity in the process of developing knowledge.
- Construct creative projects that explore elements of cultural, social, and/or scientific practices through self-directed, self-disciplined, and self-corrective thinking.

What I think about teaching and learning

I love being a teacher, I love the material I get to teach, and I love bringing new voices into the fold. So my goal is not to “cover course content,” but to welcome you into a community of learning that will serve you for life. This goal guides my teaching philosophy and my choices as an instructor.

For example, the vast majority of our time together will be in activities and conversations. You will be talking, making, doing, teaching... This is what we call *active learning*, and it will help you develop your skills in collaboration, solidify your learning for the long term, spark creative thinking, and get you to have fun along the way. Long story short, you will not be sitting in class listening to me read PowerPoint slides (though on occasion I may give short lectures to share basic information).

I realize active learning can be challenging, particularly for people who are introverted or have any kind of anxiety. I have been there! I myself am an introvert. I do my best to create a comfortable learning environment where everyone feels welcome to participate and learn to their best ability. I hope, over time, you will feel at home in the learning community we will build this quarter.

How to be a part of this class

Learning happens best in community. For our purposes, this means being present and being caring. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we are all in world this together, and that life goes best when we help each other and practice flexibility when unexpected situations come up. This quarter, let mutual respect guide our time together, so that everyone can participate and enjoy the class. To be a part of this class, strive to do the following:

- **Attend each class session**, arriving a few minutes early if you can so we can start on time.
- **Read the assigned readings and give yourself time to mull them over before each class**, so you can participate meaningfully in our in-class activities.

- **Do your best to get to know your classmates as the course goes on.** These are your allies—and future colleagues in life. The world is small. If you're on the shy side, challenge yourself to step just outside of your comfort zone when you're able.

What book you need

Long story short, you don't need to buy any textbooks for this course. All the readings will be provided on Blackboard. We will be reading several chapters from *Making Futures Work*, by Phil Balagtas (2024), the entirety of which is available digitally through the Drexel Libraries. That said, if you get into speculative design, it's worth buying yourself a hard copy! For the other readings, see the Course Schedule on the final page of this syllabus.

Contacting me

Student–instructor interaction is a vital part of any course. I am available to you, and I want to help you succeed in this course, in your program at Drexel—and in life. **Please come to me with any questions, problems, discoveries or anything else you'd like to share.** If you have a question that may be of interest to others in the class (e.g., syllabus, readings, logistics, etc.), please ask it during class so that others can benefit. With personal or urgent questions, email me directly or speak to me before or after class.

I am available to meet with you most days before class and by appointment. My office is in CCI, but we can also meet up somewhere more convenient for you. Also, feel free to email me at any time. Just note that I don't check email at night or on weekends. In our always-on society, it is important to set boundaries—firstly because healthy lives require off-time, and also because our academic activities require uninterrupted periods of time for reading, writing and thinking. Moreover, taking time for rest and pursuing leisure activities have been shown to improve productivity, creativity and accomplishment, as Alex Pang discusses in his book *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*. I hope you will join me in living with more balance.

Assignments and Grading

This class will provide you with a platform for learning and trying new things. You will get the chance to connect what we learn and discuss in class with what you have learned and practiced in other classes. There are three main types of assignments in this class, which you'll both submit on Blackboard and bring to class for sharing and discussion.

Signals of change

Most weeks, you'll be asked to find a *signal of change* for discussion. As we'll learn, signals of change are current-day innovations or disruptions that may suggest an emerging trend, which invite us to imagine a possible future where that phenomenon is common. A signal of change could be a news item, a research result, a new product on the market, a conversation, a piece of law or policy, etc.

Speculative design example

Midway through the course, you'll be asked to find and share an example of speculative design created by a professional. Along with finding and explaining the design, you'll get to reflect on what interested you about the design, what sorts of ideas it sparks for you, and so on.

Speculative design project

The biggest assignment for this class is a term-long design project, in which you'll put speculative design into practice. You can work alone or on a team of up to three students (your pick). This assignment will ask you to identify a problem, imagine a possible future to explore that problem, and design an artifact from

that world to shed new light on the problem. You'll deliver this project in three phases, each of which we'll share and discuss in class:

1. **Problem statement:** What issue, challenge or situation do you wish to explore? Who is affected by this problem? Why does it matter?
2. **Worldbuilding:** Imagine a possible future, say about 10 years from now, based on your thinking about the problem. Maybe the problem got worse (how?) or maybe it has been resolved (how?). What technologies or systems characterize this world? What domino effects did these things create? What is it like to live in this world?
3. **Artifact + integrations:** Create something from your future world to share with people today. Do you want to warn people or get them excited? Do you want to spark debate? What feelings do you want people to have about this possible future? You'll create the object (or some representation of it), and then think through how our learnings from this object could be applied or integrated into the present world.

Grading

Research has demonstrated that grades diminish students' learning, decrease students' interest in the subject matter, and prevent students from taking creative risks. Moreover, many students experience anxiety about grades. In this class, **we are here to learn, to become interested in speculative design, and to take creative risks by trying new things** (not just following a rubric)—and we certainly don't need more anxiety in our lives.

We will use an approach to assessment that may be different from what you're used to. My intention with this class is to help you to work in an organic way, as you will after graduation. To that end, I will not put quantitative grades on individual assignments. Rather, you'll see the top-line evaluation saying either "Success" or "Revisions Requested," along with my questions and comments from engaging with your work. If I request revisions, you are encouraged to revise and resubmit your work within a week. As well, you will reflect deeply on your work and that of your peers throughout this quarter, and we will discuss your learning and effort as the course progresses. We will do this throughout the course, but there are three things I will ask you to do as anchors for this process:

- **Goal-Setting:** During Week 1, we will set goals for our learning this quarter to give us each a concrete place to aim for in addition to the general course learning outcomes listed above.
- **Midterm Reflection:** Midway through the course, I will provide you with a link to an online form that will guide you through a reflection on your work thus far—what challenges you've overcome, how you're living up to my, your group's and your own standards, and what your goals are for the coming weeks. At the end, you'll be asked what letter grade you would give yourself for your work thus far. This is your chance to assess yourself realistically and challenge yourself to improve in the second half of the term. I will respond to your reflection, and we'll have a conversation if our respective assessments do not match.
- **Final Reflection:** Ahead of Finals Week, I will provide you with another link to an online form where you'll complete your final self-reflection for the term. Again, I'll ask you what grade you would give yourself. I prefer to give everyone the grade they would give themselves, I do reserve the right to make adjustments.

In assigning your final grade, I will consider three dimensions: **effort, performance and improvement**. For reference, here is my interpretation of the letter grades:

- **A: Excellent.** You have met the learning targets for this course while exceeding expectations in effort, participation and results. You achieved or exceeded your personal goals. You were present at all class sessions with meaningful participation and arrived on time. You took part in all the assignments and did so on time.
- **B: Good.** You achieved the learning targets for the course while meeting expectations. If you started out with room for improvement, you demonstrated that improvement. You achieved your personal goals.

You were present on time at most class sessions with strong participation. You took part in all assignments, maybe with some late submissions.

- **C: Acceptable.** You made progress toward all or most of learning targets for the course, and you missed some of your personal goals. You did not complete all activities. You had hit or miss attendance. When you were present, you may have been doing other things (laptop, texting) or otherwise not participating fully.
- **D: Poor.** You did not make much progress toward one or more of the learning targets for the course. You had hit or miss attendance, and missed several assigned activities.
- **F: Failing.** You demonstrated little to no progress toward the learning targets for the course. You were mostly absent from class.

I know this process is quite different from how we usually think about grades. If any of this causes more anxiety than it alleviates, contact me at any time to discuss your progress in the course. As the quarter goes on, you'll be able to track your progress in the My Grades section on Drexel Learn.

How to get a good grade

It's easy for school to become a game. Check the boxes, don't rock the boat, tell your professor you like their shirt. In this class, we're going to shake that up a bit. Like all shake-ups, it may be uncomfortable, but in the end it will be a chance for growth. To get a good grade in this class, pay special attention to these areas:

- **Attendance and Participation:** A lot of learning will happen in our time together, and I don't want you to miss out. Plan to attend regularly, coming prepared and with energy to participate.
- **Assignments:** Use your assignments as an opportunity to demonstrate to me what you are learning. In your group project submissions, mini-essays and self-reflections, strive to integrate insights that have come up in classroom conversations as well as the course readings.
- **Professionalism:** School is practice. Here's your chance to try out new systems and figure out what will work for you in life. Give it a serious try, and bring your best self to this class. That way you'll get the most out of this experience.

If you are worried about getting a good grade in this class, your best strategy should be to do the readings, ask questions often, complete the assignments diligently and on time, and engage earnestly with all your classmates. Again, I am looking for three things from you this quarter: **effort** (time spent, dedication, conscientiousness, participation, etc.), **performance** (your results), and **improvement** (being responsive to feedback and incorporating lessons as you move forward). Look for opportunities to demonstrate those qualities this quarter, and good grades will follow.

Policies

Academic integrity

You're here to learn, and the university environment is set up to help you do that in a structured way. Please conduct yourself respectfully, and ultimately you'll learn the most you can. This includes academic integrity. In this course, as with any Drexel course, be honest about the work you did, and do your best with it. All work you submit must be your own work. Of course, we often incorporate ideas and content from others in our work; when you do that, cite your sources to give credit where it is due. Strive to make clear your personal contribution and where you drew from others. This goes for books and articles, other people, and also AI tools (discussed specifically in the following section).

In this class, any forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. This includes plagiarism (using others' intellectual work without reference) and cheating. I am obligated to report incidents of academic dishonesty to Drexel administration, and this may result in consequences such as failing the course. Note that a student who is found in violation twice (even if in two different courses) will be expelled from the university. For more information, please refer to the [Provost academic integrity policy](#) or to resources regarding [Student Conduct and Community Standards](#). Please take this opportunity to learn the most you can this quarter by upholding your academic integrity.

Generative AI tools

Many people today are excited about artificial intelligence, particularly generative AI. You may be eager to try out the newest AI tools and learn how they can make life better. In general, I want you to experiment and learn. However, I want you to reflect on the question: **Why are you in college?** If you are here to learn and build new skills, then consider how [the latest research](#) shows that generative AI tools may increase the productivity of the top writers and scientists who already have built their expertise, but have no benefits or even cause harm to those earlier in their careers, including students. Overall, the value of these tools is questionable; [a summer 2025 report from MIT](#) shows that 95% of businesses that have adopted generative AI tools have seen no benefit.

To get the most out of your college education, you should focus on building the skills that will serve you in the future. Consider AI as a layer on top of the more fundamental skills you need to develop: reading, idea generation, analysis, writing, etc. If, for example, you find yourself gravitating to AI because you don't yet have good writing skills, then [you may be undermining your own future](#).

Take this class as an opportunity to practice those fundamental skills. You're in good company, and we're all here to learn and help each other. If you take me up on this invitation, I'll help equip you with the tools you need to keep improving, you'll have plenty of time and support to work, and you'll get to learn from any mistakes rather than get punished for them. So in this class, for best results, please avoid using generative AI tools for your work.

If you're interested, you can find more of my thinking on this topic in my article "[The Rich Get Richer](#)."

Changes to the syllabus

I am here to help you learn, and I want to make sure we achieve the expected learning outcomes in this course. To do this, I may have to make some changes to the syllabus—for instance, if it becomes clear that we need to spend more time on some topic. I'll do my best to honor the syllabus as is, and I'll be sure to let you know about any changes as far in advance as possible.

Dropping the course

If you are considering whether to continue your enrollment in the course, please refer to the [Course Add/Drop Policy](#) and the [Course Withdrawal Policy](#).

Student conduct

Drexel University adopted a student conduct policy requiring that all students have the responsibility to be aware of, and abide by, the University's policies, rules, regulations, and standards of conduct. This information is available in the [Student Code of Conduct](#).

Appropriate use of course materials

Some of the course materials provided to you may be the intellectual property of Drexel University, the course instructor, or others. Use of this intellectual property is governed by Drexel University policies, including the [Acceptable Use Policy](#). Briefly, this policy states that course materials, including recordings, provided by the course instructor may not be copied, reproduced, distributed or re-posted. Doing so may be considered a breach of this policy and will be investigated and addressed as possible academic dishonesty, among other potential violations. Improper use of such materials may also constitute a violation of the University's [Code of Conduct](#).

Participating in course evaluations

Student evaluations are a required element of every course. Evaluation forms are completely anonymous. They are confidentially used to make improvements in our curriculum and teaching. They are also used by administration in evaluating faculty performance, and in decisions about promotion, tenure and retention. Please take part in course evaluations in all your classes.

Time management

Drexel University assumes that each credit-unit requires 3+ hours of work per week (i.e., a 3-unit course means a student will spend 9+ hours per week on that course), including reading, attending class and completing assignments. This is a three-credit course. Please plan accordingly.

Support and Recommendations

If you are experiencing anxiety, depression or other challenges

Drexel offers free and confidential support for anxiety-related problems, depression, family concerns, relationship issues, adjustment issues, eating disorders, alcohol- and drug-related problems, questions about gender and sexual identity, and more, all through the Drexel Counseling Center. The Counseling Center is located at Suite 201 in the Creese Student Center at 3210 Chestnut. The telephone number is (215) 895-1415. **For emergencies, or to reach an on-call counselor after regular business hours, please call (215) 416-3337.** Learn more [on the Counseling Center website](#).

If you need technical support

Get 24/7 technical support for Blackboard Learn from the Instructional Technology group [online](#) or by calling (215) 895-1224. For any other technical support (email, logins, etc.), Drexel University IT is here for you. You can contact them through email at consult@drexel.edu, by phone at (215) 895-2020, or by submitting the online [Problem Report Form](#).

Support for equality and diversity

The College of Computing & Informatics commits to creating a positive and safe learning environment for everyone—instructors, professional staff, and students—both inside and outside of the classroom. We embrace the diversity of thoughts, perspectives, and experiences that each community member brings, and we honor everyone's identity (including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, religion, veteran status, and disability). We encourage each community member to share information regarding pronouns, religious and cultural holidays, accommodations, and any other information that will assist instructors in fostering a supportive and inclusive community environment.

Likewise, Drexel University more broadly strives to promote an environment of equality of opportunity and compliance with university policies and federal, state and local laws prohibiting discrimination. If you have a question or complaint concerning discrimination, harassment, and/or retaliation, contact the Office of Equality and Diversity [online](#) or at (215) 895-1405.

Coaching, mentorship and tutoring

The [Center for Learning and Academic Success Services](#) (CLASS) serves as the organizing department for a variety of programs and services that promote coaching, peer mentoring and tutoring at Drexel. The Center is located on campus at the Creese Student Center (3210 Chestnut Street), Suite 050.

Campus activities and community

Find the Student Handbook, conduct and community standards, and the Counseling Center at [on the Student Life website](#). Consult this site for information on campus activities and student programs.

English help

The [English Language Center](#) offers English language instruction and support services to students, especially those who speak English as a second language. They are located at 229 N. 33rd Street. The telephone number is (215) 895-2022.

If you have a disability or are facing other challenges

The Office of Disability Resources (ODR) team coordinates [accommodations](#) for all Drexel students with [disabilities](#) to ensure they can succeed. ODR can also facilitate temporary adjustments for students with

short-term impairments such as due to accident, injury or illness. If you have a disability, you are encouraged to register with ODR to request reasonable accommodations. This office is here to work with you, so reach out to them for assistance.

For any accommodations to be made, you will need to request a current Accommodations Verification Letter (AVL) in the [ClockWork database](#) (if you are new to the system, start by clicking “Online Intake”). These requests are received by ODR, who then issues the AVL to the appropriate contacts, such as professors. For additional information, [visit the ODR website](#), reach them by phone at (215) 895-1401 or email at disability@drexel.edu, or visit them in person in Suite 228 in the Main Building.

Free health services

The [Student Health Center](#) is located at 3401 Market St, Ste 105. You can call them at (215) 220-4700.

Career counseling

[CCI Career Services](#) offers help with job placement, job postings and credentialing. Outside our college, the [Steinbright Career Development Center \(SDLC\)](#) offers individualized career counseling, career fairs, career programs and resume workshops. The office is located at 3201 Arch Street, Suite 250. The telephone number is (215) 895-2185.

Course Schedule

In the schedule below, **readings and assignments listed should be done before class**, since we'll discuss these things during the class session. The three assignments marked 🚩 are part of the term-long design project. All readings will be provided on Blackboard and should take about an hour, but if you're interested in the full references:

- Balagtas, P. (2024). *Making futures work: Integrating futures thinking for design, innovation, and strategy*. O'Reilley.
- Dunne, A., & Raby, F. (2013). *Speculative everything: Design, fiction, and social dreaming*. MIT Press.
- McGonigal, J. (2022). *Imaginable: How to see the future coming and be ready for anything*. Spiegel & Grau.
- Ronda Ringfort-Felner, R., Dörrenbacher, J., & Hassenzahl, M. (2025). The quality of speculation – a scoping review. In *Designing Interactive Systems Conference (DIS '25)*. ACM. doi: 10.1145/3715336.3735794

Week	Date	Topic	Read before Class	Due before Class
1	Sep 22	Introduction to the course	Balagtas ch. 1	–
	Sep 24	Field Trip: <i>Digital Twin</i> at Pearlstein	–	Goal setting
2	Sep 29	Preparing to speculate	–	–
	Oct 1	Audience and problem framing	Balagtas ch. 3 and 5	Signals of change
3	Oct 6	The speculative mindset	Dunne and Raby (<i>excerpt</i>)	–
	Oct 8	Problem statement critique session	–	🚩 Problem statement
4	Oct 13	<i>No class: Indigenous People's Day</i>	–	–
	Oct 15	Worldbuilding for speculative design	Balagtas ch. 7	Signals of change
5	Oct 20	Future simulation: <i>Road to Zerophoria</i>	McGonigal (<i>excerpt</i>)	–
	Oct 22	Worldbuilding critique session	–	🚩 Worldbuilding
6	Oct 27	Speculative deliverables + methods	–	Midterm reflection
	Oct 29	Ideation and rapid prototyping	–	Signals of change
7	Nov 3	Speculative design example show and tell	–	Speculative design example
	Nov 5	Speculative deliverables + methods pt. 2	Balagtas ch. 9	Signals of change
8	Nov 10	Prototyping theory and practice	–	–
	Nov 12	Evaluating speculative designs	Ringfort-Felner et al.	Signals of change
9	Nov 17	Applying speculative design work	Balagtas ch. 11	–
	Nov 19	Speculative design in organizations	–	Signals of change
10	Nov 24	<i>No class: Thanksgiving Break!</i>	–	–
	Nov 26	<i>No class: Thanksgiving Break!</i>	–	–
11	Dec 1	Final presentations	–	🚩 Artifact + integrations
	Dec 3	Final presentations	–	–

Final reflection due by Wed, Dec 10