

COUNTERFACTUAL FUTURES:

Speculative Design to Destabilize the Present

Instructor

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Email

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Office Hours

Mon 3:00-5:00p PST or by appointment
@The Loft (2nd Floor of Price Center) or
via Zoom

Class Meetings

Mon 12:00-2:50p PST
Mandeville B114

COURSE DESCRIPTION

*[David] Chambers asks, What if David Attenborough had become an industrial designer rather than a wildlife filmmaker, who, still fond of nature, established the Attenborough Design Group to explore how animal behavior could be used to equip technology products with survival instincts: a *Gesundheit* radio, which sneezes periodically to expel potentially damaging dust, and *Floppy Legs*, a portable floppy disc drive that stands up if it detects liquid?¹*

Speculative practitioners in the humanities, art and design, sciences and technology, literature and popular culture have historically and routinely capitalized on experimental methodologies to expand the imagination and critical thought into fringe and outlandish territories. The intention is often inextricably linked to informing fiction, reflective and atypical design, scientific epiphanies, questions of the absurd and, above all, provocation of all rational and stable beliefs about modern life. Perhaps more subversively though, these habits of criticality are leaned on in order to expand our awareness of just how extra-ordinary and non-ordinary the current reality is. By shifting the lens with which we perceive the everyday—remarkable, frightening, awesome, perplexing, unsettling, moving and transformative ideas and situations manifest.

Counterfactual Futures: Speculative Design to Destabilize the Present will invite students to operate as antagonists of the status quo, or rather, to re-imagine and *re-image* the status quo altogether. Through a quarter-long project, students will collaborate in teams to produce outcomes that influence communal contemplation of the cellular to the civic, global to the galactic. Incorporating research, writing and design, subject matter of focus for each group may land in product design, fashion, popular culture, architecture, environmental paradigms, media, sustainability, and agriculture among a number of any other planetary preoccupations.

Students will use thought experiment models such as the fictionalization of worlds, extrapolation, “reductio ad absurdum” (reduction to absurdity), counterfactuals, the utopian and dystopian and other “what-if” methodologies to move through ideation, expansion, development and final presentation of their inquiry and end result.

A majority of class meetings will be conducted in a crit-based format and are intended for intimate project dialog, critique and exchange of feedback between students. *Moderate experience with Adobe Creative Cloud and/or 3D modeling platforms are a plus but not essential.*



¹ *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*; Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Copyright 2013

SCHEDULE

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

WEEK 01 // 3.28

RESEARCH

General introduction and discussion. Review of syllabus and outlining the assignment. Examining a few examples, discussion of content generation. Establishing teams and roles for each member. Question: How do you start a project? Laying the groundwork for an unedited research process.

WEEK 02 // 4.4

MAPPING + METHODOLOGY

Reflection and analysis of your scope of research. As a team, you'll 'mine' the artifacts of your investigation and dig into possible relationships between areas of study, present day issues, historical figures, movements, society, and cultural + political paradigms.

WEEK 03 // 4.11

IDEATION + EXPANSION

Utilizing one or more of the thought experiment methodologies, teams will process and suppose three conceptual ideas that may provoke and/or propose questions + debate, parallel worlds, social + design fiction, criticality, citizenship, consumption, the 'real' and many more territories.

WEEK 04 // 4.18

SYNTHESIS + NAMING

Through further analysis and evaluation of idea strength, along with feedback from class discussions, your team will identify a combination of components with which to synthesize into a solid idea that will be produced using any of the design formalizations previously listed. This is also the stage at which you will have named your project in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

WEEK 05 // 4.25

ARTICULATION

This is the practice of using the written word to deepen both yours and the audiences understanding of your project. Here you will verbalize and touch on the various layers and lenses with which to view your idea. Your text(s) should summarize the project's 'big idea' as well as supporting details: the who, what, why, where and how. Figure out what 'data points' might be useful in coloring in the details how your concept and how it will live in the world.

WEEK 06 // 5.2

REPRESENTATION

Consider all facets and angles of your conceptual idea. Determine the most effective visualization method that will connect your audience to the project's: function, objective, point of view/philosophy, attitude, style, form/manifestation, criteria, and encounter with the external world

WEEK 07 // 5.9

REPRESENTATION

This is the stage at which you will execute on the 'build' of your idea. Map out how you will "engineer" the visualization of your idea. This may take the form of one or a combination of built objects + prototypes, 2D + 3D artifacts, the cinematic, fine art, graphic design specimens, and digital interfaces.

WEEK 08 // 5.16

REPRESENTATION

Continue on the build and production of your project. We will use class time to question, qualify, locate opportunity, address weaknesses and facilitate your team's movement forward.

WEEK 09 // 5.23

REFINEMENT

We will not meet in class this week. However, your team should use this free time as added space to finish out your build, refining areas where needed. It is also the week that you should use to put together the means with which you will present your project to the class.

WEEK 10 // 5.30

PRESENTATION

Each team will present their final presentation to the class. The presentation will be determined by the formal tactics with which you have produced your conceptual idea. More on this as the quarter progresses.

COUNTERFACTUAL FUTURES

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT METHODOLOGIES

As the basis for all conceptual work in this class, the quarter-long project will leverage the various methods of thought experimentation to drive the expanse and depth of our thinking. This frees up our speculative pursuits to make room for accident, opportunity, happenstance, the irrational, absurdity, and for endless play in the “laboratory of spontaneity and improvisation”.

It is crucial that you work as a team, utilizing each others’ strengths, to look at your project from many angles and to be as thorough in your initial research and brainstorming so that you cast as wide of a net as possible from which to hone in on a clear and specific idea.

You will be responsible for establishing a conceptual idea which compels the audience to question contemporary or future issues as they relate to the individual, social, global or galactic spaces. How your team formalizes this concept will vary from team to team and should be based on supporting the audiences understanding and interest. Formalizations could be but are not limited to built objects + prototypes, 2D plans + illustrations + renderings, motion + video, fine art, graphic design artifacts (posters + books + publications), etc.

Some thought experiment methodologies to help you to launch a concept:

1. The Counterfactual

A well-established form of thought experiment is the counterfactual. A historical fact is changed to see what might have happened, if... It is sometimes used in history to understand the importance of key events and their influence on how the world turned out. A famous example is how the world might have been if Hitler had won World War II, a theme explored in many works of fiction. See also: Floppy Legs.

2. Extrapolation

Merriam-Webster defines extrapolation in the following ways: 1. to predict by projecting past experience or known data (*extrapolate public sentiment on one issue from known public reaction on others*) and 2. to project, extend, or expand (known data or experience) into an area not known or experienced so as to arrive at a usually conjectural knowledge of the unknown area (*extrapolates present trends to construct an image of the future*). We might also couch this thinking to borrow a method, state, organization model, field, system, or ideology from one area of consideration to another, i.e., projecting the values, policies or anatomy of one construct and applying it to another.

3. Reductio Ad Absurdum

...reductio ad absurdum, a type of logical argument in which one assumes a claim for the sake of argument and derives an absurd or ridiculous outcome by taking it to its extreme, concluding that the original claim must have been wrong because it led to such an absurd result.

4. Absentia/Subtraction/Elimination/Obsolescence/Extinction

Similar to the counterfactual, brainstorming with subtractive affects on thinking involves modifying the parameters of what actually happened and/or how things actually exist. By removing a dynamic, component, participant, or allowing an ‘actor’ of the equation to ‘die out’ we can create new assumptions and alternative narratives.

5. Fictional Worlds + Extremism

The counterpoint and counter process to absentia and elimination might be the fabrication of fictional worlds and extremism, where the thought experiment multiplies, exaggerates and or takes an idea, aspect, or factor to an exponentially greater degree.

COUNTERFACTUAL FUTURES

DESIGN

We will use design in a number of capacities this quarter. Each project will determine the best form of design communication with which to illustrate, inform and convey the concept, data and form of your team project. While graphic design principles will undoubtedly come into play as a means to clearly and compellingly inform your audience, this is not a class focused on graphic design as a thinking methodology. Your team should devote the bulk of your 'design thinking' to the formal attributes of your conceptual idea and its manifestation.

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Formalizations might be but are not limited to:

- → **Built objects + prototypes**
sculpture + product design + architectural models
- → **2D/3D**
plans + illustrations + renderings
- → **Cinema**
motion + video + animation + film
- → **Fine Art**
collage + painting + drawing + photography + illustration + mixed media
- → **Graphic design artifacts**
posters + books + publications + (see Vis41 opening lecture for a list)
- → **Digital**
interfaces + computational + generative design

COUNTERFACTUAL FUTURES

THE PROJECT + PROCESS

1. Groundwork

- Don't feel obliged to make your research "important" or "impressive." Territory that seems benign and flat to other individuals can produce a compelling narrative. The choices are not a factor of inherent value, but rather how you uncover value through your project. For the project to have its greatest impact, consider territories you can investigate with depth and detail.
- Please don't turn this into a massive research project. You won't be able to cover everything and spend ample time in conceptual development mode too. That is why you must limit yourselves to the right degree. This is why you should have enough intimate knowledge to be able to jump right into proper source material or at least know where to immediately look.

To do

- Each team member chooses a research pillar to explore. Out of the pillar should come three specific focal points. You can establish these three points from one or more of the possibilities listed.

Precedents

- Historical figures
- Political movements
- Artistic movements
- Religions
- Discoveries
- Major events
- Institutions
- Organizations
- Plant
- Animal
- Viral
- Nano-

Issues

- Violence
- Climate change
- Mental Health
- Geopolitical unrest
- Unemployment
- Pollution
- Well-being
- Hunger
- Urban sprawl
- Water contamination
- Poverty
- Food scarcity
- Discrimination
- Biodiversity loss
- Disease
- Social Dynamics

Domains

- Education
- Film
- Music
- Computing
- Technology
- Environment
- Zoology
- Architecture
- Healthcare
- Biology
- Farming
- Entertainment
- Military
- Transportation
- Politics
- Fashion
- Social interaction
- Media

2. Synthesis + Development

- As a team, take some time to evaluate the landscape of your research. Spend some time quickly generating combinations of focal points from each pillar. Do this without being too critical or judgmental of your combinations. With flexibility of thinking, operate in the "laboratory of improvisation and spontaneity" to generate as many combinations as possible.

To do

- From your research, consider a combination of focal points from each research pillar.
- Do this two times for two separate equations to develop into a concept.

Precedent		Issue		Domain		Thought Experiment
Gandhi	+	Pollution	+	Fashion	+	'What if'

3. Project Idea + Identity

- Taking class discussion and feedback into account, your team will decide on a final project concept with which to develop with complexity and expanse. You will establish a name and other supplemental components to give it an identity and 'program'.

Conceptual Idea!

Wearable dhoti and shall that filter carbon dioxide.

To do

- Choose one equation to develop into a conceptual idea with a identity.
- Incorporate a 'thought experiment' methodology to strengthen your idea into speculative and unexpected realms.

"Our greatest ability as humans is not to change the world, but to change ourselves."
—Mahatma Gandhi

4. Build

COURSE POLICIES

Participation

A significant portion of your grade is based on your participation in section. You are required to engage fully in the crits. Don't be afraid of saying something wrong—being right is not the point and just showing up is not enough. Your overall grade can fall an entire letter because of low participation, even if you got high marks on everything else. This part of your grade is cumulatively evaluated over the duration of the quarter. You will not be given an 80, 90 or 100 in participation for asking 3 questions over the course of three months. You need to be persistently present, not just physically, but wholly with the group. Unapproved absences will lower your participation grade by 5 points.

Assignments

Effort trumps 'good design'. I want to see that you're iterating and testing yourself. You'll be asked to show and submit substantial proof of work each week which will cumulatively contribute to your overall grade. Unlike Vis 41, the intimate setting of this course allows for a bit more flexibility around 'assignment mandates'.

Late work

In fairness to all students taking the course, late work is never endorsed. However, if there are extenuating circumstances beyond your control or which are causing you undue personal distress, late work will be accepted with a maximum allowable grade of a B+. If you are experiencing any hardship or difficulty that is interfering with your studies on an on-going basis, please reach out to your advisor(s) or Dean of your department for assistance.

CRITIQUE ETIQUETTE

Critiquing Another's Style

Avoid calling into question the legitimacy or favorability of someone's style; your taste for the genre of another's work is not relevant. Instead, help your classmates determine whether the style they are working with is coming across as they intended or whether it's supporting the content they're giving expression to.

Forcing Your Personal Vision onto Someone Else's Work

A primary course objective is to help students identify a pathway to a practice. Since it's almost certain that no two individuals' creative codes are identical, it is of no service to yourself or others to cut and paste your code onto theirs'. Of course, the visual arts breed overlap and intersection between its practitioners, but everyone's path is uniquely their own. In providing feedback, step into the universe of others' work and the laws that apply there—**become a citizen of their study.**

No One is Special

Keep your ego appropriately in check. This is not about accumulating gold stars or gaining some traction in class hierarchy. Success in this course is defined by **your willingness to engage with your peers and dive into honest inquiry about yourself** as a creator, not by 'being the best.'

Making it Personal vs. Offering Meaningful Feedback

The focus of crits is entirely about honing in on the objective of the work presented. Though content may draw in personal references, do not use crits as an opportunity to personally attack others. Look for insightful and constructive ways to offer meaningful (not 'mean') criticism. To that end, welcome less-than-positive feedback as useful guidance to take your work to the next level, **without taking it personally.**

Arguing with Feedback

If you're doing it right, **you will fail periodically** throughout the course project. Skilled communicators fail fast and fail often. In this way, exploration, investigation and experimentation are guaranteed ways of finding your edge—but some of your iterations are not guaranteed to work. If you argue with feedback because its not a glowing review, you've missed the point entirely.

Being Too Honest or Not Being Honest Enough

Respectful debate is both expected and encouraged. Challenge one another to find the gold in each others' inquiry. When your goal is to uplift your peers to produce honest and engaging work, your approach to doing so will **neither coddle nor cut** them, but elevate, encourage and motivate.

Be Curious and Supportive

The best way to give meaningful feedback is to find a way to **be interested in the work of others.** The best way to be interested is to **be curious.** Approach your classmates' work with a beginner's mind, ask questions and try to locate what's uniquely emerging from their investigation.

GRADE FACTORS

Overall Grade Distribution //

	<i>Grade System</i>		<i>Weighted Grade Scale</i>	
Participation (10%)	Weekly Assignment	A-F	A+	100%
Section attendance, utilizing office hours and participating in discussion boards on Canvas are ways you are acknowledged for participation.	Participation	0-100	A	99–93
	Final	A-F	A-	92–90
			B+	89–87
			B	86–83
			B-	82–80
			C+	79–77
			C	76–73
			C-	72–70
			D+	69–67
			D	65–66
			F	0–64

Academic Integrity //

Integrity of scholarship is essential for an academic community. The University expects that both faculty and students will honor this principle and in so doing protect the validity of University intellectual work. For students, this means that all academic work will be done by the individual to whom it is assigned, without unauthorized aid of any kind. This includes downloading templates or design bundles from the internet to submit as your own creation. <http://senate.ucsd.edu/Operating-Procedures/Senate-Manual/Appendices/2>

Students with Disabilities //

Students requesting accommodations and services due to a disability for this course need to provide a current Authorization for Accommodation (AFA) letter issued by the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), prior to eligibility for requests. Receipt of AFAs in advance is necessary for appropriate planning for the provision of reasonable accommodations. OSD Academic Liaisons also need to receive current AFA letters. For additional information, contact the Office for Students with Disabilities:

- 858.534.4382 (V)
- 858.534.9709 (TTY) - Reserved for people who are deaf or hard of hearing
- osd@ucsd.edu
- <http://disabilities.ucsd.edu>

RESOURCES

Online //

Adobe Color CC color.adobe.com/
 YouTube
 Lynda.com (now LinkedIn Learning) www.lynda.com/
 Linotype Font Explorer www.fontexplorerx.com/
 Typekit typekit.com/
 FOUNT fount.artequalswork.com/
 Hoefler & Co. www.typography.com/
 House Industries houseind.com/
 Process Type Foundry processtypfoundry.com/
 Fontsmith www.fontsmith.com/
 MyFonts myfonts.com
 League of Moveable Type www.theleagueofmoveabletype.com
 Lost Type www.losttype.com/
 Font Squirrel www.fontsquirrel.com/
 Google Fonts fonts.google.com/
 Transtype www.transtype.com
 Fontstand www.fontstand.com

Printing //

*FedEx Office Print + Ship (recommended)

Located in: Shops at La Jolla Village
 Address: 8849 Villa La Jolla Dr, La Jolla, CA 92037
 Hours: Open 24 hours
 Phone: (858) 457-3775

☐→ Large Scale Black and White Printing:

Will print a 24x32" (black and white) on bond paper for \$5-8

☐→ Large Scale Color Printing:

Will print a 24x32" (color) on heavyweight coated paper for \$27

☐→ PROTIP: FedEx provides 10% student discounts!

Wēpa Cloud-based Printers

Printers are no longer available in Visual Arts computer labs. However, you now have access to several cloud-based printers campus-wide. Please see the following link for comprehensive information.

Located in: several locations campus-wide

blink.ucsd.edu/facilities/imprints/devices.html

Print 8.5x11" for tiling

Books on reserve //

Meggs' History of Graphic Design Phil Meggs
About Face: Reviving the Rules of Typography David Jury
Thinking with Type Ellen Lupton
Ten Commandments of Type Phil Meggs
Grid Systems in Graphic Design Josef Müller-Brockmann
Visual Communications Reader Various
Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design 1 + 3
It is Beautiful, Then Gone Martin Venezky
Subculture + The Meaning of Style Dick Hebdidge
Making a Splash Various
Pen + Mouse Various
Influences: A Lexicon of Contemporary Design Practice
 Anna Gerber + Anja Lutz
Robert Brownjohn : Sex and Typography Emily King
Hand 2 Eye Various
Fashion Illustration Next Various

Imprints @ UCSD

Located in: Geisel Library Main floor, east wing

Hours: see website

Phone: (858) 534-2534

blink.ucsd.edu/facilities/services/imprints/locations.html

Typical turnaround time for 24x32" poster is 48 hours

Student Printing Account (optional)

Setting up account with ETS:

<https://acms.ucsd.edu/students/print/>

[This is another printing resource but is not required for this course or to utilize the other printing resources listed.]

*Don't Wait Until The Last Minute To Print!

FedEx gets inundated by Vis 41 + Vis 101A students printing their posters. Plan ahead and be aware that turnaround times may vary depending on how many students are printing with FedEx. We cannot accept issues with FedEx as excuses for your assignment being late.