
Carnegie Mellon University
School of Design

Instructor
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Welcome to Play Lab!

1. Introduction

The philosopher Susan Neiman said, “to be human is to refuse to accept the given as given”. This simple yet broad thought speaks to the core of what we do as designers. We question, poke and break the things around us, ultimately trying to improve them incrementally. However, we still operate within a relatively limited box, in that we rarely question the context in which design happens. In this lab we will be challenging some of the assumptions you have operated under for much of your education so far, and constantly asking “what if”. We will push back on the walls that usually constrain design.

Play Lab is about externalizing your design vision, embracing ambiguity, broadening assumptions, and failing as early and often as possible. But most of all we will be making stuff, big stuff, small stuff, useful and useless stuff. Making is at the very core of what you do as a designer, no matter what modifier you use, be it communication, industrial, experience or anything else.

We are going to be looking at the act of design through some non traditional lenses, such as speculative design and design fiction, and using those mindsets to inform how and what we make. The things we build may ask questions, answer questions, inform research, teach people, or perhaps do nothing of any perceptible use at all. We will not accept the given as given.

2. Course Objectives

Throughout this course you will be challenged to think in ways you may not have been asked to in the past. At times this may be confusing or uncomfortable, but hopefully you will find it exciting and maybe even liberating. The world is a big complex and messy place, your job as a designer is to make sense of it all. We are going to be exploring some more fringe mindsets in design that will shift the expectations and constraints that you are used to.

This is a safe place to explore new and novel ideas. We will be playing with the built world, questioning, framing, breaking, building and rebuilding the objects and systems which surround us. We will also play with the context of the design space, for example, designing for people, places, and technologies that may not exist yet. Or we may prototype products which have no meaningful function other than to question the world they exist in.

We are going to employ a ‘make first’ attitude in this class. Often so much of the early stages of the design process are spent thinking, researching and justifying what you are going to make. For the next few weeks you are going to forget all that, prototyping concepts quickly, and using the artifacts you create as tools to react to.

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3. Course Structure and Expectations

This is a studio course, which means that we will be working and critiquing in class on a regular basis. Lectures will be short and discussion based. Participation in discussion is imperative, the point is not to talk at you but with you. I value one on one meetings and feedback. I will meet with you in class to discuss your progress, and I will make myself available out of class as often as you need it. You can email me anytime to set up a time to meet as I do not have an office space. The success of this class is wholly based on your work, I am here to help facilitate you making the best work you possibly can. Please let me know anything I can do to help you throughout the course of the semester.

4. Projects and Assignments

This is a project based class. There will be three projects during the five weeks we have together, two short pressure projects and one final project. Both short projects will be individual, the final project will be in teams of two or three. As mentioned above, this is a class about making, and therefore you will be expected to make stuff. Every class you should be making, breaking, and remaking. In addition to project based homework there will also occasionally be readings. The readings are specifically assigned to help you synthesize and comprehend your project work, they will be relevant and concise.

1. Remote Redo due September 2nd
2. Speculative Design due September 14th
3. Design, Surprise! due September 28th

You may have heard the term 'agility' to describe the labs this semester, as in the 'agility labs'. That term is used specifically because the projects you will be working on will require you think and act quickly. This does not mean that you have to miraculously turn out a polished finished project in a short amount of time. It means that you have to work smart and quick, and bring your work to an appropriate level of fidelity for the time you have and scope of the project. This may mean that your work may not be perfect and fully refined, that is ok. We are focusing on concept development, prototyping and dialogue, not high polish.

5. Attendance

Attendance, as you probably expected, is mandatory. We have a very short amount of time together, even missing one class will put you significantly behind. If you are unable to attend class due illness or other reasonable circumstance, please email me before class to let me know. It is your responsibility to catch up on missed material. If you are late to class please just take your seat and be as discreet as possible. Carnegie Mellon's attendance policy states that three latenesses become one absence, and three absences result in a letter grade reduction. This policy regards your attendance cumulatively over all three labs this semester.

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6. Professional Conduct and Attitude

By this point in your life as a student you really should not need to be told how to behave in class. If you're doing something and you think it might be disruptive or rude, chances are it is. I ask that you do not use phones / computers / tablets / google glass / smart watches or any other screen based technology during discussions and work sessions unless you are using it specifically for research purposes. You should take full advantage of in class work sessions, and blatant disruptions will not be tolerated.

7. Evaluation and Grading

Your grade for this lab represents one third of your semester grade. Final grades will be determined in collaboration with Wonder Lab and Speak Lab, and will represent a holistic view of your work in all three labs. Your Play Lab grade will be determined as follows. You will get specific feedback on each project.

Project 1	10%
Project 2	20%
Final Project	40%
Process	15%
Engagement	15%

8. Dates

Monday	Wednesday
[Aug 31] -class intro -start project 1	[Sep 02] -project 1 due -speculative design talk -intro project 2
[Sep 07] -Labor Day - no class	[Sep 09] -crit project 2 -design fiction talk -tarot cards
[Sep 14] -project 2 due -unexpected talk -intro final project	[Sep 16] -pitch concepts for final -non-design narratives
[Sep 21] -pitch -crit -hustle	[Sep 23] -pitch -crit -hustle
[Sep 28] -final project due	