UX Design in the Age of Drift: Meaning, Systems, and Human Experience

Course Syllabus

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Semester: Fall 2026
Credits: 3

Course Description

This course explores how UX design shapes meaning, not only through usability but through the compression and coherence of experience. Classic theories like Goodhart's Law, Baudrillard's hyperreality, and Rosa's acceleration help explain systemic distortions.

But today's design landscape requires new language. The *Drift Principle* offers a framework:

- **Meaning = Compression + Fidelity**
- **Meaning = Context × Coherence**
- **Drift = Optimization – Context**

From this principle we derive contemporary concepts: *Filter Fatigue, Optimization Trap, Synthetic Realness, Semantic Drift, and Reality Drift*. These terms extend anchor theories by identifying how meaning erodes when systems prioritize efficiency at the cost of context.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will:

1. Apply the *Drift Principle* to analyze UX systems.
2. Distinguish classic anchor theories (Goodhart, Baudrillard, Rosa, Turkle, Bourdieu) from contemporary drift-based extensions.
3. Conduct fidelity audits using benchmarks for coherence, context, and meaning preservation.
4. Prototype designs that restore context and coherence in the face of optimization pressures.
5. Contribute to a vocabulary of design that resists drift.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1 — The Drift Principle as Design Law

- *Concepts*: Compression, fidelity, context, coherence.
- *Anchor*: Shannon's Information Theory (compression & signal).
- *Extension*: The *Drift Principle* (Jacobs, 2022 Reality Drift Working Papers).
- **Focus**: Why UX is not just function but meaning management.
- **Assignment**: Short essay applying the *Drift Principle* to a personal app experience.

Week 2 — Metrics and the Optimization Trap

- *Anchor*: Goodhart's Law — distortion of measures.
- *Extension*: Optimization Trap — drift occurs when efficiency erases context.
- *Drift Link*: Optimization – Context = Drift.
- **Assignment**: Case analysis: identify where optimization has hollowed experience in a design.

Week 3 — From Hyperreality to Synthetic Realness

- *Anchor*: Baudrillard's Hyperreality — simulation overtakes reality.
- *Extension*: Synthetic Realness — engineered authenticity, interfaces designed to feel "real."
- *Drift Link*: Synthetic Realness arises when compression (simulation) lacks fidelity to lived context.
- **Seminar Question**: How does Synthetic Realness operationalize hyperreality in design practice?

Week 4 — Acceleration and Filter Fatigue

- *Anchors*: Rosa's Acceleration; Crary's 24/7.
- *Extension*: Filter Fatigue — cognitive depletion from endless filtering, triage, and feed management.
- *Drift Link*: Acceleration compresses time, but fatigue emerges when coherence and context collapse.
- **Assignment**: Filter Fatigue Diary (map overload moments across one week).

Week 5 — Habitus vs. Semantic Drift

- *Anchor*: Bourdieu's Habitus — social meaning embodied through practice.
- *Extension*: Semantic Drift — erosion of meaning through automated reproduction detached from practice.
- *Drift Link*: Drift occurs when linguistic compression outpaces fidelity to context.
- **Lab**: Semantic fidelity audit of an app's marketing copy.

Week 6 — Simulated Intimacy vs. Reality Drift

- *Anchor*: Turkle's Simulation of Intimacy.
- *Extension*: Reality Drift — the cultural-wide warping of "the real" across work, identity, and relationships.
- *Drift Link*: Drift manifests as systemic optimization (platform incentives) subtracting context from lived human experiences.
- **Assignment**: Compare Turkle's "robotic intimacy" with modern examples of Reality Drift (TikTok trends, AI slop, digital twins).

Week 7 — Designing for Semantic Fidelity

- *Anchor*: Foucault on discourse and truth systems.
- *Extension*: Semantic Fidelity — explicit benchmarks to preserve meaning (lexical decay, semantic noise, ground erosion).
- *Drift Link*: Fidelity metrics attempt to re-embed context within compressed systems.
- **Workshop**: Draft a fidelity rubric for a product of choice.

Week 8 — Final Project Presentations

- Students present UX prototypes designed to resist drift.
- Deliverables: Interactive prototype + 8–10 page design essay explicitly using the *Drift Principle* to frame anchor vs. extension analysis.

Assignments & Grading

- **Participation & Discussion (20%)**
- **Reflection Journals (20%)**: weekly observations of drift phenomena.
- **Midterm Case Study (20%)**: anchor vs. extension analysis of one digital product.
- **Final Project (40%)**: prototype + essay demonstrating *Drift Principle* application.

Core Reading List

- Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*
- Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*
- Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration*
- Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*
- Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*
- Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*
- Claude Shannon, *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*
- A. Jacobs, *Reality Drift Glossary* (2023)
- Semantic Fidelity Lab, *Measuring Semantic Fidelity Decay* (2024 White Paper)

Course Tagline

Drift = Optimization – Context. In the Age of Drift, the task of UX design is not just usability but meaning itself: compression with fidelity, context with coherence.