You have slept for a century as your fleet of fragile starships raced near light speed across the black of space. Now the computers have awakened you to the hum of engines and a first glimpse of the orange-tinted light of an unknown sun. Your new world awaits, the planet freshly terraformed and ready to become humanity’s new home. But you must design it: its cities, its society, its laws, which technologies to use, which energies to harvest, which animals to release into still-silent forests and oceans empty except for terraforming planktons and primordial fronds. The Earth you left behind was still thriving but mixed, its beauties and achievements juxtaposed with deep scars from the failures of humanity’s past. You joined the ExoTerra mission to do better...

Introducing the ExoTerra Imagination Lab

ExoTerra is an online collaborative research role-playing game (RPG) community for students, which the University of Chicago is launching this year. Participating students will play the crew of a space colony ship traveling from Earth to a newly-terraformed exoplanet, where you will use your expertise from your courses (biology, geology, urban planning, law, Core) to work together to design the new civilization you will create on your new world. The RPG community will run over all three quarters of the 2020/21 school year. All students in the College are welcome to participate as an extracurricular activity (like Model UN), but in each quarter a selection of undergraduate courses in many fields (Social Sciences, Humanities, Arts, STEM,) will also offer ExoTerra as an integrated course component, allowing you to research and produce a design for your part of the new world as part of the class itself.

ExoTerra participants will be divided into committees, each tasked with planning a specific part of the new world. A group of Economics majors might team up with Inequality, Social Problems, and Change minors to form the committee in charge of designing the new world’s economic policies, Biology majors might design its ocean biosphere, Architecture minors and Environmental & Urban Studies majors its capital city, Philosophy and Education & Society majors its educational system, Chemical Engineering majors its fuel and power systems, pre-meds its plan to cope with the medical effects of the new planet’s slightly different gravity, while students studying postcolonial literature might develop a plan for the new society to memorialize the relationship between space colonization and Earth’s colonial histories, and arts students might create maps, images of the new cities and forests, design a flag or compose an anthem.
First-years who have not yet picked a subject can join committees in subjects they are interested in, getting to work with more advanced majors and learn about the field, or choose instead to draw on the texts examined in the Core to draft founding documents expressing the values the new world aims to embody.

All students doing ExoTerra, whether for courses or as an extracurricular, will be part of one online community: the full crew of this terraforming mission. You and your committee will research your part of the new world’s design, share ideas with the rest of the crew, collect feedback, and present your proposal to the ExoTerra community. You will see the proposals made by others, and make suggestions of ways other components of the new world can fit better with yours: if you are designing the transportation, for example, you might coordinate with the committee designing the capital city. The crew will form a governing council, and vote to approve proposals, step by step locking in the character of your new world and making group decisions about major questions, such as where to build the first city, or what to name the new world. As the project continues over the three quarters of 2020/21, your ships will make their approach and landfall, gradually learning more about the new star system, its planets, and about the ExoTerra mission and its history, whose mysteries will unfold in an ongoing plotline written and overseen by science fiction novelist Ada Palmer (History Department), and informed by the latest research from NASA, JPL, and the University of Chicago’s own planetary research labs.

**What Do Students in ExoTerra Do?**

ExoTerra participants will be part of an online community (run via Discord), where you can role-play your characters and interact with fellow players by text chat, voice chat, or video any time you wish, both within your committee and with the whole crew. ExoTerra is thus both a research tool and a social world, uniting students from all years and sections of the college, where you can share an experience with friends in an online environment free of the challenges of COVID-19 and social distancing. All participants will work together on major decisions like naming the planets and where to put the space elevator, weigh in on different committee proposals, and have the option to work on puzzles and side-projects which will unlock documents and discoveries, both about the mysteries of the new solar system, and about the mission itself, and you its crew. Orchestrators will play non-player-characters, and periodic calls from Earth will let you talk to special characters played by guest experts in a range of fields, ranging from science fiction novelists to researchers working on the real Mars missions. All these components are open to any student who wants to participate in ExoTerra, no matter what year you are or which courses you take.

**What Happens in an ExoTerra Class?**

While all the online components of the RPG are open to anyone who wants to take part, some courses offered this year will integrate ExoTerra directly, by having the students in the course play one committee, and develop that committee’s proposal as an assignment within the class. Each course will use ExoTerra slightly differently, but class meetings will continue as normal, with ExoTerra happening in the online discussion forums and video discussion sections (often once a week) led by an instructor or course
assistant. In those discussions you and your classmates will discuss your part of the new world’s design, and divvy up research tasks. Written assignments will be turned in and graded as normal.

The instructor of each course using ExoTerra will decide how to integrate it into class, and what portion of the grade will consist of ExoTerra assignments. The major ExoTerra requirement will be to research your assigned part of the world and write up your proposal, but the number of total assignments, the length and complexity of the proposal, and the portion of the course grade they constitute will vary course by course. In some courses your ExoTerra work might be just a small portion of all the assignments, while in others your ExoTerra proposal may be your main project. The time commitment will be balanced appropriately, so students doing ExoTerra for courses which also assign a lot of additional work will have fewer ExoTerra assignments to turn in, and a shorter length requirement for the proposal, than students in courses where ExoTerra constitutes a larger portion of your total assignments. Instructors may also choose to have ExoTerra work count for extra credit, rather than as a requirement.

Which Classes Will Have ExoTerra?

The list of courses incorporating ExoTerra is not yet final, though we expect there to be about ten each quarter. We will send updates to the mailing list as new courses join. These courses will definitely do it:

- Self, Culture, and Society 1 (Zachary Sheldon, SOSC 12400/16 [87853] & 21 [87858])
- Global Warming: Understanding the Forecast (Flipped Class) (Dorian Abbot; PHSC13410, GEOS 13410, ENST 13410, part of the cluster Climate Change, Culture, and Society) Note: ExoTerra will be an extra credit track in this course.
- The Politics of Health Care (Sorcha Brophy, PBPL 26690/HLTH 26690)
- Public Policy Practicum: Interview Project on Policing (Chad Broughton, PBPL 26304)
- Education and Social Inequality (Lisa Rosen, EDSO 23005/SOCI 20297/CHDV 23005)
- Schooling and Social Inequality (Lisa Rosen, EDSO 22006/33006; SOCI 20298; SOCI 30298; MAPS 33007)
- Europe’s Intellectual Transformations (Ada Palmer, HIST 29522, FREN 29322/39322, SIGN 26036, HCHR 39522/RLST 22605, HIST 39522, KNOW 29522/39522)
- Winter Quarter: Technical Seminar in Fiction: Research & World-Building (Augustus Rose, CRWR 20203/40203)

Other types of courses likely to use ExoTerra in future include:

- Some Self, Culture, and Society and/or Power, Identity, and Resistance Core sections
- Human rights, global health, ethics, ethical thought
- Microbiology, plant or animal biology, marine biology
- Human rights, constitutional design, the foundation of governments, political thought
- Geophysical sciences, planetary science, minerology, geology,
- Big data, psychology, self-observation and self-critique of cultures & societies
• Colonial history, colonialism, post-colonialism, colonial and postcolonial literatures
• Cities and urban planning, architecture, transportation and its effects
• Agriculture, industry, energy, infrastructure
• Utopias, speculative fiction, creative writing, arts (designing buildings, monuments, anthems)
• Space exploration examined through any lens (politics, war, culture, engineering, gender)

I’m a First-Year—Can I Do ExoTerra in Core Courses?

We absolutely want first-year students to be part of ExoTerra, and there will be special forums and content designed just for first-years. Some Core courses will be doing ExoTerra, but it is up to each Core instructor to decide whether to do it or not, and since the Core is generally very stable, it is likely that only a few Core courses will adopt it. Filling out this mailing list form will help us see how many students want to combine ExoTerra with first-year Core courses. If you cannot do ExoTerra in a course, you can start with extracurricular participation, and hopefully take a participating course in spring when first-years have time for more electives, and when our story will move into its most dramatic final stage.

What If I Can’t Find a Course That’s Doing ExoTerra?

There will not be enough courses to cover every aspect of designing a new world, so there will also be a chance for those participating as an extracurricular to form auxiliary committees, and develop aspects of the new world not focused on by any course. Options to explore the new star system and the history of the ExoTerra colonization project will also be open to all. That said, if you want to take a class with ExoTerra but can’t find a way to fit in any of the classes that are doing it, we may be able to help. If the problem is that you don’t have time for an elective and none of the courses you need to take are doing ExoTerra, we can help you approach your instructors to ask if you could do Exo-Terra as an add-on, and substitute a few standard assignments with ExoTerra assignments. If none of your courses can work with ExoTerra (many can’t), it may be possible to do it as an independent study. If the problem is simply that you can’t squeeze in another class, then participating as an extracurricular will still let you enjoy the fun.

Can I Take More than One Course with ExoTerra?

Yes. If you take two in the same quarter, you will be on two committees; if you take them over multiple quarters, you will be on a new committee each time, though linked courses in a sequence may have committees continue over multiple quarters.

What if a Course is Doing ExoTerra but I Don’t want to Role-play?

The active role-playing component will be ungraded and online, so the only required component of a course using ExoTerra is to complete the research and written work about the part of your committee
work related to the class. It is up to each individual student whether to role-play extensively, a little bit, or not at all beyond engaging in the imagined world.

What if I Do ExoTerra in Autumn, but Can’t Continue in Winter?

You won’t be kicked out of the story, don’t worry. The ExoTerra online community will continue all year, and anyone who takes part in ExoTerra, even for one quarter, will continue to be welcome in the chats and forums, welcome to give feedback, and welcome to vote when the time comes. Your particular committee may become inactive and your project completed, or your project may pass to a second-stage committee in the new quarter, who may go to you for advice. Your level of involvement in the online community will be entirely up to you, but revelations about the new star system and other elements of the game world will continue to unfold for you to enjoy.

Why ExoTerra During a Pandemic?

The pandemic and related crises have created what many have recognized as a World Mental Health Epidemic. Chronic exposure to fear, anxiety, and social separation have traumatic effects on the brain, increasing the risk of mental health problems and impeding higher cognitive functions including concentration, problem-solving, memory, and language and writing skills. Friendship and the support of peers is the best therapy for this, but every campus community on Earth has experienced traumatic dissolution, and it is hard to form and continue friendships across distances, whether six feet or a thousand miles. ExoTerra is designed to help. Your ExoTerra lab will be a small, intimate friend group connected to a larger online community, uniting multiple majors and years. The game world is space to collaborate, create, and to explore ethical, social, scientific, and political issues, while the ongoing science fiction plot twists offer stimulating challenges and a break from the daily crises of 2020. Science fiction and other genre literatures are sometimes dismissed as “escapist,” but ExoTerra draws on a genre fiction movement called speculative resistance. The idea is that imagining other ways societies could work helps us broaden our perspectives and explore alternatives, generating hope, new plans, and momentum for change. The goal of science fiction is not to predict what will happen, but to challenge us to consider many versions of what could happen, previewing ethical challenges before we get to them, and dismantling the illusion that our present institutions are immutable, or that there is only one path forward. As Ursula K. LeGuin expressed it, “Hard times are coming, when we’ll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We’ll need writers who can remember freedom, poets, visionaries, realists of a larger reality.... Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art; very often in our art, the art of words.” In ExoTerra you will have in your hands a world that can become almost anything, and shape it step by step, exploring and rejecting many possibilities as you narrow down, debate, and compromise to choose the one path to make real—perfect practice for what we must do here on Earth.
Is This Like those O-Week ARG Events, Parasyte and Terrarium?

Somewhat, ExoTerra is a Role-Playing Game (RPG), which is similar to an Augmented Reality Game (ARG), but in an ARG, participants play as themselves, i.e. as a student at U Chicago, same name, same home, same year, but with game elements layered on top of their lived reality (a secret society, a magic machine). In an RPG, participants create a characters who are not their everyday selves. In ExoTerra, your character will have a name, skills, and a backstory different from your own, partly pre-designed by the orchestrators but fleshed out as you yourself decide your character’s views and actions. Additionally, the ARGs made use of campus, while ExoTerra will be wholly online.

How Do I Learn More about ExoTerra?

Please fill out the mailing list survey form, to tell us about your year, major and interests. This will help us determine how much demand there is for particular types of courses. We will also put you on a list to receive updates by email. If you have more specific questions, you can contact the head orchestrator, Professor Ada Palmer (adapalmer@uchicago.edu), though many questions will not have answers until September.

Want to help run ExoTerra? We need student volunteers with RPG experience to help as moderators or orchestrators, administering the game and online forum and working with the writing team on puzzles and game documents. If interested, contact Orcheestrator Ada Palmer (adapalmer@uchicago.edu) or Assistant Orchestrator Ben Indeglia (benindeglia@gmail.com)