

**Why Reading Spec-Fic Across Disciplines Still Matters in 2026**

Burgsbee L. Hobbs

Department of English, Music, and the Arts, Saint Leo University

**Author Note**

I have no known conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Burgsbee L. Hobbs, Department of English, Music, and the Arts, Saint Leo University, 33701 County Road 52, Saint Leo, FL 33574. Email: [burgsbee.hobbs@saintleo.edu](mailto:burgsbee.hobbs@saintleo.edu).

### Abstract

This article argues that Spec-Fic, the common industry abbreviation for the label “speculative fiction” that serves as an umbrella term for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating the “consensus reality” of everyday experience, retains its critical relevance in 2026 as both a vital interdisciplinary resource and a useful intellectual and pedagogical tool for navigating complex societal challenges. Defined as a narrative supercategory that intentionally explores “what if” scenarios, including but not limited to fantasy, horror, science fiction, dystopian, and post-apocalyptic narratives, Spec-Fic can serve as a critical pedagogical tool. By synthesizing the scholarly analysis of research across disciplines, including education, design, and environmental humanities, this article shows that Spec-Fic functions as a dynamic apparatus that transcends traditional literary boundaries. The findings indicate that by activating embodied cognition and narrative experimentation, the genre serves as an intellectual simulator, transforming abstract issues, such as climate change and technological ethics, into tangible, human-centered narratives. This process is shown to cultivate an essential historical consciousness and cognitive flexibility, empowering learners to move beyond passive observation and become informed agents of change. Ultimately, the synthesis of imaginative engagement and analytical rigor inherent in Spec-Fic makes it an indispensable resource for nurturing critical hope and preparing students to actively shape a world in a constant state of becoming. Future research should empirically assess its efficacy in non-literary disciplines and explore digital modalities and non-Western speculative traditions.

*Keywords:* critical hope, education, futures studies, imagination, interdisciplinarity, pedagogy, societal issues, Spec-Fic, speculative fiction

### Why Reading Spec-Fic Across Disciplines Still Matters in 2026

At the year's end, we tend to reflect on what has been; however, as we look toward the next, we are compelled to speculate on what prospects lie ahead. Such conjecture is the very stuff that makes up the literary subgenre commonly known today as speculative fiction (hereafter, Spec-Fic), an area once defined by the celebrated sci-fi writer Robert Heinlein as one that embodies the notions of either "just suppose" or "[w]hat would happen if" (Heinlein, 1947, p. 17). For readers who are outside the field of literary studies, note that the traditional hard genres of literature are generally understood as poetry, drama, and prose (Komala & Putri, 2025, p. 145). Literary genres are broad with shared characteristics, and easily identifiable. By contrast, literary subgenres are more specific categories that target niche audiences. So, prose would include non-fiction and fiction (and by some estimations, folklore) as subgenres; fiction gets further subdivided into the additional subgenres of realistic fiction, historical fiction, romance, crime, mystery, etc., each of which has its own subsets of nested categories in the taxonomic tree, even though there can be nearly infinite areas of overlap.

While this taxonomic approach remains essential to literary studies, the practical application of Spec-Fic for this article requires a more expansive working definition. It is an important, ongoing area of discussion for which presently "there is no master list" (Frow, 2005, p. 2) in the literary community with ample room for differing perspectives. When I teach my undergraduate literature course, ENG 319: Studies in Speculative Fiction (Lindberg, 2022) at Saint Leo University (SLU), my students and I rally behind a definition offered by Oziewicz (2017) that supposes Spec-Fic to be a "supercategory for all [sub]genres that deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience" (p. 1). In this sense, he insists, as an umbrella term, Spec-Fic includes the subgenres of "fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also

their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate [sub]genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, superhero tales, alternate history . . . slipstream, magic realism, fractured fairy tales” (Oziewicz 2017, p. 2), and even steampunk, a subject on which I have published on previously (Hobbs, 2011, p. 909); some of these subgenres will even get referenced in this article. Even more newly named groupings, such as “climate fiction” (also known as “Cli-fi”), a subgenre that refers to works of fiction exploring the impacts of climate change on individuals and societies, for example, also fits well into the Spec-Fic category (Atasoy, 2023, p. 65). In Oziewicz’s (2017) estimation, Spec-Fic is an “imaginative necessity” with an allure that lies in its evocation of wonder, its challenge to materialist assumptions, and its role as a “mode of critical inquiry” celebrating human creative power (p. 22). Spec-Fic, then, does not claim factual accuracy but instead nurtures imaginative and cognitive empowerment.

To frame the scope of this article, I draw upon the following research questions: As we take our first steps into 2026, in light of current events, why might reading Spec-Fic even matter in disciplines other than and in addition to literary studies? To contextualize the discussion, I am also guided by this inquiry: Beyond escapist entertainment, what cross-disciplinary impact can Spec-Fic have on fields such as criminology, design, education, environmental humanities, futures studies (also known as foresight studies and future consciousness studies), literacy studies, neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, and social sciences? Throughout this article, I treat these as clearly non-literary disciplines, using their research questions and methodologies to frame Spec-Fic as data, method, and pedagogical tool rather than as a mere object of close reading. My intention in raising these questions is not to generalize, but to probe the possibilities of fields beyond my own that are dabbling in Spec-Fic.

Building on these guiding questions, consider an outline of how Spec-Fic intersects with

non-literary disciplines and why this interdisciplinary approach matters for academic inquiry. While drawing on scholarship from a range of clearly non-literary disciplines, including education, criminology, design, environmental social sciences, futures studies, neuroscience, sociology, psychology, and design, to demonstrate this cross-disciplinary impact, I postulate that reading Spec-Fic still matters in many spheres of learning because, in its readers, it expedites creative thinking, encourages the exploration of ethical dilemmas, and offers insights into societal, technological, and scientific possibilities. In academic domains other than language studies, Spec-Fic can cultivate scholarly examination by exploring alternative realities and ethical dilemmas, challenging assumptions, and inspiring critical thought about society, human nature, and even potential futures. Thus, the reading of Spec-Fic in 2026 stays meaningful because it has a cross-disciplinary impact that wields both significance and purpose.

I will illustrate how across disciplines Spec-Fic can foster imagination, explore complex societal issues, and offer fresh insights into what may come, helping readers navigate a constantly changing world. This work synthesizes some key research from multiple non-literary disciplines, including education, psychology, environmental humanities, futures studies, and design, to demonstrate how Spec-Fic functions as an interdisciplinary resource. By explicitly drawing on these fields, the discussion moves beyond literary critique to examine how Spec-Fic informs pedagogical, cognitive, and sociocultural practices across academic domains.

### **Fostering Imaginations**

The following analysis, grounded in educational research and sociocultural psychology, demonstrates how Spec-Fic acts as a cognitive tool, actively disrupting mimetic, or consensus, reality. So, on the very basic topic of interdisciplinarity, I would note that the praxis of relying on readings outside of one's own discipline "has become acceptable" for some time now "as long as

the reasons for using these interdisciplinary approaches serve the higher purpose of better understanding the source material” (Hobbs, 2018, p. 207) and this study will show that this has certainly been the case with Spec-Fic. In this context, such approaches extend beyond literary interpretation into the domains of sociocultural psychology, educational theory, and cognitive science, reflecting how scholars in these fields use speculative texts to model learning, ethical reasoning, and creative problem-solving. For example, Kloetzer and Kloetzer’s (2025) psychological and educational study demonstrates how Spec-Fic prompts students to envision alternative futures, a process grounded in sociocultural psychology rather than literary analysis. In other words, the evidence presented from these non-literary disciplines investigates imagination as a cognitive and developmental process rather than a purely literary phenomenon. This framing underscores the interdisciplinary nature of my argument.

An initial reason why Spec-Fic matters in 2026 results from researchers working in disciplines such as psychology and education who have found that Spec-Fic content demonstrates a measurable effect on the imagination of readers and students. More specifically, because it is fiction, Spec-Fic has the innate ability to nourish its readers’ imaginations. This influence has been documented through experimental, developmental, cognitive, and educational research in peer-reviewed journals of, for instance, the field of sociocultural psychology, a space that is already interdisciplinary in that it is “located at the crossroads between the natural and social sciences and the humanities” (Rosa & Valsiner, 2018, p. i). For example, in one recent experimental study Swiss researchers from the University of Neuchâtel, Kloetzer and Kloetzer (2025), working from a psychological and educational perspective, examined the impact of reading science fiction on students’ ability to imagine alternative futures. As a team, Kloetzer and Kloetzer build upon philosopher Ilyenkov’s (1974/2007) work on “esthetic” education (p.

81) as fundamentally connected to the development of imaginative thinking. This is not simply the ability to invent what does not exist, but rather the skill to recognize what exists in novel forms. They maintain that:

esthetic education is connected above all with development of the power of imagination, understood not as the ability to think up what does not exist but as the ability (skill) to see what does exist, what lies before one's eyes. (Kloetzer & Kloetzer, 2025, p. 2)

Their study found that participation in science fiction, a subset of Spec-Fic, not only prompted students to envision possible future scenarios but also challenged them to expand their sense of what the present could hold (Kloetzer & Kloetzer, 2025, p. 4). This outcome suggests the subgenre's potential power for activating imagination within academic settings, such as a college course that uses readings in Spec-Fic.

Building on this psychological and educational work, a neurocognitive perspective further clarifies how fiction, including Spec-Fic, promotes imagination. Case in point, a study by Italian professors Gambino and Pulvirenti (2021) from the University of Catania supports a working connection between Spec-Fic and imagination. According to their findings, imagination is central to human cognition and artistic creation. In their publication, they first remind readers of *Poetics* (ca. 335 B.C.E./1922), where Aristotle posited that *mimesis*, or imitation of the real world, is the “main form of ‘simulation’ in the sense of ‘world construction,’ giving rise to the complex universe of fiction” (pp. 2–3). In this vein, the fictional or speculative imaginary world is constructed through an act of embodied simulation and imaginative projection (pp. 2–3). The research of Gambino and Pulvirenti (2021) purports that reading fiction delivers a form of literary simulation, which leads to active imagery and engagement with fictional worlds. The “concept of simulation,” they report, “plays a pivotal role in the neurocognitive theories on the

embodied mind” (p. 1). Furthermore, imagination “is a central concept in recent neurocognitive studies since it plays a core role in human life and in artistic production and reception” (p. 1). The literary simulation provided by fiction, they conclude, gives “rise to literary imagery and to the reader’s reception of the fictional world” (p. 1). Their study suggests that engagement with fiction, including Spec-Fic, is not merely passive. Instead, readers actively construct and inhabit alternative scenarios, a key characteristic of Spec-Fic, while engaging with it in narrative form. This neurocognitive perspective, as explored by Gambino and Pulvirenti, underscores how Spec-Fic’s imaginative engagement extends beyond literary studies into fields like psychology and cognitive science.

Now, it is this focus on interactions with the fictional imagery inherent to Spec-Fic narrative that ultimately leads to the discipline of education. Within the discipline of education, some research reveals that Spec-Fic can encourage students to imagine, for example, possibilities for social transformation. In a review of Spec-Fic’s use in educational contexts, Houlden and Veletsianos (2023) argue that Spec-Fic, especially in the subgenres “hopepunk, solarpunk, and visionary,” is effective because it offers “models of storytelling grounded in hope which imagine more liberatory education and learning futures” (p. 1). They base their work on earlier publications such as “Choice is Yours” by Costello and Girme (2021), who maintain that Spec-Fic tries to take its readers “out of the known” but not “into the unknown.” Rather, they claim Spec-Fic relocates readers back to where they “already are” with the purpose of not knowing the future but to predict the present (Costello & Girme, 2021, p. 266). When readers do this, their imaginations are being assisted by the content of Spec-Fic. Houlden and Veletsianos (2023) find that Spec-Fic works that conceptualize better, more hopeful futures help student readers envision their own futures in new ways, moving beyond traditional constraints and aiding imagination on

both individual and collective levels.

The pedagogical aspiration of this section necessitates the selection of Spec-Fic works capable of actively engaging and expanding student imagination. In their article, Kloetzer and Kloetzer (2025) stated that their introduction of Spec-Fic titles “as an artistic and narrative process” is thoroughly “grounded in the question ‘What if?’,” as they claim that the “work of the imagination in” this subgenre of writing “is triggered by the process of making bold hypotheses, that may or may not be realistic, and then imagining the impact of these hypotheses on a whole social community” (p. 25). To illustrate how these educational insights play out in concrete classroom examples, consider the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood, 1985), by Spec-Fic legend Margaret Atwood, and how the question becomes, what would happen “if fertile women were so rare that they became the sole property of the richest men?” (Kloetzer & Kloetzer, 2025, p. 25). This line of questioning moves beyond literary theme and into sociological inquiry, forcing an analysis of power, gender, and social stratification. With Suzanne Collins’s (2008–2010) novel series, *The Hunger Games*, the implied question becomes: What would happen “if an oppressive government decided to throw selected young people in an arena, for them to fight in public, to distract the population from their lack of freedom?” (Kloetzer & Kloetzer, 2025, p. 25). It is worth noting that both works have been adapted into a television series, in the case of Atwood, and into a film series, in the case of Collins, both of which formulate the same questions.

Beyond these sociologically charged narratives, additional examples such as *Dune* by Frank Herbert (1965), and Ridley Scott’s (1982) film, *Blade Runner*, illustrate how Spec-Fic engages ecological, technological, and ethical dimensions across disciplines. In my own course offerings at SLU, particularly ENG 319: Studies in Speculative Fiction, I try to incorporate both

primary text readings and films that work well with the learning objective of furthering imagination. For example, in the past I have assigned Herbert's novel *Dune*, a winner of both the 1966 Hugo Award (World Science Fiction Society, n.d.) and the Nebula Award (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, n.d.) and long regarded as a cornerstone of Spec-Fic literature. Its relevance lies in its expansive world-building, where it blends ecological science, political intrigue, and messianic prophecy, while encouraging students, with instructor guidance, to imagine complex future societies and their environmental challenges. *Dune*'s focus on foresight and adaptation aligns with Kloetzer and Kloetzer's (2025) emphasis on recognizing novel forms of the present. Per cinema, I have also assigned for discussion Scott's film, *Blade Runner*, a cult classic, nominated for two Academy Awards (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, n.d.), and still influential in Spec-Fic cinema. Based on Philip K. Dick's (1968) novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, not only is *Blade Runner* a fantastic choice for exploring questions of identity, memory, and what constitutes authentic existence, its neo-noir vision of a dystopian future with artificial intelligence also makes it relevant for my aim to challenge students to imagine ethical and technological futures, aligning with both literary simulation (Gambino & Pulvirenti, 2021) and present-focused prediction (Costello & Girme, 2021).

Collectively, these various studies show that Spec-Fic is a reliable tool for stimulating imagination and creative thinking across disciplinary boundaries. Its use in classrooms and scholarly research enhances students' reasoning abilities and helps readers rethink what is possible. The research exemplifies how Spec-Fic activates readers' engagement with alternative realities and future scenarios, accommodating cognitive flexibility and expansive imaginative skills. Through neurocognitive and educational lenses, Spec-Fic can prompt embodied simulation and active mental imagery, enabling college students to inhabit and critically explore

fictional worlds. Moreover, educational applications of Spec-Fic encourage students to envision more hopeful, transformative futures by moving beyond the known toward reimagined presents and possibilities. In an uncertain age where AI content-generating apps may be contributing to a loss of our college students' creative potential, the reading of Spec-Fic could significantly nurture and expand their imaginative capacities, helping them to evolve into better writers and better critical thinkers.

### **Exploring Complex Societal Issues**

This section moves beyond literary interpretation by examining scholarship from environmental humanities and social science to show how Spec-Fic translates large-scale systemic issues into localized, human-centered narratives. I begin with a second justification that Spec-Fic matters in 2026 because, when read and applied across academic disciplines, it offers students a powerful framework for interrogating complex societal issues through imaginative and interdisciplinary inquiry. For example, Tomin and Collis (2024) argue that speculative storytelling “as a speculative, pedagogical orientation” can serve as a means of “rethinking science education” by enabling students to inhabit the intersection of “science fiction and science fact” (p. 249). This interdisciplinary cohabitation allows learners to explore societal challenges, such as climate change, automation, and inequality, through narrative experimentation. In their classroom-based *Toronto2049* project, students engaged with Spec-Fic to collaboratively build future worlds, using extrapolative storytelling to examine “contemporary issues spanning reproductive and sexual health for teens, climate change, poverty and food security, medical care, education, religious freedom, automation, and myriad other topics” (Tomin & Collis, 2024, p. 254). The authors emphasize that this process empowered students to “combat hopelessness and helplessness and envision alternatives even as present reality crashed down upon them” (p.

256). Crucially, the project boosted interdisciplinary knowledge integration, as “a deep understanding of literary SF form brushed up against information students learned in their science, civics, and history classes” (p. 260), verifying how Spec-Fic can catalyze critical engagement with real-world systems and social structures.

Taken together, these educational projects point toward a broader sociological concern. The application of Spec-Fic to explore societal structures aligns directly with the concerns of sociology, particularly the subfield dedicated to understanding how societies envision and shape their futures. As Lancaster University’s Richard Tutton (2017) argues, the central task is to develop “a new conceptual language in which to do the sociology of the future” (p. 478), especially because “a future-less sociology is increasingly hard to defend” (p. 479). This theoretical grounding affirms that projects like the previously discussed *Toronto2049* initiative (Tomin & Collis, 2024, p. 254) are not merely literary exercises; they are exercises in applied sociology, using narrative as a method to model, critique, and reimagine social systems.

Through this pedagogical model, Spec-Fic becomes not merely a literary subgenre but a transformative tool for exploring and reimagining the societal conditions that shape our collective futures. This section has thus far drawn upon scholarship from environmental humanities, social sciences, and higher education studies, positioning Spec-Fic as a tool for interrogating societal structures and ethical dilemmas, while also emphasizing that Spec-Fic analysis can move beyond literary interpretation into, for example, the sociological and pedagogical domains.

Continuing this discussion, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson’s (2018) empirical survey of readers of climate fiction, also known as “Cli-fi,” a subset of Spec-Fic that imagines “the causes, effects, and feeling of global warming” (Irr, 2017, p. 1), exhibits how the genre contributes to

readers' engagements with real-world crises outside of the silo of literary studies, alone.

Schneider-Mayerson's work sits at the confluence of environmental social science and literary reception studies, demonstrating how Spec-Fic can enrich discussions on cognition, perception, and attitudes. In accord with Antonia Mehnert (2016), Schneider-Mayerson (2018) concurs that climate change fiction "gives insight into the ethical and socio-political ramifications of this unparalleled environmental crisis" (p. 224). His survey also records how individual readers came to recognize climate change as a broader societal issue, with one respondent testifying,

I thought about climate change as primarily an environmental issue, but after reading [Maggie Gee's novel, *The Ice People*] I began to see that it has so many other dimensions that I had not considered. Changes in climate have the potential to change the very fabric of society. (Schneider-Mayerson, 2018, p. 486)

Taken together, Schneider-Mayerson's findings signal that Spec-Fic not only represents pressing global challenges but also prompts readers to explore their broader ethical, social, and cultural implications.

Building on these findings from environmental humanities and social science, education scholars have also looked at the enablement of Spec-Fic readers, particularly students, to explore complex social issues by engaging with speculative scenarios that challenge prevailing societal norms and oblige critical imagination. One notable case from Bayne and Ross (2024) argues that Spec-Fic serves as a pedagogical tool in higher education, allowing readers to confront issues such as climate change, technological surveillance, and global injustice through creative and reflective methods. This process enhances college readers' understanding of these issues by connecting personal experiences to broader societal challenges. Rather than conventional novel-length works of fiction, in their work, they use various examples of microfiction, "fiction less

than a hundred words” (Naimou, 2021, p. 21), to quickly stimulate the discussions they want to have with students, which might be easy for out-of-field instructors to emulate in non-literature courses. First, Bayne and Ross emphasize Spec-Fic’s role in critiquing dominant educational futures. “Rather than reducing complexity and attempting to ‘fix’ the future,” they write, “there is a need instead for multiple alternative imaginaries” (Bayne & Ross, 2024, p. 3). This idea serves to highlight how Spec-Fic can encourage readers to explore social issues such as the instrumentalization of education and technology-driven inequalities by imagining diverse futures, adopting a critical perspective on current systems. Second, Bayne and Ross note Spec-Fic’s capacity to engage readers with societal uncertainties responsibly. “Speculative work values playful, imaginative, glitchy and strange encounters,” they point out, while all the while, “acting responsibly towards participants and towards the future itself” (Bayne & Ross, 2024, p. 3). This suggests that readers can engage with complex issues, such as AI surveillance or climate-induced migration, through imaginative narratives that balance creativity with ethical considerations, deepening their social awareness.

This interdisciplinary positioning, as demonstrated in Schneider-Mayerson (2018) and Bayne and Ross (2024), positions Spec-Fic as a tool for interrogating societal structures and ethical dilemmas, while also emphasizing that Spec-Fic analysis can move beyond literary interpretation into, for example, the sociological and pedagogical domains. Third, Bayne and Ross highlight Spec-Fic’s potential to reimagine educational practices. “Speculative methods,” they explain, “can provide a way to scrutinise and contest dominant imaginaries, and create new, perhaps preferable ones” (Bayne & Ross, 2024, p. 3). This clarifies how Spec-Fic narratives can help readers explore social issues such as global injustice or ecological crises by encouraging them to challenge existing frameworks and envision alternative societal structures.

So, what Spec-Fic works could be utilized to gently push students toward this area of engagement? One novel, Maggie Gee's (1998/2012) *The Ice People*, has already been cited in Schneider-Mayerson's survey as that particular narrative nicely illustrates the far-reaching societal impact of a major climate change. In my own previously mentioned ENG 319: Studies in Speculative Fiction course at SLU, I routinely integrate carefully selected primary texts and films that align well with the learning objective of getting students to explore complex societal issues. Past syllabi for the course have sometimes featured, for textual readings, *The Road*, a novel by Cormac McCarthy (2006/2009) and winner of both the 2007 Pulitzer Prize (Pulitzer, n.d.) and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (University of Edinburgh, 2024). This post-apocalyptic narrative is a powerful example of Spec-Fic that profoundly strips society down to its most basic elements. It furnishes students assigned to read it with opportunities to explore themes of survival, morality, and human nature in the face of environmental catastrophe. *The Road* addresses climate collapse, resource scarcity, and moral dilemmas, encouraging readers to engage with Schneider-Mayerson's (2018) environmental crisis insights and Bayne and Ross's (2024) focus on global injustice through reflective storytelling. In these courses, I try to balance conventional storytelling with cinematic narrative so, for film, I have used Spike Jonze's (2013) *Her*, a picture nominated for five Academy Awards, that won for best screenplay (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, n.d.). *Her* is a recommended choice because it provides an intimate and nuanced look at the evolving relationship between humans and artificial intelligence. It invites students to consider the future of relationships, consciousness, and loneliness in a society where technology is not just a tool but a companion, aligning with Bayne and Ross's argument about exploring the "glitchy and strange" (Bayne & Ross, 2024, p. 3) encounters of the future. Through its blatant, and sometimes graphic, examination of AI

relationships, isolation, and technological ethics, it offers students a platform to engage with Bayne and Ross's (2024) AI surveillance concerns and Schneider-Mayerson's (2018) broader societal implications, enhancing critical imagination.

Ultimately, the evidence from recent interdisciplinary scholarship demonstrates that Spec-Fic is far more than imaginative entertainment; it is an essential pedagogical tool for interrogating the multifaceted structures and challenges of contemporary society. Functioning as a critical simulator, the subgenre enables students to engage in "narrative experimentation" with complex dilemmas, from climate change and technological surveillance to social inequality. By leveraging the imaginative power of Spec-Fic to defamiliarize the present, readers are equipped with the cognitive and ethical tools to move beyond passive awareness toward active, socially responsive critique. This process cultivates a sense of critical hope, advancing the ability to not only understand and deconstruct dominant narratives but also to envision and shape more just and resilient futures.

### **Offering Insights into What May Come**

This final section considers research from design studies and futures studies, fields which use Spec-Fic as a methodological tool, often termed "speculative design," to practice foresight and confront future risks in areas such as cybersecurity and policy. Therefore, the last argument to be made about the ongoing significance of Spec-Fic in 2026 is that its content intersects directly with non-literary fields, such as sociology, environmental humanities, cybersecurity studies, and ethics, where speculative texts can be analyzed not for their literary form but for their function as models of social behavior, risk, and human decision-making. One way in for such fields would be to focus on Spec-Fic's frequent tendency to manifest as a didactic "cautionary tale," an ancient narrative trope that, unlike the moral tale, which is focused on the

rewards of good decisions, is instead a warning centered on the repercussions of foolish choices. This is an application of Spec-Fic that even the field of cybersecurity finds itself dipping into. Hai-Jew (2019) makes the case that in “cybersecurity communications, cautionary tales are an integral part of the strategic messaging” (p. 619) partly because the “core dynamic” of cautionary tales “is the caution of what not to do to serve as an inoculant against poor decision-making” (p. 620). Cautionary tales can be ubiquitously discovered in the literary genres of parables (e.g., Aesop’s [ca. 620–564 B.C.E./1871] “The Shepherd’s Boy and the Wolf,” which shows how credibility is both hard to build and easy to lose); epic myth (e.g., Ovid’s [ca. 8/1794] *Daedalus and Icarus*, which shows the folly of overreach and ignoring wise counsel); folklore (e.g., “The Story of Blue-Beard” [Perrault, 1697/2013], which advises against being too curious about forbidden things); or more recent children’s literature (e.g., Collodi’s [1883/2006] novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio* that illustrates how chronic dishonesty can lead to trouble and harm). In such Spec-Fic stories of warning, there is an opportunity to consider a hypothetical situation and learn from it even if some examples definitely come across as heavy-handed.

In my own teaching practice, these theoretical points take on concrete form through the use of specific cautionary narratives. Based on firsthand experience, I have used the following novel-length works in my own ENG 319 course, each of which represents some of the better-known examples of cautionary tales in Spec-Fic: Aldous Huxley’s novel, *Brave New World* (1932/2012), which tries to forewarn the dangers of the loss of individuality, consumerism, and state-controlled reproduction; George Orwell’s (1949/2001) novel, *1984*, which sounds the alarm against thought control and totalitarian surveillance; and Ray Bradbury’s (1953/2012) *Fahrenheit 451*, which speculates on the consequences of anti-intellectualism and censorship. In this way, Spec-Fic’s cautionary tales function as a form of intellectual rehearsal, preparing

students across disciplines to recognize and navigate similar warning signs in their own historical moment. Such texts remind us that the speculative imagination is not merely escapist but deeply instructive, offering warnings that remain strikingly relevant across time and academic disciplines.

Like cautionary tales, plot outcomes in Spec-Fic narratives concentrated on possible futures also have the uncanny ability to broaden the horizons of their readers regarding either what could or might happen in the hereafter, ultimately helping them to navigate a world that is continuously evolving. From an interdisciplinary standpoint, this part of the discussion engages with futures studies and design education, fields concerned with scenario planning and anticipatory thinking. By situating Spec-Fic within these frameworks, I am calling attention to its relevance for disciplines that study social systems, technological change, and cultural adaptation. For example, one archetypal trope of possible futures that crosses over with business studies that I sometimes bring into ENG 319 is the inevitable rise of the unregulated “megacorporation,” a veritable staple in “the world of comic books, graphic novels, and the multitude of big-budget, Hollywood films based on them” (Hobbs, 2015, p. 63). Such archetypes also inform the research of National University of Singapore’s Fergnani and Song, two scholars working in future studies, an interdisciplinary academic field drawing from social sciences, management studies, and cultural studies. They find that there are six archetypal tools in Spec-Fic labeled as “Growth & Decay, Threats & New Hopes, Wasteworlds, The Powers that Be, Disarray, and Inversion” for anticipating possible futures (Fergnani & Song, 2020, p. 1). Their article claims that this six archetypes system is more transformational than any previously developed scenario archetype framework and therefore better “suited to the current reality, which is increasingly presenting us with unexpected events and phenomena, forcing us to think the unthinkable more systematically”

(p. 13). This suggests that imaginative structures embedded in science fiction can serve as disciplined frameworks for rehearsing futures that extend beyond conventional expectations.

While building on the work of Thomas Lombardo, a scholar known for promoting the teaching of “future consciousness,” or “the human capacity to have thoughts, feelings, and goals about the future” (Lombardo, 2009, p. 57), Fergnani and Song (2020) also note that fictional “images of the future are powerful and influential in shaping the public’s images of the future (Lombardo, 2006, 2015)” (p. 4). “Most importantly,” claim Fergnani and Song, “fictional images of the future presented in the arts, or science fiction,” which is a subset of Spec-Fic, help readers to “think the unthinkable” (p. 4). Here, Fergnani and Song are underscoring that science fiction narratives enable readers to grapple with disruptive possibilities, thereby cultivating cognitive flexibility and social imagination. Lastly, they argue that Spec-Fic cinematic narratives “set in the future extend the boundaries of imagination and ‘challenge’ the present in such way that few other human artifacts about the future can do” and “these can then be used as predetermined archetypes to build transformational domain-specific scenarios, and thus grow prepared to critical, disruptive futures” (Fergnani & Song, 2020, pp. 4–5). This further posits how Spec-Fic equips readers not only to imagine alternative worlds but also to critically test societal assumptions, offering a structured means of anticipating the challenges of uncertain futures. This interdisciplinary relevance is further supported in research by Hinchliffe (2021), which argues that Spec-Fic’s “formal properties provide us with the language, imagery, and feelings associated with being under surveillance” (p. 414), making it a valuable tool for both sociological and surveillance studies, for instance.

In a different but complementary register, publishing in the same year as Fergnani and Song, across the globe from Singapore at the University of Colorado, was Toliver (2020) with

her publication. Unlike Fergnani and Song, she shows how reading Spec-Fic across disciplines offers student readers insights into what may come by serving as a counterstory that reimagines future possibilities. Invoking the dual lenses of feminist theory and critical race theory, Toliver argues “that situating speculative fiction as counterstory creates space for Black girls to challenge dominant narratives and create new realities” (p. 507). Her reported experiences indicate that students can use Spec-Fic to envision alternative futures by questioning societal norms, a skill critical for students in 2026 anticipating the ever-evolving social landscape. It leads to a back-and-forth exchange that engages students dialogically, where meaning is constructed through interaction. Consequently, this encourages them to anticipate future societal shifts, a point Toliver elaborates by explaining that “through this process, the listener is encouraged to participate by challenging prior suppositions, suspending judgment, analyzing the story for meaning, and situating their own stories within the context of the story being told” (p. 508). This active participation compels a deeper understanding of potential future dynamics by linking personal narratives to broader speculative contexts. Furthermore, testifying to these narratives equips students to foresee and address future challenges, an idea from Venus Evans-Winters’s (2019) book *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry* that Toliver supports by asserting that “learning to bear witness is essential because the narrative literacies of Black women and girls are ‘important humanizing projects in contemporary contexts that attempt to dehumanize, oppress, suppress, and annihilate Black bodies’ (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 23)” (Toliver, 2020, p. 508), suggesting that such engagement prepares students to recognize and counteract future oppressive structures through empathetic foresight.

Beyond advocating for empathetic foresight in literacy and critical race contexts, the act of reading Spec-Fic also gives students valuable insights into potential future developments in

applied fields, such as design. Speaking for the field of design, Anhalt University of Applied Sciences's Maciejko and Lecuna (2025) observe that by engaging with narratives and characters, readers connect with stories that “often reflect the challenges close to the viewers, just taking place in the future” (p. 2). This allows students to consider how contemporary anxieties and problems might evolve, providing a grounded, human-centered entry point for exploring what may come. This reflective process is essential because it helps to bridge the gap between imagined concepts and our current reality. As Hovorka and Mueller (2024) note, Spec-Fic helps us to “reflect on today through the exploration of tomorrow, helping to understand the role of present actions in the process of shaping the future” (as cited in Maciejko & Lecuna, 2025, p. 3). In doing so, the subgenre cultivates a sense of historical consciousness by illustrating that the present is not fixed but is in a constant state of becoming. Ultimately, the process of engaging with data fiction within Spec-Fic serves as a powerful tool to “open pathways for exploring alternative futures and offers a lens through which upcoming designers can learn how to anticipate and shape a broader range of potential futures” (Maciejko & Lecuna, 2025, p. 5). Therefore, the subgenre is not merely a form of entertainment but a critical practice that empowers students to act as informed agents of change.

### **Discussion**

Spec-Fic remains a vital interdisciplinary resource in 2026, connecting academic perspectives and offering more than literary entertainment. It functions as both a pedagogical tool and a cultural framework for addressing societal challenges across fields such as psychology, education, environmental humanities, and futures studies. This study aligns its analysis with these disciplines, foregrounding their methodologies and concerns in order to demonstrate Spec-Fic's capacity to support cross-disciplinary reasoning rather than serving

merely as an object of literary critique. By inspiring imaginative engagement, ethical inquiry, and cognitive flexibility, the subgenre provides students and scholars with conceptual and ethical resources for confronting uncertainty. Its ability to render abstract dilemmas tangible and personally resonant allows Spec-Fic to cultivate critical hope, encouraging learners to move beyond passive observation and toward becoming catalysts for informed change. Its accessibility and adaptability also make it a valuable resource for educators outside of literary studies, offering emotionally resonant entry points into speculative inquiry. In this sense, Spec-Fic facilitates interdisciplinary dialogue and prepares students to navigate a rapidly evolving world where creative resistance and ethical exploration are essential. By occupying the blurred spaces where science fiction meets science fact, readers can envision transformative alternatives while maintaining analytical rigor, ultimately equipping them to engage with uncertainty as active participants in shaping the future. So, in summary, this article has highlighted how some perspectives from non-literary subject areas such as psychology, education, environmental humanities, futures studies, and design can be integrated to utilize Spec-Fic's interdisciplinary potential.

### **Future Directions**

While this article has mapped a constellation of Spec-Fic's interdisciplinary applications, further empirical research is needed to assess its pedagogical efficacy across diverse academic contexts. Studies that measure student learning outcomes, particularly in non-literary disciplines, would help clarify how Spec-Fic fosters imagination, ethical reasoning, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Future inquiries might also explore subgenre hybridity, microfiction, and digital modalities such as AI-assisted storytelling and virtual reality simulations. Additionally, expanding the scope of readings to include non-Western speculative traditions could enrich our

understanding of how cultural imaginaries shape approaches to future-making. These directions would deepen the subgenre's academic utility and affirm its role as a transformative tool for navigating the complexities of contemporary and future societies.

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