

ASU students create next-generation AI personas in new course with will.i.am

Black Eyed Peas frontman and tech innovator partners with ASU

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Dhruv Patel's buddy knows what he knows, shares his perspectives and even mimics his speech patterns.

That's because Patel created his friend, who is not a human but an "agentic self" — an AI persona that not only completes tasks but actually reflects a person's values, voice and goals.

"I want my agent to be a riffing buddy or a friend I can bounce ideas off of," said Patel, a third-year computer science student at Arizona State University.

"I want it to think like I do, but with all the computational power and all the other intellectual capabilities that I don't have behind it."

Patel is part of a new ASU class called "The Agentic Self," taught by will.i.am, the musician, tech founder and philanthropist. Nearly 80 students from a wide variety of majors and age groups are taking the class — in both Tempe and Los Angeles — and learning how to create these personal agents.

(Video: <https://youtu.be/AEuHVhj1Eho>)

The frontman for the pop group Black Eyed Peas and a professor of practice in The GAME School at ASU, will.i.am said that AI can compute quickly but still requires human input.

"Agentic is the next step, where the agent is able to do tasks and workflows on your behalf. You set it on its course, and it would reason, research, browse, generate — all autonomously," he said.

Unlike ChatGPT or Claude large language models, where data is stored in a public cloud, the students' agents are private and entirely theirs. The agents can reason, adapt and accomplish complicated tasks — with minimal input and with the intentions of their creators.

will.i.am is the founder and CEO of [FYI.AI](#), an AI-powered technology platform designed for creative teams headquartered in Los Angeles. The students in the Agentic Self course are creating their agents with the EDU.FYI platform, a collaboration between ASU and FYI.AI, and the course is a test case for the platform. Eventually, EDU.FYI will be available to all faculty and students at ASU with the goal of bringing it to other educational institutions as well.

The partnership happened after will.i.am met ASU President Michael Crow last year.

“President Crow pitched, ‘Hey, those agents that you’re building at FYI? What about building them for professors and students?’ That vision is the reason why I’m here,” will.i.am said.

The university has embraced AI, [exploring different ways it can enhance learning and discovery](#). In 2024, ASU became the first university to partner with OpenAI and last year expanded the collaboration to bring [ChatGPT Edu](#) with GPT-5 to every student, faculty member, researcher and staff member at no cost to the individual. In addition, ASU offers two undergraduate and 10 graduate degrees focusing on AI, including a one-of-a-kind degree in artificial intelligence engineering.

will.i.am calls the ASU alliance “forever learning” — a way to equip students in any major with the skills they need for a world powered by AI.

“It’s a moral compass — this urgency to teach, inspire, encourage, mentor and motivate folks to build ethical systems that reflect themselves,” he said.

“How do you equip people with an agent when they’re being replaced by agents? So not only can they keep their job, but have the ability to utilize the power of their own agent to solve problems and create jobs themselves?”

[Peter Murrieta](#), an Emmy-winning producer and interim associate dean of the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, is one of three ASU professors who are facilitating the course with will.i.am. Murrieta said that artists, including himself, are rightly suspicious of AI after the entertainment industry was disrupted by streaming and social media for the profit of corporations.

“This class is asking the question, before we start building our own agents, ‘What do we believe in, what do we care about? What would we never give up?’ And the idea of creating an agent for yourself where you own all the materials you’re putting into that agent makes it much easier to move forward in the world,” said Murrieta, who is also deputy director of the Sidney Poitier New American Film School.

“Anything I tell it, I own, and nobody’s scraping and learning off of it. And it just feels like the only way to move forward as an artist.”

Learning from an artist

Patel said he immediately registered when the class opened.

“I’m a musician, and I grew up on the Black Eyed Peas,” he said.

“It's one thing to learn agentic AI from a computer science professor talking about all the components or the hardware side of things. It's another thing to learn it from this creative genius who can explain it to me in a way that only an artist could.”

Jeremiah Holland, a graduate student in ASU's Narrative and Emerging Media program in Los Angeles, also was intrigued by taking a class with the famous will.i.am.

“But what I really like about the class is that he's teaching us how to use AI to work on our behalf, because right now AI is owned by the big corporations that get to use your data and you don't have any say. With this class and with this AI system, the data is under our control and we get to decide how it's used,” said Holland, who earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in film media production with an emphasis in screenwriting and producing from the Poitier School.

He has used other AI chatbots, including ChatGPT and Gemini, to help with fact-checking and grammar.

“When I'm writing a script, if I'm having a hard time with an idea or if I'm writing a character, I'll ask, ‘Give me some name suggestions,’” he said.

“But this is the first time I get to build it from the ground up and decide how it thinks and how I want it to help me. Being able to see the back end of how these systems are built is one reason I'm glad I took this course.”

[Sean Hobson](#), chief design officer for EdPlus at ASU and a professor in the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, is one of the course facilitators and has been key in supporting the partnership with will.i.am.

“Working alongside will.i.am and the team has been one of the most creatively expansive experiences of my life,” Hobson said. “His vision for what students need and can become to thrive in the future pushes everyone around him to think differently.

“Pair that with a university built to move at the speed of the moment, and you get something rare — a course where students aren't just studying the future, they're building it. Learning by doing — that's the whole point.”

Developing with ethics in mind

The EDU.FYI platform is powered by Nvidia, which has donated 80 graphics processing units for the students to use. The book-sized devices keep all the students' content private, so it's not available in the cloud.

will.i.am alternates visits between the Tempe campus and a new state-of-the-art classroom he built in his Los Angeles studio — so every week, half the students see him in person, and the other half see him on a video stream.

At a recent class in Tempe, the students shared their agents' voices, and will.i.am encouraged them to talk freely when inputting their audio.

“If you’re reading when you’re talking to it, (your agent) is going to sound like you’re reading. If you’re just messing around with your friends, have them interview you or record a podcast, and talk like you’re naturally having a passionate conversation about the world,” he said.

“That’s when you’re truly going to get the agent to not sound robotic. Because you don’t show up to the world reading a script.”

Heavy-hitter guests

Thanks to [will.i.am](#)’s professional relationships, students in the Agentic Self class have been able to learn from several technology innovators as guest lecturers. At the midpoint of the course, students have heard from:

Nick Turley, the head of ChatGPT

Mati Staniszewski, co-founder of ElevenLabs

Prem Akkaraju, CEO of Stability AI

Ethical design is also a priority of the course.

[Pavan Turaga](#), founding director and professor in The GAME School and one of the course facilitators, said the students are asked to imagine a future in which everyday activities like job interviews will require an agent.

“In that future, the ethical conversations are, ‘What are you willing to give your agent as information about yourself? And what are you not willing to give?’ Because who knows how that agent will behave after that?” Turaga said.

Crow was a guest lecturer at a recent class, and will.i.am asked him:

“These students are about to design and deploy agents in a world where the government, the corporations, the rules, the ethics, they’re all lagging behind the tech. What is one concrete design principle you would ask every student here to hardwire into their agentic self so that 10 years from now, we can honestly say these systems expanded human freedom, creativity and dignity, instead of just optimizing for profit and control?”

Empathy, Crow said.

“The worst thing to be is intelligent or intelligently enhanced and be without empathy. Because you’re then consumed by your own self, your own understanding,” Crow said.

Patel said one student recently asked if the agents now hold the same biases as their human creators.

“It was a great question,” Patel said. “More than the tech part of making the agent, I’ve been enjoying the philosophical, ethical and moral conversations we’re having.”

Holland recommends that people learn all they can about the technology.

“Instead of being afraid of AI and what it’s going to do, learn about it and learn how it can enhance you to grow your capabilities.”

The course is planned to be offered again in future semesters.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU Professor of Practice will.i.am chats with business students Noa Cohen (left) and Shayna Ilyinsky during a break in the “Agentic Self” course at Wilson Hall in Tempe on Feb. 18. The musician, tech founder and philanthropist alternates between Tempe and Los Angeles — so every week, half the students see him in person, and the other half see him on a video stream. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University

Text image(s)



ASU computer science junior Dhruv Patel (right) and Professor of Practice will.i.am chat during a break in the “Agentic Self” course at Wilson Hall in Tempe on Feb. 18. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University

Gallery



Musician, tech founder and philanthropist — and ASU professor of practice — will.i.am holds up the pitchfork gesture on Palm Walk in Tempe on Feb. 4.



ASU Professor of Practice will.i.am teaches “The Agentic Self” at the FYI.AI Studios in Los Angeles on Jan. 14. FYI.AI is an AI-powered technology platform designed for creative teams headquartered in Los Angeles. The students in the Agentic Self course are creating their agents with the EDU.FYI platform, a collaboration between ASU and FYI.AI, and the course is a test case for the platform. Eventually, EDU.FYI will be available to all faculty and students at ASU with the goal of bringing it to other educational institutions as well.



ASU Professor of Practice will.i.am teaches at Wilson Hall in Tempe on Feb. 18. The musician, tech founder and philanthropist alternates between classrooms in Tempe and Los Angeles.



The students in Los Angeles attend will.i.am's course in a new state-of-the-art classroom he built in his Los Angeles studio (shown here on Jan. 14). The Tempe classroom can be seen on the screen at upper right.