

The Inner Machinations of my Mind Explained

Introduction

In this essay I plan to explore some of what I think defines my design language and design philosophy. Over the past three years in university, I have grown immensely not just as a design student, but as a person. It has been a rollercoaster for us all and has impacted everyone in different ways. It has taught us how to adapt and persist through a global pandemic. However, it will have damaged people both mentally and physically irreversibly which has caused a huge knock-on effect to friends, family on top of everything else.

Since covid-19 studies have seen a huge increase in mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. As someone who suffers from these illnesses, I can only sympathize with those who developed these debilitating diseases. I aim to explore this further and try to explain how, even though they are terrible illnesses, they can sometimes stand as a blessing and can be incredibly eye opening.

I will also dip my feet into methods of coping with these illnesses. I want to investigate what will help to aid in grounding a person to the point where they accept the new human they have become. This will also lead me onto subjects such as existentialism and nihilism. Exploring further into the nature of the universe and the meaning of life and how it has been presented over the years as well as recounting my own experiences that derived from this way of thinking.

Finally, I will take a look into the modern world and the challenges it is facing, more specifically our current capitalist state. Here I will attempt to dive deeper into the subject of capitalism, looking into its origins, how it developed, its current state as well as researching what is happening now to ensure designers today are prepared for the possibility of a post-capitalist world. Whilst it is important to design products for the here and now it is important also to try and future proof any design, making sure it will last as long as possible.

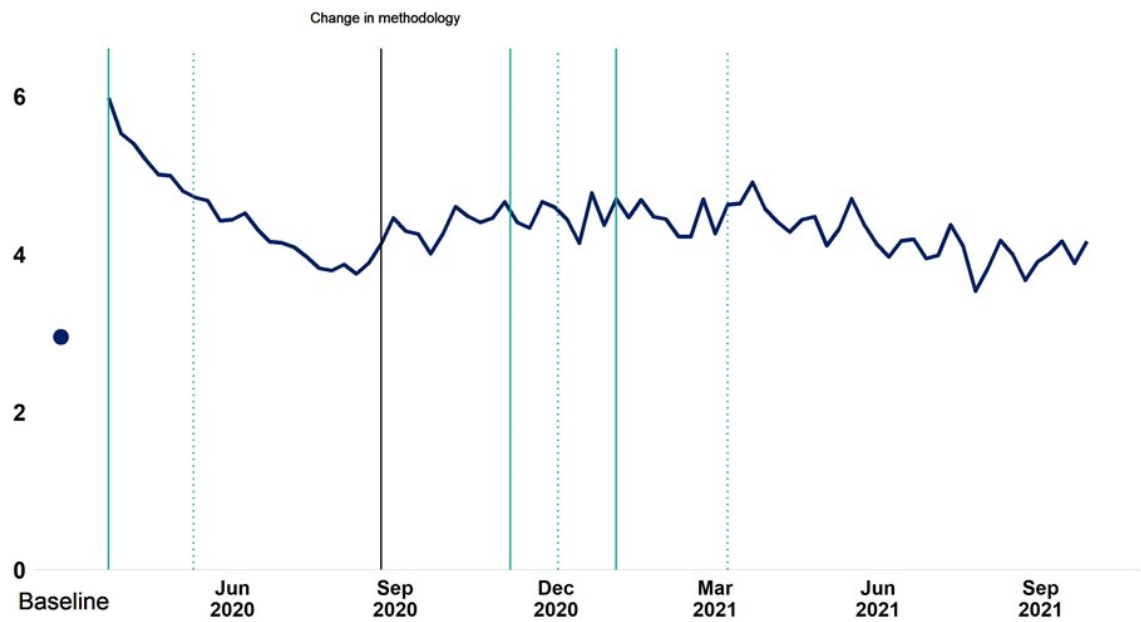
"A person who thinks all the time, has nothing to think about except thoughts."¹

This section is going to be about mental health because it's one of the few things I can relate to. Depression and anxiety are both a blessing and a curse in my eyes. Both mental illnesses have shaped me into the man I am today. This has translated into the way I go about forming my personal design language as well as seeing myself in a different light and learning to accept change.

The global pandemic has taken humanity down a path no one could have foreseen. It has demonstrated the good the bad and the ugly embedded in humans. It has demonstrated our impact on things like the environment as well as showing us how fragile life in all its forms can be. I want to start however by looking at the mental impact it has had on countless people over the past 3 years.

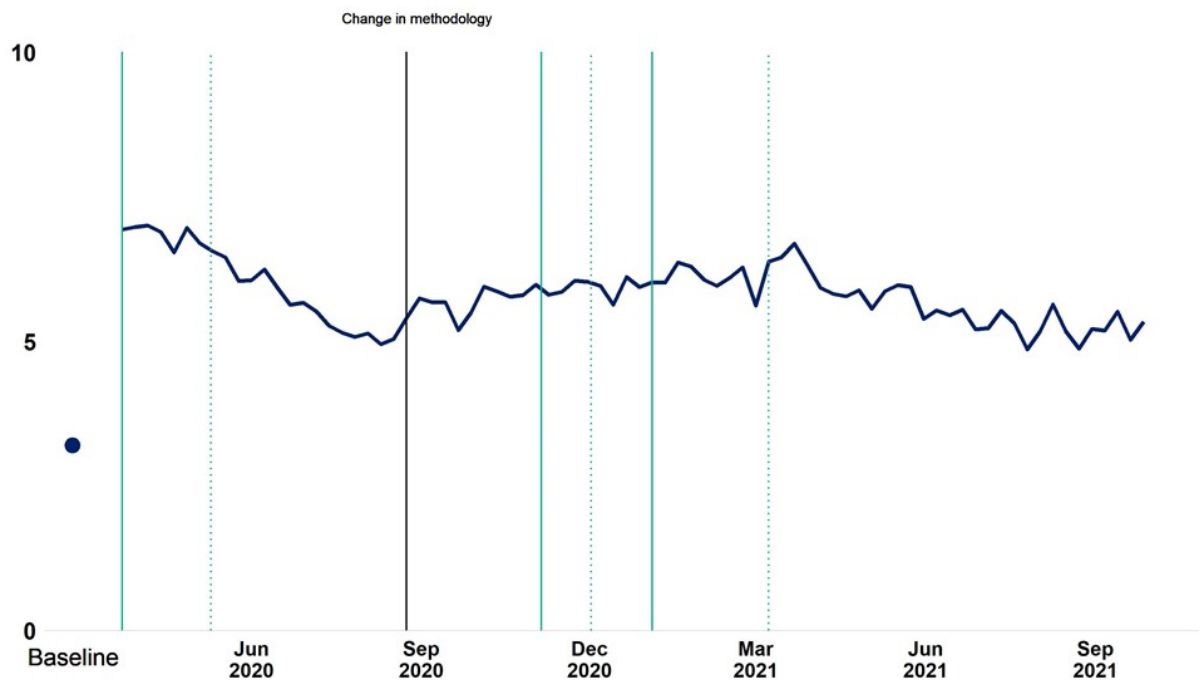
Since the start of the pandemic in early 2020 there has been an enormous spike in cases of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. However, the statistics so far have only been derived from people who have come forward about this issue. So, it is entirely likely that the percentages are much higher due to un-diagnosed cases. Studies have shown that, there is a direct link between lockdowns being introduced and increased reports of anxiety and depression (see fig1, fig2)⁷.

Solid vertical lines indicate lockdown starting, dotted vertical lines indicate lockdown easing.



(fig1) Graph showing Panel of 20,000 to 70,000 adults weighted to the national population. Data provided by UCL and used with permission (GAD-7 score, 5 to 9 = mild, 10 to 14 = moderate, 15 to 21 = severe). Baseline from German study (Löwe et al. 2008)

Solid vertical lines indicate lockdown starting, dotted vertical lines indicate lockdown easing.



(fig2) Graph showing Panel of 20,000 to 70,000 adults weighted to the national population. Data provided by UCL and used with permission (PHQ-9 score, 5 to 9 = mild, 10 to 14 = moderate, 15 to 19 = moderate to severe, 20 to 27 = severe). Baseline from US study (Tomitaka et al. 2018)

As I have previously stated, I suffer from both of these illnesses and they hit me harder than ever when the first lockdown began. One of my coping methods is to go on long drives in my car. I don't always have a particular destination in mind, but it helps me to clear my head and reset myself. As a result of the lockdown however, I wasn't able to do this. What made it even more frustrating was the fact that the roads were virtually empty with the exception of the odd lorry or police car. It often brought me to tears because something that was so small was ripped away from me. It made me realize that I take too many things for granted. This then got me thinking about how other people were living with much bigger problems than not going out for late night drives. It showed me how selfish I was being and made me realize what I really valued in life. Granted this didn't last long as once lockdown was eased and I could roam free in my car again, I would often make trips to the coast and surrounding areas.

The way I felt when I got back in the car was pure bliss. It is like finding something you have been without for years and then suddenly you find what you were looking for, and the memories come racing back into your head of the fun you used to have. It also made me excited for all the memories that had not yet come to pass. My appreciation for my car skyrocketed and, even though it had taken me nearly three years, I now loved my car and for once I didn't want to sell it on.

This is also what inspired me further to peruse my dream of designing cars in particular. It showed me that a 1-ton lump of metal and rubber could transform a person's life in so many ways. There's a specific interview between Jeremy Clarkson and interviewer Eric Bana that pops up in my head whenever I am really invested in driving. In this interview they discuss how cars have changed, formula 1 racing cars in particular, and how drivers today are being masked by the technology of the car. One famous quote among the car community is this;

"It's what non-car people don't get. They see all cars as just a ton and a half, two tons of wires, glass, metal, and rubber, and that's all they see. People like you or I know we have an unshakable belief that cars are living entities... You can develop a relationship with a car and that's what non-car people don't get... When something has foibles and won't handle properly, that gives it a particularly human quality because it makes mistakes, and that's how you can build a relationship with a car that other people won't get."-*Jeremy Clarkson*

It takes away the human element in driving and this is only going to get more mainstream. With the development of autonomous vehicles, people like myself are going to find it harder and harder to enjoy a Sunday drive where we can experience a car for what it really is. To add to this, alternate methods of fuelling, not just cars but any motor-based experience, is becoming more and more important with the state of global warming and the Earth's need for a completely carbon neutral future. It is predicted that crude oil prices are going to rise to \$78 (£58.95) per barrel by 2025 giving way to higher petrol and diesel prices⁸. We have already seen a massive increase in fuel prices over the past few months and the panic buying in the UK during September (2021) only made this worse. One factor that people may not realise however, will be the rise in car tax due to their fuel type.

The way things are going, I predict that driving a car will become a rarity and will only be available to the wealthy. People like me will have to find other methods of grounding themselves when they have a panic attack when the dog eats something he should not be eating.

Mental health has been and still is something that I am in a constant battle with. Anything that can soften the blow from either anxiety or depression is always welcome. As a designer of modes of transport, I take it as my responsibility to ensure the product I am designing achieves this feeling of bliss. When I am designing a new concept, these are the things I am considering. I am designing for

the person who wants an experience when they travel. I want to design something that not only serves as a safe space where someone can relax and reset, but also something that is able to give people the feeling of being one with the machine they are surrounded by.

"42" ²

We live in a small corner of the universe on a floating sphere of rock orbiting around a giant ball of burning gas. All that man has created is dependent on this spinning rock that we call Earth.

But are we anything more than a parasite? A bacterium that has simply become highly complicated and developed. Humans and in fact all life, is just a geological biproduct. We are the result of saltwater interacting with freshwater, creating a tiny electrical current.⁴ This is why muscles react to electronic shock, this is why defibrillators are able to restart the heart. If we imagine it as the earth being a human and the human race being a virus. We have spread across the globe and have now started to kill our host. In response to this, like every human alive, the Earth reacts to this virus with our immune system. This fights the virus and eradicates it from the body. For example, global warming. This could be seen as a means of flushing the body of any sort of foreign invader and getting rid of any negative elements.

Recently I took a drive to Charmouth beach in search of fossils. I came home with many samples, mainly ammonites. I find it incredibly humbling when I look at them and any other fossils. It shows me how, even though this creature is millions of years old, its remains have survived. The thought that this is the first light it has seen in perhaps over 70 million years fascinates me. 70,000,000 years of extreme pressure and pitch black, only to be exposed to the harsh light of the 21st century by a 20-year-old student from a town in South Wales.

Life on Earth has only existed for a minute portion of the universe's long life. And at the end of all things, what will life have to show for it? What will anything we do matter when this planet ends? Why *must* we survive? If we do end up surviving up until the very end, we will be the only thing to exist for the rest of time. That is not living. That is simply existing for the sake of existing.

It is incredibly naïve to think that there is no life beyond our own. The universe is vast beyond comprehension, meaning there is a vast sandbox for physics and chemistry to play with. It is highly unlikely that humans will explore beyond our galaxy given its size, however there are around 100 thousand million stars contained within the galaxy⁵ and over 100 billion planets⁶. That's 100,000,000,000 chances for life to exist. It may not be complex life seen in the great sci-fi novels like H G Wells' "The War of the Worlds", but single cell lifeforms are still life. An example of this probability could be comparing the planets of the galaxy to the grains of sand on Earth. Each grain is unique, there may be grains made of the same materials but no two are exactly alike. With the sheer quantity of grains, it is impossible to study every grain of sand to determine whether it contains life.

I highly recommend watching videos from YouTube by the creator Melody Sheep¹⁷. Their videos are what sparked my fascination with existentialism and the topics surrounding it such as the possibility of life or how the universe will end. His videos contain breathtaking visuals and truly fascinating topics, some of which I never would have thought of. I have left a link in the bibliography if you wish to watch his videos.

a novel that I believe incorporates this complex subject is 'A Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy' In this book there is a race of beings that create a massive supercomputer and name it 'Deep Thought' they go on to ask it the simple question, what is the meaning of life? More specifically 'the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything.' The computer then tells these pan-dimensional

beings that it will take 7.5 million years to calculate the answer to this difficult question. 7.5 million years passed and the descendants, of the originals who asked the computer, returned looking for an answer. The computer then replies with the answer "42". The beings are shocked by this most simple of answer and the computer explains that it didn't understand the question they were asking. It then explains that it has designed a successor to itself. This computer would be so large that it would resemble a planet and would harbour complex life itself and that this life would become a part of its operating matrix. The computer names it Earth. The beings that asked the original computer devolved into mice and descended onto the planet to oversee the new computers 10million year operating period.

This story fascinates me, and I can imagine all others who read it. The fact that a computer built by beings much more advanced than modern humans, can only explain the meaning of life as the number 42 is very intriguing. My view on the topic is that the computer was right. It suggested that something so simple and pointless could be the answer to everything and the recipients of this answer were in such a state of denial they could not see the computers true genius. They failed to see that the meaning of life is not some special and thought out reason, but in fact a simple and random answer. The computer is saying that life is random and cannot be justified and that there is little reason to search for this answer that has haunted countless people throughout history. At the end of the day, nothing we do as humans will matter. Everything we accomplish will be forgotten or destroyed. However if this was widely accepted the planet would grind to a halt. Nothing would be accomplished and I can imagine most people would off themselves knowing that what they did achieved nothing. However, we make our own reasoning in a desperate hunt for dopamine. We find meaning in everything we do, from loving to hating all the way to brushing our teeth in the morning. As previously stated, life is simply a bi product of a random geological occurrence. There was no higher being that created everything and even if there was it still means nothing.

I think the fact that these beings who asked the computer devolved into mice, is a great statement. Showing what may happen to us in the future. We may become so small and insignificant and we will remain as caretakers to our planet until its demise. It shows us, again, that life is forever changing and suppressing us with what it can do.

I want to share with you a passage I wrote whilst I was in the midst of an existential crisis.

People say that white is the purest colour, but I disagree It is black that is the purest. Black is void of all colours whereas white is every colour compressed into one form. I want you to turn off all the lights in your house, room or wherever you may be reading this. Just lie down on the floor, your back on the floor, with your eyes pointing up at whatever is above you. If the lights were on, you'd be able to see everything. Your mind is compressed and knows that whatever you are looking at is the be all and end all. But if you do the same thing in complete darkness, what do you see? I want you to just lay there, perfectly still. Feel what is beneath you. This works best if you are lying on the ground floor of a building or just lying on the grass. If you clear your mind of all thoughts. You eventually begin to feel all that is below you. You feel the earth emanating through your back. For it is darkness, pure black that truly clears your mind. You feel the miles upon miles of the earths' crust beneath your very person. You feel the flowing magma underneath you, all the way to the earth's core. Once you can understand this feeling on connection to the rock you live on, it is only then that you can begin the experience of existentialism. You begin to understand the universe.

"Close your eyes, count to one, that's how forever feels like."³

When I look back on this, I am fascinated by what I see. I see a confused teenager that has yet to discover what life has to offer. Since I wrote this passage, I have developed in ways I never thought I would. All thanks to the existential crisis I was experiencing at the time. Because once I emerged from it, I found hope. It taught me that I can make my life whatever I want to be. Because in the end nothing matters so I may as well enjoy it while it lasts.

I think what I am trying to say is, don't let what I am saying get you down. Just because life has no meaning does not mean life has to stop. I am simply suggesting that you do everything you've ever wanted to do. Ask that person on a date, go to that country, experience life however you please. Find your own meaning. In my opinion life is there to be enjoyed and we have a vast playground to enjoy it in. The world is here for us to consume and use how we please. We are the only ones in charge of our fate, and we must be responsible for the outcome, good or bad. A shining example of this is global warming. We've known about it since the 60s and yet it is still getting worse. My take on this matter is this; we are past the point of no return now, so the real question is not 'how can we stop this?' It is simply 'why not?'

CAPITALISM

It is all well and good talking about how nothing matters. However, the society we live in at the moment denies us these privileges and molds us into what people think a human being should be. From nursery and perhaps before this, we are told that a successful person has to be married with a big house, children, a nice car, peak physical shape, the list goes on. To add to this, to go anywhere in life you must have money. Granted there are exceptions to this but the majority of the time it is not without money that people achieve great things.

One of the fatal flaws embed in capitalism is the fact that it creates vast pools of wealth which end up turning stale. Piles of money that aren't being used which could be used to perhaps stabilize the economy or solve world hunger. It sounds ridiculous but it is entirely possible. Currently there are 2764 billionaires living on this planet¹¹. At the top of the list is Jeffery Bezos (current executive chairman of Amazon) with a net worth of \$177 billion. This money is unimaginable to most people me included. A demonstration of this would be using cheat codes in a game to gain money quicker or gain money instantly. Once you have upgraded everything and bought every item available in the game, the game quickly becomes boring. So, the money you have sits there and does nothing.

An interesting side to capitalism however is how it plays a role in the design industry. As time moves forward it is becoming increasingly hard for designers to create a concept that not only conforms to ethical standards, but also maintain a profitable growth. Whilst designers should take into account the ethical side of whatever they have been assigned to create. Technology firms are "economic actors within a capitalist mode of production...compelled to seek out profits in order to fend off competition" (Srnicek 2017, 3). For the world of design to better interact with the society we live in today we must first re-evaluate and re-arrange our priorities. Instead moving towards a future where manufacturing is not focused on profit margins.

To understand this subject better we must first look at its origins. Political economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo and later Karl Marx defined value as 2 separate factors: use-value (a products physical and social attributes) and exchange-value (market price)¹². This was then replaced with the idea of value representing utility of a product in the 1870s by Neoclassical economists (people who focus on how individuals operate within an economy). This gave way to the modern definition of value as personal utility (what satisfaction a person gains from the product).

In the world of design, we should be prioritising the use-value of a product rather than focusing on the exchange value however, this is not true. As designers it is the focus on exchange value that drives us as this is the thing that will see us gaining things like promotions and recognition as well as what engineers are willing to build. This should come as no shock as it is common in any technology firm's business model. The pursuit of financial gain drives capital accumulation.

There is such a thing as 'zebra companies'. These are companies that, whilst not gaining much recognition, are able to find a balance between use-value and exchange-value. These companies are built to last in contrast with 'unicorn companies' such as SpaceX, Facebook and Google.¹⁴ These are start-up companies with values of over \$1billion.

The issue with zebra companies however is that they tend to create a link between being socially-just/'green' with higher profits in the long run. This does not always go as predicted, for example how is a company that creates profit through fossil fuels going to increase profitability by changing to renewable energy? "Where technology is concerned, capitalism is far from neutral. It invariably favors those particular technologies that enlarge profits, accumulation, and economic growth" (Magdoff and Foster 2011, 33).¹⁵

In a world with these limitations, it is vital that designers as a whole, aim to future-proof their designs as much as they can. After digging around I found that there are currently a number fourth year undergraduate students in communication, industrial, and fashion design that have been looking into questions that involve looking into how design may function in a post capitalist future. The course is a semi-hybrid course called "Speculative City". Since 2017 The course has moved its area of study to looking into and making proposals for such a future. Two questions are the main focus of this course; '1) What might designers be producing and how might they be doing it in a post-capitalist political economy, and 2) What new roles might designers play in a post-Capitalist society?'¹⁶ These questions are at the core of the subject and play a key role in preparing the students for what life may look like in the future.

This Post-capitalist focus is aimed at challenging people, like undergraduate design students, to re-imagine some of their pre-disposed beliefs of the world of design. In other words, the course is teaching them how to future proof their own specific design language to ensure that their future is successful. These assumptions the students make are not formed by "design" necessarily, rather the global, capitalist, market economy. The course forces the students to think outside the box and go against their default beliefs by showing them the variety of materials, labour, technologies, means of production, desires, and exchanges found within the design sector.

When designing I am actively trying to produce a new concept that, not only conforms to modern day ethics and capitalist ideology but is also able to exist in a post-capitalist world as previously described. For example, I try my best to ensure that things like means of production and the materials being used will still be available by the specified time in my design brief as well as ensuring that they are widely accepted as an ethical means of production. Whilst this method of creating my own personal predictions may not be the most reliable of sources, it is important to note that there is an array of examples to examine in past years. Such as the energy crisis in the United States of America in 1979 or 'The Great Recession', spanning from 2007 to 2009. Even in present times we can learn from products that were created before this global pandemic and learn from either their continued success or their steady decline due to the virus.

Another aspect of my personal design language is that I try to emphasise is the concepts' use-value and make an increased effort to ensure that it will not drag whichever company I choose to

represent into the 'unicorn-company' category. This will mean that the company is much more likely to be sustained going into the future.

Conclusion

I set out to try and decipher my personal design language and I believe that is what I have done. This essay has allowed me not only to express my current influences when it comes to design, but also has shown me new influences that have changed the way I view the design industry as well as aiding me in my chosen field.

Currently I am very enthusiastic about making sure that whatever I design has a positive impact on the user, ensuring that their mental health is one of the top priorities. I do this because, as previously stated, I suffer from mental illnesses and know how much of a difference the small things in life can make. I want to express how I cope with these afflictions through everything I design and work on. I want to create a product that allows the user to feel like they are in a sanctuary, where they can take themselves no matter how they are feeling. Granted the methods that work for me will not work for everyone, however it shows the user a different way of doing things. It's then up to them to decide what happens next.

Another subject I like to incorporate into my design is existentialism. This subject has fascinated me for years, even when I did not know that is what I was experiencing. Once I acknowledged this feeling of dread for what the future may hold for me, I was able to develop myself. It was almost I had wiped my mind and started over. It showed me things I never thought possible and enabled me to give myself a break from the high standards I was putting on myself. I want this to show in my drawings. I want the lines to be free and flow as such and for anyone who sees them, to see this newfound freedom I have gained. I also want to challenge people into thinking 'Why not?'

One subject I never thought I would enjoy looking into, was the study on capitalism and the impact it has on the design industry. It sometimes answered the question of 'why not?' and helped me to wrestle my mind back into the real world whilst still having this element of creative freedom. It added borders to my thinking, some good and some restricting, but they will always be like the stabilizers on a bicycle; there until I understand.

To end this essay I will leave you with this quote from the popular TV show 'Rick and Morty':

"When you know nothing matters, the universe is yours."

(S3.Ep9: The ABCs of Beth, Rick to Beth)

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