

# SPECULATIVE GRAPHIC DESIGN: VISUAL IDENTITY BRANDING AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

ARTICULATIONS, IDENTITIES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the powerful combination of graphic design and visual identity branding together with speculative design. Via discussion of three student projects the paper demonstrates how this combination can be used to comment on problems and current practices in western world societies. I argue that speculative scenarios often are influenced by the time and the society in which they are created. The student projects in this paper recognize the first-world issues of self-absorbency. Credibility of the speculative scenarios crafted through design is an important aspect, but without presenting the scenario as being the real thing. However, interesting execution of the graphic design branding may create liking and make the speculative scenario shared through social media and thus have an impact on society.

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine a situation where democracy no longer exist and people go to museums to understand what it once was. The students Simen Røyseland, Emilja Jaugelaite Nora Husby and Daniel Throndsen describes a possible future situation where democracy has fallen due to our indifference to voting. This condition is presented

through ‘The Democracy Museum: Memorial Museum of Western Civilisation’. Graphic design is used to demonstrate how democracy once worked, utilising the design in a playful manner. In this future museum the visitors, whom has never experienced democracy, get to experience democratic participation in all elements, for example by manipulating the museums logo. The design system is created in such way, so when a visitor in the museum pulls a letter of the logo in a big screen, placed in the lobby of the museum, the logo changes in all places it appears, both outside the museum building and in smaller graphic elements such a tickets and buttons.



Figure 1: Selected graphic elements of The Democracy Museum. These elements were originally presented as moving images. Even the logo in the button is presented as movable.

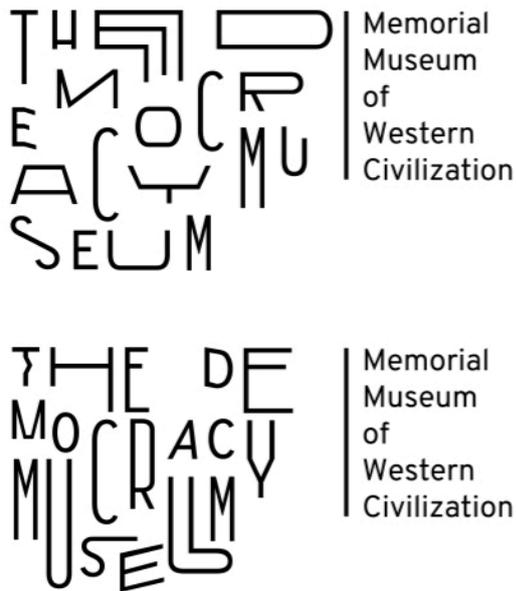


Figure 2: The logo of The Democracy Museum is a moving image that changes due to visitors playing with it.

This paper is particularly focusing on the powerful tool of visual identity branding related to speculative design and the importance of relevant problem finding based on the idea that designers are influenced by their own time and culture. The paper uses examples of three student projects of speculative graphic design to demonstrate this. I argue that clear and playful graphical visualization is important in nudging the audience to actually share the speculation via social media and thus make it possible to become part of a larger societal debate. The paper taps into some of the recent controversies and critiques of speculative design that address how speculative design tend to be design for the designers own crowd. The question is how design can become the entrance to social or political issues and how these issues can be shared with a larger audience?

#### THE POWER OF VISUAL IDENTITY BRANDING AND SPECULATIVE DESIGN ...

graphic design is rarely about itself; it's a language, a vessel in which we can fill whatever we'd like. Sometimes it's filled by clients and sometimes we fill it with ourselves, but it's always a vehicle for communication. (Fuller 2012)

Graphic design is a powerful tool of communication and can express anything from subtle underlying messages to direct and bold propaganda. It may give a voice to the people that cannot be there to speak themselves, through visual elements such as shape, colours, typography, compositions and images. Being such a powerful tool of communication, graphic design is also a responsibility and can be used as a catalyst for change. Dunne and Raby (2013) describe the term speculative design as such a catalyst, where the focus moves from problem solving for clients, to problem finding for societies.

The framework of speculative design focuses on possible, probable and preferable futures (Dunne and Raby 2013) and gives designers a tool to critique their current cultures by creating fictional scenarios and visions about society, politics, technology, and culture (Fuller 2016; Bardzell Forlizzi, Zimmermann et al. 2012; Rynning and Skjulstad 2017). When creating graphic design speculations the aim is not to fool the audience or to convince them about things they do not want to relate to, but rather to give emphasis to areas in societies that need attention in order to generate a possible change. Still, credibility of the speculation is important in order to be able to relate to it.

Graphic design and visual identity branding creates recognition of a product, a service, an organization, a company or a speculative scenario. The visual surfaces, which define the sender of the communication, spans from small tickets to huge posters, websites, clothing and graphical branding systems (Slade-Brooking 2016; Davis 2009). In addition to creating recognition, graphic design is a powerful vehicle for sharing the speculative vision both digitally and analogue, as its' products are often cheap and easy to spread. Also, graphic design is often meant to be two-dimensional, the same format in which speculative design scenarios tend to be presented and shared through social media.

Speculative design has its starting point in design disciplines other than graphic design, such as radical architecture in the sixties and seventies (Elflin 2016), and anti-design in the eighties (Papanek 1985). Further on, Dunne (2008) has examined critical design through electronic products, and Dunne and Raby (2013) continued the investigation of speculations using product design and props to create speculative artefacts. Speculative graphic design, however, is less explored. In 2014 John Sueda curated a speculative graphic design exhibition, 'All Possible Futures', in San Francisco (Sueda 2014). The Dutch designgroup Metahaven has explored future speculations using graphic design (Van Velden et al. 2010). The Design Displacement Group do future- and speculative design using playful design including graphic design (DesignDisplacementGroup, 2017). In 2015, Skjulstad and Rynning examined water sustainability through the combination of graphic design, visual identity and speculative design (Skjulstad and Rynning 2015).

#### DESIGNING CREDIBILITY

Creating a trustworthy speculation is important in order to make the audience relate to the often incredible scenarios of speculative design and to believe that the incident may actually happen in a possible future.

Auger (2013) has created a set of perceptual bridges that designers can use when designing speculations in order to make the fictional scenarios credible to the audience and bridge the speculations to their own worlds. The perceptual bridges, drawing on Auger, relating to the student projects in this paper are: *Familiarity*; The

concept must be grounded in familiar or logical reality. Too absurd visions will be rejected as ‘fairytales’. *The uncanny*; Creating a desirable discomfort and provoke. Auger (2013) suggests that too familiar scenarios may pass unnoticed, but on the other hand, too provoking speculations may create revulsion or chock. *Alternative presents*; Counterfactual and alternative histories. The audience needs to understand the logic behind the, often strange, visual stories presented (Auger 2013).

Timeliness and relevance to the target group is also important in order for people to relate to the speculation. For example, when the news tell us about political changes going on in the world and how fewer people actually are using their right to vote, the audience is more prepared to relate to the speculative scenario of a possible new government beyond democracy.

### CASE DESCRIPTION AND METHODS

A course of visual identity and speculative design was run with the second year of graphic design Bachelor students in a college university of northern Europe, over a period of five weeks in the spring of 2017. There were 31 students working in groups of three people participating in the course. The brief asked the students to develop a speculative concept based on the question ‘what if’, focusing on social, cultural or ethically difficult issues. Issues that do not have an easy answer, but still need attention in order to possibly create a change. The speculations were to be expressed through graphic design and visual identity branding. Three examples of the students’ speculative graphic design projects are presented in this paper. The first student project, The Design Museum, described in the introduction, relates to Augers (2013) perceptual bridge; *Alternative presents*, as it suggest another future than we expect and hope for.

The other two projects are described below.

#### FEEL, THE TRUE FEELING SOCIAL NETWORK

Feel, designed by Oda Ramsdal, Sebastian Taraldsen and Nicolay Wesseltoft, focused on the apparently fake perfection we are exposed to via Facebook. A further development of todays social media named Feel was created based on real feelings instead of too perfect or fake statuses that may make the ‘friends’ and viewers feel inferior. The real feelings are measured through a watch on the arm of the participants and forwarded as live updates to the social media channel, Feel. Surveillance of the whole life of the account owner may be the flip-side of Feel. The speculation relates to Augers perceptual bridge; *Familiarities*. We are used to personal measuring of pulse, sleep and calories burned via for instance Apple watch, and manage to relate to the possibility of other things such as actual feeling also being measured. This speculation is presented by a visual identity branding system where feelings are represented through colours. The logo colour change

based on the feelings of the owner of the Feel account. When a person writes posts on Feel, the colour of the persons true feeling appear as a background when writing comments and as a coloured circle around images. The visual identity changes in interaction with the users feelings measured by the watch.

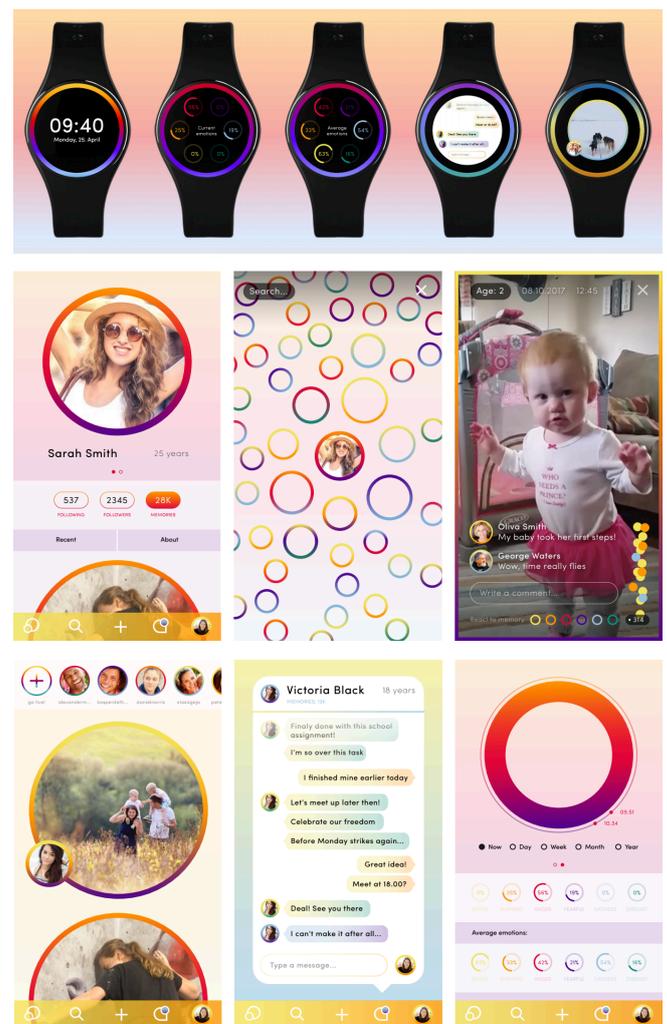


Figure 3: Elements of the ‘Feel, The true feelings social network’. The circular logos colour is continually changing depending on the feelings of the account owner. From top: Variations of the changing logo, the feelings of each colour in the branding. The functions of the watch and some examples of how the app works.

## GENELÉN, HIGH FASHION DESIGNER BABIES

The visual identity branding of the fictive company Genelén, designed by Benedicte Ingebrigtsen, Martin Lie Bø and Mathilde Sjulstad is commenting on the western world's focus on having and creating perfect children, that are both intelligent, content and pretty. The students designed the visual identity branding for a company that offer designer kids drawing on the visual style of high fashion designer brands. The customer orders his child based on his or her needs, for example, a child with the desired intelligence and look. The child-designer puts his own uniqueness on the product. The most apparent uniqueness of the brand presented here are the subtle differences of eye-colours. The logo is classical and simple like logos of high fashion brands. The visual identity branding also consists of a distinct pattern presented as an exclusive bracelet that only the costumers could wear. The Genelén speculation relates to Augers speculative bridge; *The uncanny*, as it creates a desirable discomfort.

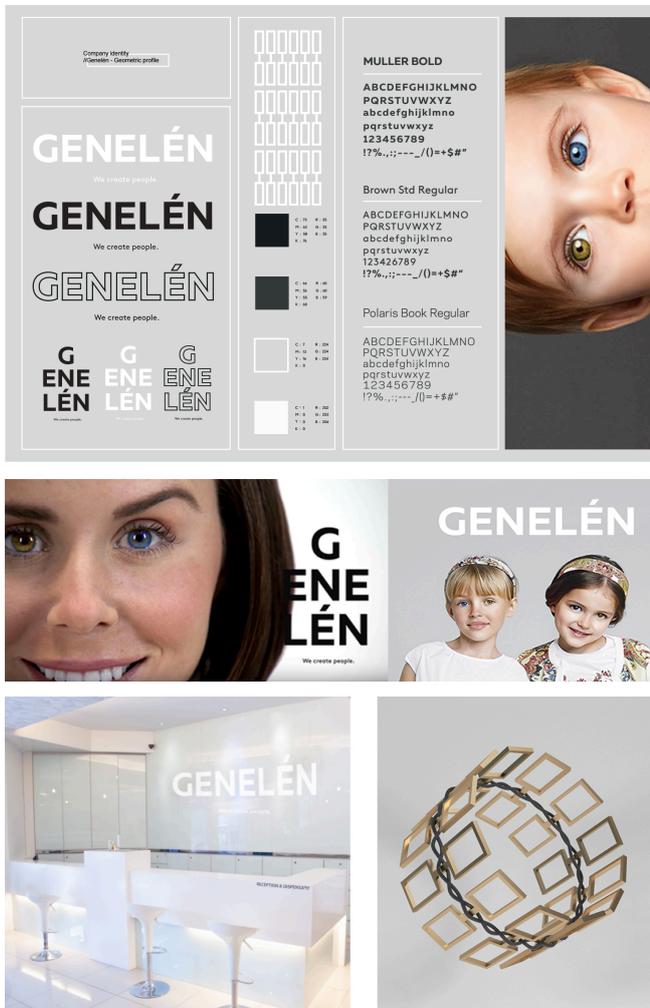


Figure 4: The basic graphical elements of the Genelén high fashion designer babies. From top: The most important branding elements of the visual identity, examples of products; the designer kids, the reception of the company, the bracelet only used by the costumers of Genelén.

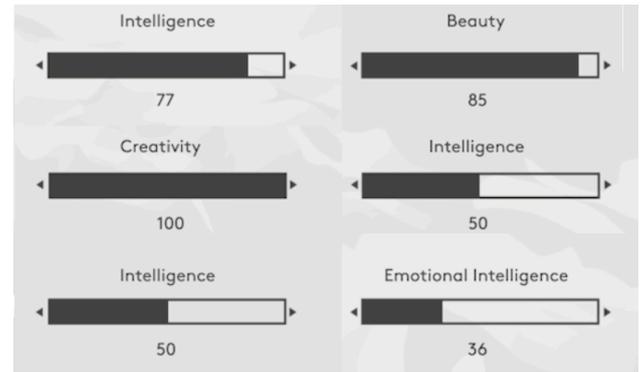


Figure 5: Examples of two different profiles of designer kids ordered by parents to be. Higher percentages of characteristics and abilities are more costly.

## DISCUSSION

The most important critiques of speculative design argues that speculative design rarely find it's way out of galleries and conferences in order to actually reach out to a greater audience (Prado and Oliveira 2014 and 2015; Laranjo 2015; Tonkinwize 2015). Prado and Oliveira (2014) suggest that this field only deals with first-world issues where the fear of loosing present privileges, happily unaware of realities in other parts of the world, is presented to the designer's own crowd of people. In this paper, however, this criticism has been addressed by how student projects reckon the increasing self-absorbency in our culture (Twenge and Campbell 2009; Twenge 2010), a theme that to a large degree has eluded speculative design so far. More specifically, three different ways of using speculative design and visual identity were used to illuminate this topic. The visions of fictions and possible futures are most likely to be expressed through the influence of the present time and context in which they are created. For instance when the visions of Utopia was presented as an ideal island society in 1516, all habitants in this possible and preferable utopian society were equal and everything was shared, but still they had slaves, as was common in the time the vision was created (More 1516). Similarly, graphic design speculations about possible futures have the basis in the presence in which the designers live, both time-wise and culture-wise.

The project 'The Democracy museum' is commenting on the situation in the western world, where fewer inhabitants of democracies are using their right to vote or vote for systems that do not necessarily bring the society and the democracy any further (Brennan 2016). Ignorance based on misinformation and indifference is widely apparent in today's democracies (Somin 2013). Political confusion and unawareness may lead to people focusing on themselves instead of on the society's needs. As Auger's (2013) perceptual bridge; *Alternative presents*, suggests, this is another future than we expected and hoped for in the western world, focusing on the fear of loosing first-world privileges (Prado and

Oliveira 2014). Visual identity branding is applied in the speculative project, focusing on the problem of political confusion that leads to the demolition of democracy, without making the bleak situation terrifying. Probably we still manage to relate to it because graphic design branding is a powerful, but more indirect and sometimes also a more playful approach of conveying a challenging message, than for instance a textual description of the situation. The enjoying of the design execution may be a reason in itself for the audience to engage in the speculative scenario and possibly also in the issue the design speculation is discussing. Appreciating the design in itself may lead to sharing the design in social media, and thus also sharing of the message of the speculation. Speculative graphic design visual identity may be easier to share digitally through social media than speculative artefact design, which is more widespread, because graphic design was meant to be presented two-dimensionally in the first place.

The visual identity branding of the fictional social media channel *Feel*, goes right into one of the issues in the western world today; Our self-centred focus on how we appear on social media and how easy we fake our happiness. Through the imaginative social media channel, *Feel*, we get the real feelings, live sharing and surveillance of our lives brought to us through graphic design and visual identity in a fun and colourful manner. We may relate to the speculation because of the visual playfulness that possibly makes it less frightening to share our true feelings. Again, relating to the design may make us relate to the difficult issue the design represents. The diversity of digital presentations in this project and the fact that it was designed for the type of social media platform where it potentially is shared may get a larger audience to relate to it. Auger's (2013) perceptual bridge; *Familiarities*, applies to this speculation as some people may recognize the fake perfectness of Facebook. The possibility of being truly honest in social media is a typical first-world issue, focusing in our self-centredness, without even noticing larger problems in other parts of the world or around us in our own societies (Prado and Oliveira 2014).

The fictive company 'Genelèn' creates designer-children and emphasize the situation were people of the western world can control if, when, how and what kind of babies they want through birth-control and donors. The children are becoming an accessory for the self-absorbed parent. Visual identity branding is an effective tool to illustrate the ethics of this issue, as the visual images are powerful without being moralising. Auger's (2013) perceptual bridge; *the Uncanny*, creates this desirable discomfort. The project illustrates the possibility of where our current situation may lead us by using graphic design illustrating an imaginable commercialization of the 'baby-business'. My assumption is

that we, as designers and inhabitants of a privileged western society, want to relate to interesting or playful design but not always to social or political problems. In this way design becomes an entrance into demanding issues. Pinpointing the self-absorbency of our western society through speculative scenarios may become a first step on the road to open our eyes and start caring about a larger society.

The speculative design framework may scaffold graphic designers with a powerful tool and a method of using their design skill as a possible catalyst for change. However, in order to be part of a larger public discussion, the design in itself does not do the job. The designs must be seen, and the meaning understood in order for it to have any influence. The graphic design speculation starts its journey as an object for discussion when shared through social media. The students' projects are often made public when the students post their projects in their own websites, their personal profile on Behance, Instagram and when reposted over time on Pinterest, blogs and websites where the speculations continue their life creating debate. The sharing of speculative design through social media is an area for further investigations and development.

## CONCLUSION

By exploring three student projects I have described the powerful combination of graphic visual identity branding together with speculative design and how this combination can be used to address demanding societal issues, mostly in the western world. The student projects focus on the self-absorption in western societies, a theme that has eluded speculative design so far. Creating credibility is an important aspect of speculative design and the perceptual bridges of Auger (2013) are the basis for making the speculations convincing. Timeliness and societal context of the issues addressed are also important in order to create credibility and debate. The execution of the speculative graphic design project may make the speculative scenario shared through social media if posted and shared via graphic design forums, social media networks, websites and blogs. In this way graphic design becomes a powerful entrance into conveying societal, political and ethically demanding issues as we, as designers and people in the western world, may more easily relate to design than to difficulties without a given solution. Design has the power to convey problematic messages in a more indirect and playful way.

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