The gravity of soul

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Abstract

In the proposed design tradition, ensoulment is portrayed as the best possible outcome for any design space. It is, however, quite hard to visualize a soul and everything it entails in a concise and effective manner. In this essay, I present a suggestion for a mental model to inform a schema that can be used, inspired by the way the scientific tradition would infer data from phenomena that is not directly observable, where the positive design features are assigned a justifiable mass in order to understand and visualize why some designs and activities has more influence on the attention of the user than does another.

Introduction

In the *"New theoretical approaches for human-computer interaction"* (2004), Rogers lists and explains a number of frameworks for design practice, and points out that most designers, despite having knowledge about these frameworks, opts out of using them because of their high complexity. In *"The Nature of Design Practice and Implications for Interaction Design Research"* (2008), Stolterman explains that the complexity of design practice can't be properly compared to that of the scientific model, and argues that interaction design researchers needs to develop their own models to facilitate understanding in the field. However, I'm not certain that has to mean that we can't be inspired by science while trying to facilitate said understanding.

Arriving at the soul

According to Nelson and Stolterman, *"Soul is an animating essence, an essential quality of a holistic, architectonic design"*[*]. This alone is not nearly enough for the uninitiated to achieve a working understanding of the concept, however, and the difficulty of understanding in itself is something I would name a meta-problem. As is reasonable to expect from any modern university student, we have spent a lifetime learning how to gauge difficulties in how hard it is to logically explain and understand it from a scientific and rational point of view. This makes the subject of my essay intrinsically contradictory - to understand and explain something, the scientific tradition of inquiry dictates that you reduce the subject to its components and examine them separately, but the concept of a soul, or the act of infusing something with one,

is in essence done by creating something that transcends the sum of it's individual parts. In the quote *"… but if it is not a unified whole it will lack the valence for the habitation of soul"* (Nelson & Stolterman, p.196) we can scry that reduction is the antithesis of ensoulment. How, then, can we by way of science find a method to observe and understand the soul of a design, if applying traditional scientific inquiry would "evict" it?

"The most careful scientist, using accurate instruments calibrated to the closest tolerances, cannot observe or quantify that which proceeds from the human imagination …" (Nelson & Stolterman, p.127). The authors, as shown in the previous quote, are trying their hardest to facilitate the separation of the design tradition from that of science and art, and while I believe their goal to be commendable, I am still of the opinion that we can gain understanding by borrowing methods and metaphors from the realm of science. In fact, so are they: *"Science cannot provide insight into what should be brought into existence, through intention, imagination, and innovation. It can only confirm potentiality and assist realization."* (p.28), although I would argue that confirming potentiality is a way of providing inspiration as long as the designer makes sure to not let it become a limitation. In the case of subjects that cannot be directly scrutinized, the scientific traditions has acquired a wealth of experience by studying physical phenomena that for various reasons are not visible to the human eye. The first example that springs to mind is that of the gravitational singularities familiarly known as "black holes". Supermassive, not even light can escape their event horizon, and as the reflection of light is what makes us see things, we can't actually see a black hole. Instead, we are forced to make justified assumptions about it's properties by observing its effects on proximate celestial bodies, or simply put - its gravitational force. If we translate this idea to the subject at hand, we should be able to see that soulful objects and activities have a higher gravitational pull upon our attention than does objects and activities without soul. This brings me back to the first paragraph in this essay - are the extracurricular activities I'm performing more "soulful" than the activities I'm subjected to in academia and work life, and are they as such exerting a greater force on my attention?

At this point, I feel like a clarification is in order. Soulful, the adjective describing an object or an activity in possession of a soul, seems to be rather digital in nature. Up until now, I have been using the term as if it was analog; i.e. as if there was varying levels of soulfulness, while Nelson and Stolterman implies that there isn't: *"Sometimes, in situations like this, we get the*

feeling that such a design could not have been different. We might even feel that it is nearly a perfect design." (p.192). While I understand that the original definition of a design with soul is one that is almost transcendental in nature from it's profound effect on our lives and perceptions, I still feel that the nearly unreachable quality could be placed as a theoretical endgame of a non-linear curve, with the intention of comparing it (the ideal ultimate particular of the given design space, the unknown perfection that-could-be) to designs that currently have no soul, depending on how far away they are perceived to be from attaining one. This means that while a design either has a soul or doesn't, there could still be something to measure in between - its gravitational force. I also like to imagine that the gravity of the theoretical soul, derived from its immeasurable mass, would be acting to pull lesser designs "closer" to itself, and in turn, closer to other designs caught in the dream of attaining a soul. While I believe it to be unlikely that iterating on a design from this perspective would ever fully grant it the rare and elusive soul that we so desire, the mental model could help identify desirable traits from high gravity activities and designs in order to judge and understand their "attention mass" in comparison to other, less impactful traits - all while keeping the idea of the soul as the ideal in the center of attention as a constant reminder of the mythical opportunities looming beyond the horizon.

"Quality is not robust enough as a scale of measurement against which to judge "good" design." (Nelson & Stolterman, p.192). Note that what I am suggesting is not a scale of quality but a mental model of design gravity. If only positive aspects of a design are considered to contribute to its gravity, it should be easy to find contributions to the design wisdom even in what would be considered evil designs or designs of poor overall quality. From the wide array of opinions present in the world it would probably be impossible to reach a conciliation regarding the exact mass that should be granted to a specific feature, but my intention for the mental model is not to be a comprehensive scientific tool as much as a way for a designer to use the gravity of the soul on a personal level to visualize and inspire good design. Ultimately, it will be the responsibility of the designer to make worthwhile judgments specific to their current design space when they assign mass to a specific design feature. If we also consider the fact that the model isn't intended to explicitly deal with weaknesses, there is also a bigger focus on design possibilities than problem solving, something that is in line with the suggested process of finding what-is-not-yet.

Schema

"Architecture, organizational design, curriculum design, urban planning, information systems design, industrial design, and social systems design all require designers that are able through interpretation to conceptualize and give form to their ideas in a way that makes them communicable and comprehensible to everybody involved in the design process." (Nelson & Stolterman, p.128).

To give shape and weight to the idea, I have taken my thoughts about the mental model of gravity and put them into a visual image, or a schema. The correct way to develop schemas is in an iterative fashion, to evaluate the design situation through the schema in order to understand what relationships form the driving force of the proposal, in order to be able to improve both the schema and the design. After a few back-and-forths, this is what I found:
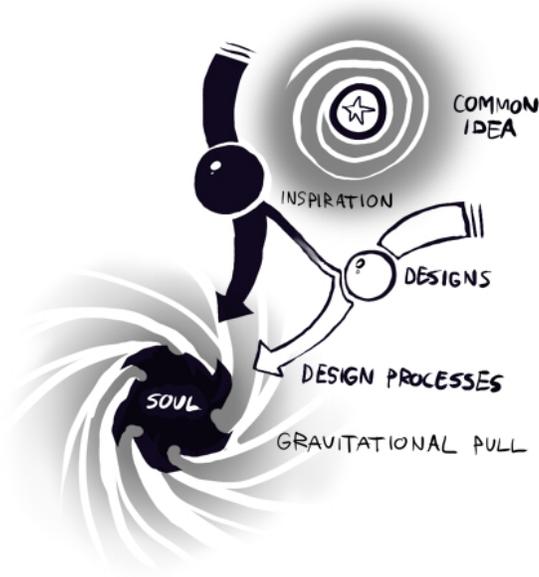

Figure 1: The gravity of soul schema.

In this schema, I have tried to illustrate the idea of design processes as paths in a design space, along which the designs move across time. Since I have concluded that the concept of a soul is what every design process is reaching for, I have assigned it the largest attention mass. As a result of this, every design process is inevitably heading in the general direction of the soul.

The soul is not the only thing exerting force on its surroundings, however - different designs also have attention mass, as does everything else present in the design space, such as theories and ideas. In Figure 1, we can see two designs following the paths of their separate design processes moving in the direction of the soul, but we can also see how their trajectories are changed by the local gravity well of a common idea, lessening the distance between the design processes, and maybe even putting them close enough to each other to give cause to direct cross-design inspiration.

However, since arriving at an actual black hole would for all intents and purposes annihilate the design, this is sadly where the metaphor ends. Luckily, reaching the soul isn't strictly important for the purpose of this schema, which is to illustrate a healthy impetus for any design process: utilizing the dream of a soul.

Conclusion

The soul is something that inspires a true design situation with the dream of a holistic purity. Gravity is something very natural, something that we all learn to understand at an early age. The notion that everything exerts an attraction equal to its mass is present both in the physical universe and metaphysical philosophy and seems to me a potent way of visualizing and extracting the truth of why one particular design might capture attention in such a way that even the sense of time is diluted while another one utterly fails to immerse the beholder and subsequently is discarded or forgotten. The idea of gravity is also a systemic concept, something that lends itself very well to describe the relations between objects in a given context.

The result of my work is a schema that adds one to the other in a hope of helping others (and myself) visualize positive movement in a design space.

References

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Nelson, H. & Stolterman, E. (2012). *The Design Way: Intentional Change in an Unpredictable World.* Mit Press, 2012.