

Louis Rawlins is a person in this world. He lives in San Francisco and began working in design 25 years ago. He was once a typesetter for a small print shop. For the past 15 years, he's designed and built software. But he misses the smell of the ink and oil on the presses in the back of the print shop; the stories printers told him while they mixed ink to run the press; the sense of achievement when a printer handed him the finished letterpress invitation he designed; the tactile feeling of ink embossed and registered exactly against a foil-stamped embellishment. Today, Louis delivers abstract outcomes like scope, strategy and mission so the people on his team can deliver the right thing, on time. He studies the world around him and wonders where we'll land; what the future may hold for all of us, human and non-human, living on this earth.

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The downward spiral: designing waterslides for our collective future

Louis Rawlins

Abstract

Emergent design, design exploration. Roadways connecting cities, circuits connecting coffee pots. Each path leads us somewhere and each of these paths were planned, though what each path produces may not have been intended (traffic congestion, anxious coworkers).

This paper is a brief glimpse into un-sustainability. What happens when we de-future our own future. The metaverse, magazines and the stories we tell ourselves about post-scarcity shape how we walk, or sleepwalk, through life.

The intent is for this paper to be lived rather than read. A text to be considered, felt and moved with rather than understood, collected and archived. An invitation to move and be moved by our world.

Keyword:

hope, abundance, hierarchy, rentism, future, design

Introduction:

The world is changing. As it always has been. Design as a discipline historically addresses the built environment. From the roadways that connect our cities, to the circuitry that powers our coffee pots, to the software I use to write this article, thought and reflection have gone

into planning and producing each of these things. I'm using this broad sense to talk about design, though my discipline in life has largely been focused on typography, usability and systems design. This paper looks at at the world from the lens of un-sustainability. What happens when we de-future our own future. When we grasp for what might be next, we find ourselves...¹

Looking back at some dead world / That looks so new Offices and fountains / That they named for you Dazzlements of accidents / Rejoice their doom Harikaris spinning' round the golden looms Girl you dream infections / From a nauseous heart Choice cut meats from derelict boulevards - Beck, "Diamond Bollocks" (1998)

The words bring to mind the on-going change that I witness in Emeryville, California. A little-talked-about section of the San Francisco Bay Area, Emeryville: sits adjacent to Oakland and Berkeley; looks across the bay to San Francisco; generally has been known at the end of the Amtrak line for folks taking the train from here to Chicago.²

When I arrived in 2004, Emeryville looked and felt like every Midwestern, post-industrial town I'd visited as a young person. Soot and warehouses. Potholes and broken-down cars. Gradually, it earned an office park, a live-work section, an open-air shopping mall

Defuturing, Tony Fry

² My partner also reminds me that Emeryville was the first city in Northern California to get an IKEA, as a gauge. IKEA is finally here! First Northern California store opens in Emeryville. (2016, February 19). California Digital Newspaper 2022, Collection. Retrieved October 16, from https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=VEST20000415.2.5&e=----en--20--1--txt-txIN-------1

with a movie theatre and a brunch spot smack in the middle of the potholes, warehouses and broken-down cars. In the past thirty years, I've seen this repeated close to a dozen times in different cities. Calling it gentrification simplifies a personal, lived happening for people just wanting to survive.

It's difficult to call to mind words to describe it because in America, we've come to accept that we live in a world in decline. I live in San Francisco where we currently seem comfortable with overflowing trash cans. When I waited for the bus with my partner recently, someone was searching for treasures inside the trash can while two young people wearing leather shoes and designer jackets costing hundreds of dollars passed by, laughing and strolling casually. The American Dream, the one where we sold ourselves material advancement at the ignorance of the pain and suffering of others—our own Olemas where we could choose to walk away—is now the rule rather than the exception in my hometown. Since I was in studying in university, people have denied me with phrases like, "It's not that bad." and "Why can't you just be happy?" to which I ask: What is good for you about the suffering of people without enough while you live with material abundance?

The aim of this paper is to be brief, but dense. We're going to look at the impact of a singular design future, one with aspects that we are living today: rentism. The term rentism is borrowed from a discussion in Peter Frase's Four Futures (which in turn borrows from a 1999 article in THE FUTURIST). It asserts that of the different post-capitalist futures—the world in which we've agreed that

³Le Guin, U. K. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Olemas" (1975) from (2000). The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction (R. V. Cassill& R. Bausch, Eds.; 6th ed.). Norton. ⁴ (Frase, 2016, #) (Costanza, 1999, #)

capitalist ways of being no longer serve humanity—rentism is one in which we have vast abundance alongside a rigid hierarchy controlling access to that abundance. Different futures can and certainly do exist simultaneously, but for the purposes of this exploration we're going to pick one. Rentism most-easily fits my lived experience as a software designer in San Francisco (an area that has become synonymous with "Silicon Valley", but was conceptually separate less than twenty years ago).

I'm going to skip the financial aspects of rentier capitalism, which are fascinating and I encourage the reader to explore. I'm also going to also ignore the fact that the terminology of "capitalism" is inadequate to capture what's happening in the world today. Rather, this paper attempts to call attention to the rigidity of academic work and scholarly writing as one of the problems currently facing the world. This paper, specifically, with its footnotes, references and attempt to collect more information about the world may be part of the problem rather than a solution. It is reflection, not action.

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⁵ We can also call it "post-scarcity" but I think that refers more to a mindset rather than a real reckoning with what the world has to offer and how we treat one another. It's fair to say that this paper asserts: there is no utopia, so let's stop trying to reach it; we always have enough available, provided we can figure out an equitable distribution of what's needed for living being on this planet; many people do not have enough and live a life filled with fear, discomfort and pain because their ability to heal is stymied by those who take (which would include me). The reasons for this inability to heal can be categorized broadly to address refugees (people pushed out of land due to war or conflict) and the chronically unhealthy (people living out-of-step with their environment and means).

⁶ See especially, Morozov, E. (2022). Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason. New Left Review, 133/134(Jan/Apr 2022) and Zacarés, J. M. (2021). Euphoria of the Rentier? New Left Review, 129(May/June 2021) for entertaining assessments of our current global economic situation.

⁷Lane, F. C. (1969). Meanings of Capitalism. The Journal of Economic History, 29(1), 5-12. Woods, E. M. (1981). The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism. New Left Review, 127(1). Fredona, R., & Reinert, S. A. (2020). Italy and the Origins of Capitalism. Business History Review, 94(Spring 2020), 5-38.

⁸ CITE / Type I and Type II problems, end of civilization

I'll borrow another of Frase's terminology and call what is written here "design science fiction." What I'm sharing is meant to open up space for emergence and exploration, rather than an assertion of answers.

Expression

As a means of emergence and exploration, I'm interested to reflect a point by Lennar J. Davis at the beginning of his book *Enforcing Normalcy*. He reminds us that "the aural/oral method of communicating, itself seen as totally natural, like all signifying practices, is not natural but based on sets of assumptions about the body, about reality, and of course about power." He goes on to elaborate that texts in the Middle Ages were meant "as scripts for performance" rather than a truth asserted in word. Over time, "as texts became more common, a switch occurred to a consciousness of textuality that was no longer to be performed."

If it helps the imagination, pretend that there is a minstrel retelling a story alongside a person playing the recorder for a Renaissance court performance.¹⁰ This paper is meant more of a performance to be lived than a text to be read. A text to be considered, felt and moved with rather than understood, collected and archived.

(Davis, 1995, #)

¹⁰Flute vs. Recorder – t.blog. (2019, July 14). Thomann. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from https://www.thomann.de/blog/en/flute-vs-recorder-the-ultimate-comparison/ A collection of recent examples of recorder music can help get you into the storytelling mood *Tribute to Adriana Breukink* | *Team Recorder*. (2022, October 12). YouTube. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z54FU4qGuOs

Four Futures

Rentism is about what happens when capitalism is over. Late capitalism is happening now; rentism is happening now, so let's consider it!11

In Four Futures, Frase outlines his reasons for focusing on human labor and economic production, but for this paper, I'm more interested in dealing with America, because that's where I live today. We can both acknowledge that design gets deeply entangled at a global scale and that America has an outsized influence as a global empire with "its globe-spanning network of 750-plus military bases."12

Four Futures		
	Abundance	Scarcity
Equality	communism	socialism
Hierarchy	rentism	exterminism

(Frase, 2016, p 29)

This future is going to feel familiar to people, so let's dive in.

Abundance

Limitless at our fingertips / Don't sweat it, just get it We're too cool to admit it / All we have is the internet - Sudan Archives, "Limitless" (2019)

¹¹Benanav, A. (2020). Automation and the Future of Work. Verso Books.

¹²D'Eramo, M. (n.d.).American Decline?New Left Review, 135(May/June 2022). https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii135/articles/marco-d-eramo-americandecline

When I look back at the magazines I subscribed to in the nineties—publications like Dwell, Emigre, Vogue and Harper's Bazaar (not including trade magazines like Digital Output, Computerworld and New Media)—I wonder what made me think having so much paper in my home was a good idea. The only periodical I receive in the mail today is New Left Review. It's important to me because I like to walk around and read the journal like I would a book. The journal has essays that inspire me to think differently about the world, but the bulk of what I read is online now, or in books that I've ordered online. My approach is mixed-media, to be sure.

My interface to this online world does not reflect me as a person. From LinkedIn to Instagram to Spotify, the services that have arisen in the world of online community and connection take me as a person for granted and provide me with a "feed" of information that tries to unseat me from the reason why I entered into that community. People who design these interfaces knowingly get "users" "hooked" on their products. 13 With apparently no irony in reference to the War on Drugs from the 1980s, companies proudly assert with measures and metrics how well they are able to capture revenue from advertising to their hooked users.

When I open my browser to LinkedIn so I can respond to a message, what is on my screen tries to get me to follow the "feed" of a colleague before I remember that I wanted to respond to a message. On Instagram, it hails me to view yet another "feed" as I try in vain

¹³Hoover, R., &Eyal, N. (2014). Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products (R. Hoover, Ed.). Penguin Publishing Group. See also thinking on more-than-human centered design in Inamura, T. (n.d.). Design Praxis with the Kingfisher and Bacteria; The River as Place for Post Human-Centered Design learning. Design for All Institute of India, 17(No 6 – June 2022), 65 - 78. http://designforall.in

to hide it so I might respond to a one-on-one message within the app. In *Transmetropolitan* by Darick Robertson and Warren Ellis this noise and need to capture attention from everyone everywhere all the time is the norm now. The always-on feed seems to correspond with the quiet desperation for connection felt on the streets of San Francisco. Men with vibrant lime-green mohawks seat themselves for a meal in a Japanese restaurant while a woman passes with wooly bouffant hairdo framed by racing goggles. *Transmetropolitan* may have seemed pastiche when it was published in the nineties, but today its simply a historical document that accurately reflects what I saw during a recent meal. Life imitates art, imitates life, imitates a deep seated need to be noticed. What gets taken away in the extraction by online worlds can't be given back again in the real world by posturing and flamboyancy. But that doesn't stop people from trying.

Hierarchy

The metaverse, currently being assembled by men who are mostly white and mostly wealthy, aims to give people a way out, a way to live big dreams in limitless space.¹⁴ This metaverse purports to allow people to avoid the horrors of this, real, physical life. The selling point seems to be that we can avoid living in the here and now in favor of a virtualized representation of ourselves.¹⁵ Put on a pair of

¹⁴Zenou, T. (2022, June 30). *Neal Stephenson's 'Snow Crash' predicted metaverse and hyperinflation*. The Washington Post. Retrieved October 6, 2022, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/06/30/snow-crash-neal-stephenson-metaverse/Apparently Second Life and IMVU didn't have enough pizzaz for people.

¹⁵Žižek, S., &Iek, S. (2002). Welcome to the desert of the real! : five essays on September 11 and related dates. Verso. For one attempt to help reintegrate people to their lives through the power of virtualization, see: *Invest in*SuperBetter —

virtual reality goggles and "peace out" from the world. Neal Stephenson, the author of the book *Snow Crash* which defines the term "metaverse" claims it is "neither dystopian nor utopian" because "this is just the nature of the human condition." I'm not sure utopia or dystopia is a great destination for all of humanity, but I do know...

They're gonna try to get a rise / To unseat you They'll demagnetize / Your poles And you know they're gonna try / To delete you So now you're atomized / Unwhole You know better / Start making your apologies Stop blaming technology / Yeah Blaming technology / Whoa May you please / May you start Making your apologies / Oh Blaming technology / Yeah Blaming technology / Oh We're only human / That's what they tell us Here's what I say to them / What is your point? Is each of us an island / Or more like Finland? Here's what I say to them / Things fall apart - Andrew Bird, "Atomized" (2022)

What I'm seeing of the metaverse, both literally and figuratively, fits the phrase "there is no there there," from Getrude Stein. 16 The

Republic. (n.d.). Republic.co. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from https://republic.com/superbetter

¹⁶Werner, M. (2012, February 3). Gertrude Stein puts the "there" back in Oakland. Inside Google Books. Retrieved October 14, 2022, from http://booksearch.blogspot.com/2012/02/gertrude-stein-puts-there-back-

metaverse doesn't offer much of value. This critique is not about clinging to the past and being reluctant to engage the new, but as a desire not to spend frivolous time in the metaverse doing nothing. Working in Silicon Valley reminds me that questioning the premises of a company can be a career-ending affair, and so I've often adopted my mother's admonition that "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything." Except, it's getting more difficult by the day to understand if "nice" means supporting a reasonable, safe and healthy life for people, or if "nice" means keeping my mouth shut even though I see anxiety and depression increasing for my colleagues and I worry about their ability to rest because they are constantly scrutinized about their ability to deliver on abstract goals like "frictionless transactions" and "delighted users."

Most software built for the internet today is built to enable a financial transactions. It may be fees from home-delivery of food, investment and money-transfer mobile applications or incremental-usage for software infrastructure like Amazon Web Services. Even software that enables a social transaction where one human interacts with a feed of image or text *content* created by humans, that software links attribution to retailers and advertisers, thus enabling a financial transaction. The context for the person using

in.html What's strange to me, is that I had a long conversation with a taxi driver heading to the airport when I was living in Oakland. He described the rolling orchards clear into the bay from where I lived at the time, at the top of a hill in East Oakland. You can feel the loss. It's clear by the climate that Oakland can sustain—as one might expect from the name—many trees. Today, however, it's unbearable hot in Oakland because the orchards and greenspaces that used to offer oxygen and capture carbon have given way to houses, roads and freeways.

17 I think of the a recent class offering at the School for Poetic Computation called Scrapism that suggesting "this class may not be for you" if you "think highly of the CEOs of most major tech companies" https://sfpc.study/sessions/fall-22/scrapism It's difficult times for the unemployed and newly laid-off worker in technology as of October, 2022.

these mobile applications is not relevant. A person can be sitting on a bus, sitting on a toilet, or laying on the sidewalk under a blanket in a cardboard box.¹⁸

This call-out of isolation is not happenstance. Rushkoff reminds that "advertisements work best on lonely individuals. So it's no coincidence that mass media tend to atomize us."¹⁹ It's become so ingrained in American culture to side-step responsibility. Sometimes this means literally walking around people laying on the sidewalk, in need of food. I do this daily. It's not hyperbole.

It's difficult to remain compassionate in the face of overwhelming inequities. In San Francisco, feces and urine can be found on the sidewalks from humans as regularly as from dogs walked by their owners. The orange cap from hypodermic needles litters bus stops and "rough" areas in the city as a reminder that some people feel obligated to self-medicate, outdoors, to make it all tolerable.

At times, this can make the what's happening in San Francisco feel distant as a shared problem requiring us to come together.

Rushkoff continues, that "even in the richest countries, most people are so atomized, materially insecure, and alienated from their collective capacities that their horizons are stunted. If full automation can appear as both a dream and a nightmare, that is

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¹⁸ Yes, I've seen plenty of people with mobile phones who live on the street. I understand from some that this may be their only lifeline to call people, but I doubt it, as I've seen a fair number of digitally literate unhoused people using computers at the library. I likewise doubt people living rough on the street would be using their phones to check Instagram, but honestly, I've never asked.

¹⁹ (Rushkoff, 2016, pp. 18 - 21)

because it has no innate association with human dignity, and because it will not generate a post-scarcity world by itself."²⁰

An oft-used quote from James Baldwin reminds us that, "not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." We need to do some work here.

Conclusion

The news today, during October of 2022, speaks of climate crisis, an impending nuclear war (stylized as *Cold War II* or *World War III*—take your pick), or any manner of infrastructure collapse: physical structures like bridges, governmental bodies, national economies or all at once. We, as humans, don't have a terribly good outlook for one another and yet according to the news, we still seem to find it necessary to blame *someone*. It's odd, given our present status as a global economy and the fact that we live on this singular planet Earth. Once blame is placed, it quickly cycles around the room—or globe, in this case—and lands back in the lap of the person blaming. To say that humans are less happy than other animals in the world would be an understatement. ²¹ We seem not to be able to help ourselves but to suffer. ²²

We have ways to move forward. It's not hopeless, and at the same time as I've heard people say, "Hope is not a strategy." We can—and I'd argue, must—connect to our collective capacity. Take real steps to assess what we do and do not want to get from technology, rather

²⁰(Morozov, 2022, p. 93)

We tend not to like to think of ourselves as animals, but as we've defined animals we seem to fit the category. Reluctantly. Timofeeva, O. (2018). The History of Animals: A Philosophy. Bloomsbury Academic.

²² Nuwer, R. (2022, August 26). Book Review: The Downside of Human Exceptionalism. Undark Magazine. Retrieved October 16, 2022, from https://undark.org/2022/08/26/book-review-downside-human-exceptionalism/

than accepting changes in our lives that benefit a few and then allow those few, like Andrew Carnegie before them, to assign the money they've earned from our attention philanthropically to shape how we see the world. We can do this by starting to connect with ourselves deeply, then create community where we are.

In Automation and the Future of Work, Aaron Bananav notes that protests against the growing inequities in our world "fail to rise from the level of reproduction to that of production." In this struggle people have "generally purchased the materials they use to perform these tasks within the ordinary course of the life they seek to disrupt by such actions. ... Scarcity is overcome through the free giving of goods and services, and our human capacities are correspondingly enlarged as new vistas of existential security and freedom open up." In Alone Together, Sherry Turkle, a long-time researcher and psychologist looking at the impact of technology on people, reflects on her own relationship with her daughter. 23 Newly at university overseas, Turkle talks about how much she enjoy exchanging letters with her mother when she was in university. Her daughter, speaking to her over Skype and have recently exchanged text messages with her mother can't think of much tosay if were she to write a letter by hand. Her daughter does, however, encourage her mother to give it a shot and write the letter. In many ways, this encompasses two values we need to learn as a global village. It needs to be supported and encouraged for people to interact in the way they wish, when they wish it. Being required to use a telephone, write a letter, or check Facebook, all creates differing levels of boundaries for people. Ultimately, it's the human connection that matters. On the flip side,

²³Turkle, S. (2017). Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other. Basic Books.

we need to be comfortable with letting it go. If a group of people wants to spend their lives in the metaverse, connecting themselves to tubes of Soylent so they can most-closely resemble the power-generating pods in *The Matrix* series of films, then we need to find peace with that. Struggle over where we all land, especially for something as frivolous as how we dream about our lives, is not time well spent. Rather, we can spend time dreaming about how we *live* our lives. Putting action and physical intent behind the changes we want to see.

My Grandmother's Hands, a book primarily written to address racialized trauma in the United States, helps show a way forward.²⁴ It outlines a difficult topic: the idea that our bodies have an outsized influence over how we perceive the world. For example, if a person working on the police force is continually trained to kill and frequently put into high-stress situations, the odds of that person may harm another person unintentionally raises with each day that trauma goes unresolved.

Resolving trauma is an on-going and highly personal process. Sometimes it takes a person a lifetime to gain awareness that they've been harmed. Other times, it takes a major shift in culture for there to be awareness of what may be categorized as harm. Post-traumatic stress was initially identified as "shell shock" after World War I, studied extensively before it fell out of fashion and has now come back into view as a state that can benefit from healing, much as a cut on your finger or a broken leg.

²⁴Menakem, R. (2017). My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies. Central Recovery Press.

The author of *My Grandmother's Hands* and many more humans are beginning to come together to question our ability to heal collectively. The premise is that if we spend time to notice and *discern* for ourselves what happens in our bodies, we start to gain awareness of what happens in the bodies of the people around us. Likely, you've seen someone crying and felt compelled to cry. Or seen someone in pain and felt pain.

Similarly, when people are upset, angry or scared, it can have an impact on the people nearby. This work is creating opportunities to learn how we show up for one another. While it is largely coming from the Black community in America, from my perspective, the benefits are worldwide and it's worth noticing. It's going to take time and Generations.

If there is any fear that we might lack the will to participate in a world in which we no longer struggle, Bananav closes with this reflection:

What will people do with their expanded free time? Postscarcity has been called "post-work," but such framing in inadequate. After a period of rest and recovery, even the most work-weary people become restless and look for something to do. The reorganization of social life to reduce the role of necessary labor is not, therefore, about overcoming work as such; it is about freeing people to pursue activities that cannot be described simply either as work or leisure. That might include painting murals, learning languages, building waterslides—or discovering new ways to do common tasks to make them less time-consuming. It could mean writing novels, or self-reinvention through education or exploration. As automation theorists of both right and left envisage, the end of scarcity would enable people to enter voluntary associations with others from all over the globe: to join consortia of mathematical researchers, clubs for inventing new musical instruments, or federations for building spaceships. For most people, this would be the first time in their lives that they could enter truly voluntary agreements—without the gun to their heads of a pervasive material insecurity.

This is within our grasp as humans because, quite simply, we do these things all the time. The last time you opened a car door for someone, you showed compassion for someone's need. Perhaps you washed dishes at someone's house after a gathering, or a partner offered to clear the table after a meal.²⁵ We—the humans reading this, living among our fellow humans every day—have the capacity to recognize the way that we support and uplift one another. It's in our hands. In the scheme of thing, all we have is time.²⁶

One way that can be explored is simply by understanding where you fit in the world. I've lived with prilevege for as long as I can remember, but I've also felt the squeeze of poverty and the fear that comes with being near death more than once due to my health. It's a strange world we live in, and it's worth taking the time to let your

²⁵Graeber, D. (2021). Debt: The First 5,000 Years, Updated and Expanded. Melville House.

²⁶BayoAkomolafe: The Times are Urgent, Let Us Slow Down. (2019, September 2). YouTube. Retrieved October 14, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qWaWGHNvy0

body swing—Swing your belly baby / Move your body buddy—let the rhythms of life that abound move you.²⁷

²⁷ José González - Swing (Official Music Video). (2021, August 18). YouTube. Retrieved October 16, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bw2XHzmo_3g

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