

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

COUNTER-RHETORICAL DESIGN: USING POLITICAL RHETORIC AS A DESIGN FRAMEWORK.

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DOI: 10.63442/QXQR7327

KEYWORDS | SPECULATIVE DESIGN, COUNTER-RHETORICAL DESIGN, MONETARY AND ECONOMIC VISIONS, COUNTERFACTUALS, SPECULATIVE AND CRITICAL DESIGN

ABSTRACT | Rhetorical discourse within the political sphere appears evermore meaningless and impotent to the complex challenges within contemporary society. This is partly due to the influence of social media, changing the dynamic of communication, and the limitations of traditional rhetorical devices to persuade and communicate new or original ideas. Through this research, we explore how speculative and critical design methods might be utilised within political discourse to communicate the unfamiliar by co-opting the familiar rhetoric from the past or present. We term this approach counter-rhetorical design, a subgroup of speculative design that utilises past failed rhetorical arguments as a framework to propose implementable solutions based on the original objectives represented by the rhetorical device. The results from this research project consist of two case studies created using the counter-rhetorical design approach. It concludes with an outline of future opportunities and further research which might enable new modes of political persuasion, or methods to bring specificity and content to the future political discourse.

1. Introduction

Traditional rhetoric in the political arena appears increasingly meaningless and ineffective in addressing the wicked problems that confront us globally. This aligns with the declining public trust in politicians, which Ipsos (2023) reports is at its lowest in four decades.

This paper proposes that social media's instant, omnipresent, and diverse feedback loops have negatively impacted how the public perceives political rhetoric. Digital media, as pointed out by Flanagin & Metzger (2017), makes it difficult for people to assess the credibility of the available sources due to their sheer number and the challenges of verifying their authors' intentions and expertise, reflecting a public credibility erosion in political speech. Moreover, Coe's (2015) concept of narrowcasting, where social media enables the possibility to target specific political messages to specific groups, not only alters the delivery of political messages but also fosters political division and scepticism towards political statements outside one's social media echo chamber. Despite its long-standing role in political engagement since ancient Greece, political rhetoric must be reconsidered and updated to suit our intricately connected modern society.

This paper aims to show how contemporary challenges associated with political rhetoric might be addressed by utilising speculative design methods and tools, thereby facilitating the development of concrete and impactful political propositions. Here, we introduce the concept of Counter-rhetorical design. This approach borrows from speculative design methods and uses counterfactual conditionals—hypothetical scenarios describing situations and their outcomes—to show what would have happened under different circumstances.

The counter-rhetorical design aims to unveil the fallacies within political rhetoric about ineffective, deceptive, or manipulative ideas, typically propagated by those in positions of power or influence, political figures, or movements, or by advertisements or campaigns. Borrowing from James Augers' notion of 'alternative presents' (Božanić, S., & Bertalanič, P. 2019), it seeks to envision how the world might look if these ideas had come to fruition. Counter-rhetorical design is not a futuring device but a fictional present generator. It challenges historical political rhetoric by illustrating its unfulfilled promises through speculative 'present-day' scenarios.

This paper presents two counter-rhetorical design project case studies: 'Trickle-Down' and 'Level Up.' Trickle-Down revisits the 1980s, proposing a new function of money that makes income tax redundant by directly redistributing wealth between people's banks or saving accounts. This system and its associated devices reflect the principles of classical liberalism and free-market capitalism advocated by Friedrich Hayek and popularised by the rhetoric of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Conversely, the 'Level Up' project introduces a variable geographical tax rate for a new central bank digital currency (CBDC pound), based on the 'Levelling Up' rhetoric used by Boris Johnson's government to gain power in the 2019 general election.

In summary, this study's practical design work and methodologies highlight the significance of critical thinking and design in lending tangibility and specificity to political discourse. This approach offers valuable insights and tools for future political endeavours aimed at exploring and trialling new ways of engaging with politics, formulating policies, and communicating ideas.

2. Broken Rhetoric – Contextualizing the Issue

This section outlines a brief history of the classic rhetorical tool and questions its effectiveness in our social media-dominated society. When rhetoric is free of restraint or review, is it time to rethink its use to frame our political choices?

Rhetoric is a tool for persuasion that has stood the test of time. Most scholars accept that rhetoric can be traced back roughly 2500 years to the sophists in Greece in the 5th Century BCE. (LEGGETT, 2012) However, it was Aristotle who helped formalise rhetoric.

“...these three means of effecting persuasion. The man who is to be in command of them must, it is clear, be able (1) to reason logically, (2) to understand human character and goodness in their various forms, and (3) to understand the emotions—that is, to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited.” (Welldon, 1886, p.12)

According to Herrick (2017), opinions on rhetoric have been divided since its foundations. Philosophers such as John Locke, who qualified it as deceptive, or Friedrich Nietzsche, who coined it as a “gentle reproof”, helped tarnish rhetoric’s image. However, Herrick explains, we are at a cultural juncture where the study of rhetoric is gaining recognition for its contribution to human communication.

Good and bad rhetorical arguments have always existed. An example of a good and influential rhetoric would be Martin Luther King's ‘I Have a Dream’. In his speech, aspects of Aristotle’s principle of rhetoric were effectively met, using a wide variety of rhetorical tools and “rely[ing] heavily on “loaded” language geared towards engaging the emotions of his audience” Washington (1993). However, demagogues also propose bad rhetorical arguments that utilise people’s desires or prejudices. This dichotomy shows how a “longstanding association with persuasion has been at the heart of the conflict over whether rhetoric is a neutral tool for bringing about agreements or an immoral activity that ends in manipulation”—Herrick (2017) p. 4.

The prevalence of good and bad actors in rhetoric might not have changed much over the centuries, but its methods of communication have. Traditional media (radio, television, or printing press) has often relied on verification and a consensus of experts to determine the truth of specific claims, often relying on journalistic standards, editorial processes, and fact-checking practices (at least in democracies). For example, the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists set guidelines for “seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues”, helping to reduce opportunities for demagogues to exploit.

With the advent of social media, all those brakes came off -the friction associated with editing a paper, commissioning a TV report, or travelling to deliver a live radio broadcast- is gone. The institutional control and self-regulating mechanisms from the media outlets and the broadcasting standards have been sidestepped, along with the expert’s analysis and viewpoints that add perspective. The way social media works conduce to “low barriers to entry and reliance on user-generated content [...] undermin[ing] the reputation mechanisms that serve to guard the quality of information of traditional media outlets” Zhurayskaya et al. (2020). Hence, facilitating and maximising the effect of unethical rhetoric practices.

In the light of social media and our highly connected society, rhetoric has exploded and arguably in doings so also become meaningless. Exemplifying this are a couple of tweets from Donald Trump’s tweets during his tenure as U.S. president, during which he sent roughly 30 tweets per day. (Coles, 2020):

I will be leaving the great Walter Reed Medical Center today at 6:30 P.M. Feeling really good! Don’t be afraid of Covid. Don’t let it dominate your life. We have developed, under the Trump Administration, some really great drugs & knowledge. I feel better than I did 20 years ago!

[7:37 PM · Oct 5, 2020](#)

We are United in our effort to defeat the Invisible China Virus, and many people say that it is Patriotic to wear a face mask when you can’t socially distance. There is nobody more Patriotic than me, your favorite President!

[8:43 PM · Jul 20, 2020](#)

Obama's wind turbines kill "13-39 million birds and bats every year!" <http://bit.ly/1jXRgk3> Save our bald eagles, symbol of our nation!

[4:38 PM · May 23, 2014](#)

In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally

[8:30 PM · Nov 27, 2016](#)

2.1 Broken Rhetoric – The Act of Countering

In the previous section, we argued that traditional political rhetoric has become ineffective in the modern digital era, where social media's influence leads to decreased public trust in political communication. In this section, we introduce the notion of counter-rhetorical design, a design tool that can be employed to increase public trust in political messages.

As political discussions shift to social media platforms, rhetoric must evolve. It must become more concise and immediate, aiming to engage a diverse audience with clear, universally comprehensible language. Social media's intrinsic characteristics demand that rhetoric be handled as a form of direct communication between individuals (Dannagal et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the essence of political rhetoric must navigate within the boundaries of what is generally deemed acceptable by the public. Most politicians aim to secure election or re-election, so their rhetorical approaches must align with the **Overton window*** (Mackinac Center for Public Policy), ensuring their messages resonate within the permissible spectrum of public discourse.

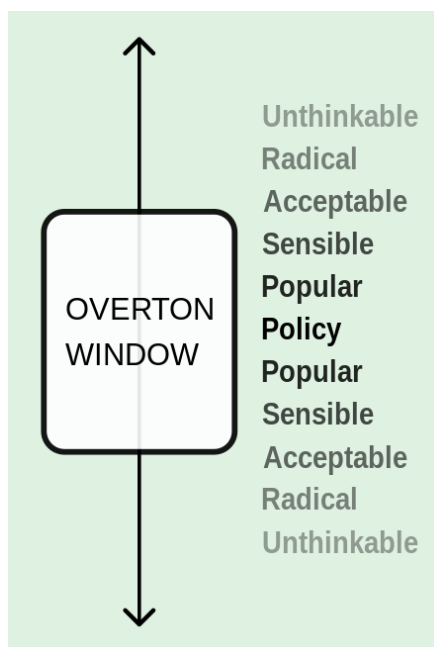


Figure 1. Diagram of Overton window, taken from Mackinac Center for Public Policy website.

In this context, it is easy to understand how political tropes become prevalent in social media political messaging. They simplify complex issues, evoke emotional responses, and reinforce ideologies or narratives. Examples of these increasingly pervading tropes in political public discussion in social media are 1980's Thatcher's retort, "You can turn if you want to, the lady is not for turning", or 1996's Blair's "Education, education, education", or 2018's Theresa May's "There is no magic money tree".

This research introduces "counter-rhetoric" design as a novel method to critically address and challenge ineffective or misleading political rhetoric. By creating and analysing fictional scenarios occurring in the "present", this approach scrutinises the underlying meanings of political tropes and their potential impacts if realised, thereby offering a fresh perspective on evaluating political discourse.

Counter-rhetoric design is linked to critical design thinking and derives from counterfactual design practice, which "offers a narrative in which an event or situation has been changed in the past and a history is developed that establishes an alternative present and depicts an alternative trajectory of socio-technical development" Malpass (2017), and the Alternative Presents speculative practice identified by Auger (2013) p. 12 where "rather than focusing on asking 'what if' of historical events and imagining the effect on here and now, it shifts the emphasis onto artefacts".

Counter-rhetoric design counters failed rhetorical devices by unpacking their original intentions and designing an appropriate system and artefacts that evidence the results of its implementation within a believable scenario.

3. Case Study 1 – Trickle-Down

Thus far, we have outlined the challenges currently affecting rhetorical discourse in contemporary society and have proposed that design can play a role by adding specificity and palpability to political communications. In this section, we outline the first case study that employs a counter-rhetorical design method, focusing on the rhetoric of Trickle-Down economics.

3.1 Trickle-Down Rhetoric

The rhetorical aspect of Trickle-Down economics has a long and varied history. This rhetoric attempts to repackage a classical economic notion into a metaphor that appeals to all. Adam Smith proposed the economic notion in question:

“[A tax] may obstruct the industry of the people and discourage them from applying to certain branches of business which might give maintenance and employment to great multitudes.”
(Smith, 1869, p 416)

This disincentivising nature of tax might be true in certain circumstances. However, Smith does not indicate as to the type of taxation. Also, the Industrial Revolution was in its infancy when Smith published his 'Wealth of Nations,' thus, the injustices faced by factory workers were not fully realised. Nor were the tensions between individual profit and taxation as a form of wealth redistribution. Only after the establishment of the wealth fair state in the 20th century did Trickle-Down economics appear in political discourse as a useful way to sell the idea of lower taxes for the higher earners to the public. During his 1981 address from the Oval Office, Ronald Raegan stated:

“Our aim is to increase our national wealth so all will have more, not just redistribute what we already have which is just a sharing of scarcity. We can begin to reward hard work and risk-taking, by forcing this Government to live within its means.” (Address to the Nation on the Economy - February 1981, n.d.)

Trickle-Down was a useful metaphor to justify how lower- or middle-income earners would benefit from low taxation of high earners. Yet the reality and impact of this policy didn't enable wealth distribution or even an increase in GDP; in their 2020 paper 'The Economic Consequences of Major Tax Cuts for the Rich,' London School of Economics senior fellow David Hope states:

“We find that major tax cuts for the rich push up income inequality... Turning our attention to economic performance... real GDP per capita and the unemployment rate are unaffected by significant reductions in taxes on the rich in both the short and medium term.” (Hope & Limberg, 2022)

In fact, the economist Heinz Arndt, in his 1983 paper ‘The Trickle-Down Myth’, suggests that the usage of the term Trickle-Down was never intended to be applied as a national redistribution tool. Arguing that the post-1945 development economists focused on inequality between countries rather than inequality within a country and assumed that an increase in gross domestic product (GDP) would broadly maintain the same wealth distributions (Arndt, 1983). In this regard, most economists do not take the notion of Trickle-Down economics as a serious economic proposal that enables wealth creation or distribution. Nevertheless, notions of Trickle-Down continue to exist within the political landscape as potent rhetoric. From Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to, more recently, Liz Truss. The notion of Trickle-Down constitutes a powerful political rhetoric but not the economic tool of wealth creation or redistribution that it was claimed to be.

Our project utilises a counter-rhetorical design approach, developing a functional object that enables the implementation of Trickle-Down rhetoric. This allows individuals to contemplate and reflect on the actual effects of applying its foundational ideas.

The project is a speculative design proposal set in 1980s Britain, where a researcher within White Hall proposes the Trickle-Down economic model and prototype devices that turn Trickle-Down from political rhetoric into a function of money.

3.2 Trickle-Down Monetary Design

Our counter-rhetorical fiction starts with Margaret Thatcher’s 1983 Conservative conference speech in Blackpool, where she states:

“One of the great debates of our time is about how much of your money should be spent by the State and how much you should keep to spend on your family. Let us never forget this fundamental truth: the State has no source of money other than money which people earn themselves. If the State wishes to spend more it can do so only by borrowing your savings or by taxing you more. It is no good thinking that someone else will pay—that “someone else” is you... there is only taxpayers' money.” (Thatcher, 1983)

Thatcher’s speech positioned the state as a taker of people's hard-earned money, but the distinction between rich and poor was not made; thus, the nuances of the arguments for wealth distribution were sidestepped with a straw man argument. However, when pushed during a 1977 interview with William Buckley, she states:

“I think in societies where there are enormous differences between very great wealth and very great poverty, I would recoil from that... there is therefore something to be said for a certain amount of redistribution.” (‘What Have We Learned from the Failure of British Socialism?’, 1977)

As Thatcher is not against redistribution, the challenge here is to enable some form of wealth distribution within a small state. The economist Friedrich Hayek, who heavily informed Thatcher’s thinking, alludes to a potential approach:

“...It is possible to bring about considerable redistribution under a system of proportional taxation. All that is necessary is to use a substantial part of the revenue to provide services which benefit mainly a particular class or to subsidise it directly.” (Hayek, 2020)

‘To subsidise it directly’ is the key suggestion that informs the idea of placing Trickle-Down into a function of money, but what is a function of money? The ‘functions of money’ are often found within foundational economic texts, used to define money by its functions: “Money as a Medium of Exchange. Money’s primary function is to facilitate trade” (Stiglitz, 2006), “a store of value is an item that people can use to transfer purchasing power from the present to the future” (Mankiw, 2012) and “a unit of account is the yardstick people use to post prices and record debts” (Mankiw, 2012).

Speculative design works have explored the idea of altering the functions of money, but rather than reducing these functions, this project explores the possibility of adding an additional function that bakes wealth distribution to its operation.

Historically, most aspects of money and its functions have evolved over thousands of years and have been largely limited to the characteristics of a given material (commodity currency like gold). Yet, within an electronic fiat currency system, the limitations associated with materials are not present, and money can be designed to incorporate new functions and characteristics. Our counter-rhetorical design proposal takes advantage of this design flexibility that electronic payment systems enable.

3.3 Crafting the Trickle-Down Devices

Thus far, we have outlined the rhetorical proposition that frames our design approach and the monetary theory that could be used to bring the rhetoric into reality. Now, we explore the generative design side of the work.

The speculative design approach used here is like the one outlined by James Auger in ‘Crafting the Speculation’. (p.12): “A design speculation requires a bridge to exist between the audience’s perception of their world and the fictional element of the concept.” Bridging the fictional elements of this work requires reference points from popular culture and technology of the early 1980’s. Hence, the industrial design aesthetic was informed by mainstream consumer electronic devices like the Panasonic KX-T1510 answering machine and the late 1970s CR1020 Receiver by Yamaha. Similarly, the technology the devices utilise is from the early 1980’s; including the magnetic strip card and reader (IBM invented). And an early version of the early dial-up system ‘USENET’ created in 1997 by Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis at Duke University (“USENET~,” n.d). These historical references act as the bridge to the fictional elements. The main Trickle-Down device represents a consumer Trickle-Down monitor that a wealthy individual would own; it works by placing a magnetic striped bank card into the slot. When activated it links to their bank account via the phone line and displays the account total and the Trickle-Down rate. The rate of Trickle-Down can be changed depending on the amount held in the account. These rates are set centrally within the government and reflect the current economic priorities of the serving government.



Figure 2. A context shot of the Trickle-Down device.

The Trickle-Down device and system also encourage the natural ‘trickle’ of money through a buffer system, like claiming expenses against taxes within a business. The card owner can spend money in the local economy, which acts as a capacitor. For instance, if £2000 were spent locally, the constant Trickle-Down rate would come from the £2000 rather than the main bank account. This would encourage people to spend in the local economy. If the money is not spent in the economy, then the money will come from the main account.

As the state is reduced, the choice of the destination of the trickle lies with the account owners. They can select lower-level accounts where they want the trickle to fall or a-sign their trickle to any of the open Trickle-Down public receivers positioned by local charities to help those most vulnerable. To bring this aspect of the work into reality, the Trickle-Down public receiver of the money sits alongside the main device. In the context of a gallery space, the audience can experience the process of receiving a small amount of money via the Trickle-Down receiver.



Figure 3. A photo of the trickle-down project displayed at MoneyLab13, organised by NeMe in Cyprus.



Figure 4. A close up of the trickle-down receiver being fed from the consumer device on the right.

During the Moneylab13 conference and exhibition held at NeMe gallery in Cyprus, the audience could play with the cards and device to get a printout (from the smaller device) stipulating how much they had received from the wealthy individual. This brought a level of interaction to the proposal.

4. Case Study 2 – Levelling Up

This section outlines the second case study that employs the counter-rhetorical design method but shifts towards a much nearer time frame. We focus on political rhetoric based on a surprisingly old term: Levelling Up.

4.1 Levelling Up Rhetoric

‘Levelling Up’ is a term that many politicians today have used to reduce complex issues to a digestible term referencing popular culture. Although it initially sounds rather new concerning political discourse, as our popular imagination recognises it as a gaming term, this belies its long history. One of the first uses on record of ‘Levelling Up’ is within a political context during the 1860s, in a debate about the Anglican and Catholic churches. During this session, a Lord applied the term in a useful interjection by stating, ‘You must arrive at equality either by levelling down or by Levelling Up’. Dr Jack Newman also notes that the phrase was used throughout the 20th century in relation to government spending, being adopted by various governments, including ‘The New Labour and the first conservative government of the 21st century. (Newman, n.d.)

Although this longstanding rhetorical term has been utilised during a plethora of different political periods, this project is focused on the 2019 general election, where Boris Johnson won an outright majority on the promise of ‘Levelling Up Britain.’

“This Government is committed to Levelling Up all parts of the United Kingdom – and getting Brexit done will enable us to give new support to people in rural and coastal communities, and for our farming and fishing industries.” (2019 Conservative Manifesto, n.d.)

As stated above, ‘Levelling Up’ was for ‘all parts of the United Kingdom’ to give ‘new support to people.’ A 2022 report from the IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research) states, “*Levelling Up... evokes and reheats many previous agendas but remains less focussed (geographically and thematically) than its predecessors.*” (Webb, n.d.) Another report from the Fabián Society comments on the 2 years of inaction

“‘Levelling Up’ – a vague election slogan from 2019 that has only recently taken form in the government’s White Paper and a Bill before parliament.” (Raikes, 2022)

Since 2019, living standards have declined, aiding extensive political upheavals. Thus, Levelling Up during the 2019 election constituted a failed and ineffective rhetoric.

4.2 Levelling Up Taxation Design

To have a long-term impact, the aim of ‘Levelling Up’ an economy would require continuous economic incentives rather than limited or momentary ‘funding pots’. Thus, to enable sustained and meaningful Levelling Up in all areas of the UK, systemic economic levers must be utilised to provide continual leverage. Not only this, but these levers need the ability to be fine-tuned between geographical locations and adjusted against a change over time in economic activity. In terms of which possible radical proposal might enable Levelling Up in this systemic way, an idea presented by payments expert David Birch suggests a possible way forward:

“We should set ourselves up for a world in which there are hundreds, thousands, or even millions of kinds of money. Your phone will show you the price of your latte in London Loot but transfer money in California Cabbage, Apple Apples, and SF Parking Permits.” (Birch, 2018)

Numerous currencies might also enable numerous fiscal and monetary policies. Perhaps then, areas with low economic activity would have a currency that would devalue and thus become attractive as an investment, driving growth. However, this market of money might not hold the central control needed to guarantee the Levelling Up agenda promised by the government.

Rather than enacting a dog-eat-dog scenario of currencies, might a dynamic taxation that enables varying tax levels between different areas of the country hold the possibility of encouraging investment in deprived areas? This type of dynamic taxation would only be possible using a digital pound. Could a central bank digital currency enable a more nuanced approach to taxation incentives and disincentives?

4.3 Crafting the Levelling Up Devices

Moving towards the generative side of the Levelling Up project, we employ another counterfactual approach. This scenario proposes a CDBC (central bank digital currency) system that embodies the Levelling Up notion by creating a digital British pound and a variable geographical VAT rate that increases within higher-wealth areas and reduces in lower-wealth areas.

We took a slightly different approach to bridging the gap between the audience and the fiction. Although considerations have been made regarding the aesthetic of the devices to resonate with the context of 10 Downing Street, the believability and communication come mainly from the interactive variable taxation map displayed on the Levelling Up device, which the audience can interact with to help understand the proposal.

The image below depicts the government's Levelling Up device, which enables changes in VAT rates between specific geographical places within the UK. In the scenario, the device is installed within number 10 Downing Street, enabling the government to set and rest the variable tax rates during every new budget.



Figure 5. A close up of the levelling-up device displayed at MoneyLab13, organised by NeMe in Cyprus.



Figure 6. An overview of the display, including the device, fictitious address from Boris Johnson and the future wealth disparity maps.



Figure 7. A close-up shot of the wealth disparity map.

Alongside the Level Up device would hang a series of 3d printed wealth disparity maps. Areas of high deprivation are indicated as a peak and low deprivation as a trough. Within the context of this scenario, the 3d printed maps get updated every time the government introduces a new budget, usually once a year. The maps create a lasting and readable reminder of the progress the government policy is making within the UK. Enabling a palpable depiction of wealth distribution within the country over time.

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented the transformative potential of counter-rhetorical design in rethinking how persuasive political arguments are framed and communicated. By employing speculative and critical design methods, we have demonstrated that design can be used to enhance the specificity and tangibility of political discourse. The explorations within the 'Trickle-Down' and 'Level Up' case studies exemplify how such methodologies can critically assess and potentially rectify the fallacies and inefficacies within traditional political rhetoric. This approach fosters a broader conceptual bandwidth for political parties' communications, moving beyond the restrictive confines of Overton's window and engaging more deeply with political processes.

While counter-rhetorical design is a novel mode of political engagement, it faces limitations due to its speculative nature. The hypothetical scenarios it presents may not capture the full complexity of real-world political dynamics and may not be universally applicable or acceptable. The effectiveness of these design interventions in influencing political discourse and public policy remains largely untested and speculative.

Future research should concentrate on empirically testing and measuring the impact of counter-rhetorical design projects, assessing their influence on public opinion and political engagement. This would enhance the efficacy of counter-rhetorical design, consolidating its status as an effective design method for enriching political discourse and democratic engagement.

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Acknowledgements: We would like to thank MoneyLab 13 and NeMe in Cyprus for funding and displaying the projects presented in this paper, especially Yiannis Colakides, for making the event happen and for all his support. We also thank Huddersfield University design researcher Dipo Olaosun for his help in ideating the form of the Levelling-up device, the staff and technicians in the workshop at Sheffield Hallam University, who assisted greatly in the production of the components, and Sheffield Hallam University seed funding, which enabled the project to come to fruition.

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

This contribution was presented at Cumulus Budapest 2024: P/References of Design conference, hosted by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, Hungary between May 15-17, 2024.

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ISBN Volume 1: 978-952-7549-02-5 (PDF)

ISBN Volume 2: 978-952-7549-03-2 (PDF)

DOI Volume 1: <https://doi.org/10.63442/IZUP8898>

DOI Volume 2: <https://doi.org/10.63442/TADX4016>

Conference Organisers

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest (MOME)

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