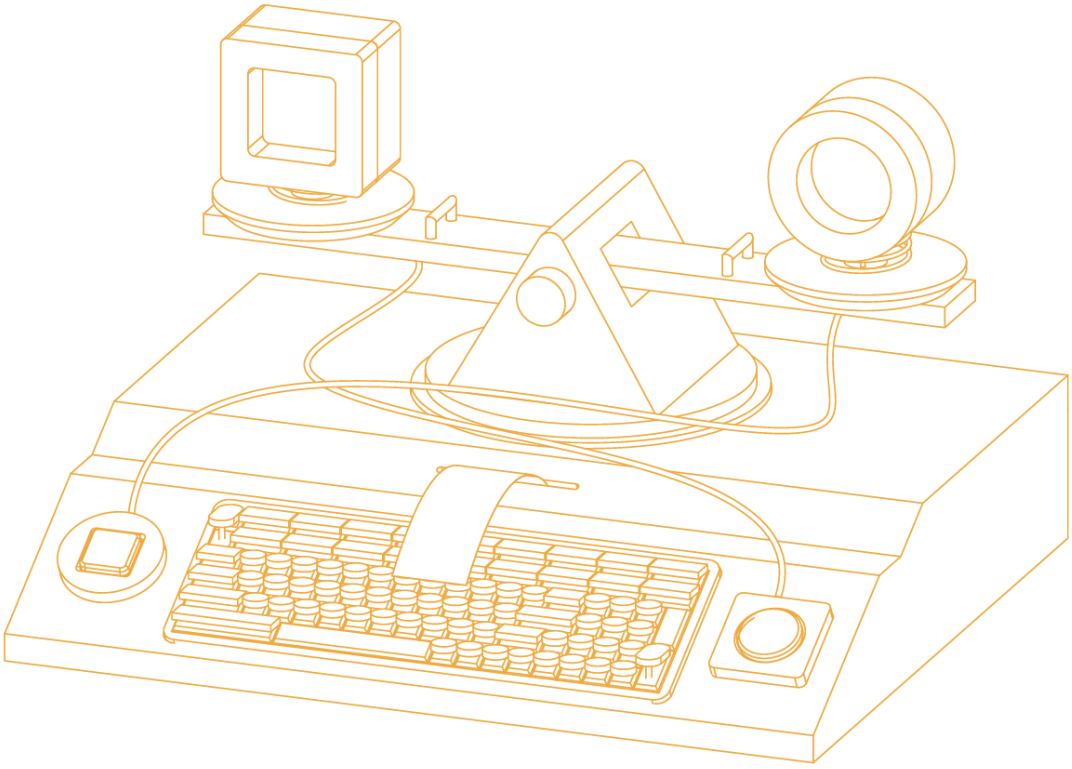
Seesaw Economy Manifesto

Component 2 Catalogue Essay



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Introduction: Why We Begin with a Seesaw

This project started from personal confusion. In daily life, I've often been puzzled by how prices are set. Why should perfume, made cheaply, sell for hundreds of pounds? Discovering that such pricing aligns more with consumer self-perception than production value only deepened my confusion. Clearly, luxury perfumes and a £5 meal deal from Waitrose follow entirely different value logics, yet both use the same monetary standard. What kind of "value" flattens these differences into a single metric?

Driven by this curiosity, I began reading *Marx's Das Kapital* (1867) *and The Communist Manifesto* (1848). These texts revealed that modern economic valuation systems, despite their rational facade, originate from historical extraction and structural inequalities. However, recognizing my own experiential and positional limits, I chose not to critique this immense structure systematically. Instead, I adopted a more personal and embodied approach, exploring value exchange as a lived and felt encounter.

The **Seesaw Economy Manifesto** emerges from these exploration—not as theory, but as a tangible object. It does not propose economic reforms or new financial structures. Rather, it offers participants a bodily experience, inviting a poetic, relational, and playful reimagining of value. Drawing on the idea that value is relational and performative (Graeber, 2001; Simmel, 2004), it explores how expression, movement, and language could become part of how we exchange meaning. The result is not a grand theory, but a kind of invitation—to tip, to respond, to co-balance.

The seesaw structure forms the manifesto's spatial and emotional grammar, while participants co-create its content through movement, attention, and language. Thus, the project is both installation and proposition—a prompt to reconsider how we assign value and to experiment with alternative approaches.

The chapters that follow look at four related questions: How did we come to accept one form of value measurement as universal? What alternatives—historical or imaginary—exist? Can imbalance itself be a form of ethical relation? And what role does language play in shaping our perception of worth?

Ultimately, the seesaw is not a model to implement but an invitation to play, listen, and negotiate, reminding us that true balance lies not in stillness, but in care and movement.

Chapter1: Reverse-Scale:

The Limitation of Standardized Currency

Theoretical Background

The scale has long symbolised fairness and objectivity in economic exchange. In classical economics, price is framed as a neutral reflection of utility and scarcity. Yet scholars like Georg Simmel (2004) and David Graeber (2001) argue that this neutrality is illusory. Simmel saw money as a tool that abstracts human relationships into measurable equivalences, while Graeber traced the origins of currency to institutions of violence and hierarchy—not free, egalitarian trade (Graeber, 2011).

Karl Marx described this abstraction as the fetishism of commodities—where relationships between people are concealed behind relations between things (Marx, 1867). When value is reduced to a number on a scale, it loses its emotional, ethical, and social complexity.

In other words, in modern material life, where nearly everything—goods, services, education, even ourselves—is subject to the scale of monetary comparison, the promise of happiness often falls short. The seesaw, as a playful and relational structure, stands as a symbolic opposite: not to measure, but to respond.

Design Theory and Precedents

Design has often reinforced systems of abstraction—standardising, measuring, comparing. This project instead draws on speculative and para-functional design (Dunne & Raby, 2013), not to solve problems, but to provoke reflection. The seesaw may resemble a measuring tool, but it resists fixed outcomes; it invites ambiguity.

Redström (2017) suggests that design can be understood as unfolding—a process that evolves meaning rather than delivering answers. In this spirit, imbalance becomes a feature, not a flaw. Echoing DiSalvo's (2012) notion of agonistic design, the installation uses dissonance as a space for negotiation and dialogue. Here, design becomes relational—shaped by movement, perception, and participation.

How Seesaw Economy Manifesto Responds to This

The installation deliberately evokes the imagery of a weighing scale. Its large circular trays and aligned base prompt participants to interpret it as a tool of measurement—anchoring them in familiar metaphors of balance and fairness.

But other cues soon disrupt this reading: a longer horizontal bar, colourful accents, and handle-like ends suggest a visual impression of seesaw. As the structure tilts, the metaphor shifts—this is not a device for quantifying equivalence, but a platform for co-experiencing difference.

By merging the visual language of both scale and seesaw, the project opens a conceptual hinge. It invites participants to question how deeply the language of value is embedded in objects—and what it means to tip those metaphors into motion.

Chapter2: Escape from Gravity:

Rethinking Possibilities Beyond Necessity Value

Theoretical Background

Anthropological and archaeological research shows that value has not always been based on equivalence. Many enduring systems of exchange—such as gift economies, ritual trade, and status-driven reciprocity—operate on different logics. In The Gift (1925), Marcel Mauss described how value emerges through obligation, delay, and relationship, not immediate return. Marshall Sahlins (1972) built on this by outlining forms of reciprocity: generalized (e.g., Inuit, Māori), balanced (such as the kula ring), and negative—showing that economic activity is deeply social and moral.

Bronislaw Malinowski's work (1922) on the kula exchange in the Trobriand Islands highlights a ceremonial system where shell armbands and necklaces circulate not for utility, but for honour, memory, and continuity. These objects gain meaning through time and movement, rather than scarcity.

In Papua New Guinea, the moka system (Strathern, 1971) involves competitive gift-giving—often pigs—to gain prestige and forge alliances. Here, giving more than one receives is a sign of power. Likewise, as Graeber (2011) notes, ancient Mesopotamian debt systems were communal and often reset through jubilees, countering the logic of endless accumulation.

These diverse cases reveal that value is not inherently economic, but always cultural. It emerges in kinship, ritual, generosity, and imagination. They remind us that the grip of the market is not total, and that other, more human-centered ways of measuring worth have existed—and can still be reimagined.

Design Theory and Precedents

Design that embraces play rather than function opens space for alternative forms of value to surface—forms rooted in emotion, relation, and rhythm. Dunne and Raby (2013) describe such speculative design as a way to challenge utility by staging possibility. Chris Speed et al. (2019) further suggest that design can help build new socio-economic imaginaries, loosening the grip of inherited economic logic.

Here, "escape from gravity" is more than metaphor. It describes a shift from the fixed weight of measurement to the lived sensation of imbalance. As Miguel Sicart (2014) writes, play is not the opposite of seriousness—it is the opposite of submission. In this project, the objectivity becomes a site of negotiation, not calculation.

How Seesaw Economy Manifesto Responds to This

The project resonates with alternative logics of value in two primary ways. First is metaphorical. One of the joys of a seesaw is the brief sensation of escaping gravity. This playful experience requires two people balancing rhythmically, creating a momentary feeling of lift. The installation embodies this metaphor physically, through the seesaw's rise and fall—offering participants an immediate sense of shared effort, timing, and mutual responsiveness.

Second, the project encourages an experiential shift away from conventional value exchanges. Rather than trading physical objects, participants share images representing personal value and describe each other's choices through words and emojis. This semi-fictional mediation creates a playful distance from familiar economic habits, inviting curiosity and reflection rather than judgment or competition.

Through this interaction, participants momentarily escape the gravitational pull of price and move toward a shared construction of value that lives in tension.

Chapter3: To Rise and To Fall:

Dynamic Balance as Mutual Equality

Theoretical Background

In political and philosophical discourse, equality is often framed as a fixed state: a sameness in rights, resources, or treatment. Yet anthropological and phenomenological perspectives suggest that equality can also be enacted dynamically—through rhythm, timing, and mutual adjustment (Graeber 2011). This aligns with the logic of generalized reciprocity as seen in many gift-based economies, where delayed or open-ended return fosters long-term bonds rather than settling scores (Mauss, 1925).

Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests in Truth and Method (1975) that play is an experience of mutual transformation, not domination. The essence of play, he notes, is that players surrender to the rhythm of exchange—an ebb and flow that no one fully controls.

Drawing from this, theorist María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) reminds us that care is not about restoring symmetry, but about "staying with dependency, friction, and unfinishedness." Her concept of care ethics resists closure and embraces vulnerability as part of the relational condition. In the context of dynamic balance, this becomes crucial: the seesaw does not require equal weight to move, but mutual attention and a shared willingness to respond.

Perhaps this dynamic model is more aligned with how people actually live together: rising and falling in relation to one another, negotiating difference rather than erasing it. In this way, dynamic equilibrium is not a compromise, but a different way of imagining co-existence altogether. It is in the back-and-forth, the rise and fall, that a more lived sense of fairness is enacted.

Design Theory and Precedents

Designing for dynamic balance—rather than fixed equality—requires shifting away from control, symmetry, and finality. In Adversarial Design, Carl DiSalvo (2012) argues that disagreement and friction can be generative, not merely disruptive. Rather than designing toward resolution, agonistic design creates space for continued negotiation. This principle aligns closely with the seesaw: its function is not to resolve difference, but to hold it—visibly, physically, and relationally.

Ambiguity, as Gaver et al. (2003) note, can be a productive design resource. It invites interpretation rather than dictating meaning. Designers like Gijs Gieskes and Kazuhiro Yamanaka have explored balance as instability—a quality to be engaged with rather than overcome. Their work shows how co-dependence can be embedded in form, prompting users to adapt, respond, and collaborate in real time.

How Seesaw Economy Manifesto Responds to This

The installation mirrors the experience of being on a seesaw. To rise, a participant must push the ground—a small exertion that causes the other to descend. This cooperative rhythm is replicated in the way participants engage with the system: by contributing words to describe the other's object, they effectively 'add value' to that side. The side being valued begins to lower, physically and metaphorically acknowledging the weight of meaning assigned to it.

At the same time, each object's initial description—provided by its owner—acts as a baseline value that influences how sensitively the seesaw responds. This creates a layered negotiation: participants are not just moving the installation at random, but carefully adjusting their input to reflect attention, respect, and responsiveness.

In this way, the movement becomes a choreography of communication. Value is not imposed, but interpreted and reciprocated.

Chapter4: What we talk about when we're on the seesaw:

Expression, Evaluation, and the Language of Value

Theoretical Background

Language is not neutral—it creates value as much as it describes it. From a performative perspective, speech is a form of action. As Judith Butler (1997) argues, words do not just reflect reality; they intervene in it. To speak is to position, to affect, and to relate.

Evaluative language—words like valuable, important, or authentic—therefore carries consequence. Anthropologist Fred Myers (2001) describes value not as an inherent quality but as something that accrues through circulation, framing, and interaction.

This reframes expression as a relational economy: a space where meaning is not fixed, but continuously negotiated. David Bohm (1996) describes dialogue not as argument or consensus, but as a process of emergence—where meaning arises through mutual attention rather than assertion. The act of speaking becomes less about convincing, and more about staying in relation.

When this expressive vitality meets the embodied rhythm of play—like the seesaw's rise and fall—a new kind of value emerges: one rooted not in scarcity or control, but in participation. This humanistic vision recognises that our exchanges—of words, care, attention—may be fleeting, but they are never trivial. They are how we stay in relation.

Design Theory and Precedents

In critical and speculative design, language is never neutral. It frames, activates, and sometimes even destabilizes.

Bill Gaver et al. (2003) describe ambiguity not as failure but as a resource: a way to open interpretation and enable participation. When evaluative language is decoupled from fixed meaning, it becomes less a statement of truth and more an act of positioning. This interpretive openness invites users to take responsibility for meaning.

Designers such as Moritz Stefaner (2012) and Aaron Koblin (2008) have explored the transformation of language inputs into dynamic, system-responsive forms. Their projects reveal how seemingly ephemeral expressions can be translated into structures of visual, emotional, or spatial consequence.

Such precedents foreground a central insight: in systems where language acts as input, expression becomes a mode of intervention. In these contexts, value is not delivered—it is performed, interpreted, and rebalanced in real time.

How Seesaw Economy Manifesto Responds to This

In my installation, value is expressed not through currency or material trade, but through language. Participants are invited to describe one another's images using words and emojis that reflect emotional, aesthetic, or symbolic associations. This linguistic layer becomes the exchange medium: open-ended, interpretive, and unquantified.

But language in this context does more than label. Each word chosen is translated into movement: the seesaw responds physically to participants' input, tilting according to how the system interprets these descriptions. Value thus moves from expression to embodiment, becoming a kind of silent dialogue enacted through rhythm and weight.

The final receipt, printed at the end of the exchange, captures this ephemeral negotiation. It records not a price, but a moment of shared articulation. This receipt becomes a co-authored document—a miniature "seesaw economy manifesto"

Conclusion: A Value of Our Own Making

The Seesaw Economy Manifesto is not a blueprint for a new economic system. It offers no currency, no fixed rules, and no promise of efficiency. What it proposes instead is a shift in metaphor—a small, intentional movement away from stillness and toward rhythm; away from abstraction and toward relation.

It asks: what if value was not something we measured, but something we moved with? What if balance was not about stillness, but responsiveness? What if words were not tools of persuasion, but invitations to relate?

Through movement, language, and participation, this project gestures toward a different way of valuing—one that is reciprocal rather than extractive, dynamic rather than static, and grounded in trust rather than equivalence. It draws from play, from trust, from asymmetry, from the unfinishedness of care. Value here is not fixed or fair—it is fragile, co-created, and always in motion.

The installation lives only in the moment of engagement. Its meanings are made and remade with each interaction. Yet in its brief choreography of co-balance, it invites a quiet, playful proposition: that value is not found in the thing itself, but in the space between. A space we inhabit, shape, and make meaningful together. This is not a solution. It is a beginning.

It is an invitation to tip.

While this text has focused on the theoretical context and conceptual rationale of the project, the design development—its shifts, tensions, and iterative negotiations—are documented in the accompanying visual narrative (Component 4), where the project's making becomes part of its meaning.

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