

Selfish Designs: What Computer Designs Need from the Economy and How They Get It

In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, computer designers created a series of “option-rich modular design architectures” in both hardware and software. But a “pure” design is, strictly speaking, only an idea. Unless the design is reified – made real, brought into reality – it cannot affect the physical world and cannot be used or consumed. In order to affect the world and be valued, a design idea must be first completed and then made into something. Those actions in turn require human effort and human organization.

Designs need the economy for several purposes:

- to implement design processes so that the designs can be completed;
- to carry out design instructions so that the designs can be realized;
- to transfer designs and/or artifacts to users who value them; and
- to get designers and producers paid for their efforts.

Of course, designs do not really need or want anything. Rather, people need or want solutions to their problems and those solutions in turn are based on designs being created, completed, realized, transferred, and paid for. Seeing the world from “a thing’s point of view” is a mental trick, a strategy for understanding how the thing behaves. Richard Dawkins famously used this trick in *The Selfish Gene* to illuminate the mechanisms of genetic evolution. We will adopt the same strategy and look at the world from the “designs’ point of view” in order to understand the economic institutions and mechanisms by which new designs and new artifacts come into existence.