Being a student of design, and working through different projects throughout my studying years has seen me, along with my classmates, struggling with the brief descriptions. Sometimes we wouldn’t really know what to do. We would start producing layouts, and upon getting feedback from our tutors, we were told that our work wasn’t on the right track. Sometimes it felt like we reached the point where we were trying to get the design ‘right’, and sometimes, for us this meant impressing the tutors more than doing our own thing or committing to the brief. We struggled with what was ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in our designs. On our reading lists we looked into books and magazines with example layouts which just ‘looked good’. Why couldn’t we produce something as simple and amazing as that? Where were we going wrong?

That’s what this research project is about. I’m planning to investigate rhythm in layout design, to look at what rhythm is, and look at if and how it can be present in design, and if it is, does it add anything to the design, or ultimately subtract from it?

I’ve become almost romantically fixated with the idea of being able to present information in a correct and effective manner, and I think that is why I’m investigating this topic. If I can learn what made those examples look the way they did, then I can feel satisfied knowing that I understand what made them that way.

Why rhythm? I believe rhythm is something that is all around us, all the time. I’ve been playing the drums for about 8 years, and I am very familiar with rhythm from a musical perspective (i.e. tempo, slurs etc.) and I see this as an opportunity to take this concept which is a passion of mine, and explore it on a completely different plane. So note that when I mention seeking to decolone rhythm in design, it will not be from any musical perspective, but as an abstract concept that could be applied to anything.

To help me along the way, I’ve been reading a lot of books, probably more than I’ve ever read at any time in my entire life so far. I don’t have any difficulty reading, but still it is something that has never particularly taken off with me, so this has been quite a new experience. The books I’ve been looking at are a blend of design practice and theory, typography, philosophy and psychology. These, along with web research and a couple of documentaries have provided a sturdy board of knowledge from which I have dived into this dissertation.

To minimise reader confusion (or in an attempt to subtract from readers feeling a sense of self-stupidity) I’ve divided my investigation into four chapters. These are ordered in such a way as to deliver my thoughts in a sequence which I believe will make the most sense. As my chapters are fairly heavily linked with one another, I’ve placed ‘Nothing’ first. This chapter focuses on absence, white space, and rhythm in design. This will provide a base which other chapters and ideas can link back to. It also features examples of layout design using devices, which I will deconstruct, and determine whether rhythm is present and how that affects the work.

The second chapter, ‘Tao’ takes a break from the deconstruction, and exposes the links between old Chinese philosophy and rhythm in layout design. This will feature extracts from ‘The Rhythm of Life: Based on the Philosophy of Lao-Tse’ and provide a different view on layout design.

The third chapter, ‘Gestalt’ leads on from the ideas of ‘Nothing’ and ‘Tao’. I will explain what Gestalt is, examine Gestalt principles and then look at how they are used in design, referring back to the ideas of Nothing, and rhythm.

The fourth and final chapter, ‘Soup’ will bring all of these elements together, and feature my thoughts, philosophising, and analysis on the subject. I will also raise questions and make suggestions in an attempt to find some sort of answer to my central question: ‘Does rhythm exist in design, and if so, how is it manifested?’

So let’s jump in at the deep end of the pool.

A note before starting:
There are some important points to make about some of the vocabulary I use:
‘Design’ when I refer to design, I refer specifically to the field of Graphic, layout and information design. However the argument could be perceived from a perspective of a wider range of design fields.
‘Nothing’. When I mention ‘Nothing’ with an upper case ‘N’, I am referring to Nothing as an abstract concept - the concept I am discussing. This differentiates my intentional use of the word from the use of ‘nothing’ in explanatory text.
White Space. When this occurs in the text, I am referring to the spatial area on a design-related canvas. This does not necessarily have to be ‘white’ per se, but rather empty space in which a designer can create.
A time signature is written as two numbers, divided by a slash (4/4, for example). In Fig 1 you can see that the pattern is comprised of four beats. This makes up the first number in the signature. This pattern is repeated four times. This gives us the second number, number of measures. The rhythm that is 4/4. This diagram shows the differences between patterns and rhythms. I have also recorded audio samples supportingFig 1 which can be found on my blog http://rhythmanddesign.wordpress.com/supporting-audio/It would be untrue to define a definition of abstract rhythm on my judgement alone, and so I look to the most obvious place where definitions are to be found - a dictionary. The Colliers English Dictionary & Thesaurus (2000, Pg 646)explains my list of rhythmic characteristics from four added qualities. It describes rhythm to be repetitive, consistent, sequential, structured, organised, predictable, habitual, harmonious. Comparing this back to my understanding of musical rhythm, all these qualities seem fitting, and so I will use this list of rhythmic characteristics as my definition of rhythm from which I can weave back to and compare other things against.:

It seems the ideal place to start is to establish a definition of rhythm, so what is rhythm? What exactly are we looking for? A musical rhythm? A characteristic from a musical perspective, and so to shift things away from the definition of rhythm from a musical perspective, and so to shift things away from the characteristics of rhythm into account. What I already understand rhythm to be (in a musical sense) is duration, sequence, pattern and structure. Surely by looking at the characteristics of musical rhythm, I will be able to find commonalities between that of musical and abstract rhythm.

For us to truly understand this concept, I will briefly explain time signatures. A time signature is a fraction indicating the number of beats and the note value of each beat. It is shown written above the treble staff and is used to meter music. While MIDI is a universal format for music notation, it is not a music notation system in itself, but rather a language for communicating music across different systems.

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Let us return to the idea of information hierarchies, which we touched upon earlier. In the final chapter. The information hierarchy too, like the grid, as we examined previously, creates rhythm for a reader when they are digesting information. Thinking more about the hierarchy, it seems that a hierarchy is not any concrete thing as such, it is not a component of design, but rather it is a kind of device that enacts front this relationship formed between other components in a layout. You cannot have an information hierarchy without any information to give order to, but when the information required for a hierarchy is present, this hierarchy forms automatically. A hierarchy can be identified in a layout, but is it concept concrete enough for it to be seen? Let’s look at fig. 3 here.

Fig. 3 shows a very basic layout design by Josef Müller-Brockmann. Here we can see that a hierarchy does exist, as there were aimed to point out. We could point out the components which we would deem most important (Joji Feuenich, Zurich being the most prominent, ‘Stadthäuser’ the second most etc.) and explain which ones come first. However, there is no concrete visual object which we can physically point to and say ‘hierarchy’. From this I believe we can safely say that, the hierarchy is, like the grid, at work, but unknown. This fills into both what Lao-Tse says about Tao, being unknown, and also into our parallel. So from here we can say that the hierarchy is another manifestation of Tao in design.

Tao is Nothing/Everything Lao-Tse tells the curious man the story of the ‘Yellow Emperor’ (Borel, 1923, pg. 21), who loses his precious pearl, and despite falling to try if it through means of knowledge, sight and speech, he finds it by doing nothing. Lao-Tse explains to the man that the pearl is a metaphor for the Yellow Emperor’s soul, and so the story takes a shift into new light: he finds his soul through space and perfect quietude. In this instance Lao-Tse is saying that to succeed, you need to do nothing. ‘You need to be at peace – in complete harmony with Tao. You must become part of Tao, and accept Tao as your natural state of being. (ibid. Pg. 74-75) Only then will you truly understand the world, and be content with your position in it. Our parallel begins to emerge even further here: if we were to succeed in design (let’s presume that this is giving the perfect answer to a design brief) by doing nothing, we would stick with white space and leave it at that, without adding any components.

Returning to the idea of white space having the potential for ‘perfect communication’, does this mean that white space is another form of Tao in design? If Tao is Nothing, then Tao is everything. This makes sense because it runs in line with what Lao-Tse says about Tao being all around us. If we substitute ‘all’ (humans) for the components of a design, then this makes sense, because the white space surrounds the components, just as Tao surrounds us in this world.

Tao is Harmony Lao-Tse also tells the man: ‘We fit as natively into this beauty around us as a tree or a mountain. If we can but remain so, we shall always retain the feeling of our own well-being, midst all the great workings of the world system.” (ibid. Pg. 61-62) Here, Lao-Tse is describing harmony. Returning to the parallel, this runs in line with visual harmony in layout design. Let’s look at this quote as if an individual layout component was saying it: ‘We fit as natively into this beauty…’ The component knows that it has been placed specifically by the designer for a specific purpose, and it accepts its position in the ‘design’ (if all the great workings of the world-system. The ‘world system’ here, is the layout design itself. So just as people live in and around the city, those that Tao (the grid, hierarchy and white space) amongst and around them at all times. However it seems unfair to give all the praise of Tao in design to these three elements of design alone.
Through being a student, I have discovered the magnificent world of research. Truly understanding what it means to me - reading to gain knowledge in something that interests you - has opened my eyes to the countless fields of investigation and areas of thinking. People record their thought processes and theories in books and on papers. Seeing how these fields link over and into each other has opened my eyes as to how areas of interest - for example, graphic design can be made up on theoretically, philosophically and intellectually. So I figured that looking at the concept of nothing, layout and information design, there was bound to be an area of study of these subjects, and I think this is it - Gestalt.

Gestalt is a branch of psychology which originated in Berlin, Germany, and focuses on perception. It was created in 1910 by Max Wertheimer, who built on the previous ideas of Christian von Ehrenfels. (Köhler, 1967) Gestalt was then taken and developed further by figures such as Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler, the latter of which wrote the text 'Gestalt Psychology' (1970). From which I take most of my examples in this chapter. I believe I'm right in saying that Gestalt seems to be not the right tool to try to point at this in the investigation, because graphic communication is visual, and it seems inevitable that our eyes are the essential medium for the conveyance of information from print and screen to personal knowledge, and so a look into a study of perception is justified enough.

So what is Gestalt, in a literal sense? Gestalt translates from German as a synonym for form or shape. (Köhler, 1970, Pg. 177-178) “That object’s gestalt is quite angular.” But Gestalt also has another meaning in the German language: it can also be defined as a definite existence or entity which exhibits characteristics including a shape or form. This is interesting because if we distill both of these definitions, we imagine words such as ‘shape’, ‘appearance’, ‘form’, ‘vision’ and these things in which Gestalt psychology examines and studies. This definition is specified on www.gestaltpsychology.org (2011), where Gestalt is described as a study of the parts & wholes in visual perception.

Gestalt & Nothingness

The idea of parts and wholes is crucial to Gestalt, because one of the main ideas behind Gestalt is the mosaic theory. This theory states that in our visual field, we perceive a ‘mosaic’ of features, colours and hues, all of which having differing levels of visual detail. It is the difference in visual detail between two areas (when light is reflected off them), that causes segregated visual components, or wholes, which are distinguishable from one another. (Köhler, 1970, Pg. 159). Relating now, to design, I think Köhler argues that when we first look at a layout we don’t perceive the white space as we, don’t look only at the parts, we perceive the white, but we are able to hold in our parts and focus on them individually due to the absence of differences in visual detail, that span a layout. White space continues to slowly reveal itself as a bigger leporello in all of this. The idea that whitespace defines things, as mentioned at the end of chapter 1, is present here. Köhler says here, Something’s ‘Gestalt’ or visual characteristics can only be seen/received/interpreted with, the use of white space, or some sort of background against which it can be compared.

Gestalt & Tao

These five Gestalts principal which have just been explained are devices that are used (sometimes unintentionally) in layout design. However these are not design concepts, as they occur, just as Gestalt explains, in our visual field in everyday life. We can make a link between these devices, and the invisible, but present, and working Tao. These Gestalt principles begin to work as soon as we put objects into a space, whether we like it or not. Until the principles are examined and learnt, or until one is made aware of them. They are invisible, and at work in a design. I would say that they are the clever and hidden ‘inner workings’ of graphic design. Gestalt philosophy and that of Tao present us with some more interesting links. Whilst talking about his study, Köhler, (1970, Pg. 139) Köhler states that ‘Gestalt psychology claims that it is precisely the original segregation of communicated wholes which makes it possible for the sensory world to appear so utterly imbued with meaning to the adult; but, in its gradual evolution into the sensory field, meaning follows the lines drawn by natural organization; it usually enters into segregated wholes.

I can take away two main things from what Köhler says here, the first is, simply that what makes meaning exist, the second is, that visual existence (things in our visual field) can be differentiated from each other. Because there is always a visual boundary separating one thing in our visual field from another, those things can be identified and therefore meaning applied to/borrowed from them.

The second point that I believe Köhler is making is that meaning is not always present in the entire sensory field, not only the visual field! Doesn’t occur instantly, it is gradual, a learnt process, through past experience and eventual habituation. (Köhler, 1970, Pg. 159) And when it does occur, usually ends up as segregated wholes. It falls into place, as nature intended, which gives the impression of flow and order. It also suggests meaning doesn’t have a choice, and it’s only option is to follow the ‘natural/organigram’ falling into place - into balance and. This relates directly to the Tao philosophy in that everything has balance and beauty, everything flows in cycles.

This idea of cycles is promoted by Köhler, who mentions that individual parts of a whole can be moved separately, to break away from the rest, and reunite with others. (Köhler, 1970, Pg. 140). The idea is quite modicum concept of breaking and recombination at all is becoming quite interesting, as we have of course, Tao as an idea. For us, as a part of Tao overall, that we are not part of the whole, and that we will eventually return to become one with Tao, our true and pure form.

From a design perspective, we could draw a parallel with semiotics - Two separate images, or ideas, can exist as separate images, but if the two images are combined, the combination of these devices can potentially present an entirely new meaning.
Now we've gathered all the ingredients. Nothing is the rhythm in design, then is as we bring them all together. We have defined rhythm with all the information provided and combined the characteristics of this definition to discuss where design, philosophy and psychology Two things are not seen as rhythm by themselves. In a rhythm, rhythm can be seen. In design, through attempts such as the typographic grid, the information hierarchy gives us some more interesting links. Gestalt & Tao. But how do we see the Tao? If Tao is the rhythm in design, then is rhythm in the Tao? If so, what is the rhythm in the Tao? Rasdoo & Church Ontology (Frager, 2011). This is expressed as Xi = Yi & Zi, then Xi & 2. If Tao is Rhythm, and Tao is also Nothing, then Rhythm is also Nothing. But rhythm as nothing seems impossible, because Rhythm can be heard and felt through music and audio, seen visually in layout design and experienced in three dimensions and beyond. So how can rhythm be Nothing? In what context is rhythm Nothing? Maybe the lack of rhythm is when the technologies are not nothing but the absence of rhythm is when the technologies is Nothing. Is absence a form of rhythm? Visually, rhythm that can be seen Nothing. Nothing is a rhythm, so this can't be said that rhythm does exist in design, through attempts such as the typographic grid, the information hierarchy. The Gestalt principle of perception or what is called the empty white space. Let's help you review a few concepts that we've encountered so far.

Guess what? Nothing. Nothing is white space, nothing is empty space, yet Nothing is everything. How can this be? What is so special about this Nothing? Nothing seems to be the absolute basecase of layout design. Aside from other abstract concepts such as imagination and creativity the designer plans things on whitespace. The designer builds something onto Nothing, and needs this Nothingness in order to build. The objects which are placed into a layout are all segregated visual entities.

Now this is where Gestalt comes in. Gestalt defines the shapes (or graphics) that the graphic designer produces by differentiating them from the surrounding whitespace. This difference in visual detail between the white space and the graphic defines the graphic, segregating it as a whole, set apart from the whitespace. Gestalt needs Nothing to work. Certain principles help to define the way we perceive these segregated objects.

Now Tao underpins both Nothing and Gestalt by establishing a balance over and within everything. Tao is the invisible magic that is working within a design. It's in the nothing, it's in the everything, in the interpretation, and the transportation of the information. Tao's world is when the text overlap is so heavy that there is no legibility. Communication, as was noted previously, is both the transfer of information, and the message itself. When it comes, the Good communication is not communication, but a risk of chaos ensuing, as seen previously. So how does all of this translate to the layout? If good communication is manifested in Fig 2.1, however if this is the designer's intention, then the Gestalt idea that once difference in visual detail is defined, and something is planted in the visual field, it becomes organised, and therefore contains some aspect of rhythm. There are points where meaning is lost when the text overlap is so heavy that the characteristics cannot be distinguished, so how far could the chaos be taken before becoming completely inseparable from communication?

The principle of closure is all about recognising a shape or form, characteristics including a shape or form. What might that be? From a design perspective we could draw the ‘Paradox of the name’ relationship, highlighted in Frager-Church Ontology (Frager, 2011). This is expressed as Xi = Yi & Zi, then Xi & 2. If Tao is Rhythm, and Tao is also Nothing, then Rhythm is also Nothing. But rhythm as nothing seems impossible, because Rhythm can be heard and felt through music and audio, seen visually in layout design and experienced in three dimensions and beyond. So how can rhythm be Nothing? In what context is rhythm Nothing? Maybe the lack of rhythm is when the technologies are not nothing but the absence of rhythm is when the technologies is Nothing. Is absence a form of rhythm? Visually, rhythm that can be seen Nothing. Nothing is a rhythm, so this can't be said that rhythm does exist in design, through attempts such as the typographic grid, the information hierarchy. The Gestalt principle of perception or what is called the empty white space. Let's help you review a few concepts that we've encountered so far.

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The Predicament
Here I have found a problem, it is an example of a 'Paradox of the name' relationship, highlighted in Frager-Church Ontology (Frager, 2011). This is expressed as Xi = Yi & Zi, then Xi & 2. If Tao is Rhythm, and Tao is also Nothing, then Rhythm is Also Nothing. But rhythm as nothing seems impossible, because Rhythm can be heard and felt through music and audio, seen visually in layout design and experienced in three dimensions and beyond. So how can rhythm be Nothing? In what context is rhythm Nothing? Maybe the lack of rhythm is when the technologies are not nothing but the absence of rhythm is when the technologies is Nothing. Is absence a form of rhythm? Visually, rhythm that can be seen Nothing. Nothing is a rhythm, so this can't be said that rhythm does exist in design, through attempts such as the typographic grid, the information hierarchy. The Gestalt principle of perception or what is called the empty white space. Let's help you review a few concepts that we've encountered so far.

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I believe as humans we like to classify things, and this becomes difficult when dealing with very abstract concepts such as rhythm. Nothing and Tao. I think that this has been one of the most difficult issues that was faced when thinking about how all the ideas connect. But they all are connected it seems. Nothing, Tao and Gestalt are all inexorably linked. Rhythm does exist in design, and these things all play a part in creating this rhythm.

Nothing is white space. White space is everything because of the potential it holds. White space is also needed by Gestalt for the definition of objects in a layout. The difference in visual detail between the object and the white space allows us to perceive all its visual characteristics, it's Gestalt including its structure, organisation and position in the layout. The Gestalt principals are also devices that create rhythm when present in a layout.

All these things are worked by Tao. Tao was difficult to define, and we encountered many potential answers as to what it is. One thing we know for sure, Tao itself is not seen, but the effects of it are. Tao is the rhythm, Tao is what makes design work, it holds the components together in the visual field, Tao or rhythm is present inside, around or between parts of a design. It is the beginning point, the working point, and the finishing point all in one. Josef Müller-Brockman said that 'Grids Are Good For The Soup' (aisleone, 2011). However, I'd like to be radical and tweak this statement, I'm going to say that grids are good for the soup, and not just grids. Information hierarchies, white space and Gestalt theories are all ingredients that exist and can be seen working, but cannot be seen themselves. These things all operate through Tao, and the Tao brings the rhythm.

A generous dose of white space + A few Tao leaves + A sprinkle of Gestalt & pepper = Rhythmic soup.
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My family for all their support, and their proof-reading ability.
My course mates and colleagues for their help and suggestions.
Stephen Fry, Wolfgang Köhler and Lao-Tse for being my intellectual idols.
All the dead graphic designers, for their legacy and the inspiration they have provided.
All the graphic designers who are still alive for all their inspiration.
Thank you all.
Rhythm + Design
Nothing + Tao + Gestalt
= Soup