Personal Statement

When I think about the world, I imagine a system — many organisms perpetually interact with one-another, each governed by its own set of rules, collectively unpredictable & complex; with the occasional sprinkle of universal noise. My artistic practice is wholly devoted towards the pursuit of understanding and representing this semi-ordered nature of the world.

I grew up all around India, moving with / between my parents and studying in as many as seven different schools. Every two years, I was an outsider in a well-established social system; *desperate* to fit in. As a somewhat reserved child, I began observing and replicating behaviours considered favourable by certain groups of people, in the hopes of being accepted by them. During the first few weeks at a new school, I would pick out the corner bench in class and carefully study the rules of social interaction in that environment. When patterns emerged, I made slight adjustments to my personality and tried it to see if my hypothesis of becoming more appealing to people in that group stood true. Years later, during my undergraduate education in design, I would find a succinct term for what I had been doing all those years — 'research'.


I would argue that I have been a researcher all my life, even before the systematic way of channelling curiosity was formally introduced to me. In school, I was kicked out of classes for asking 'more than necessary' and, sometimes, 'unanswerable' questions. To make friends, I studied people and tried behavioural experiments. As a student-athlete, I kept logs of training schedules & performances to understand what stimuli worked best. Throughout childhood, there remained an formally unharnessed attachment between me and the scientific method, perhaps due to the absence of an open academic playground.

After graduating high school, the results of two aptitude tests directed me towards an undergraduate education in design. In the first month, we were all sat down in a classroom and were being introduced to a course that required our participation for the next three months. I remember visible dissent in that classroom — none of us could figure out how or why this would be helpful in our careers as designers. I did what I always did when something didn't sit well with me — I raised my hand and asked the professor *why* we were being asked to take this course. As soon as the words left my mouth, I expected a 'sit down' or 'get out'. To my surprise, she *answered*.

As I would learn through practice in the next four years, curiosity was essential to be a designer and there were ways to channel it without getting kicked out of class. In my first three years, I explored conventional domains within the 'bubble' of design such as brand, interaction and product design. In doing so, I inadvertently also explored psychology, engineering, mathematics, biology, etc. As I made more projects, I began to realise that design could exist in-between academic confines, draw connections and present these to people in digestible formats.

Math Roses generated on Processing by Arjun Yadav.
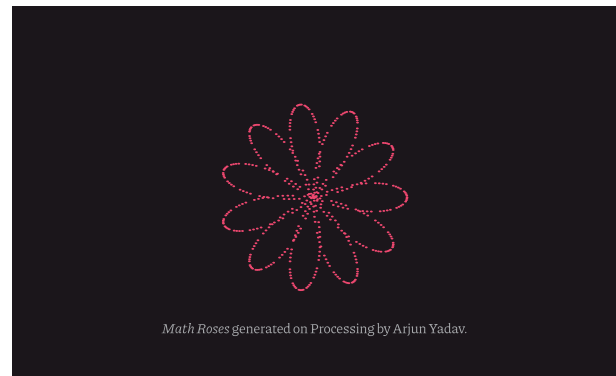
To put this definition to the test, I joined the Xperimenters programme at Science Gallery Bengaluru for my thesis. A first-of-its-kind programme in the country, the organisation invited four young adults to interact with leading experts working in diverse disciplinary fields. I spent my time sitting in biophysics labs, distinguishing between human needs & wants with a theoretical computer scientist, and learning web development with a creative technologist. Each conversation formed the base for new creative work, all of which are logged here.

Ultimately, I developed *In Between Life & Death* — a web game for young adults that tried to convey why human beings do what they do. The game was built on my interpretation of *Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs* and allowed players to control a particle that progresses through 'life'; by meeting requirements of each hierarchy. With the game as a tool, I facilitated two workshops with 50+ young adults — discussing human needs, happiness, and the existence (or inexistence) of a purpose in human life.

When the Xperimenters programme ended, I knew with resounding clarity that this was the kind of work that I wanted to do with my life, but failed to find an economically viable way to do so.

As a result, for the past three years, I have been 'semi-masquerading' as a design researcher during the day — asking questions to make products for people in low-resource environments and, at night, letting my computational art enquiry take me where it takes me. This skewed scale is what I want to fix via my time at the Interactive Telecommunications Program at NYU.

I would like to spend more of my time making things reflective of my worldview and seeing how other people experience them; all while engaging more foundationally & critically with my craft. Since two hundred diverse students share the same umbrella interest, I also envision an exchange of similar & contradicting viewpoints — forcing my practice to exist outside of the protected space that I share with my computer. This not only offers me the chance to exponentially diversify my worldview, but also work towards defining it more precisely. NYU also houses faculty members whose work I have seen & admired over the internet. Interacting and, perhaps, collaborating with them will help me pave a clearer path for my future — whether it lies in an independent art practice, academia or full-time job.