the
inverting interface

Design, personal agents, and the post-brand world

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What happens when people experience brands, services, and institutions primarily through their own AI agents—rather than through brand-designed apps, websites, and campaigns?

I use this speculative scenario to do two things at once:

- trace how design and brand work might move into an agent-mediated world, and

- stress-test a comfortable myth the industry has told itself for years: that we have been "designing for the user" and "putting the customer first", when structurally we have mostly been designing and branding for the business via the user.

The starting point should be familiar.

Technology consultancies frame *agentic AI* as a new form of capital, primarily an enterprise asset for automating workflows and reshaping operating models.

This report flips the vantage point and treats agents as *personal infrastructure*: a foundational agent representing the individual, sitting on top and negotiating with vertical and branded agents.

FROM THAT VANTAGE I MAKE FOUR CORE CLAIMS

1. Design moves to the agent layer	**2. Brands risk losing control of the interface—and will fight back**	**3. UX shifts to semantics, protocols, information architecture**	**4. UI designers become stewards of standardised design systems**
The most consequential UX and brand decisions will no longer live in screens and campaigns, but in how agents see, interpret, and act: their objectives, semantics, protocols, and behaviours.	As user-side agents strip away chrome, funnels, and patterns, brands risk being reduced to what can be expressed as data, constraints, and guarantees. Some will adapt and become *protocol-native*; others will double down on walled gardens and ornamental UX.	The centre of gravity moves from *optimising flows inside someone else's platform logic* to *defining the contracts and meanings through which foundational, vertical, and branded agents interact*. UX becomes closer to protocol design and data architecture than to page layouts.	As UI grammars stabilise and become machine-readable, most UI work collapses into maintaining and governing those systems.

Underneath these four points runs a deeper thread

Much of what we have called "user-centred design" and "customer-centric branding" has, in practice, been optimisation for business metrics under the banner of empathy—free returns, same-day delivery, frictionless betting, cross-selling flows dressed up as "delight". Designers and brand teams were rarely at the helm of those choices, but they faithfully translated them into pixels and stories.

Personal agents introduce, for the first time, a plausible technical way for "for the user" to stop being a slogan and start being an architecture.

Either the user owns the foundational agent that mediates the world for them, or they don't.

Either brands and organisations can express their value in clean protocols that user-side agents can trust, or they can't.

If agents become the main way humans and organisations meet, what happens to a discipline that has mostly lived in chrome, and to brands that have mostly lived in stories?

A reflection on the future of brands as much as the future of design.

INTRODUCTION: FROM ENTERPRISE AGENTS TO PERSONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

What if the most important interface in someone's life is not any single brand's app or website, but their own personal agent?

Somehow the starting point for this speculative exercise sits close to what some design theorists and practitioners have begun to call *post-branding*.

In that literature, branding is criticised as a key instrument of "communicative capitalism": a way of commodifying identity, collapsing public communication into competitive signalling, and turning every act of expression into potential brand labour.

Post-branding is proposed as a counter-practice—designing collective identity and public communication that is transparent, participatory, and closer to commoning than to property: less about top-down brand control, more about shared meaning-making.

In the context of this report, **I am not attempting to, nor I'm interested in importing that agenda wholesale**, but the scenario of user-owned agents and user-owned chrome **can be read as one possible, very pragmatic route toward a post-branding condition for mainstream organisations**.

On the other side of the mirror, I see the early outlines of a different possibility: **agents not just as corporate infrastructure, but as personal infrastructure.**

Instead of being something companies "use on users", agents become something individuals use to navigate companies, services, and information.

This is a report about that world.
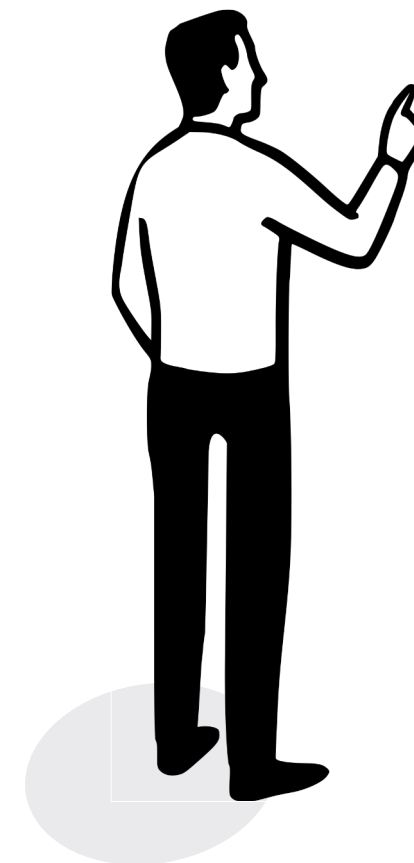
The lens and its limits

This report is explicitly an exercise in speculative thinking, not a forecast or roadmap.

Strategic design lens first. This is not a moral manifesto or a policy proposal. The primary focus is on strategic design implications: how roles, practices, and touchpoints might evolve. That said, when the gap between "for the user" rhetoric and actual business incentives is too large to ignore, I will name it explicitly, because **the misalignment itself is now a design variable.**

I remain **technology-agnostic** where possible. I do not assume specific vendors or standards; I focus on structural shifts.

The scenario is **deliberately simplified**. Bracketing out many frictions (regulation, business resistance, fragmentation) to make underlying design and brand questions easier to see.

THE CORE PROVOCATION: UX AS SOMETHING THE USER OWNS

What if the dominant UX layer is no longer brand-specific websites and apps, but user-specific, agent-mediated interfaces that sit on top of them?

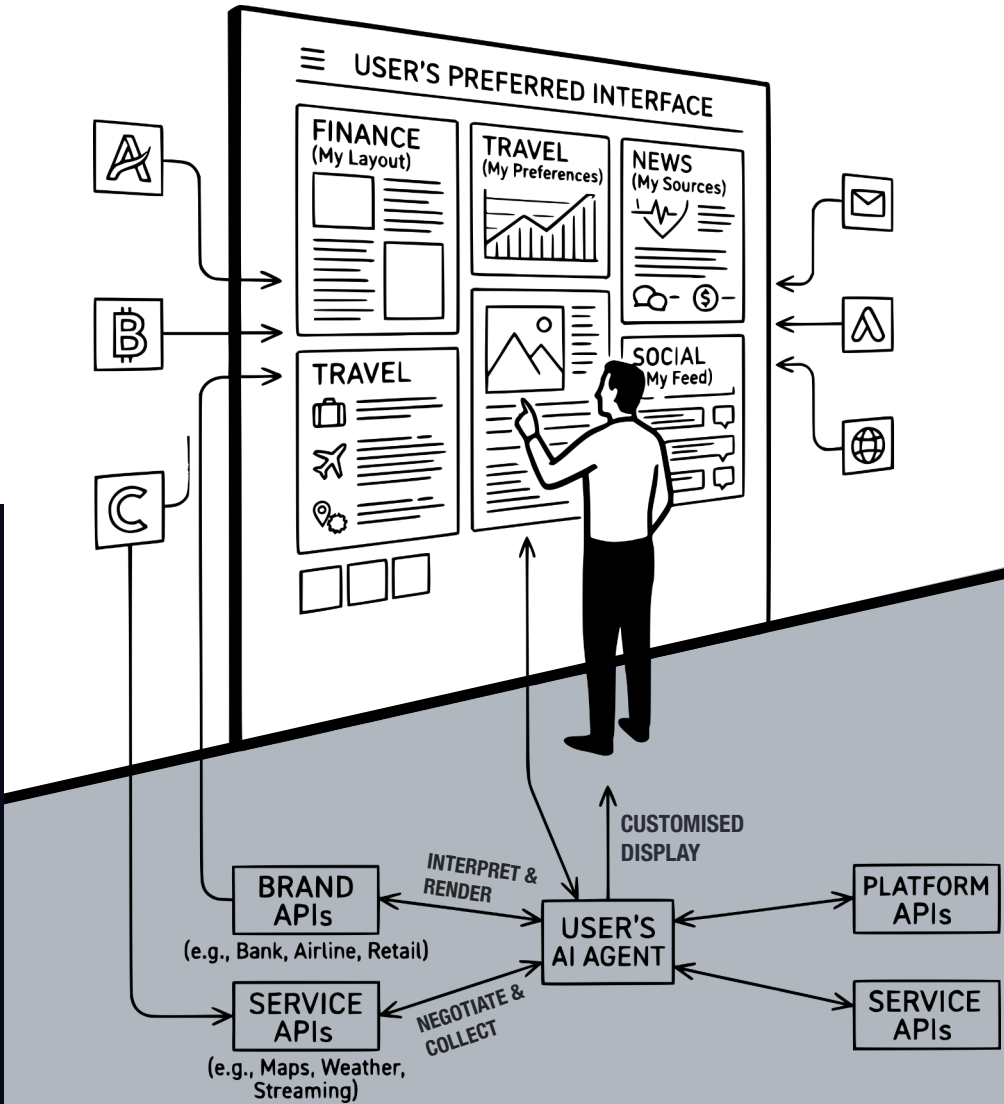The hypothesis behind this exercise is simple, in such a world:

- **The primary *user interface*** is the one your personal agent maintains for you.
- **Brand touchpoints**—content, offers, actions, policies—are consumed and rearranged by that agent, rather than presented in a fixed, brand-designed layout.
- **Agents operate directly on code, APIs, and structured semantics,** and only then produce a visual or conversational interface tailored to you.

It *reverses* the long-standing pattern in designing for digital channels:

- **Today:** Brands design an interface → user adapts to it
- **Speculative future:** Users (and their agent) define an interface → brand adapts to that.

This inversion is the backbone of the report, everything else follows from it:

1. **Design** moves to the agent level.
2. **Brands** risk losing control of the interface.
3. **UX** becomes semantics, protocols, and information architecture.
4. **UI** design collapses into design-system stewardship.

USER'S PREFERRED INTERFACE

FINANCE (My Layout) — TRAVEL (My Preferences) — NEWS (My Sources)

TRAVEL — SOCIAL (My Feed)

INTERPRET & RENDER

CUSTOMISED DISPLAY

BRAND APIs (e.g., Bank, Airline, Retail)

SERVICE APIs (e.g., Maps, Weather, Streaming)

NEGOTIATE & COLLECT

USER'S AI AGENT

PLATFORM APIs

SERVICE APIs

It is important to stress that this is only a visual metaphor.

The big touch screen inevitably evokes *Minority Report*, but in practice the "display" could be almost anything:

- a phone or laptop screen
- a smart home surface
- a voice-based assistant
- AR glasses
- a distributed set of micro-interfaces across devices
- ...

Likewise, **it does not have to look or feel like a dashboard.**

The point is **not** the form factor or the specific UI components.

The point is that there is a stable, user-centric experience layert that sits on top of many different brands and services, and that layer is mediated by the user's own agent.

FROM PERSONALISATION TO AGENT-MEDIATED CUSTOMISATION

To ground this, let's start from a familiar distinction: *personalisation vs customisation*.

Personalisation
(as we do it today)

The system collects data about you—behaviour, segment, inferred preferences—and then *it* decides what to show, in what order, under which visual variant.

Control sits on the platform side. The experience is "for you", but not "yours".

Customisation

You actively shape the environment to fit your needs, tastes, or identity.

Think of custom motorbikes built on a basic frame; or, digitally, dashboards where you choose widgets and layouts.

Presenting large, complex information sets in multiple formats is a very common design challenge.

Think of social media feeds, enterprise portals, business dashboards: all of these channels offer only limited customisation. Whenever we let a broad, heterogeneous user base freely configure them, things usually end up the same way:

- only power users bother to customise
- layouts become messy and fragile
- the system exposes its internal complexity instead of shielding users from it

For these reasons, product teams have overwhelmingly chosen personalisation over customisation—not out of malice, but out of sheer survival.

The speculative shift here is the personalisation engine moving to the user side.

Instead of a brand or platform adapting the experience *for* you, your *own agent* adapts the entire digital world *to* you:

- You don't micro-configure every screen. You express rules and constraints:

  "Never autoplay video"; "Show total cost including fees"; "Surface the most time-sensitive items first"; "Respect these accessibility needs everywhere."

- Your agent applies those rules consistently across brands and services, by operating directly on code and APIs and composing a customised display on top.

In other words, true customisation becomes feasible—not as an annoying "edit dashboard" mode, but as an ongoing, agent-mediated process.
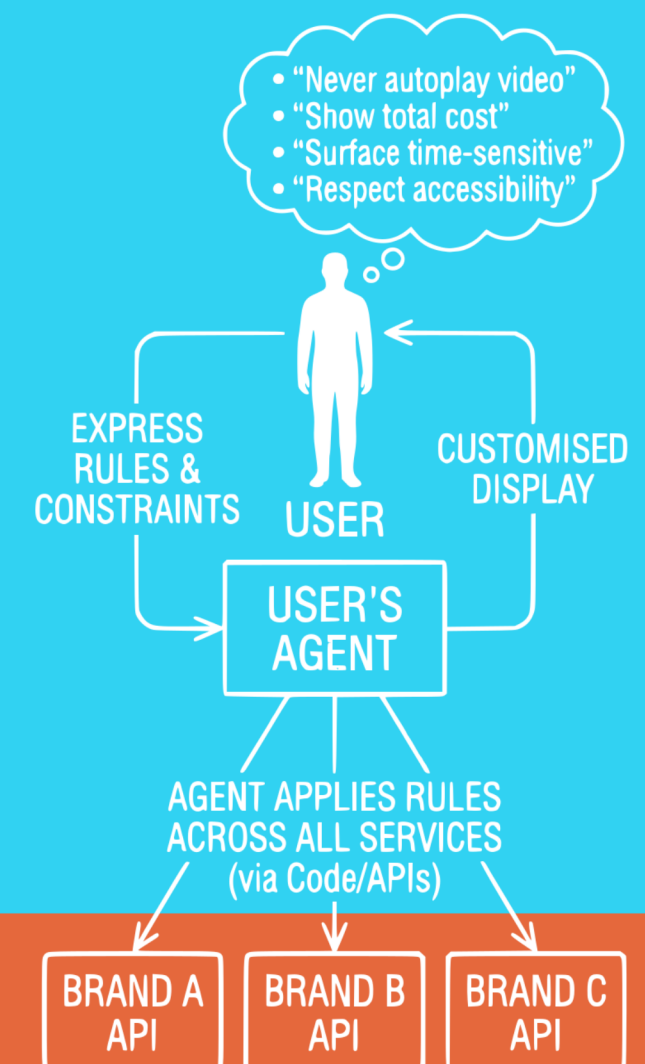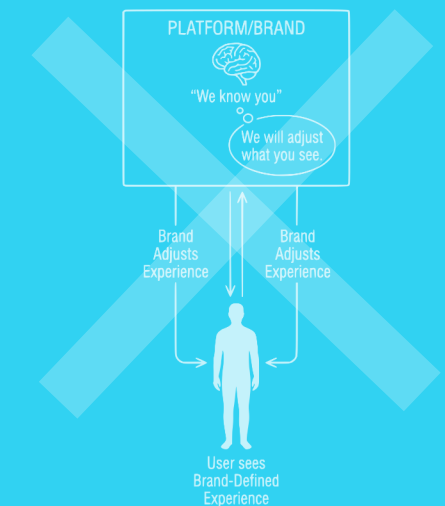
Personalisation says:

"We, the platform, know you and will adjust what you see."

Agent-mediated customisation says:

"You, through your agent, define how the world should show up for you—and services must adapt to that."

*For brands,
this is not a UX tweak.
It is a structural change
in who sets the rules of
engagement*

WHO OWNS THE CHROME, WHO OWNS THE AGENT?

The strategic question shifts from: "Who owns the browser/OS?" to: "Who owns the agent that sits above them?"

To see why this matters, we need to look at a less glamorous layer of experience: the chrome.

By chrome I mean the framing interface around content:

- **on the web:** browser window, tabs, address bar, navigation controls
- **on desktop and mobile:** the OS itself—status bars, notifications, app switchers, system gestures
- **in voice and ambient computing:** wake words, response patterns, notification rules.

For decades, **whoever owned the chrome effectively wrote the rules**

of experience. Whatever we designed had to live inside:

- **browser standards** (HTML, CSS, JS, W3C)
- **device capabilities and OS policies**
- **platform interaction grammars** (scrolling, swiping, permissions, notifications)

You could build any website you wanted—as long as it lived in a rectangle in a browser window.

You could build any app you wanted—as long as it obeyed the platform's patterns and store policies.

In this sense, the big *Minority Report*-style screen you might imagine when thinking about a *customised display* is misleading.

The real provocation is not its size; it is the idea that **the chrome itself could become user-owned.**

If a personal agent sits between brands and the person, then even on a very ordinary laptop or phone screen **that person could, in principle, control:**

| The visual and auditory representation of information | The density and hierarchy of content | Which interaction patterns are allowed or suppressed | Which modalities are foregrounded (text, voice, visuals, haptics) |

The physical device still imposes limits—pixels, sound, context—but the higher-level rules of the experience no longer need to be dictated entirely by the browser vendor or the phone OS.

The user, via their agent, can re-skin and reorganise the world they fetch on purpose.

At that point, owning the chrome becomes a subset of owning the agent:

The chrome draws the window

The agent decides what the window shows, when, and why

THE LAYERED AGENT ECOSYSTEM

It is unlikely that we will end up with a single universal agent or a perfectly neat stack. A more realistic—and more interesting—picture is layered.

It's useful to distinguish three classes of agents

Foundational agents	Vertical agents	Branded agents
Represents your identity	**Specialised in domains**	**Operated by specific organisations**
Long-term interests, constraints, values, accessibility needs.	Travel, shopping, health, money, public administration, etc.	A Zara agent, an Amazon agent, your bank's agent, a tax authority's agent.
Maintains your personal constitution	**Speak the language of their domain in depth**	**Know their own inventory**
How you want the world to interact with you.	Entities, workflows, regulations.	And policies, pricing, and systems intimately.
Acts as gatekeeper of your data	**Still operate under policies**	**Optimise for their own goals**
And arbiter of which other agents may act on your behalf, and under what conditions.	And constraints set by your foundational agent.	

DESIGN & POWER CONCENTRATE AT THE TOP

YOU

(identity, preferences, constraints)

FOUNDATIONAL AGENT

(policies, delegation, data control)

VERTICAL AGENTS
shopping, travel, health, money...

(APIs, contracts, negotiation)

BRANDED AGENTS & SERVICES
ZARA amazon Airlines Banks Tax Office

Encodes your non-negotiables.

Encode domain protocols—what 'good' looks like.

Guests: propose flows, offers; filtered, reshaped, or vetoed by layers above.

FOR BRANDS: OPPORTUNITY & THREAT

Integrate deeply into people's lives

Systematically down-ranked, sanitised, or ignored

The foundational agent encodes your non-negotiables.

Vertical agents encode domain protocols—what good looks like in each space.

Branded agents are guests. They can propose flows, offers, experiences; but these are filtered, reshaped, or vetoed by the layers above.

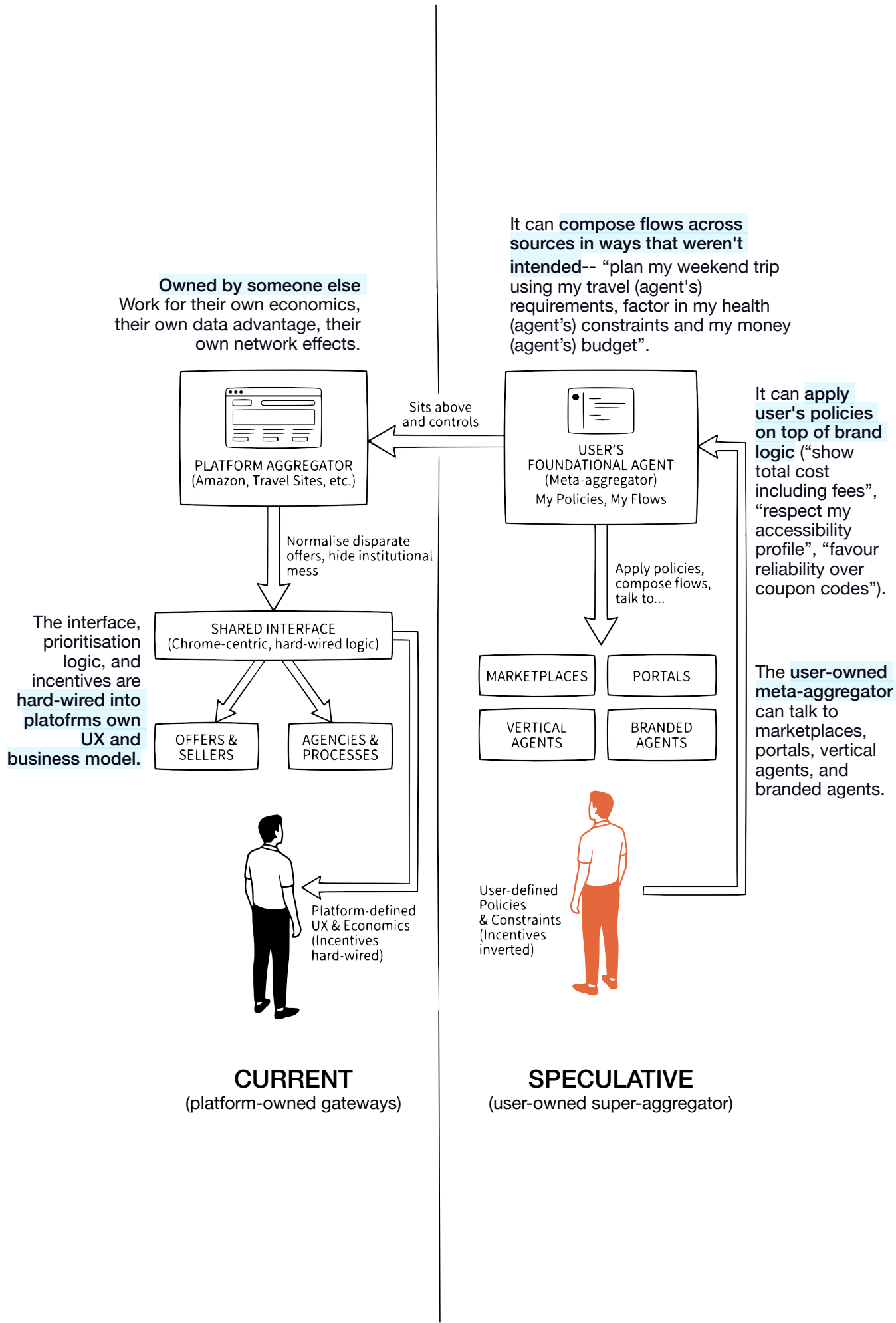# PERSONAL AGENTS AS USER-OWNED SUPER-AGGREGATORS

This is not science fiction. All of this already exists, we just inverted the incentives.

If this architecture sounds abstract, we already have crude approximations:

Aggregators and marketplaces (travel sites, Amazon, Zalando) aggregate offers and sellers behind a single search bar and checkout.

Public service portals aggregate agencies and processes behind a shared interface.

Functionally, they already:

- **Normalise** disparate offers
- **Expose** a coherent set of actions
- **Hide** some of the organisational complexity.

It can **compose flows across sources in ways that weren't intended**-- "plan my weekend trip using my travel (agent's) requirements, factor in my health (agent's) constraints and my money (agent's) budget".

Owned by someone else Work for their own economics, their own data advantage, their own network effects.

Sits above and controls

It can **apply user's policies on top of brand logic** ("show total cost including fees", "respect my accessibility profile", "favour reliability over coupon codes").

PLATFORM AGGREGATOR (Amazon, Travel Sites, etc.)

USER'S FOUNDATIONAL AGENT (Meta-aggregator) My Policies, My Flows

Normalise disparate offers, hide institutional mess

The interface, prioritisation logic, and incentives are **hard-wired into platofrms own UX and business model.**

SHARED INTERFACE (Chrome-centric, hard-wired logic)

Apply policies, compose flows, talk to...

The **user-owned meta-aggregator** can talk to marketplaces, portals, vertical agents, and branded agents.

OFFERS & SELLERS

AGENCIES & PROCESSES

MARKETPLACES

PORTALS

VERTICAL AGENTS

BRANDED AGENTS

Platform-defined UX & Economics (Incentives hard-wired)

User-defined Policies & Constraints (Incentives inverted)

CURRENT (platform-owned gateways)

SPECULATIVE (user-owned super-aggregator)

FROM SEO TRICKS TO AGENT ALIGNMENT

It is worth pausing here to look at a close cousin of this whole story: *SEO*.

For roughly two decades, SEO has been the poor person's attempt to "trick" search engines—an industry built on nudging incomplete models of intent.

Search engines could not truly understand the messiness of human desire; they only saw strings, links, click-through rates.

SEO emerged to optimise for those proxies: keywords, link farms, content mills, technical tweaks.

Sometimes helpful, sometimes manipulative.

You could say SEO existed because:

- **Users** expressed vague desires in a text box
- **Search engines** had *crude models* of those desires
- **SEO** people tried to *bridge* (and exploit) *that gap*.

In a different way, **designers have been doing a similar job:**

- **interpreting** vague, often contradictory "user needs"
- **translating** them into screens and flows constrained by brand goals, channels, and tech stacks
- **optimising** for proxy metrics (clicks, NPS, conversion) rather than lived experience

Design, under this regime, has been a kind of internal SEO for UX: **a mix of genuine interpretation and systematic gaming of limited models.**

Personal agents change the geometry of that triangle.

Instead of throwing vague queries at a global search engine, you express preferences, constraints, and goals to your own agent, over time.

Your personal agent builds a rich, longitudinal model of you—not of a demographic segment or a keyword cluster.

Will brands try to do the equivalent of SEO for agents—**Agent Experience Optimisation**? Of course.

They will tune semantics, pricing, and interfaces to perform better whatever "rules set" a user's agent requires.

But if foundational agents are genuinely aligned with the user interests, the old bag of SEO tricks stops working.

You won't get better placement by shouting louder or hiding your fees; **you'll get it by being:**

When it goes out to fetch, compare, and negotiate on your behalf

it is not guessing in the dark, it is acting from a clearer picture of what you tend to want, avoid, tolerate.

Semantically clean
agents can actually understand you

Behaviourally reliable
you do what you say

Policy-compatible
you respect the user's explicit rules

PLATFORMS: APPLE-STYLE VS ANDROID-STYLE AGENTS

How much control do I have over the software that perceives, filters, and negotiates the world on my behalf?*

If you squint, you can already see two familiar logics forming:

Apple-style agents

- **Closed,** vertically integrated, deeply embedded into hardware and OS.
- **Highly curated,** coherent, "safe"—but opinionated about what is allowed

Android/Linux-style agents

- **More open,** customisable, forkable, potentially self-hosted.
- **Messier,** but more transparently aligned with user or community **interests.**

In practice we are likely to see:

Platform agents
(Apple-style defaults)

Commercial cross-platform agents
(Android-like, but hosted)

Open-source/self-hosted frameworks
(Linux-like)
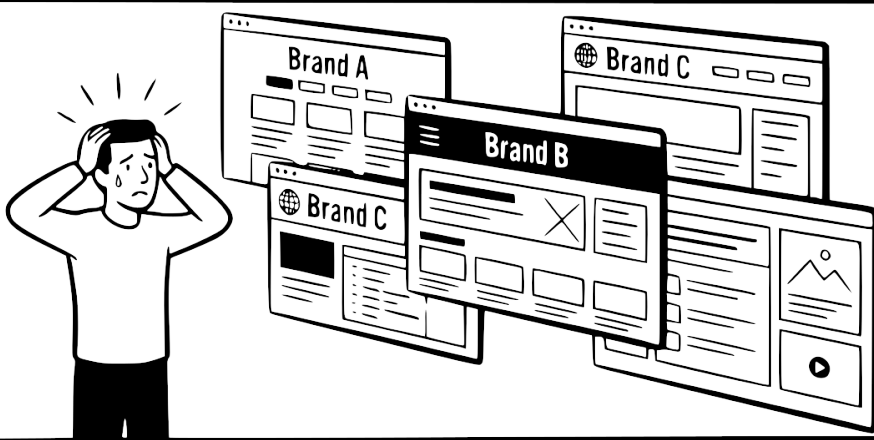
* Of course this question is relevant for the current digital ecosystem as well, it is only dramatically more exposed in a agents-led scenario.

USER'S AGENT
(Android/Linux-like)

COMMERCIAL AGENT
(Android-like, Hosted)

OPEN-SOURCE /
SELF-HOSTED FRAMEWORK
(Linux-like)

CUSTOMISABLE WORLD

PLATFORM AGENT
(Apple-style Default)

HARDWARE & OS

DEEPLY EMBEDDED

CURATED WORLD

LIMITED CONTROL

HIGH CONTROL & CUSTOMISATION
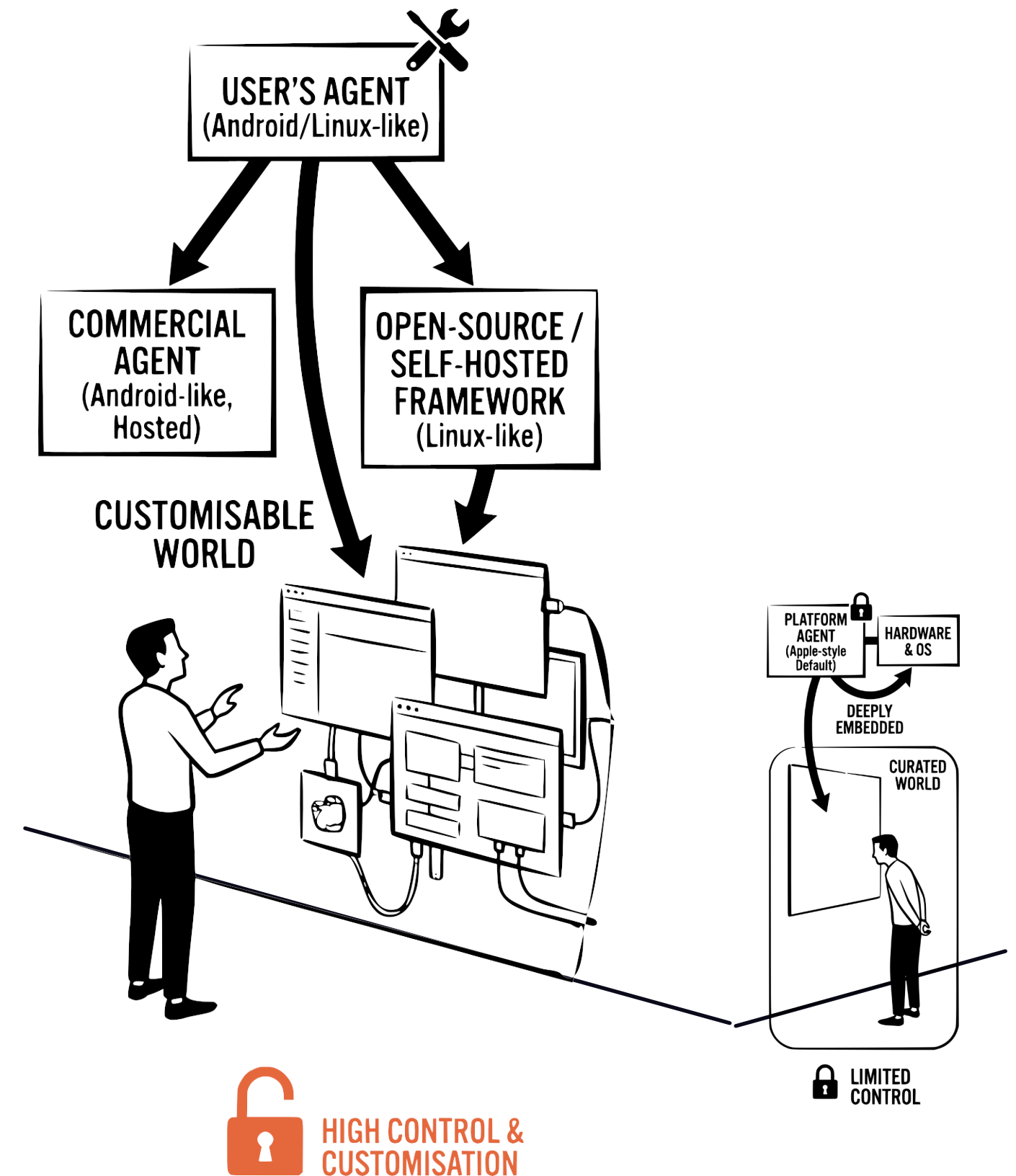
DESIGN MOVES DECISIVELY TO THE AGENT LAYER

THE OLD WAY: VISITING WEBSITES
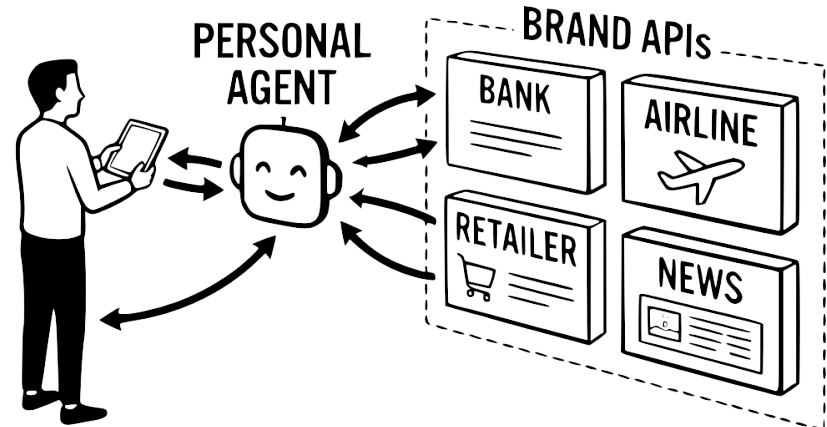
Fragmented, inconsistent patterns, frequent redirections.

Brand A
Brand C
Brand B
Brand C

MY INTERFACE: STABLE & CONSISTENT

Coherent & stable navigation, typography, contrast, density.

Welcome

AGENT NEGOTIATES & RENDERS

The agent pulls relevant actions/data. renders in my UX grammar.

PERSONAL AGENT
BRAND APIs
BANK
AIRLINE
RETAILER
NEWS

MY UX CONTAINER: CUTOMISED PREFERENCES

"Focus mode, high contrast, no upsell c%@p".

The agent enforces it across everything.

Focus Mode
BANK
NEWS
RETAIL

IMPLICATIONS FOR UX, UI, AND BRAND EXPERIENCE

**The conflict between user-side agents and brand/platform control is not a side issue.
It is the context in which all of this design and brand work will live.**

UX design shifts from "what happens on our site" to "how we behave inside someone else's agent-mediated world".

UX becomes a negotiation between agents.

In this world, *front-end UX is a negotiation* between

- **user's foundational and vertical agents** (preferences, constraints, time, cognitive bandwidth)
- **brand's agent and systems** (what it wants to surface and optimise)

- **technical and policy contract** between them (APIs, schemas, rules).

Instead of:

Brand → designs website → user visits website

we get:

Brand → exposes semantics & services

User's agents → compose them into the user's personal UX

Brands lose chrome first (and fight back)

Brands lose a lot, and visual control is the first thing to go.

Brand experience shifts from pixel-perfect, brand-infused funnels to questions like:

How good is our content and service **when stripped of our chrome**?

How do we show up when we're **one of many cards** inside someone's personal agent UI?

How does our brand agent behave when **negotiating with user agents**?

Unsurprisingly, brands won't take this loss of control lightly:

They will deploy **walled-garden apps and hostile interfaces.**

They will try to **block or limit agents** via legal and technical means.

Platform brands will try to **become the vertical agents** themselves (the travel agent, the shopping agent, the money agent).

They may also lose:

- **precise layout**
- **animation**
- **composition**
- **control over which banner sits where—or if banners exist at all**

They may retain:

- **tone of voice**
- **offer design**
- **service quality and policies**
- **the behaviour of their own branded agents**

But even these are subject to filtering, as user's agents can:

- **strip patterns**
- **surface factual elements only (availability, price, delivery, constraints)**
- **cross-check claims with public data**

Most organisations will straddle categories and experiment

STRATEGIC POSITIONING FOR BRANDS

Do we accept being one node among many in someone else's agent-mediated world, or do we attempt to become the world—the protocol, the platform, the agent?*

If we take this scenario seriously, brands are being pushed into new strategic positions

Commodity brands*	Protocol-native brands	Platform brands
• **Accept** being largely interchangeable inside user-side shopping, travel, or health agents	• **Design first for agents**, then for humans	• **Try to own** the vertical agents themselves (becoming the shopping/travel/money agent)
• **Compete** on price, availability, and operational reliability	• **Invest** in clean semantics, honest data, explicit guarantees and constraints	• **Re-centralise** power away from user-owned foundational agents
• **Design** work focuses on clarity and compliance	• **Differentiation** comes from being the easiest, safest, most intelligible brand for your agent to work with	• **Treat branded agents** not as guests but as tenants

* inside vertical agents

Compete on price, availability, reliability.

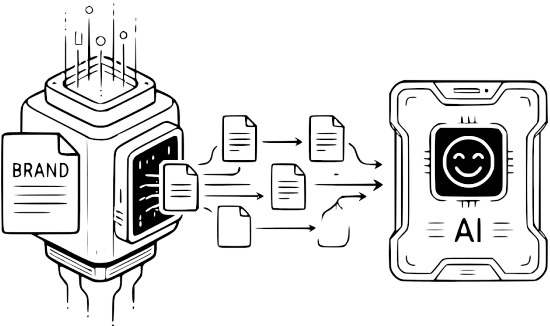Design for clarity and compliance.

COMMODITY BRANDS
inside vertical agents

Differentiation through being easiest, safest, most intelligible by agents.

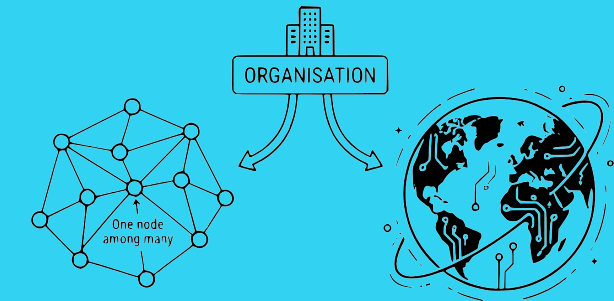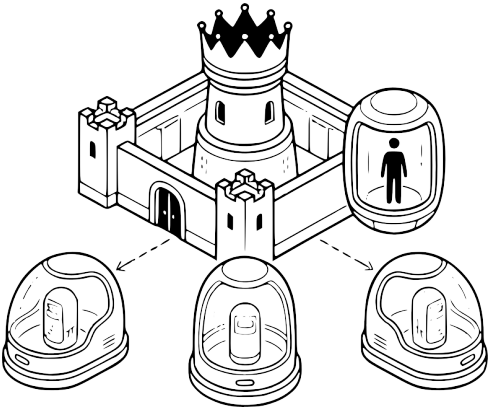Design first for agents, then for humans.
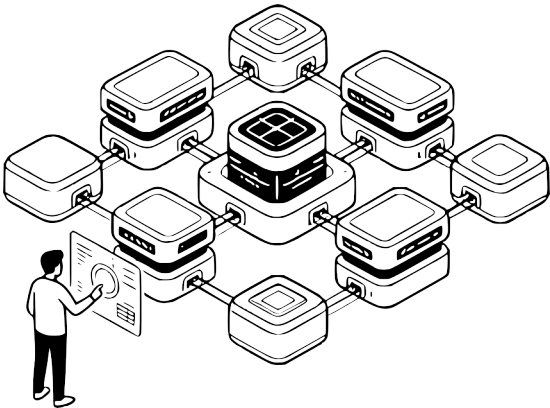
PROTOCOL NATIVE BRANDS

PLATFORM BRANDS

Attempt to own the vertical agents themselves.

Re-centralise power; treat agents as tenants.

* THE STRATEGIC QUESTION

DESIGN MOVES TO THE AGENT LAYER

In an agent-mediated world, most of what we currently call UX/UI work moves off the screen and into the agent layer.

A large share of today's design labour—pushing pixels inside pre-made templates, rearranging standard patterns for yet another funnel—**will be automated away.**

Designers who define themselves by that work will not sit near the strategic centre.

What grows instead is design concerned with **what agents see, understand, and decide, not how any one page looks.**

Designing for foundational, vertical, and branded agents

You are now designing for three audiences

The foundational agent: the person's *constitutional layer*

Vertical agents: domain protocols

Branded agents: how your organisation shows up within those constraints

For the foundational agent

You define how identity, consent, delegation, and revocation work; how conflicts between user goals and brand goals are resolved; which behaviours are never acceptable.

For vertical agents

You define domain protocols: entities, events, success and failure states; what "good" service looks like in travel, health, money, public services.

For branded agents

You design what you expose, how you explain it, what you are willing to negotiate, and what you guarantee.

Design tasks include

This is still UX—but it is UX as protocol and IA design, not as screen design

Defining semantic schemas

- primary_action
- critical_warning
- optional_upsell
- regulatory_disclosure

plus domain-specific entities and events.

Specifying priority and intent

"If the user's goal is X, emphasise this; if Y, suppress that; if there's a conflict, defer to foundational policy."

Designing negotiation logic

What may a branded agent propose?

What may a vertical agent normalise or hide?

When must the foundational agent escalate to the human?

UX AS SEMANTICS, PROTOCOLS, AND INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

UX work moves from "how does this screen flow?" to "how does this system mean?"

Core responsibilities
It is still design—but the material is semantics, not buttons.

Information architecture as data architecture	Experience protocols	Governance of behaviour
Content models, entity relationships, event vocabularies—so agents can reason about state, intent, and consequence.	Contractual rules for how foundational, vertical, and branded agents interact: capabilities, sequencing, fallback, escalation, consent.	Constraints, auditability, explainability—hooks that allow humans and regulators to understand and shape agent behaviour.

Seen through this lens, much of what we called *UX* over the last decade was doing for interfaces what SEO did for search: interpreting vague human desires for systems that only understood crude signals.

Designers ran research, synthesised needs, and then tried to *rank* certain paths higher in the user's attention: *highlight this CTA, downplay that friction, move this module above the fold.* Sometimes this genuinely helped people; often it mostly helped the funnel.

Wrapped around this, the discipline developed a comforting story: "we design for the user". The poster on the wall version of *user-centred design* is not far from the "the customer is always right" plaque in a corner shop: rhetorically about the human, structurally about the till.

If we are honest, most of what has been sold as "for the user" over the last fifteen years has been:

- **for the business**, against the user's long-term interests, or
- **for the user** in the narrowest, most transactional sense, against any wider notion of humanity or commons.

"Designing for the user" has been the story we told ourselves while designing:

- **free returns** and one-click same-day delivery at planetary cost
- **frictionless betting apps** dressed as entertainment
- **cross-selling and dark patterns** that systematically prey on cognitive limits and addictions.

All of it perfectly optimised for

engagement, *conversion*, *loyalty*.

All of it technically for the user—if your definition of "for" stops at short-term convenience and instant gratification.

Designers were never really at the helm of this. They did not decide that free returns should be the default, that same-day delivery was worth the environmental externalities, or that betting products should live in your pocket. Those decisions were made elsewhere, by people with P&L accountability and a very different notion of *value*.

But designers did, for the most part, go along with it:

- **translating** these decisions into journeys and flows
- **smoothing** over the rough edges
- **retrofitting** user-centric narratives on choices that were anything but.

So when I say that design shifts, in this speculative world, from flows to *semantics and protocols*, I am not nostalgically defending a golden age of "true user-centricity" that never really existed at scale.

I am pointing out that the old myth—"design is here to speak for the user"—was always structurally compromised, and that personal agents give users a way to speak for themselves in machine-readable form.

In an agentic world, that interpreter role shifts.

Your foundational agent has the potential, by *Design*, to be a far better—and more honest—model of you than any persona in a slide deck.

You teach it directly what you like, what you hate, what you never want to see again. It watches what you actually do, not what you say in a workshop.

That does not make design obsolete; it changes what design is interpreting.

Instead of interpreting users *for* platforms, designers will increasingly *interpret domains, institutions, and constraints* for user-side agents.

Instead of encoding "what we want the user to do", they will encode *what it means to be a good actor in this protocol*, under this law, for this kind of person.

The job shifts from "SEO for screens" to semantics and choreography for agents.

The language of the interface becomes a shared standard; the job is to keep that language coherent,

UI DESIGNERS AS DESIGN-SYSTEM STEWARDS

UI design does not disappear, but its centre of gravity changes dramatically.

With mature design systems and tokens, plus agents that can compose UI, most traditional UI work becomes:

- **generating on-brand variants** at scale
- **enforcing consistency** and accessibility
- **evolving** the underlying visual language.

Human UI designers become:

- **maintainers** and stewards of design systems
- **curators** of a visual ontology ("this is what a warning looks like; this is how urgency maps to motion or sound")
- **quality filters** and taste-makers over agent-generated interfaces.

Once interaction grammars and components are standardised and machine-readable, **most value in UI shifts from invention to stewardship.**

This is not a moral judgement; it is a capability gap. And it matters for both designers and brands.

BEYOND SCREENS: MULTIMODAL AGENTS AND THE LIMITS OF CURRENT UI PRACTICE

So far I have mostly spoken in screen metaphors. **Agents are not limited to screens.**

A health agent might live in *audio and ambient cues*: a voice message, a vibration pattern, a subtle light change.

- **A mobility agent** might blend haptics, spatial sound, and in-car surfaces.
- **A public-services agent** might be a mix of secure messaging, voice calls, and documents.
- **The "front end"** of agents is inherently *multimodal and embodied*.

Are today's digital designers prepared for that?

My view: in general, **no.**

Most are trained for:

- **flat rectangles** (phone, desktop, watch)
- **a narrow band of interactions** (tap, scroll, click, drag)
- **decorating existing patterns** in Figma kits and component libraries.

Designing for agent-mediated, multimodal experiences requires*:

- **thinking in time and space**, not just in screens
- **sensory literacy** beyond pixels
- **a systems view of context:** where the person is, what else demands attention, which channel is appropriate

* theoretically the field of Service Design, although business/industry understanding is typically (dramatically) missing from service designers toolkit.

Agent Experience* Design

This is interaction design between AIs, on behalf of humans. It is indirect— but it is Design

On the *user side*, designers shape:

- **the personal UX container** (skins, layouts, density, interactions)
- **privacy and consent flows**
- **how the agent explains itself, its uncertainty, and its trade-offs**

On the *brand side*, designers shape:

- **how branded agents talk to user agents**
- **what they are allowed to negotiate**
- **how to respect user rules while still achieving business goals**

* should we still use the word "experience"?

What could block (or slow) this future

Because this is speculative, it's worth naming a few frictions

Brand resistance

Many brands will not willingly surrender control over UX and attention. They will:

- **block agents** where they can
- **hide b**ehind legal language and technical barriers
- **push** their own apps and embedded agents as **walled gardens**

Platform lock-in

OS and browser vendors will aim to keep their own agents as the default intermediaries, pushing an *Apple-style* agent world as the safe, easy choice.

Lack of standards/ regulation

To make user-side agents widely viable, we will need schemas, protocols, and likely regulation around:

- **data and model portability**
- **transparency about objectives and conflicts of interest**
- **baseline interoperability between agents and services.**

In practice we will see hybrids:

- **some sectors embracing agents** (for trust, regulatory, or competitive reasons)
- **others resisting them,** forcing personal agents to "wrap" hostile interfaces

For brands the same duality applies:

- **Some will lean into the agentic future:** expose clean APIs, design protocol-first, cultivate an "agent-friendly" reputation.
- **Others will cling to closed apps,** ornamental chrome, and habitual lock-in.

Both can work for a while.

The question is which compounds advantage in a world where user-side agents increasingly decide who gets visibility, who gets muted, and who gets reduced to a line of metadata.

FUTURES FOR DESIGNERS AND BRANDS
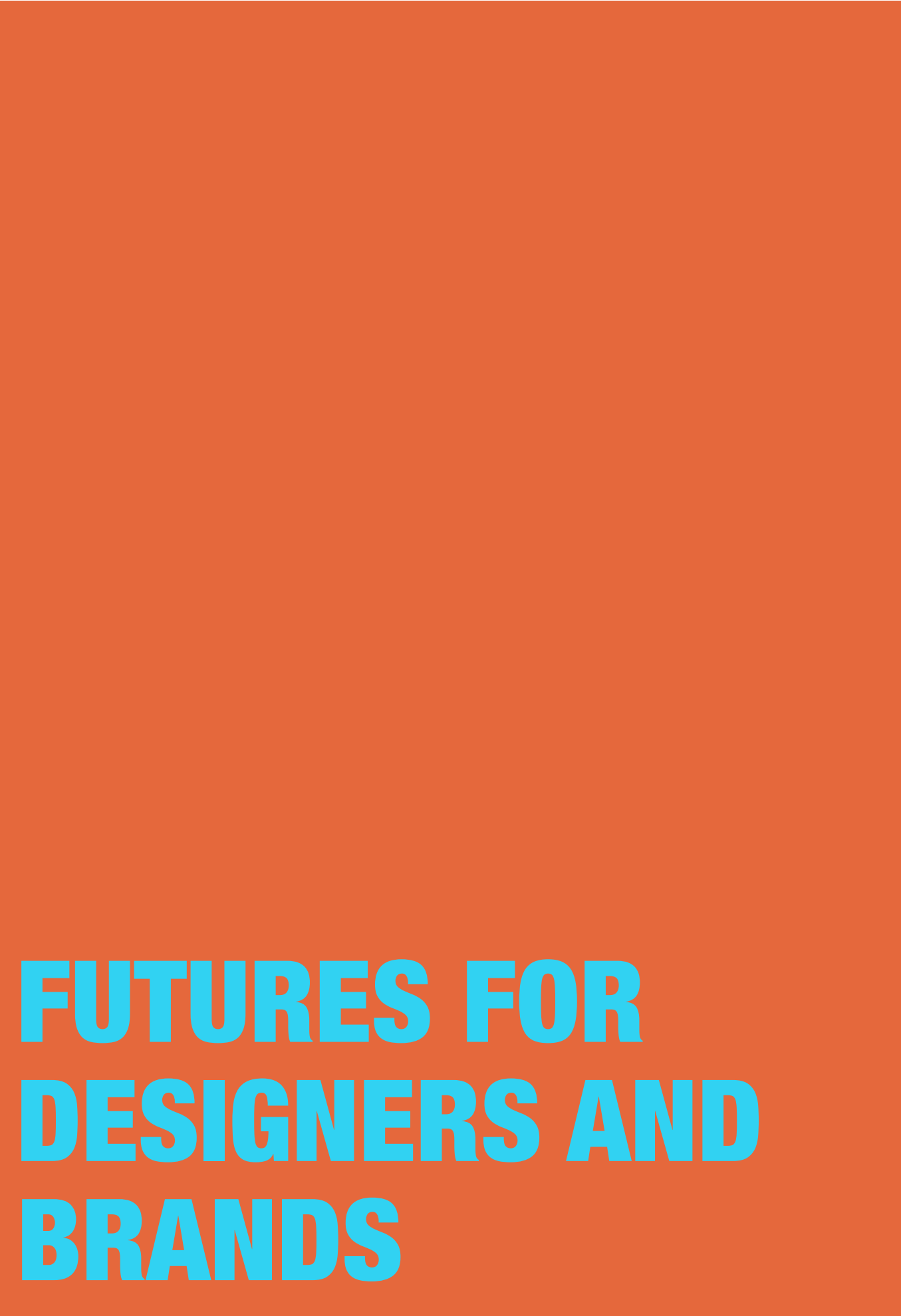
This is where the speculative exercise reconnects explicitly with a distinction I drew elsewhere: design vs Design, or designers vs Designers.

In "**Age of mediocrity: designers and the AI mirror**", I argued that much of what we call *design* today is an industrialised discipline: hyper-specialised, procedural, chained to templates and metrics.

pianabianco.com/ai-mirror

These are *designers* with a small "d": competent, tool-driven professionals operating as parts of optimisation pipelines. **Their work is codified into systems; precisely because it is codified, it is highly automatable.**

Alongside them, there is *Design* with a capital "D"—and *Designers* as people who work deliberately on frames rather than formats: they define spaces, rules, and relationships, not surfaces.

Agentic AI makes this distinction brutally concrete

design vs Design in an agentic world

Small-d design maps almost perfectly onto the layers AI will absorb:

- generating screens and flows from patterns
- instantiating visual systems
- tweaking funnels for conversion

In an agentic ecosystem, this becomes maintenance work on standardised design systems.

Capital-D Design maps almost perfectly onto the layers that become more important:

- defining constitutions for foundational agents
- shaping domain protocols for vertical agents
- designing semantics, data structures, and negotiation rules for branded agents.

Most of today's UI/UX practice, channel-bound, template-driven—**will be relegated to supervising pattern libraries for shells that agents can already compose.**

A smaller group—Designers in the stronger sense—**will move upstream into the design of agents themselves: their objectives, protocols, behaviours.**

Their material will be *policies, semantics, and institutional interfaces.* **Their outcome:** changes in how people and systems relate.

In an agentic world, the strongest brands will be those that can afford to be seen without make-up

brands vs Brands in an agentic world

Most branding today is small-b: logos, campaigns, tone-of-voice decks, orchestrated journeys. Underneath, many brands are functionally similar: same products, same policies, same patterns.

The surface is loud; the substance is thin.

In an agent-mediated world, surfaces matter less. Substance is all there is.

When your foundational and vertical agents interact with branded agents and services, they do not care about your colour palette. They care about:

- **the truth of your data** (is your pricing honest, are your SLAs real?)
- **the shape of your semantics** (can they reliably understand what you offer and on what terms?)
- **the integrity of your behaviour** (do you respect user policies, or constantly try to route around them?)

Small-b brands—optimised for campaign cycles and glossy case studies—**will struggle.** They have invested in chrome, not protocols; slogans, not systems. **To a user's agent, they look like noisy, unstructured, hard-to-trust inputs.**

Capital-B Brands, in this emerging sense, will look very different. They will be defined less by how they *look* and more by how they *behave* under sustained, machine-mediated scrutiny:

- **Protocol-native:** easy to integrate, predictable to interact with, explicit about constraints and guarantees.
- **Agent-compatible:** willing to be filtered, compared, and occasionally overruled by user policies.
- **Substantive:** offering real differentiation in products, services, or policies that survives the stripping away of chrome

In that sense, the "capital-B Brands" I am pointing to rhyme with some strands of post-branding thinking: **identity as something collectively articulated and negotiated over time.**

Where post-branding has mostly lived in activist and civic contexts, this agentic scenario hints at a mainstream variant: **brands that survive and matter because they can afford to show up, protocol-first, in environments where user-side agents are structurally allergic to spectacle and spin.**

THE UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS

Seen against this backdrop, the speculative scenario of user-owned agents and user-owned chrome is not just a thought experiment about interfaces. It is a mirror held up to two comforting myths:

that designers have been "designing for the user"

that brands have been "building relationships".

For the most part, they have been designing and building for the *business*, with the user as a necessary conduit. That is not an accusation, it is a structural fact:

UX teams sat under growth, product, or marketing. Their KPIs were conversion, retention, engagement, NPS.
Brand teams sat under marketing or comms. Their KPIs were awareness, consideration, preference, share of wallet.

The slogan on the wall said "for the user" in the same way the plaque in the shop says "the customer is always right": rhetorically about the human, structurally about the till.

In that light, free returns and same-day delivery are not acts of generosity; they are acts of extraction with deferred costs

Frictionless betting apps are not "engaging experiences"; they are very efficient funnels into addiction. Cross-selling journeys are not "helping you discover more value"; they are mining your attention and weaknesses with better targeting.

Designers were almost never the ones calling those shots. But they were almost always the ones turning those shots into pixels, flows, and narratives—and calling it "user-centred" because the interaction itself felt smooth.

Agentic systems, if we let them genuinely act on behalf of individuals, break this triangle.

For designers:

If your practice is mostly small-d design—assembling flows inside someone else's growth logic—agents will do that better and with fewer ethical qualms.

If your practice is capital-D Design—framing spaces, defining protocols, encoding what "good behaviour" means for agents and institutions—then agents become your new material, not your replacement.

For brands:

If your branding is small-b—surface work over hollow systems—agents will strip away the gloss and reduce you to whatever can be expressed as data and policy.

If your brand is capital-B—rooted in actual product, service, and governance quality that survives machine-mediated scrutiny—agents will amplify you.

And for the first time, there is a plausible technical path for "for the user" to stop being a slogan and start being an architecture:

when the user owns the foundational agent

when that agent encodes their real constraints and values

when brands have to speak that agent's language to even show up.

At that point, "for the user" is not what we write in the case study; it is what the user's own systems will tolerate.

So the questions this report leaves you with are deliberately uncomfortable, and they cut through both professions:

As a designer, are you investing in the skills that help businesses decorate other people's agents,

or in the skills that help people and institutions define what those agents are *allowed* to see, do, and optimise for?

As a brand, are you still spending most of your energy on the make-up on the chrome,

or are you investing in the systems and semantics that will still be there when the chrome, the app, and even the human-designed UX are gone—and only agents are left to judge you?

Everything in this exercise—user-owned UX, layered agents, brands losing control, design shifting to semantics and protocols, **the collapse of "for the user" theatre**—is a way of making these questions impossible to ignore.

About the author

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He works with C-suites and senior leaders to align vision, systems thinking, and human-centred design, build high-performing teams, and launch tech-enabled experiences that scale.

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