Whether you like it or not, everything from the clothes you wear, to the computer you use, relies on signifiers and signifieds to define meaning. You are constantly enamoured with a self-fashioned image. Our very existence is redefined through these chains of signifiers that permeate our communications—thus creating a parallel, simulated world composed solely of signs. This parallel world is the realm in which the accepted ideals of conspicuous, competitive consumption, and unsustainability can’t be “challenged and overturned.” These signs purportedly communicate our personal values—but these values, through those imposed on us by capitalism. In a capitalist society, profit takes precedence over the planet, and one only has a right to what they can gain for themselves in the marketplace. This everyone-for-themselves mentality leads many to desire to demonstrate their socio-economic superiority over their peers. Despite an impact on the planet, we continue to consume conspicuously—our want to look and feel wealthier than our neighbors; and competitively, we must always feel the need to “keep up with the Joneses.”

This phenomenon has only emerged in the past century—“the century of the self”—and is illustrated by the shift from advertising products’ use-value, to constantly perpetuating the belief that our choices can define us and make us happier. This is largely accomplished through creating signs that provoke our desire to consume: through coding brands and products with sign-value. Luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, and luxury objects like diamonds establish this. A Gucci purse or a diamond ring does not have any direct use-value—its prevalence and desirability is only the result of their signified: wealth and superiority. Currency is another instance of this. Although it is widely believed to be an exemplification of exchange-value—what mediates our objectification of value.

For the current capitalist paradigm of consumerism, obedience and this paradox of choice do not allow for the expression of non-consumerist or sustainable beliefs and practices. With this in mind, a new speculative currency has emerged: the International Non-Consumptive Currency, or INCC. Since its inception, we may never see global capitalism’s growth falter until its final demise; the INCC aims to provide methods of enabling autonomy, stigmatize unsustainable habits, and reward non-consumptive practices within the current paradigm of society, industry and politics.

The INCC is a parallel currency, in the form of a jewellery-based carbon credit micro-trading system. This carbon-based economy, which is currently only used at the retail corporate level—can be utilized as a tool for social welfare. In contrast to the molar form of current CO2 trading, the INCC is molecular, with every individual carbon-consuming act taken into consideration. Each participant is given a synthetic diamond ring, embedded with an RFID tag to track the carbon footprint of individual purchases. A mobile app records this information, along with other data: travel time and speed, in order to determine methods of transportation, and GPS information, to track the participant’s选购 shopping spots in a park versus shopping in a mall. The resulting carbon credit (or debit) is stored in an electronic account, with the balance fluctuating based on their personal choices—driving versus biking to work; eating at a fast food restaurant versus growing their own food. The diamond: as a representation of both wealth and carbon, functions as the wealth indicator in the INCC: the bigger the carbon credit balance, the bigger the synthetic diamond. Credits can be traded for carbon hungry corporations, in order to reward those who wish to make little to no impact on the carbon footprint of the human race.

This makes the INCC a potential transformative asset: climbing out of poverty can now be a method of creating a sustainable world. The INCC’s wealth indicator, synthetic diamonds, share a common quality with traditional, physical currency—symbolic value. Through non-consumption and sustainable actions, the participant’s synthetic diamond grows in size, subverting the diamond’s established signified—those broadcasted by unconsciously consuming. Acts of competitive consumption are also turned into their head, with the guidance and most motivations towards sustainable non-consumers—instead of the converse, which is how our perception of others currently works.

B.F. Skinner’s behavioral conditioning is a form of learning in which an individual modifies their own behaviour due to its consequences, through positive and negative reinforcement. The INCC aims to make participants’ behaviour less mindlessly consumptive and more sustainable through positive reinforcement—the diamonds size growing as material reward—and through negative reinforcement—those without a massive diamond will be continually reviled until their behaviour becomes more acceptable. It is not hard to realize that the effects of this currency will be significant. As consumers’ buying habits change, corporations with unsustainable habits will be consequently forced to change their outdated business models. The established message of conspicuous consumption: affluence, with its inherent instead of rewarding those who value non-consumption and sustainability over ostentatious displays of wealth.