

# Against Interaction Design

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*Against Interaction Design* is a short manifesto that distils a position that's emerged through a decade of creating interactive art.

I intend it here as a provocation and a speculation on an alternative future relationship between people and machines.

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## Against Interaction Design

### To design interaction is to design who we can be

Look at the words on my keyboard: command, control, function, shift. **These describe the processes of a factory or a military unit**, not a conversation, nor a dance, nor friends eating together. What of the rest of being human?

Behind every interface is a model world. People are modelled as profiles. Emotions are modelled as emojis. The interface defines how I can sense and shape that world. It defines my relationship to that world: what I can do, who I am, and who I can be.

To interact *through* an interface, I need to think in terms of the model of that interface. I need to translate my vague, complex intentions into the language of that interface. I need to align my thoughts and actions to the structures and processes conceived by its designer. I need to see myself as a part of the model the interface implies.

The more my interaction is designed, the more involved the designer becomes with not just what I can do, but how and why I might do it. I need to be the model user the designer imagines me to be. And so the less space I have to express the nuance of who I really am.

An 'expert' user is someone who transforms into the person the interface needs them to be. Those who struggle or refuse to adapt are excluded.

This is not so much a problem of bad interaction design as it is a problem of what interaction design is.

## The asymmetry of interaction design

Marshall McLuhan argued that we shape our tools, and thereafter they shape us. Except, it is not us who shape our interfaces. Interaction designers do.

We all use the same few interfaces crafted by a handful of people. Each design decision, however heroic, however thoughtful, however detailed, affects us all in the same way. The more interaction is designed, the more human agency becomes constrained to fit within the models conceived by the designer.

**The asymmetry of interaction design gives interaction designers too much leverage over our lives.**

When a single interface becomes standardised across so much of our lives, it makes us all share its singular model of that world. This works for standardised tasks like flying a plane or filing a tax return. It works for a game where we can freely step in and out of the role it defines for us.

But it doesn't work for human expression and social connection because **it filters out, rather than amplifying, the chaos that makes us human.**

## The standardisation of self-expression

Its singular model centres what matters and sidelines what doesn't. It replaces diversity with efficiency. It reduces our messy needs into explicit goals we can all agree on.

But the rest of **being human does not reduce**. To express what we think, we must continually adopt and discard different models of the world. A model is always an imperfect approximation. But what we are trying to express is real. There is no single model that can capture it all.

A standard interface that spreads to define how we relate to each other, to society, to ideas, our ability to express who we are? This is dangerous.

A standard interface standardises how we think. Some of the worst deeds of humanity emerge when the plethora of human wildness is filtered through a singular model of the world. Singular models become invisible. We forget how to discard them. Monoculture.

*'If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.'*<sup>1</sup>

If all anyone has is a hammer, we all become nails.

## Interaction without Interaction Design

When it comes to human expressivity, we cannot free people by designing how they can behave. But we can help people free themselves by letting them negotiate their own relationship with technology.

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<sup>1</sup>This quote is often attributed apocryphally to Abraham Maslow.

We need interfaces that flex, adapt and warp as needed by the human, **interfaces that emerge through negotiation between human and system**. We need interfaces as diverse as the people that connect through them.

An alternative to Designed Interaction is **Negotiated Interaction**.

Negotiated Interaction aims to uncover interfaces that:

- Let us interact without being subjected to Interaction Design.
- Belong to the individual as much as they do to the technological system.
- Empower us without making us translate our needs, thoughts and impulses into the worldview of its designer.
- Let us express ourselves through technology with as much individuality, vulnerability and sensitivity as we have without technology.
- Let us communicate our empathetic, emotional and embodied selves through technology without the need for explanation, rationalisation or categorisation.
- Let us create digital forms with as much ambiguity and complexity as our lived experiences.

**Negotiated Interaction supplants command and control with resonate and unite.**

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## Epilogue

To see our practical explorations of Negotiated Interfaces, see Sonified Body project<sup>2</sup> (2021, collaboration with Panagiotis Tigas), which uses AI to generate bespoke interfaces based on a dancer's existing vocabulary of movement.

Also see Latent Voyage<sup>3</sup>, which applies this technique to generate an embodied, non-symbolic interface for an untrained person to interact with an image-generating AI.

For a more academic treatment, see our peer-reviewed paper *Emergent Interfaces: Vague, Complex, Bespoke and Embodied Interaction between Humans and Computers* [6].

These ideas have been fueled by the writings of many others. See [1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8] for suggestions of further reading, and [2] for a suggestion from a reader of an earlier draft of this text.

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<sup>2</sup><https://timmb.com/sonified-body>

<sup>3</sup><https://timmb.com/latent-voyage>

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