Reflections

Think of the web browser as a window, a transparent window overlooking a worldwide information space. Looking through this window, internet users tend to forget about the interface. Seeking for a path through this overload of information, hyperlinks, buttons and cursors become invisible to them. However, there are moments when users should be *looking at* the interface and not only *through* it, in order to make it work: when they click on links, when they select icons, when they activate buttons, or when they scroll pages. During these events, the interface is no longer transparent but acts as a mirror, reflecting the users and their own projection into the digital space. Diane Gromala and Jay David Bolter suggest that "*No interface should be perfectly transparent, if we only look through, we cannot appreciate the ways in which it shapes our access to information and our experience of it.*"[1]

However, the current goal of the web design discipline seems to be the search for a total transparency of navigation. Everything must now be intuitive, user-friendly and instantaneous. Indeed, the main focus of design on the web today is User Experience Design. It is a framework which places the user at the center of the design process, where usability becomes the criteria with which to assess success. This ideology was introduced by Don Norman in a book unsurprisingly titled *The Invisible Computer*. Establishing a direct link between transparency and usability, Norman states: "*The ideal system so buries the technology that the user is not even aware of its presence. The goal is to let people get on with their activities, with the technology enhancing their productivity, their power, and their enjoyment, ever the more so because it is invisible, out of sight, out of mind. People should learn the task, not the technology. They should be able to take the tool to the task, not as today, where we must take the task to the tool.*"[2] By conscientiously following these usability guidelines for the past two decades, web makers have reached the point in which our interfaces have become totally frictionless. However, for me the dominance of this practice raises a reversed concern: How are we supposed to '*bring the tool to the task*' if we are not able to grasp its mechanisms? If we are incapable of creating our own tools are we too blindly reliant on preconfigured ones?

These usability principles can be seen in the evolution of small details of our web environment; details sometimes as small as the cursor on you screen. The *hover state*[3] is a visual feedback initiated by the user pausing over an interactive element of a web page using a cursor —most commonly the switch from the default cursor to the 'mickey-hand pointer' over a link—. However, this intermediate state is fading away. Usability guidelines advocate that hover states "*should be deemphasised to avoid distracting from content*"[4]. Touch-screen technology simply does not allow this feature. In fact, hover states can no longer operate on a handheld device. This technical change reveals an important transition

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[1] Bolter D. and Gromala D., 2003, Windows and Mirrors: Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency. MIT Press

[2] Norman D., 1998, The Invisible Computer: Why Good Products Can Fail, the Personal Computer Is So Complex, and Information Appliances Are the Solution—Kindle Locations 76-78, Kindle Edition.

[3] In CSS, a :hover is a pseudo-class that can be added to one element of the web page as a visual representation used to communicate the status of a component or interactive element.

[4] This citation is extracted from the Material Design online guideline. Material Design is a design language that Google developed in 2014. It became the most used design template, therefore having a major influence in defining human-computer interactions. Material Design. (2019). States. [ONLINE] Available at: https://material.io/design/interaction/states.html#hover [Accessed 30 Aug. 2019].

in our way of interacting with technology. The computer is made invisible, it's like looking in the mirror and not seeing your reflection. Rob Giampietro wistfully depicts this shifting dynamic: *"I will miss catching a reflection in the shop window late at night. Watching ripples on the water after someone's been sitting by the lake. […] Not gestures I've made, but momentary, vivid, fleeting apparitions that inhabit an unknown space. A cursor might swing like a flashlight in the dark, never coming to rest. […] I might skim the surface of words and find worlds upon worlds. I might see my breath and gasp, for a moment, at the invisible made vivid*"[5]

Our interfaces no longer reveal the reality of their technical structure and we, as users, are no longer allowed time to understand how they work. Today, the gap has widened between an increasingly complex web environment, and an oversimplified access. We are witnessing the overthrow of a system initially created to *augment human intellect*[6] and enable us to share and exchange knowledge, into a system that potentially alienates, shapes and narrows our possibilities of action. Technologist Olia Lialina insists that one should stay aware that "*There is no natural interaction, and there are no invisible computers, there is only hidden ones.*"[7]

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[5] Giampietro R, 2019, Hover States 2019. Lined & Unlined. [ONLINE] Available at: https://linedandunlined.com/archive/hover-states. [Accessed 23 January 2019].

[6] Engelbart D, 1962, "Augmenting Human Intellect: A Conceptual Framework". SRI Summary Report AFOSR-3223, Prepared for: Director of Information Sciences, Air Force Office of Scientific Research. SRI International, hosted by The Doug Engelbart Institute.

[7] Lialina O, 2015, Rich User Experience, UX and Desktopization of War. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.contemporary-home-computing.org/RUE/. [Accessed 05 June 2018].