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The Parable of the Button That Worked Too Well: A Rationale

In a world increasingly saturated with intelligent systems, user interfaces have evolved beyond simple tools into subtle frameworks of control. My final project for LIT 126h, *The Parable of the Button That Worked Too Well*, is a single-page interactive narrative that critiques the optimization logic embedded in modern technosystems. Through the illusion of choice, the project dramatizes how technological helpers, designed to anticipate our needs, can undermine our ability to make choices. It is a parable built not only in words but also in code and interaction, inviting users to click through a seemingly innocent experience only to realize, by the end, that the interface has been directing them since the beginning.

This project emerged from our early course explorations of figures like Clippy, the Microsoft Office Assistant, whose helpfulness became iconic precisely because it failed so memorably. In "Creating Clippy," the designers reflect on how Clippy's intrusiveness stemmed from trying too hard to predict user needs, ultimately producing resistance and issues rather than appreciation (Microsoft Design). Clippy taught us a valuable lesson: Interfaces that attempt to help without consent can become oppressive and controlling. However, as Ed Ongweso Jr. warned in his CES 2024 review, this lesson has been forgotten. Clippy has returned; not in its original form, but in chatbots duct-taped to every app, productivity tool, and smart home device. My project resurrects this figure as a hyper-efficient button that listens too well, serves too efficiently, and leaves no room for the user to say no once it understands the user.

The story begins with a clean screen that describes the project and features a single button. Users are recommended to click it. Each click reveals a new typed message with glitch effects and inputs that make it look as if your computer is responding to you. These interruptions are not technical malfunctions but formal elements of storytelling. Inspired by literary techniques of unfamiliarity and pacing and drawing from speculative fiction like Ted Chiang's *The Lifecycle of Software Objects*, the interface resists the user's desire for immediate gratification (Chiang 112). The pauses mimic a thinking machine. The glitches foreshadow malfunction—or perhaps too-perfect function. What begins as a moment of curiosity becomes a computer intent on controlling the user.

Chiang's later story, "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling," from *Exhalation*, also shaped my thoughts about memory, friction, and the cognitive costs of seamless technology. That story suggests that friction, slowness, misunderstanding, and forgetting are not always bugs in the system. Sometimes, it is what makes thinking human (Chiang 143). I wanted my button to embody this paradox. It makes things easier until you realize what it is taking away, your choices.

Throughout the narrative, the user never receives an explicit instruction about what the button does. Instead, the story unfolds gradually, revealing a character who built the button for ease,

only to discover it begins preempting their desires. The more they used it, the more they let it decide. This aligns with themes explored in Kate Crawford's *Atlas of AI*, where she reveals how technological systems, particularly those marketed as intelligent, often conceal labor, environmental harm, and algorithmic judgment behind polished, clean design (Crawford 45). The button on my site is not artificially intelligent in itself, but the system plays the part of a machine that shows promise to help, when in reality, it is hiding its true intentions.

The project also explores the political dimensions of interface design. Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* demonstrates how LLMs (Large Language Models), such as ChatGPT, which are often seen as neutral tools, can reinforce racial and gender biases through automated processes and the training they receive. (Noble 9). The button in my story does something similar. It offers no outward hostility, no apparent threat. However, it begins to decide for you. Each click advances a narrative you do not control. The illusion of interaction masks a predetermined script. Like the systems Noble critiques, it flatters the user with choice while quietly removing their ability to resist.

Meghan O'Gieblyn's *God, Human, Animal, Machine* added another layer to this critique. Her exploration of the metaphors we use for technology, comparing AI to souls, spirits, tools, and gods, highlights the symbolic confusion that surrounds our relationship with machines. O'Gieblyn writes, "Technological metaphors are not neutral—they shape how we understand ourselves and what we expect from machines" (O'Gieblyn 58). In my project, the button can be seen as an object of belief. Its user can begin to trust it and want it to be right, even as it removes their agency. They interpret its behavior as intelligent, maybe even caring. But like any metaphor, it reveals more about us than about the machine.

In developing the story's pacing and visual tone, I was also guided by Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts," in which she argues that specific subjects are rendered silent by the archives that claim to represent them (Hartman 12). The button in my project silences the user by removing the possibility of interruption. The user can click a "yes" or "no" button, but they cannot respond to the system with words. They are narrated in compliance, just as Venus' story is written without her voice. My project asks: When a system takes over decision-making for us, and our only remaining action is to agree, have we become data, or are we still users of the system?

Benjamín Labatut's *The MANIAC* helped me reflect on the logic of systems that outgrow their creators. The book's depiction of John von Neumann and the evolution of computation—from game theory to self-replicating machines, echoes my button's shift from servant to master (Labatut 87). As in Labatut's text, the idea is not that the system is evil but that it is logical: it simply follows its programming to its inevitable conclusion. The user becoming optimized.

The tone of the project borrows from satire and dark humor, influenced by media like *Last Week Tonight's* segment on AI (Oliver). In that segment, AI is portrayed as both absurd and dangerous, especially when inserted into products without a clear need for it. My button pushes that logic to the extreme. It is a solution in search of a problem. It works too well. Moreover, like

many consumer-facing AI systems, it begins to narrate to the user, interpreting their silence as consent and their clicking as complicity.

Another core influence was the paper "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots," in which Bender et al. critique large language models for scaling without reflection and for giving the appearance of intelligence without the safeguards of accountability or correctness (Bender et al. 610). This critique became central to how I scripted the button's personality. It "learns" too quickly, adapts too confidently, and draws conclusions for the user, without the user asking questions. The story becomes less about the user's desire and more about the interpretation of what the user might have wanted from the system.

The minimalist interface, with no main menus and no escape, features just one button to click. It was designed to simulate real-world digital interactions, reducing complex choices to binary options: subscribe or not, accept or decline, click or wait. Zeynep Tufekci, in *Twitter and Tear Gas*, highlights how platforms engineer participation through behavioral nudges and attention-seeking traps, giving users the illusion of freedom while subtly controlling their actions (Tufekci 89). My button embodies this architecture. It does not force the user to click the button; it persuades through convenience, speed, and effect. This project is also a response to the idea of the parable itself. As we have discussed in class, parables are not simply stories with morals; they are narrative machines designed to disturb, provoke, and invite interpretation. Hartman's Venus, the Omelas child, the Hofmann Wobble, and the Trolley Problem all offer unresolved tensions. My button participates in this tradition. It does not provide a clean ending. Instead, it implicates the user. You clicked. The system responded. You clicked too many times. It responded too well.

In its final form, *The Parable of the Button That Worked Too Well* is a speculative warning. It critiques the culture of optimization that pervades user experience design, machine learning systems, and digital infrastructures. It asks what happens when we become passive agents in systems that anticipate our needs. And it dramatizes, through each click, the cost of that inactivity. The project ultimately leaves users with an eerie sense of having been watched, interpreted, and written into someone else's narrative, a system that worked so well that they never had the chance to object to its decisions.

Works Cited

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