

# Non-Rigid HCI: A Review of Deformable Interfaces and Input

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## ABSTRACT

Deformable interfaces are emerging in HCI and prototypes show potential for non-rigid interactions. Previous reviews looked at deformation as a material property of shape-changing interfaces and concentrated on output. As such, deformable input was under-discussed. We distinguish deformable from shape-changing interfaces to concentrate on input. We survey 131 papers on deformable interfaces and review their key design elements (e.g., shape, material) based on how they support input. Our survey shows that deformable input was often used to augment or replace rigid input, particularly on elastic and flexible displays. However, when shapes and materials guide interactions, deformable input was used to explore new HCI paradigms, where gestures are potentially endless, and input become analogy to sculpting, metaphor to non-verbal communication, and expressive controls are enhanced. Our review provides designers and practitioners with a baseline for designing deformable interfaces and input methodically. We conclude by highlighting under-explored areas and identify research goals to tackle in future work with deformable interfaces.

## Author Keywords

Deformable interfaces; input; shape-changing interfaces; non-rigid interactions; organic displays; bendable displays; flexible interfaces; sensing; mapping; shape; material

## CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → Interaction paradigms; Haptic devices; Interaction techniques;

## INTRODUCTION

Research in HCI is shifting focus from rigid to non-rigid interactions [60, 29], and the use of non-rigid materials for interactive applications (e.g., music, gaming) is constantly under investigation [172, 173, 83, 166, 133, 142, 135]. Several prototypes exist that show potential applications for non-rigid interactions, including elastic and flexible displays that are

bendable and stretchable [163, 189, 65, 1, 146, 101, 3, 79, 134, 92, 19], deformable controllers for gaming [122, 156, 102], jamming user interfaces [62, 42], and deformable interfaces for music performances [16, 196, 173, 157, 169, 70, 106].

However, the term *deformable* is often blurred with the term *shape change* [83, 166], or used to describe material properties of shape-changing interfaces [133, 166, 135]. Consequently, as shape change emphasizes output and self-actuation [135, 136, 4], earlier work exclude deformable interfaces that are input-only [166] (e.g., BendID [122]), and under-discuss input [133, 135]. Therefore, we lack overviews of deformable input and its use for interactive applications. To compensate for that, we (1) distinguish deformable from shape-changing interfaces and (2) develop a review of non-rigid interfaces, specifically deformable interfaces, which is angled towards input.

We define *deformable interfaces* those that (1) are entirely or in part made of soft and malleable materials (e.g., rubber), (2) require physical input to be deformed, and (3) allow users to input in ways that are unlikely (if not impossible) with rigid interfaces (e.g., bend, stretch [178]). As such, we do not consider interfaces where users input by re-configuring rigid materials [75, 126, 34, 44, 57, 140], and that do not allow for direct, physical input on the interface [100, 99, 182]. We survey the state-of-the-art in designing deformable interfaces and input by reviewing 131 papers from various research communities (e.g., CHI, NIME, DIS, TEI, UIST). We use grounded theory [48] to analyze the deformable interfaces presented in the 131 papers and identify five elements that form the basis of their design, namely (1) shape, (2) material, (3) input sensing, (4) I/O mapping, and (5) use of deformable input.

With the present survey, we aim to generate an extensive overview of existing deformable interfaces that shows (1) how such interfaces are designed, (2) what are the basic elements that constitute their design, and (3) how is deformable input designed and for what interactive applications. For designers and practitioners, the review represents a baseline from which inspire the design of future deformable interfaces and approach design practices more methodically. For researchers, the review defines *deformable* interfaces, discusses open research questions, and provides a list of research goals for future work.

## SCOPE AND MOTIVATION

Recently, research on HCI has seen the emergence of various papers that review non-rigid interfaces from different perspectives, including a survey of the design space and research challenges of shape-changing interfaces [135, 4], a review of

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DIS'19, June 23–28, 2019, San Diego, CA, USA

© 2019 ACM. ISBN 978-1-4503-5850-7/19/06...\$15.00

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3322276.3322347>

shape-changing interfaces for design and application-based research [166], and reviews of materials and objects that have shape-changing properties [133, 83]. However, the aforementioned reviews emphasize the output characteristics of non-rigid interfaces (e.g., self-actuation), and widely discuss shape *resolution* [142, 83], *orientation* [135], and *actuation* [133], while deformable input and its design are seldom discussed. Furthermore, to reinforce the focus on output, previous review exclude non-display and input-only interfaces [166]; for instance, deformable interfaces for music [109] and gaming [156] are not considered.

We focus on input and include non-display and input-only interfaces. As such, we integrate previous work by reviewing deformable input more extensively and show (1) how deformable interfaces are designed for input, (2) what are the characteristics of deformable input, (3) how is deformable input designed for interactive applications, and (4) reflect on how deformable interfaces and input redefine HCI paradigms. Additionally, we found that the way researchers described interfaces as *deformable* in earlier reviews is ill-defined and may lead to ambiguous interpretations. For instance, Sturdee et al. described input with Paddle [134] as allowing for "*user-controlled deformations*". However, Paddle uses rigid surfaces for input, which may be re-configurable [83], but are not "deformable", for instance as in ShapePhone [43], where the interface can be physically stretched or bent because made of malleable material. As such, we felt the need to disambiguate between the terms *deformable* and *shape change*, and define deformable interfaces as its own sub-field of non-rigid interfaces.

### DEFINING DEFORMABLE INTERFACES

Previous review describe interfaces that can deform and shape change through the term *shape-changing* interfaces. However, they require interfaces to be self-actuated [135, 4], emphasize output [142, 133, 4], and exclude non-display or input-only interfaces [166]. We emphasize input and user-controlled deformation and see deformable interfaces as:

1. Made entirely [132] or in part [38] of soft and malleable materials, including fabric, rubber, and clay.
2. Emphasizing physical input and user-controlled deformations over self-actuation and shape change [135],
3. Supporting user input through deformable materials, even when combining rigid and deformable parts (e.g., [181, 119]), or when actuated (e.g., [68, 85, 143]),
4. Allowing users to input with gestures that are unlikely or impossible with rigid interfaces (e.g., *twist* [59], *bend* [47]).

### METHOD

We searched for papers from HCI proceedings (e.g., CHI, TEI, UIST), music proceedings (e.g., NIME, ICMC), and browsed several online libraries (e.g., ACM, IEEE, Springer, Elsevier), to cover the most relevant areas. We filtered our search using the keywords "deformable", "malleable", "elastic", "flexible", "bendable" "organic", "shape-changing", "soft tangible" AND "interface" OR "display", and collected a total of 149 papers.

The complete list of papers included in our review can be found at [www.deformableUI.com](http://www.deformableUI.com). We applied the definition of *deformable interfaces* to the collected 149 papers and found that 18 did not match the criteria. We reviewed the selected 131 papers and analyzed deformable interfaces based on grounded theory [48], in particular content analysis [164] and affinity diagramming [174, 52, 13]. We conducted the analysis verbally over several meetings, using Excel sheets and Google Docs for annotating the discussions, and RealTime Board<sup>1</sup> for affinity diagramming. After three months, we reached consensus on the five elements that form the basis of designing deformable interfaces: (1) shape, (2) material, (3) input sensing, (4) I/O mapping, and (5) use of deformable input. Next, we first describe deformable input and its characteristics. Then, we outline the first four design elements listed above and show how they are designed to support deformable input and for what interactive applications. We conclude by explaining how deformable input is used to augment and replace earlier HCI paradigms (i.e., rigid multi-touch input), or explore new ones.

### DEFORMABLE INPUT

Interacting with deformable interfaces requires physical manipulation of shapes and materials. Users can input on deformable interfaces by using their hands e.g., [172]) or the entire body (e.g., [128]). Deformable interfaces add depth to bi-dimensional touch input (e.g., [172, 24, 189]), allow users to deform interfaces by means of stretch [180], bend [38], twist [80], squeeze [178], and combine those to allow for multidimensional input (i.e., multiple deformations used simultaneously for controlling various parameters [59]). Furthermore, as deformable interfaces are made of soft and malleable materials, they may afford energetic and aggressive input like slapping [120] and punching [91].

#### Hand-Based Deformable Input

Deformable interfaces allow for one- or two-handed input, with bend, squeeze, stretch, twist, and push being most common. Bend is used frequently in deformable displays and controllers [47, 35, 37, 185, 59, 79, 5, 122, 157, 155, 67, 96, 5, 102, 96, 92], and users generally like corner bend as a gesture [185, 35]. One-handed squeeze is widely used as input for controllers and music interfaces [51, 12, 191, 192, 173, 45]. Stretch is less common compared to bend and squeeze, and can be two-handed [180, 194, 139, 16, 203], or one-handed [25, 167, 202]. Twist is the result of bending with two hands in opposite directions and can be performed either vertically [87, 118] or horizontally [110, 80, 79, 81]. Push is used often for input on elastic displays for depth-touch [189, 24, 68, 129, 72, 172, 55].

Other hand-based deformable input include twiddle [149], punch [91], slap [120], prod [106], roll [124], and shear [190]. Although becoming common in HCI, previous work showed that creating a vocabulary for hand-based deformable input is hard [172], as users still tend to rely on earlier paradigms based on rigid input (e.g., multi-touch), particularly when deformable interfaces resemble rigid displays or tasks are inspired by touch and WIMP interactions.

<sup>1</sup><https://realtimeboard.com/>

### Body-Based Deformable Input

Body-based input for deformable interfaces is uncommon. However, there are few examples. BendableSound [28] allows for input with hands but encourages its users to input with other parts of the body too, such as the head or the arms. FuwaFuwa [168] and Ballagumi [106] allow for input with the mouth and the neck. SmartSleeve [128] is a deformable interface worn on the arm that can be bent for input by flexing the forearm. Emoballoon [120] can be hugged and squeezed to the chest for cuddling interactions. However body-based input with deformable interfaces remains under-explored, because, at this stage, deformable interfaces are still designed to fit dominant HCI paradigms [18].

### Kinetic Deformable Input

As said above, deformable interfaces can afford aggressive interactions and input due to their softness and malleability. For instance, when Emoballoon [120] is slapped it will flash a red light and interpret the user input as "aggressive". Inflated Roly Poly [91] lets users punch and poke the display to blow up bubbles in virtual games. However, as body-based deformable input, kinetic input with deformable interfaces are also under-explored.

### Multidimensional Deformable Input

Deformable interfaces may allow for multidimensional input, where each deformable input can be used to control an individual output [122]. There are few examples of deformable interfaces that allow for two simultaneous input. Examples include twist + touch [80], bend + touch [5, 19, 35, 36], and stretch + touch [180], which combine rigid and deformable input. There are also examples where two simultaneous deformable inputs are allowed, including bend + twist [80, 158, 157, 59, 156], twist + stretch [25, 16, 195, 77, 53], and bend + push [122]. At present, multidimensional input with deformable interfaces are being explored. In particular, research about conductive polymers [49] and nanomaterials [84] shows promise for deformable input beyond two dimensions [144]. However, sensing more than two deformations simultaneously remains challenging. Despite technical feasibility, there are still no research that explore the extent to which users can handle multiple deformations for input, and what are the benefits.

## SHAPE

This section presents an overview shapes used with deformable interfaces (Figure 2). We considered shapes of deformable interfaces before user manipulation and found two main types of shape: (1) *volumetric* and (2) *flat*. Flat shapes are widely used for interfaces that act like deformable displays, while volumetric shapes follow applications and interactions.

### Volumetric

Volumetric deformable interfaces are 3D-mensional and 2.D-dimensional, and can be either *geometric* (e.g., cube, sphere), or *organic* (e.g., zoomorphic, xenomorphic).

#### Geometric

Geometric deformable interfaces have the shape of geometric primitives. We identified four types of geometric shapes: (1) *spheroid*, (2) *cuboid*, (3) *cylindric*, and (4) *tetrahedron*.

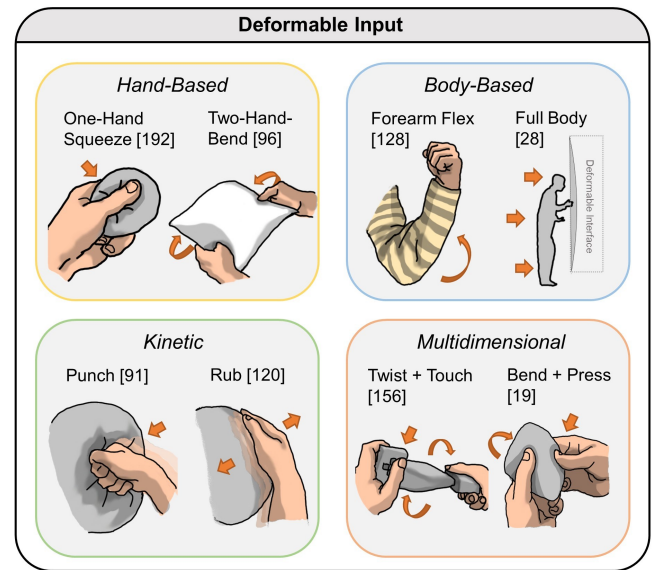


Figure 1: Characteristics of deformable input; © Troiano & Boem

Spheroid are sphere or hemispherical. Spheres were used to create deformable interfaces for music [173, 58, 191, 70, 193], virtual 3D sculpting [159], and soft lamps [179]. Emoballoon [120] used rubber balloons to create deformable interfaces that infer user intentions based on the character of deformable input (e.g., hug-is-friendly). Bacim et al. [7, 6] used hemispherical, elastic displays to investigate multi-touch on curved surfaces. OrbTouch [93] allowed users to move Tetris pieces by deforming a soft hemispherical controller. DeformWear [190] is a soft hemispherical controller that is worn on the index finger ad controlled via the thumb for navigating maps or playing video-games on external displays and VR headsets.

Cuboid can be shaped like cubes or rectangles. As spheroid, they were used as deformable interfaces for music [173, 17, 77, 87] and virtual 3D sculpting [117, 155]. MARSUI [197] and Soundflex [169] coupled deformation with auditory feedback on malleable rectangular interfaces; the user deforms the interface guided by sounds to put it in specific modes (e.g., folded around the wrist is "watch" mode). BendID [122] and TWEND [59] used rectangular soft interfaces to support multidimensional bend + twist input for gaming and mobile applications. Kildal et al. investigated bend + twist using similar prototypes [78, 79]. ShapePhone [43] proposed prototypes of deformable, shape-retaining smartphones, which are stretched to morph into TV remote or Wiimote-like controllers.

Cylindric shapes resemble cylinders or tubes. HandLog [12] used soft cylinders to support squeeze input for gaming. Watanabe et al. [187] used flexible rubber cylinders to explore deformable input on rigid mobiles, such as finger-flicking to ignore e-mails, or twisting to scroll emoji menus. SonicBanana [157] used tube-shaped flexible interfaces as MIDI controllers that users can bend or twist to perform music. Sculpton [16] used tetrahedron shapes to create malleable music interfaces for "sculpting" sounds with the hands.



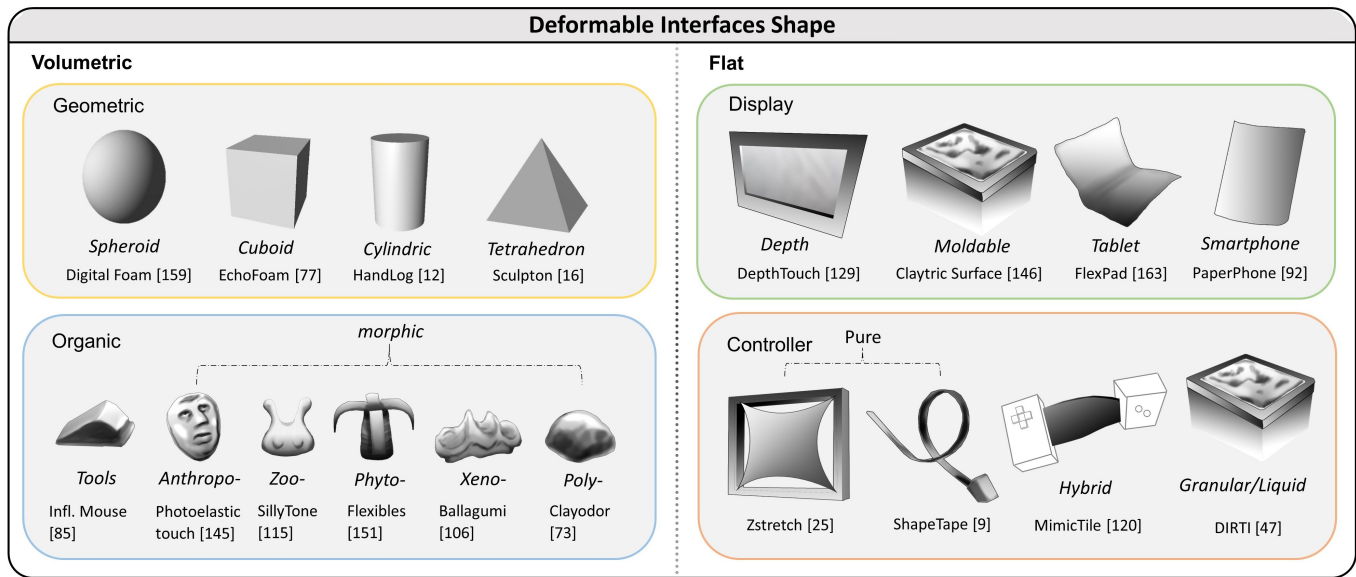


Figure 2: Types of shapes for deformable interfaces; © Troiano & Boem

### Organic

Organic deformable interfaces can be shaped after tools, real life objects (e.g., plants), or be arbitrary. We found six types of organic shapes: (1) *tools*, (2) *anthropomorphic*, (3) *zoomorphic*, (4) *phytomorphic*, (5) *xenomorph*, and (6) *polymorphic*.

Deformable interfaces shaped like tools include Inflatable Mouse [85] and FlexStylus [39], which add deformable input to computer mice and rigid stylus for WIMP and drawing applications. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic deformable interfaces resemble human and animal shapes. Sato et al. [145] used transparent rubber on multi-touch tabletops to create a humanoid face that changes facial expressions when poked or squeezed. SillyTone [115] is a rabbit-shaped, deformable interface that plays sounds when its ears are bent or squeezed. Flexibles [151] are shaped like trees and users can bend and release them fast to throw fruits at each other in AR games.

Xenomorph shapes look organic but are unusual and strange. Examples are Ballagumi [106], Glume [127], and Senspectra [94], which allow for deformable input respectively for music, creating network platforms for 3D modeling, or sensing mechanical strain. Finally, polymorphic interfaces can be deformed by users to any desired shape. We found many example of clay-based, polymorphic interfaces, which were used for various applications and domains, including music [188], real-time model-capturing for AR [138], odor retrieval [73], gaming [184], and education [14, 199, 150]; input with such interfaces follow dynamic affordances of highly deformable materials and gestures become potentially endless.

### Flat

Flat deformable interfaces (Figure 2) have a two-dimensional shape and are either display or controller. Deformable displays have co-located input and visual output on the very same surface. Designers of such deformable interfaces often explicitly reference existing multi-touch technology as a source of

inspiration (e.g., [129]). Deformable controllers are input-only interfaces, where input and output are not co-located.

### Displays

Deformable displays resemble rigid multi-touch displays (e.g., touchscreens, smartphones). On deformable displays, deformable input augments or replaces multi-touch. They provide visual output, unless used as proof-of-concept prototypes [96]. Deformable interfaces that resemble displays often have elastic surfaces, which allow for depth-touch along with bidimensional multi-touch input [129, 189], and may support deformable gestures [174]. Examples include Khronos Projector [24], a pushable display for interactively explore videos and pictures in four dimensions.

The Deformable Workspace [189] and DepthTouch [129], are elastic displays for depth multi-touch and 3D sculpting applications. BendableSound [28] is a wall-sized elastic display that helps autistic children develop motor skills through expressive therapies. Troiano et al. [172] used a guessability method [198] to investigate user-defined gestures for elastic displays, showing that users input with deformable gestures mostly when tasks involve manipulating and displacing 3D objects.

Deformable displays can be shaped after rigid tablets and smartphones. Bend input was widely used on prototypes of flexible tables and smartphones [185, 30, 96, 97, 5]. Bendy [102] and Flexpad [163] used deformable input on flexible tables for mobile gaming and controlling video-animations. Flexible smartphones were used to investigate bend input for various mobile applications [37, 47, 92, 20], including password creation [108], map navigation and browsing [152, 3, 19, 47, 45, 81], music [50], holographic gaming [51], non-verbal communication [165], and blind interactions [35, 37]. Moldable displays can be deformed by users to desired shapes [112], varied in stiffness [125], be wrapped around rigid ob-

jects [101], and can self-actuate to provide haptic feedback [68]; such displays are flat at their default state (i.e., before users manipulate them). Tunable Clay [43] and Claytric Surface [146] provide users with variable stiffness displays that can be deformed and made hard to "lock" the created shapes. IlluminatingClay [131] and Sandscape [62] allow users to deform malleable displays to explore the topography of visually-augmented physical landscapes; Phoxel-Space [137] proposed similar displays but for medical applications.

DeformMe [132] and deForm [42] propose gel-based displays for creative 3D modeling and picture distortion, where users input with their hands as well as arbitrary objects (e.g., toys), and fiducial markers [71]. Lepinski and Vertegaal use fabric to create displays that can conform to the shape of rigid objects and be visually-augmented for organic-feel, desktop interactions [101]. MudPad [68], Tablehop [143], and Feelex [64] are displays that are both deformable and shape change to provide users with haptic feedback via mechanical and fluid actuation.

#### Controllers

Flat deformable interfaces were proposed as controllers for various applications. Controllers with flat, elastic surfaces were proposed for music [123, 173, 25], and sonification-based data exploration [113]. Trampoline [55] uses elastic surfaces, which can be pushed from both the front and back sides, to input in virtual repoussé and chasing applications. ElaScreen [204] is a pushable touch-pad for depth-navigating datasets through their graphic visualizations. Elasticcon [88] uses elastic strings for eyes-free input when browsing content on interactive glasses or external displays. *Flexible* strips like ShapeTape [9], RoCuModel [154], and fStrip [27], were used as input interfaces to model NURBS or for non-verbal, symbol-based communication. PerForm [196] uses flexible frames as music interfaces, which can be reshaped by users to play different musical sounds (e.g., tambourine, guitar).

FlexSense [139] uses thin plastic sheets placed on rigid tablets to augment rigid input with deformable input. Follmer et al. [43] combined deformable input and haptic feedback with pneumatically-actuated, transparent flexible controllers for tactile exploration of pictures and maps. Flexy [177] allows users to control digital animations via flexible interfaces loaded with conductive ink. Other deformable controllers augment rigid interfaces [180, 203, 202] or human body parts [128, 201], with flexible materials that allow for input. Examples include PaperNinja [38] and MimicTile [119], which augment rigid input on smartphones with flexible parts for bend input. Bentrroller [156] combines bend and twist input with rigid input on a Nintendo®-like deformable game-pad. Finally, DIRT [147] and Linetic [90] are controllers made of sand or fluids, and can be dynamically reshaped by users.

#### MATERIAL

Various materials were used with deformable interfaces, including, fabrics [129], rubbers [145], and composites [169]. We discussed materials based on studies of material science [22] and haptic perception [95, 89, 10, 32]. We found that deformable materials could be characterized as: (1) *non-shape-retaining* and (2) *shape-retaining* (Figure 3).

#### Non-Shape-Retaining

Non-shape-retaining materials reverse to the original shape when removing external force. Based on elasticity and reverse speed, they can be: (1) *elastic*, (2) *flexible*, or (3) *malleable*.

Elastic materials are favorable for deformable input like stretch and push, and will spring back to their original shape fast. They include fabrics (e.g., cloth [129, 25], elastane [172, 55, 201], yarn [180, 167, 124]), and rubbers (e.g., silicone, [145, 113], latex [120, 7], PVC [91]). Designers of deformable interfaces attached thin sheets of fabric or rubber to rigid frames, and tense them to create elastic surfaces [55, 204, 189, 93, 181, 113, 7], which users can pull, stretch, and push to input [172]. Khronos Projector [24], The Deformable Workspace [189], DepthTouch [129], Zstretch [25], SilentDrum [123], and BendableSound [28], were created in such way. Troiano et al. [172] showed that users enjoy input on elastane due to low friction when in contact with the skin, but that it is hard to grab and pull because slippery. Kingsley showed that input supported by elastic fabric is more accurate than mid-air, but surface tension makes it hard to input at the corners [86].

Flexible materials are stiffer than elastic and afford well deformable input like bend and twist [59, 173]. Flexible plastic sheets were used as proof-of-concept prototypes to explore bend and twist for mobile applications [185, 59, 139, 30, 108, 102, 96, 152, 79, 81, 97, 200]. Gallant et al. [45] used paper prototypes for similar research, while Ernst et al. used stiff cardboard [36] and flexible silicone [35, 37] to investigate bend input for blind interactions; they showed that users like corner bend and enjoy the tactile feedback of silicone. Girouard et al. [47] augmented silicone with above-projection and investigated one-handed bend, showing how deformable input can compensate for issues of rigid mobile (e.g., unreachable targets and grip re-adjustments). E Ink-based flexible displays [92, 19], OLED displays attached to plastic boards [3], and Flexible OLED (FOLED) [50, 20, 33], were used to create high-quality prototypes of deformable smartphones.

Malleable materials are softer than flexible and support well squeeze and push. Foam-based interfaces were covered in fabrics to provide users with smooth tactile experiences [109, 110, 173, 70, 87, 193, 53, 178] and used to explore squeeze for music interactions [17, 77, 173, 87, 70, 53, 205, 193, 109, 110], making virtual 3D sculpting physical [117, 155, 159], and explore expressive input for gaming [12, 122, 156]. Silicone, latex, and gels were used for creating malleable music interfaces [16, 191, 58, 106], while fluid metals or gels covered in fabric or thin film, were used as malleable displays and widgets [90, 103, 68, 42]. SmartSleeve and FabricKeyboard use fabric to create soft surfaces for deformable input on the forearm [128], or MIDI keyboards that can be stretched and pulled for playing music [195].

#### Shape-Retaining

Shape-retaining materials are capable of maintaining user-created shapes when external force is removed. Also, they can vary in stiffness to physically match digital contents [125], or create intersections between rigid and deformable interactions [146]. Shape-retaining materials can achieve shape-retention either (1) *naturally*, (2) *mechanically*, or (3) *computationally*.

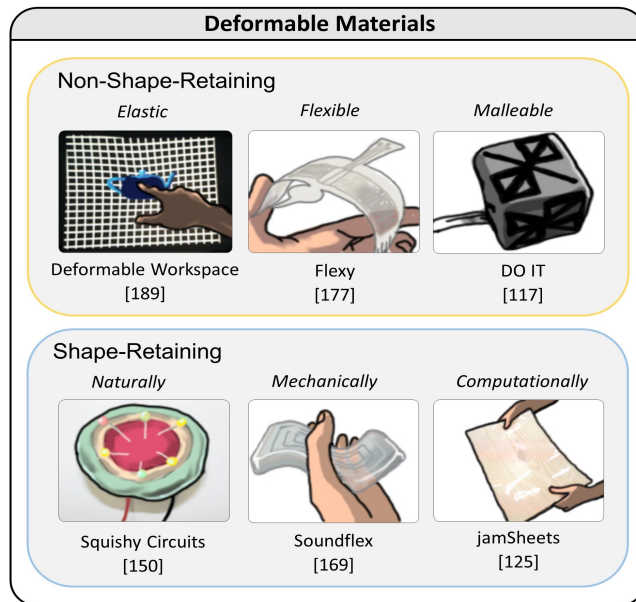


Figure 3: Deformable materials; © Troiano & Boem

Clay and paper are naturally shape-retaining; such materials may bring deformable input beyond gestures to enhance interactions that follow material properties. Squishy Circuits [150] were used to introduce kids to electronics through creative play with conductive dough. PIPLEX [14] allows kids to control virtual characters and manipulate objects in AR educational games using plasticine. ClayTone [188] allows users to create "sound sculptures" using clay. Reed [138] proposes digitally augmented clay, which shape can be tracked and computationally reconstructed as users deform it. DeForMe [132] and Phoxel-Space [137] use clay to create deformable displays that allow users to physically deform digital contents. Clayodor [73] lets users deform clay into fruit shapes (e.g., a banana) to retrieve odors.

Apart from clay, Projectagami [170] uses paper to demonstrate deformable displays that can be shaped after applications, such as flat for map navigation or folded for online shopping. Sandscape [62] and DIRT [147] use several small glass beads to create deformable interfaces that retain shapes through spatial conformation [135, 174]. Soft materials can mechanically retain shape when combined with stiffer ones. Iron wires embedded into silicone, foam, and plastic allow deformable interfaces like MARSUI [197], SoundFlex [169], Flexpad [163], and fStrip [27] to retain shapes while remaining flexible. In Illuminating Clay [131], iron wires and clay were combined to create deformable displays that allow for both natural and mechanical shape-retain. Mechanically shape-retaining materials seem to be favorable for accurate and gesture-based deformable input. Computationally shape-retaining materials can vary stiffness through computer-controlled mechanisms. Claytric Surface [146], Tunable Clay, and ShapePhone [43], use particle jamming to create deformable, shape-retaining interfaces, where soft particles (e.g., coffee grounds), covered in fabrics or thin sheets of latex, vary stiffness through computer-controlled solenoid valves. jamSheets [125] uses

air suction for layer jamming and variable stiffness without using jamming particles. Volflex uses computer-controlled air cylinders [65] for shape-retaining. MimicTile [119] uses shape-memory alloys (SMA) for variable stiffness edge input on smartphones.

### INPUT SENSING

Sensors make deformable materials interactive and allow input to be recognized through sensing techniques. Choices of sensors and sensing techniques are based on (1) the deformable input that needs to be sensed, (2) physical characteristics of interfaces (e.g., shape, size, deformability), and (3) interactive applications. We reviewed sensing for deformable interfaces based on the categorization of *non-perceptual input* proposed by Karam and Schraefel [74], and found two main approaches to sensing: (1) *embedded sensing* and (2) *external sensing*.

#### Embedded Sensing

Embedded sensing relies on sensors that are embedded in deformable materials. The majority of deformable interfaces included in our review used low-cost, commercially available sensors for embedded sensing. Low-cost flex sensors [67, 59, 152, 200, 92, 185, 102, 157, 205, 70, 197, 173, 87, 50, 35, 5, 51, 125, 38, 19, 108, 47, 171, 30, 196], and strain gauges [9, 79, 25, 81, 20, 27, 3, 82], were used to sense bend and twist, while force sensitive resistors (FSR) were used for press and squeeze [70, 109, 67, 200, 115, 58, 193, 191, 5, 125, 73]. For sensing stretch, Troiano et al. [173] and Chang et al. [25] used conductive rubber chords embedded in elastic fabrics, while others woven conductive thread into fabrics or paper, which approach can be used to sense stretch and bend on both flat [128, 180, 8] and volumetric surfaces [53, 191].

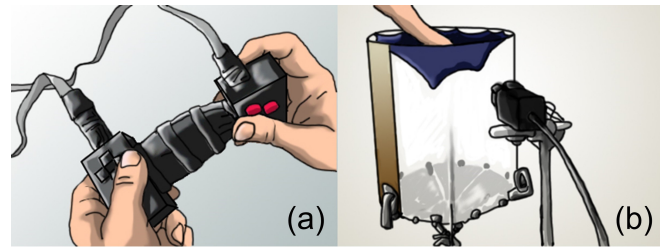
Designers of deformable interfaces strategically placed sensors in specific configurations for unobtrusiveness, sensing input in multiple areas, or enable gesture-based input. Flex sensors and conductive tapes [169, 197] were placed inside [173, 157] or on the back [205, 156, 185, 30, 108] of prototypical deformable interfaces to hide sensors from users. MARSUI [197] places conductive tape inside silicone to create sensors layout that sense bend independently in multiple areas (e.g., at center and corners). Masqood et al. [108] strategically placed flex sensors only at the corners of a silicone smartphone prototype to sense corner bend. The aforementioned examples show how designers can take advantage of commercial sensors to sense deformable input. However, embedding low-cost, commercial sensors in deformable materials presents limitations. First, they wear out fast and may require creative escamotage to be fit to custom shapes (e.g., [157]). Second, depending on sensors' size and thickness, the stiffness and weight of materials may increase, thus affecting interface robustness and control experience. Hence, designers explored alternatives to increase robustness and resistance of deformable interfaces. For instance, fiber optics and photo-reflective sensors were used instead of flex sensors to sense bend and twist [9, 39, 154, 26, 16], but also for stretch and squeeze [17, 190, 167, 168, 16]. I/O Braid [124] used a combination of fiber-optics and conductive yarn to sense several gestures, such as pinch, roll,

and grab. Trampoline [55] used a combination of magnets and hall-effect sensors to allow for deformable input on elastic fabric, without burdening the very input surface. Others used conductive materials, including conductive fabric [195], conductive foam [117, 159, 12, 121, 121], conductive 3D-printed materials [151], conductive dough [150, 199], electro-active polymers (EAP) [122], and conductive ink [177]. Particularly interesting are sensing approaches that use conductive materials stacked in layers to sense multiple deformations. BendID [122] used a grid made of nine EAPs sandwiched between two layers of conductive foam covered in conductive fabric, to sense bend and squeeze simultaneously and at different locations. FabricKeyboard [195] used layers of interwoven conductive fabrics to sense touch and stretch as input for controlling sounds. In MultiSoft [203] and iSoft [202], Yoon et al. explored Electrical Impedance Tomography (EIT) as a technique to create elastic surfaces, that can discriminate between different inputs, including multi-touch and stretch.

### External Sensing

External sensing relies on sensors that are placed outside deformable interfaces. The deformable interfaces included in our review use external sensing based on computer vision (e.g., blob detection) via image sensors (e.g., CCD). External sensing tends to emphasize how a shape or a surface is deformed, rather than sensing specific gestures (e.g., [163]). Compared to embedded sensing, external sensing has the advantage of not burdening deformable materials and may offer better sensing resolution. However, with external sensing deformable interfaces are bound to the capture areas of image sensors (e.g., [163]). Also, the approach can be economically and computationally expensive, it may require specific light conditions (e.g., darkness), and portability can be an issue.

Single charge-couple device (CCD) sensors were widely used for sensing deformable input [181, 113, 188, 123, 31, 155, 45, 189, 184, 72, 145, 137, 101, 24], but stereoscopic CCD sensors were used too [101]. Cassinelli et al. developed a custom image sensors that combines CCD and infra-red (IR) to sense depth input on elastic displays [24]. IR sensors alone were used to detect input on deformable displays [43, 7, 6, 189, 132, 137, 21, 42, 62]. A combination of invisible markers and IR sensors was used to interpret and sense shape deformation on deformable displays like DeForMe [132] and Information-Sense [21]; similar results were obtained using polarized filters [145], and extraction of features like the contour of interfaces' shape [188, 184, 123], or their color [188, 184, 31]. Recently, the use of depth sensors like the Microsoft Kinect® has slowly replaced IR technology for sensing deformable input [162, 28, 170, 21]. Also, depth sensors can capture deformations in high-detail and do not require added markers for surface tracking or for reconstructing the geometry of shapes deformed by users [163, 21]. Finally, hybrid embedded/external approaches to sensing are also possible. jamSheets [125] combined image sensors with flex sensors for enabling deformable input and adapting projected visual contents to user-deformed surfaces in real-time. Through algorithmic interpretation and filtering of sensors' signals, gesture-based interactions via deformable input are possible.



**Figure 4: Two examples of input sensing: (a) Bendtroller [156], sensing input through embedded flex sensors; (b) SilentDrum [123], sensing input via CCD sensor; © Troiano & Boem**

### Recognition and Classification of Deformable Gestures

Deformable input inherently involves performing gestures (e.g., squeeze), but not all deformable interfaces are designed with gestures in mind (e.g., [24]). Previous work designed deformable input based either on sensors' characteristics, or on how shapes and materials deform and used those deformations to infer gestures (e.g., [43, 62, 188]). Here we report recognition and classification techniques used to design gesture interactions with deformable interfaces. There are two main approaches to gesture recognition and classification: (1) *feature-extraction* and (2) *machine learning*.

Feature extraction approaches gesture recognition by relying on individual sensors for individual gestures (e.g., flex sensor → bend [173]), on individual sensors to extract multiple features (e.g., magnitude and direction [20, 3]), or by placing sensors in particular configurations to extract features from combined sensors values (e.g., [156]). Warren et al. [185] extract location, direction, size, angle, speed, and duration of bend using six flex sensors and signal thresholding. Daliri et al. [30] use similar approaches to recognize 12 bend gestures (e.g., up, down, left, right). Shorey et al. [156] use two flex sensors arranged in a cross-like pattern and recognize bend and twist by thresholding combined sensor values.

Zadel et al. [205] recognize up-down bend by measuring positive and negative curvature of four pairs of flex sensors. Marier uses two three-axis accelerometers to recognize bend and twist by differentiating their pitch and roll [109, 110], while Boem uses six optical sensors and recognize stretch and bend by thresholding the combined sensor values [16]. In sum, feature-extraction is convenient when sensors' signal need simple filtering and gestures can be recognized straightforwardly.

However, contingent on design choices and needs, recognizing and classifying gestures based on deformable input may be challenging. In such cases, previous work used pattern recognition and machine learning. PaperPhone [92] used k-Nearest Neighbour (k-NN) to recognize and classify bend gestures based on features like orthogonality, consistency, polymorphism, and directionality of bend. BendID [122] and MultiSoft [203] used support vector machines (SVM) to classify and discriminate between deformable gestures (e.g., the direction of bend, position, and intensity of push).



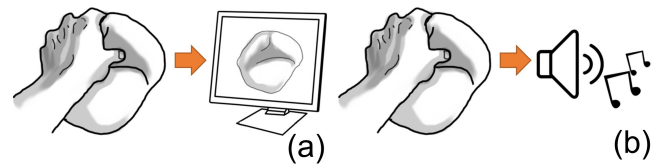
Emoballoon [120] used SVM to measure intensity and character of deformable input, and based on rapidity and strength of kinetic input interpret users' intentions (e.g., gentle-squeeze-is-friendly, violent-rapid-push-is-aggressive). The Skweezee System [178] could recognize up to seven user-defined gestures on soft cubes and cylinders via SVM. Smart Sleeve [128] used SVM to recognize and classify several deformable gestures performed by users on smart fabrics placed on the forearm. Besides SVM, Artificial neural network (ANN) was also used to recognize and classify gestures with deformable interfaces [149, 169]. For instance, Larson et al. [93] used convolutional neural networks (CNN) to predict deformable gestures, by extracting spatiotemporal features from recorded user input on deformable surfaces.

### I/O MAPPING

One characteristic of deformable interfaces is the capacity of being both generic and specific [173]. This is contingent on how deformable input is mapped to the output and for what applications. Thus, mapping strategies vary heterogeneously, as deformable interfaces can fit a wide variety of applications. However, they are seldom documented. We review I/O mapping with deformable interfaces following earlier work on digital music instruments (DMIs), which has a long tradition on systematic investigations of mapping [107, 69, 114]. We found that deformable input was mapped to output based on either (1) *explicit mapping* or (2) *implicit mapping*.

With explicit mapping, the input corresponds directly to the output. For instance, in ClayStation [184] and Flexpad [163], the shapes of deformable interfaces are equal to their digital counterparts, and the effects of deformable input are directly matched by and visible in the output. As such, explicit mapping can be used to create physical consistency between the deformable interface and the contents that they manipulate. This is favorable for virtual 3D sculpting and modeling applications [117, 155, 9, 154, 55]. Explicit mapping with deformable music interfaces is harder, as sounds are abstract and their relationships to deformable input requires analogies [109, 110, 16, 123, 157]. However, previous work showed that musicians find squeeze and stretch related to volume and pitch [173]. Interestingly, the study shows that for musicians, stretching an elastic surface is directly related to "stretching" the pitch of sounds (e.g., [25]), while expanding volume loudness is inversely related to squeezing a malleable interface [173]. However, explicit relationship between input and output with deformable interfaces should be further investigated.

With implicit mapping the correspondence between input and output is based on analogies and metaphors. Differently from explicit mapping, the input is not physically consistent with the output (e.g., input shape = output shape [9, 163]), but rather mapped to functionality and actions that are represented by deformations. For instance, the up/down direction of bend was mapped to zooming on maps [5, 45, 152], items selection [152, 98], and mobile locking [5]. Implicit mapping was used to create analogies between bend and twist and the speed of objects in video games [122, 156], between twist and audio effects (e.g., distortion) in music [173], and between squeeze and speed of zooming [85, 45, 19]. Stretch was mapped to control



**Figure 5: Deformable I/O mapping. (a) *explicit* - physical manipulation corresponds to its digital counterpart [117]; (b) *implicit* - deformable input is analogy to sound [173]; © Troiano & Boem**

time-based events, such as the playback speed of videos [31] and sampled sounds [188, 25]. In Khronos Projector [24] the simple action of pushing into a deformable display becomes metaphor to exploring the fourth dimension of videos and pictures. Often, deformable interfaces using implicit mapping regarded control as expressive [58, 110, 173].

Although implicit mapping shows interesting possibilities for deformable input that are based on the use of metaphors and analogies, examples are still sparse and we need a more systematic understanding of I/O relations. A better understanding of I/O relations may help better design the use of deformable input for interactive applications. Next, we show how deformable input was used for interactive applications, and retrospectively analyze how it moves HCI from earlier paradigms to newer forms of input interaction.

### USE OF DEFORMABLE INPUT

We see three uses of deformable input, which move gradually from hybrid rigid/non-rigid, to fully non-rigid interactive applications and paradigms: (1) *deformable input augments rigid input*, (2) *deformable input replaces rigid input*, and (3) *deformable input follows shapes and materials*.

#### *Deformable Input Augments Rigid Input*

Deformable input was used to augment rigid input in different ways, for instance by combining flexible parts with rigid ones [180, 85, 187, 39, 38, 119], or by using rigid input (e.g., multi-touch) on deformable interfaces (e.g., [129]). Examples include Cobra [200] and Behind-the-Tablet Jamming [43], where rigid multi-touch tablets allow for flexible input on the back, or FlexStylus [39] where users control the size of digital brushes in drawing applications by bending the flexible parts of rigid stylus.

Others implemented multi-touch gestures on elastic displays [129, 189, 6, 7], such as rotating digital objects with two fingers [189]. The aforementioned examples explored how rigid and deformable input can coexist on the same interface, and be either (1) assigned to different functionality for integrated control performances (e.g., [39, 85]), or (2) create interactive flows where users can dynamically transition from rigid to deformable input (e.g., [189, 129]).

#### *Deformable Input Replaces Rigid Input*

Deformable input replaced rigid input particularly in mobile applications [47], where interfaces tend to maintain the same physical characteristics of their rigid counterparts [20, 3], and



rigid input is technically still possible [152]. In most cases, rigid input was replaced using bend [3, 82], for navigating and zooming on maps [152, 45, 19, 20], but also as alternative input to touch-based pattern-lock authentication [108]. Burstyn et al. [20] showed that one-dimensional bend input is promising for interacting on flexible mobiles, as it highly correlates with Fitt's law [41], and may help improve control accuracy on mobiles. Beyond GUI-based interactions, Ernst et al. [35] showed how deformable input makes mobile technology accessible to visually impaired users. Overall, interfaces that replace rigid with deformable input tend towards new interactive paradigms, but are not yet untied from earlier ones.

#### *Deformable Input Follows Shapes and Materials*

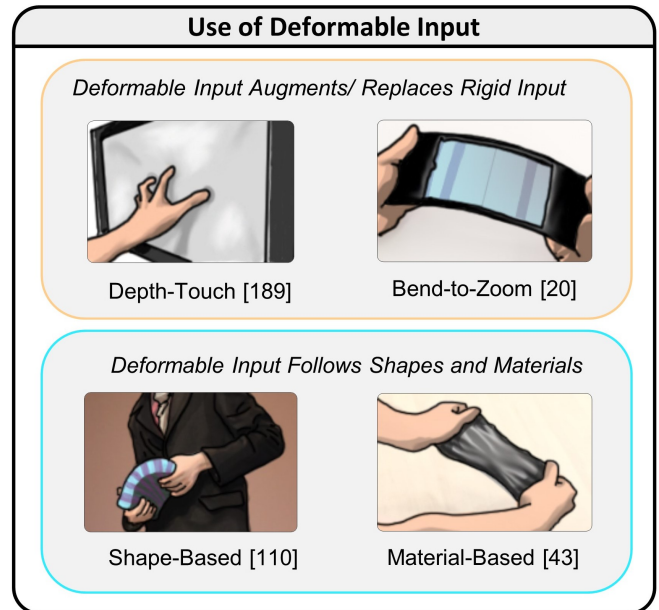
Here, deformable input is used to explore new interactive paradigms that are untied from rigid interactions and interfaces. Even when used as input for WIMP applications, squeezable foam was used in place of mouse and keyboard for 3D sculpting in CAD applications [117]. Furthermore, mobile interaction is not the focus and the range of applications is wide (e.g., music [173, 191, 16, 157, 195, 113, 17], virtual 3D sculpting [155, 55, 181, 183], gaming [122], animation [12], data exploration [147, 204, 113]).

We noticed that deformable input here was used for two purposes: (1) *functional*, where deformations support functional aims, such as bending displays for privacy [125] or deform interfaces to match applications [43, 197, 170], and (2) *expressive*, where deformations enhance creative practices [173, 16, 109, 110, 193, 53, 25, 123], or promote new ways of manipulating and exploring digital contents [24, 62, 21, 204, 55, 28, 93, 162, 177, 154, 12, 184]. In both cases, individual gestures may be used, but become potentially endless as interactions are guided by shapes and materials. Hence, we found that deformable input can be *gesture-based*, but also *shape-based* or *material-based*.

Deformable input can follow shapes, when these become physical counterparts to the digital contents that they manipulate – much like Tangible User Interfaces (TUIs [63, 153, 176]). For instance, when used for virtual 3D sculpting [116], deformable interfaces allow users to physically deform the shape of digital mesh [117, 118, 159], or NURBS [9, 154]. In Flexpad [163], the dynamic deformation of flexible tablets is mapped to the movement of video-animations in real-time, while Clayodor [73] changes odor based how users shape the clay (e.g., a banana-like shape will smell accordingly).

However, unlike TUIs, deformable interfaces can be both generic and specific [173], depending on how I/O is mapped [125], and because their shapes can be dynamically modified to match contents and applications (e.g., [170, 43, 125, 197]). In that respect, they are also similar to shape-changing interfaces [135], but the way they change shape is based on user manipulation, rather than automated self-actuation.

Depending on material properties, deformable interfaces can be partially (e.g., [197]), or radically deformed (e.g., [138]), to the point where the modified shapes have nothing in common with the initial ones [150, 188]. Examples are clay-based interfaces [138, 173, 188, 184, 150, 199, 31], where deformable



**Figure 6: The way in which deformable input is used in relation to earlier HCI paradigms or to explore new ones;**  
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input follows the physical response and the dynamic affordances of the material, rather than specific gestures. As such, deformable interfaces like Illuminating Clay [62] and Digital Clay [138] promote interactions that are closer to sculpting compared, for instance, to bendable displays. With variable stiffness, deformable input follows dynamic materials that shift from soft to stiff and vice versa. In Claytrix Surface [146], users can sculpt physical shapes on deformable displays when soft, and paint on the created shapes using touch input as the display goes stiff; here deformable interfaces express interesting potential for HCI, by bringing together qualities of tangible and shape-changing interfaces. However, further research is needed to fully exploit the potential of shape- and material-based deformable input.

## DISCUSSION

We surveyed deformable interfaces, reviewed elements that form the basis of their design (i.e., shape, material), how they support deformable input, and how is deformable input used for interactive applications. We concentrated on input to integrate earlier reviews that focused more on output [135, 166, 142, 83, 133]. As such, we provided an extensive overview of design practices and solutions for non-rigid input, which were yet under-discussed. The review will be useful to designers and practitioners that wish to better understand non-rigid input and systematically approach its design. Furthermore, we identify under-explored research areas and propose research goals for future work with deformable interfaces and input.

### *Designing Deformable Interfaces and Input*

We surveyed elements that form the basis of designing deformable interfaces and input. Regarding shape, if not designed after displays, their use is sparse and tied to designers' choices. Similarly, choices of deformable materials vary

greatly across interfaces and design practices are still experimental. We need studies that more systematically investigate how and which deformable input can be best supported by specific combinations of shapes and materials, and for which interactive applications. Integrating notions of psychophysics [46] and material perception [161, 11, 32] in future work may help advance knowledge in this area.

We showed how materials that shape-retain and vary stiffness allow deformable input to follow dynamic affordances. However, while dynamic affordances were investigated with shape change for output [174], they are yet unexplored with deformable interfaces; we would like to see similar studies that investigate dynamic affordances with deformable input. We see how deformable interfaces may enhance kinetic input, both gentle and aggressive [173], to express intentions [120], transmit energy in performative acts [16, 205, 109], or convey meaning through shape and movement [165, 120, 27, 177, 163]. Kinetic input with deformable interfaces represents a great opportunity for designing new HCI paradigms (e.g., punchable interfaces [91, 120], and should be further investigated.

We provided a thorough analysis of sensors and sensing techniques for deformable input and their implementation, which was briefly touched upon by previous review, and for displays only [166]. Furthermore, we analyzed and discussed mapping, which is key for understanding I/O relations with deformable interfaces, and how those relations determine (or are determined by) interaction design. Previous reviews did not discuss I/O mapping and we see great potential for future research in this area with deformable interfaces. For instance, deformable interfaces allow users to "touch" sounds. Further investigations of I/O relations with deformable interfaces may help make such analogies consistent between different sensory perceptions. We suggest that future work look at cross-modal correspondence [175, 160] and DMIs [23, 61, 40] to systematically investigate I/O relations with deformable interfaces.

#### *Research Goals for Deformable Interfaces*

There are research areas within deformable interfaces that remain under-explored. For instance, we have user-defined models of deformable interactions that wait to be implemented [178, 172], with yet little progress in that direction. Future work should further exploit such user-defined models and find suitable applications to those.

Deformable interfaces have shown promise for applications in expressive therapies, for instance through the use of deformable displays that act like music interfaces, and help autistic children in engaging in social interactions [105, 28]. However, the use of deformable interfaces for expressive therapy remains mostly unexplored. Deformable input has shown to support eyes-free interaction through haptic feedback provided by shapes and materials [190, 128, 173, 88, 53, 37, 98, 201, 124] which we encourage to further investigate.

We know that technology may allow sensing beyond two simultaneous deformations [144], but we still do not know: (1) what is the maximum number of deformations that users can control simultaneously? (2) how do users perceive individual

deformations when they blur into one another? (3) what tasks are good fit to multidimensional deformable input and why? We suggest looking at studies of psychophysics to investigate perception of multidimensional deformable input [46], and integrality of input for finding fitting tasks [66].

Deformable input was often regarded as potentially more expressive compared to rigid input [102, 156, 26, 173]. However, since control expressiveness may be relative to tasks and how refined the I/O mapping is, one may argue that rigid interfaces can be used expressively too [111]. At present, we do not know how (and if) the above claims are true (i.e., deformable more expressive than rigid), but we do encourage more comparative studies (e.g., [104]) that investigate rigid vs deformable input.

We are witnessing the emergence of bendable and foldable displays in the industry [76, 141, 130, 56, 2, 148, 186], but reducing deformable interfaces to "flexible displays" only may be risky. For instance, our review shows that deformable interfaces are more than just "bendable", and they move HCI paradigms to yet under-explored territories when deformable input follows shapes and materials (e.g., [109, 16, 173]). However, while research on displays and GUI is well-grounded in HCI, interfaces that are not display remain in the realm of highly experimental work, and answering the question "what is a deformable interface really useful for?" remains hard [173]. For instance, what is the "killer app" for deformable interfaces and who could benefit from using existing interfaces (e.g., Illuminating Clay [131])? To answer those questions, we need to ground existing prototypes (e.g., deformable interfaces for 3D sculpting [117] and music [16]) in real-life, and let professionals use them and give feedback.

As such, we encourage studies based on participatory design (PD) [15], which directly involve users and stakeholders by grounding the design of deformable interfaces in their needs, as well as *in-the-wild* studies [54], to obtain spontaneous reactions from users that are unlikely in lab-controlled studies. Furthermore, we need longitudinal studies [173], that observe how users learn to master deformable input over time. Finally, we encourage future reviews to include deformable interfaces from other interdisciplinary fields and potentially relevant sources, such as interactive arts and design.

## CONCLUSION

We reviewed deformable interfaces and input based on 131 papers. We outlined their main design characteristics, discussed use of deformable input, and identified under-explored research areas. We hope that our work will contribute a productive discussions among designers and researchers that wish to further investigate deformable interfaces and non-rigid HCI.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Kasper Hornbaek, Monica Tentori, Hiroo Iwata, Casper Hartevelde, and Alessio Chierico for their precious feedback on the draft. We would also like to thank Rannvá Glerfoss and Igor Kaneda Knowles for their kind support.

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