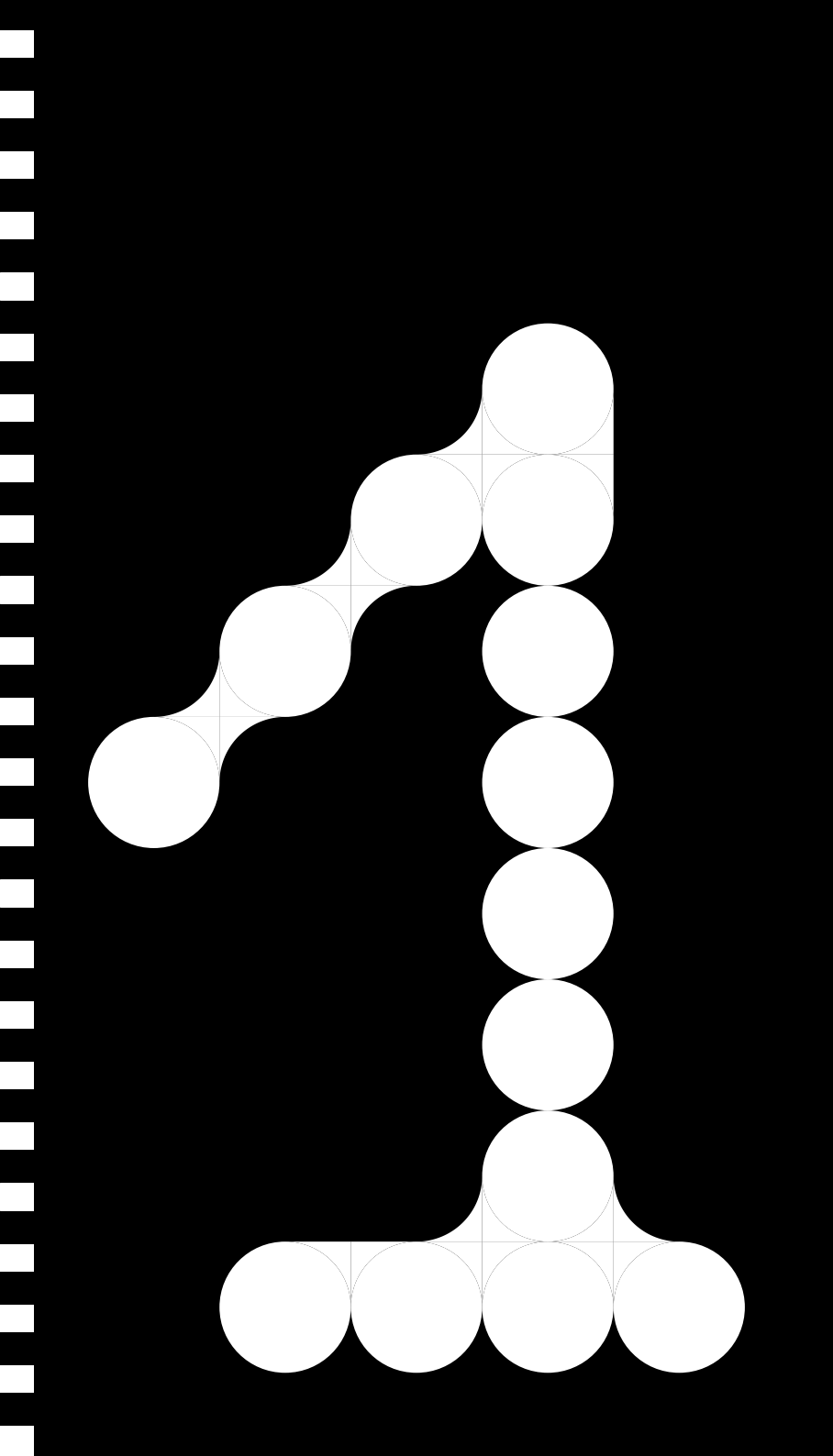


Chapter 1

A journey from the hands-on freedom of early web and clunky mobile magic to today's opaque, corporate-run platforms and design defaults that stifle creativity, underscoring our lost agency in a web we once built.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: THE WEB WE LOST

Reflecting on my own entry into digital culture, I am reminded of the early, almost awkward intimacy of technology in early 2000s. I watched as mobile phones rose - not as sleek objects of desire, but as clunky and unpredictable devices. These early phones, for all their quirks, facilitated new forms of connection and seemed to shrink distances, conjuring McLuhan's idea of a "global village" (McLuhan, 1964). I can vividly recall the sense of wonder the first time I loaded a webpage on a tiny Nokia screen: glitchy, barely legible, but magical in its promise. The experience was imperfect, but it invited exploration. The internet of this era felt radically open, unfinished, and full of potential.

Marshal McLuhan, The Medium is the Massage, 1964

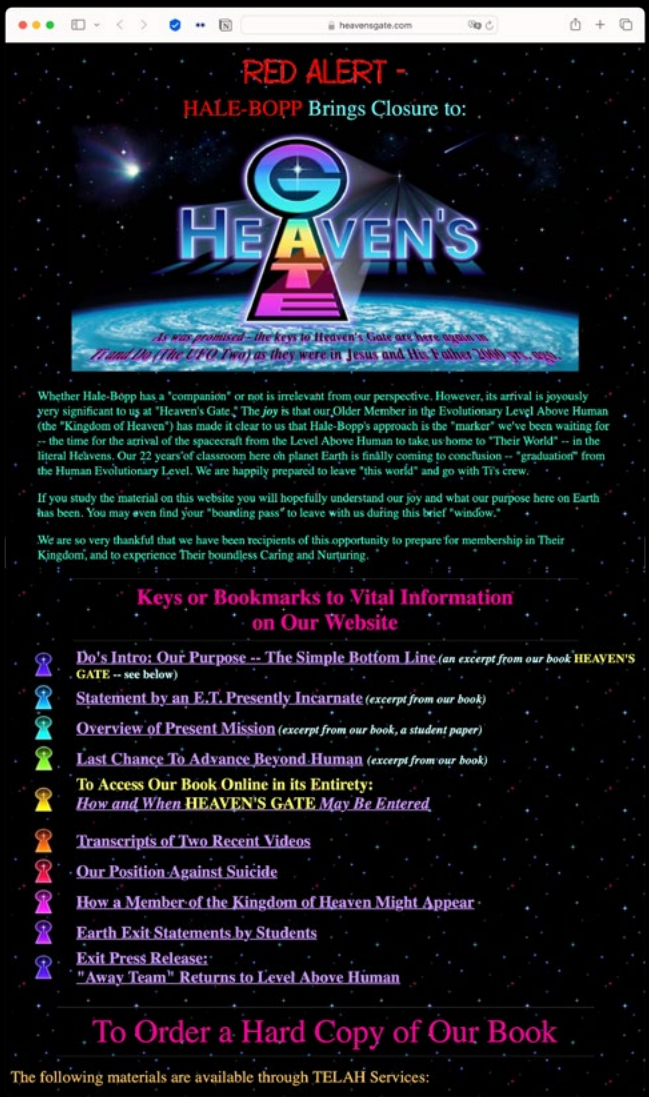
Although I wasn't born yet to participate in the so-called "free web" of the mid-1990s, I nevertheless encountered its traces: hand-coded personal sites, niche forums, and scattered remains of a DIY internet that carried an unmistakable sense of intimacy and slowness. There was a palpable feeling that one could still carve out a digital identity without being absorbed into the logic of centralized platforms. As Chayka (2014) observes in his meditation on Web 1.0, this period was marked by a quieter, safer, and more personal internet. The prevailing dream was that digital space might be a place for self-authorship, a hope that now feels distant.

Kyle Chayka, GIZMODO *The Great Web 1.0 Revival*, 2014

↑ found image of Nokia I used to own

→ www.heavensgate.com

Example of a Web 1.o website
that's still maintained



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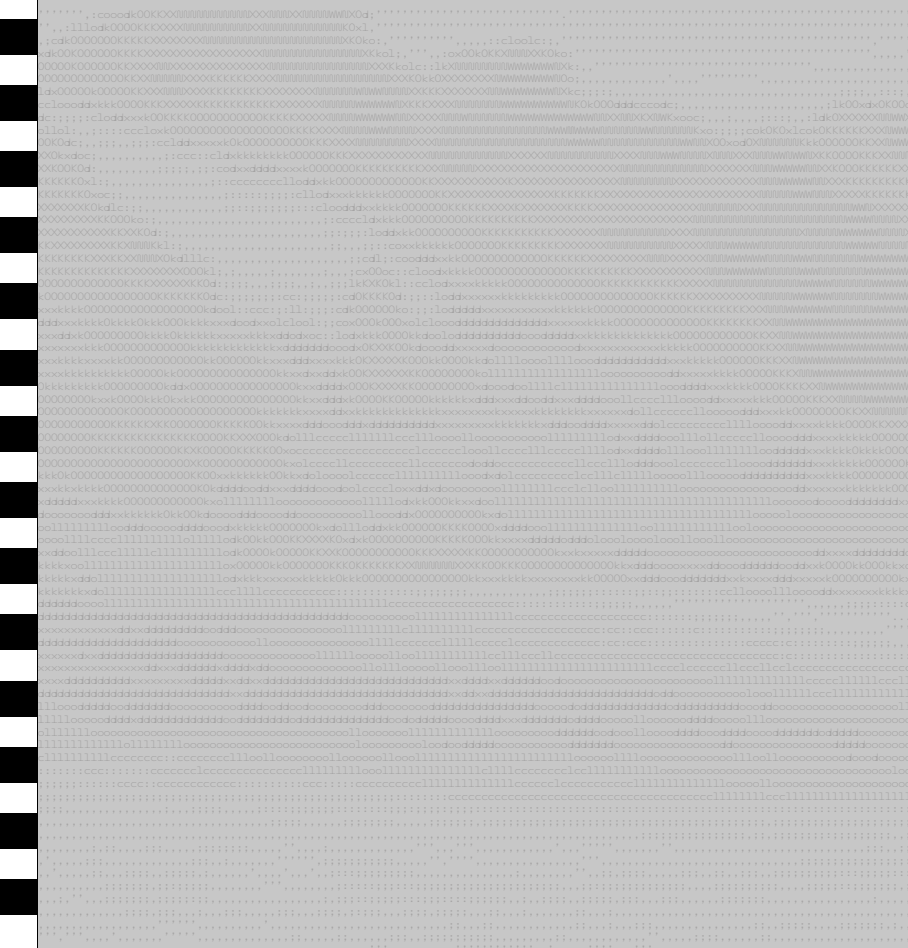
↑ Hito Steyerl, quote from Too Much World Is the Internet Dead?, 2013

PROBLEMS OF THE CURRENT DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

The landscape today could hardly be more different. Technology, once promising and participatory, now often feels remote and controlling. The contemporary internet is defined by what Powers (2011) calls digital maximalism: an environment engineered for relentless consumption, not for creative exploration. Algorithms govern our feeds, shaping experience and taste, quietly relegating users to the role of spectators. Hito Steyerl (2013) describes the modern web as “sanitised, surveilled, and monopolized” - a system policed by corporations for the purposes of copyright, conformity, and

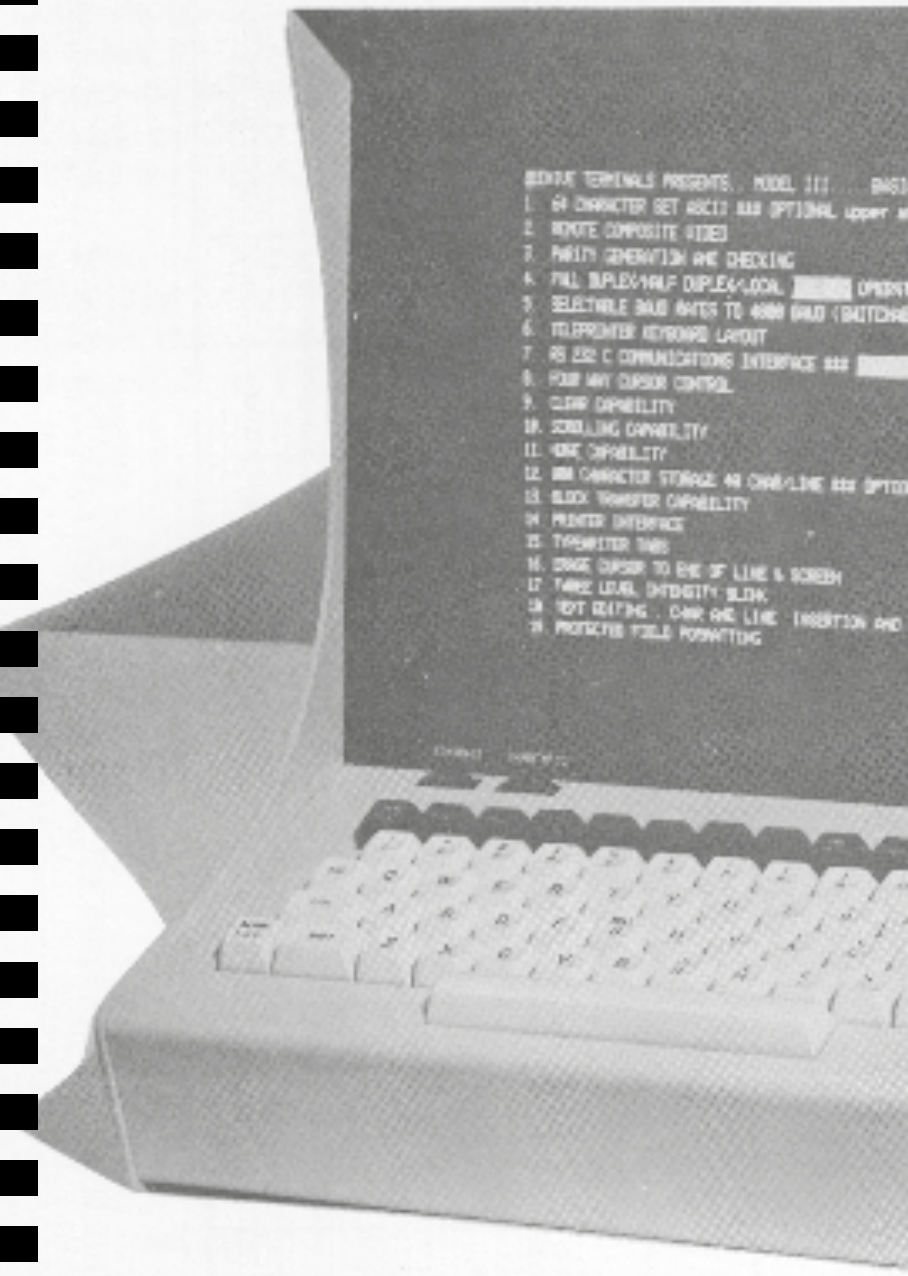
Hito Steyerl, Too Much World, Is the Internet Dead?, 2013

William Powers, Hamlet’s BlackBerry, 2011

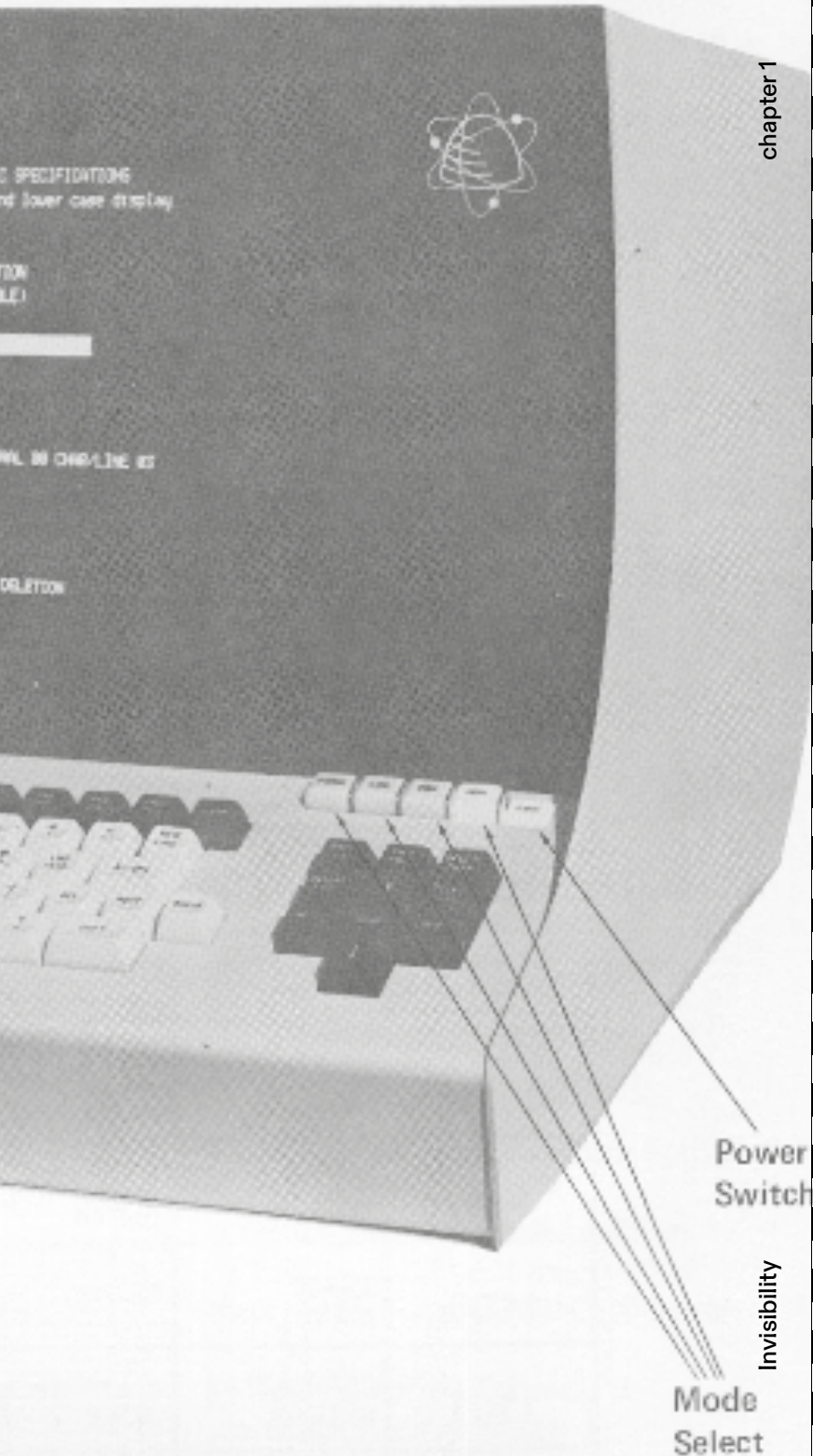


profit. Chayka (2014) expands on this, suggesting that platforms now encourage users to act as curators, but only within pre-filtered, limited options. The promise of agency is often an illusion; choice is a performance enacted within tightly drawn boundaries.

> This landscape of monopolistic platforms, ever-present surveillance, and the manufacture of disinformation produces a form of digital exhaustion. The simple act of "being online" is less joyful and less present. Tolentino (2019) points to the internet's ability to "distend our sense of identity," to foster the overvaluation of opinion, and ultimately to "destroy our sense of scale." In this way, what was once a space of possibility has become, for many, a source of confusion, anxiety, and fatigue.
>
> Kyle Chayka, GIZMODO, *The Great Web 1.0 Revival*, 2014



“oN-Line System” (NLS)


Power
Switch
Invisibility
Mode
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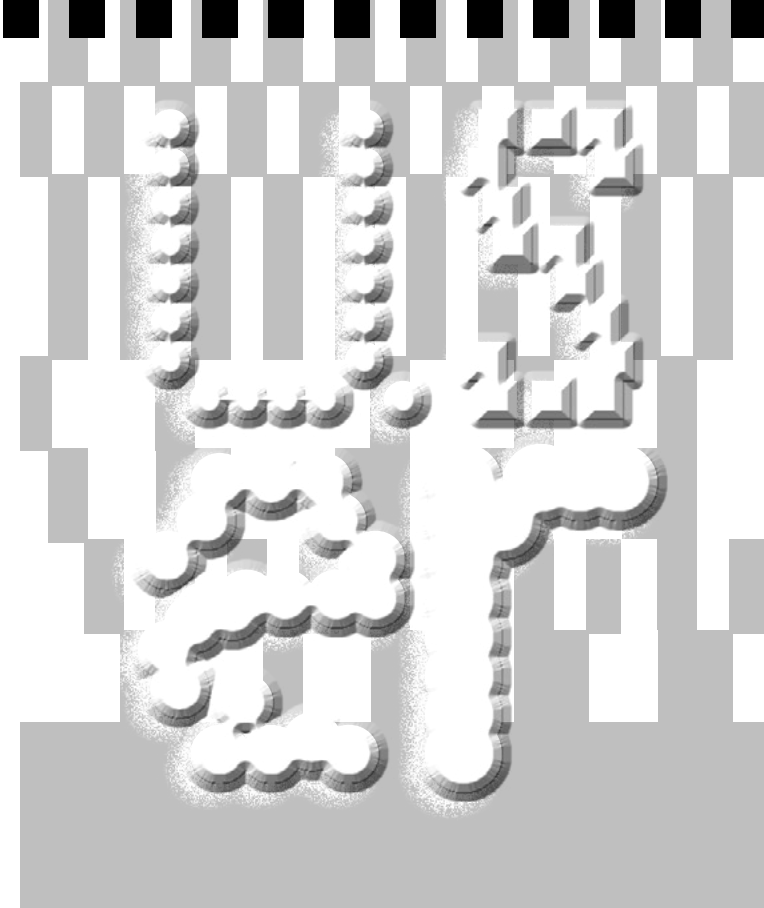
THE NOTION OF INVISIBLE TECHNOLOGY AND THE INVISIBLE USER

The alienation of users from their tools did not occur all at once. Early computing, with its physical, clunky machinery, required a deep, almost bodily engagement; programming was a process of direct confrontation with the limits of hardware, keeping the human “close to the metal” (Norton, 2019). This changed dramatically with Douglas Engelbart’s invention of the computer mouse in 1968, as part of his visionary “oN-Line System” (NLS). The mouse created a new kind of intimacy with machines, transforming the computer into an extension of the user’s body. Yet, paradoxically, this innovation also marked the beginning of a gradual distancing: as interactions became smoother and more abstract, the workings of technology became increasingly hidden (Real Life, 2020).



Emma R. Norton, Close to the Metal, 2019

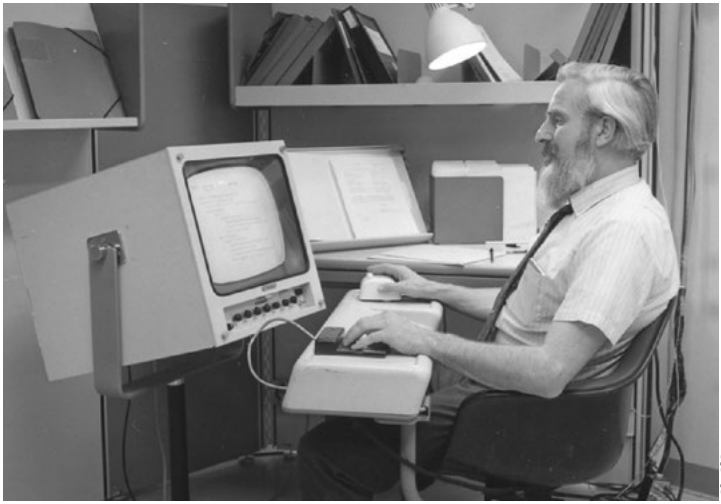
Don Norman, “Why Interfaces Don’t Work”, in: Brenda Laurel (Ed.), The Art of Human-Computer Interface Design, 1990

Emma R. Norton, Close to the Metal, 2019

Olia Lalina, Turing Complete User, 2012

This concept of "invisible computing" was championed by Don Norman, who in his influential essay *Why Interfaces Don't Work* (1990) proposed that, "The real problem with the interface is that it is an interface. The computer of the future should be invisible!" (Norman, 1990). The tech industry quickly adopted this principle. Apple, for example, declared in a 2012 campaign that *"Technology is best when invisible."* While this promise of seamlessness might seem elegant, it also detaches users from the systems they rely on, making questioning and understanding almost impossible. As Brenda Laurel famously remarked, computers became *"doors without doorknobs"* - perfectly smooth, yet fundamentally inaccessible (Laurel, cited in Lialina, 2015).

Olia Lialina identifies this as a core reason for the transition from interface design to what is now called experience design. The aim is not simply to make technology easy to use, but to erase awareness of technology altogether leaving only the user's emotions, goals, and tasks. The price of this comfort, however, is a deep alienation: users become not just operators, but invisible presences within systems they can no longer interrogate or change.



↑ Image courtesy of the Doug Engelbart Institute

Invisible Technology

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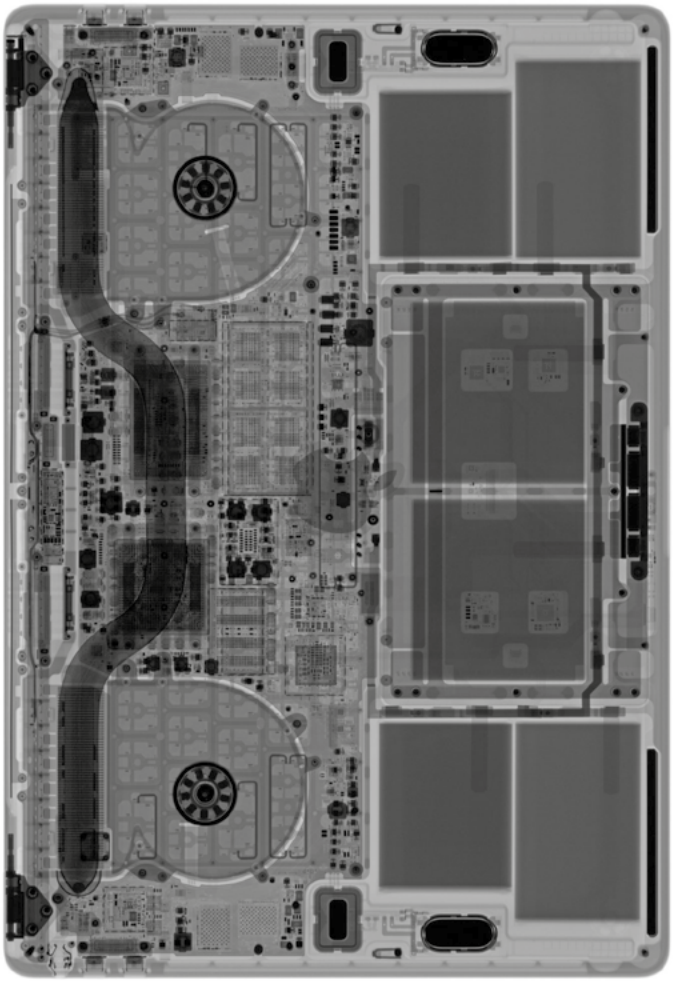

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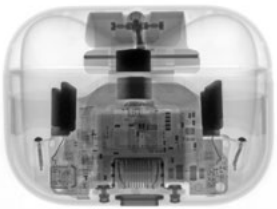

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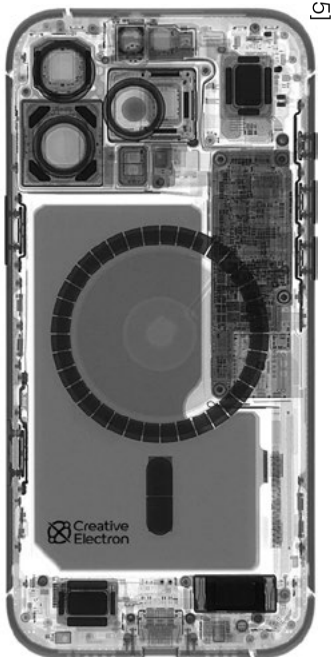

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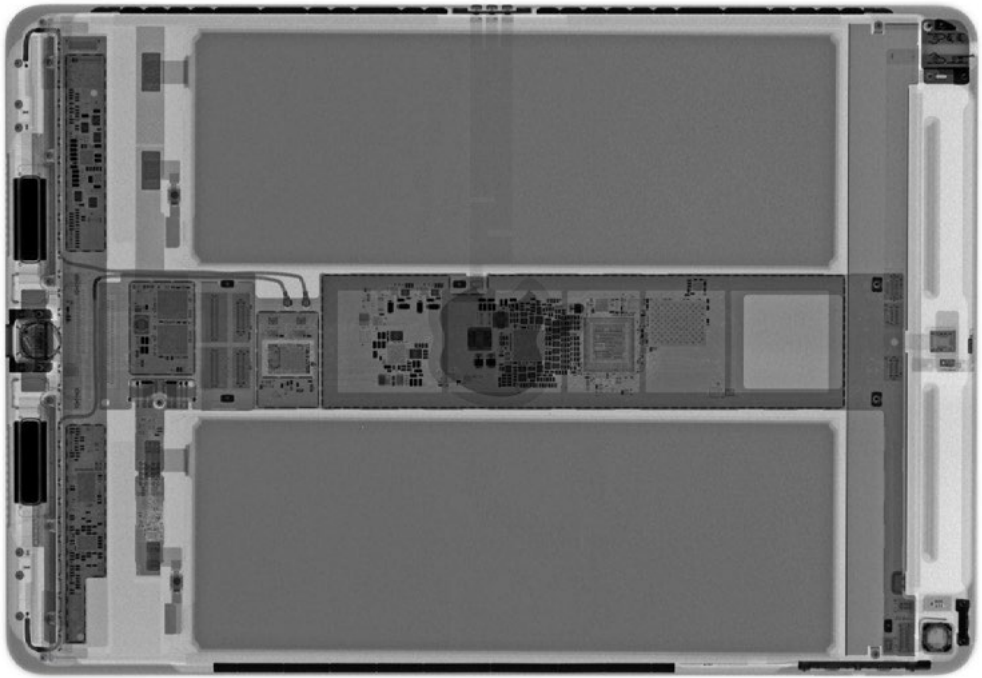


[04]

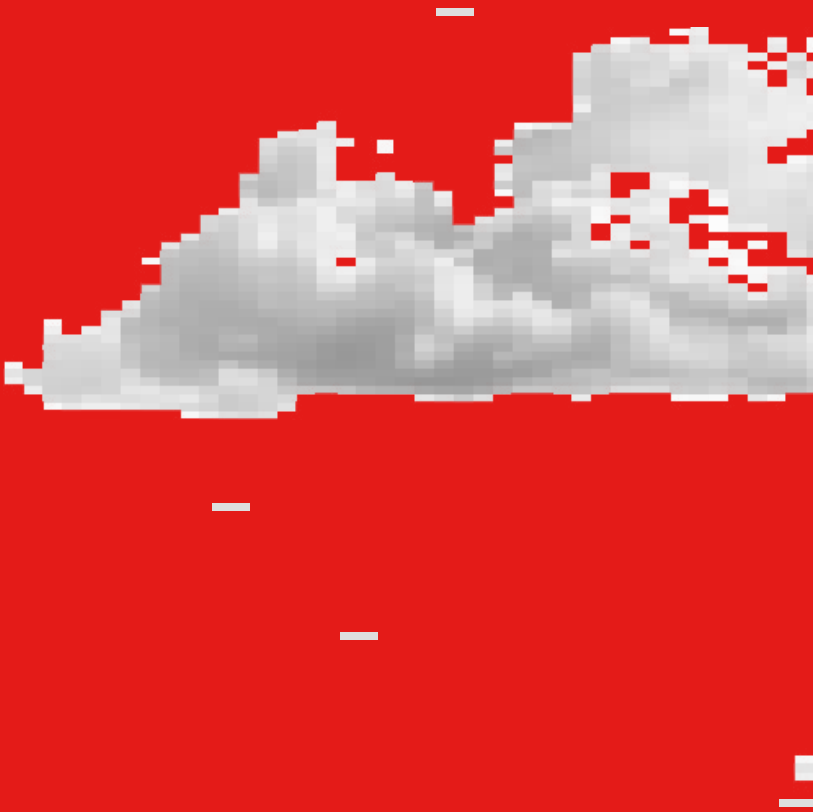
"We believe that tec
best when it is invis

chnology is at its very
ible”

The New iPad (iPad 3) Offical Introduction Video,
Youtube, 2012

HOW METAPHORIZATION OF THE WEB DISTANCES US FROM TECHNOLOGY

One of the most persistent forces alienating users from technology is the human tendency to cloak the digital world in layers of metaphor and abstraction. Rather than revealing, these metaphors obscure, turning technology into something mystical at once familiar and fundamentally unknowable. This process distances us, the so-called "users," from the technical realities underpinning our digital environments.

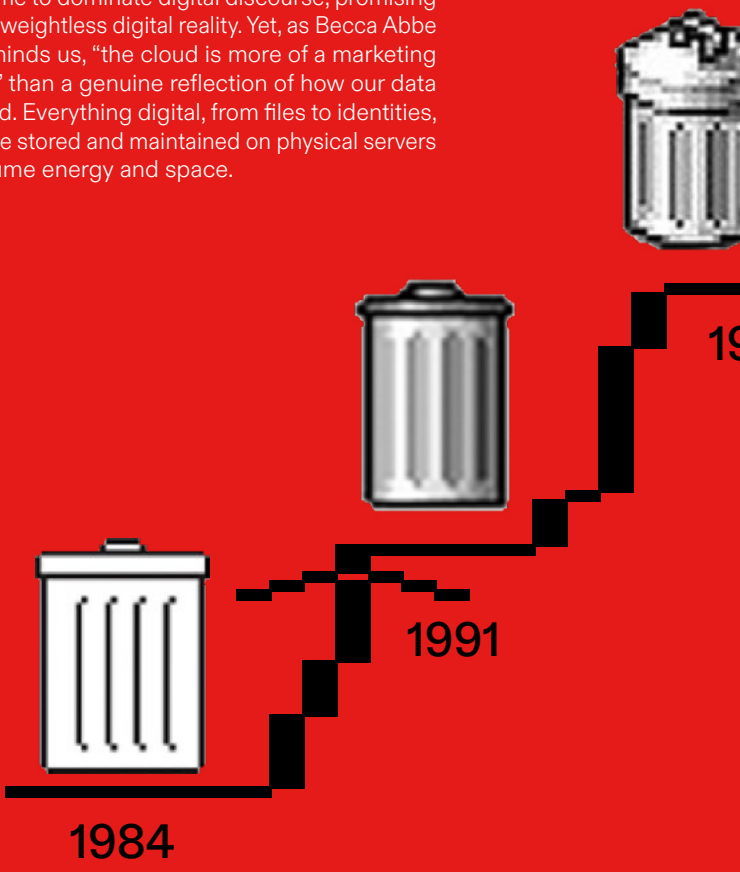


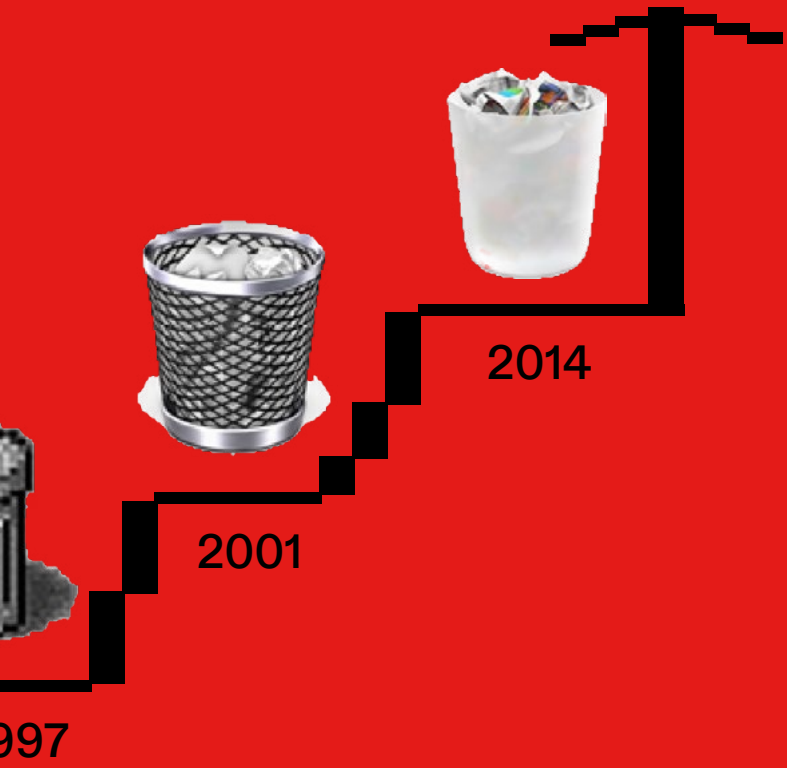
Compiling Edge Effects: Notes on Publishing Ecologies, 2023

Graphical user interfaces (GUIs) themselves have become “an abstracted representation of a person’s relationship to a machine” and it is precisely this abstraction that prevents users from seeing or questioning the technical and political realities at play (Ecologies, 2024). These metaphors, once meant to make technology approachable, now render it distant and unchallenge-able, reinforcing the illusion of seamlessness and disguising the power structures beneath.

The invention of the computer mouse, for instance, brought us closer to virtual space by introducing a new form of embodied navigation, demanding at least some physical effort from the user. However, the subsequent rise of handheld devices like smartphones and tablets has pushed us further from meaningful engagement with the inner structures of software. Where once we could tinker, explore, and understand, now we are encouraged to scroll, swipe, and passively consume information. As Lori Emerson (2014) notes, “The iPad works because users can’t know how it works”, the mechanics and logic are hidden behind glass.

A similar abstraction is evident in the evolution of interface icons. The attached image shows how design has shifted from pixelated, almost diagrammatic representations to highly polished, lifelike metaphors. Early icons bore traces of technological limitation; their pixel grids gave users a sense of the computer’s underlying logic. Today’s icons, by contrast, are seamless, inviting users to ignore the complexity behind them and accept a mediated, “magic” experience. The abstraction is further amplified by language. By the 2010s, terms like “cloud” came to dominate digital discourse, promising a limitless, weightless digital reality. Yet, as Becca Abbe (2024) reminds us, “the cloud is more of a marketing buzzword” than a genuine reflection of how our data is managed. Everything digital, from files to identities, must still be stored and maintained on physical servers that consume energy and space.





Emerson, Lori, Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound, 2014
Becca Abbe, The Internet's Back-to-the-Land Movement, 2019

A SINGLE PROGRA
RUNNING THROUG

M.
HOUT A NETWORK

Network is potentially unlimited in size.

This culture of abstraction and detachment finds its most potent expression in the world of design software. As Rob Giampietro has argued, "The computer has changed design, but it has also changed our process of thinking and making" (Giampietro, 2014). Tools like Adobe Creative Suite, with their intricate ecosystems of defaults, templates, and automated features, shape not only how we work but how we think about what design is and could be.

design

CREATIVE OS

AND

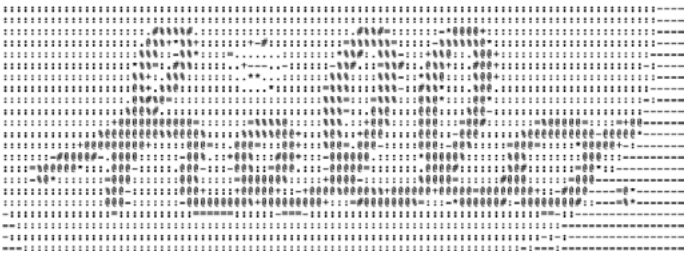
DEFAULTISM

This phenomenon extends beyond mere hardware. The introduction of the Macintosh computer, for instance, coincided with the decline of the Swiss International Style and the rise of a more automatic, industrialized approach to graphic design. “Default systems are machines for design creation,” Giampietro writes, describing a shift toward design practices that align with capitalist values - speed, replication, and efficiency over craft, and critical engagement (Giampietro, 2003).

Default settings, far from being neutral, actively sculpt creative outcomes. They make design more accessible to the masses, but also risk flattening difference and dehumanizing the creative process. The designer is gradually replaced by the software; what once required intentional choice and authorship is now accomplished through the path of least resistance, the click of a button. Even the notion of “ugly design,” as Giampietro discusses, is bound up with these same systems - driven by a mix of democratic impulse and algorithmic convenience.

The first Apple Macintosh was introduced on January 24, 1984, by Steve Jobs.

Rob Giampietro, Default Systems in Graphic Design, 2003



For me, this resonates with Olia Lialina's critique of Adobe's marketing: campaigns that claim, "I have more time to do what I like most - being creative," while actually encouraging designers to distance themselves from code, links, and the deeper workings of the web. The message is clear: the less you understand about the technology, the more creative you supposedly are (Lialina, 2015).

Adobe, in particular, monopolizes the "creativity" market, setting the standards for what is considered "good design" and influencing aesthetic norms across the field (Giampietro, 2003). The deeper issue is that default systems are designed to be invisible. Their norms, once established, become silent truths—rarely questioned, yet powerfully shaping the direction of an entire industry. As Pipkin (2019) observes, "To live a life within human society is to live a life inside of technologies, including many that have become so standardised and widespread that they are the default lens through which we view the world."

Olia Lialina, Turing Complete User, 2015

Rob Giampietro, Default Systems in Graphic Design, 2003

Everest Pipkin, essay The House that Technology Built , 2022