

CONCEPT PACKET — MEDIA LAB

Title

**When Forms Survive but Meaning Does Not:
A Physical Interface for Studying Transmission Loss**

Classification

Exploratory Research Artifact

This document proposes an experimental interface, not a theory.

1. Starting Point (Why Media Lab)

This work does not attempt to explain culture, education, or governance.

It asks a narrower question suitable for experimental design:

Can loss of meaning transmission be observed,
induced, and mitigated through interaction design?

Rather than studying systems abstractly, this project externalizes the problem into a **physical, observable interface**.

2. The Research Object

The object is not a game, not a toy, and not a teaching tool.

It is a **Physical Cognitive Interface** designed to expose how humans interact with form, structure, and intent under constraint.

The interface allows researchers to observe:

- how structure solidifies,
- how adaptation stalls,
- and how transmission between participants degrades or recovers.

3. Core Research Hypothesis

Transmission is not carried primarily by explicit rules, but by synchronized state between participants.

When synchronization fails, systems remain functional but lose continuity.

This hypothesis is explored experimentally, not asserted philosophically.

4. The Artifact: A Board-Based Interface

4.1 The Grid (Formal Space)

- A modular hexagonal grid.
- Uniform, minimal, neutral.
- Represents optimized form without embedded meaning.

No instructions are printed on the grid.

4.2 The Objects (Forms)

- Geometric blocks with no inherent function.
- Identical appearance, different internal constraints.

These objects represent:

- procedures,
- institutions,
- or formal roles.

They are intentionally ambiguous.

4.3 The State Tokens (Non-Formal Signals)

- Organic, irregular tokens (color, texture, weight vary).
- No textual meaning attached.

These tokens represent **non-verbal transmission**:

- intent,
- pacing,
- emphasis,
- and relational timing.

5. Dual Dynamics (Observed, Not Explained)

The system evolves through two concurrent dynamics:

A. Structural Solidification

- Over time, blocks interlock automatically.
- Movement becomes restricted.
- Options narrow.

This simulates institutional self-stabilization.

B. Adaptive Reconfiguration

- Participants may reconfigure the system only by coordinating placement of state tokens.
- Success depends on timing and shared understanding, not rule-following.

Participants cannot destroy structure – only reinterpret it.

6. The Critical Constraint

Participants are **not allowed to explain rules verbally**.

Communication occurs only through:

- gesture,
- pacing,
- object placement,
- sound cues,
- and shared attention.

This constraint is essential.

7. What Is Being Measured

The experiment does not measure “success” or “winning”.

Instead, researchers observe:

- time to structural lock-in,
- frequency of dead states,
- recovery attempts,
- divergence between participant intent and system outcome,
- and variance between groups with identical starting conditions.

8. Why This Matters to Media Lab

This artifact sits at the intersection of:

- interaction design,
- collective cognition,
- embodied communication,
- and system resilience.

It allows Media Lab to study:

- how meaning survives abstraction,
- how coordination degrades without language,
- and how systems fail silently while appearing stable.

9. What This Is Not

- Not a cultural statement
- Not a pedagogical framework
- Not a critique of any nation or institution

It is a **neutral probe** into a structural phenomenon.

10. Open Research Directions

Media Lab teams may explore:

- variations with AI agents as silent participants,
- sensor instrumentation for physiological synchronization,
- translation into digital or hybrid environments,
- or longitudinal studies on learning curves.

The artifact is intentionally incomplete.

11. Closing Note

This work does not ask Media Lab to accept a conclusion.

It offers a **designed situation** in which a phenomenon may reveal itself.

What emerges – or fails to emerge – is the result.