A provocative call to engage with social and sensory aspects of touch

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Abstract

The social and sensory aspects of touch are critical for human communication, yet the challenges of haptic technology development and a focus on the technological means that digital touch communication often fails to realise the potential and promise of touch. The Manifesto for Digital Social Touch in Crisis responds to this through a call to action to rethink and reimagine digital touch. It offers 10 provocative statements as a resource for how haptic designers, developers and researchers might rethink and reimagine the social and sensory aspects of touch, and foreground these more in design.

Keywords

Touch, social touch, digital touch, multimodal, sensory, haptics, design, manifesto, interdisciplinary research

This practitioner reflection show the potential of the manifesto form (see Hanna and Ashby, 2022) to bridge between disciplinary boundaries in this case with attention to concerns about social touch. The Manifesto for Digital Social Touch in Crisis was developed through an interdisciplinary collaboration between computer scientists, designers, engineers, Human Computer Interaction scholars and social scientists from industry and academia. The collaboration and manifesto development method are outlined elsewhere (Jewitt et al., 2021).

The manifesto articulates seven foundational themes related to the key opportunities and challenges raised through the growth of digital touch facing designers, developers and researchers. These themes include the need to (1) broaden the conceptualisation of touch; (2) enrich digital touch experience; (3) engage with the wider socio-political context of touch including the commercialisation of digital touch (a theme also articulated in Golmohammadi’s contribution to this special issue); (4) understand and manage user expectations; (5) consider the design of touch privacy; (6) develop interaction design tools; and (7) encourage interdisciplinary dialogue on the social and sensory aspects of touch.

As society engages with and emerges from the uncertainty of touch in Covid-19 times, the Manifesto for Digital Social Touch in Crisis signals a desire for change and a rethinking and reimaging of the social and sensory aspects of touch through the design process.
MANIFESTO FOR DIGITAL SOCIAL TOUCH IN CRISIS

This manifesto is for designers and developers working on digital touch across academia and industry. It is a vision designed to challenge and provoke debate, raise awareness, incite questions, inspire and direct research and design on the social and sensory aspects of the digital design of touch.


1. MAKE SOCIAL TOUCH CENTRAL

Human touch matters! None in on social touch. Include touch matters at the heart of digital communication. Amidst conflicting social concerns and uncertain futures, we must find routes to navigate the technological realities and promises for social touch. Give life back to the digital. Feel the pulse.

2. DESIGN TOUCH FIRST, TECHNOLOGY SECOND

Touch is at risk in technology. Technology always is not the solution. We need technologies to better realise digital touch. Given digital touch should be set by something more than technological availability. Amplify interdisciplinary to FREAM RESET. Reframe the dialogue between the social, sensory, tactile aesthetic and technological drivers underpinning digital touch development. Bring nuance to a collective imaginary of future touch.

3. DEMOCRATISE TOUCH: DON’T LOCK IT IN

Touch is political. Touch is infused with power. We are positioned to touch through socio-economic and socio-cultural drivers. Let’s interrogate how digital design achieves touch needs and norms. Digital touch needs to be a full conversation. Everyone is qualified to have a say on what digital touch might become. The touch etiquettes of the 20th century will not suffice. OPEN UP ‘opportunity spaces’ TO AVOID disamplification of touch getting ‘locked in’. DESIGN HETEROGENEITY. Just say no to ‘homogenised touching’. Amplify diversity through touch encodings.

4. PROTECT TOUCH: KEEP TOUCH PRIVATE AND SECURE BY DESIGN


5. MOVE BEYOND VIBRATION: FEEL BEYOND THE HABITUATED

Pay closer attention to the FEEL of touch. Re-encode touch sensations. Create haptics of self-resistance in the tactile terrain. Materialise touch ROUGH it up ... WARM it up. Give it texture. Soft bouncy, warm and comforting. How about a lot of give and take - Material reciprocity beyond the limits of the slick or smooth. Give me a digital touch I don’t expect. Inexplore new TACTILE RHYTHMS. Make time for touch. Ambient 5G-CW touch. Enrich the shallow vibrating utilitarian feel. Venture beyond the hand, beyond the skin, and make digital touch thrive.

6. FOSTER EXPLORATION OF MEANINGFUL TOUCH EXPERIENCES

PERSONALISE TOUCH. Design for a plurality of touch preferences and sensory thresholds. Keep it Runner, get mobile, tap digital touch outdoors? DESIGN a varied touch terrain. Include more options. LEAVE SPACE FOR MUTUAL touch CREATION. STRETCH the embodied limits of touch socially and functionally to explore new possibilities. A CUSTOMISABLE tactile landscape to support the development of social touch languages. Give the user felt feedback to sense their own touch and handle whom and where touch lands. Give digital touch value culture. Add biocultural rent. Allow social touch to extend beyond the immediately comfortable everyday zone.

7. REMAKE, DON’T ONLY REPLICATE!

Free digital touch from the limits of its analogue reflection and let go. Confound and REASSOCIATE touch. Challenge the status-quo. Foster alternative views. Engage with unfamiliar touch, prepare to touch newly. Touch the touch screens devoid of feedback. Transmute the rub language of HOK-HUMAN touch into the tactile landscape. Resonate touch. Resonate photochrome of touch. Take a leaf from nature, music and reality as a stepping stone to remake touch. OR JUMP into the water and wade to a new back to refresh touch.

8. MANAGE GREAT TECH-XPERCUTIONS

Frame users’ touchy touch expectations. Communicate and contextualise digital touch. Avoid the feel of disappointment. Digital touch is a long-term endeavor. Tackle commercial SME. We need to over promise ... LIKE NOTHING EVER FELT BEFORE. Keep possibility alive within an honest sense of promise. Metaphor and imagination can bridge a user to unconnected social, sensory and digital touch. Managing expectations is an important step towards adoption.

9. DEVELOP OPEN TOUCHY TOOLS

We need diverse collaborative tools. libraries and archives, technical tools, thinking tools and sensitizing tools to expand touch in the digital realm. Shared tools that can interweave between users, designers, developers, manufacturers. Make. Try. Explore. Tools to inspire and educate and bring potential users into the digital touch dialogue. Generate new touch metaphors. Grab at it, pinch and mould it, make our vocabularies work so we can have new relationships between language and technology to create touch sensations talk me into feeling it. COMMUNICATE! We need to understand each other better.

10. KEEP SPECULATING

Revisit touch pasts. Interrogate touch presents. Take an E-X-P-A-R-D-E-O view of touch. Pursuit the influence of digitally-mediated touch on social interaction. Explore the texture in the space between touch Dystopias — Utopias.
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