

The Curious Interface: A Design Manifesto in Favor of Play

By Jane McGonigal

*Ambiguous displays invite interpretation.
Mysterious signals demand investigation.
Curious interfaces provoke play.*

As computing technologies proliferate in our everyday environments, so do the daily imperatives we face as users. We expect our smart technologies to be responsive (often proactively) to our needs and desires; so, too, do our technologies now expect *us* to be responsive to *their* input appetites and output flows. This feedback loop has the potential to generate an explosion of exploratory digital dialogues, to foster more playful, probing interactions between humans and computers. But our opportunities to engage digitally are increasingly limited and pre-determined by technologies that *too clearly* announce their intentions and capabilities. The user who instantly understands the purpose and processes of a technology is compelled to respond in specific, directed ways. Once learned, these habits preclude user experimentation, modification and intervention. For this reason, we must insist: clarity in design is not always an advantage. On the contrary, there is currently a crisis of straightforward labels and instructions.

We call for more curious interfaces. We proclaim the importance of readouts, displays and signals that behave in curiouser and curiouser ways. We ask for more freedom in interpreting the purposes of embedded systems. We long for sensors that we must fully sense in return. We support ambiguity, multiplicity, and open-endedness in design, so that we perceive, rather than receive, our technologies. We propose that our digital domains become mysterious once again, that our environments demand our eager exploration, that every user becomes an inventive player.

A clear interface is a window to the designer's intentions, but an opaque interface is a mirror, reflecting different motives and modes of deployment with each user it engages. When what surrounds us confounds us, when the computable tends toward the inscrutable, only then we will become strategic, resourceful, poetic actors.

Be responsive.