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As media platforms shift towards more dynamic interfaces, the separation between user and content grows infinitely. While advertised as thin, light, and seamless, these platforms mask a thick and complicated space in which society must navigate. This is what I call the *Thick Interface*. The *Thick Interface* is the space between user and content. It is a space that has grown vast, complicated, and consequential through the evolution of society and technology. This space began its growth at the infancy of design practice, the Gutenberg press, but has grown exponentially in recent years to encompass a space that is occupied and lived in. Starting at the Gutenberg press reveals that the practice of graphic design was born out of and is married to technological advancement. While this growth in scale and complexity may affect all professions and all of society, I would argue that it affects graphic design on a deeper level. After all, it is designer’s role to sculpt society’s relationship with content and to narrate and disseminate the information used to guide us through our complex environments. When we design interfaces—books, posters, artifacts, websites, mobile applications, etc.—this thickening space is not only vital, but also a powerful communication tool worth utilizing as a means to understand and relate to the complexity of these engagements.

As this space continues to grow, designers much grow with it. More than just evolving to new platforms, the methodologies designers execute must also adapt to new forms of narrative and experience. Traditionally, the graphic designer has been tasked with hiding, masking, and distracting from errors. It was formerly designer’s job to clean up content, provide a happy, productive, and inspiring experience with it. This was an interaction devoid of distraction, disturbance, and clutter. Yet in today’s media landscape, designers must also consider how to not only explain content, but also explain the complexity of the experience the content represents. As the space within the *Thick Interface* becomes increasingly more extensive, confusing and disorienting, the steps designers take to hide the thickness also grow. We are using new softwares, technologies, languages, etc. as a means to encourage an audience to forget this space exists. What happens if we stop trying to hide the errors and

embrace them? As we seek to visualize the complexity, I argue that the most important tool of the contemporary graphic designer is not photoshop, indesign, processing, or html; it is the glitch.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a glitch as, “a sudden short-lived irregularity in behavior.” The glitch has traditionally been viewed as a computer problem, when a machine makes a mistake. While often glitches are cumbersome burdens—considering they represent an undesired outcome, usually at the most impromptu time—glitches also have an aesthetic within the art and design community which many are fascinated. They are pixelated, noisy, and nostalgic. They are dynamic, unexpected, and edgy. These formal qualities are what Curt Cloninger and Nick Briz call an ‘a-ha’ moment in our interaction with technology.<sup>(1)</sup> An ‘a-ha’ moment is when an expected visual responds in an unexpected way. For example, Kenneth Goldsmith—in his book *Uncreative Writing*—tells a great story about how during a transatlantic flight his seat-back monitor shifted from visualizing a map of the plane over the ocean, to a sea of computer code, only to return to the map after a DOS re-boot<sup>(2)</sup>. In this instance, the glitch reveals a mild unexpected and unplanned interruption. The viewer is momentarily aware of the underlying system that supports the map and the glitch provides a momentary access point into the *Thick Interface*, revealing its inner structure. These glitches, opposed to the forced glitch typically associated with Glitch Art, are possibly the most intriguing digital glitch in the reveal of the Thick Interface. They take place in the worst possible situations: airports, signage systems, ATM machines, etc. These are spaces dictated by a very specific agenda, usually one dependent on time and money. Here, the glitch disrupts our goals and compounds distress. Yet the heart of a glitch is its temporality. It always retreats from this ‘a-ha’ moment back to the expected experience. If we step back and evaluate this narrative; the glitch becomes a gift. It is an opportunity to understand and digest the reality of thickness of our interfaces right in front of us. Obviously, these examples are unintended moments. These interfaces were designed to work seamlessly and these reveals were never intended to be seen. As designers, we so often fear the glitch. But this experience of appreciation sheds light on their potential. Designers should be utilizing the narrative potential of the glitch in our everyday experiences to not only translate information, but also comment on the experience.

The glitch is not necessarily new in graphic design. Grunge typography, among other disruptive typographic experiments throughout history, are close cousins to the contemporary idea of the glitch. Popularized in the 1990’s by the likes of graphic designers

David Carson and Neville Brody, this form of typographic expression followed a similar trajectory to other examples of graphic design innovation. It was a direct result of technological advancement. More importantly, it signaled graphic design's potential to not only simplify content, but to participate in the conversation of that content; to open up the content even more, and to comment on the world in which the content resides. Here, the interface is no longer invisible, but increasingly material, both formally and conceptually.

Grunge typography was as much about its time in history as it was about the technology. The nineties were a world of anger, resentment, and confusion following the end of the Cold War. As Carlos Segura put it, "Grunge typography came in as a backlash, very much like how punk music came in. It was almost like a societal complaint...everything was getting too clean."<sup>(3)</sup> These stylistic moves added layers of disruption to the reading experience. David Carson's most famous example is his treatment of a *Raygun* article about Brian Ferry which he set entirely in Zapf Dingbats, rendering the text completely illegible. Here, Carson politicizes his work as a means to alter the expected experience of a reader and a magazine.

More than twenty years later, the glitch resides in a similar situation. The world of today is formally similar yet exponentially more complicated to that of the nineties. The complication exists in the invisible systems and networks surrounding our urban existence. What has changed since the days of grunge is that designers have become far better at cleaning up the edges and surfaces of contemporary complexity, and the containers we design in are deeply more magical. In the nineties, the interface, while thickening, was still relatively thin. Today, that interface is vastly thicker and the glitch is the tool which serves the role that grunge type once did, activating the content, while also experimenting with the technology. The glitch is not only an access point to the *Thick Interface*, but also a potential statement about societies position within it regarding privacy, security, power, etc.. Yet still, grunge is only a cousin of the glitch because—for the most part—it is still purely a stylistic move. Grunge typography is more closely related to glitch art than glitch design, where the aesthetic of error is utilized to formally make statements. The glitch I argue for has far more reach than the visual splendor of anxiety. It has an opportunity to alter the experience and the perception of an audience as they participate in the world. It takes into consideration more than just the visual spectrum, but time, tactility, sound, and space.

Unfortunately, in the expansion of complexity and the *Thick*

*Interface*, graphic designers have—more often than not—retreated back to the role of stylist or technician of these new interfaces. We do not clean up the thickness itself, but rather the container it lives in. In this model, society need not concern itself with what is under the hood and how it works. This is very much dictated by a client driven business model. Clients want—and pay for—work that promotes a specific agenda to their audiences. The stereotype of error negates and interferes with a curated strategy. But if we stop thinking about glitches as simply computer problems to solve but as opportunities to disrupt expected experiences, the narrative potential of the glitch is infinite.

Sure, the works of glitch typographers, artist/designers, and even contemporary practitioners like OKFocus, Metahaven, etc. have experimented with disruption and glitch in traditional graphic design practice. I still feel we have only scratched the surface of the potential of interference in design methodology. Where the intrigue of the glitch has the potential to go further is embedded in the growing thickness of our interfaces. Here, the physical and digital are intertwined and the glitch is no longer simply a physical disruption to digital systems but digital systems also invading our physical environments. These glitches are no longer one-way systems and two-dimensional visuals. When the digital invades the physical glitches shift to experiential, participatory, and interactive moments in our everyday environments.

This brings us to Cloninger and Briz's second glitch moment; the 'oh shit' moment. Here, they point out that the glitch is not a computer problem but a human problem. They state, "Computers don't make mistakes, people do. If all variables remain the same, given the same input, a computer will always render the same output; however, often times a programmer slips...These slips result in entirely predictable, yet unexpected output. We tend to place the onus on the computer and call this moment a glitch."<sup>(4)</sup> This statement points to the glitch as something we can control and utilize, not simply something to which we are subjected. They go on to say, "A glitch is experienced when a human mis-expects one thing and winds up with something else. Without hope, anticipation, and expectation, without a sense of rightness and the way things are supposed to be, there is no glitch."<sup>(5)</sup>

Hope and expectation drive our everyday lives. We expect our technology to work as advertised. We expect it to help and to enhance our lives. Since the glitch is so dependent and so effective in these moments when expectations are high, designing disruptions are an

enticing opportunity in the toolkit of the contemporary designer. The glitch can start to shape, frame, and alter the way we experience complex content. The glitch provides the designer the opportunity to not only reveal the thickness, but to explain it in new, relatable, and memorable ways. Additionally, when we remove the glitch's tie to its formal stereotype of pixels, shifts, and error on a screen, it can become anything—physical, digital, both, or neither—which momentarily disrupts an expected experience. It is this rupture that provides the graphic designer great opportunities for how we tell contemporary stories.

It is no longer the task of the contemporary graphic designer to simply beautify the edges of our complex contents and societies. The job now includes thoroughly explaining the systems themselves. The glitch becomes the access point to chronicle these complexities; through time, space, and experience. Cloninger and Briz often define this as the 'glitch event'<sup>(6)</sup> which prefaces that the glitch is an interactive and participatory entity. The designed glitch takes us from the playful and surface 'a-ha' moment, to the deep, rich, engrained, and sometimes terrifying, 'oh shit' realization of what our experiences in the *Thick Interface* actually imply. As graphic designers continue to attack more complex and consequential problems, the glitch opens up our interfaces, not by simplifying, but by providing a vantage point to understanding and a new lens to observe and evaluate our evolving media landscapes. Designers should evolve from stylists to interfaces in their own right, not be trying to mask 'a-ha' moments, we should be intentionally creating 'ah-shit' moments. Evolving from graphic designers to glitch designers.

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