Practitioner Reflection

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

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Correction (January 2026): Author disclosure statements have been updated

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.

> Human touch is at risk. Of disappearing. Neglected touch. Low touch. No touch. Not enough touch. Touch hunger. Skin starvation. Touch deprivation. Remote. Distant. Missing. ///Flip -Switch/// Too much touch. Intrusive. Unwelcome. The wrong kind of touch. Feel the cacophony, the weight of fears for technological touch – but don't forget the good dreams.

1. MAKE SOCIAL TOUCH CENTRAL

Human touch matters! Hone 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 (alone) is not the solution. We need technologies to better realize digital touch. Goals for digital touch should be set by something more than technological availability. Amplify interdisciplinarity to PRESS RESET. Rebalance 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 reshapes touch needs and norms. Digital touch needs to be a felt conversation. Everyone is qualified to have a say on what digital touch might be/become. The touch etiquettes of the 20th century will not suffice. OPEN up 'opportunity spaces' to AVOID imaginations of touch getting 'locked in'. DESIRE HETEROGENEITY. Just say no to 'homogenised touching'. Amplify diversity through haptic encodings.

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

Touch is intimate. Touch reveals myself and my boundaries. When I touch what do I convey about myself? What did I feel of you? Am I identify-able? Did you feel it was me? Can I touch back? Touch overload. Touch Space Invader. Unauthorised touch. WARNING. Alert! Deceptive touch. HACKED FEEL. FAKE Touch 'Retouchée'. Guarantee me control of my digital touch patterns and preferences. Record. Share. Replay. Mix. Consent. I own my digital touch. Don't wait to tame the haptic 'Wild West'. Develop a haptic business model beyond haptic-monitoring. Let the user decide when, how and where technology touches.

5. MOVE BEYOND VIBRATION: FEEL BEYOND THE HABITUATED

Pay closer attention to the FEEL of touch. Re-encode touch sensations. Create landmarks of felt resistance in the tactile terrain. Materialise touch! ROUGH it up - WARM it up. Give us texture. Soft, bouncy, warm and comfortable. How about a bit of give and take - Material reciprocity beyond the limits of the slick or smooth. Give me a digital touch I don't expect. Negotiate new TACTILE RHYTHMS. Make time for touch. Ambient S-L-O-W 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 sensitivity thresholds. Keep it indoors, get mobile, take digital touch outdoors? DESIGN a varied touchy 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 when and where touch lands. Give digital touch value: calculate its biological cost. 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 RECALIBRATE touch. Challenge the status-quo. Foster alternative visions. Engage with unfamiliar touch, prepare to touch newly. Trash the touch-screen devoid of feedback. Translate the rich language of NON-HUMAN touch into the tactile landscape. Rename touch. Reconfigure reliance on visuality. Take a leaf from nature, mimic reality as a stepping stone to remake touch. Or JUMP into the water and wade to a new bank to refresh touch.

8. MANAGE GREAT TECH-XPECTATIONS

Frame users' techy touch expectations. Communicate and contextualise digital touch. Avoid the feel of disappointment. Digital touch is a long-term endeavour. Temper commercial HYPE. No need to over-promise - 'LIKE NOTHING EVER FELT BEFORE!'. Keep possibility alive within an honest sense of promise. Metaphors and imagination can bridge a user to unexpected 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 travel between users, designers, developers, researchers. 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 hone 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-N-D-E-D view of touch. Forecast the influence of digitally-mediated touch on social interaction. Explore the texture in the space between touchy Dystopias … Utopias.

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