



Neta Alexander

Interface Frictions: How Digital Debility Reshapes Our Bodies

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Griffith Wynne Williams coined the term “highway hypnosis” in 1963 and hypothesized that trance-like states were triggered while driving, because of the combination of monotonous roads, repetitive scenery, and the patterned cadence of lights and reflections. Highway hypnosis is a deadly problem, born from the collision of embodied expertise and the rhythm of infrastructural sameness. It also echoes a current discourse about technology that blends the politics of attention, fatigue, and the entrapment of human consciousness in the “machine zone” of monotonous behaviour (Schüll 2019, 421–36). This catches us at a time when concerns about technology have shifted from the annoyance of distraction to the dangers of enrapture. The solutions to highway hypnosis are found in disrupting the flow of monotonous activity through the strategic deployment of *friction*. This is the same refrain heard when critics of the ease of technology (for some people) recommend increased encumbrance between people and their devices. The journalist Kathryn Jezer-Morton calls such interventions “friction-maxxing” and states that we bear a “responsibility of keeping friction intact as part of our families’ lives” (2026).

In need of guidance and empirical weight to understand our moment, Neta Alexander’s book, *Interface Frictions*, arrives to account for the many lives of friction where the corporeal rubs

against the technological. The book is an ingenious contribution to the fields of media studies, disability studies, and science and technology studies—and a crystalline example of the ways those fields have grown together. Alexander’s serrated analysis documents the messy, often debilitating, and culturally bewildering politics of interface design, violence, and appropriation. Where the popular discourse may emphasize a simplistic economy of *friction versus convenience*, Alexander offers the weft and warp of the manufactured frictions that erupt between technologies and their real-life users.

Interface Frictions is built around four empirical chapters, each investigating a spectatorial position and a corresponding design feature and frictional dynamic. Chapters about the experience of buffering, speed watching, binge-watching, and soporific media chronicle the development and response to the design of the refresh, the introduction of variable playback speed on video platforms, non-consensual autoplay, and the night mode features of contemporary screen technologies. These, in turn, illuminate the physical and psychological frictions of perpetual anxiety, eye strain, emotional triggers, and fatigue.

To give a sense of the nuance and abundance of *Interface Frictions*, consider simply the chapter on buffering and the refresh. Alexander writes, “Refresh answers a difficult question: Why is

the internet so boring?" (28). That is, despite its promises of infinite knowledge, unpredictable connection, and surprising and potentially even enlivening encounter, the web offers, instead, a pit of infinite disappointment. For most of us, the act of "refreshing" is our simplest means of trying to rectify this.

Alexander again, "one can spend an entire day online, clicking the mouse or the keyboard or moving one's thumb across a glass screen, expecting something meaningful to happen, and still be confronted with a stupefying sense of tedium" (28). It's this readily recognisable fact that motivates the book's descent into a world of buffering, arrow-spinning, progress-barring, beach-balling, swiping, clicking, and F5ing, and the bodily, debilitating, and affectively stultifying world of the refresh, to confirm an assertion echoed by Wendy Chun: "Repetition breeds expertise, even as it breeds boredom" (Chun 2016, 1).

If Alexander's first question is "Why is the internet so boring?," the second, unstated one, is: Why is the internet so frustrating? Frustrating things are often interesting things. But the internet succeeds in being both tedious and annoying. The dreamed-for resolution of this fact—the static that erupts at the interface of frustration and boredom—is the simple drag of thumb down screen, the gentle *pop* to signal a request to the API, and the more than likely result: nothing new. This is a scandal. Alexander's acuity for describing sensuous life, the variegation of interface experience, and the acidity of technology use, serves us a precise lexicon for registering this scandal and documenting its indignities.

For instance, she writes not just of the refresh but of its many subgenres: when she writes of "frustration-motivated refreshing" (27) she writes of the desire, through the refresh, to restore temporal continuity to the web, to overcome buffering, to repair the torn seams of digital experience. "Boredom-motivated refreshing," (27) on the other hand, pings the server—an echo in an empty tunnel—asking for fresh data, something more interesting, or something more dev-

astating. A desire for novelty to break the rhythm of the highway.

But there are less obvious forms of the refresh, like those that ask you to refresh to prove your humanity to a system that expects bots and AI imposters. The refresh, the worn gesture of humanity, can stand in for sentience. Or there's the "refresh-as-a-hack," (27) where savvy users can use refreshing, or try to use it, to secure merchandise, tickets, or medical appointments in digital queues. Regardless of its genre though, refresh is a portal on the other side of which is a hoped-for change of state. Refresh is a form of repair—where repair is the feel-good dream of the possibility of renewal.

Rebecca Schneider (2020) writes about the idea of "Slough Media" as the dynamic relationship between the ephemeral and the enduring. The refresh is just such a slough, activated by the gestures of clicking, pulling, and swiping. These gestures are significant: not only do they activate a desire about the future (to make it more interesting, to repair latency, to assert humanity, or to reap the suffering of others), they contribute to the debilitating effects of repetitive gestures. Gesture's essential iterativity simultaneously cites and opens out toward the feeling that "something's coming" (Schneider 2020, 28). This idea of *something's coming* is, of course, the incantation uttered by the refresh.

The persistent disappointment, and frustration, and anger of the refresh and the enervating drain of latency, are just some of the frictions in *Interface Frictions*. Alexander's understanding of friction is consistently layered, and multifaceted and not reducible to a single analytical critique. But it merits dwelling on the discussion of latency. It is latency, after all, that often produces the desire for the refresh, as a means to quicken the buffer.

Alexander's analysis of latency, the buffer, and the refresh recalls Vivian Sobchack's (1990) work on early digital video. We come to understand how the constraints of the network, the database, and the format accrue and are

experienced by people in sensuous, aesthetic, and bodily registers. "The interface, however, is where those various compounding latencies become visible for the end user, who is then faced with frustration, anger, and, in some cases, the anxiety and fear of missing one's chance to receive a potentially life-saving vaccine" (Alexander 2025, 26).

I return to Alexander's analysis of latency because it's a remarkable piece of research and cross-sectional analysis. In one passage she transitions from a history of user expectations about latency and the duration of "a moment" from the ping of radar technology to the responsiveness of vaccine booking websites. In the middle of this history is a diagonal analysis of latency as it relates to viruses themselves, and in particular HIV, and the sense of latency as that which is "dormant or undeveloped" (34). This incubation time is the source of unreckonable anxiety. All of this is to say: latency is a temporal misfit that is re-jiggered by the refresh.

When Rosemary Garland-Thomson (2011) writes of the misfit, she writes of "*fitting* and *misfitting*" as denoting an encounter in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction" (592). She writes of shapes and substances, of a "square peg in a round hole" (593). These are thoroughly spatial metaphors. When Alexander writes of the frictions of the refresh and its subgenres, she's revealing the temporal character of misalignment; she is documenting the rankling prickles of temporal aesthetics and sensuous frustration.

Alexander's reading of real, lived, debility and "consensual impairment" (10) is generous and complex, but the book also resolves into a larger contribution by laying out a theory of the digital interface attuned to the "somatic temporalities of waiting, compression endurance, and drowsiness" (151). We are reminded throughout that friction is what gives us purchase, it marks the traction between body and the world. But too much friction, and we drag, we scrape, we chafe. Not enough friction, we slide, we slip, we

fall. Friction then is not a value judgment, but a marker of the calibration of bodies and their environments.

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