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Digital Insanity: Complicating the Moralization of Technology in the Twenty-First Century Exploring the Intimacy Between Humans and Their Devices

Layla Muchnik-Benali
Skidmore College

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"I'm so tired of performing in the pageantry of vanity/And conforming to this accepted form of digital insanity."
– Prince Ea, Can We Auto-Correct Humanity?
We are far from forgetting about the offline; rather we have become obsessed with being offline more than ever before. We have never appreciated a solitary stroll, a camping trip, a face-to-face chat with friends, or even our boredom better than we do now. – Nathan Jurgenson, “The IRL Fetish.”

How many times have you heard something like “put down your phone, disconnect for a second, live in the moment…”? I’m willing to bet you’ve heard someone express this sentiment at least once if not many times in your life. Whether it’s an adult telling you, as a child, that you cannot spend time in front of a computer, or a friend expressing the liberation of deactivating a Facebook account, it seems like there are always people positing the importance of detaching oneself from the smartphone or from social media so that one can be more in tune with a non-digital reality. But what is meant by reality, and why is the digital world perceived as exempt or outside of this reality? Why do we insist on separating the digital and the “real,” the on-screen and the off-screen?

In his essay “The IRL Fetish,” Nathan Jurgenson challenges the notion of what he calls digital dualism, the idea that the digital and the “IRL” (In Real Life) are separate realms, untouching and unrelated, and that someone can pick and choose which world they inhabit at any given time. He posits that “[t]he deep infiltration of digital information into our lives has created a fervor around the supposed corresponding loss of logged-off real life.” In other words, the proliferation of devices and mobile Internet access has in turn defined a concept of reality as it relates to the digital. Suddenly, the “real world” is precious, evasive, and elusive. It is, in Jurgenson’s terms, fetishized. His essay is poignant, articulate, and even a little bit radical. He pinpoints a specific phenomenon of recent years:
Many of us... have always been quite happy to occasionally log off and appreciate stretches of boredom or ponder printed books — even though books themselves were regarded as a deleterious distraction as they became more prevalent. But our immense self-satisfaction in disconnection is new. How proud of ourselves we are for fighting against the long reach of mobile and social technologies! One of our new hobbies is patting ourselves on the back by demonstrating how much we don’t go on Facebook. People boast about not having a profile. We have started to congratulate ourselves for keeping our phones in our pockets and fetishizing the offline as something more real to be nostalgic for. While the offline is said to be increasingly difficult to access, it is simultaneously easily obtained — if, of course, you are the “right” type of person.¹

Jurgenson’s tone may seem a bit harsh, but he is countering the aggressively moralizing arguments which shame contemporary human-technology relationships, arguments that often go unexamined and unexplored. The powerful rhetoric of shame is capable of convincing people to agree for the sake of retaining their pride. When someone disparagingly says “people are so obsessed with their phones today,” a common (and understandable) response is to retort “I am not one of those people,” or at least “I don’t want to be one those people.” When disdain, weakness, and vanity are associated with the use of technology, it becomes an act bordering on the sinful. My own conception of religious sin is vague and based on what I have gleaned from books, movies, and art history, but sometimes it really does seem like the ways in which we use technology embody (to some) an ultimate evil, a combination of all seven deadly sins: lust (pornography), gluttony (“food porn”), greed (expensive devices), sloth (inactivity), wrath (anonymous rage), envy (looking up your ex’s new love), and pride (selfies & accumulating “likes”). When technology is blamed for sparking sinful activity, it generates a cultural response which values abstinence. Human history is entwined with religious principles, and our increasingly atheistic sensibilities do not preclude the

persistence of age-old, culturally calcified values.² It makes sense that we should feel proud of pursuing an offline reality when it distances us from the sinful realm of the Internet. The only way to escape this sinful realm is to log off, turn off, and put away. And yet, how does logging off actually cleanse the user of his or her sins? Just because the tab is closed, does not mean the envy is gone. This tension between “reality” and “virtual” echoes many aspects of Donna Haraway’s seminal and game-changing essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” in her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. There is no “offline” versus “online,” there is no “real” versus “virtual.” These seemingly opposing and separate realms feed off each other and live in symbiosis and they are ultimately inseparable.

Re: Shame, Morality, and Authenticity

*If This Video Doesn’t Convince You To Put Down Your Phone, Nothing Probably Will*

“This video will probably make you put your phone down for a minute. It hits the nail on the head when it comes to describing how our generation is missing out on so much in life because [of] our current obsession with social media and mobile devices. It has changed our lives, but in some cases it may have changed it for the worse.”³

It’s hard to know where to begin with Prince Ea’s immensely popular *slam poem-turned-video, Can We Auto-Correct Humanity?* With over twelve million views on YouTube, Prince Ea’s goal is to call out a generation of people obsessed with social media, the Internet, and their devices. He does this by weaving poetry, music, image,

² I should clarify that I am speaking, here, from a primarily Western, U.S. perspective. Many nations around the world are actually seeing an increase in religious practice in recent time, but the U.S. has shown a recent increase in agnostic/atheistic tendencies, as reported by the Pew Research Center. Author Unknown, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life Project*, October 9, 2012. Accessed April 28, 2015. [http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/)
and factual information together into one three-and-a-half minute multimedia artifact.⁴ The aesthetic quality of the video is soft, emotional, and moving; it combines serene, natural imagery (a body of water, a horizon at dusk, a jetty) with clips of people using their devices in lieu of forming authentic and deep social bonds, frequently lit by the artificial, cold light of a screen. On-screen text accompanies and ‘acts out’ his poem—for example, when he says: “Cause see, while [technology] claims to connect us, connection has gotten no better,” an on-screen animation of the wifi connection strength icon appears near a woman’s face (depicted below), and it dwindles from two “bars” to one. The video is filled with these illustrations of the poem’s verses in visual, textual, and graphic form.

By combining these well-produced, evocative images with a gently intensifying acoustic score, *Can We Auto-Correct Humanity*? appeals directly to the viewer’s emotions. Why would we want to miss out on that dreamy sunset? What kind of jerk would ignore his or her date, sitting directly across from her or him? Of course we want to side with Prince Ea, we want to distance ourselves from these examples of obsession. The poem-video offers little room for nuance, concluding with: “Call me

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crazy but, I imagine a world where we smile when we have low batteries/Cause that will mean we’ll be one bar closer to humanity." This statement implies that we squander our human essence on our devices, and we are faced with a choice: log off or lose ourselves.

*Can We Auto-Correct Humanity?* contributes to the previously mentioned rhetoric of shaming an undefined yet deemed excessive amount of interaction with technology while adding in another element: authenticity. Facebook “friends” are not real and technology threatens the very fiber of our interpersonal relationships. We are missing out on reality by spending years worth of time looking at our phones. He opens with “Did you know the average person spends 4 years of his life looking down at his cell phone?” a statement which assumes that time spent on one’s phone is time spent not living, at least not in the real world. Technology becomes conflated with the inauthentic. Yet, this perspective fails to clarify what is meant by “real” and “authentic.” That would require an in-depth exploration of the metaphysics of existence, a hefty task which would take far too long and, frankly, would be inaccessible. Rather, it seems like the “authentic” is highly intuitive—you know it when you experience it, but it proves challenging to articulate and define clearly. As Rob Horning, editor of The New Inquiry, writes for DIS Magazine:

> As social media makes unmistakable, we clearly live in a “network world,” yet authenticity remains potent as a marketing tool, if not a personal ideal or moral crusade. We still habitually judge people and things in terms of their “realness,” even when we know there can be no reference point, no essence that can make the assessment sound.\(^5\)

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Horning is right, there is no singular reference point for authenticity, no reigning authority to tell us what is real and what is not. What is more urgent for arguments like the one posited in *Can We Auto-Correct Humanity?* is the legitimacy ascribed to offline reality. The elusive concept of authenticity is used as leverage to convince users to log off once and for all, supporting the false binary of the offline as real life versus the online as suspended life.

The poem goes on: “So many "i"s, so many selfies, not enough "us"s and "we"s / See, technology / Has made us more selfish and separate than ever / Cause while it claims to connect us, connection has gotten no better.” This line sums up one of the biggest criticisms of technology usage today: vanity and self-obsession. With the advent of cellphone cameras, the rise of the selfie has generated extensive conversation on the relationship between self-documentation, self-esteem, and narcissism. Often these discussions are targeted towards young women who post selfies on social media with the apparent intent of accumulating likes and compliments from their followers. The May 2013 cover of *TIME Magazine* featured a young, White girl laying on her stomach (right), taking a selfie with her smartphone; the headline was “The ME ME ME Generation: Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents. Why they’ll save us all.” Granted, the article written by Joel Stein was by no means an attempt to bash an entire generation—his goal was to actually explain their existence and even to defend them. Yet, the particular choice of imagery to represent an entire demographic of people born roughly between 1980 and 2000 is extremely revealing.

There exist extensive amounts of scholarship exploring the selfie as it relates to gender, politics, media, and Millennials and I do not feel like I can contribute much to
that conversation.⁶ That said, the selfie is undoubtedly wrapped up in a rhetoric of shame, and is worth unpacking. For the first time in recent human history, women are taking control over their own representation. Our culture bombards women with images telling them who they should be, how they should act, and where their worth lies. As John Berger famously wrote: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” Why? Because the representation of women has long been in the hands of men. While the selfie certainly does not eradicate this problem, and indeed women who take selfies probably do still “watch themselves being looked at” through the heavily internalized male gaze, the selfie still marks a shift in power. This shift threatens the global patriarchal structure which has long thrived on the low or silenced self-esteem of women and the role of women as only muses to be admired by or inspire men. Some could argue that selfies of women are only deemed successful if they gain “likes” or male attention, which is sometimes true, but the selfie is not an end-result; it is a step, and it is still fairly new (if we overlook the plethora of self-portraits by male artists for hundreds of years). The recent #BlackOut phenomenon on Tumblr and Twitter proves the power of selfies as vehicles for wider positive representation as selfies of Black-identifying individuals were widely liked, reblogged, and appreciated by the Tumblr and

Twitter communities.\textsuperscript{7} Disabled and transgendered individuals received just as much love and support as others, and the range of body-types circulating was astounding. The goal was to flood social media with images of Black people feeling good about themselves, to counter racist mainstream imagery of Black people, and to challenge the dominant White, blonde, blue-eyed, able-bodied Eurocentric standard of beauty which exists today.

Yet, selfies continue to be characterized as expressions of terrible narcissism and vanity (note that this is one of the seven sins), and to return to \textit{Can We Auto-Correct Humanity?} as manifestations of self-obsession. The poem even characterizes the documentation of moments as problematic: “\textit{No longer do I want to spoil a precious moment by recording it with a phone / I’m just gonna keep them / I don’t wanna take a picture of all my meals anymore - I’m just gonna eat them.}” Prince Ea brings up cellphone photographs, essentially protesting that images have replaced experiences. I would argue instead that images are collections of experiences; archives of our lives as sentimental as memory itself. In the next section I explore how cellphone photographs relate to practices of collecting, and how they reflect an increased symbiosis and intimacy between humans and technology.

\textit{The Digital Shift}

The practice of photography and its components have long been investigated by cultural critics since its invention roughly two hundred years ago. In the last decade or so, with the shift from tangible to digital, the conversation around photography has had to adjust to new terms and parameters set by the advent of new technologies. The shift from analog to digital photography brought along new conceptual paradigms, many of them founded in the concrete, physical differences between the two photographic methods. Digital cameras brought with them screens to preview photographs about to be snapped, and the brand new “delete” button allowed users to permanently dispose of unsatisfactory snapshots and be more persistent in their attempt to capture the perfect image. As Daniel Rubenstein and Katrina Sluis write:

> With these two innovations, digital technology addressed...two significant barriers for engagement with [analog] photography: the delay between taking a picture and viewing it, and the cost of each exposed frame.\(^9\)

In other words, photography went from being an almost exclusively technical endeavor accessible to few to a more user-friendly experience, available to anyone who could afford it without necessitating extensive training.

As digital technologies continued to develop and become faster, sleeker, smaller, and more affordable, they became increasingly collapsed into daily life. Susan Murray points out how digital cameras eliminate the need to preserve one’s film for precious and unique moments, someone could take a thousand pictures a day if they wanted to.\(^{10}\) Indeed, as cameras began appearing as standard features of cellphones, they started to disappear. Not only does the lack of intimidating technology encourage more

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9 Ibid.
individuals to take pictures with their phones, it also offers a way to document one’s experiences with minimal disruption; “the absence of the camera…[ensures that] the photographer does not become an observer but remains intimately connected to the subject of photography.”

Previously, bulky camera bodies and detachable lenses were the primary modes of photography, which inevitably drew attention to the users as outsiders looking in on a given setting. Not only does the physical appearance of a camera affect how photographers might view themselves, it shapes the way a subject might respond or react to them, effectively changing the image produced. With camera phones the subject feels less targeted, preserving a sense of spontaneity and, in some cases, candidness.

As one considers the increasing invisibility of cameras even further, Paul Graves-Brown’s position on human-technology relationships as being deeply connected to the human body comes to mind. Graves-Brown is a professor at the University College of London, and his seminal essay “Always Crashing in the Same Car” thoroughly yet succinctly explores the dense concepts behind car culture (intimacy, eroticism, agency and symbiosis) and how they can apply to human-nonhuman relationships in general. In this essay, he quotes the postmodern scholar Jean Baudrillard when he writes: “[t]hus technology as an extension of ourselves is part of the self, technology is (as Baudrillard 1981 says) ‘confused with’ the body.” Dissolving the camera into the cellphone does indeed bring it one step closer to the human body as most individuals today tend to carry their phones on them at all times, and it often acts as an extension of the physical

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13 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
and emotional self. A catchall device for e-mails, personal notes, ideas, and of course personal photographs, contemporary cellphones (specifically smartphones) are often reflections and extensions of their owners. These devices are developed specifically for human use and are thus designed to fit our bodies perfectly, with easy-to-use touchscreens and keyboards guaranteeing a smooth user experience in a size suitable for pockets and purses. Bearing this in mind, the cellphone camera suddenly becomes both an extension of the human body and mediator of interaction, comparing to the human eye more than previous cameras ever could. The act of photographing becomes more experiential than technical.

_Digital Collections_

In this part of my project, I explore how individuals use their cellphones to build personal archives out of collected photographs. Before delving into the interviews I conducted on this topic, I would like to discuss how I conceive of the term “collecting” and why I believe cellphone photographs can be collected despite several interviewees expressing disagreement or indifference towards the term itself. Daniel Rubenstein, Katrina Sluis, and Susan Murray all use the term “collection” at least once in their discussions of digital images, referring to them within the context of an organizational interface such as Flickr, iPhoto, or the iPhone’s “camera roll.” These authors generally use the term “collection” when considering a group of digital images seen all at once rather than individually. In his most well-known book _The Language of New Media_, Lev Manovich establishes the concept of the database as a “structured collection of data,”
with sub-genres defined by various organizational needs. Whether or not they are aware of it, these scholars have drawn an intriguing connection between the act of collecting and the non-physical quality of digital images, considering the fact that most collections are conventionally conceptualized as a tangible series of objects. Susan Stewart, poet, currently teaching at Princeton, and critic who focuses on memorials and souvenirs, writes: “the collection relies upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined by these boundaries…” But her interpretation, formulated in 1993, overlooks the intangible possibilities of collecting. If we were to apply her framework to the digital world, perhaps the “box” becomes the digital folder, the iPhone’s camera roll or even its hardware, allowing the images to exist and be revisited and categorized by their owners.

Thinking beyond physical boundaries, Jean Baudrillard’s *Systems of Collecting* comes to mind when considering how cellphone images can be conceptualized more broadly into collections:

…pleasure springs from the fact that possession relies, on the one hand, upon the absolute *singularity* of each item…and, on the other, upon the possibility of envisaging a set or *series* of like items, in which is implied a prospect of limitless substitution and play.

Here we see the relationship between singularity and plurality at the core of collecting. Indeed, within a collection each item can stand on its own as a unique entity, but it derives additional meaning from belonging to a series, which can grow as long as its creator wishes to continue collecting. With cellphone images, the collection does

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offer a future of “limitless substitution and play” as data storage technologies expand and allow users to save literally thousands of images before running out of space. Yet, each image is undoubtedly singular, taken at a specific time and place, representing a different moment in the user’s life.

Because collections are comprised of singular past moments existing simultaneously and presently, Baudrillard argues that “collecting abolishes time,” and Rubenstein and Sluis (artist and curator, respectively) point out that with recent technologies “a whole year’s worth of pictures can flash in front of your eyes in a manner of seconds.” This time-bending element applies to collections of any sort—each collected item represents a different moment for the collector, but seen within the context of the collection it becomes tied to the present moment as belonging to a series. Looking at a collection means reflecting on the histories and pasts of each item while simultaneously considering their present existence as defined within the collection. With cellphone images this tension between past and present becomes even more apparent as each image always literally depicts a past moment in time.

To better understand how the concept of collecting can apply to cellphone photographs, I have selected a few images from my own collections that embody the crux of my argument. To make it even clearer, I have come up with three criteria for defining a collection: it must incorporate the act of keeping, the act of revisiting themes and/or subjects, and the act of adding. This definition differs from others because it sets out concrete parameters for what collecting can be rather than relying on a conceptual argument like in Baudrillard’s writings, and it can be applied to unconventional

17 Ibid, 16.
collections that might not otherwise be seen as such. My images are an obvious example of these three criteria working together; the first, the orange orb collection, began spontaneously one day when I discovered three orange spherical objects in the same day and documented each with my cellphone camera (Fig. 1). This subsequently led to an ongoing project in which I took photos of other found orange orbs during the following months. The second collection is my bug collection (Fig. 2), which is exactly what it sounds like: a collection of photos of various bugs I have encountered in my daily life. Lastly, I've included my prize machine collection, comprised of cellphone photos of various prize vending machines found at rest stops along the highway (Fig. 3).

Each of the collections mentioned above fully embodies the established parameters of collecting: they exist through the act of keeping, the act of revisiting themes and/or subjects, and the act of adding. My collections are intentionally just that, collections, but they also act as case studies of how other cellphone pictures can be seen as collections more generally speaking. In the interest of applying the definition of collecting to other people's cellphone photos, I interviewed seven individuals, three men and four women, all college-aged, about their cellphone picture-taking habits.\textsuperscript{19}

Although some of them did not see themselves as collectors, I argue that their cellphone pictures are indeed collections regardless of their intent.

\textit{The Interviews}

Out of the seven people I interviewed, admittedly a very small sample, three of them did not feel that their cellphone photographs comprised a collection. Three others had not previously thought of their cellphone photographs as a collection, but were

\textsuperscript{19} These interviews took place between October and December 2014 at Skidmore College.
willing to entertain the thought when I brought it up. One interviewee admitted to considering some of her cellphone photographs as part of a collection, but attributed these thoughts to her friendship with the interviewer. Despite these disparities in self-perception, I am arguing that each interviewee does in fact collect cellphone photographs and they each embody the concepts of collecting established earlier.

First, each interviewed individual kept and stored his or her cellphone images in one way or another. One candidate proved to be, at first, an exception to this—Julian, a twenty-one year old man, often deletes photos minutes after taking them, and if he doesn’t delete them instantly then he deletes them a few days later. When asked why he does this, Julian said “I don’t want [the photo] to last.” Julian was the only interviewee to express profound detachment from the images on his cellphone. He told me that he “really [doesn’t] keep anything of value,” and that he “[doesn’t] mean for anything to be timeless” when it came to his cellphone photographs. Julian explained this detachment as based in his perception of the past, which he finds difficult to reflect on via cellphone photographs. “It’s hard for me to look at past photos and think about where I was compared to where I am now. Everything’s changing around me, and I don’t want the option of looking back.” Julian’s perspective brings up an absolutely key aspect of the cellphone photograph: its intimate relationship with memory and the passage of time. Every single other candidate interviewed mentioned the idea of memory and related it to value. While Julian did not want to hang on to old photos, every other interviewee expressed attachment to their own photos as personal mementoes and reminders of the past. One candidate, Ezra, also a twenty-one year old man, said: “photos are really important to me in terms of understanding the past. I like
trying to understand the difference between me, in that photo, perceiving the world and me perceiving the world now." Ezra and Julian may have differing feelings towards their cellphone images, but they both recognize their deep relationship to memory and the passage of time.

What does memory have to do with collecting? I am positing that cellphone pictures are, in effect, collectable representations of memory, and anyone who consistently takes photos with their cellphone is a collector. To return to Julian's case: though he actively deletes images from his phone on a regular basis, he does upload select favorites to social media websites like Instagram and Twitter. Even if he deletes those images off his phone, they continue to exist in an essentially curated online collection. In other words, even Julian participates in the act of keeping, one of the parameters defining collecting. Social media becomes the "boundaries" previously mentioned by Susan Stewart that contain the collection.

Aside from memory, other themes that appeared consistently throughout my interviews include the spontaneity afforded by cellphone cameras, social gatherings, romantic partners, nature and animals, food, documents (e.g. homework, schedules), and sharing images through social media or text messaging. It became clear to me that even if an individual did not see themselves as a collector, they nonetheless had the tendency to keep images, to take photographs of the same types of subjects, and none expressed the desire to stop taking cellphone pictures in the near future.

The implications of this argument are twofold: first, cellphone photographs may be intangible entities but they can be conceptualized as objects; second, they can be analyzed through the lens of collecting as established by previous cultural critics like
Jean Baudrillard and Susan Stewart. Doing so can result in a greater understanding of human relationships with technology and images, and furthers Bruno Latour’s ideas of “intimacy” and “symmetry between humans and nonhumans.” By understanding cellphone photographs as intimately tied to human desires to collect, we can see the technology of the cellphone camera (portable, immediate, personal) as a logical step in the evolution of devices and as a manifestation of how the self-imposed dualism of “human” vs. “technology” is diminishing and will eventually evaporate. The cellphone effectively contains a personal archive storing the user’s memory and allowing revisiting, forging an intimate relationship between user and device.

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As Meryl Streep cries out at the end of John Patrick Sharley’s 2008 film adaptation of his own play (*Doubt: A Parable*, 2004): “I have doubts…!”

I wonder about how attached I am to defending the legitimacy and potential of devices and the Internet. I have started to have doubts, probably because I am now pushing myself to articulate my opinions and thoughts more than ever before. I’m taking a stance that will be read by at least one other person! And, on top of that, I am forced to consider my own relationship to my devices and the Internet. A few weeks ago, I wrote in my journal: *Maybe I am trying to convince myself that technology is good because I am not ready to accept my total dependence on it…?* I might not own a smartphone, but I spend hours on my laptop sweeping the Web, looking for things that are interesting, cool, pleasing, beautiful, serious, ‘real,’ quick. I collect images and quotes on a tumblr, I tweet fragments of thoughts, I share the things I find with my friends. I feel like an explorer and a hacker. I keep tabs on the people I care about or those I’m not supposed to care about anymore, I install browser extensions to make advertisements disappear. I scroll up and down, side to side, for miles.

In my doubt, I think of the words of Piotr Czerski, Polish poet, blogger, and musician:

*We grew up with the Internet and on the Internet. This is what makes us different; this is what makes the crucial, although surprising from your point of view, difference: we do not ‘surf’ and the internet to us is not a ‘place’ or ‘virtual space’. The Internet to us is not something external to reality but a part of it: an invisible yet constantly present layer intertwined with the physical environment. We do not use the Internet, we live on the Internet and along it. If we were to tell our bildungsroman to you, the analog, we could say there was a natural Internet aspect to every single experience that has shaped us. We made friends and enemies online, we prepared cribs for tests online, we planned parties and studying sessions online, we fell in love and broke...*
up online. The Web to us is not a technology which we had to learn and which we managed to get a grip of. The Web is a process, happening continuously and continuously transforming before our eyes; with us and through us. Technologies appear and then dissolve in the peripheries, websites are built, they bloom and then pass away, but the Web continues, because we are the Web; we, communicating with one another in a way that comes naturally to us, more intense and more efficient than ever before in the history of mankind.²¹

He reminds me that the Internet is what I know. It’s more than just a tool, it’s my reality. Growing up with the Internet and computers means that using these things are second-nature for me. They feel intuitive, even though they are not fundamentally so.²²

When I went for six days without using my laptop because I was traveling, I noticed that upon returning to it I felt disoriented. It did not make sense: that a window should disappear behind another and yet the screen remain so flat was unsettling. That disconnect between the illusion of depth with the reality of flatness was alien and alarming. And the correlation between my finger, moving centimeters at a time on the horizontal surface of the trackpad (or a mouse), and the movement of a tiny arrow inches at a time on the vertical plane of a screen was just as bizarre. I think I finally concretely understood why people in older generations sometimes struggle with their devices. If I had to learn how to use a computer in my thirties or even later, I probably would damn it to Hell too, because the truth is that operating systems, internet browsers, word processing applications, and e-mail accounts are not nearly as intuitive as they seem to me, as someone who takes these things for granted and has lived with them for the vast majority of my life. How is it that in one window of Google Chrome,

²²I remember I used to think it would be so much fun to sit down in front of a totally unknown machine and have to figure out how it works on my own, because I felt like I really understood the foundations of how machines and device interfaces work. Finding the “on” button, the “select” mechanism, and which cable gets plugged in where seemed like it would be a fun game. It was and still is like a jigsaw puzzle, except that when you figure out how to work a machine the result is like a light bulb going off rather than the almost bitter satisfaction of completing an image (completing a puzzle tends to leave me thinking “now what?”).
there can be an infinite number of tabs? Do we have a comparable/analogous physical system? It's undoubtedly convenient, yet the amount of times I have witnessed brilliant college professors, experts in their field, struggle to figure out which tab is where proves to me that it is also profoundly confusing and not intuitive. It's a learned system, one that my generation has been immersed in for most of our lives.

This system is a highly designed one. To be able to fully engage with technology, a user must pass through the human-computer interface, a concept I have summed up with the word proxy. I have not seen this word used to refer specifically to the human-device interface, though it is used in other realms of computer science to mean different things. Proxies, as I define them, inhabit the ambiguous region between human and machine, contributing to the increasingly blurred distinction between the two as posited by Donna Haraway in her 1983 *Cyborg Manifesto* and by many others. They are connected to touch, proximity, and interaction, three traits which suggest intimacy and closeness. In the next section, I examine in greater depth how proxies complicate existing popular narratives of human-technology interaction as being empty, lonely, and cold.

**The Intimacy of Proxies in Technology**
Computers are sensitive and they react to you. They play you songs when you ask, and show you pictures you may or may not want to see.23
– @lylmb

The relationship we have with technology is a tactile and visual one—we touch screens, tap on keyboards, and rest our palms on computer mice; we skim received text messages, search for the YouTube app, react to the small red notification we get when someone likes our photos on Facebook. In this part of my project, I explore an aspect of technology that I call proxies: the means and mechanisms through which humans gain access to their devices. I will focus on keyboards, touchscreens and computer mice as access points through which users can immerse themselves in their devices, keeping in mind that without them the device is useless and full engagement is impossible.

Drawing from the work of philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists like Bruno Latour, Paul Graves-Brown, and Adam Reed, I explore the implications of proxies and the role they play in shaping the human-device relationship. Ultimately, I hope to complicate existing arguments regarding technology, challenging the notion that devices are passive, empty vessels for human loneliness. We collectively insist that technology has decreased our capacity for human intimacy (an already questionable argument), but in doing so we overlook the new iterations of intimacy that are forged through the use of technology.

The Mouse/Touchpad

There are two principal ways to control a cursor on a screen—with a touchpad (usually found on laptops) and with a classic mouse. Though their connotations and actions differ, their functions are identical. The classic mouse requires the whole hand, and its physical displacement translates into motion on-screen. It is also generally connected via a cable (though wireless examples do exist, but not without a USB component creating a signal between mouse and computer, rendering the cable invisible), a detail which frames the mouse as external to the computer, whereas the touchpad is generally integrated into the physical structure of the computer. Different touchpads are conceived in different ways—some have clearly marked right and left-click buttons, for example, while others do not. But they all require the use of direct tactile interaction in order to have any consequence within the device.

The mouse, aptly named for its aesthetic similarity to the animal (with its small size and connecting “tail” cable) allows users to move within the space of the computer: it is a point of access. It allows users to switch in between windows and take action within these spaces by clicking. The motion of clicking is our way of confirming our presence within the computer, which reacts to our clicks and gestures via the mouse. Scrolling and clicking are two central actions that allow us to position ourselves within the virtual space of the computer screen, determining where windows are placed within our field of vision. The touchpad requires a consistent, gentle touch, often repetitive, at least when the user wants to scroll without having to click and drag a scroll bar. While the computer is unable to directly or literally reciprocate these motions, it still responds to them—they elicit reactions from the computer and can trigger sounds, images, and
other media that require activation. In other words, the mouse is an element which belongs both to the computer and to the user, acting as a proxy on behalf of the latter.

The Touchscreen

Much like the touchpad mouse, the touchscreen’s function is a direct result of tactile interaction. The difference lies in the capacities of the touchscreen versus those of the touchpad. A smartphone’s touchscreen is the primary way of entering its space—you may press a physical button to initially activate the device, but once illuminated the user employs light taps, strokes, and gestures to achieve certain results. The touchscreen becomes both the mouse and the keyboard, effectively eliminating any external proxies to allow the user to engage with the device. The sense of control feels more direct because a user literally touches what they want to activate with their own finger rather than mediating the interaction through an external object.

The gestures required by touchscreens are standardized actions: certain motions always create certain responses. On an iPhone, “pinching” the screen inwards or outwards shrinks or expands the image or page on the screen, as does double-tapping on a certain point. These motions are so prevalent that they even emerge in popular culture—in Luc Besson’s film Lucy (2014), for example, Scarlett Johansson’s character Lucy uses the expanding pinching motion to zoom in on a touchscreen-like surface. Spike Jonze invents new gestures in his film Her, when Theodore, played by Joaquin Phoenix, plays a video game in which he simulates running with his fingers imitating legs. Framed this way, touchscreens are like bodies themselves that respond to human
touch. The touchscreen’s agency lies in how it frames the human-device interaction as a form of intimacy, requiring that its user be gentle and light with their touch.

Bruno Latour explores the concept of intimacy between humans and nonhumans in his own work, and even though Latour characterizes this intimacy as resulting from a notable increase in subject-object relationships I do think the word *intimacy* works well when considering the touchscreen.²⁴ For Latour, intimacy results from the human and the nonhuman becoming increasingly entwined due to sheer numerical growth. In other words, we own and use more objects and devices than ever before, pushing the human and the nonhuman closer together. Within my own argument, intimacy is more metaphorical, but I believe it is an intimacy nonetheless. For what is more intimate than communicating through touch with an entity that knows about you, your memories and favorite songs, and allows you to learn and communicate with the device itself and with other people?

*The Keyboard*

The keyboard is a compositional tool designed specifically for human fingers. It has remained more or less unchanged since its first appearance as a part of the typewriter—letters, numbers, and punctuation are all constants in the history of the keyboard. With the arrival of computers, however, the keyboard adopted a handful of new functions; no longer dedicated solely to composing words and numbers, the contemporary keyboard also includes several buttons that control varied functions of the computer itself. The “play/pause” key can start or stop music, and the “eject” key can

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discharge a DVD. These functional keys transform the keyboard into a dashboard or control dock while simultaneously existing as a creative and productive tool for its user.

As humans learn to type, the process of typing becomes “blackboxed,” as Latour would put it: it becomes invisible.25 Once an individual masters typing, they become less focused on the act itself and more on what is being typed. The hiddenness of the typing process gives the user an illusion of immediate transcription of thought, no longer delayed by the more time-consuming act of writing by hand (although it is possible that prior to keyboards people were simply better at writing things quickly, and a similar phenomenon already existed in a different iteration). The lack of idiosyncratic handwriting also inevitably places greater emphasis on content, since the uniformity of installed fonts removes visual personal flair. This is not by any means to imply that word processors erase human individuality. Instead, it takes on a different form, based more in tone, word-choice, and formatting.

Keyboards are fast-paced items, responding not to gentle touches but to highly intentional and precise pressure points. They are also the way humans integrate language into their devices, composing e-mails, texts, and writing notes to themselves using the keyboard, whether it is part of a touchscreen or exists externally. The keyboard’s function is hence completely different from the computer mouse and the touchscreen previously discussed. While those allow the user to exist within the space of their device, the keyboard acts as translator and transcriber once access is granted.

Theoretical Interpretation

The agency inherent to these proxies, i.e. their capacity to have consequences outside of themselves, is also territory worth exploring; their agency furthers the argument that human-technology relationships are a two-way street. Devices are not exclusively acted upon: their existence has consequences outside of themselves, and if we consider anthropologist Adam Reed’s compelling argument in “Smuk is King: The Action of Cigarettes in a Papua New Guinea Prison” that agency is unrelated to intent, we can conclude that the device has agency.26 When a user watches a funny video on their smartphone or computer and they laugh, their reaction is a direct result of their device. Without the smartphone or computer, the video remains inaccessible, the laughter would have never happened. If an individual is informed of a delayed flight via a downloadable application, the device has facilitated a shift in the user’s scheduled day. So, the devices themselves certainly do have agency, but what about the proxies attached to them? Years of typing on a keyboard may result in carpal tunnel, or a malfunctioning mouse could result in an inability to complete an important task. The point here is that we as human users of these devices (via proxies) are not solitary actors. The relationship between humans and technology is reciprocal. While we do control our devices through proxies and have an effect on them in that way, they do respond and affect our actions as well.

26 Adam Reed, “Smuk is King: The Action of Cigarettes in a Papua New Guinea Prison,” in Thinking Through Things, ed. by Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007), 36. Adam Reed’s core argument is that inanimate objects that we seem to have exclusive and unreciprocated control over actually can and do affect our actions and emotional states. In this article, he focuses on cigarettes in a Papua New Guinea prison, exploring how inmates’ actions, emotions, and beliefs depend upon cigarettes in a critical way. Social bonds form over cigarettes, which are used as currency and as a means of escape from difficult and monotonous prison life. To apply his argument to a more art historical framework, a museum’s gallery space affects a visitor’s actions by determining where he or she can stand or sit to look at artwork. A visitor’s physical location is determined by the organization of the room. The gallery space thus has agency, because its existence shapes the actions and perceptions of others.
Pushing this point even further are Paul Graves-Brown and Bruno Latour’s concepts of hybridity and fusion between humans and technology. As previously established, proxies are specifically designed for human usage: keyboards, touchscreens and mice are all *meant* for human hands, yet they belong to the device. It is thus not too much of a stretch to argue that these proxies are part and parcel of both devices and the human body, effectively bringing us a step closer to a cyborg reality. They are the means through which humans can engage with their devices, facilitating and even mediating the human-device relationship. Proxies are an essential component of any technological device, without which it would be rendered useless, and they are the platform where human-device intimacy is performed and expressed.

*While You Are Surfing* by Arslan Sukan

Possibly the most engaging and intriguing aspect of our relationships with devices today is that they revolve around touch. I discussed earlier how the tactile nature of touchscreens suggests a form of intimacy between humans and their devices. *While You Are Surfing* by Arslan Sukan reveals traces of that intimacy: scanned iPhone
surfaces are enlarged and printed on reflective paper, becoming abstracted and enigmatic yet still recognizable (Fig. A, B, C). A metallic fingerprint emerges and luminous cracks light up the dark screens which evoke the sublime depth of night skies. The devices are turned off to better reveal the smudges and cracks, which has the secondary effect of distancing them from their myriad and specific functions. In other words, we can’t know if the user was texting a friend or watching a video; all we know is that they were engaged with their devices through their fingertips. Sukan has said about these images that they “[question] whether our experiences with the digital world… are any less immediate or complete than our encounters with experiences in the physical world.” Indeed, by revealing and highlighting the evidence of touch, Sukan brings the physical nature of our devices to our attention. The total absence of icons, lock screens, or other signage reminds us that when we explore the endless and intangible boundaries of the Internet on our smartphones, we are doing so through a mediated encounter with a solid, hand-held object. Our virtual experiences are in fact physically rooted, and the boundary between virtual and physical is blurred yet again.

The Visual Element
Proxies are crucial to facilitating human-technology interactions, but they would be useless without the designed components that bring them to life. Without icons, toolbars, menus, windows, scrollbars, backgrounds and lock screens, our gestures and clicks would be meaningless and lead nowhere. We know our devices are awake and open to us when they light up and glow, bringing to mind Donna Haraway’s words: "Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals." They are signals that we constantly receive, filter, touch, swipe, and click; they are signals that communicate everything from a note written yesterday, to what song we are listening to, to the amount of battery life left.

Manifested as visual elements, these signals act as a road map for the user. If you want to get to your text messages, you look for the appropriate icon or menu item to orient yourself, and activate it to reach your destination. This means that icons and interfaces need to be designed in such a way that allow for at least semi-intuitive usage. In other words, the icon representing text messages is probably not going to be a green banana—an intuitively designed icon would most likely be an envelope or a speech bubble, something that says “click or tap here to see all your text messages.”

An icon is like a door to an application, and an effective one will include clear and concise signage. One example is the TextEdit icon, depicted below, which clearly shows paper and pen, alerting the user to its function as a word processing software.

The application’s name also contributes to this signage, and there is little reason to think

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29 Perhaps the most intriguing part about icons is how surprisingly detailed they are. The TextEdit icon is a good example of this—the writing on the page is not simulated or a filler paragraph written in Latin. It’s a letter addressed to Kate, signed John Appleseed, containing Apple’s famous ad campaign from the late 1990s to early 2000s—“Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers…” etc.
that TextEdit is intended for anything other than writing and editing text. This is an example of a literal, intuitive icon. It is perhaps dated or archaic, since hand-written letters, essays, and notes are no longer our primary mode of communication, but this is an extension of the concept designers call skeuomorphism. Skeuomorphism is, essentially, digital design that mimics the real world despite being presented virtually. The TextEdit icon is not the most extreme manifestation of skeuomorphism, but it falls under that category nonetheless because it does use shadow and texture to depict its physical “real-world” equivalent. Skeuomorphism is often frowned upon and disparaged in the design community for being tacky, over-used, and denying the reality that a screen is a flat plane (as such the objects in it should not feign three dimensionality).

These anti-skeuomorphs echo the art historical concerns of modernists like Clement Greenberg that a medium should aim to do what it does best, i.e. a painting should not purport to be anything other than canvas stretched over wood, or a photograph should not attempt to be anything other than captured light.

But skeuomorphism is important. As was posited earlier, our devices are not necessarily intuitive. To learn how to use them effectively, we generally need clues, because it is unlikely that we will find a user manual detailing the possibilities of every single icon or design detail. As one journalist writes: “It’s the language that human designers have written to let humans talk to machines.” Skeuomorphism means sometimes making digital elements look like physical ones because that is what we

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30 Handwritten notes are certainly not obsolete, but they are often seen as going the extra mile and are appreciated specifically for their rareness in an increasingly e-mail-based world.
know. When looking at the TextEdit icon, we might think about how old-fashioned it seems to associate writing with pen and paper, but we know exactly what to expect when we open the application. Kelsey Campbell-Dollaghan for Gizmodo put it best:

[Skeuomorphism is] more like a spectrum, or a color palette, that designers have at their disposal. At one end, we have gross misuse: Fake wood, fake leather, fake shadows. At the other, we have thoughtful use of perceived affordances: A digital clock face that looks a lot like a normal watch, because it’s easier to read. Great design assumes users are smart enough to do without the fakery—but it also knows how to use existing cultural references to its advantage.34

While the TextEdit icon falls pretty squarely into the more-skeuomorphic-than-not side of the spectrum in terms of actual design (shadows, texture, color) it is also simply a more literal icon. A literal icon does not have to be skeuomorphic; a clock can be designed with no shadows or textures and still be recognizable as a clock. It thus might be helpful to consider skeuomorphism and “literalness” as two separate design choices that shape how a user interprets a given icon. A more literal icon does not mean it will be more easily decoded. The Angry Birds (a popular game) icon, for example, is literally an angry cartoon bird, but that does not reveal the function of the application or even the rules of the game. When considering the designs behind certain icons, one should consider how both skeuomorphism and literality inform the user’s ability to understand and decode the icon with and without knowing the represented application’s function.

One icon that is much less literal and skeuomorphic belongs to the smartphone app Snapchat (see below). Snapchat has tremendous analytical potential—one could write pages on its implications as an application and what it means for cellphone photography, social media, and sharing culture. The basic function of Snapchat is to send cellphone photos to friends; the twist is that they only appear on the recipient’s

34 Ibid.
screen for x number of seconds (as determined by the sender). When time’s up, the image vanishes, creating a venue through which friends can communicate with each other in a way that is not archived and preserved. On their blog, the creators of Snapchat write:

We believe in sharing authentic moments with friends. It’s not all about fancy vacations, sushi dinners, or beautiful sunsets. Sometimes it’s an inside joke, a silly face, or greetings from a pet fish.

Sharing those moments should be fun. Communication is more entertaining when it’s with the people who know us best. And we know that no one is better at making us laugh than our friends.

There is value in the ephemeral. Great conversations are magical. That’s because they are shared, enjoyed, but not saved.35

In other words, Snapchat (to its creators) is about “authenticity,” “fun,” and “ephemerality.” But how does this translate into an easily recognizable and effective icon? A yellow square with a white, outlined ghost in the middle, evoking the ever-popular emojis (small cartoon images that can be incorporated into text messages, tweets, emails, and more) that are so abundantly used in the smartphone world: this is how Snapchat looks when installed on a smartphone. Taken out of context, the icon is enigmatic; if someone saw it with no prior knowledge of what Snapchat is, they would have a hard time guessing the application’s function. It could represent anything from ghost-busting to Rorschach-testing (notice the ghost’s symmetrical design). It might not be obvious at all that the white shape is meant to be a ghost—the only reason we are completely sure is that the logo previously included a face until 2013 (depicted here).

The Snapchat icon is not a literal icon like the TextEdit icon discussed above. Its interpretation depends on the conceptual framework of the application to give it meaning. Ghosts in popular culture are ephemeral, they disappear and reappear, and they are spooky; the emoji-like design replaces this last quality with playfulness. The icon leads users to draw parallels between the fun, endearing ghost and individual Snaps (sent and received photos), which “die” once time is up, engaging with the concept of Snapchat in ways that a more literal icon would not. What the Snapchat icon pushes for in conceptualism, it loses in intuitiveness—taking a more symbolic approach means relying on a user’s prior knowledge for meaning to be successfully transmitted.

A device’s visual interface is not always intuitive, since the signage is not always clear. Literal icons are not necessarily better than conceptual ones—they just allow for more spontaneous and instinctive interaction, sooner. And, with no icons at all, the device would be an open sea for a user to get lost in. Whether conceptual or literal, icons are key to navigating any interface. The more literally they represent the function of an application, the more accessible they become to a wider demographic range of users. This is not to say that more conceptual icons should all be abandoned in favor of more literal ones—rather, acknowledging the range of meaning possible within one designed icon leads to questions about visual language, culture, and the possibilities of expression. While logos are designed by individuals, they contribute to a relatively collective process of determining the parameters of our developing visual language. A more crowd-sourced aspect to this is
the abundant use of emoticons and emojis in daily life, where they may be designed by individuals but their meanings are largely in the hands of the average texter using them.

![Image of emoticons and emojis]

Picture-based written language is hardly a new phenomenon—hieroglyphs have existed for thousands of years and appear in cultures separated by oceans. As linguist Ben Zimmer, quoted by Alice Robb, put it: “It's a recurrence of a very old impulse.” 36 And, in many ways, emoticons and emojis expand the narrative and expressive possibilities of a solely text-based message.37 Linguists have found that emoticon and emoji usage can actually be studied as a language, and follows similar patterns to spoken and written language; as linguist Tyler Schnoebelen explains: “you start using new emoticons, just like you start using different words, when you move outside your usual social circles.”38 What makes emoticons unique and exciting is their entirely open and flexible meaning; they may be collectively agreed upon, but individuals are free to take literal and conceptual approaches to using them, the images are not attached to a specific function or application which frames their meanings. For example, someone might use the cherub emoji to express the concept of “angelic,” or religiosity–maybe they are in church—or maybe they are ironically insinuating their culpability (e.g.


37 It’s worth establishing the difference between an emoji and an emoticon: emojis originated in Japan at the turn of the century: they are not text-based, but rather take the form of small pictograms that can be inserted into text-based messages. Emoticons are primarily text-based, meaning they are comprised of punctuation, letters, and numbers. That said, one could refer to emojis as emoticons and not be wrong—but an emoticon could not be called an emoji.

Someone ate your last cookie? It wasn’t me! Perhaps there is an inside joke between two individuals where \( \) is associated with a particular event and as such adopts a completely unpredictable and spontaneous meaning. The possibilities are endless, yet the images themselves remain constant.

Emoticons and emojis are visual (and virtual) elements which directly generate and receive meaning; that is their core purpose. This brings to mind the notion of “representation” as posited by cultural critic and analyst Griselda Pollock in her essay “Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art.” She essentially argues that the term acknowledges the role of art (and visual culture) as contributing to and emerging from social practices, which are generated and absorbed/consumed by the audience. There is a cycle at the core of her argument, based in Marxist ideas that production (or creation) cannot exist without consumption (or a receiving audience) and vice versa.\(^{39}\) Emoticons are products of our desire to communicate but they also reflect how comfortable we have become with expressing ourselves digitally. And, they fundamentally crowd-source meaning: there is no genius ego behind emoticons, no individual artist to worship and idealize. Emoticons provide an accessible and concrete way, almost like a prototype, to consider the ways in which visual representation can be studied without looking towards biography and the cult of personality to extract meaning.

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Conclusion: Don’t Be Afraid of Your iPhone (But It’s Okay If You Are)

“It is thus no mystery that human beings should speculate over whether computers ‘think’, or ask whether machines will ‘save’ us or pose a ‘menace’ to our existence; the questions are grounded in the habits of sociality well before they find expression in ethical or governmental debates, and reflect the ambiguity of all intersubjective life— the question as to whether the other, with whom I have yet formed no primary bond, is with or against me, friend or foe.”  

Computers are no longer just for solving complex equations or organizing data, they have become vehicles for individual expression and connection. Smartphones (pocket-sized computers) and their portability allow for the development of even more intimate human-technology relationships than ever before. At the crux of these relationships are visual and structural elements which mediate these interactions and emerge from the desire to create a more enjoyable and practical user experience. These elements are increasingly examined today, but they are still generally overlooked, especially in the academic world; most of the writings I found in my own research were web-based articles from various news sources. In the field of art history, material culture is actively studied and for good reason: our material possessions and

objects tell us much about our culture. Our chairs and silverware point to certain values and social structures and illuminate cultural rules and principles. They are products of immensely thoughtful and skillful design and craftsmanship. Yet, there is a missing component. Our iPhones, laptops, iPods and GPS’s are all part of our (developed and wealthy) contemporary material culture, but their contents, designs, and functions can be thought of as *immaterial* culture. To push visual cultural studies one step further, and for the sake of expanding our understanding of our own society and values, it is crucial that we (who thoughtfully study visual culture) take a good, long look at the objects and devices we use every day. Perhaps this could help our communities move away from the shaming rhetoric that is so often used to describe human relationships with devices. If we can understand these devices and their structures better, we will be less likely to severely ‘other’ and reject them. As anthropologist Michael Jackson put it in his important and exciting essay “Familiar and Foreign Bodies: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Human-Technology Interface”:

*What decides the difference between building walls and building bridges is, as in any intersubjective encounter, the degree to which a person or group feels ontologically secure. The less one’s sense of comprehension and control the more one is likely to split self from other and construct the other as alien, minatory, dirty, or dangerous.*

Jackson’s entire essay abounds with rich analyses and interpretations of human-technology relationships, but at the core of his argument lies the concept quoted above. The reason so many feel shame, threatened by, or disdain towards technology is because of severe insecurity, fear, a sense of chaos or no control, and fundamental misunderstanding. Those who other technology do so because they do not feel “ontologically secure.” Let me emphasize that this is not by any means an unreasonable

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41 Michael Jackson, “Familiar and Foreign Bodies,” 344.
way to feel. Technology is complex and not as intuitive as we think, it can be fussy and unpredictable, and if it malfunctions then individuals risk losing tremendous amounts of personal information and data; we can be monitored and lied to through technology. And yet, it is entwined in our daily lives and identities, and will likely continue to be that way for years to come. It is thus in our best interest to develop a language and conversation to discuss technology in a way that is accessible and open to communal input. Considering how our devices are designed and what our interactions with them are like can demystify them and frame them as less “alien, minatory, dirty, or dangerous” than before. My goals with this project were just that, to demystify technology and look it straight in the eye, so to speak. By considering how we engage with our devices through touch and proxies, how we use them to collect memories and archive our own lives, and how their designed components can be vehicles of meaning, I hope the reader has found some tentative answers and the information to ask questions about their own relationship with their devices.
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