

Lined & Unlined

A filing cabinet on the internet by Rob Giampietro

Hover States

In HTML, a hover (or `a:hover`) is one of four pseudo-classes that can be added to an anchor. Links have two anchors, a source and a destination. The markup for a link defines them both. A new link can be expressed as `a:link`. Once it's been visited, it can be expressed as `a:visited`. The moment of clicking the link can be expressed by `a:active`. Approaching the link, nearing it, can be expressed with `a:hover`. Unlike new and visited links, hovering leaves no visible trace and creates no visible record. It's a game of peek-a-boo. For a moment, the page reveals something more about itself than it has first expressed. At this moment we glimpse some key vulnerability — what it would like you to do, what you could do, what it thinks you want, what it wants you to want.

We used to point at what we wanted with a mouse or a trackpad, including the verbs to thread it all together with meaning. This PRINT that. This SAVE that. This LOAD that. This this this this BOOKMARK. Pointing required confirmation, and it created a delay. I'm pointing at you, you said. You're pointing at me, it said back. Correct, you said. That all took a moment. In that time, it was easy to change what we were pointing at, or decide not to point at the verb that would make the pointing real. To hesitate. To reconsider. Across the room, you might glimpse someone, who might furtively look back for a moment. Suspended for a moment. Verbs, however, are literal. Once verbs were involved, you were involved. You'd made a choice.

In the age of touchscreens, though, the hover state has started to disappear. Touchscreens use direct manipulation. Here, there is no confirmation necessary because there's no distance. No one knows you're watching. You're invisible. Then, suddenly, your touch signals a presence, a desire. It feels more immediate to you, but the

touchscreen is in the dark. It has nothing to tease you with, to hint at, to make you want, because it doesn't know you're there. And crucially, it's mute. No verbs. Not this ROTATE that, just a gesture. Not this CLOSE that, just a gesture. A mouse grazed. The touchscreen gropes. Instead of a softshoe, there's a cartwheel. Instead of acknowledging the screen, the new illusion is attempting to dematerialize it.

This is an understandable progression. Perhaps it's the course we'll stay with. Nevertheless, I will miss catching a reflection in the shop window late at night. Watching ripples on the water after someone's been sitting by the lake. Feeling the breeze kick up all of a sudden and then fade away, leaving the world silent and still. Not gestures I've made, but momentary, vivid, fleeting apparitions that inhabit an unknown space. On a screen, images might fade up over columns of text like ghosts only to disappear again. Grave faces in black and white might colorize and and glint back at you. A cursor might swing like a flashlight in the dark, never coming to rest. Day-glo gradients might twist like kaleidoscopes on a cracked display. I might skim the surface of words and find worlds upon worlds. I might see my breath and gasp, for a moment, at the invisible made vivid. If interactive technology really is a branch of cinema, as technologist Ted Nelson insists, I hope the show's not over.

But energy moves around. As I write this, the Democrats and Republicans are in a standoff, with the US government in a state of temporary shutdown. At some point, there will be some kind of resolution, though not necessarily a lasting one. For now, though, the story is about the standoff. Standoffs are interactions that precede real choices. Each side attempts to signal to the other what could happen, but communication is oblique and obscured. Earlier versions of this standoff linger in the background like a haze. The two sides sit in an unnatural state of suspension. They are not flying high or standing still. They are circling each other. They are hovering. You can never hover forever.