

What if the “I” in HCI stands for Integration?

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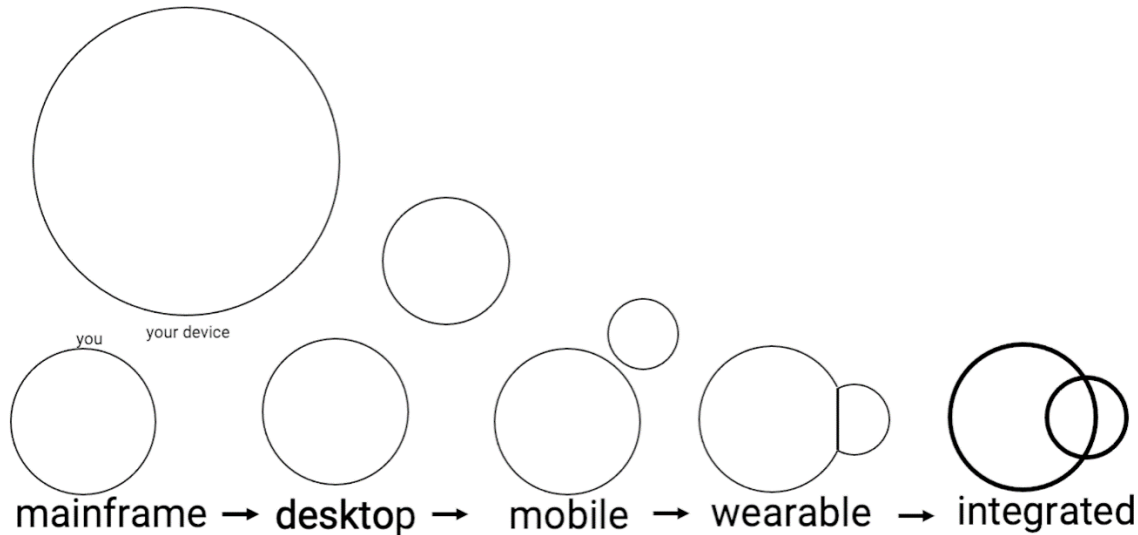


Figure 1: Evolutionary trends in interface paradigms reveal (1) devices getting smaller, and (2) devices closer to the user’s physiology & cognition. This begs the HCI community to ask what I think is the most important question: *what comes next?*

Abstract

I explore the future of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) by rethinking the “I” in HCI as standing for “Integration” rather than “Interaction.” Analyzing the evolution of computing interfaces, from desktop computers to wearables, reveals a trend toward miniaturization and closer integration with the human body. I posit a new generation of devices that integrate AI-interfaces with brain or muscle stimulation to provide cognitive or physical assistance in a way that does not feel disempowering, since the user’s body is *deeply integrated*. This provides a shift towards integrated interfaces that directly assist users’ bodies rather than replacing them with external robots. This challenges us to envision a new type of AI interfaces that *integrate* with humans, enabling new physical modes of reasoning and self-expression. To this end, I argue the main challenges are (1) preserving the user’s sense of agency (e.g.,

keep users in control); (2) avoiding device-dependency (e.g., devices that teach rather than automate); and (3) mapping its societal implications.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → Human computer interaction (HCI); HCI theory, concepts and models; Human computer interaction (HCI); Interaction devices; Haptic devices.

Keywords

Human-Computer Integration, Integration, Evolution of HCI, AI-Integration, Haptics

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1 BACKGROUND: EVOLUTION OF INTERFACES

When we look back to the early days of computing, user and device were distant, often located in separate rooms. In the 70s, personal computers moved in with users. In the 90s, mobile devices moved

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computing into users' pockets. Recently, wearables brought computing into physical contact with the user's skin. These transitions proved extremely useful: moving closer to users allowed interactive devices to sense more of their users and act more personal & expressive.

2 EACH EVOLUTION-STEP HAS IDIOSYNCRATIC GAINS

At every evolutionary step, as we switched from one interface paradigm to another, new societal benefits emerged. For instance, while the emergence of interactive maps did not immediately change society when accessed via desktop interfaces, it drastically sparked new markets once it was interactable via mobile interfaces (e.g., ride-sharing, food delivery, freelance gig work, local economies, and so forth). Similarly, while the inclusion of accelerometer data in mobile devices led to some early explorations in health-tracking, it was when this type of sensor data was acquired via on-skin wearables that new modes of interaction exploded (e.g., interactions based on physiological signals, such as fitness or mindfulness apps; and, activity recognition, such as irregular heart rhythms, handwashing, or fall/accident detection).

3 WHAT COMES NEXT IN THE EVOLUTION OF HCI?

I want to challenge us to consider the following question: What is the next interface paradigm that supersedes wearables?

A systematic investigation of this question should consider as many evolutionary interface factors as possible: hardware substrate (e.g., reduction in the size of components), processing capabilities (e.g., the increase in processing speed), user's physical abilities (e.g., load capacity of a joint, fatigue, accuracy, dexterity), user's psychological abilities (e.g., the hotly debated "bandwidth" of the human brain [53]), usability factors (e.g., how well each machine capability is matched with the user's abilities), societal factors (e.g., societal perception/adoption, ethical and moral norms).

4 WHAT IF THE "I" STANDS FOR INTEGRATION?

I have examined many of these evolutionary factors to extrapolate how the evolution of interfaces might play out [36]. The rapid evolution of these factors points to two key aspects that help determine what might come next: (1) *devices getting smaller* (e.g., fitness trackers, earbuds, and so forth); and (2) *devices are getting closer to the human body*. In other words, as depicted in Figure 1, the interface is being **integrated** with the user (i.e., the circles representing the user and the device *overlap*). This integration with the user's body leads to a generation of interactive devices that mimic human capabilities (e.g., AI interfaces attempt to match the user's reasoning abilities, haptics interfaces attempt to match the user's dexterity, etc.).

I posit that many factors contribute to my extrapolation, namely the rapid evolution of hardware (e.g., Moore's law, Bell's Law of computer classes, or Dennard's Law), decades of insights from psychology & neuroscience that allowed HCI to create a tight coupling between user's abilities and device interface (e.g., inventions such as

pointing/GUIs, touch/NUIs, conversational UIs), and the evolution of societal norms (e.g., the postmodern moral shift).

5 WHY INTEGRATION MATTERS

1. Integration = miniaturization. A first advantage of *user-device integration* is that it puts forward a new generation of miniaturized devices, circumventing constraints that often cause devices to end up larger than ideal. For example, towards providing users' bodies with *physical assistance* (i.e., force-feedback [15]), we see how *user-device integration* has proved beneficial in generating new solutions. Engineering haptic devices based on electrical muscle stimulation (as of 2025, over 100 of these muscle-devices have been explored in HCI [13]) allows achieving force-feedback & physical assistance comparable to that of larger and more cumbersome robotic exoskeletons [30]. This trend is idiosyncratic as it breaks away traditional engineering constraints (e.g., large motors are required to produce large forces [40], large batteries are required for large physical effects [5], etc.). I posit that this novel form of miniaturization via *user-device integration* underlies not just recent haptics research (e.g., in VR haptic actuators can be miniaturized by instead stimulating the user's brain [48, 49]), but also other domains, from implantable devices [19, 46] to software tools where user(s) and device collaborate to achieve functionality that would otherwise require a supercomputer (e.g., crowdsourcing, AI-assistants, and more [4, 7, 20, 35, 43]).

2. Integration = user-centric design. A second advantage of *user-device integration* is that it allows for interactions to emerge without encumbering the body with external tools—in this paradigm, the *body becomes the interactive device*. Using these interfaces, users would not need to hold devices if their hands could temporarily act as the input/output device [16, 42], or would not need to look at screens to get directions if their visual cortex is stimulated to "generate images" depicting directional cues [11, 17]. While nascent and provocative, these interfaces give rise to new meaning to "user-centered design"—in the sense that the device's design is *physically* centered in the user's body and must be designed to respect biological constraints as much as the usability constraints of typical user-centered design [41, 52].

3. Integration = new ways of thinking. A third facet of this *user-device integration* is that it allows new physical modes of reasoning with computers to arise, going beyond symbolic thinking (the primary mode of working with computers since the era of visual interfaces took hold [21]). This lines up with important paradigms in HCI where interfaces allow users to explore data using their bodies [14, 27, 28], via tangible representations [34], or even via interoceptive signals (e.g., internal sensations like gut-feelings [37]).

4. Integration = new abilities. A final facet of *user-device integration* is that it enables us to probe the boundaries of human perception, cognition, and action. I argue for a trend in recent HCI where interfaces endow users with new physical abilities (i.e., not just regaining lost abilities as in sensory restoration [1, 2]). Examples of such interfaces include devices that: allow users to locate odors by smelling in stereo [6], steer users to safety by accelerating their reaction time using muscle stimulation [22], or add biologically implausible senses, like feeling Wi-Fi signals via the skin [14].

6 DO WE LOSE OURSELVES IF DEVICES INTEGRATE?

While this integration between humans and computers can be implemented as beneficial (e.g., faster reaction time [22], improved skill acquisition [8, 38, 51], new sensorium [6, 14, 50]), it also touches on a deep philosophical question: *Do we still feel human when we integrate with an interface?*

Agency. I argue that the question of agency (i.e., exerting & feeling control over an interface) is probably the most important in technology, both from a standpoint of the evolution of interfaces, but also when considering novel forms of AI interfaces (including any forms closer to general intelligence, known as AGI). To answer this, I posit that we need HCI, ethicists, and neuroscientists¹ to work together to rigorously understand what gives rise to our conscious feeling of control, evaluate the impact that automated interfaces have on our sense of agency, and map the boundaries of our moral understanding of *user-device integration*. I argue for a recent trend in HCI leveraging insights from neuroscience, regarding agency, to improve the design of this new type of integrated interfaces [3, 10, 22, 23, 47, 48].

Device dependency. Probing deeper, another question emerges: *When we integrate with devices, do we become dependent on them?* One way to tackle this is by exploring types of *user-device integration* that impart bodily knowledge rather than impose dependency. Some clues are on the horizon: in accelerated reaction time via muscle stimulation, users can become faster even after removing the device (if the device was designed to preserve some of their sense of agency) [23]. This is akin to how some tools are helpful even in their absence, such as maps, which provide a simplified representation of a space that we mentally store for later retrieval. We should strive for designing *user-device integrations* that work even when they are turned off (e.g., no battery, removed, etc.).

7 WHAT OTHER EVOLUTIONARY ROUTES ARE THERE?

While Figure 1 depicts one possible evolution, in which users and devices integrate, I posit that there are more shapes this evolution might take. An important step is to map possible paths and celebrate their idiosyncrasies. To illustrate this, I depict some different visions I have gathered over the years. In my classes & talks, I show the diagram of Figure 1 (while hiding the last interface paradigm) and ask for attendees’ interpretation of what will happen to the two circles (i.e., user & interface). It is inspiring to see how different visions people have when primed to think about “what’s the next interface”—Figure 2 shows one example.

8 COULD EVOLUTION BE CYCLICAL? WHERE IS AI?

One critical question in this is how Artificial Intelligence (AI) fits into this evolution of interfaces. Since the primary interface between users and AI is textual commands, the interaction style is similar to that of early command-line interfaces (CLI). As such,

¹Unique to my argument is calling for joint work across Neuroscience and Human-Computer Interaction—more on this in [29].

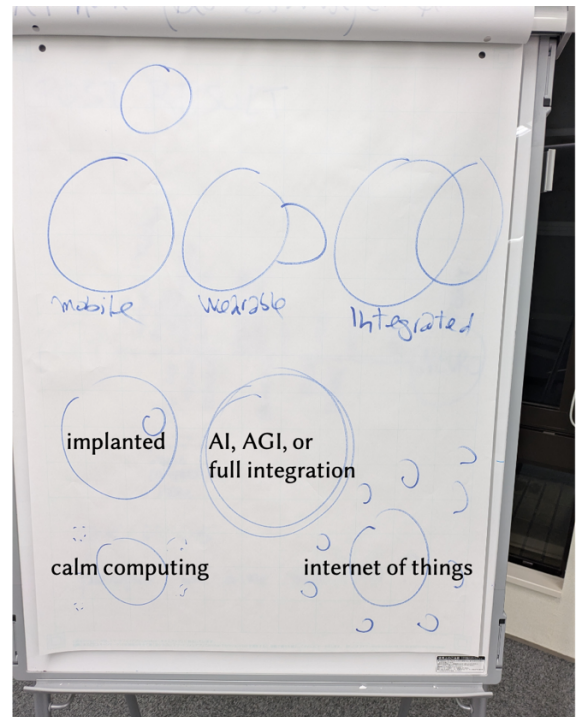


Figure 2: The lower sketches are ideas for the future of interfaces, drawn by attendees of keynotes/classes. (I annotated each drawing with comments on what their sketches imply).

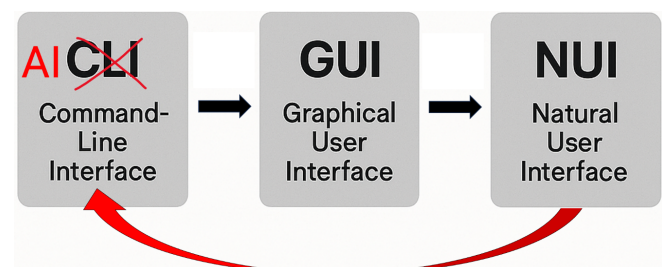


Figure 3: The popular portrait of the evolution of interfaces (CLI to GUI to NUI). But could interactions with AI (via LLMs) be resetting us back to the CLI?

one could argue that this evolution of HCI is cyclical and that we are in the first “grand reset” of interface paradigms—did AI bring interfaces back to the 60s?

However, I’d argue this cyclical argument (Figure 3) can be deceiving, as we are not just seeing a return to the CLI but, instead, the first integration with humans’ cognitive capabilities. Large-language models (LLMs) are a type of conversational interface able to integrate with a key facet of human biology: our ability to communicate in language. Moreover, AI interfaces are rapidly adopting all other paradigms: point-and-click, touch, mobile cameras, and

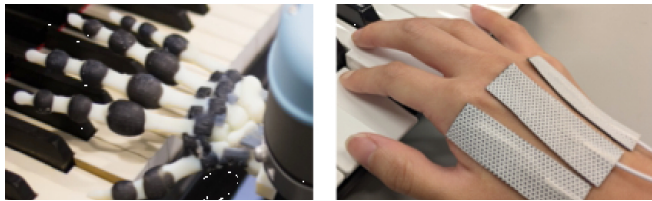


Figure 4: The current vision of AI (left) is that robotics will automate tasks. Instead, via the lens of human-computer integration (right), we can envision a new type of AI that assists the user's body rather than replacing it. This begs a key question: what is at the core of being human? In other words, do we want a robot to play for us or teach us? (Image on the left by Josie Hughes, in Creative Commons at flickr.com/cambridgeuniversity-engineering; right side by Yun Ho [8]).

wearable sensors. Seeing AI move through the evolution of interfaces begs the question: *How might the next generation of AI interfaces connect more physically to the user?*

9 INTEGRATION TO ENVISION A DIFFERENT AI-WORLD

The closest that contemporary AI comes to assisting users with physical tasks is through robotic automation. While this is indeed a way to “assist” with physical challenges (e.g., a robot that does the dishes), decades of research in HCI, cognitive/learning sciences suggest that automating a task is not synonymous with learning it (i.e., instead creates a physical dependency on these devices). Moreover, while we might decide as a society that some tasks warrant automation (e.g., those involving hazards), from a humanistic lens there are tasks at the core of being human (e.g., self-expression through dance/painting/music, meaning making through discovery & curiosity), which might not be desirable to be automated with robots.

Thinking of HCI as in “Integration” rather than “Interaction” opens up a new type of AI that *integrates* the user's body, rather than *removing* the user from the task (as with AI-based robotics). I argue for a trend in which recent HCI research on force-feedback devices (e.g., exoskeletons [26, 44], muscle stimulation [24, 25, 28, 31], or brain stimulation [48, 49]) conjures a new type of *embodied AI* that moves the user's body to provide feedback for learning physical tasks. One example is a system, by Nith & Ho et al., that assists users in performing challenging tasks not via “textual instructions” (as typical of LLMs) but by electrically stimulating the user's body to act out the task—a form of embodied-AI assistance [18]. This idea that an AI could act internally, rather than externally, is illustrated by the provocation in Figure 4 would we rather design AI-interfaces that play piano *for* us or that *teach* us how to play piano?

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²<https://lab.plopes.org/>

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