Glanceability And Voyeuristic Distance: How Designing for Brief Interaction Shapes Engagement with the Apple Watch Activity App

Introduction

This article examines the design concept of glanceability as a normalizing mode of engagement with technical images. The glance, a visual order that recurs across everyday life, has proliferated dramatically with the emergence of the Graphical User Interface (GUI). While glanceable cues are ubiquitous on screens, their impact remains largely overlooked in media studies. Addressing this gap, the research draws on a textual analysis of media theory and a technical walkthrough of the Apple Watch Activity Rings (Light et al., 2018). It argues that glanceable interfaces act as resolution regimes that channel attention into minute interactions and create a rhythm of engagement in which informational complexity is traded for efficiency. Expanding Blascheck et al.'s (2021) framework of glanceable cues – 'Presence and Access', 'Simplicity and Understandability', and 'Suitability and Purpose' – with Ellis's (1982) concept of voyeuristic distance, the article identifies three key trade-offs: low information resolution, reductionism, and fragmented interaction. Situating this analysis within Jonathan Crary's theorisation of attention in *Suspensions of Perception* (2000), it frames glanceability as a form of distributed agency that normalizes behaviour rather than simply reflecting notions of efficient data display. Within this scope, the article highlights the significance of glanceable GUIs as resolution regimes that shape contemporary engagements with screens.

Problem and Research Question

Blascheck et al. (2021) note that studies of technology concerned with human behavior have designated the glance, an interaction with a screen that lasts up to 5 seconds, a 'new research challenge' for our attention to and engagement with interfaces. However, while the authors acknowledge the significance of glanceability for HCI and adjacent fields, they also concede that 'research on glanceable visualizations has not considered people's understanding of what the data represents and what it implies' (Blascheck et al., p. 159). Using the Activity App as a case study, this paper examines the design choices of glanceability in technical images by addressing the following questions: (1) How does media theory focused on screen interfaces contribute to an understanding of glanceability? (2) How do glanceable interfaces engage users? (3) How does glanceability normalize user behavior?

Extending Glanceability: An Ethnographic Walkthrough of the Apple Watch Activity App

This paper examines glanceability through two media studies perspectives: (1) HCI research on interface design and (2) film and television studies. While HCI literature frames the glance as an optimization issue (Consolvo et al., 2008, 2014; Klasnja et al., 2009; Gouveia et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2020; While et al., 2024), it overlooks its broader effects on users (Blascheck et al., 2021). Drawing on John Ellis's 'glance theory' (Ellis 1982), I argue that the visual prompts of glanceable interfaces channel attention into minute interactions that form a rhythm of engagement. While efficient, the emphasis on brevity necessarily reduces the conveyed information to a resolution regime, where complexity is stripped away to prioritize immediacy. Expanding on this, I examine the trade-offs of glanceability's three key traits (Blascheck et al., 2021): 'Presence and Access' leads to shallow content, 'Simplicity and Understandability' fosters reductionism, and 'Suitability and Purpose' fragments daily interactions. An ethnographic walkthrough (Light et al., 2018) of the Apple Watch Activity App situates this framework of glanceability within the broader discourse on the ecological operations of interfaces in actively shaping behavior and perception.

Findings

Building on theories on glanceability as well as the modern conception of attention (Crary 2000) the analysis shows that glanceability constitutes a form of distributed action. It produces a rhythmic interplay of brief bursts of attention to low-resolution information within a distraction-filled environment. This demonstrates that glanceability encompasses more than the fixation on reduced attention spans typically suggested within HCI and adjacent disciplines. With the plethora of glanceable displays and the shrinking timeframes of interaction, the attentive subject of brief visual stimuli is shaped into an expectant observer who is primed for the very glanceable technologies engineered to deliver the right information at the right moment. In a world progressively exploding with screens (Casetti, 2023: 317) the resolution regime of the glanceable interface enhances productivity but also diminishes critical engagement, embedding normative patterns of attention in everyday life and warranting further scrutiny.

Keywords: Glanceability; Digital Interfaces; Normalization; Perception; Apple Watch

References

Blascheck, T., Bentley, F., Choe E.K., Horak T., & Isenberg, P. (2021). Characterizing glanceable visualizations: From perception to behavior change. In Lee, B., Dachselt, R., Isenberg, P., & Choe, E.K. (Eds.). (2021). Mobile Data Visualization (1st ed.). Chapman and Hall/CRC. https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003090823.

Consolvo, S., Klasnja, P., McDonald, D. W., Avrahami, D., Froehlich, J., LeGrand, L., Libby, R., Mosher, K., & Landay, J. A. (2008). Flowers or a robot army? Encouraging awareness & activity with personal, mobile displays. Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Ubiquitous Computing (UbiComp '08) (pp. 54–63). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/1409635.1409644.

Consolvo, S., Klasnja, P., McDonald, D. W., & Landay, J. A. (2014). Designing for healthy lifestyles: Design considerations for mobile technologies to encourage consumer health and wellness. Foundations and Trends in Human-Computer Interaction, 6(3–4), 167–315. https://doi.org/10.1561/1100000040.

Crary, J. (2000). Suspensions of perception: Attention, spectacle, and modern culture. MIT Press.

Ellis, J. (1982). Visible fictions: Cinema, television, video. Routledge.

Gouveia, R., Pereira, F., Karapanos, E., Munson, S. A., & Hassenzahl, M. (2016). Exploring the design space of glanceable feedback for physical activity trackers. Proceedings of the 2016 ACM International Joint Conference on Pervasive and Ubiquitous Computing (UbiComp '16) (pp. 144–155). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/2971648.2971754.

Islam, A., Bezerianos, A., Lee, B., Blascheck, T., & Isenberg, P. (2020). Visualizing information on watch faces: A survey with smartwatch users. 2020 IEEE Visualization Conference (VIS) (pp. 156–160). IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/VIS47514.2020.00038.

Klasnja, P., Consolvo, S., McDonald, D. W., Landay, J. A., & Pratt, W. (2009). Using mobile and personal sensing technologies to support health behavior change in everyday life: Lessons learned. AMIA Annual Symposium Proceedings, 2009, pp. 338–342. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2815473/.

Light BA, Burgess JE and Duguay S (2018) The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. New Media & Society 20(3): 881–900. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675438.

While, Z., Blascheck, T., Gong, Y., Isenberg, P., & Sarvghad, A. (2024). Glanceable data visualizations for older adults: Establishing thresholds and examining disparities between age groups. Proceedings of the 2024 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '24) (Article 987, pp. 1–17). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3613904.3642776.