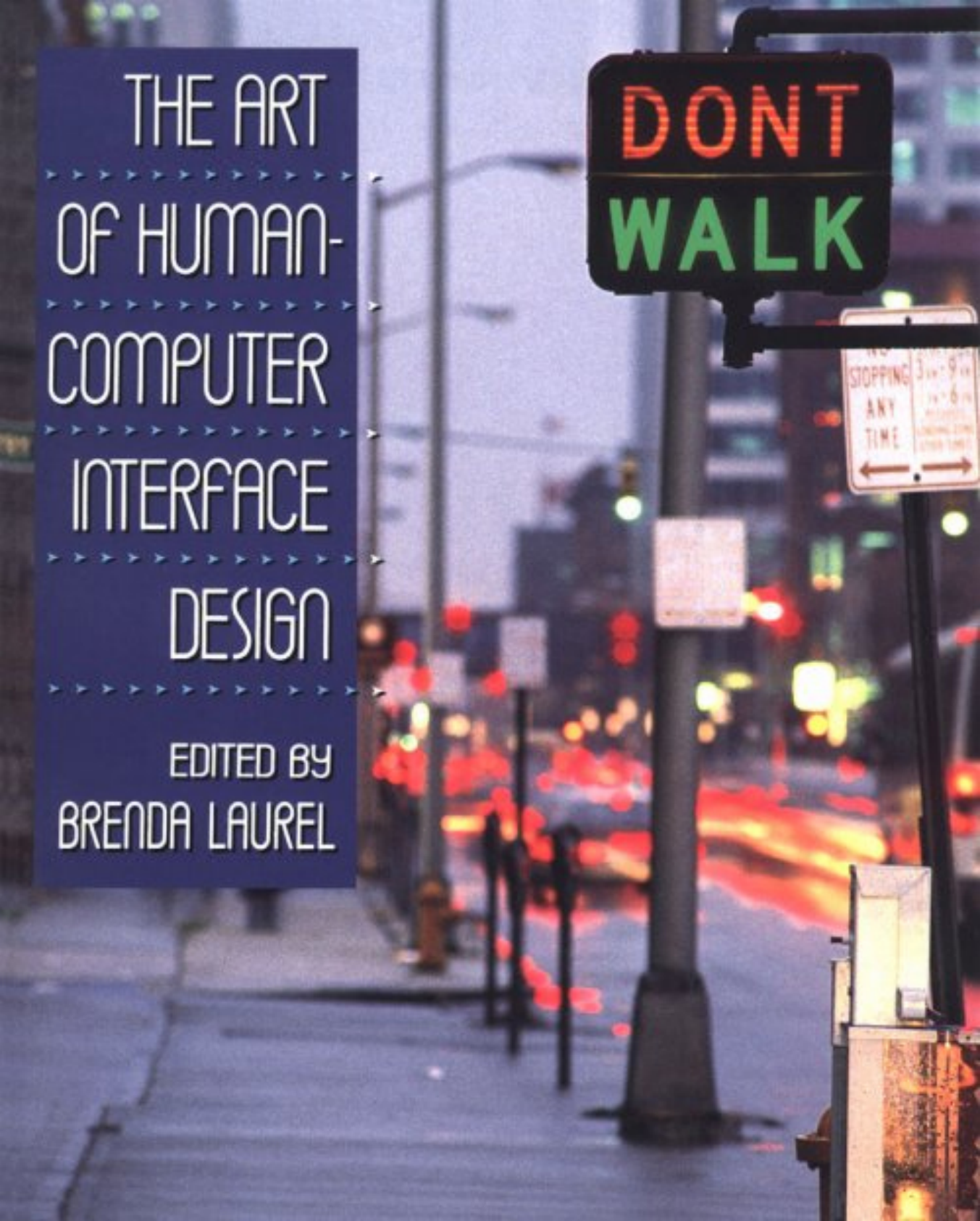


THE ART
OF HUMAN-
COMPUTER
INTERFACE
DESIGN

EDITED BY
BRENDA LAUREL

DONT
WALK

NO STOPPING ANY TIME



This book was begun in 1987 and completed in 1989. It went out of print in the mid-to-late 1990s and was not fully captured digitally. I've included the Table of Contents as an indicator of the diversity of authors and topics. I've included the Postscript to give a sense of where interaction design stood at the time.

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Postscript:

On Visions, Monsters, and Artificial Life

Brenda Laurel

THE DISCIPLINE OF INTERFACE DESIGN seems timid in a peculiar way. We thread our way through an enormous number of constraints. As Roy Pea puts it, it's like putting on a straitjacket and then wondering why you're so uncomfortable.

At the deepest level, our visions are bound—like a genie in a bottle—by incantations, taboos, hexes. The power in the bottle is unknown, and so fears are endlessly embroidered by imagination. It is an old taboo, cross-cultural, that says: do not presume to imitate God—and even: do not presume to imitate life. The interdiction spans a spectrum from Platonist to Hebrew to Balinese, from grandmother to toddler, from conceptual artist to computer engineer.

Why is our vision so constrained? Besides this first archetypal taboo, there are four kinds of fears. The first is that, if we attempt to create conceptual “entities” that are modeled after sentient beings, we will succeed only in constructing crude and lifeless representations—scarecrows, talismans, dolls. It is the fear of failure.

The second fearsome vision is that we will succeed, like Dr. Frankenstein, in creating “life” that grossly amplifies our own shortcomings and flaws—and which suffers and makes us suffer in return. This is the fear of our human fallibility. It is beaten into us by war, poverty, the rape of the environment, the specter of extinction. In this view, nothing that we can create can be good—but we have a special gift, it would seem, for creating monsters.

The third fear is that if we succeed in transforming computers into augmentation devices as empowering and indispensable as the opposable thumb, we will transform ourselves into something “less” than humans—slaves to a cybernetic symbiosis. It is the fear of losing our identity.

The final fearsome vision is that there really *is* a genie in the bottle. When some threshold of knowledge and capability is reached, a new kind of

sentience will emerge. Whether we are parents or midwives hardly matters, for this is the fear, not of God, nor even of usurping God's creational prerogative, but rather the fear of alien life.

Yet just as surely as these fears will slow and subvert our progress, we will continue to pursue our age-old desire to give form to imaginary worlds. It is our nature—and our gift. Plato banned the art of drama from his Republic because he thought that humans were in danger of confusing art with life. Yet few regret the ability to weep with Antigone or laugh with Falstaff. The theatre answers a universal hunger for animate and malleable representations of our experiences, our condition, and ourselves.

It is the same with interactive media. The same objections will be raised; the same doubts and arguments will nip at our heels. But the idea of empowerment through representation will continue to drive us to create. We can't help it. This new medium, like all the others before it, will absorb and transform our hopes and fears, our archetypes and myths. There they will grow and change and take on new shapes and powers. They will be the stuff new visions are made of.

How fast can we invent the future? Will this book be obsolete in five years, two, or one?

Let's hope so.