OWEN MARSH

NOTES ON ATTENTION

Contents

What Attention Actually Costs **5**

Designing for Attention **7**

What Attention Actually Costs

Herbert Simon observed in 1971 that "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention"[1]Simon 1971. The claim sounds obvious now, but its consequence is not: if attention is the scarce resource, then every design decision that competes for it has a real cost, whether or not that cost shows up on any balance sheet.

[1] Simon was writing about information overload decades before the internet made the problem visceral.

Notification design is the clearest modern instance of this. A single badge on an app icon is a standing claim on your future attention — it will be resolved eventually, and until it is, some small fraction of your working memory is reserved for it, whether or not you are consciously thinking about it.

Figure 1: A schematic: each open notification is a small, ongoing tax on working memory, not a one-time cost.

The Interruption Tax

Gloria Mark's research on workplace interruption found that it takes an average of 23 minutes to fully return to a task after an interruption[2]Mark, Gudith, and Klocke 2008. This is not because the interrupted task was hard — it is because switching contexts has its own fixed cost, paid again on the way back.

[2] The commonly cited figure is 23 minutes and 15 seconds, from continuous logging of office workers' activity.

Interruption type	Typical recovery time
Email notification	1–2 minutes
Chat message	2–5 minutes
Phone call	10–15 minutes
Full context switch (meeting)	20+ minutes

Table 1: Rough interruption costs by type, illustrative only.

Designing for Attention

If attention is scarce, the natural design response is to spend it deliberately rather than by default. This does not mean removing all notifications — some genuinely warrant an interruption — but it means treating every claim on attention as a decision with a cost, not a free action.

Bibliography

Mark, Gloria, Daniela Gudith, and Ulrich Klocke (2008). "The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress". In: *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 107–110 (cit. on p. 5).

Simon, Herbert A. (1971). "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World". In: *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*. Ed. by Martin Greenberger. Johns Hopkins Press (cit. on p. 5).