

ATTENTION LABYRINTH

A field guide to the invitations built into interfaces — and the limits of what one maze can tell us.

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THE CENTRAL QUESTION

A person can face the same physical options but experience different choices because some alternatives are made more prominent, emotionally interesting, or effortful. This project holds its maze layout constant while changing optional interface cues. It is an interactive thought experiment, not a psychometric test.

01 What actually changes?

Quiet: plain navigation. Casino: an expressive interface whose extra mechanics remain OFF until the visitor enables them. The words “casino” and “labyrinth” are artistic metaphors, not claims that this website reproduces gambling psychology.

Novelty: selected open cells display an unusual glyph; routes do not change. Reward: visiting selected cells displays symbolic badges without points, prizes, or monetary value. Friction: entering selected cells requires an extra confirmation. Distraction: an optional card offers one accessible step away from the exit, with an equally visible decline action. All four can be disabled instantly.

02 A precise account of the measurements

Moves: successful orthogonal transitions to an adjacent open cell. Detours: any move that increases shortest-path distance to the exit; a detour does not mean a mistake. Elapsed: active session time since the first successful move, excluding paused and hidden-tab time. Decision intervals: time between successive successful moves; this includes reading and interaction latency and excludes interpretation of intent. Events: timestamped, local-only records of moves, prompts, confirmations and settings.

The shortest-path metric uses breadth-first search over the same static nine-by-nine grid. A visitor can deliberately choose a longer route, and experience with the maze can shorten a later run independently of the interface cues. The system observes clicks and movements; it does NOT observe “attention” inside the mind.

03 Reproducibility and privacy

The map is fixed in the code and replayed unchanged. There is no RNG and no server state. Completed sessions are saved in localStorage in this browser only, capped at the latest 16 runs. The live event log retains at most 250 records; displayed log shows only the latest 35. CSV and JSON exports are generated locally as files. Reset All Data clears saved runs and the active run. Export before erasing if you want to keep a copy.

No account, webcam, microphone, cookies, external analytics, advertisements or API keys are part of this implementation. The site cannot verify or control browser extensions, network intermediaries or external hosting policies.

A SMALL LABORATORY YOU CONTROL

Three guided experiments, best approached as personal observations rather than proof.

Experiment A / Same maze, different salience

Procedure. Complete Quiet. Record moves, detours and active time. Replay Casino with novelty signposts ON, leaving the other mechanics OFF. Follow any paths you like. Export both sessions separately.

Questions. Did you deliberately seek the unusual glyphs? Which of the differences could be explained by already knowing the map? Would reversing the order change the result?

Limit. Repeated play confounds the interface difference with learning. Two runs do not estimate a general causal effect.

Experiment B / The cost of a click

Procedure. Replay Casino with friction doors only. At a marked door, notice the additional confirmation. Finish and compare with another run without friction.

Questions. Does this added step make you reconsider direction or only slow down? Under what circumstances might a confirmation prevent harm (e.g., deletion or payment), and when would it merely obstruct?

Limit. Decision intervals include motor interactions and reading; differences should not be read as “quality of deliberation.”

Experiment C / Design an easy refusal

Procedure. Enable distraction cards only. When a card appears, read it and select “No thanks.” Continue to the exit. Repeat while accepting at least one optional detour.

Questions. Does naming the diversion make it less manipulative? How does an obvious decline button alter the meaning of the invitation? What if dismissal were hidden, delayed or guilt-laden?

Limit. Self-observation changes what you notice. This is a reflective design exercise, not a clinical measure of impulsivity.

04 Reflection worksheet

- Which cue did I notice first, and what concrete action followed?

- Which apparent “preference” may simply be familiarity with the map?

- Which route was enjoyable even though it was longer?

- What would consent look like on a shopping, workplace, or educational interface?

- What data would be needed before claiming a design actually caused a difference?

THE ETHICS OF INVITATION

Design can invite curiosity while respecting the right to leave.

05 Ethical design commitments

Make every optional mechanic visible and OFF by default. Use clear labels before a change happens. Preserve equivalent access to the underlying task. Never make declining harder than accepting. Avoid artificial scarcity, hidden tracking, stochastic jackpots and punitive timers. Give users an easy reset and a meaningful account of what has been observed.

An important distinction: choice architecture is the way options are presented, not evidence that an individual is weak-willed. A cue can help orientation in one context and undermine deliberate choice in another. Evaluation therefore requires attention to actual users, goals, context and possible harms.

06 Interpret with humility

An observed detour may mean curiosity, experimentation, misunderstanding, or a preference for exploration. A fast response may mean familiarity rather than lack of thought. An accepted prompt may reflect intentional play. The experiment logs behaviour but cannot assign motives. Reproducible observations are not necessarily generalizable findings.

If a formal study were desired, the design would need ethically reviewed recruitment where appropriate, explicit consent and withdrawal terms, a pre-registered outcome definition, counterbalanced condition order, adequate sample size, accessibility checks and careful privacy planning. None of that is claimed here.

07 Suggested reading and conceptual roots

- Daniel Kahneman (2011), *Thinking, Fast and Slow* — influential framing for cognitive processing; apply popular dual-process shorthand cautiously.
- Richard H. Thaler & Cass R. Sunstein (2008), *Nudge* — choice architecture and its ethical controversies.
- B. J. Fogg (2009), "A Behavior Model for Persuasive Design," *Proceedings of Persuasive '09* — motivation, ability and prompts as a design model.
- James Williams (2018), *Stand Out of Our Light* — attention and ethical technology design.
- Harry Brignull, *Deceptive Patterns* (deceptive.design) — vocabulary and examples of manipulative interfaces.
- W3C (2023), *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2* — accessibility requirements including keyboard reachability and focus visibility.

08 Operational notes

Keyboard: arrow keys or W/A/S/D; touch: large directional controls or adjacent-cell buttons. Enable Focus for less visual stimulation; the operating system's reduced-motion preference is respected. The entire core simulation works locally without a remote backend. A no-JavaScript edition retains the explanations and a static map, but interactive play requires JavaScript.

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