

The Architecture of Attention

C2 | Adults / Teens | Reading + Vocabulary + Discussion | 70-85 minutes

BEFORE YOU READ

Talk with a partner. To what extent is a person's attention their own responsibility when digital environments are designed to capture it?

1. Match the words (1-6) with the definitions (A-F).

- | | | |
|------------------------|-------|--|
| 1. salient | _____ | A. the ability to make one's own decisions |
| 2. intermittent | _____ | B. occurring at irregular intervals |
| 3. compulsion | _____ | C. an important imbalance between two sides |
| 4. frictionless | _____ | D. requiring almost no effort or delay |
| 5. autonomy | _____ | E. most noticeable or important |
| 6. asymmetry | _____ | F. a very strong urge to act |

2. Read the article. The bold words are the vocabulary from Activity 1.

1. The complaint that digital devices distract us is familiar, but it can obscure a more precise question: how are environments engineered to make certain signals **salient**? A notification is not merely information. It is a prompt placed within a system that competes for time, predicts behaviour and learns which interruptions are most likely to be answered.

2. Particularly powerful are **intermittent** rewards. A feed does not offer a reliable amount of interest; it occasionally produces something surprising, amusing or socially meaningful. This uncertainty can make stopping more difficult than it would be with a predictable activity. The result is not necessarily addiction, but it can resemble a **compulsion**: a repeated action that continues after its value has diminished.

3. It would be simplistic, however, to describe users as passive victims. People seek connection, entertainment and relief from boredom, and many use digital tools purposefully. The problem lies in an **asymmetry** of knowledge and resources. A person makes moment-to-moment choices, while a platform may test thousands of design variations and measure the consequences across millions of users.

4. This is why calls for individual self-control are only partly persuasive. A **frictionless** system removes pauses at precisely the points where reflection might occur: before another video plays, before a purchase is confirmed, before a message is sent. Small design changes can therefore matter without requiring technology to become less useful.

5. The central issue is **autonomy**. A choice is not meaningless merely because it is influenced; all choices are influenced. But autonomy becomes thinner when the influences are hidden, personalised and continuously optimised to reduce a person's ability to disengage. The challenge is to build tools that serve attention without quietly converting it into a commodity.

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UNDERSTAND, DISCUSS AND WRITE

3. Comprehension. Answer in complete sentences. Use the article to help you.

1. Why is a notification described as more than information?

2. How do intermittent rewards affect behaviour?

3. What asymmetry does the article identify?

4. Why does the article criticise a purely self-control-based response?

5. How does the article define the threat to autonomy?

4. Discuss. Talk in small groups. Give reasons and examples.

- When does persuasive design become manipulative?
- Should platforms be required to build in stopping points?
- Can users realistically protect their own attention?
- What would an attention-respecting digital product look like?

5. Homework: Write an opinion paragraph.

Write 220-260 words assessing the claim: 'Digital distraction is primarily a design problem, not a personal failing.'
Develop a nuanced argument and define the limits of your position.

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ANSWER KEY AND TEACHING NOTE

Vocabulary matching

1. **salient** - E
2. **intermittent** - B
3. **compulsion** - F
4. **frictionless** - D
5. **autonomy** - A
6. **asymmetry** - C

Comprehension answers

1. Why is a notification described as more than information?

It is a prompt within a competitive system designed to predict behaviour and identify interruptions people are likely to answer.

2. How do intermittent rewards affect behaviour?

Their uncertainty can make it harder to stop because people keep checking for a surprising or meaningful result.

3. What asymmetry does the article identify?

An individual makes immediate choices while platforms possess extensive data, testing capacity and resources to optimise design.

4. Why does the article criticise a purely self-control-based response?

It ignores how frictionless design removes moments for reflection at key decision points.

5. How does the article define the threat to autonomy?

Autonomy is weakened when hidden, personalised influences are continuously optimised to make disengagement harder.

Teaching note

Compare vocabulary answers before reading. Help learners plan an argument about digital distraction: design, personal responsibility and limits. Accept accurate comprehension paraphrases and supported personal responses.