On Hitting the Button

Melanie Gruben
Munster Technological University
Bishopstown, Cork
Republic of Ireland
melaniegrubenresearch@proton.me

Remember that story about pressing the button, and one person dies, but you get a million dollars?

Button Button, it was called, by Richard Matheson.

I find it easy enough to put it out of my mind, really. I just assume we're all fucked and things are already bad so what I do doesn't really matter. It doesn't feel good, but to be honest nothing feels good these days. I'm just trying to get by.

I type my query. Nothing matters anyway. We're all doomed. Everyone I know uses it. I'm already using it at my job. Why make things harder for myself at the end of history? I need a win.

I hit the button, and I get an answer straight away. It's like magic. Clarity through the exhaustion. Not a million dollars, but instant relief. I'm not alone.

The button sparks at least 8 times the processing-power demand of standard computing, wears away at a semiconductor, decays some wire, releases some nitrogen dioxide, leaks some heavy metals from the facility, and makes a little blip in various economies.

It then stores my behavioural data indefinitely, which doesn't bother me. It's not like I'm using it. I think I heard it goes to the military or something but I just sort of stash that thought away. I really don't have headspace for that kind of thing, just being honest. It's kind of a lot. LIFE is kind of a lot.

Meanwhile:

> *...a homeowner's lights go out. They need power for their medical equipment. They contact the power authority but there is no explanation.*

I type a clarifying response and hit the button.

> *...a user-data trained drone opens fire at a civilian it automatically identified as a viable target; she is Instagram friends with a journalist.*

I ask another question and hit the button.

> *...a customer service rep is made redundant. She puts plans to leave her abuser on hold – just until finances are better.*

I throw in my CV and ask for a polish, then hit the button.

> *...a worker narrowly evades being trampled during an evacuation of over a thousand LLM training contractors. Occupancy limits aren't enforced in his country, and more workers per floor means a faster release of the newest update. The foreman does a headcount while the building blazes behind him.*

I ask a question and hit the button.

> *... an 8-year-old girl develops health complications from digging for semiconductor minerals with her bare hands.*

I can tell it's lied, so I ask a followup prompt to check its work, and hit the button.

> *...a graphic designer gives in and downloads the software. Learning art was the wrong move. Later he'll say that in front of his son, not thinking.*

It gives a different result I know is also untrue, so I rephrase the fact check query, and hit the button.

© Gruben. Published by BCS Learning and Development, Ltd.
Proceedings of the 39th International BCS Human-Computer Interaction Conference, London, UK, 1-3 November 2026

...loggers divert a river streamlet in a rainforest. It floods an indigenous nation's natural horticulture plot, which took over a hundred years to cultivate.

I tweak my original request, and hit the button.

...an accountant starts importing water from another town, as the local mains have been compromised. Shops start price gouging bottled water. News companies won't engage.

I type "Yes" and hit the button.

...a paramilitary platoon that was partly funded by tech companies to drive down the cost of data centre mineral mining displaces a family of five. There was recently an international court case against big tech for this reason, but the country lost.

I upload another document for clarity and hit the button.

...a cornerstone independent business closes, which will soon lead to a darkening of a city quarter currently filled with smaller independent businesses.

I ask what I should wear to a work function tomorrow and hit the button.

...a night-shift psychotherapist in the Trust & Safety industry hurries a content moderator to the on-site urgent care room at their shared workplace. The on-call medic is already waiting.

I take a break. I want to see some funny and kind of surreal art of me and my cat, so I hit the button.

...a young person decides not to leave the house on weekends. The local youth centre is closing anyway.

BUT, I'm kind of overwhelmed right now and I don't really have the mental bandwidth to do things the old way. To be honest, I'm barely managing, and this feels like having help.

I notice I am relying on the button a little more each week but I am trying to get better at going easy on myself. I see it as a form of self-care in a terrible time. Nobody's perfect. Everyone keeps saying the button is here to stay. What is there to gain by resisting?

P.S.

Gentle reader, did you know that a lot of button use is actually *optional*?

Abstract. a one-page piece of prose expresses the defeated and disembodied experience of humans using GenAI casually while knowing or suspecting some of the resulting harms. It is written with a cadence to invoke a sense of direct causation from single user action to single outcome, but this is partly for effect to illustrate participating in a network of harms. In a closing line, the author suggests to the reader that even in such hopelessness, we still have choices. The abstract and keywords are placed afterward to protect the "show, don't tell" rule of fiction writing. This piece was submitted to BritChi's alt.britchi track, a creative call on the topic of what HCI (human-computer interaction) can't do.

Keywords. GenAI, Generative AI, LLMs, human-computer interaction, digital harms, disruptive technologies, climate change, global south, imperialism, neo-colonialism, war