

# Prompted: An AI Tool that Asks, Not Answers

## Designing for Orientation Over Optimization in Support of Creative Reflection

Anna Zhang  
Independent Artist  
San Francisco, USA  
annazhang.studio@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

Most generative AI tools are designed around a single logic: an input is given, an answer is produced, and the gap between the two is treated as friction to eliminate. This paper introduces *Prompted*, an experimental AI tool that refuses that logic. *Prompted* responds only with oblique questions, never answers; requires deliberate hold gestures rather than quick clicks; imposes a randomized delay before an output is returned; locks each input from revision; and arranges the resulting exchanges spatially on an open canvas rather than in a chat thread. Drawing on a lineage of sensemaking systems—the I Ching, Marshall McLuhan’s DEW Line card deck, and Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt’s *Oblique Strategies*—the paper argues for a class of *orienting* AI interactions that return the work of interpretation to the user, contrasting these with the *optimizing* interactions that dominate current AI design. A first-person reflection on building and using *Prompted* closes the paper, situating the work within the RiCE workshop’s themes of AI support for reflection and creativity support tools for reflection.

### KEYWORDS

reflective AI, generative AI, creativity support tools, slow technology, speculative design, sensemaking

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The dominant logic of contemporary AI interaction (as can be seen in commercial chat interfaces such as ChatGPT and Claude) is *optimization*: compress the time between input and answer, converge on a result, move on. Interfaces compete on latency. Output streams token by token to make response times feel shorter still. Iteration is instant and unlimited; if the answer is unsatisfying, regenerate.

But the space between question and answer is where a particular kind of thinking has historically happened: the formulating, the connecting, the sitting with what one does not yet know. As that space contracts, so does that thinking. Working with AI tools, I noticed a recurring pattern of reaching for the model before a thought was finished, of reading outputs without genuinely engaging them, and of experiencing my own slower process of formulation as a personal failure—a failure to operate at machine pace. The frictions that once kept thinking with the thinker had been designed away.

*Prompted*<sup>1</sup> is an experimental AI tool that pushes back against this logic. It uses generative AI to surface oblique questions rather than produce answers, requires deliberate gestures rather than clicks, imposes randomized delays, and arranges thinking spatially rather than as a scrollable chat. The argument is that AI interactions can be designed for something other than speed and resolution, which forecloses human thinking: they can be designed to keep explorations open, to give creators material to think with rather than products to just accept.

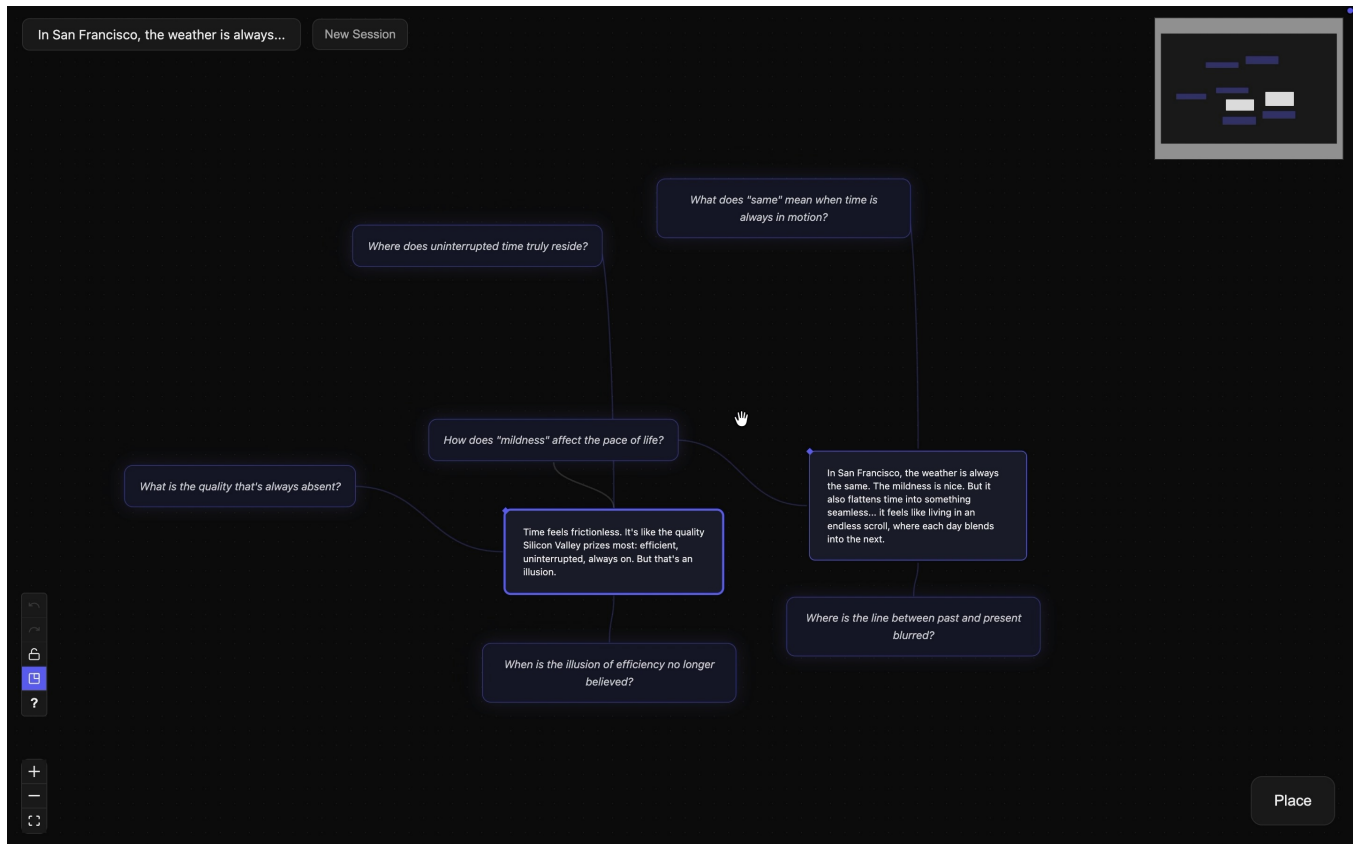
This paper situates *Prompted* within a lineage of *orienting* systems—tools that provide structure for sensemaking without resolution—and offers a first-person reflection on its making and using. It contributes to two of the RiCE workshop’s themes: *AI support for reflection* and *creativity support tools for reflection*.

## 2 ORIENTING VS. OPTIMIZING SYSTEMS

Long before generative AI, there were tools designed around a different logic. The I Ching, an ancient Chinese system of divination and cosmology, asks the user to cast coins or sort yarrow stalks to generate one of sixty-four hexagrams paired with a text. The text might read “Fire over the lake: the image of Revolution” [1]; what that image means in relation to the question one brought is the user’s to determine. In 1969, Marshall McLuhan and his collaborators produced the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line card deck [2], which carried what McLuhan called “probes”: compressed aphorisms intended to disrupt the frame one had brought to a problem. Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt’s *Oblique Strategies* [3], a deck of cards developed for use in studio practice, applied the same logic to creative blocks. Each card carries a cryptic directive (“Honor thy error as a hidden intention”; “Do nothing for as long as possible”) that does not address the problem directly but redirects approach to it.

These systems differ from contemporary AI interactions in a basic way. Optimizing algorithms treat uncertainty as a problem to solve: predict, maximize, converge. Orienting systems treat uncertainty as a condition to navigate. Their output gives the user material to interpret rather than a result to evaluate; the computation completes when the user has made meaning from it, not when the system produces it. The thinking stays with the user.

<sup>1</sup>A demonstration video is available at <https://portfolio.anna-zhang.com/projects/prompted>.



**Figure 1: A Prompted canvas. Locked user inputs are marked with a diamond; italicized nodes are the questions generated from them. Branches and dead ends remain visible spatially as the canvas accretes.**

This distinction connects to a broader thread in HCI on *reflective design* [4], on *slow technology* [5], and on speculative and adversarial design’s interrogation of design’s problem-solving defaults [6, 7]. What this lineage suggests, when read alongside the I Ching, DEW Line card deck, and Oblique Strategies, is that an AI interaction can be designed as an *orienting* system: one that uses the responsiveness of large language models to a user’s specific input to reframe and provoke new lines of thought, instead of answering for the user.

### 3 PROMPTED

Prompted is an open canvas (Figure 1). On opening a space, the user is met with minimal instruction: place something you’re thinking about. The user must articulate what they bring.

Four design choices distinguish Prompted from conventional AI interfaces. Each emerged as a counter-move to a specific way I had observed my own attention being reshaped by existing tools.

*The hold gesture.* To submit, the user does not click but holds: a small, sustained gesture that turns a reflex into

a deliberate act. The hold marks the moment as one of commitment rather than disposable trial.

*Locked input.* Once released, what the user placed cannot be revised or deleted. The regenerate button common to chat interfaces had taught me to commit less to what I was asking, since I could always ask again. Locking the input restores weight to the act of formulation: what one writes is what one stands behind.

*Randomized delay.* After the input is locked, and while the questions are generating, there is no progress bar, spinning indicator, or streaming token output. The duration of the wait is randomized and unknown. The not-knowing interrupts the mental planning of how to spend the next few seconds efficiently; the time itself becomes thinking time, whether the user remains at the screen or steps away.

*Questions only.* When the system is ready (Figure 2), a second hold gesture is required to receive the response: three to five oblique questions appear as nodes connected to the original input. The questions are intended to reframe the original thought, complicate its assumptions, or redirect where thinking might next go. They cannot be regenerated.



**Figure 2:** When the system is ready, the user holds anywhere on the screen to receive. The unpredictable wait that precedes this moment cannot be optimized; it becomes time the user can spend with their own thinking.

To continue, the user must bring more of their own thinking to the canvas.

The canvas itself is the fifth design choice. Unlike a chat thread, which privileges the most recent exchange and scrolls earlier ones away, the canvas preserves everything spatially: branches taken and dead ends. Over time it becomes a topology of questions encountered rather than a log of answers received. This addresses a tension common to reflective creativity support tools—how to record creative process without interrupting flow—by making documentation the natural artifact of interaction rather than a separate task.

The AI system runs locally, built on top of the large language model Llama 3.2 3B. The provocations are shaped by the user’s own language, which is something the I Ching, DEW Line deck, and Oblique Strategies cannot do: their content is fixed regardless of the question brought. Prompted uses the responsiveness of generative AI in service of the orienting logic, rather than against it.

## 4 REFLECTION ON THE MAKING

The making of Prompted was itself an exercise in the kind of reflection the tool tries to support. Using the early prototypes was hard. I was impatient, restless with the very pace I had designed. Over time something shifted. Because the input was locked, I had to think more carefully about what I was placing. Because the delay was unpredictable, the waiting itself became thinking time rather than time to manage. Because only questions came back, the thinking returned to me—I had to do something with what I received. The lineage from the I Ching to Oblique Strategies emerged in parallel with the design, a way of naming what I was building: a way of sensemaking with AI.

## 5 DISCUSSION

Prompted contributes to the RiCE workshop’s theme of *AI support for reflection* by proposing that the cognitive mismatch between LLMs and creative practitioners need not be addressed by training models to “think more like creators.” It can also be addressed at the level of interaction design: by refusing the streaming, regenerative, answer-oriented defaults that encode the optimizing logic, and replacing them with structures that scaffold reflection without producing on the user’s behalf. The contribution is an existence proof that the dominant interaction patterns are designed, not inevitable.

Several open questions remain. Whether other users find the constraints generative or frustrating is a question this work does not yet answer; a study with creative practitioners is the natural next step. Methodologically, capturing reflection in Prompted poses a challenge the workshop call names directly: think-aloud protocols would disturb the pacing the tool is designed to create. Microphenomenological interviews [8] or first-person accounts paired with canvas artifacts may be a better fit. The design space of orienting AI is also larger than Prompted alone; other constraints—enforced solitude, single-day expiration, audio-only output—would yield different reflective qualities, each worth designing into.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Prompted is a small intervention in a large default. It uses generative AI not to do thinking faster but to return certain kinds of thinking to the user: the questioning, the connecting, the sitting with uncertainty. The proposal is that AI interactions can be designed as *orienting* systems rather than *optimizing* ones, and that doing so opens a richer space for reflection in creative practice than the dominant patterns currently allow. The system provides structure; the user provides meaning. The computation is not complete until the user has interpreted what they received—and that interpretation is theirs to make.

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