

Calm Design Lab
Calm Audit

Author: Audrey Lingstuyt
Published by Calm Design Lab
calmdesignlab.com · contact@calmdesignlab.com
CC BY 4.0 · Free to use and share with attribution
Version 4.2 · September 2026

Calm Audit

A framework for analyzing how digital products shape attention. The Calm Audit evaluates digital products against the conditions that shape attention within the Calm Design Framework, not by scoring isolated features, but by examining the overall attentional ecology a product creates over time. It is deliberately evaluative: an audit asks whether something meets a standard, and here the standard is whether a product respects the attention it's asking for.

How to Use the Audit

The audit is organized into three layers, moving from foundation to consequence.

Layer 1: Foundations

Three foundational dimensions, **Time, Space, and Body**, come directly from the Calm Design Framework. They apply to any designed experience, digital or physical, and describe the basic conditions through which attention happens.

Layer 2: Relationships

Two extensions, **Agency and Social Ecology**, apply specifically to interactive, networked products, which the foundational three were not built to fully capture.

Agency examines the vertical relationship between a person and the system making decisions on their behalf: how much control they retain over the loop.

Social Ecology examines the horizontal relationship between a person and everyone else competing for the same attention: who else is in the loop with them.

Neither question exists for a painting or a chair. Both become unavoidable the moment a product is interactive and networked.

Layer 3: Attentional States

Attentional States close the audit as an outcome layer rather than a sixth parallel category. Having examined the conditions a product creates, the final section asks what those conditions actually produce.

For each dimension, work through the audit questions and record direct observations rather than scores. The value of the audit lies in what the observations reveal cumulatively, not in a final number.

A Note On Trade Offs

No product will perform equally well across every dimension, nor should it try to.

Several dimensions pull in different directions by design. Reflective friction can interrupt the continuity that flow depends on. Attentional recovery makes it easier to pause and return, while closure supports clear endings. Different products serve different attentional purposes and carry different trade offs.

The value of the audit is not in maximizing every dimension. It is in identifying which attentional conditions matter most for a particular product, and examining whether its trade offs were made deliberately.

The question is not whether a product satisfies every dimension. It is whether the attentional conditions it creates are appropriate to what the product asks people to do.

Layer 1: Foundations

Time, Space, and Body describe the basic conditions through which attention happens. They establish the temporal, spatial, and embodied context in which an experience is encountered.

Dimension	Principle	Audit Question
Time	Rhythm and temporal pressure	Does the product respect the user's natural pace without creating artificial urgency?
	Pauses and microtemporalities	Are there pauses, breathing spaces, or moments of decompression between actions?
	Temporal continuity	Does the experience avoid unnecessarily fragmenting attention?
	Closure gestures	Does the experience provide clear endings rather than endless continuation?
	Temporal honesty	Does the system communicate honestly how much time an action will require?
	Attentional recovery	Can users pause, leave, or return later without unnecessary difficulty or penalty?

Space	Spatial legibility	Is the perceptual hierarchy understandable without effort?
	Attentional resting spaces	Are there intentional areas of silence or low intensity?
	Stimulus density	Is the density of stimuli appropriate for the attentional state required?
	Relationship to physical environment	Does the product acknowledge the physical context in which it is used?
	Transition back to the physical world	Does the experience support reentry into the surrounding environment?
	Orientation and continuity	Can users easily understand where they are and how to return?
Body	Embodied interaction	Does the experience account for the user's bodily state, posture, movement, and physical context?
	Cognitive fatigue	Does the experience respond to accumulated mental fatigue?
	Sensory balance	Is there a balanced sensory presence beyond the visual channel?
	Bodily awareness	Does the experience allow users to maintain awareness of their body and surroundings?
	Accumulated physical intensity	Does the experience avoid sustained physical tension or hypervigilance?

Layer 2: Relationships

Agency is about the vertical relationship: how much control a person retains over a system making decisions on their behalf. Social Ecology, on the other hand, is about the horizontal relationship: who else is competing for the same attention, and how the product mediates that.

Dimension	Principle	Audit Question
Agency	Accessible self regulation	Are tools for regulating attention directly accessible to users?
	Reflective friction	Does the product introduce moments that encourage deliberate choice before continuation?
	Algorithmic transparency	Can users partially understand why certain content or stimuli appear?
	Active choice	Does the experience preserve meaningful opportunities for users to choose whether and how to continue?
	Meaningful customization	Can users modify elements that shape their attentional experience?
	Reversibility and exit	Can users undo, pause, or leave easily?
	Non engagement	What happens when the user pauses, hesitates, or chooses not to continue?

Social Ecology	Relational quality	Does the product prioritize meaningful relationships over visible activity metrics?
	Social comparison	Does the experience avoid encouraging compulsive comparison?
	Respect for shared presence	Does the product avoid interfering with in person interactions?
	Openness toward offline life	Does the experience support continuity beyond the device?
	Sustainable social rhythms	Does the product avoid imposing permanent availability?

Layer 3: Attentional States

Having examined the conditions above, the final question is what they actually produce.

Dimension	Principle	Audit Question
Attentional States	Calm	Does the experience allow users to remain in a low pressure state of open awareness?
	Engagement	Does the experience support intentional and focused involvement without compulsive escalation?
	Flow	Does the experience support deep, sustained involvement without exploiting post flow vulnerability?
	Introspective	Does the product protect contemplative or reflective states from interruption?
	Overwhelmed	Does the experience create a level of sensory, cognitive, or temporal intensity that exceeds the user's available capacity to process and respond?
	Captured	Does the experience avoid mechanisms designed to indefinitely retain attention?

A Closing Question

After completing the audit, ask:

**What attentional conditions does this product create, reinforce, or make difficult?
Which of these are worth preserving, and which are worth redesigning?**