The drinking fountain button is tragically misunderstood

Buttons feel magical. You press *here*, and invisible connections make something happen *elsewhere*. But “magical” is probably *not* how I’d describe most public drinking fountains.

a:hover]:shadow-highlight-franklin dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-highlight-franklin [&>a]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-white”>Button of the Month In today’s digital age, it sometimes feels like hardware has taken a back seat to the software that drives our devices. Button of the Month is a column that explores the physical pieces of our phones, tablets, controllers, and beyond.

Who among us hasn’t walked up to a drinking fountain, expecting a bubbling stream of life-giving water, only to experience the crushing disappointment of a measly trickle after smashing in that button?

But I’m beginning to think it’s not the drinking button’s fault; they’re actually some of the most elegant buttons out there. They’re one of the few remaining buttons where your push directly and mechanically controls the result. They’re over a hundred years old. And all the action happens within an inch of the button itself.

a:hover]:text-black [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>You push button 16, which unseals tiny spigot 22 that normally blocks water coming from inlet 30. It shoots around the bends and out through 34. When you release, 38 is the return spring that pushes the button

back out.

a:hover]:text-black [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>“Sanitary fountains” were popularized in the early 1900s to prevent the spread of disease; earlier types had a “common cup” everyone would share. Modifications came fast after scientists found vertical streams and a spout that fits inside one’s mouth weren’t best for public health, either.
a:hover]:text-black [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>Exploded view of a Haws drinking fountain button — including the spring-equipped cartridge valve and the snap ring that holds the outer button on.
They’re harder to vandalize, too, with no lever to break off and a silver (or copper) disc cover that just spins in place if you try to twist it. Yet they’re still easily repairable: Haws patented a version in 2006 that lets a repairperson easily remove the button and access the cartridge with a single special wrench.

But ironically, it’s a *lack* of even that basic maintenance that turns bubblers into dribblers, Haws technical product manager Josh Linn tells me. Many just need their strainer cleaned out or their height screw adjusted, he says. One of the company’s owners used to carry a little screwdriver around everywhere they went to fix dribbling fountains — if you want to try it yourself, Epker says a 1/8-inch flat-blade screwdriver is the largest that will fit.

Not that you should need to in the US, where a shitty public drinking fountain experience is technically against the law! The Americans with Disabilities Act requires them to shoot a stream of water at least four inches high. Also, controls “shall not require tight grasping, pinching, or twisting of

the wrist," and a fountain can't take more than five pounds of force from a single hand to operate.

So, before you blame that button, maybe let your local parks department know it needs fixed?