

## ***Postponed*: a site-specific installation concerning man and nature**

Nagehan Kuralı, Özlem Sulak and Selin Özçelik  
University of Arts, Bremen, Germany

In this paper, we examine the contrast and correspondence of analogue and digital ways of interaction to the specific context and environment of our artwork *Postponed*. Moreover, we'll look at the effects of analogue ways of interaction on the user during the interaction, as well as on what the conceptual motivation behind our preference of using analogue interaction methods.

Interfaces, either digital input devices or analogue daily life tools, are usually the link between a user and the system during the experience of an interactive artwork. Within the realm of interactivity, the subject of an artwork is beyond being merely a spectator. In interactive artworks, a user does not only operate a tool to change the conditions within an environment, but also creates the artwork. The user becomes fully immersed into the spatial setting with his/her body. This embodied setting of interactive art presupposes close proximity on the physical and mental levels of interaction during the experience. The designer of an interactive system is not certain of the semantic level of human-computer interaction, because he/she cannot be sure whether mental representations of the machine correspond with the sign processes of the subject in action. In other words, every user might have a different understanding of how to use the input device - often differing from the expectations of the interactive system. In Maturana's terms, living systems are autopoietic machines that do not possess input and output channels (Maturana and Varela 1980: 81). Therefore the specific way that a user interacts with an interactive system may not correspond to the determined structure the system is designed with.



In the context of interfaces and their relation to a user, *Postponed* was a site-specific interactive artwork. The user was provided with analogue tools, and expected to alter a digital image. Participants were asked to mark their preferred death dates on a calendar with a pencil. A projection of a computer-generated representation of a tree onto a real tree in the garden changed correspondingly. During a classical music concert in a glass-canopied garden, *Postponed* was exhibited for approximately three hours. This garden is a specific space in which nature defends its individuation by adapting to the 'unnatural' setting that man prepared for it. Nature in this 'artificial' garden changes with an approximate delay of two weeks. When the leaves outside the garden have already fallen off the trees, the leaves inside are still strong and yellow. The garden is depicting a dialectical relationship between man and nature. This relationship was the main topic of our artwork, our disagreement with it, thus, our starting point. We believe that the essence of the relation between man and nature is such that both preserve their singularities in a mutual respect, rather than merely having a relation such as subject and object. Their relation is not on a causal level, where one is effecting and the other is affected, but more on a processual level. Their affection to each other supports their correlation, rather than differentiating them. In this context, with *Postponed* we attempted to entangle nature and man by capturing them within a constructed space and time. Our installation aimed to immerse the user in a thinking process with an analogue way of interaction via physically, hidden input detection. Niklas Luhmann's theory supports this attempt: he states that a system's structures and processes can only be understood through its relation to the specific environment it is implemented in (Luhmann 1997: 814).

During the exhibition, a pencil and a calendar were placed on a wooden table. A cherry tree was three meters away. Between both, a small pond was situated. The tree was covered with a semi-transparent screen, just as the garden is covered by the glass of the building. Participants of the interactive installation were asked to mark their preferred death dates on the paper calendar, which displayed each month on a different page. The participants were not directed in their preference of marking the date, they were merely asked to interact by means of two traditional analogue tools - pencil and paper. In the installation, the projection displayed a tree in the different stages of a year's cycle - projected on the semi-transparent screen covering the front side of the cherry tree. When a user marked a date in the calendar, the projection of the computer-generated tree was rewound or forwarded to match the specific date, and the computer-generated tree started living its year's cycle from then on. No digital sensor was attached to the pencil that the user was holding. Instead, the interaction was enabled by fiducial detection. Twelve fiducial symbols were attached to each of the calendar's pages. As the participants turned the pages, a computer hidden under the wooden table detected these symbols.



By offering traditional analogue tools, such as pencil and paper, we obscured the link between the input and the result in the interaction. The participants could not comprehend the link between the analogue device and the output screening of the image. Several users expected a digital sensor attached somewhere to the input devices. Users examined our system by checking whether a digital sensor was attached to the pencil's tip, or by applying pressure to the paper in search of a hidden sensor. For the user mental representations of the interactive systems are always subjective and therefore unpredictable. Halbach states that:

When it is a matter of interfaces of human-machine interaction, then (a) input and output channels cannot be adjusted to each other, since they are precisely what a human being, as an autopoietic system, does not possess, and (b) is it not possible to speak of a translation of the coding method, since

the subsymbolic representation forms of the human nerves have not (yet) been decrypted. (Halbach 1994: 166)

Concerning our conceptual motivation, the participatory nature and the style of interactivity had an essential significance for the user to empathize with a constructed year cycle, while defining his/her own disappearance from nature by marking his/her preferred death date. We intended that the user should spend time with the tree dwelling upon his/her own end of time, while observing the tree living its year's cycle. For users, who did not expect an interactive relation between the calendar and the projection, the time period between the physical level of interaction and the mental level became a learning process. While marking their preferred death date, they observed that it was not their direct input to the system that changed the projection. This learning process during the interaction resulted in another level of mental awareness, and they started examining the analogue devices by trying out different styles of marking on the paper after experiencing a change in the visuals. From a semiotic perspective, the meaning was not purely based on a sign (i.e. marking) but rather on the sign usage. The user constructed the meaning, not through a specific orientation by the system, but through what the conceptual background of the project expected from the user. Participants simply marked their death dates and reflected upon their own life cycles, while they observed a piece of captured nature going through its year's cycle.

The starting point of the project was the conflict, which we observed between man and nature in the garden covered by the glass building. The form of the building obscured the limits of the garden by, on one hand, capturing it inside a closed space, and on the other hand, revealing it back to the surrounding nature through its transparency. In such a setting, our interactive system provided analogue input devices that referred to the nature. The user was put into a situation where he/she can experience his/her own intersubjectivity by reflecting upon his/her death date and indirectly interacting, and, from the beginning, without being aware of the interaction.

## References

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