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'TIME' FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING AND MORE FUN

About MYSELF:

Since 1983 I am involved in the new media, first as a designer and presently as a consultant in the field of multimedia (CD-media, internet and the like).
I have been working in this area since the early 1990's and have developed numerous interactive products since: CD-i, CD-ROM and networked interactivity including the development of an interactive 'service' surrounding. Here people can obtain special services and products that are tailormade for interactive situations: e.g. you can buy products but there is a lot of personal service around it as a result of databases where personal favours and habits are tracked, stored and used to create new services.
I am of the opinion that several new services will 'sprout' in this area in the years to come.

about TECHNOLOGY DRIVEN USER INTER-FACES:

Since the early days of computers, the same pattern repeats itself: an user-interface is designed around a technology-driven concept rather than a human perception-driven concept.
Off course a lot has changed in a positive way, we see the development of 3D intuitive user interfaces that are constructed around our -evolutionairy and culturally grown- ability to deal with our spatial surrounding.
But still people find it more important to talk about bits and bites than about a friendly and understandable, dynamic interface.

Basicly I think we are still in a rather prehistorical situation. Given the situation that both hard- and software and their capabilities grow with tremendous speed, there is still little interest and effort in the development of 'natural' user interfaces.

about TIME:

The element that I consider one of the underdog of user-interface is 'Time'.
Time is a strange phenomenon. It creeps on and on but subconciously we are quite aware of time. A lot of people wake up just before the alarmclock rings. Another example is that we have build-in clocks that can tell us roughly what time of the day it is. Our biological clock can be a big help but it can also be an obstacle (e.g. when having a jet lag).
Time is one of those strange things that has shaped our lifes and is therefore our own natural 'User interface'. Time is not allways reliable. One minute in a dentist's chair can be awfully long and is in perception the complete opposite to the pleasure of listening to a live concert of your favorite band for that same minute.

Time is an instrument that shapes our life. We are connected to it and we play with it.

In general it is a natural instrument that came out of evolution and it is still ruling much of our behaviour. It is an instrument that can be used for navigation and knowledge. In interactive productions 'time' is seldom used to create user-interfaces with different storylines

theses of TIME

- Time can be used to create a special sense and knowledge and is therefore an user-interface tool.

- With the use of this tool in a proper way, you are able to avoid things that are not clear, not hierarchical and boring. Beside of that you can create a special atmosphere and knowledge.

definitions

There are different forms of 'Time'.

Time in the real world   > big circle (years, seasons, time
of the year)

Time in the real world   > small circle (Time of the day,
Tides etc.)

Time in the relative world   > This means that time can trig-
ger events.
as a direct result of.

- what you do
- what you don't
- how many times you do it
- with what interval?

In fact a lot of computergames use the relative time to create tension and dynamics
Last but not least there is 'non-time' > random generated events.
Since a couple of years I work on ideas and concepts that involve time in a dynamic way. Here are some examples:

EXAMPLES

1 the HomeShopping CD-i for Albert Heijn 1994

In a pilot project for Albert Heijn a CD-i was designed and combined with a modem. You can order aprx. 2000 articles in a shopping mall. There is information about recipies, about food, about detergents etc.

The CD-i is specially designed for people who have no time to do their shopping and therefore have the possibility to shop in their own homes. To create a dynamic interface I designed a main menu that was a result of the time of the day (which is off course connected to the internal clock of the player).
During the day you would have a bright background with dynamic music At 8 PM the scenery changed into a more shallow background combined with easy listening music.

2 'The national institute for the deaf' in St Michielsgestel 1995

In 1995 I was involved in a project to create a learning tool in order to read sign-language. The purpose was to design a surrounding where deaf and hearing people intuitively could learn sign language.
We developed a concept named: The European Island.
This was an isle, roughly the shape of Europe, but a lot smaller. On this island a mansion was situated in the middle The mansion was inhabited by various people, or better, agents. They had various backgrounds and characters. Both in the

user-interface as in 'things to happen' the concept of Time was involved. When you set foot on the Island, Time related events happened. First there were always signs of what time of the year it was and what time of the day If you entered the kitchen in the mansion around 'dinnertime' there were cooking activities During 'summer' it might happen that one of the inhabitants of the mansion -an elderly woman- suddenly would invite you to look at the special flowers growing in the garden. By doing so she interrupted the learning process you were experiencing. But you could say 'no' and could continue with what you were doing All these time related events had learning elements in it to teach people the sign language. The basic idea behind it was to create a dynamic, and non-predictable surrounding where people could learn and have fun at the same time Due to european fundraising activities this project is momentarily on hold.

3 A CD-media product called 'BIG and SMALL' 1996

This is a world full of optical illusions where people and especially children can learn about the relativity of our perception. It is a real time 3D world completely devoted to time In this world a changing city built of wooden toy blocks is the stage for strange puzzles that change during time. The city itself is a magic stage that changes due to the real time and the relative time. We created a short demo for the MILIA 1996 and at this very moment we are working on a new demo for the Buchmesse in Frankfurt. The demo I show you now is a short trip around one of the houses in the city It ends in the 'big and small' museum where nothing is as it seems. The end product will be a CD-ROM where people can wander through ever changing cities, playing games that will never be the same.

CONCLUSIONS AND RESUME

- We see a general development in user-interfaces that are more situated around our own system of perception. One example is the development of 3D surroundings through which we can navigate.
Another example might be a more sophisticated use of Time as a navigation and knowledge tool.
This is not so strange since we feel very good in natural user-interfaces (due to a combination of evolution and learning processes throughout our life).

- The understanding of complex interactive structures can be easier when you make intelligent use of 'time' as a tool It is my opinion that it is good to work with this universal and natural 'language' that everybody understands.
The technical infrastructure is less and less a problem for this development.

thank you for your attention

Léon Wennekes