

Losing Control: Looking Beyond the Surface of the Aesthetic Interface

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This paper makes a critical analysis of the characteristics and priorities of the “Aesthetic Interface” (AI) (Manovich, 2006), distinguishing them where necessary from those of the conventional Graphic User Interface (GUI). Rather than simply cosmetic, it is argued that the highly stylised, overt nature of the AI represents acceptance and exploitation of the mediatory role of the interface. It is proposed that the AI often avoids standard interface design conventions in order to disrupt expectations of efficiency and instead elicit a state of “mindfulness” in users. Play is identified as a vital device in this quest for user attention. In conclusion, creative requirements are considered and paralleled with those of established media already expert with emotive, experiential devices.

The communication capacity of the Graphic User Interface (GUI) has conventionally been understood semiotically with the interface being “read” by the user in order to comprehend the mental models of the underlying system. Apple’s desktop interface with its files and folders metaphor clearly illustrates the capacity of the GUI to provide insightful representations of abstract functionality and data. Acknowledging the virtual nature of the GUI, semiotic morphism (Goguen, 2000) highlights its ability to instantly change its “skin” and present new semiotic translations. Using a familiar GUI skin however can improve user recognition, and translations can be aesthetically rather than functionally oriented. While this describes a form of GUI aestheticisation the significance and distinction of the AI is that it involves the aesthetisation of interaction rather than merely a surface styling. The AI’s combination of animation, sound and input must be experienced over time rather than read in a static sense.

The iPhone interface exemplifies the AI’s experiential form. Screens arrive and depart rather than simply appear, with the sliding, zooming, revolving transitions creating an impression of a vast volume of space stretching well beyond the phone’s physical dimensions. Users press, tap, stroke, push and pinch. These gestural controls combine with the highly responsive cinematic

visuals to create a synesthetic relationship between the user and the graphic elements. Interaction is no longer a means to an end but an end in itself, a destination where users choose to dwell and play.

Play is a vital component of the iPhone experience and the AI generally. The nature of the play supported is incidental or ambient, but it does ask the user to “devote significant emotional, perceptual and cognitive resources to the very act of operating a device” (Manovich, 2006). Far from trivial or childish, Csíkszentmihályi’s Flow theory (1997) describes the Zen like state that a person enters when engaged in a suitably challenging level of play. The complexity of our electronic devices, in particular the PC, requires longer and more demanding user interactions in order to deliver their benefits and play becomes an important means of making these interactions less onerous, perhaps even enjoyable. Apple’s Time Machine re-imagines the dull task of file backup as a portal where users can travel through time to retrieve lost data. Restoring files is typically associated with high degrees of stress as one worries about the loss of irreplaceable resources, but Time Machine’s visualisation of floating back through your computing past makes the restoration process enjoyably nostalgic.

Reeves and Nass’ “Media Equation” claims that human-computer interactions are governed by the same social conventions as human-human interactions. Therefore, a functional efficiency that is tolerated in a work environment may be confronting or insulting in a relaxed social setting such as the home. A device such as the iPhone is not a puzzle to be solved or a mission to be accomplished but an object to be related to, and its playful interaction tells us that it is friendly and fun. Brands have long used aesthetic interaction as a character in their online promotions. Where the “how” is as important as the “what”, playful interaction can be a powerful marketing tool as hundreds of websites featured at fwa.com demonstrate. Millions of fwa visitors flock to the sites it lists to experience their novel presentations and interaction despite the content, which in many cases is the same commercial propaganda that users attempt

to avoid in traditional media representations. Seeing brands enlist the interface for marketing is unsurprising and consistent with their traditional media strategies. More importantly, using the interface to attract and persuade, challenges the supposedly altruistic human-centred aims of conventional GUI design which sees the interface as a medium of instruction and control rather than entertainment.

Standardised design conventions have been advocated in order to improve user recognition and reduce cognitive load as per Krug's usability text "Don't Make Me Think!" (2000). The AI's use of unconventional, novel presentation and input is at odds with these aims of transparency. Niedderer's concept of the "performative object" (2006) is more useful in understanding the benefits of the AI's playful experiential theatrics. In simple terms a performative object is designed to disrupt user expectations in order to break through preconceptions and incite *mindfulness*. Dunne refers to the poetic which, like mindfulness, aims to elicit awareness: "By poeticizing the distance between people and electronic objects, sensitive scepticism might be encouraged, rather than unthinking assimilation of the values and conceptual models embedded in electronic objects" (2005). The overt theatricalisation of the AI could be construed as a performative or poetic device intended to incite mindfulness, however the examples described by Manovich (2006) do not elicit the "sensitive scepticism" of which Dunne speaks, and instead their user affirmation is very much in the service of consumption. hi-res' promotional websites for movies such as "Requiem For A Dream" (2000) and "Donnie Darko" (2001) demonstrate something closer to Dunne's poetics, with each site featuring cryptic interfaces that intentionally disorient and test the user. While sometimes disturbing and frustrating, these challenging experiences are an apt promotion for their equally challenging parent movies.

The AI user accepts loss of control in favour of aesthetic experience, but for the interface designer the AI introduces new responsibilities: to attract, engage and

entertain. The success of a mainstream AI such as Apple's OS X has seen it widely imitated, diluting its novelty and aesthetic effectiveness. In performative terms, ubiquity reduces the ability to disrupt expectations. As innovative interface devices succeed they are popularised and normalised, requiring designers to invent new and novel ways to break expectations and regain attention. Thus the AI demands that GUI designers grapple with notions of perception as well as cognition, emotion as well as instruction, and fashionability as well as functionality. Like producers in cinema and theatre, the AI designer can be understood to interpret a source "text", which in the case of the GUI is a set of generic functions and data. And as with cinema or film, the AI designer must demonstrate ingenuity in their metaphorical representation of the source.

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