9.4 development(s) – dialectic(s) of awareness

There is an overload of information. Usually we don't pay much attention to this. Increasingly, we rely on search (engines) to find the information, when needed. But often our search is a bit disappointing, simply because there are too many results. If only there was more focus in search.

To assist you in proving focussed search, using google, that limits search to your site, look at the following fragement of code.

google(s)

```
<form action="http://www.google.com/search?" method="GET">
<input name="q" value="+site:www.cs.vu.nl/~eliens/media ">
<input type="text" name="q" size=40>
<input type="submit" value=" ">
</form>
```

Adapt the url, and put it in your web page, and, voila, your site is search-enabled.

On a deeper level, we may wonder why we are so impatient, in a hurry to search for information, and often not taking the time to properly digest it. In NewPanorama we wrote: *In the course of our field study for the* PANORAMA *system, we tried to establish what relation users would have to the system, not only in the way they interact with it, but also in terms of what role the system plays in their lives, and when and how they would be aware of the systema.* Due to the intrinsic properties of the *PANORAMA* system, as a system meant to support social awareness in a work environment, we could not assume direct focussed attention. Instead, we must take the various forms of awareness or attention into account.

Our thoughts in this direction were triggered by a lecture of Linda Stone (former vice-president of Microsoft) at the Crossmedia Week[1] September 2006 in Amsterdam, entitled *Attention – the Real Aphrodisiac.* In that lecture Linda Stone made a distinction between applications popular before 1985, applications which were in general meant for self-improvement, for example language-learning, applications that were popular between 1985 and 2005, applications that she characterized as supporting *continuous partial awareness*, such as email and news-feeds, and applications of the period thereafter, from now into the future, which may be characterized as applications that allow the user to be creative, take part in a community, and are in other words more focussed and less dependent on the external environment.

Admittedly, it takes a few more steps to formulate a theory of the *dialectics of awareness.* However, with the function of the *PANORAMA* system in mind, we may make, following Reproduction, some interesting distinctions between the experience of art and architecture. Where art is usually experienced in a delimited time span, and is similarly delimited in space, that is the position of the observer, architecture is everywhere and always there. As a consequence, art receives focussed attention and may be appreciated with reflective distance,

[1] www.picnic06.org

whereas architecture is often not perceived consciously, but merely present and subject to an almost sub-conscious sensibility, which is only brought to the focus of attention when it is either aesthetisized, for example when taking photographs, or when something surprising is sensed, for example in the change of skyline in New York.

As argued in Presence, many of the new interactive systems, whether in the category of *ambient media*, *ubiquitous computing* or *calm technology*, will fall somewhere inbetween the spectrum spanned by art and architecture, or more likely even alternate between the forms of awareness associated with respectively art and architecture.

In designing the new interactive systems and games, we need to be explicitly concerned with the actual phases of awareness that occur, simply because it is not clear what role these systems play in our life. When introducing a new system or artefact, we may distinguish between the following phases:

- *initiation* – appeal to curiosity
- *promotion* – raising interest
- *progression* – prolonged involvement

As designers we must ask ourselves the following questions. *How do we appeal to the users' curiosity, so that our system is noticed? How do we get a more sustained interest? How de we get the user to interact with or contribute to the system? And, how do we obtain prolonged involvement, and avoid boredom?* These questions are not simple to answer, and require also an understanding of the actual context in which the system is deployed as well as an understanding of the level of (aesthetic) literacy of the user(s).

Aesthetic awareness is common to us all, Aesthetics. Having an understanding of aesthetic awareness, can we isolate the relevant design parameters and formulate rules of composition that may help us in developing interactive applications? According to our philosophical credo, Creativity, no! However, the history of art clearly shows the impact of discoveries, such as the discovery of perspective, as well as conventions in the interpretation of art, as for example in the iconic representation of narrative context in 17th century Dutch painting. Moreover, the analysis of the visual culture of mass media may also give us better understanding of the implied meaning of compositional structures.

The notion of *perspective*, described in Perspective, is an interesting notion in itself, since it describes both the organisation of the image as well as the optimal point of view of the viewer. The normal perspective as we know it is the central perspective. However, there are variants of perspective that force the viewer in an abnormal point of view, as for example with anamorphisms.

Perspective had an enormous impact on (western) art and visual culture. It defines our notion of naturalist realism, and allowed for the development of the panorama as a mass medium of the 19th century, VirtualArt. Art that deviated from central perspective, such as cubism or art from other cultures, was often considered naive. Photography and its pre-cursors had a great impact on the perfection of perspectivist naturalism, and what is called *photorealism* became the touchstone of perfection for early computer graphics, Remediation.

Apart from perspective, other conventions regulate the composition of the 2D image, in particular, following Semiotics, the *information value* related to where an object is placed in the image, and the *salience* of the object, determined by its relative size, being foreground or background, and visual contrast. Also *framing* is used to emphasize meaning, as for example in the close-up in a movie shot. In analysing a large collection of image material, Semiotics, somewhat surprisingly found that *lef/right* positioning usually meant *given* versus *new*, *top/bottom* positioning *ideal* versus *real*, and *centre/margin* positioning *important* versus *marginal*. It is doubtful whether these meaning relationships hold in all cultures, but as a visual convention it is apparently well-rooted in western visual culture.