

Synopsis - Chat

Introduction

Throughout the Software Studies course I have gained an ability to approach software critically and analytically – evaluating it within its social, cultural, political and ethical context from a broadened holistic viewpoint – and in my paper I want to make use of this ability to make a focused enlightenment on the subject ‘chat’. I will attempt to conclude how this digital form of communication affects and compares to our natural face-to-face communication and how the creators, designers and owners of the various chat have a major influence on how we communicate.

Chat and natural face-to-face communication

I want to investigate how chat differentiate itself from natural face-to-face communication and especially investigate which drawbacks the chat communication form holds. To get a deeper and more articulated understanding of this I’m going to use an article published by Joanne Meredith & Elizabeth Stokoe in 2014, which tries to compare the Facebook chat with spoken interaction.

One of the big differences between the two forms of communication is the lack of human memory capacity compared to the computer’s ability to storage our input. The different chats simply let you go back to previous conversations, and because of this an interaction between humans can run over several days. To address this subject of memory I’m going to use a reference to Hui Kyong Chun’s article ‘The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory’ from 2008, to see if any of her ideas or conceptualization of computation memory or data storage can say anything about the chat compared to natural face-to-face communication. The ability to go back and see an interaction over again is closely related to the fact that the chat function is distorting time and space. You are able to be contacted by people all the time (as long as you are online of course) and if a person is unavailable this non-reachability most likely will lead to frustration. This tendency to always be online is definitely a major difference between face-to-face interaction, since you nearly always will be in reach of people and never be alone.

The chat owner’s responsibilities and power

Most chat-platforms and messaging applications are created and owned by companies, of which the most famous examples would be Facebook, Snapchat and Google. These companies don’t charge the users for permission to use their software, but keeps their business running on earnings

from advertisement using a huge net of data collections. The obvious way in which these companies affect their users is through this content of data-analytical advertisement, and because of the huge number of users this leads to an immense amount of commercial power. But another way – that might be a bit subtler – they affect their users is the one I want to focus on; the way in which the design and function of the chats affect and alter the daily lives of people.

The smileys has been created by users through the use of characters available on telephones or computers to draw an expression, for example: -_-', <3, o_o, :) and so on. This way of expression has turned into a library of smileys and emojis, that on most platforms has a kind of standardization, a certain emoji-library or an emotion/expression-library, which is used by a lot of chat software. To have a more in depth look of the influence of emojis and smileys I will investigate with an article by Katja Lohman, et. al., titled: 'The effect of smileys on receivers' emotions' from 2017. And another article from 2017 titled: 'Assessing personality using emoji: An exploratory study' by David Marengo, et. Al. Furthermore, I will look into how the notifications demands an answer from the chat software user and look at Benjamin Grosser's article: 'What Do Metrics Want? How Quantification Prescribes Social Interaction on Facebook' from 2004.

Lastly, I want to discuss how the different new approaches and updates within the chat software seems to be what I would call a 'naturalization of the chat environment'. By this I simply mean that chats are moving closer to the definition of the face-to-face interaction form, through the use of the emoji-library, the use of face-recognition-animations, the use of webcams during calls, the use of recorded messages and the use of images. All these alternatives compared to straightforward chat-messages that is only based on text, lets the user naturalize the message expressing emotion and body-language. This all seems to be a movement towards something great within the online communication area, but there is one thing we need to have in mind. Even though the naturalization allows more clear communication, the framework for it is still owned, controlled and designed by huge companies, who is behind the decisions that will form further naturalization of the chat communication form.

Possible Problem Settings

- In which ways does the chat communication form differentiate from spoken face-to-face interactions?

- What are the responsibilities and the power of the owners of the chat environment – when it comes to the design of it?
- How does the storage of messages affect our ways of perceiving and understanding communication?
- How does the use of emojis and smileys affect the chat environment?
- Which means of naturalization does the owners of the chat environments use?
- How does the design and functionality of the chat environment have an impact of our daily lives?

Further Investigation

As a result of my investigation into the subject 'chat' hasn't reaches enough depth yet, the possibilities for the subject haven't been defined and the fact that the core of the final paper still needs to be compressed and underlined for my own sake, I will need to investigate more deeply into the term chat and what is surrounding it. To broaden the content of my paper I will need to investigate and close-read more articles about the idea of memory, storage of data and the ability to go back into past conversations. One subject which I will look into, but I'm not sure that I will use is the question whether the growing use of chats has lead us to isolate ourselves from the close community, while letting us keep closer to distant friends and family. Furthermore, one possibility is to investigate how the next step of the naturalization of the chat environments would look like. Is it a chatroom which uses virtual reality as its base for communication and naturalization? Is it a hologram-based chat?

Possible References

- Benjamin Grosser. What Do Metrics Want? How Quantification Prescribes Social Interaction on Facebook, in Computational Culture no. 4. (2004).
- Oren Soffer. The Oral Paradigm and Snapchat. (2016).
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- Katja Lohman, et. Al. The effect of smileys on receivers' emotions. (2017).
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- Hui Kyong Chun. The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory. (2008).
- Taina Bucher. Objects of Intense Feeling: The Case of the Twitter API. (2013).