

Piet Zwart media design students 2008

Jaromil's Journal of Musings

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In the last trimester of 2008 I've been active as a tutor for students of both first and second year of the Media Design MA at the Piet Zwart institute in Rotterdam. It has been the occasion to develop a course for design students keen to engage the geeky world of GNU/Linux :) and the social and architectural visions it can inspire. The course (96h) is titled "The Art, Theory & Techniques of Free Software¹" and at its current implementation at PZ it posed the goals of writing a 4000 words essay in english plus the realisation of a net-art project.

Earlier this year, reconfirmed for 2009, I've held a reduced version of this course (24h) for the "Digital Environmental Design" MA program at the Nuova Accademia delle Belle Arti in Milano, Italy, invited by its director Paolo Atzori.

The engaging curricular scheme planned by course director Florian Cramer has inspired us to spend one third of the course exploring various topics, spanning from the variety of the programming languages to the design of digital public space, object oriented architectures and the importance that privacy and horizontal access to media have for democracy.

Thanks to the contribution of other colleagues Michael, Calum Selkirk and the media theory lectures held by Florian himself, i believe this class represents a memorable experience for the students, improving their technical as well critical skills in dealing with on-line media.

During the second third of this course the students have been encouraged to focus on a more specific topic and develop it in the two aforementioned forms, to challenge their theoretical as well practical skills.

At the beginning of the last third of this course an overwhelming media attention has been dedicated to the student project Pirates of the Amazon², which might justify the curiosity of the reader until here. I find it appropriate now to give a panoramic on some other productions that have been presented at the end of the course and which have well elaborated on the concepts we have discussed.

The End of Google

Thematic project by Dennis de Bel

This project elaborates an explicit parody on the authority of Google Search ranking algorithm offering the possibility to revert its calculation, placing the least valued links in the first place on top of its results.

After years of success servicing heuristic information to worldwide Internet users, the omnipresence of Google for our web searches is scary to some and even scholarly questioned. What in reality looks like a neutral evaluation and attribution of popularity might just be relative to a point of view: the spectre of a subjective evaluation becomes a worrying doubt for those who consider it a totalitarian monopoly on information.

While it still serves well our purposes, setting an higher standard for our web navigation and a growing number of Internet based services, Google's hegemony of sense is turned upside down by a simple web-scraping algorithm built in a web browser extension, distributing its "reverse computation" to the clients.

This project, and other projects as Google Random?, suggest that the democratic spirit of Google's policies and its "we do no evil" motto could lead to open its final and most obscure secret, the search rating algorithm, opening it as in the case of its other public services. By offering a "Google Search API"

¹pz_mdma_2008.html

²<http://pirates-of-the-amazon.com>

for its users to customise search results and match the variety of possible evaluations, Google can reply threatening criticisms with a fresh addition to its user interface, democratically empowering humans to interact with the majestic power of its machine brain, for the noble sake of relativity of views.

Yes To All

Thematic project by Selena Savic

YES TO ALL offers an humorous commentary on the condescending habit of contemporary netizens to click-sign contracts on websites.

Complementary to Linda Hilfling's recent artist in residence project "Gate Peepin" realised this year at NIMK³, the project focuses on common web-forms that captivate semi-conscious agreements of web visitors to all kinds of pretentiously official contracts: a browser extension is then provided to turn all these input forms into a uniform and repetitive "yes to all", emphasising the numb attitude most people assumes when confronted with web 2.0 licenses, input dialogs and signature widgets that are ultimately holding users responsible for such semi-automated choices.

Yes to All is a sharp and sarcastic representation of the contemporary state of web-interaction, suggesting that in a plausible future we might regret having said YES so often that we cannot even recall anymore in which occasion and what for.

Designing Controlled Spaces

Essay by Selena Savic

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³<http://www.nimk.nl/en>