

Changing the behaviour

(Lecture at 4th International Browserday, NYC)

Three years ago I stood at the Paradiso hall in Amsterdam, it was at the first International Browserday, in 1998. I had completely memorized my three-minute explanation and was dead nervous. Despite that, the presentation went well – very well, as I ended up with the first international “browseraward”.

Most clear in my memories of that presentation is that I wanted to say too much in the three minutes, and although I spoke extremely fast I never completed my full story about the concept I showed there, which I simply titled “Browser”. However, today I am here because of that presentation, and they actually gave me some more time...

One of the other reasons I refer to that browser is that the issues I chose to deal with in that design, which I then tried to squeeze into a three-minute presentation are still very present in my recent works.

>>visual: browser screen

The first thing you’d notice when looking at the browser was the complete lack of interface elements: no buttons, no nothing. I designed all the functions needed into intelligent contextual menus. On the first screen I even went a step further: there I created an on/off switch, which could turn the browser off right away. I stated that the browser then would only take you to the specified location, and completely clear the screen for the content. The browser then wouldn’t be a navigation standard and thus a format to which all content had to comply. It would rather be only a medium.

I think the desktop became such a format as well. Hardly anybody questions the desktop standards anymore, and that’s a pity. Why? Because the desktop might not be the best metaphor to control our computers.

Let’s take a closer look at the common computer desktop. In a general simplistic overview it went like this: Before the desktop we communicated with our systems through written commands. As this wasn’t accessible for most of us, luckily the graphical user interface came to life. In the so-called GUI we got quite far. It allowed us to do a complex task as for example printing a document; by just dragging the onscreen representation of that document (its icon) onto the icon of the printer, and the document would roll out of the printer. This made it possible for most of us to work with this complex device named computer. Lately the big software developers are releasing the new future operating systems, which supposedly take that desktop further.

However, I see the desktop – or better: the computer – as a world. But the desktop metaphor doesn’t allow us to use it as a world. It mainly serves as an organizer. Plus this whole interface is based on a very simple principle, namely “point and click”, which brings us back to basic communication, and that while we already have a natural language with an extended vocabulary.

So the problem I personally have with the current systems lies not in the appearance. No matter how beautiful the graphics animate onscreen, the fact that the computer with its operating system in too many cases is not more than a “helper application” is more disturbing. By this I mean that there’s still many functions hidden in this device, which we don’t “discover” and are able to use. And that’s because we keep on using interfaces that are heavily connected to our conventional world, such as the desktop metaphor. When new possibilities come to life – like the internet grew out of the existence of computers – those metaphors don’t fulfil anymore.

Getting people closer to the computer, by maintaining simplicity in the interfaces and furthermore fill them with appealing graphics, is no bad thing. But I’m convinced that those people would want more, if only they were aware, and the desktop hadn’t become such a fixed system.

Despite these negative remarks, still within that system (and browsers) there are many things to discover as well. If you deconstruct these interfaces and elements, and only look at their behaviours, there's still a lot of space to "play". For this purpose I'm running a webserver myself called usemedia.com. As it is impossible to create new techniques or software without a team of hundreds of people, I decided to use all that is available now, or better put: abuse all.

For example, by changing just a few properties of an everyday item in the interfaces strange experiences can come to life. My method in this case can be compared to this: let's say you want to change a table. If you don't look at the object, but at the behaviour, and change that, so, what is a table and what is it used for? And what new thing can supply that? In this way you may (or may not...) create an interesting new object. If you would only modify (the design of) the original object and not its behaviour, the table would get no more than a new colour.

Consider the window:

What would happen if the window became a real window and would give a view on the content that is underneath? As I do work from concepts, but I'm not a theoretical person, often I only come to these kinds of questions after I've created a work that I don't understand myself anymore. In this case: I made such a window, using very simple dynamic html techniques. Let me show you what happens:

>>demo: [new.usemedia.com /airplane windows](http://new.usemedia.com/airplane%20windows)

Mainly a visual effect, but the experience of a window changes dramatically. You start realizing that we take those windows for granted and don't question them anymore.

A step further is this: I've created an interface that uses this twist in window properties.

>>demo: [new.usemedia.com /empire](http://new.usemedia.com/empire)

Again, no interface elements, only a transparent window. Moving to left and right lets you look beyond the edges of the image, and at certain 'hotspots' the window becomes a magnifying glass, that allows you to find details in the city

Something that often happens in my work is that I make things without a straightforward (concrete) purpose. To still create content for my interfaces I use images or video footage that intrigues me. As I used here images shot from the empire state building rooftop when I was in NY last year. In a way to translate my motivation to start building these experiments in the first place: the city that fascinates me in this work has the same elements as the operating system, where it is semi-transparent and I generated a way of breaking the surface and try to look beyond the first impression.

Why do I make such a thing? What could it be used for?

The first question I answered already by my motivation. The second question in this case is a matter of analysing afterwards. If you look at these windows technically, the property used to control all this is the window position. Keeping this in mind you could for example think of another way of using the window position in the current systems. I myself already imagined the next operating system with windows that react on my preferences, which would be adding a value to the position property, or simply put: windows I move to the left side of my desktop are more important for the moment, and as the system would "know" this, it would put these windows (or folders probably) more upfront in my "open file" dialogue.

The other half of my time I do have a concrete goal, as I work in real life assignments, where I find elements of my research appearing in the designs for clients. The other way around: the concrete and practical level of producing designs for clients that have a specific goal triggers the selection of

elements I find a reason for to change their behaviour.

Then sometimes the client itself is the object I mentioned earlier when I talked about the table example. From the fear of the client (for breaking existing standards) I'm able to come to a complete new design approach, by analysing and changing the client's behaviour.

Then, if I finally try to describe what I actually do, I see a reoccurring problem in my occupation. When I consider myself an interaction designer, a "funny" thing often happens in my line of work. There are times that I create interfaces, but I do not get to the actual "filling in" (with content) of those systems. One explanation I found would be this: That content actually does not exist yet. I am looking for systems where the content and its interface merge into one experience – compare it for example with the television, where no one ever thinks anymore of what this device is, or how it works.

>>demo: underwater briefly

This "interactive movie" – a format that still didn't find a true shape – is an example of an interface and content that merge together. The fact that this example is placed within the browser constrains here, is in this case totally irrelevant, and not more than a way for enabling me to share, show and let other people experience interacting with the "computer" in a different way than they have before, and also change their behaviour towards this device.

Joos Koppers, 2001

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