

Dynamics of Pleasure in Interface Design

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Abstract

Freud in the *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* insists that, in the theory of psycho-analysis...the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle. The atmosphere which surrounded by the highly computerized world, mental events mostly take part in front of the screen of computers, kiosks, cellular phones, smart products. What can be defined on the screen as a design problem is interface(s). Interface design, which has begun with textual elements and then graphical user interfaces (GUI), evaluated in terms of ergonomics, (ease of use), functionality, attractiveness. Apart from attractiveness, the emotional side of interface design has been generally neglected, in spite of the fact that emotions are the core driven forces in interfacial relation between the user and the product. Even focusing on the engineering approaches, i.e., ease of use is addressing the emotions; especially the pleasure. In order to speak on the pleasure with respect to emotions brings the object-subject, signified-signifier relation(s). Pleasure which is ignited by desire is opposed by the 'unpleasure'. Considering these terms, the dynamics of pleasure in the interface design is questioned in the context of the Operating Systems' interface design with the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis and semantics.

Keywords: Pleasure, Desire, Emotions, Operating system(s), psychoanalysis, semantics, interface, signified, signifier

Introduction

Since the invention of computers and evolution of graphical user interface (GUI), taking things at interface value has become a significant part of our daily lives. Particularly with the extension of the worldwide web (i.e. Internet), computers which begun their evolution as giant calculating machines, have formed today's "information" society. In this society, work and leisure activities are hard to differentiate because both require computer use and converge around the same interfaces. "Work" applications (i.e., word processors, spreadsheet programs, database programs, Cadcam programs) and "leisure" applications (i.e., computer games, Informational DVD) utilize the same GUI tools and metaphors (Manovich, 2001). In both contexts, screen is the only 'window' to the outside world. This window which carries the heritage of the frame from Renaissance paintings to print media and then to cinema becomes a cultural object, acting as a code that find ways in various media.

Computer interfaces have begun their evolution in the style of command line interaction (MS DOS environment) and developed into today's graphical and direct manipulated interaction style with the Apple Macintosh GUI in the early 1980s. The Apple GUI, based on the direct manipulation by the user on a metaphorical workspace, is designed according to the physical entity and behaviors of a conceptual model which is: Description of the proposed system in terms of a set of integrated ideas and concepts about what it should do, behave and look like, that will be understandable by the users in the intended manner (Rogers, Sharp, & Preece, 2002, 40).

The conceptual strength of modern GUI originates from both the form (graphics) and behavior (interaction). The *form* of the interface depends on the desktop metaphor whereas the *behavior* actualizes via keyboard and mouse operations. This paper will investigate the dynamics of pleasure in interface within the framework of form and behavior factors.

Form

Metaphors, Metonym: Oscillating tension of pleasure

The relationship between psychoanalysis and semiotics highly intertwines in terms of subjectivity (i.e., the study of signification or the study of the subject). Freud views the subject as a signifying complex (Silverman, 1983). Considering the relation between the subject and the computer interface (as an object), the subject experiences a speculative signifying network that enables people to talk about pleasure in terms of psychoanalysis. In topographical analysis of psychoanalysis, there is a notion of substitution and interchangeability through the unconscious and preconscious considering their psychic activities as primary and secondary processes. Primary process is the psychic activity of the unconscious substituting the repressed desire with *perceptual identity* which offers the same pleasure substitute in every situation. Secondary process, on the other hand, is related to the preconscious substituting the repressed desire with *thought identity* which offers different substitutes in accordance with every different situation.

'Unpleasure principle' later named as pleasure principle is defined as governing all psychic activity to decline tension (Ibid). In accordance with this definition, user can experience a tension while dealing with work and leisure activities. While work tasks form unpleasure, leisure tasks function to eliminate the tension. User relieves the tension of work tasks and fills

this repression with leisure tasks substitutes. Also, from a Freudian view, the fundamental substitute of the unconscious for the lack pleasure is the hallucination which is mostly what a daily Internet user experiences. The floating feature of Internet assists the user to switch between several windows at synchronous time intervals which is similar to unconscious behavior, dream. Hallucination is a virtual and visual substitute to a repressed desire. Taking the screen as one of the dominant extension of the information society, Internet window is, by its nature, acts as a 'daydream' to the gratification of the souls while a wish-fulfillment to the repressions. At the end, however, it is just a fake reality that the user stands alone when closing the window(s).

Metaphors

The tension created by the screen and its hallucinatory feature are triggering cues to form the path of signification. The signification on the screen is based upon the metaphor and metonymy concepts. Since these concepts exist cognitively, metaphor exploits conceptual similarity whereas metonymy conceptual contiguity (Ibid). User interface metaphors are constructed upon a compound of visuality like a picture representing the purpose or attributes of a thing. These vary from tiny images on toolbars to the whole screen in some programs-- "from a tiny scissors on a button indicating *Cut* to a full-size checkbook in Quicken"-- (Cooper, 2002, p.289). Metonymy, on the other hand, is based upon experience, which is actualized with the overlapping windows and sliding menus on the screen. Despite the divergent classification, both metaphor and metonymy depend tightly to one another in the psychic mechanism very similarly to primary and secondary processes.

As the signifying the real world elements (i.e, image, sound, text data) with virtual elements on the frame of a screen, desktop metaphor proceeds the presence-absence dialectic which oscillates between the pleasure and unpleasure. "Metaphor and metonymy in the computer interfaces can be seen as signifying formation which facilitate a movement back and forth--a 'transversality'- not only between the two elements which they (refers to what) are conjoined, but between the primary and secondary processes, the unconscious and the preconscious" (Silverman, 1983, p.110). This transversal manner feeds the intertwining character of computer interfaces that leads to desire which in its entirety based on displacement, and actually consists of metaphors and metonymies.

Death in Interface, (a)way leading to Nirvana



Figure 1

For Freud, pleasure represents the absence of unpleasure, that is, it is a state of relaxation much more intimately connected with death than life. In the intertwining reality of the interface, the tension of the pleasure with death cannot be easily relied upon the discourse. One thing that evokes death is the crushing machines and loss of data. Another is the delete, clear, escape, exit commands of the software(s) and operating system(s). Moreover, there exists operations which are impossible to do 'undo'. Despite the possibility of the loss of data and crushing systems, a reverting possibility on the screen always exists. In a delete acting of the files in the system, for example, there is a possibility of rescuing the death files by going to the trash can and restoring the deleted files. Similarly, in a crushing situation, resetting the machine can give the chance to user to continue to work on his/her stuff on the software again. The tension that makes the computer pleasurable (by means of death) is this notion of repetition and reverting fixations. One of the leading readers of the psychoanalysis, Lacan (1970) psychically believes that the driven force behind the death-life tension is repetition. In other words, he implies that pleasure turns to displeasure because repetition "refers to a preceding moment -to (before) the loss of pleasure (or consistency). Pleasure, however, as a fixation, a trace in memory, and gives body to a fantasy (Ragland, 1995, p.89)". The tendency to the fantasy on the screen is actualized via games, web surfing, and pornographic websites that eliminate all tension, thus leads the user reaching to Nirvana.

Behavior

Pointing, Click, Drag & Drop, key press

The user acts as a direct manipulator of the GUI compound of image and text throughout the actions held via input devices like keyboard and mouse. The user interacts with the computer by *pointing, click, drag & drop, and key press operations* to instructing, conversing,

manipulating, navigating, exploring, and browsing the interface. These basic operations functionally lead the user to further develop the usage(s) of the interface. Cooper & Reimann (2003, p.273) point out this furthering via a pyramid-based hierarchy in the interaction process by mouse and keyboard actions. (Figure 2). Regarding the argument of the paper, these actions between the user and the screen can be summarized as:

Point (Point)

Point, click, release (Click)

Point, click, drag, release (Click and Drag)

Point, click release, click, release (Double-click)

Point, click, click other button, release, release (Chord-click)

Point, click, release, click, drag, release (Double-drag)

From a psychoanalytical point of view, these basic actions give the cues of psychic mechanisms as drive & cathexis, fetishism and motion.

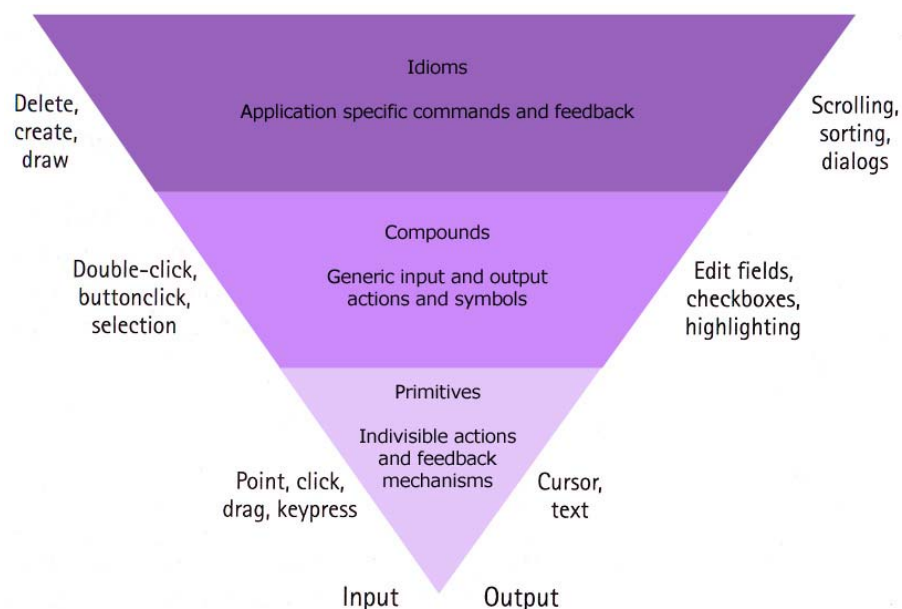


Figure 2, (Cooper,2003,p273)

Drive & Cathexis

The instinct to the point, click and other interfacial behaviors on the screen are generally rooted to the term intuition which means quick and ready insight (Cooper, year 2003). The insight that triggers the behavior of the subject in the interface depends on the drive & cathexis charges on the subject. According to Freud, “drive as a mental representative of a somatic impulse provides a psychic mediation and expression of a physiological phenomenon. Furthermore, it is the motivating source behind all psychic activity, from dreams to rational thought” (Silverman, 1983, p.67). Drive is also the igniting force from software interfaces to operating systems. Cathexis, the libidinal energy invested in some idea or a person or an object, depicts the process behind the click and key press actions. It is a kind of an investment that the user has to wait in order to reach to satisfaction.

Click Fetishism



Figure 3

Fetishism is a continuity of psychoanalytic substitute economy. In Freud’s view, “fetish is a ‘penis-substitute’ i.e., a surrogate penis in the little boy’s unconscious compensating for the woman’s (or the mother’s) penis which he once believed that his mother had and now does not want to give up” (McClintock, 1995, p.185). Pointing and clicking actions in this substitute economy become behavioral fetishes that compensate the sexual phallic drive. Related to the click fetishism, Everett (2003) brings a new perspective to this argument. Everett makes an analogy between human body/thought and computer hardware/software. An analogy between human body/thought and computer hardware/software operations results in “the click fetish, signifies the persistence of the body despite the powerful rhetoric of the post human in new media figurations. For click pleasure is predicated on an urge to retain the primacy of the body (or the flesh). The fetishizing of the clicking action, and click pleasure’s lure of sensory plenitude, inhere in the bodily tactility of the touch- touching the mouse, the keyboard, the touch pad, and screens and wireless keys.” (Everett, 2003, p.15)

Drag & Drop: Motion, *and* emotion

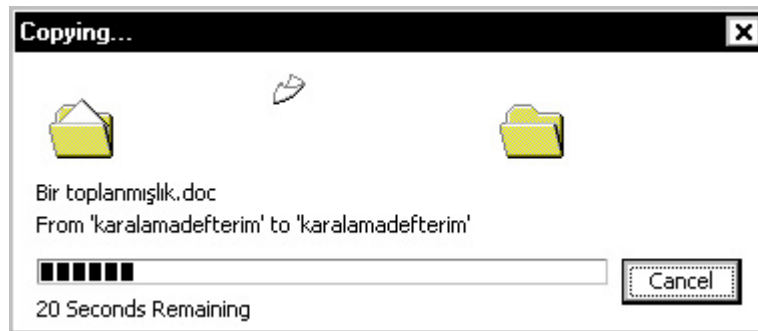


Figure 4

Drag-and-Drop (D&D) which is firstly used by Finder by Mac is one of the most efficient interaction operations. It covers all operations i.e., pointing, clicking, and moving. By description D&D is “clicking on some object and moving it to imply a transformation”(Cooperman, year). Motion is the distinctive property of the D&D in comparison to others. Motion is the relation between the stimulus (operations held by the user) and response (operations held by software-system). This relation between subject and object implies us the idea of motion, especially when emotion is expressed as an action. What is new in the position here is that emotion is fundamentally explicable as a motion between subject and object (Hillman, 1997). Hillman’s romantic approach to the motion analogically corresponds to D&D and other motion-based events on the screen. Motion apart from D&D in its nature ignites the affectivity of the user. Brian Stone’s study of ‘Type in Motion’ which investigated the motion in a different context pointed out the importance of motion in the emotional potential of the interfacial behavior. In his study, participants’ reaction to motion was investigated by showing still and moving images of a typographic animation at different intervals. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of this study concluded that motion evoked emotional responses in the participants. Motion on the screen is simulated with typographic motion. The participant shows no gestures when seeing the still image (figure 5), Whereas when she sees the moving types she reacts this with smiling which depicts an emotional awareness (figure 6). To conclude, motion can be regarded as one of the basic dynamics of pleasure which also gives cues about the future tendency of GUI design.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Conclusion

As one of the later figures of semiotics, *Barthes* in his challenging essay (1988), insists that “the object serves man to act upon the world, to modify the world, to be in the world in an active fashion; the object is a kind of mediator between action and man.” (1988, p.189) As a strong mediator between the ‘virtual’ action and man, taking the interface as an object in the framework of the semantics and psychoanalysis leads us to develop an extensible ‘reading’ towards the meaning of interface. Developing this argument based on pleasure as the most subjective psychic issue gives us a chance to speculate such a reading. Speculation, apart from its refreshing mental alertness, causes related people (i.e., designer, academic, and even programmer) to find new domains in designing the future computer interfaces in which the tendency is totally focusing on freak users. Computer interface, which is enforced to be customized, individualized more and more, will have evolved to rear window of the user, that reflects his/her identity. Then taking psychic side of the user into consideration in the design process of GUI will become a necessity. This factor will help us to develop emotionally perfect interface which will address the pleasure, as the peak point of any perfection.

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