

5.4 development(s) – inconvenient truth(s)

Since the 1970's, Dutch universities have enormously grown in size, due to the ever larger number of students that aim at having university level education. As departments become bigger, however, staff members no longer know each other personally. The impersonal and anonymous atmosphere is increasingly an issue of concern for the management, and various initiatives have been taken, including collective trips into nature, as well as cultural events, not to much avail for that matter. An additional problem is that more and more members of the staff come from different countries and cultures, often only with a temporal contract and residence permit. Yet, during their stay, they also have the desire to communicate and learn about the other staff members and their culture(s). As you can see, it is not only the climate or science itself that provides us with inconvenient truths. Life at the university, not only in Second Life, apparently suffers from the changing times.

In NewPanorama, we wrote: *in september 2006, the idea came up to use a large screen display in one of the public spaces in our department, to present, one way or another, the 'liveliness' of the work place, and to look for ways that staff members might communicate directly or indirectly with each other through this display.* Observing that communications often took place during casual encounters at the coffee machine or printer, we decided that monitoring the interactions at such places might give a clue about the *liveliness* of the work place. In addition, we noted that the door and one of the walls in the room where the coffee machine stood, was used by staff members to display personal items, such as birth announcement cards or sport trophies. In that same room, mostly during lunch time, staff members also gathered to play cards.

Taking these observations together, we decided to develop a system, nicknamed PANORAMA, to present these ongoing activities and interactions on a large display, which was to be positioned in the coffee room. The name of our system is derived from the famous Mesdag Panorama¹ in The Hague, which gives a view on (even in that time nostalgic rendering of) Scheveningen. However, it was explicitly not our intention to give an in any sense realistic/naturalistic rendering of the work place, but rather, inspired by artistic interpretations of *panoramic* applications as presented in VirtualArt, to find a more art-ful way of visualizing the social structure and dynamics of the work place.

¹www.panorama-mesdag.nl



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At this stage, about one year later, we have a running prototype (implemented in DirectX), for which we did perform a preliminary field study, see the figure above, as well as a first user evaluation, Panorama, and also we have experimented with a light-weight web-based variant, allowing access from the desktop, PanoramaWeb. Our primary focus, however, we stated in NewPanorama, was to establish the relation between interaction aesthetics and game play, for which PANORAMA served as a vehicle.

When we think of media as an extension of our senses, as we remarked in chapter 1 following DeepTime, we may reformulate the question of *interaction aesthetics* as the problem of clarifying the aesthetics of media rich interactive applications.

However, what do we mean exactly by the phrase *aesthetics*? The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy discusses under the heading of *aesthetics* topics such as

Aesthetics²

- intentions – motives of the artist
- expression – where form takes over
- representation – the relation of art to reality

As we wrote in Aesthetics, these topics obviously do not cover what we want, so we took a call for contributions to the *aesthetics of interaction* as a good chance to dust of our old books, and rekindle our interest in this long forgotten branch of philosophy, *aesthetics*.

It may come as a shock to realize how many perspectives apply to the notion of *aesthetics*. First of all, we may take an analytical approach, as we do in section 2, to see in what ways the phrase *aesthetics* is used, and derive its meaning from its usage in a variety of contexts. However, we find it more worthwhile to delve into the history of thought and clarify the meaning of *aesthetics* from an epistemological point of view, following Kritik, as an abstract a priori form of awareness, which is in later phenomenological thinking augmented with a notion of self-consciousness. See section 12.4. In this line of thinking we also encounter the distinction between aesthetic awareness and aesthetic judgement,

²www.iep.utm.edu/a/aestheti.htm

the dialectic relationship of which becomes evident in for example the occurrence of *aestheticism* in avant-garde art, Avantgarde.

When writing Aesthetics, we came along a report of how the Belgium curator Jan Hoet organized the Documenta IX, a famous yearly art event in Germany, and we were struck by the phrase *art and the public sharing accomodation*, Documenta, which in a way that we have yet to clarify expresses some of our intuition we have with respect to the role the new interactive systems may play in our lives.

What can we hope to achieve when taking a more philosophical look at *interaction aesthetics*? Not so much, at first sight. According to Fundamental, *aesthetic theory ... will not be able to provide aesthetic guidance even to the extent to which moral theory can give moral guidance*. The reason is that *aesthetic experience and creation defy conceptualization*, or in other words *they defy the identification, classification and evaluation of aesthetic objects by means of non-aesthetic attributes*. However, as Fundamental observes, in a paradoxical way *aesthetic experience not only defies but also invites conceptualization*, and therefore it seems worthwhile to gain a better understanding in what underlies the experience and creation of (aesthetic) interactive systems. If we can not change the world to become a better place, we might perhaps be concerned with making it a more beautiful place ...