Interaction as a figure of excess

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Abstract
This study reveals the need to go beyond the paradigm of “user-centred design”, towards “person-centred design”, since the first appears to be based on a simplified vision of the person, regarding the individual merely as a user. A performance-centred vision tends to forget that the interaction (that it is also always interaction of the feelings themselves and the senses) is a figure of excess: the excess of the incessant exchanges between the various worlds.

We argue that interaction appears as an intelligible confusion, whose intelligibility does not arise from a concept, but from the work of the integrated perception (where distinction acts as a trace) and whose confusion is not noise, but passage, resending, synesthesia, contact: invasion.

The excess signifies that the interaction has an invasive character that absorbs the differences leaving its trace (like a footprint in the sand). In this manner, it places us in an emotional/rational process, without removing distinguishability, even though distinctions themselves may not be conscious, but exist as if in a musical background where we unravel our actions guided by perception.

Interaction as a figure of excess

In a time when image is being replaced by interactive surfaces, in which time becomes real and space becomes virtual, technical interactive objects tend to take centre stage in the spectrum of utilization. Besides, the concept of utilization appears to recede faced with the dialogic involvement proposed by such objects.

The abundant number of studies dedicated to interface/interaction design created a new lexicon where “user” and “usability” are the most frequent and prominent words. But a more precise and more active understanding of interaction design implies a terminology update, starting by using the word ‘person’ where ‘user’ appeared previously.

To look at design more and more as interaction or experience design, it is imperative to study human activity within a framework of a relational environment, refusing the idea of evaluating isolated performances in isolated activities.

Wisdom in Design, from our viewpoint, can only be understood and found based on presumptions that clarify the way we perceive the world and how we act and create, guided by a well oriented perception through senses and feelings.
According to Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) ‘The Arts create one against another’. As the author observed, this phrase may have several meanings, according to the multiple ideas contained within the preposition ‘against’. In Portuguese, as in French or Spanish, it transmits also a sense of continuity, an idea amply defended by Kandinsky. In a sense, this idea can extend to interaction Design, to the extent that it is produced and applied ‘against’ and in ‘continuity’ with the senses involved in the process. The senses are used here according to the definition of James Gibson (1966), as systems of perception capable of learning. In turn, learning signifies a progressive syntony with the ‘world’.

In agreement with this, the world of our body and objects can be distinguished and simultaneously, systematically annul those distinctions, entering an integrated universe of perceptions. We will illustrate this idea using a typical present day situation: a person working at the computer, with music in the background.

Feeling is always feeling one’s feelings. Each one of us feels:
- identical to one’s self as a unit (I see, I hear music, I am seduced by this object);
- as a dispersed plurality (to touch the keyboard, to click on the mouse, to hear music);
- as the unified ‘system’ of these differences (I do not touch what I see, I do not hear what I touch).

Hence, it is exactly the integration of these differences, in a perception guided by a defined action that erases the consciousness of such differences.

The integrated differences can, then, be formulated: I-touch-the-keyboard-while-looking-at-my-text-and-hearing-music.

The external world comes from all the horizons to the interior of the body, eliminating the distinctions between: proprioceptive feelings (that supply above all information regarding one’s self and one’s feelings);
- the domains of exteroceptive perception (relating to information coming from the exterior);
- and action, understood as a component of perception.

There is, therefore, an abundance of contacts that interact, an excess where the world of others (bodies, natural, technical or technological objects) eliminates distinctions in benefit of a differential sensitive intensification that translates into tension and agitation, displacement, retargeting, that is, life.

We possess a sensitivity of everything to everything: of approaching proximity (continuity of colours, unfolding of ‘nuances’, proximity of the grain on surfaces with the lines), of distancing distances (separation between colour and sound, vision of the screen and touch on the keyboard), from the immediate world within eye’s reach, up to the whole sensed universe (Nancy 2000).

All this separation/sharing is always temporary and sporadic, since any state (hypothetical), in virtue of permanent interactions, becomes processual. Thus, beyond separation, what is truly marking is a type of synesthesic process where everything occurs:
- as if I touch what I see (my sense perception of what is happening on the screen becomes of a visual-tactile type);
- and what I see (as if touched) can have a musical character (my sense perception of what is happening on the screen becomes of a visual-tactile-auditory type).

It is in virtue of this double process in which the body feels itself as it feels and feels as it feels itself, in all modalities, by suppressing the singularity of sensing each sense, that the continued action of clicking the mouse and touching the keyboard, in front of the screen, can originate all types of emotions. Emotion can arise from this abundance of contacts, from the circulation of retargeting: from the excess that defines interaction, while
incessant circulation between seeing, doing, listening, being that it always marks the reflexivity or ego-reception of any action of a body: my body.

In this way, interaction appears as an intelligible confusion, whose intelligibility does not arise from a concept, but from the work of the integrated perception (where distinction acts as a trace) and whose confusion is not noise, but passage, resending, synesthesia, contact: invasion.

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Paul Valery had already asked: what is less human than the system of sensations resulting from a single sense? .

It is not by chance that the crossing, that even in myth had the meaning of archetypal happening and that cities were born from crossings that gave rise to other crossings. To exemplify what we mean by “synesthesic crossings” we will use two examples from Jean-Luc Nancy (2000): the intense red cries out, the grain of marble touches the eye with the hand.

The invasive character identified does not signify that at any moment it cannot absorb me, sporadically, by a graph on the screen and forgetting the musical background, or to single out listening to a musical aria that touches me more deeply. Since the figure of excess is also the flux of possibilities in continuous change.

We are, therefore, before a system of relations of proximity and temporary exclusions, of continuity and discontinuity, and interaction as a figure of excess lives in this ambivalence. The same ambivalence can be observed between the phenomenological (as it relates to experience) and technological spheres, since interaction requires state of the art technology. We refer to the new interactive objects that, according to Ezio Manzini (1993), do not contain in its shape the user's program. Frequently we find ourselves in a space of «virtual living». But if this space can trigger emotions, that is because interaction design allows the virtual to be lived as a simulation and belief that that it is real. That is, it operates by dissimulating the virtual, thus lived as if it was real. This is not new, if one thinks of cinema. Both the movie theatre space and the computer work space are spaces that Michel Foucault (1984) denominates ‘heterotopies’. They subvert relations with traditional spaces by space superimposition. I am sitting in a room where living the life that the screen transmits, while simultaneously my life unfolds and my world is maintained.

Thus design strengthens its role while design of interaction and tends to auto-transform into design of experience. From this one can deduce that, seeing this affirmation focused on artefact, design tends to expand from attributes to behaviour and, allows us, inclusively, to understand deviant behaviours (for example, dependence on the internet).

This study reveals, in our opinion, the need to go beyond the paradigm of “user-centered design”, towards “person-centered design”, since the first appears to be based on a simplified vision of the person, regarding the individual merely as a user. A performance centered vision tends to forget that the interaction (that it is also always interaction of the feelings themselves and the senses) is a figure of the excess: the excess of the incessant exchanges between the various worlds.

Obviously, for the most part we are mere users, as for example when we withdraw money from an ATM. All supposedly user-friendly messages are directed not only at me but at any other in my placer, i.e. they are directed at everyone and no one. They are what Marc Augé (1989) calls ‘non-places’, since besides not being relational or
historical identities, they cause distortions in communication. They are spaces of textual communication, informative, prescriptive or assertive, that dictate standard behaviour. As examples, we have motorway, airport and ATM signs and instructions.

The situation is different with design of interaction where the user functions as an active subject, incorporating, for example, the virtual in the real. While the difference between the two is maintained, it offers a multitude of experiences that can not be reduced to the experiential possibilities offered by the real. Here we will also find the figure of excess, where the excess of what is offered to me, relative to the offers of the real, turns the user into a person faced with a plurality of discoveries of herself.

While the sophistication of interaction technology appears to draw us away from childhood, we reencounter the discovery of play and playfulness. And when it appears to draw us away from humanity's childhood, we reencounter concepts like Giving, thematized by Marcel Mauss (1988), as that of participation thematized by Lévi-Brul (1996).

For example, when I write or receive an e-mail I comply with the three basic rules of primitive giving: to give, to accept and to repay. Someone sends me (gives) a message that I accept (sometimes I even have to issue a receipt of that reception that proves my acceptance), so something is expected of me in return. It is the full sense of giving, analysed first by Marcel Mauss and developed by Levi-Strauss, that criticizes Mauss for not having pointed out that social life is essentially 'exchange' (Levi-Strauss, 1950). The exchange of e-mails, the conversations over the internet as allowed by 'chats' and by 'messenger', or equivalent software, place us in a society of gifts (what we receive is equivalent to what we give) and exchanges. According to Lévi-Strauss it is, therefore, the exchange that constitutes the primitive phenomenon of social life.

The concept of participation of Lévi-Bhrul (1996) attempts to explain the relationship between man and the totemic animal, without recourse to metaphor. The totemic eagle of a tribe does not leave man intact while simultaneously making the eagle its metaphoric being, but explains that the man of that tribe shares the characteristics of man and eagle.

When I sit at the computer, I am, simultaneously sitting in the chair and in the place of my cursor. At the same time I am the person interacting on the outside of the screen, and that acting in the screen. In those games where I am the protagonist, this phenomenon of participation reaches a high degree. Through participation, the dichotomy between real and virtual stops making sense, since the design of interactions tends to create a world of coexistences where we do not have to accept the choices offered by the real (not forgetting that the virtual is also real, in a certain aception).

We are, simultaneously, in the XXI century and in a time when the spectacle does not distinguish between spectator and actor, since both are intertwined. In interaction design, maybe due to the character of the mediation of the process we still have not escaped, we are not yet at the peak of complicity and intimacy. The spirit of the party has to take us by storm, we must enjoy excess, since as well noted by Chögyam Trungpa (1993): all wisdom is mad wisdom.
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