The Dark Side of Metaphor: Fetish in User Interfaces

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Abstract

User interface designs are often inspired by metaphors originating from the unconscious imagination. Some are healthy ambitions, but many reveal fetishes. The technical imagination of science fiction can help us to recognise and account for the things we design.

Keywords

HCI, interaction design, experience design, user experience, metaphor, culture, media, fetish

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Penetration

Full virtual reality requires full penetration. But critics can be fobbed off with foreplay. In the *Matrix* trilogy, there is a great deal of ceremonial preparation for the union of man and machine, but the moment itself is elided amidst rococco apparatus and ornament, both physical and digital. David Cronenberg's film *eXistenZ* offers a science fiction vision that is both more explicit, and truer to the fetishistic imaginations and devices of HCI research. Much of the plot, and many of the most memorable scenes, in *eXistenZ* are concerned with the nature of the man-machine interface. The same is true

of *The Matrix*, but in the Wachowski brothers' rendering, the power and suffering of the messianic hero is spiritualised, the (mostly invisible and forgotten) interface a mere backdrop to the magical disembodiment and spiritual incarnation of Neo's god-like avatar.

In *eXistenZ*, players are connected bodily to the eponymous videogame via the 'bio-port', a moist, pink, sucking orifice that is cut into the base of the spine. The bio-port is both a more concrete and a more plausible user interface technology than William Gibson's comparatively coy description of the physical arrangements for 'jacking in' to cyberspace. The bio-port is a surgical stoma, at risk from infection, offering an orifice that is explicitly eroticised and fetishised. Rather than solitary jacking-in and –off, or the veiled homoeroticism of combat mission camaraderie when Morpheus' crew prepare for battle in the Matrix, activation of the bio-port is an explicit site of intimate and sexual encounter, eased and lubricated with a licked finger, graphically penetrated at first by tools and cables, and then by the videogame hardware itself. Every aspect of the film's plot is concerned with the transgressive materials involved in the manufacture, deployment and interpretation of these devices and penetrative acts.

Transgression
In a recent contribution to a symposium on universal conceptions of humanity [3], I reflected on the way that engineering logic requires the definition of standardised human components, and on the consequent reconception of the human body as a site of interface. I observed that this implicit rhetoric of standardisation (including clinical and technical repair of human interface deficits) is mirrored by an anxiety and adolescent fascination among many technology researchers, with

the mechanical function of their own bodies. Whereas those tendencies are obscured and sublimated in HCI research, they become more open to analysis in science fiction, and this paper explores the nature of that critical opportunity.

eXistenZ, as with other films in Cronenberg's oeuvre, owes much to J G Ballard's book *Crash*, itself a gripping elaboration of the man-machine interface. Rather than the idealistic conceptions of Licklider's human-computer symbiosis, or even the political systems critique of Haraway's cyborgs, Crash portrays man-machine systems at a level every engineer can understand, not a mystical 'hybrid of machine and organism' [3 p.149], but an assemblage of components, with interfaces clearly marked. The point of interface between man and machine is the key concern of the engineer, but is also a site of transgression, to an extent that popular outrage at Cronenberg's film recognised only deviance and sexual fetish. In the 20th century, the automobile has been the primary site of man-machine interface, emphasised in *eXistenZ* when the hero has an unlicensed bioport installed by the oil-stained mechanic at a local garage. I anticipate that in the 21st century, the mobile phone could replace the automobile as the most intimate and sexualised site of moral transgression.

Outrage
Perhaps moral outrage might be a better response to the casual miscegenation of human components within technosystems. It seems too easy for Western culture to assimilate previously shocking fetishes, through human weakness and social inertia. Technical visions, having achieved the immediacy and materiality of a desirable product, rapidly shrug off the assumptions under which they were conceived. Consider the scena-

rio of 'convergence', once an innocent technical ideal, but now become one phone to rule them all. A congregation of nerds are chuckling Gollum-like in their caves, initially seduced by the 'use case' of some cool party trick or other, but with a nagging unease that the magic infrastructure will one day turn its eye toward the Shire, sending black riders of privacy violation.

Figure 1, reproduced with permission from [4, p.xix]

Dan O'Sullivan captures the pathos of the user-engineering fetish in his disturbing cartoon (figure 1, from O'Sullivan & Igoe 2004, page xix, reproduced with permission). His caption calls this 'how the computer sees us', but it might more provocatively have been captioned 'how the HCI researchers saw us', in their unconscious homage to the Sensory Homunculus of early neuroscience (figure 2). The freakishness of O'Sullivan's fetish-figure is described as a rendering of Kurt Vonnegut's dystopian Tralfamadorians, but is offered to his readers as a technical challenge, an opportunity to correct a flawed design vision, rather than the manifestly uncanny consequence of allowing engineers to treat humans as an 'interface'. We could take this as an opportunity to chart another 'uncanny valley' that must be plastered-over in the next generation of UIs, but a more appropriate response might be to look more deeply within, to disinter the sublimated and repressed dark side of the collective technical unconscious that allowed such a situation to become established and to prevail for so long.

Figure 2, © The Natural History Museum, London. Reproduced with permission

Criticality

So much of what we advocate as critical practice in HCI is little more than a simple and honest self-appraisal (though we should surely welcome even that), or being sufficiently curious and disciplined to check the definitions of the aspirational words we use. Much of the field is touchingly naive in the childishness of its moral commitments. Let's help the poor people. Why doesn't that man have any arms? Can I send my leftovers to the starving children? Motivations for engagement with other disciplines can be ignorant to the point of arrogance. Why don't you tell us what the problem is, and we'll figure out how to solve it? But true critical thinking must be critical of the enterprise, not simply the activity. It draws attention to the dark side, to the unconscious, and to the conflicted, guilty, selfish, human ego of the author. True critical attention is seldom fully welcome, but the alternative is a discourse mired in complacency, hubris and gullibility. For more creative critical engagement, we might again consider the way in which metaphor was appropriated within HCI.

Imagination

As I have argued elsewhere [1], following pioneers such as Alan Kay, David Smith and Ted Nelson, metaphor should have been seen as an opportunity for imagination and interpretation in HCI, not simply an encoding scheme for instruction and cognitive structure. Yet the remnants of the desktop metaphor have become shallow metonyms, fetishizing once-coherent design elements like the wastebasket, and reflecting the fetishized engineering components that were once human users and contexts. We could shrug off those historical origins as dead metaphor, and not to be taken any more seriously than the sediment of old metaphors under the flow of any language. But my concern is with the accretion of 'dark metaphor' – still there, and exerting a gravitational pull into the deep well of technological fetishes.

Implications for Design

The main purpose of this paper is to call attention to ways in which science fiction and techno-culture more clearly reveal the seeds, roots, composts and mulches of the dark metaphors underlying HCI. To the fan or critic of these genres, the tropes of a technical zeitgeist in any particular season are easily traced and dissected. Would it not be desirable for the thousand PhD students trying to implement the *Minority Report* interface over the past decade to have understood a little better the reference points against which the film was constructed? It would be unthinkable for a film (or art, music or design) student to be as ignorant as HCI researchers about where their ideas had come from. The layers of critical awareness and reference that we take for granted in film must surely be applied to user interfaces before long. Without this, we are doomed to be captive to our unconscious, fixated on fetishes, and wallowing in the swamp on the dark side of metaphor.

References

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