

The Visual Semantification of Complex Networks.  
The what?? Just read on, please, and don't be frightened.

### **From Out of Nowhere**

Sometimes it takes a while until it suddenly becomes clear that a couple of dots are turning into an image, a number of different mutations into a separate species, and individual works into their own genre. When such a novel development finally occupies the center of attention, maybe it even starts getting referred to as a medium. And when one confronts it, astounded and somewhat perplexed, one might even label it a new interface. And if there is a Cologne School of media art, then it focuses on the dramatization of the splice that those interfaces make.

### **From Darkness to Poweruser**

The tragedy of the user in the Internet and elsewhere has a great deal to do with the fact that he is never entirely certain what's actually transpiring. He remains in the dark about the consequences and the usefulness of what he's doing. Behind the computer screen or in the Web, on the hard drive or when the processor crashes yet again, he is nevertheless left with the impression of being in complete control. The Poweruser, on the other hand, goes on attacking a few stations down the line, thereby creating for himself his own interfaces, command line environments or at least desktop themes. He makes himself at home there and is thereby perhaps the ideal collaborator for a desktop drama or a comedy of mistaken identity.

### **Usability vs. Visibility**

Over the years, types of experimental interfaces have been developed that have gone considerably beyond the constraints of usability-the functionalist thinking of the Bauhaus-and have been tracking the craggy fissures of the digital terrain, its vector-mountains and reticulated web of data impressions. They follow the paths taken by data packets in the Internet, eavesdropping on the PING and TRACEROUTE, and give rise to a full-blown Romanticism of the Digital, though ultimately remanding it back to the user, who may now consider all this knowledge from its pretty side-pretty in the sense of disinterested.

The data that have been known to always correlate in some other way-contain a dead link or a bald-faced lie, a trick or compromise, in order to yield nonetheless a bit of official information-engender the promise of delivering an accurate picture only in the thicket of their proliferations. To accumulate more significantly insignificant material than had been anticipated for the most part called for the development of "telescopes," search engines making it possible to observe more precisely the peculiar ways of things in the Digital Domain.

### **Webstalker's Forebears**

One of the first of this kind was the IOD group's Webstalker, which translated Web data structures into graphics in a way that resembled the Ping Map that Antya Umstaetter had developed over the preceding years. And, not least of all, there was the shaky Thesaurus by Plumbdesign, which served to provide a graphic depiction of the dictionary and gave rise to numerous follow-ups. These are just a few nodes that are part of a project that is increasingly establishing itself as a perceptual and representational filter interposed between the desktop and the net.

### **Seeing as Science**

Science as well has come up with 'theme maps' as approaches to visualizing complex interrelationships. This is a matter of depicting that which goes beyond one's comprehension or one wishes to understand more precisely. The capability of portraying graphically that which is expressed as a text in semantically ordered language or in more or less calculable mathematical formulas presents the possibility of being able to comprehend a concept at a single glance. Seeing means understanding. Information ordered in brachiated form and tables of contents, in catalogs and card files, lists and glossaries gives rise to the suspicion that only the precise tracing back and recording of the individual points within the territory allows an accurate navigational map to be drawn up.

## **Self-generating Data Order**

The metaphor of the desktop is a metaphor of obligatory steps and torment. With their humiliating reminders that the user is the file clerk of his own informational disarray, busying himself with wastebaskets and countless mouse-click buttons, constantly being forced to improve his table manners while transferring little symbols from one directory to the next-those overflowing "orderers" whose towering heaps of content are juxtaposed to half-written CD-ROMs. The dream is one of files that can organize themselves, that can communicate their importance to each other-and wouldn't it be nice if they themselves were aware of which interconnections are significant in which context and which are not.

Entire family trees, curricula vitae, musical styles, cliques and corporate conglomerates can thus be captured and grasped by means of skillful scouring of the data deserts. The "semantic web" has little to do with web design in the classic sense and is rather more a matter of dynamic representation of data in a race against the speed of thought. When something changes, one is most likely to notice in retrospect or with the help of tools.

## **On Minitasking**

When p2p emerged, it made all the separate private archives into a single one. And this de-localization, de-privatization and de-subjectification of digital property created a data continuum from which the content industry has not recovered to this day. The equality of the data is consummated on the level of protocols, which do not undertake a process of evaluation into hierarchical ranks. Its horizontal extent and not its depth approaches infinity. The world is a list that is constantly changing. Or-as with minitasking-a quantity of circles or quadrants or melodies that are aligned according to hit ratios, magnitudes on the basis of which one reaches a decision to keep on copying it or to forget it as quickly as possible.

The user himself is the p2p client, and only the most minimal, unpractical and more surprising of the interfaces can perhaps impart an impression of how far we have already come. On the way.

A text by Pit Schultz.