Performative materiality and interpretative interface
Johanna Drucker

Approaches to interface design have come mainly from the HCI community, with an emphasis on maximum efficiency in the user-centered experience. Since the days of Douglas Engelbart and Ivan Sutherland’s experiments with head sets, pedals, mice, and screens, in work that led to the development of the Graphical User Interface, the dominant paradigm in the human-machine relationship has come from an engineering sensibility. Leading practitioners in that field, from Stuart Card, Ben Shneiderman, and others, have defined basic principles for design methodology and display that are premised on a mechanistic analysis of user’s abilities to process information effectively. This approach, taken from flight simulators and applied to the vast numbers of tasks for searching navigating, buying, and communicating online, is grounded in a user-as-consumer model. Criticisms from inside that community, such as the work of Jesse James Garrett (showing the confusion between information and task based approaches) or Aaron Marcus’s group (analyzing cultural differences and their connection to interface functionality) have provided useful insights and shifted design principles to be more nuanced. But the basic model of the user-centered approach to interface design remains in place. And it has been adopted by humanists, particularly when the resources to do so are available.

If we bring the legacy of critical theory to bear on this model, however, we see that the same critique leveled by post-structuralists against New Criticism is pertinent here. The “text” of an interface is not a thing, stable and self-evident, whose meaning can be fixed through a detailed reading of its elements. An interface is a site of provocation for reading, and, in the same manner as a film, literary work, or any other “text” (fashion magazine, instruction manual), it is a space for interpretation involved an individual subject, not a generic user. In critical parlance, both an enunciating and enunciated subject – the speaking and the spoken subject – are aspects of textual production. (Text here is meant broadly.). This concept of performativity, articulated by John Austin in How to do things with Words, has echoes within the field of anthropology, gender studies, and cultural studies. By situating texts and speakers within pragmatic circumstances of use, ritual, exchange, and communities of practice, performativity stripped away any foundation for thinking meaning was inherent in a text or work. Performativity offered a sharp rebuke to notions of agency (individuals) and autonomy (of texts).

How can we, that is, the community of digital humanists, take these critical insights from literary, cultural, and gender studies into our current practice? If the object is merely to demonstrate that one may read an interface with the same techniques we used to read Young Mr. Lincoln or to follow Laura Mulvey’s arguments into a new realm of semiotic analysis, a rather tedious and predictable path would like ahead. This might have some value in the undergraduate classroom, as the unpacking of ideological subtexts fascinates the young. But for those of us concerned with the design of environments for digital humanities and its research agendas, the questions that arise from this critical encounter are quite different. Can we conceive of models of interface that are genuine instruments for research? That
are not merely queries within pre-set data that search and sort according to an immutable agenda? How can we imagine an interface that allows content modeling, intellectual argument, rhetorical engagement? In such an approach, the formal, graphical materiality of the interface might register the performative dimensions as well as support them. Such approaches would be distinct from those in the HCI community in terms of their fundamental values. In place of transparency and clarity, they would foreground ambiguity and uncertainty, unresolvable multiplicities in place of singularities and certainties. Sustained interpretative engagement, not efficient completion of tasks, would be the desired outcome.

This is not an argument in favor of bad design. Nor is it a perverse justification for the ways in which under-resourced projects create confusion, as if that were a value for humanists. Quite the contrary. The challenge of creating an interface in which the performative character of interpretation can be supported and registered builds on demonstrable principles: multiple points of view, correlatable displays, aggregated data, social mediation and networking as a feature of scholarly work, and some of the old, but still charming, qualities of games like Nomic, with their emerging rule sets.

My argument is that the humanities embody a set of values and approaches to knowledge as interpretation that cannot be supported by a mechanistic approach to design. This is not just a semantic exercise, but a point of departure for implementation. The concept of performative materiality has a double meaning here. In the first sense, materiality is understood to produce meaning as a performance, just as any other “text” is constituted through a reading. That notion is fundamental to humanistic approaches to interpretation as situated, partial, non-repeatable. In the second sense, performative materiality suggests an approach to design in which use registers in the substrate and structure so that the content model and its expressions evolve. The “structure of knowledge” becomes a “scheme of knowing” that inscribes use as well as provoking it. The idea of a user-consumer is replaced by a maker-producer, a performer, whose performance changes the game. This takes us back to some of the earlier theory of games, to the work of Brenda Laurel and others, whose theoretical training brought notions of subjectivity and performance into the study of online environments.

This paper does not claim to have a toolset of design solutions, since by definition, that would put us right back into the HCI model. Instead, it is an attempt to lay out some basic ideas on which to imagine a performative approach to materiality and the design of an interpretative interface. Such an interface supports acts of interpretation (does not merely return selected results from a pre-existing data set) and also is changed by acts of interpretation, it evolves. Performative materiality and interpretative interface are co-dependent and emergent.