THE PLEASURE OF E-LEARNING –
TOWARDS AESTHETIC E-LEARNING PLATFORMS

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ABSTRACT

E-learning platforms are in most cases austere and hyper-functional, supplementing the learning situation by being neutral containers or mediators of communication and learning material. Considering the development of web design, the introduction of E-learning 2.0 and a local survey we argue that in order to accommodate to future needs the focus on e-learning platforms needs an aesthetic perspective instead of mainly addressing usability and function.

Keywords: Pleasuralism, aesthetics, e-learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is becoming increasingly common at universities and other educational institutions to support learning activities with e-learning platforms [16]. The range of use extends from simple sharing of text material to more complex forms of socializing. As a result of our daily first-hand experiences with different educational platforms at the University of Aarhus, we have adopted a functional perspective on the development of e-learning platforms and the importance of usability. But beside of being a usable medium, a platform is also a medium of web based communication that similar websites has to attract, engage and hold users [12]. Analysing and using an e-learning platform as a medium of web based communication, has lead us to ask the question: Why are e-learning platforms relatively anonymous and austere, while the field of web design in general, and social software in specific, currently is experiencing an increase in the focus on user engagement and a growing aesthetic awareness?

The awareness of the aesthetics can be found in The Poetics by Aristotle [3] in his description of catharsis, as well as in many other works. Brenda Laurel has transferred it to the field of computer interface design as a way to asses "*[t]he sensory dimension of the action being represented: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile, and potentially others*" [11, p. 565]. Laurel identifies the sensory dimension as being of the utmost importance; this identification is supported by several other research projects, which all emphasise aesthetics' ability to assess aspects of user perception and the influence of the sensory dimension and interactive features [17,9,1,22].

The growing popularity of the aesthetical perspective is substantiated in practice by various and increasing numbers of experience-oriented web designs, digital art projects, 3D simulations and Flash animations, all of which aim to widen the aesthetic potential of web communication and to question the traditional accentuation of easy-to-use web design as represented by the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) [13,14,21 and others].

The evolution of web design, the current trends in the field of e-learning and a local survey conducted at the University of Aarhus all seem to indicate a growing need for rethinking and renewing the concept of e-learning platforms as being more than functional platforms providing "easy-to-access" content. We need to explore the platforms as mediums of communication and potential providers of sensuous experiences or "pleasures." Therefore we would like to suggest a shift of foci in the approach towards e-learning platforms from purely addressing function and usability towards a more aesthetical and user-experience oriented approach that addresses visual communication, sensory dimensions and cultural and aesthetic objects.

In order to address this issue, we will consider the current state of e-learning and trends towards the use of aesthetics by analysing the development of web design, the "E-learning 2.0" discussion and a local survey at the university.

2. THE CURRENT STATE OF E-LEARNING

Until now, the main criteria for choosing and evaluating e-learning platforms have focused on usability, the tools accessible and their ability to support learning activities [16]. These criteria have so far resulted in tried-and-tested platforms such as Blackboard, FirstClass, WebCT, Virtual U and several open source solutions that are characterized by strong communicational and statistical features, efficiency and increased quality-of-learning for users [16]. Unfortunately, the focus on the sensory dimension of e-learning platforms is in most cases non–existent on account of the ideals of hyper-functionalism [9], which is inspired by the easy-of-use philosophy emphasized by Jakob Nielsen and others [13,14].

3. TRENDS TOWARDS THE USE OF AESTHETICS

In order to address the future needs regarding e-learning platforms we have decided to focus on three indicators for the use of an aesthetic perspective. The indicators are motivated by the every-day-use of the digital media which sets the standard and the users' expectations towards modern means of communication: The development of web design, the characteristics of E-learning 2.0 and a local survey of the open source, e-learning system Dokeos [see 5 for further information].

3.1. The Development of Web Design

One of the visible results of the use of an aesthetic perspective is the development within the field of web design. As technologies for and knowledge about communicating and gaining results via the web have improved, web design has undergone a vivid development. Since the introduction of the graphical user interface on the web, web design has moved beyond hyper-functionalism to modern styles and genres that are both dualistic, minimalist, and expressive [9]. The introduction of Flash technology, for example, has lead to experimental and highly interactive websites which often collide with the rules of usability. Nonetheless the need to differentiate a website's image from others seems to be an important factor for companies and individuals [22].

Over the last ten years researchers in the field of web design and HCI have discussed function versus aesthetics [17] and the importance of the two. It is impossible to determine the balance between function and aesthetics; however it is clear that the use of e.g. visual communication, including fonts, colours and pictures, should not be neglected when trying to mediate a message or when trying to attract and hold customers [12,22].

In sum, it is likely to be just as important factor for e-learning platforms as it is for websites right now to integrate an aesthetic communication in order to attract and engage future users.

3.2. E-learning 2.0 (and hot topics of research)

Considering the tendencies in current research about how e-learning should be shaped as well as the general discussion about what should define the next generation of e-learning, "E-learning 2.0", key concepts seem to be *student-centered* (covering utility as well as design – and often referred to as "personal learning"), *social software* and *engaging* design [6,15,16]. At the annual conference Online Educa 2005 [15], many presentations were about the educational aspects of using multimedia such as video [20], computer games, highly interactive (Flash) simulations [2,8], weblogs [10] and wikis (also referred to as "social software") [23] in blended and distance learning. The question of how to motivate, engage and even socialise the student as an active learner was often raised and discussed [23]. Not all of these tendencies are necessarily related to the field

of aesthetics, but many of them implicate one or more different aesthetical disciplines such as enjoyability.

3.3. Our Survey: Aesthetics and Dokeos

At the University of Aarhus a recent questionnaire survey conducted among course administrators about our current e-learning platform, Dokeos 1.5.5, indicates a similar need to rethink the e-learning platform as being more than a provider of content which is easy-to-access. A basic philosophy of the Dokeos interface is high usability and accessibility [6], which was substantiated by the results of our survey. Our survey shows that 82 % of the course administrators feel that Dokeos is a useful teaching supplement, indicating the existence of qualities described as *user experience goals* [19, p. 18] - which could be considered as aesthetical qualities. However, the survey also showed that 47 % of the course administrators feel (agree or highly agree) that the platform offers limited possibilities for customisation of the design/layout, indicating unsatisfactory possibilities for visual expression and individual layout. Design and layout have a role to play – our survey showed that 82 % of the respondents feel (agree or highly agree) that design and layout in general plays a crucial role in the engagement with e-learning platforms.

In sum, our results show that the design and flexibility of an e-learning platform are important factors, just as it is emphasized in the establishment of E-learning 2.0.

4. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS PLEASURALISM

The development of web design, the characteristics of E-learning 2.0 and our local survey all point to the increasing importance of aesthetic factors such as user experiences, pleasure, engagement and the use of highly interactive sensory and visual communication. Our survey indicates an increasing need to analyse and rethink the use and the benefits of design and aesthetics of e-learning platforms. In order to accommodate these factors in the future and to future users, as described by Thorlacius and Downes [22, p. 5,7], we would like to emphasize a higher degree of aesthetic awareness in the shaping of e-learning platforms. This could analytically be achieved through the use of a *critical analysis* of the interface [4] and in practice by involving web designers in the development of an interface that both supports learning activities and encourages pleasure and sensory involvement. Furthermore an increased aesthetical awareness will help educational institutions such as universities to become better equipped to fully benefit from e-learning platforms and increase the possibilities for integrating the culture of the institution and the users in a digital environment. All of these factors could eventually lead to a greater understanding of how engaging with an e-learning platform influences the learning activity and influences motivating factors for using e-learning.

As a summarizing concept we would like to introduce the term "pleasuralism" to cover the values of aesthetics. Just as "functionalism" signifies the importance of function,

"pleasuralism" signifies the importance of pleasure, and considered in the light of e-learning platforms the term emphasizes the importance of subjective satisfaction and engagement while using and learning through the platforms. Content and function are still important, but the experience of pleasure during usage and learning should not be underestimated. It may in some cases be crucial (in order to motivate students to use the system). We are not stating that pleasure/aesthetics should eclipse or compromise content or function, but rather that learning and communication in many cases may be enhanced through the use of aesthetics.

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