Can you see what I know?

On September 23rd and 24th 2008, the Virtual Knowledge Studio for the Humanities & Social Sciences, one of the research centres of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, organized a special workshop in Amsterdam during PICNIC08 about visualization of knowledge. This PICNIC Special focused on making interests in knowledge visible and on the implications of failure by design. When creating and orchestrating mediated presence, it is mostly the visualization of data that is experienced. In these visualizations certain interests are magnified, while others are put in the background. Moreover, visualization often excludes the representation of uncertainties and ambiguities while failure by design is a vital dynamic of many processes. Taking the perspective that knowledge production evolves in social interaction, presence technologies face the challenge of facilitating expressions and exchanges of many kinds of pleasant and unpleasant knowledge produced by people: cognitive, emotional, physical, social and tacit.

To develop our understanding and harvest new approaches to these questions, around 60 people gathered at the cross media event PICNIC 2008. Scientists, academics, designers, business people and artists collaboratively explored the theme in a workshop with the title Can you see what I know? This article is a short impression of experiences and outcomes of this workshop that was held on the Westergasfabriek terrain in Amsterdam.

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Inspiration

Everyday life is becoming more and more mixed with technologies used for knowledge production. People are adept at a variety of technologies that enable them to meet, interact and share information. In the workshop participants explored how these new dynamics in personal and professional activities affect knowledge. How is knowledge created, with whom is it shared? Where is knowledge shaped, and for what purposes? When is knowledge shared, and with what consequences? In these cognitive/technical practices, can I see what you know? How do we know what we know? Which knowledge is not shared when using technology? What is the position of technology in the exclusion or attrition of particular knowledge configurations?

The many ways in which existing knowledge can be made visible have a direct bearing on how new knowledge can be generated and shared. In the workshop we focused on two key problems:

- How interests are made visible and thereby recognizable?
- How to deal with, and accommodate, failure and uncertainty?

Both problems are crucial for further development of the Web as a medium for creating and sharing knowledge. Presently, interests are often made invisible. This holds both for interests that have been built implicitly into knowledge products and for interests knowledge producers and users may have. This invisibility makes it difficult to assess the value of particular statements, products or research programmes. It supports exaggerated claims of universality of knowledge and seamlessness of networks, where awareness of seams and context may be more fertile. The second problem, failure, refers to the potentially productive role of things that go wrong and the explicit recognition of uncertainty as a useful moment for engaging reflexivity in research and design. It is obvious that unsuccessful experiments, unexpected outcomes, and unanticipated responses have been critical in the creation of genuinely new concepts and objects. Yet, most information environments and products are built on the (shaky) pillars of success and certainty. As a result, it is difficult to accommodate fiascos, unexpected developments and uncertainty, although these are happening all the time. We wish to explore design and research strategies that explicitly embrace failure, expecting that this might open up novel forms of engaging knowledge technologies.

The dynamics of knowledge are shaped by the interaction between two dimensions as illustrated in the following matrix (see illustration below). The first dimension refers to the goals of knowledge production: is knowledge a value in itself or is it in the first instance an instrument for other purposes? The second dimension refers to the "owner" of knowledge: is it an attribute of a community or group or is knowledge primarily a personal matter? In new forms of knowledge representation on the Web, we witness interesting novel interactions along these two axes. In the workshop we explored how the two key questions can be developed by positioning possible design strategies in this analytical matrix.

Knowledge as value

Collective history — Personal history

Knowledge as instrument
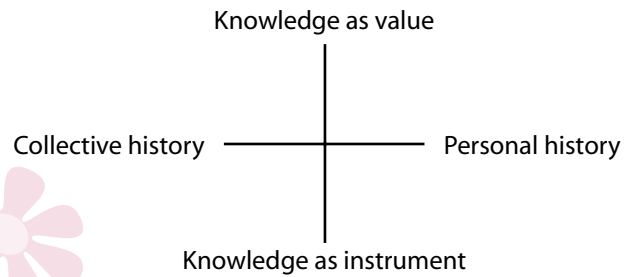
The Workshop

The workshop methodology was built upon the experience of two previous projects, CO-OP and (UN)Common ground, in which artists, designers, business people, academics and scientists successfully collaborated (Brickwood, C., Ferran, B., Garcia, D., & Putnam, T. (Eds.). 2007, Zijlmans, K., & Van den Zwijnenberg, Rob (Eds.). 2007). Inspired by keynote presentations, workshop participants collaborated in small teams of different disciplines for several hours.

The first keynote was delivered by Garrick Jones, who explored interdisciplinary collaboration while his words were simultaneously visualized by support acts performed by seven "scribes": one drawing, one googling, one producing models of interaction, one using a speech recognition application creating tagclouds, one using a wacom tablet and the remaining two support acts sketching on paper hung from the wall. Next to these seven scribes, Garrick also illustrated his presentation words with a PowerPoint presentation. The second keynote was delivered by Tara McPherson, who showed and explained the making of *Vectors*. This a multimodal academic journal in which scholars and artists collaborate in multimedia not only to present research but also to create new methodologies. In doing so they are merging form and content to enact a

second-order examination of the mediation of everyday life.

During the first day more specific presentations around failure and visibility of interest were held by Bas Raijmakers, Eric Kluitenberg, Kitty Zijlmans and Esther Polak, while the teams were analytically exploring dilemmas and artistically drawing and building 'issue-scapes' and regularly presenting their work to each other. Issue-scapes are 3D models of the dilemmas and perspectives that the teams developed. They returned the next phase of the workshop as tools for thinking catalysts. Around the issue-scapes new collaborations and research proposals evolved.

attention for the visualization of slow processes, in which effects are hard to sense, like climate change. It was argued that visualization of interest, in terms of the stakes involved, actually affects the ways in which these interests are lived. In nearly all issue-scapes, sweet candies were used and participants agreed that the creation of 'goodies' and 'sweetspots' is vital in any knowledge system for it to function. At the end of the workshop, several projects and collaborations were identified: Architecture of interaction of intercultural communication; Visualizing and experiencing medical imaging; Sensory judgement of risky proposals; An idea collider; Strategies of bad intentions; Food transparency; Modelling versus iterative processes.

Over the next few months these ideas will be pursued and possibly turn into research projects. If you are interested to participate and/or learn more about *Can you see what I know*, please contact the Virtual Knowledge Studio in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

References

Brickwood, C., Ferran, B., Garcia, D., & Putnam, T. (Eds.). (2007). (Un)common ground - creative encounters between sectors and disciplines. Amsterdam: BIS Publishers.

Zijlmans, K., & Van den Zwijnenberg, Rob (Eds.). (2007). CO-OPS - interterritorial explorations in art and science. The Hague: NWO.

Websites:

http://www.virtualknowledgestudio.nl
http://www.vectors.org
http://cyswik.blogspot.com/
http://www.picnicnetwork.org/page/22293/en

Outcomes

When discussing the issue-scapes it became apparent that taking a cultural perspective on knowledge production made it actually easier to collaborate between disciplines. It was noticed that none of the issue-scapes reflected utopias of knowledge production, but rather presented 'limited autonomy' and 'trusted environment'

as starting points for analysis and design. All issue-scapes were reflecting (or trying to deal with) the messy mess of infrastructures as they are predominantly perceived today. One of the issue-scapes, on 'frog methodology', suggested that when having to deal with complex situations it may be more interesting to focus on facilitating a travel trajectory through complexities instead of 'mapping them flat'. Another issue-scape asked