

I Didn't Get It Until the End (Still not sure if I do now)

Reflection Assignment | Jesse Strijker | s2224623

Introduction

At the start of this course, I assumed it would be similar to the course of “*Designing with Advanced Artificial Intelligence*”, a functional, grounded course that combined AI’s practical functions with a layer of aesthetic appeal suitable for this technology. But, this course, to my perception, operated very differently, it didn’t take long to realise that this course was intentionally open-ended and leaned heavily into the aesthetics of data and AI, not as an afterthought, but as a starting point. Not data and AI with aesthetics on top, but the other way round.

The slides describing the aesthetics of intelligence; emergence, uncertainty, instability, harmonizing agencies, and expressing intentionalities introduced this in a clear manner. This idea, of designing first for aesthetic expression and only secondarily for function, really challenged how I normally approach design. I found this approach, while incredibly interesting in the slides (introducing the beauty of, or designing for instability really jumped out for me), really difficult to actually bring into practice, because I noticed (in this entire master) that I tend to remain in a mindset of achievability and functionality. I want to describe this mindset with nuance though, because I don’t think that makes me closed-minded, I actually enjoy big, strange brainstorm, and having odd angles to look at things. But I merely want to highlight that it is really important for **my** brain to want to understand *what* something is *for*. At first, I struggled to find that kind of clarity here. The thing that stood out throughout the course was how we were encouraged to embrace the unconventional, even to the point of intentionally aiming for weird or uncomfortable end results.

Knowledge

In terms of AI as a design material, I’m still figuring out exactly what I learned. But one shift is clear: when you approach AI and data not from the perspective of what it can do, but what it can express (its aesthetic properties, such as loss of agency to its user), it opens up a different set of possibilities. The concept of “New Aesthetics” from James Bridle, initially felt both too vague and too broad to be useful. When reading his blog posts and seeing his TED Talk, it became clear to me that he himself is really unstable in his own definition and examples of New Aesthetics. This at first I saw as a shortcoming, of him, or the aesthetics itself, but this project did make me realize that this aesthetic is in its definition quite fluid and ever changing with all the new technologies. And perhaps, this changing definition of his was not a flaw, but also based on this changing nature of new aesthetics that he experienced. *To nuance this, I have always detested the reading between the lines in my highschool literature assignments, searching for a “deeper” meaning, but I feel this message here is not an over-analysis, but rather an actual possibility.* Additionally, the shift of using data and AI for Aesthetics became even more apparent when we examined the concept of heteromation, a term introduced to us through additional papers provided by one of our coaches, Jesse [1]. When I read the paper, I really liked the introduction of the term. Thereby I really appreciated how we integrated this idea into our performance [1] by retaining human involvement in the automation loop, emphasizing that this loss of agency as an aesthetic property of data and AI, still ties into this terminology which feels “ethically” right.

Skills

Although most of the technical content, like the use of p5.js and the AI models introduced by Janet, weren’t new to me, the workshops still offered value. What stood out most for me was the **Data Foundry**, and the way it enabled us to quickly host prototypes and engage the audience at scale [2]. That was new for me, and it added something very tangible to my abilities and our final performance. Having this new option/medium of applying technology, with a centralized database or websites on everyone’s device in an accessible environment, feels like a valuable expansion of my skill set. I also really appreciated the introduction of the **Thing Constellation** [3] by Janet during the workshops. The way it connected common, everyday objects like a chair to broader systems, and then applied this information, for example, by telling about an IoT application that would be centralized in a chair,

because the chair was so central in each relation, was a really cool example and helped me think differently about the application of AI early in the course. For me that was a rare moment where an abstract concept felt grounded, and it stuck with me.

Struggles

Throughout the course, I found it hard to create something I could feel confident in. I had trouble wrapping my head around the fact that there wasn't a clear goal to aim for. The coaching sessions, while full of new and inspiring thoughts, did trouble us in narrowing things down. I sometimes felt that an earlier consolidation of ideas could have helped us avoid revisiting discarded concepts repeatedly, thereby streamlining our process. That was frustrating. Mentally draining, actually.

But maybe that's also where the value lies. We stayed open with the project and process for longer than I normally would, and I think this was encouraged by the structure of the course, and because of that, I encountered more ideas, more angles, more ways of thinking than I would have otherwise. So this vagueness, while extremely draining, also provided more value than a regular course would. Ultimately, this whole process did lead to an end result that was satisfying, precisely because it integrated the uncertainty we had during the process.

I think that in group meetings, all of us struggled with the unclear direction, which made meetings, while very content rich, sometimes feel like little process was being made. But, as I said above, this might have been the value as well, because of this content richness, I had some of the most thoughtful conversations I've had in a long time at university, and although we cycled through a lot of ideas (and scrapped just as many), I felt those discussions expanded my view of what design can be. In a more traditional course, I might have improved my technical or teamwork skills. Here, I think I gained perspective. My way of looking at design shifted, the concept of exploring a topic before dedicating to its use, is a pattern I see more often in this master, and is new to me.

Being able to still use my technical skills in creating the prototypes [4] and a creating a soundboard [5] to use audio to its full potential during the performance, I hope I was a useful asset, both in concrete sense, but also in my conceptual contributions in the group discussions, where I attempted, through reading the literature and through attempting to get to a concrete point, to contribute to the end product.

Lastly, I feel like normally I would have started off with this point in a reflection, but in this course it didn't feel like a main struggle for me. The fact that the final performance *was* a performance, pushed me far out of my comfort zone. But it also helped me understand the emotional power of storytelling. Not just intellectually, I've read the theory, heard it from other people, I "know" the value of it, but experientially *feeling* that a performance can have a certain value as opposed to a traditional presentation was both a struggle and a valuable learning point.

Development of Identity and Vision

This course has not entirely redefined my vision as a designer, but I do think it definitely enriched it significantly by making me more willing to embrace creative risk and uncertainty. I still really value direct real-world functionality and critical design in my professional identity, but I can now also find that in initiating projects from an aesthetic and expressive standpoint (exploring first). I now see that starting from an aesthetic or expressive place, without needing immediate clarity and purpose of use, can lead somewhere meaningful. Even if I don't fully understand it at the time.

Why Heteromation™

MINIMIZE MENTAL WORKLOAD
MAXIMIZE PRODUCTIVITY

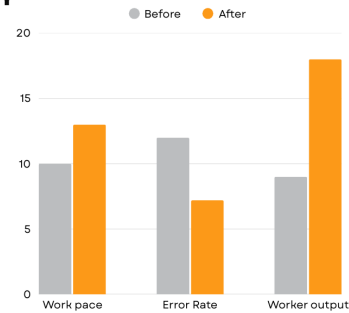


Employees provide less mental labor,
System guides tasks and decisions
Cognitive load reduced by 83%



Work stress down by 72%
Burnout risk nearly eliminated
Employees claim positive improvement in their private lives

Heteromation: A collaborative approach that keeps humans purposefully integrated in AI systems, transforming workers into strategic data nodes while alleviating decision fatigue.

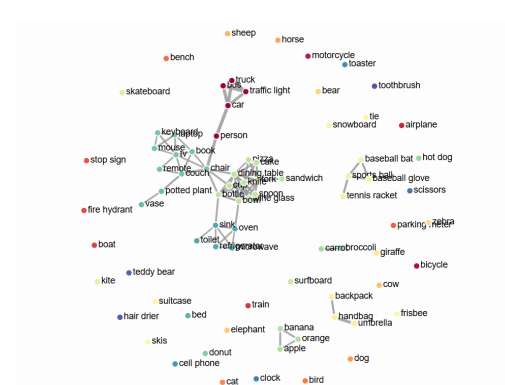
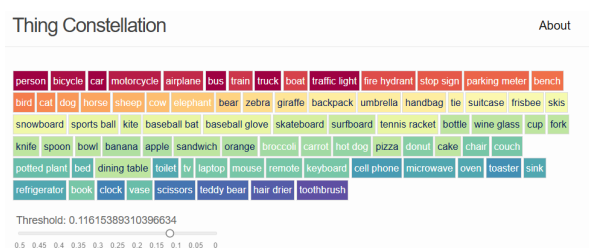


F.R.E.E.D.O.M.™ Protocol : Framework for Regulated Employee Engagement & Data Optimization Management

[1] Download of presentation slide during performance on how heteromation was “twisted” in its application



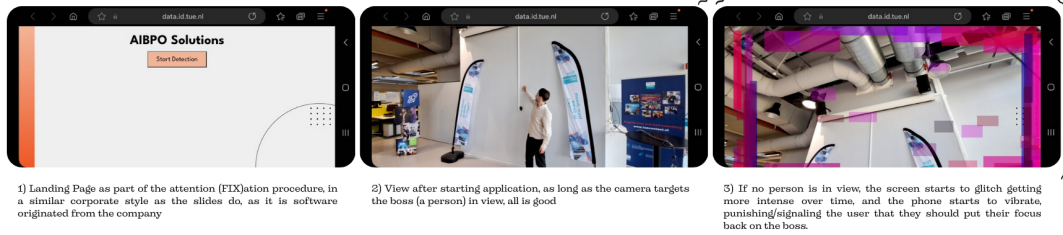
[2] Screenshots from recording of one of the teachers during the performance, where the whole class was using the prototype (*faces blurred, or removed for privacy reasons*)



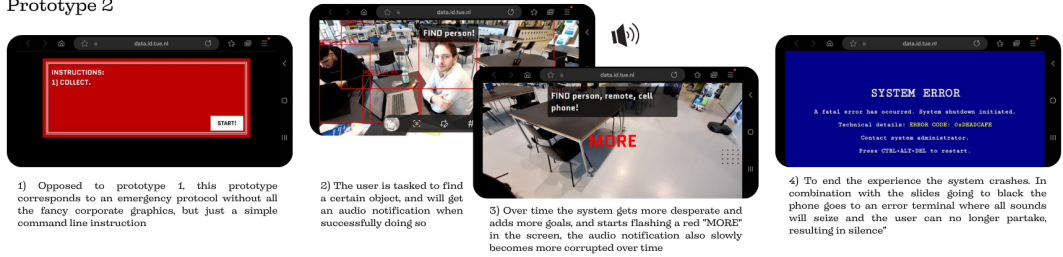
[3] Screenshot from [Thing Constellation](#) where the “chair” can be seen as a connecting factor between very different groups

Creativity and Aesthetics of Data and AI

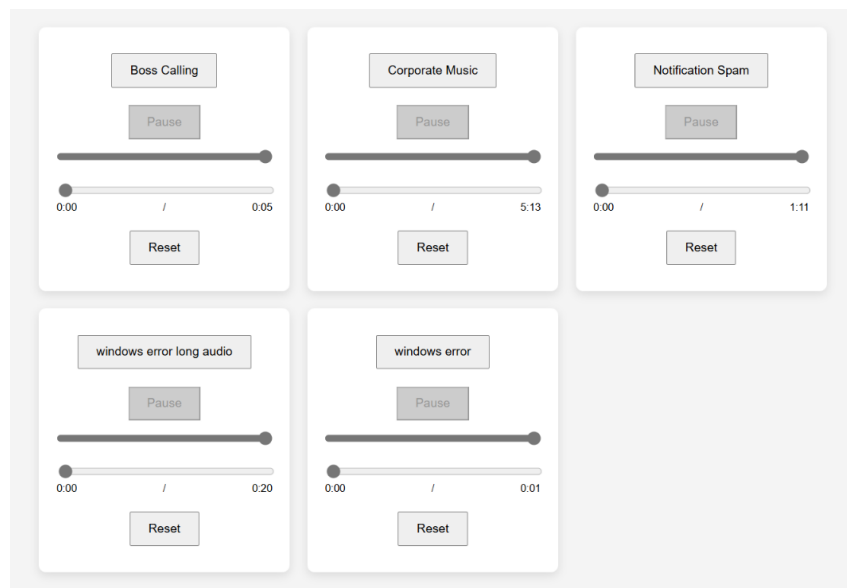
Prototype 1



Prototype 2



[4] Slide from group pictorial with an oversight of all the elements of the prototypes plus their description



[5] Cropped Screenshot of the digital soundboard website made for the course. Including individual volume sliders, self selected audio, playheads and resets for convenience