Chapter 5

The art of 'slow': taking time in the digital age

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The galloping pace of the dot.com industry is apparent in the 'just-in-time knowledge' generated from project-based research, the 'quick-and-dirty' techniques and corner-cutting strategies used to create online experiences for users that equate to fast food production. As digital designers, we are constantly told that Web users want convenience and will not tolerate anything otherwise. Saving time is regarded as the ultimate objective for both designers and users.

Therefore, the production and consumption of Web sites can be equated to the mass production and consumption of industrialized fast food. Both are assembled quickly and sold to customers who want a 'quick bite'. The homogeneity of fast food can be likened to the uniformity of usability standards and conventions that now pervade the Web.

The Slow Food movement presents an interesting antidote: just as many people do not favour fast food, perhaps users are prepared to savour rich and hospitable online experiences which have not been designed with usability as the primary consideration.

What it means to be Slow

The growing dissatisfaction of the fast food industry paved the way for the birth of Slow Food. As an international movement, it came as a timely response in the late 1980s and touched the right notes in people of the modern day culture where attention to food has given way to a fast-paced mindless way of living and eating. Slow Food 'aims to protect the pleasures of the table and the homogenization of modern fast food and life' (www.slowfood.com) by encouraging the use of quality produce as well as working to maintain a culture of biodiversity in agriculture. Ideas of hospitality and sharing are key to members of the movement. Slow Food is underpinned by a belief that eating and dining plays an extremely important role in society by offering an opportunity to enhance the social fabric. It suggests that a slow meal focuses on the quality of the experience and that the pleasures of the table come from a reflective sharing. Members of the Slow Food movement call themselves eco-gastronomes because they believe that self pleasure cannot be detached from the pleasure of others. In contrast to fast food, the careful preparation so necessary for Slow

Food ensures the quality of the meal and the thoughtful sharing enhances the richness of the experience. The moment of slow eating then becomes the focal point of thoughts and reflection, affiliation and association and the moment is unique to the people around the table.

This notion of taking time to reflect on what one consumes may also apply to how online experiences are perceived and produced. Perhaps it also offers a response to the staple diet of usability which has become the mainstay of online production. As users spend ever increasing amounts of time online, the Internet becomes central to our everyday lives in much the same way as food. This means that users want variety in their consumption, rather than for every experience to be the same. The sheer amount of information at hand with the Internet and the amount of food choice in the age of industrial food production gives us the illusion of having variety. But the homogenous production of information and food provide a singularity which is widely available yet disappointingly superficial.

Fast vs Slow interactions

In the context of food, the scientific management of fast food companies favours standardization in order to create a predictable and homogenous environment. The customers' choices are sacrificed along with consideration to the environment, the animals, the consumers and the employees. Fast food companies are only concerned about the merits of fastness, however in the wider social context the lack of sustainability in the way food is produced results in an irretrievable destruction of agricultural, social, cultural and economic landscape.

The usability movement has developed into a science which can be likened to fast food production. In online design, this is articulated in adherence to conventions which arguably fail to acknowledge diversity. A convention is defined quantitatively as an attribute which is evident on 50-79% of popular sites. Thus, it is argued that all Web sites should be lead by the conventions of large (and by association mainstream, corporate and e-commerce) sites:

'If 80% of more of the big sites do things in a single way, then this is the de-facto standard and you HAVE to comply.' (Nielsen 1999)

Fastness is bad therefore not because it is fast but because of its mindless discouragement of difference and diversity. It is worth considering whether the dot.com industry can tolerate the negative traits that have come to be associated with fast food giants: exploitation, homogenisation, globalisation.

In contrast, Slow Food is not essentially a slow process but a process that could be more accurately described as mindful or careful (Parkins and Craig 2006). As a practice it highlights the idea of hospitality and encourages people to take time to share a meal where there are opportunities for conversation and sharing. The philosophy of 'slow' therefore is a reflective practice where attention is given to the production and the consumption of food. To be mindful of time means giving significance to the experience, to invest deliberate attention and reflection to the moment, to make the experience intense. This can be translated for online production in terms of designing experiences which make users feel like they are in a hospitable environment, where the people and/or organization behind the Web site are prepared to spend time attending to the user or consumer.

Indeed, McGovern (2002) suggests that interacting with other people, not just an interface, on the Internet is what makes people feel like they matter. If a Web site does not respond to user requests, it merely represents a faceless organisation which gives little priority to current or prospective customers. McGovern cites a survey of 250 retailer sites which showed that over 50% either took over 3 days to respond to email enquiries or did not respond at all. This exemplifies a lack of consideration of the customer experience and demonstrates the fastness of dot.com culture. What is supposed to be a quick and efficient way of communicating with an organisation is so fast that it leaves the customer behind. The notion of slow means learning the lessons of the dot.com bust and actively preventing as well as learning from the mistakes of the past; adopting an 'act local, think global' philosophy whereby actions at a micro level (such as how an organisation deals with online customer enquiries) has ramifications at a macro level (in terms of its effect on the reputation of the company and industry).

There is certainly evidence to indicate that users do want this micro level or slow attention to detail in the form of personalized service, or a sense of personal connection with others. This appears to be in direct response to feeling an 'overwhelming sense of compression' (Harvey 1989: 240) brought about by the sensation of accelerated time that the future seems to be

rushing at us out of control. As Klaus Schwab (Executive Chairman and Founder of the World Economic Forum) contends, velocity itself has become the dominating characteristic of the world's quicksilver economy, in that we are moving from a world in which the big eat the small to a world in which the fast eat the slow. Civilisation is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span which comes from the acceleration of technology or the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economies. It is of no surprise therefore to see a certain anxiety and perhaps fear in the ever speeding up way of life (Kreitzman 1999).

This is illustrated by the swathes of people, particularly members of the older generation, who have either been left behind by or actively rejected online culture: unable to keep up and/or unwilling to be a number on a Web site traffic log (Greenspan 2003, O'Hara and Stevens 2006). These people who are refusing to be swept away by accelerated time cling on to a belief where the past represents security. Where the future brings the unknown, the past offers familiarity. The anxiety which accompanies the unknown future would appear to be a recent phenomenon. However, this angst can be found and traced with each advent of new technology (such as the railway in the 19th century which reduced travel times by four to five fold), in the face of accelerated time, people look back nostalgically to a slower moving past. In terms of digital experiences, this might mean a desire for uncompressed, unrushed time. While there are opportunities online to linger, interactions are still primarily designed to be fast and efficient (whether this is e-commerce, instant messaging, email or SMS) rather than rich, deep and slow.

Slow time

This is not to say that fastness is inherently bad, for it would be too simplistic to equate fast with bad and slow with good. Being fast does have its merits: it saves time, it is efficient and enables high turnover. But while speed is the driving force of capitalism, it is worth considering that having time, the possession of more time, is that to which people aspire.

Marks and Spencer's (M&S) Simply Food brand, for example, has done a successful job of selling their customers the illusion of having time. The 'this is not just food, this is M&S food' campaign highlights the allegedly slow production of their meals which seduces their customers into buying what are, in effect, conventional ready-made microwavable dinners. Yet this appeals to the regular customers of M&S who are predominantly middle class working professionals in search of time, taste and sophistication. An important indicator of

the true affluent class in the 19th century was access to leisure. Leisure, as it were, was to be free from the responsibilities of work, to engage in non-productive forms of activities for ease, relaxation and pleasure (see Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*). The cultivation of taste and manners for example, were particularly important to the leisure class because it demonstrated an abundance of spare time that was not taken up by productive work but instead, devoted to self-improvement. Leisure time is a luxury, signifying the high status of someone who is at liberty to take and indulge in the ownership of their own time. Therefore, slowness becomes a mark of refinement.

The customers of M&S in the 21st century cannot be defined according to Veblen's 19th notion of the leisure class. They are part of a new demographic group characterized by their abundance of disposable income but lack of time: this is the money-rich time-poor community. Despite these differences, the idea of having time remains appealing across the centuries. Today, having time is not so much associated with notions of taste, education and culture; but rather about possessing something which is in scarce supply.

There is potential for digital experience designers to address this. The creation of timeless digital environments which attract users because the pressure of time is absent, where the flexibility and pace of time can be self-determined, has not been fully explored. Computer and video games have been traditionally time and task-oriented: arcade games are the classic example of doing as much as possible (shooting enemies, collecting points, progressing to the next level) in the limited time available. However, understanding that users are prepared to invest time in leisure, the games industry is now experimenting with exploratory genres of games where time is not of the essence (see, for example, the Harry Potter series of games for PlayStation, Xbox etc). So conversely, the promise of a leisurely experience may entice users to take time out of their busy lives: interactive museum installations, for example, encourage the user to ponder; consumption is reflective; they inspire knowledge of the world.

Slow experiences demand much more than just time. A slow experience is not defined in quantitative terms, that is, how long we spend eating or surfing the Web, but instead must be qualitatively understood. Indeed, it is about the quality rather than the amount of time, and it is this 'quality time' that is arguably missing from our everyday online interactions because they have not been designed with this in mind.

Fast production

The absence of 'quality time' in the ways that digital experiences are created for users has much to do with the conditions under which those experiences are produced. 'Time to market', or the time taken to design and develop a digital experience to the point that it is market-ready is heavily abbreviated. This speediness pervades the overall dot.com industry down to its methodologies for design and development.

For example, designing for usability generally means designing for ease (and by association, speed of use). The main assumption here is that Web interactions are essentially utilitarian activities. That is, the Internet is regarded as a tool with which the user achieves particular tasks. Usability facilitates the achievement of such tasks with ease, just as fast food makes the job of feeding oneself simple. In usability terms, 'surfing' and eating are tasks to be completed, rather than experiences which should be savoured and satisfied.

Accompanying recommendations for ease of use is the need for speed in online interactions, as proposed in one of Jakob Nielsen's ten usability heuristics (2005). That is, it is argued that ease of use and expediency go hand-in-hand in enabling the user to achieve their online goals as quickly and smoothly as possible.

Assuming that all users need ease and speed in most online context shows an ignorance of users and the diverse ways in which the Web is used. This lack of consideration or mindfulness of the user is summed up by another usability expert, Steve Krug (2000) in his book title, *Don't Make Me Think!*. The user is reduced to an unthinking automaton interested only in ease, speed, simplicity, utility, pragmatism and efficiency. The user is patronised and characterised by the usability expert as incapable of dealing with thought and complexity.

'...pay attention to what users do, not what they say. Self-reported claims are unreliable as are user speculations about future behaviour.' (Nielsen 5 August 2001).

The principles of designing for usability deem that it is not advisable to listen to users. This establishes a distant and asymmetrical relationship between digital designers and users. What might be a slow alternative to this?

Slow relationships

Hospes, the Greek root for the word 'hospitality', means not only to welcome but to equalize. In romantic languages such as French and Italian, the word *hotes* is used for both guest and host, there is no differentiation between the two. This suggests a lack of hierarchy between the concept of host and guest, both parties are equally responsible to participate, entertain and contribute to the experience.

The relationship between guest and host can be equated to that of the digital experience designer and user. For a hospitable relationship to be established, the distance between user and designer must be minimized and there must be equal contribution to designing the experience. Participatory design methods are one way of equalizing this relationship between user and designer. Levels of participation can range from consultation to consensus (Mumford and Henshall 1983: 4-6), but underpinning these approaches is the ethical principle of respecting the user's input into design decisions and valuing their contribution to the design of the digital experience.

Likewise, this intimate relationship can apply not only to the user and designer, but also to the user and system. A hospitable experience should be friendly but not overbearing, an almost timeless space where relationships are strengthened or formed, where the moment is all there is. In order to create such a space, tools must be carefully manipulated: waiters in a restaurant should always be present to cater for a client's needs and answer questions but should not be dominating nor patronising; likewise, a system should quietly serve a user's demands through their engagement with the interface without pressuring them to leave once their 'task' is achieved. Both a Web site and a dining table can act as a physical and mental refuge from a fast-paced life.

Slow Food asserts that plate and the planet are interconnected, and asks us to extend our care by paying attention to what we eat. In terms of everyday food consumption, this could be as simple as choosing where you buy your food so that it will directly benefit the farmer rather than just the distributors. Choosing to spend time on your food rather than grabbing a burger at a fast food joint means investing time and thought to the people around us, seeing ourselves as part of a community rather than individuals in isolation. Such a holistic view on production and consumption that is premised on a model that is ethical and sustainable, can also be implemented in digital contexts as part of a mindful or careful way of designing that asks us to consider the other (the client, the user) and the nature of our relationship to them.

Being slow in a fast world

There are possibilities for taking a slow approach to production, so that it is reflective and considers the consequences for others. Take the example of the television program, *Ready, Steady, Cook!* which has been running on British television since 1994. Celebrity chefs team up with contestants as their helpers and are asked to create a meal in 20 minutes with a bag of surprise ingredients in front of a studio audience. Although the planning and preparation time of the dishes is short, expert knowledge of the culinary products ensures variety and quality in what is eventually cooked. The thoughtful design, production and presentation of the dishes - as well as the close working relationship between the chef and consumer - means that it qualifies, contrary to its abbreviated timeframe, as 'slow food' rather than 'fast food'.

Similarly, in digital experience design, there is potential to be slow in a fast environment. Although digital media production is undeniably fast, it translates to being mindful of what is created for clients and their consumers. It requires a questioning of whether we have fallen into the equivalent rut of fast food production: pre-preparing ingredients, freeze-dried buns, pre-cut dehydrated vegetables fitted into a polystyrene box and placed in a paper bag. Is this the best that can be offered to clients, who would like to think that their online presence demands attention, that consumers would take time to discover or use their unique product or service? More importantly, is it a sustainable (rather than a disposable) model of production and consumption?

The valuing of slowness in digital media production can be seen in the investment of time, despite its scarcity and luxury, by designers in getting to know clients and their customers well, and giving attention to detail in promoting the client's products in the digital environment. As mentioned previously, slowness can be demonstrated by an ethic of care and hospitality that a client experiences working with a designer. The client must educate the designer in the products or services that they offer, while the designer must educate the client in ways of creating a digital experience that will best facilitate users' exposure to these products or services. Both client and designer collaborate to design the experience for the end user.

As in *Ready, Steady, Cook!*, the contestant (or client) supplies the ingredients, and in discussion with the chef (designer), determines how these should be prepared, cooked and

presented to inspire the viewer (user) to make it themselves at home. This attempt to generate an intimate familiarity with a product or activity before intended engagement can also be seen in cookbooks, where dishes are photographed in close-up and the reader is invited to experience the food visually before making it (Norman 2004: 102 – see his discussion of the Japanese lunchbox). These examples also demonstrate the potential of being slow (through acknowledging the work and beauty that lies behind a dish) in fast environments (where a recipe promises that the dish can be produced in a certain amount of time).

Current practice in online design seems to conflate the necessity of speed in production with that in consumption. Yet it is possible to have fast production for slow consumption in the digital arena. Consumers can be enticed to invest quality time and reflection to the client's product or service. As Norman (2004: 94) observes, this illustrates usability principles in reverse: it is about making something desirable through its lack of availability. The promise of a product is so high that it demands time from those who want to experience it. Although time is valuable, they are prepared to sacrifice it. The role of the digital designer is to ensure that this experience is not a mere pitstop in a user's Web surfing, a glance between multitasking, listening to the radio and/or watching the news. The association of slowness with leisure, timelessness and luxury is seductive in its allure of 'stealing time' out of the user's day for non-productive but reflective work. Again, it is about the possibility of being slow in a fast world.

'…we need to recognize that speed itself is not a universal good. Not only has the time of construction shrunk, so too has the time allowed for research, design, development and documentation… Lack of time for reflection is, ironically, the greatest barrier for critical thinking about the future. Speed does not lead to innovation, rather in the process of design it forces reliance on conventions and the eschewing of alternatives.' (Kaji-O'Grady 2006: 11)

Summary
- The approach and processes of the digital media industry can be equated to the fast food industry in terms of the pace of production and emphasis on speed, ease and convenience
- The 'slow' movement offers the dot.com industry lessons in the value of mindful production which does not homogenise or patronise the user experience
- Slowness offers dot.com clients the attraction of being considered thoughtfully and uniquely by their customers

- Being slow in a fast world can appeal to consumers through its promise of timelessness, leisure and status.
- Slow values in digital experience design can be translated as an ability to operate with integrity and sustainability in a fast world, which includes a willingness to invest time in clients and their customers.

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