BLOG SOFTWARE AND THE ACT OF BLOGGING
THESIS OUTLINE

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Object of study

Blog software: Wordpress 2.0.7 (the user hosted version available at Wordpress.org)
This thesis will take the stand-alone, install on your own server, Wordpress blog
software as an object of study. It will not take an online hosted blogging service such as
Blogger.com as an object of study because it is a relatively closed service which you
cannot take apart like you can with Wordpress.

Main question

How does blog software explain how the blogosphere works?

Sub questions

Does the software determine the protocol of the blogosphere? What other factors
besides the software shape the blogosphere? How do the technical aspects of blogging
relate to the social aspects of blogging?

Outline

Abstract

Keywords: blog software, Wordpress, software studies, materialism

Introduction (research question)

Chapter 1.Software Studies
      1.1 Why Study Software?
      1.2 Why Study Wordpress?
      1.3 Approach (materialistic)
      1.4 Methodology
          Software Studies is an emerging field which doesn't have a specific
          methodology yet. This paragraph will explain my personally derived version
          of Software Studies methodology. This method will be influenced by
          methods used by Matthew Fuller. It might involve keeping a personal diary
          of the use of Wordpress or a seeing Wordpress as a text and using a
          discursive textual analysis or interviewing users. Not decided yet, I first
          want to read more on Software Studies to get a sense of the previous
          methods used. This thesis will mainly be written from an expert-user point
          of view supplemented by insights from other bloggers.

Chapter 2. The technical history of the blog software

  1.1 Pre- blog software history

  1.2 The rise of blog software

    1.2.1 Pyra/Blogger 1999

    1.2.2 LiveJournal 1999

    1.2.3 Movable Type 2001

    1.2.4 b2/Wordpress 2001

Chapter 3. Technical chapter on Wordpress

  3.1 Database

  3.2 Protocol

  3.3 Code

  3.4 Interface

  3.5 Linking

  3.6 Plug-ins (in general, maybe take 2 or 3 often used plug-ins)

  3.7 Widgets

Chapter 4. Social aspects of blogging

  4.1 What do we do when we blog?

  4.2 Linking, Trackback, RSS

  4.2 Case study blogosphere

    This paragraph will describe the activity of blogging. It will contain information of about five to ten interviews with bloggers who use Wordpress. What constraints do they encounter? The chapter serves as a supporting chapter of the social aspect in relation

Chapter 5. Conclusion

Why study software?

Software studies is a relatively new field of study that

> theorizes the computational turn in everyday life by examining the "new terms, categories, and operations that characterize media that became programmable" [1] [2]

Matthew Fuller also suggests studying software since "Software is often a blind spot in the theorisation and study of computational and networked digital media."[3] So what is necessary are:

> Theorisations of software that are able to operate on the level of a particular version of a program, a particular file structure, protocol, sampling algorithm, colour-scheme, public interface, request for comments, and so on, are necessary. Further, it is essential to understand any such element or event as only one layer or node in a wider set of intersecting and multi-scalar formation.[4]

Why study Wordpress?

Geert Lovink states that:

> The path to understanding blogs lies somewhere between an analysis of software functionalities and the early adopter culture that invented and shaped the blogosphere.[5]

The first blogs were written and updated manually in HTML and the files had to be manually uploaded with a FTP program. Blog software automated this process and publishing content on a webpage became an easy process: "The motor behind the expansion of the blogosphere is the move away from code towards content."[6] Although the move away from code to content accounts for the rise of the number of blogs on the web it doesn't hold up when a blogger wants to break out of the norm. Breaking out of the norm requires a move back to the code.

The front end of blogging has been widely studied in several contexts such as:
– a new public sphere (the same utopian vision that the World Wide Web received)
– A-list bloggers
– blogging as a new kind of journalism
– remediation: the blog as a new kind of diary
– private versus public

1 Truscello, Michael. 'The Rhetorical Ecology of the Technical Effect.' *Technical Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer 2005): p. 345-351. http://www.leaonline.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1207/s15427625tcq1403_13 January 10, 2007.
2 Manovich, Lev. *Language of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001: p. 48.
3 Piet Zwart Institute. 'Software Studies Workshop' http://pzwart.wdka.hro.nl/mdr/Seminars2/softstudworkshop January 11, 2007.
4 Fuller, Matthew. <matt@axia.demon.co.uk> 'Behind the Blip. Software as Culture' January 7, 2002. Netttime mailinglist. http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0201/msg00025.html November 24, 2006.
5 Lovink, Geert. 'Blogging, the Nihilist Impulse' (in: *Zero Comments*). New York: Routledge, 2007 (forthcoming).
6 Lovink, Geert. 'Blogging, the Nihilist Impulse' (in: *Zero Comments*). New York: Routledge, 2007 (forthcoming).

The back end of the blog, consisting of blog software and a database constructed by the software, has hardly been been addressed until now. It is important to study the back end, the blog software and its database, because it determines how the front end looks (how to avoid technological determinism?). But software is more than a tool that constructs an object (the blog). Software are not merely tools "but also the paths between them, how they intermix, and the bounderies and correlations between their different functions, the objects they work on and the users that they amalgamate with."[7]

There seems to be a standardization in the way blog software looks, works and acts. They all offer the user a similar pallet of a limited variety of options. The blog software unconsciously or consciously limits the user in its abilities. The user can only break out of the standard blog frame if he/she has knowledge of the code. The power of the constraints is not absolute, but lies in the ability to write your own CSS stylesheet, plug-ins and widgets or use them from others. A blog is an assemblage of these extensions.

What are the constraints in the software, the interface, the format and the code? Several issues and layers will be addressed: database (mysql, php), interface, css, plug-ins, widgets, linking (permalinks/trackbacks), uploads (restrictions, only text, pictures, pdf), control through code (allowing commens/blocking ip's). Also the context in which the software operates is an important issue. Software is often not a stand-alone application, but it acts in a wider context. In the case of Wordpress the blog software allows connection to a wider network, the blogosphere, through RSS, permalinks and trackbacks. Not only does software act in a wider context it also arises in a context. How did blogging software come into existence? Who writes the (open source) Wordpress software? (Automattic + development community)

Approach

Kittler argues that there is no such thing as software, software is immaterial and embedded in hardware. Software layers hide the hardware layers and the machine itself and for Kittler this implicates that:

> When meanings come down to sentences, sentences to words, and words to letters, there is no software at all.[8]

The only way software might be material for Kittler is in the sense that it might be patternable. This thesis however will take on a Fulleresque materialist approach to software and sees software as an existing material thing.

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7   Fuller, Matthew. *Behind the Blip. Essays on Software Culture.* Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003. p 138.
8   Kittler, Friedrich. 'There is No Software.' *CTheory* (October 18, 1995)
      http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=74 January 9, 2007.

Approach: Software criticism/materialistic approach.
Not: Software Art, Free Software debate

Expected findings

Even when plug-ins and widgets provide users with a certain degree of freedom within the constraints of the software, this kind of freedom is only available to those who have knowledge of the code. Even though Wordpress' slogan is "Code is poetry" not everyone is able to write poetry. There is a paradox in the use of a lot of plug-ins and widgets. According to Wordpress "Widgets are things you can put in your WordPress blog's sidebar without knowing how to edit a web page." and while this sounds excellent in theory, practice is usually different. This thesis will probably show that software has a huge impact on the act of blogging and the blogosphere itself, but also that the blogosphere has an impact on the software.

Way forward

Studying Wordpress as a major player in blog software is in a sense a way forward in itself. Software studies is a field in progress and needs to be contributed to. By critiquing one of the major software tools for blogging this thesis hopes to contribute to the growing field of software studies.

A lot has been written about the social aspects of blogging and little has been written about the technical aspects of blogging. This thesis strives to contribute to the understanding of blogging by connecting both aspects and explain how they influence one another.

Further info & planning

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