

Is there a {ghost} in my future?
success
God
problem

**A visit to The Tech Oracle (TTO) in esc media art laboratory (Graz), May 2015
with Pascale Barret, Julien Deswaef, Heidrun Primas, Ushi Reiter, Agnese Trocchi, IOhannes m zmölnig,
Peter Westenberg, Reni Hofmüller**

"I actually think most people don't want Google to answer their questions [...] They want Google to tell them what they should be doing next."

Eric Schmidt, Ceo of Google in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, August 2010

This quote by Eric Schmidt became the starting point for a collective creation by seven artists for whom the life on and of the Internet is of daily interest. If a search engine would really be capable to direct our lives as the the ancient Greek oracle of Delphi did, what would that look like? The artists transformed the exhibition space of esc media art laboratory (esc) in Graz into a performative environment in which the different aspects of our online lives are exposed as a routed game., with a lot of quip and humor.

This text is written for documentation purposes. It is based on conversations with the makers and personal impressions during the opening weekend.

Welcome



Three out of the four walls of esc are made of glass and are usually covered by curtains, but not for this installation. The design reminds me of Zuckerberg's office on the FB campus, so transparent that it ends up being suspicious. The windows are decorated with multiple choice questions. They were extracted from Google auto-complete, the tool that completes your writing by showing the most used keywords for this combination. They function as teasers, a form of advertising for what is happening inside. At the entrance a welcoming text on the floor explains that you can ask your question to The Tech Oracle, TTO will give you an answer that helps you on the

path to happiness.

"TTO HELPS YOU FACE THE CHALLENGES THAT LIE ON THE LIFE PATH AHEAD OFF YOU. BASED ON YOUR DATA THE ORACLE MAKES A PERSONAL ANALYSIS AND WILL PRINT OUT INDICATIONS THAT HELP YOU MOVE FORWARD IN LIFE. TO MAKE THE ADVISE UNIQUE FOR YOUR INDIVIDUAL SITUATION, TTO NEEDS YOUR PERSONAL DATA. YOU CAN TRUST TTO. YOUR DATA IS SAFE. TTO-SYSTEM IS SECURE, IT IS ALL CENTRALIZED HERE IN ORDER TO GIVE THE ORACLE THE BEST INFORMATION."

We try to predict our most simple needs; with the oracle we go much further to show the absurdity of the system but also in order to play along 'as if it was working fine'.

° Using the Google analytics and trends' tools daily, I found that people look most for satisfaction and happiness which are queries for an oracle, while Google gives consumerist answers. The Google search algorithm is mysterious in itself, so they sell advertising and we can see it is advertising no doubt; but their ranking algorithm, the indexation itself is much more complex. You can influence the position of your site in the long term, after a year of steady changes, linking, being linked, augment amount of visitors. Does anyone still know what it is? How it works? In that sense the algorithm functions like the oracle: no one really knows how. Instead of giving consumerist answers, this oracle gives you cryptic existential answers. I propose to create an image for the oracle, a collective vision extracted from the collective intelligence, just like [Google's experiment on neural networks](#), in which the facial recognition algorithms very quickly started looking for cats and learned how to compose the average cat's image!¹

Register here

In order to consult the oracle you first have to register by giving your fingerprint. The fingerprint reader is invitingly installed next to a keyboard and a screen that welcomes you as a visitor. The makers are my colleagues, I know the venue, the coordinators are my friends. I guess these elements explain my spontaneous gesture of putting the top of my index finger in the reader and watching how I'm immediately welcomed as a new user. Most visitors were not cooperative at all. They choose to follow the printed instruction and moved towards the center of the space: IF YOU DON'T WANT TO REGISTER NOW, PLEASE PROCEED TO CONTEMPLATE.

^ Having to give your fingerprint is ambiguous. Especially in Austria people do not want to give their fingerprints, like iris scans they're a piece of information we cannot change or delete, never. This highlights the question of trust: how do we establish trust? What do we base it on? While it is difficult to give it in a small physical space, we erase the question from our consciousness when we travel online. We have a terrible ease of trust in machines, while we're

1 In the mean time Google continues developing its experimental neural networks asking them to produce images starting from what the network itself learned from the images it was fed with. As Google x researchers say: "If we apply the algorithm iteratively on its own outputs and apply some zooming after each iteration, we get an endless stream of new impressions, exploring the set of things the network knows about."
<http://googleresearch.blogspot.it/2015/06/inceptionism-going-deeper-into-neural.html>"

getting more distant in our physical society. Trust between humans is a question of negotiation; this is not the case with machines: you either accept or you don't use it. 'It's your decision' becomes a phrase with a different meaning.

The installation is designed following the strategies of the big players on the net, trying to collect as much information as possible. The big difference is that the aim to collect data of the user is written out explicitly on the texts panels next to the stations. Once you've registered, you can formulate your question to the oracle and you are invited 'to help the oracle to help you' by answering the many questions that reveal more personal information, like your age, place of residency, profession etc. We know these as the classic templates of any social network profile page.

If you don't want to register now

At every stage of the itinerary this message appears. The possibility that you might not want to register creates a strange friction during a first visit. Why would I not want to register if what I really want, is an answer of the oracle? In a humorous way this message makes you conscious about the uncanny habit we have of blindly registering for online services and accepting any conditions by not reading them, only because we have a very clear objective, like making new friends or buying an indispensable object. 'Opt-out', which means to choose not to participate in something, defines the narrative of this installation, in contrast to the default of on-line services, where we're automatically 'in', and only opt-out if we remember to do so.

This double intention of not being guided immediately to registering and at the same time feeling the curiosity to know the oracle's answer, is the installation's strength. In this esthetically purified environment, where screens, a web cam and other details are discretely distributed in the space, we play the game even if we're continuously asked to slow down. The effect is that questioning and reflection are enhanced each step of the itinerary.

We made a metaphor of Gafam (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft), the big collectors of data who are interested in predicting the needs of their users and creating artificial intelligent agents who can tell them what to do next (in terms of business). But when you look at the pyramid of Maslow, there is more to needs than what Gafam can propose. The top need is one of self development, the freedom to adapt and give shape to things. We're growing more and more into an infrastructure in which we will not be able to escape the mold anymore.

The installation gives a clear sign: as humans we have the right to say 'no', or even better, in a world of growing artificial intelligence, only humans have the possibility to say 'no'. That right is the path towards freedom.

In terms of jurisdiction Europe's requirements are so high that we

have the ethical duty to continue on that level, especially now. We can disobey and protest. We set the standard for the rest of the world.

The narration was also inspired by the fact that the Snowden case has had very little effect on the world wide user's behavior. There almost hasn't been any protest, let alone changes in behavior.

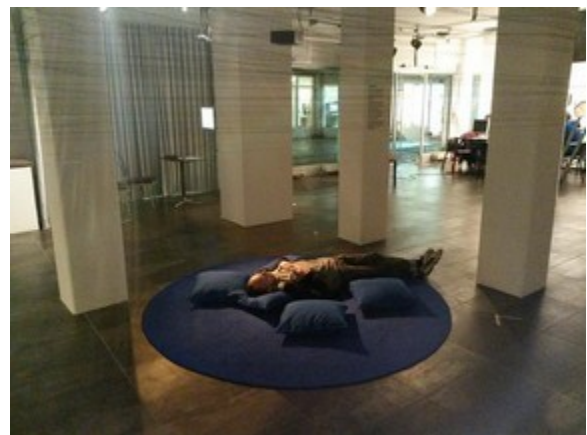
@ After Snowden our online behavior did not change; I ask myself how to make this change possible. As an artist I am faced with his question and I ask myself, how can I influence?

The Route[r/s] of Life

The guiding texts at the different 'stations' lead you through a variety of itineraries. Everything depends on 'how you feel', which mainly means, 'if you already feel ready to register'. The following description hopefully makes clear that the loops in this itinerary can be endless. Game of Life – the board game - was used as a model for these guidelines, which is a great metaphor for an oracle. But it also works as a physical embodiment of the many online routes we take, and for how algorithms work. As long as you're not complying to the different conditions of that one loop – because 'it's your decision' to accept the rules of the operating system of your smart phone – you either decide to live without the oracle's answer or to be happy with the terms of use and finally (!) register.

***Contemplate**

If you don't want to register now, you're invited to the contemplate zone. This zone is situated in the physical and virtual center of the space. Above an electric blue carpet comfortably installed with cushions, the space is demarcated with fine threads that represent the endless layers of a server farm or data center. To heighten the experience, the actual server is installed as a UFO right above. While lying on the carpet you can choose to pick several exercises that help you reflect, such as: 'Contemplate on the ways the internet can enrich your inner life,' or 'Think about the relationship between hardware, ecology, the banking system and our collective future as humans.' Afterwards you're invited to move to 'Trust' or of course, to register.



*Trust

The 'Trust' station is composed of a table with a steel suitcase that can be secured with a chain. At this stage you're invited to leave all your personal documents in the suitcase, including your ID and credit card. A printed copy of the Terms of Use allows you to look at the details of the agreement. The rare reader of this kind of documents quickly recognizes its style and content.

*Identify

Are you not happy with all this then you're guided towards the 'Identify' post. Here you have all necessary tools to mask your identity. You can anonymize yourself using the profile pictures of Facebook users and mirroring masks. You'll not only be anonymous for the living beings in the space, but also for the discretely present web cam that takes a new shot every minute, analysing each image with a face recognition software, showing each found face up front to the audience.

In case you feel enhanced with your mask, you can go back to Trust and proceed to Register. If not, you either go back to the contemplation zone or you can express your disagreement.



*Protest



Protest can be done in several ways. You can make your sign or use an existing cardboard sign and move towards the central square of Graz. Or you can think of your slogan and have two old ladies protest virtually for you. Of course, each new slogan is being logged as well. Together with fragments of your questions, answers and comments these words flash across three giant screens in one corner of the space. Nothing is left untouched, every gesture that is produced in that small

physical space can be recorded, classified, processed and reused in a different context. Even if the illusion exists, there is no such thing as a delete-button. You could ask to be deleted, but your demand can be considered insignificant. What about these old ladies who might find themselves duplicated in a thousand pictures showing slogans they might never have heard of? Everything depends upon the decision of the makers. Where will the data be stored? For how long? Will it be distributed online? We have no idea. The programmers made sure that the fingerprint reader doesn't register the authentic print, but only a numeric interpretation which is impossible to retrace later. Exactly, just like it is mentioned in their and in any Terms of Use of any data mining service: "the data and queries collected by XXX are collected in a form that does not personally identify you and may be used by XXX and its partners, licensees and third party developers to provide and improve location-based products and services".

***Comment**



Once you've registered, you can leave your comments, but not after you identified again by offering your fingertip to the reader. The computer recognizes your profile and will record your comments as more useful information for the oracle's answer. Comments on what?

Each visitor is offered a series of stunning images, selected from different sources, like the MEME templates, the Metropolitan Image Archive, national libraries, scans of old art books, fragments of cult films.

The more comments you leave, the more personalized the oracle's answer will be. And isn't that what we want? Otherwise we don't

have anything, or we get a standard answer, and yet, what is a standard message? Anyone who has tried to opt out on customized advertising services in their browser, knows that somehow it will pick up the information about age, gender and location...

Print your Oracle

As humans we have the capacity to create sense with whatever we have at hand.

Finally, the oracle, the ultimate answer for which we were ready to sacrifice our data! The outcome is a scrambled text with some personal clues in some kind of 'advisory language'. When you have taken the time to go through the entire process, trying to understand every single station; building up the anticipation for the ultimate advise, the result is... a piece of text on the old matrix printer paper. I would have enjoyed a person reading it to me from a smoky basement. But the voice of the oracle is much more materialized than that. Every hour you can

hear a overwhelming sound scape that is a collection of all sounds that materialize the oracle: servers, ventilators, data centers, but not only. There are recorded sounds from the street, and synthetic voices reading fragments of the transcribed conversations and selected texts on horoscopes and tarot readings. Impossible to miss it.



And by hearing that 'voice', I realized that the result on the little paper confronted me (again) with embedded habits of judgment. The hyper short lifespan of a search engine result – how long do you look at it - has taken the shape of a a piece of paper with some machine printed gray letters on it, a random telex message, ready for the bin after a quick glance. But it is much more! It hides the essence of a better life! The text merits to be read three or four times, to be analysed in terms of possible worlds that hide behind the funny sentences. Finally, that is what I did, days later.

The idea of a predictive force has much more influence that what we would like it to have; go to a fortune teller and you will not forget the results. It is also a pleasure to believe it a little bit. I would have preferred to use a symbolic language, like f.ex. Pictograms as in <https://thenounproject.com>. The result might have looked more like concrete poetry to which each person would have given their personal meaning. The border between poetry and aleatory text is subtle.

Concretely, the oracle is based on a data collection and texts. A webserver is linked to a database. Users fill in on-line forms and their answers are collected in the database. All questions and answers given by the user are composed of nouns and adjectives. The occurrences of these words are compared to the corpora. The best match decides on which corpus text is picked out for the oracle. A Markov generator is performed on this text and in the generated text, one random noun or adjective is replaced by one of the nouns or adjectives from the input. The Markov text generator is frequently used for writing spam messages. The advantage is that it generates a different text each time, contrary to when you would simply replace words in sentences. The corpus is composed of 15 to 20 texts, from fairy tales to a speech by Bush, texts by Nostradamus, Philip K. Dick, the Anarchist Manifesto, Brian Eno's Oblique Strategies, Google's Terms of Use and the series of NLTK-Books (except Moby Dick, because when it was in, it was selected all the time).

The process

@ One word fed the other

During ten days the seven artists physically worked together in *esc*. They were selected by the coordinators of the two collaborating organisations of art and media, *esc* in Graz and Constant in Brussels. The choice was based on the combination of skill sets and their affinities with collaborative creation processes.

The artists met online six months earlier. They were asked to make a collective piece to be shown in *esc* during a city festival in May. From the very beginning the techniques defined the routes taken. As they were all living in different locations, they decided to use IRC, the oldest chat protocol that remains very popular in on-line communities of software-developers, geeks, fan clubs; but not as a medium for the average internet user. The first form of 'alphabetization' was manifested immediately: those who are able to type fast and are used to the chat format, know that chat conversations are not linear, and that different topics can be dealt with synchronously by using tiny protocols to answer previously asked questions from specific users. People who need a lot of time to formulate their ideas, or have never learned to type as fast as they think, can easily get lost in the fast text stream of the chat. This difference in 'the knowledge of technical languages' was a frequently mentioned obstacle throughout the process, as much for the software developers as for people with only theoretical or no knowledge of technology.

Another aspect that was judged as difficult, was the 'time span'. Ten days is a very short time to make an artistic creation together. There is a lot of overhead in a collaborative process. A lot of discussions need to take place, in which everyone needs to express his or her opinion. To have been able to open the exhibition space with a beautifully finished installation, was a matter of following coinciding aspects:

^ We managed to be just ourselves, with our phantoms, fears, joys, challenges, grasping tasks, leading, leaving, following the herd...

& There was a strong local support network that could provide us with any materials, and instant solutions like a smoke machine, technicians, computers... These two mediators were essential. They were able to re-frame, adjust the atmosphere, put priorities in terms of time, content, task forces, find practical solutions.

§ The space has influenced the process a lot. First of all, we're in front of the Fluxus gallery, which doesn't leave me indifferent. And secondly, we realized that the space has a 'mineral' character. Everything is made out of metal or glass. At first we brought a lot of objects, then we started to eliminate those that were not 'mineral'.

It was a way to wipe out our presences; a way to make the content and the form resonate. It was a struggle. I'm very happy we arrived at 'crystallizing' everything!

The Tech Oracle TTO was shown from 19th May till 26th June 2015. It was the first chapter in the series of Iterations, in which a different combination of artists will remix the existing work.

More information on Iterations: <http://www.constantvzw.org/site/Iterations-The-Tech-Oracle.html>

More pictures of TTO: <http://gallery3.constantvzw.org/index.php/Iterations-TTO-Tech-Oracle>

Code of the text generator: <https://github.com/umlaeute/tto-oracle>

Software that tracks your fingerprints: <https://github.com/umlaeute/tto-FingerAuth>