Web browsers prescribe the ways we access and navigate knowledge and communities online. Since the 1990s browser software has been an arena for artistic interventions ranging from quirky standalone browsers to performative pieces to minimalist browser add-ons. The (im)possibility of navigation is not taken for granted and is probed, questioned, and reformulated through such software practices. We propose navigation as a mode of exploring interactive software that allows researchers to collectively document manifold facets of artists' browsers.

Navigation

Reihe
Begriffe des
digitalen Bildes

Navigation

Content

asdasdasdasasasasdasdasdasdasdad

wwwhakcookkr

www.kd.co.kr

www.la.co.kr

www.uf.co.kr

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Reading Between the Lines. JODI's %WRONG Browser.co.kr

A First-Person Perspective "Meta-Game"

1. I am opening JODI's *%WRONG Browser* website in the current browser of my choice. In 2021, when this experiment is taking place, Safari or Google Chrome are the two largest browsers in popular use.

2. I am downloading the *.co.kr* version of *%WRONG Browser* to my computer's local hard disc. Having installed the software, I struggle to open it. My latest MacOS operating system is no longer compatible with a 32-bit application. I turn to an older machine, which has not seen an update since 2016.[1] This time, I am able to open the application and start the actual "game of browsing".

3. I sit back and watch a neon-like dance of backgrounds and code lines, trying to point and click, write or perform any other actions a user would expect of a standard web browser, such as inputting random text and hitting the return (or enter) button to confirm the command. I use digital, gaming and systemic literacies to interact with the program; all three terms describe an ability to interact with digital systems and their conventions. I am not successful. The browser does not react in a predictable manner to any of my attempts. It does not display or "search" the text input. In most cases, it does not seem to react to clicking either. Its visual interface remains a metaphorical puzzle. JODI's *%WRONG Browser .co.kr* does not "live" a conventional life. I decide to use my imagination instead.

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1   The older Macintosh computer ran the following system: OS X Yosemite, Version 10.10.5.

4. To keep the results comparable to one another, I partici-pate in the code spectacle for a few minutes, exit the *%WRONG Browser* and launch it again. And again. I choose to focus on three interaction sessions as method of handling the software in a quasi-laboratory setting. Each time I access the browser, I try to repeat the same actions.

5. I take screenshots to document the digital voyage in the hope of discerning some patterns of code behavior meaningful enough for a later analysis.

6. While watching the *%WRONG Browser* spectacle, I ponder about the meaning of the term "to browse". Etymologically, "to browse" dates back to 15th century Middle English browsen and means "to come into bud" or "to graze". In the late 19th century, the verb started to be used within the context of writ-ten media (to browse as in to peruse a book). In the mid-20th century, browsing was extended to electronic digital comput-ers and finally now describes the action of looking for infor-mation while going through webpages in the World Wide Web. Browsing has come a long way from literally looking for food to figuratively searching for food for thought, whether in a library, a bound book or online.

The "Game" of Browsing

I am using the term "game" here in a twofold manner; on the one hand, to express my ludic and tinkerer's attitude towards the task of browsing, on the other to describe a methodologi-cal approach based on the adaptation of pre-defined rules (e.g. three consecutive browsing sessions; each lasting maximum five minutes and separated by a reset of the program). My inter-action with JODI's browser was carried out within the context of a scholarly/art experiment. I was also very conscious of my

own role as a researcher/interpreter as well as of JODI art collective. As a result, I was not expecting a predictable standard browsing experience, and in the face of the visual and systemic puzzle of JODI's *%WRONG Browser .co.kr,* I needed a method which would allow me to explore and be creative within a rigid framework. Such an attitude may be interpreted as a ludic one.

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Round 1
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www.ud.co.kr
The "ud.co.kr" URL is bathing in neon green against a feverishly red background.
www.gi.co.kr
     www.ud.co.kr
Red and black horizontal stripes keep shimmering.
www.gi.co.kr
     www.ud.co.kr
         www.go.co.kr
Black and green horizontal stripes keep shimmering.
www.go.co.kr
     www.ud.co.kr
         www.gi.co.kr
Black and blue horizontal stripes keep shimmering.
www.zu.co.kr
A yellow screen appears with a clock in the right upper corner designating the time "16:57 Uhr".
Black and light blue stripes keep shimmering with the date 2021 displayed in the upper right corner.
www.fi.co.kr
     www.yu.co.kr
Screen turns predominantly black with a few URLs juxtaposed on top of one another.

www.py.co.kr

The URL appears in bright green against black background with a red rectangle in the top line of the screen

www.py.co.kr

　　　www.f1.co.kr

Black and red horizontal stripes keep shimmering.

www.f1.co.kr

The URL shines in red against the background composed of black and green horizontal stripes. Two other URL addresses are juxtaposed on top of each other so that their destination is not easily discernible.

www.kd.co.kr

Black and blue horizontal stripes keep shimmering. An incomplete time designation "...4 Uhr" is displayed in the upper right corner.

www.uf.co.kr

　　　www.hz.co.kr

　　　　　www.nk.co.kr

　　　　　　　www.fl.co.kr

The date "10.2021" is displayed in the upper right corner: "hz.co.kr" in purple, "nk.co.kr" in green and "fl.co.kr" in red, all standing out clearly against a dazzling yellow background. Pitch black screen appears and can be covered with white lines of natural language.

My text reads: "asdasdasdasasasasdasdadsda Home Home" The screen turns into a black and red grid then goes back to dazzling yellow.

The browser freezes in a yellow state of ambience.

www.ij.co.kr
    www.hs.co.kr
        www.cq.co.kr
            www.ez.co.kr
                www.kx.co.kr
                    www.la.co.kr
                        www.ij.cc
                            www.jv.co.kr
                                www.dk.co.kr
                            www.be.cc.cr
                    www.vs.co.cr
                www.Ij.co.kr
            www.mf.co.kr
        www.fd.co.kr
      www.kn.co.kr
    www.ov.kr
www.vb.co.kr

Reflecting Images in Operation

Frieder Nake once wrote in The Algorithmic Art Manifesto: "we cannot see the digital. nor can we hear or smell or taste or touch it. the digital does not exist for human senses. we just cannot perceive it."[2] JODI's *%WRONG Browser* experiment pushes me to go beyond my humanness, as if promising to make me see what usually cannot be seen. Instead of text, images and standard interface elements, I am thrown into a random universe of dazzling code lines. The usual point-and-click visual browsing experience turns into a spectacle of images in operation. In JODI's work, it is the computable or

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2   Frieder Nake: Algorithmic Art Manifesto. In: Andrea Sick (ed.): Nevertheless. 17 Manifestos. Hamburg 2018, pp.69-72, here p.69, http://17.manifestos.de/ [accessed 15.6.2022].

the operational that has been moved to the surface for my eyes to see. And although the visual layer has been laid bare, by no means has the digital image become any clearer. The aesthetic of error and operationality turns out to be as muddling as the commercial visual metaphor. In other words, although I laid my eyes on the subface (Ger. Unterfläche) of the twofold image (to lean on Frieder Nake's concept again; Ger. das doppelte Bild), it turned out to be as incomprehensible as scratching its surface (Ger. Oberfläche), if not more so.

The above discovery should not come as surprise. Although the image is digital and discrete, the reception of it must remain analogue and continuous.[3] As a human, I am able to visually judge only the continuous aspect, so the discrete essence of the image needs to be displayed as if it were no different to the traditional analog image. Seeing behind the digital veneer without the ability to read code for its meaning rarely leads to any revelations. To my eye, the operationality of the digital image remains distant and undecipherable.

My short reference to Nake's theory of digital imagery within the context of JODI's *%WRONG Browser* is actually quite natural as the experience of interacting with the browser is a highly visual one. Every line of text and/or code is displayed on the screen and thrown against a brightly pulsating digital canvas. After all, the history of browsing and interacting with electronic computers is a history of human and computer vision. And although other senses have also been engaged in the process (more recently, together with the prevalence of virtual audio assistants such as Apple's Siri, the auditive operationality of media has entered into popular use), vision is usually the starting point for the working with software. In my interpretation, thus, it is impossible not to take the visual aspect into consideration.

3   Frieder Nake: Das doppelte Bild. In: Horst Bredekamp, Matthias Bruhn & Gabriele Werner (eds.): Digitale Form. Bildwelten des Wissens. Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch für Bildkritik. Berlin 2006.

Art tends to make the materiality of the medium particularly striking. It has the capacity to bring its most fundamental aspects to light. And this is the only "stable truth" I am able to hold on to while attending to *%wrong Browser .co.kr*. Confronted with random visual confusion, I search for understanding and the comfort of usability in the safety of visual theory. I find some consolation in Vilém Flusser's theory of technical image.[4] Flusser rethinks the image vis-à-vis its traditional representational character. Technical images no longer represent or signify any objects found in reality. They construct reality. They do not depict but visualize, model and simulate. For Flusser, although the human observer is not able to see behind the digital veneer, they remain a central figure in the act of "watching" as it is only the human, who has the capacity to turn technical images back into images in

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4   Cf. Vilém Flusser: Into the Universe of Technical Images. Minnea-
     polis 2011, p.33. English translation of: Ins Universum der techni-
     schen Bilder (first published in 1985).

the first place. Flusser's interpretation of the human observer has allowed me to shift the understanding of my own role vis-à-vis *%WRONG Browser .co.kr*. I stopped expecting any predictable return messages and did not even attempt to understand the browser's operations. Instead, I turned JODI's browser back into an art performance, which escapes all conventions, even if their existence may have seemed implied by the term "browser". Having initially attempted to understand the undecipherable set of visual operations, I ended up simply appreciating the visual confusion. The truth lies in the beauty of the digital performance.

In Flusser's reflections on the critical reception of the technical image, the question of distance remains central. He sees it as necessary to create new criteria to be used in the analysis of technical images. And these are fundamentally different to the ones familiar from the traditional realm. Since technical images are no longer representations of the outside world but approximations and models of reality, their "critical reception [...] demands a level of consciousness that corresponds to the one in which they are produced".[5]

The meaning of a technical image then is literally encoded. In order to decode a technical image, as Flusser argues, we do not need to read what it shows but rather read how it has been programmed:

We must criticize technical images on the basis of their program. We must start not from the tip of the vector of meaning but from the bow from which the arrow was shot. Criticism of technical images requires an analysis of their trajectory and an analysis of the intention behind it. And this intention lies in the link, the suture of the apparatus that produced them with the envisioners who produced them.[6]

5   Ibid., p. 22.

And precisely this aspect leaves me empty-handed. My documentation of the *%WRONG Browser* rests on the method of close reading that is well-established in literary theory; one which speaks to my human sense of aesthetic and understanding, but one which is not able to penetrate the logic of encoded screen. To understand JODI's browser for future generations is not to read it closely, but at a distance, following in the footsteps of Flusser and more contemporary critical code studies, reading code for more than what it does and focusing instead on its meaning.[7] The unreadability of the browser is not due to its missing code, but to its subversive "nature" as a work of art. Its lack of predictability and conventionality makes it virtually impossible (if not futile) to interpret in accordance with digital industry standards. JODI's browser is an artistic experiment playing with the well-established and popular practice of Internet browsing. We can, or should, thus, question the purpose documenting and archiving this "browser" on the same premises as usability software.

Having reflected on my own act of interpretation, I come back to "browsing". Round three. Attempt three. Reset complete.

Round 3 (after reset)

<*HTML* element> (Code reading)

 (An html tag defining an important piece of text in the document. In our case the opening tag <strong> is missing, so the tag has no operational meaning)

 (An HTML element responsible for displaying a line break in text. In our case, there is no text to break. The line is empty. The meaning cannot be broken.)

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6   Ibid., p.48.
7   Cf. Mark C. Marino: Critical Code Studies. Cambridge/MA 2020.

\<br\>\<br\>

\</div\> (In HTML *a generic container for flow content. There is no content preceding the tag. It cannot contain.)*

\</td\> *(An* HTML *element defining a cell in a table. Where is the table?)*

\</tr\> *(An* HTML *element defining a row in the table. It seems there is a table with a cell containing an image; most probably depicting either an autumn landscape, or something else I cannot see.)*

\<td\>\<img src="static/images/1/fall04.jpg"

alt="hosting.kr"\> \</t

\</tr\> *(An* HTML *element defining a row in the table)*

\</table\> *(An* HTML *tag defining a table)*

\</body\> *(An* HTML *tag defining the document's body. This tag is closing a body, there is no opening tag to be found. A full stop, which does not close any sentence.)*

\</html\>

Empty tags.

Empty containers.

A surface of the subface.

Representation over computation.

Meaningless HTML tags.

My attempt to read the code for what it does reveals that is has no function whatsoever. The HTML tags are used randomly, displayed as images. The "real" code of JODI's *%WRONG Browser* must be buried beneath the neon code veneer. *.co.kr* is a simulation, but one evoking its pre-modern meaning. It remains an encoded optical illusion.

I remain confused.

The subface turns out to be the surface simulating the subface.

I exit the program.

Fig.4, Screenshot.

Das DFG-Schwerpunktprogramm ‚Das digitale Bild' untersucht von einem multiperspektivischen Standpunkt aus die zentrale Rolle, die dem Bild im komplexen Prozess der Digitalisierung des Wissens zukommt. In einem deutschlandweiten Verbund soll dabei eine neue Theorie und Praxis computerbasierter Bildwelten erarbeitet werden.

**DAS
DIGITALE
BILD**