

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



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Munich, 2022
Open Publishing LMU

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Process on Display. Navigating through Flashing Light

As a historian, one is used to obscurity. Every investigation begins with a mountain of disorganized sources and the attempt to find orientation. The obscurity as it presented itself in the *%WRONG Browser* was therefore not particularly worrying. From a disciplinary point of view, one could assume that sooner or later a system would come to light, an order could be created, or at least reasons for the confusing composition could be formulated. More disconcerting was the task itself. As a historian of technology, I saw myself confronted with three challenges. They provide the structure for this text.

The first one was the research question. It required that I document how I appropriated the browser and then reflect on that appropriation – all from my standpoint as a historian of technology. The assignment thus oscillated between editing the program as a source through source criticism and writing a source along the lines of a working report of the kind that historians of technology so often find in their source collections. I edited one source to create another. It is likely that this circumstance arises more often than one would like to believe (1). A second difficulty is directly related to the first. It involves an unavoidable personal union. Software programs, be they works of art or not, function as a composition of different components. The user is always part of this composition.¹ In addition to the task of interpreting a source and creating one, there is the unavoidable circumstance of being a user and

a historian at the same time. That is, I am part of the configuration I am investigating. This might also happen more often than one would like (2). These doublings continue in the third aspect, which revolves around the central object of the task, the browser. This is, on the one hand, a computer program subject to a certain functionality that needs to be seen through, and, on the other hand, an art object that in turn has its own system of reference. The three challenges are obviously circular. It will be the browser itself that subverts these attempts for differentiation (3).

(1) There are no specific guidelines for recording systems in historical scholarship. One excerpts, makes notes and sketches, and perhaps occasionally writes a coherent, structured section of text. Apart from source criticism, there is a relatively wide methodological freedom. The type of research documentation varies and may or may not depend on the object of study. It is often subject to personal preference and habit. In my case, circumstances coincided with customs. The %*WRONG Browser.co.kr* made a totalitarian claim. The program filled the entire screen and allowed no other activity on the device it was running on. The user's view was reduced to this one program.² I had to resort to another medium for contemporaneous documentation.

My documentation consists of several handwritten notes and sketches on loose sheets of paper (Fig. 1). At first, I took notes during each short session on the browser. Later I would draw sketches. In these sketches, it is no longer possible to reconstruct a chronology, because they are successively condensed. Simultaneous observation, early associations and researched information spatially entered into direct proximity. I reworked old sketches and broke off current records after only a short time. Some sketches are overviews, others focus on a

² To see how unconventional this is: Sherry Turkle: *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York 1995, p.14.

specific aspect. Again and again, I started anew, transferring keywords from older sheets and trying to make connections with new observations and thoughts. Thus, my approach was one of constantly writing down, attempting to sort different aspects and relate them to each other. The point was to create orientation through arrangement. The distinction between observation, analysis and association is not marked in this kind of documentation. In a later step, in which I produced a narrative recording of my approach, these different qualities had to be segmented again. Unquestionably, this resulted in further sketches. Basically, the recording system consisted of creating order and destroying it, in order to then begin the sorting work again under new auspices and with new input.

(2) These records provide a basis for distinguishing the four work steps with which I acquired the program. They took place in parallel at almost all times. As a user of the 21st century, it was obvious for me to look for intervention possibilities. Unconcernedly I clicked, deleted and searched for input fields. In keeping with the task at hand, however, I also took stock and tried to differentiate components. Out of personal and professional interest, I read into the brief history of the browser and tried to understand how conventional browsers work.³ I kept recombining this disparate data to try to form a coherent picture of the browser.

When I first opened it, I was just an observer. I let it run and observed what happened. I documented the aspects that caught my attention. It was overwhelming. I copied down words I saw on the screen and described the components and what they were doing.

Without any intervention, it flashed and sounded. Sounds resembling data processing rang out. Code-like blocks of text ran in different colors and overlapped. The speed of the running

3 Cf. Janet Abbate: *Inventing the Internet*. Cambridge 2000; David Gugerli: *Wie die Welt in den Computer kam. Zur Entstehung digitaler Wirklichkeit*. Frankfurt am Main 2018, p.185; as well as in blogs like the one from Pavel Panchekha & Chris Harrelson: *Browsers and the Web*. <https://browser-engineering/intro.html> [Accessed 15.6.2022].

blocks varied. Web addresses in different colors appeared at the bottom of the screen. Sometimes they disappeared. Sometimes new ones laid themselves directly over existing addresses. From time to time, a black grid stretched across a good two-thirds of the screen, and illegibly formatted text appeared in the background. At the top of the screen, the current date and the exact time were indicated in black letters. Individual components lit up from time to time. The background constantly changed color. No component could claim its own place on the screen. There were overlaps everywhere. Sometimes characters disappeared in the background of the same color.

After some time the observer became a user. To study the browser, it was not possible to work at a distance from my source. Technologies are almost never closed compositions. Rather, they are specific configurations that produce effects that transcend their representational nature. This task did not allow me to be just a historian of technology. I have been a user of browser software all my life. Experience accompanied custom. As a user, I began to tinker and thus explore my own possibilities for intervention. This quest was exploratory and unstructured. I clicked and double-clicked, moved the mouse and pressed buttons. The user interface changed as I clicked on addresses at the bottom of the screen. It seemed as if this kicked the browser into gear. The blinking increased, the noise became more pervasive, and the colored blocks of code in the foreground ran faster. Dragging and dropping also made it possible to move the addresses around. As the web addresses moved, so did the code blocks. Moving the addresses revealed their connection to the code. They belonged to the same page. Such a code could now be viewed individually by removing the overlap of the blocks. Using the arrow keys of the keyboard, the running of the codes could be slowed down and almost

stopped. Furthermore, it was possible to write into the colored codes, to change or delete lines. Outside the code blocks, one could write across the entire screen, starting from the top left. The text then appeared in black letters between the code blocks and the black grid. The codes obscured the text input thus generated, and the grid provided a poor background for good readability of the black text.

While searching for input locations, different levels of the browser became visible. The top level was the web addresses at the bottom and the associated code blocks. Behind it was a writable area that became visible only through my input, which in turn had no effect on program activity. Behind it stretched the black grid. Although it disappeared briefly in the blinking of the program, it seemed to mark a boundary beyond which there were no more input possibilities. On this rearmost level was simply formatted text. It was barely legible, changed by itself and was replaced from time to time. The way the text was extended or replaced by a new one seemed like the result of a loading process – always accompanied by the sound of data processing.

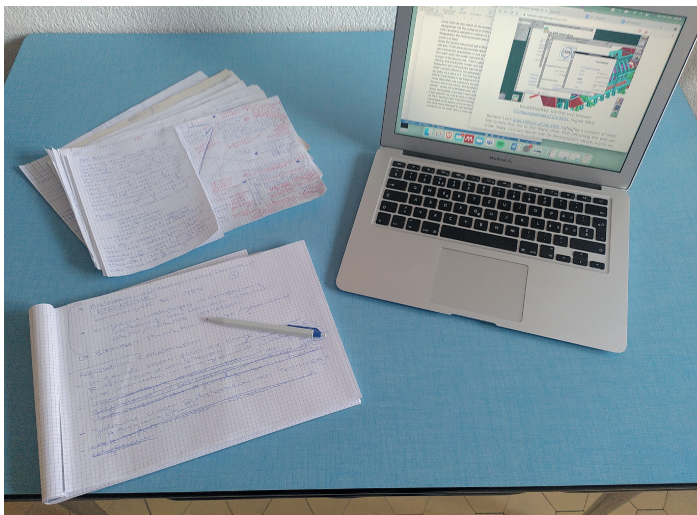
(3) The indication of the current time and date at the top of the screen caught my attention early on. It looked like the title of the work. The browser was obviously synchronized and not a relic of history. It was always committed to the present and constantly up to date. The browser set the pace. The timing seemed to convey that the processes were always running. They could no more be stopped than the passage of time. By taking up the whole screen, the program window imposed its specific interface on the user without giving her any free space. This is probably as true for the *%WRONG Browser* as for a conventional one. The display of the web page is relative to its code. But browsers determine the possibility of representability and visibility.

One of the first impulses was to enter the web addresses in a conventional browser and look up the pages they led to. It was a South Korean domain. The footer of the *.co.kr* addresses identified the location of the data and indicated commercial use. Many of the websites were no longer in operation, some led to the same websites, and most of the websites that were still active were themselves selling commercially usable web addresses from a South Korean domain. The web pages corresponded with the texts displayed at the backmost level of the *%WRONG Browser*. Underlining, words, numbers and mail addresses indicated similarities between the content of the web pages and the text in the background of the program. Here, the content had almost nothing to do with the shape of the web pages as they presented themselves in a conventional browser. The content was barely structured and eluded the usefulness of conveying information. In essence, the program reversed conventional browser activity. Browsers are commonly used to display web pages from a network. In the case of the *%WRONG Browser*, it is the HTML versions of the web pages that are foregrounded in the form of colorful and glancing blocks of code. Clicking on a web address loads the page to the backmost level of the browser. The sound reminiscent of processing marks this data transfer.

Through tinkering and a little enquiry, the space that the program had opened structured itself. The browser was set up. Interventions were possible. Things could be written, deleted and moved. However, not all of my interventions seemed to have a comprehensible effect. Calling up web pages by clicking on the addresses was the only thing that led to a noticeable effect. In most cases, there was no comprehensible coherence between input and output.⁴

4 See here that this is rather common for digital media from the perspective of the user: Cornelia Vismann: *Akten. Medientechnik und Recht*. Frankfurt am Main 2000, p.300.

Fig.2. Synchronizing with the %WRONG Browser at the kitchen table.




By bringing processes to the foreground that otherwise remained invisible, the browser produced obscurity. However, this activated my willingness as a user to act to find orientation. It may seem that usability is not the focus of this browser, because one's own position and ability to act are not immediately apparent. The view is reversed and the possibilities for intervention are small. The mechanisms of user guidance, however, are not very different from those of conventional browsers. Users sound out their options, follow the cues of a particular composition, and let the program direct their attention based on their experience with other software programs. The autonomous user constantly falls back on proven patterns.

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DFG-Schwerpunktprogramm ‚Das digitale Bild‘
Projekt Browserkunst. Navigieren mit Stil



Erstveröffentlichung: 2022

Gestaltung und Satz: Lydia Kähny und Sophie Ramm

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Diese Publikation wurde finanziert durch die Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft.

München, Open Publishing LMU

 Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft



DOI 10.5282/ubm/epub.93518

ISBN 978-3-487-16315-4

Library of Congress Control Number

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese
Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind abrufbar
unter <http://dnb.dnb.de>

Reihe: Begriffe des digitalen Bildes

Reihenherausgeber

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