

Chapter XXII

Persuasive Design

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ABSTRACT

Persuasive design (PD) is concerned with the use of computing technology for persuasive purposes. It thereby captures a comprehensive and important trend in CMC, human-computer interaction, and software development in general. This chapter describes the basic concepts of PD as well as its development from its inception in the late 90s until now. So far, rhetoric has played a modest role in the field. However, it is shown that rhetoric offers a major step forward in consolidating PD as a discipline. The concepts of PD in many respects have a theoretical basis in and are better understood with reference to rhetoric; a number of practical guidelines for PD can and should be developed on the basis of rhetoric; and ‘epistemic rhetoric’ offers a sound epistemology for PD, which is at the moment lacking. Arguably, a rhetorical turn is required for coming to grips with the problem of defining PD and placing it properly as a special case of CMC, namely computer mediated persuasion.

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, there will be a “new rhetoric” for the twenty-first century, a rhetoric of cyberspace that will be more comprehensive than any that has been devised so far, an international rhetoric that will be congenial for people of many nations and cultures. (Corbett 1999, xi)

The fact that the computer has become a most important medium of communication is well

known. This circumstance has a straightforward dual impact. First, it means that communication science must study and relate to computers and their uses in an ever-increasing degree. Secondly, it means that computer science and IT-professionals must develop their systems and software not only based on technical principles but also by drawing on whatever communication science can contribute to their theory and practise. This is not new, but the relatively recent notion and discipline of persuasive design (PD) does add a new aspect to the general development just described.

A first understanding of what PD, or captology as the field is sometimes called, is about may be obtained from the following two definitions. The founding father of PD, B.J. Fogg, defines persuasion as:

... an attempt to change attitudes or behaviours or both (without using coercion or deception). (Fogg 2003b, p. 15)

and describes PD (captology) as a field and a discipline by saying that it

focuses on the design, research and analysis of interactive computing products created for the purpose of changing people's attitudes or behaviour. (Fogg, 2003b, p. 5)

We are thus concerned with computer-based communication, which has been planned and developed with a specific persuasive purpose. The communication-theoretic basis for such activities is rhetoric, a discipline which has been preoccupied with the planning and the delivery of persuasive communication for more than two millennia, in theory as well as practice.

A typical example of the persuasive kind of software could be a simulation of what it feels like to drive in a drunken state, bolstered with specific admonitions not to do so, and perhaps footage showing the dire results of drunk driving.¹ Obviously, the interaction with this piece of software could be used to try to persuade people not to drive in a drunken state, and might well succeed in achieving this goal, at least for some period of time. We shall, in general, not discuss examples in this chapter. Excellent examples of PD can be found at www.captology.com, in (Fogg 2003b) and in (IJsselstein et al., 2006). Moreover, we shall assume an elementary knowledge of classical rhetoric on part of the readership such that basic concepts need only a brief introduction.²

The many examples of persuasive software that can be found in the current PD literature

are clear enough with respect to their persuasive character. Moreover, the difference between this kind of software and more classical information systems also seem clear. Nevertheless, while we can, in fact, circumscribe the field such that it makes sense to talk about a new discipline, its very definition is still in the process of being solidified. While the practical importance of PD is growing fast, the number of publications dealing with the concept and its definition are surprisingly few. There are a number of important contributions to the field, of course, but only a handful deal with the theory of PD as such, that is, with its definition and foundational principles.

This chapter aims to expound persuasive design and its rhetorical basis. The core concepts and issues of PD will be presented. However, we shall not repeat the kind of detailed discussions of techniques and examples with which general PD literature abounds. References to this literature will be given as required, but the chief aim of this contribution is to place PD within its proper communication scientific context—in accordance with the wider objective of seeing PD in its CMC-context, that is, as computer-mediated persuasion. To achieve this goal, rhetoric is presented in its general relation to PD, with a focus on the special potential of epistemic rhetoric for understanding and developing PD further. In particular, epistemic rhetoric seems an obvious candidate for an appropriate epistemology of PD, bringing the field on a sounder footing than hitherto in theory as well as practice.

BACKGROUND

The Development of PD

Persuasive design was introduced by B.J. Fogg and associates in a number of papers beginning in 1997. The first contribution was an extended abstract by B.J. Fogg (1997), presented at the conference CHI'97, that is, computer-human

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