Focus Group: Rethinking our Profession
(formerly: Patterns for the Pervasive World)

Participants: Joe Bergin, Pascal Costanza, Martine Devos, Dick Gabriel, Koen Hendrikx, Alan O’Callaghan, Uwe Zdun

Focus group leader: Daniel May

The focus group was originally titled “Patterns in the Pervasive World” and was intended to discuss the place of patterns in a world powered by pervasive and ubiquitous computing (i.e. where computational power surrounds us). Reconvening after the initial session, the focus group participants decided refocus its discussion in the vein of the Feyerabend focus group. The focus group could be more accurately retitled as “Rethinking our Profession”. These notes summarise this refocus, as the group was more interested in the latter discussion.

The focus group opened with a discussion of the role of designers in the computing industry and the nature of our industry vs other industries. Joe made the point that craftsmen think too often that the artefacts they create are “value-free”. Martine emphasised that we have choice in the exercise in our craft: in the projects we undertake, how/what decisions are made, what tools that we use, etc. Dick suggested that we can think of terms of “topos”, the theme/motif/story that underlies our profession. The question that was also raised was: should we effect change all-at-once or one-at-a-time?

Change and Choice
Dick asserted that significant change comes about through the political process, and suggested the funding and lobbying of politicians. Uwe suggested that choice does exist in our industry, but there are also costs to users. The professional guild was presented by Joe as a possible model for effecting change: the craftsmen themselves can enforce change on the industry. However, the group pointed out that the freedom for craftsmen, guild or no guild, to “say no” can vary—that this is near difficult or impossible in the USA, but possible in a country like Belgium. Alan also felt that “collective action” was the way to go, so what are the means of achieving of this and what are the moral choices that are faced with as craftsmen?

The group discussed a dialectic relationship between government and guild. The government stipulates requirements—such as the performance and guarantee of computing systems—which the guild tries to enforce, by ensuring the professional conduct of its members. The guild also suggests changes to the government and its requirements, as it is in the best position to understand its craft and craftsmen. The role of unions was also discussed; unions can become powerful entities but power also tends to corrupt.

What is our audit?
We discussed the nature of our ‘audit’—as computing craftsmen, we should have some notion of how we should be audited (e.g. safety, etc). The audit should also be public. Daniel raised the issue of verification and validation as factors in an audit. The group started to discuss the idea of “sneaky change”, where we could change the practices of our profession by stealth; Dick discussed some of his current work on subversive change.
A fundamental component of the stealth approach to change would be to *expose* ourselves and our industry for its lack of responsibility and guarantees—“we have met the enemy and it is us”.

Examples of principles of a code of conduct:

But what is better?

If we make a change, then it must be better.

People who are being affected by the design must be included in the process.

Daniel referred to the speech by John Thackara at CHI where he talks about “Articles of Association” (refer appendix). Other aspects that the code of conduct could cover: that our systems should be maintainable, that they must have the capacity for being backed-up, that code is transparent.

Alan raised the point that there is a “crisis of confidence in the professions” where the public has lost their trust in doctors, lawyers, etc … and that there is a greater chance of questioning. We also discussed that there is a responsibility for the public, that is conferred on the knowledgeable (i.e. craftsmen, discipline, government, but especially the craftsmen).

Extreme Programming was put forward as a code-oriented ideology: it emphasises “power to the programmers”. But there was the question of how users’ power fits into a code-oriented ideology.

We summarised our discussion thus:
Appendix

Articles of Association Between Design, Technology, and The People Formerly Known As Users

Article 1
We cherish the fact that people are innately curious, playful, and creative. We therefore suspect that technology is not going to go away; it's too much fun.

Article 2
We will deliver value to people, not deliver people to systems. We will give priority to human agency and will not treat humans as a "factor" in some bigger picture.

Article 3
We will not presume to design your experiences for you, but we will do so with you, if asked.

Article 4
We do not believe in idiot-proof technology, because we are not idiots and neither are you. We will use language with care and will search for less patronizing words than "user" and "consumer."

Article 5
We will focus on services, not on things. We will not flood the world with pointless devices.

Article 6
We believe that "content" is something you do, not something you are given.

Article 7
We will consider material end energy flows in all the systems we design. We will think about the consequences of technology before we act, not after.

Article 8
We will not pretend things are simple when they are complex. We value the fact that by acting inside a system, you will probably improve it.

Article 9
We believe that place matters, and we will look after it.

Article 10
We believe that speed and time matter, too, but that sometimes you need more, and sometimes you need less. We will not fill up all time with content.