

# GIVE ME TIME!



**OLIA LIALINA**  
olia@profolia.org

Merz Akademie, Stuttgart

Lisbon  
Computation  
Communication  
Aesthetics  
& X

The title of my talk: "Give me time!" is a quote, a phrase, or part of a phrase I often see on the pages of the GeoCities Archive. I see a lot of old web pages. I collect, analyze and preserve them since the end of the last century. I started during the first dot.com, when it got clear that their time was over. My thoughts on vernacular web and its influence on web design practices are collected in the *Digital Folklore* book and can be found online on the *One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age* blog and in *Contemporary Home Computing*.

The reason for my research is my belief that everything that happened on the WWW in between 1993 and, let's say, 1999 was unprecedented; a time when people were building the World Wide Web by building their personal home pages. I mean, it's not just technically that, with every website, the web was getting bigger, was growing, but also conceptually or, if you want, philosophically. You were building the node that was important for providing access to other nodes. It was a time when people provided links to search engines, not the other way around. This was the period when, by building their pages, web users were providing building blocks for other web makers: be it an animated GIF, or MIDI file or a piece of HTML code or JavaScript. I agree there is a difference between providing content, generating content, publishing, posting, streaming, uploading, and building your place, your world, equipping your "corner of cyberspace". The first-person possessive determiner "my" got a very strong meaning back then; "my" because I build it, I control its presentation. It is mine because the web is "ours".

It was the period in the history of Human-Computer Interaction, that IMHO, we can really, for once, describe as Human-Computer Symbiosis. These were the wonderful (how many?) years that Licklider promised to humankind in his 1960's *Man-Computer Symbiosis* that formulated the goals for the creation of real time computing and the personal computer.

People were building a network that was connecting them. People were building and designing the environment that was making them visible, successful, productive. It was a time when web users were proud to be web users and were proud of the technical (computer) skills they learned and implemented and of the time they spent on it; time spent on understanding how the web works. Building the web was valued.

The paradox of Licklider's text is that it calls for symbiosis (computer as a colleague...) but in fact it is about outsourcing to the computer 85% percent of "technical thinking" about mundane tasks. The same can be said about another

influential text by Vannevar Bush, *As We May Think* (1945), which calls for a new system... that in fact would free time for not being with this system.

The later developments in Human-Computer Interaction and interface design theory and practice, to date, claim that computer users' main objective is to spend as less time as possible learning computers, understanding computers, spending time with a computer itself. Delegate routine, mechanical, technical thinking to computers. Concentrate on "mature thought"!

With the exception of Douglas Engelbart's ideas articulated in his 1962 paper *Augmenting Human Intellect* and Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theater* (1991), as well as Ted Nelson's claim "You can and must understand computers now" (on the cover of *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, 1974) we constantly deal with the computer user imagined as very busy with something else. "Concentrate on the task, not interface" claimed Don Norman in 1991 in *Why Interfaces Don't Work*, paving the way for the invisible computer and invisible user paradigm that brought about the alienation of computer users from their medium.

Fortunately, early web users didn't read Licklider or Norman. They didn't aim for interface "transparency"; quite the opposite, interfaces were very present and vivid: every button was a "universe". You laugh, but please think that it is the look of the digital network where users don't delegate "technical" tasks and decisions. It is not funny, it is holly! Imagine girls and boys, grandmas and grandpas, professors, DRs, BSB fans and Hanson haters investing their time into the navigation of their site and navigation from their sites to other sites.

If these thoughts would be praised instead of being ridiculed (by high tech industry, education, ...), we would now live in a world with less selfies but more computer literacy.