Neurotic Armageddon Indicator: A Data Sculpture

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1. INTRODUCTION

Neurotic Armageddon Indicator (NAI) is an installation artwork which, taking the form of a small '80s style, wall clock, visualizes the 'Doomsday Clock', a symbolic clock maintained by an academic journal, 'The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' (BoAS). The Doomsday Clock represents the proximity to Armageddon expressed as minutes to midnight where midnight is nuclear holocaust. By relocating the symbolic clock to a physical installation, I argue that NAI affords a discursive attitude to the subject of nuclear Armageddon. The clock display is updated as a web-scraper "neurotically" checks the status of the Doomsday Clock as often as possible. In reality the clock is updated at rare intervals, often years apart. Thus NAI conducts a mostly redundant act of verification.

2. CRITICAL VISUALISATION

Data and information visualisation is a heterogeneous area, which has enjoyed a recent explosion out of its traditional fields of statistics and analysis into areas as diverse as advocacy, journalism, design and art. Despite contributions such as (Viegas/Wattenburg 2007) critical discourse around data visualisation remains under-developed. Meanwhile related fields such as G.I.S. and cartography have benefited from a number of critical influences from the arts and humanities such as (Kwan 2002, Monmonier 1996). NAI is situated then both within, and partially in critique of, data visualisation as a field devoted to representing phenomena in the world for analysis or engagement.

3. PERFORMATIVITY

The Doomsday Clock is a symbolic clock updated by a consensus decision from the BoAS panel. As in many visualisation projects, the audience is left to infer the background processes of data mining

and analysis, the 'visualisation pipeline'. The NAI uses the deliberately 'flat' aesthetic of digital clock display without the contextual information provided by the Bulletin's website to present itself as 'reliable' machine. By doing so it borrows the caché of authority ascribed to measuring instruments. Because of the extremely infrequent updates to the Doomsday Clock the sole indication that the device is live is a flashing indicator light labelled 'checking with Bulletin of Atomic Scientists'. The constant checking of the website serves little practical purpose but suggests a state of neurosis.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

NAI is envisaged as part of a series of clocks and indicators which display different metrics for the end of the world such as climate change data or countdowns to religious Armageddons. A series of devices, installed together may support audience understanding. NAI suggests a critical approach for visualisation, which uses the situatedness of visualisations to engage audiences with issues of representation. Experimental versions of the clock Figures 4-6 include a version where users collaborate to compromise on an agreed time for Armageddon.

5. REFERENCES

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- Monmonier, M. (1996) *How to Lie with Maps*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
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Figure 1: NAI installed as a wall clock

Figure 4: Experimental version (left) shows time set by users via a web portal

Figure 2: NAI with desk stand

Figure 5: An IP camera provides a feedback image to the web portal

Figure 3: Building an Neurotic Armageddon Indicator

Figure 6: Screen grab from web portal showing grabbed image from IP Camera and form for setting time