MENUING

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On a daily basis people make many choices from different assortments, menus and databases. These choices are made among the garments in their favourite stores, just as in the cutting and pasting functions of the software they use to work and create. Are there any common denominator for these situations and activities? They may all be examples of the cultural process of *menuing*.

There are two sides of menuing. First is choosing and making decisions with the help of menus and preconfigured assortments or databases. Second, menuing is also the activity of designing menus; sorting out, categorizing and arranging. These two sides of menuing are fundamental in any industrialized consumption society, rooted in systems of standardization and the systematics of handling assorted materials that emerged with industrialism.

The menu has a mediating function and works as a kind of prosthesis. It helps people make choices through prior categorizing, sorting and packaging. At the same time it restrains and controls. This restraint can be both a liberty and a burden. It may free the mind by letting people choose with less effort. At the same time it limits the possible choices they can make. The full range of choices has been limited to those included in the menu.

Menuing may cover a wide range of activities. It would be possible to include everything from the choices made by shoppers from the spring collection at H&M, to the ways that different filters and effects are used in computer software like Microsoft Word or Photoshop. Menuing is a trait of industri-

alized societies during the twentieth century, and it is now becoming even more pervasive when menus and selection from databases characterize digital media. Let me give two brief examples to outline the concept.

Two Examples

1. Choosing a living space. In Sweden, during the early twentieth century, a national program to build domestic houses was started. Owning one's own home became a symbol of liberty, and it also became a financial possibility for many Swedish families. Several factories offered houses made from prefabricated modules. This prefab industry was possible because wooden building material was abundant, and it was easy to assemble prefabricated wooden modules. Soon similar looking houses were popping up like mushrooms all over Sweden. Families could look in catalogues from firms like Borohus and Myresjöhus to choose the combinations of modules for their own individual houses (Edlund 2004). This way to offer, buy and build houses was cheap, convenient and allowed limited individualized variability from the assortments in the catalogues.

Catalogue houses illustrate how housing became part of the standardized systems of industrialism. Author and journalist Per Svensson has written about Swedish twentieth century living, and mentions the book *Sweden Speaks* which was launched at the World Fair of 1939 in New York. The book, an initiative by the government, marketed Sweden as a country of the future, and told the world about
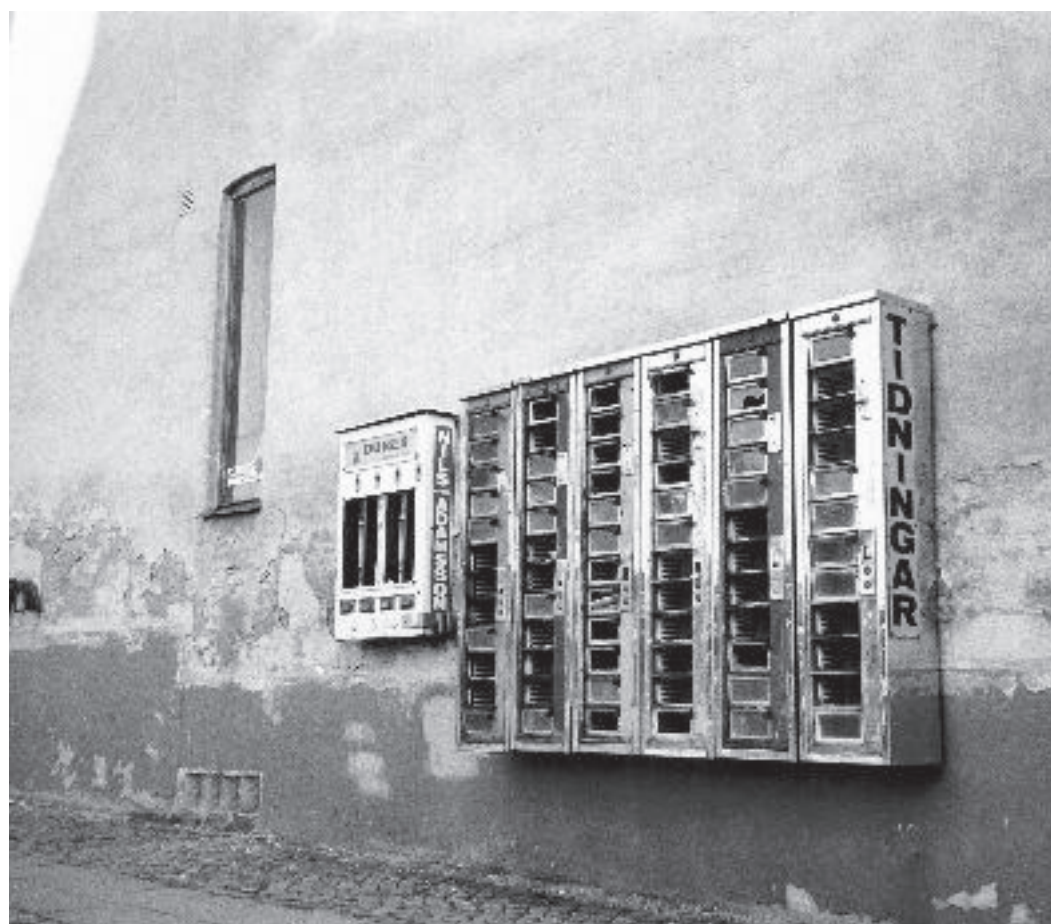
examples like the prefab houses: "The foundation has been cast in concrete, and now the ready-made walls, complete with window frames and other fixtures, are being raised. With the help of friends and good neighbors the job is done in a few hours some evening" (Svensson 2002: 55). According to the marketing rhetoric, building a house was a combination of the DIY (do it yourself) spirit needed to assemble the prefabricated elements, and the modern industrial knowledge outsourced to the prefab industry. In between these two parts we find the selection practises of menuing.

The menuing activities involved in the choices of Swedish prefab catalogue houses are still very much alive. Nowadays it is possible to buy catalogue houses in a wider range of different styles. The company Arkitekthus, for example, offers prefab houses designed by famous Swedish architects. The variety of catalogue houses track the rise of menuing as a cultural practice, and show how it is closely linked to the rise of industrialized consumer society. But menuing is not just about choosing what to buy from a catalogue.

2. Menus on the computer screen. Let us move to today's computerized world. Consider your situation in front of the computer screen. Hands on keyboard, the illuminated window shows an image in some graphic program like Photoshop. A flick of the wrist, the cursor moves up, a menu appears. You pick a filter and apply it to the image. The image is transformed. Move the cursor to another menu, choose another function. And so the work goes on. This type of environment and this interface dominate most software today. It is prefab, multiple choice, cut and paste, drag and drop. As media researcher Lev Manovich has pointed out, new digital media are the best expression of the logic of identity in advanced industrial and post-industrial societies, because computer interaction is about choosing values from a number of predefined menus (Manovich 2001: 128).

Digital Habits and Imaginations

Digital media offer clear examples of the dynamics of menuing. Let's therefore elaborate a bit on the role of digital media when it comes to this concept, and when it comes to design. Menus are examples of interface design. But menuing does not just entail material or textual organization. It is also about the way structures and order trickle down into the cultural (sub)conscious. Menus shape people's imaginations of the everyday. Menus are vehicles in the formation of habits. This is especially clear in the world of computer practices. Within the graphical user interfaces that have prevailed in software for around twenty years, the menu has been a widely used design concept.

In what ways can menuing be connected to the use of everyday things and the processes of habit formation? Design theorist Donald A. Norman made a distinction that can be used to expand the discussion on these connections. He talks about *knowledge in the head and in the world.* He uses these concepts to explain how precise behaviour can emerge from imprecise knowledge (Norman 1998: 55). Whenever the information needed to do a task is readily available in the world, the need for us to learn it diminishes. He goes on:

…consider typing. Many typists have not memorized the keyboard. Usually each letter is labeled, so nontypists can hunt and peck letter by letter, relying in knowledge in the world and minimizing the time required for learning. The problem is that such typing is slow and difficult. With experience, of course, hunt-and-peck typists learn the positions of many of the letters on the keyboard, even without instruction, and typing speed increases notably, quickly surpassing handwriting speeds and, for some, reaching quite respectable rates. Peripheral vision and the feel of the keyboard provide some information about key locations. Frequently used keys become completely learned, infrequently used keys are not learned well, and the other keys are partially learned. But as long as the typist needs to watch the keyboard, the speed is limited. The knowledge is still mostly in the world, not in the head (ibid.: 56).

When a person types frequently, a habit is formed. The knowledge of how the keys are placed move from the world to the head. Menuing is about the relations between these two different kinds of knowledge. People rely on "knowledge-prothesises" in the world. When choosing from a menu we experience a sort of comfort that things are familiar, as usual. Everything is in its "right" place. "This is one reason people can function well in their environment and still be unable to describe what they do. For example, a person can travel accurately through a city without being able to describe the route precisely" (ibid.: 57).

People do many things without being attentive to their actions at the moment. Menuing is located in this twilight zone between attention and non-attention. We'll now go on to use a computer related situation to illustrate the workings of menuing, order, and habits.

Let's Switch!

Dr X has bought a new computer. After some minutes of breaking seals and wrappings the smell of new electronics reaches her or his nostrils. The smell is exactly like that of the last computer. But this time something is different. The new computer is an Apple. The last one was a Dell. The new operating system is Mac OSX. The last one was Microsoft Windows XP.

After more minutes of seal breaking, manual browsing, and plugging in cords, it's time to configure the preinstalled software. And a familiar looking desktop emerges on the screen. At least when it comes to the conceptual mapping and basic layout. But then Dr X recognises the menus. The menus! They are similar to some degree. But then they are not. When she or he place the cursor over them, and clicks, they are rolled out as usual. But their content is different. Ok, no big deal. Much is familiar. However, Dr X can now look forward to a near future, filled with unlearning and learning all the kinds of inconspicuous practices that fill a life characterized by menuing.

This is an illustration of some of the aspects of switching menus. When people encounter new systems, orderings, menus and environments, a great deal of what have appeared to be inconspicuous activities require reflection. What has earlier been nearly automatic has to be unlearned and revised. This occurs when switching computer systems, and it also happens in many other situations. For example, when people move their homes they have to change many everyday practices (Schaffer 2001). Menuing is an essential part of habit formation, which is a central feature of human behaviour. As interface and system design consultant Jef Raskin points out:

…humans cannot avoid developing automatic responses. This idea is important enough to bear repetition: No amount of training can teach a user *not* to develop habits when she uses an interface repeatedly (…) If you have ever unintentionally driven toward your normal workplace on a Saturday morning when you intended to go somewhere else, you've been had by a habit that formed through repetition of a fixed sequence of actions. (…) Thus, after you take the wrong turn on Saturday, you may suddenly realize that you intended to drive in the opposite direction; this realization makes your navigation your locus of attention, and you can interrupt the automatic sequence of actions that would have led you to your workplace.

When you repeat a sequence of operations, making *and keeping* what you are doing your locus of attention is the only way to keep a habit from forming. This is very difficult to do. As expressed in a common phrase, our attention wanders (Raskin 2000: 21f.).

What's on the Menu, and what's not?

Menuing takes people through their everyday lives in late modern society. It is, as mentioned, intimately coupled to habit formation and routines. And habits are sometimes visible and reflected upon, but often they are the unreflected grease of the everyday machinery. This makes menus and menuing inconspicuous but important phenomena.

So, what's on the menu, what's being served today?

Please make your (individual) choice. There is a conceptual congruity among different choice situations in menu and assortment based societies (Willim 2003). There are for example similarities between the way houses were bought and sold in early and mid twentieth century Sweden and the ways that we interact today with computers. Of course, there are also differences. The routinized behaviours of interacting with computers differ quite a lot from the conscious choices made from catalogues. Menuing can foster different kinds of behaviours and cultural processes depending on context. However, an important common denominator is that complexity is hidden and packaged in standardized menus characterized by a limited number of choices. Therefore, a juxtaposition of these different examples can be fruitful.

But there must be some cracks among these processes. What is not on the menu? What things which are *off* have the potential to become *on*? The absent becomes something energizing (Hertz 1999: 400). Absent menu options may be things wanted, but unavailable, which expose the shortages of an assortment. This condition was condensed by the TV show Saturday Night Live into the phrase "cheeseburger, cheeseburger, cheeseburger…" which was a famous parody of a restaurant which offered many choices of the same cheeseburgers. What's on the menu? A lot of cheeseburgers. This is a failure of the provider and the selector.

Other shadow sides of the processes of menuing are people's more or less conscious desire to use things that are outside the given menu assortments. This can be seen as a search for otherness and self-chosen exile. It allows one to be no part of "it", but still to remain in some way connected. During the years these endeavours of revulsion have been labelled sub cultural, underground, alternative or avant-garde movements. The analytical point is to relate the desire to be an outsider, or "to be no part of

it" to the process of menuing. How is something that has been outside a set assortment to be commodified and included in a collection? Here we find the familiar process of garbage turning into vintage, or the worthless and revolting becoming the cool and fashionable. And while we are here, why not also see how items are removed from menus?

Menuing tells us how the range of processes between choice and routine work in several contexts. It helps us understand the creative processes of digital media, and it captures some major aspects of consumerism. With the spread of menuing, knowledge about menu psychology as well as menu and assortment design have become important skills. A cultural analysis of this phenomenon should be an important contribution. It can be worthwhile to analyze the congruities of different situations of menuing, and also to search for variations. It is also crucial to take into account the double-edged nature of menuing, providing both a relief from frequent choice situations, and a major constraint on freedom.

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