FAST FORWARD

Computers, Turnover and the Aesthetic of Ephemerality

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I am at the present writing my dissertation which is focused on images of IT (Information Technologies). I have done fieldwork in various settings, concentrating on the highly successful and rapidly expanding IT-firm called Framfab (An abbreviation for The Future Factory). To get a contrast to my Swedish material I have also done fieldwork in Bangalore, India. However, this presentation draws on observations mainly at Framfab.

Computers are pictured as a fast technology, and IT-oriented companies like Framfab are often called fast companies. Why this focus on speed? I would like to examine some dimensions of speed in relation to IT today. I will then deal with the concepts of speed and ephemerality. How is speed and ephemerality related to each other? Speed has to do with how fast something moves or changes, and things that are ephemeral change. Things that are very ephemeral change fast. So when talking about the speed of change there is a immediate connection between high speed and ephemerality.

The computer industry and the marketplace, are characterised by high turnover, fast changes and a short lifespan of products. For some years speed and change has also been keywords, or buzzwords, in relation to IT. I would like to stress the importance of *the rhetoric of the technology*. Mostly then, the rhetoric of speed. This rhetoric is related to practices in different contexts. For an example at Framfab. It could be seen as a feedback loop, in which a conjuring up of high speed and change take place. This conjuring up becomes part in shaping people's

images of computers at large, of the computer industry and also of particular products.

In relation to the speed- and change-focussed IT-business of today and the rhetoric of speed we can see signs of what the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has called an *aesthetic of ephemerality*. He argues that…

> The much-vaunted feature of modern consumption – namely, the search for novelty – is only a symptom of a deeper discipline of consumption in which desire is organised around the aesthetic of ephemerality.(Appadurai, 1997:84)

Within the aesthetic of ephemerality we find a constant longing for the new. As well as different modes of impatient waiting and restlessness. Arjun Appadurai mean that…

> The valorization of ephemerality expresses itself at a variety of social and cultural levels: the short shelf life of products and lifestyles; the speed of fashion change; the velocity of expenditure; the polyrhythms of credit, acquisition, and gift; the transience of televisionproduct images; the aura of periodization that hangs over both products and lifestyles in the imagery of mass media.(Appadurai, 1996:83-84)

The aesthetics of ephemerality, is characterised by ideas of the transient and the fast changing, and it can be found both in relation to consumption as well as production, not least in the IT-industry. These two categories are hard to separate. People often produce and consume at the same time.

Some places where consumption and production converge is at the offices of Framfab. I´ll now continue with some words about speed and change at Framfab. Then I´ll look at the images of speed in relation to the PC. In the end of the presentation I´ll try to weave the two accounts of speed and change together.

Fast Companies (Speed Cult I)

Some say that we now live in ”the new economy” which creates a world with a logic that is different from the one of the old economy. At the centre of these changes are information technologies, and the companies that deal with e.g. internet services, e-commerce or wireless technologies. These are often called ”Fast companies”, often with reference to the management magazine with the same name.

A central market logic in this context is the need to fast bring out new products. To be first on a market, often means more market shares. It’s not the question whether the best product will win, rather it’s the one that first reaches a ”critical mass” on the market that succeeds.

Framfab, the IT-firm I’m doing fieldwork at, was started in Lund, Sweden. They still mainly works as internet consultants, but the enterprise is becoming more and more diversified. The fieldwork I’m doing is mainly at some of their offices in Lund. Framfab is often described as a ”fast company”. When talking with one of the managers he said that they try to ”cultivate the speed myth”. Much within Framfab shall feel fast. Constant change is nearly an end in itself. Not least it is important to communicate to the stock market that you are fast. This is to a high degree a rhetorical as well as aesthetical focus on speed and continous change as something sound and beautiful. In this context speed has got mostly positive connotations. A fast company as well as a fast employee is smart and successful, not rash and hasty.

One of my questions is how the speed become visible in everyday practices at the office. I mainly concentrate on how the programming is done. And how the interface and the shape of the products is designed.
One thing that become evident in the work is the tension between a need to be creative and innovative and the need to routinize tasks because of the demand for fast delivery of products. This is two different needs for speed.

- One which means that you have to be quick.. To be smart and creative. To come with new thinking and new revolutionary ideas. Being flexible and able to swiftly change direction.
- The other need could be described as more streamlined. A need for fast production. Which often mean that you have to routinize. A determined streamlined move in a certain direction. This mode of speed has got similarities with the demands of Frederick Taylors scientific management. Rapid focused performance without too much of reflections or considerations. To some extent the logics of the assembly line.

Let´s hold on to this *tension between innovation and routine*. Between different definitions of being a fast employee. In what way is a ”fast company” fast? Much of the rhetorics about the fast companies are centered around creativity and being different from the ”slow companies”. The so called dinosaurs of the old economy. But in many ways you have to keep the demand for high performance of the earlier industry. Jonas Birgersson, the CEO of Framfab explained that the name ”Future factory” contains references to what was good with the factory. Namely the discipline and the importance of yielding a profit. Fast performance among the employees is a central component in the ”fast companies”. It's maybe so that sometimes at Framfab in order to move ”fast forward”, you have to focus on progression in one direction. The question then remain *what* you speed towards.

Fast Computers (Speed Cult II)

At Framfab the offices are often cluttered with cardboard boxes. It´s the wrappings of the latest equipment purchased. The computer equipment is often upgraded or changed. There is always room for new computers and hardware which has been marketed as being fast. Let's stop by the definition of fast computers. In which way are computers fast? It must be more than a question of the short life of the

products or their short depreciation time. When it comes to the question of speed and computers much has to do with measuring. New products are marketed by means of numbers. Donald A. Norman has written a lot about the design of different artefacts and also about the problems with the PC. According to him much has to do with the way the computer industry and marketplace has evolved. In this way Norman describe today´s computer marketplace:

> Computer magazines review the new products, and the major things they think of looking for are comparisons of speed, lists of features, and artificial performance measurements. The stores that sell PCs also have certain requirements they look for when they decide to order machines from a manufacturer: Hygienic features is what the industry calls them. How fast is the machine in megahertz, how many megabytes of RAM, how many megabytes of hard disk space? Once again, it doesn't matter that speed measured in megahertz is not only a meaningless number to the consumer, but that it doesn´t really measure computer speed either. (…) What matters is *the numbers game: Bigger is better, and if your numbers don´t compete neither will your products*.(Norman, 1999:81)

Numbers count. Of course, it's true that more powerful computers makes it possible to perform more and more complicated tasks. But a lot of other kinds of technologies have also become more advanced, without being described as becoming ever faster. We talk about eg. TVs and stereos becoming more advanced, but hardly faster.

The computer business is characterized by speed measurements. And there is also a extreme *preoccupation with coming products*. The computer marketplace could be summed up by the phrase:"not now, but soon".

The latest products are presented in numerous computer magazines. An issue of the swedish magazine PC Extra from last year, for instance, judges the

fastest processors for portable computers. The article is entitled ”Fastest” and is based on tests of different computers fitted with Intel’s latest product. Symptomatically, the article begins with an account of how Intel a month previously had for the first time shown off its latest processor, not yet launched. It will of course have a higher capacity than earlier processors and in future tests will thus be classified as faster than today’s products. By focusing at the start of the article on technology that is not on the market yet, a ”best before” stamp is put on the most recent products available today. Rhetorical shifts between present and future in articles of this type accentuates the ephemeral in the computer market.

Tomorrow’s artefacts presented as prototypes and unfinished versions at electronic fairs all over the world promise attractive new products and constantly increased potential for the user. Mostly, however, the really fantastic technology is not yet available in the stores; it is almost within reach. The really fast technology isn’t here yet. You have to wait for it. Waiting is a keyword I´ll come back to.

What’s Fast (or What are we Waiting for)?

So, what´s fast? Fast turnover in the computer business. Yes. Demands for speed in the work practices in companies like Framfab. And a concentration on speed in marketing and evaluations of concrete products. What does it have to do with each other?

To catch the relation between the turnover pace and the concrete products I would like to look at everyday use of computers. I’ll focus on the situations when people sit by their PC’s entering information through the mouse or keyboard. There´s a phenomenon that occurs with a more or less high frequency. I would like to call it ”interface time out”. It´s a very prosaic and at the same time annoying phenomenon. When using some kind of software, occasionaly, for just some seconds the visual interface freezes. The cursor stops flickering or

disappears for a moment. After some seconds the screen is updated, hopefully with the changes you've expected. It is just as if the computer power for a moment has been used somewhere else. Somewhere inside the technology.

These short moments are significant. They can convey a lot. First of all, the user become aware of that the ”seamless flow” or the transparency of the technology is depending on a constant synchronization between man and technology. When the technology breaks the synchronization attention is directed towards questions of time, tempo and speed. It's possible to feel a frustration that has to do with the technology lagging behind. *It is experienced as slow.*

Secondly it makes the user aware of the ephemeral in the technology. It feels unsafe. It doesn't give the response it should give. The symbols of the interface like the cursor disappears and leaves the user in a impotent condition, disenfranchised, excluded from the processes inside the computer. *The technology feels unsecure and transient.* The interface get locked or changes in unexpected and undesired ways.

These small delays can also say something about the relation between the technology and the business. Why does ”interface time outs” occur? When a new generation of processors or other kind of hardware components are developed, they are quickly followed by new software versions. These are bigger and demand more of the hardware. For some reason this development during the last years has been well synchronized. Which means that with more or less newly bought hardware the user soon finds her or himself in situations where the equipment is experienced as slow. The capacity somewhere in the system is not enough. This is a well known problem in the computer industry. Nathan Myhrvold, one of the previous senior executives of Microsoft, has said that:

> Software is a gas, it expands to fill its container. (…) It's a good thing that computer power expands so rapidly. This way we can build bigger and fancier

software that require you to get a bigger and faster computer, so we can use up all that space too.”(In: Norman, 1999:82)

Phenomena as ”interface-timeout” has haunted PC-users through years despite high frequent upgrading procedures. This makes one question relevant. Why are computers marketed and reported as a fast technology?

In a way it has to do with waiting. And also lack of synchronization. The PC is a technology that for the user is characterized by waiting. In a way like eg. Microwave ovens which also can be marketed as being faster. ”The new model x nukes the meat at shorter time than last years model ”. *Therefore the PC as we know it today contain elements of undesired slowness that maintain a constant longing for speeding up*. The ”Interface time outs” are examples of undesired waiting. The waiting also occurs when computers are started up, when software is loaded, or during ”Greybar time”, when some data should be processed, or something downloaded.

The question is to what this waiting is compared among users. With newly purchased hardware you first compare your equipment with earlier versions. ”Wow, this new machine is fast”. But, rather soon the waiting start to feel long, and the lack of synchronization frustrating. You start to look for new products. And in marketing and reports from fairs and new product presentations new objects of desire are to be found. Speed is relative and today´s PC is always slow in relation to that of tomorrow. Considering the focus on the future when it comes to computer business, today's technology is more slow than fast. Because mostly it is with future equipment comparisons are made. *It's a waiting for future products that will eliminate the undesired waiting we experience in the use of today´s equipment.*

The Aesthetics of Ephemerality (or Speed towards what?)

I've touched upon the relation between speed and ephemerality. At work at Framfab as well as in the computer marketplace and in uses of PC's. In a way these examples could be seen as components in a feedback loop with faster and faster upgrading as a inherent logic. In many ways the so called "fast companies" influence the pace and the direction for the development and production of IT today. In the offices of Framfab we find a distinct need for high frequent upgrading of computer equipment and also a high sensitivity to waiting and delay in the use of the technology. Under pressure to perform fast, "interface timeouts" and "greybar time" gets very annoying.

These dynamics in the computer marketplace contains waiting, impatience and the longing for the new. With Arjun Appadurai's words it's like … "the dominant force, spreading through the consuming classes of the world, appears to be the ethic, aesthetic and material practice of the ephemeral" (Appadurai, 1996:84)

In many contexts in association to IT a praising of change predominates. Not least at companies like Framfab that aspire to be fast the need both for new fast equipment as well as fast practices becomes visible. If we can talk of a direction of change it here has the direction: onward and upward. Rapid change is good, it represents beauty. A sort of fast forward ethos, towards new possibilities. A notion that things get better and better with new fast products that give us the possibilities to first change the things we work with and then the world.

If we now compare this with the ways of work in Framfab. Let´s then juxtapose the onward and upward ethos with the two different needs for speed I mentioned earlier. To be flexible and able to rapidly change mind as well as being creatively innovative is not always compatible with producing fast. Of being effective. As I've mentioned earlier this demands more of routinization than of questioning and considerations why things are in a certain way. It doesn´t give

room for pondering what speed really means. The main thing is to move fast forward. The question is then who chooses which direction is forward.

The feedback loop between ”fast companies” and the yearning for new faster computer equipment makes upgrading the one central logic. And in the loop where people is dying for new upgrades there´s not much room for questioning the pace or direction of the business. In much of the management rhetorics of for an example the magazine ”fast company” which in many cases is re-echoed at Framfab the main concern is the change in itself. Mottos as ”speed is everything” is often heard.

So, to summarize. The cult of speed needs to be scrutinized. Speed in relation to what, speed for what ends? In the cult of fast business continous upgrading and accelerating speed equals change. However, the question of what is changed remain. When it comes to Framfab the company´s name or visual image has been changed three times within one year. The company has bought a lot of other companies and grown with several hundred percent. This represents a kind of change. So Framfab is a fast changing company. Many IT-related companies and organisation are fast-changing. But nevertheless some things remain the same when it comes to IT. One example of this becomes visible in the prosaic everyday use of computers where we in many ways still are waiting. We can perform, transmute, shapeshift, blur, mix, cut and paste more and more with our equipment, but we still feel restless during ”boot-up time”, ”greybar time” or during ”interface time-outs”. These unwanted waiting times has haunted computer users for years, even if the technology recurrently has been measured as faster.

A focus on some dimensions of speed camouflage the lack of change in other dimensions. And paradoxically this lack of change then makes it possible to concentrate on concepts as speed and change in the rhetorics about IT. A presumptive consumer who is suffering from involuntary waiting and delay in front of his or her present equipment is more likely liable to arguments about purchasing new faster equipment. *This makes the turnover of products the truly fast in today´s IT-related*

business. The turnover as well as the growth of firms as Framfab. The fuel for these processes is to a high degree the rhetorics of speed and the aesthetics of ephemerality.

Literature

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