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THE DIGITAL RHETORIC OF PREZI. VISUAL RE-PRESENTATIONS OF DEPRESSION AND OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS

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Abstract: We analyze the presentation software Prezi as an evocative object and a talkative technology that engages users in diverse web-based learning situations. Prezi claims to offer an alternative to a much ridiculed PowerPoint, and Prezi’s rhetorical options indeed privilege storytelling and metaphors through spatial organization, movement, and visuals. Still, we argue that many educational prezis in psychology fall short of such aims, relying on bullet points in a decorated, quasi slide-based document. The Prezi company, together with dedicated commercial and professional users, create a talkative and plurivocal technology, with a flow of tutorials and showcased presentations. Nonetheless, we propose that these voices leave important aspects uncovered for educational users, and we argue that the Prezi team should redefine its author guidance strategy. The paper is structured as follows: we first discuss the significance of presentation tools for learning. We then go on to investigate what is Prezi and how we encounter it. We analyze several types of messages from and about Prezi, and we discuss how it is currently used. We conclude the paper by highlighting the main findings and reflecting on implications for research on digital rhetoric. Prezi is designed as an evocative technology: it explicitly aims to encourage certain ways of dealing with knowledge, organizing information in space, through movement and storylines. Its templates bring to the fore metaphors as a persuasive device; the most acclaimed prezis, highlighted through contests and various informal rankings, illustrate the presentation principle of a journey through a visual landscape, using movement to create surprise and perplexity by zooming in, and to achieve clarification by zooming out to the bird’s-eye view. Prezi is also a verbose and multivocal tool: commercial and technical interests fuel a flow of messages and conversations about how to design prezis, aiming for ‘stunning’ presentations, for clarity and creativity. Prezi users have much to learn from ‘tips and tricks’ presentations and from illustrations in showcased prezis. Nonetheless, many prezis composed for classroom use, among those published on the Prezi platform, do not make full use of the tool’s capabilities and do not really follow its invitations to storytelling, metaphorical argumentation and spatial reasoning. We have observed this shortcoming in the case of prezis about psychological conditions such as depression, bipolar disorders, and delusions: although such conditions can be greatly clarified through analogies and storytelling, the bullet list of symptoms and causes remains a dominant rhetorical device in prezi frames. Visuals are used mostly for decoration, and movements do not have other rhetorical use besides the creation of attention-grabbing transitions. We propose that part of this limitation derives from the business focus of Prezi, including its clarifying-and-encouraging voices. There are relatively few showcased prezis that deal with the clarification of scientific concepts, and there is no special focus on science throughout the corpus of prezi tutorials. Users could also benefit from comments on specific prezis, explaining how they do what they do: teachers and students may well appreciate the persuasive power of a stunning prezi without having the vocabulary to describe and then reflect on its rhetorical choices. This requires redefining the Prezi tutorial approach through an intersection between the currently disparate endeavors of ‘tips and tricks’ advice versus showcasing prominent, creative prezis.

Keywords: Prezi; depression; digital rhetoric; metaphor; storytelling
I. INTRODUCTION

As we write this research paper for eLSE’16, we are aware that we also have to compose a presentation. That is, we have to deliver a presentation of our research for fellow researchers, which we shall support with a visual document to be projected on a screen – a widespread practice nowadays for presenters in science, education, business, religion, military and other walks of life. PowerPoint has become a tool of choice since its launch in 1990 – but there are many ways of dealing with software, many alternative (though less popular) tools, and there is always the possibility of delivering a verbal speech with little or no visual support.

Prezi is a recent competitor to PowerPoint, with an explicit adversarial position towards ‘slides’. It was launched in 2009 as a cloud-based, software-as-a-service tool and it has expanded considerably its features and user base, although serving mostly able persons [1]. In this paper we aim to discuss Prezi as a web-based learning possibility: authors of presentations as well as people interested in reading about a certain topic may encounter Prezi in various interactions, and learn from it and about it.

This paper is structured as follows: we first discuss the significance of presentation tools for learning. We then go on to investigate what is Prezi and how we encounter it. We analyze several types of messages from and about Prezi, and we discuss how it is currently used. We conclude the paper by highlighting the main findings and reflecting on implications for research on digital rhetoric.

II. EVOCATIVE TECHNOLOGY

Presentation tools are relevant for learning at face value, since they appear as ‘windows for content’. Much of what we learn in conferences, meetings, classrooms has been delivered via a software supported presentation. Still, there are stronger claims about the relevance of such technologies for knowledge and learning. That is, technologies are not only conduits of information – but they are part and parcel of information. They constitute the message and, thus, they constitute our thoughts and reasoning patterns.

This theoretical insight has been applied to computers in general and PowerPoint in particular. Turkle, for example, argues that ‘PowerPoint does more than provide a way of transmitting content. It carries its own way of thinking, its own aesthetic’ [2] (p. 259). Or: ‘PowerPoint, like so many other computational technologies, is not just a tool but an evocative object that affects our habits of mind’ [3]. One of the first critical discussions of PowerPoint as thinking device belongs to Parker [4] who brings in a historical perspective to highlight PowerPoint’s attunement to corporate decision making. The most prominent argument against PowerPoint as a ‘cognitive style’ was formulated by Tufte, now widely cited: ‘PowerPoint is evil’ [5]. He denounces the software for its elevation of format over content, especially through bullet lists and linear organization; the commercial, pitching attitude, and the dominating position of the speaker – which induces, he argues, a degrading simplification of thought, especially when used in schools: ‘the PowerPoint style routinely disrupts, dominates, and trivializes content’.

Counterarguments rely on a change in attributing agency and in empirical focus. On the one hand, users are brought to the fore as authors and responsible actors for the quality of presented arguments; on the other hand, when a wide range of presentations are examined empirically, variability in information sophistication and structure across PowerPoint presentations becomes salient. We can read such counterarguments to Tufte’s charges in Doumont [6], who illustrates the key analytical tensions in research on technologically distributed knowledge: where should we place agency – in users? In tools? In tool designers? Elsewhere? How can we identify dominating ‘cognitive styles’ or practices, given the observable variety of use?

As regards PowerPoint, this dialogue is taken further in the debate between Adams [8] [9] and Vallance & Towndrow [7]. Adams starts from Turkle’s observation that PowerPoint is an ‘evocative object’ [3] and discusses PowerPoint ‘invitations’ for teachers, as they appear through software default options when authoring a presentation. She introduces a distinction between experienced and novice users to argue for the relevance of default options as indicators of the tool’s influence on thinking:
‘Indeed, it may only be a creative teacher, an experienced rhetor, or a thoughtful, practised user who
thinks to venture much beyond the PowerPoint defaults. An unassisted novice, a new
teacher, or a
busy lecturer may be more inclined to accept as given the PowerPoint defaults in forming their
presentations, and subsequently the ideas about how they will present their material.’ (p. 393). She
thus argues that PowerPoint defaults, fine-tuned for business and sales audiences, shape ‘habits of
mind’ which are not unavoidable, but are difficult to prevent and then evade. Vallance & Towndrow
[7] introduce the concept of ‘informed use’ to focus attention on the possibility of creative work with
PowerPoint, limiting the habit-formation process to the less informed users. In turn, Adams’s [9]
rejoinder brings forward the idea that even ‘informed use’ rely on the technological ‘surrounding’ that
shapes authors’ lifeworlds through ‘language, imagery, framing, at-handness, sensuality, and
mediation of its symbolism and materiality’ (p. 229): skilled use is not necessarily a subversive use.
This debate illustrates again the two analytical questions that frame research on technologically-
shaped learning and knowledge: On what evidence can we document the existence of technologically
created ‘cognitive styles’ or ‘cognitive habits’? How can we allocate agency between various types of
human and non-human actors?

We propose to take part in this discussion by examining Prezi, and attending to its specific
rhetorical affordances. As PowerPoint, Prezi is an evocative object: it guides actions through its
available and default options, it invites some movements while obscuring or precluding others. While
such invitations have strong implications for authors, Prezi is not only evocative – it is outright
talkative. There is a plurality of voices describing it, advocating its use or decrying its limitations,
recommending tips and tricks, and there is a wealth of presentations that illustrate prezi reasoning. We
argue that these voices play an important role in the artifact’s power to shape argumentation, including
its unexpected effects.

III. TALKATIVE PREZI

What is Prezi? To make this clear through a bullet-point list, which is a derided though often
used device in prezi documents (called ‘prezis’) we can say that Prezi is, at the same time:

- A software tool in competition with PowerPoint;
- A commercial ecosystem;
- A community of users;
- A searchable repository of public content, including reusable content (templates and
  prezis);
- A target of admiration and controversy;
- A (still rare) topic of academic research [10];
- A (still rare) form of academic research publication [11] [12] [13].

Its core is the Prezi web-based presentation software, which has generated a diverse landscape
of actors, practices, and messages. The Prezi tool is the engine of a commercial ecosystem: Prezi
operates according to a freemium business model, and there is considerable incentive for the company
to attract premium users. There are many other companies that specialize in creating prezis, and who
also develop prezi templates, available to buy and occasionally for free. Prezi professionals also create
prezis about best practices, tips and tricks in prezi, as a demonstration of their own skills. The Prezi
team, other teams in Prezi-invested companies, as well as users in a variety of settings participate in a
flow of messages and discussions about Prezi – pitching it, praising it, analyzing it and, now and then,
criticizing it.

3.1. Pitching Prezi

Prezi presents itself as a better alternative to PowerPoint, and describes itself in opposition to
‘slides’ as a presentational device. The main features of prezi highlighted in its commercial pitches are
zooming effects and storytelling. For example, the brief prezi that advertises the solution for business,
under the title ‘Prezi evokes curiosity’, invites users to ‘Zoom out to show the big picture’, ‘Zoom in
to show the details’, ‘Lead your audience…Down a path of discovery’, and ‘Create a visual journey…
that tells your story’, thus ‘ditching boring slides’ in favor of ‘stunning zooming presentations’ (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. ‘The Prezi for Business’ front page pitch [14]

Prezi brings forward visual metaphors and the imperative of storytelling, constantly reminding users of their power, in opposition to slides and bulleted lists. This is not only an official company message, but it is also pervasive in the numerous ‘tips and tricks’ prezis created by users and companies that specialize in public presentations.

3.2. Persuading with Prezi through layered metaphors and storytelling

Prezi invites metaphorical persuasion at three levels. Firstly, it operates with the metaphor of space on an ‘infinite canvass’ that allows zooming in and out. Information is situated on the canvass space and it becomes visible through focalization, sliding, rotating, and other movements. Therefore, relationships between information unavoidably become spatial relationships. In some instances, there is an explicit correspondence between zooming movements, spatial arrangement and the constructs including in the presentation – such as the prezi on ‘Putting Time in Perspective’ [15], winner of the award of Best zooming presentation for 2013 [16]. Still, in many cases such relationships are missing [17]. As a default strategy, Prezi recommends the use of zooming to represent generality, thus going in depth for details and zooming out for more important information. Secondly, there may be a metaphorical relation between a specific thematic imagery and the main ideas of the presentation. Prezis often use visual templates that populate the canvass with a detailed environment complete with occasional characters and sketched storylines. Prezi users may develop their own template, may choose from freely available ones, or may buy a template. As we can see in Fig. 2, templates are defined through a visual metaphor that can be selected to match one’s message; ‘Journey’, ‘Roots to Results’, ‘Mission to Mars’, ‘Input / Output’, ‘Vital sign’ etc. Thirdly, users may insert their own visual content to create metaphors or analogies, within content frames.
Storytelling is often advised as a success feature for a presentation. Prezis may be explored freely on the canvas with the mouse, but the software invites the creation of a structured ‘path’ that leads the audience from one frame or zone of the canvas to another. The ‘path’ is itself a metaphor that refers us to travel, thus journeys are a frequent frame for prezi stories. Stories may serve to give meaning to the path, which in turn consolidates their narrative line.

3.3. Admiration and Prezi contests

In the context of a Prezi vs. PowerPoint competition, and given a common ambivalence about PowerPoint presentations (evidenced through expressions such as ‘death through PowerPoint), Prezi elicits enthusiasm and a certain fan-like atmosphere among its users. This is also organized through contests, such as the Prezi contest for the best presentations of the year [16], or the TED Prezi contest [19]. Such formal and informal contests highlight exemplary prezis that serve to illustrate the main features of the solution – visual imagery, storytelling, zooming effects – and to inspire users.

3.4. Patterns and Diversity in Prezi documents

While prezis are primarily meant to serve as support for verbal presentations, they also circulate as independent documents which can be read online. They may also be designed especially for online reading, without the prospect of personal, verbal animation – for example, the TED contest prezis were not meant to be presented, just to illustrate their power of prezifying TED talks for a wider audience [19]. Prezumés, that is, personal presentations composed through Prezi, are another type of stand-alone document – see, as an illustration, the popular choice award of the 2013 Prezi contest [20]. Scholars occasionally use Prezi to compose scientific texts [11] [12] [13].

There are systematic sources of diversity among prezis: some of them are created by Prezi professionals or by companies enlisting considerable human resources, while others are created by people for their professional work or private lives, without extensive Prezi skills. Some serve purposes of organizational communication in business, some serve sales purposes, some are aimed for teachers and students – and there are other uses as well. At the same time, at the lower end of prezi specialization and in specific thematic zones, we witness considerable homogeneity.

As a case study, we examined in more detail prezis published online as public and reusable documents, in the prezi.com repository, on the subject of mental illness. We searched for terms such as ‘depression’, ‘delusion’, and ‘bipolar’ – and we found large numbers of prezis on these topics, many of them dedicated to classroom instruction. It is often not possible to know whether authors are
teachers or students, and if and how they were used for verbal presentations, and in what contexts. Still, we can examine them as independent documents, available for readers interested in the topic of mental health and in authoring a public presentation. These prezis are surprisingly similar in several respects:

- Presentation text is often organized in bullet points, and rarely in narrative form or in alternative structures (quotes, dialogues etc);
- The background visual theme has little metaphorical bearing on the subject matter; it mostly serves a decorative function (Fig. 3);
- The prezi path serves to transition from one frame of content to another, without suggesting any overarching narrative;
- Movement is used for transitions but not as metaphor.

![Figure 3. Overview of six prezis on ‘Depression’ on the search page](image)

For example, although mental illness accounts often invoke tropes of ‘falling’, ‘depth’, ‘darkness’, ‘confusion’, ‘ambiguity’, ‘paradox’ – these are illustrated only occasionally through added images, rather than through embedded options in prezi, such as zooming and lateral movements, possibly changing environments, spatial relations, and coherent storylines. Most Prezis on the topic of mental illness could be easily converted to PowerPoint without losing anything but a fluent, nonlinear transition between slides.

3.5. Controversy

Controversy on Prezi’s features and their induced user experiences and cognitive ‘styles’ are not yet frequent, given that Prezi is a novel solution; academic research on Prezi is also sparse. Still, independent and critical reflection on Prezi will most likely grow.

Critics point to several features of prezis that may lead, especially through repetition, to negative experiences when engaging with such documents:

- ‘Motion sickness’ induced by rotations when transitioning between frames [21] [17];
- Low relevance of spatial relationship for the organization of information in actual presentations (‘frames in Prezi are spatially related whether this makes sense or not’) [17];
- Excessive focus on the decorative visuals rather than the main message (including content-relevant visuals), missing the connection with the audience; ‘eye-catching visuals’ distract the attention and their novelty wears off as Prezi becomes more popular [22] [23].

Given the focus of prezi on zooming and storytelling, we find that the most prominent current limitation of Prezi is that these two affordances are rarely taken over to full capacity by non-technical users working for classroom presentations – that is, teachers and students. Themes and templates often
do not serve an overarching metaphor and/or story, being limited to decoration, and little use is made of movement and spatial relations to propose clarifying information structures.

IV. Conclusions and discussion

Prezi is designed as an evocative technology: it explicitly aims to encourage certain ways of dealing with knowledge, organizing information in space, through movement and storylines. Its templates bring to the fore metaphors as a persuasive device; the most acclaimed prezis, highlighted through contests and various informal rankings, illustrate the presentation principle of a journey through a visual landscape, using movement to create surprise and perplexity by zooming in, and to achieve clarification by zooming out to the bird’s-eye view.

Prezi is also a verbose and multivocal tool: commercial and technical interests fuel a flow of messages and conversations about how to design prezis, aiming for ‘stunning’ presentations, for clarity and creativity. Prezi users have much to learn from ‘tips and tricks’ presentations and from illustrations in showcased prezis.

Nonetheless, many prezis composed for classroom use, among those published on the prezi platform, do not make full use of the tool’s capabilities and do not really follow its invitations to storytelling, metaphorical argumentation and spatial reasoning. We have observed this shortcoming in the case of prezis about psychological conditions such as depression, bipolar disorders, and delusions: although such conditions can be greatly clarified through analogies and storytelling, the bullet list of symptoms and causes remains a dominant rhetorical device in prezi frames. Visuals are used mostly for decoration, and movements do not have other rhetorical use besides the creation of attention-grabbing transitions.

We propose that part of this limitation derives from the business focus of Prezi, including its clarifying-and-encouraging voices. There are relatively few showcased prezis that deal with the clarification of scientific concepts, and there is no special focus on science throughout the corpus of prezi tutorials. What does it mean to create a story for a scientific presentation? General injunctions for storytelling will probably fail without more specific advice. For example, scientific constructs have a history – and history is well served by Prezi’s spatial organization and its zooming abilities. Scientific constructs appear in the lives of people – be they researchers, subjects, patients, collectors or in other roles – and people have stories to tell about their experiences, which could be also well served by Prezi’s visual resources. Such stories could serve as a broad frame for the scientific and educational prezis, organizing their templates and presentation paths.

Users could also benefit from comments on specific prezis, explaining how they do what they do: teachers and students may well appreciate the persuasive power of a stunning prezi without having the vocabulary to describe and then reflect on its rhetorical choices. Showcased prezis impress, inspire, but do not necessarily inform. A dedicated commentary that would clarify what aspects of a prezi design are valuable for a certain audience, and what are its limitations or missed opportunities, would bring significant value. This requires redefining the Prezi tutorial approach through an intersection between the currently disparate endeavors of ‘tips and tricks’ advice versus showcasing prominent, creative prezis.

Researchers interested in how technologies shape our reasoning habits will continue to confront the issue of agency. We find several questions particularly engaging. For example, what is the relevance of user classifications – such as the distinction between naïve/reflexive users, or skilled/rookie users, when attributing agency towards humans and non-humans? How can we conceptualize the ‘equipped user’, the joint action and knowledge of humans and technology [24] – taking into account diversity in users’ competences? Do designers and other technologically privileged users, involved in the process of producing, adjusting, and interpreting the technology for wider audiences, have a special role in such research?
VI. References


