

Controsenso, But Not Too Much: Digital Artifacts to Ease Communication and Exchange with Seeing-Impaired People

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1 Introduction

Controsenso means contradiction or counter-sense and alludes to the idea, only apparently strange, to have a blind person as your guide through their home town. *Controsenso: Genoa as you have never seen it*, is a virtual tour of the city of Genoa to reveal in poetry the everyday life experience of seeing-impaired people. The choice is story telling through sound and images of what blind people see and perceive of their city. It conveys strong feelings in terms of noises, smells, lights and shadows, and pavement and walls textures. These represent known objects, places, people and shops: the thousands of details that go unseen at a conscious level for most of us.

Controsenso builds on the concept of the exhibition *Dialogo nel buio*® (Dialogue in the Dark by A. Heinecke), a journey in the dark with a blind guide to experience moving without the sense of sight. In *Controsenso* the idea is to provoke similar feelings offering a new way to think about Genoa and the blind. Digital technology provides immersive experience, opening multi-modal channels for communication. The experience awakes the senses and promotes a higher appreciation and understanding of the seeing-impaired experiences.

Controsenso was conceived in the frame of the event Genoa 2004¹ to compliment the official program and to experiment with communication technology. The application content was chosen after extensive interviews with seeing-impaired people from Genoa. From these people we learned how they find their way through the city, listening to the noise of locations, touching walls at corners or feeling the sidewalks and cracks with their feet. A sense that is not really engaged in the application is smell, which was on the contrary very often cited by the persons we talked to, as a leading factor. Instead, we had to rely to images to evoke a sense of smell, depending on the phenomenon of synesthesia, in which a sensation is subjectively formed concomitant with a simulated one. In multimedia we can easily provoke particular sensations following different stimulæ: a thermal sensation with an image, a sound sensation with visual signs, making the image appear longer etc.

2 The interaction

The application is based on interactive videos, launched from web pages. The videos can be seen linearly or can be browsed: the navigation is guided mainly by voices and sounds. To alert you of a possible link while you are exploring with the mouse there is usually a change of sounds underlined by a slight change of sight. You have to listen to the images, so to say, to find your way through the story.

⁰ EU-MEDES Program, on leave in 2002/03 from Köln International School of Design, Germany.

¹ Genoa has been designated as the European Capital of Culture 2004, along with the French city of Lille, by the Government of EU.



Figure 1. An image from the advertisement campaign: a boy with shut eyes.

Two videos support the paper: *I muri sbagliati* (The wrong walls) and *La forma della luce* (The shape of light). The first video is a tour of the old city center, the streets of which are locally called *carruggi*: places that may appear crowded, noisy and disorienting to unfamiliar visitors who have to rely on their full senses to balance orientation. The people are the links to follow to develop the full story: one has to identify the key people to enter secondary videos (6) recorded in spots typical of the neighborhood: a vintage cloth and dress shop, a smith shop, an historical pub, the fish market, fruit and vegetable stands, a worker. In the second video the goal is to convey the feelings about lights as seen by people with very poor sight: mere sensations that vaguely translate forms and movement of objects in ways that are different for most of us. Interacting with the video we follow lights moving along walls, running in a busy street, swimming on the water: the city is returned by its light and sound rather than its landscape.

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References

DIALOGO NEL BUIO®. Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Rovereto, Dec 03 - March 04. Also Palazzo Reale di Milano Oct 02 - Feb 03 www.dialogonelbuio.it www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com

GENOVA 2004. <http://www.genova-2004.it/>