## iFISH: engaging demonstrations

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There are search engines; there are recommender systems; there are browsing environments. Then there is **iFISH**.

iFISH started life as an research application, the aim of which was to research ways of engaging students in an exploratory task. The research focus was on how to make a mundane task interesting and engaging using current web technologies. We needed a task that had the potential for exploratory behaviour, was non-trivial, and complex enough to justify engagement with a computer application.

The task we settled on was one of university students exploring the vast number of subject offerings in the University of Melbourne subject handbook (about 2300) looking for interesting subjects to broaden their degree. This task was ideal since it involved exploring a large data set (the 2300 subjects) about which the students knew little.

The philosophy behind the exploration was to present a student with a set of sliders that presented 'meta data' relating to the subjects – not information about the subject content itself. In this way a student might make choices about the degree to which she enjoys subjects that are *theoretical* (rather than practical), *quantitative* (rather than qualitative), *investigative* (rather than directed), and so on. The playfulness of the software, together with the opportunity to follow an iterative reflection cycle, was intended to encourage exploration.

There are several incarnations of iFISH. The original iFISH system will be presented during this demonstration (Figure 1).



Figure 1 The original iFISH

However, iFISH was designed as a very flexible research tool to allow us to set up numerous situations with different degrees of *affect* and hence investigate the impact of affect on exploration and engagement. Whilst iFISH is a Flash application, the flexibility is derived from the extensive use of XML files to control the behaviour and layout of the system, as well as the nature of the data presented by it. Every action by the user is logged in a mySQL database so that a later analysis can be carried out looking at user behaviour.

In this demonstration we show iFISH in a number of different contexts:

**1) Exploring subjects offered by one department.** This version (Figure 2) allows students to change the 'weightings' of each subject to what *they* think it should be, rather than what the lecturer originally entered:



Figure 2 Exploring subjects with user input

**2) Exploring museum exhibitions whilst planning a visit.** This shows a 'keep' area where favourites can be dragged (Figure 3):



Figure 3 Planning a museum visit

**3)** As a part of ongoing research. Ruud Knieriem, a Masters student from Utrecht University in the Netherlands, is setting up a number of puzzles using iFISH. He is currently running an online experiment in which people from Australia and the Netherlands are exploring the puzzles that are presented with differing affective and interactive features. From this he will explore issues to do with affect, exploration and engagement.

Figure 4 shows an early screen shot from his experiment.



Figure 4 Exploring engagement whilst solving a puzzle

If you wish to participate in this experiment, we will give you a URL during the presentation. Or you can email Ruud at ruudknieriem@gmail.com.

## For further information

- Pearce, J. M. & Pardo, S. (2008). To search or to explore that is the question: a study in mindful engagement. Paper presented at the OzCHI Conference, Cairns.
- 2. iFISH was programmed in Flash by Mitchell Harrop, The University of Melbourne.