

Got a software design problem? Call a philosopher!

September 12 2014, by Nick King



A Canadian software company has used the expertise of a University of Nottingham philosopher to help design event calendar software.

Vancouver based Time.ly produces event planning and calendar software, which is installed in over 70,000 websites across the world, indexing 3,500,000 upcoming events.

The Philosophy of Time

One of Time.ly's founders saw The University of Nottingham's Dr Jonathan Tallant on a Philosophy File video about 'The Philosophy of Time' and asked for his input.

Time.ly was interested in looking at ideas for new ways to represent

events in time. Traditional calendars such as wall calendars and Outlook calendars display events in a linear way, known as 'static views of time' this is your traditional grid format. In this view, the past, present, and future events all exist at their particular times. However, an alternative view of time is that it is dynamic, flowing and passing.

Speaking about the views of time, Dr Tallant said: "The static, or 'moving spotlight' view is like your standard calendar, a spotlight simply moves across time, highlighting events in a very linear way. However, there is also a 'shrinking tree' model of time. As time elapses and you make various decisions, then your options (the branches of the tree) fall off and new ones emerge.

"This model is very useful because if you have access to people's locations, their interests and so on, then you are able to provide a calendar and a view of events which is intuitive and tailored to each individual."

New ways of representing time

In addition to using Dr Tallant's insights to begin developing new ways of representing [time](#) in a calendar format, Time.ly has also sought his thoughts on the nature of events in order to refine their event calendar software.

"The success of events depends on the components of their parts, who is there, when it takes place, where it takes place and so forth," said Dr Tallant. "Every aspect of an event, its quality, duration and nature all depend on the people who are present. Therefore it makes sense to design software which helps to guarantee that the right people make it to the right events, enhancing their quality and maximising the experiences of individuals and communities."

Bradley Roulston, a founder of Time.Ly added: "Jonathan has really helped us to engage with a wider audience. Drawing on his research on presentism, he has suggested a variety of ways in which we might refine the product. In particular, his suggestion that we focus on the significance of the present moment and how we can represent future [events](#) as in the present as things that are going to be has been invaluable."

Apart from his work with Time.ly on software development, Dr Tallant also ran training workshops with them on 'making good decisions'. The workshops examined unconscious biases and whether we are morally responsible for not correcting unconscious biases. He also explored the moral aspects of decision making.

Using philosophical principles to look at things differently

Dr Tallant believes that more companies can benefit from looking at some of the ideas in philosophy. "I'm sure that most businesses probably think that a philosopher is the last person who can help them. However, I think that they would be pleasantly surprised at how philosophical principles can help them look at things differently and find innovative solutions that they would never have previously considered."

Provided by University of Nottingham

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