

A Séance with Guy

*De Geuzen (a foundation for multi-visual research)*¹

Abstract

Foreword: Practicing Multi-visual Research

After leaving art school in the mid-nineties, we formed a collaborative group named *De Geuzen* and naively described ourselves as 'a foundation for multi-visual research'. At the time, we had no idea what that string of words actually meant, but as a vague description, it mapped our desire to speculate across different disciplines, artistic and theoretical alike. Borrowing the term from academia, 'research' suggests something fluid and flexible. Rather than a product or traditional art object, it promotes a process of open-ended inquiry.

With this charter in mind, we have slowly fleshed out a definition of 'multi-visual research' through practice. We have deployed a variety of methods to explore issues like female identity, critical resistance and narrative archiving. Working across both analogue and digital media, we have hosted thematic dinners, conducted online surveys, created virtual tours and designed a series of uniforms. Our strategies of research have been at times unconventional, and we frequently employ playful tactics and disguises to engage with audiences in unexpected ways. This short essay looks at an online work called *A Séance with Guy*. The project explores the thoughts of the French situationist, Guy Ernest Debord in the guise of a chatbot.

¹ *De Geuzen* is the collective name for three women, Riek Sijbring, Femke Snelting and Renée Turner. They have collaborated together as an art and design team since 1996.

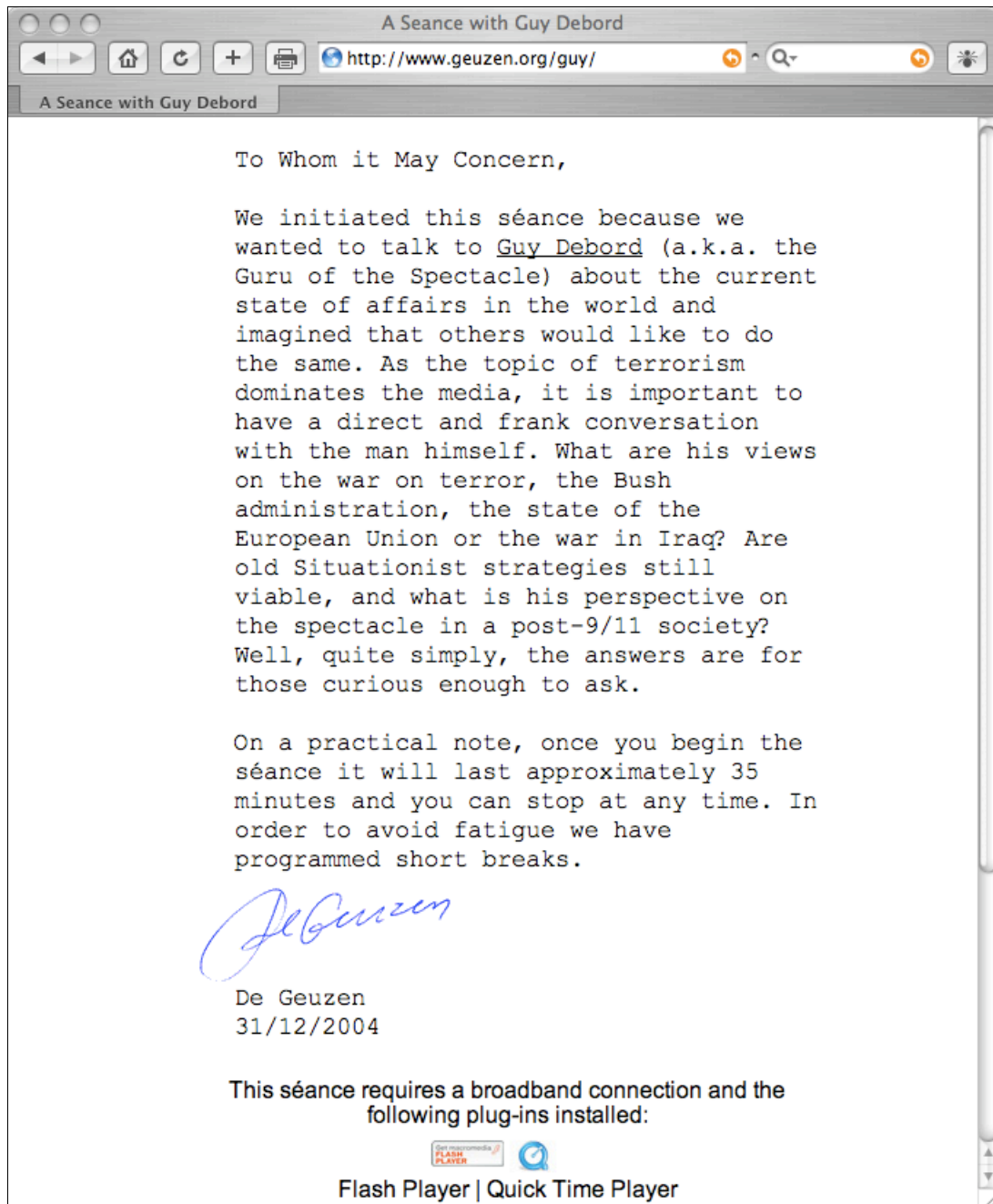


Fig.1 De Geuzen: a Foundation for Multi-visual Research, Screenshot of introductory letter taken from *A Séance with Guy*, <http://www.geuzen.org/guy/>, 2004.

Chatting Is Not Just for the Idle!

Chatting is something informal. It's the light and disarming banter happening on the fly, or in stolen breaks around coffee machines and water coolers. Like the doodle is to drawing, the chat is to conversation. It occupies the territory between real work and meaningful dialogue. When chatting, thoughts are half-baked and conversation meanders aimlessly. A lot of "you know what I mean" is interjected here and there, filling the gaps and garnering communal empathy.

On the internet, chatting is ubiquitous. Chatrooms have been the virtual hangout for teenagers, who swap info on music. They gossip about Paris Hilton's latest antics, Britney Spears' post-pregnancy chub, or her tempestuous descent into debauchery following her split from K. Federline. These spaces have also been a pedophile hunting ground, frightening parents, who continually search for sophisticated security systems to hold the endless chatting at bay. In short, we are living under what can best be described as a deluge of the chat.

With access to broadband and services like msn and skype, there is a perpetually open channel for friends and even strangers, to lure you into conversational distraction. We all know the scenario; you're trying to finish that last paragraph of an email which was meant to be answered yesterday, and suddenly, a window appears on your screen saying: *hey, are you out there? Can you talk?* Welcoming the temporary release from duties, you type: *yes, I'm here*. And with those words, you're well and fully hooked. Typing into the prompt, communication hovers somewhere between writing and speech.

But not all chats are human to human. In between man and machine, codes can emulate natural language. Scripts translated through browsers, render chatterbots of various kinds ready for input and exchange. The chatbot, as it is more commonly known, imitates conversation. It is a kind of sympathetic ear that hears, but cannot truly listen. In brief, it is a simulation of a conversation based on source code, propositions and keywords. Its structure is purely mathematical. If *this* is entered, then *that* is rendered; in other words, it's a play of impromptu conversation and calculated probabilities.

The structure of a chatbot is seductively formulaic, fetching because of both its limits and potential. In terms of communication, its status lies somewhere adrift, in the zones of legitimate exchange, pure gibberish,

reflective soliloquy and most of all, science fiction. In essence, the chatbot is an unusual, slippery and at times, unwieldy, research tool.

Resurrecting the Dead: Eliza Doolittle meets Guy Debord

Sitting around talking about impossible ideas and projects, we, meaning De Geuzen, have often dreamed of resurrecting a deceased intellectual for the purposes of a good discussion. Just think about the prospects of bringing back a sage. Maybe De Certeau could explain a little more about his notion of 'la perruque'. Perhaps Descartes could tell us whether Rationalism had run its full course. Or wouldn't it be nice to get Simone de Beauvoir's perspective on *Sex in the City*. Would she find it fascinating, frightening, or terribly inane? Given a little consideration, the mind reels at the prospect.

After looking at the inner workings of chatbots, we saw a way of fulfilling our dream. And amongst the dead, there was one person at the top of our list for re-animation, the un-artist, cult-hero and theorist of the spectacle, Guy Debord. At a time when no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, the Abu Ghraib images were in wide circulation, and online videos of beheadings were nestled amongst porn sites, putting Debord's theories of the spectacle to the test seemed more relevant than ever.

Since committing suicide in 1994, Debord's notoriety as an intellectual and enfant terrible has grown exponentially on the web. His un-copyrighted work, along with other Letterist and Situationist International texts, are distributed widely via sites such as: www.nothingness.org , www.notbored.org and www.bopsecrets.org. Next to the fact that his texts are digitized and readily accessible, his style of writing easily lends itself to the fragmented responses indicative of chatbots. *The Society of the Spectacle*, is especially well-suited. As anyone knows who has read the manifesto, his tone is that of a cryptic soothsayer.

In terms of code, there were several chatbots to choose from, some paid and others open source. Partly due to our skills, and partly because of our love of DIY, we opted for *Eliza*, a rudimentary JavaScript² version. Originally written by Michal Wallace and enhanced by George Dunlop, the script is available for others to download and modify. The script also has a fascinating history. The original *Eliza*,

² A programming language originally developed by Netscape.

from which the JavaScript chatbot borrows its name, is a pioneer of her kind. Her status in computer history is equal to being the first woman on the moon.

Named after George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* character, Eliza Doolittle, the original project was first programmed by Joseph Weizenbaum in the mid-sixties. As a study of natural language through computational means, the project was initiated by MIT. Like many early computer research programs, it was funded by the US Department of Defense.

Just as the phonetician, Henry Higgins, set out to civilize his impoverished cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, Weizenbaum set out to do the same to his machine. He wrote about his bot, '*it can be made to appear even more civilized*',³ but unlike *Pygmalion*, in this case, the script is an algorithm, the playwright, a coder, and Eliza is a computer to be tamed, not a young woman. And although the early natural language experiment was very different to what now operates on the web, Dunlap and Wallace's code, nonetheless, recalls that history.

Using the JavaScript, we placed Guy's words into Eliza's body, mixing his text with her source code. It was both a transgenderal and transliterate operation. Weaving these elements together, Eliza would become our clairvoyant able to channel Debord's thoughts into the present.

While it sounds mysterious, it's not. Once inserted into the source code, Debord's quotes can be filtered according to processing, timing and levels of keywording. Basic commands make the chat flow. Rather than simply pulling quotes, Dunlop and Wallace have integrated commands in the script that simulate conversation. For example, to formulate even the simplest of sentences, conjunctival operations have to be scripted. If the input is *I*, the response needs to be *you*, making the source command look like this:

³ Weizenbaum, J.A. 'ELIZA: Computer Program For the Study of Natural Language Communication Between Man and Machine' in *Communications of the ACM* Vol. 9, no. 1, January 1966, p.36-35. Available at: <http://i5.nyu.edu/~mm64/x52.9265/january1966.html>

| | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| conj1[0] = "are"; | conj2[0] = "am"; |
| conj1[1] = "am"; | conj2[1] = "are"; |
| conj1[2] = "were"; | conj2[2] = "was"; |
| conj1[3] = "was"; | conj2[3] = "were"; |
| conj1[4] = "I"; | conj2[4] = "you"; ⁴ |

Next to conjugations, a seemingly natural rhythm of conversation has to be set. Timing is partially influenced by the speed of the user's input, but it is also artificially dictated within the code. Dunlop notes in the source of his JavaScript, 'fake time thinking to allow for user self-reflection and give the illusion that some thinking is going on.'⁵ So anyone implementing the code ultimately decides the length of pauses. We have played with this timing in different ways. There is not only a slight delay in Guy's responses, but if no input is received, after a few minutes, he says he's going off to get a drink.

The chat has different layers of keywords which help build the dynamics of the conversation. The first is related to a general mode of dialogue and the second concerns the specific content of Debord which we integrated into the JavaScript. The first layer of keywords is a legacy of Eliza's early history. Weizenbaum fashioned his system after the discussion techniques developed by the therapist Carl Rogers.⁶ Briefly stated, in the Rogerian model, the therapist operates like a mirror turning observations into questions. The aim is to elicit the patient's own feelings about an event, person or circumstance. Weizenbaum explains:

This mode of conversation was chosen because the psychiatric interview is one of the few examples of categorized dyadic natural language communication in which one of the participating pair is free to assume the pose of knowing almost nothing of the real world. If, for example, one were to tell a psychiatrist "I went for a long boat ride" and he responded "Tell me about boats", one would not assume that he knew nothing about boats, but that he had some purpose in so directing the subsequent conversation. It is important to note that this assumption is one made by the

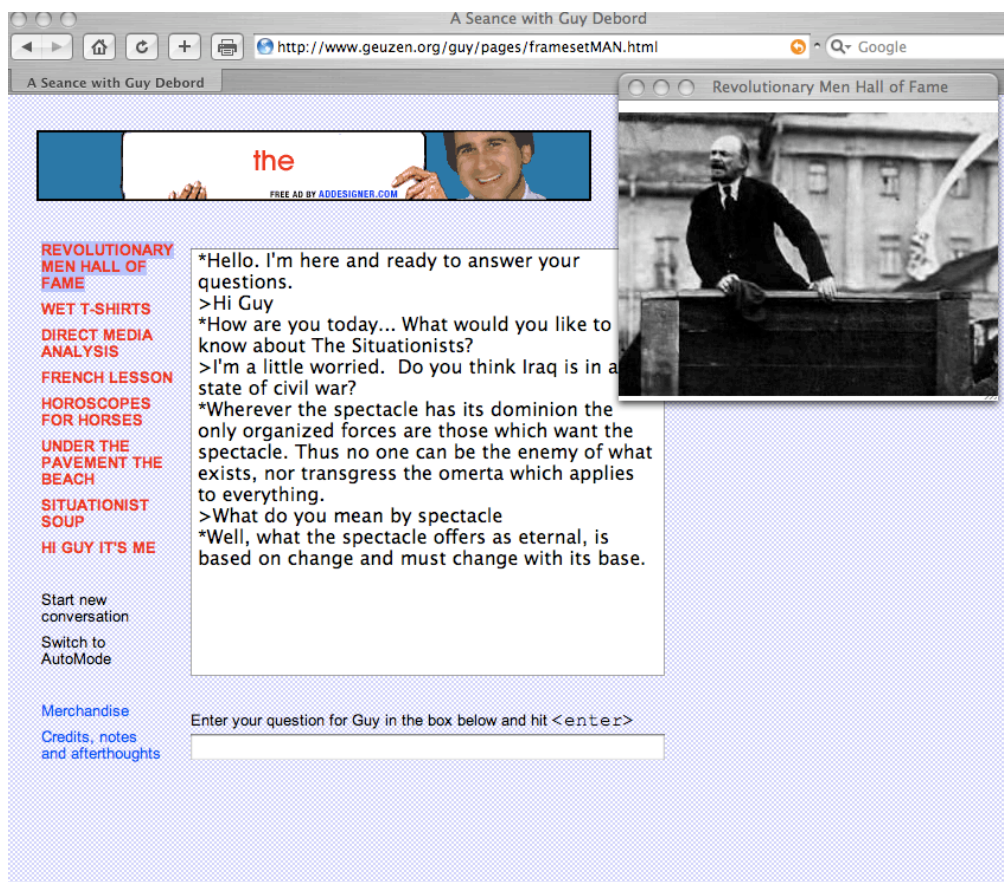
⁴ Wallace, M. source code with script enhancements from George Dunlop, Eliza, Javascript, Available at: <http://cyberpsych.org/eliza/> (view as source)1997.

⁵ De Geuzen: a Foundation for Multi-visual Research, Script for *Séance with Guy*, source code available at: <http://www.geuzen.org/guy/media/seance.txt>, 2004

⁶ Weizenbaum, J.A., op. cit. p.36-35.

speaker. Whether it is realistic or not is an altogether separate question. In any case, it has a crucial psychological utility in that it serves the speaker to maintain his sense of being heard and understood.⁷

Our *Séance with Guy* (figure 2) takes advantage of this tone. The chatbot simulates hearing by repeating the user's words back to them. For example, if someone writes: *I am worried about the state of the world today*, Guy will respond, *How long have you been worried about the state of the world today?* Of course it's a cheap trick, but nonetheless, the illusion is effective, and like Weizenbaum's analogy of the boat, the answer in any other context would be awkward, if not patronising. But in the context of the chat, the question evokes self-reflection, gives a sense that the bot is listening and asks the user for more input.



⁷ Weizenbaum, A. Joseph, *Ibid.*, p.36-35.

Fig. 2 De Geuzen: a Foundation for Multi-visual Research, Screenshot of chat with pop-up, *Revolutionary Men Hall of Fame*, taken from *A Séance with Guy*, <http://www.geuzen.org/guy>, 2004

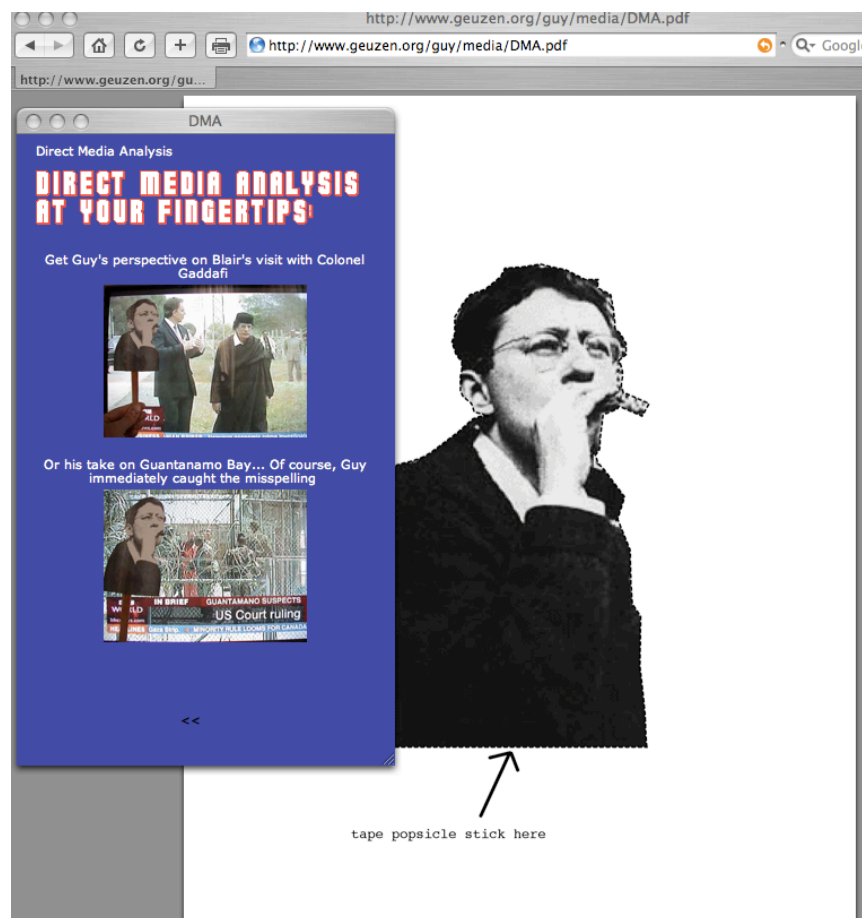
Where the user generates most of the content in the first layer, the second layer introduces the themes we were most interested in exploring. This level combines situationist content and contemporary political issues. As mentioned earlier, during the initial period of programming, words and phrases such as 'terrorism', 'the war in Iraq' and 'Abu Ghraib' were commonplace in the news. We used keywords like these, along with others related to Debord's Situationist discourse, such as 'dérive' and 'detournement'.

It was at this stage, that a close reading, code, writing and collage could come together. The list of words which touched on topical issues were co-ordinated and matched with Debord's numbered quotes. If a keyword is typed into the chatbot, a connected response is pulled from the source. For anyone reading the source code, we have made internal notes laying out thematic clusters and the breadth of possible responses:

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//CLUSTER: GOVERNMENT, BUSH, AMERICA, TERROR, IRAQ,
PALESTINE, ISRAEL
response[131]="What can I say that I have not said before:
Spectacular government now possesses all the means
necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception.";
response[132]="Spectacular government is the absolute
master of memories just as it is the unfettered master of
plans which will shape the most distant future. It reigns
unchecked; it executes its summary judgments.";
response[133]="Wherever the spectacle has its dominion
the only organized forces are those which want the
spectacle. Thus no one can be the enemy of what exists,
nor transgress the omerta which applies to everything.";
response[134]="A perfect democracy constructs its own
inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is to be judged by its
enemies rather than by its results.";
response[135]="The spectators must certainly never know
everything about terrorism, but they must always know
enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism,
everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more
rational and democratic.";
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response[136]="The story of terrorism is written by the state and it is therefore highly instructive.";
response[182]="If one really insists on finding something positive in modern culture, it must be said that its only positive aspect lies in its self-liquidation, its withering away, its witness against itself.";⁸

This means that if you type in a query asking how effective the war on terror truly is, Guy may respond with: *A perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results.*⁹ As the conversation moves on and the keyword 'terror' re-appears, another quote from the cluster will pop-up in the chat window. If the user decides to pick up on the term 'democracy', the conversation will then shift towards another thematic cluster as that too is another keyword.



⁸ De Geuzen, op. cit.

⁹ View source code for *Séance with Guy* for all source material references, available at: <http://www.geuzen.org/guy/media/seance.txt>

Fig. 3 De Geuzen: a foundation for multi-visual research, screenshot of *Direct Media Analysis: Guy Puppet*, taken from *A Séance with Guy*, <http://www.geuzen.org/guy>, 2004

Next to the chat itself we have programmed timed pop-up windows which operate almost like commercial breaks. There is a recipe for *Situationist Soup*, a short film promoting the non-existent *Revolutionary Men Hall of Fame*, a how-to guide to making your own Guy puppet, plus visual explorations of certain classic Situationist quotes. Most of the interruptions are tongue-in-cheek and play with the conventions of masculine genius. Where the chatbot's editorial work is mainly hidden within the source code - in the pop-ups - our voice is more overt. Rather than a linear analysis, the ability to script across all these levels, meant we could read and comment upon Debord's work from different perspectives.



Fig. 4 De Geuzen: a Foundation for Multi-visual Research, screenshot of chat with pop-up, *Situationist Soup Recipe*, taken from *A Séance with Guy*, <http://www.geuzen.org/guy/>, 2004

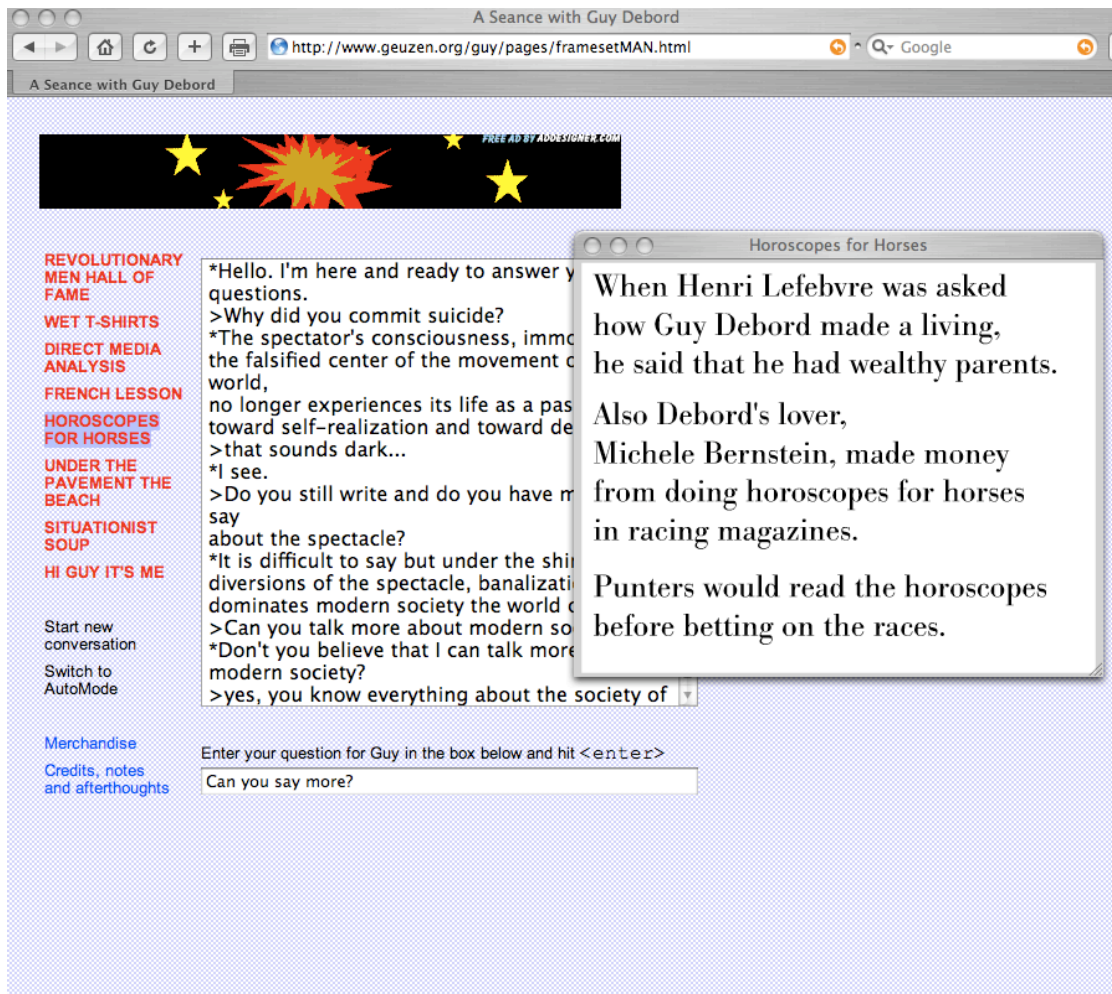


Fig.5 De Geuzen: a Foundation for Multi-visual Research, screenshot of chat with pop-up, *Horoscopes for Horses*, taken from *A Séance with Guy*, <http://www.geuzen.org/guy/>, 2004

In making and performing the chatbot before various audiences, it has been striking to see how old answers are relevant to new questions. Or, maybe seen in another way, the questions people are asking at this juncture in history are not really new. We have also noticed certain keywords are situated in a specific period of time. For example,

when the project was first launched, a question about Abu Ghraib would have been inevitable, given its dominance in the headlines, but now, no one asks about it. Abu Ghraib has become a dormant keyword, a snapshot of a particular moment in the mediascape. Over time, no doubt the keywords that fall out of use will reveal as much as those that remain topical.

As a research project, we derived a slightly perverse pleasure in moulding Debord's thoughts through Doolittle. Moreover, we relished in re-reading his work in an unconventional manner, adapting his texts through code to answer our curiosities and adopting a situationist approach to look at the movement's Godfather. Very few women have the privilege of re-scripting such a revolutionary male figure. With the assistance of Eliza, there was a sense of being feminist dominatrix through design. And issues of plagiarism? Well, through the séance we asked Guy about his perspective on the issue. He responded with: *Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author's phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, and replaces it with the right idea.*¹⁰ Of course, a quote he himself had stolen from the surrealist poet, Comte de Lautréamont.¹¹

¹⁰ Debord, G., *The Society of the Spectacle*, p.207.

¹¹ Isidore Ducasse, also known as Comte de Lautréamont actually writes: 'Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it.' *Poésies* 1870. For more reading see: The Bureau of Public Secrets, A User's Guide to Detournement available at: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/detourn.htm#2>.