

Third Places and Third Screens

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore the use of “third screens” in “third places”. We introduce “third screens” as a mundane technology and “third places” as settings for social interaction. We advocate *dwelling with technology* as a basis for appropriation and iterative co-evolution, with the use of commonplace technologies as an important prerequisite.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.2 [Information Interfaces & Presentation]: User Interfaces; D.2.2 [Software Engineering]: Design tools and techniques

General Terms

Design, Human Factors.

Keywords

Mobiles, urban screens, public places, interaction design.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we explore the use of “third screens in “third places”. Mobile media devices are referred to as “third screens” (after TV and computer), reflecting their increasing use for digital interactions [8]. “Third places” are shared public places outside home and work that act as anchors for community life [10].

In the next section we introduce “third screens” as a mundane technology and in the following section we introduce “third places” as settings for social interaction. We advocate *dwelling with technology* [2] as a basis for appropriation and iterative co-evolution, with the use of commonplace technologies as an important prerequisite to lower barriers to access. We conclude by summarising the paper and our future plans.

2. THIRD SCREENS

Goggin argues [8] that mobile devices are being recognised as the “third screen” (after TV and computer) – a media form to be taken seriously in terms of analysis and in terms of digital content creation, provision and aggregation.

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Gatz and Benefield [7] observe that 18-25 year olds consider their mobile phones as “a part of their body”. We have argued elsewhere [12, 3] that the perceived boundaries between digital interaction and physical environment are blurred, at best, for mobile technologies, due to increasingly ubiquitous connectivity and the consequent diffusion of digital interactions into the physical space of our diverse local and material contexts. As de Souza e Silva [6, p263] argues:

Because many mobile devices are constantly connected to the Internet, as is the case of the i-mode standard in Japan (NTT DoCoMo, 2006) users do not perceive physical and digital spaces as separate entities and do not have the feeling of 'entering' the Internet, or being immersed in digital spaces, as was generally the case when one needed to sit down in front of a computer screen and dial a connection.

This breakdown of the perceived boundaries between the digital and the physical through the enfolding of digital interactions into our daily physical experience has the effect of rendering such interactions, and the associated digital technologies, mundane, almost by definition.

3. THIRD PLACES

Oldenburg coined the term “third place” [10] to describe places outside the home and work that anchor community life. Examples of third places include cafés, coffee shops, community centres, shops and bars. Distinguishing characteristics of such places include: low entry cost, availability of food and drink, physically close to home or work, frequented by regulars, and so on.

Much of the previous work with ubiquitous technologies in third places emphasises specialised interfaces¹. *CowCam* [16], and *eyeCanvas* [4], for example, are specialised public screens providing innovative digital content creation and access in cafés, while *Schminky* [11] and *MobiLenin* [13] use specialised mobile devices and software to provide café-based music environments.

Even when commonplace technologies, such as SMS and simple displays, are used, trials are often only for short periods of time. *TexTales* [1], for example, uses SMS and displays for public storytelling, but trials were conducted for only about four hours for two consecutive evenings.

We argue in the next section that requiring specialised interfaces and running short-term trials precludes *dwelling with technology* as a basis for appropriation and co-evolution.

¹ In this paper we use the term *interface* as a catch-all to include interfaces, systems and technologies.

4. URBAN INTERFACES

Brown and Randell [2] argue for an understanding of long-term technology use, *dwelling with technology*, as a basis for understanding appropriation and the emergence of normative use. Long-term use supports appropriation because we can infer “what others are doing with technology, and are aware that others are viewing and making sense of our own activities” [2, p338]. *Dwelling with technology* also provides an opportunity for iterative co-evolution, iteratively eliciting and devising improvements and implementing them. The use of commonplace technologies is an important prerequisite for *dwelling with technology*.

Short-term trials provide an opportunity to evaluate users’ initial impressions of innovative interfaces. In contrast, *dwelling* provides users with the time to develop deeper understandings of, and familiarity with, innovative interfaces, moving beyond surface gestures and perceptions to the underlying actions and practices. Through *dwelling* with interfaces, users are able to engage in appropriation, leading to unintended uses and new understandings beyond the original innovation. (Outside the public sphere of third places, *dwelling with technology* is similarly fundamental to technology probes [9].)

Dwelling also provides an opportunity for iterative co-evolution, by which we refer to models of design, such as reflective practice [14], and to active involvement of users through participatory design [15]. The iterative nature of co-evolution requires longer-term use to enable repeated understanding and designing phases required for both senses of iterative co-evolution.

A prerequisite for *dwelling with technology* in third places is widespread availability of the underlying technologies. The use of specialised hardware devices or software imposes a barrier that partitions potential users into “haves” and “have-nots”. Commonplace technologies such as SMS, Bluetooth, simple displays and the World Wide Web avoid such barriers, opening up interfaces to use by the general public.

5. SUMMARY & FURTHER WORK

In this paper we have described “third screens” as a mundane technology and “third places” as settings for social interaction. We have advocated *dwelling with technology* as a basis for appropriation and iterative co-evolution, identifying the use of commonplace technologies as an important prerequisite.

We are exploring the interaction of third places and third screens in the ACID Urban Interfaces project. The project is concerned with digital interactions in the moment and in the world, and we are developing several prototypes to explore the ideas introduced in this paper:

- *Nnub* is a local digital noticeboard supporting WWW-authored postings to a touchscreen display in a general store and café opposite an outer-suburban primary school (somewhat like a public screen manifestation of *craigslist* [5])
- *IWALL* is a local digital noticeboard providing SMS posting and interaction in a café in an inner-suburban “urban village” (somewhat like *wiffiti* [17])
- *InfoPoint* is an embedded device supporting transfer of digital content to and from nearby mobile phones.

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