'Mundane' technologies for capturing and mobilizing liminality

Jolynna Sinanan
School of Social Enquiry
University of Melbourne
jsinanan@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

'Mundane' technologies are increasingly used for constructing self- narratives. They can be explored as tools used for the purpose of attempting to create experiences that are liminal across time and space. Personal pages such as Myspace.com and Facebook.com become a means through which users are able to capture certain essences of themselves and their lives as liminal experiences- suspended, complete and heightened moments of definition. In turn, personal identification within one's network becomes reciprocally defined by these images; particularly as they are projected into virtual public space. As physically spatial sites such as a tourist destination can contribute to a self-defining liminal experience, so too can the virtually spatial site, such as the personal web page. This paper presents a theoretically based hypothesis for further discussion which reflects recent work on HCI which draws upon cultural theory to consider network and community formation and the subsequent behaviour of users in the processes of technological design[1].

General Terms

'Mundane' technologies, MySpace.com, Facebook.com, tourist gaze, liminal spaces/ experiences, liminality, suspended moments

Keywords

Personal web pages, self-narrative, self-surveillance, blog

1. INTRODUCTION

'Mundane' technologies certainly penetrate every aspect of our work and social lives. This paper will discuss certain aspects of mundane technologies, the popular personal web pages MySpace.com and Facebook.com and mobile image capturing devices- digital cameras and camera phones to explore the processes of creating and sharing self-narratives. For this, the notion of what cultural theorists term the 'liminal' space or experience will be defined. Also, this aim of creating liminality predominantly seeks to appeal to an audience (ostensibly those on the receiving end of the technological contact, ie. viewers of web pages or the recipients of messages) and so, formats and

applications of these web pages resemble an episodic nature of a continuing narrative. In drawing upon the term 'liminal,' highly used in cultural theory, this paper also refers to recent work on HCI by writers such as Agre, Sengers, McCarthy, Dourish, Boehner, David, Kaye and Gaver, who aim to integrate critical theory into the technological design process. Furthermore, the relationship between creating and sharing self-narratives and surveillance, will be explored, suggesting that ultimately the process of digitising one's experiences aims to seek the formation and projection of reciprocal identity and identification- between the individual and the community. Finally, a method for testing these speculations will be outlined, including the use of data collection in the way of collecting samples of web-pages and surveys of agents- those who design and maintain pages of self-narratives and the recipients, those who visit, or consume them; in an attempt to define the relationship between agents and viewers in the reciprocity of constructing self- narratives.

2. Critical theory and HCI

As a theoretically based hypothesis for further investigation into personal web page user behaviour, this paper draws upon reflective HCI, or what Sengers, McCarthy and Dourish define as 'a style of HCI research that integrates technical practice with ongoing critical reflection'[2]. This method of HCI research is based on Agre's argument for the need of an interdisciplinary approach in furthering developments within a single discipline. Agre suggests that if a discipline is guided by critical reflection, it has the opportunity to deepen its self-awareness as well as renew itself through interdisciplinary dialogue[3]. To gauge a better understanding of the circumstances of user behaviour, Sengers, Boehner, David and Kaye further argue that not only should practitioners consider the ways technology reinforce underlying cultural assumptions, critical reflection can and should be a core principle of technology design for identifying blind spots and opening new design spaces[4]. Reflective HCI- the integration of

---

[1] Satchell, Christine, 'Cultural Theory- From Armchair Critic to Star Performer', OZCHI 2006, November 20-24, 2006, Sydney

[2] Sengers, P., McCarty, J. and Dourish, P., 2006, 'Reflective HCI: articulating an agenda for critical practice' in *CHI '06 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 22-27, 2006), CHI '06. ACM Press, New York, p1683

[3] Agre, Philip E., 1997, *Computation and Human Experience*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p10

[4] Sengers, P., Boehner, K., David, S. and Kaye, J., 2005, 'Reflective Design', in *Proceedings of the 4th Decennial Conference of Critical Computing: Between Sense and Sensibility* (Aarhus, Denmark, August 20-24, 2005). O.W.

critical theory with technological design aims to raise awareness of the complexity of organisational and political processes at work in everyday practices both in and beyond technology usage.

3. MySpace.com and Facebook.com

Briefly, MySpace.com and Facebook.com are two websites that provide space for networking, introductions by association and the expanding of social groups. They are by no means limited to an underground, peripheral or minority group, with the last count estimating MySpace at hosting 55 million users worldwide and Facebook holding 479,500 users signed up to the Australian network and with 41 million users worldwide. These social networking sites[5] have built upon the idea of the 'blog', or the online diary, but contain certain pertinent differences. MySpace.com and Facebook.com allow creators of accounts to build full, comprehensive profiles of themselves and share them with other users. While MySpace allows open access to all viewers unless specified by modifications in the uploader's profile who can set it to 'private', Facebook remains exclusive- only Facebook users can contact other Facebook users. Ostensibly, these pages rely upon the sharing of an account created by the user who then uploads a web-page with a provided format, ie. 'upload photos here', 'upload mp3 file here' and 'post message here'. This page can then be viewed by searching the server for your friend's name or via links on another friend's page. Users then come together by inviting others to view, or become friends with recipients, thus establishing a two-directional mode of accessibility, 'I can update or catch up on what is happening with you, at any time' and vice versa by the viewing information posted on the page. It is important to note that both MySpace and Facebook exercise a certain amount of exclusivity; you are connected to the network by the creation of your own account or you are excluded. These technologies allow for constructions of self- narratives by capturing what cultural theorists call the 'liminal' experience.

4. Liminal experiences

Liminal spaces and liminality has been used and defined loosely across a number of disciplines, cultural theory, anthropology (symbolic, visual and medical), sociology, media and theatre studies. For example, in medical anthropology, liminality entails 'an ambiguous status, or the transition phase of a rite of passage during which an individual is outside conventional roles', where as the general definition describes liminality as a period of transition where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are relaxed, or a situation which can lead to new perspectives. [6] The term was first used by Arnold van Gennep to describe the 'threshold' stage of a ritual in his essay *Rites of Passage* (1960) and popularised by Victor Turner in his works on anthropology and performance. For the purpose of this argument of examining mundane technologies as a tool for the purpose of creating self- narratives, liminal spaces will be defined from the point of view of two explanations. The first is exemplified in John Urry's coining of the 'tourist gaze', or viewing liminality in terms of temporary spaces, or, what is viewed in relation to tourism. The second is liminal spaces as used by Adrian Martin in his discussion of the pleasures provided by individual experience narratives in contemporary cinema.

4.1 John Urry and the 'tourist gaze'

Primarily, the aim of a tourist in terms of time and space configuration is to leave his normal mental life and normal physical constraints to travel to a limited zone; a space where he will remain temporarily for a limited amount of time. The 'on the limited' factor is the particularity of the time and space determination of the tourist's experience. What the tourist expects is to experience what is outside his normal life. In his 1990 volume, *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry suggests that 'what we gaze at is determined by the narrative that frames expectations. The narrative prescribes what should and should not be gazed at'.[7] Quite simply, for example, if the tourist's destination is Rome, narratives of history and the Roman Empire are evoked, where as if the tourist is visiting Kenya, images of safaris, tribes and the savannah are connoted. So, what the tourist decides to see in his limited amount of time is dependent on his expectations, which are shaped by a narrative. Other analyses of tourism suggest various reasons for the attraction of certain locations and certain experiences, the search for an 'authentic' way of life, romanticism or tradition; but the important factor to note is that the expectations of a tourist concentrates on an event suspended in time and space, removed from his normal reality- or, an experience that is predominantly different and exciting. As Urry's concern is defined by time and space- in the case of tourism, physical distance between home and destination, I wish to argue that seeking liminality is also pertinent to virtual space. The destination for experience and the formation of self-identity is at once distant in virtual space; however, the experience is also constructed within familiar space (with the computer at work or in the home, close to one's network or community). The notion of significance as paramount to liminality is also central to Adrian Martin's explanation of the liminal experience in relation to the pleasures of cinema.

Bertelsen, N.O. Bouvin, P.G. Krogh and M. Kyng, Eds. CC'05. ACM Press, New York, p49

[5] Wearring, Myles, 2007, 'Is Facebook good for the workplace?', www.news.com.au, 18/09/07, www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,22437742-5012424,00.html

[6] Janzen, John M., 2002, *The Social Fabric of Health: An Introduction to Medical Anthropology,* McGraw Hill, New York, p137

[7] John Urry, quoted by Meethan, Kevin, 2001,

Tourism in Global Society: Place, Culture, Consumption,

Palgrave, Basingstoke

4.2 Adrian Martin and suspended moments

In his discussion of post-modern reflections in Australian cinema, Adrian Martin explores the appeal of coming-of-age narratives, in particular, adolescent romantic comedies and dramas. The cross over and the growth of the central character represents the liminal experience, which Martin describes as 'the intense, suspended moment between yesterday and tomorrow, between childhood and adulthood, between being a nobody and a somebody, when everything is in question and everything is possible.'[8] Furthermore, 'when one is in the middle of a liminal experience, it doesn't feel like a passing phase, it is the most significant and complete moment of one's life.'[9] Thus the significance of a liminal experience entails the cathartic experience of youth, where identity is defined by 'the first time': for friendships, conflicts and discovery, thus, becoming a moment of self-formation. Tourism naturally alludes to separate and removed spaces, or a certain distance from one's source and one's destination. The catharsis associated with Martin's liminal experience is highly paramount to the suspension, or drawing out of time. Within his placing of liminality within the discussion of film, as many other film scholars who have examined the pleasures of cinema (particularly within psychoanalytic discourse), Martin illustrates the allowance cinema provides to the audience; of catharsis, of emotional immersion and the durability of the medium to recreate and duplicate these responses of emotional experience. Thus, the notion of the liminal experience in relation to users and viewers of web pages such as MySpace and Facebook allow for a greater discussion of a wider range of communicative experiences, and in turn, have greater implications of how we project out own formulations of identity across time and space.

5. The creation of self-narratives

The notion of the liminal experience resonates with how users of MySpace.com and Facebook in creating their own web pages and visiting those of other users. Firstly, as afore mentioned, in the example of MySpace.com, the application allows for the creator of the account to construct and modify what appears on the page with the template supplied. The basic format includes the user's name, marital status and age, plus general interests in music, books, movies and television shows (i.e other media that the user consumes). The user can also create a slideshow of images beside which, a blog is posted and can be updated along with new photos. Finally, there is an allocated space which displays the users friends- others with MySpace pages, and the messages they have posted on the site. In my experience of speaking with MySpace users, the trend is to update the page by posting new photos and adding to the blog, typically after a social gathering or event. These images are usually captured by other complementing mobile technologies such as digital camera or mobile phone. Furthermore, the act of the event itself, serves as a platform for experiencing as well as capturing a liminal experience. While

enjoying a party or gathering, photos are often taken with digital cameras for the sole purpose of being uploaded to the web page some time later. Thus, as well as for enjoying, the event is for capturing so it can be revisited and re-experienced over and over again from the durable medium of the personal web page. Recently, the trend amongst a local MySpace user community is completing the comprehensive picture of oneself defined by the significant and exciting moments of one's week. These projections do not intentionally or necessarily duplicitously lead the viewer to believe the user is more exciting or interesting than he or she is, but merely, in attempting to capture oneself by creating a personal page by using this application; by creating a digitised liminal space of one's life, one inadvertently becomes removed in the process by leaving an imprint for posterity. This argument undoubtedly points towards various other implications of identity and multiplicity within post-modernism and cultural theory; phantasms, inauthenticity, mimesis etc, however, the context will be focused on the act of communicating and what the participation in these communities allows, particularly the sense of being in control of communication as a separate and distinct individual.

5.1 Self-narratives and self-surveillance

Similarly to the mobile phone, community and networking web pages have become a prominent aspect of work life as well as home and social life. Facebook acts as an intermediary tool for facilitating constant contact and updates via posts on one's account that is easy to view and unobtrusive to keep open on the user's computer in their work station or area, thus allowing for social spaces to integrate into work spaces. The appeal of constant connectivity acts to affirm a positive work environment, where professional and intimate relationships coexist in one space. However, as recent media reports have suggested, there is the potential for excessive use that detracts from daily work activities as companies have recently banned employees from accessing social network sites while at work.[10] The immediacy of social and work environments thus, opens up towards questions of the creation of communities that are maintained by the construction and projection of these self-narratives combining social and professional identities. Also, while the act of instant, voice to voice communication via telephone or mobile phone is essentially a solitary activity of one speaking to another who is listening, the visiting and maintaining of social networking web pages allows both the user and viewer to become active agents sharing in the reciprocity of the interest in the other. The construction of self-narratives is designed to appeal and attract, maintained by the mutual interests in one's life; or, MySpace allows the capturing of the essence of an identity through the self-construction of a self-narrative. Thus, the communities created by MySpace and Facebook are based on an interest one has in another, or, 'this space is all about me, whenever I want, wherever I want'. How users explore the way in which they capture the essence of

---

[8] Martin, Adrian, 1996, *Phantasms*, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood p68

[9] Ibid, Martin, p68

[10] For further information, see Wearring reference. In addition, see Malkin, Bonnie, 2007, 'Facebook banned by city firms', www.telegraph.co.uk, 28/07/07, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/07/27/nface127.xml

identity and construct and reconstruct narratives is a subject that needs investigating further. Furthermore, there is the question of surveillance. Reciprocal viewing of personal pages allows for surveillance of oneself and each other through this new course of intimate and interpersonal everyday relations. And, as Brown, Green and Harper suggest, this constant, reciprocal surveillance normalises the notion that the activities and affairs of individuals should be available and accountable to others, visibly and transparently at any time and place.[11] Finally, the constant accessing and updating of personal web pages suggests the desire for maintaining identification with others, which incites the desire to maintain self-surveillance.[12]

6. Towards an ethnography of Facebook users

To better understand how embedded personal web pages are in users' work, social and family lives, and the extent to which the notion of liminality is visible, I wish to propose the following method for continued investigation. Firstly, research could encompass a sample of Facebook users who could be gathered via one initial user as a hook to their online community, thus gaining access to an established network, as the researcher basically has the equivalent of the initial user's address book (firstly seeking consent by each user in the 'hook's' network). Data collection would then include viewing all of the 'friends' or contacts' websites and collect an overview of the amount of information disclosed, based on a 'high, moderate and low' spectrum. For example, if the page has frequent, numerous updates on the 'blog' of the page (indicated by the dates posted) the user would be a high user and the site would be described as high maintenance, where as an infrequent user would classify as 'moderate' etc. The overview of the trends identified within the particular community would include how often blogs are posted, what the subject of the content is (or, a textual reading of the self- narrative given), how many and how frequently digital photos are uploaded and once again, an identification of the visuals' content. Are they only of users at a social gathering, or an event? To further investigate, a short answer questionnaire seeking to ask why certain images, events or narratives were posted could be distributed. So, after collecting an empirical sample of data from personal pages, I would then propose in engaging in a dialogue with users about the motivations, impulses and reasoning behind their use of the application. Do users merely just 'stay in touch' or is there a deeper reflexivity of self identification with those in their extended networks; for example, do they remain interested in their contacts' web pages to see how they are in return 'portrayed' on them? In the outline of this investigation, I would aim to conclude how communities use these technologies as a part of identity formation, projection and perception, which sifts through all aspects of their lives as Facebook communities often bring interactions from work, family and social lives into the same arena. Finally, I aim to investigate the verisimilitude behind my

---

[11] Brown, Barry, Green, Nicola and Harper, Richard, (eds.) 2002, *Wireless World: Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age*, Springer- Verlag, London, p33

[12] Ibid, p33

previous speculations of the particular use of Facebook as an attempt to digitally capture liminal life experiences- to create a durable, digital imprint, or reference of experienced suspended moments that would otherwise inevitably pass.

7. CONCLUSION

This short paper has discussed the use of particular 'mundane' technologies of personal web pages for social networking and briefly, suggested that complementing mobile technologies such as digital camera and camera phones can be used for a defined purpose- creating self identification within social networks via the process of digitally constructing self-narratives. The discussion has been located in the context of integrating cultural theory into HCI and technological design, referring to recent works by Agre, Sengers et al. and Gaver. The personal web page thus becomes a means through which users are able to capture certain essences of themselves and their lives in what are liminal experiences-suspended, complete and heightened moments of definition, and in turn, their own identities become defined by them; particularly when they are projected publicly. The ongoing process of digital self-representation then becomes a mode of surveillance and self-surveillance, thus opening up questions towards the role of these technologies as they constantly redefine what we perceive as normal social interactions- that increased familiarity and accountability penetrate every facet of our identity formation with the increased connectivity between our family and those in our work and social lives. Finally a method for possible fieldwork to effectively address the concerns has been outlined. Although social networking pages may be a passing phase, with 40 million Facebook users and 55 million MySpace users at present, the two have 95 million users worldwide and has constituted a controversial phenomenon. In reading how users interact with this technology, there is considerable potential in stimulating greater discussion of how embedded mundane technologies have become in identity formation as well as social interaction, as well as the cultural assumptions they suggest.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

9. REFERENCES

[1] Agre, Philip E., 1997, *Computation and Human Experience*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

[2] Broadhurst, Susan, 1999, *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory*, Cassell, London

[3] Brown, Barry, Green, Nicola and Harper, Richard, (eds.) 2002, *Wireless World: Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age*, Springer- Verlag, London

[4] Janzen, John M., 2002, *The Social Fabric of Health: An Introduction to Medical Anthropology,* McGraw Hill, New York

[5] Malkin, Bonnie, 2007, 'Facebook banned by city firms', www.telegraph.co.uk, 28/07/07, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/07/27/nface127.xml accessed 28/09/07

[6] Martin, Adrian, 1996, *Phantasms*, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood

[7] Meethan, Kevin, 2001, *Tourism in Global Society: Place, Culture, Consumption*, Palgrave, Basingstoke

[8] Myerson, George, 2001, *Heidegger, Habermas and the Mobile Phone*, Icon Books, Cambridge

[9] Pashos, Vaya, 2007, 'Whoomp, Here It Is, Vaya's MySpace', www.myspace.com/vayapashos

[10] Satchell, Christine, 2006, 'Cultural Theory- From Armchair Critic to Star Performer', OZCHI 2006, November 20-24, Sydney

[11] Sengers, P., Boehner, K., David, S. and Kaye, J., 2005, 'Reflective Design', in *Proceedings of the 4th Decennial Conference of Critical Computing: Between Sense and Sensibility* (Aarhus, Denmark, August 20-24, 2005). O.W. Bertelsen, N.O. Bouvin, P.G. Krogh and M. Kyng, Eds. CC'05. ACM Press, New York

[12] Sengers, P., McCarty, J. and Dourish, P., 2006, 'Reflective HCI: articulating an agenda for critical practice' in *CHI '06 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 22-27, 2006), CHI '06. ACM Press, New York

[13] Turner, Victor, 1979, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbology*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi

[14] Urry, John, 1990, *The Tourist Gaze*, Sage Publications, London

[15] Wearring, Myles, 2007, 'Is Facebook good for the workplace?', www.news.com.au, 18/09/07, http://www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,22437742-5012424,00.html accessed 28/09/07

[16] Weber, Donald, 1995, 'From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3, September

[17] www.facebook.com

[18] www.myspace.com