

Liminal, Spiritual, and Ritual: Fabrication and Evasion in Urban Journeys through Portable Devices

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we briefly discuss our ongoing research on the morphing role of portable device ecologies in urban journeys. Specifically, we discuss spirituality and liminality, socialities that emerge from the hybridities of devices and people, and the inevitable intrusiveness caused by perpetual possession of devices.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.3.3 H5.2 [Information interfaces and presentation]: User Interfaces.

Keywords

Non-use, Urban computing, device ensembles, mobile devices, camouflaging, spirituality, liminality

1. INTRODUCTION

With the increased ubiquity and decreased prices of wireless technologies, mobile technologies have merged into the practices of everyday life. Carrying these technologies almost everywhere one goes has become a common phenomenon in urban environments [2]. These device ensembles, or arrays of portable devices, include mobile phones, gaming devices, music players, and thumb drives [7]. The computation in these devices is not just physically embedded, but also socially and procedurally embedded. So much so, that we continually use these devices without thinking of them as computational [1]. However, as much as understandings of the use of device ensembles are important, non-use is traditionally neglected.

The portability of information and informational objects has resulted in blurred boundaries between different spheres of life - namely work, home, and play, unrestricted by geography. This leads us to raise pertinent questions on the nature of interactions shaped and mediated by these portable devices in our urban journeys. We speak here of journeys of everyday life, augmented by technology, between first, second, and third places [5]. The

transformative power of these devices lies not only in participating in different spaces, but also in creating them wherever we go. They aid in temporarily appropriating public spaces for personal use [3] [4] to escape the surrounding physical space. In our on-going research we find that in the presence of strange or insignificant spaces, people, or practices, these device ensembles can play an important role in providing the individual with a link to their private world, and intensify their personal and emotional relationship with the technology.

In this paper, we reflect on our ongoing research on the role of portable technologies in our day-to-day lives. We question the role of device ecologies in daily routines, the marriage of technological spaces with physical spaces, and the practices surrounding non-use of portable technologies.

2. METHODOLOGY

We conducted a round of interviews with 12 graduate students in the University of California, Irvine campus. The informant pool ranged from 23 to 35 years of age, with 7 male and 5 female. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Compensation was provided. The interviews were preceded by a questionnaire structured on features and processes that affect personal relationships with mobile devices, such as memories, personalization, routine, adaptation, and mobility. The interview questions themselves explored a typical day with portable devices, transition of spaces, the tasks and contexts of use of devices, offline and device intrusiveness, play, and liminality.

3. FINDINGS

In this section, we introduce a subset of our salient findings relevant to the theme of this workshop.

Liminality and spirituality: By spirituality, we differ from the conventional discourse on technology use for religious practices [8]. We broadly speak here of doing something “higher” as opposed to material or physical things [6]. Our findings show that technology can have good as well as bad impact on spiritual lives, and one has to be highly selective when dealing with technology for spirituality. Two forms of practices are worth noting here: the *use of portable technologies in supporting spiritual practices* and the *liminal shutting down of devices to achieve a state of spirituality*. The former involves emotional engagement with the technology, directly factored by intrusiveness, context, and worth. For example, mobile phones are considered spiritual when they helped in reaching a loved one, and portable music players in playing the right track at the right time on shuffle. The latter

involves escaping technologies while doing something of greater importance, such as switching off mobile phones on weekends or while spending time with family during a vacation, or relaxing on Sundays, away from computers. Consider the following quote by P4, a female: *"Once a year (at least!) I take a vacation with my family and I purposely vote for really remote locations or international destinations so that nobody can reach me."*

We propose that in addition to the variables of efficiency and aesthetics, emotional engagement should also be considered in the design of portable devices. User experiences should be designed with and without technology. Portable devices are prone to battery deaths in addition to manual occlusion. How should the device handle incoming requests when turned off, in addition to Voicemail?

Masquerades and armours: Portable devices were also appropriated for avoidance and concealment, by creating an impression of technological engagement. Camouflaging into the environment or indicating absent presence through subterfuge mechanisms such as putting on headphones or using the mobile phone while passing a group of people was quite common. For example, P10 uses her iPod and Voicemail to escape potential socialities: *"Basically, if I am like avoiding certain people, in certain situations, because our office is like so far, you have to pass so many people. Not that people bother me by saying 'Hi', but I don't want to be obligated to talk to anyone. I take the time to check my Voicemail, even though they are messages that I have already addressed. Other times I play a game or pretend to do something. My MP3 player, I really do listen to it, so I use it as a social signal than to camouflage. Sometimes when I see someone I'll just use my mobile phone"*

In addition, portable devices were also used as defence shields to indicate non-availability. Social presence, which indicates social availability, is mediated by devices. According to P3, a male informant, *"People keep bugging me, like if I want to work and someone wants to come and talk to me. I put the headphones on my iPod and ignore people. If people come and poke me then I talk to them. I mean I do have peripheral vision. But people seem to get the idea that if you have headphones on, you don't want to talk to them. I really hate when people keep talking to me and assume I am listening things."* These defence shields were also used in times of anticipated danger, such as walking down a dark street at late night or crime-prone areas.

Intrusiveness: On the subject of intrusiveness caused by people versus portable devices, our data shows that people were accused of causing intrusiveness, not the devices. It was commonly held that devices have no minds of their own and are under the user's control, barring exceptions of technological inappropriateness such as alarms going off during meetings and so on. From our analysis, three forms of intrusiveness emerged: *intrusiveness caused by others*, such as peeping to look at monitors and unanticipated intrusion into a private space, *intrusiveness caused to others*, such as talking over the phone amidst public and the subsequent neglect, and *socially-accepted intrusiveness*, such as phones going off during class and meetings.

4. DISCUSSION

The hybridity of digital ecologies, that support a myriad interactions, and physical spaces in urban journeys results in new social and symbolic meanings. We see that some of these

technology-mediated socialities, such as the evasion of technologies as well as people, are deliberate. The layerings of portable devices come to the rescue in de-personalizing interactions in these urban journeys, that are increasingly surrounded by people. Technological masquerades and armours aid in automatizing identities. In turn, the personal relationships with the device ecologies are strengthened. On the other hand, being perpetually surrounded by these devices, in journeys of all kinds, results in escapisms from technology during spiritual and emotional experiences. As designers we should *give the user the liberty to control a device*. Designing more engaging interactive experiences may not always be the right solution, especially when the user wishes to dissociate from the device. *Devices that will form a part of ensembles should be designed with other devices in the ensemble*. Portable devices are rarely used in isolation. In a device ensemble, each portable device serves a different principal purpose. They should be evaluated for various contexts, such as home, airport, gym, subway, and street, noise and illumination levels in the environment, models of shared usage, and social acceptability.

To help reify the findings, we are currently conducting in-depth interviews, diary studies, and focus groups in Finland and India, to provide a comparative lens across different cultures. Finland's categorical recreational activities, such as sauna, hiking, and weekend summer cottage getaways, and 100% mobile phone penetration provide an interesting background for our questions on spirituality and hybridity. Our interest in choosing India as the other backdrop is partly due to India's rapidly growing mobile devices base, but also due to the sedimentation of age-old practices combined with those trickled from a history of repeated colonisation and current infusion of western ideals, to provide a heterogeneous comparison.

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