

PRECARIOUS FLUX

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Mixing theory with applied perspectives this paper generates a series of questions and describes how contemporary social technologies have significantly changed our practical reality, a reality where human experience and technical artifacts have become closely intertwined. The paper's conclusion explores the ontological consequences of this change and the potential in establishing 'Precarious Design' practices and methods as a response.



Samples of the positive social and digital media branding straplines.

Introduction

The physicist David Bohm (1980) posited that the “world is full of movement and becoming, in which any thing, caught at a particular moment, enfolds within its own constitution – the history of relations that brought it here.” [1] This is an intriguing position and one that in spirit captures the inherent limitations of a singularly defined experience and gives prominence to the notion of complexity and “being in flux.” Some years later and based in another field entirely, design thinker and curator Antonelli (2008) opined that “... core human experience is rendered more urgent by the speed at which technology is moving...” and that a great number of us “...routinely live at different scales, in different contexts, and at different settings – Default, Phone-only, Avatar On, Everything Off on a number of screens, each with its own size, interface, and resolution, and across several time zones.” [2] This modern way of existing is often described as appealing, stimulating and empowering. Various social media platforms, digital agencies and technology developers all strive to assist, to connect us through these multiple interfaces and time zones. The corporate/civic/personal rhetoric of social media is driven by the positive (see Fig 1.). However a few notable counter voices have arisen. The Baroness Greenfield inspired a fierce bout of media anxiety in April 2009 after she published an article in the Daily Express titled “How Facebook addiction is damaging your child's brain: A leading neuroscientist's chilling warning” in which she claimed that there were (probably) lasting neurological effects from frequent exposure to social

media websites. Since 2007 there has been increased pressure from the American Medical Association for the American Psychiatric Association to include internet addiction, video game addiction, e-mail/text messaging along with sexual preoccupations in the upcoming 2012 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM – V), the standard diagnostic text used by psychiatrists worldwide, and on the 16th of February this year Physiologist Kathy Charles, writing in the *New Statesman*, likened once again the social network to something compulsive and destructive, claiming that: "Facebook keeps users in a neurotic limbo, not knowing whether they should hang on in there just in case they miss out on something good." This paper will attempt to avoid the techno triumphalism of being better 'connected' and similarly the paranoia around digital media's so called deleterious mental effects on users. An idea that will now be revisited and debated in British parliament after many sections of the British press blamed social media arenas for aiding the London, Birmingham, Nottingham, Bristol and Liverpool city looting problems on the 6th, 7th and 8th of August 2011. Rather this paper accepts that we are now in an age where cultural and technological change has created a new reality of sustained rather than temporary movement. Although Bohm and a plethora of thinkers, scientists and artists have either instinctually known, or through intellectual observation made peace with this worldview, this paper shall explore the problems and potentials that arise when applying such a notion to the everyday user of technology in society.

Context Theory

The majority of users remain uncomfortable around confusion, and if we do encounter it we still expect confusion to be of a fixed and short nature, it's a basic tenet of the knowledge is power aspiration. Human Computer Interaction (HCI) was a field that historically had not been concerned with representing complexity or mirroring the precariousness nature of our existence. Rather HCI's goal was to gain user satisfaction, to make digital tools more receptive to our needs. Media Art arguably has never contained any stable goals or ideologies and is populated by a mix of pioneering creative technologists (Robert Hodgin, Jer Thorp), obsessives (Joshua Davis) and niche collectives (Antirom, c5corp).

There is a danger associated with being in flux, it suggests change, pressure, and movement even Bohm's 'becoming' implies an end rather than an endless becoming. A fundamental of good HCI design was to eliminate or reduce user confusion, to allow us to be stable, to have permanence, to perceive and connected to and transact with the systems and devices that we need. User legibility was preferred over ambiguity. Design thinking was all about making things better a form of modernist 'heroics'. Recent developments in the field have seen a turn towards experience design, described as a situation where experience and technology are intrinsically enfolded. Lucy Suchman an anthropologists specializing in the digital described the "relations of human practice and technical artifact [have] become ever more layered and intertwined. At the same time that the technological project is one of congealing and objectifying human activities, it is increasingly also one of animating and finding subjectivity in technical artifacts. The assimilation of lived experience to technique goes both ways, which only makes the project of re-imagining technological objects the more urgent." [3] This turn to experience with a need for engagement with dense multidisciplinary methodologies will inevitably expose the field to the poststructuralist problem of endless subjectivity. In traditional dialectical tension to Design, Art has traditionally functioned as society's most deliberate and complex means of self-expression and as such is comfortable with subjectivity. When artworks follow anti-hierarchical ideologies (post Dada, Fluxus et al.) a certain level of dissonance can be felt by the user as they struggle to identify what are the expectancies of them given the lack of explicit rules. The ensuing paradigm of uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence in early twentieth century Art preceded Bauman's turn of the century notion of 'liquid modernity,' [4] a new

modernity in which fractured timelines were normal, where social structures were no longer stable, and a state of being where fixed concepts like ‘career’ and ‘progress’ could no longer be meaningfully applied.

Context Corporate

Today’s torrent of societal change and unrelenting uncertainty has left many industries sluggish and affected many corporate identities (consider the state of journalism, publishing, music distribution, retail). The speed to change is recognized (no longer new) but many are now feeling the impact of this sustained change. For Designers questions now arise about their role in solving societal problems and how do they confront the idea that a theory of everything is needed, that everything must be considered before anything can be addressed? The traditional path to a clearly defined problem and solution becomes a challenge, perhaps even futile in this period of dense movement and uncertainty.

Context Ludic

Cultural theorist Huizinga (1938) conceptualizing play stated that within a game you are “...spatially and temporally segregated from the requirements of practical life”. [5] Whereas now to be spatially and temporally segregated (from workmates, lovers, family and friends) are now common requirements of practical life. Perhaps there are merits to re – exploring the ludic discourse above and beyond the past the preoccupation with narrative aesthetic and revisit the psychology of role – playing. Role – testing or –playing is expected to be transitional - done in our youth, but within the social network and digital gaming contexts we can extend this process. What happens if you can’t manage our new ‘practical life’? In this scenario what does suspension of belief and or self now mean. The gaming analogy can also be distinctly felt within the observations of Jenkins [6] who described a move away from transactory culture into participation where play is becoming a default method in engagement and knowledge attainment (and almost universally seen as a good thing).

Context Social Skills

Western society has been through an adjustment; we have adjusted to accelerated change, hopefully learned most of the tools required for this new practical reality. Graduating from the novice state towards the intermediate level we psychologically lean on our tools (Charles 2011) to such an extent that dissociation anxiety has become a popularly understood term – describing our contemporary difficulty when we do not have access to our connective technologies. There have been recent attempts at convergence, by bringing together all our feeds, our emails, texts, tweets into one interface. [7] This attempt to unify the users experience is a logical but perhaps anachronistic goal when each media instance fosters a different cognitive connection, simply blending these mental conditions this may not be a unifying reductive solution. We ‘need’ these tools to provide different things for us: acts of sharing (Blog, Twitter, Podcast, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Vimeo), discussion (Twitter, Newsvine, StumbleUpon, Youtube) and connecting, re – connecting (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Friendster) are all distinct practices. Each of these different functions requires significant effort to immerse and different commitments in terms of assessing, changing and publishing content; each interface (after all conceived as a discrete experiences) cues the user into different mindsets. Bringing them all together may result in a useful Meta view of activity but perhaps not in itself a unifying experience that can solve the more fundamental mental and emotional conditions of confusion, noise and anxiety.

Context Depth

Mike Bergman, credited with coining the phrase 'DarkNet' has said that searching on the Internet today "can be compared to dragging a net across the surface of the ocean; a great deal may be caught in the net, but there is a wealth of information that is deep and therefore missed". [8] Intermediate media users can quite effectively create a closed private network of devices used for file and content sharing such as the encrypted messages sent via BlackBerry to various mobs during Britain's August 2011 riots. There is also evidence that users are finding new modes of communication and semantics [9] such as the increase in personally curating our entertainment and nested linguistic meaning. Whereby a message or sentiment is embedded, disguised or hidden within a linked text or video, which can only be truly understood by select users who are aware of the specific total (online and offline) context of the user. The deep and cognitive Web is several orders of magnitude larger than the surface or representational Web. This level of subjective and structural complexity means that the Internet still constitutes a free activity where we can move around, sign-in, explore, search, look, understand and comment without a sense of sanction. What then if anything constitutes expert usage, traditionally denoted as prolonged intense practice through experience and education, in a world full of multiplicitous digital experience? Antonelli (2008) addressed the role of design in a world which humans have surpassed their Enlightenment roles as neutral observers and have become 'actors on the very forces of nature'. Implying that to effective one must be active within the complexity. She also saw a need for users to develop personal elasticity, that being: "the by-product of adaptability and acceleration, elasticity means being able to negotiate change and innovation without letting them interfere excessively with one's own rhythms and goals." This paper also considers if to be expert now means to be agile and surface than deep. Huizinga's (1938) seminal quote goes on to extend the description of games in that we are also "bound by a self-contained system of rules that holds absolutely." As stated acceleration of the Internet and its online culture left the corporate world far behind, conventional advertising strategies were ineffective, the environment was to a large extent unstructured. New rules were slow in coming; what remained meanwhile was self-governance. We explored our user role and sense of self in a freer system of ethics and behavior – many used alter egos, role –playing and exploration of promiscuity and the taboo [10]. What constitutive and regulative rules now control our behavior?

Context Semiotics

If we remain in a gaming mindset, then the conventional wisdom is that life shall intrude, that there is a porous magic circle. In offline, online and everything in-between people are crossing this reality / non-reality threshold all the time in both directions, "carrying their behavioral assumptions and attitudes with them" (Castronova 2005). [11] Practically testing or breaking through the offline and online bubble has resulted in some contentious legal interpretations such as the recent conviction that Paul Chambers received for his 'tongue-in-cheek' tweet about blowing up Robin Hood airport in Britain back in January 2010. A vigorous debate has ensued around appropriate contextualization of Chambers actions. The presiding judge interpreted that "Any ordinary person" would interpret the tweet as alarming. [12] The notion of ordinary is now in itself a fraught concept. What is ordinary social insight when at different scales, in different contexts, and at different settings? There are still no clear regulative rules that prescribe acceptable social conduct/communication within social media (the UK Digital Economy Act 2009 is mainly interpreted as copyright protection). The Chambers case shows how problematic words without appropriate context are.

Context Physical

Service design and co–design go some way to addressing the HCI context of complexity but from a procedural and often corporate view. When attempting to congeal and objectify contemporary human activities is not surprising that Design has moved away from an industrial to emotive centered approach. An excellent example of this is the ‘The We Feel Fine’ project (www.wefeelfine.org), an emotional search engine started in 2009 whose goal is to collect the world’s emotions to help people better understand themselves and others. Having come through the other side of dematerialization, re-materialization is also becoming more prominent. The uptake in programming projects such as Processing (Java) and openFrameworks (C++) by non-computer scientists is making engineering physical and digital interaction more achievable (see ‘Pigeon d’Or’ by Tuur Van Balen). Another example of rematerialization is Tim Kring’s augmented reality game ‘Conspiracy For Good’ which confidently attempts to make a virtue out of the game fiction / social reality divide. This paper proposes that such practices could be considered as Precarious Design.

The Precarious Designer

When asked to reflect on the art of the first ten years of the millennium, art critic Hal Foster [13] focused on the ‘precarious’, art which functions as a social – political critique, work which foregrounds its own schismatic condition, its own lack of shared meanings, methods, or motivations, Art if you will, that captured a sense of cultural vertigo and liquidity. Applying Foster’s description, a Precarious Design paradigm could be a community of precarious designers who create experiences and or artifacts from a position of living and observing and testing within acknowledged and accepted precarious contexts. Such a designer accepts acceleration, recognizes the fluxing user position by being one. As with Foster’s precarious art precarious designers can function within a post – conceptual space where there is no distinction between works of self-expression and works of social critique (i.e. they are part and parcel of the same activity). Precarious design by collectivizing or collating works could also give life and voice to the broader fluxing context, objectifying places within the complex digital–physical continuum of our current reality a chaotic continuation of uncertainty.

Conclusion

Both applied and artistic practices are striving to synthesize and express what constitutes a core human experience and develop methods to survive and succeed within our fluctuating context of sustained extraordinary change. In a sustained world of acceleration the aims of design become interesting. If we fully embrace Bohm’s implicate possibilities then, as Suchman writes: “Integration, local configuration, customization, maintenance and redesign on this view represent not discrete phases in some ‘system life cycle’ but complex, densely structured courses of articulation work without clearly distinguishable boundaries between.” [6] User experience should no longer be explored in terms of a singular moment but also over longer periods, or indeed we need to consider that the different interfaces work as differing forms of personal histories. What then becomes significant is establishing what people are actually doing and what people need to do.

Problematically this practical reality is both without perceived sanction and seems to offer limitless individual agency; however, we are not free of corporate or political and legal influence and ramifications.

Users need help in delineating new cognitively useful, safe and or dangerous personal and legal boundaries. Given the cognitive freedom of theersatz ludic space, existence feels quite different. Without rules our identities and ontologies need support. In addition to the recent strategic investment of the designer as facilitator or conduit in multidisciplinary methodologies (Britain's Design Council), this paper offers up the notion of the Precarious Designer, who by way a personal insight via a personal/niche epistemology, is well positioned to conceive of these new expressions and being lighter of foot is able to dance along with the inevitable redefining moments within society and technology.

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