Workshop: Designing the Not-Quite-Yet: Ideas and Methods for engaging the Public in a Digital Future of their Choice

Dousing for Dummies: methods for raising public awareness of ambient communications

Michelle Teran, Artist, Canada (misha@ubermatic.org)
Konstantinos Chorianopoulos, Technical University of Crete, Greece (choko@ced. tuc.gr)
Katharine S Willis, Bauhaus University of Weimar (katharine.willis@archit.uni-weimar. de)
Laura Colini, Bauhaus University of Weimar (laura.colini@archit.uni-weimar.de)

Motivation and aims

As mobile and wireless technologies proliferate in urban environments the space can be considered as having an existence in terms of several visible and invisible layers. In particular, we consider that there is a physical layer that makes up our everyday direct experience and several invisible layers formed by the audiovisual and communication networks. Yet, due to the ways in which we have traditionally considered space, there are many limitations in current ways of perceiving and thus engaging with these immaterial environments (Willis, 2005). For this purpose, we propose concepts and methods for raising public awareness of the presence and implications of wireless networks, such as closed circuit TV (CCTV) and WiFi nodes. In these environments the physical boundaries of walls, doors and gates, and distances still frame and isolate social encounters, but wireless transmissions increasingly trespass on the situations that take place in physically defined settings.

In this paper, we present a series of methods developed by the artist, Michelle Teran, for raising awareness of invisible spaces created by public wireless communication technologies. These methods include public performance, where participation is through a series of walks through the city, and workshops where participants engage in the design implications through a process of locating, examining and documenting some of these invisible networks. Overall, we explore methods and strategies for engaging the public, how to create awareness of the limitations of their perception of communications technologies and techniques that facilitate the debate on the opportunities that these invisible yet rich in meaning invisible spaces might raise.

Methods

Artistic methods are employed to explore research questions that regard the social space generated intentionally, or most notably unintentionally through the use of widespread public wireless communication technology. 'Life: a user's manual'[1] is a series of public performances that examine the hidden stories captured by private wireless CCTV streams and how they intersect with the visible and spatial environment. 'Life: a user's manual' focuses on the use of wireless surveillance cameras within public

---

[1] The title of the work is taken from a novel of the same name by Georges Perec

and private places that transmit unencrypted analog audiovisual signal on the 2.4 Ghz frequency band. Easily intercepted using a consumer model video scanner, the captured, live images create a sequence of readings and views of the city and its inhabitants which are observed while walking through the streets.

The work unravels at two levels of participation; firstly a street performance where the 'audience' is led on a journey through the city, guided through a series of hidden views by an urban and nomadic persona, who acts as a physical interface to the unseen. The 'audience', led on this nomadic journey, is drawn into a borderline action of observing a normally unseen and ephemeral view of public (e.g. consumer-level CCTV cameras installed in cafes, restaurants, kiosks, etc) and private space (e.g. consumer–level CCTV cameras installed in homes for theft prevention, baby monitors,etc). Staged as a silent 'mise-en-scène' which no offer of explanation , the audience participates in the production of meaning through their observation and interpretation.

picture 3: Berlin WALK[2] performed during the Transmediale05 Festival (Berlin), February 4, 2005

Active end-user participation also occurs through a series of workshops enabled by the artist herself, where she introduces the equipment and methods used in the work to members of the public who can then explore and develop their own practices for revealing hidden layers in their environment. These take the form of walks through the city where individuals take different roles in discovering, gathering, editing together and finally presenting their personal recorded traces of networks that surround citizens or physical spaces in a city.

picture 4: participants in a workshop

Although there are many opportunities offered by the suggested research program, the reception and recording of privately located CCTV also raises ethical concerns about

[2] Nominated for Transmediale05 award

privacy and ownership of captured data.   We believe that in order to enable and encourage a balanced debate on these issues, a key step is to acknowledge the existence of these contested spaces, which ambiguously blur the boundaries between private and public life. Indeed, the participants of previous workshops have reported that the experience of these invisible views on their everyday settings and routines has added new meanings and changed their understanding of the otherwise familiar urban environment.

Further research
We focus on exploring research issues that regard the social space generated through the employment of wireless communication technology. It is argued that wireless communications re-organize the social settings in which people interact and weaken the once strong relationship between physical place and social place (Meyrowitz, 1986, ix). The elaboration on the complex relationships between physical and social space raises the following research questions: 1) techniques for information visualization of invisible wireless networks that surround citizens,   or physical spaces in urban environments, 2) engagement of the public in the development of narratives that consist of both the visible and invisible social spaces and 3) design methods, principles and tools that will ultimately involve the end-users in the design decisions and especially into the debate of the side- effects of wireless communication technologies in the city.

Practical activities:
During the workshop at BritishHCI we propose to discuss and share the outcomes of a workshop entitled 'Invisible Networks - Invisible Narratives' led by Michelle Teran, which was held in Weimar in May 2006. We will also give those participating in the workshop (subject to time constraints) the opportunity to join in a 'hands-on' session where we will introduce some of the tools of practical research for participants to experience at first-hand.

References

Perec, G., (1998). Species of Spaces and Other Pieces. Penguin Books, UK

Willis, K. (2005 to appear). Sensing Place: mobile and wireless technologies and urban space in Frers,L., Meier, L (Eds). Encountering Urban Places - Visual and Material Performances in the City, Ashgate Publishing, UK

Goffman, E . (1969). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. The Penguin Press, London

Meyrowitz, J. (1986). No Sense of Place: The Impact of the Electronic Media on Social Behaviour. Oxford University Press Inc, USA