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I was searching dance message boards and discussion groups everywhere for an interesting e-mail volley or “thread”—VoiceofDance, Tribe.net, Yahoo.com, criticaldance.com, newdance.com, edfring.com (the Edinburgh Fringe Festival) etc.—and given up, when by chance Rob van Kranenburg sent this along with the permission to print his abstract “Sleeping Giants.” New York University Forum discussion groups are by subscription and meant mainly for faculty, staff, and students, although others can subscribe by request.

Performance Studies Discussion Group, New York University

EXCERPTS

Date: Mon, 08 Mar 2004 16:38:33 +0100

From: mark.van.doorn

Subject: media-enhanced environments designed to support everyday life rituals

Dear Mr. Schechner,

My name is Mark van Doorn and I work as a scientific researcher at Philips Research in the Netherlands. In particular I do computer science research in a field known as Ambient Intelligence. Ambient Intelligence (AmI) is a vision on the future of consumer electronics that refers to the presence of a digital environment that is sensitive, adaptive and responsive to the presence of people. The goal of AmI is to make people perform their daily tasks better by supporting them with interactive media applications. To give an example, when a child picks up his toothbrush, a cartoon could be projected in a bathroom mirror that invites him to brush his teeth for two minutes. In our approach, we view AmI as a personal story that emerges out of the continuous interaction that a user/actor has with what we call an 'ambient narrative' that has been written in advance by an experience designer. An ambient narrative is basically an interactive narrative that is situated in the real-world like the script of a live action role playing game but augmented with digital interactive media (somewhat like the special effects that add to the drama in a theater play or movie).

*Before you can augment performances with interactive media applications, you need to have an understanding of what performances are and what it means to perform.* I really enjoyed reading your book "Performance Studies: An Introduction" because it gave some basic answers to these questions in an understandable manner. I was wondering if you might know about any specific research in performance studies that investigates the role of digital media in relation to everyday rituals or performances in professional service environments (hospitals, hotels, shopping malls and so on). Understanding how to write

these kinds of ambient narratives will be a multi-disciplinary exercise that requires not only knowledge of interactive media design but also interior & product design, architecture and performances in general. I can see that this understanding becomes increasingly relevant as we move into what some call an experience economy! .

kind regards,

Mark van Doorn”  
Media Interaction  
Philips Research Eindhoven

From: Theresa K Smalec  
To: "Performance Studies Discussions"

... you suggest (above) that the goal of AmI is in fact to help humans "get with the program": to help them excel in performing boring tasks like brushing one's teeth, or opening one's door by talking to it. I am not so sure that I want to go to the mall and talk to cans of paint. I am also not sure that I require an "intelligent" doorknob, since I am (usually) intelligent enough to use my apartment keys. Finally, I am not sure that I want my kids learning how to improve their teeth-brushing skills by interacting with a bathroom mirror... Do you see what I mean? If this great interactive technology is out there, then why can't humans figure out something more interesting to do with it than sticking in shopping malls and professional service environments?

From: Theresa K Smalec  
To: "Performance Studies Discussions"  
Date: Fri, 12 Mar 2004 21:07:57 -0500

Hi Again,

Apology: it's not that these recent applications of AmI are uninteresting (as I hastily suggested before). Rather, they are somehow deeply unnerving.

To think about microprocessors being implanted into "everyday objects" like the ones named in the excerpt at the bottom of this page is very strange: how can microprocessors be implanted into things like furniture or paint?

And then to think about "ambient narratives" being designed for "everyday rituals" like brushing teeth, shopping, checking into hotels, visiting hospitals, etc... is even stranger. If the point is to help employees at such venues do a better job, then who am I to argue with improved customer service? But a lot of this technology seems geared towards cutting costs, cutting out human error, and cutting out human experience in the process. Am I wrong here?

In my understanding of "performance," it is hard to appreciate without human agents/human screw-ups. In the course of making a play, you often end up "keeping" the things that happen during rehearsal by mistake. AmI does not seem to appreciate mistakes.

Also, when I think about interacting with the environment in a "personalized" way, I think about going for a walk in the city, along my favorite and not-so-favorite streets, bumping into all sorts of pleasant and irritating scenarios.

I think my problem with this technology is that it suggests the possibility of interacting with ONLY those things/environments/people that make me feel happy, secure, and comfortable. If that's the point, then why not just stay in bed all day with my preferred cats and watch my preferred t.v shows? But I am just griping now. Maybe I need to learn more about this technology rather than being afraid of it?

Date: Sat, 13 Mar 2004 13:36:54 +0100

To: "Performance Studies Discussions"

From: Rob van Kranenburg

Subject: Re: Apology for rash characterization of AmI technologies

Hi Theresa and list,

You are quite justified in your hesitations and in your being unnerved. After all, for quite some number of people cultural studies as a field has become just another marketing tool.

We don't want any of this indeed to happen with performance practice and studies:  
"In Smile, You're on In-Store Camera, Erik Baard describes how the web shopping process of following your customer every step of the way, might now become effectively used in an ordinary supermarket: "The algorithm looks for shapes of people and (passes) the same individual off from camera to camera by, for example, looking for a yellow color leaving the left side of one camera view to enter the overlapping right side of the

next. " The algorithm is tuned with pressure-sensitive carpets. Neither Identix (formerly Visionics), nor the originator of the pressure-sensitive magic carpet, MIT Media Lab researcher Joe Paradisso, thought of these ways of using their work for tracking consumers: "I was thinking of music. I never thought about this for retail at all," said Paradisso, who has designed performance spaces where footsteps trigger bass or percussive sounds and torso, head and arm movements elicit higher, 'twinkling' notes."

"Smile, You're on In-Store Camera", by Erik Baard

<http://www.wired.com/news/privacy/0,1848,54078,00.html>

It is definitely not the idea to re-invest a sterile theory-practice debate, having people taking a deep look at people's lives and rituals in order to tailor specific products to their supposed needs.

...

“Maybe I need to learn more about this technology rather than being afraid of it?”

Maybe we all do before it will be only described and formatted at the level of code and nodes as in logistics and retail needs. These new technologies will reformat our environments and our ways of organizing so very profoundly that we need all the context, all the liveness, all the very humanness, all our corporeal literacies to invest it with, well, yes what do we call it? Passion? Love? Trust? Definitely not the dominant feelings that are around now, which are mistrust, distrust, fear and uncertainty. If you want to read science fiction just take a look at what New Yorks Police Captain Cowper is thinking about as concrete problems:

[http://www.google.be/search?q=cache:Ts\\_O71KgpDYJ:www7.nationalacademies.org/cst/b/wireless\\_ppt\\_cowper.pdf+cowper+ppt+wireless&hl=nl&ie=UTF-8](http://www.google.be/search?q=cache:Ts_O71KgpDYJ:www7.nationalacademies.org/cst/b/wireless_ppt_cowper.pdf+cowper+ppt+wireless&hl=nl&ie=UTF-8)

After all,

“Nacirema”

<http://www.msu.edu/~jdowell/miner.html>

can happen again, only not as text now, but as our everyday life,

Greetings, Rob

From: Theresa K Smalec  
To: "Performance Studies Discussions"  
Date: Tue, 16 Mar 2004 12:03:10 -0500  
Subject: RFID Objects as Props: D.W. Winnicott?

Dear Mark,

<http://www.grenoble-soc.com/proceedings03/Pdf/Van%20Loenen.pdf>

The article you sent is fascinating! I'm shocked by the amount of research that has gone into studying the kinds of interactive situations that human "actors" will feel comfortable in, and the kinds of scenarios that will make them feel uneasy. (For example, people get nervous about talking to their walls, but they feel good about handling a magic wand)!

I laughed with delight when I came to the section about the "magic wands" that make tinkling sounds when humans pick them up. This human fascination with being able to manipulate "magic" and "power" is very basic, I think: it's something that goes back to the earliest days of childhood.

Do you know a theorist of human behavior named Donald Winnicott? Please click on the link below and scroll down to the section about "Transitional Objects." I think Winnicott's studies of human relations to "transitional objects" may help us to understand why humans desire the type of interactive and "intelligent" technology that you describe. We want our transitional objects back! We want objects that allow us to relate our "subjective" (inner) reality to the "shared" reality that other people can see, that can be objectively observed.

<http://www.wkac.ac.uk/edstudies/archjun02/level%20one/WIN.htm>

Performance art and theatre are one way of regaining one's childhood relations to a "transitional object." Through the process of working on a play, we turn our diverse, subjective realities into a "shared" reality that other people (other members of the cast, as well as the audience who ultimately comes) can see. This "shared" reality may not always be "objectively" observed, since some people will love it and some will hate it, but it is definitely there. It can be seen and experienced.

I am curious what you think: is Ami technology a more expensive, more sophisticated, more private means of "staging performance?" Or is it more like having an "imaginary friend" that is actually REAL?

Of course, one obvious difference between the scenarios described in your article, and those that transpire in the theatre, is that the former take place in one's living room, whereas the latter usually take place in a public space.

In the context of one's living room, the "audience" usually consists of family members or friends: people who know most of your tricks.

Unlike a paying audience at the theatre who comes to see the magic "once," the people who live with you everyday may not be the most enthusiastic audience when you try to demonstrate your magic for them. "Shut up, honey! Can't you see I'm busy right now?"

Yet even as the performance may or may not be appreciated, there seems to be no denying it: AmI technology allows people to turn their homes into a sort of "theatre" where you can conjure up personal memories/realities by waving a magic wand: thus invoking favorite photographs, favorite songs, or favorite television programs.

I love your "haunted house" comment! That's the kind of AmI technology that would really make your friends pay attention when they came over. Instead of conjuring up favorite photos, imagine that you conjure photos of a horrible accident, or photos of absolute strangers who nobody knows. Instead of your favorite songs, you wave the magic wand and hear the sounds of the ocean, or dogs howling, or the sounds of a carnival. Instead of your favorite television programs, you conjure up images of foreign countries, war-zones, cemeteries, beautiful fields of flowers.

I like the idea of "everyday rituals" that suddenly become full of unexpected surprises, twists and turns: kind of like going to the theatre!