

In Place-Spective

Nedine Kachornnamsong
Gothenburg University
nedine@lostcommonground.net

Introduction

Although most terms of *place* associates to space, the concept of *place* in the online communication implicates with social interaction rather than merely physical setting. The interrelations between *place* and persons are mutual as a *place* cannot exist without people,¹ while the interaction between people makes it possible to form a *place* without space.² This *spaceless* notion of *place* will be discussed further in terms of online social interaction.

The outcome of this research was implemented in an installation project at Copenhagen Airport, Denmark. With an intention to promote social interaction among passengers, the installation aimed to re-establish the sense of place by facilitating an indirect communication, where the people could share their dreams with the others.

In place-spective

Many studies in relation to the *sense of place* are focused on the psychological, anthropological and geographical facet of physical location. However, with the online interaction, a sense of place has proven to exist without material space. The detachment in the concept of physical space and the sense of place becomes clearly visible through the online technology — cyberspace becomes a *place* for people to socialise, meet and hang out. The online phenomena confirm the sense of place as an abstract feature built upon an intervention of site and personal experience, because “when people refer to *place*, they actually refer to their experience”.³ By focusing on the online communication, Harrison and Dourish developed the term “spaceless-place” and explain that “the sense of place must be forged by the users; it cannot be inherent in the system itself. Space is the opportunity, and the place is the understood reality. Just as space provides the underlying opportunity for a media space, place-making providers its realities.”²

Different from virtual reality, the *spaceless-place* is built upon the “placeful discussion and navigation

without physical space”.² Without a visualization of a physical world or any perspective metaphor, electronic mailing lists, internet forums, online communities and weblogs are applied a sophisticate level of abstraction. This complexity urges the users of online technologies to create their “personal cosmologies”⁴ when the conceptual view of the (cyber) world is concerned. Perhaps the sense of place is one of the cyberspace ‘cosmologies’ we establish to have the better orientation online. More examples these cosmologies (e.g. forum, library, marketplace) are mostly developed from spatial metaphors to make the systems comprehensible.⁵

At this point, one could consider that the sense of place in cyberspace is potentially derived from our behaviour as a part of social a mechanism which influence the way we communicate and navigate around the social ring. Still, the question remains for the concept of (cyber) space. If the *placefulness* provides us with a uniform to conduct an appropriate social manner, then what is the correlation the cyberspace’s *space-ness* have with the offline world? To answer this question, Chalmers referred to space in a form of medium which represents itself among others. Therefore, the underlying notion of physical and computational space is propagated from language in order to make them understood.⁶ Therefore, one could claim that the *space-ness* of online activity emerges from metaphorical cognition. It is an intervention of the way we construct the sense of place; the key to perform a successful social interaction.

Social interaction

In contrast with the rapid growth, the way the airport operates is slightly changed in last decades. The main strategy is to expand facilities, provide entertainment and comfort to establish a long-term attraction to the passengers. A place that used to merely transfer people on board an airplane has turned into a department store complex which is full of services like restaurants, duty free shops, game arcades, casinos, etc. Conversely, the building of airport department stores like this does not improve the experience of many airports’ visitors — it is just an attempt to mimic the real world outside. Facilities

as such do not enhance the passengers' experience because it does not give the transit area an identity, but make it more homogeneity. Consequently, being at the airport is a negative experience as the characteristic of transitional space makes up for its lack of meaning^{7, 8}, while the homogeneity conveys no sense of belonging.

To reconstruct the sense of place at the airport, we need more than renovating physical environment, because there are activity and experience that also involve in the *placefulness*.⁹ Having discussed social interaction as a main finding from the research, I was eager to apply my thesis to the public site — a transit area of Copenhagen Airport in Kastrup, Denmark.



Figure 1: An installation of *Washroom-Notice* (left), and *I wish, I could poster* (right)

My aim was to establish a platform to promote a spatio-temporal communication between passengers. Therefore, *Washroom-Notice* (2006) is an installation consist with posters each attached with a small pencil for people to write and reply to each other. It is an attempt to create the

sense of place by letting the passenger memorise their experience from conducting social interaction behind the toilet door. I believe that the private atmosphere of the washroom and the surveillance-free environment of the toilet are expected to give the participants a confidence as well as freedom of expression. This was an opportunity for people to share their dreams and stories — a small moment to recognise and get to know the strangers.

Conclusion

The sense of place found within the online communication gives us a new perspective beyond the existing notions of place. This metaphorical cognition of cyberspace set apart the concept of place from the physical setting. With this fresh look provided by the online technology, social interaction has become another possible source of the placefulness without the underlying notion of space. During the project, I have become aware of the great potential provided by social interaction. Still, we should keep in mind that social interaction is not the only foundation of place but one of the efficient methods, since the sense of place is an absolute subjective.

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