

RELEASING THE GHOST : RELOCATING AN ONLINE EXPERIENCE INTO THE CORPORAL WORLD

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The article is a part of an ongoing research project aimed to transfer and recreate an experience found in online interaction into a spatial setting. By applying the concept of technology appropriation, together with the idea of the ghost in the machine, Yes / No / Maybe (2009) is an interactive art event, a social experimentation, which transferred an online dating experience into the physical world.

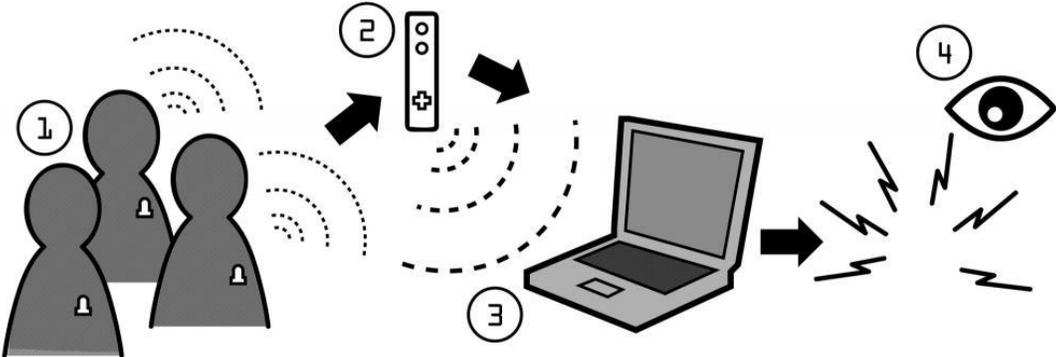


Fig. 1. Yes / No / Maybe: interactive system diagram, Illustration, Copyright: Nedine Kachornnamsong.



Fig. 2. Participants are waiting to be registered into the system, Photo copyright: Helena Bozic.



Fig. 3. The atmosphere of Yes/No/Maybe (2009) event by Nedine Kachornnamsong, Photo copyright: Ljudmila.

After the Essence

Personal computers, mobile phones and closed-circuit television, to name but a few digital devices have become everyday objects. Unlike their mechanical predecessors which utilized motion and kinetic force, these machines excel, mainly, in computing and data processing. They aim not to aid, but to empower. While the older machines are big and clumsy, the ones of the new era are neat and dynamic. Completely encased, clean and static, their capacity is not limited to their functions, but incorporates as well, modes of cybernetic operation which are expansive and abstract.

In the world of digital omnipresence, electronic signals are sent, retrieved and consummated. They respond at the speed of light; a vast network of machines lies invisibly. It is not the speed of the machine but the speed of change that painted the image of our future living with technology. From Mary Shelly's Frankenstein to the ongoing Star Trek fiction, these popular depictions are based on either utopian or dystopian view. This is an unapt dualistic approach, seeking to interpret the role of technology into good or bad by either ignoring the influence of technology or rejecting our responsibilities towards it. [1] Since our relationship with technology is mutual — we create technology and technology creates us — to engage in such binary classifications, one would need to be as naïve as to uphold the separation of humans and technology.

Enframed by the good and the bad, we see only the two sides of the same coin and not the object as a whole. Perhaps it was Heidegger who first called for a more holistic view of modern technology. He claimed that the only way to critically reclaim technology is to denounce its instrumental aspect and take a look into its essence. [6] As now, the coin is more or less recognized, I would like to further explore its comparative value at use; to reach beyond what technology could be, and instead consider it as a notable source of understanding. This is because technology is our portrait, it projects how we want to appreciate ourselves in the world.

My first attempt to apply forms of knowledge found in the use of technology was during the site-specific project 'In Place-spective' (2005-2006) in Copenhagen airport, Kastrup, Denmark. Similar to many other airports, it is a space of security, control and standard; a space to go through — always the start but never the destination. Its characteristics of in-between space and homogeneity make up for its lack of meaning and detachment. [4], [5] Even though, a number of theses on 'place', from fields as diverse as philosophy, geography and architecture, were applied to improve our experience at the airport, their solutions are still far from satisfying. After a week of 'quick and dirty' ethnographic research in the transit area, I found the attempt fascinating; trying to redefine a sense of place using influences from another perspective, to find something never been implemented by any airport operators.

I became interested in online communications, where a sense of place exists without the need for physical space. Blogs, web-boards, chat rooms and fora are not only 'spaces' for people to socialize or hang out, they form a complete 'place' when community, attachment and belonging are created among their users. Unlike virtual reality, a cyberspace is primarily constructed through the use of metaphors, instead of the real world mimicry. Graphical User Interface (GUI) is a metaphorical application used to associate visual representation with literary meaning. It involves terms such as desktop, window, page and anchor in order to convey how the elements of the interface and system should be used and navigated, respectively. Another further extension of the metaphor is normally used as an implication, for example, to make understood the purpose and expected activities delivered through the internet portal. [7] This latter type of metaphor such as online market, internet forum, electronic library and (cyber) space, do not refer to physical representations but rather, higher level abstractions — concepts of online space. In other words, we need to establish our own "personal cosmologies" [8] by coupling online possibilities with activities that exist in the real world to be able to fathom the system's uses. [11] Hence, the sense of place we establish within online communications is another strategic ontology imported from the material world to act as a framework for our online interactions. [9] Evidently, without the help of online technology, it would not be possible for us to disassociate the concept of place from the spatial setting.

TECHNOLOGY APPROPRIATION

The difference between an introduction and an appropriation of technology is very well known within the implementation of cybernetic technology. Scientists, engineers and designers may suggest how the technology should work but people are the ones who choose how to use it. Despite the fact that a few people have foreseen the ubiquity of Short Message Service (SMS) or the success of social networking sites, to the virtual reality communities like Second Life, these unexpected receptions of new technology resulting from the meaningful process of 'making use'.

Consequently, the development of any technology depends on both the makers and the users. An example of people unconsciously making place out of virtual space is not simply a coincidence. It is a preference we express, a choice we make through the use of technology. This predisposition will, in turn, reshape the coming creation of technology. And since technology is governed by our determination, it would be unseemly to indicate that it is either unintended, or untrue [3] or reduce it to an accident. [10] And if we are to be more mindful in the fabrication of technology, it is crucial for us to recognize our responsibilities inherent in the role of users.

The Ghost in the Machine

The thought of recognizing ourselves in technology is intriguing especially when it comes to digital applications. These are the machines that have earned the title of being 'smart', crossing over between intelligence and physicality. In *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), Donna Haraway refers to the disappearing border between humanity and cybernetic machines, which "have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. [2]" In other words, the cyborg problematizes the dualistic concepts that are commonly used to define humanity. Still, the rigid structures in most of societies leave us no alternative but to comply with this dualistic framework.

Even though, from the view of cyborg politics, it seems absurd to engage the division of 'either and or' as such, reflected by the *In Place*-spective project, I found that the ghost in the machine approach was invaluable for my thesis of technology appropriation. This is because for every machine, I believe, there is a ghost. And what we are haunted by is nothing but the ghost of our own desire. Only with our will can technology and machines move forward; technology without appropriation is nothing more than an already forgotten memory, which no longer paves our path to the future.

RELOCATING THE GHOST

The idea of integrating technology appropriation came into place in 2008 during a discussion with my then colleague Vadim Dubrov. We were exchanging our views of socialization when I mentioned the concept of a "traffic light" party I had come across a few years earlier. In this particular type of party, organized mostly among college students, the participants are required to dress in one of the traffic light colours which signify their level of dating preference — green is available, red is not available and yellow is undecided. I have never attended one of these parties as such, but I found it is amusing in terms of social interaction. Yet, it is not putting on different coloured clothing that provides traffic light's attendees any new opportunity. Rather, it is through 'making a statement'. Since yellow group participants have an 'unknown' status — the basic state held by any partygoer — the only group of people who benefit from this are those dressed in red, as they will be less disturbed by the green group which has a better chance with those at the party who are keen to have a date.

This prioritization of the declaration participants' dating interests found in "traffic light" parties, is similar to online dating. By looking into the structures of dating websites and combining them with the "traffic light" concept, there seemed to be an opportunity to transform an online dating experience into a material setting. Since love and (romantic) relationship is one of the greatest convictions found in human history, this is a challenging opportunity to bring forth such desire — a possibility to bring the ghost back into the world.

FROM THE ONLINE TO THE OFFLINE

To transcribe this particular desire into an everyday setting is to deliver an online dating experience in an offline location. Thus, the different of people's behaviours from the two settings is needed to be considered in combination with the concept of the traffic light party. There are principles of dating websites which are the keys to delivering the online dating experience that do not apply in the sphere of face-to-

face interaction. Firstly, in order to optimize the search process and increase pairing opportunities, participants need to be able to indicate their level of socializing preference (e.g. just looking, looking for friends, looking for dates, etc.). Secondly, while pursuing their interests, users must have the opportunity to either reveal their personal information or remain anonymous. This possibility for obscurity is what encourages people to become more open and active in their online social interactions. Thirdly, the playful element of online-dating sites represents an informal atmosphere that enhances the socializing opportunities where the users can feel more relaxed and casual.

Nevertheless, declaring a level of dating interest is successful in the online dating because cyberspace is designed for multitasking — one searches in parallel with many others. Thus, it is effective to provide users with an easy way to filter more than one interesting candidate out from the pool of online accounts. It is not only that multi-tasking is rather difficult to do in the real world, but also that such an approach is considered to be unpleasant according to conventional social norms. To succeed in transferring an online dating experience into the material world, the interactions between people have to be more dynamic. Therefore, an interactive installation was chosen as a tool to bring these two domains of interaction in to compliance.

In order to apply the above characteristics of online communication into a physical setting, this project consists of the setup of the event venue and the introduction of a new social environment.

- The venue: the setting and location where the project will take place needs to have a good atmosphere for socialization. A form of social gathering will be arranged and opened to public participation.
- The socialization strategy: the new social situation will be initiated by transferring elements from cyberspace interaction into the physical world. Therefore, the objective is to create an environment in which participants can recognize other people's level of socializing interest while their exact identity remains unknown.

An interactive system will be created as the means to simulate the informative environment that will roughly show participants the level of socializing interest in their surrounding area. Still, this indication shall only represent an average measurement to avoid a 1:1 relationship where the identity of participants and the type of socializing interest can be matched.

Yes/No/Maybe

It is crucial for a participatory project to begin with a period of pilot testing that emphasizes implementing the concepts rather than aiming for an inclusive outcome. While focusing on creating a platform for social experimentation based on the frameworks of internet dating, the main objective of Yes/No/Maybe was to produce knowledge — an analysis of the data collected on the participants' flow and movement — which could be used for further development.

This pilot project was realized during a joint residency program with Ljudmila and MoTa in Ljubljana, Slovenia as an interactive art event. In order to foster an atmosphere conducive for mingling and socialization, it took place in the café area of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana where there was music, DJs and a bar where drinks and refreshment were available for purchase. The registration process was divided into two steps in order to maintain participant anonymity. First, before entering the event, each participant had to specify his/her dating interest for the evening as a 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe' in a paper form. This was

then, folded and exchanged for an electronic tag containing microchips with a unique identification. Afterward, the pairing and registration of dating choices with the tags were carried on by project staff.

TECHNICAL SOLUTION

The technical part of this project was under the supervision of Luka Frelj from Ljudmila. Since it was a pilot project constrained by timeframe and budget, instead of mapping participants' movement using Wi-Fi or long range RDIF technology, a more practical solution was to use IR emitters and Wiimotes for the tracking input. Our ID tag design was inspired by Graffiti Research Lab's Throwies which are small, cheap and aim for temporary use. In each tag, two LR44 batteries powered two IR emitters and an Atmel ATtiny45 micro-controller which was programmed to flash a unique ID signal. Six Wiimotes were hung from the ceiling to cover the whole area and receive the signals sent from the IR emitters in a different time interval. Using the information from the Wiimote sensors, the computer software then mapped the movement of the tags (and the owners) into physical space by changing the LED lights which represented the average value of the socializing level (green, red or yellow) of individuals in that particular area.

THE RECEPTION

The public response to the project was more than we had expected. The event was originally planned to be of moderately sized, but turned into the evening's biggest event. After 40 minutes, all of the 75 ID tags we had prepared were given away. And since Moderna Galerija is a public institution, we could not impose a restriction to stop people from entering the event. At the highest point of the evening, the number of visitors reached an estimated 300 people. While I was astonished by the project's reception, at the same time I understood that it was unfortunate for my research. With only 25 percent of the participants actually connected to the system, the data was inadequate for the analysis. However, if there was any conclusion to be drawn from the event, it would be that the ghost (in the machine) is our desire and the thought of an unrestrained desire had drawn people together that night. In other words, we were all eager to release the ghost from the machine.

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