

INTRAINER SOCIALITE: EMOTICON JACKET FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION

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intraInter socialite is a wearable computing experience that investigates the loss of intonation and body language that occurs at the intersection of computers and textual communication. Emoticons, an attempt to express emotional nuances in the virtual realm, are used to subtitle interaction that occurs in the physical realm. This is achieved through force sensors that display emoticons on a jacket with a LCD screen.



Kristin Stransky Mallinger, intraInter socialite, 2011, Emoticon jacket with LCD screen, Lilypad Arduino board and force sensors (artwork and photography © 2011 Kristin Stransky Mallinger).

Emoticons construct a variable language meant to convey emotions, physical and mental states in a textual context. An emoticon consists of various punctuation and letters from the Latin alphabet to create perpendicularly oriented graphics. Although it creates a graphical language and can be universally understood, it still allows for user and virtual service interpretation. Some services — IM and email clients — convert the text to a graphic, which it is perceived to represent. These graphics are an inconsistent interpretation and vary according to the client.

Two or more users that are using messaging clients can use different clients within the same conversation and get different graphics for the same text. Users can also include additional or fewer characters than what the service recognizes, which will effect whether the client converts the text to a graphical representation or not. For example, :) would in most cases be perceived as a smile graphically, connoting a happy emotion. However, :-) may be the text recognized by the client to produce a graphic. Textual representations and their varied graphical outcomes can change the interpretation of the message and emotion. Some users may feel that :-) is a more effective smile, whereas some would argue that :) or the graphics produced are more effective.

The inconsistencies in representation of emotions can lead to some confusion. Another way in which emoticons can lead to confusion are when the emoticon is not supported by a client or is not common in a user's repertoire. When an emoticon emerges, the service is often lagging in converting its use to an agreed upon graphical interpretation. Additionally, there are many different emoticons being created to fill the user's need for emotional expression. Both users may not be proficient in a particular emoticon's connotation and this may lead to an emotional or contextual disconnect in the conversation.

Just as a person's physical cues can be misinterpreted by those interacting, emoticons and their inconsistencies can lead to misinterpretation and confusion. They can also contribute to the lexical direction and enhance a conversation. [1] Emoticons provide non-verbal indicators of emotional cues that can be lost in text-based interaction, but also reinforce physical indicators if introduced to a face-to-face social exchange. When introduced to any social situation, virtual or physical, emoticons can be used to reinforce or subvert the verbal/textual message. They can change the message intent/content in as few as two keystrokes. [2] In the virtual realm, emoticons are often a subtitle for text and are often treated as a way to interpret the tone of the message. When bodily or verbal intonation infers one message and an emoticon is introduced that infers another or when both physical and textual cues are given, which is to be used as the interpretation? Do physical indications, or textual cues that are deliberately displayed, reveal the desired intonation?

intraInter socialite is an emoticon jacket with LCD screen (Fig. 1). The focus of the jacket is to create subtexts for interpersonal human interaction. The wearer uses force sensors to create computer textual subtitles for physical interaction. My investigation into wearable computing with this project is an inquiry into the loss of intonation and body language that occurs at the intersection of computers and textual communication as is evident in today's instantaneous communication and technology-centric culture.

This project explores emotional content and expression in multiple ways. The jacket:

- acts as a non-verbal, non-corporeal intermediary to a bodily and potentially verbal social interaction to create another plane of emotional meaning.
- potentially contradicts or detracts from that which is physically and verbally expressed.
- expresses, reinforces and clarifies that which is physically and verbally expressed.
- is a physical computing experience of a virtual communicative convention.
- expresses the development of an emotional and graphical mode of expression utilizing textual punctuation.
- explores whether a barrier or channel is created for emotional content through technology and physical computing.

The piece, *intraInter socialite*, asks several questions of the interaction between the user and the jacket and the social experience while wearing the jacket. Does the expression of content through electronic means become a prosthesis and/or hindrance for inter-human interaction? If it is a prosthetic, does an emotional language intermediary offer assistance for those with autism or empathic disorders? Is meaning lost and are its prosthesis capabilities diminished when precision is taken away? Emotional content is critical for daily communications and message interpretation. [3] How does the role/character of the interactor serve as a truth-teller and how does it help the user to reinforce false emotional reactions? [4] In this case, the natural method of conveying emotion through applied pressure, leads to an imprecise emotional connection and brings the emotion being conveyed into consciousness for both parties.

In this application, the effort put into replacing the nuances of personal communication with punctuation and textual cues in the virtual realm creates a subtitle for the conversation and interaction that occurs in the physical realm. It creates a range of implied emotion from the wearer. This also introduces an imprecise control over the emoticon displayed and the perception of the emoticon in the context of the interaction. The user has the ability to change the experience of the conversation when they attempt to control the level of emoticon displayed.

The techno-centric geek and socially inept express themselves more freely and create a powerful online or electronic identity through and behind the computer screen. The electronic veil is lifted through a forced vocabulary and a forced interaction in the human world. The wearer has only the jacket to hide behind, no computer screen and no alternate identity, pictures or avatar. With only a jacket in the middle of the interaction, the focus of the conversation may dramatically shift to the screen and what is being displayed. How does this create a “veil” even though the interactors are able to see each other in real-time physical space? Experimentally, adding the language of the virtual world to a physical interaction may allow the users to focus on the jacket instead of the interaction. [5]

Emoticons are an important non-standardized aspect of communication in virtual space that help convey emotion and additional meaning. They were created to help fill an emotional content void that was not being filled by short, text-based communication. Textual punctuation has become its own graphically and internationally interpreted language through emoticons. *intraInter socialite* attempts to study the effects of adding the emoticon to physical computing and interaction. It also calls to attention the use of textual elements to create graphical emotional elements to a virtual interaction. It allows the user to subtitle and create additional emotional content for the interaction, whether true or false.

References and Notes:

1. Daantje Derks, Arjan E. R. Bos and Jasper Von Grumbkow, “Emoticons in Computer-Mediated Communication: Social Motives and Social Context,” in *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 11, no. 1 (2008): 99-101.
2. Alecia Wolf, “Emotional Expression Online: Gender Differences in Emoticon Use,” in *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 3, no. 5 (2000): 827-833.
3. Shao-Kang Lo, “Nonverbal Communication Functions of Emoticons in Computer-Mediated Communication,” in *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 11, no. 5 (2008): 595-597.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Joan Gajadhar and John Green, “The Importance of Nonverbal Elements in Online Chat,” in *Educate Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2005), <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/EQM05411.pdf> (accessed May 3, 2011).