

Intimacy and Expression in the Coffee Shop

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ABSTRACT

We are designing communication technologies for the coffee shop environment with the goal of increasing intimacy and community among patrons. This environment is already conducive to intimacy due to the affordances available for personal expression and communication on various levels. We aim to integrate rich information spaces with the natural affordances of the coffee shop to allow for new interaction styles and means for expression. We are influenced by Gaver's contextual ambiguity and the abundant means for personal expression online in our design of adaptable technologies.

Author Keywords

Coffee shops, self expression, intimacy, social communication, user adaptability.

INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

Ray Oldenburg proposes the notion of the "third place", which is any public location away from home and work where a person can revive the spirits, leave obligations of work and family, and connect with other people, friends or strangers [6]. Without a strong third place, one may feel:

- incapable of being connected to other humans
- the lack of personal attention or outlet for expression
- the lack of entertainment or play with other people or
- incapable of creating casual social relationships or having community involvement

The coffee shop has potential to be such a third place and provide remedies for the problems above. One can visit a coffee shop, seat oneself in a temporary personal space, observe others or allow oneself to be observed, and take in the atmosphere and surrounding conversation.

Oldenburg warns that there is a lack of informal life in North America, even with the multitude of coffee shops, bars, and clubs. Many people will support this claim using expressions like, "even in a crowd of people I can feel alone". Nowadays they might turn to online communities and communication tools to satisfy social needs. While there are many benefits to computer mediated communications such as connecting to others in a manner independent of space and time, they still have not replaced the intimacy in physical proximity.

Our goal is to enhance the third place nature of the coffee shop by building technologies supporting intimacy and communication. The primary objective of the present research is to enhance experience by opening new modes for personal expression. In doing so, we hope to also create guidelines for designing flexible interfaces, allowing users to adapt technologies to fit their expressive needs.

RELATED WORK

The coffee shop space has been visited by designers frequently. For example, collaboration with Royal Philips Design and four other academic partners has produced the café table for the Living Memory Project [1][4] that allows users to create, browse, store, and share information within a community. The Chit Chat Club [2] explores intimacy in scale and form. Here anthropomorphic, human-sized avatars connect remote participants to a café table, thereby connecting the real and the virtual. The Intel CowCam [5] at the Urban Grind coffee shop reveals the desired boundaries between physical and virtual worlds when a community is physically based. Finally, the Jukola project creates an MP3 jukebox that allows a café bar clientele to nominate, and vote for music to be played. They were able to observe social effects of the system in play, competition and cooperation.

These projects have revealed compelling interactions and relationships between people in coffee shops. We hope to add to this research by exploring the individual and his or her personal expression within the interactions and relationships.

THE COFFEE SHOP SPACE

Preliminary Study

Initial brainstorming sessions produced several elements considered important to the coffee shop environment such as atmosphere and aesthetics, community, objects, and spatial layout.

We devised a general questionnaire and conducted naturalistic, open-ended interviews to determine how a sample of people perceived their coffee shop experiences. The intentions of this study were to become acquainted with perspectives on coffee shops, rather than prove or disprove anything specific. The questionnaire was completed by 65 people between the ages of 19 and 52. From this sample, 6 people were interviewed more extensively.

Some interviewees expressed that unless they met people in a coffee shop community through another friend, it was very difficult to become part of a group or meet new people. Still, they found value in coming to coffee shops whether to be around people, do work, have meetings, study, or just relax, all in the company of other people. As one participant expressed of the coffee shop's social nature, "when you go to a coffee shop, part of it is that this is your place for something social to happen. Even if you go in there alone, you hope you'll run into somebody."

The importance of atmosphere and aesthetics was prevalent in the study. It is believed that the coffee shop environment is influenced by the clientele and the communities around and within it. Because of this constructed atmosphere, people often recount feelings of connection or intimacy with the other customers.

In cases where a person visits one coffee shop frequently, the intimacy can be increased to feelings of trust and loyalty. At some point, the person may be considered a "regular". Trust and loyalty are reciprocated by others. He or she acquires access to the privileges of being a regular and likely feels part of a community.

Intimacy and Expression

At this point in our research, we have narrowed our focus to technologies that enhance individual expression. We feel that the intimacy of a coffee shop starts with the ability for the customers and baristas to mark the space with part of their identity.

By supporting more intimate connections it is hopeful that we will provide:

- a stronger identity in the coffee shop environment
- greater intimacy between the people in the environment
- a means for frequent customers to establish presence and regularity in the coffee shop and
- a stronger community and social network

Given that expression is personal and individual, we must design for user adaptability. The new technology should allow for personalization in use and output. We look at two different design concepts to achieve this adaptability: Gaver's ambiguity as a resource for design and the affordances of online personal expression.

AMBIGUITY OF CONTEXT

Gaver's concept of designing with ambiguity [3] is categorized into ambiguity of information, ambiguity of context, and ambiguity of relationship. In all three categories, the ambiguity resides in user's interpretation of an artifact.

Ambiguity of context suggests that an artifact is designed in such a way that there may be various understandings and interpretations of the meaning. This is different from ambiguity of information which exists in how an artifact presents information, and ambiguity of relationship which exists in a user's personal relationship and feelings about an artifact.

Gaver states that successful ambiguity of context "disrupts easy interpretation of the design, and obliges users to work out ways to make sense of the new situation". Technologies with ambiguity of context in the coffee shop could strengthen intimacy and connections in two ways. First, an individual's interpretation and use of the technology may strengthen interpersonal connections, since the interpretation is an expression of the individual which is reflected to surrounding people. The other way would be through a collaborative interpretation, where the technology is a conversation piece in itself.

PERSONAL EXPRESSION ONLINE

Our other well of inspiration is the Internet. As mentioned previously, many people satisfy various social needs through online communities and communication. These tools can help people transcend space and time, and this feature has been tapped into by other coffee shop projects.

Besides transcending limitations of space and time, online communication tools offer users a rich, flexible space for personal expression. Through blogs, personal websites, forums, online photo albums, social networking software, dating services, etc., people are leaving pieces of themselves all over the cyber world.

Taking the simple example of a personal website, we can see that the owner is only limited by browser capabilities, the two dimensional screen, and his or her own programming skills. Though even with limited programming skills, people can use various tools to make great sites. The Internet offers an open palette for design and expression, allowing site creators to specify information and content, layout, colors, and interactivity.

Thus the Internet inspires us to create a system that allows an individual to express him or herself through various elements of the coffee shop. The customer could apply

personal digital information, preferences, or rules to the elements. For example, someone could keep a directory of songs on their PDA. Upon walking into a coffee shop, the songs would be automatically uploaded to the music system for play. This is further clarified with the following scenarios.

SCENARIOS OF COFFEE SHOP INFORMATION SPACES

Tom walks into a coffee shop and gets a coffee from the counter. The barista is happy to serve him; he posts really funny remarks to the customer comment box every time he comes in and she's still giggling from the one this morning. Tom sits down at his regular table by the window and the painting on the display behind him changes to one of cherry blossom trees lining a snow-white park. Next to the painting is a strand of photos and messages from the InkTape printer. Each postcard-sized piece of paper is attached to one strand of ribbon. Tom turns around and looks at the photos. He's left some messages on here before; usually just by SMS. He casts a glance at a picture of a girl in a bright blue dress sitting at his regular table and notes the photo's tag number in his PDA. He opens his textbooks to get some studying done.

Kirsten feels her chair warm-up and a quizzical look crosses her face. "What's up?" Pam asks. "My chair just got warmer. It feels like someone's been sitting in it, but it's only me here". Pam shrugs and they continue their conversation but both are somewhat distracted by a soft low rhythmic humming. "It sounds like it's coming from somewhere in the coffee shop". Kirsten looks around and then sees Fred, another regular, and nods. It's funny because it seems as though the rhythm of the sound matches the movement of Fred's mouth.

Meanwhile Tom is taking a break from his studying. He is thinking about the girl in blue. Judging from the advertisement posted by a good friend two cards above the picture, she must have been there sometime in the past day or so. He knows that Jake only thought of selling his car two days ago. He looks at his tabletop and reads the words and sentence fragments floating around its display. They vary in color, size, and intensity. He tries to guess if some might be from her. Tom spends the next while playing around with the words and sentence fragments, imagining the writings and conversations they may have come from.

Later that day Alicia drops by to get a latte. Getting a receipt from the barista she sees that she has 3 hits on her

profile, all from the picture on the wall. "I should come here more often", she thinks as she walks out the door.

CONCLUSION

Our next step in our user centered approach will be to conduct a brainstorm session centered on prototypes of potential technologies. Using character, props, and scenarios, we will role-play participants through various stories in the coffee shop. Some stories will involve the prototypes; some will investigate existing modes of interaction. The stories will enable an investigation of commonly perceived relationships, communication methods, their advantages and disadvantages, and the participants' thoughts on the prototypes. We hope to determine what designs provoke thought in the participants and if they feel they can express part of their individuality through the technology. Ultimately, we plan to prototype a proof-of-concept to test our design in an actual coffee shop.

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