

The nightlife of seniors: position statement for night and darkness workshop.

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ABSTRACT

Studies of senior living and technology are generally concerned with daytime activities and overlook the routines and behaviors related with life after dark. However, based on recent long-term ethnographic research with US seniors in 2007, the relevance for a shift in focus is clear. Examples from a three month period of US fieldwork with seniors regarding their informal care practices for socially appropriate telehealthcare applications are used to illustrate this point. It is argued that night-time is most appropriately conceptualized as *nightlife* involving routine practices, rather than a monotonous non-activity that spans the hours of darkness and sleep. Also, like watching a movie, nightlife offers an exploratory space for sensual experiences linked with the contrasts of silence-noise and light-darkness; albeit this is dependent on the actor's own perceptual capacities. Finally, while nightlife is often perceived as an opportunity for alternative or clandestine activities, it may also increase the likelihood of physical risk or danger. Using the backdrop of a student film concept, these themes are explored in relation to the nightlife practices of seniors in the United States.

Author Keywords

Nightlife, seniors, practice, experience, risk, danger, interaction design, ubiquitous computing.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.m MISCELLANEOUS

INTRODUCTION

Nightlife has always fascinated me with its magic and mystery. Several years ago when I was a visual anthropology student I had ambitions of making a documentary film about the streets of Manchester at night. As darkness cast its cloak over the city, the streets became transformed. Like a phoenix they rose from their industrial grittiness into a hotbed of cultural activity. Meanwhile taxicabs marked the rhythm of patrons walking to and from cafes, pubs, restaurants, theatres, movie houses, and discos. The phrase nightlife could not be more appropriate. Then,

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CHI 2008 Workshop, April 5-10, 2008, Florence, Italy

just before twilight rolls into dawn, the streets gently sway into a peaceful and almost angelic ambiance. Light played an important part of this experience, as did sound. My idea was to use these elements as filmic "tour guides" for creating a portrait of street life at night in the film. Unfortunately, I was a poor graduate student at the time and did not have access to more professional equipment, so the footage was dull and did not faithfully capture the *mis-en-scene*. (Yeah, blame it on the equipment!) Also, regardless of its night-time charm, Manchester's propensity for crime presented a number of personal safety issues that proved too risky to overlook, especially at night. Eventually I dropped the idea.

Nevertheless, this anecdote helps underline a number of points for the workshop: a.) rather than a monotonous stretch of time where nothing happens, night-time is properly framed as nightlife - involving routine practices; b.) like watching a movie, night and darkness create an alternative and sensual feeling linked with the audio-visual experience of contrast and brightness, albeit reliant on the actor's own perceptual capacities; and c.) nightlife presents both opportunities for alternative lifestyles and clandestine activities, but may also increase the risk of danger.

Enter the elderly: arguably, studies of seniors and technology have often favored daytime activities without focusing on the importance of night practices after dark. However, based on recent extended ethnographic fieldwork with US seniors in 2007 (n=20), the relevance for a shift in focus becomes clear. Below I share some examples from this fieldwork to scope the ideas in more detail.

SENIOR'S NIGHTLIFE ROUTINES

On the streets of Manchester I found an entire range of patterns and practices regarding the flow of nightlife activity. Similarly, among my US participants I discovered that many seniors have routine practices linked with nightlife. For example, Ruby, a 94 year old participant, described in meticulous detail the various items she spread out every night on her bedroom dressing table – cold creams, a hairbrush, medications, etc. – in preparation for her morning hygiene. She also used a commode several times at night and kept it near her bed. During the day she covered it with a blanket and a large stuffed bear, making

the piece of equipment almost invisible to the untrained eye. This was somewhat curious however because she rarely allowed guests in her bedroom (but this is topic for another discussion).

At the age of 78, Maggie explained that for many years she had not slept very well, partly due to her chronic diabetes. She was frequently forced to get up in the middle of the night to check her glucose levels, or just to get a drink of water. At the same time she might go on-line to check her email, making it even more difficult to sleep again.

SENIOR'S NIGHTLIFE EXPERIENCES

Like flashing police lights, a blinking neon sign, or the rumble of a light rail train down the street in the middle of the night, some US seniors enjoyed the visual and audible sensations offered by night-time experience, supporting the idea that the night is magical and mysterious. For instance, Dave, an 83 year old widower, mentioned he always fell asleep with his radio playing near his bedside. He explained that it helped sooth and relax him. He even kept a large index card that he printed with all the different radio stations for reference.

Another participant, 93 year old Patrick, often fell asleep in his recliner while sitting in front of the television and watching an educational program like National Geographic. Later he found it difficult to get himself out of the chair and into bed. In fact once he fell trying to balance after standing up too quickly. He also liked using a voice activated alarm clock by his bed because his eye-sight was getting worse. He was concerned about how much longer he would be able to see sufficiently in order to maneuver at night.

SENIOR'S NIGHTLIFE DANGERS AND RISKS

While certain Mancunian areas are more stigmatized than others, nightfall is an equalizing factor. Areas considered safe during the day may become risk zones by night. In the domestic spaces of US seniors a similar effect is found.

Many seniors perceived risks and dangers associated with life after dark. For instance, Harriet, a 90 year old participant, made the decision never to go down to her apartment complex's storage area alone after dark. She was concerned first about getting locked in, but secondly about the risk of getting attacked.

Meanwhile, 69 year-old Jude, who lived alone with her dogs, always called her pets back into the house for the night even while the sun was still shining. She was afraid that a coyote or some other wild animal would catch another member of her entourage. She only had two dogs left. The third had gone mysteriously missing one night last year, and she did not want that to happen again. She was also very adamant about sleeping with her emergency call button (Philips Lifeline) that she wore around her neck for safety, in the event she had a heart attack or fell during the night and required assistance.

CONCLUSION

The purpose here is simply to provide a surface overview of some rough insights related to night and darkness that were discovered in the course of a three-month ethnographic study with US seniors. Rather than analyze the deeper meanings that structure human practice and experience at this juncture, the intention here is merely to provide a few ideas - hor d'oeuvres really - for the workshop. The real takeaway is that these observations and insights have emerged in the course of an ethnographic research project unintentionally designed to explore senior nightlife. Nevertheless, the topic clearly emerged in the course of fieldwork and therefore demands further inquiry. For this reason the workshop context and focus on night and darkness is an excellent forum in which to explore these ideas more extensively.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the Philips Research Europe staff and the Danish Design School for their preliminary insight on this topic.