

Grim Work, Weird Fun and the Cloak of Darkness

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we look at how technology might be used after dark by workers in low-paid service sector jobs, and people participating in unusual night time entertainment and more sinister activities.

BIOGRAPHIES

Lisa Roberts and Andrew Wilson have devised some of the UK's most creative applications of everyday technology including the Guardian newspaper's text message poetry competition in 2001; City Poems in Leeds and Antwerp, commended in the British Interactive Media Awards, and Bluevend, installed in Tate Britain and featured in the Independent on Sunday newspaper. They have worked together for eight years and are co directors of Blink, a not-for-profit creative technology agency.

Author Keywords

Nighttime, darkness, interaction design, ubiquitous computing.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

GRIM WORK

An economy like that of the UK, heavily dependant on service sector industries, particularly global finance, and with a gap between rich and poor at its widest since Victorian times, is maintained by armies of low paid workers, often made up of legal and illegal migrants. In London, a refugee might find themselves holding down a number of minimum-wage jobs to support their family, including a night shift cleaning the offices of city bankers.

Badly paid shift workers, needing to work long hours or have more than one job in order to make ends meet, will not have the opportunity to spend much time at a PC, and their spending on technology is limited to essentials like a mobile phone and perhaps a portable music player. They exist in different shift to the usual 9-5 workers and as a result live their lives at odds with the majority of the population.

For nightshift workers, mobile technologies might be used to help to smooth the edges between their own rhythms and those of family members and friends, or keep up with the diurnal routines and experiences of their children, viewed as a welcome respite during a tea break at 3am or a weary bus journey home at 6am, when most people are setting out on their day.

Technologies could be used to help ease the lives of people who work on different shifts. A vibrating bracelet, for example, might connect with the alarm clock on a mobile phone by Bluetooth, allowing only the shift worker to feel the alarm, leaving the sleeping partner or other family member in peace. This might also be useful for bus and train commuters, both daytime and night workers, and nightclubbers, allowing them to fall asleep on the journey, knowing they have set the alarm and will be discretely woken before their stop.

Worn by a child, a heart rate monitor in a bracelet could establish that the child was asleep, and feed this information long distance, via Bluetooth and then mobile phone, to a parent at work. It could be displayed as a reassuring screen saver on the parent's mobile or work PC, or an SMS alert if the child were awake for more than ten minutes. A real advantage of using a communication device to relay this information is that if the child wakes and needs to speak with you they can.

WEIRD FUN

Access to, and activities in, public space is increasingly monitored and controlled, whether it is by CCTV linked to face and movement recognition software to detect crime before it happens, the tracking of mobile phones or the data mined from credit card purchases and store loyalty cards.

After dark this monitoring will take on its most authoritarian character, with anyone out at night statistically

proven far more likely to commit or become a victim of crime, with hot spots for crime easily searchable on map interfaces.

Perhaps we will start to develop submissive or masochistic relationships with the faceless but ubiquitous systems that guard or control us. We might abandon ourselves to the cameras that watch us all the time and keep us safe. Or go out after dark wearing sunglasses or a pulled down cap, lurking on street corners rather than making our way briskly homeward, waiting for the police to turn up, as if summoned up by our guilty desires, and ready to punish us for our bad thoughts. Even if in the end they have to let us go because we haven't actually done anything wrong.

CLOAK OF DARKNESS

Darkness will be a crucial part of the mise en scene for rich pervasive games and entertainment experiences, helping the game designers and story world writers to give us the thrill of hunting or being hunted, looking for illicit rewards or defeating unseen enemies.

Of course these threats and fears might become very real. Carelessly or unwittingly revealing location information linked to social network sites in the wrong context, or hacking of restricted location information, might put teenagers at risk of bullying and adults of stalking and worse. Being able to access profiles and interests on portable devices might allow an attacker in a crowded train station to single out and follow a victim, for example a person from a religious minority.

Privacy settings need to be easy to switch on and off, and perhaps the easiest way to be sure of this is to assume that the providers of our various social network and location services can't be relied on to manage our privacy correctly, and to have technology to actively jam and disable all of the profile and location information related to ourselves whenever we feel uncomfortable about our physical safety: a cloak of darkness to hide us.