

Eroticism and the night: Sensual, rhythmic and risky design

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In the popular imagination, darkness often signifies the dangerous and unknowable: in *Beowulf*, the unseen Grendel attacks only after the fires go out; Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* explores darkness in the shadows of the jungle, darkness of skin, the unintelligibility of "uncivilized" people, the darkness of the human soul when removed from all the familiar social structures that support it. Women are told (as a form of social regulation) not to walk alone after dark, because who know what dodgy characters could be out there? "Dark" is used synonymously with "evil" sometimes, as in the phrase "dark magic."

Just as darkness renders the world less visible and less knowable, it renders us less graspable to the world as well. In contrast to films of the *noir* genre, Christopher Nolan's 2002 remake of *Insomnia* reveals the main character's guilt in the bright light of 24-hour daytime. The metaphor is powerful, yet also more than a metaphor. After seeing the movie, a friend who had spent some months in Antarctica described his own depression and paranoia, brought on by the constant day and lack of daily rhythms of light and dark. Other stories lurk behind the dominant stories of the darkness as fearful and unknown, stories in which the brightness of day can become unbearable, where the dark is comforting, where our own invisibility is freeing.

The night impedes vision, but we have other senses. It's the negative space around the workday, but we can reverse the figure and ground of that daily rhythm. It can be risky, but also provide opportunity. What would we design if, inspired by a positive consideration of the night, we designed for the sensuality of the dark, the rhythms of the erotic, and the risks and opportunities of real-world sexual practice?

The night is sensual. In the dark, as our sight becomes less acute, we experience a shuffling of the senses. Hearing takes over, just at that time of day when tree frogs, cicadas, mosquitoes, and cats in heat become louder. The intimate senses of smell and touch are activated. The horizons of our sensory world close in and hug closer to our bodies. While we think of darkness as more physically dangerous, perhaps it is more emotionally safe. Maybe that glass of wine with dinner, a comforting smell, the close feel of someone's breath, and the lack of eyes on you encourage confession and intimacy.

Non-visual design. So what might it look like to design for a holistic combination of senses, rather than primarily for sight? To use touch, sound, or smell to convey safety and intimacy, to create slow interactions that you have to wait to feel, quiet ones that you have to strain to hear, to evoke memory, to communicate in ways that are not necessarily symbol-based? Rather than ubiquitous technologies that map and visualize, we might design technologies to share body heat (Goodman & Misilim, 2003) or breath (Schiphorst, 2007). These are not, by necessity, technologies that are only usable at night, rather they demonstrate that the sensual experience of the nighttime can provide inspiration for very different kinds of technologies than the loud, bright, rational and productive experience of the daytime.

The night is erotic. If you work 9-5, as people are typically assumed to do, work and productivity own your days. If we are spending time with a partner, cooking together, eating together, fighting, or playing footsie and sharing ice cream in front of the television, we are probably doing it in the evening. If we're having sex, we're probably doing it around bedtime (Refinetti, 2005). Though there is less research on the rhythms of sex that is technologically mediated, it is reasonable to guess that if we are watching porn, taking naughty pictures of ourselves or our lovers, searching online for a date, or having a racy (and/or emotionally intimate) conversation on the phone or on IM, we're probably doing it after dark.

Rhythmic design. Eroticism can be largely about timing, anticipation, and rhythm. The eroticism of the nighttime is constrained (and thus perhaps enhanced) by the restrictions of the day, when often our time is not our own. Research around long distance relationships focuses on physical distance and the presence or absence of one's partner (Kaye *et al*, 2005), but what about the rhythmic disconnects of living three, eight or fourteen time zones apart? The distance itself might require sex and intimacy to be mediated, but when does it happen and how is that negotiated if one partner's evening is the other's workday? How do couples use existing asynchronous media to create a sense of intimacy, arousal or love, and what would a medium look like if designed specifically for that use? How might a designer seek to create moments of nighttime at other times of day?

The night is sexual. Accommodating the 9-5 workday of office workers, nighttime is the workday for sex workers. Bangkok's sex workers – at least those who cater primarily to foreigners – cluster in Patpong,



Soi Nana is open for business after dark.

among the banks and office buildings of Silom, and in Soi Nana, among the offices and international hotels of Sukhumvit Road; the red light districts here are spatially well-defined. During twilight Sukhumvit transforms from a business to an entertainment district, including ubiquitous food offerings on mobile carts, bars, go-go bars, and massage parlors, all lit by neon signs and Christmas lights strung across the sois. Though defying Thai norms of feminine modesty, at certain times and places a woman may walk hand in hand with her foreign boyfriend¹ without fearing the condemnation of neighbors; she may feel more at home doing so because these are times and places where other women are doing the same (Askew, 2002). While night and neighborhood may offer a particular kind of safety for sex workers, they still must manage the risks to their own physical safety in an unregulated line of work

where they have little protection from authorities. Here also, sex workers depend on one another: more experienced workers at a go-go bar may introduce their newer coworkers to men whose character they trust, or ostracize customers who try to go home with multiple women at the same bar – despite the best interests of the bar owners (Askew, 2002). In the case of freelance escorts in the US, Google has proven an invaluable resource for verifying that clients are who they say they are, and in cases where a client behaves poorly, “bad date lists” can publicly shame him in a place easily searchable both by other escorts and the client’s employer, friends, or spouse (Ray, 2007).

Risky design. Sex work is one of many relatively risky sexual practices, a fact which is often held against sex workers if they do happen to become victims of crime. The above examples indicate, however, that people make calculated decisions about risk and reward as it pertains to sexual behavior, and take steps to minimize the risk – either to reputation or personal safety – by choosing timing and setting, by seeking or distributing information. These practices are, in truth, not much different from the precautions that women usually take when going on a date with someone they met online. The rules of thumb are well known: meet at a neutral location, Google the guy first and make sure he is who he claims to be, tell a friend where you will be, when you’ll be back, and ask them to call the police if they don’t hear from you. If it still goes poorly, there’s always dontdatehimgirl.com. Yet despite the dangers, people still date. Thinking of the night as dangerous and designing to keep people safe oversimplifies the real decisions that we make on a nightly basis; the night does present risks, but it also presents opportunities. Rather, inspired by the risks and opportunities of the nighttime, we might design for the nuances of well-informed risk-taking, whether augmenting the use of safe-words (Noessel, 2006), reducing risk for sex-workers by increasing the risks to clients for their own poor behavior, or choosing where and when to display our behaviors and preferences.

Perhaps the practice of designing for and during the day has led us to privilege the visible, to think more about space than about time, to pair danger against safety rather than with opportunity. To break out of these patterns does not necessarily mean designing specifically or exclusively for nighttime use (though that would be fun), rather foregrounding our nighttime practices provides a new framing for some innovative design themes.

¹ In practice, freelance sex workers in Bangkok often take on long-term, emotionally intimate engagements that blur the line between “client” and “boyfriend”.

References

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Bio

Amanda Williams is a PhD Candidate at UC Irvine's Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Sciences and a member of the Lab for Ubiquitous Computing and Interaction. Her research interests include urban computing, mobility, tangible (especially soft, fluffy or squishy) interfaces, computer mediated communication, intimacy, teledildonics, and how Irvine got to be such a bizarre planned community. She is currently doing ethnographic field work and system design in Bangkok, focusing on urban mobilities and mobile technology. She launched and contributes regularly to <http://sexualinteractions.org/>, an interdisciplinary webzine and forum focusing on design, engineering, use, appropriation and critique of sexual technologies, and also blogs on her general personal blog (<http://www.metamanda.com/blog/>), Bangkok's metablog (<http://bangkok.metblogs.com/>), and a food blog (<http://meatamanda.illnourished.com/>). She once had an adolescent crush on Peter O'Toole playing T.E. Lawrence, but was never certain whether it was the actor or the historical figure that she admired.