

To Be Continued: Technology, Mood and Darkness

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ABSTRACT

Mood, and in particular, those moods associated with darkness, are underrepresented in the HCI literature. If we design for happy, we must design for sad. If we design to relieve loneliness, we must design to support a positive sense of solitude. Designers must think of opposite moods. In this paper, we will argue that ubiquitous computing and communication systems ought to account for people's shifting moods that are often associated with darkness, such as solitude and loneliness, by increasing presence and facilitating imagination.

Author Keywords

Communication, darkness, interaction design, mood, presence, value sensitive design.

ACM Classification Keywords

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

INTRODUCTION

An experience of technology in darkness: I was in my apartment studying. The day had gone by in a flash of reading lists, lectures and expectations. The sun vanished, and the moon rose up. During the day, my concentration focused on class, and I was surrounded by people. But at night, after a long, intellectually and emotionally exhausting day, I found myself unable to read. Instinctively, I turned to the internet. I checked my email; I wrote a few emails. I logged on to my instant messenger client hoping to find a human to chat with. Nobody was home. The little green dots that glow when my buddies are online were a dull, depressing grey. It was too late to make a call to friends. I surfed anxiously for an hour. Suddenly, I received a text message from a friend. She was roughly two thousand miles away, in another time zone, and all her message said was, "hey." That simple "hey," rushing through the ether late at night made my phone glow in appreciation. Three little letters. One word, "hey," but it was enough to calm my agitated state. It was a reminder that I was not alone, and that someone, somewhere, wanted to connect with me.

This story illustrates how darkness and technology are linked to environment, time and *mood*. Three in the morning feels different from three in the afternoon. The world is different, and we suggest that the technologies we

design ought to acknowledge this change of mood. Other technologies are designed with the night in mind, but it is not clear that these technologies account for the mood shifts that are associated with darkness. For example, cars are engineered to be functionally useful at night by injecting light into the darkness; appropriate for ensuring safety and facilitating awareness of important information. But what about other technologies we use heavily that may not have such safety requirements? What about personal computers (especially laptops), mobile phones, iPods or television? Is the internet itself designed for a certain time of day? Street lights switch on at night, but what else should turn on, or turn off? Moreover, we must consider seasons and weather. November rain in the darkness has a different feel than June humidity. What subtle indicators should we build into our technology that will acknowledge our moods, and the way in which our moods change with our environment?

PRESENCE

Presence and environment are directly linked to mood. In the presence of loved ones, our mood changes. Sometimes we stumble into foreign environments, and our mood may shift. Other times, foreign objects or people are thrust into our safe environments through technology. For example, we sometimes receive a phone call from an unfamiliar number. New people entering into our technological environment can feel unsettling. Yet, my phone does not support my potentially anxious mood when a foreign number rings—especially at night. All numbers are the same. They do not distinguish between a range of possible moods that the intruding presence may provoke. "Presence," writes Esther Milne, "is a major focus for researchers and artists of digital culture, computer networks and new medical, communication and entertainment technologies" [4]. Milne argues that "a sense of presence is vital for the success of the particular application." The assumption here is that designers or media scholars can define "successes." What is a "successful" computer mediated interaction—at night? How do we define a sense of presence at night? The "hey" I received seemed adequate enough, still, designers must question their own assumptions about what is successful. Since presence resides in the imagination, we define "success" as any technology that supports or enhances our ability to imagine the presence of the other.

Milne describes an “imagined sense of presence.” *Imagination* is inextricable from technologically mediated communication.

- How can design support our nighttime *imaginings* of presence?
- How might our technologies *weaken* our nighttime imaginings? Humans are inventive. If a technology allowed me to deeply feel the presence of my distant loved ones, would that even be a good idea? Shouldn't we simply leave room for imagination?

Instant messaging tools are the most obvious and ubiquitous service which allows us to communicate in real time while also indicating presence. However, the sense of presence it offers is limited at best. Designers are aware of the limited sense of presence and mood we receive from our CMC, and many prototypes have attempted to create a more emotionally rich connection [1, 2]. As Chen et. al. wrote, “Little work has been done using everyday physical objects as ambient yet interactive communication devices that can be used to detect and express emotion.” Thus, “Our final solution, the ComSlipper, augments a slipper, an everyday physical object, with simple interactive and expressive behavior, allowing users to employ natural gestures to engage in emotional communication” [1]. The ComSlipper is a creative way to express emotion to distant loved ones. However, even if prototypes such as the ComSlipper allow us to sense presence, will it allow us to sense their *environment*?

- How can presence technology support the sense of the other's nighttime environment, whether snow or rain, cold or hot?

A MOOD ASSOCIATED WITH DARKNESS

In this section, we will discuss two closely related moods that are often associated with the darkness. These moods reflect differing subjective responses to similar environmental conditions: loneliness and solitude.

Loneliness

One specific mood a technology might address is loneliness. Does our technology at night promote a sense of loneliness or help us to relieve it? Using the example of instant messenger, the chat itself contains three stages:

- The search
- The chat or connect
- The end or disconnect.

Technological disconnects are often binary in their abruptness. Sometimes we maintain a “sense” of the “other” through subtle ambient indicators, but often the end leaves a feeling of coldness. Is this what we want? Would a stronger sense of *continuation*, a feeling of *to be*

continued, serve us better?

Solitude

Conversely, the night is also a quiet time when we may delight in solitude. Sometimes, we might desire to be alone, yet our technology may not be in harmony with our mood. We can shut off our phones, yet we find it troublesome to shut off the nagging sense that we may miss a message. Part of the answer is not technological but cultural. We have created expectations that once a message is transmitted, the reply will come just as fast. As Paul Levinson noted, we have not yet created a “do not disturb” for our mobile phones [3]. And even if we did, would it work? When we set our status to “away” on instant messenger, it does not prevent certain friends from banging on the door to see if we are home. At night, sometimes we are content to huddle around our own virtual campfires, confident as long as we can see the other campfires burning out on the network. Other times, though, we yearn to reach out and send our own “hey” through the darkness in the hope of making a connection.

CONCLUSION

At night, when we interact through technology with others, designers and researchers alike ought to remember that *not all connections are happy ones*. Sometimes we argue with our loved ones. Sometimes we lose people close to us. There is an assumption, we believe, implied in much interaction design that all communications are happy occasions; but the human experience is not always one of delight. If we design for happy, we must design for sad. If we design to relieve loneliness, we must design to support a positive sense of solitude. Designers must think of opposite moods.

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