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Adrian@gravity7.com

<http://www.gravity7.com>

Reading Notes: Presence Theory

- The definition of presence by the Society for Presence Research is requires that technology be a medium of presence for presence to occur. I would leave the “tele” prefix in the term for the sake of clarity, but as the organization has shortened the term, I’ll adopt their usage here. It’s a bit weird, as there is such a body of work in sociology and philosophy on presence already, telepresence being a modified engagement, not a primary term...
- I take the view that the mediation of experience involves technology as a means of production, and that technologies amplify experience along an axis of perception. There are hearing technologies, sight/vision technologies, writing, interaction, and other technologies. The tunneling of experience/presence, or channeling of perception, conditions experience, creates a framework within which our physical and perceptual experiences are modified. Understanding that modification, and its impact on social engagements, has been one of my biggest obsessions.
- I’m surprised not to find temporality among the modifications of presence technologies. Again, it seems that presence theory has a spatial and physical bias. Interpersonal and social interactions, in particular, have a temporal quality that is easily disrupted by technical mediation. This is harder for us to “see” but is no less important. The particular impact of temporal distortions (e.g. asynchronous communication technologies) affects user’s sense of being on the same page, being in synch, having or sharing time together, etc. This is a tough one to explicate, but there’s a lot to it, and it’s relevant for the design and use of social technologies. Timing, rhythm, speed, and continuity are critical to communication and interaction. As are interventions, be they interruptive, discontinuous, etc.
- Presence theory doesn’t seem to provide a place for “co-presence.” That, too, is important for social interaction. If presence is the property of an individual, then co-presence is configured as a spatial (e.g. Venn)

overlap? Isn't there risk that presence handling becomes a zero-sum game? One person's increase is another's diminishment? I prefer to see co-presence as an social involvement, one that calls out our "attention" (as in Heidegger, or as in Goffman's "focused doings"). Presence theory as defined here wouldn't work.

- I prefer to see presence as a relation. It's time to do an ontology of presence that draws on Heidegger but with a healthy dose of continental sociology.
- Suler's Psychology of Cyberspace also adopts a similar physical bias in tackling presence online. Which is almost odd, given the title of his work.
- One often finds gestures and facial expressions, which are non-linguistic, connected with UI features like avatars, smileys, icons, and other fixed design elements. Clearly these "signs" have at best a reduced correlation to the user's intended meanings insofar as they are by their nature idiomatic, iconic, clichéd. Their appearance doesn't vary from user to user. And so where a user's facial expressions are directly expressive, these are indirectly expressive. The user's expression or intended meaning is routed through a sign, which is itself embedded in a semiotic fabric of its own. When we see a smiley used in an email, for example, we resort not only to our knowledge of the author, but also to the context of email, IM, chat, or whatever communication tool is in use. I don't agree with the argument that fixed design features enhance presence; I would agree that they increase the palette of expression (but not by much).
- Apropos expression and presence, we'd have to say that presence ought to involve impressions as much as it involves expression. And Suler notes that we feel more presence when we receive feedback from others. But I'd like to add granularity to it. Firstly, presence is not only a quality or attribute of or involving physicality. It involves subjectivity also. The classic distinction here would be to say bodily and emotional. I like a tripartite distinction Gilles Deleuze makes in comments about Cinema (this seems weird but I like it...): perception, affect, action. We might say that a sense of presence derives from:
 1. Our sense perceptions (technology impacts/distorts not only our perceptual faculties, but the balance of our perceptions. For example, a magnifying glass magnifies an image, a tv telescopes our vision. Then on top of that our visual attention is enhanced, and, say, our sense of physical embodiment, motion, kinesthetics etc, is backgrounded).
 2. Affective movements within us, or how we are affected. I make the distinction here between affect and emotion because I think that prior to our having emotions we have affective movements. Jealousy is an emotion that combines anger, object fixation, and hurt/pain.
 3. Action we take, motivated (that's a hard word for me to use) by our affective impressions...

- Technologies that mediate presence, and that facilitate co-presence (call it cyberspace, virtual, online, whatever) intervene, then,
 1. In their production of perception
 2. In their distortion/amplification of affective movements
 3. And in their structuring of action
- I think all of these contribute to presence, or our sense of presence. It simply isn't true that a medium that has less expressive density as a medium (e.g. text chat) produces less presence. I know from personal experience that people rush home to check their inboxes, see if somebody's online for chat, etc etc. ASCII has nothing to do with a user's sense of presence, or co-presence. It's the other's communication that creates a sense of presence (from the perspective of participation-produces-presence). Suler's pegging the form for what actually belongs to the practice.
- I'm going to have to hammer on the elements of social interaction as practice.... We need to get away from viewing technology as an essential or defining element of interaction. Cultural anthropologists might be useful here... They look at technologies and how they're embedded in cultural practice without tending to view technologies as determining experience. I like the view that a culture anticipates its technologies, in seeing the use when that use has a valid cultural meaning.
- I like Suler's comment on narcissism for its admission that psychological tendencies may be exacerbated or complicated by technologies of communication. Again, I don't think it's as simple as Screen => Narcissism. But I do think that the practice of interacting online can play into a person's narcissistic, depressive, paranoid, anxious tendencies, should s/he already have them.

An Explication of Presence

International Society for Presence Research

Click "About Presence"

"her/his perceptions overlook that knowledge and objects, events, entities, and environments are perceived as if the technology was not involved in the experience."

"Presence occurs when part or all of an individual's experience is mediated not only by the human senses and perceptual processes but also by human-made technology (i.e., "second order" mediated experience) while the person perceives the experience as if it is only mediated by human senses and perceptual processes (i.e., "first order mediated experience)."

"Presence is a property of an individual and varies across people and time; it is not a property of a technology"

Presence is a multi-dimensional concept; i.e., there are different types of presence.....

"Social presence" (distinct from social *realism*) occurs when part or all of a person's perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of technology that makes it appear that s/he is communicating with one or more other people or entities.

Presence in Cyberspace

John Suler's *The Psychology of Cyberspace*

We rely on at least five cues for experiencing the presence of others:

- Sensory stimulation from the other
- Change in and doing by the other
- Interactivity with the other
- The degree of familiarity

"If others do not react to your being and doing, your subjective sense of your own presence tends to wane."

"Lacking eye contact, hand shakes, and hugs, people in text-only environments may be especially susceptible to feeling overlooked.

"A more sophisticated example is the weblog, in which a person controls an almost limitless range of personal expression.

"Lacking eye contact, hand shakes, and hugs, people in text-only environments may be especially susceptible to feeling overlooked. If no one replies to your email or post, your very existence in that setting comes into question. Your sense of the others as being real and present also may fade, because people - REAL people - respond to each other's presence.

"In fact, some online settings - especially text communication that lacks the visual cues to help establish a separate physical body - may exacerbate this poor self/other differentiation. For example, a narcissistic person in a message board or email group may experience the presence of others primarily as a source of attention and admiration to bolster his or her own sense of self. That person may not experience others as distinct individuals with their own ideas, needs, and feelings.

These reading notes were taken while researching source material and conceptual frameworks of potential use to *social interaction design*, an approach I'm developing for use in the development and design of social software, interaction tools, communication technologies and their applications.