

Presence and the Design of Trust

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Abstract

The dissertation “Presence and the Design of Trust” explores the effects of mediating presence and of witnessing each other in moments of social interaction both in natural presence as well as in mediated presence [1]. In this dissertation I argue that natural presence is distinct, because the sense for what is good for survival and well-being is more profound in natural presence than in mediated presence. However, mediated presence contributes significantly to the language people share and the concepts they use. Witnessed presence has the potential to function as a catalyst both in natural as well as in mediated presence. Especially when facing issues of ethical nature, as happens in processes of innovation and evaluation, the gathering in natural presence is indispensable because the sense of presence can be maximized and incommensurability between participants can be tackled. In my conclusion I argue that four dimensions determine the effect of the design of presence on trust: time, place, action and the relation with the other person.

Keywords--- Natural presence, Mediated presence, Witnessed presence, Design, Trust

1. Introduction

Designing presence in environments in which technology plays a crucial role is critical in the current era when social systems like law, education, health and business all face major challenges about how to guarantee trustworthy, safe, reliable and efficient services in which people interact with, and via, technology. The speed and scale of the collection and distribution of information that is facilitated by technology today demands a new formulation of basic concepts for our modern societies in terms of property, copyright, privacy, liability, responsibility and so forth. I argue that presence as a phenomenon is influenced by technology, and that social structures that rely on presence will therefore be affected by technology as well. The question that guided the theoretical research as well as the case studies was “How can presence be designed in environments in which technology plays a crucial role?” One of the major findings is the fact that the design of presence relates to the design of trust in social interaction. The dissertation does not elaborate on trust as such but it establishes the connection between the design of presence and the design of trust.

In this study presence is understood as a phenomenon that is part of human interaction. The nature of being with another person in a certain place, at a certain time, involved in a certain action is undergoing change because of the fact that technology mediates, contributes, accelerates, controls and/or facilitates communication. The broad spectrum of information and communication technologies that mediate presence facilitates acting, connecting, witnessing and being witnessed in other places at other times.

While conducting the research I found that I needed to make trust operational from the pragmatic and normative perspective of individual human beings. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights as it was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 has been chosen as the essential normative perspective for the quality of social interaction, and thus for the potential building or breaking down of trust.

2. Presence: a science of trade-offs

The amazing acceptance of the variety of technologies that facilitate the mediation of presence and generate the multiple presences that people are confronted with in their day-to-day lives is taken as a starting point for this study. It appears that the ‘presence’ of the other person and the ‘presence’ of one self can be mediated in such a way that this is accepted or rejected as ‘real’ presence within the context of social interaction. After discussing the current research into presence in the military, in industry, in the commercial realm, in the arts and in European policy making, I conclude that presence research is a science of trade-offs [2], and presence design is characterized by trade-offs as well. In the trade-off of presence design I have identified three basic dynamics that interact, construct and confuse the sense of presence of the self and also the sense of presence of other human beings. Natural presence, mediated presence and witnessed presence (which occurs in natural and also mediated presence) each trigger certain dynamics and influence the perception and understanding of the other presences.

A communication process that uses multiple presences is not a linear process. Time, space, action and the meeting of other people continually alter the shape of the process. Through the different configurations an image of the situation emerges, upon which a person will base his, or her, next actions. Any perceived presence, mediated or not, can be very immersive and mark a moment of significance in a chain of events or in a communication process. Therefore I

harboured the assumption that all presences and their hybrids may be equally significant to a human being in orchestrating his or her life. This assumption has been severely challenged by the research I carried out. I came to realize that all presences are ultimately rooted in natural presence.

3. Three dynamics

Natural presence is distinct because it grounds ethical behaviour in one's own, as well as other people's, survival [3] [4]. Mediated presence can provide vital information and significant communication. Through social interaction, witnessed mediated presence may contribute to taxonomies of communities of practice [5]. The dynamics of witnessed presence create grounds, rightly or wrongly, for trust to build up or to break down [6]. Witnessed presence in mediated communication does not trigger a sense of responsibility and respect for human dignity in the way that this happens in natural presence. Catharsis is bound to natural presence, to have spent time here, now and with you. The fact that in natural presence the personal ethical experience is most profound, makes natural presence distinct.

Mediated environments that offer both information and communication facilities are attractive. The more layers of consciousness that can be addressed, the stronger the presence experience [7]. Previous knowledge and opinions (including prejudices), media schemata and processes of attribution, synchronization and adaptation define how people receive and contextualize the mediated presences they perceive [8]. When mediated presence generates vital information, it can add elements to natural presence which natural presence otherwise would not have possessed [9]. Vital information creates the bridge between mediated and natural presence in a very convincing way.

For an act to exist in natural presence it has to be witnessed because the act itself elapses. In mediated presence, which can be endlessly stored and copied by the digital technologies, acts do not have to disappear, which diminishes the need to testify. In natural presence, being a witness includes having a responsibility for what happens subsequently and people sense this. In mediated presence the responsibility for what happens next is more limited and often people do not sense that they can or need to influence what happens next, they just enjoy being seen. As a result people adopt a moral distance towards others, towards their own actions and even towards themselves. Adopting a moral distance ultimately diminishes the sense of presence, the quest for well-being and the survival of the self.

4. YUTPA: Four dimensions

To be able to act and receive feedback, and to be able to contextualize how one relates to other human beings, is essential when living in a world full of multiple presences in which the respect for human dignity is at stake. As a possible

strategy for designing such respect I propose to analyse and design products and processes from a conceptual framework, which I have called YUTPA. YUTPA is the acronym for 'being with You in Unity of Time, Place and Action'. You, time, place and action can be understood as dimensions that can have different values between You and not-You, Now and not-Now, Here and not-Here, Do and not-Do. The word unity refers to the specific set of relations between these four dimensions that is designed in a certain product or process, which makes certain interactions possible while it excludes others.

Certain YUTPA configurations of presence design foster respect for human dignity and create a basis for trust to develop, while others clearly do not. In a communication process, in which multiple presences are enacted, a certain YUTPA configuration is built through the multiple presences, which informs the actor in which time/space configuration he or she relates, or does not relate, to certain people in a certain way, based upon which one can act or not. In the design of information and communication technologies — in its infrastructures, servers, hardware, software and interaction design — a YUTPA awareness that is founded on respect for human dignity should reflect this, for trust to be built up in social interaction.

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