Gibbs, Martin and Howard, Steve and Kjeldskov, Jesper and Vetere, Frank and Satchell, Christine (2006) 'Was it Good for you Darling?' – Intimacy, Sex and Critical Technical Practice. In *Proceedings Sexual Interactions Workshop CHI*, Montreal.

"Was it good for you baby?"

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Abstract
On the basis of forty-two weeks of ethnographic data collected across six pairs of co-habiting partners, we have theorized about the nature of intimacy [1, 2, 3], developed artifacts for its mediation [4, 5, 6] and explored methods for its study [7].

In this workshop we wish to take this work as our departure point, and reflect on:

- The importance of problematising intimacy carefully, that is, approaching intimacy critically [8, 9, 10].
- The complex and multiple meanings of intimacy in the context of ongoing intimate relationships.

▪ The losses and risks attendant on supporting intimacy between distributed couples.

Keywords
Intimacy

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces - Asynchronous interaction.

Introduction
Debbie reclines on a couch in the Hardwick's candle shop engaging in erotic banter over the telephone with her boyfriend. As they participate in the technologically mediated exchange, her hands wander over her body in an intimate fashion. The conversation ends, yet a distinctly sexual mood has been established. The mood remains as the action shifts from the virtual to the real world and Debbie continues to engage in intimate pleasure, not only with herself, but also with both Mr. and Mrs. Hardwick.

This scene from the 1970's porn classic 'Debbie Does Dallas' provides a useful lens for illustrating how sexual interactions traverse real and virtual environments. Yet, while much research has been conducted into how technology mediates interactions in organizational, social and more recently, domestic domains, less attention has been given to designs that facilitate sexual interactions.

Critical technical practice [] provides a useful component for HCI approaches to the design of new technologies that facilitate sexual interactions by critically recognizing

and assessing the values embedded in technology. The importance of this is noted by Boehner et al.

> As technology literally surrounds us – wireless networks saturating the ether, computers crawling off the desktop and into our living spaces and our bodies, technology shaping the way we communicate, think and reproduce – recognizing the values designed into technology becomes an acute issue (p. 1)

The research presented in this paper draws on previous work conducted into mediating intimacy, coupled with the critical analysis provided by the field of critical technical practice to suggest an agenda for future design of technology that facilitates sexual interactivity.

Approaching the problem of mediating sexual interactions
It is now commonplace to call for a non-instrumental view of the relations between technology and people. Such a view might for example, stress the 'exchange' of 'emotion' 'fulfilling', rather than the 'communication' of 'information' 'efficiently'. Though desirable, there are dangers along this path.

It can be seen that in the rush to radically enrich our view of people beyond that earlier admittedly machine-based metaphor, there is a risk, to misquote George Orwell, of unquestioningly parroting 'people good, machine bad'. Adopting a critical technical practice approach reveals a number of concerns with this position. The first is the notion of authentic

interaction confined to face-to-face encounters. The second concern is the idealization of intimacy.

Challenging the face-to-face nature of intimacy
Face-to-face interactions are traditionally seen as the only 'authentic' form of intimacy, and therefore, used as the benchmark for evaluating the worth of artifacts for mediating intimacy. Yet, as can be seen from the research conducted by Turkle (1995), great pleasure may be gained from interaction in digital environments. Furthermore, at times, technologically mediated interactions can be more rewarding than those that occur in everyday life, allowing users to transcend the limits of the real world. Turkle notes the case of an HIV positive man who has promiscuous online sex.

It can be seen that there is a need to understand and support variations of intimacy that fall outside traditional constructs, where the 'authentic' experience is embodied by face-to-face intimacy. How, for example, should we understand co-located but mediated intimacy?

Critically Analyzing the Idealization of Intimacy
Face-to-face intimacy is seen as a 'gift' to be cherished and fostered. Viewed from this perspective, it is rarely made explicit that intimacy has attendant downsides and can be beset with breakdowns. We have earlier [1, 2] theorized intimacy in such idealized terms. By critically challenging the process of idealization, a new set of concerns emerge:

- What should our position be in relation to the 'unsentimental' facets of intimacy?

- Are we destined to try to 'fix' them as we interleave technology and strong-tie relationships?

- What social purposes do these breakdowns and problems serve within relationships?

In problematising intimacy, and in turn, sexual interactions, we need to be sensitive to its social significance. We are not helped in the battle for limited research funding with disciplines that have largely reached consensus on problems if not methods (see e.g. human genome project, sustainability, ageing in place) by selecting problems that can appear frivolous or otherwise lightweight.

PUTTING INTIMACY IN ITS PLACE
"Marge, I'm going to miss you so much. And it's not just about sex. It's also the food preparation." (Homer J Simpson)

All of the major disciplines that take the relations between technology and people as their central problem (HCI, CSCW, Information Systems, SCoT etc) emerged from the difficulties and opportunities organizations faced in moving from manual to computerized systems. It is mundane now to point to the limitations of this earlier good work when our primary focus is 'non-workers' doing 'non-work' in 'non-organisational' settings. However in earning legitimacy for a non-instrumental view of the relations between people and technology (i.e. we interact with technology for reasons other than the effective and efficient meeting of tangible goals), and a focus on non-instrumental activity (e.g. aesthetic pleasure, loving, passing the time) we risk creating an exclusive

relationship between the instrumental and non-instrumental. Two key questions emerge:

- What is the nature of the interrelationships between instrumental (e.g. work of the home, routine and dutiful in its disposition) and non-instrumental (e.g. loving) human activities?
- What purposes does intimacy serve beyond the immediately obvious?

RISK AND LOSS

Our earlier work was inspired partly by an anecdote that miners in the Australian outback, who work a 'month on, month off' shift system (that is they spend alternately a month with their families, and a month away in the coal fields), suffer a 75% divorce rate. Compelling enough reason to examine their family dynamic one might think. Yet, the implications of a new technology that could provide sexual intimacy under these conditions must be explored. Three issues arise:

- In championing mediated intimacy more broadly, do we risk denying those intimate partners who live under less distributed conditions, the opportunity to be apart?

- What functions do absences play?

- When previously separated partners come together do they do so in a way heightened by absence?

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Sex is a very intimate and personal activity. How to design

technology to service such a personal pursuit? Everyone has their own

sexual mores, tastes, habits, desires. How can digital technology,

which is so often meant to be generalized and catch-all, ever hope to

service such a particular human activity as sex?

The fact that designing for such highly personal matters has become

the topic of HCI is evidence of advancement of the field. But this is

something that cannot be serviced by personalization services. We

can't hope to record the sexual preferences profile of a user and

have the system suggest what it thinks this particular user might

want at this particular time. There's nothing worse than second

guessing and guessing wrong, ask any jilted lover.

The fact that this subject becomes the topic of a workshop in HCI may

also indicate a sense in the field that human-machine interaction has

evolved to the point that it can now service truly intimate contact,

or mediate intimate human-human interaction. Really? If this is truly

the case, how can we prove it? How do we test it? Classical user

studies would most likely be difficult given the sensitive nature of

the subject nature. At the same time, interviews with young users

(see articles w/ URL's in UMelb email), show clearly that cultural

tastes and habits continue to evolve, and evolve in such a way as to

assimilate technology in the act of doing it.

Perhaps a cultural studies approach can glean insight. These

interviews show that technology can no longer be considered separate,

or a facilitator, or a replacement for something else. The young

people interviewed are part of the digital generation, perhaps for

them, there never was a non-digital sex?

In responding to these and other issues we need a research agenda that is:

•   Addressing issues of palpable social need. We need a compelling social rationale for the problems we select that is digestible by the societies that fund our research, if we are to do more than 'hobby research'.

•   Design led but empirically grounded. The sociological literature on intimacy has been less than useful in attempts to discuss mediated intimacy. What in the fields of social science should be mined further, and how do we render that knowledge useful for our design-oriented purposes?

•   Intentionally critical of its own practice, and especially the nature of its problematisation [8, 9].

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