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Interaction Between Nearby Strangers: Serendipity and Playfulness

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ABSTRACT

“Nearby strangers” provides an interestingly paradoxical space for interaction design. There are various social norms, cultural practices, and privacy concerns hindering interaction with nearby strangers, but by ignoring them, people constantly miss social opportunities. Technology enabling ad-hoc interactions between co-located people has been explored for years in research but real-life applications are still rare. The potential focus areas include increasing awareness of social possibilities; light-weight playful interactions, play and gaming; serendipitous and ad hoc social interaction; anonymous exchange of content; matching interests for various purposes; icebreakers and provocation to interact, and ambient representation of the nearby strangers.

This workshop convenes researchers and practitioners to gather and advance the state of research on interactions between nearby strangers. We aim to explore this design space and collaboratively identify new research and design opportunities that novel communication technology creates.

Author Keywords

Unfamiliar people; match making; proximity-based interaction; collocated interaction; social encouragement; icebreaking.

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INTRODUCTION

In modern societies, people often feel disconnected to the others around them, particularly in public spaces. We do not know who the others are, cultural practices or personal qualities prevent may prevent us from initiating interaction with them and we may not even pay attention to them. However, for human beings, direct face-to-face interaction is a fundamental source of pleasure and wellbeing, addressing the inherent needs of social belonging and relatedness, regardless of who the interaction partner is.

Research, relating to encouraging interaction between nearby strangers, stretches over 10 years has taken many forms. In 2003 Persson et al. organized a field trial on a social proximity application DigiDress [9]. The application was based on discovering, fetching and commenting the nearby users' profiles over Bluetooth. McCarthy et al. augmented the social practices of an academic conference by introducing proactive displays beside the coffee tables that would show profile information read from the RFID tags worn by nearby people [8]. Bell et al. introduced a location-based game called Feeding Yoshi, where nearby players could see each other on a map and could swap digital resources [2]. Mayer et al. have looked at making social matching on mobile devices context aware [7]. As a recent example, Balestrini et al. researched coordinating encounters in public places with Jokebox, a set of two interconnected installations that required two nearby people to coordinate their actions and interact with the devices simultaneously in order to hear a joke as a reward [1].

The rise of commercial applications for anonymous local communication (e.g. Yik Yak¹ and FireChat²), location-

¹ www.yikyak.com/home

based match-making (e.g. Badoo³ and MeetMe⁴) as well as proximity-based automatic exchange of game content (e.g. StreetPass⁵ on Nintendo handhelds) shows that there is a will and readiness to interact with nearby strangers.

We envision that in the near future technology-supported interaction with nearby strangers could take much broader forms. In addition to aiming to encourage face-to-face conversations, the interaction between nearby strangers could take more light-weight, playful; or even anonymous forms, still creating positive social experiences, feelings of connection and awareness of others, which we argue to be meaningful design goals.

This workshop aims to explore the current practices as well as the future possibilities for technology-supported interaction with nearby strangers in various, possibly implicit ways; and identify the opportunities, problems and research questions therein.

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

The goal of the workshop is to outline the design space and understand the opportunities related to social interactions between strangers in such proximity that they would have a chance of reaching the other person easily if they wanted. The notion of *interaction* is intentionally understood in a broad sense: interaction could span from conversation or non-verbal interaction to light-weight playful interaction, indirect mediation of information or even ambient representations of the nearby people. The workshop provides a forum for knowledge sharing, discussion and networking, as well as for producing ideas for interactive technology based approaches for the design space.

The overall research questions driving the workshop are:

- What kind of social interactions could take place between nearby strangers in different kinds of contexts?
- What are the intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivators for interacting with nearby strangers?

What are the possible roles of technology in enabling and encouraging such interactions?

Themes

We welcome submissions related to, for example, the following themes:

- increasing awareness of nearby social opportunities
- bringing people together for matchmaking, activity partnering and dating
- enabling playful interactions and social gaming with nearby people

² opengarden.com/firechat/

³ www.badoo.com

⁴ www.meetme.com

⁵ <https://www.nintendo.com/3ds/features/streetpass>

- encouraging serendipitous and ad hoc interactions and small talk
- researching current practices and norms of interaction between strangers
- gamification and other motivators for interaction
- designing for social experiences between strangers
- social embarrassment and awkwardness in interaction with strangers
- privacy considerations and self-disclosure
- establishing new social norms in public spaces
- technology enablers

This workshop is building on the success of previously organized workshops “Personal or Social? Designing Mobile Interactions for Co-Located Interaction” at NordiCHI 2014 [4], “Mobile Collocated Interactions With Wearables” at CHI’15 [5] and “Collocated Interaction: New Challenges in ‘Same Time, Same Place’ Research” at CSCW’16 [3]. However, this workshop has a special focus on social interactions between *unfamiliar people in the vicinity*, and the role of interactive technology therein.

Format of the Workshop

Participants are required to submit a 2-4 pages long position paper in the SIGCHI EA-format format, and exhibit their work in form of a short presentation or video at the workshop. For the rest of the morning, the one-day workshop follows the dialogue-labs method [6] to brainstorm visionary scenarios of interactions with nearby strangers. In the afternoon, the results are translated into a collection of research questions in group discussions. A plenary presentation of group results will collect general observations and plans for follow-up activities.

After the workshops, the group presentations will be collected on the workshop web site. We intend to write a joint publication on interactions between nearby strangers, inviting all participants to contribute.

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