
The Potentiality of Blandness: A Journey via the East to Rethinking Interaction

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Abstract

This short paper summarizes some insights that were gained during research on the characteristics of environments that initiate interaction as intuitive interaction. It further outlines that the form of openness that environments require in order to initiate intuitive interaction is at the basis of an understanding of traditional art in China. The notion of blandness and its meaning in the Eastern context serves as a point of departure for an exploration on how a different understanding of potentiality could be helpful in thinking frameworks of augmented environments.

Author Keywords

Aesthetics; art; architecture; poetics; China; HCI;

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

An Introduction to an Understanding of Interaction as Spatial Practice

Questions arising in an engagement with architecture, and site specific art installations relate to the conditions of place making. Following Michel de Certeau's work, *Practice of Everyday Life* [1], one can conclude that it is

the notion of place that allows for radical forms of interaction in the form of appropriation. Places are inhabitable. They narrate communities and yet are constantly re-narrated by communities – one can also say that they define communities and yet are constantly re-defined by the communities that relate to them—one affecting the other in a cyclical way. Inherent to the notion of place thus is a radical openness that allows for an appropriation that is a form of re-creation. Anthropological places display the characteristics of what can be called poetic. Inherent to them is the above mentioned openness that appears not as something completely open, i.e. in essence without properties, but as a space with a flexible border – a border that may be redefined constantly in order to keep alive the relations and connections that make of spaces the places we inhabit [2].

Place is at the limit of what we may think when we create frameworks for engagement and interaction, no matter if responses from the system are thought of as analogue or digital, and despite the different interactions each medium can afford. There are, however, additional questions arising when dealing with the creation of environments that are digitally augmented. They relate to the “nature” of the digital and its compatibility with notions of place, thus with spaces that are open in a very specific way.

Places in Supermodern Times

Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s above mentioned study the anthropologist Marc Augé describes the conditions of places and their vanishing in contemporary urban spaces in his study *Non-Places* [3]. One can imagine that the processes which make our situation a ‘supermodern’ situation will not suddenly halt but

instead continue. In these times, efficiency is key, and in a way defines user experience. Technology allows us to keep up with demands of the modern world, as it likewise creates new demands on us. Consequently, human beings might soon become so closely linked to the apparatuses they create, and which keep them alive and healthy, faster and more secure at the same time that the differentiation between living being and machine becomes obsolete. Then, human beings might enjoy freedom from the hassles of daily life. At all times, they might be aware of the geographical location of everyone they care about, and think of it as a prerequisite to perfect timing.

Marc Augé warns us that a sense of place, in the non-digital sense, might be vanishing in supermodern times. Obviously, once humanity has perfectly adapted to the capacities of technology, and once the body is constantly controlled in favour of security and efficiency, narratives of place are not needed anymore. We can work, consume, educate ourselves, and even engage in politics without connecting to the communities that create places and their narratives. Being a citizen does not anymore require an embedding in anthropological places.

However, does the process of increasing technologification truly lead to a replacement of anthropological places in favour of spaces which appear perfectly adapted to the conditions of a supermodernity, and which are – for Marc Augé – closed and without future? Or, assuming that we consider anthropological places desirable, agreeing thus with Paul Dourish’s and Genevieve Bell’s statement that “placeless events are non-sensical” [4], what do we

need to take into account when we create digitally-augmented environments?

In this situation it is helpful to rethink the relationship between technology and place by positioning oneself at one of the locations in Asia that have entered the global media as images of superlative spatial design. These newly created and newly mapped locations appear from many viewpoints as perfect settings for supermodern life. If we followed Marc Augé in his analysis we would need to conclude that these new spaces are lost places as they are closed. However, we suggest that these new spaces may be rather understood as 'bland spaces' into which new generations can inscribe their own future to create places – possibly through technology, and possibly on the basis of desire not necessity. We thus suggest that it might be instrumental to reconsider the newly created spaces of the East by taking into account Eastern aesthetic concepts. The suspension of assumptions that belong to Western culture means a radical shift in thought. This shift could allow an entirely new approach to the question of engagement with technological artifacts and environments, valid not only for the East.

Blandness (dan)

People who have grown up in Western culture often forget that their (dominant) view of the world is not the only view possible. For this reason, they might remember their first encounter with a different world view, such as a traditional artwork of the East as strange, and strangely shifting, and to a large extent inaccessible. The shifting perspectives inherent to Chinese traditional painting, for example, from a Western point of view, might even appear wrong, not only strange. Works of art indicate different views of

the world and of its forces and frameworks. While Western painting traditionally is oriented towards fixed ideals and absolutes, Chinese traditional painting attempts to emphasize the vitality of nature, vagueness and change. While Western art makes present the genius author as a mediator to an understanding of the world, Chinese traditional art de-emphasizes the presence of an author as mediator [5], instead emphasizing the function of the artwork as an interface between viewer and world rather than author and world. The famous Chinese painting manual *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, originally published in China between 1679 and 1701, states:

Figures should, in fact, be depicted in such a way that people looking at a painting wish they could change places with them. Otherwise the mountain is just a mountain, the figures mere figures, placed by chance near each other and with no apparent connection; and the whole painting lacks vitality. [6]

This passage from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* gives an example for the interest of Chinese traditional art in initiating intuitive interactions. The Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han outlines that it is absence not presence which opens a Chinese painting to interaction. A specific form of absence makes the viewer wish to be part of the work [5]. For the French philosopher and sinologist François Jullien, an understanding of the concept of 'blandness' as potentiality, open for imagination and interaction, is at the core of understanding Chinese art, and with it a different view of the world [7] [8]. Thinking blandness (dan) can be related to all three key schools of Chinese thought, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism [7]. To

experience blandness means to experience the absence of flavour while at the same time being confronted with the insight that this absence could vanish at every moment in time and turn into something else – everything possible. “Blandness: the phase when different flavours no longer stand in opposition to each other but rather, abide within plenitude.” [7]

Blandness is potentiality. It is the communicative link between opposites. It indicates a state that is not fixed but in constant transformation. The fourteenth century Chinese painter Ni Zan is reported to have painted the same landscape for almost his entire life with the goal to make his painting encompass all possible landscapes [7]. Strangely enough, from a Western point of view, it is the elimination of the specific that makes us experience Ni Zan’s painting as alive, but as a being that surpasses our state of being, and that induces in us the desire to be part of it. Thinking such desire lies at the core of thinking intuitive interaction.

The suspension of the Western ideal through an exercise in conceiving blandness might create different spaces with different futures, which might grant new possibilities for interactions. We might revise the way in which we think about concepts that have been theorized extensively in the West but with a different focus, such as place. Theorizing place as encompassing blandness might offer a valuable new approach. For those who develop responsive digitally augmented environments, exercises in suspension might be useful to come to a different understanding of what interfaces could be like. The animated, flickering interfaces that scream for attention often induce nothing more but experiences of limitations possibly because they are the

very opposite of all things bland. Taking into account that intuitive interaction might be initiated through an encounter with potentiality, a starting point for re-thinking digitally augmented environments might be to reconsider the role that the system could play in shifting the perception of specific places, by revealing them as ‘other’ places. Such systems would essentially attempt to shift the relation between place and user/inhabitant, and create new relations.

We are currently exploring the possibilities of text-based systems to shift narratives of place, and of modern motion tracking and sensing devices together with smart systems to enable a more subtle approach to entice users to be part of an interaction ecosystem. Text-based systems can be extended to physical interfaces where an interactive ecosystem can continually shift and transform the environment, or elements in it, to create a sense of continuous change and to invite people to be part of that change process.

In the workshop, we would like to explore further the notion of blandness and its potentiality in relation to digitally augmented environments with a specific focus on questions related to the possibility of initiating intuitive interactions in this context – for example, what role should and can technology play in such spaces; how should one design this technology to afford engagement in a way that is meaningful; how does the notion of anthropological places or non-anthropological spaces affect our idea of engagement with our surroundings and other people?

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