A Study of Relationships between Distraction, Ubiquitous Computing, and Art Practice

Michael Day, November 2015

Abstract

In this report, I first outline the aims and objectives of my study, which are to explore the phenomenon of distraction in relation to mobile digital communications and ubiquitous computing through an experimental, reflective art practice. This will generate a body of artwork that will form a practical inquiry into these distractions and the online practices that take place through them.

I then discuss the rationale behind my study as developing from earlier work that focused on solitude and landscape in relation to technological acceleration: my research sets out to explore the question of what a critical art practice could be in response to the experiential phenomena invoked by ubiquitous computing. Since the relevant contextual terrain is cross-disciplinary, my literature and practice review is organised thematically around a number of threads emerging from my engagement with the literature, namely power and user agency; productivity and work; quantification; and quasi-materiality.

I begin my review with a discussion of writing on distraction and technology that dominates public discourse on the topic. I critique Turkle’s argument in Alone Together with recourse to Jurgenson’s idea of ‘digital dualism’. Turkle is criticised here for her failure to acknowledge the blended offline/online modalities of technologically mediated communication. I continue with a critical appraisal of Carr’s more determinist accounts of communication technologies, concluding this section with a discussion of the more nuanced positions held by Norman in design theory, and Crawford and Light in the Social Media Studies field. Harvey’s CV Dazzle is mentioned as an example of work that uses the affordances of a system of surveillance against itself. I then go on to discuss the

pathologisation of distraction, and how Crary frames this in relation to the needs of industrialised labour.8 I invoke Brown’s conception of neoliberalism as a governing rationality here, and this extends my argument to include practices of quantification that are conducted using Internet-enabled technologies.9 Using examples of artwork by Grosser,10 McDonald & McCarthy,11 and reflecting on my own research, I discuss how practices of data-gathering and self-monitoring combine to frame the self as a site for the accumulation of value, and how attentiveness is a characteristic that contributes to the self-actualised value of the neoliberal self. I then discuss the materiality of the devices through which external distractions are experienced, critiquing ‘post-internet’ art practice and arguing for the usefulness of the term ‘quasi-material’ in relation to the work of Soulellis12 and my own practical research.

I then explore the methodological questions emerging from practice-as-research in art, and propose that art’s capacity to de-familiarise might be an important part of its potential as a research activity. The contribution to knowledge I intend to generate is then described as a substantial insight brought into being through the production and analysis of artworks produced through a critical and reflective art practice, in line with Nelson’s PaR model.13

In conclusion, I briefly outline the future trajectory of my practical research as aiming to intervene in the circumstance of interaction rather than to merely represent it.

(499 words)

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