

Panel: Science Friction

Chair:

Despina Papadopoulos
Inventor, Studio 5050
315 Bleecker Street
New York, NY 10014 +1-718-496-7276
peppy@5050ltd.com

Otto von Busch
Desearch & Revelopment,
Sweden
<http://rd.labbs.net>

Erik Sandelin
UNSWORN, Sweden
<http://www.unsworn.org>

Magnus Torstensson
UNSWORN, Sweden
<http://www.unsworn.org>

PANEL SUMMARY

Digital technology is often conceived of as tools designed to support goal-oriented tasks and activities as efficiently as possible. In the wake of the rapid proliferation of digital technology new uses and new settings of use emerge that call for a dramatically different design rationale.

The use of digital devices for communicative and social purposes is growing steadily, and digital devices become more and more integral in the processes in which we gain and maintain social relations.

As social beings, however, we seldom behave in specifically goal-oriented ways. On the contrary, many human strategies for communication, self-expression, and negotiation of social status rely on practical difficulty, resistances, weights, ordeals, pain, and ambiguity.

The Science Friction panel juxtaposes examples, imagery, and concepts from the domains of fashion and interaction design to provoke discussion and challenge established assumptions of personal digital technologies and start a healthy contamination of discourses: “Are tattoos user-friendly? Is that a desirable application? How does your shirt work? What is the software equivalent of high-heeled shoes?”

Categories & Subject Descriptors:

H.5.2 [User Interfaces]: *Theory and Methods*

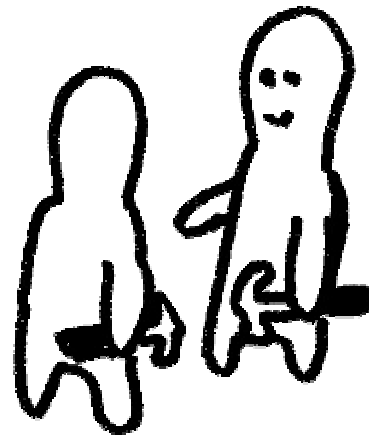
H.5.2 [User Interfaces]: *User-centered design*

J.7 [Computers in Other Systems]: *Consumer Products*

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: *Sociology*

General Terms:

Design, Performance, Theory



BACKGROUND

Pervasive Technologies

Digital technology has come a long way. From the mathematical chores of the science lab to accounting and word processing on the desks of innumerable offices; to image processing, home video editing, and Internet surfing on just as many kitchen tables; and telecommunications on the move – in our hands and in our pockets.

The activities, desires, and values we associate with our bodies are quite different from those of the office or the science lab. In order for digital technology to fit into these new settings and live up to its claim of being personal, we have to rethink our assumptions.

Personal Technologies

An electronic object can be considered personal if it is owned and operated mainly by one person; or if it adjusts itself (or is adjusted) to fit the needs and behaviours of a

specific individual; or if a person has developed a special relationship or an emotional attachment to it; or if it is small enough to be carried, worn, or implanted in (and thus reside within) the very personal, physical space of the body. Another way to look at it is to think of personal technologies as electronic objects that help us to articulate to ourselves, and others, who we are. In this sense these technologies interfere with identity and overlap with fashion.

Fashion and Technology: Towards Post-Optimal Personal Technologies?

As mentioned above, digital technology is often conceived of as tools designed to support goal-oriented tasks and activities as efficiently as possible. In the Science Friction panel we will have a look beyond this narrow point of view and discuss digital technologies not only as efficient tools but also as beautifully challenging plumages: encumbrances, weights, and story catalysts through which we can express ourselves: props in our daily role playing.



POSITION STATEMENTS

Despina Papadopoulou, Studio 5050

Arthur C. Clarke once said that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Maybe, in some ways, all technologies are “magical” (and, after all, what is an “advanced” technology?).

As technology progressively enters our personal sphere it becomes pressing to develop a methodology – a critical and inspired outlook on the ways the various artifacts we have inherited, and the ones we create, render the space we inhabit somewhat meaningful. Indeed, it is not artifacts that create meaning; it is our relationship to them and the possibilities, options even, that they create for us.

To understand technology in such terms is one way to expand or to transform our understanding of ourselves and the limits of our ability to communicate with each other.

The field of wearable computing has been growing at the same time that it tries to define itself. Technical advancements in the field – from conductive fabrics to accelerated miniaturization – have not translated into any significant advancements in social or interactional instances or acute integration in daily life and fashion.

Wearable technologies have inherent properties which make them ideal candidates for the exploration of such notions as social functionality, serendipitous technology and experimental non-verbal communication.

It is important to provide an alternative but more realistic and integrated version of wearable computing, as well as to explore ways in which technology, and the things that we put on our body, can act as means of communication and to divert occurrences of everyday life.

While such projects explore social interactional patterns and institute new ones, they must also elaborate ways in which technology can seamlessly be integrated in garments. The aim is not to create “cyber” garments, but to use technology in surprising and innovative ways and place emphasis not on the technology but on its uses.

Erik Sandelin and Magnus Torstensson, UNSWORN

The peacock boasts an impressive plumage. The peacock shows his grandiose tail to the peahen to convince her to mate with him. The peahen is, however, less amazed with the tail than she is impressed with the fact that the peacock has survived in the wild despite of it. The tail makes the peacock’s life harder and serves for that reason as an effective signal in this specific act of communication. It is a sacrifice of instrumental functionality for expressive functionality.

Many human acts of communication are served with equally costly, painful, limiting, cumbersome, or dangerous displays. Some of these displays come in the form of conspicuous consumption (Rolex watches); impractical, painful displays (Chinese foot bindings, high heels); or dangerous activities (snowboarding, bungee jumping).

Although digital technology is intensely used for communicative purposes there are few digital devices that acknowledge these awkward human strategies for communication, self-expression, and negotiation of social status. Why is this the case?

The development of most digital devices is based on an instrumental rationality that is ill-fitted to explain or support many human activities and desires. Digital devices are mainly envisioned as tools – tools that support goal-oriented tasks: the driving ideals being ease of use and efficiency. However, as the peacock tail and its human equivalents show, practical difficulty, resistances, ordeals, and weights often bear an expressive, communicative potential. If technology were to be truly personal, shouldn't it leave room also for these kinds of strategies? In the words of Jakub Wejchert: "The big problem with information technology is that it tries so hard to be rational. By contrast, humans are happy to be rational only part of the time".

Although digital technology is becoming increasingly personal and intimate, electronic artefacts and systems are still often only conceived of as tools, designed to support goal-oriented tasks and activities as efficiently as possible. The Digital Peacock Tails initiative looks beyond this narrow point of view and employs digital technologies not only as efficient tools but also as beautifully challenging plumages.

Otto von Busch, Research & Development

In the field of subversive design, fashion takes the role of turning the passive consumption of ready-made identities into the hands of the man-on-the-street. By reversing the

economy of expectations there is an opening of a space for narrative re-cycling of stories that are woven into the garments themselves by the threads of personal history – not the common narratives of the commercial myth system.

In the act of creating a parallel system based on a process of recycling garments and their stories, the recycling process reclaims the creative opportunity to re-fashion the attires marginalized by the fashion myth system of common consumption narratives. This subversion is an action in the tense field between theory and practice in an act of knowledge production and social reorganization.

By defying the general consumption system built on building myths of expectations, a subversive design tries to reverse the look on fashion as the arrowhead of the now (breaking the time barrier into the future). It points to the history of the garments, but still keeps the production as a mirror, acting inside the fashion system.

The idea is not to make pronounced or sensational garments, but to still try to have a visible thread open to catwalk fashion – to act in a semi-parasitic way and use connotations from the dominant discourse of fashion: a method of sophisticated narration within the field of fashionable aesthetics.