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Developing a Study-Site on Witnessed Presence: Being-Here

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Abstract

This paper reports about the development of the study-site www.being-here.net, which unfolds research and insight into Witnessed Presence from a variety of traditions and disciplines. Three design experiments are described. Also the three research tracks that constitute the initial body of knowledge into Witnessed Presence on the Being-Here site are discussed. The study-site www.being-here.net will be launched at ISPR 2011 International Workshop on Presence conference to be held at Edinburgh Napier University in Edinburgh, Scotland, October 26-28 2011.

Keywords---presence, witness, trust, design, art, e-learning, publishing, interdisciplinary, tacit knowledge.

1. Introduction

This paper reports about an experimental ‘study-site’ into Witnessed Presence. Mediated communication is used by millions of people and as a result human beings have found new ways to format their presence for each other and establish communication in a variety of trustworthy ways. With the acceptance of Internet and mobile technologies, trade-offs for presence and trust are changing rapidly. An on-going study focuses on how trade-offs are changing. Artists, academics and experts from a variety of professions have been asked to reflect on being witness and bearing witness in the merging technological, social and biological realities.

Witnessed presence, other than social presence or co-presence, is concerned with human’s capacity to take responsibility for words that are spoken and actions that are performed [1]. Having a judicial connotation for most, witnessed presence also refers to how the performance of presence is influenced by others, shaping the strive for well-being and survival from an ethical perspective [2][3]. The relation between presence and trust is fundamental to Witnessed Presence. Trade-offs are dependent upon each other [4]. The YUTPA framework is fundamental to this

research [5]. It addresses the dimensions of time, place, action and relation, to analyze and design technologies of communication. YUTPA is the acronym for *Being with You in Unity of Time, Place and Action*, referring to face-to-face embodied communication. This is the original configuration of communication, in which presence and trust are deeply interlinked. This study is discovering that tacit knowledge on the performance of presence and the establishment of trust in merging reality is widespread, yet not often made explicit.

The study-site Being-Here unfolds new insights into witnessed presence and is designed to provide committed readers and contributors the possibility to construct new knowledge themselves. Adopting the perspective that knowledge is produced through social interaction, the Being-Here study-site uses social network technology, in this case Anymeta developed by Mediamatic Lab, to create the initial knowledge infrastructure. Ongoing research aims to find appropriate online social interaction for an evolving body of knowledge to be meaningful.

Being-Here is a study environment for students and professionals in engineering and design, challenging them to include human presence, in all of its complexity. During the on-going design of Being-Here hand picked artists, academics and experts in specific fields have been invited to contribute to the site. All of these contributors share reflections on this site on how human’s capacity to be witness and bear witness to each other is affected by the use of technology. Each author’s contribution can be seen in its own right and each author’s contribution can be seen in relation to other contributions. Readers and contributors are challenged to make new meaningful connections. These authors, but also students, who have been invited to use the site in design processes in a different context, have developed different perspectives on their own work through confrontation with other author’s reflections.

Foundational to the design of the study-site into Witnessed Presence is design experiment Dissertation 2.0. This is described in paragraph 2.1. To create the interdisciplinary study-site Being-Here, three research tracks are undertaken parallel to the iterative design

process of the study-site. Section 3 discusses the three research tracks. Section 4 focuses on the iterative design process of the study-site Being-Here. Section 5 describes a pilot with EU students in the Being-Here. The last section, section 6 sketches future research and design experiments.

2. Design Experiment 1: ‘Dissertation 2.0’

Dissertation 2.0 has been developed in the content management system Anymeta, created by Mediamatic Lab in Amsterdam. This content management system supports the ability to design a system from a semantic and editorial viewpoint, challenging authors to be sharp and clear. The format of the site consists of articles, containing text and image. Matching is defined by metadata. The articles are gathered in sets. “Everything is a thing that links to other things” is the line with which Mediamatic Lab describes the structure of the software [6].

The first exercises in using the Anymeta system in academic context date from 2007 and 2008. Every paragraph of the complete dissertation *Presence and the Design of Trust* has been loaded into a database and given metadata [5]. An overall structure has been made that mirrored the book to make the structure of chapters and sections available on the site (see figure 1). All text of the dissertation, and no extra text, constitutes the content of the experimental site dissertation 2.0.



Figure 1: Mirroring the structure of a book

The need for the concept of *units of meaning* surfaced during these exercises. A *unit of meaning* functions on its own and invites a reader to explore its meaning. The challenge in designing metadata is to find the most appropriate length of the *units of meaning*. Units of meaning are namely the units with which matching is implemented and significance assigned. A text fragment

in chapter 1 for example may match a text fragment of chapter 4 and chapter 6 (see figure 2). Finding the appropriate size of *units of meaning* is crucial for matching to make sense. An important result of this experiment is that surfing through the dissertation has shown to be possible and experienced by students as pleasurable. Most remarkable though was the principal investigator's unexpected outcome that the dissertation 2.0 offers new perspectives on her own writing. Because the principal investigator is the author of the text and metadata, a coherence in thinking unfolds which cannot be perceived otherwise. It is like the effect of hearing one's voice on a recording, which is very different than the personal experience of one's voice. Authoring metadata, and not generating them automatically, creates new avenues of meaning and offers possibilities for reflection that are otherwise not available. This exploratory work can be seen at <http://dissertation.being-here.net>.



Figures 2: One unit of meaning, matching with others.

3. Three parallel research tracks

The next challenge in this design research is to create a study site, Being-Here, focusing on unfolding the work of a variety of authors from different disciplines. Parallel to building the site, a body of knowledge is being developed with handpicked contributors from the arts, academia and the professional realm. The process of constructing this initial body of knowledge for the Being-Here site is different in all three traditions of art, academia and the professional realm. Actually each tradition required a separate methodology to access its knowledge and insight, which are discussed below.

4. Exploratory research into Experience

To explore 'witnessed presence' 20 interviews are carried out in the Netherlands, the UK and in India with the principal investigator in filmed dialogues. Interviews are carried out with designers, social scientists, engineers, artists and business developers. Most of the people interviewed are fluent in more than one professional language and have a rich experience on which their insights and skills are based. The in-depth interviews have a very open character taking the experience and expertise of the interviewed people as perspective. The concept of witnessing and presence is explored. Each of the 4 dimensions of the YUTPA framework, Time, Place Action and Relation, are addressed in relation to trust in today's global networked society and expert's experience in day-to-day live. The interviews focus on how communication and practice differ "with the use of technology" and "without the use of technology".

Taking full responsibility for the developing conversation, these interviews can be read as testimonies in which experts bear witness to current ICT's impact on their lives and practices. Experiences, understanding and imagination are explored. As the principal investigator is 'host' to experts' testimonies, the influence of the principal investigator is significant. The constructive process of 'thinking interviews' is the basis for the formulation of a new body of knowledge.

All interviews are filmed, tracing the lines of reasoning and emergence of new concepts. Because all of the interviews are filmed, there is a limited amount of time in which the performance of 'thinking together' has to take place. The performance element due to the presence of the camera and cameraman, contributes to the concentrated effort that is made. Another reason for filming the interviews is the spatiotemporal trajectories that cannot be translated into language as such. The wide-angle filmed material of the interviews provides an impression of the way the people interviewed move and gesticulate while being deeply involved in expressing their views. The units of meaning on the www.being-here.net site are extracted from extensive summaries. The dialogues themselves proved to be too fragmented or too lengthy to use to this purpose. Original filmed material and transcriptions can be accessed at: www.systemsdesign.tbm.tudelft.nl/witness

As result of this research track, factors have been identified in each dimension of the YUTPA framework, which significantly affect the making of trade-offs [7][8]. The following factors for making trade-offs are

identified: Time: duration of engagement, integrating rhythm, synchronizing performance, making moments to signify

Place:	body sense, material interaction, situated agency, emotional space
Relation:	communion, engagement, reputation, use
Action:	tuning, reciprocity, negotiation, quality of deeds

4.1. Academic Research

Following standard academic practice, academic contributions for www.being-here.net have been gathered in a special issue on Witnessed Presence with AI & Society, Journal for Knowledge, Culture and Communication (Springer) [9]. In the call authors are invited to explore the notion of witnessing in submissions to the journal. Eleven contributions from scholars from a variety of disciplines have been accepted: from the disciplines philosophy, literature, art history, architecture, cultural studies, cognitive psychology, sociology, business administration, computer science and design. In the fall of 2011 papers are to be published online, the printed issue will appear early 2012. Due to copyright infringements, only a number of the papers can be fully published in the Being-Here site, the abstracts of the other papers are included on the site.

This special issue concludes that witnessing is fundamental to being-in-the world [10]. Presence research needs to include the complex dynamics of the *in-between* space that constitutes witnessing [11]. Different authors argue that intention, availability, address-ability, embodiment, representation, culture, imagination, and fictional presence are fundamental to witnessed presence. Only when being and bearing witness to each other is fully facilitated, will social structures of the future offer an environment in which human beings can survive and be well.

4.2. Artistic Research

In addition to contributing to the interviews, a number of artists have been invited to make autonomous work and reflect on this work in their contribution to the Being-Here site [12]. Artist's work not only had to be interesting from the viewpoint of the principal investigator, also artists themselves had to be interested to partake in exploring academic research.

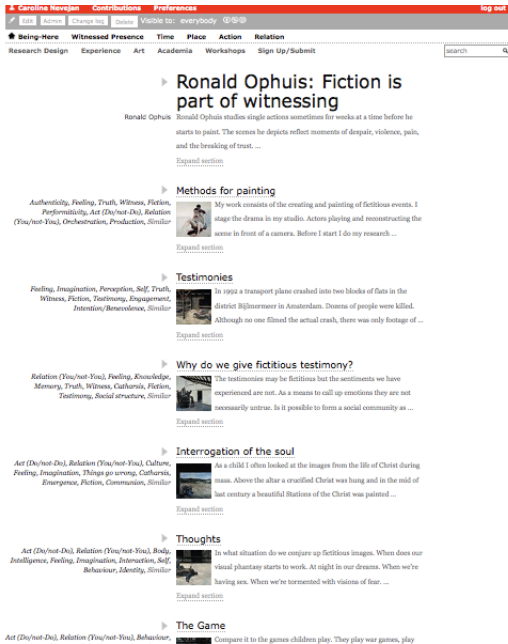


Figure 3: Linear artist's contribution of Ronald Ophuis seen in 'harmonica view'

Every artist is asked to address the same question: "What happens when one is witness to another?". After an introductory meeting, artists take time to think and make first sketches. These are discussed with the principal investigator, who mostly asked questions of clarification. Also the principal investigator points artists to contribution of other authors that may be of interest to the work at hand. During the creation process the principal investigator met three times with each artist to discuss concepts and the best way to present the work on the site. In groups of 4 special dinners have been held to stimulate and exchange ideas.

Artists focus on making a linear contribution in which they reflect on their work. Authoring articles with text and images and placing them in the right order, they make a coherent collection. Some artists make chapters; others make one text. In the linear view only the first line of introductions of each article is shown offering a harmonica view on the text (see figure 3). By clicking the red arrow articles unfold and eventually, by scrolling down, the whole contribution can be seen (see figure 4).

While placing the works and reflections on the Being-Here site, conversations about metadata between artists and the principal investigator are thoughtful and valuable. Metadata are discussed with authors, but are determined by principal investigator.

Artists report that presenting their work in this context is very inspirational because it offers them

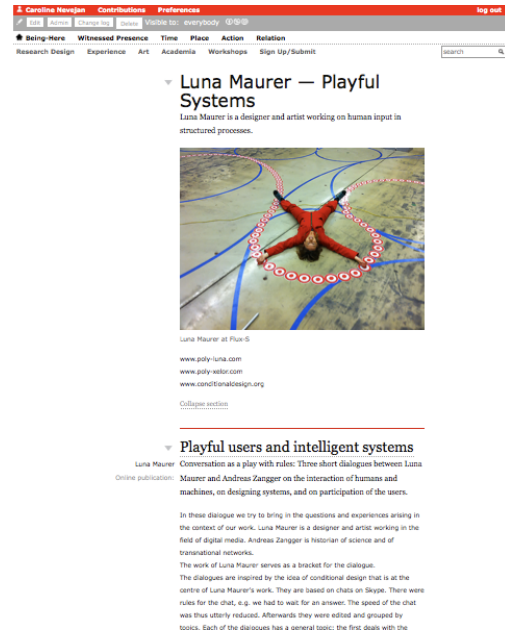


Figure 4: Unfolding the first paragraph in artist's contribution of Luna Maurer

unexpected connections and new insights in their own work.

Currently this research track is in its final phase, analysis still has to take place. It is clear though that artists show different complexities in trade-offs human beings make.

5. Design experiment 2: developing Being-Here

Having the ambition to create a site in which people can surf and can also decide to focus on a single author's contribution only, two requirements are formulated. The work of each author can be seen on its own right, and secondly matching between authors has to make sense.

The site has to offer a linear and an associative view. The matching on paragraph level between different authors from different disciplines demands a strong editorial structure in which context is provided. Only in context does matching of *units of meaning* make sense. Therefore, in all views, links to linear and associative view are available. One can switch between views on every level. Also, in all views, links to collections of distinct authors are made and traditions of art, experience and academia are shown (see figure 5).

In the Being-Here site *units of meaning*, named articles in Anymeta, are identified for every author's contributed collection of work and these are appointed metadata. Visitors and contributors are invited to access

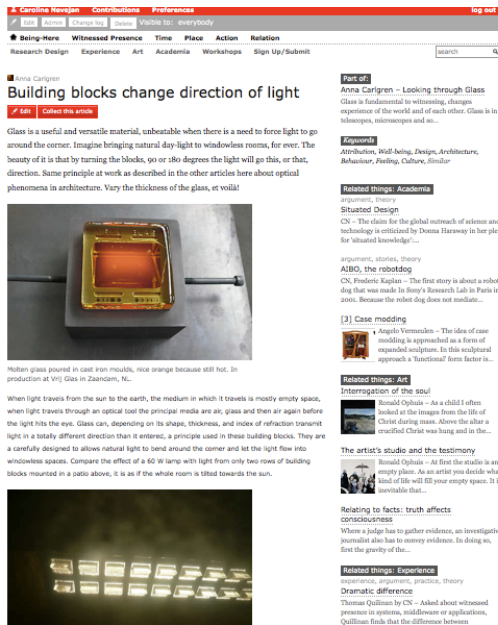


Figure 5: Matching pays tribute to the different traditions of art, academia and experience throughout the site.

the gathered contributions in multiple ways. Visitors of this site can follow linear lines of authored content and can surf according to personal interest. Distinctions between the different traditions to which authors have committed themselves (art, academia, professional knowledge and student work) are made through out.

As the body of knowledge has grown so has the editorial menu. The editorial menu, written by the principal investigator summarizes insights into Witnessed Presence, Time, Place, Action and Relation acquired during the development of the site. Below this editorial text, work of authors is dynamically generated on the basis of *units of meaning* showing the evidence that has been gathered in this study –site, which supports the conclusions in the editorial text above (see figure 6). Currently the initial body of knowledge is in its last editorial stages. The site has been not been indexed in search engines, nor could it be accessed by external parties. The site is to be launched at the ISPR 2011 – International Society for Presence Research Annual Conference. After it is indexed and people can sign on.

6. Design Experiment 3: Presence Workshop in Being- Here

In March 2011 an experiment for using Being-Here as a study-site has been conducted. Manually the site has

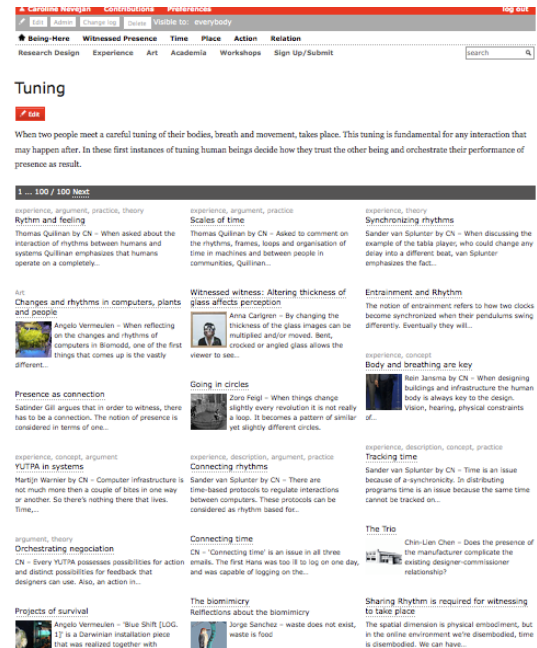


Figure 6: Conclusions are described in the editorial text above; evidence is generated below.

been adapted to receive the students. In a one-week workshop of the EU Athens Program 20 European engineering and design students used the Being-Here site as a catalyst in design processes. Being in each other's physical presence students use the site to document their own design processes as well as their shared design processes. Different moments of presentation have been orchestrated in this process. The confrontation and inspiration of existing contribution on the site challenge them to increase their own performance: writing and editorial skills improve and imagination becomes more complex.

Students report that they like working on the site, and appreciate the concentrated attention that is needed to be able to contribute, once they are forced to sit and write. The structure of the site, which allows them to gather elements of the initial body of knowledge, is shown to be inspirational. Also, because 'everything is a thing' individual contributions could be linked to the group work they contribute. Individual performances are seen in the context of shared work. This functionality is much appreciated by students. The result of the student's work is highly graded by professors of Delft Technical University.



Figure 7: By publishing their own work, students find which authors relate to their work and are triggered to engage.

7. Future research and design experiments

Currently new research designs are being formulated along the lines of the Being-Here site. Unfolding presence design in all of its complexity, special attention is directed towards designing new services for supporting ecological sustainable futures. Future focus will be on witnessing, presence and trust in the context of designing new ecological social technical structures.

The structure of the site is to grow into a next phase, incorporating the work of more students and professionals and allowing visitors to contribute. Social network features will be added in a minimalistic way. The site needs to remain a study-site, but as knowledge emerges in social interaction, future experiments focus on social functionalities needed in a study-site.

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