

ThingsCon 2024 reflections: On finding our place in a world

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Looking at current narratives and proposed use cases of technological development trajectories centered around generative and performative AI, it seems that AI assistants are meant to take over everything for us – especially the mundane stuff, but also at least parts of even more creative processes. Life is, apparently, meant to be handled through the mediation of interwoven devices and systems that can orchestrate or, more pessimistically, herd and tune attention and behavior. The phenomenological world – the ‘stuff’ that constitutes the content of our experiences as human beings – is set to become ever more fully framed and captivated by artificial agents.

The ‘natural’ world that is the primordial grounding of reality for us as biological organisms seems increasingly difficult to access in this new state of things. It is still there of course. But it is there kind of like a wall that has been papered over with several layers of paint and paper until the original color and texture is indiscernible.

If AI-powered things are meant to make life easier, and take over the bothersome stuff so we can get on with the things that are *really important* and worthy of our time and attention, what is it exactly that we are left with? And where are we? To what extent are we able to get our bearings and orient in a world that has become so decidedly impenetrable because much of what it is and does is hidden from view – due to technical inscrutability, disposition of underlying socioeconomic and sociopolitical systems, or both?

Raising these kinds of questions is not meant to return to the outworn distinction between analogue and digital worlds. That ship has sailed long ago in both practical and theoretical terms. It is no longer a question of how activity in virtual worlds, for example, might be interwoven with activity in other parts of life. The digital is now all-permeating and all-encompassing. There is no longer any real escape possible, only various defensive maneuvers that might still allow us to practically and

psychically slip through the grid of computation meant to instrument the world and its inhabitants.

However, we might still raise important questions about the role of digital things and systems in constituting reality, and the extent of artificial versus other forms of (human and non-human) agency and their interplay. Artificial agencies can pull attention away from a physical context to other networked realities (as expressed in the now-classic complaint about dinner companions who are constantly monitoring and interacting with their phones). They might also try to augment that reality with various kinds of informational overlays, providing additional context, history, identification, calls to action, and so on.

These kinds of reflections seem for some to activate an impulse to retreat to a cabin in the woods as an escape from a worrying technological society, as famously done by people like Thoreau and Heidegger and, more recently, those going on digital detox retreats. It might be possible to dismiss this kind of attitude as naive and too simplistically anti-technological. Yet there is something interesting here. What is it about our contemporary and emerging everyday reality that can make people want to just run away from it all? And if escaping to a cabin or disconnecting for a weekend is not feasible for many or for most of the time, what other more accessible possibilities exist in everyday life to unplug and get away from it all?

These developments might be positioned in a much longer trajectory of advances in media and communication technology that have expanded everyday horizons to the scale of the globe through news media (although with highly uneven coverage). It has long been the case that the scope and scale of what one can be aware of through media and communication technologies vastly exceeds the sphere of a person's possible action and influence. This situation has only intensified as the various horrors occurring throughout the world can be documented in increasingly vivid detail and shared globally in an instant. The perpetual combination of horror and helplessness is perhaps what leads to physical protests and demonstrations, in addition to hashtag activism and mediated expressions of outrage. There is a desire to do something with one's body, to show up with others at a site that has communal significance, and to see this as a meaningful and impactful act. From another angle, the pernicious dynamics and incentives of (anti)social media that are at the unavoidable heart of social and cultural life for many are now broadly recognized as constituting a public health crisis, particularly for young people.

While a belief that these new technologies stem from the handtools of previous times might explain why they so often orient around a single user (and their hands-eyes), it remains a profound paradox that the more social and connective services claim to be, the tighter the control of who is using them. Indeed, most 'social' platforms cannot be used without an individual login, many of them refusing any other 'user name' than the user's real name (in a significant departure from the early days of the Web). The more we connect, the more we are singled out as individuals. There is a very real disconnect here.

How does a person find their place in this world? We are told, implicitly and explicitly, that engaging with the world through the mundane activities of maintaining a life and home are now beneath us and can be handled by artificial assistants. Our immediate physical contexts are becoming instrumented and connected in ways that can both demand attention and be completely hidden, leading to a constant underlying wariness (or helpless resignation) about what kinds of behavior might be monitored, how, and for what and whose ends. Human bodies remain (for the foreseeable future at least) stubbornly physically embodied and rooted in space, while our awareness can be captivated by happenings on the other side of the world – not to mention the increasingly intricate and effective mechanisms for capturing attention and turning (consumer) behavior toward particular (economic) ends desired by those pulling the algorithmic strings. Artificial agents can now angle to mediate experience of even more immediate surroundings accessible through embodied sense perception – the virtual as reality.

There seem to be significant risks of displacement: of being pushed out of the metaphorical driver's seat of our lives, of mundane but grounding tasks and therefore also skills being taken over by artificial agents, and of physical surroundings and their agencies being made illegible. What if it becomes impossible to actually *be here now*? Where might one go to find a place that makes sense, and is possible to sense?

There is a distinction to be made here between my place and our place. While the former might be a place for withdrawal, a place for pause and time away, the places we spend most of our lives in are not only our own. Our place in this world is, most of the time, not only our own but ours. It is a place also of friends and families, colleagues, neighbors and others. It is a place we can at the same time relate to as our own and as something we share with others. Indeed, it is this combination that defines it: To 'own' a place is not only a reference to land treated as commodity, it

can also be an expression of how we by living somewhere make that piece of land our own.

That the spatiality of planetary scale computation is different from land is quite clear, but it is far less obvious how to treat this difference with respect to design. Questions of (individual) integrity have quickly become central in digitalized life, and it is clear that basic aspects of democracy face considerable challenges when it comes to the gathering, processing, using and not the least trading of data generated through our everyday activities. While legal frameworks and other tools in repertoires of society are most certainly needed here, we also need to ask what this means for design. In what spatialities do these activities take place, and do we ever design them to be 'owned' the way people own their streets and surroundings? The ancient Greek notion of *demos* does not only carry a reference to people, but also to their land. Not to land in the sense of soil, but in the sense of the intimate relationships between people and their places created by living and living off the land.

If this line of reflection is followed, what, then, would be the affirmative role of design here? What might it be like if we tried to build a world that would not so regularly lead to the desire to escape into the woods – and the feeling that this is the only kind of escape possible? What are the ways we can get away? What mechanisms are there for shutting down, opting out, deleting, de-generating and re-generating? How can we find and make contact with the ground and horizon of the world? How can we avoid building a world where we can never really be comfortable, never really relaxed, never really off-guard, never able to really know and trust the character of things the way one might learn the character of rocks or trees or a particular smell of soil after rain? What would it take to prototype an affirmative mode that designs to enable human capacities and indeed *need* for finding, making, and caring for places, individually and together with others?