



Are You Still There?

Tools for Interpersonal Negotiation

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Abstract

Wearable technologies sync its users with a networked ecosystem of connected devices. Through these devices, users exist in a mesh of digital and physical states. This mesh allows for new affordances - a hybrid derived from affordances particular to digital and physical interactions. This shift is supported by (technology induced) instances of synchronous and asynchronous proceedings linked with time and location resulting in a new and evolving understanding of what it means to be "present". This paper examines (these) consequential new expectations around interpersonal norms for social gathering - what are these new expectations and how do they affect social protocols?

I suggest that 'maybe' is too clumsy a tool to express the degrees of presence that fall between accepting and declining attendance. Built on an understanding of partial attendance through modular presence, there is space for expressing the gradient in participation between being present and being absent. Future tools for social negotiation and their implications are discussed.

Key Themes

Identity and Representation in the Mediated Environment

Key Words

Human-Computer Interface, Digital Dualism and Augmented Reality, Proxy, Telepresence, Seamlessness

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Introduction

“Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on him and they still give him much trouble at times.” (Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, 1939)

[1] The Millennial generation, or Generation X refers those born after 1980 – “the first generation to come of age in the new millennium.” They own one or more technological devices, often have a social networking profile, and spend several hours a day on the Internet. Labeled the ‘Upload Generation’, they use the Internet as a platform for networking and sharing information by actively uploading content rather than as a source from which to pull information from – a trait more common of the previous Generations. Millennials – A portrait of generation next. Pew Research Center, Feb 2010. Print.

[2] Hampton, Keith. Goulet, Lauren. Rainie, Lee and Purcell Kristen. “Social Networking sites and our lives.” Pew Research Center. www.pewinternet.org/2011/06/16/social-networking-sites-and-our-lives/. 2011. Web.

[3] Jurgensten, Nathan. “Strong and Mild Digital Dualism.” Cyborgology Blog. thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2012/10/29/strong-and-mild-digital-dualism/. 2012. Web

[4] Ishii, H. and Ullmer, B. Tangible Bits: Towards Seamless Interfaces between People, Bits and Atoms, Proceedings of CHI’97, ACM Press, 1997, 234-241

Technology gives us the ability to exceed human limitations. This characteristic grants it potential to be considered an ‘auxiliary organ’ as described by Freud. As an organ, a digital tool fits in with a range of other parts, each performing specific vital tasks for its user.

Social digital tools perform the vital tasks of sharing information and building and maintaining human connections. They do so through augmentation and simulation. The rising popularity of interfaces and applications [1] and the resultant phenomenon of users interacting through their technology induced presence, supports the increasing acceptance of digital social surrogacy. Here the term digital social surrogacy refers to a digital device acting as a personal representative in a social context, due to its capacity as a communication tool.

Early digital platforms were built in the image of the physical world. We have reached a time in which users’ engagement through digital platforms might equate to or exceed physical world or tangible interactions [2]. With the closing gap between the digital and physical states [3], coupled with the digital social interactions exceeding physical ones, it can be hypothesized that the physical world in turn is being shaped by digital platforms and behaviors [4].

How would this influence current behaviors and social protocols? How might this manifest through interfaces designed for seamlessness?

My thesis studies digital representation and social expectations in this in-between digital-physical state by investigating the scope, acceptance and exploitation of mediated presence. It does so by decoding the representation entity to calculate what is lost and gained in translation, through a series of research-interventions.

1/ Evolution of Technology and Social Expectations

Social software and digital tools reduce effort, increase efficiency, and facilitate performance beyond the physical capacity of its user. Widespread use of connective technology turns telepresence transactions that were once considered superhuman - such as being present in multiple locations simultaneously via a trans continental video conference (Skype) - into mundane ways of the world in which they exist.

In order to perform the superhuman task of remote presence, an individual requires assistance from an external entity. This entity may be an application, a machine, a system or a person, among others.

[5] "A Nightmare on Face Time." South Park. Comedy Central. 24 Oct. 2012. Television.

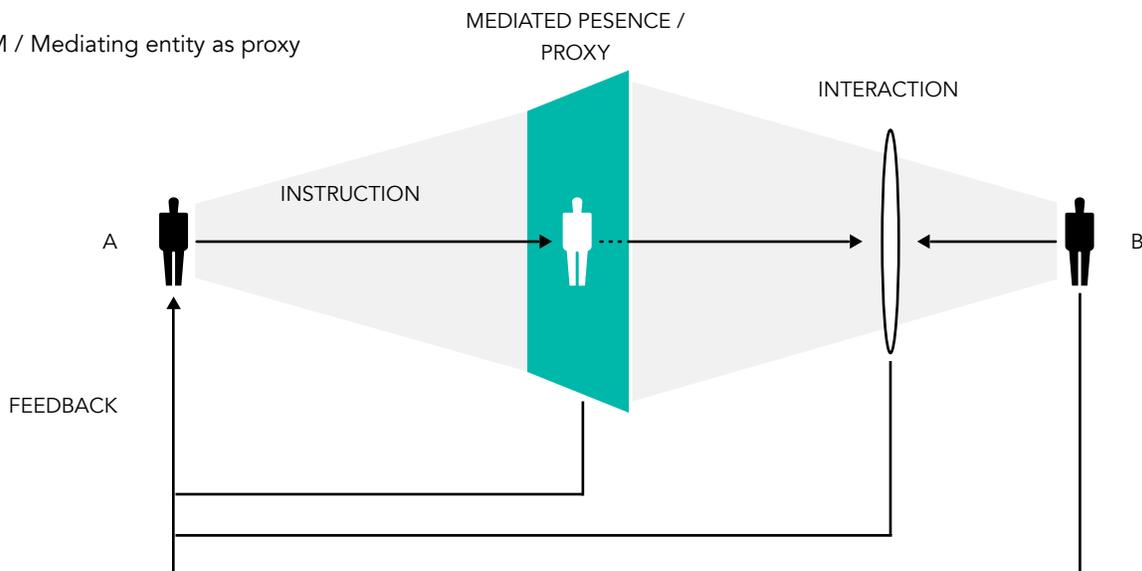
A pop culture spoof reference - in this episode of South Park, a character is kidnapped when trick-or-treating via facetime i.e an ipad is kidnapped and treated as the person inside the screen.

Though this assisting entity, e.g. a smart device such as a laptop, tablet or smartphone, is not equivalent to the person at the other end, it serves as a temporary proxy for communication. When we laugh or speak with another person through a screen, the device becomes invisible. This understanding and ease of acceptance of representation comes with frequency of use. Once it is a conventional practice, the community begins to acknowledge the screen as the person speaking through it [5].

[6] Katz, Leslie. "Meet your prom date, a telepresence robot." cnet.com. April 21. 2014. Web. <http://www.cnet.com/news/living-it-up-at-prom-via-telepresence-robot/>

Through the action of representation, some mediating entities (software/hardware) have evolved from being prosthetic organs into detached representational surrogates [6]. In other words, a digital communication platform at times acts as a digital social surrogate of its user.

DIAGRAM / Mediating entity as proxy



Surrogate (Noun)

(Oxford Dictionary):

A substitute, especially a person deputizing for another in a specific role or office.

substitute, proxy, replacement; deputy, representative, stand-in, standby, stopgap, relief, pinch-hitter, understudy

1.1/ Surrogacy and Evolution of Digital Relationships

History of Surrogacy

The concept of surrogacy cannot exist without an understanding of the self and the Other and can be presumed to have developed soon after. Popular acts of surrogacy today involve the child - parent relationship, e.g. in surrogate birth, a woman bears a child for someone else to raise as their own (proxy childbirth), and babysitters provide temporarily care for a child (proxy parenting). In another example from 1761, a woman in Austria murdered a child committing what she believed was suicide by proxy. The logic was as follows - suicide being considered a sin, individuals longing for death and heaven thought up a work around in which they killed a child (all children went to heaven), confessed to their crime which was punishable by death, and repent for their sins before being punished. It was believed that if they were truly repentant they would go to heaven [8].

Surrogacy as seen in the above cases, regardless of being 'good' or 'bad' are fundamentally loopholes to hack an existing system or state.

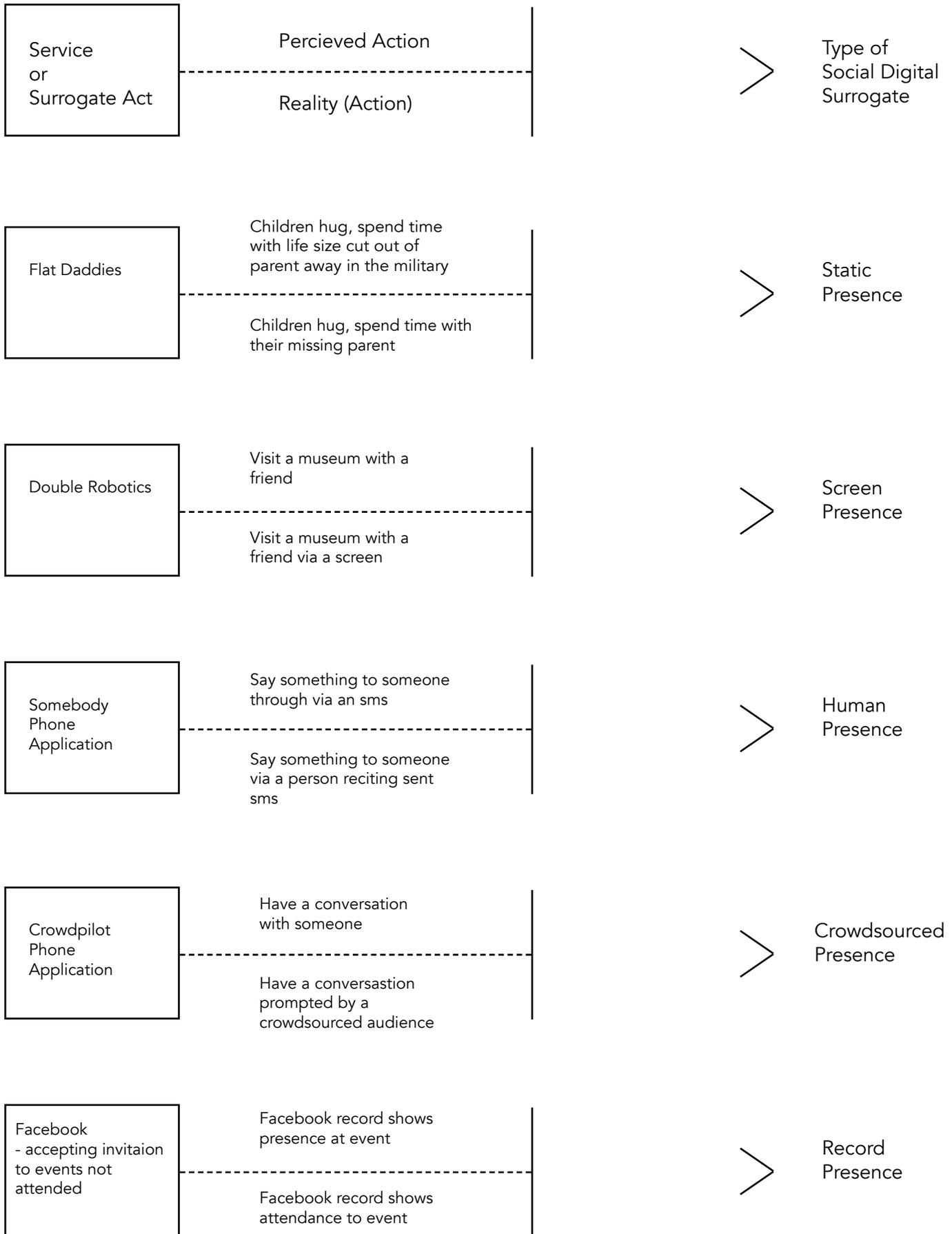
Qualities of a Surrogate Act:

1. They may be compensating for a lack of inclination.
2. They may be compensating for a lack of capacity.
3. They are an augmentation and/or simulation of the original. Their form, level of clarity and fidelity may vary and is dependent on the availability of resources.
4. They can be more successful (in function) than the original but do not replace the original.
5. They act in real time with minimum delay.
6. Consenting personal surrogates are instructed/controlled/guided by the person they represent.

[8] "473: Loopholes." This American Life. Chicago Public Media & Ira Glass. 2012. Web. www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/473/loopholes

These qualities hold for digital social surrogate acts which provide a loophole for attendance by providing a proxy presence.

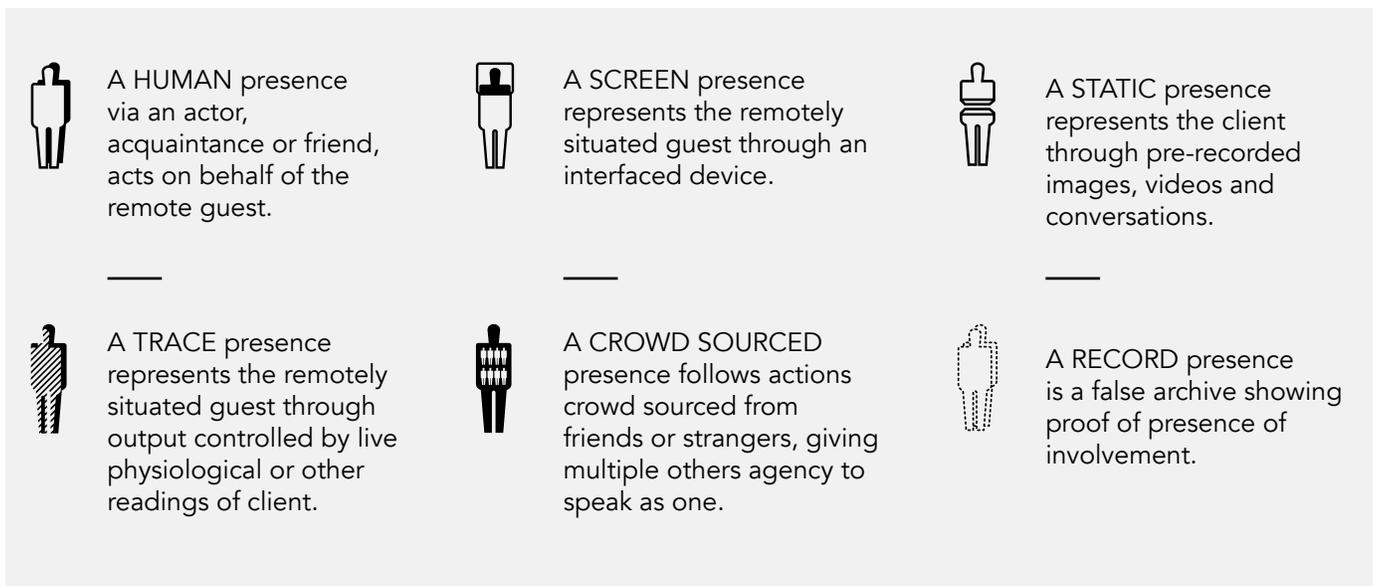
DIAGRAM (next page)/ Examples of digital social surrogacy acts and services



Self driving cars and LivesOn, a service that tweets on users behalf after their death are examples of algorithms acting on the users behalf. The college of the North Atlantic, a journalism school in Canada teaches its students 'drone journalism' in which a camera mounted drone serves as the camera man. 'Thumbkiss,' a feature of the application "Couple" performs the intimate act of kissing by proxy through users' phone screen vibration.

Through these examples it can be seen that digital social surrogacy employs different types of presence. This range of proxy presence has been classified into a taxonomy of proxies as follows:

DIAGRAM / Taxonomy of Proxies



[Social Surrogacy Services Website, Proxy Catalog, RSVP](#)



1.2/ Experiments in Representation: Social Surrogacy Services

Observing the taxonomy of proxies involved in telepresence transactions, a research-intervention - Social Surrogacy Services was performed in the form of a speculative service. This experiment aimed to understand digital representation through physical manifestation.

About: Social Surrogacy Services is a speculative service offering personal proxies for hire. Running for over a period of three weeks, covering ten events, the service hired out proxies to attend social events in place of clients. Proxies ranged from flat cutouts (of client) to trained actors.

Social Surrogacy Services provides personal proxy for every occasion. Have you ever wanted to be somewhere but couldn't? Didn't want to be somewhere



Proxy Events



but were obligated to? Ever wished you could be in multiple places at the same time, or give the illusion to be? By proxy, you can! Substitution events range from housewarming, birthdays and weddings to dinners, coffees and recitals. This service is limited to social occasions.

Observation:

1. Ease of acceptance: Client enjoyed instructing and watching his surrogate (actor) in action. Likeness of hired proxy (actor) surprising and amusing to others involved. Surrogate act was more easily accepted when it was not the primary method of correspondence i.e. the represented client was otherwise in touch with the friend involved.
2. Code of conduct - Host client requests introduction to unknown proxy - human presence in the form of a friend of a non attending friend) before admitting into personal space/event - a housewarming.
3. Modularity - Partial representation accepted based on activity. It was observed that being present in part was an acceptable alternative to being absent - on occasion and depending on the nature of the event.

In conclusion, it was confirmed that there is an evolving understanding and acceptance of presence that includes a gradient of states in need of articulation. In terms of current digital language 'maybe' is too inadequate a tool to express the range of presence possible between 'Accepting' and 'Declining' attendance.

2/ Tools for Interpersonal Negotiation

2.1/ Representation and Modularity

Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005) suggests that objects are actors to whom we delegate actions. These assisting actors develop their own character and affect the agency of the individual they represent. Agency in the world of digital social surrogacy is affected by the combined action of the individual and surrogate (actor). The surrogate does not affect the intention.

Though the surrogate does not have the power to intentionally alter the action or the message, it does alter it to a degree due to the limitations and qualities of being a representation. A representation, as a copy of the original may be very close, but is never exactly the same. It can be likened to a crop of the original - reflecting certain aspects and leaving other other. This quality of representation supports the possibility of multiple crops or modules or representations functioning simultaneously i.e. a state of modular presence.

2.2/ Experiments in Managing Presence: Presence Negotiator

To study the relevance of fragmented presence for telepresence experiences, the following project - Presence Negotiator was designed in the form of a speculative calendar application prototype. The application served as a design prop to research acceptance and use of modular presence in day to day activity planning.

About: The Presence Manager is a calendar application add-on that manages multiple attendance. It helps a user plan for events, including details of their level of presence and participation. This is done through parameters assigned and scenarios planned employing multiple modular presence to calendar events.

Observations:

1. Ease of Negotiation - Users were understandably happy to assign partial attendance in the form of partial attention of limited bodily involvement for events they were less enthusiastic about. This partial attendance was not always accepted, and led to a negotiation between those involved. The negotiation often concluded with the partially attending user promising more time

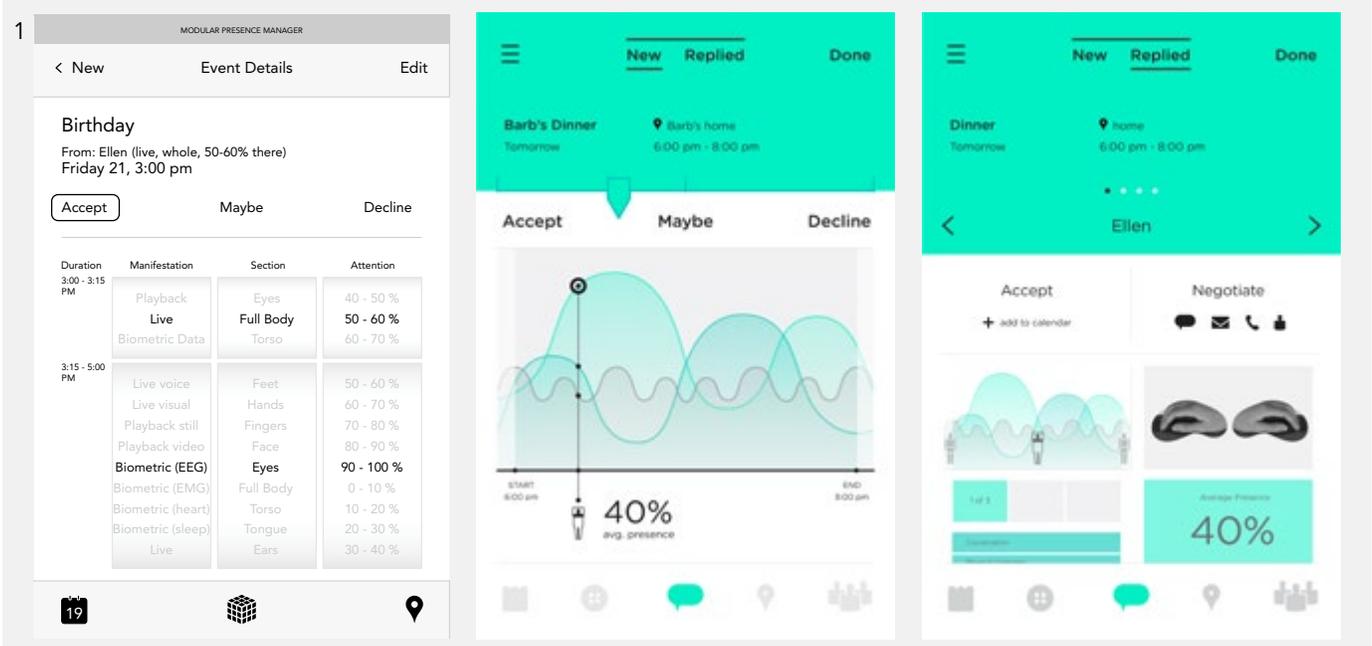


DIAGRAM / Presence Negotiator
Application: Parameters

and presence at a later date. The outcome was dependent on the negotiating powers of parties involved.

2. Transition - Users exploited the capacity to be partially present by using it to transition between conversations, and between digital and physical states by appearing and leaving in parts - a visual "fading in" and "fading out" between physical world interactions.

DIAGRAM / Transition



These speculative scenarios point towards behavior manifestations based on digital protocols and values. Though not representative of behaviour or actions that might be possible to realise in a literal sense the scenarios play out possible interactions in day to day transactions using modular presence. These highlight the act of silent or not so silent negotiation between requested and shared presence due to the introduction of a mediated interface.

Conclusion

I believe that with the increasing tendency of living in a world that is part physical and part digital, there is cause to revisit affordances and resultant behavior assumptions around social interactions.

Technology supporting ease of telepresence interactions through advances in areas of wearable devices, drones, heads-up displays, Internet of Things, the concept of seamlessness, etc. has resulted in an evolved understanding and acceptance of presence that is no longer limited by the physical boundaries of the body. The actions users expect telepresence devices to perform however are often limited by expectations specific to digital or physical state.

I suggest that superimposing behaviors from one state onto actions from another is a way to unpack tendencies that are quietly coming into being. As methods of social interaction move beyond direct to more complex mediated interactions, there is an automatic sense of negotiation that enters an interaction. In embracing this new development, there is an opportunity to design future interfaces as more capable tools of interpersonal negotiation.

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