Re: Social Catalysts

Walking up to random strangers in public places and starting to talk to them flies in the face of convention. It is inconsistent with the social norm, and as a result makes most people uncomfortable. People value consistency between attitudes as well as attitudes and behavior. Here, conformity represents consistency between one’s attitude and the expected attitude - the norm. For this reason, failure to conform is seen as an inconsistency between the perceived attitude and the observed behavior.

Social catalysts are aptly named; they alter the situation just enough to change the general expectation. Any event that is out of the ordinary will serve as a social catalyst simply because a well-defined social norm no longer exists for the new situation. Consider the street performer example. People that would normally pass each other without so much as a nod now stop and gather to watch. Conversation between familiar strangers finds new life. The everyday norm is to get to work as quickly as possible. A street is transformed into a social space by a living conversation piece.

While an event or a conversation piece may provide an extemporaneous social catalyst, this is not the ideal format to encourage social interaction. Events are temporary; sculptures in isolation are not terribly welcoming. The shape and structure of a street act as cues to its intended use. A sidewalk has just enough room for two people to pass each other and lacks areas for more than two to gather. Indeed, if many people are stationary at one point in a sidewalk its use by others is inhibited. This is, perhaps, why street corners are the most common place to gather; they are a natural point of convergence.

The welcoming atmosphere of a local coffee shop provides a stark contrast to the bustle of a city sidewalk. Like the chess tables of Harvard’s public square, the central fireplace and comfortable chairs found in many coffee shops invite socialization. While the taste, aroma and warmth of a freshly brewed cup of coffee is certainly attractive in and of itself, it does not encourage conversation as such. Imagine having a cup in a weight room or laying out a chess set on the seat of a tractor. Neither situation is particularly desirable; indeed, the constraints each situation provides imply that socialization is not the expected activity. In essence, effective social catalysts should include proper constraints.

Summarizing the evolution of communication technology over time lends insight into its use in socialization. As with many technological advances, common use trickles down from the military to the business world and then finally to consumers. Constraints provided by each environment limit the use of such technology to that which is deemed acceptable. Furthermore, physical limitations imposed by each technology further restrict its use for socialization. As such technology becomes more advanced, communication becomes more fluid and natural and socialization is increasingly encouraged. The time barriers associated with sending and receiving smoke signals or learning morse code inhibit their widespread use as instruments of social interaction. That such technologies were indeed used for socialization simply underscores the pervasive human need for such interaction.

Hole-in-Space takes advantage of a particular social constraint that deserves mention. A street corner is a natural gathering place, and the public nature of the location and purpose of each building involved encourages this. Even more importantly, perhaps, is the familiarity with and expectation of a display in these locations. Marshall Fields’ (now Macy’s) in Chicago traditionally features extensive holiday displays in its display cases. The term ‘window shopping’ may seem familiar; window-gawking is not to far off.
Telemurals provides an excellent means of communication between physically separate spaces. It provides a significantly more attractive interface than the Microsoft Virtual Kitchen for several reasons. Foremost is its playful approach to interaction. As noted, Microsoft’s Kitchen elicits a sense of loss of privacy. An attractive consequence of the audio-only communication by telephone is the ability to take a call while wearing boxers. Abstracting users’ representations serves as both a buffer and an invitation to explore. Also mentioned is the distraction introduced by a news broadcast displayed concurrently. While abstraction called attention to the interaction itself, the broadcast claimed this attention instead. As with fraternity members on a Friday night trading words while scanning the bar over each other’s shoulder, meaningful conversation takes a back seat. Social constraints associated with the kitchens at Microsoft also helped sink the project. Employees may have expected to clear their minds while making lunch or a cup of tea; finding themselves on camera, they may not have felt comfortable enough to drop their guard. Located in two dormitories and operational during pre-determined study breaks, Telemurals stood to gain from students’ expectations of socialization. What’s in a place?

Visiphone’s intended purpose is grounded in abstraction of conversation. While true, this description does not do it justice. Visiphone does not abstract what is normally considered to make up a conversation - the words spoken. Instead, it refires the aspects of conversation that are normally overlooked. Back channels, turn taking, relative dominance of a cooperative endeavor; all these things are made obvious. The simple video supplement provided to the primary audio channel accomplishes all this and more. Moving circles - and it is crucial that they move - are a sufficient indicator of presence in themselves. Motion provides feedback that allows the user to discern whether or not a technological hiccup has occurred. Use of abstraction in this case serves as a filter for useful information, simplifying the complicated display of emotion characteristic of the human face. Like a conventionally trained defender would, Visiphone forces the user to watch the ball and not the striker’s footwork.

ChitChatClub extends the idea of meeting via proxy - or avatar - into the physical world. Such meetings are common in virtual spaces such as Second Life and World of Warcraft, yet still haven’t quite escaped the realm of science fiction. That the avatars chosen attempt to simulate a human face is concerning, topped only by the fact that they seem to be holding a gun on their compatriots. Most fantasy literature and media flirts with the idea of a companion who is human, yet not human. One example is that of the daemon, a helpful spirit that - although not phenotypically similar - has human intelligence. Another is a robot like R2D2; he was perfectly able to communicate emotion with whistles and beeps. Perhaps brightening and fading of color would be a more effective way of conveying emotion. A face may be harmful and an imitation of a body certainly doesn’t help.

Carousel limits itself in scope by its name. It may be that the name plays a significant role in defining the project and setting expectations. The project is reminiscent of a security camera, though, always panning across its designated area. Instead of using a single viewport, perhaps multiple changing viewports situated around each room would improve accessibility. In a manner akin to the Last Clock visualization, update each viewport consecutively, each previous display would capture a previous moment in time. Motion could be addressed by varying the rate at which the viewports are updated. In this manner, each location would be truly blended with the other in both space and time.