
Distance and Sexuality: where HCI meets convenience and affinity

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Abstract

This paper sketches the links between distance and sexuality, and the possible roles that distant communication interfaces play in this dynamic. The interactive installation, *Passages*, suggests an experience where proximity, the use of the body and its movement, and a suggestive visualization are parameters for eventual intimate and sexual interactions at a distance.

Keywords

Human relations, intimacy, sexuality, communication, distance, body, movement.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

In a post on the website howtohavegoodsex.com, a man asked for an advice: he has "an internet/long distance relationship with a girl, we'll call her Sue". But he also has cybersex with other "random" girls. When he told Sue about it, she asked him to reconsider their relationship. Therefore he has a dilemma: he knows having "real sex" with someone else is a "big deal" but he's not convinced that cybersex is one as well [1]. This matter raises the question of sexual practices at

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distance: basically, since bodies are not involved in the *presence* of one another, is it still sex?

The “sexpert” who answered this gentleman’s concern put it in the general context of “boundaries, needs, monogamy, etc...” in a relationship but also insisted on a particular insight on technology: “with the emergence of new technology we must establish some new protocol and new social and relationship etiquette” [1].

Distant communication interfaces are not new – and neither is the use of them for sexual interactions: mail [2] and, more recently, the telephone have played essential roles in lovers’ conversations. The telephone, in particular, set a range of social behaviours after a time of adaptation to this “new media” [3]. At its turn, this media proved to be useful in connecting lovers: it’s rather discreet, secret and flexible. And just as the emergence of the phone and the networks in the 19th century enhanced our communication models, the Internet and its palette of messaging services accommodate distance in a relationship.

The incitement of distance and separation

In general, distant communication tools fit sexual interactions because they build up on desire triggered by the absence, on the “predicament and temporality of separation” [4], on privacy (a lobby or a booth for a phone, a computer screen for messaging, an envelope for a letter) and on adaptability (lovers, by essence, can’t be together alone all the time: they are in the world, always separated and in pursuit of happiness).

Somehow, a relationship is about working out the element of distance inherent to an interaction between two individuals: there is distance even in a sexual

physical intercourse. Therefore, one can notice that in the new types of human interaction, like chatting or emailing, there is always a dimension of exploration: an initiation to and a discovery of the differences, the distances between oneself and the person we’re in relation with, in particular if the nature of the relationship is sexual.

Yet, we can still wonder like the man in our introductory example, if using those interfaces to elaborate on a sexual interaction with a partner is like having “real sex”.

There could also be a frustration of staying in the dimension of fantasies, of an experience that physically stays rather at the level of masturbation, even if it’s shared at the same time. It’s possible that the new media interfaces we have at our disposal are not completely adapted to what the sexual interaction is about. The question remains to fully grasp all the elements at stake in a sexual encounter. One possible direction is to address the use and the role of the body itself in the communication interface.

The body as an interface for interaction

In the interactive installation *Passages*, we attempted to create an intimate interface that would engage the entire body and its movement to strike the possibilities of a relationship with a stranger. Inspiration for the project comes from early 20th century writings when Surrealists explored the city as a playground for people to meet and to fall in love [5]. The installation is set in the public spaces of two different cities: a large surface recalling a shop-window invites passers-by of both cities to get as close as possible to it and to interact together.

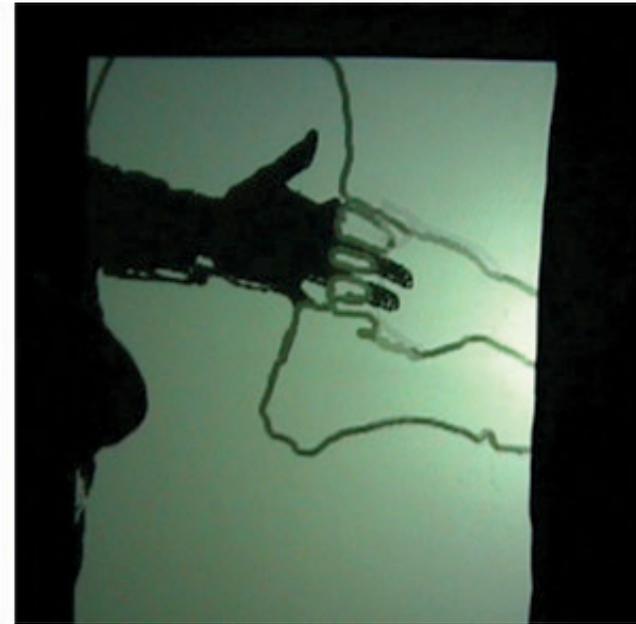
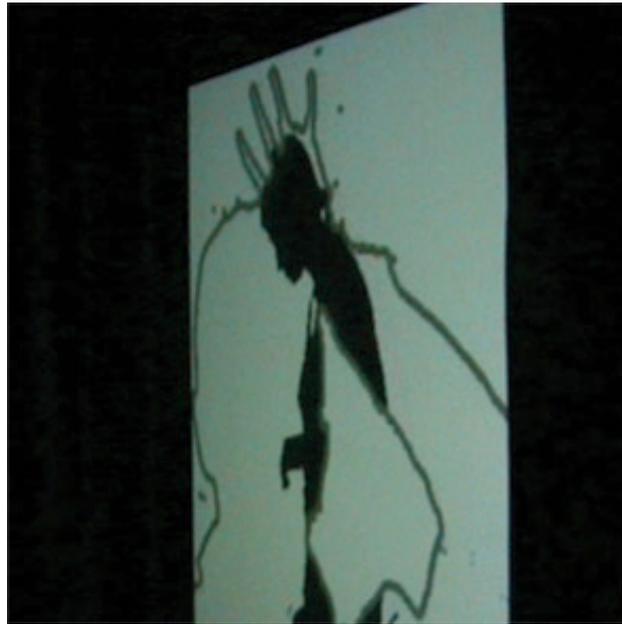


Figure 1. Screenshots of the *Passages* installation, set between the cities of Paris and Strasbourg, during the Nuit Blanche in October 2005.

Users can see each other's shadows within the limits of the contour of their own silhouettes (see **Figure 1**). With proximity calling for the sense of touch, the superposition of the silhouettes aspires for the most sensual interaction: the bodies intermingle, overlap and are wrapped. Yet, the visual representation remains abstract (only the silhouette is seen), probably toning down the impact of the contact. However the abstraction might make the contact more suggestive. It keeps us in the domain of the innuendo, a sexual tone never explicit. In the interaction design of *Passages*, the movement was as well considered as a key element to provide a sense of corporal presence and therefore

greatly encouraged. As soon as passers-by find each other in the interface, they want to move to expose more of the remote scene. Somehow, they get involved in a game of hide-and-seek. The movement is a formidable means of body awareness, and of communication with the other.

A facilitation of sexual interaction

Other than the use of the body and its movement, *Passages* addresses other elements at stake in a sexual interaction: the encounter, the shyness, the taboo and the hide-and-seek of a game of love. Its interface acts as a drape between the two persons, facilitating

anonymous expressions of desire and sensuality. (A previous work, *Palpitations* [1998], was approaching the immense facilitation of expression, information and exchanges on sexuality that the Internet represents; and on the topic of discretion on the Internet and its impact on sexual relationships, see Regina Lynn, *The Sexual Revolution 2.0*, Ulysses Press).

But probably more significantly, the *Passages* installation is addressing the issue of distance, as we started to comment on it above. Distance is often considered in a negative way: an element to reduce and to alleviate as much as possible. In the case of *Passages*, distance is taken as a creative object: as it is a shared and a bonding experience, eventually it brings people closer.

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