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I would like to share my perspective on 'social software' in order to introduce some thoughts about its potentiality, where not only people conduct social and cultural modes of exchange but also new ways of engaging with space, time and place are brought about. Here, rather than speaking as an expert, I write as an acknowledged outsider, as a new media artist and performer who has a vested interest in redefining community and self/ves, but whose expertise is not necessarily those of a programmer. I rethink these self-organising meeting and visibility spaces by considering culture and gender in software development. I refer to the /Eclectic Tech Carnival (/etc) and its associated 'public sphere' and ground the analysis in my experience as a developer of this event.

[IMAGE]

1.0 Intro

I am interested in the relationship between public and networked spaces, and the relevance of gender and selfhood; how they affect this relationship. I use the term 'public' as a connecting term, as a platform able to connect narratives and to spread memes to a broader population; also as a part of our own persona, as a way in which we see ourselves. These new social spaces created by 'situated software' allow us to actively shape the meaning of the spaces in which we find ourselves and in turn challenge us to reconfigure the limits of our sensory perception.

According to Mathew Fuller's [2003] definition Social Software, is built by and for those of us locked out of the narrowly engineered subjectivity of mainstream software. It is software which asks itself what kind of currents, what kind of machine, numerical, social and other dynamics it feeds in and out of, and what others can be brought into being? These developments, connected primarily with software developments and other media displayed in public spaces, require a rethinking of just how far the 'public sphere', extends, but most importantly what of our notions of what social software may become. I formulate my ideas and thoughts about the emerging importance of new technologies within both social and fictional spaces created by 'social software'. The development of this translocal public sphere requires further consideration in regard to not only the concept of what constitutes the public sphere, but also in regard to the 'empirical attunement with out means or ends', brought to light by Grosz,

"Perception, intellection, the thing, and the technologies they spawn proceed along the lines of practical action, and these require a certain primacy in day-to-day life. But they leave something out: the untapped, nonpractical, nonuseful, nonhuman or extra-human continuity that is the object of intuition, of empirical attunement with out means or ends (Grosz, 2001: 187)"

New forms of social software relate to the real and may give possibilities for new narrative architectures that not only have teleological or functional ideals. If you think a feature is missing in a particular programme, then maybe you are the one it takes to initiate developing it, but how can you if you are apprehensive to make contact with the developing Free Software community because of your difference? As Fuller [2004] also states, "Free Software is too internalist. The relation between its users and its developers is so isomorphic that there is extreme difficulty in breaking out of that productive but constricted circle." I would add for particular groups and classes interfacing with one another, this brings conflict and suspicion. Social stratification, class and gender mobility in software is still not free. Fuller writes is the biggest problem with free software. The movements that play the biggest role in the development of social software: political, radical organisations, environment and community groups, I argue, should also to leave room for the intuitive, fictional and the excessive.

2.0 Situated software and fictional space

What I am most curious about right now is the contribution of artists, women and other minority groups to social software and the various morphologies that may develop as a result. The /Eclectic Tech Carnival is a week-long meeting and skills-exchange between women who work with computers and women who want to learn more about computers. The emphasis is on technology, craft knowledge and an imaginative way of understanding software and hardware. The /etc has numerous community discussion lists. These mailing lists nurture the development of women's communities for the annual gatherings of /etc and other related events, such as the GCA hardware courses at ASCII. Just to be present and hang out in the environment of the hack lab, hearing the jargon, seeing people in action is basic research, an important part of one's first engagement with technology and the start of a path towards understanding the role it might play in their life. The motivating factor for these initiatives is to overcome the digital and technical divide, and support women interested in computer technology, in using computers and potentially even contributing to software development. The /etc provides resources, tools and support to all women: to build and maintain their own computers, to learn software, get involved in development communities and even possibly become (your own) programmer. The hope is that the /etc can contribute to developing a more open creative society and will support women to seek work by being more self-sufficient through the use of non-corporate tools.

However, the issue of women's only space is often a contested site of discussion. Grosz states that 'We need quite different terms by which to understand space and spatiality, if we are to be able to more successfully rethink the relations between women and space. We would also have to consider very carefully the boundaries of what constitutes the occupation of space and occupying it "as a woman(2001:25-26)". This in turn raises all sorts of questions concerning the efficacy to what was once a women only celebrated space in this FLOSS event. Furthermore, Weiden (2005) from Debian[1] women makes claims about occupying space differently, outside the terms of separatist refusal,

"...the role of the women's groups, to offer a friendly interface for women to get their feet wet and then join the community. The problem is when these groups don't have a clear target, in the end they turn in Barbie worlds that don't exist in reality. Instead of integrating the women into the community, they serve as ghettos, re-creating existing groups in the community with the only objective *being more friendly* for women..."

With this comment in mind, specifically pointing to the denouncement of "Barbie worlds", I want to consider Winnicott's assessment of creative play. Winnicott (1971) a British Psychoanalyst wrote an impressive essay, articulating the role that dolls play in a child's Psychological development. Investigating the relation between the child and its mother, the psychoanalyst centers his reflection on spatiality 'playing has a place' (1971:41) and emphasizes on the question of where we play. Winnicott suggests a potential space that extends between the player's psyche and the exterior reality, a space that paradoxically both links and disjoins the two. The proposition is based on the fact that play occurs neither entirely in the player's imagination nor in the concrete reality, but in between, in an intermediary area of experience where both other 'areas' take effect. In this potential space, the real becomes the object of the player's imaginative manipulations: a stick becomes a sword; the living room becomes a castle or its surroundings. The creativity at work corresponds to the shaping ability the player has over his playing space and the elements imported into it. Some rules of etiquette apply to that potential space; exterior agents will only come into play if they are accepted (for instance the /etc is a women only event), the shaping ability of the player must not be put in doubt or questioned (no question is too foolish, although /etc encourages a DIY[2] approach we never say RTFM[3]). Indeed the hidden contract is broken every time the player is reminded that she is evolving in a space established by the other: often when a 'male' programmer/developer interrupts the playing activity, it nullifies the possibility for 'creativity' (Winnicott, 1971:50). The absence of 'creativity' generates a

feeling of pointlessness. For instance, in /etc 2005 hosted by Extreme Subversive Centre (ESC) for the first time there was a large male presence welcome on the IRC #etc channel, they were commenting and providing insights into the content of the /etc. An IRC chat room was projected onto the overhead of the wall at medienKUNSTLABOR (mKL) Art Lab. Men could participate virtually with women facilitators and participants via the chat room. It is interesting as automatically on entering the chat they assumed the role of authority, giving constructive critical feedback such as: content of the workshop being taught, security protocols of the live email links on the website that perpetuate 'evil' spammers and secure IRC chatting and so on. One instance of this was in a discussion[4] just before the KeyWorx[5] workshop, was about the Graphical User Interface (GUI) of the software KeyWorx and how it is not respected because it uses Java (not a truly free software), and is not as fast in comparison to Pure Data Programming Language[6]. The male identified person (sevron) a Pd developer whose nickname is changed because a personal target is not my point here, but what is the goal of this very small example is that on entering the chat men automatically assume the role of providing helpful technical critique about, even though, the writing is of an informal nature and it is still visual and emotional (the incorrect grammar and spelling), it is clear that the women identified participants intrinsically use the channel instead to bounce creative ideas around:

[15:25] sevron: keyworks is soo slooow

[15:25] sistero: Yea?

[15:25] sevron: it's a slower pd, no?

[15:25] sistero: dunno

[15:26] sevron: the error is using java

[16:15] sub: i have found a lovely quote on chaos & resonance to begin.....

>[16:15] sistero: relax is main theme for my day

>[16:15] sistero: ah ha

[16:15] sub: yay

[16:15] sistero: are you using 0.9.0

[16:15] sub: uhuh

[16:16] sistero: ok and you misha are you going to grace us with your presence.

[16:16] sub: yes my inverted absentia

[16:17] sub: will be yours

[16:17] misha: what are your wishes?

[16:17] sistero: ummmmm Themes we explore: site-specific attunement / mediated rituals / teleportation process / cellular circuitry/ immersive exchange / etheric transmission/ narration of connection / text logs / Multi-planet contact /subspace/time tunnels / opening windows near stars many light years away

[16:17] misha: do you know that that my computer is picking up are 41 broadcasted wireless access points from where I am presently sitting?

[16:18] sistero: but in general its great you are here for support especially these java fire slaying i received before.

[16:18] sub: wish us into another world

[16:18] sistero: really not nice before you give a workshop for the ol' motivation

[16:18] sub: wish me there

[16:18] sistero: 41 access points wow. you are NodAL

[16:19] sub: 4+1=5=101!

[16:19] sistero: ok i start rounding them up regarding the workshop for those with os x and desire

[16:19] sistero: 101 is in town !!!!!

[16:20] sistero: because of the theme of this years /etc chatting and blogging

>16:20] misha: what's wrong with java, besides it being slow?<p>

About the presence of the men, mainly developers and programmers, in this case, the 'player' senses that she must adjust and adapt herself to the exterior world, and at times more importantly at times it felt 'as if [she was] caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine (Winnicott, 1971:65)'. Indeed constructive criticism has its advantages, but nevertheless by this very small example we can read that this did intervene upon the creative writing flow of some of the women participants. The /etc events I would say give a seamless structure of the real flowing into a dream and back again. If we keep this in mind the doll featuring prominently in many female children's lives, serving as an integration object, Weidons comments referring to an inconsequential female ghetto or 'Barbie world' are mooted in this case. The /etc wants to make safe space, some women who attend have barely used a word processor and indeed I have witnessed hands shaking at the keyboards etc. For some it takes time to integrate different sets and settings and this is an initial step for some to a pathway of understanding.

The principle of a women only environment was positively reinforced during the /etc05. Women highlighted the fact that they enjoyed the opportunity to be in a different atmosphere than the typical male computer lab and felt more comfortable to create, share and demonstrate. Indeed, it is usually the case that most FLOSS GUI's appear less advanced, it is amusing that DarkVeggy (2005) groups the friendly GUI Macintosh with a Doll and complicated PC with a fireman :) Winnicott (1971) groups the doll together with teddy bears, blankets, and other toys as transitional objects, which make the gradual separation from the mother possible. The attachment to the consistent, transitional object allows the child to shift the constant association away from the mother and so gains the child a certain amount of independence and control. Despite the fact GUI's main content is consists of words, the coded nature of situated software is so predominant that women, need a lot of integration with these environments and interfaces before they begin to code. Many women are perfectly capable of solving computer related problems, but often lack knowledge and access to peer networks. To suppose that this has not resulted in fewer discoveries and other breakthroughs by the human race as a whole is delusional. Nevertheless, to posit that men perform technical roles better than women because of genetic differences, i.e., in the midst of the social and cultural forces that drive human endeavor, can only be considered another example of the discrimination, which continues to persist today.

Thoughtful play provides practice with meaning and direction; practice enhances play and offers ideas a concrete expression. The absence of female developers is a disadvantage for social software's development, this extends to the way we communicate in an increasingly mediatised society. I would like to propose that the /etc events provide a way to understand hardware and software in an integrated manner. This women only event is appreciated by the actual participants, if not necessarily by some men who feel left out, and future events are in demand. The /etc already had an international focus but the /etc05 participation attendance expanded the network considerably, both geographically (women physically attend from far away) and also women participants from remote locations via the IRC and online collaborative software such as UpStage[7] and KeyWorx. Local participants came from diverse places: Slovenia, Romania, Czech Republic, Croatia, Republic of Georgia, Austria, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Canada and South Africa. Furthermore, there was a virtual presence of women from the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Women from h.arta collective attended the 2005 /etc in Graz they were so inspired they offered to host the next /etc. The /etc 2006 will be held from 3-10 September 2006 in Timisoara, Romania. The crux of the matter is the lack of women involved in information technology, either too intimidated to find a way in, or even chastised once they arrive sometimes in ways that are very subtle but ultimately motivation draining hurdles. In order to create new public spheres that engage with new narrative architecture build on feminine identified ideas and visions, we need to create a more women friendly environments to attract women to participate in software development. It is also ironic that a lot of free software programming discourse which talks the most about the de-centered subject, declaring

breakthroughs that allow recognition of otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized male orientated audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. If radical thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a critical break with the notion of authority in as mastery over must not simply be a rhetorical device. It must be reflected in the actual habits of programming community, including styles of coding, communication, as well as chosen subject matter. Reminding us about the people on the periphery; the poor, the young people, the fugitives, the precarious elements of the social body, giving hopeful insights into the inclusive potential of what freedom may mean.

I wonder how software development can incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized and exploited people. The experiential learning system that the /etc nurtures, unlike the current consumerist highly goal orientated approach in mainstream vocational education and training systems, encourages different types of people to engage and hopefully even sparks the desire for women to develop situated software according to their own needs and experiences. A more experiential learning environment is a synesthetic way of approaching skills development, that seems to fosters information acquisition that is not only friendly to women but also to various unorthodox minority groups. Computer and media technology play a major role in our daily lives and these are more or less excluded from production and development of information technology. What /etc is interested in, as well as assisting women to respond in their actual lives to the provocations of the /etc, is the intermixing of skills shared within a highly creative environment. There is a real interest of the /etc developers in looking at where practical action meets an understanding of what technology -both hardware and software-is and should become.

3.0 Software: dreaming, creation and development.

By now, I have pointed out some of the difficulties for women (and other minorities) and their involvement in software development, which primarily requires developing the skill of coding in a non-graphical user interface environment. It can be said that social relations of gender within the programming world are reflected in and shaped by the design. Freedom in general I believe is the ability to speak for myself, the ability to define myself, and the space to represent myself based on my own needs and experiences that rather than on an externally prescribed idea of me that serves somebody else's needs, dogmas or fears. Although social software seems willing to bring together technological creativity and computer knowledge with ethical considerations and political practices I would say even within Free Software that there is a real lack of female perspective in software discourses, design and use. This turn restricts women's entry into and participation in the development and design of software. More precisely, I see the potential direction for social software, the use of systems thinking and design principals that provide the organising framework for implementing a particular communities vision. I would like to understand situated software as consciously designed landscapes, public spheres that mimic social patterns and relationships. If people and all the complex ways in which they organise themselves are central, situated software has the potential to evolve into a very creative yet sustainable culture. Indeed software has produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain both the potential to invigorate dynamic structures and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas – not withstanding new possibilities for manipulation, social control, the promotion of conservative positions, and intensifying of differences between haves and have nots.

The political battles of the future might again be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of conflict, but politics today is already mediated by the media and will increasingly be so in the future especially if software patents act and the subsequent privatisation of code is enforced. Those interested in culture of the future should therefore be clear on the important role of social software; its relationship to free software and its development of associated public spheres, and intervene accordingly. Artists and activists cultural output is usually a product of marvelous concoction of

pleasure and politics. I maintain that people who subscribe to an economy of mutual-aid and co-operation and are committed to the non-commodification of software must also embrace freedoms of experience, and expression; acceptance of difference could spread from here.

Conclusion. The /etc draws together diverse ideas, skills and ways of living, which need to be rediscovered and developed in order to empower us to provide for our needs beyond economic rationalism. Social software development makes transparency of human organization possible, often-invisible structures. Those principals deal with physical and energetic resources, as well as the public sphere. However, how do we incorporate and provide a container for the uncertain and variable nature of that process of integration? I believe that female software developers might be able to provide the answer or at least begin to nurture a space for exchange of experience that has not been circulated, or articulated into Language (or code) as we know it today. Nevertheless, for the moment feminine activities in situated software are mainly conceptual spaces, collaborative virtual places where information, skills and experience are exchanged in a collective manner. The type of events such as the /etc are fundamentally about a new relationship between communication, education, craft knowledge, programming, art, and activism. This is a space in which all these people come together.

Moreover, it is acknowledged that there is a relationship between the real space of the event and myths where fictional places are evoked. The /etc is a transferable sight which carries its meaning to other places -places which as yet can only be imagined. It nominates a region which lies under the shadow of -but is still, for the moment, outside of patriarchy. The /etc project allows an involved engagement with the participants as collaborators, where the constant shift of positions, roles, pronouns, selves, discourses and non-linear stories takes place. The event continually intersects and work at the edge of many genres.

I am excited about the next step for the /etc, as often real revolution takes place not in the bloodied streets but in releasing the ideas from the realm of the imagination. I believe only then these will emerge onto the street. I will leave with a quote from Arthur Rimbaud (1871) who dreamt of recreating life through his words. When he decided that women would be the great poets of the future.

...These poets shall exist when the age long slavery shall have ended when, she will be able to live by and for herself, when man hitherto having given her freedom, she will be a poet. Women will discover the unknown. Will her word be different from ours? She will discover things that will be strange and unfathomable, repulsive and delicate. We shall take them from her and we shall understand them.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Debian is a free operating system (OS) for the computer. An operating system is the set of basic programs and utilities that make your computer run. Debian uses the Linux kernel (the core of an operating system), but most of the basic OS tools come from the GNU project; hence the name GNU/Linux. For more information about the Debian Women project <http://women.alioth.debian.org/about/>

[2] For a concise description of the DIY ethic see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DIY_punk_ethic.

[3] RTFM stands for the well worn statement "Read The Fucking Manual for more info: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RTFM>

[4] IRC conversation. July 13 2005 /eclectic tech carnival 05

[5] KeyWorx is a Multi-User Cross Media Synthesizer multi-user/multimedia features real-time sharing.

[6] For more info on Pure Data see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pure_data

[7] UpStage is a web-based venue and tool for artists.