

Making contact

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A note for The Media Spaces Book

I am working along, and it occurs to me that I want to talk to Lynne about the paper. I have three things I have to do: decide how I can reach her, decide if this is a good time to talk, and go through the negotiation of starting the conversation. This is the activity of “making contact,” a key part of all communications.

If Lynne and I are in the same space (same room, within earshot), I have all the information I need to support making contact: the space can provide me with an on-going awareness of Lynne’s presence, the appropriateness of interrupting her, and the means for starting the talk. In contrast, if we are not in the same space, I will have to make an effort on all three fronts, finding a media for communication, addressing her within it, and staging an unanticipated “blind” interrupt at the risk of intruding.

One of the nicest things about MediaSpace is that, at its best, it extends the feeling of being in the same space to situations in which people are separated. My experience when Annette Adler and I had coupled rooms (in OfficeShare) was that I was aware of her absence or presence, and whether she was likely to be OK with an interruption, and could start a conversation with “Lunch?”, unheralded by “Hello”, or even “Annette?” Steven Pemberton remarked at CHI2008 that he has noticed that when on an extended trip and coupled to home through video Skype, his children simply come up to him (via their computer, of course), engage and depart, just as they do when he is working at home.

Of course not all Media Spaces have the luxury of being “always on”. Indeed, the technology is such that getting them going is often a considerable effort. How many distributed meetings are started with 10 minutes of fighting the technology? These difficulties not only take effort, but more importantly, they tend to make the technology the subject matter; as such, they are usually a serious intrusion into the social interaction of the meeting. As a result, many people with good cause avoid distance collaboration using video.

My hope is that MediaSpaces of the future will address these difficulties in making contact. I imagine making it easy to identify the space that you want to

couple your space to, easy to set up the coupling, and therefore easy for people to negotiate the interruption with the full resources of coupled spaces. Many distance collaboration technologies allow you to explicitly make public your availability for interrupt. The problem is that the work to make that explicit is itself a distraction. Some technologies attempt to supply that automatically (state of presence in IM), but these work best when an immediate response is not required. From the initiator's side, peeking and probing have been tried, without good solutions for the problems of privacy and intrusion. In physical space, secretaries are the making-contact experts; houses have front porches where access is negotiated; glass windows in closed doors provide negotiating interruptions, often one-sidedly. Social systems permit ignoring intrusions which are not convenient provided there is a way of "plausibly denying" that people were ignored ("I must not have been home," or "My cell phone must have been turned off.").

I think the problems can be solved only by considering the whole technical-social design of the human activity of making contact. I think new developments in making contact in Media Spaces are essential to making space as central to our communicating as sound is.