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Ambient literature and the beginning of a ubiquitous everything

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Abstract

As an emerging form of pervasive media, “ambient literature” presents an opportunity for re-thinking the book’s engagement with contemporary technology and the broader social setting in which each operate. Building on themes developed in psychogeography and enacted in so-called locative literature, ambient literature utilizes techniques founded in ubiquitous and “calm” computing in order to leverage the context of the reader toward literary effect. With utopian visions of calm computing imagining a world in which computers fade into the background of experience and in which human life is inextricably linked to the technologies we use, how are literature and the book changed through this engagement? What does it mean for literature when the book is no longer a discrete moment of experience, but is entangled with both everyday experience and global communication networks? Building from already-existent understandings of the hermeneutic conditions linking reading, everyday life, and the wider world, this paper engages the question of the disappearance of the book into a generalized information system, one which is increasingly both present and invisible. With the contextual limits of the book effaced and replaced by a generalized field of computational effect, classic questions in critical informatics are reinvigorated to examine the entanglement of reading and movements of computerization. How is a literature which in its form and reception is inextricably linked to wider technological networks to be understood? Is it possible to continue to think in terms of individuated literary products? Taking cues from research in new media, philosophy of technology, cybernetics, and human-computer interaction, this paper will examine the newfound

contextual conditions of literature, mapping out the ontological and ethical implications of the book's computational turn.

Introduction

Thanks to Rhiannon, Jennifer, and Richard for having me here and for putting the conference together. I'd also like to start by thanking Jon Dovey who really instigated a lot of what I am going to talk about here and I'd also like to thank Amy Spencer who gave me some really valuable feedback. Like me, they're both involved along with a lot of other people with the ambient literature project, which is a two-year AHRC funded project spread across three universities designed to develop the idea of what ambient literature can be and to instantiate some examples that start to sketch out that idea.

What is Ambient Literature?

To start, right off the bat, I want to give you an example of what we mean by ambient literature. Last weekend we invited people down to the harborside here in Bristol to test out something which gestured toward the idea of ambient literature. They were handed headphones connected to an mp3 player and instructed to go and walk around outside, but to stay near the water. For 20 minutes, they heard a story that was told to them, about themselves and their relation to that place — the water, the reflective surfaces of the shop windows, the people around them. This was a story that linked the unfolding narrative that was presented by the audio to their physical embodiment in that place.

This was just an early sketch of one lo-fi, stripped down possible way to think about ambient literature (it was made by Tom Abba and the other people from Circumstance). The idea of

ambient literature is still developing and, as such, much of what I'm going to discuss here is still speculative and diverges from and builds upon this example which provides just the bare bones of an idea about literature and context. The hope of the project is that these kinds of early gestures might tell us something about the future of the book.

Put quickly and in a somewhat brutalist fashion, ambient literature is a mode of literary engagement in which the literary text is brought into contact with the situated context of the reader through the use of digital information communication technology. By using contemporary technologies like smartphones, cellular data networks, sensor networks, satellite communication, and the broad array of communicative possibilities offered by the Internet as a whole, it is possible to build new forms of literary experience which are derived from and respond to a reader's context and the data infused world which is all around them.

This particular emphasis on the networked aspect of ambient literature was given a strong formulation when, in proposing an early take on the idea of ambient literature, Jon Dovey (2016) wondered, "what might happen when data aspires to literary form" (p. 140).

The idea of ambient literature builds on an array of different kinds of approaches, most of which aren't necessarily important to this talk, but these include approaches developed in participatory theater, locative media, psychogeography, immersive installations, and (the aspect that I want to focus most on in this talk) ubiquitous computing.

While still developing and still in flux, the idea of ambient literature is rendered as an explicit socio-technical form that combines consideration of the social and cultural traditions of literature

with a technological rendering of these conditions. Of course, the traditional book is a socio-technical object as well, but works of ambient literature utilize the fact of their socio-technical constitution in ways seen only in what might be considered the more radical environs of book art today. What I want to propose here is that in its utilization of approaches developed out of ubiquitous computing, ambient literature presents a reshaped vision of the reach of the book, establishing it as a variable, responsive, and unbounded medium. In the case of ambient literature, the book has no end.

Ubiquitous Computing

The idea of ubiquitous computing was first put forward by Mark Weiser (1991) in his article “The Computer for the 21st Century,” which appeared in 1991. Based on work coming out of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, the idea of ubiquitous computing (or “ubiquitous computing”) built on the increasing availability and increasing micronization of computer components and the information communication networks that supported them. As a paradigm for human-computer interaction, ubiquitous computing proposed that users engage with the technological world around them in more tacit and natural ways than had, theretofore, been available. This sense of “calm” computing drew largely (and possibly only in a post-hoc fashion) on the distinction proposed by Martin Heidegger (2010) between ready-to-hand and present-at-hand consideration of tool use. (The famous example is, of course, the hammer which, in the hands of a skilled craftsman, disappears or recedes from the conscious world in its use, only to reappear and become explicit in the case of malfunction.) The idea was that with the advent of ubiquitous computing, computers could be utilized in a seamless fashion, coming to be integrated into the fabric of everyday life in a natural and pervasive manner.

What ubicomp proposed was a vision of the world in which computers and computer systems would be able to step in and take care of the mundane tasks of life, running in the background and leaving human beings free to pursue other, more creative and pleasing activities. As seen in a wide range of examples extending from health monitoring, smart spaces for collaboration, home automation, and beyond, ubiquitous computing began to develop toward the thematic of “ambient intelligence.” Building on advances in sensor networks and artificial intelligence (Cook, Augusto, & Jakkula, 2009), ambient intelligence sought not only to operate in the background of human experience, but also to increasingly reach outward to other networked sources of information in order to quietly supplement human cognitive processes. (Any form of location aware Internet search would provide an easy, if simplified example of this.) While there is debate regarding the exact difference between the terms “ubiquitous computing,” “pervasive computing,” and “ambient intelligence” (Ronzani, 2009) (which largely come down to corporate branding, “ubicomp” being a term from Xerox, “pervasive computing” from IBM, and “ambient intelligence” coming from the European Commission), the implications are the same. This cluster of approaches stemming from Weiser’s initial formulation of ubicomp maps out a proximal and possible future in which computing is all around us, seamlessly predicting our needs, allowing us to easily interact with complex computer networks. As this idea has taken hold, researchers in the field of ubiquitous computing have wondered whether it is possible to really think about computing in terms other than it being ubiquitous (Abowd, 2012). This is particularly the case given that we all carry computers with us today in the form of smartphones.

Of course, this originary thematic of ubicomp is not without critique and need for modification. As Yvonne Rogers (2006) and Matthew Chalmers (2004) have pointed out in different ways, the idea of a completely backgrounded interaction with computers is impossible, and mechanisms

for both acclimatizing users to ubiquitous environments and for allowing for engaging experiences is necessary. (That is not to mention that systems of ubiquitous computing are ready-made tools for surveillance.) These critiques are important for thinking about ambient literature.

Ambience: Figure and Ground

Building on these ideas of ubiquitous and ambient computing, the concept of ambient literature opens up the possibility for a literature that is always on, always around us, and always connecting us to the wider informational flows that come to characterize our lives today. It is a literature that, like ubiquitous computing, might fit seamlessly and perfectly into our experience. In talking about ambient literature, Dovey (2016) relates it to ideas derived from Malcolm McCullough (2013) who wrote about grounding abstract flows of data into the real world of the physical architecture all around us. For Dovey, linking literature and its contextual connections offers a chance to anchor human understandings of an increasingly abstract and unmoored social and cultural space.

Taking a different approach on the concept of what is ambient, Ulrik Schmidt (2013) considers the “ambient” of ambient intelligence in terms that might be most easily recognized in Brian Eno’s (1978) definition of ambient music in which there is the possibility of a shifting of attention between distraction and immersion. The idea being that it is possible to alternately pay very close attention to a work of ambient music, as well as allowing it to recede into the background of attention. (Here, the connection between both the idea of ubicomp and critiques of the idea of ubicomp should be apparent: On the one hand, we want these computing experiences to fall into the background, but on the other hand we want them to have an explicit and marked effect.)

For Schmidt, this ambient “intensification of the experience of being surrounded” (p. 176) begins to break down traditional formulations of the division between subject and object as well as between figure and ground, with there being no central locatable space to the experience of ambience. Ambient literature illustrates this move toward the non-figurative sense of the conditions of ambient experience in the way that it both heightens and eradicates questions of contextual distance through the technological and networked conditions across which it operates.

In drawing together the reader, a generalized sense of context, technological platforms, and the wider informational contexts made possible by networked communication, ambient literature offers a literature without limits, a book without an end. By being able to reshape the content of a piece of ambient writing through appeals to the situation of experience (particularly as that situation may take global form), the possibilities for the book are opened up in radical ways. Just as Weiser’s initial vision of ubicomp was an attempt to provoke both the practical development of interactive paradigms and the theoretical re-thinking of what interaction could be, so does the idea of ambient literature press both for immediate reconfigurations of how books function and for how we consider the ideas of reading and writing, of readers and writers.

Hermeneutics

These reconfigurations of our expectations around interactions with literature or the book more generally, start to open up pathways for new considerations of the basic understanding of reading and interpretation. Here, I would like to briefly lay out some of the implications that this has on how we understand the classical figure of hermeneutics.

As a foundational theory of textual interpretation, hermeneutics offers a model of interpretation which focuses on the interaction of the figure and ground that are held within an individual text or a wider body of related texts. That is, in the work of interpretation, the specific understanding of any particular element in a work is considered against the background of the general understanding of the work as a whole, and vice versa. This results in a circular movement between the two, out of which a supposedly correct interpretation results. The idea of hermeneutics was expanded upon by Heidegger (2010) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) in their consideration of hermeneutic phenomenology which gave a hermeneutic form to the basics of the experience of the world. That is, the particular standing of an individual within the world is constituted by their reaching outward toward the horizon of their experience and subsequent return.

When faced with the possibility of a text which proves to be ubiquitous and extending out along a wide horizon of networked possibilities, this basic sense of the interpretive matrices at work in hermeneutics is altered. When a ubiquitous literature comes to be defined according to Schmidt's idea of an ambient which modulates the conditions of attention between distraction and immersion, there results an extra dimension to the hermeneutics of interpretation, one which takes an active role (as akin to the active role of hermeneutics in hermeneutic phenomenology) in the production of the literary experience. Instead of just engaging a circular movement between the particular and the whole of a specific text, or between a text and the background of experience of a reader, ambient literature calls for an understanding of the movement internal to the reader themselves, between immersion and distraction.

This both reinforces and augments a sense of the openness of a hermeneutics of interpretation

as given by Gadamer (2004) which he says “always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meaning or ourselves in relation to it” (p. 271). This concern for the relationality of the interpreting subject to that which to be interpreted is important as it establishes the situation of the subject as being a necessary component of interpretation.

What ambient literature proposes is that the hermeneutic movement of textual interpretation occurs not only as a hermeneutics internal to the text itself, nor in just the hermeneutics of experience of the reader and the alterity of the proposition of the text, but as a movement within the ambient conditions of the attention of the reading or experiencing subject. For ambient literature, the situation of interpretation includes, and in some ways relies upon, the cognitive stance of the reader as they move between immersion and distraction. The expansion and contraction of attention across a ubiquitous field of literary possibilities becomes an active component of what is required in the hermeneutic process and is what forms the basis of the experience of ambient literature. This added movement within the process of both a foundational and acute understanding of hermeneutics thickens the experience of something like ambient literature.

This is not to say that traditional or alternative renderings of hermeneutics do not still apply. While readers of works of ambient literature continue to follow along a hermeneutic movement both within and external to the text, a hermeneutics of attention cuts across these established movements, functioning in a perpendicular fashion to them. It augments, inflects, and opens the possibility for an added texture to the reception and understanding of literary works. Given the ubiquitous nature of the experience of ambient literature and the wide field of possibilities within which it operates, this texture of attention is a necessary component, both for when considering

ambient literature and perhaps literature in general today.

Conclusion

So, in thinking about ambient literature and the unbounded nature of what it draws into itself — ranging from the immediate situation and context of the reader to the furthest-flung possibilities offered by networked communication — it is explicitly the literary nature of it that serves to guide these various and disparate aspects. Instead of seeing the book as bounded by the possibilities of the authorial text, it becomes bounded instead only by the attentional considerations of the reader. As much as the creation of any work is linked to the agentive movements of the artist or writer and as much as the reception of any work is linked to the reader or viewer, ambient literature points in an asymptotic fashion toward the horizon of attention which might, at some future point, be seen as the determining factor in the consideration of any artistic or literary endeavour. Reliant on the variable movement of this attention across an almost limitless field of possibility, ambient literature presents an image of a book without a beginning or an end, a book that has the possibility, in a real sense, of including everything.

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