Mapping Techno-Sexuality through Feminist Geography: Inscription, Performativity, and Paradoxical Space

Shaowen Bardzell

School of Informatics & Computing

Indiana University

selu@indiana.edu

Jeffrey Bardzell

School of Informatics & Computing

Indiana University

jbardzel@indiana.edu

Abstract

The rise of social media has been accompanied by a rise in spaces devoted to various forms of sexual inter-action. While online porn receives the most attention, it is hardly the only form of online sexual content. Exam-ples include erotic uses of Twitter, Second Life, and the Google Maps API. What are the characteristics of tech-nology-mediated intimacy, and how can interaction designers build both practical and theoretical under-standings of this important locus of embodied interac-tion? In this paper, we explore how feminist geography, especially the notions of social inscription, performativ-ity, and paradoxical space can be productive in under-standing the changing dynamics between the user, sexuality, and technology.

Keywords

HCI, sexual interaction, body, embodiment, feminist geography, performativity, inscription, paradoxical space

ACM Classification Keywords

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

Introduction

Recent research in sociology and philosophy has explored the connections between sexuality, technology, and mediated interactions [4; 13; 9]. However, in spite of a growing trend in HCI toward embodied interactions and leisure technologies, the field is slow to address the significance of human sexuality.

There are a few noteworthy exceptions. Blythe and Jones advocate for a closer look at how information and communication technologies intersect with sexual lives online [6]. Brewer et al, in the Sexual Interaction Workshop at CHI 2006, examine how sexuality inform contemporary HCI practice and discourse, especially how rich patterns of human sexual interactions provide opportunities for design [7]. Bardzell and Bardzell, through a two-year study of a sexual subculture in Second Life, contend that the participant-created virtual world enables the construction of powerful aesthetic experiences, and that these experiences are made possible by the interweaving of visual, literary, and interaction aesthetics [3]. In a follow-up paper, Bardzell and Bardzell conceptualize and explicate the notion of the aestheticization of intimacy through the exploration of online representations, identity practices, and avatars' symbolic performances [1].

Sexual interaction remains an "elephant in the room" topic in HCI that interaction designers and researchers alike are reluctant to tackle. And yet, interest in and work on related areas, including the personal and subjective experience of human-computer interaction, continues to rise. Accordingly, the analytical focus of interaction is shifting in some research away from the interface and the designer, and instead towards the bodies, motivating drives, and primordial urges of users. A part of this agenda is understanding the intersections between technology and the most intimate aspects of our lives.

The Body, Feminist Geography, and New Landscapes of Techno-Sexuality

As HCI moves beyond the cognitivist approach that dominated the field in the past, it is turning to other disciplines for both theories and methods appropriate to embodied interaction design [11]. As a scientific and critical concept, the body has been conceptualized in many ways in anthropology, sociology, the humanities, and medical science. Constituting an important strand in this research is the work of Body theorists, who argue against Cartesian mind-body dualism to champion the notion of the *lived body*, a concept that emphasizes the "lived, subjective experience of corporeality" [5]. They theorize the body not as a static entity but as one that is constantly engaged with, affecting, and being affected by the lived world. Such engagement with the phenomenological body focuses on the body not as it "is" in-itself but rather the body as it is understood, experienced, and enacted or performed.

The notion of the body is a recurrent topic of interest in feminist geography, a branch of humanist geography that applies theories and methods of feminism to the study of man-made environments, contexts, city/state/nation, as well as the body. In what follows, we will explore three theoretical constructs in feminist geography through three examples that characterizes the new territory of techno-sexuality to understand the changing relationships between sexuality and technology.

Figure 1: The body of a Gorean slave is inscribed literally and metaphorically in Second Life.

Inscription

Elizabeth Grosz, following Foucault, regards the body as a map for social inscription [12]; specifically, Grosz argues that "the body, or bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself." [Grosz, 1994, cited in 15].

Sexual interaction is one of the most pervasive forms of interactions in virtual worlds. Online simulations, such as the "Goreans" (a subculture based on a cult series of fantasy novels featuring sexual slavery) in Second Life, are rich areas for research into the complex social dynamics of sexuality online. As reported in Bardzell & Odom [2], in one of the virtual Gorean communities in Second Life, a member's virtual body (i.e., avatar) bears the marks of Gorean culture, often in the form of virtual tattoos, virtual branding, permanent collars, and other markings on the virtual body. These markings are far from merely decorative: they are often inscribed in social rituals, such as wedding-like branding ceremonies, and invested with social meaning. The rules of the community and Gorean philosophy are literally inscribed into the flesh of the slave and become one with the slave permanently (Figure 1). The branded slave's body and identity becomes socially constructed, bound by Gorean regulation and community rules.

The notion of inscription in this example reveals that it is the community that manages the body of the individual online, facilitating and mediating all social interaction. This social imposition on the individual body is necessary to transfer ownership of the body from the individual to the institution, and once an individual cedes this ownership, the individual and communal bodies become one, made meaningful and significant by the institution. That the body in question is strictly a visual representation only heightens the fundamentally symbolic role of the Second Life body: the body is a cultural text.

Performativity

Feminist theorist Judith Butler develops the influential concept of "performativity," regarding gender as a performance constituted by the "stylized repetition of acts" [8]. To Butler, being a woman is not a natural fact but "a cultural performance [in which] 'naturalness' [is] constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex" [8]. Informed by Butler, feminist geographers often consider the body as a place, a "location or site…of the individual" [15], and the notion of performativiity has been applied by feminist geographers to study the tensions between normative and "perverse" sexualities, especially how queer identities are performed in heterosexual spaces [Bell et al, cited in 15].

Social media and other technology-enabled interactions are supporting new forms of sexual performance. The popularity of *ijustmadelove.com* (hereafter IJML), a social networking site for the display and celebration of sexual acts, is demonstrative of the move of sexual interactions from the private, restricted space to public domain where everyone is invited to observe. Integrated with Google Maps, IJML plots out geographically the locations where sex was performed and encourages people to describe their experiences through identifying gender orientation, partner type, positions, and means.

14 February 2010, 02:02

i had 5 orgasms :$

Sex: Positions:

Tell a friend:

E-mail: [   ] Send

URL:

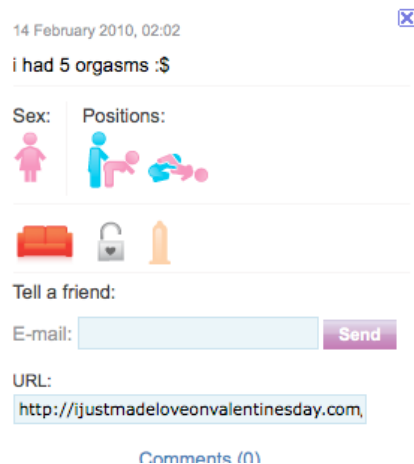http://ijustmadeloveonvalentinesday.com,

Comments (0)

Figure 2: The transformation of private consumption of sex act to public performance at IJML.

Users have the options to evaluate and share the experience with friends, and lurkers can even comment on strangers' sexual experiences (Figure 2)! Sex in IJML is not so much a biological act but rather an abstracted form of sexual exhibitionism. It is exhibitionism, because one is submitting one's sexual activity to a voyeuristic public for their erotic consumption, and yet it is abstract because neither identifying features nor specific bodies are ever on display.

Sites like IJML raise a number of interesting issues. Do users through these sites reinforce sexual norms or do they resist them? Do the sites themselves promote norms? For example, at IJML, icons for both straight and gay sex positions are available, which seems to challenge conservative sexual norms. At the same time, for heterosexuals, the icon representing penetration from behind assumes that the male is penetrating the female, and there is no way to indicate the converse, reinforcing a contemporary norm. Thus, by facilitating some types of performance at the expense of others, sites like IJML may inadvertently reinforce the sexual anxieties it ostensibly exists to undermine.

Paradoxical Space

In her book, *Feminism and Geography*, feminist geographer Gillian Rose develops the notion of "paradoxical space"—the phenomenon in which someone is liminally positioned within a clash of two or more cultures or belief systems—to consider the ways women in particular enter these liminal spaces [16]. Focusing on ways that women experience confinement, Rose observes that women occupy both insider and outsider positions. This liminal status brings to the fore the "subversive potential" of women's spatial positions [Rose, cited in 14]. Since Rose, this theoretical concept has been used

to explore feminist politics [10] and the experience of mixed-race identity [14]. In the ensuing example, we hope to show that Rose's conceptualization of paradoxical space is also productive in the analysis of online sexed identities.

Launched in 1970s, the Hitachi Magic Wand is a "back massager" widely regarded as the ultimate clitoral vibrator: it is well known, physically large and durable, and incredibly powerful. Its popularity also extends to Twitter, where Magic Wand users tweet about their experiences. One group has organized to collect such tweets, using the keyword "#HitachiMagic." As of the time of this writing (mid February 2010), the collection features 2,647 tweets, in which people describe their intimate interaction with the device. Topics include time of use, descriptions of wand-induced pleasures, and the celebration of device's status as a woman's best friend, among others (Figure 3).

Rose's notion of paradoxical space can be used to analyze women's varied, fluid, and even contradictory sexual experiences through their participation in #Hitachi-Magic. The juxtaposition of the physical space in which a woman has her sexual experience with the public social space of Twitter might be seen as a paradoxical space. In it, the woman and her space are constituted in both private and public performances of sex. The private, solo act of masturbation becomes a social and public act via Twitter. The biological enactment of sensual pleasure is mediated by the hard plastics and metals of industrialized technologies, from iPhones and computers to the Magic Wand itself. A physical world sensual performance is paired with a virtual performance. Occupying this paradoxical space opens up the possibility of subversion—of social norms, of sexual

RT @███████: @████████ Riiiight! I'm gunna Hitachi myself right now before I get dressed! lol.
about 3 hours ago from SimplyTweet

RT @████████ @████████ I hitachied myself earlier happy V day no one makes me cum like me:)
about 3 hours ago from SimplyTweet

RT @████████: RT @HitachiMagic: RT @████████ @HitachiMagic my Hitachi is my VDay date tonight!:)> u should buy it a card;–)
about 3 hours ago from SimplyTweet

RT @████████: My Mom just asked me what Dr.Boyfriend got me for VDay. Yep, just had to explain to my Mom what a Hitachi is.
about 3 hours ago from SimplyTweet

RT @████████: @HitachiMagic my Hitachi is my VDay date tonight!:)
about 4 hours ago from SimplyTweet

RT @████████: *searches around for the hitachi*
about 4 hours ago from SimplyTweet

Figure 3: The "HitachiMagic" tweets as an example of paradoxical space.

norms, and even of household appliance norms (the Magic Wand is not at all marketed as a masturbatory aid). In sum, these tweets might collectively ground a reading of sexual paradoxical space that centers on distance and immediacy in sexual interaction, anonymity and self-disclosure, as well as physical and mental/emotional aspects of intimate interactions.

Conclusion
We have quickly sketched three ideas in the context of three examples of techno-sexual interaction: inscription (Second Life Goreans), performativity (ijustmade-love.com), and paradoxical space (HitachiMagic on Twitter). Each of these concepts builds to suggest a basic argument, which we argue is deeply relevant to contemporary HCI research on embodied interaction.

This argument can be summarized as follows. First, the body is not just a biological substance, but it is also a cultural text, a key constituent of social discourses. Second, that this text does not merely express an idea, but rather it *performs*, and in so doing constitutes its subjects and demands a response from those whom it encounters. Third, this discursive performance often occurs in paradoxical spaces, that is, spaces that are constituted by diverse cultural logics and habits, and that the performances can (and do) effect social change through subversion.

In all this, we are better able to understand the surge of technology-mediated sexual interactions. Among other things, these technology-mediated sexual forms tend to be both abstract and anonymous. At the same time, it is reasonable to ask the extent to which these technologies empower and also marginalize various

sexual performances—and what all that means for society in general and HCI in particular.

References
[1] Bardzell, J., and Bardzell, S. (2008). Intimate Interactions: Online Representation and Software of the Self. In *Interactions. Vol. xv.5*, p. 11-15.

[2] Bardzell, S., and Odom, W. The experience of embodied space in virtual worlds: An ethnography of a Second Life community. In *Space and Culture 11* (3), pp. 239-259, 2008.

[3] Bardzell, S., & Bardzell, J. (2007). Docile avatars: Aesthetics, experience, and sexual interaction in Second Life. *Proc. of British HCI 2007*. Lancaster, UK.

[4] Ben-Ze'ev, A. (2004). *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet*. Cambridge UP.

[5] Blackman, L. (2008). The Body: Key Concepts. Oxford: Berg.

[6] Blythe, M. and Jones M. Human Computer (Sexual) Interactions. (2004). In *Interactions 11*, 5, 43-46.

[7] Brewer, J. Kaye, J., Williams, A. and Wyche, S. (2006). Sexual interactions: Why we should talk about sex in HCI. *Proc. of CHI 2006, ACM Press*, 1695-1698.

[8] Butler, J. *Gender trouble.* Routledge, London, 1990.

[9] Davis, M. (2009). *Sex, Technology, and Public Health*. Palgrave, MacMillan.

[10] Desbiens, C. Feminism in geography. Elsewhere, beyond, and the politics of paradoxical space. In *Gender, Place, and Culture*, *6* (2), pp. 179-185, 1999.

[11] Dourish, P. (2001) Where the Action Is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction. MIT Press, Cambridge.

[12] Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile bodies: Towards a corporeal feminism.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

[13] López, Á., and Cleminson, R. (2004). Techno-Sexual Landscapes: Changing Relationships between Technology and Sexuality. Free Association Books.

[14] Mahtani, M. Racial remappings: The potential of paradoxical space. In *Gender, Place, and Culture*, *8* (3), pp. 299-305, 2001.

[15] McDowell, L. *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

[16] Rose, G. *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.