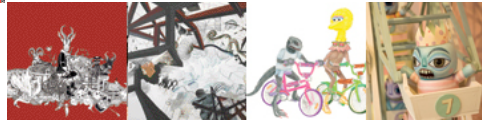




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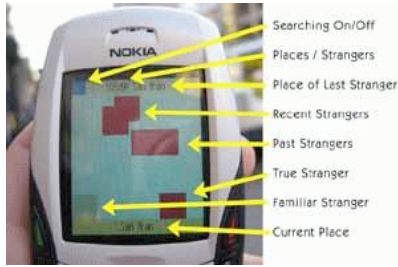
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**A Phone is a Phone is a...**

By Molly Kleiman



A Phone is a Phone is a... By Molly Kleiman

Get familiar with your cell phone applications; this cell phone indicates several familiar strangers in the user's vicinity. They are in installed in our airplanes, imbedded in our cars, lodged in our pocketbooks. Transponders: "they know where they are and they know where you are," explains Steve Bull, professor of Cellphonia at NYU. How? We build them that way. Each transponder—a genius which includes cell phones and GPS tracking devices—can reciprocally signal and emit location and information. Our portable technologies connect us to anyone and everyone, with immediacy (no longer do people make plans, they just "call you when I get there"), clarity ("Can you hear me now? Good."), and constancy (in their latest TV commercial, TMobile brags that they enable us to do what we have always dreamed of doing, "IM nonstop, 24-7").

But as these cell phones connect us to our dialed-up, virtual contacts, they absorb us fully, isolating us from those we are co-located with in real space. Of course, we cannot blame technology alone for our behavior. As we walk down the street, we know that to make eye contact with a stranger would be interpreted as a sign of lechery or mental instability. However, beyond the old strictures a new culture is developing, one we are only now developing vocabulary for—a culture of constant distractions, communal disengagement, multi-tasking to the end of sanity.

Some older vocabularies still apply. As Guy-Ernest Debord, warned us in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), "the movement of the commodity," in this case the cell phone, "is identical to the estrangement of men among themselves," and, "the spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world."

New media artists and inventors seek to counteract this "estrangement of men" by developing new applications that harness the latent power in the small, efficient, innocuous cell phone devices—turning these commodities into more complicated communication and community mapping tools. "Everybody has a cell phone. The person walking around is like the cursor on the computer, and the world is the surface," says Bull.

"Familiar Strangers," a project headed by Eric Paulos, Elizabeth Goodman and their Intel Berkeley team, actualizes this metaphor. Paulos and Goodman have created a cell phone application which can track and chart not only the user's movements, but also others' cursors (strangers' paths as they wander around us).

The genesis of this community mapping project came from Stanley Milgram's social experiments from the 70s. According to Milgram's findings, our urban communities are comprised of three types of people: those people we know (loved ones, acquaintances, neighborhood kids), those we don't (complete strangers), and those who we recognize or vaguely recognize but do not acknowledge (familiar strangers). To begin, Paulos' team replicated Milgram's experiment: wouldn't the paranoia of the 21c, the tech-mania of everyday pedestrians effect the result? In a surprise to most, the results were largely the same.

Familiar Strangers registers the people you encounter and charts them based upon how "familiar" they are to you. The easily downloadable, free cell phone application uses color and spatial images to indicate any familiar stranger in your vicinity. "Any blue tooth radio that's on any phone or device, will echo back a unique ID, like wireless access. These IDs are like people. They don't require a handshake a talking back of other devices," says Paulos. Each familiar stranger, or "unique ID" is introduced as a red square, hovering at the top of your cell phone screen; the device registers the duration of contact and frequency of path-crossings between you and other strangers (red turns to green, box gravitates toward the bottom of the screen). On a crowded street or that neighborhood coffee shop, dozens of little colored boxes may burst onto the user's screen.

"The information is stored locally in the device. We could do some sort of mapping or profiling, but we didn't want to take on the privacy issues. We want to do something now where people can share and upload and print out a visualization;" a new way to chart a journey, not spatially or geographically, but in terms of time and people. So, you could print out images: "here's my trip to

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the zoo, here's my walk down Broadway. A temporal map, with patterns stretched out over the course of your day," says Paulos.

But Paulos does not want the "Familiar Strangers" to become simply a portable friendster; he's not interested in that sort of community building. He does want people to share their experiences, feel part of a larger community. "The project is not grounded in practicality or efficiency," he admits. "It is definitely first, a playful artifact. It doesn't help you get to your destination better, safer or quicker; it doesn't quantitatively improve or optimize your life around efficiency. It provides some sort of emotional connection to your city."

"It's hard. Cause you don't want to create something where everyone is walking around, looking at their cell phone trying to figure out if their in the right spot or not. It is a sort of social barometer," admits Paulos. In the testimonials the Intel team outlines on the web, users seem to check the radar as a social test: is this a cool party; can I avoid people I know.

The "Jabberwocky" application is the newest incarnation of "Familiar Strangers": a device the size of a sugarcube. You fasten/lodge these "Jabberwockies" in places of importance to you just as you might leave a graffiti tag. But here you are leaving a wireless tag. As people pass by, the small box collects the individual bluetooth ID signals from their cell phones. It's like "leaving a digital scent around that we just sort of track. That way you can get a sense of whose around and build up patterns. All we needed was a small light weight radio to beacon locally," says Paulos.

Familiar Strangers is by no means the only project of its kind. TraceEncounters, a project launched at the Ars Electronica festival in Linz this past September, also traces the paths of strangers. Only TraceEncounters approaches the Milgram experiment from the inverse perspective. The TraceEncounters creators handed out stylized chips (green plastic, rigged with wire and colored nodes) which look more like Star Trek style pins than the "Victorian silver and marcasite pins" the creators claimed to have fashioned them after. These chips, when worn, are able to read one another, picking up each other's signal as wearers pass by one another. But the carriers are unaware of what information the chip is receiving, and when it is receiving it. The stored information is compiled into a central memory bank and translated: momentary passes become vectors; a weave through a crowd, an intricate pattern. Geometric and abstract, the output is a rich complex of "clustered nodes" and "plasma panels." Standing near this computerized data output, a wearer can track his/her own journey and how it is linked to others'.

At the opening for the Chelsea Art Museum's Passage of Mirage exhibit in NYC, September 14, Jefferson Y. Han, who along with Peter K. Kennard and W. Bradford Paley created TraceEncounters, said—"first, it's a piece of jewelry, really." Han had rigged his own device, so that the chip was proudly blinking with tiny colorful bulbs. When I asked if there is any visual signal on a non-personalized device that allows the wearer to know when she has passed another user, he laughed uncomfortably. "What, and then everyone would constantly be checking out their pin?" and he pulled his pin close to eyes, dropped neck down to chest in an exaggerated "checking out" of the pin.

As these technologies and projects become more common and widespread, it is impossible to avoid commercial exploitation—companies and advertising firms playing upon this human need to "check out the pin."

Says Bonnie Devarco, in her essay, Earth As A Lens: Global Collaboration and Geocommunication: "This new generation of cell phones and PDA/cell phones with GPS will become as commonplace as today's cell phones with digital cameras. With such an all-in-one handheld you can communicate as well as automatically geo-locate every single phone call you make, picture you take, or document you create. The side effect, invoking a sense of 'big brother' in its darker manifestation but a life-saving tool in the lighter, is that you can be tracked where ever you are on the planet so long as you have your cell phone with you."

Businesses have already cashed in on the cell phone's capabilities. Starbucks has developed a new ad campaign: when frequent customers walk near a Starbucks, they will receive a text message in their phone, luring them in to the shop for the iced, whipped, caramel macchiato they've been longing for all day. In Arizona, some advertisers have used this technology to target their consumer demographic more precisely—companies use technology that locates what radio station a car is tuned to (Rap, Country, NPR) and as the vehicle passes their billboard, they electronically change their ads to "fit" accordingly. I am not (yet) running to Tom Cruise for a recommended eyeball surgeon, but Minority Report-style privacy invasions have transgressed the realm of science fiction dystopia.

So do we stop creating for fear of future, darker applications of our inventions?

Professor Bull has heard this argument before. He reminds us, "The technology is there already. Wouldn't you rather have it in your control and know about it, rather than believe Them blithely when They tell you that They're not tracking you when They are. And They are—your credit card statements, your EZpass. If they wanted to find you, you have already been found." Bull speaks from experience as he "bumped into Homeland Security" while installing a new work recently—his project, Rat Race, tapped into road way surveillance cameras to notify people (via their cell phones, of course) as to how long their commute would be each day. The government officials interrogated Bull, "what if some terrorist gets a hold of this? And decides to blow up bottlenecks or something? I told them they were way off base. Terrorists could do that anyway. Any application that is a convenience to human beings can also be used by dark forces."

And Familiar Strangers? The applications are endless, and Paulos is used to hearing people's suggestions and fears: It could be used by police to see who is at a political protest, a scene of a crime; data could be pooled to create a more thorough database regarding your daily movements. With access to so much personal information, can this lead to further invasion?

"I'm an inventor, I'm naive," says Bull. "Sure there is going to be a dark side, there's always a dark side to technology to technology that brings people together. I'm for demystifying things: it is a very complex world we live in and the more we know about it and its complexities, the more of a chance we can talk to one another and not necessarily believe what is being told to us by an advertiser or political candidate. When we can start talking to each other and exchanging stories, it is a good thing. I don't think there is a dark side to reestablishing the tribe. We have to have trust. Must rebuild trust."

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