
Towards Mindfulness: Between a Detour and a Portal

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Abstract

Motivated by a concern with *mindlessness* in living and designing and how it might lead to outcomes that are poorly considered in their broader ecology, we ask: what if we imagine technology conceived with mindfulness in mind? To develop this thought, we examine two 'found designs' that have a cultural significance and are deeply embedded in everyday practices – the cigarette and the *torii* gate. These objects are seen as somewhere between a detour or a portal for the authors in practicing mindfulness. Using these examples, we discuss the subtle space between designing for mindfulness, which we believe is unachievable, and being aware as designers that the tools we make can have this further potential use.

Author Keywords

Mindfulness; reflection; ecology; found design; Shinto; torii gate; smoking; cigarette.

Introduction

In 2013, Buie and Blythe [4] remarked how little attention has been given to techno-spiritual dimensions in HCI discourse despite the overwhelming evidence that people are using technology every day in a way that supports various aspects of their religious and spiritual practice. Indeed, their study suggests there are at least, 6,000 *iphone* and *ipad* apps to support

religious or spiritual activities. Acknowledging their critique and bemusement, our paper is motivated by a similar concern: the way that mindfulness is discussed in HCI, where it appears to have become conflated with meditation and a 'skill' to be acquired through training. While Buie and Blythe do not make a full distinction between acts aspiring to spirituality and the rituals of religious worship, here we focus only on practices of mindfulness, whether founded in religion or not.

And we note the reductive way that a rich and complex practice like mindfulness (let alone the philosophical roots and traditions that inform it) has been discussed as a feature for productivity in work and study, such as effectiveness and efficiency [3], enhancing attention and multi-tasking [10], reduction of stress [19] or a mechanism to manage chronic pain [13]. A literature search reveals the nascency of work on mindfulness in HCI, with an emphasis on cognitive and clinical use and application. As written about in HCI, the practice of mindfulness is an instrumental tool almost on a par with aspirin and accorded no respect as an on-going state of being.

In contrast, we explore mindfulness as enabling a reflective and collective awareness of relationality, ie existence in broad ecologies of beings and non-beings of the kind that Morton talks of [12]. In our view, designing - and with it the production and use of technology - is inadvertently contributing to a disconnected view of how our daily lives are already implicated relationally to all other constituents of the world. This is contributing to an unsustainable future of rampant consumerism and systemic impact in pervasive ways that go beyond our immediate area of

influence. What might shift a view and practice towards 'being' and 'becoming', instead of 'having'? [20].

We see designing mindfully as a potential approach to help raise awareness of the impact of products and systems beyond direct function and use; and promoting a less materialist (ie less consumerist, more flexible) culture. Our approach, then, is closer to HCI work on mementos [14], self-awareness [5] and reflection with life logging (eg [7]), where the mental act is not necessarily put into service of better organization, but can be seen as a state in itself.

This paper is co-authored (or, rather, co-explored) by two authors who bring different cultural perspectives and encounter each other somewhere between West and East, not with a desire to delineate or provide reasons for difference, but rather to seek where the two meet and usefully shape their thinking. Mindfulness crosses cultures and religions and ways of being. It can also be argued that mindfulness is common in many other forms of religion and spirituality, such as Quakerism, Shinto and Buddhism. We see the work described here as born out of our wish to be mindful and stemming from a mutual curiosity and commitment to understanding how mindfulness could be relevant to designing.

Mindfulness

Varela and colleagues [18] in *The Embodied Mind*, describe two common approaches to mindfulness. One avenue is training: 'The mental fact of mindfulness is being strengthened like the training of a muscle that can then perform harder and work longer without tiring' (p26). This is a similar concern we see in HCI, as discussed before. They caution not to see meditation as

a way to develop special skills or to make oneself into a virtuoso: 'when the meditator approaches the development of mindfulness with the greatest ambitions – the ambition to acquire new skill through determination and effort –... his mind fixates and races, and mindfulness/ awareness is most elusive' (p29). In other words, meditation can be a path to mindfulness, but undertaken to achieve outcomes, it actually has the opposite effect. They suggest the mind is often cluttered with habitual patterns and an approach to mindfulness is to 'letting go of habits of mindlessness, as an *un*learning rather than a learning' (ibid).

This view may challenge expectations. If building expertise to perform better is enshrined in current work practice, it may be confronting to hear that this is 'engaging in self-deception and is actually going in the opposite direction' [18:29] and one should be wary of seeing mindfulness as instrumental or pragmatic and 'certainly not as the development of a higher, more evolved spirituality' (ibid). Mindfulness is not a goal.

Instead, mindfulness is described as a pathway for self-realisation and discover new ways of relating to others [17]. There are many approaches and descriptions of mindfulness that no one definition is possible, just like one's state of being can be numerous and different from one person to another. Some mediators report periods of panoramic perspective – a form of awareness – and an experience of space and spaciousness of mind [18]. Thien-An describes an insight into harmony of nature; 'Since everything is interrelated, since all things depend one upon another, nothing is absolute, nothing is separate, but all are part of the one indivisible whole' [17:32]. Varela and colleagues use alternative analogies; 'mindfulness is

likened to the individual words of a sentence, whereas awareness is the grammar that encompass the entire sentence' (p26). Being fully present in one's action means that one can become progressively more responsive and sensitive to conditions. Mindfulness can be seen as a form of openness and sensitivity to 'encompasses not only one's own immediate sphere of perceptions; it also enables one to appreciate others and to develop compassionate insight into their predicaments' [18:123].

Varela and colleagues propose that mindfulness can bring one closer to one's ordinary experience, changing the nature of reflection 'from an abstract, disembodied activity to an embodied (mindful), open-ended reflection' [18:27]. This is similar to what Morton [12] speaks of when he suggests that the 'ecological thought is difficult: it involves becoming open, radically open—open forever, without the possibility of closing again'. It points to a fundamental difference in considering *how we reflect*. Those of us in research are often more adept at *critical reflection*. This tends to be more cognitive and rational in process, used to interrogate, question, analyse and deconstruct phenomena. However, mindful, open reflection happens when thinking and feeling are done together. Kasulis [9] calls this a 'mindful heart', which is an 'affectively charged cognitivity' (p25). Reflection, as undertaken as mindfulness, is not just to reflect *on* experience but to experience reflection itself. Varela et al explain [18:27]: 'It can cut the chain of habitual thought patterns and preconceptions such that it can be an open-ended reflection, open to possibilities other than those contained in one's current representations of the life space. We call this form of reflection *mindful, open-ended reflection*.'

Smoking a cigarette - Ann

I used to smoke; I had a 20-a-day habit. It seems vile to me now, but, though I gave up many years ago, I still have moments when I crave a cigarette. These days, this is no longer for the nicotine. What I miss is the miniature 'time out' moment of travel away from what is concerning me, the emotional and cognitive step back as I stop to light up. I suspect that this break with the flow is more pronounced since the law has dictated a walk outside. But, even years ago, the reach for the packet ...the ritual of taking out a cigarette, lighting it and inhaling was a powerful tool for separating, stopping and letting go. Research now shows smokers take in more oxygen when they draw to inhale than in a normal breath, adding to the appeal. Meanwhile, that small regular nudge - to a point between absorption, routine, ritual and reflection - is still missing from my life.

Whilst we do not suggest that a piece of technology can enable mindfulness unless the user is disposed to being mindful in the first place, for the purposes of this paper's discussion, we consider how our relations and engagement with a designed object can help us reflect in an open-ended way and become collectively aware of a broader ecosystem. Our suggestion for this is to travel down an unusual path, via a cigarette and a *torii* gate. Here, we do not emphasize the use or the design of these objects alone to help us become mindful, but rather describe our approaches and practices in relation to these objects, showing how we are reminded and become aware of our surroundings and more present in our actions. It can be a way to realise 'the meaning of what we are doing, if we can *be* what we *do*.' [17:38].

Found Designs

The cigarette and the *torii* gate are two cultural icons that sit at the heart of a range of social practices and are familiar to everyone around them. They have a long history, enmeshed with the development of the culture in which they sit. As such, we might regard them as 'found designs', since no one can take credit for the original idea or much of their amassed cultural history. They work like 'found objects' in art practice, to provide a collage of associations when mounted together.

These objects and the practices that have grown up round them are discussed here to inform our understanding of the nature of open-ended reflection and the tools we have to support this. Thus, we deliberately bring together two seemingly antithetical and unconnected objects and, framing them through mindfulness, use them to explore our relationship to the ecology we are enmeshed within, to examine the ethics that shape our practices and the manifest ways

futures are created. We use this methodology to engage in a sensitization endeavour, which, in focusing on long-standing designs and their place in society, shows design as part of current reality, yet conjectural.

The Cigarette

Cigarettes provide for a refined form of tobacco use, dating back more than a millennium in the Americas. Smoking arrived in Europe in the 16th century, but became popular in the late 1800s. The cigarette rolling machine, which standardised production, was invented just after 1880. Since then, cigarettes have been globalised, endlessly modified to support branding and redesigned for better burning and/or draw (for instance, changes in filter plug, tipping paper and ventilation [15]). Ingredients make the cigarette stimulant, toxic and addictive (nearly half of cigarette smokers die of tobacco-related disease and lose on average 14 years of life).

Though peaking in popularity in 1965, the act of smoking a cigarette still attracts grand narratives (see [8]). In Curtis' study [6] of how Edward Bernays sold cigarettes to women, we learn how independence in the US was instrumental in changing perceptions of women smoking worldwide. Long thin smokes were then developed for women [2], [8]. In other words, socially-desirable aesthetics were established both for cigarettes and the people using them, such as class, poise, cool and indifference.

A feature of note for this paper's discussion is the appeal of smoking as a kind of personal organisation. It 'can be a particular part of your daily life... a way to pass the time, an aid to concentration and observation, an effective "pause signal" between tasks, an enjoyable

Detour to a Shrine - Yoko

I always try and pay my respects at our local Shinto shrine in my hometown in Saitama, Japan (Fig. 1). This short detour, usually fresh off a long-haul flight, involves a familiar walk from the station. The shrine is tucked behind breezeblock walls lining a busy street, where the *torii* gate peeps over the roofs. This location makes it easy to 'pop' in on the way somewhere.

I enter through the *torii* gate, approach the Shrine, offer some coins from my purse, ring the bells to invite the gods, clap twice, bow and give thanks for my safe journey home and for the wellbeing of my family and friends during my absence. It's a bit like a greeting to say 'hello, I'm back'. It is a ritual to anchor me to my roots, the place I was born. There is an act of releasing anxiety and cluttered thoughts, like a clenched fist that relaxes into an open palm, ready to receive the world. I feel at home.

ritual ... Smoking is used to punctuate the day. It provides a routine.' (www.netdoctor.co.uk/smoking/thingsyoumiss_000501.htm). This routine punctuation, never wholly predictable, but familiar in its drawing and withdrawing, can be a mindless grasping like a slurp of tea, but it can be a moment to stand back and reflect.

As second-hand smoke is now concluded to be injurious to bystanders, legislation has been introduced across much of the world that prohibits smoking in many workplaces and public areas. As a result, much smoking requires people to move to a new spot to light up, often outside. Disrupting the day in a frequent, if irregular, fashion is neither leaving the world, nor staying in the task. This is not a disassociated state of escaping from reality or being in trance that some meditators speak of. Rather than becoming automatically lost in mindless activities, which is a form of dissociation, Varela and colleagues in fact describe that mindfulness is to disrupt mindlessness [18:33]. Ann's account (see side bar p4) suggests an in-between time, marked by ritual and initiated by craving, boredom, opportunity and a range of other triggers. This may not reveal its complexities from the outside, but can also be an unconventional approach to mindfulness.

More than a habit, smoking infiltrates itself into everyday life and, at the same time, offers a mechanism for tearing through the fabric of it to see it more clearly. Thus, the cigarette – exquisitely designed and ultimately poisonous – can be both a symbolic reminder of, and a small practical portable aid to, engagement in a wider appreciation of life. It encapsulates many paradoxes.

We now turn to a more traditional symbol of connection with the wider context of living and being.

The Torii Gate

Torii are physical wooden or concrete gates that literally 'mark' entrances to Shinto shrines in Japan. Shinto is a Japanese indigenous spirituality (and not a religion), strongly inflected by Zen Buddhism. In a similar way to how a cross is a symbol of Christianity, a *torii* gate is a symbol of Shinto. Shinto shrines often demarcate a place of awe and significance, like Mt Fuji, an ancient tree, a spring, a boulder or a waterfall by virtue of its age, beauty or its eerie shape. But *torii* gates are also found all around urban townships and suburbs of Japan, among towering concrete buildings or hidden in a nook of a wall. This ubiquity is key to its everyday-ness, carving out a small pocket to pause and contemplate.



Fig 1: the torii gate at Katori shrine, Saitama (photo credit: Yoko Akama)

Implications for (Personal) Research - Ann

As we write this, it occurs to me that I might be able to use a picture of a cigarette to remind me of the pause-ful moment that used to be supplied by smoking. It would act as an object for prompting mindfulness, with the benefit of a significant history in my early life as well as a certain horror to it. It might also provide a kind of *momento mori* – a symbol of death in life; a reminder of the vanity of all things.

I would not have been able to pin up an image of a cigarette 20 years ago, as then it would have been simply a reminder to smoke.

What helps to make us mindful changes as we change.

Torii acts as a marker, for visitors, of its awe-inspiring nature, so they can open themselves up to being enveloped and permeated by awe, mystery and wonderment as they pass through. In other words, it is thought that, as one *enters* through the *torii* gate to such a place, awe also enters. One must 'make space' for its entry and the *torii* signals a preparation for this mutual entry. Kasulis [9:18] explains how the *torii* acts like a bookmark: 'It marks where one left off and where one will want to return. It is a tangible gateway to an intimacy with the world, one's people and oneself.' The *torii* gate, readying the person to be open and be drawn into the extraordinariness of the place, aids these feelings of connection. Kasulis notes that this experience of mystery means that 'the awe is not simply in the person or in the tree, but in their interaction' (p25), and that the person needs to be willing to be drawn into this interaction. He goes on to say that instead of separating the world and the person, it unites them as 'interdependent poles within a single field of resonance'. Shinto acknowledges that we are already part of the world and the experience - the *torii* draws attention to this unity.

We write as Yoko's work has begun to consider the philosophical underpinnings of Shinto as part of concern for an ecological future of beings and non-beings – and her Japanese heritage is becoming strongly relevant in her approach to design (eg [1]). Paying one's respects at a shrine is commonly seen in Japan (see side bar on p5). Kasulis [9] observes suited businessmen stopping by a shrine on their way to work: undertaken without a specific agenda or a purpose to pray. Indeed, when Kasulis asks such businessmen, they are often unable to explain the reasons why they visit the shrine. This casual and habitual manner may puzzle those who

assume this to be like praying in a church. Kasulis, however, describes how it feels more akin to dropping by a friend's place without any specific reason, seeing a light in the window and wanting to share time together. It is part habitual, but not a mindless repetition, as there is the motivation of seeking a quality encounter.

Discussion: between a Detour and a Portal

We have discussed how cigarettes and *torii* gates, our *found designs*, can be seen to support our respective approaches to mindfulness. By providing a personal vignette to illustrate these approaches (see side bars), we hope to indicate how each author approaches this differently, holding a different purpose, relevance and meaning in what we do. As Ann has given up smoking and Yoko no longer lives in a country with *torii* gates, we manage differently. They were neither our only route towards mindfulness nor the only way we experience it. Yet, in different ways, each becomes a portal – either to engage with awe and wonder of this world through the *torii* gate, or a way to punctuate a day for contemplation through smoking. In both instances, it is a detour from a busy day, which might be stressful and fast-paced, to be deliberate in making time to remember what we care about. Whereas the cigarette provides a temporal detour, the *torii* gate provides a spatial one. We travel through them, literally and metaphorically.

Both of these objects have cultural significance; they are deeply embedded in everyday practices. If technologies are similarly embedded already, how can we reconsider them in a way that serves to re-engage mindfulness in an everyday manner? In other words, could using technology be a way to disrupt mindlessness in certain contexts where one is

'...mindlessly involved without realizing that this is what one is doing' [18: 32]?

Accompanying Technology

We do not seek to detail how to design a 'mindfulness' app, nor do we intend to give instructions as to how to be mindful when designing technology. Instead we consider *portals* and *detours* to a changed state and the moments when a different consciousness beckons. Is there anything common in the lure of these icons? Can we see anything particular in interactive tools that build on this commonality further?

Mindfulness can be engendered by hearing a noise or picking up a pebble. We have described a route for each of us. Yet, digital tools can offer content to users and types of interaction and draw attention to place – all features that might act as a focus for mindfulness.

We give an example of a tool that has been designed to raise awareness of a specific relation between place and people. In this, it uses GPS mapping to reveal invisible aspects of the land in Australia; it can enable users develop an awareness of the 'invisible' presence of traditional custodians of a particular region.

Australia, as a nation, has recently begun acknowledging Aboriginal people as traditional owners of the land, recognizing they have been on the continent continuously for 60,000 years. Areas continue being renamed to reflect their status as belonging to certain Nations with associated sacred sites. It is now common on formal occasions for respect to be shown to the traditional custodians of the land in an opening address with an acknowledgment, in accordance with

Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture and practices.

Acknowledgement of Country is an app that can help users in Australia recognize on which Indigenous Nation country or land they stand. Acknowledging this is to value the history and significance of Australia's Indigenous cultures and peoples. It is not merely to make people think of who has lived or still lives on the land, but to prompt awareness of their presence in relation to Nations' continuing existence.

Such recognition of Indigenous Nations is often obscured, ignored or neglected on both digital maps and traditional cartographic maps of Australia. *Google Maps* can provide accuracy and certainty of where one is standing, but seen in this context, we could say that it perpetuates a form of mindlessness, non-presence and disconnect to past and current Aboriginal culture.

Whereas, while the app's function is relatively simple, in matching a geographic location to an Indigenous Nation it plays a political role in recognizing Nation existence and boundaries. It also enables users to acknowledge and pay their respects. In other words, the app performs in a way that reminds users to be mindful of these invisible dimensions and allows them to offer due significance, recognition, connection and respect to land, people, creatures, tradition and cultural practices. We can see this as an awareness of the kind Thien-An [17] talks of: to discover new ways of relating to others.

However, we caution, again, that this app *may* encourage awareness of self in relation to others along with the respect shown, but it cannot create

mindfulness. In the hands of another user who is only concerned with being politically correct about Aboriginal culture, its use will only result in lip-service.

With or without the app, the various protocols involved in official *Welcome to Country* ceremonies can be observed in a perfunctory way, making one Aboriginal arts administrator say, ‘...it’s wonderful you’re doing it but I often feel you don’t have any heart for it ... I want to put the spirit and the heart into it’ [16: para 6-7]. This reminds us that a proxy – be it technology, documents or speeches - cannot enable mindfulness without cultivating an embodied presence in mind and body, cutting chains of mindless, automatic, conditioned behavior and preconceptions.

Mindfulness and spirituality

As can be seen in the example above about relations to people and place, when we talk about mindfulness, this is distinct from providing for a specific religious practice (there are many amulets and other spiritual support online for Shinto and Buddhism, eg. www.timeout.jp/en/tokyo/feature/431/Tokyos-top-talismans). Rather, we are talking about something that is not specific to a type of faith, but allows us to alter modes of thinking, feeling and being.

Yet, in looking for examples, various older forms of technology (i.e. pre-digital) exist, used as aids for inner development and contemplation, many of which had a place in religious practice. Walker [20] points to the Buddhist prayer wheel, a Catholic rosary, a Jewish prayer shawl, and a pile of stones that was used as a tallying device that kept track of meditative prayers. He describes these symbolic devices to shift priorities towards greater attentiveness, arguing that such

priority shifts can counteract compulsions and cravings – behaviors associated with consumerism.

While his concern is centred on sustainability and the re-thinking required as to how objects are designed and consumed to minimize the use of materials, resources, energy and waste, his concerns connect with our ideas when he discusses spiritual dimensions, to cultivate inner transformation. He suggests, ‘[t]o better understand both our world and ourselves, it seems that we have to pay far greater attention to our often fleeting, intuitive insights and judgments...’ [20:89]. This clearly resonates with the discussion on mindfulness here and shows how design literature can consider the *things* of meditation as a possible route to mindfulness. This is quite distinct from the insights into religion and design we get from reading Buie and Blythe [4].

Symbolic devices

Technology alone cannot make us mindful, but it can potentially help to trigger, shift, remind or invite us towards fostering practices of mindfulness. In fact, we argue that convenience, comfort and automation, often seen as the key benefits of technology, may not afford the kinds of detours and portals we speak of here. As noted, making things digital has the potential to bring in content and interactions that are resonant for us. The next step is always ours to make, but we suggest some qualities that could be considered in producing technology that might help us take it:

- 1) *It accompanies me*; it is something that travels with me so that it is there when I might be mindful. It has the ubiquity of mobile technology (portable) or location-based tools (present at hand), giving the potential to be both with me and

connected to a range of (digital) inspirations and opportunities through its function as a portal.

- 2) *It has meaning for me*; it is something that I care about. In a digital tool this might be sounds, images or augmentations that resonate with me and might be drawn from things I have chosen. It is unlikely that everyone would find the same cue meaningful. This is highly experiential and culturally specific.
- 3) *It appears on occasions*; in the sense that it can enter into my world as a means of drawing me out of it. It can do so in a way that is both occasional, so that I don't habituate to it, and for the right occasion, in that it feels appropriate to the context and my mood. The use of context-aware technology here might increase the chance of mapping prompt to mood.
- 4) *It breaks routine*. Rather than perpetuating a mechanical action undertaken mindlessly, it triggers or calls to me in a way to be more attentive to what I am doing. This might mean I stop and start again anew, and break the cycle of doing things mindlessly.
- 5) *It prompts a detour – in time or space*. The flow of a day is briefly interrupted via a casual detour. This could be a suggestion to take a different route from the usual one or step out of a task when prompted.

What we suggest is not a 'reflective technology'. It is impossible to design *open reflection* to happen with the push of a button. And we do not see the role of technology as doing things we could or ought to do ourselves. This is not something to delegate to machines. Rather, let us reverse the current trend for a moment... what different qualities could our technology

support – qualities that have become ignored, forgotten or designed-out because of inefficiency, unproductivity, or inconvenience in achieving certain tasks? What is the 'hair shirt' of contemporary technology that reminds us – in a way that we have chosen for ourselves – to be occasionally aware of the magnitude of living, the fragility of ecosystems and our potential for awe?

Conclusion

Digital devices are now almost everywhere, embedded in our daily lives and eating our time with functions like social media and games. Light and Petrelli [11] suggest that 'It would be interesting to see how far digital devices can also re-inspire a sense of the revered and the joyful by working in alignment with the moments when we are not looking for distraction, rushing to complete as much as possible in the time, or extending ourselves to connect with the rest of the planet.' We take on this sentiment here, discuss what might be the benefits of a more mindful approach, what this means and how technology might support it.

We have written this to stand in contrast to some of the literature now appearing in HCI that regards mindfulness as either an outcome of design or a skill to be acquired through training. In advocating, instead, a more reflective approach in our actions, thinking, making and imagining, it is our hope that mindfulness enables an awareness whereby people and other sentient beings are interdependent and responsive to each other. We propose this here as a contribution to discussions about what could be considered for a more respectful world, in a small way, in everyday life, without demanding too much of new technological development.

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Commentary

For alt.chi paper
*Towards Mindfulness:
 Between a Detour and a Portal*

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I resonate with authors' concerns, seeing that mobile technology has the potential to transform in many ways our relations with each other and with various things and beings of the world. From this position, I think that the paper is a really valuable contribution to longstanding reflections about thinking through technology.

I wish that authors would discuss more specific instances of digital technology; I would say that the most important limitation of the article consists in the distance it still holds towards IT, approaching it from quite far away.

Ann's account of smoking reminded me of Dichter's insightful inventory of 'Why do we smoke cigarettes?' (Dichter, E., 1947, Why do we smoke cigarettes?, available online at <http://smokingsides.com/docs/whysmoke.html>). I wonder if there is a line to be drawn between distancing oneself as an escape from reality, and distancing oneself in order to better grasp reality. How can technology encourage an orientation towards the world and its hidden mechanisms, rather than away from it?

It is also interesting that, in Oisteanu's cultural history of narcotics in the Romanian culture

(Oisteanu, A., Narcotice in cultura romana, Iaşi, Polirom), the author examines the use of tobacco in the 19th century, when it was seen as a powerful stimulant for imagination and euphoria. Writers would smoke to spark visions of past or alternative worlds. Would this count as mindfulness? In brief, how can a technology invite more awareness to the here-and-now (in all its fullness), rather than engagement with other worlds?

Would listening to music offer a similar example? Music may re-orient our attention towards the rhythm of everyday existence, helping us re-discover (and re-create) an inviting world, out of the bits and pieces that are at hand.

What would be a specific role of digital technologies in supporting mindfulness? Would it serve as a carrier of mementos (songs, prompts referring to the meaning of places)? Could it offer a special kind of interaction to focus the mind on the here and now? Would you say that there are games that could serve such a role?

This article raises a lot of exciting questions, and therefore I think it would be a very valuable contribution to alt.chi.

Commentary

For alt.chi paper
*Crossing Cultural and
 Theoretical Borders:
 Towards Mindfulness
 through a Cigarette
 and a Torii Gate*

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The paper brings attention to an alternative understanding of technology per se in HCI - as tool, actor, helper, as means for productive processes in everyday life...or as artefacts of dwelling. The overall argument is that an alternative way to understand technology, also points to a different departure point for design. Understanding of technology is in the heart of fields as STS and socio-technical discussions, and I guess the human centered approach in HCI also raises the need for taking this discussion up from an epistemological and ontological perspective.

The paper argues for an open-ended approach to understanding technology use - and to frame technologies as part of a broader ecology that peoples everyday life adheres to and acts upon. Two examples of given designs are used as examples to how designs may imbricate in everyday life beyond being productive. The cigarette and the torii gate are used as examples of how artifacts are used by people to make shifts of time, shape detour, pause, adding concentration and bookmarking or readying a person to be open to what comes, to the next task or place.

The paper raises big and difficult question, and it seems that existing HCI literature does not really help. This could have been criticized - and would strengthen the argument of the paper. Meanwhile, is the aim is not to propose a finished model of technology understanding - but to spark a discussion of how to understand technology critically without throwing the baby out with the bathtub.

The paper poses a contrast to critical conceptions of technology based on studies of how technologies DO disrupt peoples everyday life; troublesome add-ons, that take focus away, disrupts our activities and

challenges us with too much information, too much choices and too fast. The paper proposes that the cigarette and the torii gate are examples that point to another possible potential role of technology: the one that brings alternative states and experiences and that supports mindful moments for users.

It seems that you raise a phenomenological perspective in western science and a perspective grounded in Japanese Zen Buddhism, and I would look forward to your articulation of these connections in the two empirical examples. I also wonder how the argument relates to perspectives on cultural practices, such as de Certeau (de Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press) - and his arguments of technologies of everyday life. For example, in his studies of photography, he frames technology as tools to take distance, to step out of situations and take a different perspective or concentrate on small details. Very much a way of thinking that reminds of the perspective on mindfulness proposed in this paper.

I also would like to pose the question of how the argument in this paper may relate to Don Ihde's work in technoscience (as for example in Ihde, *Bodies in Technology* 2002, Minneapolis MN, Minnesota University Press) focusing on how the sense of our bodies and our orientation in the world is affected by various forms of information technologies. Again, these are technology philosophies from western traditions of thinking - and the question is if these theories would support an alternative understanding relevant for the alt.chi community. And design as such which I hope will be the next step of this paper.

Commentary

For alt.chi paper
*Towards Mindfulness: Between
 a Detour and a Portal*

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The article contributes an alternative perspective to examine mindfulness in HCI through two found designs - cigarette and *torii* gate. As technology is often designed to achieve efficiency, productivity, and convenience, we are encouraged to think about how we, both as technology designers and users, could raise our inner awareness, and reflect in an open-ended way.

The authors prompt us to re-think about "how could people lead a mindful, conscious, and respectful life?" "What does it mean to experience the experience?" Sensory immersions offer people unique channels to experience mindfulness, through our ears (music/sound), mouth (taste), nose (smell), hands (feel), and eyes (visuals). Aside from the concept of mindful eating, mindful photography also helps illustrate the exploration of mindfulness. "Through the lens of camera, people are asked to examine their everyday lives in a manner they normally do not - to have an eye out for beauty, meaning, and value (Kurtz, J. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). Using mindful photography to increase positive emotion and appreciation. *Positive psychology in higher education: A practical workbook for the classroom. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.*)" It is important to note that technology does not necessarily play an active or dominant role in achieving mindfulness. It could simply act as a medium (e.g., camera).

As HCI researchers and designers, how could we better approach mindfulness? Could we find more 'mindful' ways technology is being used aside from the example given in the article? A recent TED talk on Happy Maps came to my mind (Quercia, D. (Nov.

2014) Happy maps [Video file]. Retrieved from www.ted.com/talks/daniele_quercia_happy_maps?language=en). In addition to giving people the fastest route to where they are going, as most mapping apps will do, the designers of "happy maps" consider how people feel in the process. How about a quiet path to commute via bike, or a green path to walk home? These routes increase people's awareness of their surroundings and enable them to interact with the city through different manners. Another example could also illustrate the mindset when designing mindfulness through technology. Though a commercial campaign primarily, the world's first interactive whisky glass created by HakuHodo Japan uses sensor technology to transform the drinking experience into a fine and smooth dialogue with nature and culture (Suntory HIBIKI Harmony Bar with HIBIKI Glass [Video file]. (April 2014) Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa25rerdpn4).

I wonder, could everyday artifacts and everyday practices within each cultural setting afford us good contexts to discuss and re-examine mindfulness in HCI? Could we replicate our understanding of the two cultural icons discussed in the article to our everyday life? Would enjoying a cup of tea or coffee, showering, cooking, or cleaning offer similar experience to different people - creating pause-ful moments to refresh our mind? Taking the authors' perspective on mindfulness to re-examine everyday practices in different cultures opens up an interesting and meaningful dialogue for HCI researchers and designers to explore how mindfulness relates to objects, technology and ourselves.