3rd INTERACTION DESIGN WORKSHOP - PUBLIC SPACE

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Introduction

Easter 2008 Split Croatia was the location of 3rd Interaction design workshop *splitinteractions*, where 27 students, in four teams, participated on a short workshop on Interaction Design for Public Spaces, led by Marilyn Lennon, Ivica Mitrovic and Gwyan Rhabyt.

Interaction design is one of the newest specializations in the field of design. It's related to digital media, and it's concerned not only with the product, but on how to design the way in which users interact. It is a highly multidisciplinary field, which includes design (graphical, product and interface), psychology, sociology, communication science, anthropology, computer science, engineering, information and communication technologies, architecture and art.

We know that public spaces are composed of a unique dynamic of people, activities, objects, practices, structures, protocols, histories, politics, experiences, etc. During the workshop the students challenge was to become directly involved with the materials and processes of designing interactive artefacts for specific sites. This placed responsibility on the students, in their role as interaction designers, to interpret and create meaning from the effects of their designs on the situation at hand.

While developing a broad understanding of the practices and activities at the space over the first exploratory period of the workshop, the students' evolved a number of issues for examination and discussion. These observations were used to drive concept development.

Placing prototypes on site, to be used and evaluated by the public, gave the students designers, some current and situated insight into what creates successful experiences, and provided a valuable critique for the design process.

The workshop

Three sites were chosen by four teams. A small beach, "Firule", a public square "Gajo Bulat", which two of the teams chose, and a city outdoor market (name).

In short, over the five days of the workshop the students were asked to;

- Survey the physical space and highlight its major features
- Gather an understanding of practices and activities within the site
- Collect a range of ideas and possibilities to guide the scenario and concept design phase
- Produce a working prototype of the envisioned design
- Test the design with users, - *in situ* where possible
- Perform an evaluation of the prototype

Over the course of the five days students engaged in a full design cycle. They were exposed to a variety of approaches to understanding and designing. Techniques used included: brainstorming, worksheets, group critique sessions, field observations, informal interviews, participatory design sessions, scenario-based design, prototyping, and a variety of mainly informal evaluation methods.

Four design scenarios were chosen, developed, prototyped and tested. The low-tech prototypes, ranged from illustrations, such as a drawing, model, story board, or video, to simulations of the look and feel of the working technology.

We briefly describe each in the following sections.

Concepts and Prototypes

Prototype – Urban privacy: Un-designed playground

Firule beach has an interesting atmosphere, it is an environment for itself. It is a cozy, well-organized universe were any interruption is recognized and commented on. The team wanted to subtly establish indirect communication between two very different groups of visitors who use the beach space at different times, in order to increase awareness and responsibility. The two groups were the daytime mothers and children and the nighttime teenagers.

For the daytime testing with the kids, we dug a hole in the sand and placed a microphone in it. Over that we implanted the 'caterpillar' which was made out of flexible corrugated aluminum tubing. We then plugged the microphone into the laptop and waited for the kids so we could start recording…when something was hung on the blue hooks, the sounds played back.
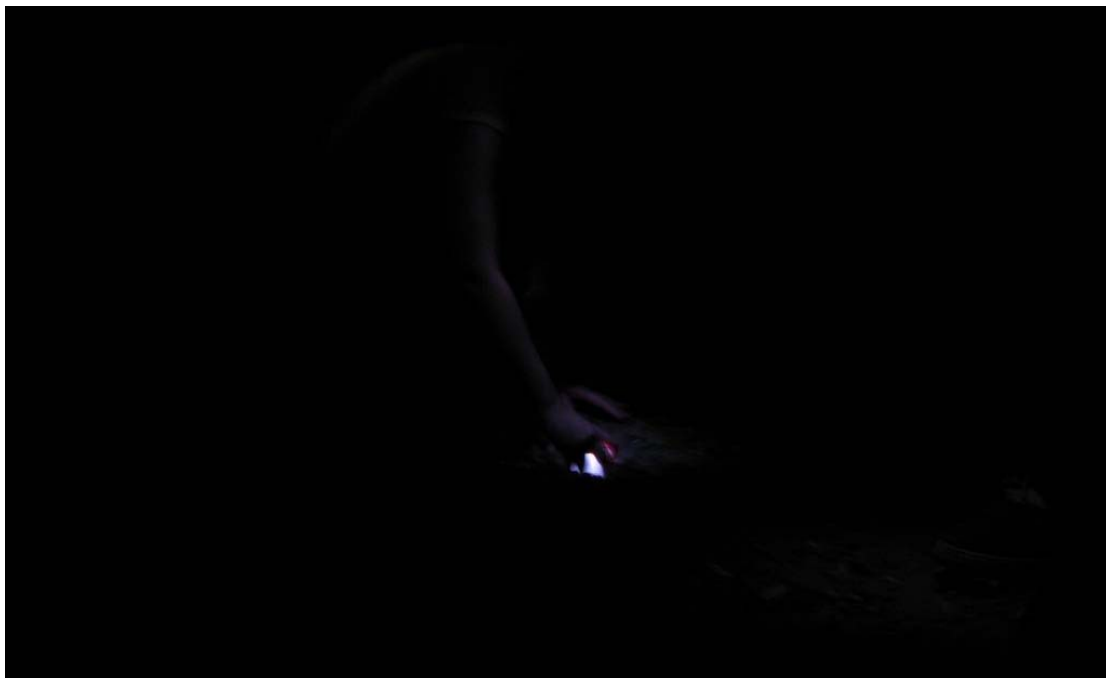
At the nighttime test we dug ten holes and buried little flashlights which we covered with upturned plastic cups, so only the bottom off the cups were visible, protecting the flashlights and dispersing the light. Then we buried a speaker plugged into a MP3 player which played the voices of the daytime children.

Prototype – Čiribimba

Gajo Bulat Square has a large building, controversially situated exactly at its centre. Public opinion is divided as to whether the building should remain or not. The building has the effect of breaking up one of Splits only official public spaces. This group designed a series of peep holes which allowed the curious public to see beyond the centrally placed building - through it - to the other sides. Hence connecting each part of the square and reuniting the divided space.

A simulation of the 'peephole' was placed in situ. Pre-recorded video from the location at different times of the day was played on a laptop inside the installation, giving the impression of a 'live' link.

Prototype – Gajo Bulat Square

The same **Gajo Bulat Square** was approached differently by this group, who believed that a gathering point was desired by the occupants of the square. The team developed interactive furniture for sitting. Integrated in the furniture material was a small public display for SMS texted information. A cardboard model illustrated the concept at the square for public evaluation and a video prototype described how the interactivity was realized.

Prototype – Market / Pazar

Market proved to be a challenging location. The team found that a greater portion of their time was required to understand the dynamic of the exchanges, the differing needs of the stakeholders, the physical structure and the social networks, and so on at the market. Interestingly while other student teams were gathering evaluations on prototypes, this team devised activities and artifacts which helped them to probe the context further.

Conclusion

The results of the workshop was the gathering of a body of knowledge on specific sites, concept development and the design of a number of prototype interactive technologies which enhanced, supported or stimulated site specific activities. The prototypes were evaluated for their relevance and appropriateness (a) by the people who use the space and (b) for the space in which the interactive artefacts were placed.

Finally, we found that having students engage with the real activities of people, in everyday settings, rather than working with artificial or 'made-up' problems in the classroom, positively affected student interest and motivation.