

Meditative computing: A diametric scale between social and meditative styles

Social and affective computing styles have been extensively studied in the past decade, with one major assumption: all interactions with a computer are social. I propose the existence of specific computing styles that fall on a continuum between the social and the intensely personal. My research centers on operationalizing the term “meditative computing” with the intent of creating a diametric scale between social styles and meditative styles, and determining the role of affect along this continuum.

Modern computer systems lend an air of overwhelming potential to the casual user—every application is “just a few clicks away,” and multitasking allows a user to be doing any number of things at a given time. While this ability has been one of the driving forces for computer hardware and software innovation, it cannot be assumed to be appropriate in all situations. Now that we are at this level of computational ability, we have come to a point where, as Stephenson says, “deciding what *should* be done with it had become far more important than imagining what *could* be done with it” (emphasis added 1995, p. 31). Rather than making everything available at all times, certain activities—e.g., composition or paper writing, artistic or design efforts (Aboulafia & Bannon, 2004), and tasks that require the user to enter a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; 1981)—are best performed with as few distractions as possible.

The question being asked here is this: “How can a computer best support the mental acuity and focus of its user, and how does affect relate to the strength of this acuity?” Reeves and Nass (1996) discuss the perception of computers as social actors (instead of—or perhaps in addition to—tools), but a social interaction is not always in the best interest of the user. In other words, some user processes are supported by social interactions, and some are supported by wholly innocuous tools. Serendipitous Web browsing may be an example of the former, since the Web is an inherently social medium. Design may be an example of the latter—if I am painting I want my brush to be an extension of my hand, a prosthetic; if I am programming I want my IDE to transcribe exactly what I visualize; if I edit video I want the software middleman between me and the information to be as slim as possible.

We need a scale that differentiates between computing methodologies: social computing on one end, and meditative computing on the other. We also need to determine the role of affect at different points on this scale, and locate certain computing activities (e.g., interactions with digital libraries, the design process, Web browsing, information retrieval, etc.) on this continuum. Further research and development in these paradigms can be informed by this classification.

Selected References

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