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p2P: Cityspeak's Reconfiguration of Public Media Space

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Introduction

The proliferation of large-scale commercial video screens is reshaping the notion of public space and significantly transforming many urban landscapes [Boeder, 2006]. As vectors of consumer culture, these giant displays tend to normalize the space around them towards a globalized media aesthetic. The commercialization of public space that these displays represent is part of a larger dynamic effecting urban centres, where opportunities for individuals to exercise personal agency are increasingly restricted. *Cityspeak* (Lewis, *Cityspeak* installations reel, 2006*)* engages this issue by providing individuals with direct access to these broadcast points.

Description

2.1 Input methods

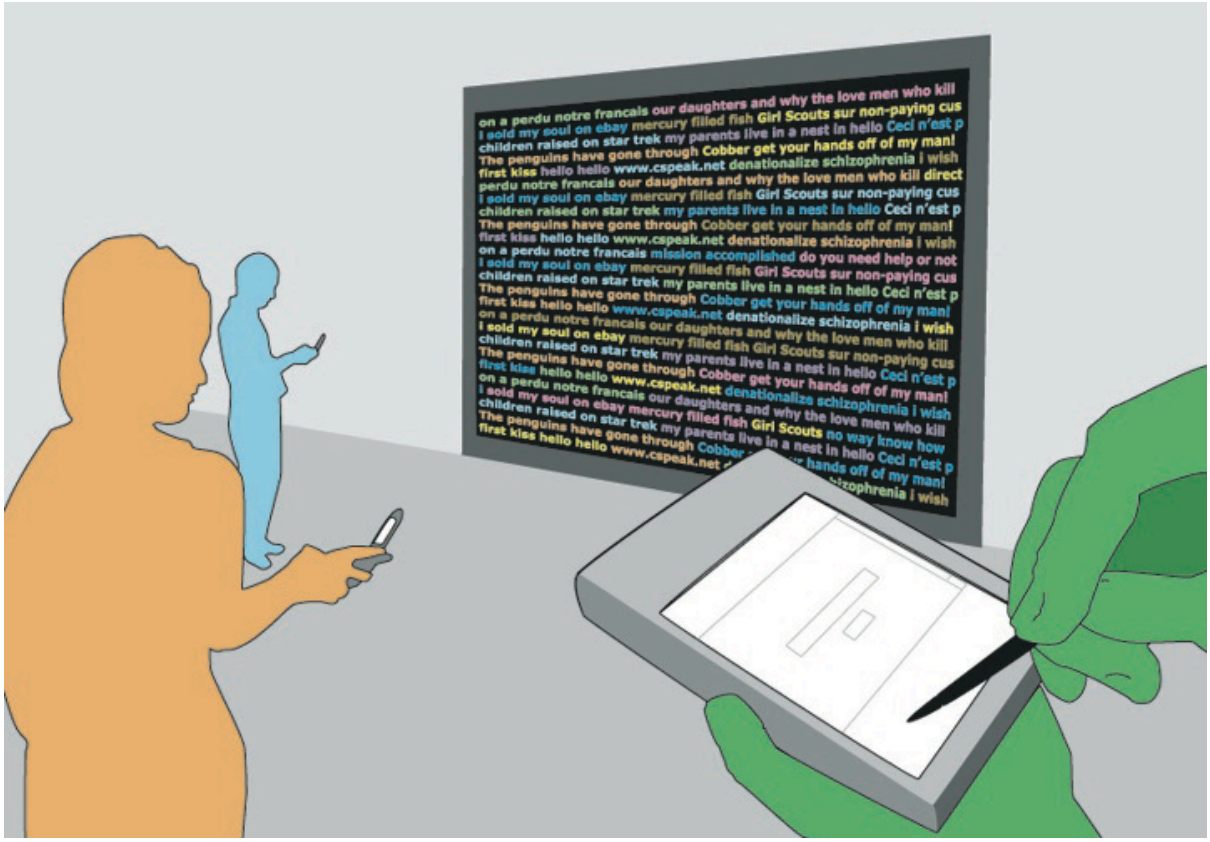

Figure 1: Interacting with Cityspeak

Participants can send text messages to *Cityspeak* using Short Messaging System (SMS) or via a web-based form (see figure 1). Each installation has its own local phone number to which SMS messages can be sent. The web-form (Lewis, *Cityspeak's* web form, 2006) detects whether the user is accessing the system via a personal digital assistant (PDA), a mobile phone microbrowser, a laptop or a desktop workstation, and displays the page properly formatted to the particular type of screen.

2.2 Visual display

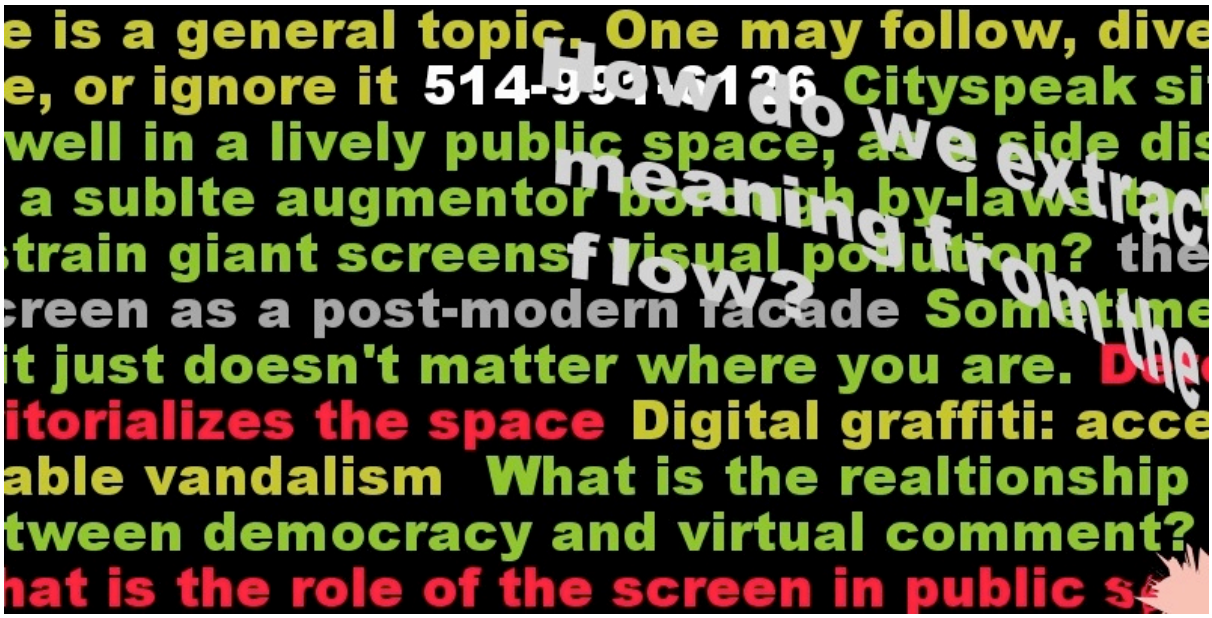

Figure 2: *Cityspeak* visual behavior

Cityspeak uses our custom Java library, NextText, to manipulate the visual appearance of the text for display (Lewis, NextText, 2006). This treatment consists of visually animating the text in such a way as to semantically reflect certain characteristics about the user's input method and the local environment. The text is displayed in three levels. New messages fade quickly into the foreground, in a large font size. The background is composed of text from previous messages, scrolling right-to-left and upward. As the text transitions from being a new message in the foreground to becoming part of the message history in the background, it goes through the 'pixel eater' in the lower-right corner. The pixel eater pulls new messages into it, creating a chaotic mass of jostling pixels. After a few seconds, the pixel eater reforms the text, letter-by-letter, and adds it to the history (see figure 2).

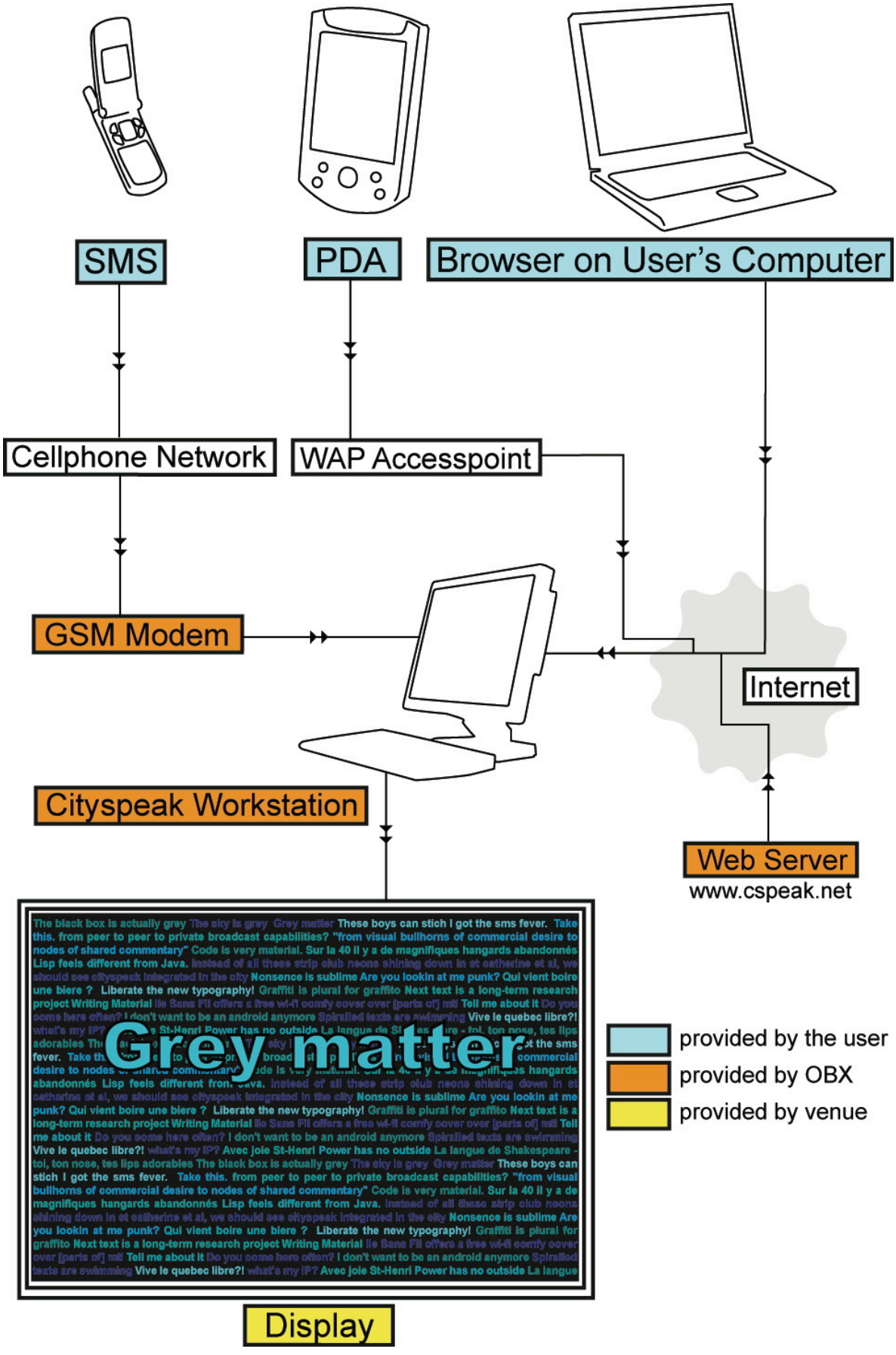

Figure 3: *Cityspeak* system diagram

2.3 Filtering

Providing the opportunity for public broadcasting creates certain constraints. While our goal is to change the one-way aspect of these screens, we recognize that those who operate these are wary of legal actions arising from public slander or gross obscenity. To address this issue, we have developed automatic filters and a manual moderating interface to allow the incoming text stream to be monitored. At the same time, however, we have programmed these functions such that problematic messages do not simply disappear. If it has been decided, in conjunction with the local venue, that “ass” is not an appropriate word, the line “he is such an ass” gets scrambled to become “sis sas na eh cush”. This allows the user who sent the message to recognize that the system is functioning, i.e. that the message was received.

Opened screens

3.1 Alternative programming

While the number of giant public LED displays is growing, they rarely function as anything other than dynamic billboards for commercial advertising. There are, however, several screen operators who are starting to make their screens available to artists or cultural groups. These include the BBC’s Bigger Picture network of five giant LED displays installed across middle England (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2005), the 59th Minute project in Times Square (Creative Time, Panasonic, 2001), the Victory Park development in Texas (Hillwood & Hicks Holdings L.L.C., 2006) and the Aéroport de Montréal (Aéroports de Montréal, 2006). However, if artistic or cultural projects are accepted, the format is invariably video. Interactive work that actively engages the public is rare to nonexistent. *Cityspeak* seeks to transform how these screens are used and perceived by inviting the public to alter – even if only temporarily – the screens’ social and visual function. As participants talk back, a new co-constructed relation emerges between users and the screen.

3.2 Talking about place

Cityspeak is both mobile and immobile in nature. Input methods (HTTP and SMS) enable local and remote communication with the output device (LED screen).

The screens embody a tension between the static physical environment in which they are situated, and the fluid global information network of which they are nodes. *Cityspeak* offers an opportunity for emphasizing the site-specific characteristics of a screen. Whether acting as a means for residents to comment on the revitalization happening to their neighborhood, an emerging poet looking for a high-exposure venue, or a city's residents discussing an upcoming election, *Cityspeak* can act as a combination of chat space and bulletin board that addresses issues of importance to a particular place.

Reappropriating the city

Cityspeak is a response to re-alignments in spatial power relations currently playing out in urban space. In North America, many city centres have shifted from public to semi-private spaces. Paul Virillio (Virillio, 1977), Rosalyn Deutsche (Deutsche, 1998) and urban theorist Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin observe this tendency to shift public interaction sites such as streets, parks, and plazas away from municipal control, to control by private and commercial interests.

> Corporate and consumption enclosures [...] are being directly interlinked with private, airconditioned walkways, tunnels and 'skyway' bridges. Such networks are superimposed three-dimensionally below, above and within the traditional street system, whilst connecting with it only through limited numbers of highly surveilled and secured entrances (Graham & Marvin, 2001).

The term often used for this process is 'revitalization', and it is led by real estate and commercial interests. Revitalization has reshaped spatial power relations to the extent that talking a walk through core urban environments is to be subject to a constant barrage of solicitation. A maximized shopping experience is gradually replacing the traditional notion of the public space as an open meeting ground in which citizens can loiter, talk and argue. Streets are turned into outdoor shopping malls, locations such as the underground corridors inter-connecting downtown Montreal are placed under pervasive Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) surveillance, and private companies are contracted to run 'public' parks, all which result in an

increased degree of control over who is allowed to participate in these spaces, and how.

One of the modes of expression that is almost exclusively reserved to the state and to private commercial interests is that of displaying text. Advertising and signs identifying buildings are considered appropriate; postering, flyering and graffiti are not. One reason that *Cityspeak* focuses on text is to return individually-generated text to public space.

Individual broadcast

An increasing number of people within post-industrial Western societies carry some form of personal communication tool. These devices are intrinsically personal, in that one does not tend to share a cellphone or PDA. Whereas these devices are usually employed to communicate from one individual to another, *Cityspeak* enables private-to-public (p2P) communication. We feel that the growing ubiquity of mobile devices and the proliferation of urban screens will offer ever more opportunities for this p2P mode of communication. At the moment, however, obtaining access to the largescale displays is difficult. While we have been in conversation with several operators, and have run tests on the BBC Bigger Picture outdoor screen in Hull, England, we have been limited to running our initial series of field trials at indoor venues (Lewis, *Cityspeak* installations, 2005-2006).

5.1 Whispering

While giving a public lecture at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs (New York), we used *Cityspeak* to elicit questions and comments from the attendees. The audience was largely composed of undergraduate students, most of whom attend class together. These messages tended to be addressed to individuals in the audience who already knew each other. The auditorium's large screen was populated with messages such as "phil likes sandals", "Quinn macnulty you are hot" and "Whatever you say Haley". Previous familiarity between users seemed to encourage a humorous approach to people's posts, creating a conversation that was akin to the tumultuous atmosphere of a classroom discussion.

5.2 Shouting

Cityspeak was installed for one evening at a local bar (see figure 4). The visitors were mostly people in their twenties and thirties. The content of messages tended towards anonymous self-proclamation, such as “Alex pearce seeks single lady to dance with him... he’s wearing the blue tshirt by the bar”. The installation became an instant bulletin board hosting quests, claims, denunciations and offers.

Figure 4: Sending SMS messages to *Cityspeak*

5.3 Commenting

Cityspeak has proved to be a useful tool for creating an informal history, or subtext, of workshop proceedings. We installed it during two meetings of the Mobile Digital Commons Network (MDCN), the umbrella collaboration to which the project belongs (MDCN, 2005-present). Attendees were able to make comments about the presentations without disrupting the speaker, creating a second layer of brainstorming and discussion. Comments such as “Build incremental pieces of technology to facilitate play and content development”, “how are we going to meet

deliverables?" and "how adaptable is the technology & how adaptable is the structure?" were posted to the system.

Related works

The impulse of writing in the public sphere has political and aesthetic motivations. A small number of other projects seek to take over public displays and, in so doing, navigate in similar topological spaces as *Cityspeak*. In Speaker's Corner (de Jonge, 2003), messages are phoned into the system and displayed to an LED ticker on a busy street corner. The focus of the project is on the content of the messages, but does not include an active engagement with the visual representation of the text. It also requires the use of fixed hardware for input, as opposed to individual, personal devices. The King Has... (Olsson & Kawashima, 2005) invites people to send secrets by SMS. These are printed on wood panels and installed on public facades. Where The King Has... is successful at translating a digital input into an analogue output, we are interested in promoting real-time exchange between participants, and multi-directional conversations. *Cityspeak* functions similarly to the Helloworld project (Gees, 2003); participants send messages and the system layers the text onto public spaces. However, where Helloworld uses lasers to inscribe text with a uniform appearance, we actively manipulate the typographic design to reflect information about the sender and the place.

Future developments

Cityspeak has been presented mostly in indoor environments. Now that the project is technically mature, we are submitting proposals to several large-screen operators to do outdoor installations in the upcoming months. The usage data from the field trials have helped orient the next phase of the project. Many users expressed their desire to control the visual aspect of their messages at sending time. We are designing a profile system that would allow people to select how their text appears. This information would be saved over the course of an installation so that users would have a consistent and persistent personalized signature. The MDCN is creating a system of outdoor temperature/light/humidity/motion sensors that are network accessible (MDCN, 2006). We plan on using this environmental information to influence the visual elements in *Cityspeak*. We are currently developing another

project called Citywide, a series of parallel *Cityspeak* installations. Citywide takes the notion of supporting dialogue in one particular location and extends it across an entire city. This will be achieved with multiple instances of *Cityspeak* that are accessed via localized wi-fi hotspots.

Conclusion

Cityspeak has proven to be an effective tool for eliciting public messaging. We provide a structure which allows personal communication devices to be used as public broadcasting tools, with the potential of subverting the narrow use of large-scale urban screens as monotonous bullhorns of commercial desire. We are looking forward to getting the work into public space in order to better understand just how motivated people are to talk back.

Acknowledgements

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