Charging as a Focal Practice

Reflections on Digital 'Focal Things and Practices' in the Wilderness

Bødker, Mads

Document Version
Final published version

Publication date:
2017

License
CC BY-NC-ND

Citation for published version (APA):
Bødker, M. (2017). Charging as a Focal Practice: Reflections on Digital 'Focal Things and Practices' in the Wilderness. Paper presented at The 2nd workshop on NatureCHI, Wien, Austria.

Link to publication in CBS Research Portal

Charging as a Focal Practice: Reflections on Digital 'Focal Things and Practices' in the Wilderness

Mads Bødker

Copenhagen Business School

Dept. of Digitalization

Howitzvej 60, 5.17

DK-2000, Copenhagen

Denmark

Mb.digi@cbs.dk

Abstract

This position paper reflects on Borgmann's notion of 'focal things' and its applicability in the discourse about interaction with technologies in nature. Using the example of a combined cooking burner and thermo-electric 5W smartphone charger (a BioLite cook stove), this position paper gives an example of how a mundane "device" turns focal once it is connected to a contextual infrastructure (the 'wild'), and reflects on the applicability of the notion of focality. The guiding question is how the notion of 'focal things and practices' drawn from Borgmann might help us think about the (strained) relationship between digital technologies and the wilderness.

Author Keywords

Nature; wilderness; experience; philosophy; design

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous; See http://acm.org/about/class/1998 for the full list of ACM classifiers. This section is required.

Figure 1: Cooking and charging with the BioLite

Introduction

Charging phones in our everyday lives in the global west is rarely a real problem. At work or at home you can plug in your phone in a wall plug. Even the train or the bus offers a spot of sufficient voltage to fully charge or top up your phone. Spots for charging are ubiquitous, safe and free. But what happens when your shiny phone is out of it's safe, dry, pocketed, couched environment, far from wall outlets, safe pockets or charging stations. Keeping the phone dry, unscathed, and of course charged becomes an activity that requires care, coordination and planning. The phone changes its status when we carry it with us into "the great outdoors" – and our relations to it change. From being largely what Heidegger terms a "standing reserve" (Heidegger, 1962) – a resource, an instrument, a means for an end – the phone becomes an object of care.

BioLite

BioLite (biolite.com) is a US company whose main products are camping stoves as well as larger stoves that contain a thermo-electric generator to generate power from any kind of solid fuel such as wood, paper, pine cones, coals etc. Their portfolio of products extends into rechargeable lightning systems, base-camp lights, and solar panels for charging phones and other 5W accessories such as smartwatches or powerbanks.

Caring for a phone

I'm kayaking with a friend. We're out and about for an extended weekend, finding lonely islands to camp on in this beautiful Swedish lake. Driving from the city took us about four hours, and out here my smartphone needs more than just power. Once charged, I need to take care that it does not get dirty, greasy, or wet. I am also out of my normal infrastructure of places to put my phone, so I need to find new ways to carry it around with me. I need to be able to find it when it gets dark (and it really gets DARK!).

I am in the wilderness after all, and I turn the phone off most of the time, trying to not care too much about it. This mostly inert piece of metal and glass that, in my work-a-day life seems to have a life of its own, buzzing and pinging me all the time, sits in a thigh pocket in my pants. Increasingly, it gets annoying to feel it slip around every time I have to crawl around on the forest floor, entering a tent, tending to the campfire and so on.

Yet, the GPS in the phone is important. I have a topographical map installed (1:25.000) on my phone to help us with orientation. So, I need power. The BioLite is fired up, and my friend and I gradually begin finding fuel (pine cones, twigs, sticks of wood, dry leaves, birch bark, anything that burns). As I expected, charging is very slow. I'm at 10%, and getting the burner to charge at a decent speed requires a lot of foraging for things to burn. I look up and chuckle as I watch the both of us crouched, scurrying around, eagerly collecting for our growing stacks of 'forest fuel'.

As we have gathered a good amount, we end up sitting around the burner, plopping pieces of wood into it at a steady pace. Occasionally we check the phone to see if it has charged, check to see if the lightning symbol turns on. Then go back to plopping and discussing how a thermo-electric charger works. We decide that having fed the charger (and thus the phone) makes it a worthy member of our little expedition.

Borgmann's 'Device Paradigm'

Borgmann notion of "Focal Things and Practices" indicates a difference between technology as a 'device' and technology as a focal thing or as furthering what he calls a focal practice.

In a necessarily truncated form, Borgmann's concept of the device paradigm as a dominant way of thinking and designing (post)modern technologies, is a critique of an inherent "device-ness" of many everyday (digital) technologies. Where he uses examples such as refrigerators, power assisted car driving and even bottled, mass produced wine as examples of the device paradigm, we might think also of smartphones or wearables belonging to that category. When we interact with a smartphone, we are not skillfully applying our body or our faculties on making it work. Rather, we are consuming the machine in a decontextualized manner, in a way that has little embodied consequences and requires little care or engagement. The things that make the technology work are hidden and inscrutable infrastructures that are just 'there' to be tapped into when necessary.

One argument derived from this is that this way of interacting with technology paves the way for a widening of unsustainable consumption of resources – attentional, social as well as physical/environmental. When no care, skill, or engagement is needed for use, we become simple consumers, mindlessly consuming whatever the technologies offer us without any thought of any consequences; socially, environmentally or in terms of our development as ethical humans. "To consume", Borgmann argues, "is to use up an isolated entity without preparation, resonance, or consequence" [1], 53)

One could argue that Borgmann misses the finer details on the exertion of skill or engagement when we interact with many kinds of digital machines. Arguable, we are relying on new kinds of skillsets that allow us to interact in (socially, ergonomically) appropriate ways with interfaces.

The challenge, however, is to see what thinking along the lines of Borgmann may reveal about the relational nature of human machine interactions, particularly with attention to the kinds of relations that can be cultivated when "devices" (in the Borgmannian sense) are brought out of their busy, protected urban settings and into nature.

Focal things
What happens when the shiny smartphone is suddenly out of place. Opposed to the "device" is the *focal thing* and the focal practice that derives from the interaction with such a thing. As Borgmann explains, the etymology of *focus* is 'Hearth' (from Latin), referring to the hearth as the central technology in a household, a thing that needs constant attention and care. A focal thing/practice is orienting and transparent in its means/ends structure. This means that, to the user, the focal thing carries meaning or the context as an environment full of meaning that has to be attended to. So, for instance, a traditional hearth is *focal* in that it requires the aforementioned attentiveness, but also because it requires other practices of engagement with a context, making the environment a meaningful part of the thing or somehow enrolling the environment *coherently* into the thing (e.g. the fireplace) itself.

In the case of me and my friend using the BioLite charger in the wilderness, the transformation of fuel found in a place into energy for charging (and, for instance, the subsequent discussion of the merits of various bits and pieces of fuel) creates an unexpected relationship between

the place we are in and my smartphone. We have to think, judge, consider the environment in order to make the phone work and obey our command. Beyond the phone being an out-of-place technology to be cared for, the BioLite charger creates a meaningful connection between the device (or not) and our little place in the wild.

The taken-for-granted-ness of the readily available technology of the phone becomes challenged by the wild, but the BioLite charger puts in in perspective, contextualizes it and makes it at home.

Concluding remarks and implications

One might argue that Borgmann (and yours truly) are unnecessarily romantic luddites (and so on). However, if we consider ourselves in some way as designers, we may, I think, take Borgmanns emphasis on care and attention to focal things, as a chance to consider how "ease of use" is not the end station for designs meant to provide us with pleasurable experiences in the wild. Rather than being a "standing supply", digital technologies can be enrolled in more complex relations with nature.

In the above case, the BioLite charger provided an opportunity to become lost in foraging of fuel, discussing the different kinds of fuel found, the nature of thermo-electric charging, the rate or 'plopping' and so on. The charger meaningfully gathers together the place with activities linked to the process of charging the smartphone. The phone, in return, became a more cherished piece of equipment, not unlike the sturdier gear brought on a kayak trip.

A key implication is arguably that "devices" are devices in the way they are linked to their infrastructure. In other words, smartphones are not as device-like once they depend on thermo-electric chargers and middle aged men foraging the forest floor for fuel.

We need to develop the vocabulary for discussing what digital technologies mean in the wild. Borgmann's version of focal things and practices is one kind of (slightly normative) vocabulary to follow, but more detailed studies of digital technologies in the wild are needed to frame such discussions in practice.

References
1. Borgmann, A. (1984). Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life. A philosophical inquiry. University of Chicago Press, 1984